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Ground Alert for Looking Glass: SAC's New Emphasis on Strategic Warning

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After nearly 30 years of continuous airborne alert, the SAC Airborne Command Post, better known as "Looking Glass,"[1] no longer flies day and night over the American midwest. Instead, the EC-135, commanded by an Air Force general and capable of controlling land-based strategic forces if ground-based communication and command facilities are destroyed, will now be maintained on "quick-reaction ground alert." Even though Looking Glass can take to the air in only a matter of minutes, and will continue to fly at random intervals, the change in its alert status highlights an important shift in SAC's philosophy regarding surprise attack.

Although the Bush administration cited the improving Soviet–American relationship and SAC cited the potential savings—$18 million the first year—in announcing the decision, Air Force officers quickly stated that the change in Looking Glass's status did not degrade the ability of American strategic forces to respond to strategic warning (indications that an opponent is contemplating an attack) or tactical warning (indications that an attack is underway). According to Air Force and administration spokemen, the official consensus has changed about the likelihood of a "bolt-out-of-the-blue" attack, an attack that fails to generate strategic warning because it develops in a noncrisis situation. By calculating that a bolt-out-of-the-blue attack is unlikely in the extreme, the Air Force can now adopt operating procedures or basing options that rely upon strategic warning to improve the survivability of strategic systems. This estimate is reflected not only in the decision to place Looking Glass on ground alert, but also in the Air Force's decision to base MX in Rail Garrison.

This new approach to the issue of surprise attack, however, violates a long-standing "rule of thumb" used to guide strategic procurement and deployment policy: systems must not depend on strategic warning. Yet, to the extent that this preoccupation is based on the debacle at Pearl Harbor, it is based upon a misleading interpretation of history. After all, the Japanese "sneak attack" was launched during the worst crisis in Japanese–American relations. At the time, policymakers and intelligence analysts even estimated that the Japanese were about to launch offensive operations somewhere in the Pacific, possibly even against the Philippines or some other American outpost. The shock produced by the strike against the Pacific Fleet, felt by both the public and policymakers, has overshadowed the fact that strategic warning, as in most instances of surprise attack, was available prior to Pearl Harbor.

Those adopting a traditional approach to the

issue of surprise attack would probably grant that Americans possessed strategic warning of Japanese offensive intentions; but they also would be quick to point out that the US still suffered a disastrous military defeat that was facilitated by surprise. They would maintain that the human element in the intelligence cycle (the collection, analysis, and response to warning of an impending attack) is inherently unreliable. Deployment policies that depend on strategic warning are not "foolproof" because they cannot guarantee that analysts and policymakers will perceive accurately and respond promptly to strategic warning. For traditionalists, prudence dictates that policymakers should be removed as much as possible from the intelligence cycle. Ideally, American strategic forces should be survivable regardless of the actions taken or not taken by policymakers in the presence or even the absence of indications of impending attack.

Interpreted from a traditional perspective, the decision to place Looking Glass on ground alert is indeed a risky enterprise. By increasing the need for a prompt human response to strategic warning, the administration and the Air Force seem to have forgotten Albert Wohlstetter's valuable warning about the "Delicate Balance of Terror." The National Command Authority (NCA) or, more realistically, the Commander in Chief of SAC (CINCSAC), will now have to issue an alert order to insure the survivability of Looking Glass. Yet, the degree of risk entailed in this change in alert status is mitigated by four characteristics possessed by the system. These qualities greatly reduce the risks inherent in leaving Looking Glass vulnerable, albeit only intermittently, to a nuclear strike.

First, Looking Glass can return to airborne alert at any moment. In other words, the NCA or CINCSAC can determine how much risk it is prudent to run under certain circumstances. With a few minutes' notice, the survivability of a key component of the command structure would no longer be dependent on the frailties of human judgment. Of course, SAC will have to maintain the capability of mounting round-the-clock operations indefinitely. An opponent should not be able to estimate that Looking Glass's airborne alert capability has atrophied over time. But because the importance of strategic warning to the survival of Looking Glass is *reversible*, the human element can be removed from the alert process whenever it appears warranted.

Second, the system can be alerted in stages, eliminating the possibility that a nascent crisis could be exacerbated by an immediate switch to continuous airborne alert. Despite the fact that Looking Glass's mission—to maintain the "continuity of command" in a postattack situation—is predominantly defensive, policymakers could hesitate to place the system on airborne alert during a crisis. During a serious political dispute, officials can become preoccupied with concerns about miscalculated escalation: the possibility that actions taken to improve defenses during a crisis could be interpreted as an offensive move by an opponent, leading the opponent to launch a preemptive attack during a confrontation that otherwise could have been solved peacefully. If the NCA or CINCSAC decides that it is important not to send a signal that possibly could be intepreted as threatening, Looking Glass could be alerted gradually. This *flexibility* increases the NCA's or CINCSAC's ability to reduce the negative or even the positive signals generated by a change in the alert status of the aircraft.[2]

Third, it is difficult for the public to perceive easily changes in the status of Looking Glass. Because the aircraft usually remains hidden from public view, either on the ground at SAC airbases or in the air over the midwest, the system does not create a "public interface problem." In other words, it is unlikely that a change in the aircraft's alert status will generate a public outcry, or that operations could be

disrupted by protesters. As a result, concerns about domestic political repercussions should not prevent the NCA from placing Looking Glass on airborne alert during a crisis. The system's *low public visibility*—most Americans remain unaware of Looking Glass's existence, despite the fact that it has flown overhead for nearly three decades—largely eliminates the public interface problem, reducing the domestic impediments to changing the alert status of the aircraft.

Fourth, because the aircraft will continue to take to the air at random intervals, a prudent opponent would have to treat the system as if it remained on continuous airborne alert. Since Looking Glass's reliance on strategic warning remains intermittent, there is nothing a prudent opponent could do that would guarantee that an attack would catch the aircraft on the ground. Indeed, this quality is related to the reversibility of the system's reliance on strategic warning: at any moment the NCA or CINCSAC can calculate what degree of risk is safe to run. In times of tranquility, a 20% probability (corresponding to the percentage of time the aircraft spends in the air) that an opponent could not destroy Looking Glass might be sufficient to eliminate minuscule incentives for launching a bolt-out-of-the-blue attack. In more troubled times, the probability that an opponent could not catch the aircraft on the ground could be reduced to 50, 80%, or even 100% with an easily arranged change in its alert status. In other words, the system's *intermittent reliance on strategic warning* greatly reduces the drawbacks inherent in placing Looking Glass on ground alert.

These four characteristics—reversibility, flexibility, low public visibility, and intermittent reliance on strategic warning—not only minimize the dangers inherent in Looking Glass's reliance on strategic warning, but could also be used to guide the Air Force as it contemplates other changes in strategic deployment and procurement policy. Systems that possess these characteristics would run only minimal risks in relying on strategic warning to guarantee their survival.

Already, the Bush administration has identified one strategic system that fulfills these requirements: TACAMO[3] aircraft that are on continuous airborne alert over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Used to relay messages to the SSBN fleet, especially following the destruction of shore-based communication facilities, these EC-130 aircraft possess the four characteristics needed to reduce the dangers inherent in relying on strategic warning. Moreover, in comparison to Looking Glass, the risks involved in placing TACAMO on ground alert are even less troublesome. If the TACAMO aircraft assigned to CINCPAC and CINCLANT are each kept at just a 50% alert rate, at least one aircraft could be over either the Atlantic or Pacific oceans at any moment. With only minimal synchronization of their alert status, the airborne relay to at least half of the deployed SSBN fleet could be maintained continuously.

It also might be possible to incorporate the new philosophy towards surprise attack in the deployment options under consideration in the administration's small ICBM (SICBM) program. Given the controversy generated by Rail Garrison, which relies on strategic warning to guarantee the survivability of the MX missiles "garrisoned" at SAC bases on "day" alert, any basing option that requires warning to improve the prospects for SICBM survivability is bound to generate resistance. Yet, even for mobile land-based missiles, the development of a survivable basing option, which is independent of warning, poses enormous technical challenges and costs. Improvements in Soviet ICBM technology, especially in MIRV accuracy and fractionation, and Soviet reconnaissance capabilities, make it extremely difficult to devise "foolproof" basing modes for ICBMs. If only portions of a potential SICBM system relied on strategic warning from time to

time, however, procurement and operating costs could be greatly reduced. Invulnerability on demand is also far easier to guarantee than continuous invulnerability. The search for the "perfect" basing mode for SICBM should not overshadow alternate ways of at least reducing the vulnerability of the system to moderate levels.

Given Congress's push to cut defense expenditures following the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe, an urge that could be accelerated by America's new commitment in the Persian Gulf, cost will continue to be a key factor governing strategic modernization and peacetime operations. SAC should continue to explore ways to incorporate safely the assumption of strategic warning into its procurement and deployment policies. Placing Looking Glass and TACAMO on ground alert is a reasonable first step in this process: the change in alert status of these aircraft creates small savings by Pentagon standards, but the risks entailed in this change in deployment policy are so small that the reduction in operating costs appears justified. Moreover, the shift in alert status is a positive, albeit modest, way of reciprocating recent changes in Soviet behavior, which largely have eliminated the political justification for keeping these aircraft continuously airborne. Until changes in Soviet nuclear capabilities mirror changes in Soviet behavior, however, the task of insuring the invulnerability of US strategic forces and strategic C^3I will remain daunting. In the final analysis, only arms control offers a cheap method of eliminating dependence on warning, strategic or otherwise.

NOTES

1. The designation Looking Glass is intended to indicate that the aircraft's capabilities "mirror" those of SAC's main underground command post.
2. The notion that policymakers might resist moving Looking Glass from air to ground alert in the future because of a desire not to send a "positive" signal to an opponent is not at all farfetched. The Bush administration, for example, rejected Secretary of Defense Cheney's request to place the aircraft on ground alert in December 1989 out of a fear that such a move would send the wrong signal to the Soviets. Members of the administration first wanted to see how the Soviets responded to the upheaval in Eastern Europe before they altered Looking Glass's alert status.
3. The acronym TACAMO stands for Take Charge and Move Out.