

How to Lose a Sprint *and* a Marathon

ANYONE who still feels the Defense Department overhyped the danger of sequestration is by now in denial. On April 9, the Air Force began standing down more than a dozen squadrons' worth of front-line combat aircraft. This extraordinary move ushered in the sort of tiered readiness the service has wisely avoided for decades.

Under sequestration, the Air Force was forced to slash its operational expenses in an indiscriminate, across-the-board manner. Reasonable people can disagree about the proper size of the defense budget, but sequestration quickly became indefensible.

Fighter and bomber units across the Air Force are being grounded to save the fuel, parts, and logistical expenses their flying hours consume.

But airmen in idle units soon lose the ability to perform their primary missions. Pilots lose combat proficiency within weeks when they cannot fly. Gen. Mark Welsh, Air Force Chief of Staff, estimated in February that by mid-July roughly 70 percent of the combat air force would not be mission-capable.

Part of the Air Force's extraordinary value to the nation derives from the fact that it is always ready to go. In recent years, when the Air Force was needed for war or disaster relief in Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Japan, Libya, or Mali (to cover just the first half of the alphabet), it immediately answered the call.

As sequestration's cuts spread through the force, readiness is no longer assured. USAF will lose its bench strength and depth, jeopardizing its ability to conduct the next operation.

It is not just the Air Force's ability to "sprint" into action that is at risk. Sequestration harms USAF's long-term "marathon" as well, as evidenced by its effect in the Pacific.

"As the sequestration starts to move downstream [and affect additional units], we start to see more and more negative impacts on the readiness of our force," said Adm. Samuel Locklear, commander of US Pacific Command, in April testimony. "The forces ... training to get ready to come [in] and relieve the ones that are on station will not have adequate flying hours, will not have adequate training."

Among many other recent, desperation cuts, the Air Force canceled Red Flag combat training exercises which prepare airmen for upcoming deployments and Weapons School courses that create future generations of combat experts.

The damaging cuts call the viability of the entire US strategy in the Pacific into question. As Locklear noted, it takes three weeks for a carrier strike

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group to steam from the US West Coast to the Philippines; a C-17 can make the flight in 15 hours. But an effective US military presence in the Pacific requires ready, dispersed, and forward deployed air forces.

The much-heralded rebalance to the Pacific will not be effective if there is no money to execute it. Rebalancing requires substantive changes that cannot be done on a shoestring budget.

Pacific Air Forces recently advanced new strategic priorities: to expand its engagement with friendly nations; increase combat capability; and improve combat force integration. This will take sustained, reliable funding for many years.

Effective engagement requires airmen and equipment to rotate through the Pacific, frequently working with the armed forces of allied nations. It is hard to envision this increasing under the current budget restraints.

Increased combat capability can come from many things, most of which require money. US forces in the region must be prepared for worst-case scenarios. A shooting war in the Korean Peninsula is a perpetual concern, and China is modernizing its military forces in ways that appear designed to exploit US disadvantages. For example, there are a limited number of quality airfields available the US can operate from in the Western Pacific, and even fewer with hardened facilities capable of riding out enemy attacks. China, meanwhile, has invested heavily in missiles capable of attacking bases as far out as Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.

There are several logical responses to this specific threat. Hardened structures, redundant systems, and rapid-repair capabilities are simple to plan but expensive to implement.

Dispersal is vital but tricky—many nations have no desire to host permanent US military forces. Others, even long-standing allies such as Australia, desire slow, low-profile military engagement. The Air Force will continue to look for new contingency bases, especially in the Southwest Pacific, but adding viable new operating locations requires relationship-building, infrastructure improvement, time, and money. To be viable operating locations, sites require fuel, weapons storage, and other improvements—a runway is not enough.

Finally, a successful Pacific strategy will depend upon new equipment. PACAF has boosted its combat capabilities over the past decade by introducing F-22s and C-17s to the theater while upgrading many other aircraft and systems, but USAF must keep pressing to preserve its qualitative edge.

Theater security packages rotate top-of-the-line combat aircraft through the theater to demonstrate US commitment to the region, and the continuous bomber presence on Guam bolsters US firepower throughout the Pacific.

Stealth aircraft deployments to the region generate a lot of international attention. By recently flying B-2 stealth bombers over the Korean Peninsula, the US sent a clear message to the saber-rattling North Korean regime that it should watch itself.

Longer term, PACOM will want F-35 fighters, KC-46 tankers, and the next generation bomber to all be based in the region. The Air Force needs to keep these programs on track, which is difficult enough even in the best of fiscal times.

What the nation really needs is for Congress to resolve the nation's budget impasse and put an end to sequestration. Until that happens, the Air Force will have only minimum flexibility in its accounts and will basically be barred from prioritizing its expenses. Today's budget nonsense jeopardizes the nation's ability to fight today's wars *and* to prevent tomorrow's. ■