

The Air Force has global reach with its bombers but needs airfields closer to the action.

The Search for Asian Bases

By Adam J. Hebert



USAF photo by SSgt. Shane Cuomo

USAF members from the 28th Air Expeditionary Wing download munitions from a B-52H at a forward location supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

IN the Cold War, the Air Force had a simple plan to make sure it could swiftly reach the Central Europe war zone: It based hundreds of aircraft in Germany, Britain, and other allied nations. The expected front line was right next door.

That was then—when US strategy pivoted on Europe. Today, the Air Force is under pressure to come up with a similar arrangement but in a different part of the world. Pentagon officials have ordered the Air Force to find new ways to position more aircraft, airmen, supplies, and fuel on the explosive rim of Asia.

Defense planners say the Asia-Pacific theater—an arc stretching from Egypt in the west through the Persian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia to Japan in the east—will grow in strategic importance, as witness the war in Afghanistan.

DOD's recently completed 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review found a serious basing deficiency there and warned that the current concentration of military assets in Europe "is inadequate for the new strategic environment." The QDR called on USAF to find new footholds in Southwest and Southeast Asia, where the distances are great and the dangers numerous.

The QDR directs the Secretary of the Air Force, James G. Roche, to "increase contingency basing in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as in the Arabian Gulf." It asks Roche to "ensure sufficient en route infrastructure for refueling and logistics to support operations in the Arabian Gulf or Western Pacific areas."

The war in Afghanistan is an extreme example of the access challenges highlighted in the QDR report. When that conflict began, USAF



had no permanent presence in the nations adjacent to Afghanistan. During the early stages of the operation, the United States and its allies were restricted largely to the use of the Air Force's long-range bombers and carrier-based fighters.

In the early weeks of the war, the Navy's aircraft carriers standing by in the Arabian Sea generated 90 percent of all attack sorties flown against Afghan targets.

The BUFF and its Friends

It was the Air Force's heavy B-1B, B-2, and B-52H bombers, however, which delivered the most devastating blows. Though these heavyweights flew only about 10 percent of sorties, they delivered 80 percent of the ordnance dropped on Taliban military positions and terrorist targets, according to Defense Department figures. And reports from Taliban

At the start of the war, the US had no military presence on the territory of Afghanistan's neighbors. US air strikes came mostly from Air Force long-range bombers and Navy aircraft on carriers in the Arabian Sea.

Over the past 20 years, USAF had built up a substantial basing system around the Gulf region—most prominently in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Turkey, and the British-owned Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia. But these facilities were distant from Afghanistan. B-1B and B-52H bombers on Diego Garcia flew long-range missions. Shorter-range aircraft, such as AC-130 gunships, F-15E fighters, and support aircraft, flew a limited number of missions from some of the Gulf bases, requiring numerous aerial refuelings.

To gain greater operational flexibility, Washington moved to secure access to several "contingency" support and operational bases in Pakistan to the south and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north. Noted on the map here are some mentioned prominently in the press. Not all have been used. The listing on this map is not intended to be comprehensive.

Indian Ocean

Diego Garcia
2,500 miles from
Afghanistan

defectors and prisoners made plain that B-52 raids had a shattering psychological impact.

“For the time being, it looks like the bombers are doing fine,” retired Gen. Richard E. Hawley, former commander of Air Combat Command, said at the height of the air campaign in late November. Hawley said, however, that the type and number of aircraft that would be needed over Afghanistan was bound to change as the mission evolved. “It really depends upon what we’re trying to do,” he said.

Even in the early days of the war, shorter-range USAF aircraft, such as AC-130 gunships and F-15E fighters, participated, though they flew a limited number of missions. These aircraft, launched from bases in the Gulf region, could not operate as efficiently as long-range bombers and large support aircraft.

Hawley maintained it is “always better” to have fighters deployed close to the arena of combat. The alternative would be to operate tactical aircraft out of distant bases, an activity that requires extensive aerial tanker support that would generate a lesser number of sorties than would otherwise be possible.

The problem caused by poor access was eased somewhat by the fact that US airpower wiped out Taliban air defenses in the first days of the campaign. That left heavy bombers free to traverse Afghan airspace without fighter escorts, enabled all air-

craft to operate in daylight hours, and greatly reduced the number of targets to be attacked.

Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said Enduring Freedom is unlike the 1991 Gulf War or 1999’s Operation Allied Force over Kosovo “where land-based [tactical] air had the predominant role.” Now, Jumper said, “we have another construct, but ... the nation has the tools to deal with it. That’s the important part.”

In the early going, USAF units had access to several bases scattered across the area, none of them close to Afghanistan. Key facilities included bases in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Diego Garcia, Guam, Japan, and South Korea.

Diego Garcia is secure and particularly useful for attack operations by B-1B and B-52 heavy bombers. However, the British-owned Indian Ocean atoll lies 2,500 miles from Afghanistan. While this poses no problem for bombers, tactical fighters would face prohibitive distances.

In view of this situation, Washington moved to secure Air Force access to several new “contingency” bases that would support operations by shorter-ranged aircraft. These facilities were located in Pakistan to the southeast of Afghanistan and, to the north, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. All share borders with Afghanistan.

However, Afghanistan’s neighbors could not provide the kind of facilities to which the United States has

grown accustomed in its operations against Iraq over the past decade.

For operations enforcing Iraqi no-fly zones, USAF has been able to rely on the well-developed infrastructure at Incirlik AB, Turkey, and Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, among others. Both have long, modern runways, extensive repair facilities, and plentiful fuel and water, but the same cannot be assumed for bases in former Soviet republics.

Worst Case?

To some, Afghanistan actually presented an extreme worst-case situation for Air Force airpower: It is a landlocked nation on the other side of the world from the US, surrounded by poor, undeveloped countries lacking in modern infrastructure and possessing few high-value targets. Air Force officers don’t expect to encounter such serious problems every time USAF goes into action in Asia.

According to a USAF statement on the subject, the US has “a large group of friends and allies in the Pacific region with the capacity to support allied military operations,” including USAF’s missions.

It went on, “The United States enjoys a robust network of relationships, including treaty allies and friendly nations, on whom we can depend. [The Air Force is] continuously exploring the most effective approaches to prosecuting our global security strategy.”

Others are more skeptical. There is concern that other countries may not be willing to let USAF aircraft onto their soil to engage in future military operations, meaning the Air Force needs to identify other, more permanent basing options.

Secretary Roche will turn to the warfighting Commanders in Chief for advice on changes to the service’s lineup of foreign bases, according to service officials. The CINCs in the Pacific and Southwest Asia are considered the best sources of information about basing needs, an Air Force official said.

The search already is under way, and the US regional Commanders in Chief will look at the issue of what additional access is needed in their areas of responsibility.

A spokesman for Roche, Maj. Chet Curtis, explained that international negotiations will feed into a basing

USAF photo by SSGT. Sean M. Worrell



This is an aerial view of Maintenance City at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, which is used by coalition forces for operations enforcing the southern no-fly zone over Iraq.

plan. The Air Force will work closely with Pacific Command and Central Command CINCs “to develop regional defense engagement strategies that focus on achieving those goals and objectives mentioned in the QDR,” Curtis said.

These commanders know the strengths and limitations of existing basing arrangements, and officials say the more urgent the need for new bases, the more the CINCs will drive the process.

Two analyses by RAND’s Project Air Force underscore the operational difficulties that must be considered.

The Missile Threat

The first, a 1999 study of air base vulnerability, found that Air Force plans to use tactical fighters heavily for attack missions will put the aircraft in danger of counterattack from enemy missiles if the fighters are based near the conflict.

Several other analyses have come to similar conclusions, resulting in a rough expert consensus that the service should now expect to keep its fighters at bases at least 400 miles distant from known missile launch areas.

Paradoxically, other experts have noted that air bases should be situated as close as possible to a war zone to maximize the daily number of sorties, increase time on station over the target, and reduce demand on aerial tankers.

The second RAND study, “Evaluat-



USAF photo by SrA. Ashley Sorrells

Established USAF facilities, like Aviano Air Base in Italy, provide resources for operations over Iraq but are too far away to support action in Afghanistan. Here, SrA. Michael Morden refuels an F-16 at Aviano.

ing Possible Airfield Deployment Options: Middle East Contingency,” was released in mid-2001. In it, author William O’Malley argued that the Air Force should develop fighter bases 400 and 800 miles away from the mostly likely targets. Get any closer, he said, and tactical aircraft come under missile threat. Move farther away and the daily sortie rate “drops dramatically.”

The report also recommended the Air Force favor large air bases and concentrate on finding basing in nations with which the United States has historically had good relations—

though RAND noted that allies can change over time, particularly in the Middle East.

According to the report, most airfields outside the Gulf region “are not optimized to support Western combat operations; US and NATO aircrews are not familiar with them; and there are no pre-positioned stocks or sustainment chains” in place to support long-term operations.

The expectation is that the Air Force will work first to improve the capabilities of a handful of existing bases, such as its now-critical facilities on Diego Garcia and Guam and, for bomber operations, RAF Fairford in Britain.

These facilities have served well in the past and are viewed as logical places for the Air Force to seek an increased presence, officials say. These existing bases can host large numbers of high-value airplanes such as bombers and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms like the E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System.

According to officials, Guam is a site of particular significance. For starters, Andersen Air Force Base is situated only about 1,800 miles from the Taiwan Strait. From there, long-range aircraft such as the B-2 could fly missions over Asia with far greater efficiency. B-2 pilots have demonstrated the ability to fly 44-hour, round-trip missions from Whiteman AFB, Mo., to Afghanistan and on to

USAF photo by TSgt. Scott Reed



It takes some work to build a base from scratch. SSgt. LeRoy Huyghue III waits in his dump truck for TSgt. Dale Scott to deposit a load of gravel destined for a tent city the 823rd RED HORSE Squadron is creating at a forward location.



Newly arrived USAF members walk through an entry control point at Prince Sultan AB, which, like other well-developed facilities in the Middle East, is too far from Afghanistan for shorter-range aircraft such as fighters.

Diego Garcia, but Guam would make for much shorter flights.

Vietnam Memories

One Air Staff officer called the base at Andersen “absolutely enormous,” with long runways and enough ramp space to accommodate hundreds of aircraft. Another source said the base handled a complement of more than 150 B-52 bombers during the Vietnam War and, with minor improvements, could now accommodate hundreds of fighters, bombers, and support aircraft.

Guam, Diego Garcia, and Fairford are expected to remain outside the range of missiles fired by any nation other than Russia or China, adding a measure of force protection.

Still, these bases are not considered sufficient, in and of themselves, for future USAF needs. Air Force officials say it is likely Washington also will secure access to new operating locations in other nations, though they concede this will be a long and politically difficult task.

“Contingency basing is a function of regional strategic planning,” Curtis observed. “The Air Force is supporting regional efforts to develop such a strategy in consonance with QDR goals and objectives.”

Curtis added that it is too soon to know when new bases will be identified or established.

One solution would be to spread aircraft to other US territories such as the Northern Mariana Islands,

Wake Island, and Midway Islands, as well as in the state of Alaska.

Increasing the US presence at these locations would reduce the concentration of aircraft at any single location, while still enabling the Pentagon to undertake operations from facilities much closer to Asia.

“It would sure make sense to take advantage” of the substantial US investment already put into these locations, one officer said.

Apart from the Air Force’s existing bases and possible expansion locations within US territories and states, there are few other nations of interest.

One USAF officer pointed to Australia as a possible future deployment site. From bases located in the northern part of that nation, the Air Force could operate not only long-range aircraft but also unmanned aerial vehicles such as Global Hawk. Falling within range of such aircraft would be the Taiwan Strait and Korean peninsula. “We have exercises over there all the time,” a planning official noted.

RAND identified a sizeable group of existing air bases around the Middle East that the Air Force may want to consider as future contingency bases, but many analysts are wary of these sites, some of which are in Saudi Arabia. They warn that they fall into a

gray area—uncomfortably close to likely scenes of conflict and worryingly vulnerable to political disruption.

High Politics

The importance of political factors in picking new bases cannot be overstated, several experts said. Even long-standing US allies can and frequently do disagree with Washington on the question of what constitutes full access.

One official argues that “it doesn’t make any sense” to build up an international basing presence if host governments can tell the United States not to use the base for combat operations. This is not a concern with Great Britain, for example, but it is a major irritant in relations with Saudi Arabia, which routinely forbids the US to launch combat operations from its soil.

Others think it would be folly to base large numbers of combat aircraft in nations such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and others in the Middle East that are busy trying to fend off Muslim extremists bent on overthrowing regimes.

Israel seems all but out of the question. Putting bases in the Jewish state, most analysts assert, would create a serious political backlash within Arab nations, including US allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and thus damage US interests throughout the Middle East. Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the US has found strong regional political support for the war on terrorism, but backing of this nature cannot be assumed in all cases.

USAF officials say Asian and Pacific nations have literally hundreds of bases that could support air operations, but Washington must first engage the nations in long-term diplomatic dialogue, which seems a certainty at this point.

All in all, a redistribution of worldwide bases over the next decade appears highly likely as the Pentagon seeks to shift from its long-standing “Eurocentric” view, established during the Cold War, to a new alignment that places greater emphasis on access on the Asian continent. Afghanistan was only the first stage of this campaign. ■

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