



PACAF must contend with smoldering crises, vast distances, and the aging of its aircraft.

Airpower for a

When the Cold War ended, some parts of the Air Force were forced to take drastic cuts in force structure and personnel, and nowhere was this more true than in Europe. United States Air Forces in Europe in 1990 had 10 tactical fighter wings. Within a few years, USAFE had lost seven of them, leaving only three.



By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

Big Ocean

By contrast, the Air Force draw-down barely touched the service's Pacific contingent. The Cold War version of Pacific Air Forces (counting forces in Alaska) comprised seven fighter wings. It still has six—two in Japan, two in South Korea, and two in Alaska. PACAF disbanded only its Philippines-based wing, after the destruction of Clark Air Base by the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo.

PACAF has for more than a decade overshadowed USAFE. The number of PACAF personnel—both uniformed and civilian—declined only 17 percent, compared to a 50 percent drop in USAFE. The 42,000 airmen in PACAF exceed the number in Europe by 7,000.

Things unfolded as they did because, in the Pacific region, the fall of the Soviet Union was not the millennial event that it was on the



PACAF's area of responsibility covers more than half the Earth's surface. Here, an F-16 based at Eielson AFB, Alaska, near the Arctic Circle, approaches Andersen AFB, Guam, near the equator.

other side of the world. The Soviet naval and bomber threat vanished from the Far East, but other military problems—in Korea, Taiwan, and elsewhere—continued as before. In fact, the threat has diversified, as new forms of danger appear in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean areas.

To better address a hodgepodge of requirements in a vast region, PACAF is taking a fresh look at its basing structure and transforming itself with precision weapons, advanced intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance systems, and stronger long-range aircraft capabilities.

The Guam Factor

At present, much of the Air Force's attention is focused on Guam, the 30-mile-long tropical island situated in the Western Pacific, roughly 3,500 miles west of Hawaii and 1,200 miles east of the Philippines. It has about 150,000 residents and more than 7,000 military personnel and family members. It is home to Andersen Air Force Base.

The Air Force thinks Guam has great potential as a staging area for combat forces, though none have been permanently based there since 1990, when a B-52 wing, moved there during the Vietnam War, was inactivated.

In the intervening years, however, the Air Force has continued to invest heavily in Andersen's infrastructure, which has allowed it to become a valuable contingency location. The air base also has enormous capacity

to bed down aircraft, and USAF used it to great advantage during recent operations.

Gen. William J. Begert, PACAF commander, told a group of defense reporters in January that he would like to add force structure in Guam. He noted that Andersen hosted more than 150 B-52 bombers during the Vietnam War. More recently, in the American buildup to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, he said, the base went from having no airplanes on the ground to "literally 75 ... within 48 hours."

And in what has become a regular

occurrence, a detachment of B-52s earlier this year deployed to Andersen.

Guam has many attractive qualities. Among them is the fact that it is US territory and PACAF does not have to obtain foreign approval to base aircraft there or to employ them in combat operations. Moreover, fighter forces on Guam would be within combat range of the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and the Taiwan Strait but still far enough from China and North Korea to be beyond the range of most missiles.

"Guam's geostrategic importance cannot be overstated," declared Adm. Thomas B. Fargo, commander of US Pacific Command, in a recent session before Congress.

Fargo said that Guam has an "increasing role as a power projection hub" and that, as a consequence, Navy and Air Force facilities there need continuous improvement.

Guam is located in what's known as "Typhoon Alley," Begert said. The Air Force has enhanced some of its aircraft facilities to be able to withstand the severe storms that frequently sweep through the area. The base already has one large, typhoon-proof hangar. A second has been funded and "will be going up shortly," said the PACAF commander.

At present, Andersen serves mainly as a valuable logistics hub. Begert believes, however, that USAF could decide, in the not-too-distant future, to return aircraft to Guam permanently. Andersen, he went on, could



In recent years, USAF bombers have become regular visitors to Guam. In February, a contingent of B-52s and airmen from Minot AFB, N.D., deployed to the island. They were replaced in May by B-52 units from Barksdale AFB, La.

serve as a home for a fighter wing, tankers, Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles, or bombers. All are “attractive options” that “make good sense,” Begert said.

Hickam AFB, Hawaii, like Andersen, offers much unused capacity. Compared to similar bases on the US West Coast, Hickam is thousands of miles closer to the East Asian rim. Like Andersen, Hickam features plenty of ramp space, enormous fuel storage capability, and ample munitions storage capacity.

However, Hawaii is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and can in no sense be viewed as a forward base. It is still more than 5,000 miles from Taiwan and more than 4,500 miles from South Korea. Hawaii-based fighter forces could not provide large numbers of sorties for a conflict in either area.

Begert believes that PACAF needs, first, to modernize and enhance its existing force structure and “right-size” its forces at existing locations. The command operates nine major bases in Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Japan, and South Korea.

“I think we need to keep what we have and see what we can do to enhance what we have in terms of capabilities,” he said.

The Equipment Is Old

PACAF’s operational units comprise more than 300 aircraft, including 260 or so fighters. The fighters are among the oldest in USAF’s inventory. Keeping them at a high level of readiness has become difficult and expensive.

Maj. Gen. David A. Deptula, PACAF’s operations director, points out that the command must meet demands from Alaska to the equator, from the US West Coast to India, with what he calls “a geriatric fighter, tanker, and mobility force.” It is a problem with which he has some personal experience. (See “Captain Deptula’s F-15,” at right.)

Begert has said that aging airplanes are his “biggest readiness issue” and singled out the F-15s based at Kadena AB, Japan, for special concern. Those fighters have failed to meet their target mission capable rate of 79 percent in every year since 2000. They were “down to about 70 percent last year,” according to Begert.

The PACAF commander noted that, as a result of structural failures,



Maj. Gen. David Deptula and the infamous Kadena F-15.

Captain Deptula’s F-15

Maj. Gen. David A. Deptula, Pacific Air Force’s director of operations, was the source of a now-famous anecdote about a 25-year-old F-15.

In 1999, Deptula was commander of Operation Northern Watch at Incirlik AB, Turkey. A detachment of F-15s from Kadena AB, Japan, arrived for duty. They had been sent to help enforce the so-called “no-fly zone” over northern Iraq.

Some 20 years earlier, Deptula had been stationed in the Far East. “I was a young captain at Kadena in 1979” when the base was making a transition to F-15 operations, he recounted in an interview. He was naturally interested in the arriving Kadena fighters. One day, he was scheduled to fly, and he noted the F-15’s tail number: 78-500.

It was the fighter he had flown at Kadena.

“The difference was, in 1979, it was a brand-new airplane,” he said. By 1999, this particular Eagle had accumulated more than 5,500 flying hours.

Partway into his Northern Watch sortie, Deptula left Iraqi airspace to meet a tanker for aerial refueling. That’s when the fighter’s emergency light panel lit up “like a Christmas tree,” he said.

He described the situation: “I’ve got more than 50 percent of the lights on. I’d flown the F-15 for more than 20 years at the time, and I’m kind of familiar with the emergencies in the F-15. I’d never seen anything like this. I mean, I’ve got generator lights, I’ve got hydraulics lights, I’ve got a ‘fuel low’ light, ... so I turn back to Incirlik.

“Meanwhile, the fuel gauge goes down to nothing, which is kind of disconcerting,” he said. After landing, maintenance crews determined that a wiring bundle that runs from the sensors in the back of the airplane to the instrument panel had rotted with age.

“All the insulation on that wiring just corroded, disintegrated, to the point where it just shorted out that wire bundle,” Deptula said.

Five years later, the aircraft is still flying at Kadena.

the Air Force had to replace the wings on five of its 48 fighters at Kadena just in the past year. In Begert’s words, “It’s just one thing after another.”

When an airplane goes down for maintenance, Deptula said, several bad things happen. Overall readiness drops. The command has to find a replacement aircraft. And the Air Force spends “an enormous amount of money” to fix the airplane.

“We need new aircraft,” said Dep-

tula, “not just because we want new airplanes but to reduce the cost and improve the capability.”

Fargo told the House Armed Services Committee, “We continue to be concerned about low Pacific Command aircraft mission capable (MC) rates.” He pointed out that, in Fiscal 2003, only one of PACAF’s six F-15, F-16, and A-10 wings met minimum MC standards. In addition, said Fargo, many of the F-15Cs at Kadena are 26 years old—11 years beyond



SSgt. Michael Wiest, USAF, and TSgt. Norihiro Matsumoto, Japan Air Self-Defense Force, go over maintenance procedures during Exercise Cope North. Numerous exercises foster strong bilateral relationships in the region.

the Air Force's maximum desirable age for fighter aircraft. "We must recapitalize our fighter force structure," he warned.

Deptula pointed out that the problem is not limited to PACAF. "The bottom line here," he said, "is we need new iron in our Air Force—in all these categories—or we simply are not going to have an Air Force to sustain our superpower capability in the future."

Deptula said that PACAF will get newer fighters as USAF fields its new F/A-22 at Langley AFB, Va., beginning next year. When that happens, Langley's less aged F-15s will become available and could flow to Kadena as replacements.

It is also "very much a possibility," said Deptula, that F/A-22s themselves could be sent to the Pacific region just after the initial deployment at Langley.

Fargo encouraged lawmakers to support the fielding of the F/A-22 in the Pacific. He said, "The transformational capabilities of this remarkable aircraft will have enduring relevance for our warfighting needs."

The PACOM commander also asked for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), saying early fielding of Global Hawk in the Pacific Theater is essential because of the "broad expanse" and "lack of access into denied areas."

Reducing the Distance

Beginning in 2005, PACAF will be getting new C-17 strategic airlift-

ers to replace C-130 tactical transports. A C-17 fleet will help overcome huge distances in the Pacific region.

Command plans call for initial stationing of eight C-17s at Hickam by the end of 2005. Later, another eight new C-17s will go to Elmendorf AFB, Alaska.

When the C-17s bed down at Hickam, it will be the first time the Air Force has permanently based strategic airlifters outside the continental US, said Col. Raymond G. Torres, commander of the 15th Airlift Wing at Hickam.

Pushing aircraft such as the C-17 out to the theaters makes them more responsive, said Torres, who expects Hickam to play a larger role in future mobility plans.

According to Deptula, PACAF had some "challenges" getting equipment to India to participate in joint exercises earlier this year. That should not be a problem "when we have our own C-17s," he said.

The addition of C-17s will improve the airlift picture. However, increased mobility is only one facet of Air Force plans for meeting its combat needs in the region. Brig. Gen. Polly A. Peyer, PACAF's logistics director, points out that commanders "can't depend upon airlift for munitions in wartime." That is why PACAF maintains stocks of munitions at key forward locations—and why it wants to do more.

Guam and Hawaii both host large

quantities of bombs and fuel. Other supplies are pre-positioned at various locations, said Peyer, with the most "sophisticated" in South Korea.

She explained that some prepared airlift packages are stored in the US, ready for emergency deployment, while huge inventories of "swing stocks" are deliverable by sea.

However, noted Peyer, pipeline times "can be difficult" if the US needs to quickly deliver equipment and supplies from the US to the theater. For this reason, it is critical that the Air Force maintain a robust forward posture.

Changes in the global security environment, Fargo told lawmakers, have provided "both the opportunity and the necessity to improve our force posture, positioning forces where they have the greatest warfighting relevance while reducing irritants to host nation citizens."

He emphasized that Pacific Command is "not looking to move combat power back toward the US mainland."

Facing Three Threats

Fargo cited as his top three security concerns the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula, a "miscalculation" resulting in war in the Taiwan Strait or over Kashmir in the border between India and Pakistan, and "transnational" terrorist operations.

Northeast Asia is home to more than 90,000 American troops in Japan and South Korea. It is, therefore, the Pacific Theater's "center of gravity," said Fargo.

The Pacific commander termed the military forces of North Korea "the most immediate security threat." To deal with that threat, PACOM maintains about 37,000 US troops in South Korea and nearly 54,000 troops in Japan. In 2003, Japan contributed about \$4 billion to the upkeep and support of these US forces, said Fargo, calling that commitment "the most generous of any US ally." That partnership, said Fargo, is focused primarily on the Pyongyang threat.

"Although the likelihood of war on the peninsula remains low," he said, "the stakes posed by the North Korean conventional threat remain high and are even higher if North Korea continues its pursuit of nuclear programs."

North Korea maintains more than

70 percent of its forces within some 60 miles of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Fargo stated that Pyongyang's missile production and missile technology exports pose a grave proliferation concern. Its missile inventory includes more than 500 short-range Scud missiles and medium-range No Dong missiles capable of delivering conventional or chemical payloads well beyond the peninsula. And, said Fargo, ongoing research on a multiple-stage variant of the Taepo Dong missile may give North Korea the means to target the continental US.

Washington plans to shift most of its forces in South Korea away from the DMZ and out of Seoul, South Korea's huge and crowded capital. This will be done as the Pentagon makes its first major change in the size of the force on the peninsula in half a century. In June, US and South Korean officials were in negotiations to decide how best to realign the forces.

With 37,000 US troops now in South Korea, the Pentagon may cut some 12,500 uniformed personnel. However, officials say any reductions will be made with overall capabilities in mind, ensuring no net loss in combat power. In many ways, advances in airpower and land warfare, as well as the shift to more joint warfare, are making the reduction of ground forces in Korea possible.

The US will spend \$11 billion over the next five years to upgrade force



USAF photo by SSgt. Corey Clements

USAF tries to keep Pacific aircraft at high readiness, but advancing age makes this increasingly difficult. Here, SSgt. Sedrick Byrd, an aerospace propulsion craftsman at Osan AB, South Korea, inspects a jet engine.

structure on the peninsula, and South Korea will pay to relocate and bed down US forces at new facilities farther from the DMZ.

Fargo said that PACOM plans to create two hubs of enduring installations—an air-oriented hub focused on Osan Air Base and a sea-oriented hub in the southeast near Pusan. “These consolidations will improve unit readiness, force protection, and quality of life while reducing adverse impact on our host nation,” said Fargo.

Osan, one of PACAF's two bases on the peninsula, anchors a hub of-

fering “access to six C-17-capable airfields, two world-class port facilities,” and a mature rail and road network, said Army Col. Daniel Wilson, chief engineer for US Forces Korea.

Some 9,000 airmen in South Korea, most stationed at Osan and Kunsan Air Bases, are fully integrated with ground forces as well as other US and South Korean air assets. Air and space power gives the defenders in Korea an asymmetric advantage, and airpower would play a critical role in defeating a North Korean invasion. (See “Keeping Watch on Korea,” June, p. 28.)

Nonetheless, said Begert, the air defenses of North Korea present a “very difficult challenge.” He explained, “They’ve had a long time to [set up their structure], to harden their facilities, and it would be a tough challenge for us.”

According to the PACAF commander, there probably are other countries with “more daunting” air defense systems than North Korea, but, he said, in planning for an offensive by Pyongyang, PACAF must consider both air-to-air threats and surface-to-air threats. The surface-to-air threats, said Begert, “are becoming more and more sophisticated, and we’re finding ourselves, in some cases, behind the power curve.”

Begert maintained North Korea's SAMs are one reason PACAF needs the F/A-22 because “it’s what gets you in and gets to knock down that

USAF photo by SSgt. Adrian Cadiz



Some of the Air Force's oldest F-15s are at Kadena AB, Japan, and some of the newest Eagles are at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. Pictured are F-15s of Elmendorf's 90th Fighter Squadron in an operational readiness inspection.



PACAF's 5th Air Force in Japan comprises fighters, mobility aircraft, and intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance airplanes at Kadena, Misawa, and Yokota air bases. Pictured are F-15s flying past Mt. Fuji, near Tokyo.

door so the rest of the forces can flow in."

North Korea has had 50 years of freedom to set up its air defenses. "Unlike Iraq," said Begert, "where we had years and months to deliberately take down their capability, in North Korea, should they attack, it will be all at once, and it will be a standing start."

The second PACOM threat—a miscalculation leading to war—could apply to either the China-Taiwan or the India-Pakistan situations. Communist China and democratic Taiwan remain at odds over reunification. India and Pakistan are nowhere near a resolution of their border conflict.

Political sensitivities mean that the United States has no treaties with Taiwan and no military presence on the island, but there is no doubt the US would come to its defense if Communist China attempted to seize the island by force. Fargo stated that Taiwan's status "remains the largest friction point between the United States and China," and the US opposes "unilateral action by either party to change the status quo across the strait."

In a war, China would pose a major challenge. It boasts significant numbers of advanced aircraft, missiles, and air defense systems, and geography dictates that airpower would play the leading role in the early days of a battle.

Begert told defense reporters ear-

lier this year that Taiwan had made "some incremental improvements" in its military. PACAF has "quietly worked with the Taiwan Air Force," he said, particularly "describing how we fight jointly." He went on to describe the Taiwan Air Force as "very capable."

China has been investing heavily in the sophistication of its airplanes and surface-to-air missiles and the ability to project power, noted Begert. "It is on a glide path to continue to increase significantly."

What Fargo termed "transnational threats" includes terrorism, which has reared its head in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fargo noted that Exercise Cobra Gold, one of DOD's largest multinational exercises, "is specifically designed to develop cooperation against these transnational threats."

Cobra Gold 2004, held in Thailand in May, included the armed forces of Mongolia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the US. The exercise is typical of US efforts to nurture a web of relations in the region with as many prospective allies as possible. Officials note that five of the United States' seven mutual defense treaties are with Pacific nations—Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand.

Begert said that the US has had "some very quiet success" working with other nations against terrorists. "There has certainly been a problem in Asia; ... it's been a transit point

for money as well as personnel," he noted.

Contingency Access

To help meet this broad range of threats, PACOM has been moving "to diversify contingency access opportunities in the Pacific region," Fargo told lawmakers. He said that having additional access options "improves training opportunities, contributes to theater security cooperation objectives, and, most important, provides warfighting flexibility when we need it most."

Fargo termed these contingency options "cooperative security locations," which, he said, would be "places rather than bases" ranging throughout the Pacific.

The goal for the region is to have a large, varied menu of solutions.

Because the United States can never be certain where its next fight will be, it is best to develop an array of allies across the region, said retired Gen. Richard E. Hawley, a former commander of US Forces Japan and Air Combat Command. That way, he said, the "odds are, someone will have coincident interests" and be willing to provide basing or other assistance.

Several US territories besides Guam could provide permanent basing options. These include the Aleutians, Kwajalein, Midway, and Wake Island. But "look at the range arcs," said Hawley. These territories probably don't offer anything not already available on Guam.

Building long-term bilateral relationships through exchanges and exercises reduces the need to construct new bases in the region. "Instead of wanting to go in and build US air bases, it is probably best for all concerned" if USAF continues relationship building, said Deptula, "so bases can be made available when needed."

Hawley said, "It's called being expeditionary."

According to Begert, a "lily pad" concept "is something that can be pretty cost effective." He said that PACAF has had "very good success in Asia, ... getting access to the bases that we need." Although such deployments are often unpublicized, Begert emphasized that "the countries in Asia like our presence in Asia." He added, "They don't see us as threatening; quite the opposite, they see us as stabilizing." ■