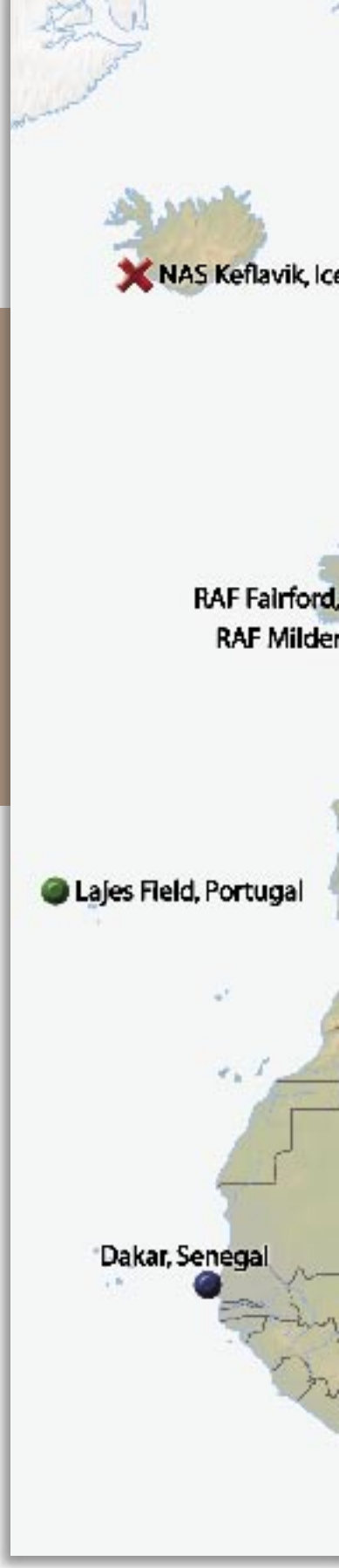
**By changing its worldwide basing, the Air Force is striving to break out of the Cold War straitjacket.**

# PRESENCE, Not Permanence

**By Adam J. Hebert,** Senior Editor




The Air Force is packing its bags and leaving Iceland, closing out more than 50 years of US military operations on that island nation. A contingent of F-15s—the last in a long line of air superiority fighters kept at NAS Keflavik—departs this month. An Air Force rescue helicopter squadron will move elsewhere in Europe.

All 2,200 US Air Force and US Navy personnel will be gone by the end of September.

Iceland is the latest but certainly not the only or last example of change in the Air Force's overseas basing posture. The service continues to adjust its structure to a world where the threats have changed, flexibility is key, and forces no longer are expected to fight in place.

Under a new basing plan announced in 2004, the US over the next decade will bring home 60,000 to 70,000 troops and close and consolidate overseas bases and facilities that no longer are needed. Most of the returning troops will be soldiers based in Germany or South Korea. While not many airmen will return, the system in which they operate will change dramatically, as can be seen in the case of Iceland.

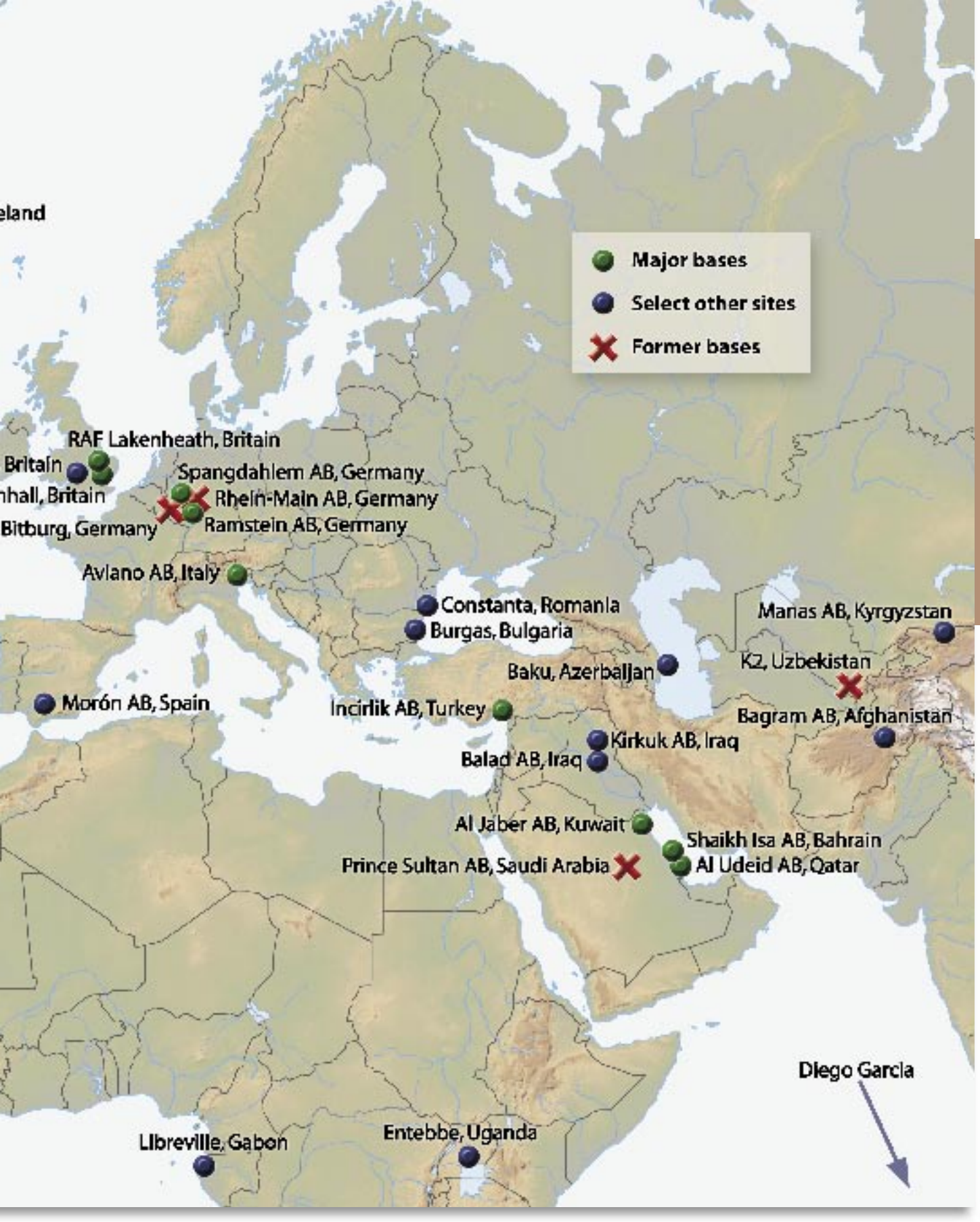
In the Cold War, Iceland was a highly strategic location, ideal for defending the North Atlantic against the depredations of Soviet naval forces and long-range Soviet bombers.

### When the Cold War Ended

To the US military, however, Iceland's significance died along with the Cold War, around 1990. Top Air Force officials for years had been dropping hints that USAF should leave the island in order to redeploy forces to more important locations. The move also will save roughly $260 million per year, about what it costs to keep US forces at Keflavik.

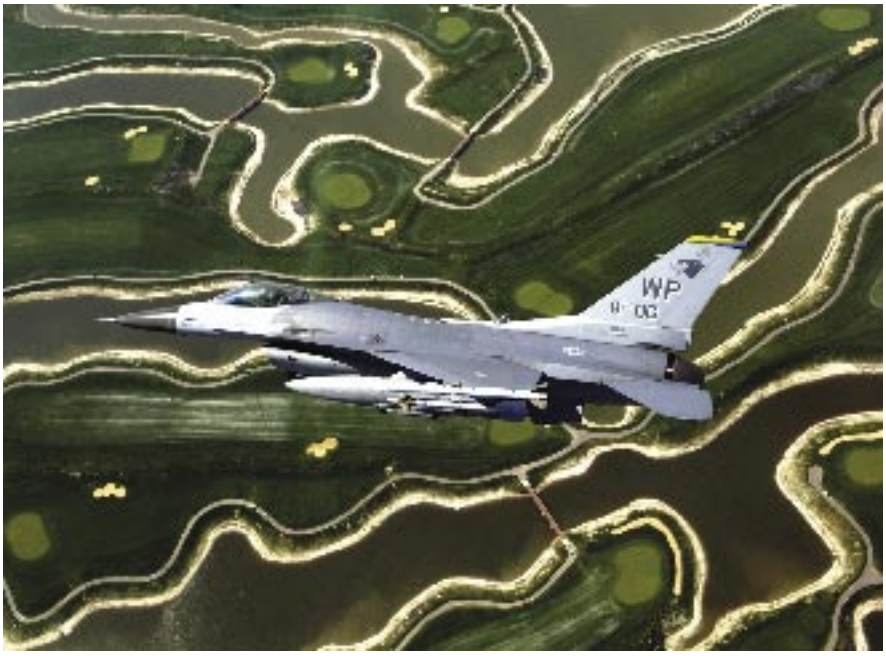
Officials emphasize that the US still will live up to its NATO treaty obligation to defend Iceland, as that nation has no military forces of its own. However, it won't garrison forces there anymore.

The Air Force won't be bringing home large numbers of airmen, but is constantly updating its basing structure. "At the conclusion of the Korean War, US forces were stationed overseas in




Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov

***The Air Force maintains a sizeable network of overseas bases, ranging from large permanent installations to part-time cooperative security locations. Here are some operating locations in Europe, Southwest Asia, and Africa. The listing is not exhaustive.***



USAF photo by MSgt. Richard Freeland

***Above is an F-16 from the 8th Fighter Wing at Kunsan AB, South Korea. This prosperous northeast Asian nation still hosts a huge US presence.***

a posture that would remain relatively unchanged throughout the Cold War," Pentagon officials wrote in a September 2004 report on global basing.

Although the number of troops based overseas was dramatically reduced after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, "forces remained concentrated in Cold War theaters—Western Europe and Northeast Asia," while the Middle East and the Western Pacific grew in strategic importance.

There are currently no plans to build permanent new Air Force bases overseas, so the demand for new locations will be met with temporary bases, while the enduring bases will frequently get even larger. Overseas USAF operating locations will, paradoxically, become both larger and more permanent, smaller and temporary.

In 2004, the Pentagon initiated its global posture review, to guide the US military presence overseas. The Defense Department is now defining its overseas operating locations in one of three ways.

The big bases such as Ramstein AB, Germany, Osan Air Base in South Korea, and Kadena AB, Japan, are now known as "main operating bases." They host permanently stationed combat forces and offer robust infrastructure.

"Forward operating sites" are locations kept "warm" with a limited US military presence that can be quickly ramped up if needed. These on-call facilities include Soto Cano AB, Honduras; RAF Fairford in the United Kingdom; and Paya Lebar Airfield in Singapore.

"Cooperative security locations" are sites the US has scoped out in advance but that have little or no permanent US presence. Sometimes referred to as "lily pads," CSLs include the airfields at Dakar, Senegal; Entebbe, Uganda; and Libreville, Gabon.

"We want to have our forces where people want them," noted Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in 2004. "We have no desire to be where we're not wanted." This philosophy was reinforced the following year, when Uzbekistan notified the US that it wanted the Americans out of Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, which had been supporting Operation Enduring Freedom operations in nearby Afghanistan. (See "Aerospace World: US Out of Uzbekistan," September 2005, p. 30.)

Remaining "wanted" often means moving out of urban areas, reducing overall force levels, or consolidating troops at the largest locations. Moves such as these "strengthen our relationships by reducing the frictions—accidents, incidents, and the like—associated with normal military activities in urban settings," noted Ryan Henry, DOD's policy chief.

### The Ramstein Waypoint

In Germany, Rhein-Main Air Base, once considered the "gateway to Europe," was recently vacated, with the property returned to the German government for an expansion of Frankfurt Airport. Meanwhile, Ramstein has proved to be a valuable stopover point on the way to the Middle East and is being updated. "It's one strategic airlift flight from the United States to Ramstein, unrefueled," noted Gen. Charles F. Wald, then deputy commander of US European Command. "It works out just perfectly."

Tens of thousands of Germany-based soldiers are returning to the United States, but officials say "bean counting" the numbers does not demonstrate combat capability or US commitment.

In Japan, 8,000 marines will probably

USAF photo by TSgt. Justin D. Pyle

***SrA. Brandon Hashida awaits a taxiing C-130 in Dakar, Senegal. Cooperative security locations such as Dakar have a minimal or no permanent US presence but can serve as valuable contingency operating locations.***

USAF photo by MSgt. John E. Lasky

***More than 50 years of US Air Force presence in Iceland will end when F-15s based at NAS Keflavik go home at the end of this month. Iceland's strategic military importance faded with the end of the Cold War.***

vacate several operating locations on the island of Okinawa, including Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. "This would enable the return of significant land in the densely populated areas south of Kadena," noted an October 2005 security planning document endorsed by Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and their Japanese counterparts.

The departing marines will likely consolidate on Guam, though plans have not yet been finalized. US and Japanese air forces will themselves link up at Yokota, currently a US-only base. Japan's Air Defense Command will be collocated with the headquarters for 5th Air Force at Yokota, near Tokyo, strengthening coordination for air and missile defense operations.

In South Korea, soldiers scattered across a patchwork of camps and forts near the Demilitarized Zone will consolidate in two large "hubs" in the central and southern parts of the country. The headquarters for US Forces Korea will move out of downtown Seoul to a new location near Osan Air Base, and the future USFK force will be 12,000 troops smaller than before.

These moves place the US troops away from both North Korean artillery and, as the DOD report put it, "the increasing congestion and sprawl of the greater Seoul area."

Improvements in precision attack and battle management capabilities, featuring the Air Force, will increase combat power in Korea, despite the one-third reduction in soldiers.

This is "not intuitively obvious," noted Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr. in a Naval War College paper this year. North Korea, however, "certainly grasped that the United States was increasing its precision-strike power around the Korean peninsula while reducing its own forces' exposure to DPRK firepower amassed just north of the Demilitarized Zone." North Korea responded by denouncing the American reconfiguration.

### The Host-Nation Problem

Utility is also key. Forces are useless if they cannot be employed, and recent history has shown that host-nation priorities are not always the same as those of the United States. In 2003, Turkey refused to let the Army's 4th Infantry Division traverse its territory at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Air Force had to perform the first-ever C-17 airdrop from Aviano AB, Italy, to help open a northern front.

Negotiations with Turkey about access rights did not end there. Senior defense officials have said DOD is interested in moving some F-16s from Spangdahlem AB, Germany, to Incirlik AB, Turkey, but this would require permission for "more flexible use" of Incirlik. Moving an F-16 squadron to Incirlik "remains an option that could be exercised in the future," Air Force officials recently wrote in response to query, "if US strategic requirements and Turkish national policy align."

Political hang-ups such as these are avoided when bases are on US territory, which is one of the many reasons that Guam is considered so valuable an operating location in the Pacific. (See "Airpower for a Big Ocean," July

USAF photo by MSgt. Dave Ahlschwede

***SSgt. Olga Valery (on the right) patrols Camp Sarafovo, Bulgaria, with a Bulgarian military policeman.***

USAF photo by MSgt. John E. Lasky

***Ramstein AB, Germany, has developed into a strategic hub for the US Air Force. In the background, C-17s from McChord AFB, Wash., await their next mission.***

2004, p. 36.) The Air Force wants to establish a global strike task force at Andersen AFB, Guam, including 12 tankers and three Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. Those permanently assigned aircraft could be joined by two squadrons of fighters that would deploy to the island on a rotational basis. All of these assets would be in addition to the firepower already available from the B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers that have been regularly deploying to Guam.

When US territory is not available, a good ally is the next best thing, and the US has long benefited from its close military relationship with the United Kingdom.

The UK's island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean has frequently hosted US bombers for combat operations, and RAF Fairford has served as an occasional base for expeditionary bomber operations from just after World War II through Iraqi Freedom. Fairford (along with Andersen and Diego Garcia) is one of three forward operating locations for B-2 stealth bombers.

During the Cold War, the military was expected to fight in place. Forces, whether they are based in the United States or overseas, are now expected to deploy to hot spots. This makes operating locations near major airlift bases and seaports attractive, and sites close to high-priority areas in the Middle East and Asia are at a premium.

No matter where US troops call home, "we think that they'll need to move, ... [so] the mobility aspects are very important," said a senior defense official in a 2004 background briefing about the global posture review.

The Congressionally chartered Overseas Basing Commission warned in its August 2005 final report that it is "concerned" that "adequate strategic sealift, airlift, and pre-positioned equipment and stocks do not exist and that the current intratheater airlift [capability] is overstressed. ... Mobility assets are inadequate to meet projected lift demand."

## Pushing South and East

The Air Force often seeks bases with an eye on minimizing the mobility burden. European Command's push "south and east" has generated a lot of attention, but the US is not moving into Bulgaria and Romania simply because those nations support US policy. These nations, bordering the Black Sea, are hundreds of miles closer to Iraq and Afghanistan than Ramstein is. That allows the Air Force to efficiently set up mobility "air bridges" to the Middle East.

At Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield in Constanta, Romania, a full range of USAF C-5, C-17, C-130, and C-141 cargo aircraft steadily resupplied forces heading into Iraq during early days of OIF.

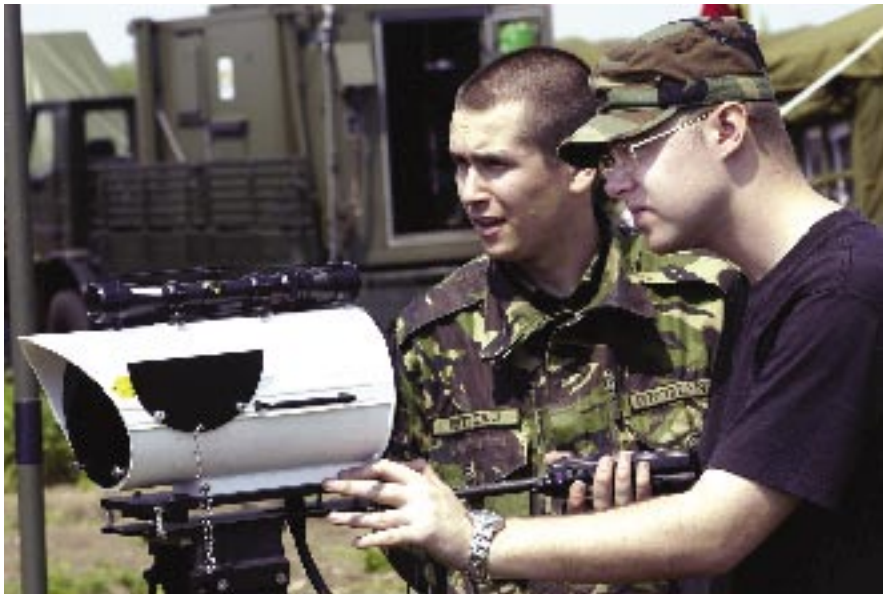
Farther south, KC-10 tankers and C-17 transports set up shop at Burgas Airport and Camp Sarafovo in Bulgaria. From Bulgaria, the mobility aircraft established an air bridge to Iraq and simultaneously were closer to the midpoint of the deployment route to the "Stans" for Enduring Freedom.

The Air Force remains on the lookout for new staging bases. "There could be locations [in the Caspian Sea region] that we could, for a very short period of time, land and operate out of, or use as a stop-off point," Wald said last year.

The airfield at Baku, Azerbaijan (2,000 miles east of Ramstein), is "very appealing to get some minimal repair to," Wald said, so that the Air Force could "land and be able to proceed back through the Stans into Afghanistan."

Bases supporting current operations in the Central Command area of responsibility remain busy.

In May, a fleet of 20 Predator unmanned aircraft racked up 2,250 flying



USAF photo by MSgt. John E. Lasky

***At Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield, Romania, A1C Ian Hoagland (far right) consults with Romanian Air Force Pvt. Ciprian Bistieru as they set up a laser module used for high-speed voice and data transmission.***

## Changing the Global System, One Base at a Time

The Air Force and the Department of Defense constantly update overseas basing structures, but the changes tend to occur in only one place at a time, with less fanfare than happens with changes in domestic basing.

Clark Air Base in the Philippines, Bitburg AB, Germany, and Howard AFB, Panama—to name just three—were all closed in the 1990s, during the same period that the Middle East was rising in importance to the Air Force.

"During the first half of the 1990s, the United States closed or turned over to host governments about 60 percent of its overseas military installations and returned nearly 300,000 military personnel to the United States," DOD noted in its global basing report.

The scale of the changes by 2004 was massive, but more needed to be done.

"There are only 230 major US military bases in the world," noted a senior defense official in a 2004 background briefing, but the US was operating from "5,458 distinct and discrete military installations around the world. ... We don't need those little pieces of property anymore."

The remaining bases tended to be a legacy of World War II and the Korean War. They served the Air Force well during the Cold War but in many cases became strategically obsolete in the 1990s.

The global basing review that began in 2004 was described by then-Pentagon policy chief Douglas J. Feith as "the most thorough restructuring of US military forces overseas since the major elements ... were set in 1953."

The Pentagon report states that by 2014 the number of foreign operating locations will be cut by more than one-third. The number of official overseas "bases, installations, and facilities" maintained by DOD will fall from 850 to 550.

In Europe, 43 bases will have been closed by the end of this year, but the enduring installations such as Ramstein are being modernized. In South Korea, 59 facilities will be closed by 2008, and forces will consolidate in brand-new quarters near Osan. In Japan, aside from 8,000 marines relocating to Guam, other "candidate facilities" have been identified for possible closure on Okinawa. Meanwhile, Kadena and Yokota Air Bases are planning for new bilateral training and basing arrangements.

hours from Balad AB, Iraq, alone—the equivalent of having three MQ-1 aircraft airborne around-the-clock for the entire month. Predators remain "the most requested asset in theater," said Capt. Fred Atwater, expeditionary reconnaissance squadron commander at Balad.

In June, an F-16 dropped two bombs that leveled a safe house containing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al Qaeda terrorist leader. A pair of F-16s was already airborne as part of the "24/7 umbrella" of coverage over Iraq when the target was located, explained Lt. Gen. Gary L. North, the US Central Command Air Forces commander.

Yet even in Iraq, the center of attention in the region, "we're looking at reducing the number of bases," said Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Air Force Chief of Staff. "We have 18 [bases] that we're flying airplanes off of right now, [and] I see that number coming down."

"But I don't see the air and space component leaving soon," Moseley added.

### The New Requirement

In the Middle East, the United States seeks to "maintain a posture of 'presence without permanence,' " Henry wrote this year. The United States is attempting to support a war without "unduly heavy military footprints" in Middle Eastern nations.

Because of host nation sensitivities, the Air Force closed up shop at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, as soon as operations at the prominent base were no longer needed. Much of the USAF presence moved to facilities in nearby Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, but the Air Force tries to keep a low profile and stresses that it stays in the Gulf Cooperation Council nations at the invitation of the hosts.

Afghanistan is similarly busy, where Bagram Air Base continues to receive an average of 650 transient aircraft a month—in addition to a long-term contingent of A-10, C-130, EA-6B, and Army aircraft at the base.

Officials point out that the Air Force presence in the CENTCOM area is indefinite and probably long-term but not necessarily permanent. "Our intention would be to stay as long as the host nations will have us," Maj. Gen. Allen G. Peck, deputy air commander for CENTCOM, recently told wire service reporters.

Another area currently generating interest is Africa, where basing options are not so good. Sub-Saharan Africa is within the so-called "arc of instability" that stretches across the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia. It is within this arc that the US is concerned about unstable governments, floundering economies, vast expanses of poorly governed areas, and the potential for breeding grounds for terrorism. (See "Swamp of Terror in the Sahara," November 2004, p. 50.)

Unfortunately, finding suitable bases for contingency access into Africa is not easy. "Despite the vastness of a combined 56 nations, quality operating locations are few and far between, limited in capability, and often inaccessible" for political reasons, noted Capt. Anthony J. Principi and Mitchell L. Reed, in the *Air Force Journal of Logistics.*

For example, Dakar, Senegal, is frequently cited as an example of a CSL/lily pad location. In 2003, Dakar was used as a staging area for the Air Force relief mission to Liberia, but the airfield was in bad shape. "Considering the degraded state of [the] asphalt overlay on the taxiway and allocated parking stands," *AFJL* reported that the foreign object damage risk was so great that, for the duration of the mission, C-9 Nightingale operations were limited to "absolutely emergency-essential use" only.

Entebbe, Uganda, also cited as a CSL, was in 2004 put on US Transportation Command's list of locations where aircraft are prohibited from remaining overnight.

Military operations in Africa are unpredictable, but the Air Force seeks to maintain solid ties on the continent, both to engage and strengthen African nations and to secure access to the region.

The Air Force will not be building any overseas bases on the scale of Ramstein for the foreseeable future, but its foreign operating locations will continue to change as the need for airpower around the world evolves. ■