

Pacific Rotations

By **Marc V. Schanz**, Senior Editor

A routine flight of two B-52H Stratofortress bombers over the East China Sea gained international headlines last November. This mission was the first military challenge to China's unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Pacific Air Forces has conducted these types of long-range flights over the vast overwater airspace of the Asia-Pacific region for years, and these



Photo via Commonwealth of Australia

Across Asia and the Pacific, USAF airmen will deploy to work with allied air arms.

A B-2 approaches the boom of a KC-135 for refueling over the Pacific Ocean in January 2013. Last year, B-2s were part of a power projection mission that helped de-escalate growing tensions on the Korean peninsula.



A B-52 from Andersen AFB, Guam, on the flight line at RAAF Base Darwin, Australia, on Jan. 28. PACAF chief Gen. Hawk Carlisle said US and Australian governments are working on establishing regular rotations of PACAF tactical aircraft to Australia to begin as soon as 2015.



USAF photo by ATC Brooke P. Doyle

particular B-52s staged from Andersen AFB, Guam, where the United States has maintained a continuous bomber presence since 2004. Bomber units rotate there from the US mainland for periods up to six months as a means to train, exercise with allies, and promote stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Such deployments are just one component of PACAF's multifaceted presence and engagement. Now, the command intends to build on these activities by adapting a deployment model first used in the Cold War; with it, the command wants to bolster its ability to advance American interests and forge familiarity with allies in the region.

Looking ahead, PACAF officials said regional USAF assets will be tasked with missions ranging from power projection and "Phase Zero" activities in preconflict scenarios—similar to the air defense identification zone (ADIZ) sortie—to deploying rapidly to provide humanitarian relief in the wake of natural disasters, such as November's Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. To support this strategy, the Air Force plans to expand its deployments to the region—and to do so beyond its traditional garrisons in South Korea and Japan.

Temporary rotations of combat aircraft—from fighters to bombers and

big-wing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets—will pick up, as crews deploy more frequently and to more locations. This action comes as the US military adjusts the combat aircraft rotations that have supported US Central Command in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for the last decade plus.

PACAF officials said the initiative is a response to Adm. Samuel J. Locklear III, head of US Pacific Command, who is urging all his component commanders to step back from planning around specific crisis points and put more thought into flexing across the entire theater to respond to tensions, preconflict states, and crises as they emerge.

Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle, PACAF commander, said that in the past, PACOM and its components heavily emphasized preparations for specific operations plans, or OPLANS, focused on single adversaries or single areas of conflict, such as a Taiwan Strait war or responding to a North Korean invasion of South Korea. Indeed, PACOM and PACAF officials said the primary purpose of many Air Force garrisoned forces in East Asia, specifically in Japan and South Korea, is to support OPLANS for just these contingencies.



SSgt. Brent Bryant prepares to launch a C-17 on the flight line at Rimba AB, Brunei, during a multilateral networking and sharing technology exercise in 2013.

Return to the Checkered Past

“What [Locklear] is trying to do is manage the entire theater, from Phase Zero to Five, to maintain an engagement posture, ... not just [in] one geographic area,” said Carlisle in a January interview.

This affects operations ranging from flights through China’s ADIZ to activities in the South China Sea or on the Korean peninsula. The divided peninsula played host to another high-profile power projection mission last year, when two B-2A Spirit stealth bombers made a nonstop training flight from Whiteman AFB, Mo., to a bomb range in South Korea. The mission was not announced in advance and helped de-escalate tensions with North Korea—which at the time had been increasingly belligerent.

Presence, however, requires flight hours, trained and ready aircrews, and iron on ramps in an era when operation and maintenance accounts are in flux due to budget sequestration. To meet the demands of this approach, PACAF is emulating the Cold War-era “Checkered Flag” model, where the majority of US tactical air forces regularly deployed to specific fields in Europe to train and gain familiarity with new operating locations.

Today airmen will be collocated in new areas across Asia and the Pacific with allied air arms from the Philippines to Australia, and they will partner with allies such as Malaysia and Thailand in keeping with the “places-not-bases” credo espoused by senior US military officials.



A1C Anthony Tarnowski inspects the cockpit of an F-16 at Andersen during Exercise Cope North 2013. USAF, RAAF, and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force participate in Cope North, an annual readiness and interoperability exercise.



USAF photo by MSGt. Jerome S. Tayborn

“I know some question if we can afford this ... engagement,” said Brig. Gen. Steven L. Basham, PACAF’s director of strategy, plans, and programs, at the Air Force Association’s Pacific Air and Space Symposium in Los Angeles in November. “We should think if we can afford not to do this. ... We’re not talking permanent presence; we’re not adding bases, but we’re adding places where we maintain a presence. ... You have to spend time with your partners and allies in order to understand their environment.”

A driving force behind the recent emphasis on the service’s Asia-Pacific posture is the importance of airpower security cooperation. The greater cooperation needs to come with a lighter footprint—and outside of the Air Force’s traditional bases.

In June 2013, Carlisle unveiled “PACAF Strategic Plan 2013,” articulating the command’s priorities,



USAF photo by SSgt. Alex Monties

taking into account fiscal and force structure changes underway. The plan directs units to focus on three core tenets: expanding engagement across the theater, growing Air Force combat capability, and improving combat force integration.

“I cannot overstate the importance of working with our allies, partners, and the international community to deter aggression and to maintain peace and stability in the region,” said Carlisle in June during the plan’s rollout. “What I see in the future is increased engagement by rotational forces, focusing across the spectrum from combat capability to humanitarian assistance.”

In July, Carlisle outlined his vision for the future rotations during a meeting with reporters in Washington, D.C. At that time, PACAF had one expeditionary squadron of F-22 Raptors deployed to Kadena Air Base on the Japanese island of Okinawa and 24 F-16s deployed to South Korea as theater security packages (TSPs). These packages comprise combat assets that augment forces already operating from those locations, usually for four-month intervals. Carlisle declared that these packages would increase in frequency and serve as building blocks for ramping up presence in the theater.

Tinkering with the size, frequency, and nature of these deployments, PACAF will be able to achieve many of its objectives and support PACOM’s theaterwide goals as well.

The essence of PACAF’s Checkered Flag reboot is to use these Theater Security Packages (TSPs) as a template for aircraft deployments, from packages supplementing large force multilateral exercises, such as Red Flag Alaska or Cope North, to smaller events with partners in locales like Malaysia and Indonesia.

“We rotated almost every CONUS [continental US] unit to Europe [to prepare] for the big Fulda Gap war [in Central Europe]. ... Everybody got familiar,” said Carlisle in July when describing his experience with Checkered Flag. Under the old construct, nearly every fighter and bomber unit would deploy every 18 months to two years and fly from a collateral operating base in Europe.

The Checkered Flag reincarnation, much like the bomber presence on Guam, has the benefit of achieving all three of PACAF’s tenets within a single construct. PACAF will increasingly be deploying forces south and west in

PACOM's area of responsibility. Forces will fan out to locations ranging from Trivandrum near the southern tip of India—collaborating with the Indian air force—to military airfields in Thailand such as U Tapao on the Gulf of Thailand and at Korat in the central part of the country and Udorn Thani in the northeast.

Over the past 10 years, combat and mobility units rotated in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan for six months at a time in most cases. A shift to PACAF would be slightly different and would have Air Force crews training in a wider variety of missions often in collaboration with allied air forces.

Units know that when they are in the bucket, in many cases, those rotations will be to other areas of responsibility, said Carlisle in January. "Our intent is to have more come to the Asia-Pacific."

Partnering Culture

As PACAF plans stand, the new rotations will be less than standard six-month hitches in the majority of cases, many being four-month TSP rotations, and some being even shorter. "Some will just be one-month rotations to participate in several exercises, or take an Air [National] Guard squadron to do a Cope Tiger [in Thailand] or a Commando Sling [in Singapore]," said Carlisle. PACAF will utilize the existing air and space expeditionary force structure, but will assign forces with greater flexibility than in the past.

PACAF's bases in Japan and South Korea remain important and will also serve as locations to support engagement in the south and west of the theater. The Air Force will operate both with long-standing treaty allies and with emerging partners in locations they have not deployed to regularly in some time, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

Set-piece rotations of aircraft around Asia are part of building up a "partnering culture" in the theater, as Heidi H. Grant, deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for international affairs, called it. As of mid-September 2013, Grant said she had visited seven of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in the previous two years. "These visits have been to have discussions, to engage, and ask, 'What is it you are looking for? How do you want to partner with the US?'" she said in an interview then.

In the past year Carlisle himself has visited some of these nations in the

USAF photo by SMSgt. Denise Johnson



Left to right: Royal New Zealand Air Force Flight Lt. Tim Pevreal, USAF C-17 pilots Capt. Gabriel Wetlesen, Capt. Caleb Rasmussen, and 1st Lt. Michael Olah run through a preflight briefing at RNZAF Base Ohakea, New Zealand, before an airlift mission for Exercise Kiwi Flag. The three-week training exercise took place last November.

past year, such as Thailand and the Philippines, a US treaty ally.

The visits resulted in improved low-level personnel exchanges, conferences, and other security cooperation activities, said Air Force and PACAF officials. Others have served as the basis for enhancing cooperation like collaboration with rotational deployments of aircraft.

As of early January, the State Department, along with PACOM, continues talks in Manila regarding the future status and disposition of US forces operating in the Philippines. Carlisle indicated that Air Force units would not return in large numbers to the former Clark Air Base, near Manila, or Subic Bay Naval Base. Instead, the Air Force might well come to the Philippines and operate out of locations alongside Philippine air force units. Locations under consideration include airfields at Cubi Point and Basa Air Base, a PAF installation north of Manila.

One of the centers of activity that will have great importance in the new rotations is Australia, another US treaty ally. In July, Carlisle said the US and Australian governments were working

on establishing regular rotations of PACAF tactical aircraft that would begin as soon as 2015 to Royal Australian Air Force Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal, both in the country's Northern Territory.

The new government of Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has reinvigorated discussions with the United States regarding military engagement, and the Australians are seeking to expand RAAF cooperation with PACAF, said Brian Woo, Carlisle's foreign policy advisor, in November. Woo is a retired foreign service officer.

Ramp improvements and cost sharing between the countries are in the works for Darwin and Tindal. PACAF anticipates that a bomber rotation could eventually begin in collaboration with the RAAF at these locations.

"We've landed a bomber out of Andersen ... down at Darwin and turned around and took it off again. So we've demonstrated it," said Carlisle in July when first detailing the renewed partnership. In late January, a lone B-52 was sent to Darwin for a short-term exercise with the Australians. PACAF officials



USAF photo by SSgt. Nathan Allen



and the Australians are also exploring deployments and training in airfields and locations in the country's sparsely populated northwestern areas, such as Pilbara.

Reducing the Cost of Presence

Talks between PACAF and the RAAF are continuing this year to address logistical issues at the sites, such as pre-positioning certain equipment at Darwin, to cut down on deployment costs, said PACAF officials.

Existing cooperation will expand steadily. In the coming year, PACAF's F-16 aggressors from Eielson AFB, Alaska, will deploy to Australia to train with RAAF F/A-18 Super Hornets, and RAAF forces will, in turn, come to Alaska to participate in Red Flag-Alaska, for example. Later this year PACAF will send assets to join one of Australia's large-force multilateral training events, such as Exercise Pitch Black, as well.

With operations accounts remaining under close scrutiny across the Air Force, PACAF officials are still refining the logistics of these plans.

The command's bomber rotation on Guam has evolved, too. Carlisle noted that innovation at the unit level helped shrink the deployment package needed to move maintainers and equipment,

Gen. Hawk Carlisle speaks to PACAF airmen at JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, Feb. 4. Carlisle stresses the importance of working with international community partners to maintain peace and stability in the region.

and PACAF command is studying the potential of permanently stationing some personnel with Andersen's 36th Wing to save dollars. "One of the big costs of rotating presence is moving the entire aircraft package," he said. In some cases, PACAF planners are working with Air Combat Command to see if there are times when aircraft could stay at a given location and only personnel would rotate for another cycle.

In the next few fiscal years, PACAF will have to spend some money on military construction of facilities and ramp improvements in areas such as Guam, but will face less of an infrastructure challenge in other locations. "In some of these areas, ... there will be contributions and cost sharing," said Carlisle. He highlighted Singapore, the host of three iterations of Commando Sling every year, and Thailand, which regularly hosts US forces. "In those areas, there will be less Milcon and more pre-positioning, so we're not moving things around all the time."

PACAF received some good news with the enactment of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 in late December. It provided some near-term stability

to operations accounts. The deal gives PACAF more money back for base operations support, flying hours, and training activities, especially in Fiscal 2014 and 2015, said Carlisle.

While some plans will have to shrink and scale back, the budget numbers "allow us to optimize where we put each dollar. ... We can preplan now, leave equipment in place ... to piggyback off other rotational presence activities to allow more participation. It also allows us to tell partners and allies in the region, 'Here's what we're going to do.'"

Still, PACAF officials said question marks remain about the later years of their plan to step up rotations. Capital investments and more military construction choices will have to be made in Fiscal 2016 and beyond.

Another question concerns what forces will deploy to the US Central Command region in future years. Both theaters will require expeditionary air forces, and it is likely that the duration of deployments will go down but rise in frequency. "We are going to have to maintain the ability to rotate forces into both these critical areas," said Carlisle. ■