

Leaving Afghanistan, staying in Afghanistan; Sharing Bagram Airfield; A-10s not dead yet; Budget highs and lows; Listen to what the people say

NOT QUITE “END OF MISSION”

With the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in December, the 13-year US war in Afghanistan officially came to a close. Responsibility for combat operations in that country was handed over to the 350,000 members of the indigenous Afghan Security Forces, which the US has been training for years and which have increasingly taken the lead in joint missions with the US.

The American presence in Afghanistan is not over, however. Succeeding OEF is Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, announced by Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in late December. The mission calls for some 13,000 US troops to remain in Afghanistan on an indefinite timetable, to assist Afghan forces by continuing to train them in various aspects of military affairs.

Combat-capable US forces providing advice and training will be part of the technically separate Operation Resolute Support. These troops will chiefly provide guidance to their Afghan colleagues, Hagel said in a statement, adding that they might be called on for combat in direct response to a specific al Qaeda or other terrorist plot against the US or Afghanistan.

A NATO release said its troops—including US forces—will work at the ministerial, operational, and institutional level to continue developing an Afghan military and government that is stable and capable of looking after its own internal and external defense. NATO personnel will assist the Afghan forces in getting comfortable with civilian control of the military, to develop defense budgets and learn the bureaucracy of running a military, to be transparent, and with other military-specific tasks.

About 20 percent of the US forces remaining in Afghanistan—about 2,600 people—will be Air Force personnel, according to US Air Forces Central spokesman Col. Edward T. Sholtis. They will be a mix of Active Duty, Guard, and Reserve airmen.

The 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, based mainly at the Afghan capital of Kabul but also at some other locations, “will train, advise, and assist the Afghan Air Force in developing a sustainable air capability and support ... Afghan National Security Forces with mission capabilities such as airlift, aeromedical evacuation, tactical reconnaissance, and ground attack,” the spokesman said.

The personnel involved are trained as instructors and advisors “in the flying and maintenance of platforms the Afghans use”—some of which are not in the US inventory—“as well as operational/tactical mission planning and the basic staff functions of an air service,” he said.

The 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, to be based at Bagram but also with some satellite locations, “will maintain a counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan to continue to target the remnants of al Qaeda and prevent an al Qaeda resurgence,” as well as to thwart “external plotting against US targets or the homeland,” Sholtis added.

It’s the 455th that will have the shooting mission if the US deems it necessary. Sholtis explained that “although under this mission we won’t target belligerents solely because they are members of the Taliban, as part of this mission we may provide combat enabler support” to the Afghan National Security Forces “in limited circumstances.”

Air Force combat and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft will be in Afghanistan indefinitely; in early January, the mix was “predominantly” F-16s and remotely piloted aircraft, and the 455th will mainly be involved in flying and maintaining them. He described the numbers of aircraft as “several dozen.”

Besides those based at Kabul, Bagram, and elsewhere, the mission will be supported by airlift assets and tankers, either based in-country or elsewhere in the US Central Command area of responsibility, as well as aerial porters and their gear.

Force-protection personnel will also be involved at all locations, as well as “other mission support capabilities required for expeditionary unit operations,” he noted. Moreover, there will be other assets in the region on-call, and “we can shift assets to bases in Afghanistan as the [narrower] mission dictates.” There are also the various “reachback” capabilities in the continental US that are only an email or phone call away from airmen in Afghanistan.

Three years ago, the Air Force built modern, permanent dormitories and other housing at Bagram Air Base to replace dilapidated temporary structures that had seen 10 years of hard use and were in bad shape. Over the years, USAF also expanded the Bagram runway system and ramps to double its capacity. With the sharp reduction in the number of US aircraft transiting the base, the Air Force will go back to using just half the base; the Afghan Air Force will use the other half, and a joint team will staff the control tower.

HURLING THUNDERBOLTS

The Fiscal 2015 defense bill, approved by Congress and signed by President Obama in December, denies the Air Force its wish to retire the A-10 Warthog fleet wholesale, but does let the service put some of the ground attack fighters in “backup” status.

The \$585 billion National Defense Authorization Act specifically forbade the Air Force from retiring the A-10 fleet, after spirited opposition from many members of Congress. USAF had requested the move to save some \$4.6 billion over the Future Years Defense Program, to spend on higher acquisition priorities such as the F-35 fighter, KC-46 tanker, and



Hawks dodged the axe—for now.

USAF photo by A1C Gustavo Castillo

Long-Range Strike Bomber, but also to free up maintainers to transition to new F-35s.

The bill allows the Air Force to put 36 A-10s in “backup flying status,” which means the service doesn’t have to fully fund them with maintenance and assigned aircrew, but will occasionally fly them to keep them in working order. The move is expected to free up about 100 maintainers to go to the F-35, but USAF was counting on 800 experienced A-10 maintainers to make the transition, out of some 1,100 overall maintainers needed for the new fighter. The F-35 program executive officer, Lt. Gen. Christopher C. Bogdan, said in November that the lack of experienced maintainers is the biggest obstacle to USAF declaring initial operational capability with the F-35 on time in August of 2016. Without them, there could be a delay of a year to 18 months, Bogdan said.

The bill also requires the Pentagon’s Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation shop to study how the Air Force will perform close air support in the future, as well as other ways the Air Force could fill its F-35 maintainer needs. In its arguments to retire the A-10, USAF has consistently argued that some 80 percent of the CAS mission in Afghanistan was performed by other platforms, including F-16s, F-15Es, and B-1 bombers.

Champions of the jet, however, point out that A-10s are back in action against ISIS targets in Iraq and suggest that this is proof positive of their enduring value.

OTHER BUDGET FALLOUT

The final 2015 defense bill also blocked the Air Force from retiring the U-2 spyplane. This was a move the service sought to afford mandates from Congress to continue buying and flying the RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft.

Congress went along with a Pentagon-recommended one percent raise to military pay, after 14 years of real increases that were well above inflation.

Air Force research and development and test and evaluation accounts were flat compared with the Fiscal 2014 level of \$23.6 billion.

Of the \$585 billion appropriated, the overall Defense Department base budget accounts for \$521 billion. The remaining \$64 billion funds overseas contingency operations in Afghanistan, the European Reassurance Initiative to bolster support to NATO, counterterrorism operations, and \$5 billion to conduct operations against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The enacted budget of Air Force aircraft procurement—\$12.1 billion—was actually \$525 million higher than requested by the service. The additional funds will be spent on two additional

F-35A jets, the KC-46, and a new combat rescue helicopter program. No extra monies were appropriated for the JSTARS recapitalization program, upgrades to the E-3 AWACS, or development of the new Long-Range Strike Bomber, but the requested budgets for those programs were left intact.

To address US dependence on the Russian-designed RD-180 rocket engine used in Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle boosters, Congress directed the Pentagon to find an alternative engine not later than 2019. There’s to be a “full and open competition” to develop the alternative motor, but Congress let stand existing orders and options for using the RD-180.

The Air Force will be allowed to transfer 12 MC-12 Liberty aircraft to US Special Operations Command. USAF said the aircraft, which were rapidly developed and fielded to meet operational needs in Iraq and Afghanistan, were excess to its needs.

VOX POPULI

A solid majority of Americans think the world is getting more dangerous and want the US to increase defense spending and get rid of the 2011 Budget Control Act spending caps on military budgets, according to a Harris Poll conducted on behalf of the Aerospace Industries Association. It is a sentiment politicians and especially candidates for office in 2016 should ignore at their own peril, said AIA President Marion C. Blakey.

The poll was conducted in mid-November and surveyed 818 registered voters.

Collectively, 78 percent of those polled think the US is in more direct danger as a result of the activities of Islamist jihadists and al Qaeda operating in Iraq and Syria. The numbers were similar when respondents were asked whether they would support a candidate who favored increased defense spending, Blakey said. She urged politicians to set aside “the rose-colored glasses of a naïve isolationist” and the “green eyeshade of a fiscal ideologue” and heed the concerns of the American people. Blakey decried the “modernization holiday” which has persisted while the US fought the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying it “simply must end” or the US will face real losses to its both on-call forces and industrial capacity needed to sustain them.

Blakey noted that Congress’ standing with the populace is at historically low levels, and one way to get back in the voters’ good graces would be to end this “dangerous procrastination” and repeal the budget sequester. Blakey said the sequester has been highly destructive already and could do worse damage if it’s reinstated in Fiscal 2016.

Asked if, given “evolving and increased threats” to US security, the US government should increase defense spending above the Budget Control Act levels set in 2011, 69 percent of the respondents said yes. Some 73 percent of the polled said that a combination of defense spending cuts and the sequester, which have taken about \$1 trillion out of defense spending from the 2012 to 2022 timeframe—with a 10 percent reduction in the last three years—have made the US less secure.

By political affiliation, this sentiment was the most polarized response, with 90 percent of Republicans, 71 percent of Independents, and 55 percent of Democrats saying the US is “less secure” due to spending cuts; still, a majority of all groups agreed that the nation is in greater danger from external threats.

Blakey warned candidates for office “to listen” to the sentiments revealed by the poll. In a statement accompanying the poll’s release, she said, “If this new Congress is to restore any faith in our political process, they can start ... by revisiting the budget caps to reflect today’s security needs.”



The new budget has room for two more F-35s, the KC-46, and a new combat rescue helicopter program.

Boeing photo

USAF photo by A1C Mikaley Towrie