Foreign Policy at BROOKINGS

POLICY BRIEF | FEBRUARY 2023

OVERSEAS BASING LOGISTICS AT A CROSSROADS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, SUB-SAHARA AFRICA, AND THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

JASON B. WOLFF

Executive summary

The United States has declared that the post-Cold War era is over and that competition among today's major world powers will shape what comes next.[1] The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) state that the top two U.S. strategic priorities are outcompeting China and constraining Russia.[2] To pursue these goals, the United States must project power globally and maintain a sustained regional presence in multiple regions. In the Middle East (ME), Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), and the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), meeting the NSS and NDS objectives are at a crossroads.[3] The United States could fail in today's security environment if they continue using current U.S. basing practices and limited resources. A new strategy of building robust logistics networks can help the U.S. meet its goals to keep pace with China and deter Russia.

Introduction

The NSS affirms that the United States' overall strategic goal is a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. But China and Russia are increasingly challenging this goal by promoting their own agendas.[4] The United States has outlined its actions and leadership role in response to the rise of China's military power and Russia's recent aggression in Europe, but to be successful, it will need to rely heavily on new and existing global partnerships and alliances. These relationships provide vital overseas basing or access, enabling the United States to project power to deter strategic threats or disrupt terrorist threats. A key aspect of projecting this power is having the ability to use military force, as described in the NDS.

The NDS describes the U.S. military's role and force structure needed to maintain and gain war-fighting advantages while limiting those of U.S. competitors. Its framework dictates how the Department of Defense (DOD) should manage the rise of China and deter Russian aggression. However, the DOD has limited resources and must focus on more than just these top two priorities. The department must also protect against threats from North Korea, Iran, violent extremist organizations, and transboundary challenges. These significant issues, most of which are beyond U.S. borders, impact multiple regions and drive insecurity. Reaching globally beyond U.S. borders requires leveraging limited resources from strategic locations that can move to a crisis when needed. The U.S. military can and does project power globally, playing a pivotal role in providing international security. Additionally, permanently assigned overseas military forces do provide strategic basing and power projection platforms for quick response options at a global point of need. These relationships with host nations remind adversaries of the United States' commitment to mutual defense treaties.

Since the drawdown from Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has committed most of its overseas forces to European bases and the Indo-Pacific in the Northern Hemisphere. The DOD determined this force posture by conducting a Global Posture Review (GPR) in 2021. The GPR results indicated the need for incremental increases in force posture in both regions. Actions in Europe included increasing the posture of the U.S. Army by 500 personnel in Germany and creating a Multi-Domain Task Force and a Theater Fires Command.[5] Both these units work together to provide command and control and integration support with other U.S. Army, joint, and multinational fires capabilities to synchronize across cyber, air, land, sea, and space for lethal and nonlethal effects[6]. In the Indo-Pacific, the artillery division headquarters of the U.S. Army's 2nd Infantry Division moved permanently to South Korea.[7] Of course, these seem like minor steps compared to sending a temporary but indefinite surge of 20,000 extra U.S. military personnel into Europe since February 2022 to assure allies and deter Russia.[8]

In the ME, SSA, and the WIO, the United States maintains bases in Bahrain, Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. By comparison, China possesses one base in Djibouti, and Russia holds two bases in Syria. The military bases do not appear to influence or incentivize neighboring countries, supported by having no new bases currently under construction for China or Russia in these regions.

China is taking a more economic rather than military approach to increasing its presence in the regions. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is financing and building railways, power grids, and strategic seaports.[9] China already has more than double the institutional investments that the United States has in SSA infrastructure alone.[10] Beijing is also actively pursuing mineral rights and commercial markets for its finished products.

Meanwhile, Russia's substantial efforts focus on providing military aid; this has worked in a limited capacity in Iran, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Syria. Moscow's more minor efforts include increasing its influence through regional cooperation. In November 2021, Russia became a dialogue partner in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to have a greater stake in the Indian Ocean and East Africa Coast affairs.[11] Although Russia's moves appear calculated, it has made little progress in these regions given the ongoing war in Ukraine.

As the United States evaluates its resources and force posture in response to military and geoeconomic challenges from China and Russia, it is at a crossroads; Washington cannot place a base in every partner nation to keep pace with or deter its competitors. Thus, a new, broader approach to U.S. overseas basing is worth considering an approach that includes more robust logistics networks spread across multiple countries and strategic locations.

Overseas basing

According to the DOD, an installation is "a military base, camp, post, station, yard, center, homeport facility for any ship, or other activity under the jurisdiction of the DoD, including leased space, that is controlled by, or primarily supports DoD's activities. An installation may consist of one or more sites."[12] For the purposes of this brief, U.S. overseas basing is defined as sustained military forces on an installation with equipment located together in a geographic location outside of the U.S. mainland and its territories. An installation's capabilities may include, among others, security cooperation assistance, humanitarian aid, logistics support, and combat power.

The U.S. overseas basing formula is to build installations, move in forces, and provide equipment to make the forces operational as fast as possible. The faster the construction, the faster the United States can bring military power to bear. However, the formula has not always succeeded. In Afghanistan, rapid build-a-base tactics were used continuously from 2001 until the U.S. withdrawal of forces in 2021. Once a base is completed, sustainment starts, but Afghanistan's economy could not support sustainment because items were unavailable locally or not produced at the required quality level. Sustainment required the United States to spend incredible amounts of money to bring all classes of supplies — from bottled water (class I) to miscellaneous supplies (class X) — into the country. Washington spent over 20 years and $837 billion arming, equipping, and constructing a multitude of forward operating bases that were then mostly abandoned or destroyed (only a handful of bases were turned over to the host nation).[13]

Successful overseas bases include those still shared by the United States and partners in the ME. These installations are typically dual-use, as they are military-capable but also currently used for commercial operations. For example, the Kuwait International Airport is also home to the Al-Mubarak Air Base, which supports the U.S. 386th Air Expeditionary Wing and the 5th Expeditionary Air Mobility Squadron.[14]

As noted earlier, however, the United States cannot rely on current basing practices — even if successful in some ways — to keep pace with China and deter Russia in the ME, SSA, and the WIO.

The added power of robust logistics networks

The United States must take a "whole-of-government" approach to basing and not just view its military bases as U.S. outposts.[15] A central pillar of this approach should be robust logistics networks that aim to sustain access through transportation infrastructure and industrial development rather than just military operations. Logistics networks help reduce war-fighting requirements in a region and the costs. They also increase U.S. presence and influence in multiple regions simultaneously and add resiliency at multiple locations in a country instead of at a few bases.

ACCESS

The United States requires air, land, and water access to project power, including sea and intercoastal routes. The concept of access is the ability to move or transit in, out, and through another sovereign country's territory designated by its borders. Examples of access include flying through another country's airspace, sailing through its waters, landing in the country at a port of debarkation, and conducting over-the-shore land movements. The ability to have permission to access the country is called clearance.

Every country has unique clearance approval processes for transporting commodities and people through customs and immigration. Clearance approval includes meeting requirements for weapons, ammunition, and hazardous materials. The U.S. military wants to know the limitations, restrictions, and conditions to avoid violations that can delay cargo for days to months if not handled

properly. Following the clearance process and working with the host country is essential. It can ease barriers, reduce delays, and accelerate delivery times if paperwork is submitted correctly and on time. More importantly, in times of crisis, a country can waive or eliminate clearance requirements for a good partner. Qatar waived specific clearance requirements when assisting in the humanitarian evacuation from Afghanistan.[16]

Building robust logistics networks can streamline the clearance processes and build familiarization for both countries to accomplish this process better. As relationships with host countries strengthen, the ability to have access is vital. However, maintaining an installation, forces, or equipment in a country could become optional if robust logistics networks are in place.

TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Building robust logistics networks and sustaining access in the ME, SSA, and WIO requires having substantial infrastructure at sea and aerial ports, as well as facilities that enable inland ground transportation. Two strategic sea lanes for shipping run through and along the coast of sub-Saharan Africa, and they are of global consequence since one represents a gateway to the Suez Canal and the other a gateway to the Cape of Good Hope. The ME, in comparison, is a crucial geolocation; from this region, one can reach two-thirds of the world's population with an 8-hour flight, allowing for rapid responses to multiple situations.[17] Given the varying opportunities in the regions, the most ideal placement of bases and infrastructure will always require in-depth analysis and planning. The United States must pursue options that will impact today and remain viable in 50 years. Host nation facilities that are already built or easily modified for operations may provide the best solutions for limited resources. However, the United States must take action in the next five years before the competition, or the initiative could be lost forever.

Both seaports and aerial ports have advantages and disadvantages to consider. Seaports allow bulk delivery but have limitations or constraints owing to the requirements for inland transportation, including vital intermodal connections that utilize ships, roadways, railways, pipelines, and airports. In addition, multiple uncontrollable factors impact seaports, including seasonal weather conditions and wave and tide cycles that change the depth of the sea floor. These and other complex factors affecting access channels, including the need for tugboats, can result in ships having more or less space to maneuver. Seaports with piers to accommodate the roll-on/roll-off prepositioned support ships carrying tracked vehicles or tanks are critical factors for U.S. forces. Additionally, there are only a few seaports that can accommodate a vessel as large as an aircraft carrier or as specialized as a submarine for rearming in these regions.

Aerial ports allow swift delivery, but aircraft delivery is in limited quantities compared to sea vessels. Moreover, similar to seaports, aerial ports need intermodal connections for inland transportation and have to contend with uncontrollable factors — seasonal weather, altitude above sea level, and colocation to deserts, oceans, and mountains can all affect flying conditions. In prioritizing the placement of air bases in the ME, SSA, and the WIO, the United States must thoroughly evaluate its aircraft options and the existing runway lengths and weight tolerances, hangar dimensions, and warehouse space available. The U.S. Air Force has established standard air mobility planning factors to help determine optimal locations for its anticipated required aircraft.[18] Planning factors for the large C-17A transport aircraft include a maximum range of 2,500 nautical miles, up to 160,000 pounds of cargo, and 18 pallet positions (storage space units). Compared to the smaller C-130J transport aircraft with a range of 1,500 nautical miles, it can accommodate 30,000 pounds of cargo and six pallet positions. Essentially, the type of aircraft used can dictate how many bases are needed.

Furthermore, the logistical needs for supporting a single base versus multiple regional bases are vastly different. The cost is not borne only by the United States in equipment and staffing, but the host nation must also provide liaisons and support at each location. The goal is to leverage existing aerial ports or build the minimum required infrastructure at strategic locations with partner nations.

Ground transportation infrastructure enables the movement of people and commodities in and out of ports for inland transportation and intermodal connections. Essential ground infrastructure includes roads, rail, and pipelines. Nevertheless, multiple uncontrollable factors also impact ground infrastructure. Roadways are the most susceptible to weather conditions; terrain features like mountains, river crossings, and deserts, change daily. Many developing countries still have limited paved or concrete roads and less commercial trucking capacity than seen in developed countries. Further, they have fewer railways, and the pipeline systems required for tankers to download or upload fuel or chemicals are often only found at major seaports.

Overall, the importance of infrastructure cannot be stressed enough for the ability to conduct and sustain successful humanitarian, security, and military operations in any location. These regions have limited infrastructure that can be improved and should not deter U.S. involvement but encourage more involvement to ensure proper infrastructure development. The U.S. assisting in improving infrastructure could also accelerate a country's industrial development.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

New or established industrial manufacturing will substantially impact standing up or sustaining any base. The fewer items a unit must bring to a location, the more cost-effective it is to deploy and sustain the unit. The United States should evaluate whether the host country has industrial infrastructure that can support the manufacturing of military products if required and whether it has a properly trained workforce. Although, even if a partner nation does not have these elements, kick-starting its industrial development can often be done and is best done through incremental steps.

The active development of more local support capabilities providing food, medicine, and commercial products for military, humanitarian, and civilian purposes can be an excellent first step to building an industrial manufacturing base. For example, the purification and bottling of water is a proven entry-level business endeavor that can kick-start industrial development. In Afghanistan, the Aria Water Plant was a joint venture of private Afghan funders and the U.S. Army's 10th Sustainment Brigade soldiers, known as the "Muleskinners." The plant was started and completed in six months, producing nearly 400,000 bottles of water a day once all four production lines were at capacity. More of this local support capability could have saved the U.S. and nongovernmental organizations millions of dollars a year by buying products on the local economy versus the cost of shipping them from outside the country on convoys.[19]

Military manufacturing could also open doors for international partners to participate directly in the U.S. government's Foreign Military Sales program. Suppose a partner were to be deemed ineligible for this program for some reason. In that case, it could likely go through the Direct Commercial Sales program to obtain U.S. defense services and articles to start the foundation of a shared logistics network. The increased participation in these programs could help establish new partnerships in multiple locations and thereby build up redundancies in U.S. and partner nation logistics networks. It could also help nurture long-term partnerships and interoperability.[20] Shared logistics systems provide a common operating picture that limits the competition space among partners. They also further reduce the ability of China or Russia to entice nations to their sphere of influence.

The way forward

The United States must increase the coalition of partner nations in Southern Hemisphere regions to build more viable and robust logistics networks. It is already committed to military basing in Diego Garcia and Djibouti projecting combat power and humanitarian aid from these locations (and from its ME bases, if required). In pursuing long-term partnerships, Washington must strategically focus on allies that could provide the best return on investment to oppose the competition from China and Russia. It must also capitalize on regional partnerships, including by leveraging the momentum from the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. The United States has an open door to start or strengthen partnerships with the African leaders that attended, because there is already a 50-year master plan and blueprint for Africa to become a global social and economic powerhouse (called Agenda 2063). These U.S. partnerships could help African countries accelerate their Agenda 2063 economic goals by jointly establishing logistics networks that will, in turn, help them develop more industrial manufacturing and infrastructure.[21]

The United States must bring multiple groups and organizations to the table to build robust logistics networks within the regions (the ME, SSA, and WIO) and between them. And in doing so, the U.S. government should break down its internal institutional silos. For instance, the DOD, Department of State, and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative should work together to ensure participation in and execution of the African Growth and Opportunity Act within economic markets. This effort and other actions could encourage allies to join and contribute to developing the ME, SSA, and WIO countries with interconnected robust logistics networks.

Conclusion

The United States cannot meet the NSS and NDS goals and sustain them in the future by relying on current overseas basing practices. At this crossroads, a strategy of robust logistics networks involving access, infrastructure, and industrial development can keep pace with China and deter Russia. The best logistical network locations are near the East Coast of SSA, and the WIO, bordered by the ME Countries in this area. Those locations have the access required to multiple regions and established trade routes.

References

1 "National Security Strategy," Washington, DC: White House, October 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/.

2 "National Defense Strategy," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, October 2022, https://www.defense.gov/National-Defense-Strategy/.

3 The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) covers coastal East Africa, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the island nations of the Arabian Sea.

4 "National Security Strategy," 11.

5 "DoD Concludes 2021 Global Posture Review," U.S. Department of Defense, November 29, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2855801/dod-concludes-2021-global-posture-review/.

6 "U.S. Army Europe and Africa to receive two new units and retain three sites," U.S. European Command, April 13, 2021, https://www.eucom.mil/article/41168/us-army-europe-and-africa-to-receive-two-new-units-and-retain-three-sites.

7 Todd South, "Army division artillery headquarters moves from JBLM to South Korea permanently," *Army Times*, September 9, 2021, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/09/09/army-artillery-headquarters-moves-from-jblm-to-south-korea-permanently/.

8 "Fact Sheet - U.S. Defense Contributions to Europe," U.S. Department of Defense, June 29, 2022, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3078056/fact-sheet-us-defense-contributions-to-europe/.

9 Brian Gicheru Kinyua, "Is China Using Africa to Shape a New Global Maritime Order?" The Maritime Executive, September 24, 2020, https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/is-china-using-africa-to-shape-a-new-global-maritime-order.

10 Andrea Shalal, "Chinese funding of sub-Saharan African infrastructure dwarfs that of West, says think tank," Reuters, February 8, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/markets/us/chinese-funding-sub-saharan-african-infrastructure-dwarfs-that-west-says-think-2022-02-09/.

11 Sankalp Gurjar, "Russia's Indian Ocean pivot," *Deccan Herald*, November 23, 2021, https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/russias-indian-ocean-pivot-1053726.html.

12 "Base Structure Report – Fiscal Year 2018 Baseline: A Summary of the Real Property Inventory Data," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2017), 4, https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/Downloads/BSI/Base%20Structure%20Report%20FY18.pdf.

13 "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction," (Arlington: U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, August 2021), 1, https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/what-we-need-to-learn/.

14 "Al-Mubarak, Air Base Kuwait International Airport, 29°14'15"N 47°58'26"E," Global Security, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/kuwait-iap.htm.

15 Rebecca Bill Chavez, "Ensure a whole-of-government approach," (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, May 2022), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/books/allies-ensure-a-whole-of-government-approach/.

16 "The United States and Qatar: Strategic Partners Advancing Peace and Security," U.S. Department of State, November 20, 2022, https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-qatar-strategic-partners-advancing-peace-and-security/.

17 Scott Mayerowitz, "Middle East becomes the world's new travel crossroads," USA Today, March 4, 2013, https://www.usatoday.com/story/todayinthesky/2013/03/04/middle-east-becomes-the-worlds-new-travel-crossroads/1961565/.

18 "Air Force Pamphlet (AFPAM) 10–403: Air Mobility Planning Factors," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Air Force, October 2018), https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a3/publication/afpam10-1403/afpam10-1403.pdf.

19 Michael Rautio, "State-of-the-art bottled water plant opens in Afghanistan," U.S. Air Force Central, January 8, 2007, https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/455th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/News/Display/Article/275413/state-of-the-art-bottled-water-plant-opens-in-afghanistan/.

20 "Foreign Military Sales FAQ," Defense Security Cooperation Agency, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.dsca.mil/foreign-military-sales-faq.

21 "U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit Overview," U.S. Department of State, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.state.gov/africasummit/.

About the author

Col. Jason B. Wolff has more than 21 years of experience in the U.S. Department of the Air Force with multiple overseas commands and deployments, including tours with U.S. Forces-Japan Staff, and The Joint Staff. He is currently a federal executive fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution.

Acknowledgements

The author sincerely thanks Andrew Yeo of the Brookings Institution and Isaac Kardon of the U.S. Naval War College for their significant contributions to this brief, as well as Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution for his constructive feedback and insightful perspectives. The author also thanks Hanna Foreman for her valuable research assistance, Lori Merritt for her helpful edits, and Rachel Slattery for her expert layout of the brief.

Disclaimer