

Pentagon Prepares to Scatter Soldiers in Remote Corners

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Pentagon Prepares to Scatter Soldiers in Remote Corners

Shift in Strategy Plays Down China,
Calls Attention to Fighting Terror

By **GREG JAFFE**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MANAS AIR FIELD, Kyrgyzstan -- At this long-abandoned Soviet bomber base, the future of the U.S. military is taking shape.

Kyrgyzstan allowed the U.S. and its coalition partners to station jets here in December 2001 to fight the Afghanistan war. Even though it has been more than two months since the planes dropped a bomb, U.S. forces aren't preparing to pull out. Last month, the Pentagon leased 750 acres of land now populated with shoeless shepherds and curious children who race past on horses without saddles. Kyrgyz officials calculated the rent based on the amount of wheat the land could produce.

This summer the U.S. will begin installing water and sewer lines on the property, 300 yards from the rows of tents where U.S. troops now live. Next year, plans call for erecting mobile homes, temporary offices and maybe a swimming pool. No one in the Pentagon can say how long the U.S. will stay at this base. But Col. James Forrest, the base's deputy commander, acknowledges, "this place is so deep into Central Asia you'd hate to lose it."

The U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan reflects a major change over the past 18 months in the U.S. vision of who its enemies are and how to confront them. This shift is pushing U.S. forces into far more remote and dangerous corners of the world.

OVER THERE

See a [map of possible locations](#)⁰ for U.S. troops.

At the outset of the Bush administration, Pentagon planners and national-security thinkers assumed China was the threat the U.S. would worry about for years to come, and the military was adjusting accordingly.

Today that notion has been replaced by a radically different view. The danger, it is now assumed, lies in what Pentagon officials call an "arc of instability" that runs through the Caribbean Rim, Africa, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia and North Korea. Worries about this arc of countries, largely cut off from economic globalization, increasingly are influencing how the military trains, what it buys and where it puts forces.

The new strategy carries risks. The more thinly U.S. forces are spread around the globe, the less prepared they will be to fight a war against a major power. U.S. officials are betting they will have time to react if a major power emerges as a threat.

As the military becomes easier to deploy and closer to dangerous regions of the world, it's also likely to become far busier. Some military officials fret about the U.S. becoming embroiled in several simultaneous conflicts. In many of its fights, the U.S. could be reliant on new friends with poor human-rights records and far-different values.

Pentagon officials, however, insist the military must wade into this new world. "The unprecedented destructive power of terrorists -- and the recognition that you will have to deal with them before they deal with you -- means that we will have to be out acting in the world in places that are very unfamiliar to us. We will have to make them familiar," says Andy Hoehn, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy.

Military planning for the world as the U.S. now sees it goes on inside a warren of Pentagon cubicles with views of an alley stacked with trash and wooden pallets. A team of 10 analysts, led by Mr. Hoehn, has been toiling since last summer on a new posture for U.S. forces. Their work has been heavily influenced by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

For the first few months, these planners didn't even think about where they wanted to put troops. "We spent a lot of time initially on what's changed in the world and what's changing in how we think about warfare," Mr. Hoehn says.

Their conclusions, which so far have received little attention, amount to one of the biggest shifts in U.S. military thinking in the past 50 years. Since World War II, the Pentagon has focused on preparing for the next big war. First it was the big war against the Soviet hordes. In the early 1990s, the "big one" gave way to two smaller "big ones" that could be waged simultaneously in Iraq and North Korea. Then, in 2000, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was pushing the military to focus more on a confrontation with a resurgent and technologically advanced China.

Smaller Fights

Now Mr. Rumsfeld, chastened by the unprecedented power of terrorists and the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands, is preparing U.S. forces for a future that could involve lots of small, dirty fights in remote and dangerous places. The new strategy assumes that the U.S. is far more likely to send troops into countries that are disconnected from the global economy, either because they reject the whole concept or because they lack the resources to compete, says Thomas Barnett, a Defense Department analyst. "Disconnectedness defines danger," he says.

To strike faster at these remote hotspots -- or prevent them from becoming hotspots -- Mr. Rumsfeld is pushing U.S. forces out of their big garrison bases in the U.S., Germany and South Korea, three countries that typically host more than 80% of the 1.4 million U.S. troops. Instead, he envisions a force that will rotate through a large number of bases scattered throughout the world in places including Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, Singapore, the Horn of Africa and Eastern Europe.

In some of these places, the U.S. might post a few dozen troops who would keep the base in good condition and maintain equipment for use by troops that occasionally arrive for training. In case of war, these forward bases could be used as launching pads for strikes elsewhere. Current bases in Romania, the Philippines or Kyrgyzstan might fall into this category.

Other bases will be far more austere. The U.S. might rotate through these facilities once every year or two for training or for attacking terrorists. Such bases might be in places such as Azerbaijan, Mali, Kenya or the Horn of Africa.

The goal is to cut the time it takes the U.S. to respond with an air, ground and naval force from months to days or even hours.

Already the new strategy is driving the military to invest in new types of equipment. In the war with Iraq the U.S. used high-speed, 100-foot catamaran ships to ferry Army tanks and ammunition from Qatar to Kuwait. The ships can travel 2,000 miles in less than 48 hours, twice the speed of the Pentagon's regular cargo ships, and carry enough equipment to support about 5,000 soldiers. Because they have a shallow draft, the boats can unload in rudimentary ports, allowing troops to land closer to the fight.

The Pentagon has only three of these ships, made by Bollinger/Incat USA LLC, based in Louisiana. But it expects to order as many as a dozen more starting in the 2005-06 budget, and it is pushing allies to buy similar vessels. "These ships are really redefining how we look at the world," says one senior military official working with Mr. Hoehn's team of analysts.

The most pronounced changes are in the Army. For years the Army's annual computer-simulated war game has focused on fighting a major war. This year, however, the forces didn't face any single simulated enemy. Instead, they juggled military actions in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Caucasus, while monitoring unrest in Latin America and Africa.

In the simulated Southeast Asia conflict, set in 2015, a radical Islamic separatist group, supported by funds from the Middle East and the drug trade, seized large parts of a country allied with the U.S. Those parts of the country became breeding grounds for terrorists. U.S. forces swooped in quickly. They appeared to drive the enemy from the capital within days and then mounted attacks on rebel strongholds elsewhere.

As soon as U.S. troops left the capital, however, the rebels there -- many of whom had simply taken off their uniforms and melded into the city of five million -- re-emerged to storm the parliament, the government television station and the airport. When U.S. forces counterattacked, these guerrillas once again slipped into the shadows.

"We were never able to set up the conditions to make these disaffected people fewer in number. We won and then we found we owned this nightmarish place," says retired Vice Adm. Lyle Bien, who played commander of U.S. forces in Asia.

The experience left a few, such as Adm. Bien, believing that the best course of action would have been not intervening at all. "We're developing a force that makes it almost too easy to intervene," says Adm. Bien. "I am concerned about America pounding herself out."

Other participants insisted the military needed to develop a broader array of policing and nation-building skills to deal with turmoil both before a conflict begins and after it ends.

No Game

In Kyrgyzstan, many problems that commanders wrestled with in the simulated war game -- troubles with partners' differing values, corruption, Islamic extremism and poverty -- are playing out in real life.

The country boasts the largest number of U.S. and coalition troops, about 1,500, of any nation in Central Asia outside Afghanistan. It's probably the most progressive of the five former Soviet states in Central Asia. It was the first among them to join the World Trade Organization, and it has a relatively free press.

U.S. officials note that Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev keeps a bust of Thomas Jefferson in his office and quotes him frequently when talking to foreigners. Unfortunately, he is still struggling with some of the basic tenets of Jeffersonian democracy. In 2001, Mr. Akayev jailed his chief political rival, Feliks Kulov, for 10 years on corruption charges. In March 2002, Kyrgyz forces opened fire on demonstrators near Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, killing five. The shootings set off protests that virtually shut down the capital.

"We are facing some problems with democracy and human rights," says Foreign Minister Askar Aitmatov. "But our country is evolving. Institutions are changing."

The U.S. military has tried to wall itself off from its messy surroundings. At first, American military police ran regular patrols through the nearby city of Marble, handing out candy to kids in the street. But the patrols were canceled when the Americans stopped bringing sweets and the children began throwing stones at them. Today, U.S. troops are allowed off the base only on infrequent "cultural tours" or for organized community service, such as a recent effort to refurbish a school near the base.

Still, U.S. commanders can't keep the less attractive aspects of the outside world from intruding. Drunk townsmen and impoverished children approach the guards at the base's gate begging for money or food. "They hide their shoes in the woods," complains Airman First Class Kyle Richards, who stands guard. U.S. base commanders had to begin dumping their garbage far from town after local papers printed embarrassing pictures of townspeople hoisting discarded packages of hot dogs and Aunt Jemima maple syrup like trophies.

Corruption also is a problem. On any given day someone from the airport authority might stride up to the U.S. or coalition commanders and demand more airport fees, says U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Tommy Goode, the base's coalition coordinator.

Kyrgyz opposition leaders complain that fuel for the coalition planes, which costs more than \$25 million a year, is provided by a company owned by President Akayev's son-in-law. The contract was put out for competitive bids, say U.S. and Kyrgyz officials. But Lt. Col. Goode concedes that all of the airport contractors have some connection to senior government officials or the president. "We have to work within that system," he says.

For Pentagon officials back in Washington, the critical question is whether the U.S. military presence here will lead to a more stable and democratic Central Asia.

It's too early to tell. Like many of its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan worries about Islamic fundamentalists. In 1999, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, launched an incursion into the country from neighboring Tajikistan. The Kyrgyz military repelled the attack only after taking heavy casualties. "If we had this air base in 1999, the IMU would have thought twice before indulging in our territory," says Mr. Aitmatov, the foreign minister.

More recently, Kyrgyz and U.S. officials have been concerned about Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an Islamic separatist group, which has taken root in southern Kyrgyzstan. If the group becomes a threat, the Kyrgyz won't need to rely solely on the Americans. Last month, the Russians, driven by concerns about Islamic extremists

and the growing influence of the U.S. in the region, moved into an air base about 15 miles from the U.S. base.

Critics of U.S. policy on Kyrgyzstan worry the military presence makes it less likely that the Bush administration will lean on the Kyrgyz government to become more open and democratic. "Recognizing a country with governance problems as a strategic ally means you'll press less hard because you need something from them," says Anthony Richter, director of the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute, an organization funded by George Soros that promotes democracy.

Kyrgyzstan probably needs some pushing. President Akayev has promised he will step down in 2005 -- an important milestone in a region where rulers have refused to cede power. But it isn't clear whether Mr. Akayev will follow through with that pledge. A recent constitutional referendum could give him the right to run for another term.

What is clear is that the U.S. military doesn't plan to leave Kyrgyzstan any time soon. On a warm May afternoon the base held a ceremony to welcome a new general. Before the ceremony, the old commander, Brig. Gen. Jared Kennish, spoke of the expanding U.S. presence in the region. "Here I am in a nation I had never heard of, couldn't pronounce and couldn't find on a map six months ago, and my remarks are being broadcast on television throughout the country," the general marveled. Later, he handed the ceremonial guidon to his successor. Half a dozen Kyrgyz generals, wearing Soviet Army-style uniforms, saluted.

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