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**Basing and Other Constraints on  
Land-Based Aviation Contributions  
to U.S. Contingency Operations**

Adam B. Siegel



**Center for Naval Analyses**

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The Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) is a private, nonprofit, federally funded research and development center that does analyses for the Department of the Navy. This paper is one of a series of technical or historical analyses intended to contribute to the ongoing debate on the roles and missions of the military services, particularly those aspects involving sea-based airpower and its alternatives. The papers are intended to be quick references on one facet of the overall issue.

The author is an analyst with CNA's Policy, Strategy, and Forces Division. Mr. Siegel's work at CNA since 1984 includes operational deployments in support of Desert Shield/Storm and, most recently, Uphold Democracy (Haiti). His current project work focuses on the role of U.S. Marine Corps forces in humanitarian-assistance operations. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in military history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

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## Introduction

Amid the debate over roles and missions in recent years, claims of land-based airpower's capacity to match the contributions of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers have been a prominent theme. As part of that argument, some land-based aviation advocates have argued that basing and other constraints have little relevance to the debate—that basing constraints have not prevented land-based airpower from contributing to U.S. military operations.

This argument masks a far more complicated history of U.S. access to facilities and airspace in the midst of international incidents and crises. Land-based airpower has contributed, in some manner, to every significant U.S. military operation since World War II. But basing constraints have often made this contribution more difficult or, more important, have seriously limited the capabilities that land-based airpower could bring to contingency operations.

In light of the potential confusion about this issue, this paper examines the history of limitations on land-based aviation activities during U.S. contingency operations.

### Overview

After presenting some caveats, the paper identifies four types of base and other access limitations on land-based aviation's contributions to U.S. contingency operations. Following this, the historical section reviews some contingency operations in which basing and other constraints limited the role of land-based airpower. A brief section describing limitations on other U.S. military capabilities follows. The conclusion briefly reviews the preceding sections.

### Caveats and limitations

This paper is not the product of a long-term, or even an ongoing, CNA research effort. Instead, it reflects the author's

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familiarity with U.S. contingency operations.<sup>1</sup> A wider range of sources could add to this information. In particular, the paper does *not* rely on a review of classified material, where the most detailed information on such limitations probably exists. Thus, it may be that the historical examples presented here represent only the tip of the proverbial iceberg of problems the United States has faced with base and other access during responses to international incidents and crises. Although research in classified archives would no doubt add detail and more cases to the information presented here, I do not believe that this material would undermine the fundamental conclusion of this paper; that is, while land-based aviation has contributed to every significant U.S. military operation over the past 48 years, basing (and other) constraints have limited the type or scope of land-based airpower's contributions in many operations.

In addition, this paper focuses on limitations on U.S. Air Force actions. While it seems probable that base and other access limitations have had the most serious implications for Air Force operations, this paper makes no pretence of documenting the implications of basing (and other) constraints on the activities of the U.S. Army, Marine Corps, or Navy to the same (albeit limited) degree it does for the Air Force. More precisely, this paper describes limitations on the basing and employment of land-based aircraft. These limitations apply regardless of service, but in practice fall most heavily on the Air Force.

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1. For examples of the author's work dealing with such issues, see CNA Research Memorandum 90-246, *The Use of Naval Forces in the Post-War Era: U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps Crisis Response Activity, 1946-1990*, February 1991; CNA Research Memorandum 94-42, *JTF Operations Since 1983*, co-author, July 1994; and CNA Information Memorandum 334, *A Chronology of USMC Humanitarian Assistance and Peace Operations*, September 1994.

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## **A typology of limitations on land-based aviation operations**

A wide range of basing and other constraints can limit—and have limited—the ability of U.S. land-based aircraft to contribute to U.S. military operations. These include (but are not limited to) the following four types of constraints:

- *Overflight restrictions:* Countries—allied, neutral, and hostile—can refuse permission for U.S. aircraft to overfly their airspace.
- *Base access problems:* Governments can deny the United States access to basing facilities or can limit base use.
- *Limited base infrastructure:* Base infrastructure limitations can hamper operations in numerous ways, from limiting the number of aircraft deployable into theater to slowing or otherwise restricting throughput.
- *Political repercussions of unauthorized base usage:* Sometimes base restrictions do not occur during an operation because the United States does not seek permission or ignores the wishes of the host country. In such situations, the United States can face serious political repercussions for ignoring or otherwise defying host-nation sensitivities. These repercussions can include losing base access or having restricted base access, which can adversely affect the U.S. ability to respond to a different situation.

Table 1 provides selected examples of limitations on land-based air operations. Each of the four types of constraints on the use of land power is illustrated in these cases.

Table 1. Examples of limitations on U.S. land-based air operations during contingency operations

Year(s)	Country	Type of restriction	Description
1958	Greece, Austria, Switzerland	Overflight denied	These three countries denied overflight rights for the transportation of U.S. Army units from Germany to Turkey in support of Operation Blue Bat in Lebanon.
1958	Saudi Arabia	Base access denied; overflight denied	The Saudi government stated that the United States could not use Saudi bases or airspace to support British operations in Jordan.
1964	Libya	Base access not sought	State Department vetoed Wheelus Air Force Base, Libya, use to support Congo operations.
1964	Spain	Transit rights denied; political repercussions	U.S. airlift aircraft staged through Spain en route to the Congo without permission from the Spanish government. Spain refused to allow the aircraft to return via Spain.
1965-1966	Vietnam	Physical limitations	South Vietnamese air bases could not support the required build-up of tactical aviation. Aircraft carriers deployed to fill the ground support gap until air-base construction caught up with requirements.
1973	Western Europe	Base access denied; overflight denied	With the exception of Portugal (Azores), all Western European countries denied the United States permission to use their airfields or airspace in support of the airlift to Israel.
1975	Thailand	Restricted base use	During the <i>Mayaguez</i> rescue operation, the Thai government did not allow USAF strikes against the Cambodian mainland.
1979	Costa Rica	Base access denied	The Costa Rican government ejected a USAF unit forward deployed for a potential evacuation of Americans from Nicaragua.
1980-1990	Persian Gulf	Base access denied	The U.S. Government had little success obtaining base access following the Shah's fall.
1986	Spain, France	Overflight denied	France and Spain did not grant overflight rights to U.K.-based F-111s participating in the strikes against Libya.
1992-1995	Italy	Restricted base use	The Italian government has placed restricted flight hours on the bases from which aircraft support NATO and UN operations.
1994	Saudi Arabia	Base access delayed	The Saudi government delayed movement of USAF aircraft to respond to Iraqi movements.

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## Restrictions on overflight

For many, if not most, military operations involving land-based aircraft, the United States will either have or want to have these aircraft fly through another country's (or countries') airspace. Most occasions involve the use of transport aircraft on essentially routine missions, and overflight rights are, essentially, routinely granted. This is not always the case, however. In his examination of great-power rivalry over bases, Robert Harkavy noted:

On a less visible and hence seemingly less sensitive level, there is the now often crucial matter of aircraft overflight privileges, involving a range of practices and traditions, some altered by time in an era of increasingly "total" warfare, diplomacy, and ideological enmities. Some nations have allowed others more or less full, unhindered, and continuous overflight rights (perhaps involving only pro forma short-term notices), while in other cases, ad hoc formal applications for permission to overfly must be made well ahead of time, which may or may not be granted depending upon the purpose and situation, be it normalcy or crisis. Turkey and Yugoslavia, for instance, granted the USSR overflight rights during the 1973 airlift to the Arabs, while some of America's NATO allies did not grant similar access to the United States on behalf of Israel. The United States has had serious problems with overflights in some Middle Eastern and African corridors.<sup>2</sup>

It is the rare situation where the United States has unimpeded and unquestioned overflight rights in any and all circumstances. While the 1973 Arab-Israeli crisis provides the most prominent example, on many other occasions the United States has either had trouble acquiring or been unable to secure approval for overflights to support contingency operations.

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2. Robert Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy*, New York, Pergamon Press, 1982, pages 21-22.

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These problems range from Austria, Greece, and Switzerland refusing overflight to transport aircraft en route to Turkey in 1958; to French and Spanish refusal to allow F-111s overflight rights as part of the April 1986 strikes against Libya; to limited overflight rights for U.S. Navy combat aircraft in the Persian Gulf region during the 1987–1988 Earnest Will escort operations; to a rather tortuous negotiation process to gain Indian approval for transport aircraft overflight (and emergency divert airfield access) in support of Operations Desert Shield/Storm in 1990–1991.

### **Base access problems**

National sovereignty issues can affect U.S. military operations many ways. Besides having to seek permission to fly through another country's airspace, the United States must seek approval to use air bases and other airfields to support U.S. military operations. In many cases, this is a prenegotiated element of a base agreement. In others, such as typically occurs with airlift aircraft involved in humanitarian assistance operations, this is essentially a *pro forma*, and rather rapidly accomplished, process. At other times, however, the host nation constrains or even refuses U.S. use of facilities to support an on-going U.S. military operation. In some cases, the United States will not even attempt to use or gain access to bases on the assumption that the host nation will deny its use. In rare cases, the U.S. Government may choose to use a base or conduct overflight without seeking host-nation approval. (The section on political repercussions below briefly deals with the implications of ignoring host-nation sensitivities and/or desires.)

The more a host nation's and U.S. interests are in common, the less likely a denial or constraint on U.S. base access will occur. When U.S. and host-nation interests diverge, however, U.S. use of facilities may be constrained or even refused. A detailed analysis of the U.S. basing structure in the Philippines addressed the issue as follows:

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Another cause of discord in relations between the United States and host nations is U.S. use of overseas bases for reasons other than direct defense of the host nation. In the case of NATO, use of bases in defense of members of the alliance is theoretically approved. However, use of bases for out-of-area operations falls into a different category and is sometimes not allowed. The most prominent example of such action is the refusal of Spain and France to allow overflight of U.S. aircraft taking part in the bombing of Libya in April 1986. Denial of access for resupply of Israel during the Yom Kippur War is an earlier example. NATO allies are not the only reluctant participants in external operations. During the Vietnam War the United States used Thailand as a base for B-52 and fighter operations, however it specifically avoided using the Philippines because that government had indicated it would prefer not to host these activities.<sup>3</sup>

Another situation occurs when the United States finds it difficult if not impossible to gain access agreements to support military operations. From the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1978 until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States had only the most limited access to bases in the Persian Gulf region, even though this was an area of almost continuous near-crisis response by U.S. military forces throughout this period.<sup>4</sup> For example, Oman limited access to airfields with the restriction that any resupply material brought in by airlift had to be removed from the airfield area that same day. Throughout this period, basing constraints limited land-based airpower's contribution to U.S. military operations in the Persian Gulf region to

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3. Katharine Watkins Webb, *Are Overseas Bases Worth the Bucks? An approach to assessing operational value and an applications to the Philippines*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Rand Graduate Institute, 1988, page 6.
  4. Notable crises include the U.S. Embassy hostages in Teheran, Iran; the Soviet invasion of and war in Afghanistan; the Iraqi invasion of Iran; and the shipping war within the overall Iran-Iraq War.
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airlift, aerial refueling, command and control, intelligence, and U.S. Navy aircraft conducting maritime surveillance patrols.

To give some idea of the scope of problems in U.S. access to bases (not only in the midst of contingency operations), table 2 provides examples of when U.S. military access has been denied or ended over the past five decades.

### **Limited base infrastructure**

In some cases, limitations on U.S. military operations have little or nothing to do with political issues. Basing constraints are sometimes physical, creating limitations on the ability of forces to move into a region. Physical constraints might also limit the ability to operate as desired or up to the capabilities of the available assets. The following are examples of physical limitations hampering the ability of land-based airpower to contribute in an operation:<sup>5</sup>

- In 1958, U.S. Air Force combat and transport aircraft overwhelmed the available bases in Turkey and the airport in Beirut as they moved in support of Operation Blue Bat in Lebanon. This delayed the movement of U.S. Army forces from Europe and limited the ability of deployed combat aircraft to execute missions, if they had been required.<sup>6</sup>
- In 1960, during relief operations following a major earthquake in Chile, airfield inadequacies constrained the U.S. airlift effort. Constraints included airfields that could not

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5. Although three of the five examples concern transport aircraft and operations, these issues are illustrative of the problems that any land-based air assets—including bombers and tactical aviation—might face in a demanding real-world operation.

6. Roger J. Spiller, *“Not War But Like War”*: *The American Intervention in Lebanon*, Leavenworth Papers No. 3, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, January 1981, page 31.

Table 2. Selected chronology of U.S. military access denials since 1947

Year(s)	Country	Brief Description
1947-1948	Australia	Australia denies the United States postwar basing rights at Manus in the Admiralty Islands.
1960-1961	Cuba	The United States severs diplomatic relations with Cuba, partially due to the U.S. military presence at Guantanamo Bay.
1962	Saudi Arabia	The Saudi government refuses to renew the U.S. lease for bases at Dhahran airfield, ending the U.S. presence there.
1963	Morocco	The Moroccan government shuts down three U.S. bases.
1964	Spain	Following unauthorized use of Moron air base to support operations in the Eastern Congo, Spain refuses to allow U.S. aircraft or personnel to use Spanish bases for returning from Africa to Europe.
1966	France	France's withdrawal from NATO's united military structure forces the United States to shut down all bases in France, including nine major air bases.
1969-1970	Libya	Following his seizure of power, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi requires the United States to leave Wheelus Air Force Base.
1973	W. Europe	During the U.S. resupply effort to Israel, Portugal was the only European country to allow the United States to use its bases (on the Azores) for supporting the airlift effort.
1973-1974	Thailand	Six U.S. bases are shut down due to local opposition.
1975	Turkey	In response to U.S. pressure on Turkey to moderate its role in Cyprus, Turkey requires the United States to close all U.S. military installations on its soil.
1975	Vietnam	Following the fall of South Vietnam, over 60 principal bases and installations constructed by the United States during the course of the war are occupied by North Vietnamese forces.
1978	Ethiopia	The new Ethiopian regime forces the United States to evacuate from its facilities.
1979	Iran	Following the fall of the Shah, the Islamic Republic effectively severs all previously negotiated prior access agreements.
1988	Spain	Spain refuses to renew the lease on Torrejon Air Base outside Madrid, forcing the withdrawal of the 41st Tactical Air Wing.
1990	Liberia	The civil war in Liberia forces the evacuation of communication facilities and ends the use of Liberia as an emergency divert site for shuttle missions.
1990	Somalia	The disorder in Somalia leads to the December 1990 removal of all supplies from the facilities at Berbera, Somalia.
1991	Philippines	Nationalist opposition in the Philippine Senate to U.S. bases ends the almost century-long U.S. military presence there.

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operate at night or during inclement weather, and airfields with inadequate (essentially no) ramp space to allow multiple aircraft to use the airfield at the one time.<sup>7</sup>

- In 1965 and 1966, the limited air-base facilities in South Vietnam could not handle U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps aviation required to support the build-up of U.S. ground forces. The Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, ordered U.S. Navy aircraft carriers to Dixie Station to fill part of the gap in requirements. Construction of airbases eased this problem by mid 1966.<sup>8</sup>
- In 1992, inadequacies in the en route basing infrastructure hampered airlift movements to Mogadishu, Somalia, as part of Operation Restore Hope. Specifically, the support airbase in Egypt had limited ramp space and could not support 24-hour/day operations until several days into the operation. In addition, the Mogadishu airport had minimal ramp space for unloading aircraft.

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7. Military Airlift Transport Service (MATS), U.S. Air Force, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, Press Release for 28 May 1960, in file "Press releases: MATS, USAF, Scott"; and CINCARIB Quarry Heights CZ 26171B (May 60) "Sit Rep 1 as of 261600Z May 60" in folder "AMIGOS Airlift (earthquake) May 1960" in the Air Mobility Command archives at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.
  8. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, volume II: From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965*, Washington, DC, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1986, pages 515-516; CNA Research Memorandum 94-152, *An Overview of CV TACAIR Operations in the Vietnam War*, by C. Bernard Barfoot, October 1994, page 6; CNA Operations Evaluation Group (OEG) Study 712, *Analysis of Tactical Aircraft Operations in Southeast Asia, 1965-1966: Short title: TACMIX*, by J.F. Brennan et al., January 1968, volume 1, page 3, volume 2, pages 10, 13; René J. Francillon, *Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club: U.S. Carrier Operations Off Vietnam*, Annapolis, MD, Naval Institute Press, 1988, pages 42-43.

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- In 1994, inadequacies of the Goma, Zaire, airfield hampered relief efforts to aid Rwandan refugees who had fled to Zaire. At one point, press reports indicated that one U.S. Air Force aircraft had closed the Goma airfield for almost an entire day to other relief flights as it unloaded heavy equipment on the runway itself because of inadequate ramp space at the airfield.

In these and other cases, Air Force (and other) personnel have diligently worked to overcome the basing constraints on the full use of land-based airpower's capabilities to contribute to the overall U.S. military operation. Base structure inadequacies did not prevent land-based airpower from contributing but did make it more difficult to make this contribution.

### **Political repercussions of base/other usage**

Another form of constraint exists: political repercussions for U.S. actions. This constraint does not usually affect immediate operations, as the constraint is displaced to the future. The United States has sometimes acted without seeking host-nation approval for the use of facilities on its soil. This can lead to a backlash from the host government that can limit the U.S. ability to operate from that country in the future. In 1964, for example, the United States moved a transport squadron through Spain to support operations in the eastern Congo without first seeking approval. In response, the Spanish refused to allow the United States to return the aircraft carrying Belgian paratroopers through Spanish airspace. This forced the chartering of commercial aircraft to return the paratroopers to Belgium. In 1980, the United States used Omani facilities in the attempted rescue of the U.S. Embassy hostages in Teheran, Iran, without seeking approval. This action caused the Omani government to monitor the U.S. use of Omani facilities and limited the U.S. ability to gain base-access agreements with other countries in the region. Arab nationalists used this case to support their argument that the United States would use such facilities to support Israel.

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## Historical examples

This section presents examples when basing and other constraints limited land-based aviation's ability to contribute to a U.S. military operation.

### Lebanon, 1958

During Operation Blue Bat, the movement of forces into Lebanon in July 1958, the U.S. Air Force faced several restrictions on the movement of aircraft and on the use of bases.<sup>9</sup> A number of countries refused U.S. aircraft overflight rights as the Air Force moved Army units from Germany to Turkey. Original planning assumptions relied on the policy that "wherein such [overflight] privileges were not obtained, they [restrictions] would be ignored."<sup>10</sup> Real-world events did not follow this scenario. The first aircraft had been airborne for three hours when it was learned that Greece would not grant overflight rights. This added two hours of flying time and forced refueling of the transport aircraft in Italy. Austria and Switzerland also refused to allow U.S. aircraft to fly through their airspace. Initially, Austria approved U.S. overflights, but withdrew this approval two days later. The United States continued overflights for three days past this until the U.S. Ambassador in Vienna reported "that the continuation of unauthorized overflights would weaken seriously our moral and propaganda position" and the Austrian

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9. For information on Blue Bat, see: Spiller, *Not War But Like War*; CNA Research Contribution 153, *The Lebanon Operation of 1958: A Study of the Crisis Role of the Sixth Fleet*, by George S. Dragnich, 10 March 1971; and, Jack Schulimson, *Marines in Lebanon*, Washington, DC, History and Museums Branch, Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, 1966; and Albert P. Sights, Jr., "Lessons of Lebanon: A Study in Air Strategy," *Air University Review*, vol. 16, no. 5, July-August 1965, pages 28–43.

10. The quotation is from a study on the guidance from the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the operation as cited by Spiller, *Not War But Like War*, page 29. See page 31 as well.

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Defense Minister announced orders for the Austrian Air Force to shoot down "any intruding military aircraft."<sup>11</sup>

When the Lebanon crisis heated up, the State Department initially vetoed the Air Force deployment to Incirlik Airbase as a provocative action. This veto soon ended because Incirlik was a key element for the U.S. military operation. As part of Operation Blue Bat, the Tactical Air Command eventually deployed a Composite Air Strike Force (CASF) to Incirlik. The CASF included 26 F-100s, 12 B-57s, 7 RF-101s, and 3 WB-66s. In addition, the airlift aircraft carrying forces from Europe used Incirlik as a staging base en route to Beirut. The bases in Turkey and in Beirut were inadequate for the scheduled air flow and the CASF. Congestion in these bases forced a hold on the movement of Army units to Lebanon, with Task Force Bravo held for several days in France.<sup>12</sup> At Adana Air Base, congestion forced incoming aircraft to go into a holding pattern until ramp space was cleared for them to land.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time that the United States sent forces to Lebanon, it supported a British move to Jordan. Although President Eisenhower decided not to send U.S. troops to Jordan, despite a direct request from the British Prime Minister, he ordered U.S. support for British troop movements. In addition to airlift of equipment and supplies from Lebanon and Cyprus, Eisenhower contemplated supply from U.S. air bases in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia withheld permission for such an operation. The Saudi government also refused U.S. transport aircraft overflight rights to carry fuel from the British base in Bahrain to Jordan. Eisenhower stated that he would have acted without Saudi

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11. Dragnich, *Lebanon Operation of 1958*, page 66.

12. Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, and Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, volume I: 1907-1960*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Air University Press, December 1989, pages 611-612; Dragnich, *Lebanon Operation of 1958*, pages 64-66.

13. Spiller, *Not War But Like War*, page 31.

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permission if he had thought it necessary. The United States did support the British effort with flights over Israel, which was erratic in allowing overflights. The first airlift of British paratroopers was forced to turn back while airborne because Israel had not yet granted overflight clearance. After several weeks of overflights, Israel closed its airspace and threatened to fire on U.S. and British planes if they attempted to overfly Israel without permission. Other countries, such as Ceylon and India, refused to allow any military overflights in support of the British and U.S. operations.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey was not consulted before or during Operation Blue Bat. As a result, the Turkish government placed restrictions on the use of Incirlik that remained, in essence, until the Greek-Turkish confrontation over Cyprus. For a long period, from 1975 into the 1980s, Turkey closed access to Incirlik in reaction to the U.S. pressure on Turkey to moderate its role in Cyprus.

### **Congo, 1964**

In the summer of 1964, rebels invaded the Katanga province in the eastern Congo. These rebels directly threatened European expatriates in the region (and killed many of them). The United States considered direct intervention, but opted instead to support a Belgian intervention to rescue endangered expatriates.

The State Department vetoed the use of Wheelus Air Force Base (AFB), Libya, for the Belgian troop movement to the Congo. This forced the airlift aircraft to use the British base at Ascension Island as an intermediate base. According to General Earl Wheeler, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, using Ascension rather than Wheelus "added 1,600 nautical miles to

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14. William B. Quandt, "Lebanon, 1958, and Jordan, 1970," in Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1978, pages 238–9; Dragnich, *Lebanon Operation of 1958*, pages 67–69.

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the flight and cost \$2,400 more per aircraft.” Wheeler stated “that it was doubtful that the State Department was fully aware of the military implications created by such rerouting.”<sup>15</sup> Use of Ascension Island rather than Wheelus forced the airlift aircraft to land for refueling in the Congo. The stop in the Congo created a threat to operational security and added several more hours to the force’s reaction time to orders.<sup>16</sup>

For a variety of reasons, in some ways almost inadvertent rather than purposeful, a squadron from the 464th Tactical Airlift Squadron moved to Moron Air Force Base (AFB) in Spain without the proper diplomatic clearances. In response to this action, the Spanish government refused to allow the Dragon force to return from the Congo to Europe via Spanish airspace. This forced the chartering of commercial aircraft to return the Belgian paratroopers to Belgium.<sup>17</sup>

### **Thailand and Vietnam, 1965–1966**

The United States faced a wide range of limitations on its actions during the Vietnam War, including self-imposed political restraints on military operations, constraints on U.S. actions imposed by other countries, and physical limitations on the extent and type of operations U.S. forces could conduct. The following briefly highlights examples of how the last two limited the land-based aviation contribution to operations in 1965 and 1966.

Thailand, in addition to requiring that the United States keep secret all operations conducted from Thai bases, would not allow U.S. aircraft operating from Thai bases to fly missions over

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15. Major Thomas P. Odom, USA, *Dragon Operations: Hostage Rescues in the Congo, 1964–1965*, Leavenworth Papers number 14, 1988, pages 35, 37. See map on page 36.

16. Odom, *Dragon Operations*, page 47.

17. Odom, *Dragon Operations*, page 75.

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South Vietnam. These aircraft could, however, conduct missions over Laos and North Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

The inadequate airbase infrastructure also constrained the ability of land-based aviation to contribute to operations in South Vietnam in 1965 and 1966. With the rapid build-up in ground forces in 1965, the requirement for U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps aircraft to support ground operations increased commensurately. The available airbases in South Vietnam could not, however, support the required build-up. For example, plans to transfer Thai-based tactical squadrons to South Vietnam (which would shorten the radius of operations and thus allow a higher sortie rate) were not carried out in late 1965 because the airfields in South Vietnam were already saturated. While a construction program went ahead at full steam, CINCPAC ordered an aircraft carrier to be stationed off the coast of Vietnam and B-52 strikes from Guam until base construction in South Vietnam caught up with the need for land-based tactical aviation support for ground operations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Arab-Israeli conflict, 1973**

The United States responded to the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War with a spectrum of military activities. One of these, the emergency airlift of supplies to Israel, placed great demands

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18. CNA Research Memorandum 94-152, *An Overview of CV TACAIR Operations*, page 4; CNA OEG Study 712, *Analysis of Tactical Aircraft Operations*, vol. 1, page 3, vol. 2, pages 11–12. In a self-imposed and somewhat similar restriction, aircraft operating from U.S. Navy aircraft carriers in the South China Sea could not fly over North Vietnam as part of their missions over Laos and South Vietnam. CNA OEG Study 712, vol. 1, page 3.

19. Marolda and Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, vol. II, pages 515–516; CNA Research Memorandum 94-152, *Overview of CV TACAIR Operations*, page 6; CNA OEG Study 712, *Analysis of Tactical Aircraft Operations*, vol. 1, page 3, vol. 2, pages 10, 13; Francillon, *Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club*, pages 42–43.

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on the U.S. Air Force's transport aircraft. All U.S. allies, with the sole exception of Portugal, refused to grant the United States access to bases to support this airlift operation. Overflights were also a problem as "international politics created operation problems concerning routing of flight." NATO countries and Spain, with the exception of Portugal, refused overflight access to U.S. aircraft. "Consequently, flights originating in West Germany flew a circuitous route that took them west to Lajes before heading east to Israel."<sup>20</sup>

Because U.S. aircraft based in Italy could not support the operation, U.S. Navy fighter aircraft provided escorts to USAF transport aircraft. To support the airlift, "the Navy tracked MAC transports from ship to ship from Gibraltar through the Mediterranean, keeping a ship on station every 300 miles and an aircraft carrier every 600 miles."<sup>21</sup>

Not only the airlift operation faced difficulties in terms of constraints on base access. For example, the United Kingdom restricted the U.S. use of Akotiri base on Cyprus during the 1973 war. Akotiri-supported missions included intelligence flights.<sup>22</sup>

When the Spanish government renegotiated the base access agreement in 1975, it insisted that it would maintain the right to restrict use of the bases in specific crises, as it did during the 1973 war. "The facts of Arab oil leverage over Spain seemed virtually to ensure that such a veto would again be exercised in the event of a new Middle Eastern war."<sup>23</sup>

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20. David K. Mets, *Land-Based Air Power in Third World Crises*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, Air University Press, July 1986, pages 105–106.

21. Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, and Doctrine, vol. II: 1961–1984*, December 1989, page 642.

22. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition*, pages 227, 228.

23. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition*, page 224.

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### *Mayaguez, 1975*

In May 1975, just after the final U.S. evacuations from Cambodia and Vietnam, Cambodian forces seized the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez*. President Ford soon ordered a military operation to free the ship and rescue the crew.<sup>24</sup> The Thai government, extremely sensitive about the likelihood of a total U.S. withdrawal from the region in the wake of South Vietnam's fall, placed restrictions on the use of its facilities to support this rescue effort. David Mets, an analyst with the U.S. Air Force, described the implications of these limitations as follows:

Similarly, political considerations were reducing the flexibility of the U.S. Air Force units then stationed in Thailand. The units were hardly an hour or two away from the target area, and as there were then three fighter wings located in the country, they could have brought far more combat power to bear on the mainland targets than was possible for the air wing aboard the *Coral Sea*—and they could have done it much sooner, had that been necessary. Yet Thai sovereignty was involved... the Thais made it clear that they could not condone the use of their territory for the mounting of attacks against Cambodia, especially the mainland. The result was that the physical flexibility of the Air Force units in Thailand was not fully available for exploitation and the carrier air units had to be used against the targets at Kompong Som and Ream.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Air Force, Army, Marine, and Navy units participated in the operation. For the U.S. order of battle, see Daniel P. Bolger, *Americans at War, 1975–1986: An Era of Violent Peace*, Novato, CA, Presido, 1988, pages 36–7.

25. Mets, *Land-Based Air Power in Third World Crises*, pages 56–57. The restrictions did not prevent USAF strikes on the islands. USAF aircraft conducted bombing raids on Koh Tang Island in support of the Marine assault. CNA Study 1085, *The Mayaguez Operation*, by Urey W. Patrick, April 1977, pages 75–85.

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## Nicaragua, 1979

As the Sandinistas drove out the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, the United States moved to evacuate Americans. In June, USAF aircraft evacuated more than 1,400 people, and brought 51 tons of food and other supplies to victims of the civil unrest.<sup>26</sup> Following this evacuation, however, many Americans—including the official Americans in a reduced Embassy staff—remained in Nicaragua. A U.S. Air Force contingent was moved to Costa Rica in case these Americans required a rapid evacuation. This incident provided a case for a premier student of basing.

The extent to which continued U.S. access, even in areas long under close-by military sway is now under severe political pressure was illustrated during the Nicaraguan civil war, during which the U.S. was ordered “within 24 hours” to withdraw a small Air Force contingent and its two helicopters from Costa Rica. The latter were initially allowed to enter Costa Rica to be available if an evacuation of U.S. citizens from Nicaragua became necessary. Costa Rica, along with Mexico and Panama, was backing the Sandinistas, and its refusal of access to a U.S. rescue contingency unit was echoed later by Turkey’s restriction of similar American access to Incirlik during the Iranian revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Following the ejection of the Air Force helicopters, the Secretary of Defense ordered an amphibious task force, centered on LHA-2 *Saipan*, to off the Nicaraguan coast in case an evacuation became necessary.

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26. Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, *45 Years of Global Reach and Power: The United States Air Force and National Security, 1947–1992: A Historical Perspective*, 1992, page 26.

27. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition*, pages 213–4; “Costa Ricans Expel U.S. Air Force Unit,” *New York Times*, 11 July 1979, page A7.

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### **Hostages in Iran and the April 1980 rescue attempt**

The Iranian seizure of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and the hostage crisis that lasted into January 1981 created an extremely difficult political situation for any U.S. military operation to rescue the hostages or otherwise act against Iran. In essence, no country in the region would authorize anything other than the most minimal U.S. access to facilities. Turkey specifically refused to allow the United States to use facilities on its soil in support of operations into or against Iran. This forced the eventual April 1980 rescue effort to rely on the minimal access Arab countries would grant to land-based airpower.

Extreme secrecy surrounded the planning and execution of the April 1980 rescue attempt. "Any undercover operation requires deception—not only of enemies but sometimes of friends as well. Thus, the government of Oman, whose base at Masirah was to be used for refueling the C-130s, was not told the true nature of the mission, simply because permission to refuel probably would not have been granted."<sup>28</sup> Use of an Omani airfield as part of the abortive rescue attempt in April 1980 angered the Omani government. The Omanis claimed that the United States had not appropriately informed them before using the airfield and threatened to end U.S. access to its facilities. U.S. access continued, but at some diplomatic cost.<sup>29</sup>

Saudi Arabia, at that time, greatly restricted U.S. military access with decisions on a case-by-case basis for any U.S. access to Saudi facilities. In line with these limitations, "the U.S. aircraft which stopped at Oman en route to the Iranian desert rendezvous appeared to have skirted around Saudi airspace at the expense of a much longer route."<sup>30</sup>

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28. Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why it failed*, Annapolis, MD, Naval Institute Press, 1985, page 63.

29. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition*, page 218.

30. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition*, page 219

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### **Libya strikes, 1986**

In 1986, following a series of Libyan actions against U.S. interests and with direct evidence of the Libyan government involvement in terrorist actions that killed Americans, President Reagan ordered a U.S. military strike against the terrorist infrastructure in Libya. This strike involved U.S. Navy and Marine Corps aircraft operating from two aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean and U.S. Air Force bombers operating from the United Kingdom.

Initial planning for USAF involvement in strikes against Libya assumed that the F/B-111s would cross over France from the bases in the United Kingdom to the Mediterranean. When approached, both Spain and France refused overflight access. To participate in the strikes against Libya, the F/B-111s' flight had to remain over water in international airspace. This delayed execution of the strike operation because the longer flight required more tanker support and the tanker aircraft had to fly into theater from the United States.<sup>31</sup>

### **Earnest Will escort operations, 1987-88**

Throughout the 1980s, the United States conducted a number of responses to international incidents and crises in the Persian Gulf region. These crises included the hostages in Teheran (discussed above), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iran-Iraq War. Throughout this period, the U.S. military had only limited access to facilities in the region. In 1987, the United States initiated a major military operation in response to an escalation of the "Shipping War" between Iran and Iraq as a sub-component of their war. The United States agreed to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and protect the transit of these (and all other U.S.-flag merchant) ships through the Persian Gulf. The United States conducted the Earnest Will escort operations in the face

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31. Daniel P. Bolger, *Americans at War, 1975-1986: An Era of Violent Peace*, Novato, CA, Presido, 1988, pages 415, 417, 418.

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of Iranian opposition, which erupted into direct U.S.–Iranian armed confrontations several times in 1987 and 1988. The various countries in the region that supported the U.S. operation greatly restricted U.S. use of facilities. While land-based airpower provided important support to the operation (airlift, AWACS command and control, intelligence (including U.S. Navy P-3 patrol aircraft conducting maritime surveillance), and refueling), no country in the region would allow combat aircraft (fighters or bombers) to operate from their soil.<sup>32</sup>

### **Operation Southern Watch, 1992 to the present**

In 1992, in support of UN Security Council Resolutions, the United States and its allies began Operation Southern Watch to limit Iraqi activity in southern Iraq against Shiites in that region. U.S. aircraft conducting these operations come from the Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy. At various times, the Saudi government has restricted aircraft operations from Saudi bases. For example, in June 1993, President Clinton ordered Tomahawk strikes against Iraqi targets in response to an Iraqi assassination attempt against former President Bush. One reason the United States used Tomahawk missiles was because the Saudi government would not authorize the use of its airfields for such strike operations.<sup>33</sup>

### **The former Republic of Yugoslavia**

Sometimes restrictions on base usage do not arise from disagreements over international policy, but can be found in the old

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32. The comments are based on the author's work in support of Operation Earnest Will in 1987 and 1988. Among other efforts, he was co-author of the U.S. Navy's internal lessons learned document.

33. The comments are based on open press reporting on Southern Watch and discussions the author has had over the past several years with military officers (USAF, USMC, USN) with experience in the operation, both in planning and execution of the Joint Task Force's operations.

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adage that “all politics are local politics.” The constraints on operations from Italy in support of operations over or near the former Republic of Yugoslavia provide an example of local politics affecting constraints on base usage. The two principal bases supporting these operations have, over the past decades, seen a build-up of the surrounding areas. Thus, like many civilian airports around the world, restrictions have been placed on flying times because of concerns about noise disturbing people at home. For example, at one base flights are not allowed at night and are not allowed on the weekends at another. Aircraft operating from U.S., British, French, and Spanish carriers have conducted missions during those hours aircraft could not operate from Italian land bases.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Vigilant Warrior, Saudi Arabia, October 1994**

In early October 1994, Iraqi military forces began moving south, threatening, by their movements, another Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. President Clinton quickly ordered U.S. military forces to the region. This included forces from all four services. Saudi hesitancy over allowing additional aircraft onto airbases in Saudi Arabia delayed the movement of U.S. Air Force fighter and bomber aircraft into theater.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Comments by Rear Admiral Michael Gretton, RN (United Kingdom), at the conference on the “Role of International Navies After the Cold War,” Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 25 March 1994.

35. On 10 October 1994, CNN reported the Saudi restrictions on USAF fighter/bomber movements into the region.

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## **The Air Force is not alone in facing constraints**

This paper focuses on the restrictions placed on the ability of land-based aviation to fully participate in U.S. contingency operations. With this focus, a reader might believe that the U.S. Air Force is unique in facing such limitations. This is simply not the case. Each of the other services faces either the same or similar problems as part of its operations.

The U.S. Army, for example, can directly suffer from restrictions on U.S. Air Force movements (e.g., when soldiers have to suffer longer flights and delays because of overflight restrictions on transport aircraft). In addition, unless it is an operation conducted directly from U.S. soil, soldiers cannot act without some degree of permission from the host-country's government (or, if the decision is to act without permission, the United States might face political repercussions). The infamous "face-off" between special operating forces and Italian soldiers at Sigonella air base over the *Achille Lauro* hijackers is an example of such a situation.<sup>36</sup>

The U.S. Marine Corps also can face basing (and other) constraints on operations. For example, Marine Corps' aircraft flying from Italian bases in support of operations over the former Republic of Yugoslavia face the same restrictions on night and weekend flights as do U.S. Air Force aircraft. Marines operating from land bases overseas, such as Okinawa, can face the same types of restrictions that Army soldiers confront in conducting operations overseas.

For the U.S. Navy, constraints come in many forms. There are long-term basing limitations, such as the limited infrastructure in the Persian Gulf, with just a small logistics facility in Bahrain and limited air access in Oman before Operation Desert Shield. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power have also led to a

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36. See, for example, Daniel Bolger, *Americans at War*, pages 375-6.

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number of restrictions. For example, the United States suspended the ANZUS treaty in the mid 1980s after New Zealand refused to allow a U.S. Navy warship to make a port visit because of the U.S. Government's policy to "Neither Confirm Nor Deny" the presence of nuclear weapons aboard warships. Denmark, for another example, does not allow nuclear-powered warships to make port calls. In Japan, in a limitation similar to the current problems in Italy over weekend and night flying, the Navy has long had problems getting approval for night-time carrier landing practice. Somewhat similar to overflight restrictions, the Navy faces limitations on its use of the Panama (size restrictions) and Suez Canals (limited access for nuclear-powered ships) that can dictate ship movements in a crisis situation. Overflight restrictions can hamper Navy operations as well. In the Earnest Will operation, for example, the United Arab Emirates and Oman limited U.S. Navy aircraft overflights of their countries (except in emergency situations). This required Navy aircraft to fly somewhat longer flights (often supported by U.S. Air Force KC-10 refueling aircraft) to maintain coverage of convoys and other important patrol areas.

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## Summary and conclusion

This paper documents real-world examples where limitations—imposed both by U.S. allies and neutral states—have affected land-based aviation’s ability to contribute to a U.S. military response to international incidents and crises. In many cases, the Air Force and other affected services have overcome the limitations imposed on them and fully accomplished the mission despite the imposed handicaps. The work-arounds adopted when Austria, Greece, and Switzerland refused overflight rights for U.S. Air Force aircraft en route to Lebanon during Operation Blue Bat in 1958 provide one such case. The pilots and planes had to fly longer distances, but the Air Force got the job done.

In other situations, however, basing (and other) constraints have seriously limited the capabilities that the land-based airpower could bring to bear. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, U.S. Air Force fighter aircraft could not use European bases to provide escorts to the airlift aircraft carrying supplies to Israel. Therefore, U.S. Navy aircraft (flying from aircraft carriers) provided the protection to the cargo planes throughout the Mediterranean. During the Earnest Will escort operations, the Arab partners of the United States would allow only limited U.S. Air Force operations from their countries and no fighter or bomber operations. Only U.S. Marine Corps and Navy aircraft flying from aircraft carriers could provide the necessary air coverage for the convoys and drop the bombs in response to Iranian threats to the operation.

Without a doubt, land-based aviation and, as a component of this, the U.S. Air Force, has contributed to every significant operation over the past 48 years and often in very important ways. These contributions should not mask the fact, however, that basing (and other) constraints have seriously limited this contribution to many of these operations.

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## Related CNA papers

The following CNA studies might be of interest:

Annotated Briefing 94-39, *Aviation Roles and Missions: Some Thoughts on a More Meaningful Debate*, by David A. Perin, October 1993

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