U.S. Over-the-Horizon Capability for Afghanistan

THE ISSUE

President Biden and his Administration's spokesmen state that the US will rely on an "over-the-horizon" (OTH) capability to identify threats and "act quickly and decisively if needed." OTH capabilities can readily service intelligence collection and logistical resupply, but offensive capabilities rely on the ability to find and then strike targets before they move. OTH operations are framed by regional access, assets, their capabilities, and their limitations. With the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, U.S. OTH capabilities are very limited, and non-clandestine operations will likely rely on satellites, U-2s, unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and strategic airlift platforms for the foreseeable future.

REGIONAL ACCESS

- Landlocked Afghanistan borders China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

- Access via overflight of Iran and China is not viable, nor is access through Turkmenistan likely.

- Northern access through or overflight of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is possible.

- Pakistan access is politically episodic; overflight is required for access from the Persian Gulf.

ASSETS

- Aircraft carriers based in the Persian Gulf have fighters with precision strike capability.

- Fighters, bombers, tankers, strategic airlift, RQ-9s, and U-2s are or can be based in the UAE.

- Fighters, bombers, tankers, strategic airlift, and RQ-9s are or can be based in Qatar.

- Persian Gulf–based Tomahawk cruise missiles, range ~ 1,000+ NMs, fly at ~ 550 MPH.

- Airlift/resupply and tanker aircraft are or can be based in Turkey and Romania.

- Satellites and U-2s can cover all of Afghanistan and offer near-real-time intelligence.

CAPABILITIES

- Space-based sensors can cover all of Afghanistan and offer near-real-time intelligence.

- Gulf-based MQ-9 UAS can loiter over/recon/strike any part of Afghanistan for 8-plus hours.

- Time from UAE to northern/central Afghanistan: 5 hours/4 hours; Qatar: 6 hours/5 hours.

- Sea-based fighters: launch to arrive over Northern Afghanistan ~ 2 hours; Central ~1.5 hours.

- Qatar/UAE fighters: launch to arrive over Northern Afghanistan ~ 3 hours; Central ~2.5 hours.

- Tomahawk missiles: launch to impact Northern Afghanistan ~ 1.5 hours; Central ~ 1 hour.

- Combat radius of bombers/Strategic airlift platforms allows complete coverage of Afghanistan.

  - Timing same as fighters; enable strikes and resupply in support of SOF/opposition forces.

LIMITATIONS

- Pakistan can deny Persian Gulf–based aircraft access to/return from Afghanistan at any time.

- The closest U.S. air base is 1,500-plus miles from an Uzbekistan or Tajikistan entry.

  - Overflight of Kazakhstan may be required for overflight of Uzbekistan or Tajikistan.

  - Overflight approval and tolerance for missions against the Taliban may be hard to secure.

- Air Force and Navy fighters require Air Force tanker support to strike targets in or loiter over Afghanistan.

- Very limited ability to recover downed aircrew elevates hostage potential and political risk.

- Launch and transient times for all weapons systems including the MQ-9 hinder strike success.

- Optical U-2/satellite sensors and MQ-9 employment are hampered by regular cloud cover.

Bottom Line: Satellites and U-2s deliver viable ISR capability, and unmanned MQ-9s are the most viable strike platform. All OTH options are limited by access, transient times, and/or weather.