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REBASING THE 401st TACTICAL FIGHTER WING--HERE, THERE, OR
ANYWHERE?

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REBASING THE 401ST TACTICAL FIGHTER WING--HERE, THERE, OR ANYWHERE?

I. SUMMARY

A complicated and changing political situation in Spain has forced the removal of the 401st Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) from Torrejon Air Base near Madrid. The 72 F-16s are the United States' only air contribution to the defense of NATO's Southern Region, stretching across the Mediterranean underside of Europe. Although the move is unpopular in the United States, it is a given that the wing will depart Spain, and that fact is no longer at issue. However, where the 401st should go next is very much the issue.

The initial US response was a desire to return the wing to the US and deactivate it. However, the remaining members of NATO lobbied to keep the 401st in the Southern Region and offered to rebase it using NATO funds. Italy volunteered its soil and current plans involve building a base "from scratch" at Crotone in the extreme south of the country (see map appendix).

Although logical and simple at first glance, the moving of the 401st is complicated by four factors: 1) the Soviet/Warsaw Pact threat is taking on a much kinder face, 2) the fast-paced Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) talks are moving toward fewer forces in Europe, 3) the internal domestic budget concerns of the US are driving a smaller defense budget, and 4) there is an approximate 4-year mismatch between when the US has to be out of Torrejon (4 May 1992) and when Crotone will be completed

(Spring 1996). The Secretary of the Air Force has begun an initiative to speed-up construction and lessen the gap, but the amount possible has yet to be determined.

The relocation of the 401st is a microcosm of the major issue that now faces the US--how will NATO forces be realigned to ensure stability in the region? The policy options facing the US and NATO in this case will help set the stage for the NATO defense structure of the future.

II. ISSUE DEFINITION

What should be the disposition of the 401st TFW? Does the current situation call for a relocation of the wing within Europe or a disbanding of the wing to save defense dollars? NATO and the US Defense Department support the move to Crotone to ensure a continued presence in and protection of what is viewed as the important Southern Flank. Congressional leaders are finding it difficult to support building a new base in Italy while defense cuts are causing bases to be closed in the US.

III. BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Torrejon's Purpose

Torrejon's 401st TFW has the mission of supporting the US Air Forces in Europe in the NATO southern region war plans. The wing has three squadrons which are capable of performing either in a conventional or nuclear role and make up a large share of NATO's intermediate nuclear forces in the post-Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) environment. This makes it a valuable asset in NATO's continuing strategy of flexible response.

Beyond its traditional role as a deterrent to the Warsaw Pact, the 401st is also seen as a deterrent to terrorist factions and other "out of area" military threats to US interests in the region. Turkey, a 401st area of responsibility, can be seen as the lynch pin for operating US forces close to the Middle East--an area of major geostrategic importance.

Why the 401st Must Move

Spain has had a very volatile political environment throughout this century. It was during the very authoritarian rule of Franco that the US gained basing rights in Spain (Pact of Madrid, 1953). Since Franco's death in 1975, Spain has moved toward a more social-democratic form of government and has tried to distance itself from the Franco era. Quite simply, the US bases are viewed as Franco leftovers and hindrances to Spain's quest for true sovereignty. The government of Filipe Gonzalez has been able to appease the people to accept three of the four US bases in Spain and to remain in NATO by promising a reduced US presence. From the Spanish view, Torrejon, next to the capital city of Madrid, was the most visible and the natural choice for cuts.

The Planned Alternative

When it was agreed that the 401st would vacate Torrejon, the NATO Defense Ministers, in an unprecedented move which showed great resolve, agreed to fund the relocation of the 401st. Italy agreed to host the 401st and offered three

possible locations as its new home--Lamezia, Ortanova, and Crotone. All were very southern locations in less developed areas which had much to gain economically by the presence of a new base. The southern locations were also offered to offset the high populace of military already established in the northern Italy and to complete a missing "defense bubble" around Italy's southern sector. With Italian guidance, the US chose Crotone as the new home of the 401st.

The cost of the new base at Crotone will be \$827 million, and NATO will pay for it through its infrastructure fund. The US share will be its normal 27.8 percent (\$230 million) contribution to the fund; so, a large portion of the US cost would be paid to the fund whether Crotone is built or not. However, the total US bill for vacating Torrejon, relocating other units from Torrejon, and repaying NATO for Crotone's housing will be \$468 million dollars over the next Five Year Defense Plan.

US Interests and Policy Objectives

Europe has always been of great geostrategic importance to the United States, but the political, economic, social, and military ties it has developed there since World War II has made it even more important. It therefore seems intuitively prudent to remain in a position to protect these interests. However, the US military presence in Europe will certainly have to decrease as the threat decreases, but a total pull-out from any one region (North, Central, or South) would not show strong

resolve in protecting these interests. As the Germanies move toward unification, US presence will be increasingly questioned, but one must remember that any base given-up will be almost impossible to regain.

As the Warsaw Pact disintegrates and as the military threat dissolves along the central front in Europe, this area can be viewed more as a political rather than a military theater of operations. And, just as it did in the military focus, Central Europe is attracting almost all the attention of the world. Meanwhile, on NATO's Southern Flank many important US interests are quietly motoring along--for now. However, it is important for the US to step back and recognize that the southern flank is the key to protecting the Mediterranean--an area of great importance to the US, Europe, and the USSR. Over 6500 ships operate in the Mediterranean each day and 50 percent of Europe's oil enters via this area. It also carries 50 percent of the Soviet's imports and 60 percent of their exports. The region is also next door to the oil producing Middle East--a vital area which remains very unstable and which has few prospects for peace in the near future. It is therefore imperative the US maintain a military presence as close as possible to this volatile area, and basing in the southern flank of NATO is the closest friendly real estate available.

The policy objectives for the US should concentrate on maintaining a military presence throughout Europe. The strength, prosperity, and sovereign initiatives developing in

the central region, with prospective German reunification, could possibly lead to the US being asked to leave this region in greater numbers than can now be anticipated. This factor increases the need to maintain a substantial presence on the flanks of Europe to the degree allowed under future CFE agreements. In essence, the US needs to begin thinking in terms of a "Flank Defense Strategy" rather than its "Forward Defense Strategy" of the past in Central Europe. Since there appears to be no threat to go nose-to-nose with in the central region, a Flank Defense Strategy would seem to better serve regional sovereignty issues while also protecting the vital areas of concern on the flanks. This is especially true in the southern region which does not share the advanced state status of central European countries. It is in this light that the relocation of the 401st TFW takes on a new importance.

US Policy Options

The planned move of the 401st TFW directly from Torrejon to Crotone does not appear to be physically possible due to the mismatch of availability dates. However, the US has several other policy options available with regard to the 401st, and each has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

First, the US could disband the unit and bring it home.

- Proponents of this stand see a peaceful Europe which requires ^{fewer!} less forces, and since the 401st requires the expenditure of funds to remain in Europe, the move is a wasted expense.

- Opponents view disbandment as a unilateral withdrawal from Europe before CFE talks are concluded. They also claim this would signal a lack of commitment to NATO in general and to the southern region in particular. The cost of the move--most of which will be covered by the members of NATO--is seen as a very necessary investment in security.

Second, expand facilities already in existence in the southern region to accept the 401st.

- Proponents would list this as a more near term and cheaper solution than building a base from scratch in Italy.

- Opponents point out the flat refusal of the Italians to expand military presence in the northern regions and the volatile political hurdles that would have to be overcome in Portugal, Greece, and Turkey to expand basing rights. It is also recognized that basing rights in these last three countries are tied to economic support from the US and the basing arrangements already in place in these countries have proven that a "bases for rent" policy is neither stable or economical. The base at Crotona is not tied to aid in any form.

Third, The US could negotiate with Spain to allow the 401st to remain at Torrejon, if not forever, at least until the base is ready at Crotona.

- Proponents see this as an "easy fix" to the timing mismatch between the two bases. However, it is recognized that this has to be a NATO, not US, proposal if it is to have any chance of success.
- Opponents recognize the political liability this would be to Spain's pro-NATO government. The Gonzalez government fought an uphill battle to get the Spanish people to remain in NATO, and one of the enticements was a reduced US presence in Spain. If Gonzalez allows the 401st to stay, no matter who's idea it was, this group feels the pro-NATO government and Spain's membership in NATO could be in jeopardy.

Fourth, the wing could be divided among its two classified wartime operating bases in the southern region until it can be reunited at Crotone.

- Proponents see this as a painful, yet necessary move to keep the 401st in Europe and the southern region. They site that it was a NATO (as a corporate body) decision to build the base at Crotone. The US is a member of NATO and should therefore support that decision. They view Congress' argument with this process as being well beyond the normal Congress/ Defense Department squabble and inappropriate in the international environment.
- Opponents see this as an inefficient and costly method that would cause great morale problems

within the Air Force as such a move would force overseas unaccompanied tours at these interim locations.

Suggested Course of Action

If one attacks the problem of the 401st from a strategic interest perspective, Option Four (temporary basing at wartime locations while awaiting Crotona) is the best course to steer. This option supports corporate NATO desires, provides continual support to the vitally important southern region (Middle East oil and the Mediterranean), and does not jeopardize political stability and NATO membership in Spain. The cost of Crotona will be heavily borne by NATO and, once completed, will not tie the Alliance or the US to a dysfunctional "bases for rent" policy.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The bottomline remains that the United States has major interests in Europe. As the central region becomes less threatened, the southern region will continue to exhibit instabilities and remain an area of geostrategic importance requiring a strong military presence. The region's location along the Mediterranean and the neighboring Middle East almost ensure this need. The 401st Tactical Fighter Wing is a key player in protecting these interests and although the decisions on rebasing are difficult, this fact should only serve to magnify the importance of seeking the correct course of action. To reiterate, a base given-up in Europe will certainly be almost

impossible to regain. Therefore, one must think beyond short-term costs and effects to a longer range strategy of what the new defense posture in Europe should look like. Will it remain a Forward Defense Strategy executed with a few less troops--the majority of which will still be located in the central region? Or will the politics of the central region require a new Flank Defense Strategy which protects from the periphery and carefully watches as Europe renews itself once again.

The rebasing of the 401st is the first key step in this bold, new, and geostrategically important process!

The Mediterranean Basin

