

# The World's Fireman and Its Lily Pads:

## The Case of K2

Dr. Stephen R. Schwalbe

*Changes to our global posture will improve our ability to meet our alliance commitments while making our alliances more affordable and sustainable.<sup>1</sup>*

Douglas Feith, 2004

### Introduction

According to President George W. Bush's 2002 *National Security Strategy* (NSS)

The presence of American forces overseas is one of the most profound symbols of the US commitments to allies and friends.... To contend with uncertainty and to meet the many challenges we face, the US will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia, as well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of US forces.<sup>2</sup>

As such, the number of troops and bases the United States (US) maintains overseas is essential to our national security. Since George Bush was elected president, the American military presence overseas has been, and continues to be, dramatically transformed to accommodate the changed international environment. At the end of the 20th century, the Soviet Union, a communist empire since World War I, disintegrated under internal nationalistic and economic pressures. As such, the US Department of Defense (DoD) began downsizing its physical presence overseas, while exploiting technological advancements that enabled more effective and efficient power projection in every region of the world.

The "new" overseas military basing paradigm has been referred to as the "lily pad" strategy,<sup>3</sup> with the US Air Force (USAF) seeking bilateral military basing agreements with numerous countries in the developing world. The paradigm envisions main operating bases serving as hubs, with associated foreign military bases serving as temporary locations for DoD forces to operate out of in support of regional military activities. This was the situation regarding Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2), in Uzbekistan, beginning in 2001. DoD's main operating bases (MOBs) in Europe include Ramstein Air Base in Germany, Mildenhall Air Base in England, and Vicenza Air Base in Italy. These MOBs support Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the US-led coalition military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban, and used K2 as one of the primary spokes.

The bottom line is that the new lily pad paradigm, i.e., employing numerous and varying types of bases and base agreements to allow maximum flexibility when required to conduct military operations, was validated by DoD's successful exploitation of K2 in support of OEF. When the US was asked to vacate K2, there was minimal impact on the overall mission since the nation still had other base options available to continue supporting OEF. However, the criteria that DoD

uses to select countries with which to make its bilateral basing rights deals need to be adjusted to accommodate either national interests or democratic principles, whichever have the greater priority. To make such a determination, we must first discuss the US overseas basing strategy, philosophy, and criteria, then analyze the case of K2.

## **21st Century Overseas Posture Transformation Overseas Basing History**

By the end of World War II, the US had acquired an extensive array of military bases and facilities in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Asia. With the onset of the Cold War, the US was forced to maintain most of these MOBs and military forces, particularly in Europe (122,000 troops) and Japan (150,000 troops), to deter the perceived communist threat. With the end of the Cold War, troop levels in Europe were cut over two-thirds, from a high of 341,000 in 1989 to 109,000 in 1995.<sup>4</sup> By 1998, the US had around 235,000 troops stationed abroad, to include 109,000 in Europe, 93,000 in Asia, and 23,000 in the Persian Gulf.<sup>5</sup> With the drawdown of military forces, the military infrastructure established for the Cold War needed to be cut and remolded to accommodate the cut in military personnel and the new threat environment. Today, American forces are operating in very different locations from the Cold War, including the Balkans, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, among others.

## **Overseas Basing Philosophy: From Policeman to Fireman**

In September 2004, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith issued a report to Congress entitled “Strengthening US Global Defense Posture.” The report’s bottom line was “the United States can no longer expect our forward forces to fight in place.”<sup>6</sup> During the Cold War, America’s overseas military bases were strategically located to prosecute a theater war against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. Whenever there was a conflict or significant increase in Soviet influence in a Third World country, the US and its allies responded. As such, America could be characterized as having served as the *world’s policeman*. With the changes in the international environment, America responds to almost every crisis that gets on television, from tsunami and earthquake relief, to stopping the Serbs in the Balkans and the Janjaweed in Darfur, Sudan. As such, America can now be better characterized as the *world’s fireman*.

As the world’s “fireman,” the US has been dealing with terrorist attacks in almost every region of the world, to include North America. Many scholars believe that terrorist attacks against the US did not begin on “9/11” 2001, but as far back as November 1979, when the Iranians held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.<sup>7</sup> As evidence that the US was indeed at war with al-Qaeda before 9/11, this terrorist organization, led by Usama Bin Laden, was linked to the attack at Central Intelligence Agency headquarters and to the first bombing of the World Trade Center in early 1993. For the US, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) demands a completely different overseas military base posture than the Cold War required.

## **Current Status**

Congress tasked DoD to provide a global posture review as part of military base closure legislation in 2002. This review was intended to transform the US military from one operating

out of large military bases established to counter the Soviet threat into a more mobile, agile, and flexible “fireman” force that could respond more quickly to a crisis that might arise along the “arc of instability.”<sup>8</sup> In 2004, Air Force General Richard Myers, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, approved publication of the *National Military Strategy* (NMS), subtitled “A Strategy for Today; A Vision for Tomorrow.”<sup>9</sup> This NMS identified the arc of instability as: “stretching from the Western Hemisphere, through Africa and the Middle East, and extending to Asia...”<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, the NMS discussed some of the philosophy behind stationing American forces overseas:

The US will conduct operations in widely diverse locations.... Our primary line of defense remains well forward. This access supports the ability of the US to project power against threats.... Our forces, including those rotationally deployed and those stationed forward, will work cooperatively with other nations....<sup>11</sup>

In March 2005, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld disseminated the *National Defense Strategy*, which declared “the US cannot influence that which it cannot reach,” thereby justifying bilateral military arrangements with numerous nations around the world. The document explained that the US needed to operate in and from the “strategic commons” – defined as space, international waters and airspace, and cyberspace - since “Our capacity to project power depends on our defense posture and deployment flexibility at home and overseas, on the security of our bases, and on our access to the strategic commons.”<sup>12</sup> Currently, the US has formal military agreements for base usage with 93 countries, almost half the membership of the United Nations (UN).<sup>13</sup>

The main idea behind the 2004 basing strategy is to position a larger portion of the US military forces stateside while deploying to relatively austere staging areas around the world as necessary.<sup>14</sup> A corollary to that idea is to establish smaller, more forward military bases with lighter, more mobile forces.<sup>15</sup> Finally, if for some reason the host country changed its mind about supporting US military operations from one of its military bases, then there would probably be another military base in the affected region the US could use without adversely impacting military operations.

Feith defined DoD’s terms for the new overseas military installations as MOB, forward operating sites (FOSs), and cooperative security locations (CSLs). The MOB are installations developed during the Cold War and kept to facilitate the new overseas basing paradigm. The FOSs are “warm facilities” maintained with a limited, rotational US support presence. Lastly, CSLs are facilities with little or no permanent US presence, and are maintained with periodic service, contractor, or host-nation support.<sup>16</sup>

For those Americans curious about what our allies may think of this new basing paradigm, our allies are likely to favor it since anything that helps the USAF transport forces more efficiently and effectively to a military area of operations is a good thing. No country in the world has the transport capability of the USAF; hence, no other country needs to evaluate overseas basing strategies like the USAF does.

## **Overseas Basing Criteria**

In defining America's global posture, Feith cited five elements for consideration when contemplating forward bases and personnel: relationships, activities, facilities, legal arrangements, and surge capacity. He explained that we want to "help cultivate new relationships founded on common security interests." Military activities include training, exercises, and operations: "Our military activities with our allies and partners increasingly will be focused on preparing our forces for operations that may occur in remote, austere areas." Our forward posture includes facilities where our forces live, train, and operate, as well as storage facilities for pre-positioned equipment and materiel. Of course, a critical component of our global defense posture is "the set of bilateral and multilateral legal arrangements pertaining to our military personnel and activities worldwide." Finally, regional combatant commanders require a surge capacity to meet new or changing threats, or significant natural crises.<sup>17</sup>

However, the most important criterion for selecting nations to negotiate military basing agreements with is the *location* of the base being considered. Any lily pad base must be able to effectively support US military operations in the region. Another important criterion that should be considered is whether there is any potential for spreading democratic values or inspiring a market economy in the prospective host nation, a primary foreign policy goal of the US for many years now.

### **The Case of K2**

The US implemented its lily-pad basing strategy while under fire as OEF began on October 7, 2001. Unfortunately, like most developing regions in the world today, the countries located within Central Asia are generally rife with corruption, undemocratic governance, and sputtering economies. Uzbekistan also had the distinction of having the second worst human rights record in all of Central Asia.<sup>18</sup> However, the US decided that its interests in prosecuting the GWOT in Afghanistan outweighed its priority to spread democracy and a market economy to Uzbekistan. After all, Uzbekistan was perceived to possess a lot of potential due at least to its physical size and location.

The US negotiated the right to use Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in 2001 to support military operations in Afghanistan. The DoD believed it would be able to use K2 for the indefinite future, and it treated the air base accordingly. It spent millions to upgrade the installation, to include \$5 million to double the amount of ramp space to park transport aircraft, and \$1 million for a new dining hall and movie theater.<sup>19</sup> DoD stationed around 1,750 personnel at the base, to include 900 Air Force, 400 Army, and 400 civilians, as well as 20 C-130 transport aircraft. The base was used to support reconnaissance flights, Special Forces operations, and both aerial and surface transport resupply missions. The 416th Air Expeditionary Group averaged 200 passengers and 100 tons of cargo every day from K2.<sup>20</sup> Some characterized K2 as a new regional MOB, while others even characterized it as a "gilded lily pad."<sup>21</sup>

In March 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdul-Aziz Kamilov signed the "United States-Uzbekistan Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework." This declaration required Uzbekistan to intensify its democratic transformation, both politically and economically. Unfortunately, the Uzbek government never fulfilled any of its obligations under the declaration. In fact, it exploited its relationship with the

US while further oppressing its citizens. In 2002, President Islam Karimov arbitrarily extended his presidential term until 2007, much to the dismay of the West. By 2004, executive departments of the US government were pursuing divergent interests in Uzbekistan. The State Department rescinded \$18 million in aid to Uzbekistan for human rights violations, while the Defense Department awarded it \$33 million in weapons transfers and other military assistance.<sup>22</sup>

Alexander Cooley observed that the “US military presence in repressive countries gives Washington additional leverage to press them to liberalize.”<sup>23</sup> However, he determined that setting up bases in nondemocratic states brings mostly *short-term* benefits, and rarely helps promote liberalization in the long term. In fact, sometimes the bilateral agreement backfires for either the authoritarian government or its democratic successor because

Even as authoritarian leaders flout US calls for liberalization, they often manipulate basing agreements to strengthen their personal standing at home. And when one of these autocrats is eventually ousted, the democratic successor sometimes challenges the validity of the deals the former regime had struck.<sup>24</sup>

According to Cooley, the US has had little success leveraging its foreign bases to promote democratic values in host countries.<sup>25</sup> In any case, the Uzbek leaders were convinced that liberalizing Uzbek society was the worst thing they could do since it would further destabilize the country, possibly leading to the regime’s collapse.<sup>26</sup>

Following the May 2005 massacre in Andijan of as many as 1,000 unarmed demonstrators protesting the conviction of 23 Uzbek businessmen by Uzbek security forces, the US demanded an international investigation into the incident - despite official Uzbek government protestations. As well, the Uzbek government probably decided it was not going to receive the promised US foreign aid due to its actions and lack of progress on the 2002 Declaration, hence it began imposing restrictions on US flight operations at K2. Perceiving an impending fallout with Uzbekistan, the US facilitated the airlift of 439 Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan to Romania using K2 in late July 2005, under the auspices of the UN, and over the protests of the Uzbek government. (Most observers feared that if the refugees were returned to Uzbekistan, they would be detained and tortured by Uzbek security personnel.) The very next day, the Uzbek government delivered its ultimatum to the US to leave K2 within 180 days, in accordance with the 2002 Declaration. Within months, Uzbek President Karimov signed new friendship agreements with both Russia and China, while the US vacated K2.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The lily pad overseas basing paradigm is premised on having multiple base options in every region to maximize flexibility in case relations between the US and host country sour. In this case, by 2005, K2 had become redundant, hence expendable, as the US had expanded military operations at three other regional bases (in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Bagram and Kandahar, Afghanistan). The question is why did the US government not withdraw from the agreement with Uzbekistan before the Uzbek government did? Where K2 had become expendable, and the US had democratic and human rights principles to live up to, it again put its short-term interests ahead of its avowed principles and values.

Following the Uzbek expulsion, the US State Department declared that democracy, human rights, economic reform, and military cooperation are all criteria that the US demands from nations with which it signs agreements. In this case, State Department spokesman Tom Casey stated, "I can assure you that the United States is going to continue to press our concerns for human rights and democracy in Uzbekistan."<sup>28</sup> However, this statement was probably perceived as disingenuous since it was made *after* the US was asked to leave Uzbekistan.

Now that the lily pad overseas basing paradigm has been demonstrated to be feasible, attention needs to focus on prioritizing the criteria for selecting the bases and host countries. Currently, the Department of State is advocating democracy and human rights as the top priority, while the Department of Defense is pushing for optimal locations allowing for maximum flexibility for conducting military operations. However, DoD's lily pad paradigm, with its regionally redundant bases, actually allows for idealism to take priority over pragmatism. As such, in the case of K2, once the US determined that the Uzbek government was not going to live up to its 2002 declaration, the US should have terminated the agreement and withdrawn from K2.

## Notes

1. Douglas J. Feith, "Strengthening US Global Defense Posture – Report to Congress," (September 17, 2004), 2.
2. President G.W. Bush, US National Security Strategy, (Washington DC: The White House, 2002), Chapter 9. The 2006 edition of the NSS says only, "The fight must be taken to the enemy." See The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, (Washington DC: The White House, 2006), 8.
3. Colin Robinson, "Worldwide Reorientation of US Military Basing in Prospect," Center for Defense Information, (September 19, 2003), 1, attributes the term "lily pad" to General James Jones.
4. David Yost, "The Future of US Overseas Presence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 8 (Summer 1995): 72.
5. Richard L. Kugler, Chapter 4, "The Defense Budget," in QDR [Quadrennial Defense Review] 2001 edited by Richard Armitage et al., 119.
6. Feith, "Strengthening US Global Defense Posture," 5.
7. Daniel Pipes, "Death to America," *New York Post*, (September 8, 2002).
8. Jamie Dettmer, "Plan to Shift Bases Shakes Up Allies," *Insight*, (December 22, 2003), 34.
9. Richard B. Myers, The National Military Strategy of the United States of America, (2004).
10. Ibid., 5.

11. Ibid., 11.
12. Donald H. Rumsfeld, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (March 2005), 6, 13.
13. Vijay Prashad, "Outsourcing Torture," *Frontline*, 22, issue 12, (June 2005): 63.
14. James Kitfield, "About-Face," *National Journal*, (January 31, 2004), 32.
15. Dettmer, "Plan to Shift Bases," 35.
16. Feith, "Strengthening US Global Defense Posture," 10-11.
17. Ibid., 7-8.
18. Eugene Rumer, "The US Interests and Role in Central Asia after K2," *The Washington Quarterly*, 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 144.
19. Alexander Cooley noted that the US provided millions more to the Uzbek government as a tacit quid pro quo, including \$120 million in military hardware to the Uzbek Army, \$82 million to the Uzbek security services, and \$55 million in credits from the US Export-Import Bank. See Alexander Cooley, "Base Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, 84, no. 6, (November-December 2005): 83.
20. John Pike, "Camp Stronghold Freedom," GlobalSecurity.Org at [www.globalsecurity.org/military/khanabad.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/khanabad.htm).
21. Vijay Prashad labeled it a MOB, while David Hoffman and Cory Welt titled their article on K2, "Gilded Lily Pad" (at [www.prospect.org](http://www.prospect.org)).
22. BBC News, "Timeline: Uzbekistan," [www.BBCNews.com](http://www.BBCNews.com), (August 29, 2007); Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan: Will US Decision to Withhold Aid Have Any Practical Effect?" [www.RadioFreeEurope.com](http://www.RadioFreeEurope.com), (July 14, 2004); and Thalif Deen, "US Ramps Up Arms Supplies to Repressive Regimes," [www.antiwar.com](http://www.antiwar.com), (May 26, 2005).
23. Cooley, "Base Politics," 79.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 80.
26. Rumer, "The US Interests and Role in Central Asia after K2," 146.
27. Peter B. House, "Uzbek Refugees Under Threat in Kyrgyzstan," [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org), (September 2005).

28. Tom Casey, "Dialogue with Uzbeks to Continue Despite Loss of Air Base" at [www.usinfo.state.gov/eur/archive/2005/Aug/01-851976.html](http://www.usinfo.state.gov/eur/archive/2005/Aug/01-851976.html).

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### **Contributor**

**Dr. Steve Schwalbe** retired after 34 years in the Air Force in July 2007 to Cheney, Washington. He continues his working relationship with the Air Force as an adjunct professor for Air Command and Staff College's new distance learning masters program, and as a consultant for Squadron Officer College's competencies curriculum. He is also an online adjunct professor for American Military University. His academic and musical careers continue at Eastern Washington University.

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