
CONCLUSIONS

This report has shown how competent and committed adversaries could take advantage of the way in which the USAF plans to conduct theater air operations. They could do so by combining several well-known and widely available technologies, such as UAVs, GPS, submunition warheads, and ballistic missiles. Armed with accurate area weapons capable of inflicting substantial damage on soft-skinned targets, such as parked aircraft, tents, radars, and personnel, such an adversary could severely disrupt the USAF's ability to conduct combat operations from theater airbases.

Over the short term, the USAF could respond to this threat by deploying its combat forces with extensive active and passive defenses. However, these measures may be too manpower-intensive, heavy, or expensive to protect all USAF assets required to support combat operations. In addition, some very valuable USAF aircraft, such as airlifters, bombers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, will be very difficult if not impossible to protect passively because of their size. Another alternative is to operate from dispersed locations or to disperse USAF aircraft more widely at existing facilities. These concepts could work to reduce the effectiveness of a missile attack against USAF assets but have significant drawbacks of their own, such as decreased USAF sortie-generation efficiency, increased logistics costs and complexity, the need to accurately predict the scene of future conflicts, and failure to address the threat posed to tent cities.

Another possible response to long-term increases in adversary missile capability is to shift away from an operational concept that requires

large numbers of USAF fighters and their support personnel to deploy to a combat theater. Instead, the USAF could rely on a fleet of long-range aircraft operating from permanent bases to project USAF combat power. Appendix C describes a concept for fast, high-flying, stealthy bombers that could operate in this way.

The options we have discussed here for conducting attacks against USAF theater airbases, and the possible USAF defensive responses, are almost certainly incomplete. There are probably other ways to attack the bases, and other options (or combinations of options) for dealing with the attack methods we have presented. However, it is not important that our descriptions of various attack options represent absolutely accurate predictions of future adversary attack plans or capabilities. What is important is that USAF planners recognize that the success enjoyed by the USAF during Desert Storm provided a powerful incentive for any nation considering military action that could involve conflict with the United States to devise an effective plan for dealing with USAF land-based air combat power.

We have shown how such an adversary could go about constructing a simple, robust, effective, and relatively affordable capability to disrupt USAF theater air operations. The options presented here represent only the beginning of a long process of systematically laying out and analyzing the various options available to the USAF for decreasing its vulnerability to such attacks.