

ALASKA: GATEWAY, ENABLER, AND EXEMPLAR FOR AGILE COMBAT EMPLOYMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC THEATER

Kristine Swain, Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security

30 March 2025

The Communist Party of China (CCP)'s accelerating aircraft and missile capability development is a rising challenge to maintaining US air superiority in the event of a conflict in the Western Pacific. Enabling penetrating strikes and ensuring control of the air domain¹ remain important elements of US military power projection. China's rising military power poses an increased threat to US air assets operating in the Western Pacific and requires a thoughtful and innovative response. Originally developed by PACAF, the concept of Agile Combat Employment (ACE) addresses the current vulnerability of large, consolidated air bases in the Indo-Pacific theater and elsewhere. ACE, however, entails significant infrastructure development and logistical challenges and will require robust investment along with extensive exercise and training if it is to be effective in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific theater. **Importantly, geography dictates a critical role for the Alaska theater as a gateway and enabler for ACE in the Western Pacific. Furthermore, military air operations in and around Alaska have contributed to a body of knowledge and experience that can inform ACE development and implementation in the Western Pacific.**

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21 defines ACE as “a proactive and reactive operational scheme of maneuver executed within threat timelines to increase survivability while generating combat power.”ⁱ ACE is the USAF's operational imperative for resilient basing. Additionally, it works in conjunction with the Air Force's new force generation model (AFFORGEN) to ensure maximum preparation for distributed, high end combat operations.ⁱⁱ Agile Combat Employment responds to concerns that while overall reduction and consolidation of air bases improved efficiency and streamlined costs, it increased vulnerability for air operations. Mega bases represent mega targets for an adversary.ⁱⁱⁱ With NORAD's longstanding requirement for timely response to Soviet and now Russian air incursions into the Alaskan Air Defense identification Zone (ADIZ), Air Force operators in Alaska regularly overcome the tyranny of distance and space, the complications of training and operating in austere locations, and challenges of communications, logistics and infrastructure maintenance in harsh weather and remote locations. With increased Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) cooperation in the Arctic

¹ Airpower's primary role in joint air operations is to achieve control of the air. Historically, control of the air has been a prerequisite to success for modern operations. It facilitates freedom of action, freedom of movement, and prevents enemy air and missile threats from effectively interfering with operations of friendly air, land, maritime, space, cyberspace, and special operations forces (SOF). Dominance of the air cannot be assumed. In the air, the degree of control ranges from complete absence, to air parity (or neutrality) where neither adversary can claim any level of control over the other, to local air superiority in a specific area, to air supremacy over the entire operational area.” Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-0, Operations, 22 Jan 2025, 11.



and Western Pacific, and rising capabilities within the PLAAF, military air and logistical capabilities and potential in Alaska should be fully integrated into implementing ACE in the Western Pacific.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- Pacific air operations reliant on ACE will require sustainable logistical support to myriad locations.
- PLAAF and air defense assets will attempt to target deployed aircraft at ACE airfields and to maximize survivability, aircraft must be prepared to rapidly relocate to alternative locations.
- Alaska will remain an important logistical hub as well as a target.
- Russia could strain US air asset availability through initiating air activity in and near the ADIZ.
- Russia may offer strategic support and basing for the PLAAF and/or provide augmented energy resources, weapons, equipment and technical assistance. Russia could also instigate targeted cyberattacks on US DOD assets.
- In the event of conflict in the Western Pacific, defense of Alaska will require augmentation from Canada and/or other NATO Allies if 5th generation aircraft are supporting ACE in the Indo-Pacific Region.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGES

For ACE to be effective, **accessibility, communications and fuel challenges all must be addressed.** USINDOPACOM as a whole is responsible for 52% of the globe and while the Western Pacific represents a smaller subset of this, it encompasses huge distances, large expanses of water, and small island locations for dispersed air operations. Also, negotiations with **allies and partners are essential to ensure access** in peacetime, in a contested environment, and during conflict. This includes permission to conduct exercises and overflight authorization throughout the spectrum of conflict. Reliance on ACE creates a risk if diplomatic and political failures prevent access in wartime. **Reliance on US territory in Alaska for prepositioning some assets and providing logistic support does help mitigate this risk. Positioning such resources further out the Aleutian chain would benefit logistical response time.** With remote, dispersed deployment locations, highly mobile and rapid establishment of communications networks are important considerations. Sortie generation will need to be rapid and flexible as relocation may be necessary and maximizing fuel efficiency due to the limiting factor of fuel availability adds a complexity to ACE operations. **With a small contingent of personnel and lacking all the support functions available at a large, consolidated base, airmen may need to assist in multiple mission roles.** This could include mission roles such as applying emergency first aid or assisting in runway repair. Furthermore, due to the very real possibility that communication links could be severed, personnel will also need the expertise and agency to continue the mission in the absence of additional guidance.^{iv} **The success of ACE will depend on prepositioning,** not just in time delivery. Thus, exercises involving ACE must incorporate the entirety of logistics needed for success. The upcoming 2025 exercise Resolute Force Pacific scheduled for Summer 2025 will include around 300 aircraft across 25 locations and will consider the full logistics chain.^v

RECOMMENDATIONS

Planning and operational considerations for ACE should **leverage Alaskan geography and expertise.**^{vi}

- This includes the key role of logistics with **Alaska an important link in rapid deployment** of troops, equipment and aircraft to the Western Pacific. Flights through Alaska can maximize aircraft payloads without the need for aerial refueling. Utilizing airfields on the Aleutian chain could further optimize payload capacity.^{vii}
- **Alaska offers runway capability at major bases and the possibility of additional forward operating locations (FOLs)** such as King Salmon, Cold Bay, Allen Army Airfield and possibly Adak.^{viii}
- The Alaskan military air presence has required experience in building and maintaining airfields in austere locations, innovating with locally available materials for runway construction and maintenance, and coping with harsh weather and short work seasons. Utilizing remote, austere airfield locations in the Pacific would

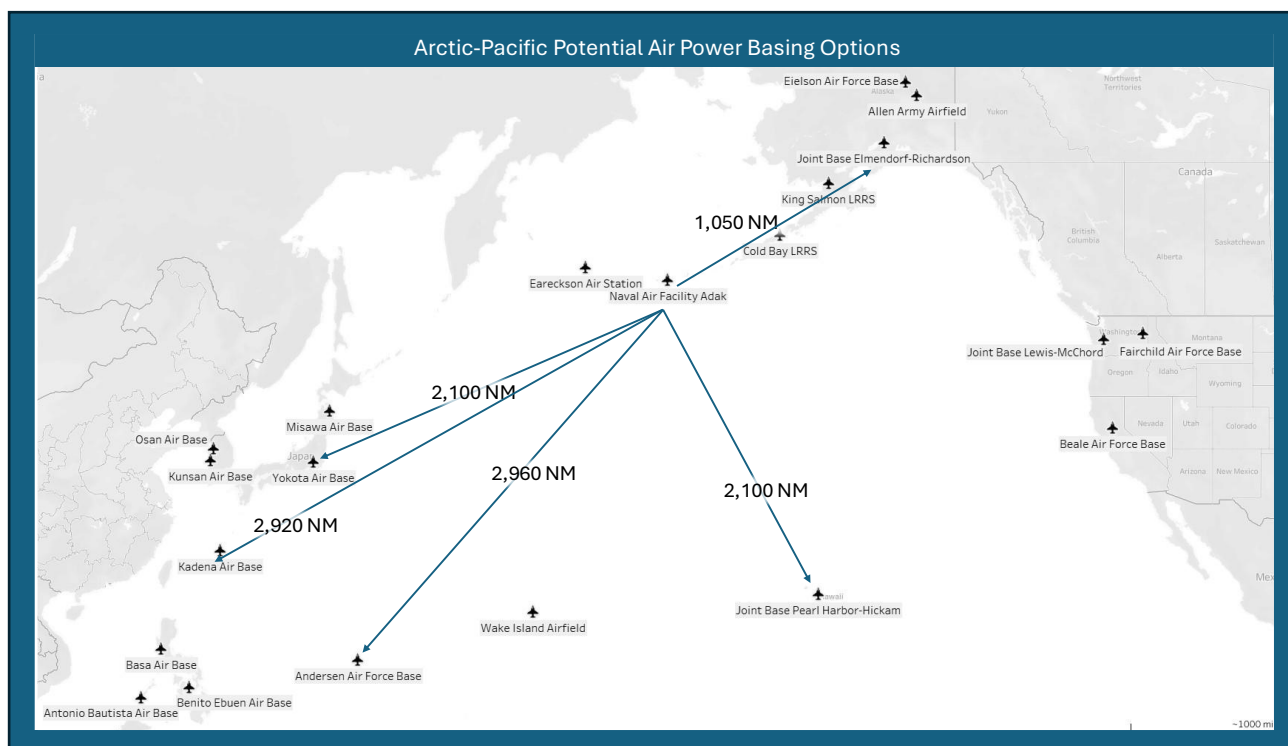


also involve the difficulty of moving material, dealing with weather issues and the additional problem of a more corrosive environment. **Alaskan expertise can facilitate ACE preparations.**^{ix}

- **Alaska and particularly the Aleutian chain offers significant geographic advantages for prepositioning materials and equipment** needed for ACE in a buildup and/or conflict in the Western Pacific. Current plans for JBER include upgrades and construction of facilities to store Regional Base Cluster Prepositioning (RPCP) assets for rapid deployment to strategic locations.^x
- **NORAD's long-standing experience in air operations in the ADIZ and across Alaska and North America along with that of other Arctic NATO Allies should be leveraged** to support planning and employment of ACE. Defense of the Alaskan approaches to the US Homeland if a preponderance of US air assets are pulled into Indo-Pacific operations is an important consideration. Such considerations are not just theoretical. Canadian aircraft helped defend Alaska in World War II and CF-18s deployed to support Alaska when F-15s were grounded in 2007. Canada also supported during the grounding of F-22s in 2011.^{xi}

CONCLUSIONS

As the US is reorienting its military for great power competition against China and Russia, the use of ACE will require updated approaches to logistics and sustainment. In a conflict, airlift capability will be severely strained and multiple ACE locations will increase requirements and the complexity of meeting them. Alaska's airfields are an important asset to support this effort but need consideration for long term sustainability and redundancy. Their location and cold weather environment increase challenges for maintenance and require local expertise and Arctic capable equipment to effectively maintain them. However, they offer optimized flight distances to the Western Pacific and the potential for housing significant prepositioned strategic material. As the US conducts exercises and considers investing in infrastructure upgrades to enable potential ACE locations, the expertise gleaned from air operational experience in Alaska can be both instructive and bolster responsiveness. 5th Generation fighters currently stationed in Alaska would most likely forward deploy and defense of prepositioned asset and the homeland from its Alaskan approaches will almost certainly require Canadian support, perhaps augmented by other willing NATO allies.



Author's Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Brief are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or of the U.S. Government



ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Nicastro, Luke. Defense Primer: Agile Combat Employment (ACE) Concept. Congressional Research Service. June 24, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/.crs-product/IF12694>, Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-0, Operations. 22 Jan 2-25, p 51. https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-0/AFDP3-0Operations.pdf
- ⁱⁱ Nicastro, Luke. Defense Primer: Agile Combat Employment (ACE) Concept. Congressional Research Service. June 24, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/.crs-product/IF12694>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Air and Space Forces Podcast episode 188 Front Line Mobility Revolution: 317th Airlift Wing. <https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/podcast/episode-188-317th-airlift-wing/>
- ^{iv} Air and Space Forces Podcast episode 188 Front Line Mobility Revolution: 317th Airlift Wing. <https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/podcast/episode-188-317th-airlift-wing/>
- ^v Hadley, Greg. PACAF Boss: As China Expands Reach of Missile and Warplanes, US Needs Inside Force. Air and Space Forces Magazine website. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/pacaf-boss-china-expanding-reach/?src=dr>
- ^{vi} Briefing at Arctic Industry Forum, Anchorage, Alaska, 26 February 2025.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Briefing at Arctic Industry Forum, Anchorage, Alaska, 25 February 2025.
- ^{xi} Canadian Fighter jets Temporarily fill in for US Air Defences. Canadian Broadcast Company. November 27, 2007. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/canadian-fighter-jets-temporarily-fill-in-for-u-s-air-defenses-1.635315>; Church, Aaron. Raptor Return. Air and Space Forces Magazine Website. December 2011. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/PDF/MagazineArchive/Documents/2011/December%202011/1211raptor.pdf>

