

NATO AIR POLICING – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The term Air Policing was first used by the British between the World Wars to describe its mission in Mesopotamia (now part of Iraq) where their aircraft, in effect, replaced the more traditional army approach of “boots on the ground”. This was the first time Air Power had been used for this task and it was deemed at the time to have been very successful.

AIR POLICING EVOLUTION

Today, NATO members use the term Air Policing to describe their collective use of fighter aircraft to preserve the integrity of NATO airspace. In the 1970s nations participating in the NATO military structure realised that individual air defence systems operating independently could not effectively protect NATO and national airspace. They started working together,

therefore, to establish a structure to overcome this deficiency. Combining national assets supplemented as necessary by other NATO elements, an integrated air defence structure and system was organised. The resulting NATO Integrated Air Defence System (NATINADS) comprises sensors, command and control (C2) facilities and weapons systems such as ground-based air defence and fighter aircraft. The interconnecting data-link systems enable the free and open exchange of the Recognised Air Picture, or RAP, from North Norway to South Eastern Turkey. NATINADS has been, and remains a major pillar of Alliance solidarity and cohesion.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES AND EXPANSION

Alliance nations “chop” their air defence assets to SACEUR’s operational command to fulfil the NATO

Air Policing task. This is executed from data-linked ground radar and surveillance assets attached to Combined Air Operations Centres (CAOCs) distributed throughout the region. There is an ongoing rationalisation process involving the CAOCs to facilitate the roll out of NATO’s Air Command and Control System (ACCS). This will see a reduction in CAOCs from the current five in our Area of Functional Responsibility (AOFR) to just two. The process is already underway with the closure of CAOC 3 at Reitan, Norway, on 29 February and the amalgamation of its Air Policing Area (APA) into that of CAOC 1 at Finderup, Denmark. The next step will be the closure of CAOC 9 in High Wycombe, Great Britain, later this year and the absorption of its APA into CAOC Finderup’s AOFR. On 30 June 2008 CAOC 4 at Meßstetten, Germany, will close



First-time cross-servicing of a German Eurofighter at Ramstein Air Base





Norwegian F16 taking off at Ørland Main Air Station during Exercise "Bold Avenger 2007"

and its APA will be absorbed into CAOC Uedem's APA.

NATO members without the necessary national assets to conduct Air Policing are assisted by other NATO members to ensure air sovereignty is maintained. In March 2004, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined NATO and since then, NATO members have assured their airspace through the deployment of NATO fighter aircraft to Siauliai Air Base in Lithuania. In addition, the indigenous BALNET radar surveillance and command and coordination system was seamlessly integrated into NATINADS. Another example is Slovenia. The country's relatively small airspace and proximity to Italy and Hungary make it possible for these countries to execute this mission for Slovenia with the support of Air Policing interceptor aircraft there, as for instance is the case for Luxembourg which is covered by interceptors from Belgium. Similarly, the withdrawal of United States forces from Iceland in 2006 has seen the smooth

integration of the Icelandic radar surveillance and C2 facilities into NATINADS, with full two-way exchange of the Recognized Air Picture (RAP) through existing NATINADS links. NATO members will, at the request of the Icelandic government, regularly deploy fighter assets and support to Keflavik Air Base to assure coverage for the Icelandic airspace. Deployments will also include NATO AWACS to further enhance the RAP and other additional airborne assets as required. Both the Siauliai and Keflavik Air Policing deployments further demonstrate the cohesion of the Alliance.

Russia and other neighbouring countries have been informed of NATO's Air Policing Mission. Air Policing activities are not directed against Russia or any other neighbour of the Alliance. In fact, NATO is engaged in separate efforts to de-

velop NATO-Russia cooperation in airspace security, and to promote transparency, predictability and interoperability among Allied and Russian military forces, including especially those who might be operating in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This notwithstanding, in a well publicised series of training events, Russia has resumed their Long Range Aviation (LRA) flights, transiting out from their traditional operating areas, to a more global flight regime. Last year saw a marked increase in these training flights. Consequently, this resulted in an increase in the number of intercepts by NATO Air Policing aircraft.

THE FUTURE

As mentioned above, ACCS is about to "go live" and its capabilities will keep NATINADS at the cutting edge of C2 technology. ACCS is designed to combine and automate the tactical planning, tasking and execution of all air operations with a view to providing a unified air C2 system for the whole Alliance. It is expected to emerge from its current system testing at the end of 2008 with roll-out to Alliance members over the coming years.

NATO expansion always brings with it new challenges for existing members and the next NATO Summit in Bucharest later this year could reveal the detail in this regard. The inclusion into NATINADS of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2004, and Iceland from its unique situation with the US last year has shown the



French AWACS clearing the runway at Ørland MAS during "Bold Avenger 2007" Photos: CMSgt Gerhard Kühner, CC-Air HQ Ramstein Public Affairs

commitment of existing members to absorb deficiencies in air defence capabilities and to maintain the Air Policing task across the AOFR. Bucharest may push this requirement even further.

SUMMARY

NATO's Air Policing posture and NATINADS structure with its sensors,

data links, C2 and alert fighter assets is without question a NATO success story. Alliance Nations individual sensors and fighter assets are unified under the operational command of SACEUR, and provide tangible proof of Alliance cohesion. New Members devoid of this structure have been pulled under NATO's Air Policing umbrella further reinforcing Alliance

cohesion and resolve. The ability to view the RAP from anywhere within the Alliance through the NATINADS structure of data-linked sites promotes confidence and stability. Technological developments, including ACCS, will keep NATINADS current and focused as the Alliance looks to other challenging tasks outside its traditional AOR.

