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## Pacific policy possibilities

Experts consider what second Trump administration might do about actions by US adversaries in Asia

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U.S. Marines with the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin 24.3 participate in a jungle survival class in Australia in August. Some experts believe the U.S. is likely to boost the number of troops in Australia.

MITCHELL JOHNSON/U.S. Marine Corps



## COVER STORY

# Experts predict rise in US troops in Australia

## Researchers: Under Trump, presence will help to deter China

BY SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Australia, already in partnership with the Pentagon on several fronts, would welcome an even larger U.S. presence under President-elect Donald Trump, Australian defense experts said.

The United States has sent growing numbers of troops Down Under since 250 Marines kicked off annual rotations to the country's northern port of Darwin in 2012.

The force, which operates in Australia from April to October, has grown to over 2,000 members.

Australian security researchers predict the U.S. under Trump will accelerate its growing military presence in their country as it seeks to deter China and disperse its forces to make them less susceptible to enemy missiles.

Australia is already spending \$450 million in U.S. funds to build air bases in the Northern Territory to accommodate rotations of U.S. B-52 Stratofortress bombers, Pacific Air Forces commander Gen. Kevin Schneider said in July.

And the U.S. and United Kingdom are building five nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, part of the AUKUS pact, for deployment in 2027, the first delivery in a program expected to cost \$250 billion over three dec-



MANUEL RIVERA/U.S. Marine Corps

**Marine Cpl. Tanner Watson of the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin 24.3 sights in on an M240B medium machine gun during Exercise Southern Jackaroo 24 in Queensland, Australia, in May.**

ades.

The Trump administration will seek to ramp up the size of the Marine rotational force several fold, Australian defense researcher Allan Orr said.

"Likely at least 10,000 Marines and likely permanent if they get their way," he said.

Australia would prefer a permanently stationed force of 10,000-20,000 troops, Orr said, adding that the Marines should move forces from Japan to Australia as soon as possible.

"Moving these positions from a country where their presence is much more politically protested to Australia and out of most Chinese missile ranges would be ideal for both sides," he said.

The U.S. and Australian governments have wanted to increase the

American military presence for more than a decade, Orr said.

"If anything, the U.S. footprint is evolving too slowly," he said.

Australia needs to add missile defense, more runways for strategic bombers and enough troops to make sure the deployment deters China, Orr added.

Mike Green, chief of the United States Studies Centre in Sydney, told The Australian in a Nov. 7 report that ramped-up American deployments to Australia would be part of a bipartisan plan for a more distributed military posture in the region.

"They're going to come in on day one and want to accelerate co-operation with Australia on defence," he told the newspaper. "If there is an issue, frank-

ly, it's that the (Australian) government is going to come under pressure to spend more on defence."

Australian military spending roughly matches the NATO target of 2% of gross domestic product.

"He (Trump) might also request a further boost in our defence budget — perhaps to 3% of GDP — within a few years," former Australian assistant defense secretary Ross Babbage said.

It's possible that the Trump administration may want Australian units to operate more frequently with U.S. forces in the Far East and for Australia to accelerate efforts to build missiles to supply Australian and U.S. units, he said.

"Further U.S. operations in and from Australia are anticipated over time and are almost always universally welcomed here," he said. "They are rarely controversial."

However, Paul Buchanan, an American security expert based in New Zealand, said Trump could scale back the U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

"The MAGA (Make America Great Again) people are neo-isolationist," he said. "They want to withdraw American military commitments all around the world."

The U.S. Congress has pushed back on the AUKUS commitment, contending it distracts from efforts to grow the U.S. submarine force, Buchanan said.

"I'm not convinced [Trump] considers the Western Pacific the region of priority," he said.

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## Expert predicts Trump may recognize N. Korea as nuclear state

BY SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — Donald Trump in his second term as president is likely to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and ask for more defense spending by America's Asian partners, a Japanese foreign policy expert told reporters.

Those close to Trump see no hope of denuclearizing North Korea during his second term, according to Meikai University professor Tetsuo Kotani, a

senior fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs.

"According to President-elect Trump, he's going to recognize that (nuclear weapons power) status for North Korea so that he can bring North Korea to the negotiation for nuclear arms control," Kotani, an expert in international relations, said in translated remarks during an online conference at the Foreign Press Center Japan.

Recognized nuclear states include the U.S., Russia, Britain, France and

China, all signatories to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. North Korea signed the treaty in 1985 but withdrew after testing its own nuclear weapons in 2003. India and Pakistan have declared their weapons but are not signatories, and neither is Israel, which is believed to have them.

U.S. negotiators will focus instead on limiting the North's arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the U.S., Kotani said. The North

last tested an ICBM on Oct. 31.

Official recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons power will damage non-proliferation efforts, but without it Trump's advisers think the North's nuclear threat could be greater in 10-20 years, he said.

"The international community is faced with the question of what they should consider in the event that the United States officially recognizes North Korea as a country owning nuclear weapons," he said.



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## MILITARY

# Pentagon report: No evidence of aliens

DOD findings also stated 21 cases would be needing 'further analysis'

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has not found any verifiable evidence of extraterrestrial beings among nearly 300 cases of “unidentified anomalous phenomena,” more commonly known as UFOs, analyzed this year, but at least 21 cases need further analysis, according to a recently released annual report.

“There are interesting cases that, with my physics and engineering background and time in the [intelligence community], I do not understand. And I don’t know anybody else who understands either,” Jon Kosloski, director of the Defense Department’s All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, or AARO, said of the 21 open cases.

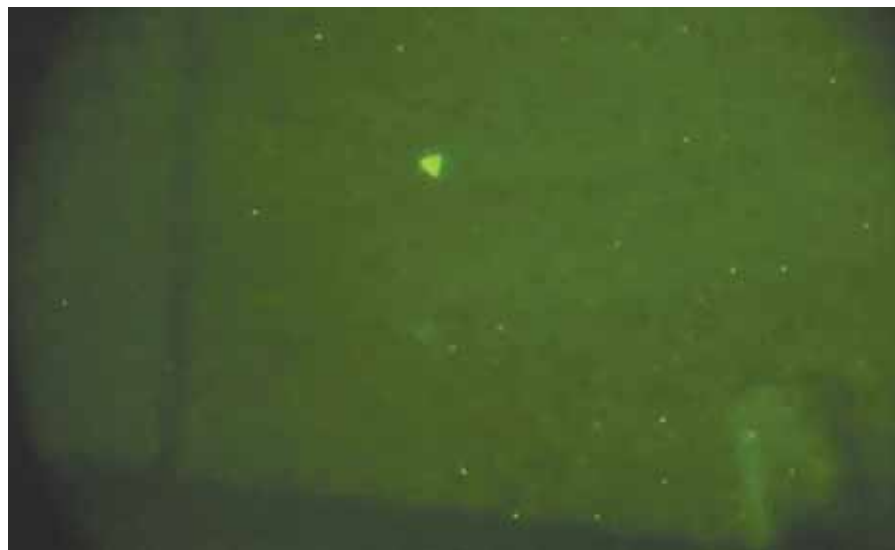
The AARO was created in 2022 to investigate sightings of UFOs and standardize data collection. To date, the office has received 1,652 reports of unidentified anomalous phenomena, most of which occurred in the air, including 485 that were reported between May 2023 and June 2024. An additional 272 reports dating back to 2021-22 that were not previously reported were included in this year’s report.

Of the 757 cases detailed in the report, 292 have been closed or are scheduled to be closed pending review. Those cases were found to be balloons, birds, satellites, aircraft or drones.

“There are definitely anomalies. We have not been able to draw the link to extraterrestrial,” Kosloski said.

The report was released one day after the House Oversight and Accountability Committee held a hearing to examine reports of UFOs and the secrecy surrounding them.

“We know that there are objects or phenomena observed in our air space and also possibly in our oceans,” said Rep. Robert Garcia of California, the top Democrat on the committee’s na-



U.S. Navy

**In a 2022 hearing on unidentified aerial phenomena before the House Intelligence Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, and Counterproliferation subcommittee, Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence Scott Bray shared this Navy image of a UAP captured during naval exercises off the U.S. East Coast. Based on additional information and data from other UAP sightings, the UAP in this image were subsequently reclassified as unmanned aerial systems.**

tional security panel. “The American people have legitimate questions and I believe it’s critical that Congress should help address them.”

The AARO’s inability to solve or identify a swath of reports of UFOs — approximately 900 cases — has fueled speculation of a coverup and fed the public’s growing interest in aliens.

Luis Elizondo, a former senior intelligence official who ran a predecessor agency to the AARO, said that the government possessed alien technology and was in a secretive “arms race” to reverse engineer the aircraft.

“Let me be clear: UAP are real,” Elizondo said. “Advanced technologies not made by our government, or any other government, are monitoring sensitive military installations around the globe.”

Kosloski said he “absolutely agrees that UAPs are real” but noted more than 900 cases have not been resolved.

“Until we know what they are or who they belong to, we can’t distribute intent and understand exactly what the purpose of that phenomenon is. We, AARO, are not comfortable saying at this time whether or not the UAP are there to collect information or not,” he said.

To date, Kosloski said, the AARO has

no evidence to indicate foreign enemies are collecting information on the United States.

The details of the 21 cases that merit further analysis, he said, have not been cleared to release to the public yet. But Kosloski was able to confirm several of the cases occurred in the past year and a half, occurred in multiple undisclosed locations, have multiple eyewitnesses, and — in some instances — have video evidence. The cases did not have any commonality and ranged from sightings of orbs, cylinders and triangles, he said.

“There could be some [unmanned aerial vehicle] activity in the environment that’s getting confused or conflated with the [unidentified anomalous phenomena] activity, so we are trying to tease that out right now,” Kosloski said.

The AARO is working with the Defense Department, its intelligence community and science and technology partners to facilitate additional collection and conduct analysis using advanced techniques such as modeling and simulation. The AARO report said the office will provide immediate notification to Congress should any cases involve breakthrough technology or foreign adversarial aerospace capa-



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Luis Elizondo, a former Defense Department official, testifies Nov. 13 during a House Committee on Oversight and Accountability hearing in Washington about UFOs.**

bility. Kosloski defined breakthrough technology as capabilities that the U.S. does not have and will not have within a few years.

According to this year’s report, another 444 cases lacked sufficient data and were placed in the “active archive,” where they will be held to be reexamined if additional data becomes available. Archived cases can be reopened and resolved should additional information emerge to support analysis.

Last year, the Defense Department launched a site for service members, veterans and civilian defense workers to report UFOs. The AARO is working to engage more with the services to help troops, such as aviators, understand what a UAP is and how to report it. Kosloski said there are plans to follow that up with an education campaign to show service members closed UAP cases that have been identified as clusters of satellites.

The AARO continues to analyze historical UAP cases. In accordance with a congressional directive, the office will release a report on its findings of historical cases in the coming months.

“AARO will follow the science and data wherever they lead,” Kosloski said. “We are committed to sharing as much information as possible at the unclassified level to inform the public of our activities and findings.”

Stars and Stripes reporter Svetlana Shkolnikova contributed to this report.  
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MILITARY

# Air Force to retire A-10s based in S. Korea

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force is retiring A-10 Thunderbolt IIs from South Korea and upgrading its F-16 Fighting Falcons there as part of a “modernization effort” across the service, according to a recent news release.

Starting in January, all 24 A-10s assigned to the 25th Fighter Squadron at Osan Air Base will be relocated in phases to the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group in Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., 7th Air Force spokeswoman Maj. Rachel Buitrago said. They’ll undergo maintenance and display preparations in Arizona.

The A-10s will not be immediately replaced, according to Buitrago. The plane is better known as the Warthog, for its rugged durability and distinctive armament.

F-35A Lightning IIs, F-16s, FA-50 Golden Eagles and F-15K Slam Eagles



KAHDJIA SLAUGHTER/U.S. Air Force

**A Thunderbolt II assigned to the 25th Fighter Squadron taxis at Osan Air Base, South Korea, in August.**

from the U.S. and South Korean air forces “are more than ready to fill the role of the A-10” on the peninsula, Buitrago added. The two services are “confident in their ability to bring the full spectrum of combat capabilities to defend [South Korea] during crisis and conflict,” she said.

The 7th Air Force, headquartered at Osan, plans to outfit its fourth-generation F-16s with “pivotal upgrades,” including a new avionics system to bring it “closer to fifth-generation capa-

bilities” beginning next year, according to the Air Force news release.

The plan to upgrade F-16s and remove the A-10s mirrors a similar move in Japan by the Pentagon to replace older F-15 Eagles at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, with the improved F-15EX fighter and replace F-16s at Misawa Air Base in northern Japan with 48 F-35As. The Navy is also swapping F/A-18 Super Hornets for F-35Cs at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in southern Japan.

The F-16 makes up about 50% of the Air Force fleet and has flown in every major U.S. conflict since the 1970s. In 2022, the service allocated \$6.3 billion for improvements to its F-16s, which pilots have described as a modular aircraft that is easily upgraded with new equipment.

“The modernization effort seeks to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Korean Peninsula, through state-of-the-art aircraft,” the Air Force release said.

“The strategy bolsters deterrence against North Korea and reaffirms the ironclad U.S. security commitment to the South Korea-U.S. alliance by strengthening South Korean and U.S. combined defense.”

The single-seat A-10 has proven its worth by providing close-air support for ground forces since it entered service in 1976. It is equipped with the infamous seven-barrel 30 mm Gatling gun and can carry up to 16,000 pounds of ordnance.

The Air Force plans to divest 56 A-10s from its inventory in the upcoming fiscal year.

Critics of the A-10 have argued its singular role of providing ground support is outdated in the contemporary battlefield and ought to be replaced with something that can also face off against aerial and anti-air threats.

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May. 19, 2010  
“Taliban attack key US base in Afghanistan, killing 1 US contractor, wounding 9 troops”  
– Fox News

Nov. 12, 2016  
“4 Killed in Bagram Airfield Explosion”  
– DOD News

Dec. 11, 2019  
“US airstrikes end daylong battle after Taliban attempt to storm Bagram Airfield”  
– Stars and Stripes

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## MILITARY

# 'This beautiful symphony of execution'

## 2 Silver Star recipients among those honored for repulsing Iranian attack

By LORETTO MORRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*

RAF LAKENHEATH, England — An Air Force officer who became the third woman to be awarded a Silver Star since World War II was among 30 service members recognized recently for battling a barrage of Iranian missiles and drones during an unprecedented retaliatory attack against Israel earlier this year.

Capt. Lacie Hester, a weapons systems officer, was awarded the third-highest military decoration for valor in combat at a ceremony at RAF Lakenheath in England. Maj. Benjamin Coffey, the pilot of the two-seater F-15E, received the citation alongside Hester.

More than 150 people attended the ceremony to honor the awardees, which included ground crew members who kept the pilots in the fight during the April 13-14 Iranian attacks.

Hester and Coffey were part of a coalition air mission that countered an Iranian launch of more than 300 ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as one-way attack drones.

During their first flight, the pair intercepted six drones flying in the dark at low altitude, the Air Force said.

The fighter was forced to return to an undisclosed base in the Middle East because of a missile that couldn't fire. Coffey and Hester took cover in a nearby bunker in anticipation of a possible attack on the base.



**Capt. Lacie Hester and Maj. Benjamin Coffey watch the closing of a recent award ceremony at RAF Lakenheath in England. Each received a Silver Star.**

After learning that a replacement F-15 was ready and as overhead explosions from missile intercepts rang out, they left the bunker for a second flight.

During both flights, the pair fired all available weapons. Hester also directed fighter jets in the area through the end of the Iranian attack, officials said.

Despite the risks, they remained focused on completing their mission and returning to safety, Lt. Col. Timothy "Diesel" Causey, commander of the 494th Fighter Squadron, said at the ceremony.

"It was just this beautiful symphony of execution," Causey said.

Causey was one of six people who received the Distinguished Flying Cross with valor. In all, 14 officers earned the Distinguished Flying Cross

in some form. It acknowledges the recipient's "heroism or extraordinary achievement" while participating in a flight.

Six people ranging from airman first class to staff sergeant received the Air and Space Achievement Medal, while six others earned commendation medals.

Maj. Clayton Wicks and Master Sgt. Timothy Adams were awarded Bronze Stars for their efforts, which included directing maintenance, refueling and reloading operations for a dozen F-15s over seven hours while under threat from the Iranian assault.

Gen. James Hecker, U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa commander, praised the award recipients and the collective efforts of the 48th Fighter



**Air Force Lt. Col. Timothy "Diesel" Causey was one of six service members to receive a Distinguished Flying Cross with valor.**

Wing, known as the Panthers.

"You never know when your time is going to come, but when your time comes, you need to be ready," Hecker said. "I'm happy to say the Panthers were ready."

In all, seven women have received the Silver Star and Hester is the first in the Air Force. Three others received the Citation Star, a predecessor of the current medal.

Pfc. Monica Lin Brown received the Silver Star for treating wounded soldiers while under intense small arms and mortar fire in April 2007 in Afghanistan.

Then-Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, who is not related to Capt. Lacie Hester, was awarded the medal for her actions during a March 2005 enemy ambush on a supply convoy near the town of Salman Pak, Iraq. She was the first woman to receive the citation since World War II.

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## Army keeps incentive pay for extending service for deployments

By BRADLEY LATHAM  
*Stars and Stripes*

Soldiers approaching the end of their enlistment contracts in a unit scheduled for a rotational deployment can keep counting on an Army enticement aimed at getting them to stick around.

The service will continue to offer rotational deployment extension-assignment incentive pay, which it originally announced in January.

The purpose is to encourage soldiers to extend their service to remain available

to their units for the duration of a deployment, according to an internal Army message issued Nov. 1.

Soldiers who request the incentive pay can still reenlist if otherwise qualified, but additional service time won't begin until the original extension time is complete.

The Army introduced the incentive pay in a military personnel message in January with an expiration date of a year later. The latest message, retroactively effective Oct. 1, aligns with the fiscal year and expires in a year.

The extra money is being offered only to first-term, active-duty soldiers and doesn't include those in the Army Reserve or National Guard, according to the message.

To qualify for the incentive pay, soldiers must be on their first contract with an end date that falls between the deployment start and end dates, plus 90 days.

Eligible soldiers can request the incentive pay beginning nine months prior to the unit's latest arrival deployment date.

Those who extend between six and nine months before then will receive \$500 per month for each full month of extension. Those who opt-in at least 90 days before their service term expires but less than six months in advance of the deployment will receive \$250 per month. The payment is given as a lump sum and is also tax-free if the deployment is to a combat tax exclusion zone.

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MILITARY

# Army urged to return horses to Arlington

By LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The return of military horses that have escorted caskets to gravesites at Arlington National Cemetery for more than 75 years will depend on the Army securing adequate pastureland, repairing rundown stables and improving training for handlers, officials said.

Unsanitary living conditions and a lack of open space for the herd to graze led to an indefinite suspension of the 3rd Infantry Regiment Caisson Platoon in May 2023 after several horses died, Maj. Gen. Trevor Bredenkamp, commander of the Army Military District of Washington, said recently at a hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee's subpanel on disability and memorial affairs.

Lawmakers sought an update on the Army's work to improve care for the horses and develop a plan for the resumption of horse-drawn funerals at Arlington.

"Caisson-pulling military horses were dying in 2022 because of the Ar-



HUEY D. YOUNGER JR./U.S. Navy

**The caisson platoon of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division leads a funeral procession at Arlington National Cemetery, Va.**

my's failure to provide proper food, veterinary care, pastureland and stables for the herd," said Rep. Morgan Luttrell, R-Texas, chairman of the subcommittee. "Our caisson platoon should be the most elite organization of its kind

on the planet."

Known as the Old Guard, the caisson platoon of the 3rd Infantry Regiment has carried the caskets of deceased service members to gravesites at Arlington since 1948.

The caisson — a ceremonial wagon that bears the casket — is drawn by four specially trained horses. The processions are considered an integral part of traditional full-honor military funerals at Arlington.

"The Army has given us no estimate on a time or date when these operations will resume," Luttrell said.

An Army investigation in 2023 revealed the horses were kept in cramped quarters with a lack of maintenance or care. The herd was grazing on land with construction debris and manure. Horses were consuming low-quality feed and suffering from parasites, according to the findings. Sand and gravel were found in the digestive tracts of two horses that died.

The problems evolved over time, said Bredenkamp, who also commands the Joint Task Force-National Capital Region. They included stables in disrepair, lack of open land to exercise and graze the horses, and handlers with little or no training in working with horses.

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## IG criticizes Navy oversight of Red Hill fuel facility

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Navy officials did not effectively manage operations, maintenance, safety and oversight in accordance with policy and federal and state laws at the now-defunct Red Hill fuel facility in Hawaii, according to a pair of Department of Defense reports released recently.

A fuel leak at the facility in late 2021 contaminated the Navy's water distribution used by military communities on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. The disaster has been an expensive one, according to a news release from the DOD Inspector General's Office.

The DOD spent more than \$220 million responding to the 2021 contam-

ination incident, the news release states. The National Defense Authorization Acts for fiscal years 2022 and 2023 included more than \$2.1 billion in funding related to the water contamination and the facility's closure.

Thousands were forced to relocate for months to area hotels as the Navy flushed the system. Some residents reported a host of maladies in the wake of the spill, such as rashes, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, anxiety and depression.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in March 2022 ordered the World War II-era underground storage facility to be permanently closed. The process of emptying and cleaning the 20 massive tanks and cleaning up the soil surrounding the facility will take years.

One of the Navy's wells remains contaminated with jet fuel.

The two IG reports stated that risks inherent at the facility were well documented and that incident response plans to mitigate them existed.

"However, the DoD OIG also found that Navy officials did not follow the basic tenets of their incident response

plans or meet the reporting requirements for fuel incidents," the news release states.

"Furthermore, the incident response plans were insufficient," the release states.

Navy officials "did not consistently analyze trends in the fuel inventory to prevent, identify, and respond to potential or actual fuel incidents.

"It is imperative that the Navy address ongoing challenges with the management of fuel and water systems at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam," Inspector General Robert P. Storch said in the release.

"Although the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility was defueled and the DoD intends to close it permanently, the fueling operations at Naval Station Pearl Harbor and Hickam Air Force Base remain in operation," he said.

Among the IG's 16 recommendations are that the DOD assesses leak detection systems at all Navy fueling points.

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