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No-fly zone paves way for drone attack

THE Pentagon's plans for military action in Libya include the imposition of a no-fly zone and strikes with Tomahawk cruise missiles, drones and ground-attack aircraft.

A former senior Pentagon official warned that if the US decided to hit certain targets with Predator drones, it would have to be part of "a much broader context".

He said Libya did not have many tanks, but destroying a few with the Predator's Hellfire missiles would not end the violence. Most of the US air force's Predators and the longer-range Reaper drones are assigned to Afghanistan. But some could be redeployed for use in Libya.

"The best thing about using Predators is that they have a lot of loiter time and there is no air crew to be put at risk," the former Pentagon official said.

The Predator, armed with two Hellfires, has a range of 3200km and can stay in the air for 24 hours. The Reaper, with 14 Hellfires or a combination of weapons including two 226kg Paveway II laser-guided bombs, has a range of 5150km and can remain airborne for up to 28 hours. Italy has six of its own Predators, based at Pisa.

Experts in the use of unmanned aircraft said the new generation of armed drones could provide a more politically acceptable and highly effective weapon against the tanks and artillery that had been Muammar Gaddafi's most effective tool against the rebels.

"It (the fleet of drones) might offer an opportunity for an arm's-length show of force in the hope that that would be enough and it makes it a bit more politically acceptable," said Paul Cornish, head of international security at Chatham House in London.

Elizabeth Quintana, the head of air power and technology at the Royal United Services Institute, said: "He (Gaddafi) is only very rarely using his aircraft. He has concentrated on other forces - tanks and artillery. So a no-fly zone that only prevents aircraft flying has a limited effect. Drones would be very, very effective in limiting movement on the ground. Because of their endurance they can be very sure in what they are targeting, very precise." The Tomahawk option has already been accounted for with the decision to redeploy the nuclear-powered Los Angeles-class submarine USS Providence from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. The submarine, armed with Tomahawks, went through the Suez Canal a few days ago, sources said. USS Providence was part of the strike force assigned to the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise.

The carrier itself, however, is now heading for the Gulf of Aden, although a Pentagon official said it could be turned around if required or could be ordered to take part in operations from its present location. The US navy now has a growing fleet in the Mediterranean, ready if action in Libya is ordered. They are the USS Kearsarge, an assault ship with 400 Marines, USS Ponce, another assault ship, three destroyers, USS Barry, USS Stout and USS Mason, and USS Providence.

Asked why the only aircraft carrier in the region was heading away from Libya, Pentagon spokesman Colonel David Lapan said sufficient land-based aircraft were available. There are two squadrons of F16s - about 40 aircraft - at Aviano in Italy. General Norton Schwartz, the US air force chief, said he expected that F22 Raptor stealth fighters would be used in a no-fly zone operation. They would be used with other fighters (F16s), refuelling tankers and surveillance and electronic jamming aircraft.

P3 Orion surveillance aircraft are already monitoring the Libyan airspace, along with NATO AWACS planes. The US's specialist jamming aircraft would be used to block communications between Gaddafi's regime and his army commanders.

If the F22s are used to attack Libyan fighters, it will be the first time that the US's most advanced fighter jets have been used in anger. They are normally based at Langley in Virginia but would probably be redeployed to Aviano for operations over Libya.

NATO has been planning for a no-fly zone for weeks but until the UN Security Council resolution was tabled yesterday by the US, Britain and France, there had been low expectations of any authorisation for military action.

Britain has two frigates, HMS Westminster and HMS Cumberland, already in the Mediterranean with French and Italian ships making a combined international force of about a dozen vessels.

Britain has a sovereign airbase in Cyprus but does not routinely keep jets there. Sources said the Cypriot government would have to grant permission for British aircraft to participate in a no-fly zone from Cyprus. A similar situation exists for bases in Malta.

Britain can offer a number of "force multipliers". The RAF has a squadron of E3D Sentry AWACS aircraft, which carry out surveillance from high altitudes and operate command-and-control - a prized intelligence asset. A squadron of Sentinel R1 aircraft, which are able to track vehicles and individuals on land, is also available.

A number of Nimrod R1 electronic intelligence aircraft, which, like HMS Cumberland, are due to be scrapped in the coming months, could also be deployed.

France's solitary aircraft carrier, Charles De Gaulle, is in the Mediterranean and would typically be defended by frigates, destroyers and submarines. It has a highly effective force of up to 35 Rafale and Super-Etendard fighter-bombers as well as E2C Hawkeye early warning aircraft.

Analysts suggest a coalition of Western and Arab forces would have three options for enforcing a no-fly zone. Imposing a full no-fly zone would involve patrolling more than 1.7 million square kilometres, more than five times the territory covered by the Iraq no-fly zone during the 1990s. Establishing the zone would involve strikes to degrade Libya's air defences, using hundreds of aircraft.

The US Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments costed an initial disabling of Libyan air defences last week at between \$US500 million and \$US1 billion. A more limited zone would cover the north of the country, north of the 29th parallel, where most of the population is.

Or it could be restricted to aircraft and ships off the Libyan coast.