

Russians deploying SS-20s in Afghanistan

The Soviet Union has deployed medium-range SS-20 nuclear missiles in western Afghanistan. This conclusion has been reached by Western defence analysts based on mounting evidence that includes high-resolution satellite photography.

According to Western sources and Afghan resistance groups, the missiles have been deployed at Shindand airbase, located near the Iranian border, a major Soviet staging base for operations against the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

These missiles, each with three accurate 200 kiloton nuclear warheads, and a range of 6-8,300 km (4,000-5,500 miles), are thought to be targeted against the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. There, the U.S. has established a major base for its rapid deployment forces that includes a harbor and repair facilities; heavy equipment, munitions and stores for a 15,000 Marine amphibious group; and a powerful communications station. Diego Garcia also has a long runway capable of handling B-52 bombers.

The Soviet base at Shindand is also an important communications relay post for Russia's growing Indian Ocean fleet and serves as a base for reconnaissance and maritime strike bombers. Equally significant, it is the base for a top-secret mobile force whose mission is to reach the Persian Gulf within six days. Soviet strike aircraft at Shindand are now easily within range of the Gulf and its vital oil producing areas. Shindand airbase is only 750 km (465 miles) from the Strait of Hormuz, the jugular of western oil supplies.

Afghan sources have reported the presence of SS-20 missiles at Shindand since 1983 but these claims have been largely ignored by the western media until recent leaks from the Pentagon and British military authorities. Massive development of the Shindand base is only one aspect of the widening Soviet investment in permanent strategic infrastructure in Afghanistan that includes roads, railways, bridges, air bases, barracks and military housing.

Extensive Soviet military activities have also recently taken place further to the south, towards the Pakistan border, at the top-secret Farah airbase. No

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hard information is available but some sources suggest that Farah is being prepared as a large base for an entire Soviet airborne division. It may also house missiles and certainly contains important electronic gear.