

Statement for the Record
Rep. Devin Nunes
Hearing before the House Armed Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
On
The FY14 National Defense Authorization Act
May 8, 2013

Chairman McKeon and Ranking Member Smith,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Before I begin, I'd like to submit this letter for the record, signed by myself and five other congressmen, raising concerns about the Air Force's decision to draw down forces at Lajes Field on Terceira Island.

Lajes has an unparalleled strategic value. Located on the Azores island chain between Europe and the United States, it is like the Hawaii of the Atlantic Ocean – only closer to the American mainland. The islands belong to Portugal, a strong U.S. ally since World War II that has never prevented us from conducting operational missions.

The base at this crucial location has bolstered the United States' control of the Atlantic since World War II, proving critical to our tracking of Soviet submarines during the Cold War. It allows for U.S. access to Europe, the Middle East, and western and sub-Saharan Africa, and enables the expeditionary movement of warfighters, aircraft, ships, and global communications to AFRICOM and CENTCOM's joint, coalition, and NATO operations.

It is also a vital site for countering a major regional threat, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which has known ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other violent groups. In fact, from Lajes, ten of the eighteen African countries that hold State Department Travel Warnings can be reached within six hours. Further, Lajes is well-positioned to act as a logistical hub not only for the Defense Department, but also for USAID, the State Department, and other agencies.

Having engaged with Portuguese officials for years on the issue of Lajes, I bring it to your attention today due to the dire consequences of the decision to draw down at the base. Our strategic planners may believe we can leave a mere skeletal operation at the base and retain access there, but in reality, this decision means a total end to the U.S. presence at Lajes. Scaling back the base according to current plans will severely impact the Azorean economy, forcing Portugal to find a new tenant for the site. In light of the weak Portuguese economy, we do not want to make Azoreans choose between their loyalty to the United States and their ability to feed their families.

While our strategic planners may not want to be in the Azores anymore, leaders of other nations feel differently. Several high ranking Chinese officials have visited the Azores in recent years,

culminating in a June 2012 visit to Terceira by then-Premier Wen Jiabao. The Chinese did not divulge what all these delegates were doing there, but I can assure you they weren't sipping port and enjoying the pleasant climate.

In the wake of our decision to wind down Lajes, we cannot assume the Portuguese will exclude China or other bad actors from the site simply out of allegiance to the U.S.; the recent decision to send 500 U.S. Marines to Moron, Spain – a contingent that would have much more flexibility at the logistics hub of Lajes – could easily be interpreted as a calculated insult to our Portuguese friends.

I fully understand the budgetary reality we face. However, as we reduce our European footprint – comprising 110,000 personnel and twenty-nine military installations – we need to base our decisions on each site's global strategic value and tactical and strategic flexibility. It would cost billions to build a base like Lajes today, and if our strategic planners insist on giving up something this vital, then at the very least, this committee should encourage the creation of a pilot program to privatize its operations, to keep them running round-the-clock, and to guarantee 24/7 access to the site for TRANSCOM.

In conclusion, the retention of Lajes was not an issue for seventy years because prior planners never contemplated surrendering something so crucial to U.S. interests. This committee must understand that the decision to cut the base's operations means closing the site and losing our access there. I leave this committee with three questions:

1. If we withdraw from Lajes, should we assume that Chinese and Russian submarines will suffer some mishap that prevents them from sailing in the Atlantic Ocean?
2. If we withdraw from Lajes, should we assume that sub-Saharan Africa – which has the youngest population on Earth and includes countries like Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and others with known al-Qaeda affiliates – will not be used as a training site for the next generation of jihadists?
3. Finally, I draw your attention to this map and ask an extremely simple question: if the U.S. government wants to fulfill its responsibility to protect the United States, its people, and its interests, then which of these bases should it deem as having the highest geostrategic value?

Thank you for your time today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have.