Past statements of basic doctrine by the Air Force traditionally include a listing of “Air Force missions,” such as interdiction, close air support, defensive counterair, and others. These lists have not enjoyed a great deal of saliency outside of the Air Force, mainly because they are not really “Air Force missions.” Missions are assigned to combatant commanders, not services. They are carried out by force elements provided by the services, usually in a joint operation. For example, Air Force and Navy aircraft may carry out interdiction sorties; Air Force, Army, and Marine aircraft may provide close support to friendly ground forces; and all four services field forces capable of shooting down enemy aircraft in flight. In light of this reality, it makes little sense for the Air Force to try to lay claim to a set of missions through its own doctrinal statements.

General Fogleman recognized this when, in 1995, he charged the Air Force's long-range planning activity to “define the roles of air and space forces in joint missions.” Since missions are inherently joint and since the Air Force should, in principle, be poised to demonstrate growing capabilities across the full range of joint missions, we recommend that the Air Force adopt an approach to defining the capabilities of air and space forces that is cast in terms of joint missions and expressed at the operational level. This is quite distinct from claiming a subset of joint missions as “belonging” to the Air Force.¹

¹Of course, the other services could use a list identical to the one we propose here.
This begs the question of what joint missions are. Webster defines a mission as “a specific task with which a person or group is charged.” Inherent in the concept of mission is an objective—something that is to be achieved. With this in mind, we offer the following list of general missions that are assigned or that could be assigned to U.S. combatant commanders in peace and war:

- **Strengthen stability and deter aggression** in key regions through operations and interactions in peacetime.
- **Resolve crises** by, for example, providing humanitarian relief, enforcing peace agreements, protecting and evacuating civilians, rescuing hostages, conducting punitive strikes, or intervening against hostile regimes.
- **Win “cold wars.”** By this is meant the military dimensions of a long-term political, economic, and military strategy aimed at isolating and exerting pressure upon an adversary state. The Soviet Union was the primary target of such a strategy during the Cold War. Today, North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and Cuba are primary among the states with which the United States is waging a cold war.
- **Counter weapons of mass destruction.** This encompasses efforts to impede the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as their delivery vehicles; to deter their use; and to prevent them from being used (or used effectively), through counterforce attacks and the employment of active and passive defenses.
- **Defeat large-scale aggression and compel surrender.** This mission is, properly, the focus of the bulk of the United States’ defense planning and defense resources. The ability to project large-scale military forces over long distances is the defining feature of U.S. military forces in the post–Cold War era, and it is this ability that makes the U.S. alliance structure viable. Accordingly, we focus on this mission in the remainder of this document.

Each of these broad missions can be disaggregated into its constituent components. In the case of the key mission of defeating large-scale aggression, the constituent parts are the elements of an
overall theater campaign. Not all of these objectives would necessarily be relevant in every conflict, and they would not have to be pursued in a strictly sequential fashion. (Indeed, there is great value in being able to attack multiple objectives simultaneously to maximize the shock value of one’s operations and minimize the enemy’s ability to adapt effectively. Such a “parallel” approach to attacking enemy assets would, presumably, offer the best chance of compelling the enemy to surrender quickly.)

Assuming that the enemy initiates a major conflict through offensive action, a generic theater campaign can be thought of as having two major phases. In the first phase U.S. and allied forces would strive to wrest from the enemy the initiative in all aspects of military operations within the theater. As this was accomplished, the focus would shift to destroying the enemy’s capacity to wage war and compelling a surrender.2 Key objectives within each of these phases are listed below and are displayed graphically in Figure 1.

- **Phase I: Gain Control of Military Operations**
  - Dominate operations in the air
  - Dominate maritime operations
  - Halt invading land forces short of critical objectives
  - Defeat weapons of mass destruction and their delivery means
    - Destroy or deny access to stocks of weapons of mass destruction and delivery means
    - Destroy aircraft, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles in flight

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2This conception of a theater campaign is somewhat different from the more commonly used three-phased approach, in which U.S. and allied forces would seek to halt the enemy invasion, reduce the enemy’s warfighting capacity while building up their own in the theater, and then compel the enemy’s forces to withdraw from captured territory through a counteroffensive. We prefer our approach because there is more to the opening phase of a conflict than simply halting aggression and because it is not a foregone conclusion that a combined arms counteroffensive will always be necessary to compel surrender. (Both approaches envisage a post-war stabilization phase of indefinite duration, but operations in this phase are subsumed within our framework under the mission of strengthening stability.)
Defining the Role of Airpower in Joint Missions

- Dominate air operations
- Dominate maritime operations
- Halt the invasion
- Deter/prevent WMD use
- Degrad/destroy warmaking infrastructure
- Isolate, demoralize, destroy fielded forces
- Evict enemy forces from captured territory
- Seize and hold ground

Figure 1—Key Objectives in Theater Warfare

- Protect U.S. and allied assets, facilities, and personnel from the effects of weapons of mass destruction.
- Pose credible threats of unacceptable damage or retaliation for use of weapons of mass destruction.

Phase II: Continue Operational Dominance and Compel Surrender

- Degrad and destroy war-related industries and facilities that support the conduct of the war
- Especially, neutralize facilities that support the enemy’s leadership in maintaining control over military operations and in exercising sovereignty over the nation
- Further isolate, destroy, and demoralize enemy military forces
- Evict enemy forces from captured territory, if necessary
- Seize and hold ground.

This framework encompassing joint missions and objectives provides a means by which the Air Force can describe the capabilities of air forces and space forces and then quantify these capabilities in analyses of representative campaigns. A basic doctrine that set forth
such a framework would help position the Air Force favorably to compare and debate the utility of air and space forces in meeting the needs of the future.