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Beyond Close Air Support

Forging a New Air-Ground Partnership

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Summary

Recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have reawakened interest in counterland operations. One battle in particular, Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, sparked a heated debate between the Air Force and the Army about the conduct of close air support (CAS) and led to new efforts to improve the integration of air power and ground power prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although these efforts were quite successful, there is growing recognition by both airmen and soldiers that air-ground cooperation is increasingly important and that additional steps must be taken.

This report seeks to help the Air Force engage the Army in a constructive dialogue on this issue. In particular, it addresses three policy questions: (1) How should air attack and ground maneuver be integrated? (2) How should the CAS terminal control function be executed? (3) How should ground maneuver/fires and air attack be deconflicted?

The Evolving Relationship Between Air Power and Land Power (see pp. 20–30)

Whether air power or land power should predominate depends on the particular military problem being considered. Depending upon the situation, either might predominate, and their relationship is likely to shift over the course of a campaign. At one extreme, air power might augment the firepower of ground units, even replacing

artillery in some cases. Marines habitually take this approach, and it might also be valid for Army forces in some situations, such as an airborne assault. At the other extreme, air power might coerce an opponent or destroy his military forces in the absence of any ground operation.

Between the extremes are three plausible alternatives, one highlighting air power, one highlighting land power, and one based on partnership. From the perspective of a land-force commander, air power's greatest contribution is in weakening and impeding enemy forces before they can close with friendly troops. From the perspective of an air-force commander, land power's greatest contribution is in flushing and fixing enemy forces so that they can be destroyed by air attack. Both perspectives are valid, but neither captures the whole truth. The most fruitful perspective is a partnership in which either or neither partner may predominate, depending upon the operational and tactical situation.

There are several reasons for developing a partnership. It is the approach most suitable to the largest number of adversaries, and it can easily be adjusted toward greater prominence for either partner. It gives the least opportunity for parochial claims and one-sided pleading for one's own service. Its very difficulty could be a virtue: Once the services have mastered partnership, they can easily revert to simpler approaches.

Partnership does not, of course, imply having co-equal commanders of the same operation, thus violating unity of command. It implies an allocation of authority that maximizes the contributions of each partner toward a common endeavor. Within the range of his organic weapons (normally 30 to 40 kilometers), the land-force commander rightly expects to control air attacks. Indeed, he must have such control in order to integrate direct fires, artillery, rockets, attack helicopters, and fixed-wing aviation. Beyond that range, an air-force commander should control air attacks, but with a view to assuring successful maneuver of land forces. Neither of these commanders need be considered supported or supporting according to doctrine, since both work for the same joint-force commander.

Trends in Counterland Operations (see pp. 31–38)

Enemy land forces were the critical target set during recent conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In all of these conflicts, enemy land forces were the only target set that was undeniably legitimate, politically acceptable, and of pivotal importance. Destroying Serb ground forces in Kosovo would have been the most direct way to accomplish NATO's goal of ending the oppression of Kosovar Albanians by Serbia. Attacking Taliban ground forces in Afghanistan toppled the Taliban regime, stripping al Qaeda of its sanctuary. Defeating Iraqi ground forces assured the end of Ba'athist rule and made Saddam Hussein a hunted fugitive. Moreover, in all three cases, there were cogent political reasons for avoiding extensive damage to infrastructure. The case of Kosovo is particularly instructive because when Milosevic capitulated, NATO had almost exhausted the targets its members were willing to strike.

When accomplished jointly, counterland operations by air forces are becoming ever more effective. Thanks to improved sensors and precision munitions, air attacks are now effective at night, during extreme weather conditions, and in close proximity to friendly forces. Moreover, the potential for fratricide is declining, thanks to improved communications and tracking of friendly ground forces through the Global Positioning System (GPS). The chief impediment to successful counterland operations is the inability to detect and identify enemy ground forces. Again, the Kosovo case is particularly instructive. In the absence of a credible threat from NATO land forces, Serb forces were free to disperse and hide in terrain that offered plenty of cover and concealment. As a result, air attacks against them were not effective. Indeed, Serb forces drove hundreds of thousands of Kosovar civilians from their homes during the NATO bombing at little cost to themselves. In contrast, indigenous opposition forces fixed Taliban forces, making them easy targets for air attack, and coalition land forces flushed Iraqi forces, making them reveal their positions.

Jointness is descending to lower levels of command, but current doctrine was designed for the Cold War, when jointness tended to reside at higher levels. Special operations forces (SOF), employed

more frequently in recent years, take jointness down to the level of very small teams. An Operational Detachment-Alpha in the Army's Special Forces is just a squad, yet it may operate independently, and, normally augmented with terminal attack controllers (TACs), it may call in large numbers of air attacks. Conventional forces are operating at lower force levels, implying that jointness has to descend to lower levels. In Afghanistan, for example, U.S. land forces consisted of just one understrength brigade at the height of combat operations. In the combat phase of operations in Iraq, the Army fielded a corps headquarters and two full divisions, but only one division led the advance, and it usually had one brigade in front. The tendency to push jointness down to lower levels will probably accelerate as the Army fields new forces that operate in more fluid fashion.

Key Findings (see pp. 167–170)

Key findings of this study are summarized below.

- **Army Transformation is increasing Army interest in air attack.** As the Army seeks to become more strategically deployable and agile on the battlefield, it is reducing the weight of ground-based fires available to maneuver units. Although not yet fully detailed, the number of independent artillery brigades will shrink as the Army shifts manpower in those units to military police and other undermanned functions. Moreover, operations are expected to center increasingly on independent brigades, which will operate without or with less division and corps fire support. These factors, combined with a newfound Army confidence in the accuracy and responsiveness of air-delivered fires, will result in increased Army requests for CAS and air interdiction.
- **Army Transformation will increase the demand for terminal attack controllers.** Current joint procedures require that a certified TAC control aircraft conducting normal CAS missions. The Army wants to have this capability at company level. To satisfy

this demand, the Air Force must either train more TACs or change the way they are organized.

- **The joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) program is not designed to generate a large number of certified TACs.** The JTAC program was created to ensure that TAC standards are uniform across the services, not to produce a vast new pool of TACs. Whether TACs are trained at a joint school or produced by the services, the fundamental constraints remain the same: a shortage of qualified candidates, a demanding job that takes years to master, a shortage of training facilities (ranges and simulators), and heavy demands on strike aircraft that make it difficult for them to generate the necessary training sorties for more than the current TAC force.
- **Operational/technological trends and manpower realities, not service preferences, are at the heart of the TAC debate.** Some view the TAC debate as the latest event in a long struggle between airmen and soldiers over the control of air power. In our judgment, however, the debate is driven by operational and manpower realities, not service preferences or doctrine. The Army recognizes a strong trend toward dispersion on the battlefield and is appropriately adapting its forces to operate in smaller elements dispersed across a larger battle space. Such forces will need more ready and routine access to air power. The Air Force is correct in insisting that only fully certified, experienced, and proficient TACs have the authority to control aircraft.
- **Creative use of available technologies can free TACs to focus on essential functions and can give engaged ground elements greater access to joint fires.** The Army does not really need TACs with every engaged combat unit. What it needs is a system that allows engaged elements to designate targets, TACs, and fire support officers (FSOs) at the battalion level to confirm that no friendly forces are at the target locations, and aircrews to independently confirm that the targets are good. The technologies discussed in Chapter Six would enable such a system. These technologies already exist or are well along in development.

- **Disaggregating the TAC function is essential to ensuring that both Army and Air Force battlefield needs are met.** Identifying TAC functions that could be delegated to engaged combat units (e.g., target identification and geolocation) would ensure that dispersed ground elements could easily call for air support and would allow TACs to focus on those functions that require a fully certified controller (e.g., aircraft control and deconfliction). It is the only option that has a high probability of meeting Army needs without presenting undue risk to ground and air forces.
- **The doctrine for counterland operations and the associated control measures needs revision.** In current counterland doctrine, only CAS is satisfactorily defined; interdiction is poorly defined; and strategic attack is barely mentioned. These missions should be redefined with greater clarity, linking them unambiguously to the actual and contemplated actions of maneuver forces. In current doctrine, the fire support coordination line (FSCL) is unrelated to missions and is often contentious. During operations in Iraq, the 3rd Infantry Division almost overran the FSCL because the FSCL could not be adjusted quickly enough. At other times, the line was placed too far ahead, imposing unnecessary and counterproductive constraints on air attack. It should be redefined as the outer edge of CAS, usually at about artillery range beyond friendly forces, i.e., the area where integration of fires is necessary. As command and control matures, the FSCL should be replaced with a flexible system of kill boxes. The CAS area would be defined as those kill boxes where terminal attack control, implying control by a land-force commander, is required. Outside this area, an air-force commander should have the authority to conduct the counterland mission, always assuming that his efforts will complement and not run counter to the scheme of maneuver.
- **Army organic fires remain the most efficient means of meeting routine unplanned requests.** Army standards for responsiveness in counterbattery fire are high. For example, counterbattery fire was often delivered within two minutes of sensing the incoming fire during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This level of responsive-

ness is possible from the air for selected high-priority missions (e.g., the leading elements in a major offensive such as the 3/7th Cavalry during Operation Iraqi Freedom, or Special Forces conducting direct-action missions) but requires a huge force structure to sustain for prolonged operations over a large battle space. New concepts for long-range joint fires might meet some of these needs, but the most responsive systems (missiles) tend to be extremely costly and are often inappropriate for small-unit needs—and even missiles cannot meet single-digit response times unless they are relatively close or have hypersonic speed. Therefore, the Army should retain sufficient organic fires to meet the routine fire support needs of dispersed units. Air forces are best used to directly attack enemy maneuver forces throughout the depth of the battlefield, to support selected forces at high risk, to partner with ground forces in planned offensive operations, and to act as a theater reserve.

- **Air attack and ground maneuver should be planned as mutually enabling activities.** “Close air support” is an inaccurate term that implies a one-sided relationship. In modern combat, air and ground forces increasingly operate in mutually enabling ways. This partnership should be encouraged. “Close air attack” is a more accurate description of what modern air forces do in partnership with ground elements. Whenever possible, air elements should be free to conduct deep operations against enemy maneuver forces, thereby isolating the battlefield. These operations have the potential to deny the operational level of maneuver to enemy motorized forces, preventing them from conducting offensive operations at the brigade or higher level. On the isolated battlefield, friendly ground forces can operate in smaller, more dispersed elements, finding and fixing enemy elements that increasingly will operate in small units to minimize their signature. Air and ground forces will attack these forces cooperatively, with air aggressively seeking enemy forces beyond the immediate line of sight of engaged friendly forces and also providing direct support to friendly forces as needed. Finally, in this vision, ground forces do those things they are uniquely able to do: capture and

hold territory, find and control weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and enforce peace.

Recommendations for the Air Force and the Army (see pp. 170–171)

As we look to the future, the opportunities for effective partnering of air and ground forces are likely to grow significantly. We recommend that the Army and the Air Force work together to develop new concepts and technologies to speed this process. In particular, training, education, and doctrine will need to be adapted to more smoothly integrate air attack and ground maneuver; the TAC function will need to be disaggregated and new processes developed to effectively designate targets while ensuring that essential oversight remains with the TAC and the combat aircrew; and improved control mechanisms will be needed to exploit the benefits of the digital battlefield and get maximum benefit from the ability of air power to roam over the battlefield.

As adversaries adapt and move away from massed motorized forces operating in the open to dispersed, smaller forces exploiting difficult terrain, a well practiced and developed air-ground partnership will be increasingly necessary.