



Beyond Close Air Support Forging a New Air-Ground Partnership

Recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have emphasized the importance of integrating air forces and ground forces. The U.S. Army is preparing its forces to operate in smaller units across larger areas, implying an increasing demand for close integration with air forces. However, air forces would lose their inherent flexibility and versatility if tasked solely to provide on-call support to small ground units dispersed across a large area. RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) examined this problem and concluded that the Army and U.S. Air Force should get beyond a debate over which force supports the other and instead develop a partnership in which either may predominate, depending upon the situation. The PAF report contains the following key findings:

- The current Army Transformation implies that the Army will have greater interest in air attack and that it will demand more terminal attack controllers (TACs), the Air Force specialists trained to control close air support.
- Creative use of available technologies can free TACs to concentrate on their essential functions and, by improving communications and connectivity, give engaged ground units greater access to fires from all service components. The Army does not need TACs with all engaged ground units. Rather, it needs a system that allows engaged units to designate targets for air forces and provides enough TACs to properly control the attacks while ensuring the safety of friendly forces.
- Disaggregating the TAC function is essential. Engaged ground units should perform some of the current TAC functions (e.g., target identification and geolocation), freeing TACs to concentrate on functions that require a fully certified controller (e.g., assigning targets to aircraft and clearing pilots to release munitions).
- Doctrine for operations against ground targets and associated control measures needs revision. Currently, only close air support is satisfactorily defined; interdiction is poorly defined; and strategic attack is barely mentioned. These missions should be defined with greater clarity, linking them unambiguously to the actions of maneuver forces. As technology permits, the fire support coordination line (a coordinating measure established by the land force commander to facilitate attack beyond the line) should be replaced with a more flexible system of grids generally called “kill boxes.”
- The Army’s own firepower remains the most efficient means of meeting routine requests, especially in counter-battery fire. Air forces would require a huge force structure to attain the degree of responsiveness attained by field artillery and rockets. The Army should retain sufficient firepower to meet the routine needs of its dispersed units.
- Air attack and ground maneuver should be planned as mutually enabling activities. Whenever possible, air forces should be free to conduct operations deep within enemy territory against enemy maneuver forces, thereby isolating the battlefield. Friendly ground forces can operate in a dispersed fashion, finding and fixing enemy forces so that they become targets for friendly fires from any service component. ■

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