



U.S. Joint Doctrine Should Be Revised to Reflect the Changing Roles of Air and Ground Power

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Post–Cold War U.S. military operations have witnessed a shift in the relative warfighting roles of ground and air power. However, the two services largely responsible for promulgating the relevant doctrines, creating effective organizations, and procuring equipment for the changing battlefield in the domains of land and air—the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force—do not appear to be fully incorporating the lessons of post–Cold War operations. For example, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, flexible, all-weather, precision-strike air power—enabled by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance—played a central role in defeating large conventional enemy forces. This capability has not been adequately incorporated into overall joint campaign planning, mainly because it conflicts with service operational doctrines, particularly that of the Army. If air power could largely supplant ground power in deep operations, as this analysis suggests, the implications for both joint doctrine and service capabilities would be significant.

To assess this shift in roles and its implications, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) analyzed the applications of air and ground power in post–Cold War conflicts in Iraq (1991), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003). The study concluded the following:

- **Shaping the theater battlespace—strategically and operationally—should be an air component function.** Air power has proven to be capable of performing a mission—deep strike operations—that the Army has long believed the Air Force could not or would not reliably perform. Furthermore, the organic systems that the Army has to fight the deep battle—the AH-64 Apache helicopter and the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS)—are not as effective in that role as fixed-wing aircraft, although they have shown considerable value in other roles. Thus, the task of shaping the theater—strategically and operationally—should be an air component function, and joint and service doctrines and programs should change accordingly.
- **The Army should focus more than it currently does on the central role of ground forces in achieving strategic objectives.** Despite the warfighting prowess of the U.S. military, its forces have been less effective in military operations other than war (MOOTW). This realm is largely and intrinsically ground-centric. Even though the Army is adapting in real time to the challenges beyond major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the strategic goals of these operations have not yet been realized. Given the effectiveness of air power in deep operations, perhaps the time has come to assess whether the Army should be substantially altered to bolster its effectiveness in the all-important realm of realizing strategic objectives that go beyond the ability to maneuver and dominate the battlespace. Resources for this redesign could come in part from existing or envisioned deep operations capabilities—from across all services—that air power can provide more effectively.

Much work remains to attain a true American joint warfighting system, including un-skewing the “lessons” from recent conflicts. Even more work is needed to adapt American warfighting prowess into capabilities to achieve strategic political objectives. Reform will be difficult, but it must proceed apace to ensure that the United States has the capacity to deal with the strategic realities of the 21st century. ■

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