

Aligning Roles and Missions for Future Multidomain Warfare

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The formal decisions, documents, and events that established the roles, missions, and functions (RMF) of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the military services in the early post–World War II years are now over 70 years old. Although the foundational documents and agreements have been modified somewhat through legislation, organizational changes, and joint service agreements, the original division of labor among the services remains largely unchanged. A fundamental reassessment of RMF may be in order for several reasons. First, China and Russia have greatly improved their conventional combat capabilities, particularly in the areas of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; electronic warfare; long-range precision strike; and network attack. The combination of these capabilities puts at risk the U.S. ability to project power abroad. Second, in some cases (e.g., defense of air bases from cruise missile attack) service stakes and responsibilities are misaligned, inhibiting DoD’s ability to correct shortfalls. Third, the services are developing concepts that envision the integration of sensors and shooters across domains. At least two services—the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and the U.S. Army—envision themselves as the principal integrator of All-Domain Operations, a responsibility currently residing with combatant commanders. Finally, the creation of the U.S. Space Force (USSF) raises RMF issues both within the Department of the Air Force (DAF) and across the services.



APPROACH

In this report we have identified RMF disputes that have endured as problems for the USAF, some factors associated with major RMF events, and several reasons why reform efforts intended to address them have often failed. We have also crafted a framework for analyzing the RMF implications of strategic-level guidance such as the 2018 National Defense Strategy, emerging operational concepts, and the creation of the USSF. Finally, we have considered how the vision that USAF leaders choose for the service’s future will influence the relative attractiveness of RMF courses of action.

Table S.1 illustrates a vision-based framework that USAF leaders might use to clarify choices they face and consider the RMF implications of alternative visions they may wish to pursue. The left column displays six visions, ranging from a partnership with the DAF and USSF to one that envisions the USAF as a hub for innovation across the joint force. The top row lists four alternative courses of action (COAs) and the underlying cells display some possible outcomes at the intersection of a given COA and vision. For example, the Winged Warrior vision sees a USAF focused on aerodynamic systems exclusively, which implies a narrower set of service responsibilities. One possible outcome of that vision/COA combination might be to divest intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

TABLE S.1. LINKING USAF VISIONS TO COURSES OF ACTION FOR ROLES AND MISSIONS: ILLUSTRATIVE OUTCOMES

Alternative USAF Visions	Alternative USAF Roles and Missions COAs			Advocating for Fewer RMF Constraints on Service Research and Development
	Narrowing USAF Responsibilities	Maintaining USAF Responsibilities	Expanding USAF Responsibilities	
DAF/USAF/USSF Partnership		Air and space power integrated under the DAF		
Winger Warriors	Divest ICBMs to USSF			
Resilient Power Projector (RPP)			USAF is responsible for integrated air and missile defense of air bases	
Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO) Integrator			The Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) plays unique integrating role	
Strategic Strike Force			USAF acquires surface-based long-range strike (LRS) capability	
Innovation Hub				USAF is free to compete for more functions



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Major findings from this project are as follows:

- The USAF’s vision for its future must inform any alternative roles and missions COAs it seeks to pursue.
- It remains unclear whether DAF, USAF, and USSF visions, narratives, and concepts will be fully integrated (as in the new Arctic Strategy) or simply aligned.
- In spite of JADO and Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2), the USAF lacks a narrative that clearly explains how it will generate airpower in a contested anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) environment.
- While there is no single trigger for RMF disputes, interservice tensions are most commonly associated with ownership of new capabilities or control of a major function.
- Major DoD reorganization and RMF reform efforts have failed more often than not.
- Defense agencies are not traditionally considered part of the RMF debates but compete with the services for equities and resources.

These findings have led to the following recommendations:

- Consider RMF implications of alternative visions for the USAF.
- Align or integrate the USAF narrative, vision, concepts, organization, and force structure with DAF and USSF efforts.
- Use the public narrative to explain how the USAF’s desired roles, functions, and capabilities uniquely serve the nation.
- Identify new technologies and capabilities that are priorities for the USAF.
- Reconcile existing RMF frictions through cooperation and compromise with the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Navy, the Joint Staff, and defense agencies.
- Encourage DoD to include defense agencies in all RMF assessments.



FINAL THOUGHTS

The shift in focus demanded by the growing vulnerability of U.S. forward bases to long-range precision attack (as exemplified in 2018 National Defense Review guidance), the 2019 creation of the USSF, and the rapid shift to JADO present USAF leaders with a daunting set of demands but also a unique opportunity to initiate institutional transformation. In contrast to times of stasis, a period marked by tumult is more likely to open minds to new possibilities and break down bureaucratic barriers to organizational and strategic innovation. Thus, USAF leaders have, if they so desire, a moment wherein they can rethink fundamental assumptions and consider alternate visions for the future USAF. Whatever vision USAF leaders embrace—either alone or in partnership with the DAF and USSF—will have distinct RMF implications.

The key question for USAF leaders is whether the existing framework is fundamentally sound (requiring only modest adjustments), whether it should be replaced by a “Key West 2021” agreement that would recast RMF assignments, or whether narrowly defined responsibilities are a hindrance to agility and innovation and should be scrapped entirely. And this question can only be answered after USAF leaders have first arrived at and articulated their vision for the future. Without charting a clear vision for its future the USAF will find it exceedingly difficult to navigate RMF hazards that will inevitably arise.



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