Running the Joint

Air Force Efforts to Build a Joint Task Force Headquarters

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In 2016, General David Goldfein, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF), called on 9th Air Force (9 AF) at Shaw Air Force Base (AFB) in South Carolina to develop the capability to serve as a joint task force (JTF) headquarters (HQ), with the expectation that other numbered air forces would eventually develop similar capability. In August 2020, 9 AF and 12th Air Force (12 AF) direct-reporting units and wings were integrated to form 15th Air Force (15 AF), which now continues to carry out the mandate to develop a JTF HQ capability.

This project examines the U.S. Air Force’s (USAF’s) efforts to develop a JTF capability that maximizes airpower’s contribution to joint warfighting—one that has the organization, training, and equipment required to effectively carry out a JTF HQ mission when called on to do so.

APPROACH

The research team conducted literature reviews, engaged in discussions with subject-matter experts, attended multiple staff exercises at 9 AF headquarters at Shaw AFB and at Robins AFB in Georgia, and generated three case studies of operations in which the staff of the JTF HQ consisted of a cohesive preexisting or “core” unit like 9 AF. The team also examined a data set of 88 JTF HQs activated between 1990 and 2017 to gain insight into the causes and conditions that typically result in JTF HQ formation and to understand the factors that shape JTF HQ mission sets, selection processes, and their duration.

RAND’s findings and recommendations reflect research conducted prior to 9 AF’s integration into the new 15 AF, but they remain relevant to 15 AF personnel and others interested in understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with USAF efforts to stand up a JTF HQ.

CONCLUSIONS

- The USAF’s JTF HQ mission scope is not well defined.
- The plurality of USAF JTFs between 1990 and 2017 involved humanitarian relief/noncombatant evacuation operations (HR/NEO) missions, which often require JTF HQs and draw on USAF strengths.
- Units selected to serve as a JTF core are most often aligned with a combatant command.
- Joint integration and collaboration are critical to JTF HQ success.
- There is tension between the USAF’s JTF HQ construct and its emerging force presentation model.
- The USAF contributes to joint command and control (C2) at the component level and is attempting to play a larger role.
- USAF resourcing decisions constrain JTF HQ initiative.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research supports recommendations in three main areas: (1) scope 9 AF’s mission set; (2) choose a force presentation model aligned with 9 AF’s mission set; and (3) address broader institutional-level issues related to USAF-wide culture and budget issues, as follows:

**Scope the Mission Set**
- Come to formal agreement on JTF HQ mission and function.
- Focus on HR/NEO mission sets before considering mission set expansion.
- Affiliatethe JTF HQ capability with a geographic combatant command.
- Reconsider whether worldwide deployability is an appropriate goal.
- Increase training opportunities in collaboration with military and civilian partners.

**Choose a Force Presentation Model**
- Acknowledge and reconcile the JTF HQ’s relative C2 priorities.
- Increase JTF HQ staff over 9 AF staffing levels.
- Choose a transparent force generation cycle that balances USAF JTF HQ limitations with the needs of joint force.
- Clarify Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve funding and authorities to meet the JTF HQ mission.
- Engage in long-range planning to align Guard and Reserve mobilization with JTF HQ force presentation needs.

**Resolve Broader Institutional Issues**
- Make a unique contribution to joint command.
- If leading JTF HQs is critical, promote it in USAF culture.
- Ensure that 15 AF is an attractive assignment.
- Prioritize funding for the JTF HQ effort.
- Follow CSAF guidance to establish a program of record for the JTF HQ capability.
- Enhance advocacy for JTF HQ funding.