



Part VI-Tested, Not Imagined: The Future of Doctrine

The wargame floor lights up like a city seen from orbit: grids, routes, threat rings, data feeds pulsing in color-coded urgency. Screens flash with alerts that do not wait for consensus. A space layer goes gray without apology. Logistics routes blink from green to amber to red as if the map itself is losing blood. Autonomous swarms appear as tight clusters of icons, then scatter, each one a decision moving at machine tempo. Somewhere in the background, a simulated information campaign is already reshaping what commanders believe is happening, not just what is happening.

2035 arrives early.

Within the LeMay Center's world of doctrine and education, the future isn't predicted, it's pressured. The room will be filled with warfighters and technologists, strategists and specialists, gathered under a single premise: doctrine cannot afford to teach slowly anymore. That premise is the spine of Air Force Doctrine 2035 (AFD35), an initiative designed to convene the right people to discover, wargame, and inform doctrine at the speed of relevancy.

In the long thread of legacy, process, practitioners, continuity, and proof, we can see that the Air Force has come a long way. We are preparing now for the next decade. Because the enemy does not wait for the next doctrine publication cycle.

The modern fight has a new gravity: **compression**. Technology cycles are no longer measured in generations. Decision cycles are no longer protected by distance. Contested domains overlap in ways that punish stovepipes, space degradation cascading into navigation and timing uncertainty, cyber disruption blurring truth, logistics becoming a target set, and information warfare pressing down on cognition until confidence itself becomes fragile.

In that environment, "best practice" has an expiration date unless it is continuously tested.

In earlier eras, doctrine matured at the speed of experience: wars, campaigns, exercises, and the slow hardening of lessons. But now, adversaries weaponize disruptive technologies with blurring speed. Technologies advance that are still unproven, untested and not ready for battle today. The intent of AFD35 is to turn this exploration into pressure and pressure into

advantage. AFD35 exists because doctrinal surprise is no longer an academic risk; it is a battlefield risk, paid in misalignment, hesitation, and lost tempo.

This is the first lesson embedded in the wargame room: **the future doesn't announce itself. It arrives as contested frustration.**

A simulated commander receives an update: a critical node is degraded, a forward location is threatened, and a decision must be made in minutes. The traditional reflex is to ask for more data. The wargame punishes that reflex. The clock keeps moving. The adversary's plan keeps unfolding. The timeline doesn't care that the picture is incomplete.

And so the room relearns an old truth in a new setting: doctrine's value isn't certainty. Doctrine's value is **coherence under uncertainty**.

AFD35 began with scouting: purposeful discovery across industry, academia, and the operational force to identify technologies that could disrupt how the Air Force fights. Its explicit goal is to prevent doctrinal surprise, avoid doctrinal stagnation, and catalyze evolution fast enough to match accelerated change.

In the AFD35 construct, discovery is not a shopping trip for "cool tech." It is a disciplined hunt for implications, how emerging capabilities reshape command and control, risk, tempo, sustainment, and the very meaning of advantage.

The discovery lanes are broad and deliberately unsettling. The AFD35 effort focuses on five advanced technology areas, spanning artificial intelligence and automation, advanced materials and production, biotechnology and neuroscience, and more, because tomorrow's fight will not be disrupted by a single invention. It will be disrupted by a convergence of innovations.

Then we simulate the effects to watch the results with a wargame in April.

The scenario is set in 2035 not for spectacle, but for stress. The wargame is designed to simulate contested environments, future force structures, and adversary responses, forcing assumptions into collision with consequence.

A staff has a plan that "works" on paper. The wargame strips away the comforts that paper quietly assumes.

- Space effects degrade timing and navigation.
- Logistics routes are contested, delayed, and denied.
- Autonomous systems saturate the environment with speed and ambiguity.
- Cognitive pressure fractures shared understanding, turning trust into a target.

A decision point appears, not as a multiple-choice quiz, but as a moment with teeth:

Does the force centralize command to prevent error, or distribute control to preserve tempo?

The room watches as the “safe” choice becomes dangerous. Factions spend money on what they think will prove valuable, only to watch plans crumble under scrutiny or a convergence of other tech that went unnoticed. Centralization is becoming slow. Slow becomes predictable. Predictable becomes targetable.

The teams pivot toward mission command, not as a doctrine buzzphrase, but as survival architecture: initiative within commander’s intent, disciplined empowerment, decentralized execution held together by shared understanding. The wargame does what doctrine must do: it makes principles measurable again. And then comes the translation step, the part most futurism forgets.

AFD35 is not meant to end at “insights.” It is meant to **turn insights into doctrinal implications**, future best practices codified early, while the Air Force still has time to train them, teach them, and scale them.

That translation is how the Air Force avoids being forced into adaptation at the enemy’s pace. Modernization without doctrine is a risk disguised as progress.

What will we become in 2035?

New technology can produce local brilliance while creating force-wide confusion, different units using different frameworks, different words, different assumptions, and different command relationships. That is how modernization becomes disconnected experiments: promising in isolation, incoherent at scale.

Doctrine prevents that.

Doctrine is the bridge between **capability**, **force design**, and **operational employment**. It is how innovation becomes something the entire Air Force can understand and apply with a shared baseline, so that initiative is aligned rather than scattered.

AFD35’s genius is that it treats doctrine as a living system. One test will be to determine if and when the Air Force should break the doctrine update on a timeline and move to a different process where assistive technologies provide overwatch and the system adapts to real world events. The project is not separate from the doctrine enterprise; it is designed to inform it, feeding results into how the Air Force thinks about future best practices, before war makes the changes unavoidable.

The wargame floor, viewed through this lens, is not an exercise in imagination. It is a pressure chamber for coherence. As the results shake out, we need to ask harder and harder questions that challenge the way we approach doctrine of 2035.

If a new tool entered your unit tomorrow, would your processes absorb it, or fracture under it?

- Would handoffs become cleaner or messier?
- Would decision rights become clearer or more contested?
- Would mission command be strengthened, or would control tighten until tempo died?

AFD35 forces those questions early, when there is still room to adjust doctrine, training, and culture. There is a deterrent message embedded in disciplined doctrine development, and it is not subtle to anyone who studies militaries for a living:

An adversary may build weapons, but weapons do not guarantee advantage. Advantage comes from a force that can integrate, across domains, across components, across time zones, across uncertainty, without becoming brittle.

AFD35 signals that the Air Force is not guessing about the next decade. It is testing assumptions in a 2035 fight space, learning where the seams are, then institutionalizing what holds.

For competitors who rely on disruption as a strategy, degrading space, attacking logistics, flooding cognition, forcing hesitation, the message is clear: those tactics are expected. They are being rehearsed against. They are being designed around.

A force that learns early denies an adversary the satisfaction of surprise.

After the wargame day ends, the room doesn't feel triumphant. It feels sharpened.

The conversations continue in quieter clusters, operators comparing notes with engineers, planners arguing with analysts, doctrine professionals capturing the language that emerged when the simulated environment turned hostile. The most important product isn't the slide deck. It's the alignment that formed under pressure and the insights that survived disagreement.

Somewhere nearby, the "living binder" from earlier parts of this series waits, not as a relic, but as a symbol. Legacy, process, practitioners, civilians, and paragons all feed into this moment. The long thread runs forward again, pulled taut by the future.

A new page is inserted. 2035: tested, not imagined. That page is a promise: doctrine will evolve because the Air Force refuses to learn slowly.

Leadership Takeaways

- **AFD35 reduces risk by testing futures now**, before conflict forces adaptation at speed.
- **Doctrine is how innovation becomes operational advantage at scale**, turning novelty into coherence the entire force can employ.
- **Future doctrine must preserve mission command and disciplined initiative** under extreme uncertainty, because centralized certainty will be the first casualty in a contested fight.

Series Close: The Invitation

Doctrine is written with the force, not just for it. That means every Airman has a role: read it, teach it, challenge it with real lessons, and contribute to its evolution. AFD35 was a quick look at the mechanism that makes that evolution deliberate, discovering emerging technology, wargaming 2035 scenarios, and translating what holds into doctrine that can guide the fight. To engage further visit: <https://www.doctrine.af.mil/>