



## USAF DOCTRINE ADVISORY

on

### Service Doctrine and the Air Force Future Operating Concept

The Air Force recently released its Future Operating Concept. It contains a lot of new concepts and terms. How different are these new concepts and terms from concepts and terms contained in current doctrine?

#### **Airpower: what Airmen apply**

First of all, what does the Air Force provide the nation? Well, it is the chief proponent in the application of airpower. As [basic doctrine](#) defines it, “airpower” is actually broader than the term itself sounds:

“Airpower is the ability to project military power or influence through the control and exploitation of air, space, and cyberspace to achieve strategic, operational, or tactical objectives.”

“Airpower” was chosen over “air, space, and cyberspace power” because the latter expresses what the Air Force provides but in terms of technological stovepipes, not what that “power” collectively provides. Thus, airpower was consciously defined at a level of abstraction above the three domains in which the Air Force normally operates.

In the AFFOC, repeated invocation of “air, space, and cyberspace” merely refers back to the keys technical tribes within the Air Force, but does not relate to what the Air Force provides. A focus on airpower might arguably be stronger.

#### **Domains in general**

The AFFOC mentions domains a lot, especially in the context of maintaining superiority within domains, but Airmen should understand the doctrinal context of domains.

First, nobody “owns” a domain – domains are only environments in which we conduct operations. Joint doctrine is specific on this point:

“While domains are useful constructs for visualizing and characterizing the physical environment in which operations are conducted (the operational area), the use of the term “domain” is not meant to imply or mandate exclusivity, primacy, or C2 of any domain. Specific authorities and responsibilities within an operational area are as specified by the appropriate JFC.” (Joint Publication 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*, [Ch 1, para 1.a](#))

Thus, while Airmen may seek a relative degree of control within a domain (as in seeking air superiority), Airmen only operate within that domain; the air component commander

does not “own” it, as other joint force components may also operate within it. Unlike joint operations areas, domains are not assigned to commanders.

Airmen should be sensitive to how they use “domains” in official products. The other Services are very sensitive to the impression that discussion of “control of a domain” may imply some sort of programmatic power grab.

### **Operations in multiple domains (“Adaptive Domain Control”)**

This is another area in the AFFOC in which current terminology already provides a coherent picture of what Airmen are trying to do.

The Air Force applies airpower, primarily through the air, space, and cyberspace domains, to create effects in all domains: air, land, space, maritime, and cyberspace – what in existing doctrinal parlance is called the *operational environment*. The primary goal of airpower operations is to first achieve the requisite degree of freedom within the operational environment to obtain continuing advantage. This continuing advantage allows the joint force the freedom from attack, freedom to attack, and freedom to maneuver.

In doctrine, continuing advantage in the domains is described in terms of relative influence, typically categorized as parity, superiority, or supremacy. To use the air domain as an example, Air Force counterair doctrine defines air superiority as “that degree of control of the air by one force that permits the conduct of its operations at a given time and place without prohibitive interference from air and missile threats.” Air supremacy is defined as “that degree of control of the air by one force that permits the conduct of its operations at a given time and place without effective interference from air and missile threats.”

In parallel manner, control within the space and cyberspace domains speaks to the degree of control in these domains without prohibitive or effective interference from the enemy.

Note that Airmen do not seek superiority or supremacy as ends in themselves; it is more precise to say they seek a relative degree of control within a domain. This also ties back to the issue of not owning domains.

In sum, while it is sometimes fashionable to describe Air Force operations using terms such as “integrated multi-domain operations,” what we are really describing is simply achieving the relative degrees of control within the operational environment.

### **The air operations center**

The AFFOC posits a highly integrated, senior C2 node which it calls the “multi-domain operations center” or MDOC. The discussion here parallels the description of [basic functions of an AOC](#) as described in Annex 3-30, *Command and Control*:

“[A]n air operations center (AOC) is the Air Force component commander’s command and control (C2) center that provides the capability to plan, direct, and assess the activities of assigned and attached forces. AOCs do not work in isolation; they require appropriate connectivity to operations centers of higher

headquarters (e.g., to the joint force headquarters for the operational branch, and to senior Air Force headquarters for the administrative branch), to lateral headquarters (e.g., other joint force components), to subordinate assigned and attached Air Force units, and to other functional and geographic AOCs as necessary. The overall C2 structure should make maximum use of reachback.

“An AOC, along with subordinate C2 elements, should be tailored in size and capability to the mission. An AOC should generally be capable of the following basic tasks:

- Develop the component strategy and requisite planning products.
- Task, execute, and assess day-to-day component operations.
- Plan and execute intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tasks appropriate to assigned missions.
- Conduct operational-level assessment.

AOCs and their subordinate C2 elements may be geographically oriented or functionally oriented. To bring all the Air Force’s capabilities together for a given operation or activity, the AOCs normally work together in a mutually supporting command arrangement, with one of them designated as the supported center.”

If doctrine is about enduring concepts, the basic outline of an AOC endures.

### **Distributed operations**

The AFFOC notes that future operations should bring diverse capabilities together to achieve effects. Current doctrine (Annex 3-30, *Command and Control*) [makes this point](#) explicitly:

“It is important to understand that airpower is flexible in organization and presentation. Because it encompasses a wide range of capabilities and operating environments, it defies a single, general model for organization, planning, and employment. ... However, at the focus of operations within any region, it is possible to place the collective capabilities of airpower in the hands of a single Airman through skillful arrangement of command relationships, focused expeditionary organization, reachback, and forward deployment of specialized talent.”

In fact, a great deal of Annex 3-30 deals with lashing together the various manifestations of airpower into a coherent organization that achieves unity of command and unity of effort. Careful organization includes delineation of the necessary command relationships between supported and supporting commands, as well as designation of commanders at appropriate echelons with commensurate authorities.

Again, current doctrine fully supports what the AFFOC presents.

### **Survivable command and control**

The AFFOC provides many examples of Airmen at various points within the force performing information-intensive tasks. “The enemy gets a vote” -- in future conflicts, Air Force C2 itself becomes a lucrative target. It should be emphasized that future C2 should have the ability to degrade gracefully (if possible), and be capable of rapid reconstitution in order to assure continuity of operations and retention of continuing

advantage and initiative. This is not simply a connectivity issue; Airmen at subordinate echelons should have the planning tools, training, and initiative to continue operations for however long it takes to re-establish contact with higher echelons.

### **Bottom line**

One ACSC student noted that “doctrine provides the box that everyone exhorts me to think outside of.” Actually, that *is* one way to look at doctrine. Doctrine provides the intellectual baseline from which one departs as Airmen tailor their operations and organization.

Examination of future challenges would be better served by presenting the contemporary discussion of key doctrinal points and discussing how they might evolve. This would provide an intellectual baseline against which future operations could be more realistically imagined.

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