

Crossing the Streams

Integrating Stovepipes with Command and Control

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As any Air Force weapons officer, participant in a Red Flag exercise, or graduate of Squadron Officer School (SOS) knows, Airmen integrate airpower capabilities to achieve desired effects—but integration is hard to find over Afghanistan. None of our air platforms excel at every mission; the capabilities of each cover the weaknesses of others. Removing a capability exposes a vulnerability that adversaries can exploit. If a capability is present but the command and control (C2) system has not fully integrated it, then the same vulnerability is exposed. Current airpower planning and execution processes reveal significant integration gaps. To fix these problems, Airmen must reexamine the people, processes, and products of the air and space operations center (AOC). In the future, the AOC should perform all planning in a single division, publish the plan in a single document, and package capabilities under mission commanders empowered to respond to changing circumstances.

The capabilities of Air Force platforms currently flying over Afghanistan are poorly integrated. That is not to say they are ineffective; rather, the volume of assets compensates for failures to integrate. A C-130 might air-drop supplies to a drop zone plagued by small-arms anti-aircraft fire. The drop might occur immediately beneath an MQ-1 Predator orbit, but the Predator crew would not know that the airdrop is planned, much less scan for threats to the C-130—unless the supported unit happens to task it to do so. Simultaneously, one regional command over, an F-16 provides armed reconnaissance along a route

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that friendly forces will patrol the following day, oblivious to the fact that an MC-12—in an overlapping orbit—has found and fixed a high-value target, hoping that a strike asset arrives in the area before collateral concerns preclude an attack. An HH-60 takes fire during a casualty evacuation mission, not knowing that a Sandy-qualified A-10 is in the next kill box. These are fundamental breakdowns.

These problems mostly stem from stovepiped planning, which is conducted separately by function, with limited visibility into and much less integration with parallel efforts. For instance, close air support (CAS); intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and mobility missions are planned in separated divisions of the AOC. Furthermore, in counterinsurgency operations, this planning is largely driven by requests from supported units, despite similarities in both requests and capabilities among many of these assets. A supported unit's planned tasks for CAS inevitably include scanning, overwatching, and detecting. Meanwhile, units request MQ-1 and MQ-9 aircraft because of their armament. As capabilities improve, the distinction between CAS and ISR almost disappears—they are best viewed as points on a continuum rather than as distinct species. CAS planners, however, do not consider the planned locations of armed ISR assets. The ISR plan is completed on a different timeline by different people in a different division in the AOC and published in a different document. If CAS and ISR integrate, they do so by luck. One hand of these multirole assets remains always cuffed to its respective stovepipe. The air mobility plan is even further removed. Despite their brief mention in the air tasking order (ATO), both ISR and mobility pilots refer to other documents for details—the details necessary for integration.

Problems continue in execution. Occasionally an armed ISR asset will respond to a troops-in-contact situation when no traditional CAS assets are immediately available. It would never respond *in addition* to a traditional CAS asset. Yet, the responding CAS asset is oftentimes immediately asked to scan an area or supply positive identification, tasks better suited for ISR platforms, particularly when supported by the

massive and capable processing, exploitation, and dissemination architecture. Instead, ISR remains tasked to its supported unit, allowing the insurgents to exploit disintegrated airpower.

Although volume masks these failures in Afghanistan, we may have insufficient numbers to hide integration deficiencies in future conflicts. Budget cuts could reduce our force structure. Increasingly contested operations could exhaust our reserves. We cannot afford to use assets inefficiently if we wish to be effective. We need to reevaluate the way we command and control the people, processes, and products of the AOC. The Air Force can solve these problems at almost no cost, starting in four areas:

1. Plan airpower within a single AOC division as an integrated whole.
2. Publish the plan in a single document.
3. Package capabilities in a tactical structure empowered to react to changing circumstances (i.e., group multiple platforms into a coordinated package and designate a mission commander).
4. Manage these packages from the operational level to maintain coherence in reaction to changing circumstances: let the AOC command and control.

First, airpower capabilities must be planned as an integrated whole. At a minimum, all planning must occur in the same room, under a single leader, and with constant collaboration among planners of different disciplines. At the tactical level, every mission-planning cell works that way. All planners receive guidance, determine how to maximize their specific capabilities, and then assemble a detailed plan integrated to maximize the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of all players. AOC planning is different in scope, but it is all the more important that the operational planners assemble the right capabilities so tactical operators can produce the desired effects. Doing so requires an organizational change (moving the planning function into a single AOC division under the leadership of a single Airman) and a physical change (moving the planners to one room, allowing collaboration);

otherwise, it is cost free. Although supported organizations would still prioritize requirements—the joint tactical air strike request prioritization process for CAS and collections-requirements management for ISR—the AOC would be postured to fill these needs in an integrated way. Additionally, when air is the supported effort, these planners would be more prepared to integrate necessary capabilities when resources are scarce.

Second, the complete, integrated plan must be published in a single document. Currently, different varieties of information wind up in the ATO for different types of aircraft, making it impossible for pilots to determine which other aircraft will operate in the same area at the same time. Seemingly, this structure was designed to prevent airborne assets from collaborating or integrating capabilities. Potential deconfliction problems are solved in real time; the integration problems are not. Instead, all assets should be tasked in the ATO at the same level of detail. The ATO should include the location of the tasking, the time, and a request identifier pointing to more detailed data, even if that identifier demands access to higher levels of classification.

Third, assets that offer particularly symbiotic capabilities should be assigned to a package—a construct universal in major combat exercises yet unheard of in Afghanistan. Electronic warfare assets and certain ISR assets work best when they can leverage each other's capabilities. They should be tasked together to areas where they can support one another and should be assembled into a package. Smaller packages might combine the effects of multi-intelligence assets and fighters. F-16s and MC-12s demonstrate this scheme perfectly. A flight of F-16s could be packaged with several MC-12s, spread out around the fighters' expected working area. If the F-16 flight is retasked, it can shuttle between MC-12s to retain that combination of capabilities despite air-speed differences. These packages should have a mission commander who retains the authority to modify how the package provides support. Within certain parameters, this mission commander can adjust the plan if a changing situation dictates a shift in priorities.

Finally, this execution should be backed up at the AOC in the combat operations division (COD). Although less stovepiped than those divisions responsible for planning, the COD can still integrate more effectively during ATO execution. Our newly empowered mission commanders can make tactical decisions, but the COD could dynamically reallocate assets to a package as the situation changes, whether due to varying requirements of supported units or asset fallout. Additionally, given the difficulty of tactical integration with national assets, the COD can make sure that space and cyberspace effects are integrated into the ongoing effort.

These are unoriginal ideas. In fact, all of them are simply adaptations of practices used for major combat operations, perfected over years of training. In that game, the Air Force takes institutional pride in integrating all available capabilities. Unfortunately, in places like Afghanistan, where airpower plays a supporting role, these solutions do not immediately present themselves. Providing support has devolved into mindlessly filling requests, even when the result runs contrary to the Air Force's airpower expertise. We must right this trend and return to integrating capabilities—supporting with effects rather than a disjointed menu of capabilities.

Critics will claim that the waning months of the war in Afghanistan is not the time to experiment with a new process or concept. Nevertheless, forcing increased integration now will not only enhance our effectiveness throughout the drawdown in Afghanistan but also help us prepare for future combat operations, “major” or otherwise. Making integration work in the current war is the best way to ensure that it will work in the next. We must revitalize the culture of integration. The weapons officers, Red Flag veterans, and SOS graduates at the AOC and the air expeditionary task force headquarters can make this happen. They have a successful model but need to open their apertures beyond the scope of recent squadron experience. We cannot afford to continue our reliance on volume to solve problems. Instead, we

must rejuvenate the culture of Airmen, at all levels, by integrating capabilities to produce desired effects. ★



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