NATO Air Command–Afghanistan

The Continuing Evolution of Airpower Command and Control

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The evolution of cooperation between air and ground forces over the last 12 years in Afghanistan has been continuous and dynamic. What began in 2001 as special operators on horseback calling in precision air strikes from distantly based aircraft has transitioned to the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan (9 AETF-A). The command and control (C2) of airpower in Afghanistan remains agile, providing airpower effects at the right place and time. This article offers the perspective of the senior US / North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Airman on the ground in Kabul and describes the latest developments in airpower C2 in Afghanistan.

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The Evolution of Air Command and Control in Afghanistan: From the ACCE to the Five-Hatted Commander

The Five Hats of the Commander

The **air component coordination element (ACCE)**, the combined force air component commander's (CFACC) representative to the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), ensures that the latter has a direct link to the combined air operations center (CAOC).

The **9 AETF-A commander** holds operational control and administrative control of all US Air Force forces in the Combined Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan as the senior US Air Force Airman, with the exception of special operations forces.

The **US Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR-A) deputy commander for air** works air issues associated with USFOR-A as the senior US Airman.

The **ISAF Joint Command (IJC) deputy chief of staff for air** works NATO air issues as the senior NATO Airman.

The **NATO Air Command–Afghanistan (NAC-A) commander**—the senior NATO Airman in Afghanistan—holds limited operational command and control of NATO air forces. Additionally, the commander is responsible for NATO airports of debarkation and the development of the Afghan Air Force.

Although the toppling of al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in 2001 undeniably showcased the benefits of air and ground forces working together, occasional turbulence occurred between the components as the mission in Afghanistan evolved. After noting significant disconnects in air/ground integration in 2002's Operation Anaconda, leaders on both sides of the air/ground disconnect realized that the ad hoc C2 arrangements used in the earliest days of Operation Enduring Freedom would no longer be sufficient to cope with the increasing complexity of our operations.[1] To bring additional airpower expertise into forward planning efforts, the US Air Force introduced the ACCE in 2003. Initially presented as a small team of operational-level air planners led by a brigadier general, the ACCE served as the CFACC's forward liaisons, charged with coordinating airpower planning and execution between

the US and ISAF headquarters in Afghanistan and the CAOC. After initial experiments basing the ACCE in Regional Command East, a decision was made in 2007 to place it in Kabul with the ISAF and USFOR-A commander, where it remains today.

The ACCE concept was applied both to Afghanistan and Iraq, improving the ability of the CFACC to assess the requirements of the supported commanders there and then to recommend the best apportionment of theater airpower to the commander of US Central Command. The ACCE helped improve air and ground integration in both cases, but having only a liaison role did not give the senior Airman on the ground a "seat at the table" in key headquarters meetings. As a result, in 2009 the CFACC, Lt Gen Mike Hostage, delegated limited operational control to the ACCEs, giving the forward senior Airman more authority to organize, plan, and direct local Air Force forces, a concept captured by his comment "I will cash any check my ACCE writes."[2] In 2010 this "empowered ACCE" gained more responsibility as the 9 AETF-A, creating a two-star command position with operational and administrative control of all US Air Forces Central forces in Afghanistan.[3] The 9 AETF-A staff concentrated on short-term and midterm plans with the US and NATO commanders in Afghanistan while the CAOC controlled planning and execution of the daily air tasking order (ATO). This remains the current division of responsibilities between the 9 AETF-A and CAOC.

In May 2011, the 9 AETF-A commander assumed the additional title of deputy commander for air, USFOR-A, and later was incorporated into the ISAF chain of command as the deputy chief of staff for air under the IJC. This gave the ACCE / 9 AETF-A commander his third and fourth "hats," respectively, putting the various related US and NATO air support responsibilities under the purview of the same Airman.[4] The 9 AETF-A commander also maintained both a direct liaison link to the CFACC and C2 of various "over the horizon" capabilities from bases outside Afghanistan.

Why We Need Airmen Forward

Key Airmen need to be located with the ground forces they support. Even in an age of increasing connectedness, automation, and distributed operations, some vital elements of collaboration cannot be performed solely through secure satellite communications, radio, phone calls, e-mail, collaborative tools, and video teleconferences from distant headquarters. This is true for several reasons.

Because We Are Human

Despite advances in technology, collaborative planning still depends on the strength of trust formed through personal relationships, with the strongest psychological ties formed in person. At the most basic neurological level, trust between people forms not only through what they say but also through a number of subtle social cues that cannot be faithfully transmitted over or detected in distributed communications. Consequently, communication challenges that sometimes persist for days and weeks in repeated e-mail exchanges can often be resolved in mere minutes by putting the right people in the same room together. Lacking the foundation of this personal connection, we often form unhelpful stereotypes of others that do not aid the formation of trust. This is most concisely expressed by a popular critique of distributed planning captured in the expression "virtual presence equals actual absence." The 9 AETF-A provides trusted agents in various locations (Headquarters ISAF, Headquarters IJC, and USFOR-A) who can work one-on-one with their counterparts in the other components, helping them understand both air capabilities and requirements in the same locations where key decisions are made.

Because Not All of the Needed Information Will Be Discussed in the Video Teleconference

Chance meetings and interactions are often the catalyst for the creative ideas and connections necessary for accurate problem identification and problem solving. Such serendipitous connections usually re-

quire the physical presence of individuals. These interactions occur completely outside formally scheduled meetings and events, creating new opportunities to find the missing piece of the puzzle in surprising and unexpected places—a recipe for innovation throughout human history.[5] Living in the same place as the forward commanders and planners delivers this beneficial effect by hastening the discovery of emerging issues through using the diverse expertise of members of the entire joint and combined force for adaptive advantage as they solve those problems together. As we have found through practical experience living in Headquarters ISAF, oftentimes the people we meet in the dorm, gym, chapel, or dining hall supply the social inroads and information needed to stay abreast of rapidly changing events.

Because Having Operational-Level Airpower Experts Involved Early in the Joint/Coalition Planning Process Creates a Win-Win Situation

Most joint staffs are manned with personnel who have experience with airpower under the concept of combined arms. However, fewer are familiar with the organizational complexities of generating and delivering airpower at the operational and theater levels. ACCE planners led by a senior Airman offer this expertise and can directly assist the staffs in which they are embedded with activities such as problem framing, strategy development, operational design, plans production, and requesting both local and theater air capabilities. This situation brings credibility and trust into the joint planning process from both directions—joint staffs benefit from the Airman's perspective, and Airmen gain a better appreciation of how their efforts can contribute to the overall joint campaign. When ISAF planners have questions about over-the-horizon support to the coalition, 9 AETF-A Airmen are there on the spot with the expertise and connections to answer them.

Understanding the Gaps between Tactical and Operational Airpower Planning

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the current 9 AETF-A construct is the connection it creates between local tactical and theater operational-level air planners, correcting a problem that had sometimes stymied effective air and ground coordination in the past. From the start of Enduring Freedom, Battlefield Airmen such as joint tactical air controllers, battlefield weather officers, and air liaison officers were embedded with tactical units in the field. These Airmen served as an immediate source of airpower expertise to local ground commanders, giving them advice on tactical airpower and connecting them to the request process for tactical air support. Under this construct, however, during the initial planning of ground operations, direct communications between the tactical Airmen on the ground and the operational-level air planners at the CAOC were missing. An understanding of two key aspects of airpower reveal why this was a problem.

Airpower Is Inherently Flexible in Tactical Execution, within the Constraints of Physics and Human Endurance

One of the asymmetric advantages of airpower over most surface forces is that it can be rapidly flexed to new mission taskings and area assignments during execution, within the limits of geography, weather, fuel, deliverables, and the endurance of the crew. In the 9 AETF-A, we constantly advocate for a theater and Combined Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan perspective to overcome the tendency to think of air capabilities as tied to specific regional commands—a geographic paradigm that doesn't apply to theater air assets.

The Operational Planning and Logistics That Make the Tactical Flexibility of Airpower Possible Are Not As Flexible As the Tactical Execution of Individual Missions, and Establishing Them Requires Significant Time and Coordination

Many details have to come together to put an air-support mission overhead, including answering the following questions at the appropriate levels of authority:

- How much air support can we balance between various areas of operations across the theater, and is the risk in uncovered areas acceptable to the joint force commander?
- What supporting capabilities do we need (e.g., intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR], personnel recovery, electronic attack, aerial refueling, communications relay, airborne C2, space and cyber support, etc.)? Do we need to pre-position any of them before the mission can begin?
- Will we require surge operations to meet the support requirement, and do maintenance schedules and crew duty cycles need readjusting? How long can surge operations be sustained in terms of consumables and crew duty cycles / operational and safety limits?
- Can other joint forces provide support (e.g., carrier-based aircraft, Marine Corps excess air)? What lead time is necessary to apportion them to the ATO and position them for execution?
- What aerial refueling plan will we need to support the concept of operations, and should we first establish an "air bridge"?
- Does the operation require us to readjust sustainment from intertheater or intratheater airlift, redeploy Battlefield Airmen, and so forth?

These are but a few of the considerations that go into an operational air scheme of maneuver, normally handled by operational-level planners at the CAOC. The better the operational planners understand the sum total of air support requests in a specific time period, the sooner

they can work across the multiple agencies needed to bring all of these moving parts together. Like the tip of an iceberg, a single sortie overhead is only a very small part of the total airpower effort dedicated to generating it. The earlier that operational-level planners receive notice of what will happen on the ground, the sooner they can position the total available assets to support the effort. This fact will be especially important in Afghanistan as organic assets reposition, potentially increasing the requirements for over-the-horizon air, space, and cyber support.

In the past, with only the tactical Battlefield Airmen tied into ground planning, operational-level planners usually got no more than 48 hours warning of major ground operations, the typical turn in time for joint air support requests (formerly known as air support requests). This was not enough time to perform the actions needed to coordinate all of the requests when significant air support was needed or when multiple disaggregated ground efforts resulted in an aggregate major effort for the air component. Such a situation was partly to blame for disconnects in air and ground planning experienced during Anaconda in 2002 and periodically afterwards in subsequent operations even after the ACCE was introduced to the theater. Battlefield Airmen had situational awareness of pending ground operations but no familiarity with the full range of capabilities that the CAOC could bring to bear, given sufficient warning time to prepare logistics and coordination at the operational level. Operational planners were not warned of pending requests until it was too late, with joint tactical air strike requests arriving 24 hours after the air operations directive for the ATO period had already been issued, forcing them to rework most of their prior logistics planning in crisis mode. Something had to change.

Bridging the Gaps

Bringing more NATO Airmen into the higher headquarters planning staffs has been one of the most important ways we have closed some of the gaps between ground and air planning. In the ISAF's early days,

the air task force in Headquarters ISAF was a small staff led by a NATO two-star Airman, established primarily to handle intratheater airlift with as few as four dedicated sorties per day. As the insurgency in Afghanistan grew, the ISAF grew to counter as well, and the IJC emerged to coordinate war fighting between the various regional commands. Under the IJC, the two-star deputy chief of staff for air position was created, along with an associated staff of rotary- and fixed-wing planners led directly by a one-star director for coalition air operations. This staff of NATO Airmen plays a crucial role in coordinating among the IJC, regional commands, and tactical execution of air operations controlled from the CAOC and the air support operations center. The same senior Airman oversees the entire continuum of air operations in support of the coalition.

Under the current 9 AETF-A construct, Battlefield Airmen of the 504th Expeditionary Air Support Operations Group (EASOG) also report to the 9 AETF-A commander. The practical results of this merger of operational and tactical Airmen under the same AETF roof have been overwhelmingly positive. By having the EASOG commander involved in the weekly 9 AETF-A commander's battle rhythm, warning time for pending air support request surges has increased to weeks instead of the 48 hours typically available in the past. Response times for troops in contact usually average less than eight minutes, and the CAOC now often receives weeks of warning time to plan the air support of major ground operations. This enhanced communication and warning creates a win-win situation for both air and ground forces, allowing us to bring to bear the full weight of both local and over-the-horizon airpower effects for our US and coalition operations, preventing a repeat of the disconnects from past operations.

Asymmetric Advantage from Airmen on the Battlefield

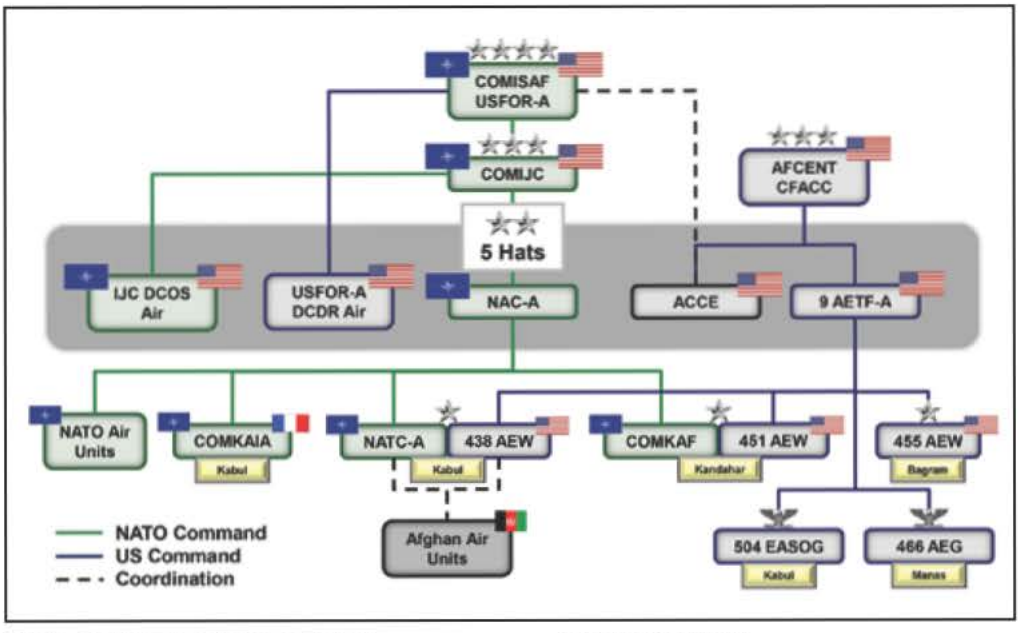
As coalition forces reduce their operational footprint throughout Afghanistan, air base defense will become increasingly important. Our Battlefield Airmen bring critical skills needed to link our defense capabilities, as highlighted by a recent incident at Bagram Air Base, where Airmen patrol the surrounding area in mobile "Reaper" teams. In this case, the team encountered an improvised explosive device outside the base and while working with explosive ordnance disposal to disarm it, came under direct fire from insurgents. The Airmen were able to immediately contact the joint defense operations center at Bagram, coordinate between multiple ISR air and ground-based assets to maintain positive identification of the attackers, and direct A-10 strikes against the insurgents' position within minutes, removing a threat to both the base and the surrounding community before the enemy had the opportunity to evade and attempt future attacks. This example highlights the advantages of having Battlefield Airmen specifically trained to connect and coordinate multiple air and ground systems, proactively defeating threats before they can be employed against the air base.

NATO Air Command–Afghanistan: The Next Evolution

Prior to 2013, coalition responsibilities for security and training were maintained under two separate commands—the IJC and NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, respectively. With the announcements of Milestone 2013 and Tranche 5 last June, the Afghan National Security Forces assumed the lead for security in Afghanistan. In accordance with the ISAF commander's 2013 posture statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, the focus of the remainder of the ISAF mission and of Resolute Support, the proposed NATO follow-on mission, is to provide security force assistance to the Afghan security forces, helping to ensure that their hard-fought security gains remain sustainable and irreversible.[6]

To assist in the development of the Afghan Air Force, the 9 AETF-A commander is assuming a new role as the commander, NATO Air

Command–Afghanistan (NAC-A) (see the figure on the next page). The commander, NAC-A will retain all of the roles and responsibilities of the IJC deputy chief of staff for air but will transition from being part of the IJC staff into a new command subordinate to the IJC. Under the NAC-A, the commander will assume responsibility for the Afghan Air Force security force assistance mission. The commander, NAC-A will oversee the current NATO Air Training Command–Afghanistan, which will maintain its name and mission under the new command. This new command structure offers a significant functional advantage by placing all NATO and US air operations under the purview of the same senior Airman in-theater. Thus, it unifies the entire NATO air enterprise but still provides the immediate link to over-the-horizon air capabilities supplied by the CFACC. Given the need to keep the number of troops on the ground as low as possible, the consolidation of these functions brings the maximum amount of capability forward at the lowest possible price in terms of Airmen's boots on the ground.



9 AETF-A – 9th Air Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan
ACCE – Air Component Coordination Element
AEG – Air Expeditionary Group
AEW – Air Expeditionary Wing
AFCENT – US Air Forces Central
CFACC – Combined Force Air Component Commander
COMIJC - Commander, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command
COMISAF – Commander, International Security Assistance Force
COMKAF – Commander, Kandahar Airfield
COMKAIA – Commander, Kabul International Airport
DCDR – Deputy Commander
DCOS - Deputy Chief of Staff
EASOG – Expeditionary Air Support Operations Group
IJC - ISAF Joint Command
ISAF – International Security Assistance Force
KAIA – Kabul International Airport
NAC-A – NATO Air Command–Afghanistan
NATC-A – NATO Air Training Command–Afghanistan
USFOR-A – US Forces–Afghanistan

Figure. Commander, NAC-A "Five Hat" construct

With the shift to the NAC-A, giving air support to the coalition will remain our primary focus, but we will add a new major responsibility: providing security force assistance to the Afghan Air Force. Although the air force will always be proportionally small compared to the size of the rest of the Afghan National Security Forces, its progress thus far has been real and measurable. In the last year, the Afghan Air Force has conducted casualty evacuation, air assault, and aerial transport and resupply; moreover, it is growing initial capabilities in ISR and the delivery of aerial fires. These capabilities buttress the confidence and capability of the other Afghan forces it supports, acting as a force multiplier for morale as well as physical capability on the battlefield.

The Rise of the Afghan Air Force

Growing a professional air force is no easy task. It requires aircraft, air bases, suitable maintenance facilities, proper airspace for training, and—above all—sufficient human capital to support the myriad of activities associated with aviation. The Afghan Air Force has made significant strides in reaching this goal and has already conducted numerous missions in casualty evacuation, aerial resupply, air assault, aerial fires delivery, and human remains recovery—some of them with all-Afghan crews. Its growing capabilities are helping to bolster the confidence and effectiveness of the rest of the Afghan National Security Forces.

Closing Thoughts

There is no single, perfect solution for C2 in a complex, constantly changing coalition environment—change itself is the only constant. Knowing this, we can intentionally design our C2 structures to be adaptive, anticipating the pace of change. The AETF/ACCE construct does exactly this and leverages the one constant lesson learned over more than a decade of continuous coalition operations in Afghanistan: nothing is more effective for building trust between commanders and staffs than face-to-face communication. Maintaining a small presence of Airmen forward with operational joint planning expertise is the best way to build solid relationships based on mutual understanding, trust, respect, and shared experience. Even when we disagree on the approach or emphasis, these connections—as well as the cross-organizational communications they enable—help to keep us moving united in the same direction. The commander, NAC-A will preserve the best practices learned in NATO and improve on them as we move forward into Resolute Support. ✪

Notes

1. Richard L. Kugler, Michael Baranick, and Hans Binnendijk, *Operation Anaconda: Lessons for Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, 2009).

2. Maj Gen Charles W. Lyon and Lt Col Andrew B. Stone, "Right-Sizing Airpower Command and Control for the Afghanistan Counterinsurgency," *Air and Space Power Journal* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 5.

3. Ibid., 5–11.

4. Maj Gen Tod D. Wolters and Lt Col Joseph L. Campo, "Team Building: The Next Chapter of Airpower Command and Control in Afghanistan," *Air and Space Power Journal* 26, no. 3 (May–June 2012): 4–14.

5. Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010).

6. Senate, *Statement of General Joseph F. Dunford, Commander, US Forces–Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan, April 16, 2013*, 113th Cong. 1st sess., https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=736812.

Maj Gen Kenneth S. Wilsbach, USAF

Major General Wilsbach (BS, University of Florida; MS, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University; MS, Naval Command and Staff College; MA, Industrial College of the Armed Forces) is the commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan; commander, NATO Air Command–Afghanistan; and the deputy commander for air, US Forces–Afghanistan. In these command roles, he oversees three air expeditionary wings and two expeditionary groups consisting of more than 6,900 Airmen. He also advises and assists with joint expeditionary tasked / individual augmentee taskings in the Afghanistan combined joint operating area and ensures the optimal integration of air and space power in support of Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom missions. Lastly, as the commander, NATO Air Command–Afghanistan, he is responsible for developing the Afghan Air Force. In addition to these three command functions, Major General Wilsbach serves as the Central Command combined force air component commander's personal representative to the ISAF commander as the air component coordination element liaison and serves on the ISAF Joint Command staff as the deputy chief of staff for air. He has commanded a fighter squadron, an operations group, and two wings. General Wilsbach is a command pilot with more than 4,000 hours in multiple aircraft, primarily in the F-15C, and flew 31 combat missions in operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch.

Lt Col David J. Lyle, USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Lyle (USAFA; MBA, Louisiana Tech; MMAS, US Army Command and General Staff College; MAAS, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies) is the chief of strategic plans, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan. Prior to his current assignment, he served as director of operations for the 505th Combat Training Squadron, 505th Command and Control Wing, Hurlburt Field, Florida. Lieutenant Colonel Lyle, a master navigator with more than 2,400 flying hours in the B-52H, flew 43 combat missions over Kosovo and Afghanistan.

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