Preparing the Air Force's Maneuver Elements: Speed and Flexibility in a New Conflict Environment

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In 2024, Chief of Staff of the Air Force outlined the need to re-shape the way the United States Air Force organizes, trains, and equips its forces to better align with the current operational and strategic environment. Specifically, General Allvin highlighted the Air Force's adaptability throughout the years as a primary factor for its success.[1] The future structure, which includes In-Place Combat Wings, Deployable Combat Wings, and Combat Generation Wings as units of action, provides a deliberate focus on force presentation as well as force readiness to meet the complex needs of today's landscape, marking a shift away from the historic ad-hoc nature of Air Force support tasking. To better train and equip these new maneuver elements, the Air Force must establish the appropriate organizational changes and associated command relationships (COMREL) to ensure units are trained for today's complex environment. As such, this paper will focus on key changes to doctrinal command and control, and the overall organization of presented forces, required to enable optimal U.S. Air Force pre-deployment training. The future force, to prevail in conflict, must break away from historic doctrine and reoptimize it's structure to value independent airpower application as separate from supporting airpower, enable distributed control down to the units of action, and train and equip wings with the composite forces and staff they need to execute with speed in highly contested environments.

Organize:

Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC) and Commander, Air Force Forces (COMAFFOR) are two distinct roles, yet Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-30 notes that these roles are normally filled by the same general officer. This allows the same position to enact Operational Control (OPCON) and Administrative Control (ADCON) of Air Force forces as COMAFFOR, and Tactical Control (TACON) of Air Force forces as the JFACC.[2] For the past three decades, the JFACC has used the Air Operations Center (AOC) as the primary mechanism to execute command and control (C2) of air forces.[3] The AOC operates around the clock to synchronize planning, direction, and coordination of aerospace operations that are eventually published via an Air Tasking Order (ATO) on a 72-hour timeline.[4] This C2 node allows the JFACC to oversee a myriad of indispensable functions, from intelligence gathering and targeting functions to intra-theater deconfliction of tanker support. However, it presents two main issues in that the ATO process impedes flexibility, preventing commanders from effectively exercising

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[1] Gen David W. Allvin, "A Case for Change: Optimizing the Air Force for Great Power Competition," U.S. Air Force, 2024, https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2024SAF/GPC/The_Case_for_Change.pdf.
[2] Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-30, Command and Control, 7 January 2020, 3.
[3] Col Frederick "Trey" Coleman, "Air Operations Center Evolution: A Roadmap for Progress," *Wild Blue Yonder*, 14 March 2022, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2963845/air-operations-center-evolution-a-roadmap-for-progress/.
[4] Joint Publication (JP) 3-30, *Joint Air Operations*, 17 September 2021, III-19.

mission command, and that the process relies on a model that prioritized air power in support of a ground campaign that was often centered around ground force partner capabilities, one in which the environment was often uncontested.[5]

Any conflict with a near peer adversary would present problems that far outpace the targeting cycle's or the ATO's ability to iterate and synchronize effects. In fact, on many occasions insurgency-type target sets have proved to outpace the targeting cycle.[6] The Air Force's movement towards Deployable Combat Wings (DCW) provides an opportunity to better exercise what AFDP 1-1 calls distributed control, which allows commanders to delegate authority across dispersed locations, enabling subordinates to adapt in real-time to execute commander's intent, enhancing span of control and initiative in contested environments.[7] DCWs and their associated mission generation force elements (MGFE) become the maneuver elements executing in major combat operations. The issue with this construct is that current doctrine and the JFACC-level force allocation model do not allow appropriate delegation of the authorities needed to plan, coordinate, and execute airpower in a contested environment. For the Air Force's units of action to properly train and prepare for such a conflict, traditional force structure and command relationships will need to adapt.

For U.S. Air Force units of action to have the capacity to react and adapt to a dynamic environment, the JFACC and the COMAFFOR should bifurcate roles and responsibilities in major conflict operations. Dr. Mark Clodfelter's framework of independent versus auxiliary airpower, where auxiliary airpower supports ground or sea forces and independent airpower achieves its own objectives apart from other services, provides a useful lens to discuss the future of Air Force units of action.[8] A singular general officer acting as both COMAFFOR and JFACC requires that they weigh auxiliary versus independent airpower requests against one another. Yet, with all COMAFFOR assets effectively apportioned to the JFACC, the COMAFFOR is limited in their ability to keep airpower in an independent role to execute emerging mission sets or leverage assets for pulsed operations, outside of the cumbersome ATO process. In a world where the Air Force is looking for ways to produce multi-capable airman to fill multiple roles at once and reduce forward force presence, these are two roles that should not be combined in major combat operations. Shown in Figure 1, the COMAFFOR will still offer TACON over a portion of their forces to the JFACC but will retain some DCWs as independent maneuver elements capable of executing distributed control and independent airpower application, similar to other service component commanders. This is not to say that the form independent airpower described does not integrate into a Joint Force construct; it simply provides the COMREL to allow airpower to achieve certain objectives with more freedom of maneuver, which will set the stage for follow-on objectives.

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[5] Allvin, "A Case for Change."
[6] Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, "From Forever Wars to Great-Power Wars: Lessons Learned From Operation Inherent Resolve," *War on the Rocks*, 20 August 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/from-forever-wars-to-great-power-wars-lessons-learned-from-operation-inherent-resolve/.
[7] AFDP 1-1, *Mission Command*, 14 August 2023, 3-4.
[8] Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 213.

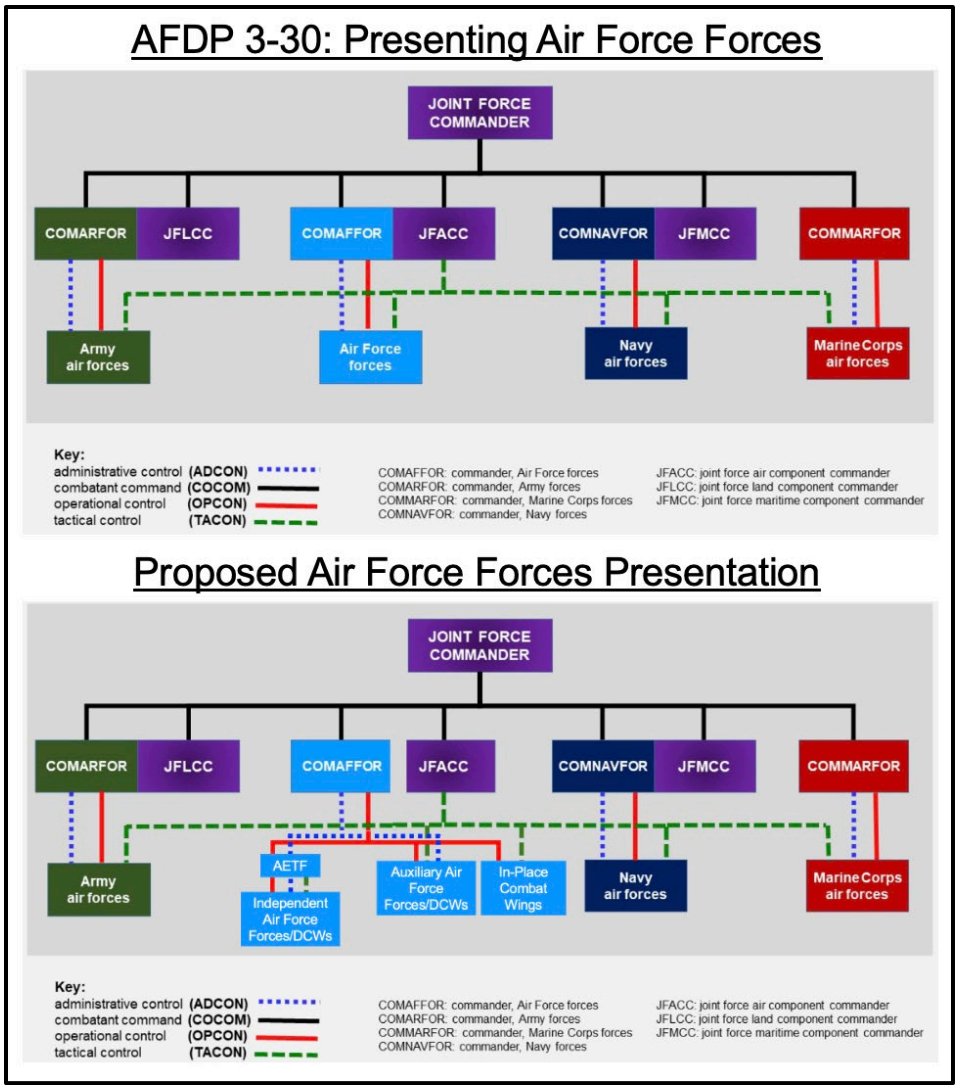

Figure 1: Contrast of AFDP 3-30 and Proposed Air Force Forces Presentation[9]

Recent history has demonstrated the need for flexibility in executing independent airpower – the flexibility which the bifurcation of the COMAFFOR and JFACC roles would provide. Operation DESERT STORM afforded the U.S. Air Force the requisite authorities to operate with noteworthy autonomy to use independent airpower to target Iraqi C2 centers, air defenses, and key infrastructure during the initial phases of the air campaign.[10] Independent airpower again showed its use, despite heavy restrictions on engagement and targets, in Kosovo during Operation ALLIED FORCE. In less than 4 months, NATO air forces were able to execute an air campaign which set conditions for Slobodan Milosevic's surrender, with General Clark, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, commenting, "the indispensable condition for all other factors was the success of the air campaign itself."[11]

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[9] AFDP 3-30, *Command and Control*, 43.
[10] Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, *Desert Storm: 30 Years Later – Lessons from the 1991 Air Campaign in the Persian Gulf War* (Arlington, VA: The Air Force Association, 2021), 51.
[11] Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo – A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 82.

The COMAFFOR will need to establish an Air Expeditionary Task Force (AETF) to successfully C2 their retained tactical units of action. AFDP 3-30 cautions against the AETF retaining TACON because of its inability to effectively C2; however, with distributed control, the C2 responsibility is federated down to the Deployable Combat Wing, reducing this requirement for the AETF or JFACC.[12] This would allow the independent JFACC to retain cross theater coordination of some assets and roles, such as aerial refueling allocation, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support through In-Place Combat Wings, intra-theater airlift, airspace control authorities, area air defense commander authorities, and other doctrinal requirements of the JFACC.[13] COMAFFOR would use their AETF to exercise OPCON and TACON of the subset of retained U.S. Air Force assets to execute flexible and timely independent airpower objectives to achieve theater level effects. USCENTCOM used a similar model when it established the 9th AETF-Levant (AETF-L) to provide a credible proponent for airpower underneath an Army three-star general Joint Task Force (JTF) Commander.[14] The 9th AETF-L retained OPCON of three combatant wings but gave TACON of those forces to the CFACC.[15] This new model uses that same AETF to keep air-minded leaders and staffing in the fight but retains TACON of its forces to execute independent airpower applications while remaining flexible to support JFACC requests when time, forces, and risk allow.[16]

The AETF staff must be robust enough to coordinate support requests up and out, either through the JFACC, which would maintain control of auxiliary airpower and In-Place Combat Wings, or other joint force entities. The impact of JTF Proven Force on Operation DESERT STORM showed the efficacy of an air-led Task Force, a corollary for the Air Expeditionary Task Force, and showcased lessons which can be used in a new bifurcated JFACC and COMAFFOR construct. With USAFE retaining OPCON over JTF Proven Force based out of Incirlik, Turkey, CENTAF exercised TACON over its subordinate combat element, the 7440th Composite Wing.[17] As the fight progressed, CENTAF discovered that the ATO process was too cumbersome and did not adapt quickly enough to the changing battlespace and was forced to pivot to Mission Type Orders (MTO).[18] JTF planners, with their freedom of maneuver granted by the MTOs, began relaying prioritized targets back to CENTAF, expediting the intelligence apparatus by actioning CENTAF intent while executing the refined mission planning at lower echelons.[19] This form of dual directional feedback and integration will be a requisite for any success in a dynamic and changing future threat environment.

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[12] AFDP 3-30, *Command and Control*, 29.
[13] Ibid., 2, 23.
[14] Maj Gen Alex Grynkewich and CMSgt Antonio J. Goldstrom, "The AETF Today: Enabling Mission Command of Airpower," *Air and Space Power Journal* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 6, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-34_Issue-2/SLP-Grynkewich.pdf.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 5, 14.
[17] Lemay Center Staff, "November Doctrine Paragon: Mission Command and Mission Type Orders," Lemay Center Doctrine Development and Education, 19 November 2024, https://www.maxwell.af.mil/News/Display/Article/3971744/november-doctrine-paragon-mission-command-and-mission-type-orders/.
[18] Lt. Col. Richard M. Meinhart, *Joint Task Force Proven Force: An Outstanding Success* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1994), 5.
[19] Ibid., 11.

JTF Proven Force also revealed the value of composite wings executing distributed control, allowing flexibility and speed to meet commander intent. Shown notionally in Figure 2, the DCWs must be comprised of multiple Mission Design Series (MDS) to provide the DCW/CC with the most flexibility to execute given mission sets and react to a dynamic enemy within commander's intent. In recent discussions with Dr. Jay Varuolo, USAF retired, a former wing Weapons Officer and Air Mission Commander (AMC) for the 366th, he explained that through multiple briefings, exercises, and daily life interactions, the individuals within the composite wing build trust with one another, which unlocks the wing's true competitive advantage: its human capital.[20] This advantage allowed the 366th to rapidly react to short notice taskings or airborne re-taskings against dynamic enemies during Operations SOUTHERN WATCH and ENDURING FREEDOM with minimal loss of efficiency or lethality, a requisite for any DCW in future combat operations.[21]

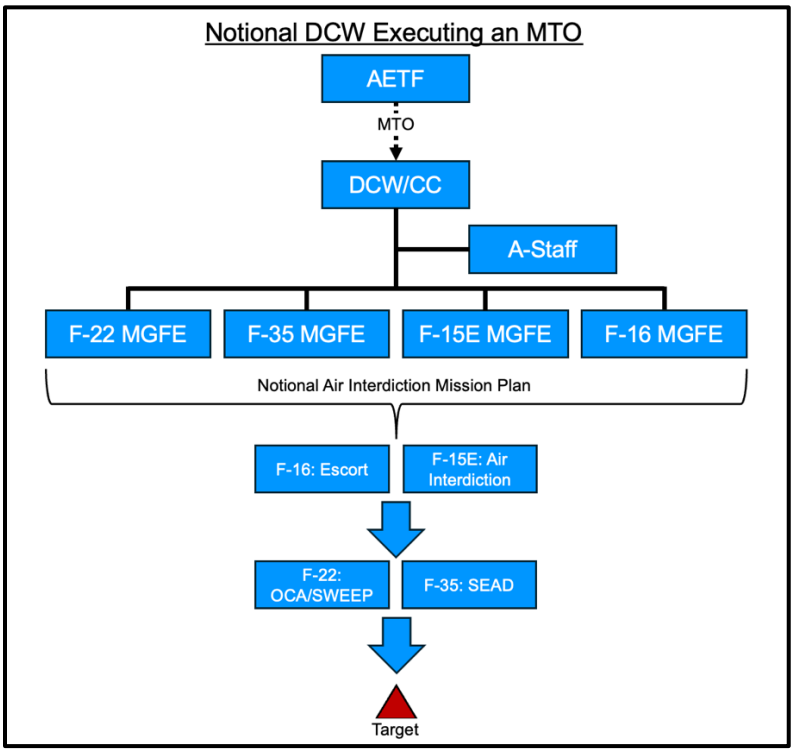

Figure 2: Notional Composite DCW Force Offering

The proposed force structure, with COMAFFOR maintaining OPCON and TACON of some maneuver elements, requires that those elements are individually operable units of action. If, in this new construct, the COMAFFOR, via their AETF, is constantly apportioning forces from different DCWs to accomplish one mission, they will have lost the advantages of pre-deployment training, MTOs, and what Stephen M. R. Covey, in the business world, calls the speed of trust.[22] Gen Allvin, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, has discussed the fiscal limitations on creating

[20] Lt Col (ret) Joseph "Jay" Varuolo, Ph.D. (Assistant Professor of Warfare Studies - Air University, former Weapons Officer in 366th Wing) interview by author, 10 December 2024.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Stephen M.R. Covey with Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 3.

standing composite wings in the U.S., but sees the benefit of modularity in the DCWs.[23] To avoid the costs of composite wings based together in the U.S., DCWs will need to rely on the Mission Generation Wings to provide dissimilar MGFEs through the training and deployment cycle to gain the benefits noted by Dr. Varuolo at a price point more acceptable to modern budgetary constraints. This new organizational structure, with associated command relationships and delegated authorities, combined with the power of composite wings as maneuver elements, will give COMAFFOR the capability to supply independent airpower operations to the Joint Force Commander while being ready to assist with auxiliary airpower operations when able and requested by the JFACC.

Train:

New COMREL and the delegated authorities required of distributed control will require intense pre-deployment training for both the AETF and the DCWs, to ensure flawless execution in combat. The Air Force Force Generation (AFFORGEN) model, with its *Reset*, *Prepare*, *Certify*, and *Available to Commit* phases, presents avenues for DCWs to train together and with their AETF.[24] While the *Reset* phase is primarily a time to establish assignment of personnel and MGFEs to the DCW, other training may be accomplished to improve operations in the *Prepare* phase. In the *Reset* phase, In-Place Combat Wings, Mission Generation Wings, and DCWs will need to execute a deliberate training regime to ensure the baseline skillset required of them to coordinate and execute MTOs as a cross-functional team. First, A-Staffs should attend an air staff basic course focused on providing a baseline for how the staff should function. Next, DCW and In-Place Combat Wing staffs should seize opportunities to visit the next higher echelon in person, to begin building the relationships for future integration. Finally, the DCW and In-Place Combat Wing staffs should attend courses and briefings regarding the planned deployment region and joint forces therein, to garner a broad understanding of current Joint Force Commander and Civilian Leadership intent for the region in which they will be operating. These experiences will ensure the U.S. Air Force presents joint-minded, geopolitically focused command elements capable of understanding political intent and a working knowledge with which they can adapt operations in times of limited oversight.

Proper training and force preparation in the *Reset* phase ensure forces have the entirety of the *Prepare* phase to execute combined training both locally and at major exercises. Executing together as a composite DCW will give the wing's AMCs, flight leads, and respective A-Staff the necessary repetitions to familiarize themselves with both the wing's composite capabilities, as well as its assigned individuals. This phase is also an opportunity for any AETF augmentees to gain the required training and knowledge base, regarding DCW capabilities, to be value-added on the AETF staff.

The *Certify* phase will present the best opportunity for the AETF to work into major large-scale exercises with their assigned DCWs. In the proposed construct, the AETF would be granted OPCON of multiple DCWs in a combat environment, requiring pre-conflict practice and

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[23] Greg Hadley, "Combat Wings: Air Force Chief Lays Out New Model for Packaging Forces," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, 12 February 2024, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/combat-wings-air-force-presenting-forces/.
[24] Air Force Instruction (AFI) 10-401, *Operations Planning and Execution*, 19 July 2024, 33-34.

training. The AETF should look to integrate with multiple exercises at once to replicate a scenario in which multiple DCWs are deployed to different locations during combat operations. This would allow the AETF, via MTOs, to delineate certain conditions-based authorities that would allow DCW Commanders to exercise distributed control at echelon. In line with current doctrine, incorporating conditions-based authorities in training scenarios would allow AETFs to clearly delineate roles that subordinate DCWs would assume if communications were lost with higher headquarters, which would in turn empower DCW Commanders to exercise prudent risk and management.[25] This would also create an opportunity for the AETF staff to manage multiple requirements at once from different DCWs, while also understanding the exercise's intent and dictating independent airpower application toward that end. Through these concurrent exercises, the DCWs and AETF will be able to certify that their staffs and their MGFEs are ready for major combat operations.

Equip:

The In-Place Combat Wing, Mission Generations Wings, and DCWs all have unique mission sets that will drive different manning requirements for each. A-Staffs on the In-place Combat Wings and Mission Generation Wings will require a heavy A2, A3 presence, but can afford to reduce the personnel in the A4, A5, A6 and A7. For the reduced staff functions, In-Place Combat Wings and Mission Generation Wings can rely on liaising with their host Air Base Wings to provide support in those respective areas. The manpower saved by reducing directorates in the U.S., can then be shifted to bolster those directorates within the DCWs as well as enhance the A3 and A2 offices with tactical expertise and mission planning personnel to add speed and feasibility assessments to service component commander priorities.

The DCW's subordinate MGFEs will require an MTO with specific commander's intent to meet the complexities of a dynamic enemy. In an ideal world, each DCW staff would have a liaison from each mission design series to help generate appropriate tasks. To minimize the time to execution of the MTO at the MGFE level, this planning apparatus must make a sufficiently detailed plan to marshal forces, and enough ambiguity and authority vested in the AMC to adapt in the air as required. At a minimum, the DCWs will need to retain weapons officers and AMC-qualified pilots to generate this type of advanced plan for subordinate echelons to refine. Detailed planning at the wing level is not a new idea for the Air Force, with group navigators planning entire bombing missions in WWII, but it will need a resurgent focus on ensuring the right people are planning the missions and flying the jets, and rotating between both, when the time allows.[26]

A significant hurdle this new construct faces is the allocation of munitions and handling magazine depth during combat operations. The AETF will need to retain authority over exquisite munition allocation and use, apportioning munitions when contested logistics allow for movement and a requisite target emerges. The use of such munitions will be included in the MTO to the DCWs, with the DCW staff having the ability to request additional munitions or

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[25] AFDP 3-30, *Command and Control*, 2.
[26] Ralph H. Nutter, *With the Eagle and the Possum: The Memoir of a Navigator's War over Germany and Japan* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 32.

support back up through the AETF during their mission planning. AETF oversight of low-density, high-demand munitions is necessary to allow theater-level deconfliction and management.

The Time to Accelerate Change is Now

The COMREL and associated doctrine changes described herein are not all-encompassing and will require considerable effort and planning to identify gaps in execution. Bifurcating the COMAFFOR and JFACC roles and then training and equipping composite DCWs to execute MTOs requires change and risk acceptance. However, as adversaries continue to advance, the need for speed in execution becomes paramount for survival. The U.S. Air Forces will need to regain the flexibility so often referred to as the key to airpower. This speed and flexibility cannot be achieved by adhering to processes and paradigms from the last 30 years. Instead, creativity and authorities must be distributed to our DCWs if victory in near peer conflict is to be achieved.