

THE CASE FOR CHANGE



**OPTIMIZING THE AIR FORCE FOR
GREAT POWER COMPETITION**

A LEGACY OF ADAPTATION

The United States faces a time of consequence marked by significant shifts in the strategic environment. With maturing domains like space, cyber, and information warfare gaining prominence, the global landscape is more complex and dynamic than ever before. Heightened risks of major conflicts; uncertain air, space, and cyber superiority; rapid technological change; employment of asymmetric means; and enduring fiscal pressure all underscore the need for urgent and focused enterprise-level efforts to address these challenges effectively. To remain ready, the United States Air Force must change.

The Air Force has a rich history of successfully reckoning with transformational change. Since its inception in 1947, it has consistently evolved by reorienting and “reoptimizing” itself to align with dynamically changing demands at key inflection points. During the Cold War era, when confronting the Soviet Union, the Air Force embraced advanced conventional technology to overcome Soviet conventional mass while also prioritizing nuclear readiness for strategic deterrence. During the Unipolar Moment—after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the success of Desert Storm—in light of a perceived reduction in the global threat, the Air Force optimized for regional threats and coercive operations by prioritizing efficiency and cost savings. Following the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the Air Force optimized for flexibility and prioritized tailored support to the Joint Force, largely supporting uncontested, ground-centric operations to counter violent extremism.

Today, a new key inflection point is upon us. We cannot afford to be complacent, holding on to outdated structures. The Air Force built for the previous era is no longer optimized for the current strategic landscape. History has shown that we can successfully navigate these turning points—now is the time to do so again. Our motivation is crystal clear: change is not an option but a necessity. We must adapt to effectively demonstrate our readiness and capability to deter, and, if required, to prevail in conflict.

Four core areas demand our attention: how we develop our people, generate readiness, project power, and develop capabilities. These pillars define our path forward. To forge ahead, we must prioritize organizational alignment, streamline decision-making, and place mission outcomes above narrow functional competence. This journey requires rigorous self-assessment, transparent communication, and a resilient, adaptable institution. Equally important is building a dedicated workforce to ensure we attract, train, and retain the best. Throughout its history, the United States Air Force has thrived by embracing adaptability and change.

As we confront this new strategic environment, we must be true to our legacy and rise to meet the challenge.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. W. Allvin".

David W. Allvin
General, USAF
Chief of Staff

OPTIMIZING FOR THE COLD WAR

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a period of heightened geopolitical tension and competition, marked by an escalating nuclear and conventional arms race. The US prioritized developing stealth and precision technologies to offset its numerical inferiority in conventional forces, seeking a qualitative military advantage.

DEVELOP PEOPLE



Deterrence-focused Airmen with an “always at war” ethos. Pre-positioned, standardized, and trained for rapid, large-scale mobilization. Practiced experts in their specific task set.

GENERATE READINESS



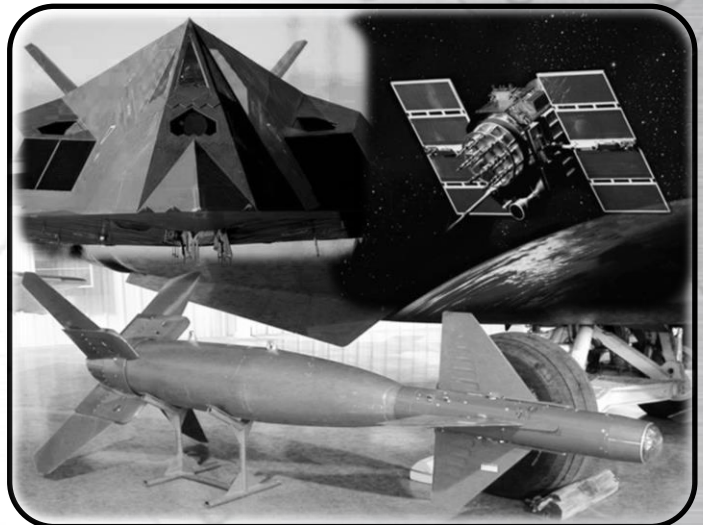
Realistic, threat-informed, high-end training; large-scale mobilization exercises; and responsive nuclear alert forces regularly assessed for readiness.

PROJECT POWER



Extensive network of overseas basing with a large forward presence to enable rapid mobilization. Heavy reliance on strategic nuclear forces to deter adversary aggression.

DEVELOP CAPABILITIES



Development of stealth aircraft, precision-guided weapons, and persistent space capabilities to offset Soviet conventional quantitative overmatch with American technological superiority.

OPTIMIZING FOR THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT

The success of the Gulf War, coupled with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, marked the end of the Cold War, driving the US military and USAF transformation. Amid this Unipolar Moment, the US military massively downsized while utilizing the flexibility of airpower in a series of campaigns seen in the Balkans, the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and Iraq.

DEVELOP PEOPLE



Increasingly specialized Airmen for technical and operational proficiency in expeditionary roles. Total Force Airmen dramatically decreased as part of overall US military "Peace Dividend" drawdown.

GENERATE READINESS



Readiness regionally focused, rotational, and marked by episodic air campaigns. Nuclear stockpiles downsized and alert posture deemphasized in favor of conventional employment on a rotational basis.

PROJECT POWER



Massive force build-up—completed on US timeline and marked by uncontested delivery of military assets. Overseas basing consolidated and CENTCOM infrastructure surged.

DEVELOP CAPABILITIES



Lacking a peer adversary, capabilities development increasingly tailored to achieve industrial efficiencies. Less frequent major weapons procurement driven by increasing requirements.



OPTIMIZING FOR COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, marked a new era centered on the “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT). Innovations in technology and tactics focused on emergent requirements driving the USAF to optimize its capabilities and support the Joint Force through on-demand power projection and sustainment accomplished by continuous rotational deployments.

DEVELOP PEOPLE



Highly adaptable Airmen deployed to unique operational environments, consistently performing non-traditional roles and rapidly acquiring skillsets outside of their initial training.

GENERATE READINESS



Optimized supply chains for efficiency and continuous employment of rotational forces, enabling sustained engagements while managing operational demands.

PROJECT POWER



Uncontested air domain control achieved through flexible and highly customizable capabilities tailored for specific and diverse mission requirements.

DEVELOP CAPABILITIES



Expedited acquisition processes driven by urgent operational requirements necessitating flexibility and adaptability across multiple domains.



CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

Today, the Air Force once again finds itself at a critical juncture—an era of Great Power Competition marked by a new security environment, a rapidly evolving character of war, and a formidable competitor. Continued Air Force dominance in this new era requires understanding its challenges and the attributes needed to succeed. Only then can we meet the demands of high-end conflict.

The **current security environment** is dynamic and characterized by aggressive state actors and transnational threats. The People's Republic of China's (PRC's) military advancements threaten our intended mode of warfare and utilize assertive strategies to impose costs and deny US power projection capabilities. Concurrently, Russian aggression imperils European stability, openly challenging established norms and the rules-based international order. These challenges are unfolding against the backdrop of resurging tensions in the Middle East, marked by conflicts among key states and multiple extremist groups, and further compounded by the provocative actions of North Korea.

The **character of war** is also swiftly evolving. Competitors now routinely employ asymmetric means to achieve both military and national objectives. The ascending domains of space, cyber, and information have gained prominence as viable battlespaces and expanded the ways from which our adversaries can inflict harm. New technology, such as hypersonic weapons, AI, low-cost drones, uncrewed underwater vehicles, and sophisticated cyber-attacks, challenge traditional US advantages and threaten forces at home and abroad. Finally, the expansion of nuclear capabilities, advanced delivery methods, and the emergence of a tripolar nuclear world is particularly alarming and necessitates the maintenance of a credible deterrent.

The PRC is the Air Force's most formidable competitor since the Soviet Union and perhaps in its history. For the last several decades, while the nation was focused on countering violent extremism, the PRC's military strategy was laser-focused on negating US competitive advantages. Recently, it has become a stark and compelling challenge. The PRC's long-term strategy, deeply rooted in the pursuit of "national rejuvenation," seeks to reshape the current international order, with China demonstrating astonishing growth in economic, diplomatic, military, and technological arenas.

Success in today's strategic environment requires a force **aligned and focused** on the requirements and attributes that will keep us competitive. The Air Force must deliver combat-effective, **agile and adaptive** airpower at scale. The complexity and speed at which combat may unfold demands greater preparation, and prioritizing readiness based on **mission effectiveness over functional competence** will be essential to our ability to **rapidly project and execute the mission with precision**. We must also increase the scale and complexity of our exercises and enhance internal inspections to ensure **effective and persistent self-assessment**. Similarly, we can no longer design and build the pieces of our Air Force separately and solve the integration challenges after the fact. We must pursue **deliberate integration of mission systems** in their design and ensure the platforms we build and operate align with these systems. While physical limits constrain the development and production of hardware, the responsiveness of software and mission systems is limited only by the speed of coding. The ubiquity and accessibility of data dictate that the entity capable of gaining insights and capitalizing on them faster will gain the advantage. This requires ruthless introspection to evaluate what is working and what isn't, an **enterprise focused on solutions**, and a commitment to take corrective actions and **follow through**.

OPTIMIZING FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

URGENT THREATS



Complex security environment defined by the PRC pacing challenge and the acute threat of Russia.

ACCELERATED CHANGE



Disruptive technologies mark inflection points including low-cost drones, quantum computing, AI, and hypersonics.

CONTESTED ENVIRONMENTS



State actors engaging in aggressive and asymmetric actions, challenging traditional warfare methods.

ASCENDING DOMAINS



Maturing and increasingly contested space and cyber domains more critical to warfare's evolving character.

DEVELOP PEOPLE

Developing personnel is a deliberate priority requiring a dedicated and unified effort to attract, retain, and nurture the talent and specialized skills demanded by the emerging strategic landscape. The Air Force must cultivate Mission Ready Airmen—individuals with the expertise and versatile skillsets required to win in various operational scenarios. The personnel we need requires optimizing the force we have by **centralizing force development, reinvigorating our warrior ethos to create Mission Ready Airmen, and establishing robust and effective “paths” for technical areas critical to creating competitive advantage.**

Centralizing specific facets of force development under a single commander will streamline the coordination, integration, and execution of Air Force training and education initiatives. This centralization will enable the identification and evaluation of specific areas of Airman Development that are common and would benefit from a concentrated, integrated approach. This will ensure a more standardized Airman experience and development with a shared understanding of the threat environment. The desired outcome is the development of the right Airmen for the right place and time, a skilled cadre well-prepared for future challenges, and a cohesive workforce adept at competing effectively—poised to surge and sustain operations during times of conflict. This transition also requires the appropriate renaming of AETC to Airman Development Command, reinforcing its focus on shaping the Airmen of tomorrow.

Reinvigorating our warrior ethos and creating Mission Ready Airmen is not simply a policy or project but a deliberate, enduring necessity. It begins in Basic Military Training (BMT) and our pre-commissioning programs with education and training focused on understanding threats, Mission Command, the Air Force's role in defending against those threats, and the significance of teams with a deep grasp of the mission. It emphasizes the need to transcend syllabus-driven, technical training for specialized roles with an appreciation of their overarching role in a challenging environment and as empowered members of small teams tasked with anticipating and solving complex, undefined problems under contested conditions.

Establishing robust and effective “paths” for critical technical areas is key to sustaining a workforce equipped with deep expertise and the skills essential for maintaining competitiveness. Leveraging our nation's top talent will prove to be a decisive advantage in the era of Great Power Competition. This initiative will entail the establishment of robust and effective pathways (technical warrant officers, technical tracks, and tailored career categories) for individuals specializing in critical technical areas, notably cyber and IT career fields, vital to maintaining a competitive edge. Achieving this objective requires different incentives for Airmen who are passionate to serve and excel in highly perishable and rapidly evolving skill sets—yet may not aspire to pursue a formal leadership track.



Resilient, Mission Ready Airmen with diverse skillsets prepared to execute a wide range of operations in complex, contested scenarios.

GENERATE READINESS

Strategic adjustments are necessary to optimize our readiness for the present and future operating environments. The Air Force must enable our forces to adapt and excel in real-world operational scenarios, equipping them to confront dynamic challenges and deter adversaries. This requires **realigning from functional readiness to mission readiness, prioritizing mission-focused assessments and inspections, and enhancing mission support effectiveness.** Doing so will ensure a warfighting posture best positioned to succeed in a Great Power environment.

Prioritizing mission readiness over functional competence centers our focus on the most demanding and complex scenarios. We will implement large-scale exercises and mission-focused training encompassing multiple operational plans to holistically assess our ability to rapidly and effectively generate and deploy forces. This not only serves as a powerful deterrent by showcasing our capabilities but also enhances unit cohesion through comprehensive team training. Training will involve all essential force elements, enabling us to execute complex combat operations at scope and scale, such as Agile Combat Employment (ACE). Foundational to this approach is the development of tailored Force Generation Models based on the AFFORGEN concept but designed to meet mission needs in support of strategic requirements.

Mission-focused assessments and inspections demand a prioritization of Mission Readiness over Platform Readiness. We will conduct a comprehensive overhaul of how we conduct readiness assessments to align operational capabilities seamlessly with mission requirements. This transformation involves evaluating, assessing, and integrating relevant readiness data to measure what is needed for GPC. To provide clear readiness guidance, standards, and goals must be achieved through a holistic and risk-informed process. Inspections will use validated readiness data to inform senior leaders and certification determinations. This reinvigoration will allow us to assess our readiness, better advocate for it, and understand where we are truly taking risks when making resourcing and programming decisions. In doing so, the Air Force will ensure that our readiness evaluations align with the demands of high-end conflict.

Finally, the Air Force will **prioritize support critical to combat mission effectiveness.** This will ensure the support capabilities most relevant to readiness, and important to the combat mission, are prioritized for resourcing. This will ensure the prioritization of our support functions to meet GPC requirements, guaranteeing that the necessary capabilities are resilient, survivable, and sustainable, ready to be delivered at any time or under any circumstances.



Specialized power projection, achieving mission readiness through large-scale exercises and mission-focused training.

PROJECT POWER

Power projection is at the heart of our National Defense Strategy. Our ability to demonstrate rapid military power projection is core to integrated deterrence and lessens our nation's likelihood of being drawn into conflict. To ensure the effectiveness of our Air Force in competition today and the next fight, we will need to restructure our force presentation for optimal power projection. To do this, the Air Force will clearly **define and assemble modular "Units of Action," articulating each Unit of Action's four main elements, clarifying the relationship between the Combat Wings and the Base Commander, and streamlining Service Components aligned directly to Combatant Commands.**

The Air Force will **create coherent, standardized, and well-defined Units of Action** to present a clear and cohesive structure for effective combat operations and force presentation. We will define the types of Air Force operational wings (Units of Action): Deployable Combat Wings (DCW), In-Place Combat Wings (ICW), and Combat Generation Wings (CGW). These wings will prioritize readying whole units that can be combat-effective on Day One of a conflict. They will train together and, as applicable, deploy and fight together—enhancing their ability to provide direct support to Combatant Commanders. Taken together, these Units of Action will form a significant portion of the Air Force, providing a clear understanding of “how much” Air Force combat capability we possess and have ready, enabling us to assess associated risks.

We will also **articulate the three layers** of each Unit of Action, including **the command layer, mission layer, and sustaining layer**, along with its foundational elements. The command layer will be an empowered echelon comprised of a senior leader and support staff to execute command and control of the unit. The mission layer will include at least one Mission Generation Force Element (MGFE) with modularity to attach additional MGFEs to the unit as the mission requires. Finally, in addition to organic sustainment forces resident in MGFEs, the sustaining layer will include standardized combat support to accomplish base operating support, air operations, sustainment, and protection. This modularity provides the flexibility to present clear and credible combat capability tailored to Combatant Commands, while allowing the Air Force to better “see ourselves.”

Optimizing for power projection also requires the Air Force to **clarify the relationship between Combat Wings and the Base Commander**. This seamless partnership and mutual understanding enables Combat Wings and their command team to focus solely on their warfighting tasks, while allowing the Base Command to focus on effectively operating the base in competition, crisis, and conflict.

Streamlining Service Components aligned directly to Combatant Commands ensures the Air Force better prepares, presents, and generates airpower effects for the Joint Force. This direct alignment, notably the elevation of AFCYBER as a standalone service component, enables service component commands to focus on preparation and presentation for their combat missions. This realignment also allows institutional commands to be solely responsible for developing Airmen, generating readiness, and delivering capabilities for today and tomorrow.



Optimized, well-articulated "Units of Action" designed for mission effectiveness, modularity, and rapid force presentation.

DEVELOP CAPABILITIES

To win in future conflicts, we must optimize our capability development pipeline through an enterprise-wide integrated force design. This involves streamlined decision-making, data-driven prioritization, and the integration of emerging technology across the Air Force. To achieve this, the Air Force must **establish a single authoritative entity focused on identifying and prioritizing future operational capabilities, drive cross-platform mission systems integration and capability development, establish focused acquisition Systems Centers for effective portfolio and life cycle management, and establish relevant Secretariat offices which inform Department of the Air Force senior leaders on enterprise decisions.** This will result in a more agile and technologically advanced warfighting posture, positioning the Air Force for success.

Establishing a single authoritative capabilities command will prioritize and coordinate Air Force integrated system-of-systems capability with new technology requirements. This command will align future capabilities with Air Force operating concepts, aggregate and prioritize MAJCOM requirements, ensure coherences across systems, and provide a unified demand signal for materiel needs. This integrated approach ensures the development of operationally necessary capabilities, breaks down organizational stovepipes, and allows operational commanders to focus on warfighting readiness.

Driving cross-platform mission systems integration and capability development reprioritizes "platform-centric" kill chains to integrated, mission-focused "system-of-systems" kill webs. This underscores the importance of adopting common open architectures and cross-platform integration from the outset, enabling greater flexibility, agility, and rapid system upgrades at the speed of software coding. The Air Force will establish an office responsible for executing early systems acquisition prototyping, systems engineering, and integration—able to generate a healthy tension between operators and technical experts to ensure a more viable and executable future force.

Establishing and elevating acquisition Systems Centers responsible for integrated enterprise-level portfolio and life cycle management of weapon systems in three key areas: nuclear materiel management; air dominance; and information, cyber, and electronic warfare dominance will facilitate collaboration across functional and specialized areas. This approach is consistent with viewing the enterprise as an integrated system-of-systems.

Establishing Secretariat offices capable of facilitating DAF-level enterprise integration, providing overarching guidance and prioritized demand signals in areas such as capability development, program analysis and evaluation, and sensitive activities will enable DAF senior leaders to make informed decisions and ensure coherence across the Department. These offices will also promote integration across the Joint Force where appropriate, fostering a more unified and effective military approach.



Horizontal and vertical integration to deliver connected and interoperable systems at speed and scale.

CONCLUSION: THE CALL TO CHANGE

The current strategic landscape demands adaptation to meet present and future challenges. With multifaceted geopolitical tensions, the global ambitions of the People's Republic of China, and the rapid ascent of disruptive technologies, we cannot afford to underestimate the realities of the security environment we face today. In our increasingly complex world, change is an imperative. We cannot afford to fail.

We have successfully undergone transformations in the past. However, the Air Force's previous adaptations are no longer sufficient for the landscape we find ourselves in today. To ensure our readiness, we must once again evolve and remain responsive to the current security environment. Embracing change is not a choice; it is a necessity. We must "reoptimize" our Service into an enterprise prepared for high-end conflicts and long-term strategic competition.

We must be clear-eyed and accept the fact that we will not achieve perfection right out of the gate during this change journey. However, we must solve for agility—have confidence in the fundamental logic and analysis that has given us this direction, and move out, knowing that we can and will adjust along the way. We can change course, but we must be in motion to do so—otherwise we're not changing course, just changing our minds—and falling behind.

We're out of time . . . we have to follow through now.



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