

Air Mobility Intelligence

Survivability in the Contested Environment

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The intelligence enterprise supporting air mobility operations must evolve to meet the demands of the future fight. The rapid global mobility intelligence architecture should provide mobility-focused intelligence at tempo; however, it currently exhibits a structure more suited to a set-piece Cold War than the next war. To adequately protect rapid global mobility in a high-end conflict and deliver the Joint Force to its destination, the Air Force must accelerate change in the intelligence architecture in three ways. The service must update its force development, expand the participation of rapid global mobility intelligence in operational planning, and establish a rapid global mobility senior intelligence officer who can operate across service and Joint boundaries to ensure air mobility Airmen have the situational awareness to optimize their decisions in a crisis.

Students of great power competition recognize the vital contribution Air Mobility Command (AMC) delivers through rapid global mobility (RGM) to deploy and sustain the Joint Force at the time and place of the nation's choosing. Rapid global mobility encompasses the entire range of AMC-delivered capacities, namely airlift, air refueling, aeromedical evacuation, and air mobility support.¹ Now more than ever, the command requires dedicated intelligence processes to protect these capabilities in the future contested environment.²

Unfortunately, the RGM intelligence enterprise has not evolved to meet this new era, prompting the need to streamline how intelligence supports air mobility. This restructure will require (1) deliberate force development within the AMC intelligence force, (2) the provision of AMC intelligence liaisons for air mobility planning, and (3) the designation of an RGM senior intelligence officer responsible for synchronizing processes across the global enterprise.

The rapid global mobility intelligence architecture is disjointed and lacks process discipline from planning to execution. While some intelligence support exists at AMC and its 618th Air Operations Center (AOC), the Air Force persists in splitting RGM intelligence capabilities into geographic commands rather than deploying them as part of a functional intelligence organization. Meanwhile, almost no RGM intelligence-trained

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1. US Air Force (USAF), Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-36, *Air Mobility Operations* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education (LeMay Center)), 1, <https://www.doctrine.af.mil/>.

2. Mike Minihan, *Air Mobility Command Strategy* (Scott AFB, IL: Headquarters, Air Mobility Command (HQAMC), March 29, 2022), 4, <https://www.amc.af.mil/>.

Airmen sit on air component or Joint staffs outside transportation organizations. This results in what the US Air Force *Operating Concept for Information Warfare* describes as a fragmented approach to integrating key information capabilities across war-fighting echelons.³

Because of this construct, small teams of RGM intelligence personnel at the theater air operations centers must rely on nonmobility Airmen for intelligence support. Airmen at the unit level develop their intelligence products based on what they happen to know. This model is deficient as it defeats the purpose of a necessary “unity of effort” in the execution of intelligence operations for RGM customers and lacks the depth of analysis that would be gained from an experienced intelligence staff focused on their core mobility mission.⁴ As a result, quality intelligence is not reaching all its RGM stakeholders.

In response, the service should functionally align its rapid global mobility intelligence at all echelons, linking AMC headquarters to theater air operations centers and unit-level activities to provide the optimum intelligence available. This will require an intelligence force seasoned in the RGM ecosystem, liaisons across planning staffs, and, most importantly, a single RGM intelligence officer overseeing the enterprise. This transformation will allow the Air Force to leverage one voice on RGM intelligence matters unencumbered by command boundaries while maintaining the forward force necessary to conduct analysis at the tactical level when operating in a contested environment.

To understand why now, more than ever, an inflection point exists in how the Air Force should harmonize mobility intelligence requires a discussion of how the Joint Force is imagining employing air mobility in a near-peer fight across multiple geographic commands and theaters. During combat operations, a commander might yield partial air superiority or cede key terrain and plan to come back another day. In contrast, the worldwide logistics chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and a break incurs immediate strategic risk. In this environment, an antiquated RGM intelligence architecture will fail to provide relevant intelligence. This reality should drive the service to explore why and how RGM intelligence should transform to meet the demands of the future fight.

Failure to Adapt

Despite AMC’s recent success when it extracted 124,000 personnel from Afghanistan and then rapidly flew weapons to Eastern Europe in support of Ukraine, it is becoming more feasible for adversaries to contest air mobility from the point of departure, requiring what the unclassified summary of the *2022 National Defense Strategy* describes as the

3. USAF, *United States Air Force Operating Concept for Information Warfare* (Washington, DC: USAF, March 2022), 6.

4. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Joint Publication (JP) 2-0, *Joint Intelligence* (Washington, DC: CJCS May 26, 2022), <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

ability to “withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption.”⁵ The historical treatment of air mobility as a guaranteed resource is outdated, and the new environment is driving AMC to develop concepts and capabilities to survive in the contested environment. But RGM intelligence has fundamentally failed to innovate in the same manner as Air Mobility Command’s operational side, even though there are examples of functional integration within other military intelligence organizations.

The military often inadequately plans for RGM effects. During the Operation Desert Storm build-up, the planners did not initiate mobility planning until after the deployment order was issued, leading to infeasible airlift requirements.⁶ When the pace of operations accelerated during Operation Allied Force, the understaffed planning cell was nearly overwhelmed.⁷ During Operation Unified Response, a lack of RGM and intelligence resources within the geographic command delayed the US response to the Haiti earthquake.⁸ These cases represent an indifferent approach to RGM planning that senior DoD and Air Force officials have stated will no longer be acceptable.⁹

New threats, including hypersonic weapons and information warfare, underscore the reality that the battlefield now starts at home. Air Force operating concepts advise that “adversaries will aggressively target and attack vulnerable US and allied information and logistics networks to prevent our advanced weapon systems from engaging in any consequential kinetic fight.”¹⁰ In April 2022, US Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) commander General Jacqueline Van Ovost summed up the situation by warning that “the complex contested environment that is emerging will test the future readiness of our enterprise and challenge USTRANSCOM’s ability to deliver a decisive force when needed.”¹¹ As the air component to USTRANSCOM, Air Mobility Command is investing in capabilities to improve situational awareness and survivability. The command

5. Department of Defense (DoD), “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy,” DoD News (website), March 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

6. James A. Winnefield, Preston Niblack, and Dana J. Johnson, *A League of Airmen: U.S. Air Power in the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, January 1, 1994), <https://www.rand.org/>.

7. D. Richard Simpson, “Command of Theater Air Mobility Forces during the Air War over Serbia: A New Standard or A New Data Point?,” *Air & Space Power Journal*, Chronicles (online Journal), October 11, 2000, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

8. Joseph Vanoni, “From Strategic to Tactical and Nowhere In Between: The USAF at the Operational Level” (master’s thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Maxwell AFB, AL, June 1, 2012), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>, 127.

9. Valerie Insinna, “EXCLUSIVE: Even with Ukraine Operations Ongoing, Air Mobility Commander Focused on China,” *Breaking Defense*, April 1, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

10. USAF, *Information Warfare*, 1.

11. US Transportation Command Public Affairs, “Van Ovost Delivers Command Posture Statement to Senate Armed Services Committee,” National Defense Transportation Association (website), April 1, 2022, <https://www.ndtahq.com/>.

is fundamentally transforming the way it conducts operations through agile combat employment.¹²

The agile combat employment concept replaces traditional linear methods of airlift that have been the hallmark of mobility since the advent of Air Transport Command in World War II. This concept injects flexibility and adversarial dilemmas through a proactive scheme of maneuver but requires “sufficient coordination of intertheater and intratheater transportation to move the force at the proper time and with sufficient tempo to achieve desired effects.”¹³ These efforts inherently complicate coordination between air, maritime, and surface logistics, requiring real-time intelligence for risk-informed decisions during mission execution.

Obstacles to Reliability

Despite this paradigm shift, the intelligence apparatus supporting RGM operations does not reflect the new intertwined, fast-paced environment. There is no intelligence synchronizer to pull and push intelligence and drive activities across all mobility intelligence units, which often operate under different command relationships and environments. Additionally, Joint and air component staffs do not have dedicated RGM intelligence planners that advocate for the intelligence needs of air mobility. Consequently, if the Air Force faces a near-peer fight, intelligence support to air mobility will be ill-prepared and reactive. Instead, it should have a unifying voice that collaborates across the Joint Force to represent RGM intelligence equities.

A case study of where change is needed can be found within the theater air operations center construct, the Air Force’s command-and-control center for a combatant command. While Air Mobility Command’s 618th AOC conducts global air mobility operations and is dedicated to RGM requirements, a theater AOC is much different. A theater AOC has only a small RGM intelligence support team functionally separate from the center’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance division. Per service doctrine, this team is beholden to this intelligence division for all its intelligence needs.¹⁴

Rather than reaching back to AMC experts to provide additive mobility intelligence, the rapid global mobility intelligence team is simply one of many customers clamoring for the intelligence division's support. Even in that aspect, it is at a disadvantage because the intelligence division will not prioritize mobility needs. Instead, the division’s priority

12. US Government Accountability Office (USGAO), *Defense Transportation: DoD Can Better Leverage Existing Contested Mobility Studies and Improve Training*, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO-21-125 (Washington, DC: USGAO, February 2021), 29, <https://www.gao.gov/>.

13. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education (LeMay Center) Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 1-21, *Agile Combat Employment* (Maxwell AFB, AL: LeMay Center, December 1, 2021), 8, <https://www.doctrine.af.mil/>.

14. Department of the Air Force (DAF), DAF Manual 13-1 AOC, vol. 3, *Operational Procedures—Air Operations Center (AOC) Operations Center (OC)* (Washington, DC: DAF, December 18, 2020), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

is combat air force equities such as threats against Air Force and Joint combat sorties, theater intelligence collection operations, and targeting for local air operations.¹⁵ This leaves the theater RGM intelligence support team without adequate or consistent support.

Because of this structure, the isolated RGM intelligence team at the center must conduct independent research and raise different, important questions for mobility operations that the rest of the AOC overlooks. This outcome is unfortunate and inefficient but predictable since the fundamental purpose of the air operations center is to plan and direct activities of assigned and attached forces. Even if the theater AOC tries to support its own local RGM forces adequately, it lacks the expertise and depth that resides at Air Mobility Command and the 618th AOC.¹⁶ (Incidentally, the 2019 AOC Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Initial Qualification Training made no mention of RGM intelligence other than making the observation that some intelligence existed within the Air Mobility Division, but they were independent.)

In addition to these obstacles to reliability at the theater AOC, there is no forcing mechanism to ensure a common intelligence picture is consistent across the RGM enterprise. Because RGM intelligence is split among commands, when an air mobility aircraft flies a mission with one enroute stop, the crew might receive three different intelligence briefings based on the peculiarities of the unit-level intelligence shops they encounter. By continuing to disperse RGM intelligence Airmen across geographic commands when their customers operate globally and deserve intelligence products aligned across command borders, the Air Force accepts clear disadvantages and fails to present a common intelligence picture for RGM Airmen.

Functional Alignment

By comparison, other DoD and Air Force intelligence organizations functionally align their intelligence activities. The 44,000 Airman-strong Sixteenth Air Force provides “multisource intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, cyber warfare, electronic warfare, and information operations.”¹⁷ With a single commander, the Sixteenth Air Force can integrate efforts while simultaneously providing tailored support to diverse customers.

Similarly, the US Space Force concentrates its operational intelligence in Space Delta 7, whose squadrons provide a central hub to forces across its service and to Joint Force commanders worldwide.¹⁸ Perhaps most directly analogous to AMC, the functionally organized Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) consolidates its intelli-

15. DAF, *Operational Procedures*, para 6.1.

16. DAF, *Operational Procedures*, para 2.1; and AMC, Air Mobility Command Instruction (AMCI) 10-2102v1, *Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships, and Authorities* (Scott AFB, IL: AMC, April 11, 2020), 3.3.2.

17. Sixteenth Air Force (Air Forces Cyber), “U.S. Air Force Factsheet,” n.d., accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.16af.af.mil/>.

18. US Space Force Space Delta 1, “Space Delta 7,” n.d., accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.spacebase.delta1.spaceforce.mil/>.

gence capabilities under one umbrella to better present intelligence support to its command as it performs a worldwide mission.¹⁹

While the missions of Sixteenth Air Force, Space Force, and AFSOC differ, there are some relevant comparisons. All three organizations are based around a functional mission, they are agnostic to command boundaries, and they are vital contributors to a particular core mission or capability. These examples should inspire the Air Force to think about how to better structure RGM intelligence.

In short, the fault lines described above create an intelligence problem for RGM forces endeavoring to become more formidable in the face of contested operations. Despite the signs that concepts such as agile combat employment influence how the Air Force will employ air mobility, the supporting intelligence architecture has not evolved. Yet before exploring potential solutions, it is important to examine the principles of RGM intelligence. These principles contribute to the overall ability of the service to plan and execute air mobility operations.

Principles of RGM Intelligence

Three key principles highlight why RGM intelligence is functionally unique and how those tenets should impact Air Force planning and execution: unity of effort, operational relevance, and responsiveness to leadership. When appropriately applied, these principles enable effective RGM preparation during planning and employment during execution.

The first principle is unity of effort, in that the service must ensure the intelligence supplied to all mobility Airman—from the AMC commander to the pilot in command—is analytically sound across time zones and units. Disconnected and independently developed threat briefings provide no value to wing deployments and sortie executions. Clearly, situations will occur when unit Airmen must respond to fresh intelligence or cannot communicate in a denied environment. But these production anomalies should be the exceptions to consistency and standardization among RGM intelligence products and assessments regardless of which mission or AOC they support.²⁰

The second principle is operational relevance. Air mobility leadership needs an intelligence staff that describes threats in operationally relevant terms incorporating air mobility standards and employment parameters. This may cause friction with other analysts that do not understand threats to rapid global mobility. For example, in the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom, assessments differed regarding the anti-air threat in southern Afghanistan.²¹

19. 1st Special Operations Wing Public Affairs, “361st Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Group,” Hurlburt Field (website), n.d., accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.hurlburt.af.mil/>.

20. LeMay Center, *Agile Combat Employment*, 10.

21. Nathan Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan 2001–2002: From the Sea* (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps (USMC) History Division, 2011), 101.

This disagreement illustrates that without a dedicated intelligence staff to inform air mobility commanders and pilots, external stakeholders will place aircraft in jeopardy either through ignorance or moral hazard. Mobility-tailored threat assessments underpin the ability to make effective risk decisions for mobility air forces, applying a mobility-sophisticated lens to threat assessments for operational planning and execution.

The third RGM principle is responsiveness to air mobility leadership. In major combat operations, multiple commanders with different priorities will compete for limited resources. The engaged combat forces striving to maximize tactical successes often garner the most attention. Air mobility leaders, whether at headquarters, AMC or in the theater, must have a clear picture of threats to aircraft, airfields, and supporting activities to ensure the Joint Force strikes a deliberate balance in the allocation of counterair, air and missile defense, and force protection. Along with outlining threats to rapid global mobility missions, RGM intelligence experts must craft intelligence requirements that inform the selection of mission location, the timing of operations, and synchronization with combat forces or theater logistics.

By proactively applying these principles at the inception of operational planning, RGM intelligence experts will produce analysis that will inform logistics schemes and set expectations for force protection. Working in collaboration with the Intelligence Community and theater intelligence staffs, RGM intelligence analysts should examine adversary courses of action to determine threats to airfields and airspace while creating associated priority intelligence requirements. These actions will ensure air mobility's risk-to-force and risk-to-mission are accurately evaluated in parallel with other stakeholders and adequately represented during wargaming and course-of-action evaluation.

Applying RGM principles at the outset of operational planning is important because once logistics infrastructure is set, it becomes a herculean effort to reset port locations and reallocate air and missile defenses. Moreover, it is unacceptable to put aircraft and Airmen in harm's way because of avoidable miscalculations during planning. This error has occurred not only during exercises where the theater command plans in isolation but also in real-world operations where planners applied "pixie dust" to air mobility concerns by planning as if it was a limitless resource in a dynamic battlespace.²²

After operational planning and transition to execution, RGM intelligence must provide a threat picture that takes advantage of all available intelligence and analytical resources. During execution, air mobility assets may transit multiple theaters of war with different command relationships. In this setting, intelligence personnel at command and control nodes are analysts and knowledge brokers; they must coordinate with multiple intelligence and operational entities to monitor the changing battlefield in real time and inform their aircrews.

In summary, RGM intelligence is most effective during planning and execution if it integrates the three principles of RGM intelligence: unity of effort, operational relevance,

22. Based on author's firsthand experience.

and responsiveness to leadership. These principles form the foundation that keeps mobility intelligence relevant; further, they inspire key recommendations to modernize the intelligence enterprise for air mobility.

Modernizing the Enterprise

To achieve the goal of a functionally aligned RGM intelligence enterprise ready for a near-peer fight, the Air Force must innovate. This requires a model that standardizes RGM intelligence assessments across the force and ensures those assessments support operational planning and execution. This will occur through three lines of effort: (1) investing in force development, (2) providing liaisons to provide RGM intelligence support to planning, and (3) assigning functional responsibility to a single mobility intelligence Airman.

The first line of effort requires the Air Force to commit Airmen to develop their intelligence capabilities within the RGM enterprise. This process would pipeline Airman from unit-level intelligence to become intelligence staff officers ready to serve on the AMC staff or other air component staffs. This career path would avoid an atrophy of expertise that currently occurs when Airmen rotate out of the mobility world after only one assignment, and it would provide Airmen the time to grow staff skills as intelligence analysts and planners. The service should reinforce this priority by creating a special experience identifier for career-field development and designate some AMC assignments as milestone assignments within its talent management framework.

In tandem with this effort, the Air Force must grow RGM intelligence skills at the operational level of war—where operational art is used to link military actions to national strategic objectives.²³ The existing curriculum for RGM intelligence personnel—at the initial schoolhouses, command and control courses, and weapons school—focuses on performance at the tactical level. For intelligence Airmen expected to contribute to AOCs, staffs, and planning teams, the service should prepare them for such work by sending them to additional courses covering the Joint planning process and advanced command and control, including hosting intelligence officers within the Advanced Study of Air Mobility program.

Under the second line of effort, the Air Force should designate some intelligence officers as liaisons to provide intelligence insight during air mobility planning. These individuals could deploy to external staffs on short notice to work directly with Joint logisticians to analyze options for operating inside a threat's decision cycle.²⁴ This complements the Air Force's intent to assign intelligence Airmen to the staffs where they will have the most impact.²⁵

23. CJCS, JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: CJCS, May 15, 2018), I-13.

24. CJCS, JP 4-0, *Joint Logistics* (Washington, DC: CJCS, February 4, 2019), IV-15, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

25. USAF, *Information Warfare*, 8.

These liaisons are somewhat akin to Air Force intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance liaison officers who integrate intelligence into ground schemes of maneuver and air mobility liaison officers who create feasible mobility requirements.²⁶ Rapid global mobility intelligence liaisons would identify threats to mobility operations during mission analysis and articulate the need for theater-provided force protection. They are particularly relevant when the supported staff lacks mobility know-how but is creating requirements that AMC will execute with organic forces.

To illustrate the value of a RGM intelligence liaison, consider the following scenario: a combatant command's emerging operational plan envisions multiple AMC C-17s delivering the Army's High Mobility Artillery Rocket System to an austere location held by a Marine littoral regiment inside an adversary's weapons engagement zone.²⁷ The liaison would work across organizations to ensure a complete threat picture, establishing intelligence-sharing relationships with the embedded Marines.

The liaison would ensure intelligence operations included collection required by the C-17 mission planning cell and would participate in the planning team responsible for the overall operation. In this scenario, the liaison would harmonize the natural seams between functional and geographic organizations at multiple echelons within the Joint Force and would provide a robust threat evaluation to the RGM commander with operational control of the C-17s.

The third and most important line of effort is designating a senior intelligence leader, most likely at AMC, as the RGM senior intelligence officer responsible for the orchestration and direction of the RGM intelligence enterprise, regardless of what customer or command relationships exist.²⁸ This individual would set standards on analysis and production applicable to all mobility intelligence Airmen. Moreover, they would actively oversee the entire enterprise to ensure effective force disposition of intelligence resources and synchronizing intelligence assessments across the force. This officer would also be responsible for setting the right force balance between meeting the requirements for theater intelligence support and AMC priorities as set by US Transportation Command.

Aligning under a single air mobility senior intelligence officer brings RGM intelligence into compliance with how AMC leads the overall RGM enterprise, which must comply with AMC's standards for air mobility forces' interoperability and efficient employment regardless of assignment.²⁹ This would also fundamentally realign RGM intelligence within theater AOCs by linking all the RGM intelligence personnel worldwide

26. Mike Snelgrove and Jaylan Haley, Ricochets and Replies, *Air & Space Power Journal* 29, no.2 (March–April 2015), 166–69, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

27. USMC, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (Quantico, VA: USMC Warfighting Laboratory Futures Directorate, February 2021), <https://www.mcwl.marines.mil/>.

28. USAF, Air Force Instruction 13-103, *Command and Control: AFFOR Staff Operations, Readiness, and Structures* (Washington, DC: USAF, April 12, 2019), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

29. AMC, *Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships*, 2.4.2.

into a singular intelligence structure and possibly require those forces to be in a direct support relationship versus attached to the theater.

As a result, the value of RGM intelligence deployed to the theater AOC would improve by harnessing the analytical power of a global air mobility intelligence enterprise. This translates to more robust support when planning and executing operations such as escorted airdrop missions or air refueling combat sorties.

Implementing these lines of effort does not assume RGM intelligence resources will increase; instead the Air Force can accomplish this by more effectively employing existing capabilities. Accordingly, there is a risk that some stakeholders will believe these changes deplete their capabilities or move processes outside their control. As these concerns become known, subsequent research should incorporate these perspectives to ensure the service includes customer needs when optimizing the RGM intelligence enterprise.

Conclusion

These three recommendations represent a needed starting point, and their implementation will evolve as they demonstrate value. They are rooted in military and civilian experiences in US Transportation Command, Air Mobility Command, and AOC combat operations. More importantly, they reinforce the Air Force's global approach to integrating capabilities across strategic, operational, and tactical warfighting intent.³⁰

As the Air Force seeks to maintain its ability to project and sustain the Joint Force under all-domain persistent attack, it must mature air mobility intelligence for the contested environment. Doing so will ensure the underlying intelligence architecture meets the demand of the mobility maneuver force at tempo in a near-peer fight. With a reinvigorated force, key touchpoints across the Joint Force, and an air mobility intelligence senior intelligence officer at the helm, rapid global mobility intelligence will be a critical capability that enables AMC and air mobility forces to project "decisive strength across contested domains."³¹ This is the cost of entry to ensure the Air Force can provide decisive contributions to Joint warfighting and preserve the competitive advantage of rapid global mobility. ✈️

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30. USAF, *Information Warfare*, 6–8.

31. AMC, "About Us," AMC (website), n.d., accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.amc.af.mil/>.