

The Trilateral Strategic Initiative

A Primer for Developing Future Airpower Cooperation*

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Since the rudimentary deconfliction measures of the First World War, the US Air Force, Royal Air Force, and French Air Force have developed their ability to conduct coordinated air operations, a practice they have further refined since the end of the Cold War. Interoperability—the effective integration of planning and execution during coalition operations—is now a critical factor for success. Specific to air operations, the importance of interoperability has consistently been identified during North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) actions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya, as well as ongoing coalition efforts in Iraq, Syria, and sub-Saharan Africa. Although each campaign has highlighted specific challenges for the three air forces, they have also demonstrated the potential of airpower integration. Thus, even though all three nations reserve their prerogative to act autonomously, a coalition effort seems a likely response to future crises.

Current doctrine and future strategy also confirm the importance of a coalition approach to air operations.¹ Broadly speaking, coalition operations offer some tangible advantages. Specifically, political resilience, strategic reach, and individual niche capabilities are better employed when air forces combine capacity. The identification of common objectives makes national efforts more closely aligned and coherent. Additionally, responding collectively at short notice is increasingly important to national leadership; consequently, success depends upon the constant monitoring of and investment in interoperability, even for the closest of allies. Operations act as a catalyst to integration (through sheer necessity), but difficulties that emerge during complex multinational operations point to the need to preempt those frictions by raising the baseline of trust and interoperability ahead of the next operation. The effort demands clearly articulated political intent, the identification of common objectives, and the necessary resources to develop a trust-based, effective partnership.

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The Trilateral Strategic Initiative (TSI) provides one such framework. The initiative had its origins in the personal relationships among the three air force chiefs who articulated their initial vision via a letter of intent in 2011 and signed a TSI charter in 2013, which not only outlines both intent and objectives but also designates a steering group. Three pillars of strategic importance lie at the heart of the initiative: increasing trust, improving interoperability, and advocating for airpower. Together, they set conditions for the more effective employment of airpower. Oversight of the initiative is the responsibility of the Trilateral Strategic Steering Group (TSSG), composed of senior officers from the three nations, serving in trinational teams placed in strategic posts close to the chiefs. This arrangement maximizes their effectiveness in areas of trilateral interest.² The TSI is now in its third generation of trilateral chiefs who are equally supportive of the initiative, and a new version of the charter was recently signed at the Royal International Air Tattoo, United Kingdom, in July 2015.

To better understand the potential of this initiative and its steering group as a model for advancing international cooperation, one must explore the elements that make it a viable proposition for the constituent air forces. Doing so requires consideration of the initiative's defining characteristics, the means chosen by the steering group to develop it, and the challenges that the initiative faces to achieve its goals.

Natural Convergences and Characteristics of the TSI Model

The US, French, and Royal air forces have strong historic and cultural ties; moreover, each has played a predominant role in developing and employing airpower as an instrument of national security. The core values of integrity, service, and excellence permeate these countries' military cultures, which also have been shaped by a historic record demonstrating a consistent political appetite to employ airpower in support of national and international interests.

Existing and emerging crises have brought about a convergence of many national security objectives for the United States, France, and United Kingdom. Further, contextual reality, simultaneous multinational global operations, the diversity of threats to collective security, and an environment of increasing financial scrutiny continue to support a more compelling case for cooperation. At the same time, each of the three air forces has confronted the issues of maintaining readiness while remaining committed to expeditionary operations and wide-scale modernization. Such centripetal forces, therefore, have reinforced the need for "burden sharing" and have highlighted the value of effective military cooperation. All of these factors validate the chiefs' vision of shared operational efficiency.

As for the characteristics of the TSI that help define its potential to progress under this vision, two in particular stand out. First, the exchange of senior officers who make up the steering group offers a small-scale but enduring framework to build trust and improve interoperability at the strategic level of each air force. Granted, the crucible of a multinational air campaign or even a complex exercise normally results in improved trust and interoperability among international participants. However, without a permanent framework designed to capitalize on progress, any

advances risk being overlooked in subsequent efforts. Although not designed as a “lessons learned” mechanism, the TSI does give each air staff a mandate to promote an agenda of improving international cooperation, and its multinational steering group includes action officers charged with that responsibility. Second, the fact that the TSSG operates without the cumbersome bureaucracy commonly associated with a formal alliance or coalition gives it the liberty to creatively pursue the chiefs’ vision within the limits of its resources and to be innovative in its approach.

The convergence of values, as well as historic and current context, combined with national and organizational goals across the three air forces, helps explain the “why” behind the TSI, and the defining characteristics of its steering group help clarify the parameters of their mission. The “how”—the means employed under the initiative to realize its ambition—clearly need to be consistent with these parameters in order to sustain the tangible progress towards fulfilling the vision of the three service chiefs.

Means

The establishment in each air staff of a cadre of international officers responsible for driving trilateral cooperation at the highest level of each air force, itself a manifestation of trust, is a central pillar of delivering this vision. As with any exchange of international officers, incumbents quickly recognize the limitations of a purely national view, and their perspectives are necessarily broadened by their wider exposure. Although tactical-level exchange officers are rightly focused on developing tactics, techniques, and procedures, the individuals on this strategic exchange cross-pollinate ideas and concepts that directly influence the employment of airpower. In turn, having privileged access to the air force chiefs, they are well placed to influence the thinking of senior leaders.

The approach adopted by the steering group is a relatively simple one: it identifies impediments to airpower’s interoperability and presents solutions involving trilateral cooperation. The basis of the chosen model is ongoing collaboration among the elements of the steering group in each air force, creating opportunities for an informal exchange of ideas and for the sharing and debating of concepts (flavored by the perspective of each air staff) designed to feed the thinking of senior leaders. By maintaining an understanding of ongoing bilateral initiatives among the three air forces and an awareness of their institutional and operational priorities, the steering group can identify areas most likely of interest for trilateral cooperation. The desired results are not predicated upon placing any one nation in a lead role; rather, given the open-ended nature of the initiative, the interoperability and trust it seeks to build could support any number of cooperative constructs well adapted to a variety of operational requirements. To prime this model, each air force must select officers for this type of exchange who are well suited professionally and personally for the demands of duty at the strategic level of an air staff and who possess additional traits necessary to collaborate and advance a trilateral agenda while serving abroad. To inform its own internal discussions, the TSSG has brought together subject-matter experts and has hosted a number of forums on a rotational basis, reflecting

the service chiefs' specific priorities or deriving from major lessons identified during combined operations. Previous subjects have included combined crisis response, command and control, operational readiness, air advocacy, and national approaches to regional tensions. The formats have included workshops, planning exercises that address particular scenarios, academic seminars on airpower topics, and broad analyses. Generally, TSI activity also incorporates civilians, academics, and members of think tanks who make recommendations that will have the most impact not only on modifying reflexes and shaping behaviors but also on improving trust. The subsequent publication of trilateral results is intended to influence broader, higher-level national debate.

By steadily developing the network of officers and civilian airpower professionals associated with the TSI, efforts to institutionalize this collegiate approach are gaining traction. In Europe, trilateral cooperation has taken root among the three air operations centers, initiated through a series of exercises called Tonnerre-Lightning, launched in 2013 to conduct combined air command and control and to incorporate live sorties under progressively more complex scenarios.³ With its imperative to maximize the output of trilateral exercises, the combined air staff continually identifies opportunities to integrate collective aims into the exercise calendar. This aspect of the trilateral relationship has been reinforced by quarterly video teleconferences among air operations chiefs of the three air forces and by a new operational trilateral charter that they signed in March 2015.⁴

The trilateral exercise hosted by the US Air Force's Air Combat Command at Langley AFB, Virginia, in December 2015 is another excellent example of cooperation. US F-22 Raptor, French Rafale, and UK Typhoon aircraft operated together for two weeks at Langley to develop and better integrate their niche capabilities. This type of initiative, which seeks to prepare our combat forces prior to a complex conflict, concentrated on generating a disproportionate operational advantage. Other, equally pertinent opportunities for trilateral cooperation exist. An infrastructure-protection exercise held at the Avon Park auxiliary field in Florida in 2015 highlighted how this sort of cooperation can extend beyond aircraft participation. Security forces from each air force sought to protect and defend an air base by utilizing shared resources and objectives. The exercise provided an excellent basis for future operational integration among support mechanisms for air operations.

Efforts conducted under the TSI also contribute to more effective and credible air advocacy. Each of the air chiefs recognizes the priority of preparing airmen to positively influence joint and national decision makers. The most recent trilateral workshop, conducted in Washington, DC, in March 2015, was tailored to crafting a more refined, targeted trilateral airpower narrative. Furthermore, by contributing to the development of airpower, other allies can benefit from the TSI acting as a "trail-blazer" or an intellectual catalyst. Results of TSI-sponsored activities have already informed ongoing debates within NATO and in the headquarters of allied air forces. The initiative can have a continuing role as a body representing the position of the three most capable air forces in the alliance on a broad range of airpower determinants. The seventh TSI workshop, to be held in France in 2016, will address potential convergences among the three air forces' visions of future airpower employment. Moreover, it will shape recommendations for areas of emphasis in the

trilateral relationship, which can complement a wider NATO study on the future of joint airpower in the alliance.

Intrinsic Challenges

Just as trilateral progress requires continuous effort, so does it demand perseverance in overcoming a variety of challenges. Fulfilling the trilateral vision of the chiefs calls for stamina, patience, and a deep cultural understanding of the three air forces so they can reach a mutually agreeable position. The steering group's independence from organizational bureaucracy, a sort of blessing from which it derives a substantial degree of freedom of action, can equally be viewed as a curse when it comes to implementing trilateral activities.⁵ The streamlined nature of the model, which empowers a small group of senior officers to creatively advance their service chiefs' vision, helps minimize implementation costs to each service. It sits on the opposite end of the spectrum from treaty-based military cooperation, created to respond to higher and more complex political objectives that require significant investment across the joint military staffs of participating allies into the oversight of cooperative objectives. Although the trilateral steering group is easier to implement than a treaty-based military hierarchy, its independence from organizational oversight means that the group cannot act as an empowered executive staff entity. Rather, it relies on initiative and creativity to overcome friction, and—given the limited degree of direct leverage that the steering group can exert on senior decision and policy makers—it must make the most effective use of its time and manpower.

At the practical level, a common impediment to cooperation is simply a lack of technical interoperability. Incompatibility of communication, information, and computer systems has a significant effect on effective integration. Coupled with the commercial sensitivities associated with procurement and open competition within the defense sector, such incompatibility makes industrial collaboration an even more complex issue. Therefore, new approaches to defense procurement may need to innovate; it is even conceivable that trilateral interoperability could become a contracted requirement in the future. Equally, in the conduct of air operations, trilateral activities will be inherently more complex than either national or bilateral alternatives and, at least initially, will demand more time to plan. To be addressed effectively, matters such as information exchange, security caveats, and intelligence sharing will call for considerable effort and trust. A central aspect of this shift is the willingness to exchange sensitive information. That is, building trust and confidence will depend upon moving from the principle of a “need to know,” which underpins many protocols related to information security, towards a “need to share” in the context of multinational operations. The TSI facilitates this principle by promoting among the partner nations an open exchange of concepts and doctrine that can propagate into wider, more accepted practices. A lack of language proficiency can also reinforce technical and procedural barriers. During a recent combined joint expeditionary force exercise between the United Kingdom and France, for example, translation and communication issues were identified as one of the major impediments to timely and accurate decision making in the combined headquarters.

However, the predominant strategic impediment to trilateral activity is cultural. Despite historic links and an increasingly rich operational capital to draw on, vested national interests and “national reflexes” can still offer a reassuring alternative to the inevitable friction and uncertainties associated with multinational operations. Even with shared NATO doctrine, defense policy and ambition are not identical and reflect the capacities and priorities of each nation. The US-UK “special relationship,” however defined, is woven into the cultural fabric of generations of military and political classes in the United Kingdom.⁶ This kinship greatly facilitates cooperation between the two countries’ air forces but is insufficient in itself to ensure an equally coherent trilateral relationship. Similarly, the principle of strategic autonomy is a *sine qua non* to France’s defense policy and continues to define many aspects of its military culture.⁷ Work under the TSI, therefore, must honestly acknowledge these differences and identify and exploit opportunities in each bilateral relationship to better align behaviors at a trilateral level.⁸

Furthermore, practical realities within each air force demand that a preponderance of the effort focus on national priorities. The inevitable consequence for most airmen is an infrequent exposure to their international counterparts, which in turn reinforces cultural reflexes towards national solutions when a country faces the need to employ airpower. Activities sponsored under the trilateral initiative are designed to expose participants to the potential of multinational operations and seek to readjust their reflexes for national responses towards a more trilateral perspective. The model must also confront limitations associated with any single-service initiative, given that many issues of interest to the three air forces inevitably have joint equities. If the TSI is to address those issues, exposure to the joint level will be necessary, and—in the absence of parallel trilateral initiatives outside the air domain—solutions for particular matters must be sought on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, the dynamic and cyclic nature of national politics presents a challenge to continuity. The TSI’s ambition to continuously improve integration is vulnerable to political cycles—a nation’s appetite for foreign intervention can change on short notice. Moreover, the level of priority afforded to defense and security concerns in national dialogues can have a profound effect on the sustainment of military partnerships. To remain insulated from these dynamics, cooperative initiatives such as the TSI must constantly prove their value. Thus, ambition should be tempered accordingly. The TSI was never intended to become the basis for an executive body in each air staff; rather, it serves as a framework designed to inspire activities to strengthen personal relationships, develop mutual understanding, and build confidence.

Consequently, even though the initiative offers a common vision for high-level trilateral cooperation, technical challenges, cultural dynamics, and national priorities will inevitably act as a drag on the rate of progress. Faced with these issues, the three countries will find that results are often difficult to quantify and must be validated against more pragmatic criteria. In this context, incremental gains and gradual progress pursued under the TSI meet the spirit of the chiefs’ vision and reflect the relatively informal nature of the steering group they established to pilot the initiative.

Conclusion

Although not a unique approach, the TSI and the steering group responsible for its implementation represent an original and potentially innovative model for exploring common ground and improving coherence in the development and employment of airpower. Each nation offers a different perspective on how to employ air and space capabilities, but the TSI seeks to refine the combined capabilities of the three air forces to respond as a team to rapidly emerging crises. By implementing a valuable forum for strategic communication and coordination, these air forces can identify and address operational impediments, establish greater cohesion, and explore the frontiers of trilateral cooperation.

As for the chosen means to implement the initiative, one finds an elegant approach in the establishment of a multinational steering group cross-pollinated at the strategic level of the three air staffs, which collaborates and sponsors trilateral activities, free from bureaucratic oversight but equally limited in its executive role. Its simplicity differs significantly from more formalized and more ambitious cooperative models such as the NATO command structure and the framework created in the French and UK military staffs to advance political objectives of the Lancaster House treaty. In this sense, the group meets the chiefs' intent to advance their vision while respecting the practical realities confronting each air staff and its capacities to confront cultural barriers and practical challenges. The success of the TSSG depends on cultivating a community of participants in its trilateral activities and widening the number of individuals exposed to the results of its debates.

As this model gains traction, some questions inevitably arise concerning the broader utility of such an agreement: what, for example, might its applicability be for land and maritime forces or within a joint construct among the United States, the United Kingdom, and France? These aspects could broaden trilateral cooperation to build trust and advance interoperability across a wider spectrum of military operations. Are there other international trilateral groupings that might benefit from a similar initiative of their own, based on its own logic, such as that of regional cooperation? Responses to these types of questions could depend on exposure and evaluation of this trilateral initiative beyond the three participating air forces.

The future success of trilateral efforts under this model hinges on several factors: sustained political intent, the highest levels of support within each air force, and continued evidence of advancement towards objectives. This progress is anticipated on multiple fronts in 2016, in collateral activities subsequent to the December 2015 trilateral exercise at Langley AFB, in the continuation of the Tonnerre-Lightning exercise series in Europe, and directly from the forthcoming TSSG workshop in France. The strategic context demands these types of efforts from close allies, and ongoing operations are sure to reinforce this requirement. The TSI model is a valuable tool in meeting that need. ✪

Notes

1. Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30, *UK Air and Space Doctrine*, July 2013, 2-5-2-6; Joint Concept Note 3/12, *Future Air and Space Operating Concept*, September 2012, 1-12-1-13; Department of the Air Force, *USAF Strategic Master Plan* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, May 2015), 28-29, 34-35; and Ministère de la Défense, *Livre Blanc: Défense et Sécurité Nationale* (Paris: Ministère de la Défense, 2013), 21.

2. The US Air Force hosts UK and French officers in its Strategic Studies Group (HAF/SSG); the French Air Force hosts US and UK officers in its Plans Bureau, Strategic Studies Division; and the Royal Air Force hosts US and French officers in its Air Staff, International and Engagement Division.

3. The three centers include the 603rd Air and Space Operations Center at Ramstein Air Base, Germany; the UK joint force air component commander at RAF High Wycombe, England; and the French Centre National des Opérations Aériennes at Lyon Mont-Verdun Air Base, France.

4. An agreement between the US Air Force's Third Air Force commander, the Royal Air Force's commander of operations, and the French Air Force's commander of air defense and air operations, the document creates a framework for multiple trilateral working groups designed to improve interoperability, specifically in the planning and conduct of air operations.

5. This independence could be contrasted with the proliferation of bilateral responsibilities assigned to officers in the military staffs of France and the United Kingdom as a result of the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty on Defense and Security Cooperation, a binding agreement designed to significantly improve defense and security cooperation between the two allies. Implementation has resulted in well-developed plans at the joint and single-service level to field a combined joint expeditionary force, providing a scalable asset up to two brigades in strength with an associated naval task group and air expeditionary wing. Of necessity, this approach demands general officer engagement at multiple staff levels and a commitment to training and regular exercises.

6. The US Air Force and Royal Air Force benefit from a privileged level of information sharing that underpins a robust officer exchange program and a tradition of high-level bilateral training. Though somewhat mirrored in the post-Lancaster House Treaty growth of UK-French cooperation, this sharing still outbalances similar US Air Force programs with the French Air Force.

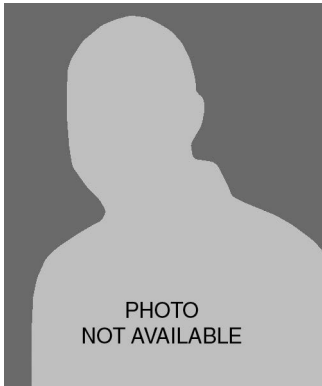
7. Ministère de la Défense, *Livre Blanc*, 19-22.

8. Bilateral relationships include those provided under the United Kingdom-France Lancaster House Treaty and those that arise from increasing US-French cooperation in Africa.



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