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MAXIMIZING STRATEGIC AIRBORNE ISR UTILITY THROUGH
EXERCISE OF OPERATIONAL CONTROL

by

Christopher D. Crouch, Major, USAF

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Introduction

The draft FY17 NDAA highlights the transregional, multi-domain, and multi-functional reality of current operations.¹ Congress proposed to modify sections of the Goldwater-Nichols Act to facilitate transfer of forces among combatant commands. This bold move by the military's civilian leadership highlights their commitment to facilitate flexibility in transregional operations and should act as a charge to the military to provide similarly novel, flexible solutions. Strategic C2ISR platforms including the U-2, RQ-4, RC-135, and E-8 are inherently agile with their ability to traverse multiple geographic locations in a short time. This paper proposes to answer the military's civilian leadership call to maximize flexibility by rethinking the assignment of operational control (OPCON) of those agile, strategically significant platforms. OPCON is defined and explored on the way to presenting an argument for a national strategic airborne C2ISR asset arbiter. This paper does not endorse a specific COA but instead presents a spectrum of options to assist military senior leaders in answering the civilian leader's charge to increase flexibility. It will continue by postulating how this new operational control authority would fit in a broader intelligence structure, and conclude with lessons learned from other members across the USAF.

Scope

Joint Publication 2-0 describes agility as “the ability to quickly shift focus and bring to bear the skill sets necessary to address the new problem at hand while simultaneously continuing critical preexisting work.”² While many would argue that airpower itself is inherently agile, the U-2, RQ-4, RC-135, and E-8 possess heightened levels of strategic agility. With their highly trained crews, exceptional loiter time, and relatively fast speeds, these assets have the ability to launch from one combatant command, perform a mission in another combatant command, and

recover back to the original base in a 24-hour period. Effectively supporting two combatant commanders while not decrementing the initial commander multiple days of operations. This flexibility enables intelligence managers to maximize asset utilization across the globe in support of combatant commander requirements and is the epitome of the agility described in JP 2-0. This paper refrained from including the medium altitude remotely piloted aircraft due to their dual mission capability of ISR and strike. Their relatively slow speed contributed to their exclusion as well. While it would be possible to support two combatant commands, the transit time between them in most cases would be prohibitive. This paper excluded naval assets for their limited range and speed. Newer capabilities have the potential to have the same agility in the future. When those assets achieve their potential, they will be considered for this structure as well. Some of the COAs included are service-specific and sister service incorporation would require an organizational change.

The use of OPCON

There are many avenues to address the concept of increasing the availability of strategic airborne ISR assets. The focus of this paper is the delegation and utilization of OPCON. Joint Publication 1 describes OPCON as “the authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations and joint training necessary to accomplish the mission.”³ OPCON is the favorable tool because it is the language of the CCDRs. It is the ability to employ forces to carry out a mission.

OPCON, when delegated from the SecDef, does not rely on a memorandum of agreement or a pool of peers in competition for assets. JP1 specifically mentions that OPCON enables the

commander to prioritize ISR.⁴ This entitlement enables a worldwide ISR arbiter to establish ISR prioritization across the globe, to more effectively utilize low-density high-demand assets.

Delegation of Command Authority

Command authority is established by Title 10, US Code, section 162.⁵ Command authority runs from the President to the SecDef to Unified and Specific Combatant Commanders.⁶ The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 established this iteration of US Code. The Goldwater-Nichols Act was passed to reorganize the DoD structure. Many civilian leaders felt that centralized power at the service chiefs led to the less than stellar performances in previous wars. Leaders less concerned with the greater needs of the DoD and more concerned with the relevance of their own service resulted in joint operations failures such as Desert One. The national civilian leadership looked to reduce individual service inputs and increase and solidify civilian leadership at the top of the military structure. Congress accomplished this task through the Goldwater-Nichols Act. The act positioned the CJCS superior to the individual service chiefs. It defined this job as the principle military advisor to the President and SecDef. To ensure the focus of the DoD was on the war and not on the services, the act delineated CCDRs as sole recipients of OPCON from the SecDef. As it should, doctrine has fully incorporated, and unquestioningly followed this chain-of-command.⁷ This paper used a loose interpretation of the doctrinally staunch stance that OPCON must flow to and through the combatant commander to avoid bias and enable free thought without restriction. In cases where the traditional flow of OPCON is changed, this paper will recommend an acceptable alternative to establish OPCON flow.

A Global Strategic Airborne C2ISR Arbiter

Mark Twain once said, “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.”⁸ OPCON of strategic ISR assets is an excellent case study of this claim. The Goldwater-Nichols Act was passed to reduce individual service inputs and focus on the DoD in a joint world.⁹ CCDRs are now so entrenched in their piece of a limited resource, they have lost the global focus. To return a global prospect to the strategic airborne ISR force, a global arbiter is needed. JP1 makes reference to a “Global Synchronizer.”¹⁰ JP1 directs the synchronizer to align specified plan, activities, or agencies across the US Government.¹¹ Establishing an arbiter creates the environment for unity of effort, prioritization, and agility. Currently each commander has their own prioritization which may not capitalize on the strengths of a certain asset. An arbiter will have a global prioritization perspective. It will provide the expertise to enable unity of effort across the intelligence activities and enable limited assets to capitalize on their inherent agility.

COA 1

The first COA involves the CJCS and its operational relationship to the force proposed by the draft FY17 NDAA.¹² A difference in wording between the actual bill and the summary is a sign that congress is open to a lenient interpretation of the law. The bill itself recommends the Chairman receive an “advisory responsibility on operations and on the allocation and transfer of forces among combatant commands.”¹³ The bill later reinforces the intent for the Chairman to have a strengthened advisory role in operations, particularly those operations that cross services and combatant commands. The summary prepared by the Congressional Research Service published a more liberal interpretation of the role of the Chairman. The summary specifically uses the phrase “allow the Secretary to delegate some authority to the Chairman for the worldwide reallocation of limited military assets.”¹⁴ At the conservative end of this COA, the newly established J32 shop, formerly JFCC-ISR, should guide the CJCS in advising the SecDef

to move a strategic airborne ISR asset as a proof of concept. Recent world uprisings should provide plenty of opportunities for the CJCS to exercise its strengthened advisory role. At the aggressive end of this COA, the CJCS should request OPCON of the strategic C2ISR platforms and become an informal arbiter until the SecDef chooses to transfer OPCON to another entity. The Chairman can leverage the newly founded J32 shop to prioritize intelligence requirements and transfer assets across combatant commands based on a newly established prioritized list. This proposal is the most attainable from the new provisions provided in the FY17 NDAA. It also provides a rank appropriate arbiter for any disagreements from the CCDRs. The biggest challenge to this COA is its increased work load. The workload required to receive and prioritize requests may outstrip the J32 shop's limited manpower. Current staff reduction emphasis suggests that no matter the task, the shop would not receive manpower reinforcement.

COA 2

The second COA requires a liberal interpretation of Title 10 USC section 162.¹⁵ This sections states that forces in a geographic command should be apportioned to the geographic commander unless directed otherwise by the SecDef. This COA assumes the SecDef will exercise their authority liberally and focus on the clause "except as otherwise directed by the Secretary of Defense" in Title 10 USC section 162.¹⁶ Operating under this assumption, SecDef directs OPCON of the strategic airborne C2ISR mission to the USAF. Doctrinally JP1 does not list intelligence as a responsibility of a CCDR.¹⁷ ISR is a core mission of the USAF.¹⁸ The transfer of strategic C2ISR is doctrinally logical. There are two historical models for the flow of operational control. The first is the pre-Goldwater-Nichols era. Although there were combatant commands, Service Secretaries and Service Chiefs exercised a great deal of control over their service assets.¹⁹ The second, and more attainable model, is the role of Air Combat Command

under Joint Forces Command.²⁰ ACC was the air component to USJFCOM. The UCP disbanded USJFCOM, erasing the opportunity for ACC to be a traditional Component MAJCOM. It does take some creativity, but it is conceivable that ACC could be labeled the air component to CJCS delegated operations or the SecDef could ask for Presidential approval to assign the strategic airborne C2ISR mission and its OPCON to ACC. ACC in-turn delegate OPCON to 25th Air Force. In both these scenarios 25 AF would act as the arbiter for strategic airborne C2ISR through its 625 AOC. This is a similar organizational structure to 618 AOC Tanker Airlift Control Center. The 618 AOC is the AOC for 18 AF, the NAF for AMC, who is the air component MAJCOM for USTRANSCOM.²¹ In this COA, J32 would remain an entity that advises the CJCS and the SecDef on when it would be appropriate to transfer OPCON to CCDRs during wartime activities. This COA relies heavily on liberal interpretation of a law by civilian leadership.

COA 3

The third COA establishes a service component command. USSTRATCOM reintegrates ISR back into their mission set. A service component command AF Vigilance Command is stood-up subordinate to USSTRATCOM. AF Vigilance Command integrates 25th and 24th Air Forces. SecDef delegates OPCON to the Commander of USSTRATCOM, to the Commander of AF Vigilance command, to 25 AF/CC. The 25 AF/CC acts as global C2ISR arbiter through the C2 function of its 625 AOC. If sister service assets are later integrated under AF Vigilance Command, the title would be converted to JFCC-Vigilance and it would become a functional component command. The entity J32 would remain as before, an advisory element to the CJCS and SecDef. From a legal and doctrinal standpoint, this COA is the most sound, but it does have its weaknesses. The status Component Number Air Force for USSTRATCOM has been

previously assigned to 8 AF. The 8 AF/CC has JFACC authority, if they chose to exercise it, over Vigilance Command assets.²² A robust set of CONOPs between the two NAFs would need to be established to prevent inadvertent or malicious chain-of-command incursions.

Integration

Integration of this new structure is equally important as the structure itself. While changing the structure does gain efficiencies, incorporating that structure into a conducive intelligence network allows the full realization of those efficiencies. In a model of ISR integration (Figure 1) a CCDR sends intelligence requests and requirements to US Vigilance Command. US Vigilance Command tasks 25 AF as the office of primary responsibility. 25 AF liaises with 24 AF to exploit intelligence in the cyber domain to include previously tabulated data in the cloud derived from big data analysis. 25 AF federated PED teams and retained analysts would integrate the intelligence from the cyber domain with intelligence from the space domain and other theater assets. If this process can provide an answer for the request, the analyst publishes the report and the 625 AOC retains a valuable aircraft sortie for another priority mission. If the analyst determines the intelligence on file cannot answer the request, she will request 25 AF work through the 625 AOC to divert the area of operation for the next day's RQ-4 flight. The federated PED analyst passes the requested intelligence to the retained analyst to answer the initial request. In the process the PED analyst discovers a previously unobserved pattern of life and request subsequent RC-135 flights to provide intelligence answers before leaders know there are questions. The 25 AF retained analyst packages the intelligence summary into a report on the cloud and sends the CCDR a link to retrieve it. This process drives a CCDR to request intelligence, not a sensor. It provides teeth to the concept of being sensor agnostic. This model uses the cloud combined with a federated and distributed system to satisfy around-

the-clock, around-the-world request. If the speed of this processing could be accomplished near-real-time, the intelligence principle of prediction could immerge as a pseudo-command and control function.

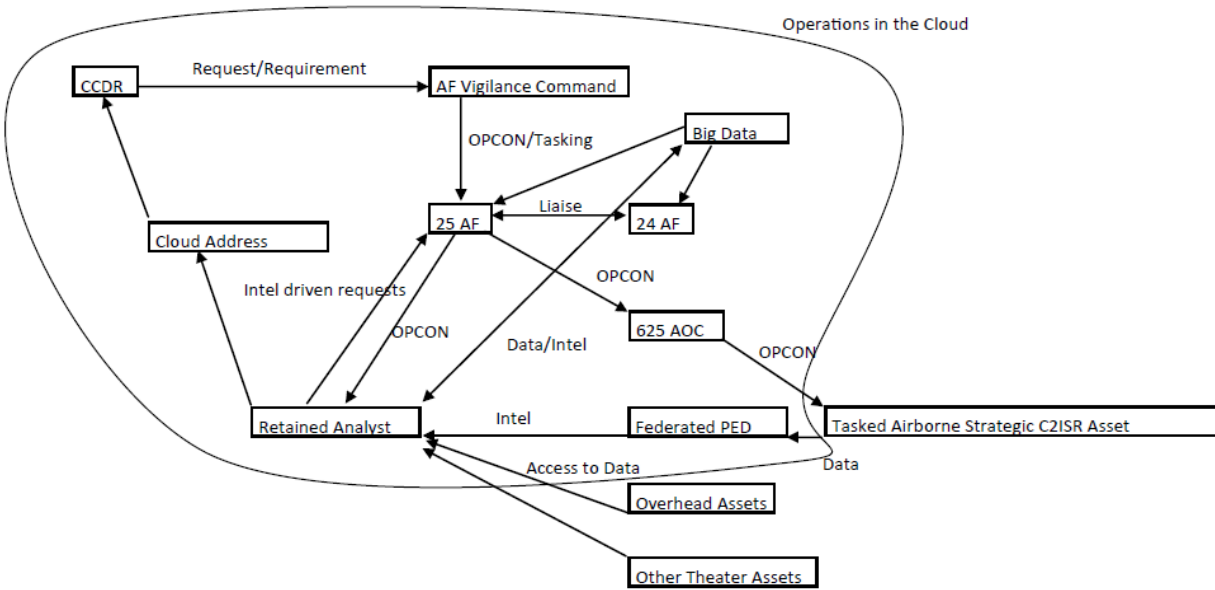


Figure 1: Model of ISR Integration

Validation

At the conclusion of this thought experiment a telephone interview was performed with members at 25 AF. The staff at 25 AF relayed they had concurrently imaged similar structures. They relayed that in recent history there was little senior military appetite for force structure changes of this nature.

Conclusion

Although this research did not provide novel or actionable ideas there are several valuable conclusions that can be drawn. The first is the importance of this topic. In analytic research an experiment must be repeatable. The fact that 25 AF and this research found similar conclusions during independent thought experiments shows that the solutions presented are reliable. This reliability shows the significance of the ideas and warrants continued discussion.

The second conclusion is that although military senior leadership may not be support change, civilian leadership support is strengthening. This is apparent in the draft FY17 NDAA,²³ in Secretary Carter's 5 April 2016 address,²⁴ and Senator McCain's March 2016 address.²⁵ In an increasingly globalized world where a single combatant commander does not own a problem set, it is imperative that the military provide its civilian leaders with a globally agile solutions.

End Notes

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