

Military Strategy for Agile Combat Support in the United States Air Force

CAPTAIN STEPHANNIE HERNÁNDEZ RUBERTÉ, USAF

The United States Air Force (USAF) is in a position that requires adapting to emerging global threats. The development of adversaries across multiple domains calls for the preparation of air forces in a manner capable of conducting adaptive operations—a renewed focus on world powers is vital to combating threats to American power, influence, and interests.

To achieve survivability in contested, degraded, and operationally limited environments, the Air Force has begun practicing the deployment of tactical fighter wings to complement an offensive capability in advantageous locations for military bases, with the necessary agility, posture, and infrastructure. The change in deployment strategy implies the need for training in distributed and decentralized operations, which, until now, have been limited in practice. In turn, Air Force management continues to seek success in implementing the new strategy in an environment of limited resources—which have become much more complex; seeking to develop competencies in support of agile aviation, while mitigating an operational infrastructure deficit due to antiquated equipment.

Military strategy for agile combat support in the USAF

For the past decade, the USAF has sought to refocus its efforts on developing a survivability and mobility capability, or deployment agility, of its combat forces. Several documents allude to the need for a renewed posture for military forces, which has required a change in mentality and training within the Air Force, to develop forces capable of extending their survival in contested, degraded, and operationally limited environments.¹ These documents also mention the need for better readiness in terms of military agility and resiliency, designated as the agile combat employment concept of operations, focused on adaptive base-building. Among the antecedents to the foundation of this theory, is the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, which introduces the need for modernization of military capabilities, “adaptable [as a consequence] of the uncertainty that exists in the global strategic environment that continues to change.”² Like the National Defense Strategy, the 2017 US National Security Strategy highlights the requirement for an air force prepared to immediately face events in a combat theater.³ The 2021 Interim National Security Strategy adds the need for continued distribution of

military power to deter and prevent adversaries from threatening both US and allied nation interests, and the global community.

Although decades of worldwide strategic advantage have demonstrated the rigor of the US in anticipating changes in the war field, the transition to an agile method of deployment, seeking to implement the mobilization of decentralized, scalable, and resistant tactical wings to contested environments, confirms the arduous task the USAF must adapt to.

Concepts related to the discussion of agile combat

The USAF has invested time and resources to refine the concept of deploying agile military units between main operating bases and forward locations, with the goal of seeking the element of surprise during the resurgence of global competition with other military forces. The strategy has required a transition to the development of temporary bases to counter the evolution of modern weapons, in particular long-range precision weapons and ballistic missiles, which threaten main operating bases. However, the concept of adaptive bases could not be realized without considering the survival of the Air Force in contested, degraded, and operationally limited environments. Today, there are a myriad of challenges to Air Force command and control (C2) operations due to the continued development of enemy anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) weaponry, built to sideline US operations.⁴ Thus, there has been a greater focus on the innovation and expansion of C2 across multiple domains, seeking to maintain air, space, and cyber superiority, which has also generated discussions regarding the US agility deploying air power. The mobilization and deployment of aircraft to temporary bases, with a geographically advantageous position, has brought to light the need for the multifunctional “Airman” - who must conduct tasks outside their particular area of expertise to provide support to combat aviation elements.⁵ Cross-functional teams are key to performing dispersed and dynamic operations, but their continuous development, both in concept and training, is essential for the survival of temporary bases and agile missions —the need for a rapid escalation capability is required, since dispersing aviation and support teams in the combat theater requires maintaining an agile footprint.

Challenges to the evolution of agile combat strategy

The introduction of the agile combat strategy has brought with it several challenges to the USAF. Although it's expected to be advantageous to the projection of US power, since air forces would be able to take advantage of a network of

military bases in austere locations to support operations against long range targets, the transition has proven difficult.

Under the agile combat operations concept, the tactical wing reorganizes and practices through joint military exercises to deploy an entirely self-sufficient combat force. This has caused an increase in training costs; not only are more resources required to support deployment readiness, but the establishment of a network of military bases also incur an added cost, in terms of the periodic movement of temporary bases.⁶ The adaptive base involves an initial deployment, followed by the construction, disassembly, and reconstruction of the same military capabilities in another austere location, which requires a considerable number of financial resources. In addition to the increased expense to maintain an agile footprint, the concept of distributed and decentralized operations requires extensive Air Force training, which has been noticeably lacking.

Considering that for decades, the US has practiced centralized command and decentralized execution; establishing bases in contested, degraded, and operationally limited locations requires decentralized command to support decision-making at times when there is no communication with higher headquarters. To enable delegation and empower subordinate unit commanders, it is necessary to establish a common lexicon among the armed forces to discuss issues related to agile combat. Given the development of new requirements and operating standards to conduct adaptive basing, it is critical for the USAF to create training manuals that level expectations across tactical wings. This way, the US could begin to establish a common dialect between the USAF and the aviation branches of allied countries.

Introduction of agile combat employment for allied nations

Allied nations, including those that are part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, have already integrated with the US in combat through multi-domain operations. Continuous cooperation will require interoperability in contested and operationally limited environments, since only then will it be possible to maximize power against a common enemy. Therefore, the development of instruction manuals to elaborate on the use of agile combat is only the beginning—it becomes increasingly important to include allied nations as participants in military exercises prior to deployment, to enable practice of a common dialect and tactics.

Innovation comes into play when considering agility in terms of how to drive the pace of military operations in different theaters of combat. The US military routinely investigates how to outmaneuver the enemy, and employing agile combat is an innovative concept of operations that considers the need for adaptive base support to counter the decision-making cycle of the enemy. Although practice has proven the difficulty faced by the USAF in preparing tactical wings, in

terms of mobilizing combat-ready forces to conduct decentralized, scalable, and resilient operations in competitive environments, it is an undeniable requirement for the institution, to maintain agile fighting forces against continually evolving adversaries. □

Notes

1. Mills, P., Leftwich, J. A., Drew, J. G., Felten, D. P., Girardini, J., Godges, J. P., Lostumbo, M. J., Narayanan, A., Van Abel, K., Welburn, J. W., & Wirth, A. J. (2020, April 16). Building agile combat support competencies to enable evolving adaptive basing concepts. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4200.html.

2. Office of the Secretary of Defense. (2018). Summary of the 2018 national defense strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American military's competitive edge. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

3. White House. (2017). National security strategy of the United States of America. <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/lps90878/2017/NSSFfinal121820170905.pdf>.

4. Tompkins, W. (2018). Command & control of ISR in a contested, degraded, and operationally limited environment: Ensuring support to unit level intelligence (part 1). Over the horizon: Multi-domain operations & strategy. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <https://othjournal.com/2018/12/10/command-control-of-isr-in-a-contested-degraded-andoperationally-limited-environment-ensuring-support-to-unit-level-intelligence-part-1-2/>.

5. Knight, K. (2021, March 15). Multi-capable airmen: Smarter. Faster. Stronger. The Mobility Forum. <https://themobilityforum.net/2021/03/15/multi-capable-airmen-smarter-fasterstronger/>.

6. Knight, K. (2021, March 15). Multi-capable airmen: Smarter. Faster. Stronger. The Mobility Forum. <https://themobilityforum.net/2021/03/15/multi-capable-airmen-smarter-fasterstronger/>.



Captain Stephannie Hernández Ruberté, USAF

Capt. Stephannie Hernández Ruberté is the Chief of the Advisory Mission Planning Section, 4th Tactical Fighter Wing, Seymour Johnson AFB, NC. Between her current and previous duty assignment, Capt. Hernandez was selected to the US Fighter Aircraft Weapons School, Nellis AFB, NV, from which she graduated as a Weapons Intelligence Officer. Prior to her current job, Captain Hernández was the Chief of the Aviation Unit Support Branch for the Air Transport Command, leading a nine-member team responsible for disseminating operational information and aerial intelligence through 114 service units. Capt. Hernandez attended the Officer Intelligence Course, 315th Intelligence Training Squadron, Goodfellow AFB, TX, graduating with honors in May 2015.