Cohesive Air Defense

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Modern conventional warfare, whether in the sands of Iraq or on the Korean peninsula, is a complex, lethal endeavor. To be successful in such a conflict, the theater commander, whether of a single nation or a coalition of nations, must be able to react rapidly and with a vision which covers the entire theater including ground, naval and air threats to friendly forces. Because of the tremendous influence of modern technology on warfare, the most dyramic threat in the theater battle is in the air, not just from enemy aircraft, but from ballistic missiles as well. In the American military, we have traditionally divided the responsibility for defense from air and missile attack between the Services. But given the speed and lethality of modern weapons, we should now end that arbitrary division of responsibilities. The theater commander needs a single individual, responsible for defending against all enemy attacks from the air, regardless of the type of weapon system being used for attack.

By the end of World War II, the Army and its tethered offspring, the Army Air Forces, had discovered that the most effective way of providing air defense was for a single Service component, the Army Air Force, to control all air defense assets, both airborne (fighters and interceptors) and ground based (air defense artillery). But in the complex politics of consolidating the military into a single Defense Department and the push to create a separate Air Force, that effectiveness was deleted. In return for senior Army support for a separate Service, the Air Force agreed not to push the issue of control of air defense assets. It may not have seemed particularly important in those days when ground based air defense provided only a point defense against enemy air attack. But today the enemy threat from the air is theater-wide, and the range and capabilities of air defense assets go well beyond point defense. Whether judged on the grounds of military effectiveness or common sense, there is a compelling need for a single air commander tasked with defending against both aircraft and missile threats.

Air defense of friendly territory constitutes the defensive counterair mission. It really doesn't matter whether the defense is against aircraft or missiles, it's still defensive counterair operations. We have long recognized the need for a single commander to command and control defense against enemy aircraft. The reason for this is simple. Air defense assets are limited, high value assets. Only by using a single commander, who has a theater wide perspective concerning the enemy's airborne attack, can we concentrate those assets where they are most needed. It is efficient because it allows us to direct defensive counterair assets without layers of intermediate control. It is effective because it allows us to mass those limited air defense assets against the most serious threat from the enemy. In today's environment, where the enemy may attack with aircraftl missiles, or a combination of both, the need for centralized control of those air defense assets extends as well to the theater missile defense (TMD) assets available to the commander.

From the standpoint of efficiency, consolidated control of aircraft and missile defense assets eliminates overlapping areas of responsibility. The air component commander has direct access

both to the theater warning systems and the national warning assets out of theater. A single Service command of aircraft and missile defense assets provides the air component commander seamless, direct communications with all theater defensive systems. The need for the relay or transfer of information between Service components is eliminated, thus saving critical minutes and seconds. Further, the chance of fatal error is reduced when a single Service component controls all counterair resources. Both possibilities, 1) that duplicate systems will be used to react to an incoming threat, or 2) that no system will react in mistaken belief that another Services systems will be employed are drastically reduced. The seam which currently divides aircraft and missile defense is eliminated. Elimination of seams makes military operations more efficient and reduces vulnerabilities which an enemy can exploit.

To be most effective, single Service control of aircraft and missile counterair defense assets should be placed in lhe hands of the commander having a view of combat operations which is both theater-wide and air and space oriented. Ground commanders, by the very nature of their task, focus on the battle from a two dimensional, linear point of view and tend to view the enemy threat in terms of the land forces arrayed in front of them. The air commander, on the other hand, must necessarily also focus on the third dimension. His view is not limited to the enemy directly across the front lines, but is broader, encompassing the air and space medium throughout the theater. Just as the ground commander is schooled in maneuver of land forces in the surface battlel the air commander is schooled in maneuver of air and space forces in the three dimensional world of air combat.

The time has come to revise our thinking and our defense organizational structure. Air warfare is about control and exploitation of air and space, regardless of the type weapon system transiting that air and space. Old agreements, based on the politics of post-World War II defense reorganization should be replaced with an organizational structure which accomodates all dimensions of future military conflict. The Service providing that defense should be the one which routinely operates in the third dimension.
