

Air Expeditionary Force - Ground Attack

Direct Air Attack Against Conventional Forces

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Introduction

As the US looks into its national security concerns for the future it is apparent there will be less reliance on pre-positioned forces to handle contingency operations from general conventional war to limited war. In the case of conventional attack against an ally or national interest, American military forces must be able to move in rapidly, stabilize the situation, and seize the initiative. A possible scenario in such an event is the rapid armored thrust. Deployed US forces must be able to effectively deal with this type of attack. Heavy land forces are extremely capable of this task but are difficult to move requiring significant time and transportation assets. Light forces (such as airborne troops) are easier to deploy but often lack sufficient firepower to handle this type of threat. Airpower, on the other hand, provides a rapidly deployable force and in most cases is capable of effecting a conflict more quickly than ground forces. Aircraft can seize the initiative, and stop or delay the ground offensive until sufficient ground forces are present. Therefore, as America decreases its forces overseas it must plan to use an airpower force capable of rapidly moving into a situation and conducting direct attack against an enemy field force. This force would either end the conflict or allow ground forces the time necessary to assemble to meet national objectives. The purpose of this paper is to examine the development and employment of a new form of the air-power expeditionary force, the AEF-GA (Airpower Expeditionary Force-Ground Attack). The AEF-GA is tailored around aircraft capable of directly targeting an enemy field army. This package would be able to operate independent of, or prior to ground force deployment, in conjunction with ground units once in place, and in integrated fashion with other air assets. Such a force would provide options to counter enemy offensives that may otherwise not be available.

AEF-GA

The concept of the AEF-GA is the direct independent application of air power against mobile tactical military targets. Joint Publication 1 describes this type of operation as an asymmetrical battle. This scenario will strictly dictate the mission, applicability, availability and employment of the aerial "maneuver" element. The proper role and the uniqueness of the AEF-GA is defined by these parameters.

The mission of the AEF-GA is similar to the conventional AEF with differences in targeting. At present, the mission of a conventional AEF is to project US airpower (an air presence) to trouble spots around the globe in a rapid fashion. In some cases such as SWA (South West Asia) the AEF has been used to fill the "gap" left by the absence of a deployed aircraft carrier. The mission of the AEF-GA would be very much the same but instead would be used to fill the "gap" left by

the absence of adequate ground forces. This could either be in a peacetime setting to show national resolve, or in crisis situation to conduct combat operations. This unit is tailored for combat operations against potentially threatening ground forces.

Prior to hostilities, the AEF-GA would show a commitment by the US to directly effect any conventional assaults against the area of interest. This AEF-GA would continue to conduct normal training operations in an effort to become familiar with the local area and likely avenues of attack. The objective of these operations is to build situational awareness. This information is extremely valuable for any potential hostilities given the nature of attacks that the force would be required to conduct.

Once hostilities have commenced, the mission of the AEF-GA is to serve as an aerial "ground" force and directly target the enemy offensive. Combat operations essentially follow three lines. Operations to deny ground, operations to destroy units, and punitive strikes in a static ground situation.

Operations to deny ground follow historic lines where aircraft have been employed to shape the direction of the battle. Essentially, the objective of ground denial missions is to delay and disrupt an enemy force. In situations where key terrain is threatened, the AEF-GA's task is to conduct attacks in an attempt to keep an enemy force from gaining the advantage. This entails keeping an enemy from seizing staging areas, ports, airfields, or other key areas of interest. This mission is executed by massing aircraft in the threatened geographical regions and maintaining continuous pressure. Air forces cannot hold ground, but through heavy attacks are capable of delaying and disrupting invading forces causing considerable attrition. This effort to buy time or dismantle a coordinated assault might make enemy military operations too costly or even impossible.

An example of denying terrain to a ground force through the application of airpower occurred during the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and Egypt. In an attempt to retreat to the Suez, the Egyptians were fleeing head long toward the Mitla Pass and supposed safety beyond. The Israeli objective was to reach the pass ahead of the Egyptians and thus deny any escape. Israel was forced to use significant airpower in a concentrated manner to deny this exit to the retreating forces. Aircraft destroyed thousands of Egyptian vehicles and thus were able to deny their access to the ground that would lead them to safety. In situations where the US is attempting to reinforce an area with ground forces, allow its allies time to mobilize, or protect critical areas of interest, employing the AEF-GA to deny ground might serve to stabilize the situation and force the enemy to react.

Air attacks to delay or disrupt ground forces also have been successful in past conflicts. The Allied attacks on German reinforcements during the Normandy campaign in June 1944 are such a case. Through the massing of aircraft against armored forces the Allies were able to keep a major German counter attack from developing. This effort allowed ground forces the time necessary to assemble and kept the Germans from seizing the initiative.

The key factor in these ground denial missions is that aircraft are being massed against targets based on geographical concerns, i.e. keeping the enemy from reaching the pass. In contrast to

this, aircraft can also be massed against specific combat units. These operations are efforts to destroy designated units in detail.

Operations to destroy units involve the full weight of the AEF-GA massed against a specific target ground unit. Depending on the situation and size of the AEF-GA, this could range from battalion to corps concentration of forces. The objective of this type of attack is the direct targeting of combat power in an effort to annihilate or make it ineffective. Historically this type of operation has several examples. During the Second World War, the concept of massing air forces to destroy ground units showed its effectiveness. The XII Tactical Air Command (TAC) was used to target the German 19th Army in southern France during August 1944. In an effort to stop the German retreat, Allied tactical air forces (mainly P 47 Thunderbolts) massed against the 30 mile long column the fleeing Germans presented. In a two day period thousands of vehicles were destroyed on the road by marauding Thunderbolts. The outcome was the elimination of the 19th Army as a viable fighting force. A more recent example of targeting a ground unit for destruction occurred in the war with Iraq. On the night of 31 January 1991, Allied air forces, mainly A-10s operating at night, attacked the Iraqi 5th Mechanized Infantry Division. The Iraqi 5th Mech was maneuvering in the open to support the developing battle of Al Kahfji. The result was the annihilation of an entire Iraqi armored brigade on a road leading from the Kuwaiti town of Al Wafra. After this devastating loss the Iraqis ceased to move in large numbers until the final days of the war.

Both of the above situations describe enemy mobile offensive operations. The AEF-GA is also well suited to conduct punitive strikes in a static scenario. The same principle of mass against ground targets applies in this case. Examples of these attacks are the initial stages of the air war against Iraq and the operations against limited ground targets in Bosnia. In this case, the AEF-GA is capable of singling out units or key areas as dictated by the scenario and military objectives. The significance of a "first" blow against an enemy that effectively destroys a major combat unit is great. A systematic destruction of enemy units in the field would have a decisive effect on their capability to conduct combat operations. For example, the Iraqis could have entrenched instead of withdrawn their forces during the crisis of fall 1994 and threatened to conduct offensive operations into Kuwait. This threat would have been greatly degraded had American airpower destroyed the lead republican guard division in a concentrated attack.

Whether in defensive or offensive roles the mission of the AEF-GA is centered on one aspect - directly effecting the ground battle. By denying an enemy the use of key terrain, individually destroying units, or conducting punishment strikes, the AEF-GA relies on mass and concentration to achieve its objectives.

The AEF-GA's mission of direct attack is viable in several situations. The first, as already mentioned, is in response to a conventional attack in an area where no US ground forces are present. This is currently the situation in Kuwait where the U.S. Army does not maintain a large ground force on a permanent basis. Any large scale Iraqi attack against Kuwait will be met by U.S. airpower in the initial stages of the war. In fact, airpower offers the best chance at keeping Iraq from destroying or capturing the pre-positioned equipment in Kuwait. Any Iraqi offensive will be very rapid and not vulnerable to a traditional interdiction campaign. In a two day war for the sixty miles of Kuwait elimination of the bridges over the Euphrates may not have a decisive

effect. Destruction of the lead division by overwhelming air attack might slow or even make the offensive too costly to continue. In this situation, the AEF-GA would continue to target the enemy field force attempting to seize the initiative from the air and keep the enemy off balance until ground forces arrived.

In addition to not being present at the start of the conflict, ground forces face other considerations and limitations. Reliance on air power to fight a "ground" war may be necessary in situations where it is logistically difficult to introduce land forces. Land locked regions might only be accessible by air. Even if port facilities are available reinforcement by sea is time and asset limited. In some situations, airpower might be the only force capable of applying military pressure in a timely fashion.

Another factor in using an AEF-GA, no matter how distasteful to airmen, is political objectives. In some cases it may be politically unfeasible to commit the necessary numbers of U.S. ground forces. This could be either in an effort to limit ground casualties, satisfy shaky alliances or to quell domestic political pressure. Even large scale conventional combat will not be devoid of these considerations. For example, an armored attack by Libya against Chad may not be seen as sufficient cause to employ U.S. ground forces. Deployment and employment of an aerial force to attack the invading Libyan army might be more desirable. This has certainly been the case with the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. Until recently, the only real pressure applied was from the air. This is also true in Iraq where current operations amount to an "occupation by air." Whatever the specifics, political concerns might make airpower the most attractive option to counter any ground threat.

The use of the AEF-GA is not universal to all scenarios. Certain contingencies, however, make its employment the best option until other forces can be introduced to the conflict. The AEF-GA is not an attempt to fight and win every war from the air but only an effort to use available air forces to regain and maintain the initiative.

Advances in the lethality of tactical airpower are a cornerstone to the success of the AEF-GA. At present the backbone of the USAF ground attack force is the A-10. Improvements to the A-10 significantly increase its ability to engage ground targets both day and night. A new computed bomb sight allows for effective medium altitude employment with both general purpose and cluster munitions. This allows the A-10 to avoid threats and conduct SEAD C operations in heavy AAA environments. Increased accuracy to the free fall delivery capability is a supplement to the precision of the AGM-65. A-10 use of the maverick had an extremely high kill percentage and was very versatile in the War with Iraq. Besides carried munitions, the A-10 can employ 1150 rounds of 30MM against an array of ground targets. Given its munitions load capability, a single A-10 is capable of destroying numerous targets on a single sortie. The most significant advance for the A-10 has been Night Vision Goggle (NVG) operations. With these devices, A-10s have the capability to detect and strike targets such as armor throughout the cover of darkness. Other assets such as LANTIRN F-16s are also capable of directly targeting ground forces. Increased use of the AGM-65 and LGBs make the F-16 more viable in this role. The overall impact of the improvements in tactical aviation is the true ability to destroy individual pieces of equipment with a high rate of success. This capability employed in a concentrated fashion can quickly and decisively degrade any ground force. The composition of an AEF-GA

must make use of these advantages. By combining attack aircraft (such as the A-10) with precision strike capability (such as the F-16 or F-15E) a synergistic effect can be achieved. This force is able to apply pressure against ground units across a wide spectrum.

The final element of the AEF-GA's uniqueness of operations is employment. Traditionally, airpower goes through the apportionment process and is divided among areas depending on requests and intelligence estimates. This process often divides the combat power of massed aircraft and is normally in support of the army or in attacks against static targets. Employment of the AEF-GA will be a massed formation against specified ground units. In an attempt to exploit the principle of mass, the AEF-GA operates in coordinated fashion to destroy ground units in detail. This aerial "shock" attack is a near simultaneous strike against divisional centers of gravity and combat forces. A massed attack against critical nodes such as command and control or logistic centers combined with direct attack against the combat units will have a decisive effect on the enemy maneuver element.

The AEF-GA is a combination of aircraft that are well suited to directly effect the ground battle. The mission of this force is to conduct independent operations in an attempt to regain or maintain the initiative by either delaying or destroying an enemy force. Scenarios for its applicability are driven by many factors from ground force availability to political necessity. Regardless of the reason, the composite force dedicated to direct attack on an enemy field force is more realistic with today's weapons than ever before. These forces have the ability to quickly enter a conflict and produce decisive results.

Force Integration

The AEF-GA will benefit from coordinated operations as other assets appear in theater. Complete integration with the air campaign will have a synergistic effect on the success against the field force. First, air to air and SEAD assets achieve or maintain air superiority at least over the battle area if not over the theater. Air interdiction assets, if available, continue to influence the deep battle and work to funnel ground units into the "killing" zone of the AEF-GA. This is possible by attacking lines of communication and command and control targets in traditional AI operations. Then the command and control of the ground forces can be engaged. Information warfare assets identify critical targets that support coordination in the enemy field force such as corps HQs, command nodes, etc. These links are either degraded, exploited, or destroyed by electronic warfare assets or precision guided attacks thereby forcing the enemy assault to be badly coordinated. JSTARS identifies the mobile units as they attempt to operate in a mobile fashion. The AEF-GA targets these units and destroys them in detail. This type of warfare would truly attack all aspects of the enemy ground offensive at all points nearly simultaneously. Enemy air defense forces can be expected to be overwhelmed and unable to support their tactical units. These operations would continue until the situation stabilized, ground and additional air forces arrived in theater and a more traditional campaign is undertaken, or the cessation of hostilities. This combined warfare would, of course, be coordinated by the JFACC to ensure complete unity of effort.

In addition to integrating with other air assets, the AEF-GA is well suited to continue to operate in conjunction with ground forces. The initial use of the AEF-GA is designed to be in the

asymmetrical battle prior to arrival of U.S. ground forces. Once land forces are in place the AEF-GA can continue to function in two ways. First, the separate aircraft types can be employed in the traditional manner as driven by the ATO process. Second, the AEF-GA can be kept in coordinated fashion and continue to operate in mass. This last option opens possibilities to conduct true joint operations. Such options include using the massed force to provide flank security, screening, or attack preparation to ground forces as desired. The concept of aircraft protecting the flank of a ground force is not an original concept. Once again World War II provides excellent examples. The Third Army's rapid advance through France in 1944 was protected on the flank by the XIX TAC. This aerial force was used enmasse to counter any German counter attack with devastating results. The advantage gained by using tactical aircraft in this manner is that it offers tremendous flexibility to the overall campaign. Aircraft are capable of covering an entire front and are easily capable of shifting focus and mission from day to day. Also, this mobility allows the AEF-GA to operate as an operational reserve to be used at critical points in the campaign. In all, the AEF-GA provides as many options after a ground force is in place as it does prior.

Conclusion

The possibility of conventional attack is on the increase around the world today. As weapons become more available to third world nations and as previously quiet areas flare up, the U.S. can expect to be faced with this situation. Whether again in the Persian Gulf by either Iraq or Iran, or in the North West Pacific by North Korea America must be able to quickly and decisively intervene. In all cases, air forces will be able to reinforce in the most timely manner. It is therefore logical to plan to engage ground forces with air units specifically designed for the task. This unit is the AEF-GA. Use of the AEF-GA can have the effect of placing a maneuver element at a place of our choosing. This ground attack capability supplements the Air Forces ability to strike hard static targets with precision. The ability to defeat an enemy field army is one that the USAF will need to maintain for the foreseeable future. This concept can be demonstrated through participation in numerous peacetime exercises across the CONUS. The Army's National Training Center offers an excellent environment to validate AEF-GA operations. AEF-GA asymmetrical attack against the OPFOR one just one day of the battle will demonstrate the decisive nature of modern airpower against a mobile enemy. Employment on the Nellis ranges at the "Flag" exercises also can provide the necessary data although against static targets. This concept is necessary because in some conflicts the field force will be the center of gravity. The USAF must be able to conduct direct attack to destroy any enemy ground element. This can produce the desired effect of placing an armored battalion in an enemy rear or in an area where he was not expecting an attack. The AEF-GA offers the best tailored opportunity to achieve this objective.

Notes

1. Joint Pub 1 *Joint Warfare of the US Armed Forces* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1991), p. 59.
2. Chiam Herzog, *Arab Israeli Wars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p 163.
3. Edward Jablonski, *Air War* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), Vol 4 p. 79.
4. Geoffrey Perret, *Winged Victory* (New York: Random House, 1993), pp. 317-318.

5. Williamson Murray, *Air War in the Persian Gulf* (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, Inc, 1995), p. 253.
 6. Bruce W. Watson et al, *Military Lessons of the Gulf War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993), pp. 93-94.
 7. John A Warden, *The Air Campaign* (Washington: Pergaman-Brassey's, 1989), pp. 91-92.
 8. Perret, *Winged Victory*, p315.
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