

# Forging New Horizons

## The Imperative for USAF Strategic Planning

The last strategic planning vision for the United States Air Force was put forth in 1947 by Hap Arnold with the advice and assistance of his scientific advisor, Dr. Theodore von Kármán. The report, *Toward New Horizons*, placed airpower in the context of post-WWII scientific developments and described how the Air Force should organize and invest to capitalize on those developments. Since then, there has been no comparable overarching vision of the kind of Air Force we will need 20 to 30 years down the road. I served 35 years in the Air Force in cockpit, command, and staff positions up through vice chief of staff, and I have no recollection of any senior Air Force leader putting forth a long-range strategic planning vision of the US Air Force's future and laying out the road map and capabilities needed to get there.

The strategic environment we face today presents incredibly complex challenges. In the future, we will confront those same challenges—compounded by increasing competition from rising peers such as China and a resurgent Russia—that have a full range of technological, military, and economic capabilities with which to threaten our security. Today we are fully engaged in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East in general, and we are fighting to survive. The lion's share of the United States' attention goes to Army and Marine Corps ground forces, while Air Force calls for recapitalization fall on deaf ears in the administration and Congress. The Air Force budget plea is for an additional \$20 billion per year. It is not being heard precisely because Airmen have not made a succinct long-range strategic case, which could help to underscore what we see as critical needs.

To fill this strategic gap, I believe that the Air Force must establish an independent long-range strategic planning group, headed by a deeply experienced, forward-looking general officer and staffed with senior experts in air, space, and cyber warfare; technology; intelligence; culture; and threat assessments. The group's charter would be to examine scenarios we could face in 2020 and 2030 in sufficient detail to identify and articulate potential threats and propose strategies and capabilities the Air Force will need to counter them. The group must be experienced, well manned, and independent of the day-to-day struggles Air Force leaders face in the here and now. Consider the following issues:

- There is a growing Chinese economic, military, and diplomatic presence in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. China also fields aggressive space programs with the potential to disrupt military and commercial space activities. Along with these troubling developments, Chinese computer hackers currently pose the most aggressive and dangerous cyber threat to the US economic and military infrastructure.
  - If current trends continue, will China dominate trade in these strategic areas?
  - Will it extend its military capabilities, with a powerful blue-water navy, to control the sea lanes from the Indian Ocean to Japan?
  - Will it build a strategic air force to support its goals?
  - What air, space, and cyberspace investments must we make today and in the future to preserve US security against this potential competitor?
- Russia has emerged from its decline of the 1990s fueled by capital from oil and natural gas and backed by a strong, aggressive central government. Russia's conventional military forces may be smaller than those of the Cold War era, but its strategic nuclear forces still have the ability to hold the United States at risk. In the diplomatic realm, Russia has adopted an adversarial stance toward the United States with respect to key strategic interests such as Iranian nuclear proliferation and US support for European missile defenses.
  - Will Russia continue to develop its strategic forces as a challenge to the United States in Europe and in the Middle East?
  - Will Russian support for Iranian nuclear programs increase the instability in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East?
  - Will the Russian oil and natural gas leverage over European states shift the balance in Europe toward Russian interests?
  - Will Russian exports of next generation aircraft and anti-aircraft missile technologies result in strategic and operational risk for US forces?
  - Will China and Russia create a strategic alliance to counter their perceptions of US intentions?
  - How will a growing, sophisticated India play in this strategic future?

An Air Force long-range strategic planning group needs to have expertise to examine these, and a host of other, possibilities. We should have intelligence expertise to look at where we think our future adversaries are headed. We

must have the experts in technology to predict how military technology will evolve, both for us and our potential adversaries, and most particularly, we must factor the long-range impact and evolution of cyber warfare into our projections. We must also have expertise in culture and economics to predict how China and Russia will evolve. It is only by thorough and careful long-range pragmatic analyses that we can prepare to address these multifaceted evolutions from a strategic perspective.

Then, based on our best judgments, we need to examine our own Air Force capabilities and project how they must evolve to meet potential threats. The future we face will require air, space, and cyberspace capabilities that can confront a full range of challenges. We already experience daily attacks from adversaries in the cyber world—these attacks will continue and become more sophisticated as technologies and tactics evolve. Conventional challenges will also become more sophisticated as adversaries acquire new technologies, develop countermeasures designed to negate our advantages, and forge alliances to constrain our actions. Finally, rogue states and emerging peer competitors will attempt to balance, and ultimately defeat, our forces should competition turn into war. Airmen have a responsibility to assess the likely outlines of these future challenges—General Arnold had the strategic foresight to lay the foundations for the Air Force that won the Cold War. Today, we must develop a similar strategic plan that will guarantee our security for the new horizons that lay before us.

A powerful Air Force long-range strategic planning group cannot be ad hoc. It must be an institutional entity, an assistant chief of staff function, reporting directly to the secretary and the chief of staff. Its views, findings, and recommendations must be continuously provided to Air Force leaders and combatant commands. It must also be available to other DoD elements. If it is sustained by Air Force leaders, it can become a powerful capability to illuminate and project our Air Force future and its needs.



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