



**Dubai International Air Chiefs
Conference:
“Tailoring Airpower Capabilities for
Joint Combat Operations”**

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Introduction

Thank you for that very kind introduction. We thank His Highness General Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid al Maktoum for his generous patronage of this conference, being held here in this magnificent venue. To my friend and colleague, Major General Swaidan: thank you for extending the kind invitation to join my fellow airmen in addressing this distinguished audience, and in discussing matters of mutual interest. And, I thank the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis for organizing this conference, with the world-renowned International Aerospace Exhibition—now in its twelfth year—as our inspirational backdrop.

We all face a future in which we must sustain, and in some cases increase, our level of effort to meet wide-ranging challenges, all the while contending with declining resources. And as we all acknowledge, and do our best to prepare for, increasing geostrategic complexity and continued economic pressures, we must be ever more efficient, even as we focus on being operationally effective.

As aviation professionals, we also recognize that airpower is an enabler for a wide range of strategic pursuits—notably security, but also diplomatic and political, commercial and financial, and cultural and societal interests. In terms of its unique versatility, precision, and ability to travel vast distances with unmatched speed, airpower has a near distinct capacity to provide strategic agility—a wide range of options to cope with both known threats and inevitable surprises of the future. For all of its benefits, airpower—and the air forces that provide it—is indispensable.

The Ability of Airpower to be Tailored: Precision, Persistence, and Integration

What enables airpower’s unique flexibility is its inherent ability to be scaled and tailored as appropriate to the specific need. For the past decade, the need predominantly has been effectiveness in counterinsurgency and/or



counterterrorism environments, which present unique challenges—most notably, the ever more compelling need for precision to avoid civilian collateral damage. We know that imprecision and avoidable collateral damage can be extremely counterproductive, with each civilian casualty carrying real risk of damaging and diminishing hard-earned gains.

So although the U.S. Air Force is preparing for broad-ranging requirements—from larger-scale contingencies to the smaller-scale, counterinsurgency environments—we expect that our military forces will continue to engage enemies that operate amongst civilian populations. This effectively transforms precision from a mere benefit in a traditional, conventional environment—with tank columns, troop and aircraft formations, or other legitimate military targets on the open battlefield—to a categorical imperative in civilian-populated areas.

Thankfully, many years of working on, and significant investment in, precision technology and weapon systems have resulted in our ability to essentially create effects, with pinpoint accuracy, where we intend. While important for non-kinetic effects, this is particularly critical for kinetic engagements for the reasons that I just discussed. Therefore, the challenge becomes ensuring that we are striking the appropriate targets—those which will create the military effect that we desire and intend.

In short, we can hit what we aim at; but is it the correct target? Answering this question requires accurate and reliable intelligence. So in the last decade, the U.S. Air Force has invested heavily in its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or “ISR,” capability. Through operating a robust mix of aircraft and satellites with powerful sensors that provide unparalleled data-collection capability, we effectively have transformed our Nation’s ISR capability from “retail” to “wholesale.”

So to be sure, we still maintain the capability for wide-area perspective for theater-wide engagements, but with the addition of capabilities that now allow us to support small-unit, tactical engagements, our ISR capability has become equally effective and valuable to the national decision-maker and battlefield commander alike. In this sense, it is noteworthy that this ascendant ISR capability—particularly, from our remotely-piloted aircraft like Predator and Reaper—is itself an



important manifestation of the tailorable nature of airpower, in addition to being an enabler of precision.

Our remotely-piloted systems afford another key characteristic that has allowed the U.S. Air Force to tailor its core contributions to the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism environment: the attribute of persistence. The ability to loiter is invaluable to our ability to study and leverage so-called “patterns of life.” Through persistent overwatch, our intelligence analysts can establish baseline patterns, detect deviations, and evaluate their significance in designing courses of action. This helps operations planners to assemble the appropriate mix of assets and tailor the appropriate balance of capabilities to create the desired effects—efficiently, precisely, and with minimal “flash to bang.”

In addition to its importance to gathering intelligence influencing the optimal mix of assets and capabilities, persistence is vital when it comes to creating kinetic effects, which is why our tankers that provide in-flight aerial refueling are so vital to U.S. and partner-nation operations. Air Force tankers underwrite our Nation’s ability to project power at intercontinental distances, and then to provide persistent overwatch once we arrive—conducting airstrikes, if necessary, to achieve operational and strategic objectives. Put another way: after our assets get *to* the fight, they can remain *in* the fight as an omnipresent threat to adversaries.

In addition to requiring precision and persistence, the ability to integrate airpower assets, with unity of command, is also vital to the appropriate tailoring of airpower capabilities. This requires, among other things, robust relationships between airmen, sustained involvement in training and exercises, and common or interoperable equipment and systems. As we have seen in countless engagements in the last decade, coordination and integration between air forces is clearly vital—most recently displayed in air operations over Libya.

But integration must exist in both the air-to-air and air-to-ground dimensions in order to create intended effects. We therefore also anticipate the need for continued innovation to integrate airpower even more effectively with ground, maritime, and marine power—all to address a growing range of threats. One notable and recent example of this adaptability and innovation is the collaboration



between U.S. Marines, Soldiers, and Airmen, to revise Joint doctrine for close air support. From its 20th-century construct involving pre-planned “kill boxes” in the Vietnam- and DESERT STORM—era, to its current near-real-time manifestation requiring extraordinarily close coordination between air and ground forces, Joint close air support doctrine has been revised three times since 2003, with our Joint Fires Manual following suit. Our experience with counterinsurgencies—most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq, but drawing back to the Vietnam era—reflects a fundamental truth: that the linkage between tactical effects and strategic consequence continues to become more condensed, and its impact more direct. This in turn requires even more precise, even more timely airborne fire support. Battlefield success in this area results in enhanced ways of saving lives, while offering additional strategic options for our civilian leadership and combatant commanders.

This returns to my earlier point on precision. By continuing to respond with more rigorous training at all levels, and further developing appropriately-scaled options at the behest of friendly ground forces, we were able to decrease civilian casualties from airstrikes in Afghanistan by 54 percent in 2010. Precision, in essence, is no longer merely a term of geographic location and timing, but also of scalable and tailorable effect. In the case of post-9/11 close air support doctrine, Marines, Soldiers, and Airmen responded and, with considerable success, adapted doctrinally to meet current and evolving operational needs.

A recent example that pulls together all of the observations that I have been describing is a very meritorious combat mission that was executed flawlessly by four U.S. Airmen, flying in two F-15E Strike Eagle aircraft, joined by an extremely courageous and capable joint tactical air control teammate on the ground. The aircrew was recently honored with a major aviation award—an event in which I had the honor of participating. These four Airmen were credited with saving the lives of some 30 members of a joint special operations task force that was pinned down by an overwhelming number of heavily-armed Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Outgunned, almost out of ammunition, and extremely close to the attacking enemy force, these allied troops called desperately for help, almost to no avail. A quick



reaction force that responded to back up the initially-surrounded reconnaissance team had gotten ambushed and pinned down, as well. And although a B-1 bomber was on-hand to provide close air support, weather precluded that potential assistance, along with any possibility for calling in helicopter support.

After the Strike Eagle two-ship arrived, its first salvo of four 500-pound bombs—a carefully considered tailoring of airpower effects—yielded an important, but short-lived, twenty-minute pause in the attack. Two subsequent attempts to suppress the enemy with coordinated artillery fire from a forward operating base and show-of-force passes by the Strike Eagles also failed to produce the desired permanent effect of eliminating the threat. Running low on fuel, despite several brief visits to an aerial refueling tanker, the Strike Eagles coordinated with the besieged joint terminal attack controller, with time running out on the ground, to drop two 2,000-pound bombs on the buildings that the enemy used as firing positions. Their remarkable airmanship resulted in pinpoint-accurate delivery of extremely powerful, but appropriately-scaled, weapons, hitting the intended target—the hostile enemy force—while avoiding a nearby mosque and the proximate civilian population. The result of this tremendous effort, despite the presence of civilians within what we call “danger close” range of the targets, was zero collateral damage.

I would note two very important points from this episode. First, the Strike Eagle crewmembers’ concern over collateral damage was unmistakable and undeniable, and it was a prominent feature of their mission orders. In fact, because the battle damage assessment was not available until the following day, the lead pilot could not sleep that night, and had to run on the treadmill to allay his anxiety, which his teammates fully shared with him. Their utmost attention to this very important detail exemplifies our commitment to take, very seriously, every instance of a potential civilian or friendly casualty.

The second point is that this episode not only involved the stressful, gritty, and life-saving actions of two Strike Eagle crews; it is a compelling story of how our Airmen work together as a team, incorporating all of the points that I have discussed here: precision, persistence, and integration—both air-to-air and air-to-ground. I am proud of our Airmen, whose expertise and professionalism in tailoring



airpower specific to the circumstances were indispensable to the resultant positive outcome.

I am also proud that many of us in this room were directly involved in what is only the latest example of the unrivaled ability of multinational airmen to come together in common cause, toward a shared objective. I refer, of course, to the impressive coalition of air forces that coalesced, in very short order, to enforce U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, bringing together airpower in all of its dimensions: aerial refueling; surface strike; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and command and control of multinational forces. Owing to a long-standing, shared culture amongst airmen; to sustained involvement in combined tactical exercises; and to the resultant unparalleled interoperability, multinational aircraft and airmen literally were flying together on each other's wing, providing a broad range of combat airpower, including strike missions and associated support. As airmen, we all can be proud of our unmatched ability to operate together effectively, thereby presenting strategic options for our nations and coalition partnerships.

Conclusion

These are just a few observations on the many dimensions of the ability of airmen to provide tailored airpower. And they constitute just a few of the core reasons why I believe that airpower will play an increasingly prominent role as we advance into the second decade of the new century. Airpower's speed, range, precision, reliability, flexibility, and tailorability provide us with much-needed options at a time when fiscal pressures leave us with fewer material resources to address our numerous, wide-ranging challenges.

More importantly, the professionalism, innovation, aptitude, and skill of airmen, and the kinship among the global community of airmen, have demonstrated time and again that we can expect great things, even in moments of austerity. History informs us that tight times often unleash ground-breaking innovations that result in significant progress. I am confident that, by working together, we can repeat this history. I thank you for your kind attention, and I look forward to your questions to the panel.