



Right-Sizing Airpower Command and Control for the Afghanistan Counterinsurgency

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On 3 November 2010, the commander of United States Air Forces Central Command (COMUSAFCENT) signed and released an order establishing the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan (9 AETF-A). This order represents an important moment because it alters the 20-year-old model of how COMUSAFCENT, in his role as the 9 AETF commander, presents forces to the supported joint force commander (JFC)—in this case, the commander of US Forces–Afghanistan (COMUSFOR-A).¹ This article serves as a complementary piece to Lt Gen Mike Hostage’s article “A Seat at the Table,” which appeared in the Winter 2010 issue of this journal.² It documents how this change in USAFCENT’s airpower command and control (C2) structure developed, tempered by my observations and perspective as the commander charged with implementing the COMUSAFCENT’s vision.

First, I explain the initial tasks that General Hostage gave me as director of the “empowered” air component coordination element (ACCE). As I do that, I illustrate how we began to evolve into what has become the AETF staff. Next, I discuss why this evolution was necessary and the rationale for creating a subtheater C2 echelon in today’s war-fighting environment. I do so to give the readers of this journal one Airman’s sight picture on how we can adapt central-

ized control procedures for a mature, enduring campaign. Finally, I offer a few thoughts on how and why we arrived at this juncture.

Empowered Air Component Coordination Element (2009–10)

*I will cash any check my ACCE
writes.*

—Lt Gen Mike Hostage
COMUSAFCENT

The dialogue to empower the ACCE–Afghanistan (ACCE-A) organization began in earnest in 2009. My predecessor, Lt Gen (then Maj Gen) Stephen Mueller appealed for and received sufficient resources to place liaison officers across adjacent headquarters (HQ) structures in Kabul. This additional manpower ensured an Airman’s presence in planning cells at Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (HQ ISAF), Headquarters ISAF Joint Command (HQ IJC), and Headquarters United States Forces–Afghanistan (HQ USFOR-A).³ Simply stated, these Airmen “connected the wires” for cross-domain activities. General Hostage presented me his vision of the empowered ACCE construct when I first arrived in-theater in May 2010, saying, “Be all things Afghanistan.” Initially, he gave me three tasks, later adding a significant fourth task. These four basic assignments set us on the evolutionary path from the empowered ACCE organization to the 9 AETF-A.

Task 1: “Support the commander of ISAF. . . . Help him succeed . . . by his measures of success.”

In order to help the commander of ISAF (COMISAF) succeed, I first needed to know what he and his subordinate commanders considered important to the success of the population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. I redoubled ACCE-A's efforts to understand the operational design of the campaign and to translate that design into measurable airpower objectives. The COMISAF's success does not hinge on the application of effects in the airpower domain (or in any single domain or mode). Rather, his success results from combined effects produced across three themes in the COIN operation: security, governance, and development. The COMISAF uses these themes to reach the military end state: creating a safe, secure environment sustainable by and for the Afghan people.

I shifted our organizational focus—people, processes, and products—to make sure we fully understand the commander's intent and keep the combined force air component commander (CFACC) informed. Does COMISAF particularly care how many sorties the CFACC generates in a day or the number of bombs his aircraft deliver? No. The commanders on the ground care about the ability of the air domain to shape and influence the situation on the ground. Instead of focusing on sorties/hours flown, we now measure the percentage of joint tactical air strike requests we fill per air tasking order (ATO) cycle and the average time it takes for an aircraft to respond to a troops-in-contact situation. We also measure our effectiveness rates for weapons employment. In other words, do we have aircraft in a position to support and enable ground operations in accordance with the COMISAF's priorities? Can we respond to an emergency for his troopers in a timely manner? Can we produce precision-weapons effects exactly where the ground commander asks for them? These are the questions we ask. Furthermore, the staffs of United States Central Command (CENTCOM), AFCENT, ISAF, IJC, and USFOR-A have vetted and

agreed to the classified performance that we measure. The leaders responsible for succeeding on the ground have identified their “demand” signal, and we “supply” the assets to meet their objectives.

Task 2: “Execute Air Force forces duties and conduct planning activities.”

Air Force Forces Duties. The US Air Force is “all in.” Just over half of the US Air Force Airmen deployed to Afghanistan operate under the C2 of AFCENT. The remainder execute missions under the operational control of five other commands in Afghanistan—mostly led by commanders from the ground domain. These Airmen provide combat support and combat service support capabilities at the request of the JFC in Afghanistan—from individual augmentees at the four-star ISAF headquarters to joint expeditionary tasked explosive ordnance disposal teams protecting maneuver units at the battalion/squadron level. Nearly all troop-contributing nations in Afghanistan operate within force-management limits.⁴ Our nation is no different. As the war evolves, the COMUSFOR-A reshapes his forces to adjust to conditions on the ground. The AETF commander now has responsibility for balancing risk across the task force to ensure that the right force structure is in place to meet campaign objectives. Arguably, the AETF-A commander functions as the “commander of Air Force forces—Afghanistan” (COMAFFOR-A) in this capacity. Regardless of the C2 relationships of the supporting Airmen, the AETF-A commander provides unique insight into the value of all US Air Force Airmen deployed to Afghanistan. As we seek to deploy more “trigger pullers” and off-ramp more “enablers,” I now have the ability to prioritize the Airmen and the capabilities they provide relative to campaign objectives. This is an important contribution in my advisory role to the COMUSFOR-A.

Planning. The COMUSAFCENT wanted a senior Airman with “boots on the ground” in Afghanistan to serve as the nexus for strategic and operational planning support to the COMISAF/COMUSFOR-A. I instructed



my staff to be certain that they maintain a clear understanding of both strategic- and operational-level deliberate plans while maintaining awareness of regional command/division-level operations. The presence of liaison officers in key planning teams affords maximum opportunity to synchronize air component support to COIN operations. These officers request augmentation of subject-matter expertise from the combined air and space operations center (CAOC) or AFCENT/AFFOR staff, as needed.

We increased the air component's involvement in the other two pillars of the ISAF COIN strategy—governance and socio-economic development—by infusing the expertise of Airmen into developing civil aviation infrastructure in partnership with US agencies and international partners. We work with members of the United States Embassy staff in Kabul to form an integrated civilian-military team that presents a unified approach to the Ministry of Transport/Civil Aviation as we jointly advise and assist ministry personnel in aviation issues. We also have increased our interaction with the NATO Air Training Command-Afghanistan to further leverage our Air Force's abilities to transform the Afghan Air Force into a professional partner.

Task 3: "The deputy CFACC remains responsible for execution—centralized C2 through the CAOC."

This task appropriately scoped the mission of the empowered ACCE—a reminder that the theater CFACC and the CAOC construct remain in place to conduct the details of building, distributing, and executing the daily ATO that services operations from the deserts of Iraq, across the Arabian Gulf, through the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. The deputy CFACC continues daily execution of AFCENT air operations; this arrangement retains the proven centralized control model "as is" across the entire CENTCOM area of responsibility through the theater air control system (TACS). The 9 AETF-A staff concentrates on short- and midterm future plans, while the CAOC and TACS perform the ATO planning and daily execution tasks (fig. 1).

Beyond the execution role, the deputy CFACC is the ultimate arbiter of staff effort and priority as he weighs the multitude of tasks aimed at the CAOC and AFFOR staffs by himself, the CFACC, and both of the subordinate 9 AETF commanders (Afghanistan and Iraq). Again, Airmen understand centralized control—in the air and in the execution of staff duties. We established business rules

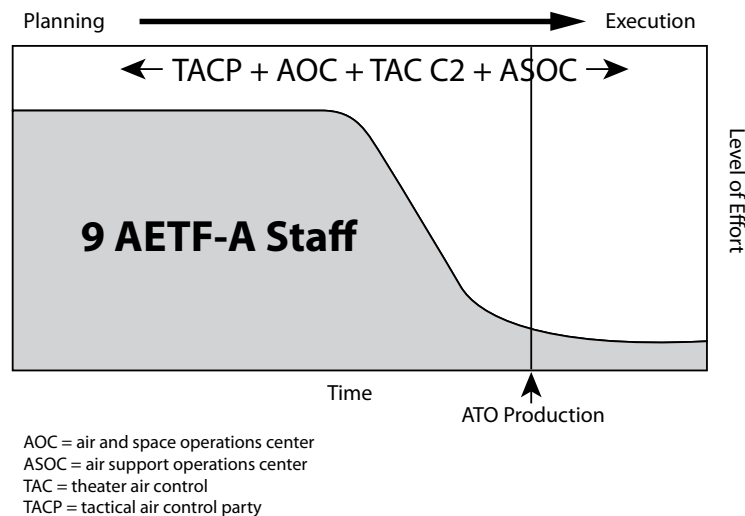


Figure 1. The 9 AETF-A's level of effort: planning versus execution over time

between the subordinate AETFs and the AFCENT staff. At first, “sharing” the staffs with subordinate AETF commanders presented a challenge, but the business rules resolved ambiguity and prioritization issues so that the various C2 nodes can function in harmony.

Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force (3 November 2010)

Liaison and coordination did not prove sufficient to satisfy the JFC.

—Lt Gen Mike Hostage
COMUSAFCENT

Commanders have the unique authority to compel change in subordinate units. Inputs to a unit commander from anyone other than *his* commander are similar to suggestions from “a friendly uncle.” General Hostage’s vision of the empowered ACCE was clear—be all things Afghanistan. However, without the formal authorities and responsibilities of command, the empowered ACCE remained an adviser and a liaison—to the JFC and to air expeditionary wings alike. The order of 3 November 2010 establishing the 9 AETF-A formalized General Hostage’s vision of an empowered ACCE and guaranteed it would transition to an enduring vision for Afghanistan.

Context for the Change

The current generation of Air Force senior leaders understands well the concept of the theater CFACC supported by a centralized C2 node embodied in the CAOC.⁵ Our careers span the idea’s emergence in the shadow of Operation Desert Storm and the subsequent maturation of the CAOC as the Falconer Weapon System. Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, includes the following foundational statement: “Centralized control and decentralized execution of air and space power are critical to effective employment of air and space power. Indeed, they are the fundamental organizing principles for air and space power, having

been proven over decades of experience as the most effective and efficient means of employing air and space power.”⁶ That statement implies that the JFC is the geographic combatant commander (i.e., CDR USCENTCOM). Hence, it is easy to see why so few leaders have approached a subtheater AETF construct. However, after participating in and reflecting on two decades of continuous combat operations, some individuals find the construct of a single-theater CFACC without an intermediate command echelon an impediment to close coordination with our ground component partners in the COIN campaign—such as Afghanistan today. Some members of today’s generation of Air Force senior leaders, myself included, recognize that a “one size fits all” approach to centralized C2 may not meet the needs of a protracted and complex COIN fight. A quick review of AFDD 1 reveals the pathway ahead: “The AETF is the organizational structure for deployed Air Force forces. The AETF presents a JFC with a task-organized, integrated package with the appropriate balance of force, sustainment, control, and force protection.”⁷

The course of action we ultimately proposed and implemented for the 9 AETF-A structure mirrors the parent 9 AETF structure in many respects (fig. 2). I reorganized my staff to mirror an A-staff—by reengineering but not by increasing the staff size (i.e., manpower neutral). I am unwilling to off-ramp combat capability to bring in additional staff members. Therefore, we leverage the CAOC, AFFOR, and AFCENT staffs that provide the heavy lifting while our 9 AETF-A staff maintains close relationships with individuals in the adjacent staffs in Kabul. In fact, in recent iterations of force-management planning for the midterm, these Kabul-based adjacent staffs recognized the value that the AFCENT and larger US Air Force “reachback” model supplies. Consequently, they have begun establishing their own plans to relocate some of their support staff members outside Afghanistan to make headroom for additional combat forces within our national force-management limits.

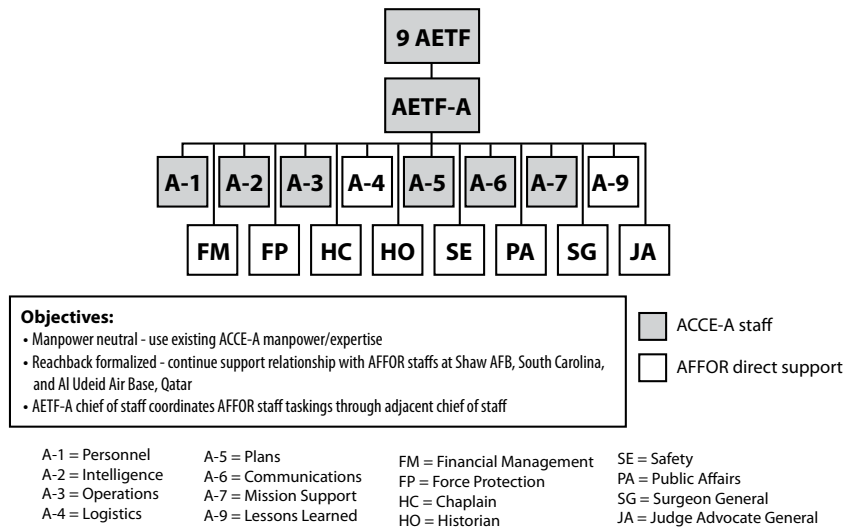


Figure 2. 9 AETF-A staff structure

Task 4: “When directed, be prepared to execute.” (12 September 2010)

An additional task emerged as we were evolving into an AETF. The CFACC issued me the task to be prepared to accept tactical control of forces for limited periods of time. Should the theater CFACC lose connectivity across his area of responsibility for any number of reasons, the 9 AETF-A staff needs to prepare itself to serve as a short-term node in the AFCENT TACS. This is prudent planning in the cyber age and in a world of uncertainty. I assigned the staff tertiary responsibilities to assist the CAOC as required in the event we are pressed into service as the Afghan “execution” arm. As time allowed, we trained to meet minimum air and space operations center (AOC) “weapon system” qualifications through the tutelage of the 505th Command and Control Wing and the 609th AOC staffs. The wedge-shaped shaded area in figure 3 represents the requirement I see for 9 AETF-A to maintain working knowledge of and familiarity with daily operations in order to accept mission-type orders as a gap-filler for the TACS.

Final Thoughts

Effective integration at all levels requires more than close proximity. The ACCE needed, and I gave him, sufficient staff to integrate at all levels, responsibility for forces assigned to the joint operations area . . . , and the necessary authorities to respond to the JFC’s needs.

—Lt Gen Mike Hostage
COMUSAFCENT

Neither the formal structure nor my vision of the 9 AETF-A structure hatched overnight. The current form of the 9 AETF-A came about only through candid and open discussion from a variety of sources both from within my staff as well as outside it. The most important discussions were the one-on-one sessions with General Hostage. A fair amount of debate occurred over the need to formalize his intent. In the end, we all realized that Airmen understand and respond to the chain of command. The ACCE existed as a floating, unattached block on the AFCENT wiring diagram. The 9 AETF-A exists with clear lines of authorities and re-

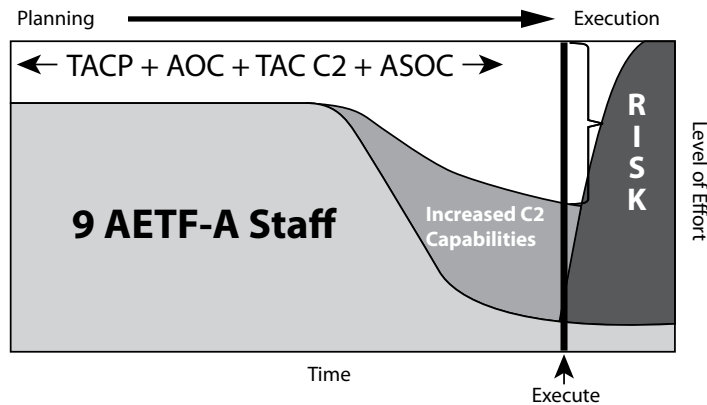


Figure 3. 9 AETF-A staff risk reduction

sponsibilities. The structure is in place and forms a repeatable mechanism for C2 in future personnel-rotation cycles.

The subtheater AETF (9 AETF-A, 9 AETF-Iraq [9 AETF-I]) tangibly improves the 9 AETF commander's support to the JFC by leveraging the capacity and capability to multitask the CAOC, AFFOR, and AFCENT staffs in support of the subordinate 9 AETF commanders (9 AETF-A, 9 AETF-I) while preserving the CFACC's flexibility to swing forces to meet emergent needs of the CDR USCENTCOM. This construct addresses historic concerns of Multi-National Corps-Iraq and COMUSFOR-A/COMISAF by presenting a task force commander rather than a senior liaison officer. The task force commander can shape his forces and operations support based on his detailed understanding of his respective JFC's ever-changing requirements through insight gained through daily interaction—in a dy-

namic and complex environment—while the CFACC/COMUSAFCENT focuses on supporting the CENTCOM commander's broader theater requirements.

In the coming years, as we continue to adapt our application of centralized control/ decentralized execution across the full spectrum of military operations, we will find out whether this intermediate echelon of command is heretical, warranting the comments we heard about “Billy Mitchell rolling over in his grave,” or whether it is a Billy Mitchell airpower success story. I have heard and embraced our Air Force's mantra *flexibility is the key to airpower* for over 30 years now. I believe the establishment of subtheater AETFs is just one example, implemented at the operational level of war, that shows the willingness of senior leaders engaged in the fight to sustain the flexibility of Airmen where it matters most—in combat. ✪

Notes

1. The commander of the International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) is dual-hatted as the COMUSFOR-A. We refer to him as the COMISAF when discussing the overarching North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission and specify him as COMUSFOR-A when discussing US-only issues.

2. Lt Gen Mike Hostage, “A Seat at the Table: Beyond the Air Component Coordination Element,”

Air and Space Power Journal 24, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 18–20, http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj10/win10/2010_4_05_hostage.pdf.

3. HQ ISAF is the four-star NATO strategic headquarters. Its mission is as follows: “In support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ISAF conducts operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency.” “About ISAF:



Mission,” International Security Assistance Force–Afghanistan, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/mission.html>.

HQ IJC, the three-star NATO joint war-fighting command in Afghanistan, is one of several major subordinate commands to HQ ISAF. Established in November 2009, the command allows HQ ISAF to focus on “up and out” (strategic issues) while HQ IJC controls the “down and in” (operational fight).

HQ USFOR-A is the four-star US headquarters “intended to enable the most efficient command and control of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and ensure effective integration and coordination between U.S. and coalition forces operating under NATO/ISAF.” “Defense Department Activates U.S. Forces–Afghanistan,” news release, US Department of Defense, 6 October 2008, <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=12267>.

4. The term *force-management limits* refers to the US military troop-strength limit in Afghanistan es-

tablished by the secretary of defense. The current limit calls for a maximum of 98,000 uniformed military personnel. The secretary has an additional 3,000 in reserve for emerging requirements, bringing the maximum number to 101,000.

5. I use the term *CFACC* for the purposes of this article, recognizing that some air component commanders may command joint, not combined, forces and that they are known as joint force air component commanders (JFACC). In parallel, the CFACC operates a CAOC, and not all air operations are “combined.” AOC is the generic C2 term for the Falconer Weapon System.

6. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 17 November 2003, 28, <http://www.e-publishing.af.mil/shared/media/epubs/AFDD1.pdf>.

7. *Ibid.*, 61. Combatant-commander-level presentation of an AETF is not a US Air Force canon.



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Major General Lyon (BA, The Citadel; MPA, Golden Gate University; MS, National War College) is the commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan and deputy commander–air, US Forces–Afghanistan. He oversees three air expeditionary air wings and three expeditionary groups consisting of more than 8,500 Airmen directly engaged in combat; he also advises and assists with joint expeditionary taskings / individual augmentee taskings in the Afghanistan combined joint operating area. Additionally, he serves as the personal representative of US Central Command’s coalition force air component commander to the commander of Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as well as the deputy commander–air to the commander, US Forces–Afghanistan, thus ensuring the optimal integration of air and space power in support of Headquarters ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom missions. General Lyon entered the Air Force in 1981 as a distinguished graduate of the Citadel’s AFROTC program in Charleston, South Carolina. Prior to his current assignment, he served on the Air Staff as the deputy director, Directorate of Operational Capability Requirements. He has commanded a fighter squadron, an operations group, a fighter wing, and an air expeditionary wing in Southwest Asia. General Lyon is a command pilot with 3,800 flying hours, including more than 1,100 combat hours in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Serbia, flying the B-1B, F-16C, KC-135R, RC-135, E8-C, and RQ-1 remotely piloted aircraft.



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