

The Air Force and the Army square off over warfighting approach.

The Halt Phase Hits a Bump

By Elaine M. Grossman

SELDOM have two little words caused such controversy among military officers at the most senior ranks. But when the Air Force succeeded recently in getting the term “halt phase” into two joint documents on warfighting, a high-stakes test of wills ensued, one that has yet to be resolved.

Since the mid-1990s, Air Force officials have speculated that airpower could be used quickly and effectively to stop the advance of enemy forces into friendly or allied territory. Rather than wait through the weeks or months it may take ground forces to assemble in a theater to reverse enemy aggression—as the United States and its allies did when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990—strike aircraft and missiles could be brought to bear quickly to blunt and even turn back an aggressive adversary, the theory goes.

Especially in the case of the second of two overlapping Major Theater Wars, a halt phase could help compensate for shortfalls in airlift and buy enough time for heavy ground forces to deploy to the region and retake and hold territory, aerospace advocates say.

In early February, Joint Staff officials drafting a new revision of Joint



The Hard Way. In the Gulf War, Iraqi vehicles (such as these destroyed at Khafji) became object lessons in the use of airpower to halt an armored thrust. Some US theater commanders now include a “halt” option in their war plans.

Publication 3-0 on “Doctrine for Joint Operations” signaled their agreement that such an approach is viable for warfighting commanders. “A possible halt phase is necessary when decisive combat operations are required to terminate aggression and achieve US objectives,” according to a close-hold “final coordination” version of JP 3-0, in the works for more than two years.

Ample Precedent

The wording actually draws off of ample precedent in the Defense Department’s 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review report and the National Military Strategy that followed, according to military officials.

In arguing behind closed doors in favor of a halt phase, Air Force officials even found themselves backed up by some unified warfighting command representatives, who said their war plans now include a halt approach—primarily using aircraft and missiles—at the outset of major hostilities.

But it was not until early this year that the halt language was first inserted into the campaign-plan phasing section of the nearly 200-page doctrine publication. Initially, Air Force officials avoided pushing to include a reference to halt operations. The turnabout came when the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Michael E. Ryan, decided he would go to the mat over the issue, if necessary, at the level of the Joint Chiefs.

How did the rather inconsequential realm of doctrine suddenly become so important? After all, while commanders have traditionally regarded joint warfighting doctrine as “authoritative,” they are free to disregard it at their discretion in executing wartime operations.

Military documents that may prove more critical to the way in which operations are carried out are the National Military Strategy and unified commanders’ warfighting plans. Their references to a halt phase have already helped the Air Force argue for a stronger operational role and a meatier budget for weapons platforms over the past several years.

But were “halt” to remain absent as a campaign phase from the newly revised overarching doctrine publication, the Army or Marine Corps might just gain a foothold in persuading the Bush Administration that ground forces play a unique role in stopping an enemy landgrab. A logical next step would be to suggest that some amount of resources be diverted from aerospace assets and toward them.

Doctrine’s central importance to the services is being reaffirmed at the Pentagon in real time. When the Joint Staff released the new halt-phase wording for JP 3-0 in February, the Army reacted swiftly with a powerful counterstrike.

A top Army officer reportedly sent a message to the Joint Staff leader-

ship indicating that his service would protest any reference to the halt phase in joint publications. At immediate issue was a draft report on the Joint Strategy Review. As the military’s latest take on how to approach future threats, the JSR is meant to serve as part of the analytical foundation for the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review.

Army officers were particularly concerned by the JSR’s reference to a “rapid halt,” sources said. The adjective only adds to the impression that heavy ground forces could not deploy in time to execute such a phase.

In response, Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, personally ordered that the halt-phase language be excised from the JSR, at least for the time being. Officials close to the Chairman explained that Shelton thought it inappropriate to send the Joint Strategy Review to Donald H. Rumsfeld, the new Defense Secretary, before the services had a chance to sort out pending disagreements over the halt approach in the doctrine document, which was on a separate track for completion.

With both the Air Force and Army indicating they would “nonconcur” if the halt-phase issue did not go their way, it will likely take a session of the Joint Chiefs in their secret “Tank” meeting facility to resolve the matter.

Ryan’s Support

As in the case of JP 3-0, no halt-phase wording appeared in the main body of the JSR draft report until recently, sources said. The Joint Staff had been drafting the JSR for several months, but only when it became apparent how strongly Ryan felt about the issue did the Air Force push to include the halt phase in the Joint Strategy Review’s discussion of approaches to major warfighting.

Yet top officers in the ground services feel just as strongly about the matter. The Army—and possibly the Marine Corps as well—will likely protest the new wording up to the top of the military hierarchy, sources said.

To one senior Army officer, an airpower-dominated halt phase may lack the capability ground forces offer to “preclude or deny” an adversary’s ability to take friendly territory. “If you could get land forces in



House Divided. Army Gen. Henry Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, excised from the Joint Strategy Review all reference to the “halt” concept. The Joint Staff had inserted the option at the insistence of Gen. Michael Ryan, USAF Chief of Staff.

USAF photo by SSgt. Angela Stafford

as part of joint force, along with air, ... I think you present the enemy a lot more challenges in what he would face [than] if he was only facing a single-dimensional solution or a single-dimensional attack," the officer said in a Feb. 1 interview.

As it stands, JP 3-0 supports the use of a halt phase in fairly definitive terms, at least under certain scenarios. To bolster the notion that a halt phase may prove "necessary," the draft doctrine explains that "an adversary may deploy a sizeable invasion force and seek to delay a US response. Moreover, an adversary's use of information attacks, terrorism, urban warfare, or anti-access strategies may complicate US response options. This phase seeks to obtain full-dimensional control of the operational area and achieve dominant joint force levels to deny an adversary political or military objectives."

JP 3-0 language does not appear to limit the execution of a halt phase to aerospace forces, though. "When authorized and appropriate," the document now states, joint force commanders may "use all available joint force capabilities (air, land, sea, space, and special operations) to seize the initiative, stop further aggression, and take immediate action to initiate unrestricted decisive operations."

A key Air Force backer of the halt-phase approach agrees the potential is there for any service to contribute, if it can bring range, speed, and flexibility to bear early in a conflict. "Rapid halt is a joint construct," said Brig. Gen. David A. Deptula, USAF's National Defense Review director, in a Feb. 26 interview. "It is not proprietary of any one service."

But a commander might also act before the full joint force can get in place, the draft doctrine suggests. The joint force commander "may apply combat power at the very outset of an adversary's aggression in an attempt to halt the adversary's initial advance," the wording states. "Such a [course of action] could potentially assure and expand friendly freedom of action, stop the adversary's advance, al-



Fast Halter. Long-range B-1B bomber awaits action in Operation Allied Force. Army officers were particularly concerned by the Joint Strategy Review's reference to "rapid halt," which seemed to imply that heavy ground forces could not deploy fast enough.

low access to the theater infrastructure, and provide time to build up theater forces in order to conduct decisive operations."

Deptula—whose tour of duty in Turkey had him commanding forces from all of the services in support of air combat patrols over northern Iraq—said the need to act quickly to halt enemy aggression may preclude more traditional employment strategies in this initial campaign phase. The "transformational" halt approach, he said, "challenges the legacy construct for the conduct of conflict and is therefore viewed as threatening to the forces and force structures that contribute little to this capability."

The senior Army officer remained confident that a warfighting commander would choose to bring in the broader capabilities of a joint force if he has that option. Although airpower offers "tremendous" effects, "there are a lot of low-tech solutions that the enemy can use against high-tech capabilities," noted the Army officer. "If you've got an enemy that's presenting a great target, you can do some pretty good damage against him [from the air]. [But] if he's rooting himself down into some tough terrain, or he's in an urban area, or you've got somebody that wants to

use human shields," that is potentially a much greater challenge for attack from the air.

Similar Problems

Advocates of airpower counter that if an adversary digs in or uses civilians to protect his military forces, such tactics could present as serious a challenge for ground troops as they do for air forces.

The more challenging the situation, the greater the need to use a full toolbox of forces, responds the Army officer. "I think if you can go in with a joint force, and take a more flexible, adaptive capability with you, you just present [an adversary] with a hell of a lot more problems than you do if he's only facing one particular problem at a time," the officer said. "It's the joint capability that gives you that synergy."

But will future enemies wait until a joint force has been assembled before threatening US and allied interests? "What they can't win in real life, they try to win in doctrine," said one airpower supporter in reference to Army officials.

While the JSR should be completed this spring, the bureaucratic battle over "Doctrine for Joint Operations" could be a bit more prolonged. Service comments on the doctrine are due back to the Joint Staff this month, but military officials say a final decision on the fate of the halt phase could still be several months off. ■

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