European forces lag behind in most critical capabilities, including precision strike, stealth, and standoff weapons.

Why the Allies Can’t Keep Up
NAFTA has always been a US–dominated alliance, but recent military operations show NATO’s European allies are falling ever farther behind the United States in military capabilities. This has generated potentially serious problems. The alliance, warn officials, could become fractured if American capabilities continue to greatly exceed those of the Europeans or if American systems are unable to link up with European aircraft in joint operations.

Some argue that NATO–Europe is already marginalized. The allies lack precision guided munitions, cruise missiles, stealth aircraft, and advanced command-and-control capabilities of the type and quality that the US relies upon in aerial warfare. Moreover, experts warn that the capability gap is widening. While the United States appears committed to advanced military technology, Europeans in many cases do not.

The political consequences could be severe, a fact pointed out by no less a figure than former US defense Secretary William S. Cohen. Cohen, writing in a January Washington Post commentary before he left office, said Operation Allied Force in Yugoslavia in 1999 revealed stark disparities in NATO capabilities. European members subsequently pledged to correct the situation. “Regrettably,” said Cohen, “progress since has been less than brisk. ... [I]nequities in defense commitments inevitably will yield political consequences that are likely to subvert rather than strengthen NATO solidarity.”

A downward trend in European military investment and increased reliance upon European military equipment also pose a threat to fundamental military effectiveness. Though the US has taken the lead in recent air operations, NATO–Europe still contributes significant numbers of aircraft and personnel to support these missions. If NATO–Europe cannot contribute effectively to combat, the US will be forced to pick up an ever-larger share of the burden. As one recent study found, “NATO allies may not be able to perform military missions at US performance levels.”

Known Far and Wide

This is hardly a military secret. The experience of recent operations has made the allies well aware of their shortcomings, and both political and military leaders have voiced concern.

“In Kosovo, we saw that some NATO members had to carry a disproportionate share of the burden when it came to the high-tech, sophisticated missions,” Robertson said. “[European] allies simply didn’t have the capability to participate at all levels. This imposes an unfair and politically unsustainable division of labor within the alliance.”

Robertson added, “Quite simply, a ‘two-class NATO’ will not work.”

Similar warnings have come from Gen. Klaus Naumann, the retired German army leader and former chairman of NATO’s military committee. Naumann has pointed out that most NATO–Europe members will find themselves excluded in the early days of a future NATO air campaign, as happened during Allied Force.

Naumann noted the initial phase of the Balkan air campaign could only be done by the US and Britain, the two NATO nations in possession of cruise missiles. “The guidance was clear—we were not allowed to enter the airspace with manned aircraft initially.”

Naumann called that situation “unpleasant” and went on to say “many” NATO members are pursuing standoff weapon capability in response to being left on the sidelines during the early days of Operation Allied Force over Kosovo.

However, few are optimistic that the situation will improve either soon or dramatically. In a recent study of the interoperability challenge, RAND’s Project Air Force found that NATO–
Europe faces systemic barriers to its acquisition of capabilities on which the US has come to rely in the early days of a conflict.

“At the strategic level,” said the RAND analysts, “the allies do not put high-intensity conflict at the centerpiece of their planning. They do not see a superpower threat to NATO ... or any serious military threat to their well-being. Hence, their strategic focus is on peace operations and crisis response. The result is proportionately lower investment relative to the United States in developing and acquiring advanced military systems such as stealth aircraft” and all-weather precision guided munitions.

While the US Air Force is modernizing its fighter and bomber forces with long-range and precision-strike capabilities in mind, “US allies are not likely to follow suit to the same extent,” stated the RAND report, “Interoperability: A Continuing Challenge in Coalition Air Operations.” It went on, “This divergence in capabilities between the United States and its allies is becoming more apparent and must be properly managed to ensure that the potential benefits of coalition operations are realized.”

Typically, RAND noted, the US is not only the largest participant in coalition operations but also the nation with the most-capable systems. “Recent coalition operations demonstrate the growing divergence between US and NATO ... air forces in all-weather precision-strike capabilities to minimize collateral damage and employment of standoff weapons, as well as in stealth to minimize the risk of aircraft attrition to enemy defenses,” RAND stated.

Few, Very Few

RAND also said that, although it’s hard to find exact numbers, it appears that even the largest NATO–Europe air forces have only a few thousand direct attack guided munitions. Few have plans in place to buy additional quantities of smart weapons.

The entire realm of precision attack is dominated by US forces. The allies are expected to continue to lag behind in this capability, despite pronouncements from NATO members that they will pursue more guided munitions.

The US Air Force is moving forward with plans for the next-generation advanced targeting pod, which is intended to give F-16s enhanced targeting capability to perform destruction of enemy air defense missions. The advanced targeting pod will “enhance and maintain” the lethality of the USAF strike mission with a “cost-effective” system, the service says. The Air Force is also procuring additional F-16CJ aircraft used for air defense suppression.

For NATO–Europe, however, precision guided munitions, standoff weapons, and targeting pods are all in short supply. The RAND study said that, though there are some exceptions, most NATO nations have not announced any plans to procure Global Positioning System–guided weapons and thus will not be able to take advantage of their aircrafts’ abilities to employ such weapons.

Most NATO–Europe air forces will soon have large numbers of night-attack and precision strike–capable platforms. However, said RAND, “only one [nation] will have enough targeting pods to employ these aircraft in this role on a large scale. Relatively modest investments in targeting pods could enhance this capability considerably.”

Meanwhile, NATO–Europe is struggling to acquire any kind of air defense suppression capability at all. According to RAND, “Only the German and Italian air forces field a specialized aircraft for this mission. The high cost of these platforms limits the ability of other nations to procure them.”

Enhancing these capabilities would greatly increase the flexibility of NATO allies’ air forces, allowing fighters from European nations to substitute for US aircraft in multiple mission areas, RAND found.

“The relatively modest costs of the targeting pods and direct attack munitions should put them within the reach of most NATO nations,” said the study. “Further, the United States should continue to encourage its NATO allies to acquire advanced precision munitions. GPS–guided weapons are particularly promising in that they are relatively inexpensive and can be employed without a targeting pod.”

Command-and-Control Problems

The problem is not confined to attack hardware. As Naumann observed, “It is definitely not only the cruise missiles. I think [it is] the entire area of C4I [Command, Control, Communications, Computers,
Tough task. This Luftwaffe Tornado ECR, shown in Italy during 1996 Bosnian operations, is one of few European aircraft used for the critical SEAD role. R&and says adding SEAD capabilities will be one of NATO’s most difficult tasks.
less found expensive, major programs like JSF are not the most effective routes to interoperability.

“Mindful of the current budgetary environment on both sides of the Atlantic, we emphasize lower-cost, short- and medium-term” solutions, the report found, such as unified NATO standards, organizational reform, and joint systems based on already existing technology.

The Europeans should pursue these options “rather than new, major weapon programs” so as to “encourage the United States’ NATO allies to ‘turn words into action,’” said RAND. This does not imply that indigenous European efforts such as the NATO alliance ground surveillance capability should be abandoned but rather that “a common platform approach should not be the dominant factor in addressing interoperability challenges,” RAND believes.

Success Story

One frequently cited success is the NATO E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System fleet. While the US Air Force owns 32 E-3s, NATO owns and operates 17, and Britain has declared six of its seven AWACS to be devoted to the alliance, meaning they will be available to NATO at any time the United Kingdom does not require them for domestic missions. The European–owned aircraft are largely interchangeable for joint missions.

Oddly enough, however, the Air Force finds itself to be lagging behind Europe when it comes to AWACS technology, and this creates some minor interoperability concerns in the airborne early warning realm.

NATO AWACS have now completed the Radar System Improvement Program. The Air Force’s aircraft will not complete their version of the program until 2006. Therefore, “for missions requiring RSIP capability, only a fraction of the US AWACS fleet will be interchangeable with the NATO AWACS fleet. ... Moreover, NATO has planned and fully funded additional E-3A upgrades,” which the US has not, RAND found.

A final concern about AWACS, according to RAND, is that NATO tends to train operators to focus on defensive surveillance missions, while US crews devote much more time to offensive aircraft control missions.

The potential for Europe to significantly upgrade systems for interoperability exists only if new investments are made. All sides acknowledge Europe must spend more, but there is much debate about how much interoperability is ultimately needed and how much NATO should be willing to pay for the benefits.

Retired Navy Adm. Harold W. Gehman Jr., the former commander in chief of US Joint Forces Command, said he faced interoperability problems regularly while serving with NATO forces. Gehman, however, does not believe allies require significant commonality to achieve mission goals, and he cautioned against “hopelessly expensive and complicated solutions.”

“You can prescribe allied inter-

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**Fighter Aircraft Projections for Selected NATO Allies’ Air Forces (Year 2010)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Primary Mission</th>
<th>Number (Combat-Coded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>F-16AM</td>
<td>Multirole</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F-16AM</td>
<td>Multirole</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>EF-2000</td>
<td>Air superiority</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tornado IDS</td>
<td>Ground attack</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harrier</td>
<td>Ground attack</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>EF-2000</td>
<td>Air superiority</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tornado IDS</td>
<td>Ground attack</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tornado ECR</td>
<td>SEAD</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EF/A-18A</td>
<td>Multirole</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RAND’s Interoperability Report

Projections for the fighter components of NATO–Europe air forces are shown here. What is readily apparent is that the Europeans have few US–designed fighters. These are limited to older model F-16s and F/A-18s. They are considered far less capable than current generation American fighter aircraft.
Common Data Communication

An example of pushing existing technology is the Multifunctional Information Distribution System, to be used by US and NATO fighter aircraft. Euromids, a European consortium, was awarded a contract to supply to France, Germany, Italy, and Spain a secure, jam-resistant, interoperable Link 16 communications link for fighter aircraft. It is a capability needed for "critical NATO operations," DoD said in a December statement announcing the contract.

The capability addresses RAND’s finding that "there has long been a need for interoperable data communications for fighter aircraft." Today, most US and NATO allies’ fighters communicate using insecure analog radios that provide only interactive voice communications.

The United States is pursuing similar Multifunctional Information Distribution Systems for its own Navy and Air Force fighters. Air Combat Command sought to add $20 million to the 2002 Air Force budget to accelerate the installation of a MIDS fighter data link aboard F-15E Strike Eagles, an upgrade the service describes as an "urgent" improvement to combat effectiveness. The Air Force says Link 16 capability will dramatically improve fighter aircraft situational awareness by providing an integrated air picture, targeting data, and the locations and headings of friendly and hostile aircraft.

By making comparable systems available to allies, the US should find it much easier to conduct joint and combined combat operations in the future. The Pentagon said the MIDS agreement comes as a response to lessons learned during Operation Allied Force. "One of the most important recommendations coming out of the Kosovo action was for greater interoperability of communications assets in order to improve joint political and military interface during crisis situations," the DoD announcement stated.

Interoperability manifests itself not only in successful operations but also in maintaining a sometimes fragile coalition of political entities. A frequent criticism of Allied Force was that the need for multiple governments to approve targets slowed the Air Force’s ability to attack those targets.

"The importance of minimizing casualties—including those of friends and even possibly adversaries—has arguably increased in the post–Cold War world," RAND said. "This is because NATO politicians who ultimately decide if military intervention is warranted put a high value on minimizing casualties in efforts to mitigate public opposition."

In this environment, precision munitions will enable the United States to maintain coalition support for combat by reducing collateral damage—and the political pressures it can create.

While there remains a potential for NATO to close the capability gap with the United States, RAND remains pessimistic about some capabilities. "Encouraging more NATO nations to procure standoff weapons or weapons carrying anti-armor submunitions would probably be ... difficult," the report noted, and "enhancing NATO allies’ SEAD [Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses] capabilities may be even more difficult."

In sum, RAND found that being interoperable enhances combat power and strengthens NATO, but the United States seems to be leaving its allies behind in many key warfighting capabilities. NATO, therefore, needs to reprioritize its spending or increase its defense budget to maximize participation in future operations.

Gehman, the former US theater commander, is all for that. The United States and NATO will have to determine the "proper" level of interoperability, he said, in order to share information and conduct unified operations. As Gehman said, "Odds are, in the future ... if you cannot talk on an allied secure voice network you probably will not be invited to the party.”