

By Robert S. Dudney, Editor in Chief

Fighters Under a Microscope

ARMY Lt. Gen. David Barno, the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, had the task of covering that huge country with just 18,000 troops. It was possible to do so, he observed, because “airpower from all the services ... have given ground forces ... the ability to operate in smaller units and respond quicker, with more accurate weaponry, than at any other point in history.”

Over the last 15 years, many have come to regard airpower as the key to victory, in war zones ranging from the Gulf to the Balkans, from Afghanistan to Iraq. Fighter forces, in particular, have proved to be effective, destroying defended targets, supporting fast-moving land forces, and dominating the skies.

Yet serious questions keep cropping up. Is the size of the tactical fighter fleet about right or is it “excessive”? The USAF fighter force has fallen from 37 to 20 wings. Navy and Marine Corps aviation arms have shrunk, too. For all that, DOD still hankers to squeeze tactical forces.

Top Pentagon leaders claim that the armed services invest too much in fighters. They see air dominance as one area in which the US has “excessive overmatch.” The new National Defense Strategy, released March 1, suggests cutting some of the “overmatch” so as to better fund new capabilities and expand ground forces.

According to *Inside the Navy*, Deputy Defense Secretary-designate Gordon R. England recently told reporters that he sees great potential in “integrating” Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Army aviation. England left no doubt about the basic objective: “If you can gain efficiencies in [tactical forces],” he said, “what else can you do with the money?”

The integration concept seems to presuppose a contraction of tactical air. Indeed, we have seen its precursor. England, as Navy Secretary, presided over the recent integration of Navy and Marine Corps aviation arms. That move slashed \$35 billion and 500 fighters from their plans.

Any such move now could pit the Air Force, the Navy/Marine team, and, to a degree, the Army against each other, conceivably igniting a roles and missions dustup.

The last such tussle came in the mid-1990s. It was sparked by Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who lamented, among other things, that America’s was “the only military in the world with four air forces.” A blue-ribbon Commission on Roles and Missions, or CORM,

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spent more than a year pondering the matter.

We are skeptical of the integration idea, and believe all signs are that DOD should think, and think again, before going down the road toward contraction of tactical air. Indeed, that 1994-95 roles and missions review provides good cause for wariness.

First, the supposed “problem” proved to be largely illusory. CORM in 1995 reported, “Inefficiencies attributed to the so-called ‘four air forces’ [were] mostly in the infrastructure, not on the battlefield.”

Second, CORM concluded that a little redundancy isn’t a bad thing, because forces can turn out to be valuable in unexpected ways. A recent case in point: the pivotal role played by naval air in the first weeks of war in Afghanistan—a remote, landlocked nation far outside the Navy’s usual mission focus.

Third, overlap fosters interservice competition, often resulting in better systems or concepts of operations, whether they concern close air support, long-range strike, or something else. CORM Chairman John White called for a balance between the “high value” of competition and efficiency measures.

We don’t believe aviation integra-

tion is inevitable, but, if it comes, it should proceed on a sensible course. “Perhaps,” suggested one air officer, “it’s time to [consider] the idea of putting the four separate ‘air forces’ in DOD into the one and only US Air Force.”

The Air Force does not now nor has it ever claimed a right to monopolize military aviation. The other services have modern and powerful capabilities—rightfully so. As the CORM pointed out a decade ago, they usually complement, rather than conflict with, those of the Air Force.

Even so, there are sound reasons to make the Air Force the “keeper” of the tactical aviation art. The air arms of the other services are limited; their primary purpose is to perform missions tied directly to their basic landpower, seapower, or amphibious roles.

Marine aircraft, for example, historically have tended to stick close to USMC ground units. Naval air has typically faced range and payload limitations.

Great airpower advances of recent decades—stealth, precision, supercruise, innovative operational concepts—tended to emerge from the work of professionals for whom airpower is a paramount concern rather than an adjunct to the main event.

Military aviation, always dynamic, has been particularly so during the past decade. Maybe those changes have been so far-reaching as to justify a major reshaping of tactical air.

Yet Pentagon officials should be cautious before tampering too much with the current size, structure, and working arrangements of the services’ tactical air forces. They would do well to heed the admonition of Gen. Gregory S. Martin, who has commanded US Air Forces in Europe and Air Force Materiel Command and who recently warned:

“Nothing works without air and space dominance. Nothing. We don’t want to assume that we will always have it. We want to always understand what it takes to get it, and we want to make sure we are building the systems that will give it to us.” ■