

The War of the “Four Battles”

In late 1994, Gen. Merrill A. McPeak lobbed a roles-and-missions bomb into the nation's defense community. The soon-to-retire USAF Chief of Staff called for scrapping an Army missile, elimination of Marine Corps fixed wing aviation, transfer of Army air defense to the Air Force, and Air Force abandonment of the close air support function. The always blunt McPeak said such moves would reconcile US forces with what he termed “the four battles”—close, rear, deep, and high—and eliminate overlaps in service spending. His suggestions did not sit well with the three other services, which soon started shooting back. Though McPeak's ideas made considerable sense, they faded away when he left the scene.

In my view, modern warfare can be seen as containing several distinct “battles,” each with associated battlespace. Setting aside the maritime battle, about which I am not the expert, land warfare can be seen as encompassing the rear battle, which includes bases and supporting elements; the close battle, where the main opposing ground forces engage one another; the deep battle, including hostile territory well beyond our front lines; and the high battle—the arena of air and space combat. ...

Since operations in the rear and close battles revolve around seizing, holding, and securing ground, these battles should, in my view, be the responsibility of a ground forces commander—an Army or a Marine officer. Likewise, the Army and the Marine Corps should have the lead for organizing, training, and equipping forces that secure rear areas and engage enemy forces in close combat.

On the other hand, the air component commander should fight the high and deep battle. ... Air assets provide the cheapest and best—often the only—capability to operate in this battlespace. The air commander will likely be an Air Force or Navy officer. ... It seems logical that the Air Force and Navy should lead in fielding forces for the high and deep battles. ...

If you accept the scheme I have laid out, it follows that the commander responsible for the close battle has a much reduced requirement for weapon systems that reach across his battlefield seams into the deep and high battles. If there are such systems in the field or on the drawing board, they might be good candidates for retirement or transfer to another department. Alternatively, the commander with responsibility for the deep battle has little need for forces designed to support close ground combat. If there are any, they too could be transferred or cut. ...

The Army is investing almost \$6 billion on a long-range surface-to-surface missile known as the Army tactical missile system or ATACMS. ATACMS would be used to attack both fixed and moving targets deep in the enemy's rear—a capability that airpower has provided for at least 50 years. Now, we should ask whether—at projected funding levels—ATACMS is really necessary. ...

Now, I've just violated one of the cardinal rules of civil discourse within the Pentagon by questioning the need for a system being fielded by another service. So, let me suggest an Air Force capability that is at odds with the concept of the

“Roles and Missions”

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“Keeper File”

modern battlefield. Earlier, I stated that responsibility for the close and rear battles should be assigned to a ground forces commander—an Army or a Marine officer. Yet, today, all four services provide close air support for ground forces. ...

It would be no great break from recent experience to assign the Army and Marine Corps primary responsibility for close air support. If we did, Air Force A-10 and OA-10 squadrons could be retired, saving about \$5 billion over the next five years. ...

So there, I've done it. An Air Force Chief of Staff has suggested that the Air Force could give up some of its aircraft—some of its force structure. In fact, let me digress a moment to say I believe our nation has too much Tacair. ...

One option would be to transfer enough Marine Corps F/A-18 squadrons to the Navy to fill out their carrier air wings and retire the remaining Marine F/A-18s. Marine vertical-lift aircraft—helicopters and Harriers—are ideal for over-the-shore force projection and close-battle operations. But Marine F/A-18s require the same improved airfields as other high performance, fixed wing, land-based fighters. They are best suited for deep- and high-battle operations, where they duplicate existing Air Force and Navy Tacair capability. ...

Having discussed the deep and close battles, let me turn to the high battle for a moment, starting with theater air defense. ... Freedom from aerial attack is so important that all the services have fielded capabilities to defeat the enemy air threat. ...

We have no way of knowing whether our style of “disintegrated” air defenses—unique to us among the world's first-class military powers—will really work under stress. We all should be highly skeptical. It is for these reasons that the Air Force has suggested that land-based air defenses should be our responsibility. This would allow us to save money, provide for integrated command and control, and increase effectiveness while reducing the odds of fratricide.

Now, I'm sure many of you will agree that the points I've raised today are entirely noncontroversial and will be accepted by the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps with open arms. ■