

An Air Force Strategic Vision for 2020-2030

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Reader's Comments

From Lawrence:

I was impressed with the change of focus on the Air Force Strategic Vision for 2020-2030 in the last issue when I read about the service “refining a flexible power-projection” on pages 11-12. The second of the four opinions captured my attention.

When a conflict arises against an adversary in what I view as traditional uniform force via uniform force, as stated by the authors, “in a conflict with a peer competitor...for determining an appropriate Air Force response is simple”. I could not help but think of the past 40 years of history that have determined the proper Air Force power response. Certainly, the Air Force has been in all the fights, but it has not been textbook or easy to operate as a service in the irregular warfare environment. The authors do a nice job capturing this concept.

Keeping in mind Colonel TX Hammes’ excellent book on 4th Generation Warfare titled “The Sling and the Stone”, the US has for years been fighting enemies that are difficult to locate, close with, and destroy...for a plethora of reasons. This irregular conflict, from Vietnam to Somalia to Afghanistan (...and more), has been and continues to be, challenging for the Air Force to fight in using traditional ways. Developing a “general purpose force...not often considered part of the service’s power projection role” as stated by the authors, is steel on target...a fantastic way ahead.

More important than resources spent on equipment in the five critical capabilities mentioned in the article is the development of the service’s greatest asset: the mind of the warrior. Whether thru Fellowships, in-residence War Colleges, or higher education at a civilian institution, our creative mindset is where all problems are first solved. I think interwoven in the Vision is the invisible and important thread of developing the intellectual capital of all our personnel. This includes the few and far between available seats granted to Reserve and Guard officers at in-residence War Colleges....

For profit companies rely on creativity to stay in business; think Apple and their iPad as an example...started as a simple phone with no buttons. The Air Force is no different. Innovation, creative thought, critical thinking, and studying lessons learned all come to mind when discussing power projection capabilities, and it is noteworthy that the Air Force has a written vision to act as a catalyst for thought and action in this arena.

From Anne:

Given the current fiscal climate and fluid nature national security challenges, not to mention the level of integration among the services and external agencies such as the State Department, I question many of the assumptions on which Gen Shaud and Dr. Lowther base their vision for the

Air Force. For example, they assert that the Air Force needs to control the air, space, and cyber domains. Particularly in the case of cyber, “control” is neither feasible nor practical, and may not be necessary. The true security need is freedom of operation in these domains; controlling the domain may be the most effective way of ensuring free access, but it is also the most expensive and possibly the most risky approach, other than inaction. Further, the assertion that the Air Force has responsibility for offensive cyber capabilities is presumptuous, given that other agencies are already chartered and funded for this mission. The Air Force should claim responsibility for integrating cyber operations into air and space operations, but the investment required to establish these capabilities, particularly if they exist elsewhere in the US arsenal, may not be prudent and should be carefully evaluated.

I found the discussion of space-based weapons particularly unsettling, specifically the assumption that the American public will call for and “aggressive” DoD response in the event of an attack on our commercial space capabilities. First, the public perception of the attack would probably not trigger the same response as, for example, the 9-11 attacks, which brought us horrific images of violence and death. Few people get violent when their cell phone reception or television service goes down, and while inconvenienced, people may not link a kinetic or electromagnetic space attack to the need for a violent response. Secondly, any response would be in another domain than space; if the source of the attack is known, any call for violent retaliation would be on the attacker's doorstep on earth. We already have the capabilities to respond to a large portion of the potential threat space in this scenario.

As technology becomes increasingly expensive and challenging and as globalization blurs the already unclear boundaries between the roles of the elements of national power, we must make tough choices about our investments in national security. We can no longer assume that we must be able to control any airspace, anywhere, at any time; instead, we should strive to understand the true security need - such as freedom of operation - and align our investments accordingly, balancing a portfolio that includes the other instruments of national power. Instead of asserting that the Air Force must step up to the plate in all of the cases described by the authors, we should carefully consider other players who are able to take the ball and run with it, and determine what functions we truly need to be able to accomplish as a service to win the game for the team, whether or not we get the glory of scoring the touchdowns.