

Rethinking Air Force preparation and mounting for joint force operations in the Indo-Pacific

Shane Ivimey

Australian Defence Force

Abstract

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) needs to integrate air power into the joint force in order to maximise their contribution to the exercises in the Indo-Pacific. To achieve this, RAAF needs reforms that focus on implementing the processes outlined in existing doctrine to improve the training, certification and force preparation of deploying task elements.

Introduction

The Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF) contributions to joint operations¹ in the Indo-Pacific lack the force preparation, mounting and certification framework to maximise their contribution to the three Strategic Defence Objectives (SDO), especially *Shape*. The RAAF's preparation for contributions to joint operations in the Indo-Pacific needs to be reformed for the RAAF to fully achieve strategic, not only tactical, effects.

This essay comprises three sections. First, it contextualises the role of air power in the joint force and the current geostrategic environment. This section focuses on why the RAAF needs to reform its operational mounting process. Second, it discusses the deficiencies in current processes, especially when compared to the mounting process previously used for operations in the Middle East Region (MER). This section illustrates how the current process makes it difficult to implement the *2020 Air Force Strategy (AFSTRAT)* lines of effort (LOE) needed to effectively integrate air power into the joint force. Third, it provides several implementable recommendations to address the identified shortcomings and achieve joint objectives.

Overall, reformation of the RAAF's operational mounting process will allow air power to be better integrated into the joint force while growing strategically minded and culturally intelligent aviators.

Doctrine and operational overview

The operational mounting process is articulated in ADFP 3.0.3 *Mounting Operations*. This essay does not argue for an overhaul of the existing doctrine, nor is it a detailed analysis of the publication; rather, it argues that the doctrine should be properly applied to RAAF activities in the Indo-Pacific. Importantly, the process for mounting, including training, certification and force preparation, rests with the mounting headquarters (Department of Defence, 2009, pp. 1–10).

¹ These operations include ARGOS, SOLANIA, GATEWAY and other maritime surveillance patrols.

The key area of focus is the need for mounting headquarters (Headquarters Air Command) to conduct the training, certification and force preparation of deploying units to ensure they can achieve their mission (Department of Defence, 2009, p. 5). The mission encompasses the operational objectives in support of national objectives, not just the tactical objectives per sortie. Despite the joint nature of the aforementioned operations in the Indo-Pacific (see footnote 1), the task elements or units deploying on these activities are almost exclusively drawn from the RAAF. A RAAF officer commands operations at the Task Element Commander (CTE) and/or Task Unit Commander (CTU) level.² This position is under the operational commander of Director General Air Operations (DGAIR) and the Air and Space Operations Centre (AOC). This command and control structure is contained within the RAAF and, therefore, provides the RAAF with the opportunity to swiftly implement many of the recommendations proposed in this essay.

Strategic context for the application of air power

The geostrategic environment in which air power is applied is rapidly changing and, in many cases, deteriorating. This change, captured in the AFSTRAT, necessitates that air power be applied in a more deliberate and 'broader' manner to provide greater 'utility to the joint force' (RAAF, 2020, p. 5). The AFSTRAT outlines five LOE to achieve this, many of which are applicable to the mounting process. In the Indo-Pacific, air power is primarily focused on shaping the region to uphold the international rules-based order and counter malign actors, deterring actors from unilaterally changing the status quo and responding to adversarial activity. Currently, most of this activity 'persistently' occurs in the grey zone short of conflict (RAAF, 2020, p. 3). Consequently, the majority of RAAF operational deployments in the Indo-Pacific region are intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities conducted from partner nation bases. For example, Operation GATEWAY is conducted from RMAF Butterworth, Malaysia; Operational SOLANIA is conducted from various Southwest Pacific nations; and Operation ARGOS is conducted from Kadena Air Base, Japan.

AFSTRAT LOE1 highlights how RAAF contributions to operations must understand the joint force objectives to be able to integrate air power effectively into the joint force (RAAF, 2020). In the Indo-Pacific, this is closely linked with LOE4, which requires our units be strategically minded and understanding of the context of their activities across the spectrum of competition. Therefore, the mounting process must ensure the CTEs understand how their tactical effects link to operational and strategic objectives.

Further, our task elements must understand, as outlined in LOE3, the relationships Australia is trying to build with the partner nations that host RAAF activities. This understanding, combined with cultural intelligence, will allow our aviators to maximise opportunities when engaging in the region. This engagement is the centrepiece of the *Shape* SDO. These requirements can no longer be taken as a given, or treated as an afterthought, in operational planning or force generation activities as tactical effects alone are insufficient to achieve the joint force's mission. To achieve the *Shape* SDO, relationship building and international engagement should be planned and prioritised by the RAAF as much as the rest of the operation. This means that the relevant AFSTRAT LOE must be fully integrated into the mounting process.

The current process and its challenges

The RAAF's mounting process for operations in the Indo-Pacific currently focuses, almost exclusively, on the administrative, logistical and tactical aspects. The process neglects the

² A CTE is typically a Squadron Leader (Flight Lieutenant for Operation SOLANIA), and a CTU is typically a Wing Commander. Not all Indo-Pacific operations have a task unit and, often, are just a task element. This essay uses the term 'CTE' for ease of reading and the fact that all operations have a CTE but not all have a CTU. Nevertheless, the challenges and recommendations apply equally to both levels of command.

training, certification and education of strategic-level objectives or AFSTRAT LOE to the deploying task element. The RAAF's main operating environment, the Indo-Pacific, has a patchwork and immature deployment mounting process. This is especially true when compared to previous operations in the MER.

From experience and observation, the practised mounting process for RAAF activities in the Indo-Pacific contains the following steps. First, members from various force element groups are assigned to an operation – usually conducted by a Surveillance and Response Group (SRG) platform. Each area, such as communications or aircrew, undertakes their own tactical work-up training and certification through their technical control chain of command. Concurrently, the AOC conducts a pre-deployment synchronisation brief with the CTE, which outlines the operational and strategic effects to be achieved. This brief is the only formal interaction between the operational commander and the CTE. It is no longer than one hour and is the only time the CTE is formally provided with the context that links their tactical actions to joint operational objectives and strategic effects.

Second, at the point of embarkation, or once together as a formed task element in country, the CTE provides the detachment with an operational overview brief. This brief is usually focused on the administrative, legal and logistical aspects of the operation, as opposed to how the operational objectives are aligned to the SDOs. In the currently practised mounting process, the strategic understanding and networking across the force is conducted by the AOC, which then provides detailed written direction to the CTE. Craig and Snook (2014) argue that while this will lead to compliance and the satisfactory achievement of objectives, the stove-piping of information due to the disconnect means the workforce's full potential is not harnessed.

Contrast this to the MER mounting process, which included a minimum three-day force preparation for all deploying members conducted by the 39th Operational Support Battalion. This covered all aspects of the operation, including the strategic context, the desired operational effects for the theatre, cultural intelligence briefs, and routine administrative and logistical aspects. This was then reinforced by classified briefs in theatre and addresses by the Joint Task Force 633 executive staff during the reception, staging and onwards movement phase.

Research from the Centre for Army Lessons indicates that the articulation of strategic intent to all personnel increases performance and motivation on deployment (Australian Army, 2017, p. 43). Clearly, the mounting process for RAAF contributions to Indo-Pacific operations has not been amended to reflect the changing geostrategic environment and increased demands on the application of air power. While the professional military education continuum provides a strong intellectual framework for understanding air power, it does not specifically provide commanders or units with the operationally specific objectives they are seeking to achieve or how they link to joint objectives.

Joint Force Objectives

Currently, CTEs are not sufficiently educated on the operational and strategic objectives, making it difficult to fully integrate air power into the joint force. The requirement to integrate is passed exclusively to the AOC, thus separating the CTE from the strategic environment. This can lead to the task element focusing on tactical wins at the expense of strategic objectives. For example, the mission of Operation ARGOS is to 'enforce United Nations Security Council sanctions on North Korea ... by monitoring and deterring illegal ship-to-ship transfers of sanctioned goods' (Department of Defence, 2021). The operating area means there are numerous People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels active in the operating environment. Tactically, P-8A crews are proficient and experienced in intelligence collection on PLAN vessels. Therefore, without proper strategic understanding, P-8A crews may prioritise intelligence collection on PLAN vessels over deterring illegal ship-to-ship transfers. This would be detrimental to the mission and needs to be highlighted through pre-deployment

briefings that link tactical ISR tasks to strategic effects, not just captured in AOC directives that demand compliance but not understanding.

Relationships

The CTE does not directly engage with the areas of the Department of Defence responsible for generating the direction on regional engagement. This can lead to the task element not understanding what opportunities exist during their deployment to strengthen relationships. For example, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* states that Defence needs to increase its intelligence sharing across the Indo-Pacific to deepen relationships (Department of Defence, 2020, p. 22). Layton (2021) argues that in the Indo-Pacific, this would mean sharing maritime domain awareness products with regional nations. This sharing will provide those nations with an understanding of the malign activity occurring in the region and allow them to respond, thereby building resilience and trust. This sharing achieves all three SDOs and is an active part of all Defence strategic documents.

However, in the currently practised mounting process, CTEs are unlikely to be aware of how this direction directly translates into permitted tactical actions. Most CTEs only conduct a single operation during their posting, and they are likely to be cautious about sharing information due to fear of a data spill or mistake. Brown (2013) argues that such institutionalised risk aversion has become engrained in the Australian Defence Force. This is contrary to the AFSTRAT, which states that RAAF aviators must 'seize opportunities, not just treat risk' (RAAF, 2020, p. 3). Further, there are no dedicated cultural intelligence briefings or courses available on the RAAF's primary areas of operations. The briefs in the current mounting process focus on the consequences of poor behaviour in the host country. This combination likely leads to most aviators being too risk adverse to create people-to-people contacts that build mutual trust, understanding and goodwill.

Recommendations

The RAAF can implement several initiatives to improve the overall operational force generation and mounting framework for Indo-Pacific activities.

Linking Tactical Effects to Strategic Objectives

First, HQAC, as the mounting headquarters, should develop a CTE training continuum and federated RAAF force preparation system. These would be tangible efforts to support AFSTRAT LOE1 and LOE2. The CTE training would be aimed at the RAAF wings and squadrons that provide CTEs for deployments. The training should focus on educating these personnel on the strategic environment, the operational specific objectives, the relationship building objectives and how to effectively convey these points, not just the current administrative points, to all aviators in their detachment. This will require coordination across the joint force, including international engagement, HQJOC Joint Effects and International Policy Division. For the federated aspect, there are various areas of HQAC that could be used to implement this program, such as the AOC or Air Force Training Group. Similar to the RAAF's School of Postgraduate Studies model, nodes could be set up at all major RAAF bases to facilitate in-person training. This would remove the administrative impost of travelling to a central location, previously experienced in the MER force preparation program. The RAAF should take a federated approach to preparing other members of detachments for their deployments. The AFSTRAT LOE and required actions are the responsibility of all units; therefore, they should already be providing members with a baseline understanding of the Indo-Pacific theatre. For example, intelligence staff from Number 87 Squadron are embedded in all Force Element Groups and can provide (potentially pre-recorded) briefs on the geostrategic situation in the Indo-Pacific as part of annual induction training. Additionally, the RAAF can link with industry partners who already provide Indo-Pacific cultural intelligence training to the private sector.

Second, major overseas exercises should go through the same certification and mounting processes as operations. While not specifically covered in this essay, the AFSTRAT argues that force generation activities play a significant role in air power's integration into the joint force to achieve national objectives (RAAF, 2020, p. 9). This is a fundamental paradigm shift for many aviators. This new way of thinking should be captured through a formal training program to equip exercise commanders with the same skills and perspectives as their operational counterparts. In the current era of geostrategic competition, the RAAF cannot afford to allow bureaucratic lines between exercises and operations to impede achieving strategic effects.

Relationships

Third, to help build relationships, the AOC can set up a dedicated intelligence sharing team to integrate air force operations into joint and national intelligence sharing initiatives. This team can reside within the current force structure and fuse reports from different operations into a consolidated intelligence picture that can be shared, through HQJOC, with other nations.

Lastly, the RAAF should advocate for the establishment of a permanent Indo-Pacific Air Task Group (ATG), akin to the ATG 630 model adopted in the MER. This could be a future force initiative due to the time required to establish the overseas positions. This command and control model would be a significant change to the currently employed patchwork model. It could have a Commander ATG (Group Captain rank) working directly for DGAIR and supported by CTUs (Wing Commander rank) responsible for different geographical areas such as the Southwest Pacific (Op SOLANIA), Southeast Asia (Op GATEWAY) and North Asia (Op ARGOS). The task elements would be raised in Australia and sent into theatre, where they receive operationally relevant intelligence briefs from the ATG staff. These would be permanent positions located in theatre, such as at RMAF Butterworth, or existing Defence sites in Singapore.

The permanent presence will be increasingly important as the RAAF future force, through remotely piloted aircraft, will be capable of conducting operations in the Indo-Pacific from Australia. The benefits of this system include continuity and personnel with a detailed understanding of the theatre and strategic objectives and the ability to form long-lasting relationships with partner countries. Aspects of this model already exist, with the 92 Wing Detachment A Commander being the permanent CTE for Op GATEWAY. The benefits of this system include the ability to form strong relationships and intelligence sharing arrangements with the Malaysian Air Force, which has ensured Defence access to RMAF Butterworth for over 40 years.

Ongoing access is a key requirement for future activities in Southeast Asia (Department of Defence, 2020, p. 21). Several issues such as cost, host nation permission and staffing constraints need to be considered; however, the fact that the RAAF maintained ATG 630 for over a decade shows it can be achieved. Further, the volatile nature of the Indo-Pacific provides the strategic justification for such an outlay.

Conclusion

The RAAF needs to reform its mounting process for activities conducted in the Indo-Pacific. The reform process should focus on implementing the processes outlined in existing doctrine to improve the training, certification and force preparation of deploying task elements. The primary area for improvement is understanding and capitalising on the linkages between tactical actions, joint operational objectives and strategic effects. This can be achieved by increasing the RAAF's strategic understanding and providing aviators with the tools needed to deepen relationships, such as cultural intelligence. This improvement will lead to more effective integration of air power into the joint force and achievement of strategic effects.

A variety of different methods can be used to achieve this. On one end of the spectrum, the

RAAF can adapt its existing force-in-being to create a federated force preparation or intelligence sharing system. In the middle of the spectrum, the RAAF can create a dedicated CTE training system for all operational and exercise leaders operating in the Indo-Pacific. On the other end of the spectrum, the RAAF can advocate to the joint force for the establishment of an Indo-Pacific ATG, which could replicate the benefits of the MER ATG (ATG 630). The Indo-Pacific is currently the RAAF's primary operating area and will only become more complex over time. The RAAF, in line with the AFSTRAT, must carefully invest in the training, certification and preparation of its deploying units to ensure the RAAF's contributions to joint operations align with and contribute to Australia's national objectives.

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