



AIR TO AIR REFUELLING IN EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS

JAPCC – Air-to-Air Refuelling Section

“From the hills of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli...” USMC Hymn

According to the lines quoted above, Expeditionary Operations are not a new concept. History is sprinkled with numerous examples, and the characteristics of these operations have not really changed. SACT discusses many expeditionary concepts in their document “Expeditionary Operations Overarching and Conceptual Vision and Frameworksⁱ”.

The three main questions that define the conditions of Expeditionary Operations remain the same: “How far? - Wherever they are needed”; “How long? – Temporaryⁱⁱ”; “How much? – Tailored”. What is really new is the reaction time. At the beginning of the 20th Century, fifty-five days were required to free the western embassies in Beijing from attack. Now at the beginning of the 21st Century, a more immediate response is required.

The keyword that highlights the contribution of an Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR) capability is “Wherever”. Its importance is directly related to the distance and could be essential to mitigate, in part, a lack of infrastructure in an austere environment. This article will analyze the characteristics required for an AAR Force supporting Expeditionary Operations.

Interoperability

The first requirement of the AAR Force is a high level of interoperability to avoid, or at least minimize, the impact of employing different assets with different specifications. Expeditionary Forces should be joint and combined. This implies operating under the same rules and following the same procedures.

More movement towards increased interoperability is required. In particular, interoperability preparation, training, qualification and certification between tankers and receivers needs to be performed prior to the assets being declared as part of an Expeditionary Force. Only this way can certification make air forces more interoperable, enabling them to participate in a Joint Operations Area far from their bases of deployment. The JAPCC project, “Enhancing NATO AAR Interoperability” aims to enhance AAR interoperability within NATO by providing a global AAR manual, doctrinal guidance and standard planning materialsⁱⁱⁱ.

Unity of Command

During expeditionary operations, NATO missions will coexist with national missions, and correct coordination to support both must be assured. All tankers involved in Expeditionary Operations should be integrated in a Combined Tanker Force under the Command of the JFC (or JFACC). Integrated planning and execution is essential to unity of effort through unity of Command and optimizes the use of limited tanker assets. It is also a way to assure prioritization and the correct sequence. Indeed the integration of tankers will allow adjusting this force to a rapidly changing situation. The best model for deploying a NATO expeditionary force is the “*Reception, staging, onward movement and integrations of forces conducted at the point of embarkation^{iv}*” model because it can coordinate the support of assets coming to sustain or create the deployment (national responsibility) with those assets launched to carry out combat or humanitarian air operations (NATO responsibility).

Tailored Tanker Force

The missions that Expeditionary Air Forces may be required to carry out are many and varied. They can include combat and humanitarian operations to achieve control of the air, support expeditionary surface forces, surveillance missions, etc., indeed all missions that constitute the air operations planned under NATO responsibility. But those operations have to be compatible with another group of air operations, mainly air logistic operations and flights to reinforce or replace assets, performed as a national responsibility. AAR refuelling support to the first group is important in order to achieve the objectives of the Expedition. But supporting the second group is equally important in order to maintain the logistic flow that links the Expeditionary Force with its re-supply. This is as important as Interoperability or Unity of Command. It is more than a matter of prioritising or apportioning. The AAR Force must be able to support all the operations that require AAR without affecting the course of other actions. During deployment and employment NATO AAR and national logistics requirements vary, and aircraft able to perform either role could be assigned to AAR or logistics roles depending on current requirements.

Alternative Tasks

The tanker's long endurance makes it usable for other Combat Support missions. Such missions may include Command and Control Support or even ISR tasks, if the tanker has been specially equipped. Lastly, the cargo carrying capability of tankers should not be forgotten. The tanker can be a valuable addition supporting joint operations or deployments. The expected lack of infrastructure encountered at the forward operating airbases close to the JOA, will limit the number of air assets. The ability to carry out multiple roles could be a valuable characteristic to enhance the flexibility and efficiency of the expeditionary forces.

High Readiness

In the case of expeditionary operations, the time of reaction and surprise is crucial. Having your force at High Levels of Readiness is the best way to avoid delays, and maintain the initiative. After all, a factor in deterring the enemy is credibility, and an expeditionary force is only as strong as its weakest link. Therefore, if one of the parts is ready at short notice, while other components are not, credibility is reduced. The readiness of the tankers should be the same as the receivers they support to ensure the fastest possible response time.

Realism in Exercises

Exercises must be planned to simulate a realistic operational situation. AAR should be emphasized in exercises; it is not only a training matter, but also an operational and planning issue. During the first Gulf War, AAR missions were the second highest in number; they had the same ranking in the Kosovo Crisis. This ranking (number of missions) is not currently reflected in exercise programmes. While this could be understandable from the economic perspective, it does sacrifice the realism of exercises.

AAR is not a substitute for infrastructure

There is a temptation to use a theatre AAR capability as a substitute for basing infrastructure; that is to plan to air refuel on-task air assets so that they do not need the support of sophisticated ground base infrastructure in the AOO. However, there is a danger here. Such reliance on tactical AAR will entail an AAR effort, which could overstretch the AAR Force and deny AAR support to strategic and air logistics operations. There exists only a limited number of AAR aircraft in the NATO inventory; their employment must always be a balance of priorities.

Summary

AAR is an essential component of any Expeditionary Force. By its very nature it is a force enabler that allows forces to operate globally. However, in considering the usage of AAR in Expeditionary Forces, there are some areas which require emphasis. There is a need for improved Interoperability and Unity of Command. The tanker force will need to be carefully tailored to allow it to conduct the required operations. Indeed, the tankers aerial presence in the theatre may make it a candidate for additional C2 and ISR missions. The readiness of AAR units, their training and realism of exercising will have to be specifically programmed. Lastly, AAR is a limited asset, it should be employed primarily in its primary task and only if there is spare capacity should it be considered for alternative missions.

ⁱ Expeditionary Operations Overarching and Conceptual Vision and Frameworks, published by the Expeditionary Operations ICT of HQ SACT in February 2006, promulgates an overarching vision and framework for the conduct of work, both conceptual and capability related within the area of Expeditionary Operations.

ⁱⁱ The term "expeditionary" implies a temporary duration with the intention to withdraw from foreign soil after the accomplishment of the specified mission. An operation that involves a permanent or indefinite presence supported by a standing organization and infrastructure ceases to be an expedition and becomes a campaign (Expeditionary Operations Overarching and Conceptual Vision and Frameworks).

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at www.japcc.de

^{iv} See footnote 1.