

Army Operations and the Air Tasking Cycle (ATC)



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Introduction

Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows. The Soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent, and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.

– Sun Tzu

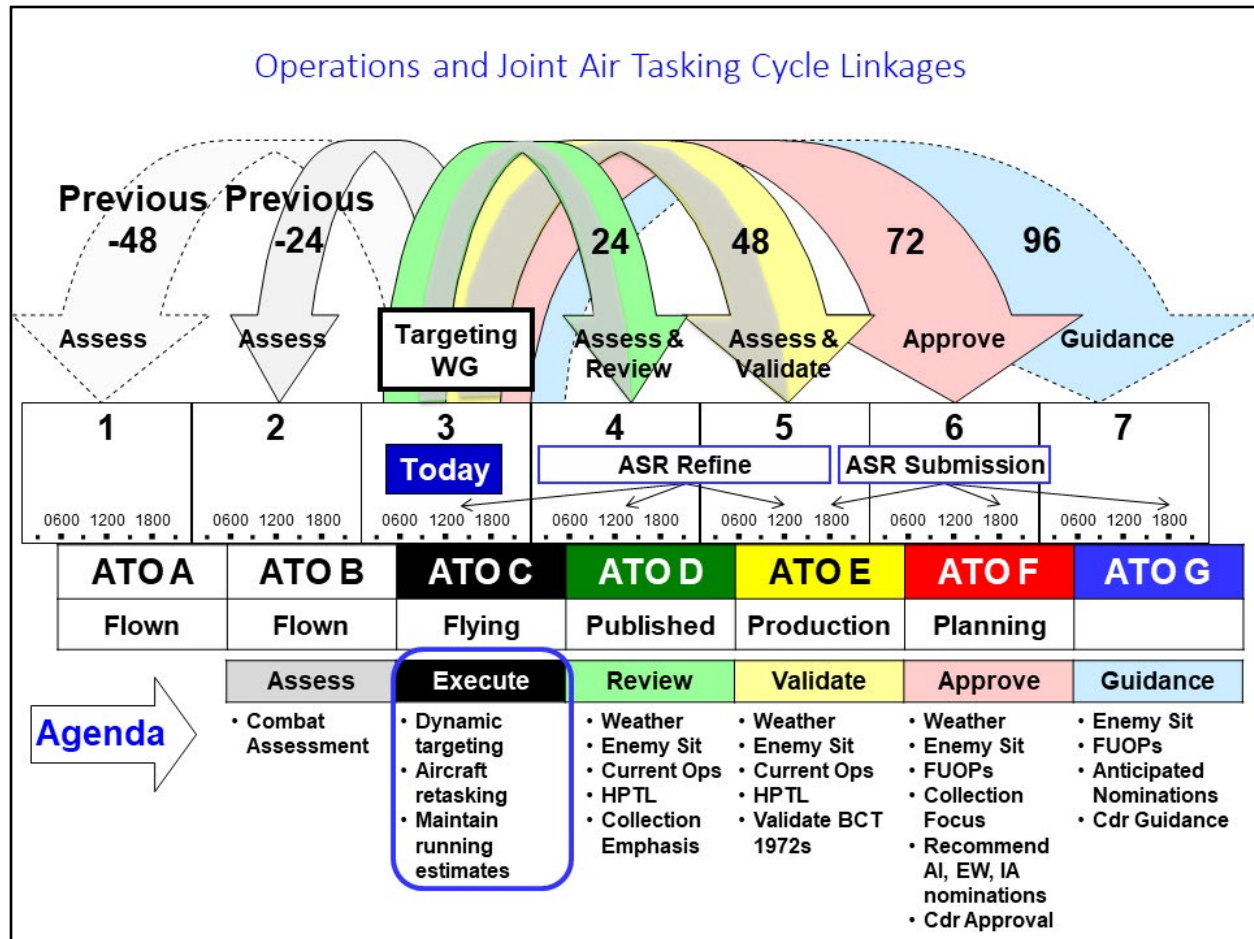
Commanders and staffs routinely synchronized battle rhythms with the air tasking cycle (ATC) in recent corps and division Warfighter exercises. During recent counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, this alignment was operationally accepted where the tempo of the operation was considerably slower, and the enemy was not a conventional near-peer threat. However, Army doctrine does not require a corps or division to align its battle rhythm with the Air Force's ATC. In large scale combat operations (LSCO), the battlefield is dynamic and unpredictable. This requires agility and flexibility to gain and maintain the initiative over a near-peer enemy in real time. With this, one must ask, "Is it best for a corps and division headquarters to synchronize battle rhythms with the ATC during LSCO?" To answer this, it is first necessary to review the ATC cycle and LSCO. With this, it will next be possible to consider the requirements for a headquarters within LSCO as well as to highlight potential challenges and implications for a unit synchronizing battle rhythm with the ATC. From this, it will be clear that units that tie battle rhythm to the ATC in LSCO are likely less effective and lose their agility on the battlefield by becoming process oriented instead of objective oriented.

The Air Tasking Cycle

The ATC is the method the Joint Force Air Component Commander uses to control air assets in a theater. It allocates resources and it tasks its subordinate units in support of the joint force commander's (JFC) priorities. "The joint air tasking cycle is time dependent. It is built around finite time periods to plan, prepare for, and conduct joint air operations. There are set suspense's for product inputs and outputs for each stage of the joint air tasking cycle, generally over a 72–96-hour planning cycle."¹

The joint air tasking cycle is an iterative process consisting of six stages that occur sequentially: JFC and component coordination, target development, weaponing and allocation, ATO production, force execution, and combat assessment.

There are up to five ATO's in different stages of planning development. During the process, the joint air tasking cycle receives products developed during the joint targeting cycle and other joint force processes to include Army targeting cycles. The joint targeting cycle and joint air tasking cycle are systematic processes to match available capabilities and forces with specific targets to achieve the JFC's objectives.²



**Figure 1. Air Tasking Order Cycle
(Mission Command Training Program [MCTP])**

The ATC is driven by constraints in time, requiring intensive and centralized management of resources and manpower to ensure support to the joint force commander (JFC).

It takes time for ground crews to prepare aircraft for flight (with the right ordinance for the target/mission), for aircrews to plan missions, and for those crews to fly to the immediate area of operations from distant airfields. Likewise, commanders should have enough visibility on future operations to ensure sufficient assets and crews are available to prepare for and perform tasked missions. These requirements drive the execution of a periodic, repeatable tasking process that allows commanders to plan for upcoming operations. The typical tasking cycle, the ATO (usually 24 hours in duration), and the process that develops it (usually 44-96 hours in duration), are a direct consequence of these physical constraints.³

From this it is evident that the ATC cycle can and does most often remain a periodic and repeatable tasking process whether the operational tempo is COIN or LSCO.⁴

Large-scale Combat Operations

Army doctrine defines LSCO as, “...extensive joint combat operations in terms of scope and size of forces committed, conducted as campaigns aimed at achieving operational and strategic objectives through the application of force.”⁵ For the Army, the LSCO environment is fluid against a dynamic enemy where the tactical situation changes rapidly. As stated in Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, 1 October 2022, “These operations typically entail high tempo, high resource consumption, and high casualty rates. LSCO introduces levels of complexity, lethality, ambiguity, and speed to military activities not common in other operations.”⁶

Consequences and Considerations

With these definitions, it is possible to identify consequences and further considerations concerning the synchronization of an Army headquarters battle rhythm with the ATC. First, the many corps and divisions attempts to align their battle rhythms with the ATC led to a time-based operations planning process instead of one based on objectives.⁷ Consequently, this process was driven by staff meetings, working groups, and decision boards that fed and rigidly aligned with the targeting cycle and ATC. However, Army operations are not strictly time dependent, particularly in LSCO. Operations are driven by tasks and purposes that achieve objectives tied to an end state. Operations must remain agile to counter crisis and exploit opportunities that occur outside of standard planning processes.⁸ As stated in Army doctrine Publication (ADP) 5.0, *The Operations Process*, 31 July 2019, “A goal of the operations process is to make timely and effective decisions and to act faster than the enemy. A tempo advantageous to friendly forces can place the enemy under the pressures of uncertainty and time. Decision making during execution includes knowing how and when to adjust previous decisions. The speed and accuracy of a commander’s actions to address a changing situation is a key contributor to agility.”⁹

Army doctrine requires agility to improve the prospects of success. Agility is an Army tenant and arguably agility may be required to attain other tenets. To that end, Army forces must be capable of deciding and acting faster, moving quicker, and rapidly adapting to a situation more than the enemy does.¹⁰ However, as seen in the example battle rhythm (Figure 2), an Army headquarters limits its agility when it rigidly synchronizes its battle rhythm to the ATC. As seen in this battle figure, commanders and staff are very limited in their flexibility due to an abundance of meetings. These meetings are time consuming and are intricately dependent on each other for information and decisions, forcing commanders and staff to strictly follow the battle rhythm to avoid upsetting the cycle, regardless of the battlefield conditions.

As highlighted in the description of the ATC, Air Force doctrine places LSCO in its counterland operation doctrine, stating that, “...This doctrine applies to both LSCO and stability operations.” It goes on to define counterland operations as, “...Airpower operations against enemy land force capabilities to create effects that achieve JFC’s objectives.”¹¹ With this, the ATO planning cycle remains unchanged regardless of the tempo of ground combat operations. However, during LSCO, Army battle rhythms will most likely not be sustainable as static 24-hour cycles. They will change with the ebb and flow of operations. During planning and preparing, there may be a time predictable battle rhythm, but during sustained execution, the developing situation and the enemy will greatly influence the tempo and rhythm of the operation. This is reinforced in ADP 5-0.

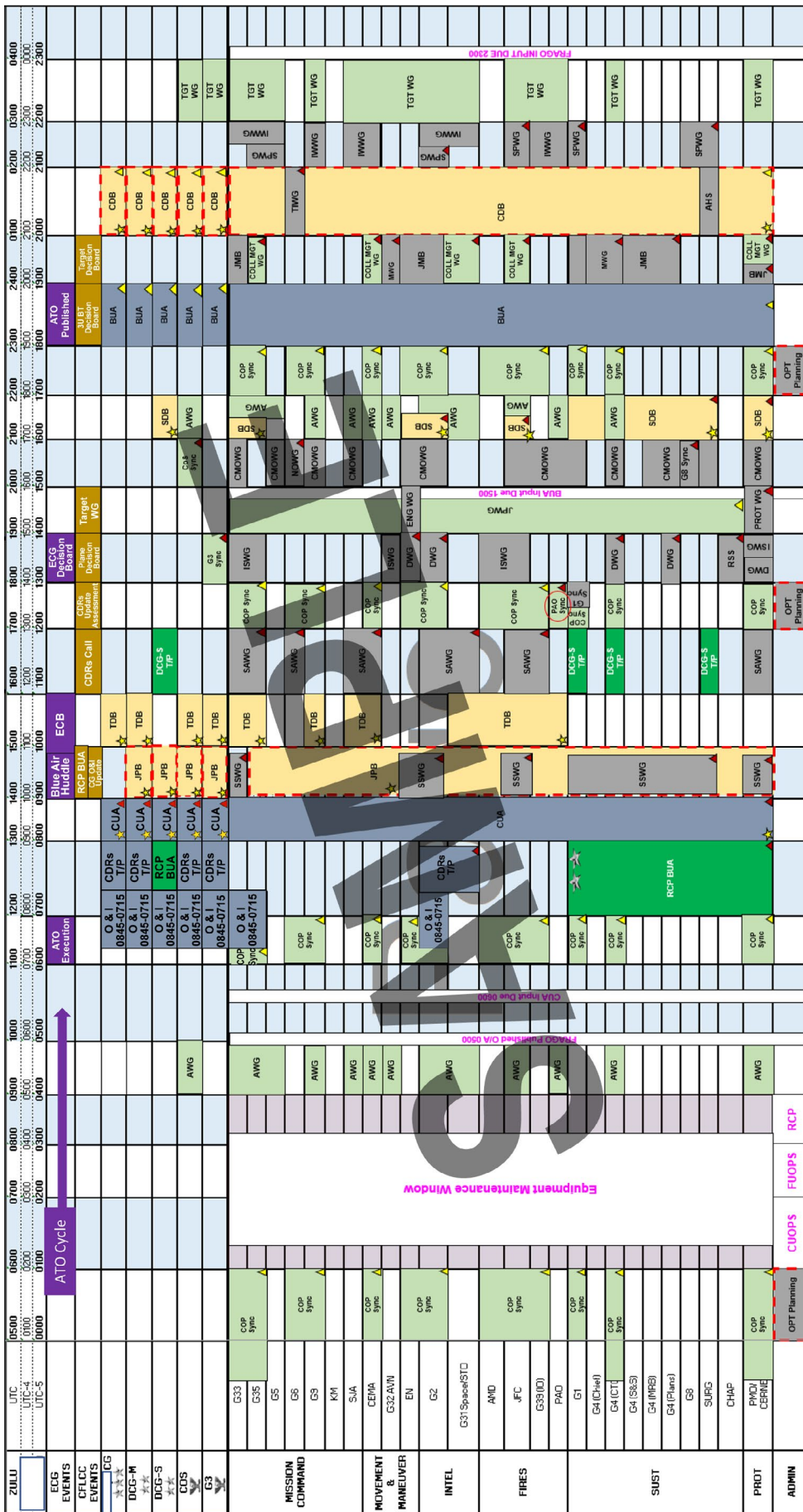


Figure 2. An Example of a Corps/Division Battle Rhythm (Mission Command Training Program [MCTP])

There is no standard battle rhythm for every situation. Different echelons, types of units, and types of operations require commanders and staffs to develop a battle rhythm based on the situation. During large-scale ground combat, where lethality and time constraints require rapid planning and decision cycles, the unit's battle rhythm focuses on defeating the enemy.¹²

In a LSCO environment where the tempo of the operation is faster, tactical actions and counteractions are unpredictable. With this, ground commanders must assess by seeing themselves, the enemy, and understand the situation to adjust (revisualize, decide, and direct) in compressed time to succeed, which could prevent synchronization with an ATO cycle.

Conclusion

As demonstrated from recent exercises and real-world operations, Army headquarters habitually tie battle rhythms to the Air Force's ATC. While the ATC has proven effective for the Air Force to support the joint force, it has not synchronized well with all Army battle rhythms. In lower intensity operations like COIN, Army headquarters have synchronized their battle rhythms to the ATC with little consequence. However, with increased demand for flexibility and agility, LSCO requires the tailoring of battle rhythms to operations-based planning rather than a time-based process of sequential working groups and planning cycles not controlled by the Army.

Ultimately, the solution resides with the joint force commander because he sets priorities and allocates resources and the Air force who owns the ATC. Most likely the joint force air component commander (JFACC) is not going to deviate from the JATC, and the Army still must fight the ground war. From this, Army headquarters should develop an operational approach to battle rhythms to best enable agility and tempo of ground operations while still fostering close coordination and cooperation from the joint force commander.

Finally, we must train as we fight. This requires division and corps warfighter exercises and joint exercises to reflect the realities of contested air domain so land and air forces can rehearse jointly fighting the enemy and achieve the agility LSCO demands.

Glossary

ADP	Army doctrine publication
AFB	Air Force base
AFDP	Air Force doctrine publication
ATO	air tasking order
ATP	Army techniques publication
COIN	counterinsurgency operations
FM	field manual
JFC	joint force commander
JP	Joint publication
LSCO	large-scale combat operations
MCTP	Mission Command Training Program

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Endnotes

- 1 Joint Publication (JP) 3-30, *Joint Air Operations*, 25 July 2019, Section III, page 20 and [3-0-D29-I-OPS-The-Tasking-Cycle](#), page 3.
- 2 JP 3-30, *Joint Air Operations*, 25 July 2019, Section III, page, 20.
- 3 United States Air Force, Curtis E. Lemay Center. [3-0-D29-I-OPS-The-Tasking-Cycle](#), page 2-3.
- 4 Counterland operations is the Air Force doctrine for air support overland. “Counterland operations are applicable across the competition continuum and the range of operations. Counterland operations apply to both large-scale combat operations (LSCO) and stability operations characterized by insurgency, guerrilla tactics, and civil strife.” Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-03, *Counterland Operations*, page 3. The Air Force resourcing process, the air tasking order (ATO), remains the same across weather in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations or LSCO.
- 5 Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, 1 October 2022, Chapter 6, page 6-3.
- 6 Ibid., paragraphs 6-2 through 6-4.
- 7 WFX [*Warfighter*] 21-5 *Post Exercise Report* observation is just one of many that illustrate corps and division constraining themselves to a time driven process instead of an operational process tied to actions on the battlefield; “The division structured its targeting board within the 24-hour ATO cycle framework, limiting its ability to visualize the nominations within its scheme of maneuver. This added to its inability to see where and when it should synchronize effects as well as how these effects could support its scheme of maneuver.”
- 8 Ibid., Chapter 1, page, 15, paragraph 1-3.
- 9 Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5.0, *The Operational Process*, 31 July 2019, Chapter 1, page 14, paragraph 1-7.
- 10 FM 3-0, *Operations*, 1 October 2022, page 3-3, paragraph 3-8: Agility is one of four Army tenets, and is defined as, the ability to move forces and adjust their dispositions and activities more rapidly than the enemy. Agility helps to influence the tempo, create opportunities, and exploit opportunities. Agility also builds leaders and forces that can recover from setbacks and regain the initiative.”
- 11 United States Air Force, Curtis E. Lemay Center. AFDP 3-03, *Counterland Operations*, page 4.
- 12 Ibid, Chapter 1, page 28, paragraph 1-83.

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