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JOAC begins the discussion on access, but tough problems remain

By [*Robert Haddick*](#)

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Last week, the Pentagon released to the public version 1.0 of its **Joint Operational Access Concept** (JOAC), a 64-page document that outlines how the U.S. military will overcome looming “anti access/area denial” (A2/AD) problems and threats. Over the past few years, it has dawned on defense analysts and military planners that open access to Eurasia, something that U.S. planners have taken for granted for decades, is no longer a valid assumption. In the future, the U.S. may very well have to fight to achieve access or to restore freedom of navigation to the global commons. This has logically led to the development of a joint concept on access, the JOAC. JOAC provides a good outline of the theater access challenges for defense policymakers and planners. But it only begins to describe how difficult those challenges will be.

JOAC achieved at least three noteworthy successes. First, it listed 30 specific capabilities U.S. forces will have to possess if the U.S. is to overcome adversary A2/AD barriers. JOAC doesn’t say what investments or systems are needed for each of these capabilities; that will be left to the completion of subsequent assessments. But outlining the required capabilities is an important first step.

Second, JOAC stresses that the U.S. will achieve access against challengers only if it can achieve “cross-domain synergy.” To the JOAC’s authors, cross-domain synergy means synchronizing efforts and effects among land, sea, air, space, and cyber operations. In addition, JOAC wants U.S. military forces to achieve this synergy not just at the theater level, but also at much lower levels in military organizations. Obviously much work remains to achieve these expected benefits.

Third, JOAC includes a list of ten detailed risks that come with attempting to implement JOAC’s concepts. This risk analysis is a bright warning to policymakers across Washington. A2/AD is an unfamiliar problem which will require solutions that are disruptive to existing practices, institutions, and policies. The risk analysis calls for fresh thinking and implies that botched implementation could result in serious harm.

JOAC is the beginning outline for addressing the A2/AD problem. By contrast, the document barely describes how difficult those challenges will be. For example, the A2/AD challenge is commonly structured as U.S. expeditionary forces competing against precise and mobile missiles of a continental power. In these scenarios, adversary mobile missiles are the “hidiers” and the U.S. is the “finder.” With current technology, the U.S. is usually on the losing side of this competition.

The solution is for the U.S. to attempt to “blind” the adversary through deep strikes to the adversary’s C4ISR network, in an attempt to render his missiles useless. U.S. planners will be counting on strategic air power to achieve the C4ISR blinding required. But these planners should also keep in mind that since the

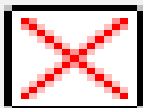
Korean War, top policymakers have placed boundaries on, or clawed back during hostilities, the targeting freedom air campaign planners initially assumed they would have. Adversaries know this and know how to take advantage of it to protect their C4ISR networks.

A C4ISR blinding campaign will inevitably lead to widespread war in space and cyberspace. This will occur either because U.S. policymakers will perceive combat in these domains preferable to the sight of explosions on television, or more likely because the adversary will see an advantage in escalating to these two domains. U.S. policymakers are well aware of the U.S. vulnerability to military escalation in space and cyberspace. Regrettably, solutions to the problem of U.S. escalation inferiority are hard to find.

Finally, war termination remains a major gap in JOAC, the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, and many other top-level doctrinal publications. Many of the authors of these documents no doubt see war termination and setting the conditions for a stable and favorable endstate as beyond the scope of their mandates. However, this stance may also be part of the explanation for why the U.S. has had such difficulty over past decades with effective war termination. With planners and policymakers pointing their fingers at each other whenever the subject of war termination comes up, it is little wonder the U.S. has had problems ending wars.

The “cross-domain synergy” that JOAC seeks needs to be directed toward not just warfighting but also toward achieving stable outcomes. Very few doctrine-writers seem interested in making a clear connection between military effects and sustainable endstates. Someone should step up to that challenge, too.

About the Author



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Robert Haddick is a contractor at U.S. Special Operations Command. From January 2009 to September 2012 he was Managing Editor of *Small Wars Journal*. During this time, he wrote the “This Week at War” column for *Foreign Policy*. Haddick was a U.S. Marine Corps officer, served in the 3rd and 23rd Marine Regiments, and deployed to Asia and Africa. He has advised the State Department, the National Intelligence Council, and U.S. Central Command.

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