Log-centric Airbase-opening Strategies in Korea

By STEVEN M. ANDERSON *and* DOUGLAS A. CUNNINGHAM

The airlift of supplies to the forward elements of the 8th Army, at a time when such an operation was our only means of supply, has permitted ground troops to continue their combat mission in the forward area. The keen application of the logistics situation, and the efficiency . . . demonstrate the close cooperation that exists between ground and air in the Korean War.

—Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, Commander, 8th U.S. Army, Korea, 1950[1]

South Korean military members participate with U.S. Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, and Sailors in the air operations center at Osan Air Base, Exercise Foal Eagle 2007

4th Combat Camera Squadron (Francisco V. Govea II)

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Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom* have afforded the U.S. military unique opportunities to open airfields under wartime conditions—missions that have become increasingly important as more overseas bases close down. These opportunities have demonstrated the global reach capabilities of U.S. airbase-opening forces and the ways in which regional commanders employ these forces to achieve mission goals. The experiences have proven particularly valuable for specialized, task-organized airbase-opening units, such as the Air Force's Contingency Response Groups (CRGs), built as "first responders for opening airbases . . . [that] bridge the gap between the seizure forces and the follow-on combat/expeditionary combat support forces."[2]

As valuable as ongoing operations have been for exercising new airbase-opening structures and ideas, current theory remains focused specifically on opening airbases for fighter aircraft and other operations-centric missions already codified in doctrine.[3] In addition, present discourse centers almost exclusively on U.S. unilateral base-opening efforts, rather than exploring the ways multinational partners combine to accomplish airbase-opening missions. Alexander M. Wathen stresses this latter point: "Missing from the CRG concept of operations . . . and training plans is the construct of joining with our coalition partners throughout the globe. It is time to start thinking beyond 'jointness' and begin moving into the realm of 'coalition,' since recent history shows that unilateral U.S. action is becoming politically less viable."[4]

In the Korean theater of operations (KTO), Republic of Korea (ROK) and U.S. planners, from Combined Forces Command (CFC) and its components, are exploring ways to share the burden of airbase openings while, at the same time, focusing on how such airbases can serve as logistics (log)-centric distribution hubs for airlifted materiel. Both of these issues are important for further study and analyses; in the post-9/11 era, when American forces are spread

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thin among various contingencies and conflicts across the globe, the military must increasingly plan and coordinate with its international partners to ensure the effectiveness of host-nation transportation infrastructures and supply distribution strategies. Without such coordination, commanders assume significant risk to the time-tested logistics promise of getting the right materiel to the right place at the right time.

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As part of the effort to reach combined airbase-opening solutions and robust plans for aerial resupply of combat or other ground forces, CFC planners have adopted and adapted strategies employed in both Afghanistan and Iraq to develop a concept for forward-located distribution hubs in the KTO, known as air terminal supply points (ATSPs). This article examines the development of these combined airbase-opening concepts in the KTO and the lessons learned as a result of planning and executing a combined, proof-of-principle ATSP field training exercise and operational vignette during spring 2006.

Throughout the concept and exercise development processes, several key questions presented themselves. How would ROK and U.S. forces combine to open airfields on the Korean Peninsula? Which nation and which units would assume responsibilities for which tasks? What challenges might hinder progress toward combined goals? How would decisions be made regarding airfield selection and identification of the Senior Airfield Authority (SAA, the component charged with airfield operations) and Base-Operating Support Integrator (BOS–I, the component charged with life support and security for the airbase)? Who would make these decisions? Which agencies would own the ATSPs? While final answers to these questions are still under development, CFC and ATSP Working Group planners have nevertheless reached 10 interim conclusions that help light the way ahead for airbase-opening operations in the KTO and in other combined environments.

Background

The concept of opening austere airfields to support aerial resupply of regional forces or medical/equipment backhaul is certainly not new to the Korean Peninsula. United Nations forces, for instance, successfully employed the concept on several occasions during the Korean War. Recently, however, CFC planners, inspired by the successes of base openings in Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, recognized the continuing viability of the concept within the KTO, dusted off the history books, and placed new emphasis on log-centric airbase openings.

To this end, in October 2004, the C4 Transportation Division established the ATSP Working Group, a combined/joint team consisting of transporters, log planners, security forces, air mobility experts, operators, engineers, and various other functional areas. This working group operated with a mandate to plan combined, log-centric airbase openings and operations, and later to execute a field training exercise to validate these missions and to develop/maintain proficiency.

By March 2005, the working group had developed a white paper for distribution at the CFC Spring 2005 Senior Leaders Seminar that explicitly addressed a doctrinal gap in airbase terminology:

> ATSP *is a current term, specific to the KTO, that fills a doctrinal gap in both the terminology and operational concepts related to theater airlift operations. . . . [T]he term originated from the need to describe the location and purpose of a forward airfield specifically designated for air-landed re-supply operations in support of ground forces. Historically, the term* Forward Operating(-ions) Base (FOB) *was used in the attempt to describe what logistics planners intended; however, experience working with our ROK counterparts and exercise AARs* [after action reports] *indicated that this term was confusing, had different meanings to different users, and was not adequately descriptive. An initial survey of doctrinal terms listed* [in Joint Publication 1–02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, and Field Manual 101–5–1, Operational Terms and Graphics] *shows that no one term is particularly suitable. The terms tend to speak of RSOI* [reception, staging, onward-movement, and integration] *processes, tactical air operations, ground operations, or special operations separately, and they do not adequately describe the air-ground, inter-modal, and combined nature of the concept.*[5]

The white paper went on to provide its exact definition of ATSP:

> *The term* Air Terminal Supply Point *marries the air concept of an air terminal to the ground concept of a supply point* [both of which are doctrinal terms]. *The term is simple, intuitive, and easily understood when translated literally as "a place to receive supply by air." Based on this construct, we currently define an ATSP as a designated air transportation hub that accommodates the loading and unloading of airlift aircraft and the in-transit processing of traffic* [not to include cargo breakdown] *in support of ground forces. The ATSP also serves as a designated location in an area of operations used as a base for supply and evacuation by air*[6] (see figure 1).

The term *ATSP* generates some controversy in the KTO (particularly among Air Force personnel with base-opening experience in Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*) because it is theater-specific and, for the time being, nondoctrinal. The irony, however, is that since the term was introduced to the theater in 2004, it has demonstrated its value and come into common use at all levels on both the ROK and U.S. staffs, from action officers up to the four-star commander of CFC.

The term's usage persists because it addresses a specific mission performed at an equally specific airbase scale. Throughout 2005, however, planners continued to grapple with the term's nondoctrinal status, and for this reason, the ATSP Working Group designed an aerial port of debarkation (APOD) continuum (see figure 2) to represent where an ATSP (as an emerging doctrinal concept) might sit in relation to doctrinally accepted APOD sizes. This representation helped by acknowledging that an ATSP was not yet a doctrinal concept while, at the same time, providing planners with a doctrinal context for its local application

the concept of opening austere airfields to support aerial resupply is not new to the Korean Peninsula

Figure 1. Air Terminal Supply Point Layout (Notional)

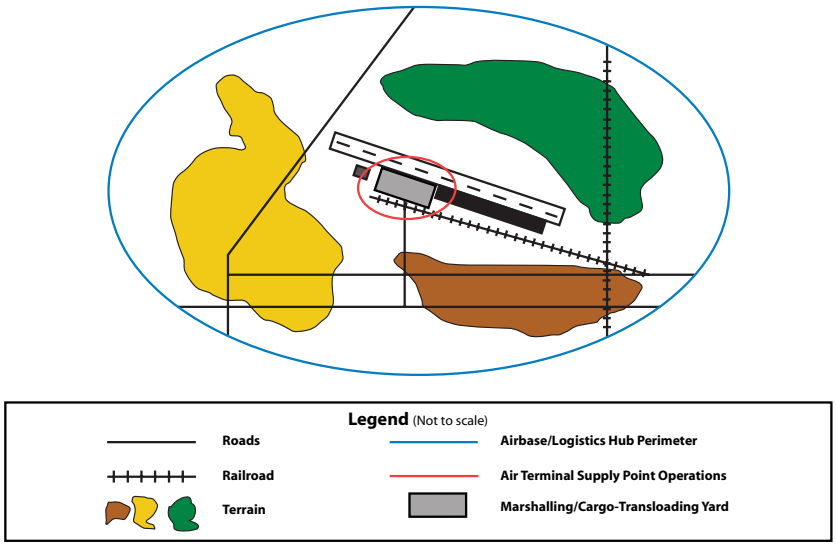
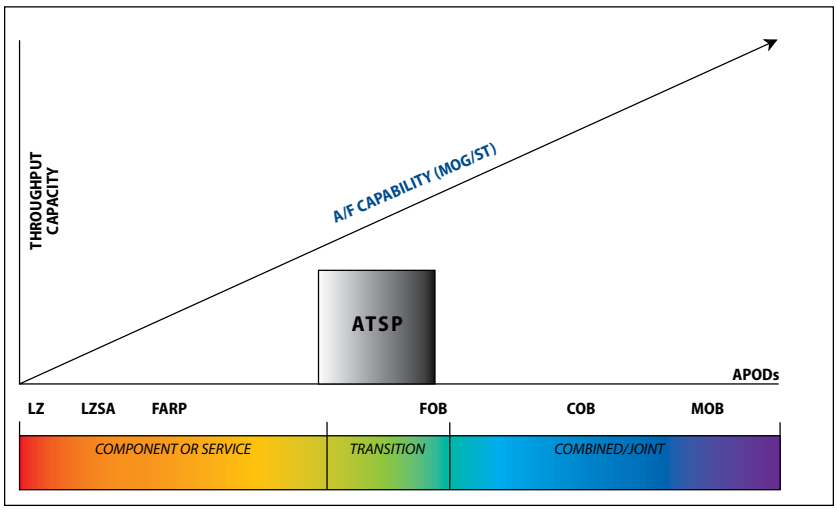


Figure 2. APOD Continuum



in the KTO. The chart also demonstrated that airfield sizes could be tailored to fit operational requirements, thereby eliminating the "one-size-fits-all" APOD versus ATSP thinking that had come to characterize thinking in the Korean theater of operations. Finally, the chart reflected the fact that an ATSP airfield has the potential to grow beyond its log-centric mission to become a larger-scale APOD, such as a collocated operating base or a main operating base, during which time its ownership would grow distinctly more joint and combined.

Between 2004 and 2006, planners in the KTO exercised the ATSP concept in a number of theater-level command post exercises (CPXs). Each of these CPX experiences helped to define the concept further while, concurrently, educating theater planners (particularly surface transportation planners) about the inherent strengths and limitations of ATSP operations.

More importantly, these CPXs made clear the need for a physical execution of the concept. Even at senior levels, leaders and planners often had misconceptions about the scale and realistic potential of ATSP operations. The ATSP Working Group planned to dispel these misconceptions with a combined field training exercise and operational vignette slated for the spring of 2006. After a year of planning, Working Group planners executed the field training exercise and operational vignette with great success. These events included practice and demonstrations of CRG airfield assessment and establishment of Air Force Red Horse Assault, Assessment, and Repair Operations; combined air-traffic control; combined airbase-ground defense; combined cargo-offloading and transloading (to both rotary-wing aircraft and ground transport); and combined SAA to BOS–I interaction (CFC's Air Component Command acted as SAA while Ground Component Command provided the BOS–I).

Ten Early Lessons Learned

Two years of exercise planning and execution by the ATSP Working Group have yielded some valuable and unique lessons regarding combined airbase openings in the KTO. These lessons will almost certainly prove useful in other theaters as planners evaluate options for reducing demand on U.S. forces to open log-centric, ATSP-like airbases in environments where forward basing has been dramatically reduced.

Crawl First, Run Later. C4 Transportation, as the head of the ATSP Working Group, briefed the ATSP concept at every opportunity to permanent party military personnel in the KTO and to visitors from the continental United States. Although excited about the Working Group's efforts, many watching the briefings asked questions that were beyond the current level of planning. Many of these questions dealt with the specifics of execution at the component levels, which would necessarily be answered by the components themselves when writing the supporting plans for the CFC-level plan. During these early presentations, briefers always explained that the concept was in its "crawl stage" and that the "run stage" would come later (which it did). In almost every case, inquisitive audience members accepted this answer, and their well-intentioned questions contributed to

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future thought and planning for the ATSP at both the theater and component levels.

Go Combined Early. The ATSP Working Group enjoyed the advantage of working in a well-greased combined environment in the KTO because the 56-year-old ROK–U.S. alliance provided long-tested channels through which to communicate. Language and cultural differences presented their share of challenges, but ATSP planning undoubtedly benefited from great ROK interest and participation. The combined nature of the planning, for example, quickly revealed many of the strengths and limitations that each nation would bring to actual ATSP execution, and it generated important discussion at the ROK component levels about the scale and supportability of the ATSP concept. Similarly, U.S. planners tempered their initial expectations based on ROK feedback, and the resulting planning products proved all the more realistic.

Stress Flexibility in Planning. As ATSP planning progressed, many combined logisticians, engineers, and even operators in the KTO became overly focused on the specifics of the planned ATSP locations, SAA, BOS–I, and so forth, and lost sight of the greater need to remain flexible enough to respond to operational needs. C4 Transportation and the ATSP Working Group strived to correct this course of thought by stressing the need to think outside of the deliberately planned box. While purposeful planning remains the essential baseline for eventual execution, the mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops available, time available, and civilians almost always dictate that the plan will have to change. The working group wants KTO planners prepared for these potential vector changes, and it has developed policies and procedures to ensure that all ATSP options get weighed in the struggle to meet operational requirements.

Empower Working Group Decisionmakers. As the ATSP concept began to mature and the planning for a field training exercise began, combined ATSP exercise planners soon encountered significant cultural differences in decisionmaking at the action-officer level. While the U.S. senior leadership empowered its action officers to discuss issues and make key decisions at planning conferences, the ROK senior leadership preferred to have action officers collect issues at planning conferences and then present those issues for decision at the O–6 or O–7 level. While neither method proved right nor wrong, the planning conferences nevertheless required the presence of empowered decisionmakers (this would have been especially true during fast-paced, real-world execution when the need to reduce the planning cycle time would be paramount). Eventually, the ROK planners appointed two capable and passionate ROK army colonels (with several action officers in tow) to represent its interests at major planning meetings. The U.S. planners kept their senior leadership informed and engaged, but they did not arrive on the ground at the field training exercise site until 2 weeks prior to execution. The key is to plan with cultural differences in mind while, at the same time, ensuring the presence of participants who can make decisions on behalf of their organizations.

Engage Operational Planners. Undoubtedly, operational planners have a lot on their plates. They realize the logistics fight is important, but sometimes their attention is necessarily focused elsewhere. When planning something as important as log-centric airbase openings, however, the input from operational planners is both invaluable and required. These individuals help to frame ATSP planning by providing requirements, schemes of maneuver, and operational timing/synchronization advice. Working Group planners succeeded in roping operational planners into ATSP concept planning through sheer persistence, demonstration of relevance, and a mutual understanding that operational planners will often have higher priorities on any given day. Because of the good working relationship established between the ATSP Working Group and the planners, both parties now comprehend the ways in which each can effectively respond to the needs of the other in deliberate, exercise, or crisis-action planning. These interactions have also educated the logistics community about the scope of operational requirements, and this education has enabled the ATSP Working Group to address those requirements more effectively.

Exploit Equivalent Capabilities. First during the ATSP concept planning and later during the ATSP field training exercise planning, the Working Group sought to identify and take advantage of similar capabilities between the United States and ROK. That helped the Working Group ensure that the airbase openings would truly be combined, with plenty of opportunities for the ROK side to act as full partner and contribute significantly in areas such as airlift, security, engineering, aerial-port operations, air-traffic control, and cargo loading, unloading, and transloading.

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While the ROK military did not match American capabilities unit for unit, it did feature significant aerial port, engineering, security, and cargo-handling teams. For example, while the United States seeks to employ an ad hoc arrival/departure airfield control group as its primary cargo-handling and marshaling authority, the ATSP Working Group quickly learned that the Korean side has standing airlift service support point teams that perform the same mission. This discovery resulted in more planning and execution flexibility. Similarly, both the ROK and United States explored ways to utilize their equivalent engineering capabilities, expertise, and equipment essential to opening any airbase. Interestingly, the ROK side grew so enthusiastic about the Air Force CRG concept during discussions about the ATSP that they quickly researched ways to develop their own equivalent from preexisting ROK military units, and the ATSP field training exercise presented the ROK with its first opportunity to test this concept.

Share Costs, Facilities, and Equipment. As with the previous point, efforts to ensure truly combined airbase openings in the KTO would necessarily include shared costs, facilities, and equipment. While many of the details of these shared efforts will have to be identified and resolved at the component levels, primary areas for such sharing have surfaced during both ATSP concept planning and field training exercise planning (for example, life support, fuel, water, engineering, lodging, and materiel-handling equipment). As the concept matures in supporting plans, the ATSP Working Group will continue to look to precedents in *Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom*, and even the Korean War to help materialize the mutually supportable solutions.

Secure Buy-in from Senior Leadership. The ATSP Working Group planners secured a great deal of buy-in by placing the ATSP concept before combined, four-star leadership at two key events: the Senior Leaders Seminar in spring 2005 and the ATSP field training exercise and operational vignette in

as a result of the field training exercise, the Working Group identified a lack of codified procedures for combined pallet buildup and cargo loading

Republic of Korea air force security advisor speaks with U.S. Army officer in Kirkuk, Iraq

U.S. Air Force (Suzanne Jenkins)

Supplies are loaded onto Korean C–130 at Hickam Air Base, Hawaii

U.S. Air Force (Ed Foster)

spring 2006. At each of these events, planners presented the CFC commander and dozens of other ROK and U.S. flag officers with briefings and prepared scenarios designed to demonstrate the viability of the ATSP concept. During the Senior Leaders Seminar, the deputy C4 explained the concept (then in its infancy) and described a tactical vignette scenario to which audience members contributed comments and questions. For the ATSP field training exercise and operational vignette 1 year later, the Air Component Command of CFC planned and executed a major ATSP orientation briefing and a real-world, scripted aerial port and cargo-transloading demonstration designed to communicate the scope of ATSP operations and capabilities. Both events were well received, generated a great deal of discussion among senior leaders, and contributed to a greater emphasis on ATSP operations in the KTO than the ATSP Working Group could possibly have envisioned in 2004.

Develop and Codify Procedures. The planning processes for both the ATSP concept and the ATSP field training exercise have provided unique opportunities to identify gaps in current policies and procedures. For example, as a result of the field training exercise, the Working Group identified a lack of codified procedures for combined pallet buildup and cargo loading. Resolution of this issue has now become a C4 Transportation priority. Similarly, ATSP play in various command post exercises uncovered a need for a more structured method of selecting ATSP locations and their respective SAAs and BOS–Is, which, in turn, could work in tandem with future command, control, and communications plans, processes, and time cycles. C4 Transportation, in concert with C4 Plans, devised a decision-tree process for this purpose for approval by the ATSP Working Group, and this process will soon find a home in the next edition of the C4 Logistics, Policies, and Procedures. As these procedural gaps arise, planners should convene the necessary working groups and operational planning teams to generate, codify, and secure approvals for proposed solutions.

Practice, Evaluate, Advertise Success. Certainly, any endeavor improves after practice under the watchful eyes of both internal and external observers. After practicing the ATSP concept during a major command post exercise in the spring of 2005, Working Group planners arranged for future planning oversight from CRG subject-matter experts during KTO planning conferences. The experience that these experts brought to further planning, both for the ATSP concept and the field training exercise, proved priceless. In addition, exercise planners arranged for observers from U.S. Joint Forces Command to provide feedback after watching the field training exercise and operational vignette. This feedback, too, proved invaluable to future planning efforts.

The U.S. military needs to look beyond its current paradigms for opening airbases by examining the ways in which multinational or host-nation partners can play a major role in relieving the American burden and contributing to current and future fights. The ATSP concept, developed for austere, log-centric airfields opened by the combined ROK–U.S. forces, offers a proven template for airbase openings, one that incorporates the latest lessons of operational requirements and logistical constraints.

While still under development as emerging doctrine, ATSP planning has demonstrated substantial promise as a key enabler to get the right materiel to the right place at the right time, through close coordination and participation of multinational and host-nation forces. And such cooperation with our allies is exactly what the United States needs to achieve success in its coalition efforts. **JFQ**

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NOTES

[1] Quoted in William M. Leary, *Anything, Anywhere, Anytime: Combat Cargo in the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 10–11.

[2] Barbara Lee, "Air Force Contingency Response Group Operational Concept, Version 1.0" (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Air Force, 2004), 2.

[3] Rodney L. Croslen and Marsha Kwolek, "Retooling Global Mobility and Forward Presence: Solving the Challenge of Opening Airbases," *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 18–31, available at <www.aflma.hq.af.mil/lgj/Vol_29%20No%202%20WWW.pdf>.

[4] Alexander M. Wathen, "Contingency Response Group: Time to Expand the Box and Think 'Coalition,'" *Air & Space Power Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005), available at <www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj05/sum05/sum05.html>.

[5] C4 Transportation, C4 Plans, and the ATSP Working Group, "Air Terminal Supply Points: A White Paper on a New Operational Concept," 2005.

[6] Ibid.