
Defense Report

AUSA



In Matters Of Close Air Support, There Can Be No Buck-Passing

In 1948 the Air Force was given responsibility for close air support, defined as: "Air action against hostile targets which are in close proximity to friendly forces and which require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces."

Since then, ground combat has become far more complex in terms of depth of engagement, speed of movement and the intricacies of coordination and control of supporting fires.

Of recent months, these points have raised the intensity of the debate over which Service should have primary responsibility for close air support. The Air Force has shown an apparent willingness to cede that responsibility to the Army as the major user of such support. There's even been talk of giving the Army the fixed wing aircraft usually dedicated to this role.

Recognizing that attack helicopters afford it the means for accomplishing some tasks formerly deemed suitable only for fixed wing aircraft, the Army still sees a requirement for high performance aircraft for the rapid delivery of heavy munitions in support of maneuvering ground forces.

At the same time, the Army would abstain from acceptance of responsibility for a whole category of fixed wing aircraft for which it does not have the logistics capability.

There is a fairly easy solution to all this and it is spelled out clearly in the February 1993 report of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "Roles, Missions and Functions of the Armed Forces of the United States." The Chairman concludes that "close air support is a joint function and a standardized, joint procedural and control system is being developed." Further, to support its conclusion that all Services are responsible for close air support, the CJCS recommends some specific primary and collateral functions in this arena for each—the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force.

All that's really needed to ensure that American troops, locked in combat with the enemy, get all the fire support they need is for the Secretary of Defense and the President to approve and the Congress to fund the recommendations of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.