



# **The Case for Medium Altitude Persistent Air Power**

*MQ-9 REAPER: FOUNDATIONAL.  
COMPLEMENTARY. INDISPENSABLE.*



*From rising tensions to full blown high intensity combat, the multi-role MQ-9A Reaper's range, persistence and payload capacity provides operational commanders with great latitude in achieving their objectives and responding decisively.*

By Gen. Frank Gorenc, USAF (Ret.)

The only constant in life is change. Just when you get comfortable, something happens to completely upend the status quo. The 1991 end of the Cold War, the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the 2007 financial crisis and now the 2020 pandemic are black swan events which resulted in significant change to the global security environment. After the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and China's rising power, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) reprioritized the threats to the US to near peer adversaries, regional actors and terrorism.

Senior DoD leaders immediately shifted their focus. Service chiefs are adjusting the way they organize, train and equip the force. Combatant commanders are adjusting requirements to meet the NDS end state. With a modestly increasing defense budget, DoD leaders are rightfully investing in an all-domain, robust "near peer" toolbox that includes next generation linked assets able to penetrate, persist, and attack targets in contested environments under networked Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2). Next gen capabilities are essential, but are not cheap and may not be available in adequate numbers soon, if ever. And because the near peer fight is the most dangerous planning scenario, the US will have to accept significant risk. Unfortunately, in addition to the most dangerous near peer scenario, most likely scenarios, such as aggression by regional threats and terrorists, will continue and remain ever present.

The DoD will address both scenarios using a mix of next gen and legacy systems for decades to come. As usual, there is significant pressure to divest legacy weapon systems now to fund next gen systems for the future. Unfortunately, one legacy platform being deemphasized

is the MQ-9 Reaper -- this should be readdressed. The MQ-9 is, and will remain, foundational, complementary and indispensable to the American way of war now and in the future for many reasons.

- The MQ-9 is a Global War on Terror (GWOT) proven performer because it is persistent, flexible, lethal and provides high-volume ISR and strike. Since 2001, medium altitude Remotely Piloted Aircraft (Predator first, now Reaper) have flown 6 million+ hours, 90% of which are combat hours.
- The MQ-9 is multi-role and can do a myriad of tasks, such as multi-int ISR, overwatch and strike ... all on the same mission! Future missions include maritime surveillance, missile defense, communications relay and electronic warfare.
- The MQ-9 can execute the entire kill chain (Find, Fix, Track, Target, Engage and Assess) or provide actionable intel to the rest of the force at any point in the kill chain.
- The MQ-9 is the founding member of manned-unmanned team (MuM-T) as thousands of laser guided bombs dropped by manned platforms have been guided by a MQ-9 laser designator illuminating that target.
- MQ-9 availability, readiness and costs (procurement, operating, per flying hour, and life cycle) are unmatched. The MQ-9 has a demonstrated 90% Mission Capable rate.
- You can buy MQ-9s or gain access to the capability, in many ways including government owned-government operated (GOGO), government owned-contractor operated (GOCO), contractor owned-contractor operated (COCO) and lease to own.



*Always there and always ready, the highly reliable MQ-9A Reaper's 90% mission capable rate empowers the Joint Force to Connect, Know, and Act when they need it most.*

- The US Marine Corp has been operating a MQ-9 COCO for over two years and has decided to move to GOGO to support continued combat operations in the Middle East. This procurement will help inform their ongoing deliberations for a future Group 5 UAS.
- Allies and partners are investing heavily in MQ-9s which is advancing coalition interoperability to new heights. Partner capability and capacity to process, exploit and disseminate (PED) intelligence will continue to increase as well.
- The MQ-9 is a proven technology testbed as demonstrated by a long string of cockpit, platform, weapons and sensor improvements, which were integrated during combat operations.
- MQ-9s do not need to be transported to theater because they can self-deploy. If transported, they can be moved on C-130s or A-400s. In both cases, needed mobility aircraft will be available for other critical missions.
- MQ-9s do not need air-to-air refueling to execute long endurance missions. Valuable tanker assets will be available for other critical missions.
- MQ-9 is ideally suited for the adaptive basing and agile combat employment initiatives being considered for future combat. MQ-9s can operate from fixed or expeditionary locations with minimal infrastructure requirements, logistics footprint, or deployed personnel. From a 3,500-foot runway, a small team can launch and

recover a properly equipped MQ-9 using laptops and portable communications gear.

Like other assets, the MQ-9 may not survive the opening moments of a near peer fight, but that is just one small part of the spectrum of conflict that is wide and unfolds over time. As always, deterring China or Russia is the goal because we want to minimize the risk of a high intensity conflict. To successfully deter, leaders must have decision superiority. Making informed decisions based on accurate, timely ISR and analysis will enhance deterrence and permit leaders to skillfully manage escalation. Similarly, combatant commanders need reliable and consistent ISR to support course of action planning, characterize the battlefield and set the theater. Precise enemy order of battle and deviations from normal enemy pattern of life must be readily assessed and constantly verified. Most importantly, adversaries need to know they are being watched and held accountable, all day, every day, with visible and persistent ISR assets. Effective deterrence occurs well prior to the onset of high intensity combat and there is no better platform to provide needed, cost effective, high volume ISR than the MQ-9.

As tensions rise and deterrence fails, ISR demand will increase exponentially as leaders prepare and prosecute the war. The MQ-9 will give leaders breathing space as next gen assets dominate the opening moments of high intensity combat, while continuing to monitor regional threats and terrorists. As the war unfolds, MQ-9s will fold into operations and when we win, can monitor post-war compliance.

From rising tensions to deterrence failure and full blown, high intensity combat, then post conflict operations, MQ-9 will remain indispensable. Although some MQ-9s may be destroyed early on, they are unmanned and relatively inexpensive compared to some of the next gen capabilities in the near peer toolbox.

Providing foundational capabilities that are complementary to the rest of the joint coalition force make the MQ-9 an indispensable weapons system, now and in the future. The MQ-9 is like oxygen: when we have enough, we don't think about it; when we don't have enough, it is the only thing we think about!

*General Frank Gorenc, USAF, Retired is the former Commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Commander of U.S. Air Forces in Africa and Commander of NATO Allied Air Command. He is currently a defense and leadership consultant, public speaker, and author.*