



CENTRALIZED CONTROL AND DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION

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The tenet of [centralized control](#) and [decentralized execution](#) is critical to effective employment of [airpower](#). Indeed, they are the fundamental organizing principles for airpower, having been proven over decades of experience as the most effective and efficient means of employing it. It enables the principle of [mass](#) while maintaining [economy of force](#). **Because of airpower's unique potential to directly affect the [strategic](#) and [operational levels of war](#), it should be controlled by a single Airman who maintains the broad, strategic perspective necessary to balance and prioritize the use of a powerful, highly desired yet limited force.** A single air [component](#) commander, focused on the broader aspects of an operation, can best balance or mediate urgent demands for tactical support against longer-term strategic and operational requirements. The ability to concentrate the air effort to fulfill the highest priorities for effects and to quickly shift the effort can only be accomplished through centralized control. On the other hand, the flexibility to take advantage of tactical opportunities and to effectively respond to shifting local circumstances can only be achieved through decentralized execution.

This tenet is best appreciated as a general philosophy for the [command and control](#) (C2) of airpower. The construct of centralized control is an encapsulation of a hard-learned truth: that control of a valuable yet scarce resource (airpower) should be commanded by a single Airman, not parceled out and hardwired to subordinate surface echelons as it was prior to 1943. Tied to this fundamental truth is the recognition that no single Airman is capable of making all decisions, and should thus empower subordinates to respond in accordance with senior leader intent.

Centralized control should be accomplished by an Airman at the functional component commander level who maintains a broad focus on the [joint force commander's](#) (JFC's) objectives to direct, integrate, prioritize, plan, coordinate, and assess the use of air, space, and cyberspace assets across the [range of military operations](#). Centralized control may be manifest at [different levels within a combatant command](#) depending on how the air component(s) is (are) organized and the nature of the supporting C2 architecture ([functional or geographic](#)).¹ Also, due to the dynamics of the [operational environment](#), control over some capabilities may, over time, shift up or down the command chain according to changes in priorities.

¹ For example, with a geographic architecture, control over some capabilities may be exercised at levels below the COMAFFOR, as discussed in the [theater air ground system](#) section in Annex 3-03, *Counterland Operations*.

Centralized control empowers the air component commander to respond to changes in the operational environment and take advantage of fleeting opportunities, and embodies the tenet of flexibility and versatility. Some would rather this be just “centralized planning and direction.” From an Airman’s perspective, “planning and directing” do not convey all aspects of control implied in “centralized control,” which maximizes the flexibility and effectiveness of airpower. Centralized control is thus pivotal to the determination of continuing advantage. **However, it should not become a recipe for micromanagement, stifling the initiative subordinates need to deal with combat’s inevitable uncertainties.**

Command and control is a continuum between direct control and total autonomy. Wise commanders should carefully analyze the situation and select the most appropriate method of control of their assigned and attached forces. Centralized execution authority for selected sensitive missions or tasking a unit to directly support another particular unit may be appropriate for a given operation or specific period of time. Nevertheless, the central tenet of centralized control coupled with decentralized execution authority remains the doctrinal gold standard for efficient employment of airpower.

Senior leaders should resist the temptation to make tactical-level decisions that are best left to subordinate commanders and forward decision makers. Communications now enable use of the “thousand mile screwdriver,” but the most forward commander or tactical decision maker usually has the best information on the immediate situation. Overuse of the “thousand mile screwdriver” can breed a lack of initiative in the forward commander, with a resultant inability to act in the face of adversary tactics that may, for example, cut off communication with the COMAFFOR and AOC.

In general, once a sortie has been tasked through the air tasking order, a COMAFFOR and AOC staff should not normally get involved in how the mission is executed. While the AOC may have planned most of the enabling details and provided the operational constraints, the operational unit accomplishes the detailed mission planning and selection of tactics necessary to successfully meet mission tasking.

The challenge is most apparent when a decision is made to retask or even re-role a mission. The COMAFFOR balances JFC-directed priorities against an unplanned but higher priority need, such as prosecution of a designated high-value and time-sensitive target. In such instances, the COMAFFOR and AOC may have information not readily available to the mission commander and it will be appropriate to perform much of the mission planning and coordination required to successfully prosecute the target.

Decentralized execution is defined as the “delegation of authority to designated lower-level commanders” and other tactical-level decision makers to achieve effective span of control and to foster disciplined initiative and tactical flexibility. It allows subordinates, all the way down to the tactical level, to exploit situational responsiveness and fleeting opportunities in rapidly changing, fluid situations. The benefits inherent in decentralized execution, however, are maximized only when a commander clearly communicates intent and subordinate commanders frame their actions accordingly.

Centralized control and decentralized execution of airpower provide broad global or theater-wide focus while allowing operational flexibility to meet military objectives. They assure concentration of effort while maintaining economy of force. They exploit airpower’s versatility and flexibility to ensure that it remains responsive, survivable, and sustainable.

Execution should be decentralized within a C2 architecture that exploits the ability of front-line decision makers (such as strike package leaders, air battle managers, forward air controllers) to make on-scene decisions during complex, rapidly unfolding operations. Modern communications technology may tempt commanders to take direct control of distant events and override the decisions of forward leaders, even when such control is not operationally warranted. This should be resisted at all costs in all functional components—not just air. Despite impressive gains in data exploitation and automated decision aids, a single person cannot, with confidence, achieve and maintain detailed situational awareness over individual missions when fighting a conflict involving many simultaneous engagements taking place throughout a large area, or over individual missions conducted in locally fluid and complex environments.

There may be some situations where there may be valid reasons for control of specific operations at higher levels, most notably when the JFC (or perhaps even higher authorities) may wish to control strategic effects, even at the sacrifice of tactical efficiency. However, such instances should be rare, as in the short notice prosecution of high-value, [time-sensitive targets](#), or when the operational climate demands tighter control over selected missions due to political sensitivities, such as the potential for [collateral damage](#) or mistargeting, or in the case of nuclear employment. In all cases, senior commanders balance overall [campaign](#) execution against the pressing need for tactical effectiveness. **As long as a subordinate’s decision supports the superior commander’s intent and meets campaign objectives, subordinates should be allowed to take the initiative during execution.**
