



## USAF DOCTRINE ADVISORY

on

### The Continuing Relevance of Centralized Control / Decentralized Execution

The Air Force's tenet of centralized control and decentralized execution (CC/DE), first articulated in 1943, is currently under intense debate. Because command and control (C2) and organization are tightly linked, CC/DE is both a statement of C2 philosophy and a touchstone for organization, most notably for the appointment of a single Airman in command of airpower within any given operation. However, this can create confusion, in that the need for centralized control may be conflated with the contemporary prevailing architecture of a theater commander, Air Force forces (COMAFFOR)/joint force air component commander (JFACC) supported with a large air operations center (AOC) and AFFOR staff, with little between that echelon and the executing forces. This, plus scenarios that warn of loss of connectivity between the theater AOC and subordinate forces, has given rise to proposed alternative paradigms such as "centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution" (CC/DC/DE).

A meeting of the LeMay Center's Doctrine Advisory Group, composed of retired senior leaders and airpower advocates, recently convened to examine this issue. After long debate, the consensus was that the long-standing concept of CC/DE is still valid, even after considering other paradigms. They determined that the concept of centralized control expressed in basic doctrine is an encapsulation of a hard-learned truth: control of a valuable yet scarce resource (airpower) should be commanded by a single Airmen, not divvied up and hardwired to subordinate surface echelons as it was prior to 1943. Tied to this fundamental truth is the recognition that the single Airman is incapable of making all decisions, and should thus empower subordinate echelons to respond in accordance with senior leader intent. This may guide a commander to an organizational structure, but CC/DE does not **prescribe** that organizational structure.

This update will address three key misimpressions of what CC/DE implies:

- CC/DE implies centralized control must occur at the theater level
- CC/DE does not address C2 below the COMAFFOR level
- CC/DE does not accommodate degradation or loss of C2 between a COMAFFOR and his/her forces

#### **CC/DE implies centralized control must occur at the theater level**

The current discussion of CC/DE in basic doctrine<sup>1</sup> does not necessarily point to a theater-level C2 construct when it mentions "centralized control." The language says:

"...centralized control ... should be accomplished by an Airman **at the air component commander level**...[emphasis added]"

<sup>1</sup> <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=V1-D24-Tenets-of-Airpower.pdf>

Does current doctrine further describe other possible manifestations of a component, other than at the combatant commander (CCDR) level?

**Yes.** Doctrine specifically notes that forces can be commanded at the combatant command, subunified combatant command, and joint task force (JTF) levels. Joint and Air Force doctrine specifically describe a Service component command existing whenever Service forces are assigned or attached to a joint force commander (JFC) at the combatant commander, subunified commander, or JTF commander level. Joint and Air Force doctrine also state that a JFC at whatever level may designate a functional component commander (e.g., JFACC) from those assigned and attached Service components over which the JFC has operational control (OPCON).

There is further guidance as to what the air component might look like (see “Air Force Component Presentation Considerations”<sup>2</sup>):

“There are many possible options for presenting forces in support of a joint force commander (JFC). To provide an initial baseline for organizational decisions, this section discusses three general models for presenting an Air Force component in support of a JFC:

- **Theater-level component.** This establishes an air expeditionary task force (AETF) at the combatant commander (CCDR) level, attached with specification of operational control (OPCON) and commanded by a theater commander, Air Force forces (COMAFFOR)/joint force air component commander (JFACC).
- **Sub-theater-level component.** This establishes an AETF at the subordinate unified command or joint task force (JTF) level, attached with specification of OPCON, with a COMAFFOR (prepared to act as a JFACC) at a level below the CCDR.
- **Sub-theater-level AETF in support of a JTF.** This establishes a dedicated Air Force force in direct support of a subordinate JTF, with OPCON retained by the theater COMAFFOR/JFACC.”

Doctrine also provides some basic considerations as to when it might be better to attach Air Force forces to an AETF below the CCDR level:

- “Do the operational tempo, intensity, duration, and scope warrant near full-time use of an attached AETF?”
- Do the operational tempo, intensity, duration, and scope justify a dedicated AETF that, once attached to the JTF, may not be available to support operations elsewhere?
- Does the priority of the JTF mission, relative to other theater missions, justify a dedicated AETF that, once attached to the JTF, may not be available to support operations elsewhere?
- If the choice is to attach an AETF to a JTF, does the Air Force have the ability to provide the required command and control of Air Force forces? Does the provision of forces to a subordinate JTF, either by attachment or direct support, effectively demonstrate and enable the Air Force component’s commitment to the joint force effort?”

Thus, doctrine does, in general terms, discuss other options below the CCDR level in which an Airman may exercise centralized control.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=V1-D45-AF-Presentation-Consider.pdf>

## **CC/DE does not address C2 below the COMAFFOR Level**

The discussion of CC/DE again provides the basic philosophy of control below the COMAFFOR:

“Execution should be decentralized within a command and control 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.”

Where the “front-line decision makers” are depends on your architecture – whether you have a mature theater with echelons and C2 nodes in place, or whether your theater is relatively quiet and only the bare essentials are in place, to be augmented upon direction. If, for example, there are air support operations centers (ASOCs) in theater aligned against Army divisions or corps, then they exercise a specific degree of centralized control over the capabilities allocated them.

Thus, centralized control during execution may be exercised at several different points in a theater, not necessarily at the COMAFFOR level.

Arguably, the current CC/DE discussion is vague about subordinate C2 architectures. Recall that the CC/DE discussion is only a high level C2 philosophy. Written at that level, the current discussion thus applies to *any* Air Force component, whether organized regionally or functionally; it is intentionally not prescriptive. (Granted, space operations and air mobility appear to be highly centralized in their execution, but that is largely because their respective support operations drive a more centralized construct. Even so, Air Mobility Command acknowledges that there are instances – for example, for detailed integration or threat mitigation – that control of air mobility forces may pass from AMC to a regional commander for a period of time.) Thus, as a statement of fundamental belief, the current level of detail in the discussion of CC/DE is appropriate.

The very success in Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM may have contributed to this lack of familiarity of control below the theater COMAFFOR level. Our recent experiences have tended to bypass subordinate wings, groups, and squadrons to be executed directly from the theater COMAFFOR, almost down to the flight leads. As a result, sub-theater echelons of command have become accustomed to being force providers instead of force employers. Even if overall control remains centralized with the CCDR-level COMAFFOR, decentralized execution can still be carried out through the subordinate echelons of command (numbered Air Force to wing; wing to group; group to squadron). These subordinate echelons would, in turn, exercise a degree of centralized control over their included commands and forces and employ decentralized execution through their subordinate echelons of command. Some discussion today describes this as CC/DC/DE, but it is implied and can be understood as CC/DE through a pyramidal command in depth structure.

## **CC/DE does not accommodate degradation or loss of C2 between a COMAFFOR and his/her forces**

This issue is, in reality, a continuity of operations/devolution of command issue. The subordinate forces should continue to operate in accordance with the latest valid orders/commander's intent. Commanders should account for adverse scenarios in their planning to include provision of basic guidance in the event of loss of connectivity to higher headquarters (this is, by the way, something we used to do during the Cold War). Doctrine does address this as a consideration for C2, but does not dictate an organizational structure for it, and it shouldn't.

A robust subordinate C2 architecture below the AOC is really an “organize, train, and equip” issue. Airmen need to ask serious questions as to whether we have organized, trained, and equipped to support the way we intend to fight, and under what anticipated scenarios.

### **Summary**

The current debate about distributing control within an Air Force component is a contemporary and operationally valid issue. But it should not be confused with fundamental doctrinal principles.

The current discussion of CC/DE in doctrine -- as a C2 *philosophy* -- is still very much valid. As a philosophy, it is not restrictive; to conflate it with a prescribed C2 architecture or C2 systems roadmap strays from that fundamental intent. Doctrine Volume 1 is currently open for revision, and based upon recommendations of the Doctrine Advisory Group and inputs received during the revision process, the LeMay Center will make this point more clear.

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