



U.S. Air Force (Greg L. Davis)

Centralized Control/ Decentralized Execution in the Era of Forward Reach

By MARK G. DAVIS

The phenomenon of political and military leaders reaching forward into the realm of tactical operations has existed since Thucydides. It differs today because of technology, doctrine, and the current operational environment. Enduring Freedom

demonstrated that technology can provide commanders on all levels with immediate situational awareness and that joint publications can offer doctrine on every aspect of operations. Moreover, warfare is no longer controlled under the same model that prevailed throughout most of the 20th century. Commanders can anticipate conducting operations in an environment in which political goals are vague; domestic and international support is tentative; and casualties are dutifully avoided. To redress this dilemma, DOD has spent

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billions on command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C⁴ISR) systems. As a result, centralized control and decentralized execution pursued by the Air Force is not valid in view of joint doctrine and the emergence of effects-based operations.

Takeoff to Landing

The first doctrinal issue is the inconsistency between centralized control and decentralized execution and the joint precept of centralized planning and direction. As a reaction to the

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bombing of Vietnam during Rolling Thunder in 1971, the Air Force altered the concept of centralized control to include decentralized execution. Since then, centralized control and decentralized execution has been accepted by the service as the best way to employ airpower. By contrast, Joint Publication 1, *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States*, establishes that centralized planning and direction is “essential for controlling and coordinating the efforts of all forces available.” What is more, Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD 1), “Air Force Basic Doctrine,” states that “centralized control is the best way to employ air power,” which would be opposed by the Army and Marine Corps, which utilize centralized planning and direction and mission-type orders to employ forces.

Because senior officers of the Air Force are routinely selected as joint force air component commanders (JFACCs), it is essential that its doctrine and execution methodologies mirror those prescribed in joint doctrine. Its tenet of centralized control is not a recognized term in joint doctrine and is causing confusion not only

within the Air Force but throughout the joint community. The following statement is an example of the dichotomy between Air Force and joint doctrine. Joint Pub 1 states, “Unity of effort, centralized planning and direction, and decentralized execution are key considerations in joint operations.” Where conflict arises between service and joint doctrine, joint doctrine takes precedence, according to Joint Publication 0-2, *Unified*

Action Armed Forces. It is therefore imperative that the Air Force core tenet of centralized control and decentralized execution be modified to reflect the principles outlined in joint doctrine. Centralized planning and direction is consistent throughout joint doctrine and clearly shows that this tenet is contradictory to the basic command and control tenet outlined.

From a joint perspective, centralized control and decentralized execution is illogical and cannot exist together because control is about execution and is inherent in command, as explained in Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*. An aircraft is under centralized direction virtually from takeoff to landing through a series of control functions: Joint force commanders and

JFACC maintain operational or tactical control of each aircraft on the air tasking order; the airman is required to execute only those missions derived from the air tasking order or in the case of time sensitive targets when directed by joint commanders; the airman must adhere to the instructions as outlined in the airspace control order and special instructions; to receive direction and guidance the airman must communicate over the theater air-to-ground system, which exists to expedite the ability of joint commanders to control air operations; and finally, if the aircraft is conducting close air support, it must receive clearance from an air or ground controller before releasing its ordnance. The only decentralized aspect in this mission scenario is the tactics involved in striking the target, and even then rules of engagement could be a controlling factor.

Another clear discrepancy between joint and service doctrine involves control of airpower. AFDD 1 is unequivocal in insisting that “Air and space power must be controlled by an airman.” By comparison, Joint Publication 3-56.1, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*, states that a joint force commander will assign responsibilities for air operations to a commander with the preponderance of air assets and skill to control joint air operations.” Moreover, when “a JFACC is not designated, the JFC may plan, direct, and control joint air operations.” Joint doctrine makes it quite clear that centralized planning and direction of joint air operations can be assigned not only to airmen, as Air Force doctrine would seem to imply, but to senior officers from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps with control over substantial air resources and requisite qualifications.

Centrifugal Force?

Command relationships are another doctrinal issue that generates concern. Joint Pub 3-0 outlines four relationships: combatant command,



Gardez Valley, Afghanistan.

55th Signal Company (Andres J. Rodriguez)

Desert Storm.



DOD (Kimberly Yeargan)

operational control, tactical control, and support. Centralized control is missing from that menu and its ambiguous definition in AFDD 1 might leave some airmen guessing. Does the Air Force tenet of centralized control bestow command authority over assets once aircraft are aloft or does execution authority and responsibility continue to reside with joint commanders? As noted, when taken as a whole, this tenet confuses the issue of control, which according to Joint Pub 3-0 is inherent in command. Joint doctrine satisfactorily addresses the level of control of forces delegated to joint commanders by establishing relationships for particular missions or operations, and centralized control is not among them.

The third issue deals with decentralized execution and the realities of modern air operations. Air Force doctrine defines decentralized execution as delegating “execution authority to responsible and capable lower level commanders . . . to achieve span of control and to foster initiative, situational responsiveness, and tactical flexibility.” Does this statement accurately reflect the realities of air operations since Deliberate Force, Allied

Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom? Have the joint air operations planning process, air tasking order cycle, theater air-to-ground system, and C⁴ISR fusion capabilities within the air weapons operation center subsumed all responsibility from subordinate air commanders on the wing and squadron level and made joint commanders the focal point for every aspect of air operations? As Joint Pub 3-56.1 states, “The JFACC directs . . . the air operations plan [centralized planning] and a responsive and integrated control system [decentralized execution].” Again, joint doctrine refers to centralized planning, not centralized control, and additionally describes the theater air-to-ground system as the method for utilizing decentralized control. That system enables joint commanders to exercise control over the air and space environment, control air missions to achieve assigned air operations objectives, and finally produce command, control, communications, and computers systems that enable the control of assets. It would be difficult to describe the theater air-to-ground system as anything but a tool for joint commanders to extend control over the execution of air operations.

The military reluctantly turned to decentralized execution in the past because technology did



U.S. Army (Brandon R. Aird)

Kirkuk, Iraq.

not exist to provide an integrated network to control operations. Today, unity of effort is achieved not by decentralized execution but through an elaborate system of systems that enables centralized planning and direction on the highest levels. The spirit of decentralized execution resides in senior commanders issuing mission-type orders to subordinates and allowing them to develop plans and execute missions based on the mission and intent of higher command, as outlined in Joint Pub 3-0. The joint air operations planning process, air tasking order cycle, and theater air-to-ground system have usurped this precept of joint operations. Decentralized execution is established joint doctrine, but it would appear that the Air Force tenet of centralized control is inconsistent with its spirit and the realities of modern joint air operations that require centralized planning and direction.

The fourth issue that invalidates the tenet of centralized control and decentralized execution is that doctrine allows joint commanders to reach forward. This is best illustrated in Joint Pub 3-0: "JFCs have full authority to assign missions, redirect efforts, and direct coordination among subordinate commanders . . . in addition the command authority [combatant command] provides the JFCs unlimited authority to direct every aspect of the operation." Until doctrinal changes are implemented, joint force commanders will continue to

have the authority to play JFACC, wing commander, and tactical fighter pilot.

A fifth issue is focused on the principles of war, specifically unity of command. In Joint Pub 3-0, unity of command means that "all forces operate under a single commander with requisite authority to direct all forces employed in pursuit of a common purpose." In comparing this tenet with unity of command it might be concluded that it is merely a duplication of a principle of war, readily acknowledged as the enduring bedrock of doctrine. Centralized control and decentralized execution is not necessary when such principles are already inherent in joint operations.

The final doctrinal issue deals specifically with the emergence of effects-based operations and its impact on centralized control and decentralized execution. These operations are conceived and planned in a systems framework that considers the full range of direct, indirect, and cascading effects by the application of military, diplomatic, psychological, and economic instruments. They embrace the notion that political, economic, and diplomatic considerations are more important than military conquest. They represent a top-down process rather than usual bottom-up operations.

Because of casual linkages among target sets and the danger of objective fratricide, effects-based operations must be orchestrated by a centralized planning and execution authority that has situational understanding of every aspect of



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the diplomatic, informational, economic, and military campaign. Such operations will add myriad players to the targeting process to include economists, nongovernmental officials, bankers, lawyers, and politicians. It will require micromanagement of air operations and demand enhanced C⁴ISR systems to control all aspects of ground, sea, and air maneuvers. It would be impossible for

it would be impossible for centralized control and decentralized execution to coexist with a true effects-based campaign

centralized control and decentralized execution to coexist with a true effects-based campaign strategy construct.

The areas highlighted above have emphasized the tactical and operational friction points that arise when contrasting centralized control and decentralized execution with the concepts codified in joint doctrine. The most significant danger facing the joint community is not the impact that this tenet will make on tactical and operational warfighting methods, but how it will affect the strategic thinking by senior political and military leaders. Centralized control and decentralized execution, and specifically centralized

control, could lead to tactical and operational considerations that define strategy, sometimes called *tacticization of strategy*.

Traditionally, the levels of war are depicted as a pyramid with the strategic level on top and the operational and tactical levels in subordinate positions. Today, the lines separating these levels are difficult to discern. Codifying centralized control in doctrine will further confound an already complicated situation. On the strategic level, centralized control influences decisionmaking in three ways. First, the operational level will be less critical because sensors and shooters are becoming strategic. Secondly, centralized control and the emphasis on the capability to destroy targets with precision-guided munitions will result in strategic success without first identifying political goals. Finally, centralized control increases the likelihood of intervention by political and military leaders removed from the fight. The danger of centralized control is subverting long-range strategy that looks beyond the capabilities of weapons platforms and destruction of targets.

Centralized control and decentralized execution is not possible in an environment in which political factors nullify military efficiency and emerging joint doctrine enables commanders to reach forward and direct air operations. In the event, neither technology nor the environment invalidate centralized control and decentralized execution in military operations; rather it will be joint doctrine and the emerging strategy of effects-based warfare that will decide its fate. **JFQ**