

# Decentralized Execution

## Executing the Mission



The counterweight to air and space power's "master tenet" of *centralized control* is *decentralized execution*. In a balanced operation, these two tenets are critical to the effective employment of air and space power.

They are, in fact, the fundamental organizing principles, and decades of experience have proven them the most effective and efficient means of employing air and space power. Decentralized execution balances any command-level tendency toward micromanagement by authorizing subordinates to seize the initiative in dealing with the inevitable uncertainties faced during combat mission execution.

Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines decentralized execution as the "delegation of execution authority to subordinate commanders." Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, provides the specifics for air and space power, stating that decentralized execution of that power is "the delegation of execution authority to responsible and capable lower-level commanders to achieve effective span of control and to foster disciplined initiative, situational responsiveness, and tactical flexibility" (p. 34). When commanders clearly communicate their intent to lower-level echelons, decentralized execution allows those subordinates to exploit opportunities in rapidly changing, fluid situations in a manner that is consistent with the senior commander's overall plan. The theaterwide focus provided by centralized control and the operational flexibility resulting from decentralized execution allows air and space power to best

meet the joint commander's theater objectives. It assures a concentration of effort while maintaining an economy of force—exploiting air and space power's versatility and flexibility—ensuring that air and space forces remain responsive, survivable, and sustainable.

Operation Linebacker II (December 1972) is a clear example of the deleterious effect of overcentralizing planning and execution by staffs far removed from the operational environment. Those responsibilities must be delegated to the echelon best suited for the task. As evidenced by several recent operations, modern communications provide a strong temptation to centralize the execution of air and space power. Those command arrangements, however, will not stand up in a fully stressed, dynamic combat environment and should not become the norm for air operations.

Despite impressive gains in data exploitation and automated decision aids, a single person cannot achieve and maintain detailed situational awareness when fighting a conflict involving many simultaneous engagements taking place throughout a large area. A high level of centralized execution results in a rigid campaign that is unresponsive to local conditions and results in the joint effort losing its tactical flexibility. For this reason, a campaign's execution should be decentralized within a command and control architecture that exploits the ability of strike-package leaders, air-battle managers, forward air controllers, and other frontline commanders to make on-scene decisions during complex and rapidly unfolding operations. Nevertheless, in some situations, there may be valid reasons for executing specific operations at higher levels, most notably when the joint forces commander—or, perhaps, even higher authorities—wish to control strategic effects, even if that means the sacrifice of tactical efficiency.

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### To Learn More . . .

Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1. *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, November 17, 2003. <https://www.dctrine.af.mil/Library/Doctrine/afdd1.pdf>.