

# Operational Control (OPCON)



Joint Publication (Pub) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, December 17, 2003, defines *operational control* as “command authority that may be exercised by commanders at any echelon

at or below the level of combatant command. Operational control is inherent in combatant command (command authority) and may be delegated within the command” (p. 385). Basically, OPCON is the foundation for command at all levels; it gives commanders the authority to organize commands and employ the necessary forces for assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction for carrying out an operational mission. Additionally, OPCON allows commanders to direct all aspects of military operations and joint training for the purpose of conducting an assigned mission.

According to the definition in Joint Pub 1-02, combatant commanders and their designated representatives (subordinate commanders) have the express authority to exercise OPCON; neither the service chief nor the commander of the major command is in the loop. In order to accomplish an assigned mission effectively, the combatant commander will delegate OPCON of assigned (or attached) forces to the subordinate component commanders, who may include a joint force air and space component commander (JFACC) or a commander, Air Force forces (COMAFFOR). Regardless of the individual to whom the combatant commander relinquishes OPCON, the chain of command still goes up to the combatant commander.

When a subordinate commander receives OPCON over joint forces, that control normally carries with it full authority to organize the commands and forces as he or she deems necessary for accomplishment of the operational mission. According to joint doctrine, this authority—granted by the president and secretary of defense—can provide for the transfer of OPCON from one combatant command to another. Such a transfer might occur because forces are often located in one area of responsibility

(AOR) but are assigned to another command located elsewhere. In such situations, the national leaders decide which commander has OPCON of which forces. Normally, the geographic combatant commander has OPCON of these forces although there are exceptions to this rule. For example, forces that transit through a different AOR for a brief stint do not normally become part of that combatant commander’s OPCON. Similarly, when forces actually bed down in one geographic command but are tasked to support a different combatant commander, the commander tasked with the mission retains OPCON.

Although the lines of distinction are somewhat hazy in these examples, the authority for OPCON traditionally remains with the commander tasked to achieve mission objectives rather than with the geographic commander to whom the forces are apportioned for planning purposes. The lines of distinction are further blurred when the original geographic commander temporarily surrenders OPCON of the apportioned forces but continues to have responsibility for providing logistical support, including food, water, bedding, air traffic control, and many other administrative functions. Although charged with logistically supporting the forces on his or her “base,” the original commander does not necessarily have OPCON of them.

When it comes to preparing to fight wars and actually fighting them, we airmen believe in our air and space power doctrine. We use it to guide our employment of air and space assets in military operations. Based upon experience and historical examples, Air Force doctrine represents what we have come to understand. Although doctrine cannot provide a solution to every problematic situation, it does give us a starting point. We then have to utilize our own experiences and analyses of past situations in order to determine how best to handle the new ones. Air Force doctrine should reflect what has worked over the years, and for cases with which we have no experience, it should grow in order to capture and include such events. The key lies in determining which combatant commander is responsible for conducting the operational mission and ensuring that he or she has OPCON of those forces.

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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>.