The Case for a Marine Corps Regional Air Defense Commander

Filling a gap for the Joint Force

by LtCol Corey R. Belton

Warfare increasingly features threats from above. Hypersonic glide vehicles, collaborative combat vehicles, and long-range unmanned aerial vehicles continue to proliferate to our adversaries. China's military includes advanced cruise and ballistic missiles that can easily range the first and second island chains. If the Marine Corps expects to act as the stand-in force for the Joint Force, air superiority will be necessary from time to time. Forces on the ground will need windows to operate free from prohibitive interference from an enemy air force. The Joint Force needs to command and control air defense assets in the first and second island chains to provide force protection and opportunities for maneuver. The Marine Corps can plug this gap by operating as a regional air defense commander (RADC) for the Joint Force during a great-power conflict in the 21st century.

Joint Publication 3-01 divides the counter air framework into offensive counter air and defensive counter air (DCA). Offensive counter air includes missions like fighter sweep, escort, and attack operations; however, those missions are not the responsibility of a sector air defense commander (SADC), RADC, or area air defense commander (AADC). The offensive operations section at the combined air operations center (CAOC) handles those missions. The CAOC is the command post for the Joint Force air component commander (JFACC). Defensive counter air missions are cleanly divided into active and passive air and missile defense. Defensive counter air is the realm of the air and missile defense (AMD) command and control (C2) structure. Air and missile defense is further divided into air defense "measures designed to destroy attacking aircraft and aerodynamic missiles or to nullify or reduce the effectiveness of such attack"[1] Meanwhile, ballistic missile defense, "measures designed to destroy ballistic missiles or reduce the effectiveness of such attack."[2] Passive AMD is all other measures to minimize the effects of hostile air and ballistic missile threats against friendly forces and assets.

If the Joint Force commander (JFC) designates a Joint Force air component commander (JFACC), the JFC will likely also designate the JFACC as the area air defense commander and airspace control authority. The JFACC

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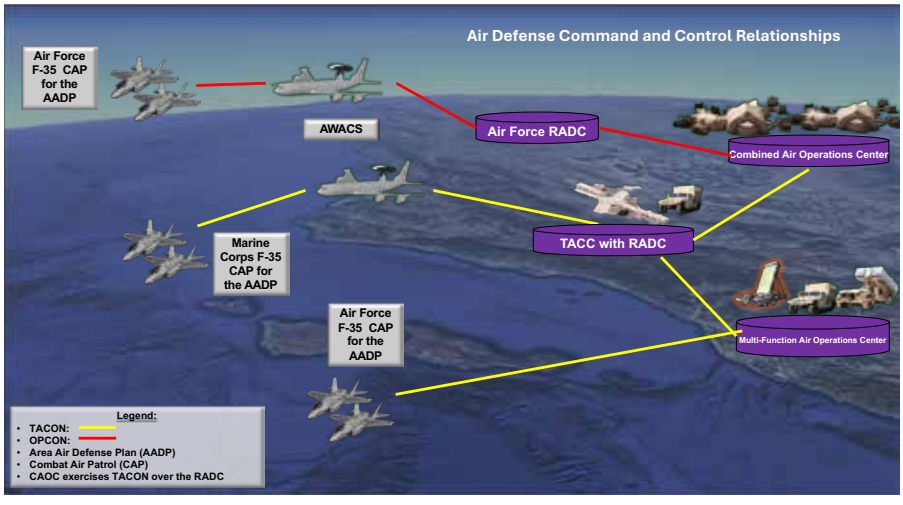

Potential RADC laydown with doctrinal command relationships. *(Image provided by author.)*

is normally the Service component commander with the preponderance of air assets and the capability to plan, task, and control joint air operations.[3] The JFC designates an AADC with the authority to plan, coordinate, and integrate overall Joint Force DCA operations, who is normally the component commander with the preponderance of AMD capability, intelligence, and C2 capability to plan, coordinate, and execute defense operations, including realtime battle management. *JP 3-01* specifically states, "During complex operations/campaigns conducted in a large JOA/theater of operations, the AADC may recommend, and the JFC may approve, the division of the operational area into separate AD regions, each with a RADC who could be delegated responsibilities and decision-making authority for DCA operations within the region."[4] Those regions may be further divided into sections. The vast expanse of the INDOPACOM theater and the specter of war presented by the Chinese Communist Party clearly falls into the category of complex campaigns or operations in a large theater. So, if organizing INDOPACOM into regions and sectors will be necessary, who should man the watch?

The Commandant reinforced our heritage and responsibility to the Nation in his planning guidance: "We became Marines to fight, and we work hard every day to be the country's choice to be the first to fight."[5] Noticeably, the first to fight is in bold. In his 249th birthday message, Gen Smith clarifies our ethos, "our ethos will never change—*Every Marine a Rifleman* and *Everyone Fights*."[6] Note that "Everyone fights" is emphasized in italics in the message. China is our pacing threat identified in our *National Defense Strategy*, and our Commandant clearly wants to be first to the fight and every Marine to be ready for the risk that entails. Gen Smith details our task as being the "JTAC for the Joint Force,"[7] sensing, making sense, and communicating with an any-sensor, any-shooter mindset. The JTAC (Joint Terminal Attack Controller) analogy is fitting for the stand-in force, finding targets to engage through fires, extending to targets that fly through the sky. Despite the ever-changing character of conflict, the nature of war and the Marines remain eternal.

The Marine Corps already possesses the necessary equipment to integrate with the CAOC. The Multifunction Air Operations Center (MAOC) and Tactical Air Command Center (TACC) are part of the theater air control system, and both have direct connectivity to the CAOC thanks to their equipment suite known as the Common Aviation Command and Control System (CAC2S). Like the legacy Tactical Air Operations Center or Direct Air Support Center during the Global War on Terror, the MAOC may directly coordinate with the CAOC for joint sorties across all mission types. Like the Tactical Air Operations Center in Operation Enduring Freedom, the MAOC can control Marine Corps sorties in Marine Corps airspace along with joint sorties in joint airspace simultaneously. The JFACC exercises operational control over their Service forces and tactical control (TACON) or direct support from other Services' forces.[8] The JFACC uses the theater air control system to execute that control. For example, the JFACC may have operational control of an Air Force F-22 through a Marine Corps RADC and MAOC. A Marine F-35 could fly a DCA mission as part of the Joint Area Air Defense Plan (AADP) and be TACON to the JFACC through a Marine Corps RADC who has TACON of an Air Force E-7 controlling the DCA lane where the F-35 is stationed. Understanding who has control over which sortie is challenging but is already practiced by air command control experts across the Joint Force.

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So, our present-day task of controlling Joint DCA sorties is already baked in, but what would comprise the RADC? To determine that, we must ask how much autonomy the RADC needs and how much authority the AADC is willing to delegate regarding the air tasking order and the AADP. Do we think that the CAOC may be unable to reach a RADC during a fight, or if the CAOC succumbs to an enemy attack, is the RADC responsible for planning the next day's DCA sorties and tanker support? It is entirely reasonable during a great-power conflict to expect critical C2 nodes to be targeted, so there needs to be enough flexibility in the AADP to allow the integrated air and missile defense to persist despite the loss of one central node. The Marine Corps does not need to be a second JFACC, but RADCs should be able to shoulder some burden until a CAOC reconstitutes. Subject-matter experts in tankers, sensors, intelligence, communications, tactical data links, groundbased air defense, electronic warfare, and fighter aircraft should support a RADC and conduct contingency planning. A least a portion of those subject-matter experts should come from the Joint Force. A separate facility housing the RADC team could be attached to the TACC or MAOC, where they would supervise current operations, coordinate with the CAOC's combat operations and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance divisions, provide recommendations to the CAOC's combat plans divisions, and conduct contingency planning for their region. Alternately, a slimmed-down version could be the RADC attaches to the air defense cell in the TACC, with limited liaisons from the Joint Force requiring contingency planning support from the TACC.

Training for the RADC team outside the fundamentals already being practiced should focus on command relationships and understanding the authorities vested in the RADC across the competition continuum. The main authorities include identification, commit, engagement, air defense warning conditions, and weapons control status as defined in *JP 3-01*. These authorities may be held at the AADC or delegated to the lowest tactical level of a tactical command and control unit, for example, an MAOC. Identification is assigning approved tracking classifi-

cations, such as unknown (Bogey) or friendly.[9] Commit authorizes forces to prepare to engage an entity or assigns a weapon to a threat. The Air Defense Warning Condition is the degree of air attack probability based on the threat assessment. Weapons Control Status is a control measure that establishes the conditions under which fighters and surface AMD weapons are permitted to engage threats. The Marine Corps currently practices all these authorities at the Weapons and Tactics Instructors Course in both competition and conflict scenarios with a designated SADC and small team attached to an MAOC in live and simulated events.

The Marine Corps has the framework necessary to execute as an RADC or SADC, but there is still work to be done. Potential RADCs and SADCs need to hone their skills along with their teams. Integration with the CAOC and laterally with other RADCs or SADCs is critical. Sharing common tactical pictures through data links is challenging and requires expertise. The Joint Interoperability and Data Link Training Center makes the experts who share sensor data across tactical data links and the Marine Corps wisely created a new warrant officer military occupational specialty for the most qualified experts known as Command and Control Interface Officers, or known across the Joint Force as Joint Interface Control Officers.[10] Joint interface control officers enable the vision of any sensor, any shooter by networking information exchange requirements between them. More CAC2S suites may need to be purchased as the means for the RADC to command and control from their facility to display and disseminate situational awareness.

There are necessary technological investments to perform RADC well. Tactical-level deception needs to be prioritized to enhance survivability. Sustainment in the Pacific is a known challenge across the Marine Corps and the Joint Force. Missile warning is the field that needs the closest attention, as it is a primary responsibility for a RADC or SADC. The RADC must have realtime missile warning data and be able to disseminate that information in seconds. The CAC2S provides some capability in missile warning, but understanding how the CAOC ties into national-level assets must be learned and applied in earnest.

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Despite the known challenges, the Marine Corps is best postured to act as a RADC in the first island chain. Airborne platforms are on station temporarily and would not be able to provide contingency planning. The Navy is capable of being a RADC, but they also have their high-value units to defend. The Marine Corps has the most expeditionary sensors and C2 systems within proximity to the threat, and the intention to remain there. The Marine Corps can tidy up the loose ends necessary to act as a RADC and fulfill the air defense role of JTAC for the Joint Force. The Commandant tasked the Marine Corps with being the first to make contact with the enemy, and that contact will likely come from the sky through combinations of drones and missiles. The Marine Corps must adapt to the evolving character of war and be ready to coordinate the first air defense actions of great-power conflict.

Air Defense Warning Conditions	
White	An attack by hostile aircraft or missile is improbable
Yellow	An attack by hostile aircraft or missile is probable
Red	An attack by hostile aircraft or missile is imminent or in progress

Weapons Control Status	
Free	Any target not positively identified as friendly in accordance with current ROE may be engaged
Tight	Units may only fire on targets identified as hostile in accordance with current ROE
Hold/Safe	Units may only fire in self-defense or when ordered by proper higher authority

Doctrinal authorities vested in air defense commanders. *(Images provided by author.)*

Notes

1. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats* (Washington, DC: 2024).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Gen Eric M. Smith, *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: 2024).

6. Commandant of the Marine Corps, "249th Birthday Message," (Washington, DC: 2024), https://www.cmc.marines.mil/Birthday.

7. *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance.*

8. *Joint Publication 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.*

9. Ibid.

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Creation of the Command and Control Interface Officer* (Washington, DC: 2024), https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/3666701/creation-of-the-command-and-control-interface-control-officer-7216-pmos.