



Allied Joint Doctrine for Air and Space Operations



Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-3.3, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Air and Space Operations* is NATO's authoritative doctrine for the conduct of air and space operations within joint military contexts. Edition C supersedes the previous Edition B and reflects significant updates to command structures, operational frameworks, and the growing importance of space as an operational domain.

The publication sits beneath AJP-3, the keystone doctrine for Allied joint operations, and provides comprehensive guidance on the unique characteristics, employment considerations, and command and control arrangements for air forces and space capabilities. While air power is best employed in an integrated joint context, the document acknowledges that operations are rarely executed by a single domain, emphasising the inherently joint nature of modern military operations.

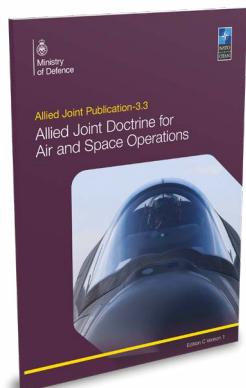
Command and control architecture

Effective command and control underpins successful air operations, with the document emphasising that air power is particularly sensitive to misdirection given its speed and reach across multiple theatres. NATO's preferred approach is centralised control with decentralised execution, delivered through a task-oriented command structure. The Combined Force Air Component Commander serves as the primary authority, supported by the NATO Command Structure Joint Force Air Component Headquarters. The command architecture must satisfy five design considerations: flexibility, responsiveness, appropriate authority levels, effective communications and sustainability.

The four operational roles of air power

The doctrine identifies four fundamental and enduring operational roles. Control of the air enables freedom of action whilst denying the same to adversaries. Attack lies at the heart of air power's capacity to create effects, encompassing strategic attack and counter-surface force operations. Air mobility provides the capability to project forces and sustain operations across vast distances. Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance fuses planning and operations to deliver actionable intelligence supporting decision-making at all levels.

These roles are enabled by four critical functions: basing options that provide operational agility; sustainment through air logistics; connectivity via command, control, communications and information systems; and force protection to safeguard personnel and assets.



The air tasking cycle

Planning and execution follow a six-phase air tasking cycle aligned with the joint battle rhythm. This begins with strategy and plan development, translating joint commander guidance into air contributions. Subsequent phases address scheme of manoeuvre and target development, weaponeering and air allocation, air tasking order development, execution, and assessment. The assessment process provides continuous feedback to inform adaptations throughout the planning cycle.

Strategic communications

AJP-3.3 emphasises narrative-led execution to align Alliance actions and words from tactical units to the North Atlantic Council. Unclear objectives or apparent contradictions may undermine Alliance cohesion and provide adversaries opportunities to attack NATO's unity of purpose. Effective communication forms the first phase of deterrence, aiming to persuade potential adversaries whilst reassuring mission participants.

The space domain

A substantially updated chapter reflects space's evolution as both an operational domain and critical enabler. Space capabilities provide unique advantages including global access unconstrained by geographical boundaries, though they face increasing challenges in a contested, congested and competitive environment. The document establishes space support coordination elements at tactical, operational and strategic levels, recognising that space capabilities are frequently a precondition for operational success. Key space services include satellite communications, positioning and navigation, environmental monitoring, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

Enabling considerations

The publication addresses force protection as essential given that air assets are expensive, vulnerable and scarce. Legal and ethical considerations including rules of engagement and the law of armed conflict govern all operations. Electromagnetic warfare capabilities are identified as key enablers across all air power roles, with assured spectrum access being prerequisite for successful operations.

AJP-3.29, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Space Operations* is currently in development and is expected to promulgate in early 2027. Once AJP-3.29 is promulgated, AJP-3.3 will have the space chapter removed as it will duplicate text contained within AJP-3.29. AJP-3.3 will then be updated accordingly and re-promulgated.

Want to read more?

AJP-3.3 is intended primarily for commanders and staff at the joint operational level. It also provides guidance for all levels of command and is instructive for coalition and NATO partners.

Find out more about joint operational-level doctrine at the links below.

