



U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Joseph Saldana, a boom operator assigned to 50th Air Refueling Squadron, observes the Alaskan landscape during a refueling mission at Northern Edge 23-1 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, May 18, 2023. Northern Edge provides a large-scale opportunity to enhance inter-service capabilities focused on joint combat operations in the Indo-Pacific region. (U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Jen S. Martinez)

Disjointed Command and Air Domain Challenges in Alaska

The Case for a Single U.S. Combined/Joint Force Air Component Commander

By Jeffrey W. Kempff

On February 13, 2025, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Commander of U.S. Northern

Command (USNORTHCOM) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), General Gregory M. Guillot, expressed concern

over rising threats to the homeland. Specifically, he mentioned increased cooperation among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran; combined Chinese-Russian bomber patrols near Alaska; and Russian naval incursions along the U.S. East Coast.¹ Notably, in September 2024, China and Russia

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conducted another combined approach into North American waters along Alaska while forward-posturing and flying advanced fighters and strategic bombers.² According to the 2025 USNORTHCOM Posture Statement—which General Guillot delivered to the House Armed Services Committee on April 1, 2025—adversaries are increasing their capabilities to conduct direct conventional strikes on the homeland across multiple domains, accelerating the urgency for integrated defense.³

These threats underscore a critical vulnerability in the current homeland defense posture: fractured command organization and relationships in the air domain over Alaska. The existing U.S. defensive command and control structure within NORAD and USNORTHCOM is incoherent and non-doctrinal, hampering rapid response, fragmenting unity of effort, and degrading lethality. While these overlapping command authorities may have sufficed during the Cold War or eras marked by violent extremist organizations, they are ill-suited to the modern all-domain threat landscape posed by peer adversaries. The “tyranny of distance” keeping North America safe has eroded, leaving the United States and Canada vulnerable to threats across multiple vectors, not just the air domain.

Alaska’s strategic location makes it the key terrain for both homeland defense and Great Power competition. The 2024 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy illustrates capability gaps across the High North, outlining the need to enhance domain awareness and capabilities, engage with allies and partners, and demonstrate America’s presence in the Arctic.⁴ The Arctic Strategy highlights a seam in command and control between U.S. Pacific Command and USNORTHCOM that America’s adversaries—namely, China and Russia—could exploit. As figure 1 illustrates, the most direct air and sea supply routes from the continental United States to the western Pacific pass through USNORTHCOM’s area of responsibility, highlighting Alaska’s importance in protecting staging areas and resupply lines. Unlike Guam, with its integrated joint defense,⁵ Alaska’s

Figure 1.



Source: Author.

Aleutian islands of Shemya, Attu, and Adak are particularly vulnerable, and even Anchorage is closer to potential conflict zones than Hawaii. This disparity, combined with Alaska’s limited unity of effort in the air domain, creates complex coordination challenges that underleverage the air domain’s critical role in integrated deterrence and defense.

Defense of the homeland has historically been the highest priority of the National Defense Strategy⁶ and will be a transregional joint multifunctional battle across all domains—air, land, sea, subsurface, space, cyberspace, and information.⁷ As General Guillot testified to the House Armed Services Committee, “Defending North America is inherently linked to the ability of the joint force to operate effectively across the entire USNORTHCOM area of responsibility—to include the Arctic.”⁸ Meeting this imperative requires a deliberate modernization of organizational structure and command relationships. These organizational changes require seamless integration between domains and within domains. The first and most immediate step is to unify the air domain with a complete air component for NORAD and USNORTHCOM under a single U.S. Combined/Joint Force Air Component Commander (C/JFACC)—specifically, a *single* Airman commanding the Alaskan and Continental NORAD Regions, aligned with the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) responsibilities—and recraft that

person’s subordinate commands to mirror each other.

Context and Background

NORAD and USNORTHCOM: A Bifurcated Defense Architecture

While NORAD’s air defense mission successfully safeguarded North America until 9/11, the subsequent shifts in homeland defense introduced bifurcations in the U.S. defense posture. President George W. Bush established USNORTHCOM to lead all-domain homeland defense and civil support rather than reforging NORAD as a coalition command. Meanwhile, NORAD maintained responsibility for air defense in regions like the Alaskan NORAD Region, and USNORTHCOM assumed broader authority over the Alaska Theater of Operations. In 2014, Alaskan Command transferred from U.S. Pacific Command to USNORTHCOM, formally aligning Arctic defense under a homeland-focused structure. However, no additional forces or staff accompanied the shift, further complicating regional command coherence. The resulting NORAD and USNORTHCOM organizational structure leaves overlapping roles and responsibilities. Where Alaskan Command fits into the USNORTHCOM area of responsibility remains nebulous, and air domain command and control has not been cohesively adapted since the creation of USNORTHCOM.



A U.S. Air Force F-22 Raptor assigned to the 3rd Wing receives fuel from a KC-135 Stratotanker assigned to 50th Air Refueling Squadron during Northern Edge 23-1 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, May 18, 2023. Northern Edge 23-1 provides an opportunity for joint, multinational, and multi-domain operations designed to implement high-end, realistic warfighter training, develop and improve joint interoperability, and enhance the combat readiness of participating forces. (U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Jen S. Martinez)

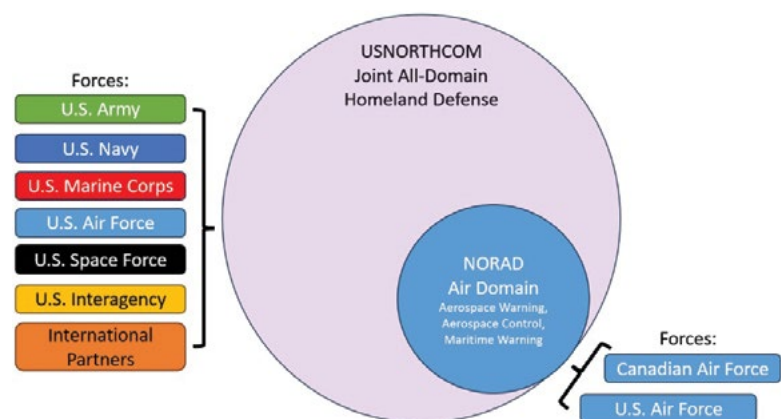
Meanwhile, China emerged as the U.S. military's primary pacing challenge.⁹ Successive National Security Strategies have documented China's expanding conventional military capabilities, including bombers, cruise missiles, and hypersonic weapons.¹⁰ While Guam and Hawaii have received integrated joint defense layering, Alaska remains organizationally fractured despite its geographic proximity to the Indo-Pacific (see figure 1). USNORTHCOM lacks dedicated forces in the Alaska Theater of Operations, and NORAD retains air-focused assets in the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations. The limited availability of assigned forces in USNORTHCOM potentially inhibits the combatant commander's ability to defend the homeland against the all-domain threat that present and future China possesses.

Although NORAD and USNORTHCOM share the same

four-star commander and support each other by policy, their operations remain split, as depicted in figure 2. NORAD is the bedrock of the strong North American alliance, providing a vital relationship and scalable command structures for mutual defense. However,

the binational treaty does not support joint all-domain operations,¹¹ limiting NORAD's ability to react and respond in the modern all-domain threat environment. Within the NORAD and USNORTHCOM headquarters, separate J3 (operations) directorates run

Figure 2.



Source: Author.



A C-130 Hercules from the 144th Airlift Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, flies away from Denali, the highest point in North America, March 4, 2017. After 41 years of flying the C-130 aircraft, the 144th Airlift Squadron's eight C-130s were divested, with the planes either being transferred to outside units or retired from service. The unit's last two aircraft departed Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, the following day. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Eagerton/released)

semiparallel operations,¹² further complicating integration despite contemporary alignment efforts. Moreover, the lack of a unified air component disrupts joint warfighting principles such as simplicity, unity of effort, and integrated command and control—particularly in the Alaska Theater of Operations and the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations. Additional modern doctrine, including the emerging Joint Warfighting Concept 3.0, calls for seamless command and control across all domains and unified joint force integration.¹³ Yet Alaska's bifurcated air domain—divided between NORAD's Regional command and USNORTHCOM's theater oversight—undermines these objectives.

As shown in figure 3, the NORAD Agreement divides air defense responsibilities into three regions—the Alaskan

NORAD Region, the Continental NORAD Region, and the Canadian NORAD Region—which in turn are further subdivided into four Sectors.

NORAD Regions have assigned air defense forces, including an Air Operations Center, fighters, tankers, airborne early warning assets, and Battle

Figure 3.



Source: Author.

Figure 4.



Source: Author.

Control Center. In contrast, in figure 4, USNORTHCOM's area of responsibility is not sectorized similarly and relies on the Global Force Management process to allocate joint forces, none of which are permanently assigned to Alaskan Command.

Where Is Here?

USNORTHCOM is charged with leading all-domain homeland defense; however, within the Alaska Theater of Operations, this mission is complicated by force structure gaps and command friction. A small number of forces in Alaska are assigned to the U.S. Element of NORAD (USELEMNORAD), primarily postured for aerospace warning and control and delegated to the commander of the Alaskan NORAD Region. While unrestrained in their ability to support USNORTHCOM missions, these forces are limited in scope and readiness to conduct broader all-domain operations. For example, in 2024, while a combined Chinese-Russian flotilla patrolled the Bering Sea,¹⁴ the USNORTHCOM JFACC had no assigned assets other than those supporting assets assigned to the Alaskan NORAD Region Combined Force Air Component Commander (CFACC). However, the Alaskan NORAD Region CFACC concurrently employed those assets to counter violations of America's airspace.¹⁵ No one functional air domain commander could prioritize the use of air assets, thus violating unity of effort. An aligned single U.S. C/

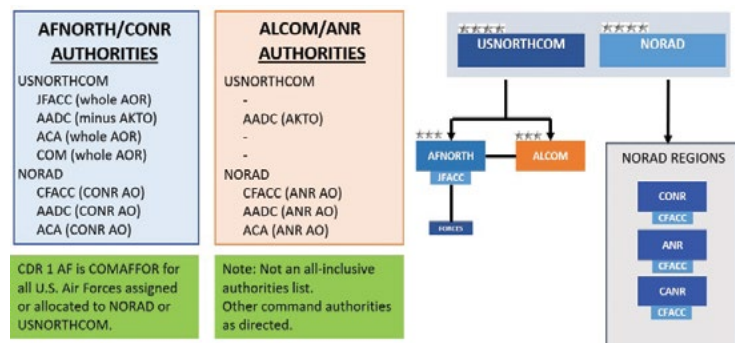
JFACC would easily smooth the command friction and would keep the ability to distribute the limited assigned forces within the air domain.

The challenge of bifurcated commands in the air domain is compounded by the existence of these two peer-level air commanders operating in the same airspace: one, the Alaskan NORAD Region CFACC, reporting to NORAD, and the other, the USNORTHCOM JFACC. This violates the joint command and control principle of simplicity.¹⁶ These commanders split the responsibilities of the Alaska Theater of Operations and the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations and operate under distinct authorities, priorities, chains of command, rules of engagement, and planning processes. In the

contiguous United States (CONUS), one general serves simultaneously as Continental NORAD Region CFACC and USNORTHCOM JFACC—ensuring simplicity, clarity, and integrated control. In Alaska, this cohesion breaks down. The resulting fractured unity of command and divided unity of effort requires adjudication at the combatant commander level rather than at the air component level.

Additionally, a notable divergence of Area Air Defense Commander (AADC) authorities in Alaska results in a disaggregated defense design. The AADC is appropriately aligned to the commanders of the Alaskan NORAD Region and Continental NORAD Region for their respective areas of operation in NORAD channels. However, the AADC's responsibilities also include defense design and resource allocation outside the NORAD mission sets. In USNORTHCOM channels, the AADC follows the JFACC except in the Alaska Theater of Operations, where the AADC is aligned to the commander of Alaskan Command. However, the preponderance of U.S. AADC efforts is assigned to the commander of the Continental NORAD Region and the USNORTHCOM JFACC, including command of the Army subordinates and a preponderance of air defense assets. These conflicting assignments of authorities hamper defense design and again call for adjudication at the combatant commander level to defend the

Figure 5. Current Command Organization, Relationships, and Authorities

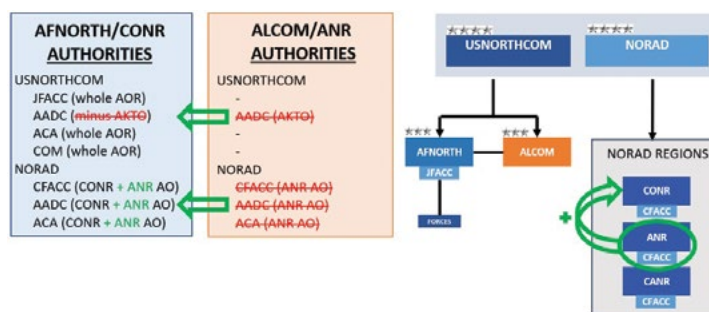


Source: Author.

aggregate area of responsibility. Figure 5 highlights the disparity and inconsistent organization and authorities under NORAD and USNORTHCOM.

Consider if the commander of Naval Forces Northern Command (NAVNORTH) were designated as the supported commander for an operation in Alaska. The commander of NAVNORTH would have a default JFACC¹⁷ with no assigned forces, functionally attempting to align air domain efforts in the Alaska Theater of Operations. Simultaneously, the commander of the Alaskan NORAD Region would be the supported command in NORAD lanes and functionally attempt to align air domain efforts in the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations. These two peer-level air domain functional commanders in the same geographic area would leave the commander of NAVNORTH uncertain about whom to coordinate with, like the AI robot in figure 6. Again, this bifurcated command friction differs from the

Figure 6. Simple, Unifying Proposed Changes



Source: Author.

supported/supporting relationships in the CONUS air domain, where unity of command (aligned CFACC, JFACC, and Area Air Defense Commander) is codified, and simplicity is prevalent when executing air operations. The air domain over Alaska remains the only geography in the USNORTHCOM area of responsibility and NORAD area of operations without a unified, integrated C/JFACC and Area Air Defense Commander. Unified effort in the air domain enables

mission success by integrating joint effects in USNORTHCOM, thus effectively supporting the lead command.

Alaska Past and Present Operations

Russian incursions into Alaskan air-space have been a recurring reality for decades—an air threat that NORAD was built to counter and continues to manage effectively. In 2023, the shooting down of high-altitude airborne objects over North



East-Coast-based U.S. Naval Special Warfare Operators (SEALs) conduct a patrol on Shemya Island, Alaska, September 4, 2023, as part of Operation POLAR DAGGER. During the operation, special operations forces projected the ability of U.S. forces to defend critical infrastructure, enhanced all-domain awareness, demonstrated operational reach, and strengthened our understanding of activity in the Arctic. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Matthew Dickinson)

America¹⁸ demonstrated how NORAD forces were used in unilateral support of a USNORTHCOM-led mission. This coordination, while successful, exposed a key friction point: air assets under the NORAD CFACC executing missions directed by the USNORTHCOM JFACC without unified command and authorities. In recent years, combined Chinese-Russian maritime patrols, often incorporating strategic bombers and fighter aircraft in the Bering Sea, have further highlighted the strain in coordinating across mission sets that span both NORAD and USNORTHCOM areas of responsibility.¹⁹ This adversary maritime presence, a USNORTHCOM issue, requires layered air integration and control with NORAD air defense efforts. As the increase in combined adversary naval patrols and the hypothetical NAVNORTH example highlight, these responsibilities are currently split across air component commanders and exceed the limits of NORAD's air-centric mission.

Imagine this realistic, complex scenario. The commander of Alaskan Command is the supported commander providing civil support following a massive 7.0 earthquake, such as the one that struck Anchorage in 2018.²⁰ Concurrently, as the commander of the Alaskan NORAD Region, that person is the supported commander to intercept a Russian airborne incursion and simultaneously support the USNORTHCOM JFACC to intercept and shoot down a high-altitude object. Meanwhile, the CFACC and JFACC must coordinate airspace and support the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander monitoring a combined Chinese-Russian surface action group. Rather than one commander and staff coordinating air effects in Alaska, there are two: the JFACC in Florida and the local CFACC. Having two different air component commanders in the same geographical area strains the commanders' span of control during peacetime, let alone moving from crisis into conflict.

Future Operations and Emerging Air Domain Demands

On January 27, 2025, President Donald J. Trump issued an executive order establishing the "Iron Dome for America" initiative—renamed "Golden Dome for America"²¹—to counter advanced airborne threats such as ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles.²² This evolving initiative reflects the growing complexity of defending the U.S. homeland across multiple vectors, with effects that straddle both NORAD and USNORTHCOM's responsibilities. The proliferation of unmanned systems, nonkinetic threats, and long-range strike capabilities from adversaries²³ only sharpens the need to unify the air domain across NORAD and USNORTHCOM. Future defense efforts will integrate emerging technologies and layered defense systems to protect critical national infrastructure and the lines of resupply and power projection. As capabilities and authorities converge across multiple joint air defense systems, clear command and control alignment would ensure seamless coordination, rapid response, and efficient resource allocation—especially in the high-risk terrain of Alaska and the Arctic.

As homeland defense evolves toward multidomain, all-threat engagement, it is imperative to immediately designate

"An offensive spirit must be inherent in the conduct of all defensive operations." In the United States and Canada, the U.S. JFACC handles offense while the NORAD CFACC and the area air defense commander provide defense. Those are different commanders in Alaska, but not different commanders in Canada or the rest of USNORTHCOM.

a single U.S. C/JFACC and Area Air Defense Commander to unify air domain responsibilities across the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations and the Alaska Theater of Operations. Doing so will eliminate unnecessary seams between NORAD and USNORTHCOM efforts and ensure that lethality and responsiveness are maximized in the most strategically exposed and vital airspace of the U.S. homeland.

Air Domain Structure: Gaps in Unity, Resourcing, and Doctrine

Lethality in the homeland air domain—particularly over Alaska—is diminished by structural misalignment and doctrinal inconsistency. Unity of command is fractured but can be restored by addressing two interrelated but distinct command seams.

First, the commanders of the Continental NORAD Region and Alaskan NORAD Region are separate individuals. This creates an imbalance in command authority across the U.S. portion of NORAD, preventing one commander from holistically allocating air domain resources or synchronizing decisions (including with Area Air Defense Commander responsibilities). Second, within the USNORTHCOM Alaska Theater of Operations, the NORAD CFACC and USNORTHCOM JFACC remain separate individuals. This bifurcation splits unity of effort in a shared geographic and operational domain, leading to coordination challenges and overlapping tasking of limited resources.²⁴

Organizationally, the Alaskan NORAD Region lacks a complete and functional air component, having only the 611th Air Operations Center (611 AOC), unlike the rest of the NORAD

Regions. AOCs do not support all-domain wars alone; they require integration with a dedicated Air Force staff and clear Service component responsibilities. Currently, the 611 AOC operates without a dedicated or complete Air Force Service component structure, relying instead on fragmented support arrange-

ments. Even designating the commander of Air Forces Northern (AFNORTH) as USNORTHCOM JFACC and even a support relationship to Alaskan Command leaves a disjunction—AFNORTH is led by a different commander than the Alaskan NORAD Region, the 611 AOC, and Alaskan Command—leaving an incomplete air component in the Alaskan NORAD Region.

In contrast, CONUS presents a model of coherence. The commander of First Air Force serves as CFACC for the Continental NORAD Region, JFACC for USNORTHCOM, Area Air Defense Commander, Airspace Control Authority, and Collections Management. This centralized leadership enables responsive and unified operations under a single Airman and is supported by a whole air component staff—AFNORTH—and the 601st Air Operations Center (601 AOC).²⁵ The mismatch between the Alaska Theater of Operations and the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations splits these roles between two commanders and two Air Operations Centers, diluting command authority, generating conflicting directives, and creating gaps in operational execution. A previous proposal to assign AFNORTH as the air component supporting the Alaskan NORAD Region would create the same challenges; it would demand that a single staff support two separate commanders.

At the tactical command and control level, the disparities continue. The Continental NORAD Region's Sectors—the Eastern Air Defense Sector and the Western Air Defense Sector—are each staffed with approximately 350 personnel and commanded by two O-6s (one with Title 10 authority and one with Title 32 authority). In contrast, the Alaskan NORAD Region's Alaska Air Defense Sector is a Sector in name only: manned by only about 150 personnel and led by an O-5 commander under Title 32 authority. The O-6 commander of the 611 AOC must dual-hat to fulfill Title 10 Sector requirements when needed. While all three Sectors are assigned to USELEMNORAD, they support both NORAD and USNORTHCOM missions, and the Alaska Air Defense Sector remains significantly under resourced and structurally unequal.

Balancing these disparities is not simply a matter of equity—it is a prerequisite for increasing interoperability, achieving doctrinal coherence, and restoring lethality across the homeland air.

Previously Attempted Solutions

Repeated efforts to address command and control seams dividing Alaska's air domain have emerged since at least 2014 but have failed to achieve lasting unity of effort. While institutional change is challenging, modernizing air domain command and control is essential for maintaining lethality in a high-end conflict. NORAD and USNORTHCOM have experimented with annual Tier 1 exercises since at least 2023, yielding valuable insights and momentum toward improvement. Yet despite clear organizational friction and lack of unity of effort, refining the air domain has never sustained the urgency required to outpace competing crises or bureaucratic inertia.

Recent exercises have explored a range of concepts to modernize the air domain command and control structure in Alaska, particularly in pursuit of a single U.S. C/JFACC and Area Air Defense Commander. During Exercise Vigilant Shield 2023, the 611 AOC was experimentally converted into an AFNORTH detachment, establishing a forward presence under a complete air component. While the concept showed potential, its execution revealed areas for improvement in preparation and staff integration, highlighting the value of a more deliberate and extended test period. In 2024, the follow-on exercise adopted a different, nondoctrinal approach: two Air Operations Centers operated simultaneously under a single U.S. C/JFACC and Area Air Defense Commander. This configuration

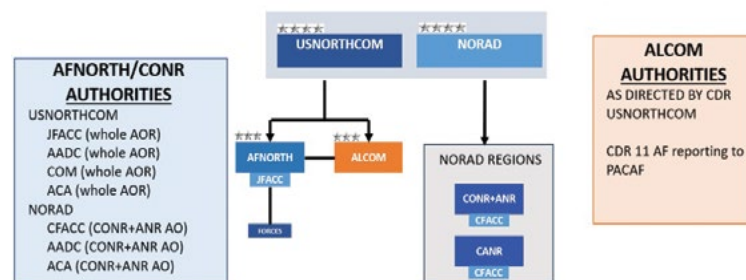
significantly improved unity of effort across the air domain and streamlined coordination. The commander of NORAD and USNORTHCOM saw measurable gains in logistic agility, lethality, and decision space left of launch. The AFNORTH staff, with clearly defined authorities, enabled the single U.S. C/JFACC to integrate and synchronize joint effects effectively, ensuring mission success and seamless support across Service and functional components.

Call to Action—Align the Air Domain

Command and control of the air domain can be rectified in a legal, doctrinally sound, and simplified manner to enhance joint all-domain defense across the homeland. Immediate reorganization is required due to the bifurcated organizational command structure, lack of unity of effort, past exercise successes, and the evolving threat environment posed by China and Russia. These recommended solutions leverage and incorporate lessons and best practices from previous Tier 1 exercises and are doctrinally correct for a future joint all-domain operations fight. As illustrated in figure 7, there are two steps to achieve this result, both of which can be started immediately.

Step 1 (Immediate): Establish a single U.S. C/JFACC and Area Air Defense Commander for USNORTHCOM and NORAD to unify command and control of the air domain across the entire USNORTHCOM area

Figure 7. Simple and Unified Command Organization and Relationships



These authorities are seamless and allow a single Commander in the U.S. Air Domain for increased lethality.

Source: Author.

of responsibility and the U.S. portion of the NORAD area of operations.

Assigning one U.S. Airman as both CFACC and JFACC will:

- Eliminate conflicting authorities between the current CFACC and JFACC roles in Alaska
- Balance air defense prioritization between CONUS and Alaska
- Align Area Air Defense Commander and Airspace Control Authority responsibilities under one commander
- Doctrinally align the air component in NORAD and USNORTHCOM
- Enable a unified Joint Air Operations Plan, Air Operations Directive, Special Instructions, and Air Tasking Order cycle
- Streamline decisionmaking and increase lethality in both peacetime and conflict

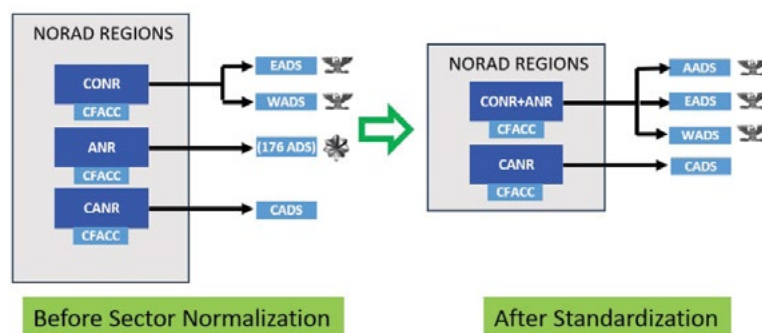
Under Title 10 U.S.C. § 162, the commander of USELEMNORAD has full authority to designate a single general officer as both commander of the Alaskan NORAD Region and commander of the Continental NORAD Region. This internal U.S. alignment requires no change to the NORAD Agreement or Terms of Reference. The Canadian Alaskan NORAD Region deputy commander and deputy CFACC can remain in place, reporting to the newly aligned U.S. CFACC, mirroring existing structures in the Continental NORAD Region.

This realignment supports NORAD modernization and integrated deterrence without impacting Alaskan Command or Eleventh Air Force command structures. It is entirely executable within current authorities and frameworks.

The commander of NORAD/USNORTHCOM/USELEMNORAD should:

- Create the single U.S. C/JFACC for at least one year to validate operational effectiveness. This provides sufficient time to participate in a major Tier 1 exercise, face numerous adversary incursions in Alaska's airspace, potentially experience a combined Chinese-Russian maritime or air patrol, assess staff buy-in and

Figure 8. NORAD Sector Uniformity and Re-Alignment



Source: Author.

cohesion, and provide unity of effort through the process of developing the Golden Dome for America

- Task the U.S. C/JFACC with delivering a Commander's Estimate after 180 days outlining progress, resourcing needs, risk, and recommendations

As seen in figure 8, this step delivers immediate improvement to U.S. and North American air defense, aligns with strategic guidance, and closes a critical seam in homeland defense—without requiring legislative or treaty changes.

Step 2 (Short-Term): The commander of USELEMNORAD should re-task the 611th Air Operations Center (611 AOC) to convert to and function as the Alaska Air Defense Sector (AADS). In tandem, advocate with the Secretary of the Air Force and Pacific Air Forces to formally reorganize assigned forces and rebrand the 611 AOC as the AADS. While the 611 AOC functions well during Phase 0 and limited Phase I operations, maintaining two Air Operations Centers under one Service component commander (the commander of First Air Force) is inefficient. Combining the 611 AOC and the 176th Air Defense Squadron into a cohesive AADS as an organization under the Alaska Air National Guard creates a modernized warfighting organization that can scale beyond peacetime operations into the full spectrum of conflict. This structure mirrors the construct and leadership of the other NORAD Sectors. Beginning transition to a dedicated AADS within the first 90–180 days

will enable a seamless handover of the mission of the Alaskan NORAD Region area of operations from the 611 AOC to the 601 AOC and AFNORTH staff. While establishing and stabilizing a properly resourced AADS (notably by converting existing billets into tactical command and control and cyber support positions) will take additional time and planning, this initial transition successfully begins the process. Visualized in figure 9, the benefits of this reorganization include:

- **Standardization:** Aligns the new Alaskan Air Defense Sector with the Western Air Defense Sector and the Eastern Air Defense Sector, creating a common structure and doctrine across all three U.S. NORAD Sectors to enhance interoperability and unity of effort
- **Command Alignment:** Establishes a constituent leadership model across the three Sectors, each led by an O-6 commander for Title 10 requirements, enabling rapid activation of a Regional Air Defense Commander, and an O-6 with Title 32 authorities supporting the Sector mission
- **Manpower Aggregation:** Consolidates the 611 AOC (approximately 110 funded personnel of an authorized 240 billets) with the 176th Air Defense Squadron (approximately 150 personnel), justifying O-6 level command and building parity with other Sectors with an Air Defense Group
- **Preservation of Expertise:** Retains existing 611 AOC personnel during

the transition, ensuring continuity of operations and critical institutional knowledge of Alaska and the Arctic

- **Streamlined Integration:** Strengthens command and control across the air domain by aligning the reformed Alaskan Air Defense Sector under the single U.S. C/JFACC

This newly forged Alaskan Air Defense Sector will scale beyond Phase 0, increasing operational efficiency and ensuring all U.S. NORAD Sectors can support steady-state and crisis operations with unified doctrine and structure that present manpower does not support.

No Roadblocks—Only Challenges to Overcome

There are no roadblocks to implementing any recommended organizational or relationship adjustments. However, there are staff-perceived impediments to change. Unified Campaign Plan changes, communications challenges, revisions to the NORAD Agreement

and/or Terms of References, and sensitivities with manpower and resources in Alaska top the list of difficulties that hinder progress.

Legal and Statutory Difficulties

A seemingly daunting legal and statutory challenge arose following previously attempted solutions to improve the air component command organization in Alaska. That challenge was that removing one of the Alaska three-star's hats would require Senate reconfirmation. However, the current legal framework does *not* require Senate reconfirmation for changes in duty assignment. General and flag officers are appointed and confirmed to the grade, then assigned to a duty position. For example, Lieutenant General Case Cunningham was confirmed "to the grade indicated while assigned to a position of importance and responsibility" under Title 10 U.S.C. § 601.²⁷ Moreover, Title 10 U.S.C. gives the President, on the recommendation of the Secretary of Defense (§ 161–167)

or Secretary of the Air Force (§ 9013), the authority to assign a three-star rank to positions they deem of "importance and responsibility." Finally, suppose the commander of NORAD and USNORTHCOM decides to realign responsibilities, reorganize forces, or remove a hat. In that case, no new Senate confirmation is required—just an internal reassignment within the Department of War's existing legal authority.

Legal precedent and statutory authority support reorganization. The perceived legal barrier is actually a matter of internal delegation—not law. Legally, a three-star is not mandated nor limited for either Eleventh Air Force or Alaskan Command individually or in combination. Statutorily, a three-star position could continue to be justified as commander of Alaskan Command as a critical sub-unified command and because of Alaska's key strategic location. Law and statute would not require any change to the Alaska general officer's appointment.

U.S. Army soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 11th Airborne Division, provide security as part of a force projection operation to Shemya Island, Alaska, in the North Pacific Ocean, September 13, 2024. The U.S. and Alaska are immense in size and the division's ability to project forces quickly to any environment, no matter how remote, is critical to our nation's defense and the strength of our relationships with partner nations and allies throughout the Indo-Pacific. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Brandon Vasquez)



Lost Communications

Distributed operations and communication reliability are common, modern facets of warfare. The homeland is no different, and within the air domain, implementing a Regional Air Defense Commander construct would acknowledge and mitigate these issues while adhering to Air Force²⁸ and joint doctrine.²⁹ Leveraging the existing NORAD Sector structure (the Eastern Air Defense Sector, the Western Air Defense Sector, and the Alaska Air Defense Sector) and codifying the Regional Air Defense Commander construct would ensure seamless decentralized execution. Additionally, agile combat employment concepts, such as mission-type orders, are U.S. Air Force-endorsed methods to deal with this exact air domain situation. Applying the current doctrine will streamline and simplify command and control, keeping it at the appropriate level of warfare. Therefore, a single U.S. C/JFACC, supported by doctrinally sound procedures and existing infrastructure, could effectively command and control the air domain—even under contested or degraded communications conditions.

Binational Command or Unified Campaign Plan Changes

The foremost proposed changes—creating an aligned single U.S. C/JFACC for the two U.S. Regions—do not require modification of the binational NORAD Agreement with Canada or the NORAD Terms of Reference. The NORAD command structure incorporates Canadian partners throughout the chain of command—key to a unified, cohesive defense strategy. The NORAD deputy commander, J3 director, and two Canadian deputy commanders for the U.S. NORAD Regions can remain in place, conducting operations as they do today and reinforcing the Regional Air Defense Commander proposition. Therefore, these core NORAD documents dictate the existence of the Alaskan NORAD Region and the Continental NORAD Region but do *not* prescribe by whom or how Region command or manpower is fulfilled,

thus enabling the designation of a new commander without changing the documents. Unlike the key NORAD documents, the U.S. Unified Campaign Plan is frequently updated.

Early in his second term, President Trump proposed consolidating combatant commands. If U.S. Northern Command and Southern Command were merged in a revised Unified Campaign Plan,²⁶ the core argument for increased lethality, simplicity, and unity of effort in Alaska as outlined in this article would remain sound and fundamentally unaffected. Strategically, closing the gaps in authorities and command relationships within NORAD, and between NORAD and USNORTHCOM in Alaska, would fulfill the same intent as consolidating Northern and Southern Commands. Given the inherent structural reorganization resulting from such a merger, these proposed changes can serve as a template for other reorganizations.

Transition of Resources

Executing the immediate reorganization of the 611 AOC into an Alaska Air Defense Sector proper is a decisive first step that yields immediate operational benefits. To achieve full capability and long-term stability, however, negotiated planning must follow to codify the Sector's permanent structure, manning, and resourcing. This analysis and planning can unfold following the initial change, with several aspects already partly developed or that could be mimicked from existing frameworks.

As the newly minted single U.S. C/JFACC, the commander of First Air Force should oversee this planning effort in coordination with Canadian partners, Pacific Air Forces, the Alaska Air National Guard, and civilian leadership. The primary task will be negotiating and codifying the force structure model, including a transfer of authority—transitioning the 611 AOC's approximately 110 funded billets to the Alaska Air National Guard to conduct the Sector and Regional Air Defense Commander missions on behalf of the commander of USELEMNORAD.

These decisions will drive a plan to address billet specialty mismatches, fulfill previous manpower studies, and secure funding streams. Fortunately, this effort will not start from scratch. Leadership within the Alaska Air National Guard has already made strides toward some of these solutions, and the other NORAD Sectors provide proven models to guide the final force structure and training requirements for the new Alaska Air Defense Sector.

Conclusion

The United States is increasingly vulnerable to all-domain threats as the Nation's adversaries continue to invest and innovate. China and Russia have demonstrably identified the gap in the air domain in Alaska and the friction along combatant command boundaries. This evolving threat landscape demands more than recognition; it requires strategic discipline and decisive action to optimize command structures for joint all-domain operations. Failure to adapt the command relationships in the air domain leaves a friction point that adversarial malign actors could exploit, risking an aerial attack on North America because of complex authorities. Enhancing the command relationships and organizational structures in the air domain will enhance joint all-domain defense and resilience.

As one step along that journey, repairing the fractured command and control structure over Alaska's air domain is logical and overdue. The recommendations presented in this article directly support an enhanced defense of Alaska, the Arctic, and the broader U.S. homeland, contributing meaningfully to joint operations in a future conflict with China or Russia. Unify the U.S. air component under NORAD by designating the commander of the Continental NORAD Region as the commander of both that Region and the Alaskan NORAD Region, thus closing the gap between two separate NORAD CFACCs, and by removing the bifurcation between CFACC and the USNORTHCOM JFACC. Once in place, realigning the supporting authorities—AADC, Airspace Control Authority, and

Collections Management—would become a matter of administrative efficiency, not political complexity.

Bottom line: The threat is real. The solution is viable. The time to pull the trigger and resolve the air domain's fractured command relationships is now in order to enhance lethality, decision space, and the survivability of the homeland. JFQ

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Notes

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