No Base is Safe: Joint Point Defense and Agile Combat Employment in an Era of Saturation Threats

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In an era of saturation attacks, the assumption that United States (U.S.) airbases will remain secure sanctuaries is dangerously outdated. Adversaries such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) are investing in an array of low-cost, high-volume threats, including loitering munitions, small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS), and precision ballistic and cruise missiles designed to overwhelm traditional defenses and degrade U.S. power projection at the outset of conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in a Taiwan Strait scenario, where dispersed Agile Combat Employment (ACE) forces would be required to operate under constant threat of detection, disruption, and attack. In such environments, point defense (PD) is not a supporting function, but a precondition for survival.[1]

This essay argues that the United States Air Force (USAF) cannot rely on organic Air and Missile Defense (AMD) capabilities alone. Instead, it must pursue a deliberately integrated joint force approach that merges Army, Navy, Marine, and allied PD capabilities into the ACE maneuver scheme. While recent doctrine, such as *Air Force Doctrine Note (AFDN) 1-21: ACE*, acknowledges the need for reactive protection within ACE, USAF and joint doctrine still fall short in codifying how PD forces integrate across components, who exercises authority over their employment, and how command relationships are established under dispersed operations.[2] ACE risks becoming a maneuver concept that cannot withstand the very threats it is designed to evade without doctrinal reform, force structure adjustments, and clearly delegated PD authority at the tactical edge.

Historically, airbase defense was shaped by the strategic assumptions of the era. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles led to a USAF focus on deterrence, early warning, and hardened facilities, and not localized PD. Following 9/11, the center of gravity shifted again, and force protection doctrine evolved to counter asymmetric threats to overseas installations. The focus narrowed to fences, flightline patrols, and contractor-based perimeter defense, which are effective in counterinsurgency environments, but insufficient against loitering munitions and sUAS that require integrated radar coverage, electronic warfare (EW), and kinetic interception. As *Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-10, Force Protection* notes, "air bases are no longer considered sanctuaries," and the proliferation of small, cheap aerial threats requires a new operational mindset.[3] Yet current doctrine still treats point defense as a rear-echelon function rather than as an enabler of frontline maneuver.

Historical Context and USAF Organic Limitations

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[1] Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, *Point Defense Doctrine Advisory*, February 2024.

[2] *Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21: Agile Combat Employment*, Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, August 23, 2022, 1.

[3] AFDP 3-10, *Force Protection*, Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, July 2023, 3.

The Air Force's approach to base defense has historically mirrored the character of the dominant threat, not the demands of maneuver warfare. During the Cold War, the focus was on deterrence through strategic basing, hardening infrastructure against nuclear strikes, and securing overseas installations in stable host nations. Point defense was generally limited to passive protection measures and Air Base Ground Defense principles executed by Security Forces.[4] During the post-9/11 era, the force shifted toward perimeter defense, anti-terrorism measures, and contractor-supported force protection in support of counterinsurgency. The adversary was largely asymmetric, and the threat to fixed airbases was localized rather than systemic.[5] As a result, the USAF's force structure, doctrine, and authorities surrounding PD stagnated just as adversaries like China and Russia began fielding advanced long-range missile and unmanned aerial capabilities designed to strike first in peer conflict.

Today, the Air Force lacks the organic tools necessary to counter these threats in a dispersed operational environment. As stated in *AFDP 3-10*, "Force protection ensures the survivability of personnel, assets, and information," yet most base defense doctrine remains focused on installation support rather than maneuver protection.[6] The USAF does not possess organic ground-based air defense units capable of intercepting cruise missiles or loitering munitions at deployed locations. Small-unit air base defense packages, such as the Base Defense Group concept, provide local force protection and counter-unmanned aircraft systems (C-UAS) capabilities but are not fielded widely enough to support ACE operations across the Pacific or Europe.[7] Moreover, current PD capabilities are limited to passive measures—camouflage, dispersal, hardening—and short-range EW or kinetic defenses against Group 1 and 2 UAS. These systems may be sufficient against isolated attacks but are unlikely to survive or scale during a saturation campaign.

The broader challenge lies in institutional perspective: PD is not treated as an operational function within Air Force maneuver. While ACE is designed to "increase resiliency and survivability while generating combat power," point defense is rarely discussed in the same doctrinal breath as logistics or command and control.[8] Instead, PD remains siloed under force protection, with limited authority delegated to mission planners or forward commanders. This organizational separation creates a vulnerability. Even if Airmen maneuver swiftly under ACE principles, they arrive at contingency locations that cannot defend themselves. The risk is not just mission failure, but attrition by design.

The Case for a Joint AMD Approach

The Air Force's limitations in organic point defense are not unique, but they become acute when viewed through the lens of ACE. USAF maneuver elements do not possess the radars, interceptors, or integrated command systems needed to defend forward-deployed Airmen from saturation attacks. This reality underscores the necessity of integrating with joint force partners, especially the U.S. Army, whose AMD capabilities are uniquely positioned to close these gaps. Army AMD forces provide the joint force commander with the ability to conduct active and passive defense in

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[4] Robert A. Barlow, *U.S. Air Force Air Base Ground Defense Doctrine: Are the Issues Which Arose Concerning Air Base Ground Defense During the Vietnam Conflict Recognized in Current U.S. Air Force Doctrine?* (Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1984).
[5] AFDP 3-10, *Force Protection*, 3.
[6] Ibid., 2.
[7] Headquarters Air Force A4S, *Expeditionary Base Defense Concepts of Operations*, July 2022, 9–11.
[8] *Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21: Agile Combat Employment*, 1.

support of maneuver, and, when properly synchronized, they can create the survivable operating conditions ACE requires.

According to the U.S. Army's *Air and Missile Defense 2028* strategy, the Army AMD force is being modernized to defend against "complex, integrated attacks" across the Multi-Domain Operations framework.[9] It identifies three essential joint tasks for AMD: protect maneuver forces and critical assets, defend theater and operational support areas, and converge capabilities to create "windows of superiority" for the joint force.[10] These are not back-end support functions, but operational enablers. Capabilities such as the Maneuver Short Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD), Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS), and Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor are explicitly designed to move with and defend forward-deployed forces, including expeditionary air bases.[11] But without deliberate planning and doctrinal integration, these systems may never arrive at the same place, or under the same authority, as USAF ACE elements.

Joint doctrine also recognizes the need for integrated air and missile defense but falls short in execution detail. *Joint Publication (JP) 3-01: Countering Air and Missile Threats* describes AMD as a joint function with contributions from all services. It emphasizes the importance of "layered, overlapping, and complementary" systems, yet it does not assign clear command relationships below the combatant commander level.[12] Moreover, *JP 3-10: Joint Security Operations in Theater* notes that joint force protection should be integrated into the planning process for "joint bases and deployed elements," but stops short of resolving who owns point defense when components are dispersed or operating under separate chains of command.[13] These gaps create ambiguity at the tactical edge, where ACE commanders must make time-sensitive decisions about mobility, survivability, and the protection of airpower assets without guaranteed support from Army AMD or Navy Aegis systems.

Further complicating the picture is the absence of shared digital infrastructure. While the Army's IBCS and the Air Force's Advanced Battle Management System both aim to deliver multi-domain situational awareness, they are not yet interoperable at the scale needed to support ACE.[14] This technology gap mirrors a doctrinal one: the USAF and Army have not fully defined how PD capabilities are tasked, commanded, or delegated in a dispersed maneuver environment. As a result, joint AMD remains a strategic asset with tactical uncertainty.

To close this gap, the Air Force must advocate for deliberate AMD integration into ACE planning cells, reframe point defense as an operational enabler, and develop doctrine that clarifies how joint AMD assets are prioritized and tasked in support of forward-moving Airmen. Without that clarity, PD will remain a doctrinal afterthought, rather than a prerequisite for survivable maneuver.

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[9] *Army Air and Missile Defense 2028*, U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command, 2023, 1.
[10] Ibid., 1–2.
[11] Center for Strategic and International Studies, Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS), Missile Threat Project, February 3, 2021.
[12] *Joint Publication 3-01: Countering Air and Missile Threats*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 2023, III-5.
[13] *Joint Publication 3-10: Joint Security Operations in Theater*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2021, II-2.
[14] Jeffrey Valenzia, "ABMS Will Deliver the Decision Advantage," *Airman Magazine*, https://www.macdill.af.mil/News/Features/Display/Article/2647112/valenzia-abms-will-deliver-the-decision-advantage/.

Taiwan ACE Vignette: A Joint PD Imperative

In a notional Taiwan Strait conflict, the first hours of hostilities would be dominated by a multi-axis saturation strike designed to paralyze U.S. and allied airpower before it can project force. The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force is assessed to maintain hundreds of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, capable of striking U.S. facilities in Japan, Guam, and potentially expeditionary airfields in the Philippines.[15] In addition, the PRC has demonstrated swarming drone tactics and loitering munition systems in exercises and joint force demonstrations, highlighting a shift toward low-cost saturation capabilities aimed at overwhelming traditional defenses.[16] Under these conditions, the Air Force's Agile ACE concept is a survivability requirement and not a doctrinal luxury.

In this scenario, multiple Air Expeditionary Wings execute dispersal operations, rapidly deploying to pre-surveyed contingency locations across partner territories. The maneuver is well-coordinated and tactically sound, but as each force repositions, a glaring vulnerability emerges: those contingency locations lack integrated point defense. While the ACE scheme of maneuver emphasizes speed, dispersion, and unpredictability, it assumes that minimal defensive infrastructure can suffice in the near term. But near-term is no longer enough. A $100 million fifth-generation fighter becomes a $10 million write-off if it is destroyed by a $10,000 loitering munition while rearming at an unsecured forward location.

The Taiwan scenario reveals more than a tactical vulnerability, and it exposes a doctrinal flaw. As *AFDN 1-21* notes, ACE is meant to operate "within threat timelines" and requires both proactive and reactive protection.[17] Yet without pre-coordinated integration with Army AMD or Navy Aegis capabilities, the USAF's ability to survive in theater depends on forces it does not own, command, or control. Even if U.S. Indo-Pacific Command assigns Army AMD units to support air operations, the lack of doctrinal authority delegated to the ACE element commander prevents rapid employment of point defense assets in dynamic conditions. Similarly, rules of engagement, fire coordination, and radar cueing protocols may be written for static bases, not mobile clusters of aircraft operating under degraded communications.

A Taiwan conflict would also test command relationships in an unprecedented way. *JP 3-01* stresses that the Joint Force Commander retains overall responsibility for AMD priorities but may delegate authority to component commanders.[18] In theory, this enables task-tailored integration. In practice, the absence of standing doctrine or habitual relationships between dispersed Air Force units and Army AMD batteries leads to confusion over who provides what protection, when, and under what command.[19] The consequence is operational paralysis; ACE units forced to choose between movement and vulnerability. To win in such a scenario, ACE cannot just maneuver faster than the enemy; it must maneuver under protection.

ACE and the Integration Problem

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[15] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2024, 78–80.
[16] Ian Williams and Masao Dahlgren, *"More Missiles: China Previews Its New Way of War,"* Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 13, 2022.
[17] *Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21: Agile Combat Employment*, 1.
[18] *Joint Publication 3-01: Countering Air and Missile Threats*, III-2.
[19] Ibid., II-5.

ACE is not a standalone concept, but a maneuver doctrine that depends on the seamless integration of logistics, protection, communications, and command. While the Air Force has made significant doctrinal strides in defining how ACE supports survivability and lethality, it has not fully resolved how that maneuver is protected from the most likely and lethal threats: sUAS, loitering munitions, and precision-guided missile attacks. The critical vulnerability lies not in the execution of movement, but in the absence of integrated point defense authority during and after that movement.

Current Air Force doctrine acknowledges the threat environment. *AFDN 1-21* emphasizes that dispersed operations "must be executable under contested, degraded, and operationally limited conditions," and that survivability depends on both reactive and proactive protection; however, PD is still treated as a component of installation defense rather than maneuver support.[20] For example, *AFDP 3-10* outlines the need to assess risk and implement protection measures, but does not define how forward-deployed ACE elements can request or control Army AMD assets or integrate C-UAS systems into their mobility plans.[21] Likewise, *AFDP 3-01: Counterair Operations* describes active defense against missile threats as a shared function across the joint force, but provides no guidance on how tactical-level commanders can exercise those authorities under dispersed conditions.[22] The result is a conceptual mismatch. ACE operates under dynamic movement timelines, while AMD coordination relies on static planning and centralized authority.

The command relationships further complicate execution. According to *JP 3-10*, "the supported commander must identify AMD priorities," but does not dictate whether component commanders, such as an ACE element leader, have the delegated authority to control or reposition AMD systems.[23] In a static joint operating base, this may be manageable. In ACE, it becomes a liability. If an Air Expeditionary Wing disperses across four airfields and receives support from a single Army M-SHORAD unit, the absence of clear tasking authority may delay defense emplacement by hours, which is an eternity under saturation attack. Even more problematic, fire control and radar cueing across components are not interoperable without advance technical integration and joint planning. These are not just technical problems; they are doctrinal shortfalls that constrain maneuver.

Moreover, survivability under ACE is often conceptualized in terms of denial and deception, which changes the airfield every 48 to 72 hours, minimizes signatures, and leverages speed to stay ahead of the adversary's kill chain. But these measures do not eliminate the need for PD; they only compress the timeline in which it must be deployed. The lack of lightweight, mobile PD packages that can accompany ACE elements, either organically or from joint sources, means that maneuver units may consistently arrive at unprotected locations. This breaks the core logic of ACE. If mobility enables survivability, but maneuver cannot be protected, then ACE becomes a gamble, not a strategy.

To resolve these contradictions, ACE doctrine must explicitly incorporate joint AMD planning as a foundational element, not a supporting consideration. This includes pre-coordinated delegation of command relationships, integration of PD into theater air tasking orders, and the development of mobile, scalable protection packages that can maneuver at the same pace as ACE elements.

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[20] *Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21: Agile Combat Employment*, 3.
[21] *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-10: Force Protection*, 4–5.
[22] *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-01: Counterair Operations*, 6–7.
[23] *Joint Publication 3-10: Joint Security Operations in Theater*, II-2.

Without such reforms, the Air Force risks building an agile force that is tactically brilliant but operationally exposed.

Doctrinal Review and Recommendations

A review of current doctrine reveals that the Air Force and joint force have acknowledged the growing importance of PD, but have not codified the authority, structure, or integration mechanisms required to support ACE under realistic threat conditions. *AFDN 1-21* rightly states that "ACE demands operational agility and resilience," yet stops short of assigning PD as an operational enabler rather than a security support function.[24] The note identifies the importance of defensive counterair in countering sUAS, cruise missiles, and ballistic threats but lacks prescriptive guidance on how to incorporate joint PD capabilities into ACE planning cycles or mission generation teams.[25] The gap is in operationalization, not recognition.

Similarly, *AFDP 3-10* treats force protection as a core mission area but does not extend PD beyond installation-centric risk management. While the publication highlights emerging threats and the need for base defense planning, it fails to articulate how those responsibilities shift or scale under ACE. For instance, there is no discussion of how ACE teams should coordinate protection at contingency locations that fall outside traditional basing constructs, nor is there clarity on the role of organic versus joint PD assets.[26] This omission creates ambiguity for commanders who must make tactical decisions without established authority to task joint AMD units or deploy self-contained PD packages.

Joint doctrine is more expansive, but still insufficient. *JP 3-01* offers a comprehensive framework for AMD operations and encourages layered, integrated defense across the force.[27] Yet it lacks procedural direction for dynamic maneuver environments like ACE. It does not clarify how responsibilities for PD shift as units disperse, nor does it address how joint fire coordination, radar sharing, or weapons control statuses should be delegated when the supported commander is a mobile Air Force unit operating outside traditional fixed infrastructure. *JP 3-10* similarly supports integrated security operations but does not define the command relationships or control mechanisms that enable real-time PD in a joint, mobile context.[28]

This essay offers four key recommendations to close these doctrinal gaps and operationalize PD within ACE, :

1. Doctrine Revision – Future revisions of *AFDN 1-21*, *AFDP 3-10*, and *AFDP 3-01* should define point defense as an operational requirement for ACE. This includes identifying PD as a planning input for mission generation cells and specifying how joint AMD integration should be incorporated into each phase of the ACE scheme of maneuver.

2. Command Delegation Mechanisms – Joint doctrine should clarify under what conditions AMD control can be delegated to ACE unit commanders or task force leads. This includes rules for radar cueing, weapons release authority, and pre-planned fire control agreements between services.

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[24] *Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21: Agile Combat Employment*, 1.
[25] Ibid., 10.
[26] *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-10: Force Protection*, 4–5.
[27] *Joint Publication 3-01: Countering Air and Missile Threats*, II-3.
[28] *Joint Publication 3-10: Joint Security Operations in Theater*, III-2.

3. Scalable Protection Packages – The Air Force should invest in scalable, rapidly deployable PD packages that can accompany ACE units. These packages should integrate low-collateral C-UAS systems, electronic warfare, and limited kinetic interceptors to provide a minimal, mobile defensive envelope without relying on static joint support.
4. Habitual Planning Relationships – To prepare for operational execution, the USAF and Army should establish habitual relationships between ACE squadrons and AMD units at the theater level. This enables pre-conflict integration, familiarization with force structure, and coordinated deployment planning that does not rely on ad hoc coordination during crisis.

These reforms are not additive. They are foundational. ACE cannot function under the assumption of sanctuary or benign threat environments. By embedding point defense into maneuver doctrine, clarifying joint authorities, and investing in agile capabilities, the Air Force can ensure that its most innovative operational concept is not undermined by its oldest vulnerability.