Air traffic control should focus on its core task: Safety
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This guest essay reflects the views of R. Michael Baiada, a retired United Airlines captain and the president of ATH Group, a consultancy that works with airlines, and Devin Osting, executive director of the Alliance for Aviation Across America.

Since last year's midair collision and the recent LaGuardia Airport runway accident, air traffic control (ATC) has received renewed attention. Policymakers and industry leaders have largely converged on a familiar response: Invest in modern technology and strengthen the workforce.

Those steps are important and overdue, but address only part of the challenge. The deeper issue is more basic: We have never been fully clear about what ATC should — and should not — be expected to do.

At its core, ATC maintains the safe separation of aircraft, a critical function. Yet it is often asked to manage the efficient flow of traffic and sequence arrivals — altogether different tasks that airlines are better positioned to handle.

The consequences are apparent. At the busiest airports, traffic fluctuates sharply from minute to minute. Aircraft arrive in waves, forcing the controller to issue vectors, speed changes and sequencing instructions in response to feed traffic safely into the airport.

On final approach, corrections become larger and more disruptive. Aircraft may need to slow dramatically, fly extra miles or enter holding patterns to restore spacing — especially in congested airspace like New York's, where traffic to LaGuardia, Kennedy Airport, and Newark Liberty International Airport converges.

Many of these conflicts could be smoothed earlier. Small en-route speed adjustments long before final approach can spread traffic more evenly and avoid larger corrections near the airport.

Consider a simple analogy.

Imagine a couple painting a room. One uses a roller to cover the walls quickly, while the other follows with a small brush to paint the narrow strip along the trim where precision matters.

The roller is the efficient tool and should cover every square inch it can reach. The brush sacrifices efficiency for precision and should be used only where the roller cannot reach.

If the roller paints close to the trim, the brush work is minimal and the job moves quickly. But if the roller stops several inches short, the brush has far more to do — and the entire project slows to the pace of the brush. The brush becomes the chokepoint.

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Air traffic management works the same way. Smooth traffic earlier with broad adjustments, and controllers have to do far less precision work later.

Airlines are well positioned to do this. They balance aircraft performance, connections, crew schedules, maintenance and gates — where minutes can determine whether hundreds of passengers make their connections. For decades they've had available trajectory-management software to optimize flights in real time. One of us leads a company that offers just such a system.

Small early speed adjustments let aircraft arrive in an orderly sequence, smoothing demand on controllers. This shifts much of the "roller" work from ATC, leaving controllers free to focus on safe separation.

The result works better for everyone: fewer last-minute speed changes and holding patterns, lower fuel burn, fewer delays and more focus on safety.

This also clarifies another debate in aviation policy: proposals to privatize ATC. Supporters argue that changing the governance structure would resolve many of the problems that overburden controllers and lead to delays and inefficiencies. But those problems do not stem primarily from ATC itself, and privatizing it cannot solve them.

Only by recognizing that much of what we ask ATC to do lies outside its core capability can these problems be solved. Let ATC focus on separation, while airlines manage the timing of their flights.

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