Remarkably low affinity of CD4/peptide-major histocompatibility complex II protein interactions

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The \(\alpha\beta\) T-cell coreceptor CD4 enhances immune responses more than 1 million-fold in some assays, and yet the affinity of CD4 for its ligand, peptide-major histocompatibility class II (pMHC II) on antigen-presenting cells, is so weak that it was previously unquantifiable. Here, we report that a soluble form of CD4 failed to bind detectably to pMHC II in surface plasmon resonance-based assays, establishing a new upper limit for the solution affinity at 2.5 mM. However, when presented multivalently on magnetic beads, soluble CD4 bound pMHC II-expressing B cells, confirming that it is active and allowing mapping of the native coreceptor binding site on pMHC II. Whereas binding was undetectable in solution, the affinity of the CD4/pMHC II interaction could be measured in 2D using CD4- and adhesion molecule-functionalized, supported lipid bilayers, yielding a 2D \(K_d\) of \(<5,000\) molecules/\(\mu\)m\(^2\). This value is two to three orders of magnitude higher than previously measured 2D \(K_d\) values for interacting leukocyte surface proteins. Calculations indicated, however, that CD4/pMHC II binding would increase rates of T-cell receptor (TCR) complex phosphorylation by threefold via the recruitment of Lck, with only a small, 2–20% increase in the effective affinity of the TCR for pMHC II. The affinity of CD4/pMHC II therefore seems to be set at a value that increases T-cell sensitivity by enhancing phosphorylation, without compromising ligand discrimination.

protein interactions | TCR phosphorylation | adhesion | T-cell activation | binding equilibrium and kinetics

T cells with \(\alpha\beta\) T-cell receptors (TCRs) comprise functionally distinct subsets depending on which transcription factors and which of two coreceptors, CD8 or CD4, they express. CD8\(^+\) T cells respond to peptide agonists presented by major histocompatibility class I molecules (pMHC I) and are cytotoxic, whereas conventional CD4\(^+\) cells recognize peptide-MHC class II (pMHC II) and provide “help” defined by the cytokines they secrete (1). Cell adhesion assays explain this functionality insofar as CD8 and CD4 bind directly to pMHC I and pMHC II, respectively (2, 3). CD4 comprises two pairs of V-set and C2-set Ig superfamily domains, with early mutational data showing that the “top” two domains bind pMHC II (4). Crystal structures of cross-species and affinity-matured CD4/pMHC II complexes suggest that CD4 binds a pocket formed by the \(\alpha2\) and \(\beta2\) domains of pMHC II (5, 6). The role of coreceptors in heightening T-cell responses is well established. For example, whereas CD4\(^+\) T-cells can respond to single peptide agonists presented by major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class I and II molecules (7), CD4\(^+\) T cells require a peptide/MHC complex to be presented in an MHC context. However, the function of the T-cell coreceptor CD4 presents a long-standing puzzle. Although it is among the most potent modulators of immune responses, CD4 interacts with its binding partner, peptide-major histocompatibility class II (pMHC II), with previously unmeasurably low affinity. Here, we set a new upper limit for the solution affinity of CD4 and pMHC II and show that the two-dimensional dissociation constant in supported lipid bilayers is as much as two to three orders of magnitude higher than that for other interacting leukocyte surface proteins. These findings extend the known physical limits of functional protein interactions at the cell surface and suggest new ways that T cells may use differential receptor affinities during antigen recognition and discrimination.


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With a Dengue peptide (Den2) as a negative control (Fig. 1A). The pMHC II proteins bound strongly to L243, a conformation-sensitive, pan anti-human DR antibody (Fig. S2A), indicating that the pMHC II was functional. However, even at exceptionally high concentrations of sCD4 (up to 2.5 mM), no significant difference in response was detectable between the control and the pMHC II-containing flow cells (Fig. 1A). Injections at the highest concentration (2.5 mM) at 4 °C (to minimize dissociation) also gave no binding (Fig. S2B). These measurements were repeated with two other pMHC II, HLA-DRB1*15:01/DRA*01 (DR2) bound with MBP peptide and HLA-DRB1*04:01/DRA*01 (DR4) bound with EBV peptide, with the same outcome (Fig. S3).

To confirm that sCD4 could bind pMHC II we developed a multivalent binding assay. DR1, the beta chain of which was attached N-terminally to HA peptide and C-terminally to GFP (i.e., HA-DR1-GFP; Fig. S4A), was expressed in HEK 293T cells. Biotinylated sCD4 (sCD4biot) tetramerized with phycoerythrin-labeled streptavidin (SA) bound strongly to HEK 293T cells expressing HIV-1 gp120-GFP, but not to cells expressing HA-DR1-GFP (Fig. S4B). sCD4biot avidity was then increased by attaching it to SA-coated magnetic beads (~50,000 sCD4biot per bead) and used to “pull down” HA-DR1-GFP-expressing cells (Fig. 1B; example bead-bound cells are shown in Fig. 1C). Three- to fourfold more cells expressing HA-DR1-GFP could be recovered than cells expressing the DR1β chain or GFP only (Fig. 1B), demonstrating binding of sCD4 to HA-DR1-GFP. However, this was only a quarter of the recoverable gp120-GFP-expressing cells (Fig. 1B), emphasizing the very low affinity of CD4/pMHC II binding. The interaction was sensitive to mutations of residues clustered in the pocket between the α2 and β domains used by affinity-matured CD4 to bind DR1 and DR4 (19), that is, βL158, βL158, αT90, and αL92 (Fig. 2, Fig. S4C and SI Text, Mutation Analysis of the CD4 Binding Site of DR1).

Results

Binding of Soluble CD4 to pMHC II. We first tried to directly measure the binding affinity of CD4 for pMHC II molecules in SPR-based assays. For this, soluble biotinylatable human CD4 (sCD4) was expressed in mammalian cells (18) (Materials and Methods). sCD4 bound stoichiometrically at distinct epitopes to two different mouse anti-human CD4 antibodies (ADP318 and RPA-T4; Fig. S1 A and B), and it also bound to HIV-1 gp120 (Fig. S1C), indicating that it was homogeneous and correctly folded. sCD4 was injected at different concentrations at 37 °C over a sensor surface presenting immobilized HLA-DRB1*01:01/DRA*01 (DR1) pMHC II bound with influenza HA peptide or HLA-A*24:02 (A24) pMHC I bound with a Dengue peptide (Den2) as a negative control (Fig. 1A). The pMHC II proteins bound strongly to L243, a conformation-sensitive, pan anti-human DR antibody (Fig. S2A), indicating that the pMHC II was functional. However, even at exceptionally high concentrations of sCD4 (up to 2.5 mM), no significant difference in response was detectable between the control and the pMHC II-containing flow cells (Fig. 1A). Injections at the highest concentration (2.5 mM) at 4 °C (to minimize dissociation) also gave no binding (Fig. S2B). These measurements were repeated with two other pMHC II, HLA-DRB1*15:01/DRA*01 (DR2) bound with MBP peptide and HLA-DRB1*04:01/DRA*01 (DR4) bound with EBV peptide, with the same outcome (Fig. S3).

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Fig. 1. The interaction of CD4 with pMHC II in solution is very weak. (A) SPR data showing the response when passing sCD4 over sensor surface presenting immobilized biotinylated pMHC II molecules (DR1/HA; ○), or pMHC I molecules (A24/Den2; △) as a control. (B) Number of isolated pMHC II (HA-DR1-GFP)–expressing HEK 293T cells that bound to biotinylated sCD4-coated beads. Error bars show ± 1 SEM. (C) A bright-field image of cells with bound sCD4-coated beads (Left); white and black arrows identify individual or clustered cells expressing or not expressing HA-DR1-GFP based on a corresponding fluorescence image (Right).

where \( N_i \) and \( f \) are the number and mobile fraction of pMHC II molecules, respectively, \( S_{\text{cell}} \) is the surface area of the cell, and \( p \) is the ratio of the SLB/cell contact area to \( S_{\text{cell}} \). Measurements were also made for rat CD2 and CD48 for comparison and as a test of the CD4/pMHC II results. Finally, we consider why CD4/ pMHC II binding is so weak and develop a mathematical model to investigate how it could affect the stability of TCR/pMHC II complexes and affect rates of Lck recruitment and TCR phosphorylation. Our findings extend the known physical limits of functional protein interactions at the cell surface.

Fig. 2. The native CD4 binding site of pMHC II. (A) The surface of HLA-DR1 (PDB ID code 3S4S) is shown over a ribbon representation of its secondary structure (alpha chain in blue; beta in purple). The surface corresponding to the binding site (alpha chain in blue; beta in purple). The surface corresponding to

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Mutations of residues analogous to those in pMHC I that bind CD8, that is, E137 and V142, were disruptive, as noted previously (20), due perhaps to indirect effects on the structure of the pocket. Mutations of αK126, αT129, and αT130 at a second site proposed to allow CD4/pMHC II complex oligomerization (21) were without effect, however, implying that CD4 does not bind this region. Overall these data are consistent with native CD4 binding pMHC II at the single site identified in structures of cross-species and affinity-matured CD4/pMHC II complexes, and with binding being undetectable in SPR experiments due to the very low solution affinity of this interaction.

**Binding of B Cells to CD4 in Lipid Bilayers.** SLBs containing different amounts of Alexa Fluor 647-labeled, lipid-anchored CD4 (400–4,000 molecules/μm²) were used to investigate CD4/pMHC II binding at the B-cell surface at room temperature (22 °C). Raji B cells were added above the SLB and allowed to bind to the proteins in the SLB. To ensure firm contact, and to position the cell surface at physiologically relevant distances (22), ∼400 molecules/μm² of Alexa Fluor 488-labeled, lipid-anchored CD2 was incorporated in the SLB. Movie S1 shows B cells settling on an SLB containing 900 molecules/μm² of CD4 and 400 molecules/μm² of CD2.

Three types of SLB/B-cell contacts formed (Fig. 3). Clear increases in CD2 fluorescence beneath the cells are observed in all three cases but, for case i, the CD4 intensity decreases compared with outside the cell, whereas in cases ii and iii it increases slightly (see also Fig. S5). The distribution of cases is i, 22 ± 15%; ii, 52 ± 12%; and iii, 26 ± 11% (mean value ± 1 SD from 12 experiments), where, from Fig. S5, case i is defined as cells to the left of the kink in the fitted curve and cases ii and iii as cells on the lower and upper half of the slope, respectively. In case ii it is also seen that under the cell, but outside the contact area given by the CD2 image (dotted contour in the bright-field image, Fig. 3), the intensity is significantly lower compared with outside the cell (see also SI Text, Kinetic Binding Theory). The reason for this is that unbound CD4 is excluded from the cell–cell contact. Case i corresponds to an SLB/B-cell contact where no amount of CD4 binding is discernible. This behavior is not limited to CD4 binding to B cells: CD4 depletion was observed in SLB contacts formed by pMHC II nonexpressing Jurkat cells (Fig. S6A), and rat CD2 added to the SLBs, which does not bind human B cells, was depleted at B-cell contacts (Fig. S6B). However, in these cases depletion only was observed, and not accumulation as observed for the SLB with CD4/B-cell contacts (see cases ii and iii in Fig. 3), indicating that CD4/pMHC II binding was being measured. Ligand depletion observed elsewhere has been attributed to steric crowding at the contact (17). This can significantly affect the analysis of binding affinity using Eq. 1 if not corrected for, especially when B/F < 1 (16, 17) (see SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity for details of how compensation was made).

**Zhu–Golan Analysis of CD4/pMHC II Binding.** The amount of CD4 accumulation under different cells on a given SLB varied considerably (Fig. S5), with the SD of B/F for each experiment being ∼20% of the mean. However, the mean value from different sets of experiments under similar conditions has a much smaller spread and is fairly reproducible (Fig. 4). The variation therefore results from differences between the cells and their CD4 avidity rather than measurement uncertainty. Plotting the mean value of B/F from each SLB resulted in the data shown in Fig. 4 for CD4/pMHC II binding and for rat CD2 (35–1,600 molecules/μm²) binding to rat CD48 [either WT or a weakly-binding mutant Q40R (25)]. For the latter experiments CD48-transfected Jurkat T cells were used and ∼100 molecules/μm² of human CD58 was added to the SLBs to position the cells (Fig. S6 C and D).

The experimental data were fitted to Eq. 1 with values of N_t and S_c determined as described in Materials and Methods (see Table 1 for values), assuming a mobile fraction of f = 1. The only free parameter to fit is then K_d. This gave the following 2D K_d values: 4,800 molecules/μm² for CD4/pMHC II (see also SI Text, Accuracy of the CD4/pMHC II 2D K_d function), 38 molecules/μm² for CD2/CD48 (WT), and 380 molecules/μm² for CD2/CD48 (Q40R). To validate the analysis we also analyzed the rat CD2/CD48 (WT) data using the standard Zhu–Golan method, where the slope of the data in Fig. 4 is used to determine K_d without knowing N_t, f, and S_c (16). The observation that the two values were the same (38 molecules/μm²) indicated that our method of analysis was approximately valid, at least for the rat CD2/CD48 case. We did not use the Zhu–Golan analysis for all datasets because using the slope to determine the K_d value is less accurate for the weaker interactions, because the slow change in B/F vs. B × p is less than, or comparable to, the accuracy of the measurements for those cases. This is less of a problem when fixing N_t, f, and S_c, which gives more accurate values for K_d assuming that the error in choosing N_t, f, and S_c is not too large.

The 2D K_d value for WT rat CD2/CD48 binding is similar in magnitude, but slightly smaller, than previous measurements (15). The 2D K_d value for the weak-binding Q40R mutant is 10-fold larger than that for the WT, similar to the ratio in the 3D K_d measurements (Table 1). These interactions are weak compared with many other protein interactions between T cells and APCs, as illustrated also by their relatively large 3D K_d values. However, the CD4/pMHC II 2D K_d at 5,000 molecules/μm² is one to two orders of magnitude, but slightly smaller, than previous measurements (15).
of magnitude larger compared with these interactions, three orders of magnitude larger than that for human CD2/CD58 binding (17), and two to three orders of magnitude larger than that for TCR/pMHC interactions (13, 24). The 3D $K_d$ values for the latter interactions is $\approx 10$ μM (10, 13, 24, 25), so it can be expected that the 3D $K_d$ for CD4/pMHC II binding should, similar to the 2D $K_d$, be two to three orders of magnitude larger than this value. This is in agreement with a lower limit of 2.5 mM for the 3D $K_d$ of the CD4/pMHC II interaction measured here using SPR, although extrinsic factors such as the average distance between the two cell surfaces could in principle significantly affect binding in 2D vs. 3D. Measurements of the CD4/pMHC II 2D $K_d$ were also made at 37 °C. The B/F ratios from different SLBs were, within the accuracy of the experiments, similar to those at room temperature.

A delimited area of the SLB/B-cell contact was bleached and recovery studied to investigate the dynamic behavior of the CD4/pMHC II interaction (Fig. S7). The fluorescence from free and bound CD4 almost completely recovered within 2 min, indicating that the amount of trapped CD4 in the contact is small compared with the density of mobile molecules. From a fit of the recovery data (Fig. S7B) an average diffusivity of $D = 0.16 \pm 0.06$ μm²/s ($n = 4$) was obtained for CD4 in the contact. This value is 10 times smaller than that for free CD4 outside the contact (1.8 ± 0.2 μm²/s; $n = 4$), most likely caused by a higher net drag on the protein in the contact, rather than specific CD4 binding events (see SI Text, Measure of CD4 Turnover Using Photobleaching for details).

Modeling of the Effects of CD4 on TCR/pMHC II Stability and Phosphorylation Rate. Different mathematical expressions were derived to investigate how the very weak CD4/pMHC II interaction affects T-cell sensitivity and the stability of ternary TCR/pMHC II complexes.

**Effect of CD4 on Lck recruitment to nonphosphorylated TCRs.** CD4-associated Lck (CD4-Lck) can only phosphorylate the TCR complex when it is within a certain area, $A$, around the TCR/pMHC II. It can be assumed that Lck is within area $A$ when CD4-Lck binds to pMHC II in a TCR/pMHC II pair, which means that bound CD4-Lck can phosphorylate the TCR/pMHC II complex an extra factor $R_c/K_c$ of the time (see SI Text, Recruitment of CD4-Lck to Nonphosphorylated TCR/pMHC II for details), where $R_c$ is the density of CD4-Lck and $K_c$ is the 2D $K_d$ of the CD4/pMHC II interaction. This results in the following formula for the overall rate of TCR phosphorylation by CD4-Lck, for which the second term is due to Lck recruitment:

$$k_{p, CD4-Lck/TCR} = k_{p, Lck/TCR}(1 + \sigma/K_c), \quad [2]$$

where $k_{p, CD4-Lck/TCR}$ and $k_{p, Lck/TCR}$ are the rates of TCR phosphorylation by CD4-Lck and Lck, respectively, and $\sigma = 1/A$ is an effective local concentration corresponding to one molecule within area $A$. The actual size of $A$ has not been experimentally determined but is estimated to be of the order of 100 nm², corresponding to $\sigma = 10,000$ molecules/μm² (8, 9, 26). This is also comparable to the area occupied by Lck in the CD4-Lck/TCR/pMHC II complex (19). With $K_c = 5,000$ molecules/μm², $k_{p, CD4-Lck/TCR}$ is a factor of three larger than $k_{p, Lck/TCR}$.

**Effect of CD4 on the stability and phosphorylation of ternary CD4-Lck/phosphorylated TCR/pMHC II complexes.** Following TCR phosphorylation CD4-Lck can bind phosphorylated tyrosines in the TCR complex (27). To investigate how this can affect the recruitment of Lck and the stability of TCR/pMHC II in the ternary complex, we developed a mathematical model describing the equilibrium distribution of CD4-Lck, pMHC II, and phosphorylated TCR (TCR-P) in different binding states (Fig. S6, SI Text, Equilibrium Models to Describe the Distribution of CD4-Lck, TCR-P, and pMHC II). The number of TCR-P is assumed to be low early in T-cell responses, such that most CD4-Lck molecules are not bound to TCR-P. The increase in effective affinity of TCR for pMHC II, $1/K_{eff}$, in the presence of CD4 can, under these conditions, be shown to be (see SI Text, Equilibrium Models to Describe the Distribution of CD4-Lck, TCR-P, and pMHC II for details)

$$\frac{1}{K_{eff}} = \frac{1}{K} + \frac{R_l}{K + K_l} + \frac{R_c}{K_c + K_l} \approx \frac{1}{K} + \frac{R_l}{K_l} \approx \frac{R_l (\sigma + K)}{Kl}, \quad [3]$$

where $K_l$ and $K$ are the 2D $K_d$ values for binding of CD4-Lck to TCR-P and TCR-P to pMHC II, respectively. The parameter $\sigma$ corresponds again to the local concentration of bound molecules in the complex (see also Eq. 2), which for simplicity was set to be equal for all three interactions. It has been assumed in Eq. 3 that both the concentration of pMHC II and $R_l$ are significantly lower than $K_c$. The rightmost expression is approximately valid when $R_l/K_l < 1$. Inserting $\sigma = 10,000$ molecules/μm², $K_c = 5,000$ molecules/μm², and $R_l/K_l = 0.01$–0.1 (see SI Text, Equilibrium Models to Describe the Distribution of CD4-Lck, TCR-P, and pMHC II for details on how $R_l/K_l$ is estimated) into Eq. 3 gives an apparent affinity increase of 2–20%, respectively, when $K << \sigma$. CD4 will thus only modestly affect the stability of the TCR/pMHC II interaction under these conditions.

Using the same assumptions and parameter values the increase in recruitment of CD4-Lck to TCR-P due to CD4/pMHC II binding can also be estimated. For $K_l = 250$ molecules/μm² (28), the fraction of CD4-Lck-associated TCR-P/pMHC II increases by 2.6- and 3.0-fold for $R_l/K_l = 0.1$ and $R_l/K_l = 0.01$, respectively (see Eq. S18). The subsequent phosphorylation of the TCR complex, as well as phosphorylation of recruited ZAP70, will therefore also be increased by approximately threefold (see Eq. S17). It should finally be noted that, from Eq. S17 and Eq. 2 this phosphorylation rate ($k_{p, CD4-Lck/TCR-P}$) is 30–40 times larger (depending on the value for $R_l/K_l$) than the initial rate of phosphorylation, that is, of the unphosphorylated receptor ($k_{p, CD4-Lck/TCR}$ in Eq. 2).

**Discussion**

The binding of CD4 to pMHC II is remarkably weak compared with the interactions of other molecules expressed by T cells and APCs. Here, sCD4 monomers failed to bind pMHC II at concentrations as high as 2.5 mM, setting a new lower limit for the solution $K_d$. To confirm that this measurement was reliable we established a binding assay wherein, in a highly multivalent form, sCD4 binding to cell-expressed pMHC II could be detected.
Using this assay we confirmed that for native CD4 the binding site on pMHC II corresponds to that suggested by crystal structures of cross-species and affinity-matured CD4/pMHC II complexes (5, 6). It can therefore be assumed that native CD4 forms the same “v-shaped” complex that affinity-matured CD4 forms with TCR/pMHC II, wherein contact with the TCR is seemingly precluded (19). It thus seems very unlikely that the ternary CD4/pMHC II/TCR interaction is stabilized by direct interactions between the extracellular domains of CD4 and the TCR.

To characterize binding in 2D approximating the conditions at T-cell/APC contacts, we studied the interactions of B cells with SLBs containing human CD4 and used CD2 to initially anchor and then position the cell on the SLB at a physiologically relevant distance. Zhu–Golan analysis gave a 2D $K_d$ of $\sim$5,000 molecules/µm$^2$ for the CD4/pMHC II interaction, to our knowledge the largest value ever reported for protein interactions at the cell surface. This value is two to three orders of magnitude larger than typical interactions between molecules expressed by T cells and APCs but is still specific because CD4 in SLBs did not interact with cells lacking pMHC II. Photobleaching measurements showed that CD4/pMHC II binding is reversible, and that the mobility of CD4 in the contact is more than 10-fold lower compared with outside the contact. Although the 2D off-rate ($k_{off}$) for the CD4/pMHC II interaction could not be determined in the present experiments, it can be estimated to be in the order of $2 \times 10^{-4}$ s$^{-1}$ (see SI Text, Estimation of Kinetic Rate Constants for details). With a 2D $K_d$ value of 5,000 molecules/µm$^2$ this gives a 2D on-rate ($k_{on}$) of 0.05 µm$^2$ molecules$^{-1}$s$^{-1}$, which is comparable to that measured for protein–protein interactions of higher affinity between T cells and APCs (13, 29). However, the $k_{on}$ is orders of magnitude larger (12, 13, 29).

The 2D $K_d$ value obtained here corresponds to the equilibrium value when two cells, or lipid bilayers, are held with their surfaces positioned relative to each other at a distance similar to that in the synapse contact between T cells and APCs. Other techniques involving, for instance, micropipettes to periodically bring cells containing the two proteins into contact (12, 30), have been used to study the binding kinetics of single bonds when the cells are not aligned. However, including stronger binding auxiliary molecules to align and position the contacting surface, such as rat CD2/CD48 in this work, would be problematic in pipette-based experiments because the binding kinetics of the auxiliary molecules would dominate the overall signal vs. that for the specific CD4/pMHC II interaction. The 2D $K_d$ value obtained for the CD4/pMHC II interaction could be different when T cells contact APCs versus B cells contacting SLBs containing CD4 and CD2. However, the observation that the CD4/pMHC II interaction is orders of magnitude weaker than typical T-cell/APC protein interactions is expected to hold.

What are the implications of the very large dissociation constant, and how does CD4 so profoundly affect T-cell signaling? The important role of CD4 in vivo is believed to be the recruitment of Lck to the TCR (8, 9, 31). The recruited Lck would phosphorylate immunoreceptor tyrosine-based activation motifs constituting an early step of T-cell activation (8, 9). In agreement with this, Xu and Littman (27) found that T-cell responses were significantly reduced if CD4 could not bind pMHC II, and that this depended on CD4-Lck being able to bind phosphorylated tyrosines in the TCR. Huppa et al. (13) and Hong et al. (30) also recently showed that CD4 has a negligible effect on the affinity and lifetime of TCR/pMHC II complexes, indicating that the primary role of CD4 is not TCR/pMHC II stabilization. To see whether our measured affinity of CD4 for pMHC II fits with these results we undertook numerical calculations to establish whether, in particular, (i) CD4 contributes to initial TCR phosphorylation (Fig. S4) and (ii) how the CD4/pMHC II interaction affects the effective affinity of the TCR for pMHC II and the recruitment of Lck to previously phosphorylated TCRs (Fig. S5B).

The mathematical expressions showed that despite the very low affinity of CD4 for pMHC II it is sufficiently strong to increase the rate of phosphorylation of both unphosphorylated and previously phosphorylated TCRs up to threefold due to the recruitment of Lck. However, the effective affinity of the TCR for pMHC II only increased marginally (2–20%) under the same conditions, in agreement with previous experimental observations (13, 30). This indicates that the decrease in T-cell sensitivity when CD4/pMHC II binding is blocked arises from a reduction in TCR phosphorylation by Lck, rather than from destabilization of TCR/pMHC II binding. It should, however, be noted that the increase in Lck recruitment of a factor of three is significantly less than the 10- to 100-fold decrease in sensitivity observed in antibody blocking experiments when calcium and IL-2 signaling are monitored (7, 32). A possible explanation for this is that the increase in phosphorylation is magnified by the exponential lifetime of the TCR/pMHC bond (26) as well as by the requirement for multiple triggering events to act cooperatively in producing calcium fluxes and downstream signaling (33). The derived expressions also showed that the phosphorylation of previously phosphorylated TCRs is significantly (30–40 times) faster than the phosphorylation of unphosphorylated TCRs. This results from CD4-Lck binding to TCR-P, explaining the observation by Xu and Littman (27) that T-cell responses are significantly reduced when Lck cannot bind to TCR-P. It also indicates that phosphorylation of the first tyrosine(s) in the TCR complex is rate-limiting for TCR phosphorylation.

It needs to be emphasized that these calculations are only approximations and their purpose is to illustrate how, even with the low affinity we have measured, CD4/pMHC II binding can augment T-cell signaling. However, it is also possible that CD4 function and signaling are rather more dependent on prior TCR/pMHC II engagement, because this facilitates CD4 recruitment. For example, the 2D $K_d$ of the CD4/pMHC II interaction could be lower due to suppressed membrane fluctuations and/or optimal positioning of pMHC II for CD4 binding (34) (Fig. S9).

Other processes, such as phosphorylation by tyrosine kinases not associated with CD4, might also affect initial signaling rates. It is furthermore possible that because the local concentration of CD4-Lck is increased in the immunological synapse (31), this could start to stabilize TCR-P/pMHC II in the synapse according to Eq. 3, which would also increase sensitivity. It is clear that more experiments are therefore needed to completely understand the role of CD4 in T-cell activation, but our data provide two key insights. First, the interaction of CD4 with pMHC II is very weak but measurable and second, at this low affinity, CD4 binding can enhance TCR phosphorylation but has less influence on the TCR/pMHC II stability. Other processes, such as phosphorylation by tyrosine kinases not associated with CD4, might also affect initial signaling rates. It is furthermore possible that because the local concentration of CD4-Lck is increased in the immunological synapse (31), this could start to stabilize TCR-P/pMHC II in the synapse according to Eq. 3, which would also increase sensitivity. It is clear that more experiments are therefore needed to completely understand the role of CD4 in T-cell activation, but our data provide two key insights. First, the interaction of CD4 with pMHC II is very weak but measurable and second, at this low affinity, CD4 binding can enhance TCR phosphorylation but has less influence on the TCR/pMHC II stability.
Materials and Methods

The methods and materials used are summarized below; detailed information is given in Supporting Information. Institutional review board approval was not required for use of the human cell lines or DNA constructs referred to.

Solution Affinity and Bead-Binding Experiments. sCD4 protein and soluble, biotinylatable forms of DR1/HA (residues 307–318; PKYVKQNTLKLA), DR2/MBP (residues 85–99; ENPVYHHFKKVINTPR), DR4/EBV (residues 627–641; TGGYVHYKHHVHHE), and A2/Db2 (residues 555–564; INYADRWRWF) were produced as described previously (35, 36). For testing for binding to sCD4, the biotinylated pMHC II was immobilized on biacore streptavidin-coated chips at levels of 1,100 RU (DR1/HA), 1,500 RU (DR2/MBP), and 1,840 RU (DR4/EBV). A2/Db2, a kind gift of Tao Dong, University of Oxford, Oxford, was immobilized as a negative control at 1,600–1,900 RU. The affinities of WT and Q40R-mutated rat CD4 were measured as described previously (23).

For the bead-binding assay, HEK 293T cells were transfected with constructs encoding fluorescent HA-DR1-GFP or gp120-GFP as a control (see SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity for details). To generate CD4-coated beads 10 μg biotinylated sCD4 protein was incubated with 6.7 × 10⁷ magnetic streptavidin beads M-280 (Dynal Biotech). HEK 293T cells were transiently transfected by calcium phosphate precipitation with alpha and beta chain constructs to express WT or mutant HA-DR1-GFP molecules (Fig. 5) or gp120-GFP controls. Following magnetic “pull-down,” cells were either viewed by fluorescence microscopy and counted in duplicate microscope fields or absolute numbers of cells recovered were determined using a hemocytometer.

2D Affinity Measurements. An SLB consisting of 1-palmitoyl-2-oleoyl-sn-glycerol-3-phosphocholine (POPC) from Avanti Polar Lipids with 5–10 wt % of 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycerol-3-(N-(5-amino-1-carboxyptyl)liminodiacetic acid)succinyl] (nickel salt) (DGS-NTA) (Avanti Polar Lipids) was vesicle-fused assembly. After formation of the SLB the solution was exchanged with a protein mixture of either co-polyhistidine-tagged CD4 (labeled with Alexa Fluor 488) and human CD4 (labeled with Alexa Fluor 647) for the CD4/pMHC II measurements (or ii) polyhistidine-tagged CD2 (labeled with Alexa Fluor 488) and human CD58 (labeled with Alexa Fluor 647) for the CD2/CD48 measurements.

Raji B cells or Jurkat cells expressing either WT or weakly binding Q40R mutant CD48 were added to the protein-coupled SLBs and allowed to settle for ~60 min before imaging. Number of proteins on the cell surface, N0, was determined by flow cytometry and QuantiBrite analysis with saturating concentrations of PE-conjugated monoclonal antibodies (see SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity for details).

Fluorescence imaging was performed in total internal reflection mode with simultaneous imaging of the sample at 488 nm and 647 nm (see SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity for details of the microscope setup). Images of ~50 cells were acquired for each SLB. SLB protein densities were calculated using fluorescence correlation spectroscopy and the images were analyzed as detailed in SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity to obtain BIF and Bex. SNI was obtained from a bright-field image of the cell. Photo-bleaching measurements were performed with the same microscope setup as described in SI Materials and Methods, 2D Affinity.

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