

# Mission Command

## Addressing Challenges and Sharing Insights

By JAMES PARRINGTON *and* MIKE FINDLAY

*One of the myths of mission command is that it equals less or little control. In some ways this could not be further from the truth.*

*Mission command is the balancing of command and control, and different ways to gain control.*

*I would offer that universal understanding of commander's intent is a very powerful method of control.*

—Senior flag officer, 2013

**J**uxtaposing *mission command* and *cross-domain synergy* has clear utility at the strategic and operational levels for operating at the *speed of the problem*. Mission command is important in setting conditions for military subordinates. Cross-domain synergy leverages the capabilities of our many mission partners to increase overall effectiveness. This article addresses our observations on mission command. The next publication will include our observations on cross-domain synergy.

### Three Major Insights

**Build Trust and Gain Shared Understanding.** Joint commanders increasingly note the large number of mission partners that they must work with to build trust, share understanding, and achieve unified action. They also note how national and international leaders' viewpoints and policies change as these decisionmakers interact and learn. Building and maintaining trust, continuing dialogue, and gaining shared understanding with the many mission partners impose significant time demands on commanders and staffs at combatant commands and joint task forces (JTFs). This may be a markedly different experience for those whose previous experience was at the tactical level. However, trust and

shared understanding enable empowerment, cross-domain synergy, and ultimately effectiveness.

**Empower Subordinates to Act.** Today's interconnected world is unpredictable and complex. The pace of change and speed of operations is accelerating. In response, commanders find they must share both *operational context* and their *intent* to successfully empower disciplined initiative in their subordinates.

**Support Command Relationship and the Role of Establishing Authority.** The need to leverage many capabilities from other commanders and partners to achieve cross-domain synergy highlights the importance of the support command relationship and requires increased effort by Establishing Authorities to prioritize, allocate resources, and synchronize actions to act at the speed of the problem. Direct involvement by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff is essential to enabling agile, cross-combatant command synergy.

### Mission Command

Commanders at the joint level use some form of a mission command philosophy focused on the art of command in today's complex environment, regardless of the technological and informational improvements that many refer to as the science of control.

The *art of command* is the creative and skillful use of authority, instincts, intuition, and experience in decisionmaking and leadership while the *science of control* is about the systems and procedures that improve a commander's understanding and support the execution of missions. Effective joint commanders leverage both art and science.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff notes in his Mission Command White Paper that the burden is on the commander due to the complexity and uncertainty of the environment, tempo of operations, and number of mission partners. Additionally, while we leverage new technology to advance our science of control, that aspect may not always be robust (for instance, in austere environments) and may be vulnerable to attack. This further reinforces the need to focus on mission command.

Mission command is a command philosophy, as noted in the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020* (CCJO). The key attributes of this command philosophy (trust, understanding, and intent) are in current joint and Service doctrines. All commanders exercise varying degrees of control in their application of mission command based on several factors, such as the situation, activity, and capabilities of forces.<sup>1</sup> One example of this is the positive and procedural control measures used within airspace control.<sup>2</sup>

A mission command philosophy allows for the Service and functional components and coalition partners to operate in a decen-

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tralized manner in accordance with their respective doctrines and concepts. The Navy's daily intentions messages and Composite Warfare Commander Concept and the Air Force's centralized control and decentralized execution concept for command and control are Service examples. Mission command provides the means (through commander's intent, mission type orders, and decentralized execution) to operate at the speed of the problem by increasing overall agility and effectiveness, and enables better synergistic cross-domain operations with our joint, inter-agency, and multinational mission partners. We have seen the following challenges in the exercise of mission command.

*Understanding* the many perspectives, interests, and policies at national and international levels is hard for the commander and staff to digest. It is difficult to remain abreast of the continually changing geopolitical context and national guidance due to its scope, complexity, and many players. (For example, in 2011, the mission in Libya rapidly evolved from one initially focused on noncombatant evacuation to that of military intervention). It is equally hard to rapidly share this changing understanding at every echelon in the military formation to enable disciplined initiative. Subordinates may not always grasp the subtleties of the broader and changing context in which they operate. This can result in the commanders opting to retain control and not empower their subordinates, potentially losing the initiative.

The decentralized nature of mission command and delegation of approval levels require that subordinate commanders understand and appreciate the many relevant laws, policies, and directives. Lack of a shared understanding of these *authorities* and their limitations can result in loss of legitimacy, trust, cohesion, and tendency to retain centralized control.

Establishing and maintaining a common and uniform understanding of authorities become especially relevant in operationalizing a mission command philosophy. There are numerous U.S. authorities (Titles 10, 22, 50, and others) and significant international and national authorities (including the host nation) in multinational operations. There are also many specified authorities and responsibilities within the U.S. Armed Forces (such as the operational direction authority of a joint force commander and Services' Title 10 and administrative control responsibilities).

An example of this lies in the complex administrative control and Title 10 relationships that the U.S. National Support Element in Afghanistan has with the theater Service component commands (such as Army Central) and the Service forces under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization operational control of the commander of the International Security Assistance Force. Understanding and application of these many authorities require frequent special staff access to the commander as he frames problems, provides guidance, and makes decisions.

The global *information environment* brings several challenges. It leads to an increase in the tempo of operations as we are challenged to observe, plan, decide, and act quicker than the adversary. It can also lead to instances of information overload as commanders attempt to process all information before making decisions. In some cases, we see that this onslaught of information—driven by the staff—may preclude commanders from taking valuable time to reflect on the problem, develop an operational approach, and craft clear guidance and intent. In these cases, the commands often default to a centralized control philosophy as they react to emerging challenges with no clear overarching approach.

Staffs may also be inclined to rely too much on the science of control relative to the art of command by implementing more reporting, control measures, and battle rhythm events in an attempt to fully monitor, track, and control operations. Staffs may not understand or be comfortable in operating within a mission command construct of trust, shared understanding, intent, and empowerment. Likewise, the opposite may also exist where the staff may have to operate in an environment where shared understanding and trust are inadequate at the command level.

The information environment also has the potential to imbue tactical action with near immediate strategic ramifications due to visibility in the continuous 24-hour media. This *could* lead to risk adverseness and a tendency to overcontrol and centralize decisionmaking when we may need to do just the opposite.

Successful units fight through this by working even harder to share understanding; provide clear intent; and trust, decentralize, and empower subordinates to appropriately act at the speed of the problem. We also see commanders using their instincts and

intuitive judgments to cut through the fog and friction induced within the information environment.

The interconnected nature of operations requires continuous interaction with a *large number of our unified action mission partners* especially at the strategic and operational levels. Building and maintaining trust with these many partners are difficult and impose significant time demands on commanders and staffs. This has particular significance to flag and general officers as they assume positions of authority in strategic and operational level positions and spend significant time engaging with these partners. They will not have as much time available to control or guide subordinates as they may have done in previous assignments. Thus, the concept of mission command and the importance of shared understanding, guidance, and intent may be even more important at this higher level as commanders increase efforts up and out with other mission partners. Nurturing relationships must be a constant drumbeat for the commander—in and out of crises.

Our mission partners—both adjacent partners and subordinates—may come from *diverse cultures or backgrounds* in which decisionmaking is centralized, and where empowerment, subordinate-level decision-making, and acceptance of responsibility are not wanted or expected. Some mission partners may not have the capability to gain the same degree of situational understanding or have the same experience in operations (for example, a new U.S. or coalition member to the team) and may require increased support, supervision, or control. Equally important is understanding how each partner communicates. Some partners may use texting on cell phones, some need formal papers, some use fax, some prefer phone, and some require a formal top-down approach. Each partner has a method of communicating that is unique, and commanders must devote the time necessary to figure this out or they will waste time with ineffective communication that slows down the building of trust and confidence across the team. Commanders must recognize these differences as they build relationships, and massage and tailor the necessary level of coordination, control, or supervision. Ignoring these differences can damage trust and teamwork, and risk mission accomplishment.

The decade of learned lessons in irregular warfare informs us of the value of decentralization to achieve operational objec-

tives and is the basis for globally integrated operations described in the CCJO. History suggests there is potential for *a return to more centralized command philosophies* as the military transitions from large-scale conflicts to a different landscape characterized by peacetime engagements and limited conflicts. Garrison operations, tight fiscal constraints, and increased competition for promotion could bias leaders, especially within the Services, toward centralization in an effort to be more efficient and controlling. Our joint headquarters may also be tempted to centrally control the myriad of more scrutinized peacetime engagements. However, while centralization may work to some degree in peace, it may not work in conflict (or a disaster response) in which higher commanders rely on subordinates' initiatives and speed of decision and action. It takes time to develop a culture of decentralization and empowerment; it cannot occur overnight when a crisis occurs. Therefore, we suggest the need to deliberately determine the degree of a centralized or decentralized command climate and culture in peacetime.

History also suggests the potential to *return to a Service-centric focus* in the years ahead as we move away from the decade of war and close interaction. Over time, we may forget the potential benefits of a unified action approach as we focus on Service basic skill sets. We may also lose the valuable tactics, techniques, and procedures relevant to joint and combined operations with our mission partners. This could move us away from a mission command philosophy and interdependent mindset with our partners that are essential for success in periods of conflict and other operations.

## Insights

*Building and maintaining trust* is possibly a commander's most important action to establish and exercise mission command and to achieve cross-domain synergy. Developing trust gains synergy with mission partners and enables mission type orders and empowerment.

Personal relationships are often equally or more important than command relationships in today's environment. These relationships must be built and continuously maintained through both dialogue and actions—before, during, and after crises. This has significant time implications, especially the time to build and maintain trust and rela-

tionships with stakeholders and new mission partners (for example, the time required for an incoming joint commander to build trust through words and actions with the country team(s) or a coalition partner that just joined the team). We see commanders making this their priority. There are a number of observed best practices:

- Plan how to build and maintain trust in and out of crisis.
- Identify the organization(s) that the commander and staff will be most dependent on or work with as the target for early engagement and team-building. Commanders' time is finite so they have to pick where to invest with regard to critical relationships.
- Establish a personal relationship between commanders that will become a critical enabler when staffs are required to execute operations in the fog of war.
- Build trust through words and actions, with continuous reinforcement.
- Allocate the necessary time to build trust before a crisis (in Phase 0—Shape).
- Include mission partners in commander conferences, circulation, and battle rhythm events.
- Establish private means and the atmosphere to engage directly with subordinate commanders.
- Leverage both the ability for frank discussions in private meetings and public engagements with mission partners to share perspectives.
- Focus on aligning actions and words (that is, follow through on promises).
- Broaden engagement to more than just commanders (for example, staffs and subordinates).
- Consider the advantages of using standing Service and functional component headquarters to employ forces versus default to standing up ad hoc JTF headquarters due to the trust and relationships already built within the permanent standing headquarters with both the combatant command headquarters and area of responsibility mission partners.
- Maintain sensitivity to guard against/correct the potential for a false perception of U.S. military leaders' disregard of other coalition members/roles through overemphasized use of U.S. SIPRNET and U.S.-only meetings.

*Gaining and maintaining common understanding* of the situation, problem, and intent are significant challenges. This

can affect what "right looks like." National leadership may have different geopolitical perspectives than field commanders. A theater-strategic commander might have a different perspective on the environment and problem than an individual at the tactical level. Similarly, a military commander may have a different perspective than a State Department Foreign Service officer. Thus, the right thing for one may not be the same right thing for another. This also has a temporal aspect to it: the environment is continually changing and the understanding of what is right may not keep up (for example, the changes in nighttime tactical operations and evidence-based operations in Afghanistan as the government matured and asserted its sovereign authority).

We observe that one must continually dialogue with higher authorities and mission partners to better understand the changing environment and perspectives and what a shared understanding of right looks like. This continuing dialogue deepens trust, clarifies authorities for action, assists problem-framing as part of design, enriches guidance and intent, enables synergy with mission partners, and, coupled with mission-type orders, enables us to release the disciplined initiative of subordinates to do the right thing. One combatant commander notes, "collaboration releases the initiative of subordinates." This collaboration and information-sharing has significant time implications for joint force commanders and subordinates. There are a number of observed best practices:

- Recognize the geopolitical challenges that national-level leaders will likely face in a crisis. Commanders can assist these leaders by understanding their perspectives while also keeping them informed of theater-strategic and operational-related perspectives, potential risks, and feasible options. This will enhance trust between national leadership and commanders required for the resultant delegation of authorities and standing permissions.
- Recognize the contract made with subordinates as a result of sharing understanding. Shared understanding is a trust contract for subsequent disciplined initiatives on the part of the subordinates. The word *disciplined* is key here, signifying recognition (and agreement) from both parties that actions taken will be consistent with higher intent and a shared context.

- Emphasize use of commander conferences (both physical and virtual).

- Direct staff-level interaction and sharing (that is, not only commanders sharing information). Assess this interaction and emphasize as required.

- Focus attention on understanding authorities, which takes effort and is often led by the J5 (Plans) and Staff Judge Advocate.

- Conduct significant commander circulation (and staff circulation) sharing perspectives (up, down, and across). Discipline scheduling to prevent circulation fratricide due to multiple visits overwhelming the same subordinate—possibly with different messages.

- Provide feedback to the staff from commander circulation; the staff does not have the benefit of the understanding gained through this circulation and discourse.

- Develop appropriate Commander's Critical Information Requirements (CCIR), organize the staff, and discipline the battle rhythm to ensure the staff optimally supports agile commander decisionmaking. Use instincts and intuitive judgment when appropriate to cut through the fog and friction of information overload.

- Develop a communications infrastructure that allows for information-sharing and collaboration with mission partners (for example, the Defense Department, U.S. inter-agency community, and coalitions). This will likely require some form of common mission network much like the Afghanistan Mission Network, All Partners Access Network, or the emergent Mission Partner Environment discussed later in this article.

*Providing quality guidance and intent* that links strategic direction to operational approaches to tactical action—the essence of operational art—is a key responsibility of the commander. This process starts with insightful dialogue to inform and be informed by national and international leadership. Quality guidance and intent, coupled with risk guidance, enables mission command. There are a number of observed best practices:

- Make the time to *dialogue* and *strategically reflect* on the problem before crafting and providing guidance and intent.

- Bring external players into the inner circle to discuss the environment and challenges. Attempt to see the various perspectives on the problem: the political-military aspects from the national (and international

level), regional level, and adversaries' perspective (value of red teaming).

- Consider how an operational approach and intent can place the adversary on “horns of a dilemma” by exploiting vulnerabilities and maintaining advantage.

- Recognize the value of continuous circulation and sharing of intent, particularly in the early stages of a crisis.

- Consider how intent can enable the command and subordinates to take on an adaptive stance to be able to rapidly adapt to a thinking adversary.

- Co-develop intent with mission partners (including higher and subordinates) to gain perspectives and subsequent understanding and buy-in. Sample interpretation before issuing is often helpful. What the commander writes and what subordinates read may be different—better to fix this before sending.

- Personally craft commander's intent. We recognize this is a common dictum, but we still see planners drafting intent. These draft intents often predispose commander's final intent and guidance documents and do not reap the benefit of the commander's personal reflections on the problem and approach.

- Continuously share intent not only in orders but also during circulation, and in meetings and other battle rhythm events.

- Be prepared to change intent based on the situation and reframing of the problem.

- Do not abrogate the higher headquarters design and planning responsibilities as part of the concept of decentralization.

*Providing risk guidance* is an important aspect of mission command. It helps to share intent and understanding by communicating the commander's perspective of his perceived impediments (or hazards) to the mission and force, together with respective decision approval authorities (often through some form of decision-approval matrix). This is directly related to empowerment. There are a number of observed best practices:

- Deliberately analyze risks to the mission and force. Use red teams.

- Understand national caveats of mission partners before publicly outlining risk. Publicly outlining risk before understanding national caveats creates the possibility of placing team members in embarrassing positions (since they may not have the

authority to decide what they can or cannot do in an operation).

- Delineate these risks to the mission and the force together with risk-mitigation direction (including decision approval authorities).

- Be clear where the commander is willing to accept risk. Do not be vague and require subordinates to “suck it up.”

- Make it clear *who* is allowed to take what level of risk.

- Correlate key risks with CCIR, which helps share to the staff and subordinates what the commander believes is important, such as future decisions and potential risks.

The last 10 years of combat reinforce the idea of *decentralizing and empowering subordinates and staff* to act at the speed of the problem. Those who did not appropriately decentralize lost agility and initiative, and risked mission failure. We have seen how commander's intent—focused on the *what* and *why* versus the *how*—enables the disciplined initiative in subordinates to gain agility and effectiveness.

Commanders need to take the time to understand, recognize, and develop a subordinate's ability for empowerment and initiative, together with the skill to know how and when to adjust the necessary level of supervision. Consider how some commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan focused their attention and coaching on a new member of the team, developing his or her tactical prowess until up to standard, and then incrementally empowered them.

Combatant commands also recognize the need for empowerment. Every geographic combatant command we visit has numerous ongoing missions, including multiple peacetime engagements as they work with many U.S. Ambassadors, nations, and stakeholders throughout their area of responsibility. Similarly, functional combatant commands are working with all of the geographic commands. Each relies on mission command to set conditions for numerous subordinate actions. These higher headquarters focus on design and planning activities and share their understanding and provide guidance and intent to help set conditions for their subordinates to execute. There are a number of observed best practices:

- Recognize the need not only for *intent*, but also for a *shared understanding*

of *context* in order to empower disciplined initiative—particularly important at the strategic and operational levels. This is related to the earlier discussion on disciplined initiative.

- Delegate authorities to the lowest appropriate level capable of integrating assets to work inside the adversary's decision cycle. Within this context, balance decentralization with the need for the requisite level of supervision. Accept becoming uncomfortably decentralized to achieve mission success. This may include providing assets to subordinates as well.

- Develop terms of reference documents that lay out roles and responsibilities of deputy commanders and key staff within the headquarters.

- Tailor decision approval matrices applicable to decision approval authorities both within the headquarters and for subordinate headquarters. For example, J-code directors may be empowered with certain decision authorities to maintain agility and effectiveness within the headquarters in addition to empowering subordinate commanders.

- Align CCIR and other reporting requirements with decision-approval levels. While recognizing the requirement for shared understanding, guard against establishing CCIR and other reporting requirements that may impinge on the initiative or slow agility of subordinate units.

- Conduct quality in-briefs with new leaders/key personnel coupled with focused visits and circulation to assess strengths, degree of experience, and comfort in exercising initiative and accepting responsibility. Make subsequent decisions on necessary coaching, mentoring, and tailoring of degree of empowerment. (Some members of the team may be empowered more than others based on varying levels in their abilities, propensity for initiative, and mission set.)

- Be attentive not to overwhelm subordinates with collaboration or visits as they are also planning and conducting their missions with their subordinates. We often see deliberate limiting of demands on subordinates for extensive updates during higher headquarters battle rhythm updates, rather than tasking the higher headquarters staff to report on the situation, and then giving subordinates freedom to surface issues and questions.

- Define the fight. Ask the key questions: What is the combatant command's fight, the JTF's fight, and the subordinate's

fight? If we do not do this upfront, everyone focuses on fighting the subordinate's fight; no one is focused on setting the conditions upfront for their success.

- Discipline the organization to stay at the right level from a higher headquarters perspective. We have heard the common adage before: "One is more comfortable and will default to doing his last job, and not his new job." Operational and strategic level headquarters will be tempted to operate at the tactical level. One commander deliberately kept his headquarters *lean* so as not to give the staff the capacity or opportunity to take on subordinate headquarters tasks. We continually hear the wisdom in focusing higher headquarters on setting conditions for the success of their subordinates. This is all part of staying at the right level to enable mission command.

The Deployable Training Team point of contact for this article and many other operational-level insight and best practice papers is Mike Findlay. Please contact him at js.dsc.j7.mbx.joint-training@mail.mil. Additionally, many of the DTD papers are open source and available on the Internet. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2012), notes, "while mission command is the preferred command philosophy, it is not appropriate to all situations. Certain specific activities require more detailed control, such as the employment of nuclear weapons or other national capabilities, air traffic control, or activities that are fundamentally about the efficient synchronization of resources."

<sup>2</sup> See Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Air Force, September 1997), and Joint Publication 3-52, *Joint Airspace Control* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 20, 2010), for good discussions on the centralized control and decentralized execution of airpower and airspace control. AFDD 1 addresses how decentralized execution allows subordinate commanders to take the initiative and increase airspace control effectiveness through real-time integration during execution. JP 3-52 addresses the concept of positive and procedural control measures that are used in airspace control. Airspace control procedures provide flexibility through an effective combination of positive and procedural control measures.

## Joint Publications (JPs) Under Revision (to be signed within 6 months)

JP 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*

JP 2-0, *Joint Intelligence*

JP 3-06, *Joint Urban Operations*

JP 3-07.4, *Joint Counterdrug Operations*

JP 3-11, *Operations in Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Environments*

JP 3-17, *Air Mobility Operations*

JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*

JP 3-27, *Homeland Defense*

JP 3-28, *Defense Support Civil Authorities*

JP 3-29, *Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*

JP 3-32, *Command and Control for Joint Maritime Operations*

JP 3-57, *Civil-Military Operations*

JP 4-0, *Joint Logistics*

JP 4-09, *Distribution Operations*

## JPs Revised (signed within last 6 months)

JP 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States* (March 25, 2013)

JP 3-14, *Space Operations* (May 29, 2013)

JP 3-16, *Multinational Operations* (July 16, 2013)

JP 3-35, *Deployment and Redeployment Operations* (January 31, 2013)

JP 3-60, *Joint Targeting* (January 31, 2013)

JP 4-01, *The Defense Transportation System* (June 6, 2013)

JP 4-08, *Logistics in Support of Multinational Operations* (February 21, 2013)