



# Understanding **OPCON**

By CHARLES T. BERRY, JR.

Joint force commanders (JFCs) have routinely exercised authority to reorganize and break apart attached forces under the guise of operational control (OPCON). This exercise has become common practice because of misinterpretations of joint doctrine. Specifically, many officers believe that the authority to direct the internal organization of an attached force is contained within the jointly defined authorities of operational control. This belief is fallacious. Joint doctrine does *not* delineate the authority to internally organize an attached command or force as an authority inherent to OPCON.

Central to this discussion are several key terms, such as *combatant command* (COCOM), *operational control*, and *tactical control* (TACON), most of which are defined in joint doctrine and worthy of mention herein. Unfortunately, there is an additional term critical to this discussion that is not defined: *internal organization*.

## **COCOM, OPCON, and TACON**

Combatant command is the authority vested only in combatant commanders by Section 164 of U.S. Code Title 10, or as otherwise directed by the President or Secretary of Defense.<sup>1</sup> Commanders with COCOM can only exercise those command functions or authorities found in Title 10, which specifically defines the command functions that COCOM includes. Moreover, joint doctrine expounds upon the code in Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*. It is also important to note that JP 1 restricts combatant commanders from transferring or delegating COCOM.

JP 1 summarizes COCOM as “the authority of a combatant commander (CCDR) to perform those functions of command over assigned forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces; assigning tasks; designating objectives; and giving authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations, joint training . . . and logistics

necessary to accomplish the missions assigned to the command.”<sup>2</sup> COCOM, as defined by JP 1, provides a broad range of command and control that appears appropriate for a commander with permanently assigned forces.

Unlike COCOM, OPCON is not legally defined in law. Instead, it is derived from the authorities of COCOM and delineated in JP 1. Logically, operational control is inherent to COCOM because it is defined as a subset of the COCOM functions (authorities) delineated in Title 10 and JP 1. OPCON provides a much more limited array of command functions than does COCOM. JP 1 states that OPCON “is the authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning

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tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission.”<sup>3</sup> Operational control is the command relationship normally transferred to a gaining combatant commander when forces are attached. The rationale for this appears sound, given that the attachment of forces is a temporary transfer normally associated with the accomplishment of a specific mission and the citation above ends with “necessary to accomplish the mission.”

A current example of this is the rotational deployment of I Marine Expeditionary Force units to Iraq and Afghanistan, which is facilitated by a change of operational control between U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Central Command. Only the Secretary of Defense or President can authorize the transfer of forces and change of operational control as described.

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Combatant commanders cannot delegate OPCON outside of their commands, but they can delegate it within their commands. Moreover, any commander who has operational control of a force can delegate that authority *within* his command. OPCON is designed in this manner to provide commanders with the requisite authority to organize their commands, delegate the appropriate level of authority, and assign tasks to subordinate commanders as necessary to accomplish the mission. With these facts in mind, it appears that OPCON is appropriate for the temporary command and control of attached forces.

Tactical control is a subset of the authorities specified in operational control. Accordingly, TACON is inherent in OPCON and is delegable. Tactical control generally provides the commander with the authority to furnish detailed direction and control of those forces attached to him. Specifically, JP 1 states that TACON “provides sufficient authority for controlling and directing the application of force or tactical use of combat support assets within the assigned mission or task.”<sup>4</sup> As described here, TACON provides a limited range of command and control and is normally prescribed for specific missions or tasks

that forces are specifically provided for. The passage implies that the delegation of TACON is appropriate for circumstances where forces are provided for the accomplishment of a specific mission or set of tasks.

### Defining Internal Organization

There is some debate over the term *internal organization*, which is used in the Basic Authority paragraph that describes OPCON in JP 1.<sup>5</sup> This paragraph does not define internal organization, but it does provide some context. Internal organization refers to the task organization of the attached command (or force).<sup>6</sup> The list of elements contained in the sentence with this term relates to the attached commands (or forces) and not to the joint force as a whole. According to the text, OPCON “does not include the authoritative direction for

logistics or matters of administration, discipline, internal organization, or unit training.”<sup>7</sup> The nature of the elements in the list (logistics, administrative matters, discipline, and unit training) implies that internal organization refers to the task organization of the attached elements. Furthermore, the context does not limit the definition of internal organization to the reorganization of major elements, dismemberment of the unit, or reassignment of individual personnel—thus, it is reasonable to assume it *includes* all of these things because there is no supporting rationale to *exclude* them.<sup>8</sup>

Conversations about command relationships are sometimes littered more with popular belief than with factual (doctrinal) detail, and this is true for the topic of OPCON authorities. Many military officers believe that the delegation of operational control authorizes the gaining commander to break apart an attached force. Again, this belief is not supported by joint doctrine, which specifically states OPCON does not include “authoritative direction for . . . internal organization” of attached forces.

JP 1 does not clearly define the level of authority that includes the authoritative direction to reorganize or dismember an attached

force. The authority is mentioned discursively, in two specific locations in JP 1, as an inherent authority of combatant command. The most definitive language on this issue is not found in the section covering COCOM authorities but rather is again in the Basic Authority paragraph discussed above, which states, “[t]hese elements [administration, discipline, international organization, or unit training] of COCOM *must be specifically delegated by the* [combatant commander].”<sup>9</sup> The emphasis implies that COCOM includes the authority to internally organize a force, and it specifies that a CCDR can delegate this authority.

With this in mind, the following excerpt, once more from the COCOM Basic Authority paragraph, is the most logical link to this authority: “COCOM provides full authority to organize and employ commands and forces as the CCDR considers necessary to accomplish assigned missions.”<sup>10</sup> Language in JP 1 that describes this specific authority more distinctly would be useful, but as written, it is reasonable to conclude that the authority for internal organization of an attached force is inherent to COCOM, not OPCON.<sup>11</sup>

### Common Misinterpretations

Debate on this topic normally focuses on two elements of the list of OPCON authorities, both of which are commonly misinterpreted. The first is the authority to “[p]rescribe the chain of command to the commands and forces within *the command*.”<sup>12</sup> This authority allows the JFC to subordinate an attached command to another command within the joint force. This does not imply that the JFC can prescribe the chain of command within an attached command. Instead, it simply authorizes the commander to adjust the organizational structure of the joint force (“*the command*”) by subordinating one unit/force to another. This authority allows the JFC to *modify his span of control*.

For example, a JFC has OPCON over three Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) and a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The authority to prescribe the chain of command authorizes the JFC to place the MEU under the tactical control of a BCT commander. In this arrangement, the JFC has reduced his direct span of control to three elements by delegating TACON of the MEU to a BCT.<sup>13</sup> Without this authority, the JFC must control each attached force directly; he cannot modify his span of control.

The second—and more contentious—OPCON element is the authority to “[o]rganize subordinate commands and forces *within the command* as necessary to carry out missions assigned to *the command*.”<sup>14</sup> The key text to highlight in this element is “within the command.” The command referred to in this text is the joint force. Organization of the subordinate elements (commands and forces) within the joint force allows the JFC to modify his span of control to best support mission accomplishment. This authority is what permits a JFC to organize his subordinate elements into joint task forces (JTF), functional components, or other subelements of his choosing.

The most convincing argument is provided by identifying context. When the authorities listed in the OPCON section of chapter IV (JP 1) are viewed in isolation, the reader has no context to work with. Chapter V, “Doctrine for Joint Commands,” discusses this authority in detail and references the specific authority in the subsection titled “Organizing Joint Forces.” The first full sentence of this section states that a “JFC has the authority to organize assigned or attached forces with specification of OPCON to best accomplish the assigned mission based on the CONOPS.”<sup>15</sup> Compare this with the OPCON authority in question: “Organize subordinate commands and forces within the command as necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command.”

Indeed, the two sentences align, implying that the section is discussing this specific OPCON authority. The section clearly focuses on organizing assigned and/or attached forces into components (Service, functional, JTF, or some other). It does not specifically or implicitly discuss “authority to organize” in the context of internal organization.

Some will argue that the wording of JP 1 provides flexibility for interpretation. A common assertion is that the language does not specify that “the command” is the joint force. However, both uses of the term in the sentence refer to the *same* command—the joint force as a whole. “The command” referenced in the second instance is the same command (joint force) that is assigned missions that attached forces are provided for. Therefore, the JFC is authorized to organize his joint force for the purpose of facilitating mission accomplishment.

Others will postulate that the OPCON basic authority caveat regarding internal

organization is a weak point in this argument, and hence joint doctrine does not specifically prohibit an internal organization of attached forces. This counter is also flawed. Joint doctrine specifically states that “authority is never absolute.”<sup>16</sup> The authorities granted to a commander must be specified by an establishing authority, directive, or law. A commander cannot assume he has authority because it is not specifically prohibited in doctrine—just the opposite is true. This statement does not suggest that command authorities, as written, do not require interpretation. The commander must make reasonable interpretations of those authorities that are specifically delegated to him.

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It is not surprising that joint doctrine protects the integrity of attached forces within the joint force architecture. JP 1 articulates clearly that unified action is intended to “elicit the maximum contribution from each Service and Department of Defense agency and their unique but complementary capabilities.”<sup>17</sup> Service component forces can best provide the maximum contribution to the joint force when employed as originally designed. Proper command relationships are critical to this concept. It is not coincidental that the authorities vested in operational control protect the internal organization of attached forces, given that this level of authority is routinely delegated and exercised. Contrary to popular opinion, the distinguishing difference between OPCON and TACON is not the authority to internally organize—it is much more. **JFQ**

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, IV–8.

<sup>6</sup> The terms *command* and *force* are defined in JP 1–02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 12, 2001, as amended through October 31, 2009), and listed in the glossary (GL) of JP 1. The author uses the joint definitions in this article. Command is a “unit or units, an organization, or an area under the command of one individual. Also called CMD [command]” (JP 1, GL5). A force is an “aggregation of military personnel, weapon systems, equipment, and necessary support, or combination thereof” (JP 1, GL7).

<sup>7</sup> JP 1, IV–8.

<sup>8</sup> Of note, some units are designed or internally organized to be broken apart for employment. One example is the Marine Corps Air/Naval Gunfire Liaison Company; Force Reconnaissance units are another. Obviously, dismembering the unit is not an issue in this case because the attached force is organized for this, with a double or triple loading of officers and equipment.

<sup>9</sup> JP 1, IV–8, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, IV–4.

<sup>11</sup> Within the first excerpt provided above, it is clear that joint doctrine does permit a combatant commander (CCDR) to delegate this element of combatant command (COCOM). However, it may be worthy of mention that CCDRs normally only exercise COCOM over assigned forces. The President or Secretary of Defense can delegate COCOM to a CCDR for attached forces, but the normal relationship for attached forces is operational control. The obvious implication is that CCDRs do not have the authority to internally organize attached forces; hence, they cannot delegate this authority to a subordinate commander.

<sup>12</sup> JP 1, IV–8, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note here that a joint force commander (JFC) with tactical control (TACON) over the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) could not prescribe the chain of command within the MEU. The JFC with TACON must directly exercise control above the MEU and cannot subordinate the MEU to another subordinate commander in the joint force.

<sup>14</sup> JP 1, IV–8, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, V–2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, IV–1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Law Revision Counsel, Title 10 United States Code, available at <<http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/10C6.txt>>.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 20, 2009), 1, IV–4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, IV–7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, IV–9.