

MISSION COMMAND IN MULTI-DOMAIN OPERATIONS

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Abstract: *The world is constantly changing and so are the requirements for conducting military operations imposed by the complexity of today’s operational environment. This paper addresses the appropriateness of mission command for multi-domain operations, a transformative concept in NATO that aims to orchestrate military activities across all physical environments, integrated with non-military ones. Mission command is crucial in a multi-domain environment where there are no sanctuaries of safe areas. Advanced technologies have increased battlefield transparency and enabled adversaries to threaten critical infrastructure. Building trust, fostering relationships and promoting shared understanding are essential elements for successful employment of mission command in multi-domain operations.*

Keywords: mission command, multi-domain operations, leadership, modern warfare

1. Introduction

The essence of the military profession is to protect and defend a nation’s interests, security, and sovereignty through the use of force if necessary. It involves the organization, training, and deployment of armed forces, as well as the values of duty, honour, loyalty, and selfless service. The military profession requires individuals who are dedicated, disciplined, and willing to make sacrifices for the greater good of their country. It also emphasizes the importance of leadership, effective decision-making and the ability to adapt and innovate to achieve operational success, therefore to practice mission command’s principle.

But the world is changing and, implicitly, the requirements for conducting military operations have changed taking into consideration the complexity of current environment. On the other hand, the increased overt and covert activities

orchestrated by state actors and non-state elements force us to reconsider the approach to military operations considering a multi-domain environment. Based on these preliminary aspects, the research question this article will try to answer consists in: Is mission command appropriate for multi-domain operations?

2. Multi-Domain Operations

The second element of our title, multi-domain operations (MDO) is a transformative concept in NATO that aims to orchestrate military activities across all physical environments, integrated with non-military ones, to create desired outcomes and present challenges to adversaries. The five domains within NATO’s structure are Maritime, Land, Air, Space, and Cyberspace [1]. MDO emphasizes the need to coordinate military activities across all domains as a single force for long-term defence and deterrence initiatives. The

responsibility for developing MDO capabilities falls on every aspect of NATO, including domain-focused military forces, nationally integrated Instruments of Power (government departments and agencies responsible for specific sectors), and external stakeholders such as academia and private industry. MDO envisions collaboration and integration across domains and capabilities, going beyond traditional “Joint” military capabilities that focus on coordination between armed services and involves the integration of military and non-military assets.

3. What is Mission Command?

The primary responsibility of a commander is to fulfil missions and tasks that contribute to designated objectives in accordance with commander’s intent and higher concept of operations (CONOPS). It is fundamental how an organization integrates leadership, command and control (C2) to generate combat power. Therefore, mission command is NATO’s command philosophy, which emphasizes delegation and encouraging leadership, thus facilitating decision-making by those directly dealing with the situations at hand, maximizing initiative to seize opportunities [2].

Mission command is defined differently in various doctrines, but the underlying principles remain consistent. It is generally described as a decentralized style of command that emphasizes trust, intent, initiative, and common ground. The United States Army (USA) defines it as “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent” [3]. NATO defines it as the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders. The Swedish Defence University describes it as a command philosophy that emphasizes decentralized decision-making and initiative at all levels. The German Armed Forces define it as a leadership philosophy that grants

subordinates the freedom to exercise initiative and make decisions within the bounds of their authority [4].

So what is the essence of mission command? We can state that mission command is a command philosophy that promotes decentralized decision-making and the empowerment of subordinate commanders. It emphasizes providing clear guidance and intent to subordinates, trusting their judgment and initiative, and allocating sufficient resources for them to carry out their missions. Mission command allows for flexibility, adaptability, and synchronization of efforts across multiple units and domains, enabling commanders to achieve their objectives while maintaining unity of effort.

4. Mission Command in Multi-Domain Operations

Military conflicts post cold war (starting with Bosnia and especially during the campaign in Afghanistan) marked the beginning of a new command and control dynamic that would change the way military thinks about, makes decisions and executes tactics and strategies in wartime: employment of mission command through video teleconference (VTC). “In those early days of planning, we spent at least five hours every day sitting around darkened conference tents, huddled together like thought lemmings watching staff officers around the globe read from PowerPoint slides and the pontificate on anything and everything they felt like talking about. Thirty to fifty leaders at a time were forced to listen to senior officers on what each thought someone one step above them thought we should do next” [5]. This technology sometimes provides a false sense of control, resulting in disregarding of the fundamentals of mission command. An abundance of information readily available through digital systems encourages senior leadership intervention even in combat situations. These systems cannot substitute the direct experience, knowledge and

understanding of the junior commander on the ground, lowering their initiative and promoting over-centralized command styles. This is just an example of how the implementation of mission command can be hindered by challenges as the reluctance of senior commanders to give away control, changes in the nature of military operations, and command and control technology.

Executing mission command in multi-domain operations is a significant challenge. The battlefield transparency increased with the advancement of technologies that allow detection and hitting of targets at a great distance with devastating accuracy, as witnessed in the latest conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh war (2020), Israel-Hamas conflict (2021), the Ukraine-Russia war (ongoing) and the current Israel-Hamas war. A peer/near peer enemy has robust sensor networks that include Imagery Intelligence (IMINT), Electronic Intelligence (ELINT), and Human Intelligence (HUMINT) that enhances their situational awareness and provides them with critical information about our forces and our vulnerabilities. Lt. Gen. James Rainey said that “We’re going to fight an enemy that can pretty much see the whole battlefield space [and electromagnetic signals] and has a magazine depth and range to hit anything he can see that’s not moving” [6]. Therefore, it is a must to operate, survive and win in not only a lethal but also transparent environment where it is impossible to mass forces that are not masked from enemy sensors. Decentralized decision-making and the empowerment of subordinate commanders becomes of crucial importance in such an environment. The war in Ukraine has many examples of the destruction of Russian Command Posts (CPs) demonstrating that large CPs filled with comforts assets for senior leaders are a recipe for disaster, offering no sanctuary in modern conflicts. Command Posts are “facilities that include personnel, equipment, information systems, and

networks, guided by processes and procedures that assist commanders in the exercise of mission command” [7] and they exist to empower command. But the latest reality of military conflicts demonstrates that “survivability depends on dispersing ammunitions stocks, command and control, maintenance areas and aircraft. Ukraine successfully evaded Russia’s initial wave of strikes by dispersing its arsenals, aircraft and air defences. Conversely, the Russians succeeded in engaging 75% of static defence sites in the first 48 hours of the war” [8] Command and control is a primary target in nowadays military engagements, open-source information claiming that some seven to sixteen Russian generals have been killed in headquarters strikes by Ukrainian forces and hundreds of CPs have been destroyed [9]. Masking, mobility, reducing footprint and silent running (turning off all electronic systems) are the full-spectrum, multi-domain effort to deceive enemy sensors and disrupt their targeting. These actions require leaders to have a thorough understanding and employment of mission command.

5. Mission Command Fundamentals

The performance of mission command is supported by pillars such as mutual trust and shared understanding.

Building and maintaining trust is crucial for successful mission command. The development of vertical and horizontal trust generates synergy at the level of mission partners, while also allowing the exercise of command and the empowerment of subordinates for the various missions. Trust between the commander and subordinate personnel reflects how the latter decide to execute the mission and tasks received in the context of the commander’s intent and the higher echelon’s CONOPS. These relationships should be developed continuously through dialogue and cooperation supported by a shared experience. Also, trust implies the willingness to accept mistakes, from one

side and the other. This makes determining the coherence at the level of the C2 and the driving system, regardless of the level.

Gaining and sharing common understanding is essential for mission command and is obtained over time and through practising appropriate training and doctrine. It helps build trust between commanders, subordinates, partners and peers. Mutual understanding ensures a high level of unity in thinking and consequently action at all operational levels. When there is a shared understanding of the objectives, intent and capabilities, it becomes easier for commanders and subordinates to align their actions and make coordinated decisions, even in situations where communication is limited. This understanding allows commanders to anticipate the needs and challenges of their subordinates and enables them to apply their initiative effectively. Instead, subordinates generate a command perspective that supports them in anticipating and applying disciplined initiative performance.

Mutual understanding is based on common doctrine and command philosophy. It ensures that all members of the command structure have a shared understanding of the principles, procedures, and expectations. This shared understanding enhances unity of effort, facilitates effective decision-making and enables decentralized execution.

Mutual understanding is a central pillar of effective force integration, especially in multinational, inter-agency and civilian context, all characteristics of multi-domain operations. In such demanding environments, where the practice of common experience and doctrine could suffer, it would be advisable for commanders to emphasize the formation and development of common understanding. It helps bridge gaps in knowledge, experience and interoperability, facilitating effective collaboration and coordination among diverse actors.

In summary, mutual understanding is

essential in mission command as it builds trust, promotes unity in thinking and action, enables anticipation and initiative, facilitates effective force integration and ensures a shared understanding of doctrine and command philosophy.

6. Conclusions

History has provided us with numerous examples where it is not the quantity of men or the quality of weapons that make the ultimate difference but it is the ability to out-think and out-imagine the enemy that determine the ultimate victory.

In a multi-domain environment, mission command is more applicable than ever. There are no sanctuaries, rear areas of safe areas in the modern battlespace. Advanced technologies have enabled warfighters to detect and hit targets at a great distance with high accuracy and have increased battlefield transparency, allowing adversaries to threaten forward operating bases, command posts, logistic hubs and critical infrastructure. The enhanced situational awareness provided by robust sensor networks allows gathering critical information about enemy forces and vulnerabilities.

On the other hand, the answer to the research question (Is mission command appropriate for multi-domain operations?) is a strong yes as mission command is crucial in this sensor-rich and precision fires dominated battlespace. The philosophy of mission command should infuse and saturate the entire organization as it empowers leaders to solve problems that occur quickly on their own, allowing them to exercise disciplined initiative in the complexity and uncertainty of the multi-domain environment, recognizing that those closest to the problem often have the best comprehension in how to solve it. Building trust, fostering relationships and promoting shared understanding are essential for successful mission command in Multi-Domain Operations.

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