

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TROOP LEADING PROCEDURES IN UNITED STATES ARMY AND SERBIAN ARMED FORCES

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Abstract: *The paper presents a comparative analysis of the troop leading procedures (TLPs) in the United States Army (US Army) and the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF). Central to the manuscript is a qualitative comparative analysis that aims to identify key similarities and differences in the approach to planning, decision-making, and execution of operations by unit commanders/leaders. The findings reveal that while the procedures share a common framework and objectives such as mission clarity, systematic reconnaissance, and phased planning, they differ notably in the placement and methodology of Course of Action development, the use of formal analytical templates (METT-TC, SITEP, ASCOPE), and the inclusion of a dedicated “supervise and refine” step. The paper concludes with synthesised observations and recommendations relevant to future doctrinal development.*

Keywords: Troop Leading Procedures, Decision-Making, Serbian Armed Forces, United States Army, comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Effective troop leading procedures (TLPs) are critical for tactical success, yet the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) doctrine, though originally modeled on the U.S. Army’s framework, retains legacy elements drawn from Yugoslav and domestic practice that can constrain responsiveness. This blend raises an operational question: how can SAF preserve doctrinal continuity while optimizing decision speed and lower-level initiative inherited from its American template?

The subject of this study is focused on contemporary comparison of U.S. Army and SAF Troop leading procedures at company and platoon level. Its objectives are to (1) catalog and contrast each doctrine’s step-by-step process and codified sub-steps; (2) evaluate the

impact of SAF’s added legacy procedures on planning flexibility and command tempo; and (3) develop targeted recommendations to refine SAF TLPs-leveraging proven U.S. methods and streamlined legacy practices, for improved agility and coherence in joint operations.

To achieve these aims, the research employs qualitative comparative analysis, doctrinal document review, systematic codification of procedural elements, and structured tabular mapping of sub-steps. This methodology will show how SAF’s adaptations augment or impede the core U.S. model and guide actionable enhancements to its troop leading doctrine.

2. Comparative Analysis

For the sake of comparison, the steps of the Troop leading procedures in the Serbian Armed Forces are marked with the acronym SAF and are numbered in a way that mostly corresponds (some steps do not have a fixed place in the sequence, such as commander's reconnaissance and initial movement) to the order of steps during the procedure. Specifically, they are marked as follows: Task reception and initial assessment (SAF-1.0), Issue warning order (SAF-2.0), Make a tentative plan (SAF-3.0.0), Commander's reconnaissance (SAF-4.0), Decision-making (SAF-5.0), Plan refinement (SAF-6.0), Issue Operation order (SAF-7.0). As for the Commander's Procedure in the United States Army, the steps are marked with the acronym USA and are numbered as follows: Receive mission (USA-1.0), Issue warning order (USA-2.0), Make a tentative plan (USA-3.0.0), Initiate movement (USA-4.0), Conduct reconnaissance (USA-5.0), Complete the plan (USA-6.0), Issue Operation order (USA-7.0), Supervise and refine (USA-8.0) (Figure 1).

In both procedures, **the first step** emphasizes the reception and understanding of the task/mission, as well as the clarification of any uncertainties if they exist. However, differences arise in certain sub-steps, such as in one procedure where there is an additional action performed by the commander during the assessment process.

SAF-1.1 and USA-1.1: Both sub-steps carry the same title and essentially deal with similar assessments, with the difference being that in the American doctrine, the situation assessment is more detailed regarding the mission as a distinct factor of the situation. They attempt to provide a basic formulation of the mission statement, from the information available to them, which is generally insufficient for a complete mission statement, they formulate an initial mission statement that is further updated and refined throughout the procedure.

Another major difference is that American doctrine emphasizes the use of the reverse

planning method, through which the time available for planning is determined more precisely. In both sub-steps, the one-third/two-thirds rule is applied, meaning one-third of the time available is allocated to the commander for planning and issuing orders, while the remaining two-thirds are given to subordinates for their own preparations until readiness [1, 2].

The second step in both procedures is titled: *Issue the Warning Order* (SAF-2.0 and USA-2.0).

The tendency to issue the Warning Order as early as possible, without waiting for further information in order to initiate planning and preparations at subordinate levels, is present in both doctrines. Subordinates are updated with supplementary information through the issuance of additional Warning Orders in both armies.

The key difference is that the U.S. Armed Forces use the five-paragraph format for Warning Orders, whereas the Serbian Armed Forces apply extended version which, in addition to the five paragraphs (formulated somewhat differently) includes a section with information on the enemy [1, 2].

The third step in both procedures shares the same title: *Make a Tentative Plan* (SAF-3.0.0 and USA-3.0.0). One of the key differences is that SAF-3.0 includes the initial movement as a sub-step, whereas in the U.S. doctrine, the Troop leading procedures treat the initial movement as a separate step.

The development of the **tentative plan** in both doctrines is based on **mission analysis** (SAF-3.1.0, USA-3.1.0), which is significantly more comprehensive than the initial assessment from the first step. A key difference in mission analysis is that in USA-3.1.0, which follows the METT-TC(I) model, there is a distinct sub-step for mission assessment, as well as "information considerations," which are not standalone factors but are integrated throughout all other factors [1, 2, 3, 4].

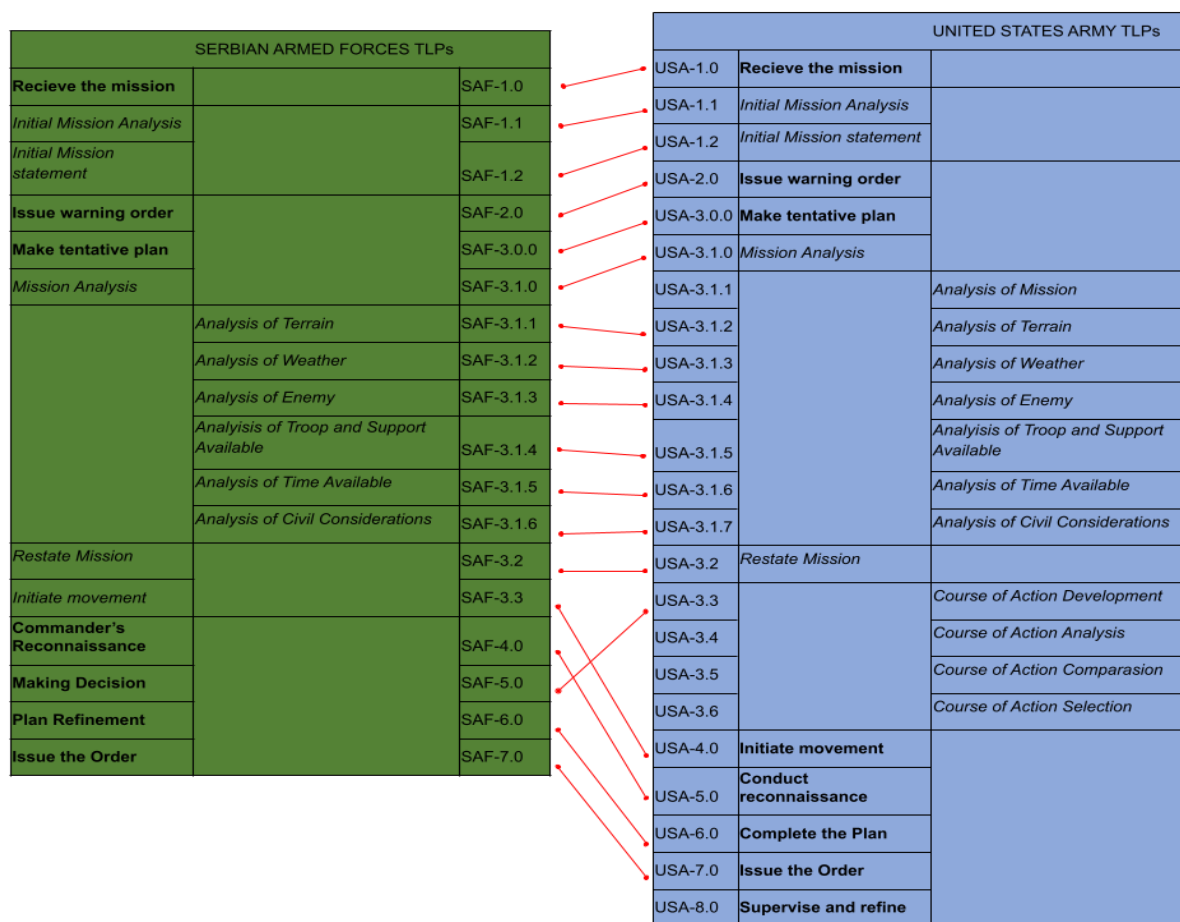


Figure 1: Comparative analysis of the Troop Leading Procedures in SAF and USA – Group of codified steps and sub-steps
Source: Author Mihailo Mijić

Mission assessment (USA-3.1.1) in the Serbian Armed Forces doctrine corresponds to the analysis of higher headquarter's orders conducted before assessing mission factors, consistent with USA-3.1.1. Both doctrines evaluate similar elements, but with differences: USA-3.1.1 assesses the missions of adjacent, supporting, and supported units and their relationship to the higher plan, which SAF does not. SAF, on the other hand, includes classification of tasks into specified and decisive, not mentioned in USA-3.1.1. Additionally, at the end of the mission assessment, in SAF the commander informs subordinates of the conclusions for further action, which is also not specified in USA-3.1.1 [4]. In addition to the previously mentioned points, differences also exist in certain individual assessments. **The assessment of**

the enemy (SAF-3.1.1 and USA-3.1.2) includes disposition, strength, capabilities, organization, as well as recent activities, all of which are considered essential in both doctrines. In the doctrine of the Serbian Armed Forces, only a concise framework for enemy assessment is presented, whereas the U.S. doctrine provides more extensive explanations and methods to assist the commander in the assessment process. Throughout the entire assessment phase, USA-3.1.2 relies on the “Enemy Situation Template” (SITE MP), which represents the final product of the enemy assessment and serves as the basis for the commander’s planning. In the SAF doctrine, this may be equated to the “possible courses of action,” which are mentioned in the assessment, though without further elaboration [1, 3, 4]. **The assessment of terrain** (SAF-3.1.2 and

USA-3.1.3) and **meteorological conditions** (SAF-3.1.3 and USA-3.1.4) is addressed jointly in both procedures due to their direct interdependence. Both procedures rely on the format of the five military aspects of terrain, for each aspect, a clear definition is provided along with its individual importance or impact on the unit's mission. The doctrinal difference lies in the fact that, in the SAF doctrine, the explanations are more concise and specific, with defined classifications, while in the U.S. doctrine, examples and the explanatory method are more frequently employed.

As for meteorological conditions, they are assessed in both doctrines through the following aspects of weather: visibility, cloud cover, wind, precipitation, temperature, humidity, and others as required. Both doctrines also emphasize the impact of meteorological conditions on soldiers, equipment, and support assets [1, 2, 3, 5].

In both doctrines, **the Assessment of Troops and Support available** (SAF-3.1.4 and USA-3.1.5) follows the same logic as the analysis of the enemy, through the identification of capabilities, weaknesses, strengths, morale, equipment, and support. The only difference lies in the fact that USA-3.1.5 provides commanders with a method for evaluating factors such as ammunition, personnel, fuel status, combat systems, and similar elements. For this purpose, evaluation ratings are used: green (85%+ – fully operational), yellow (70–84% – mostly operational) etc [1, 4].

Regarding **the Assessment of Time Available** (SAF-3.1.5 and USA-3.1.6), both doctrines emphasize that the commander must continuously evaluate and adapt the use of time. They equally highlight the importance of analyzing time in relation to space, meteorological conditions, and assigned tasks.

The fundamental difference is that SAF-3.1.5 is primarily focused on narrower tactical timeframes required for planning, order development, rehearsals, and movement.

In contrast, USA-3.1.6 encompasses the entire operational process [1, 4].

In **the Assessment of the Civil Environment** (SAF-3.1.6 and USA-3.1.7), both doctrines agree that the presence and condition of the civilian population represent an important factor influencing the success of a military operation. They also emphasize the necessity of understanding or meeting the basic needs of civilians: water, food, energy, shelter, and healthcare.

The main difference lies in the fact that USA-3.1.7 is significantly more detailed, as it employs the ASCOPE model (Areas, Structures, Capabilities, Organizations, People, and Events) to evaluate the impact of each factor individually on the success of the operation.

Regarding sources of information, SAF-3.1.6 clearly defines them as civil-military cooperation and open sources, whereas USA-3.1.7 implies that the analysis is based on data from all levels [1, 3, 6].

The Mission Statement (SAF-3.2.0 and USA-3.2.0) in both doctrines must answer the same questions: who, what, when, where, and why. Additionally, the formulation of the mission in the Operational Orders is almost identical in both.

The final product of mission analysis, or what the commander needs to understand after the completion of mission analysis, differs significantly between the two doctrines. USA-3.1.0 must meet expanded requirements beyond those foreseen in the mission factors. Specifically, the U.S. doctrine recognizes: key reference points crucial for mission success; the type, nature, and likely location of contact with the enemy (engagements) in the depth of the operation; communications and electronic warfare activities (just for the platoon level commanders), all as separate requirements distinct from the mission factors. SAF-3.1.0 assumes that these same requirements are addressed through the analysis of mission factors but does not recognize them as separate requirements [1, 2, 4].

Following mission analysis, the SAF doctrine briefly states that the commander, in accordance with tactical principles, develops one feasible Course of Action (COA) based on the assessed situation. In contrast, USA-3.3 to USA-3.6 elaborates a comprehensive process for developing, analyzing, comparing, and selecting COAs: from applying screening criteria (feasible, acceptable, suitable etc), through analysis of relative combat power and generation of multiple options, to detailed force allocation and development of an operational concept.

SAF simplifies the process by focusing on the selection of a single “feasible” option, whereas USA emphasizes the importance of developing at least two alternatives and using wargaming methods to test and compare each COA. SAF places emphasis on efficiency and speed in decision-making, while USA balances operational tempo with the need to create and compare multiple options to ensure greater mission success [1, 2, 3, 4].

The initial movement in both doctrines refers to repositioning the unit for mission execution, but the approaches differ. SAF-3.3 emphasizes timely movement based on the tentative plan, listing transportation means (march, motorization, railway, vessels, aircraft) and requiring superior approval [7]. In contrast, USA-4.0 treats initial movement as a separate step in the Troop Leading Procedures, focusing on movement phases and locations (TAA, combat/attack positions, new operational areas) without detailing transport means or approval processes [1, 4, 8].

The fourth step of the Troop Leading Procedures in the Serbian Army is called: *Commander's Reconnaissance* (SAF-4.0). In the U.S. procedure, the step with a similar meaning is the **fifth** one, called: *Conduct reconnaissance* (USA-5.0). The difference in naming arises because the step in the U.S. procedure refers to a general concept of reconnaissance, which includes other forms of reconnaissance in addition to

the commander's, which is not the case in the Serbian Army procedure.

Both procedures emphasize the importance of the commander's personal situational awareness, if tactically feasible.

However, SAF-4.0 does not outline alternatives for gathering information when personal reconnaissance is not possible. In contrast, USA-5.0 details alternatives: map reconnaissance, delegating reconnaissance to subordinate commanders while the commander continues planning - saving time and improving subordinates' terrain understanding.

SAF explains why reconnaissance may occur before or after decision-making. In USA doctrine, decision-making involves adopting a Course of Action (COA), not treated as a separate step but developed and refined through reconnaissance. The final COA is adopted in the “Complete the Plan” step, implying reconnaissance always precedes final decisions and informs potential adjustments.

SAF notes commander's reconnaissance is usually conducted from a single point. USA doctrine lists several personal reconnaissance methods: movement across the line of departure, AO reconnaissance, walking from the front line through the platoon's area, or from fighting positions along enemy avenues of approach. It also allows supplementing personal reconnaissance with patrols or subordinate-led efforts to identify enemy positions [1, 2, 3].

The fifth step in the Serbian Armed Forces doctrine, titled *Making Decision* (SAF-5.0), corresponds to what the U.S. doctrine defines as *Course of Action (COA) Development* (U.S.-3.3.1). Both steps are focused on the *execution* paragraph of the Operations Order, essentially trying to answer the question: *How to accomplish the mission*.

The main difference lies in the level of detail and methodological guidance. SAF-5.0 provides only the structure and content of the commander's decision (COA), without explaining a method that would

assist the commander in reaching that decision. In contrast, USA-3.3.1 focuses on each individual step of COA development, thus offering the commander a clear method by which a solution can be more easily found [1, 2, 3].

The sixth step of the Troop Leading Procedures in the Serbian Armed Forces doctrine is called *Plan Refinement* (SAF-6.0), while in the U.S. doctrine it is referred to as *Complete the plan* (USA-6.0). Despite the slight difference in naming, both steps focus on the same activity: transforming the mental concept of mission execution (Course of Action) into a physical document, the Operation Order.

This step in both doctrines emphasizes the creation of visual aids (schematics), the selection of the method and location for issuing the order, as well as defining elements of logistics support and command and control [1, 4].

The seventh step is named the same in both doctrines: Issuing the Operations Order (SAF 7.0 and USA 7.0). SAF 7.0 focuses on the formal structure of the order, defining required content within a standardized five-paragraph format and detailing the commander's responsibilities for its clarity and completeness. USA 7.0 emphasizes delivery, stating that orders should be brief, clear, and persuasive, with attention to trust building, eye contact, and subordinate feedback to ensure understanding.

While SAF 7.0 prioritizes structure and thoroughness, USA 7.0 highlights effective oral presentation, motivation, and unit engagement [1, 2, 4, 8].

Supervise and refine (USA-8.0) is the **eighth step** in the USA Troop Leading Procedures. This step involves continuous oversight of the plan's execution, assessment of unit readiness, and necessary adjustments - often implemented through rehearsals and training. The commander systematically applies various control techniques such as PCC/PCI (Pre-Combat Checks/Inspections) checklists for inspecting equipment and personnel,

interactive rehearsals for practicing key actions, and back-briefs where subordinates restate their tasks to confirm understanding. USA-8.0 ensures that challenges arising during execution are detected and addressed in time, thereby improving the unit's overall effectiveness.

In contrast, SAF refers to oversight and rehearsal within preparatory/warning orders and implies them during execution phases, but these activities are not outlined as a distinct step with a defined methodology and mandatory tools. As a result, commanders lack an explicit guideline for applying specific control methods and do not have standardized rehearsal procedures under realistic combat conditions. Without a formal phase dedicated to control and supervision, such as Monitoring Execution, Rehearsals, and Adjustments, rehearsals and checks that could address operational weaknesses before execution may be skipped, ultimately reducing overall unit effectiveness [1, 2, 3, 4].

3. Conclusion

Comparative analysis of the SAF and U.S. Army Troop Leading Procedures has shown that while share a broadly similar structure centered on task receipt, planning, reconnaissance, and execution, there are critical differences in how certain steps are implemented, particularly in the areas of planning methodology, decision-making, and refinement processes.

One of the most significant findings concerns the development of Courses of Action (COAs). In U.S. TLPs, COA development is not delayed but integrated early into Step 3 - "Make a Tentative Plan" - which includes the generation of multiple options, comparison, and war-gaming. In contrast, SAF places this function primarily within Step 5 "Donošenje odluke" (Decision-making). This sequencing makes SAF's approach appear more linear and less iterative, often leading to the consideration of a single COA rather than fostering flexibility and adaptability through

comparative analysis. Relocating COA development earlier in the process could substantially enhance the quality of SAF planning by enabling more informed, deliberate decisions based on multiple feasible options.

Another key difference lies in the use of structured planning aids. The U.S. system extensively employs templates and analytical tools such as METT-TC, SITEMP, and ASCOPE to systematize mission analysis and ensure that both enemy and civil considerations are accounted for. SAF performs similar analyses but does so in a less formalized way, which may lead to inconsistencies in planning depth or focus. Incorporating structured frameworks could improve the clarity and thoroughness of SAF's operational planning.

While both systems emphasize reconnaissance and preparation, the U.S. doctrine more explicitly outlines reconnaissance responsibilities and emphasizes feedback loops through mechanisms such as rehearsals and back-

briefs. SAF includes these elements but does not distinguish them with a dedicated refinement phase. The inclusion of a step equivalent to "Supervise and Refine" would strengthen SAF's ability to adjust plans based on evolving conditions and to ensure subordinate readiness through structured checks and rehearsals.

In summary, the SAF TLP system is well-founded and effective but could benefit from refinements inspired by U.S. doctrine. Most notably, shifting COA development into the earlier planning phase, supported by analytical tools and a formal refinement process, would enhance planning flexibility, decision quality, and operational coherence without disrupting the essential logic of SAF's existing model.

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