
(From left) Command Sgt. Maj. Isaia T. Vimoto, command sergeant major of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC) and 18th Airborne Corps and Command Sgt. Maj. Mohammad Ali Hussaini, command sergeant major of the Ground Forces Command, Afghan National Army (ANA), discuss issues between briefings at the Initial Best Practices Seminar held at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, March 27, 2014. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jarred Woods)

# Understanding Levels of Command Authority

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Command is integral to military operations, but is not just a simple surface structure. It has different levels and missions as the commander's intent is passed down through multiple echelons. This article will analyze command relationships and authorities in the joint environment, use historical vignettes to demonstrate how different aspects of command were used both successfully and unsuccessfully in wartime environments, and highlight how senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) can best affect the battlefield.

## Command Relationships

The relationship between command, unity of command, and unity of effort is symbiotic. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2013) state, "Command is central to all military action, and unity of command is central to unity of effort" (p. xx). Modern commanders, however, find themselves in a unique position as they rarely operate unilaterally, nor are they confined to working solely with their respective branch. Units today often operate in dynamic environments characterized by multi-domain operations. Current and future operations may be joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, or some combination of the above (Prewitt, 2020). Therefore, modern command authority requires a coalition of supporting members working in unison. The following sections describe U.S. military command philosophies and how they apply to modern operations.



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## Unity of Command

Unity of command applies when all forces work for a single commander who directs them in pursuit of a common purpose (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020). Effective unity of command can be traced back to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant as he took responsibility as supreme commander over Union forces, organizing U.S. military assets under his leadership (Hope, 2008). Similarly, during the 1918 German offensive, the Supreme War Council granted French Gen. Ferdinand Foch supreme command over French, American, and British forces. Gen. John J. Pershing, who often disagreed with Foch, later said he believed unity of effort was only possible with a supreme commander (Hope, 2008).

More recently, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf exemplified unity of command during the Persian Gulf War. Ian Hope (2008) states, "Schwarzkopf was left alone to function as the singular 'combatant commander,' and was the center-point that ensured singularity of purpose, and simplicity in structure of command" (p. 7). Schwarzkopf, like Grant and Foch, united his forces toward a commonly recognized objective.

### Obstacles to Unity of Command

However, unity of command in multinational operations may not always be possible. Nations across the world operate under different authorities and leadership, which may create obstacles to a smooth command structure. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020) state, "During multinational operations and interagency coordination, unity of command may not always be possible, but unity of effort, the coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, becomes paramount for successful unified action" (p. V-5). An example of this challenge took place in Afghanistan in 2006 when Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan passed control of ground operations to the International Security Assistance Force. This caused the operations to split between commanders in charge of U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Central Command, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, causing significant logistical problems (Hope, 2008).

Another challenge U.S. forces face with unity of command and unity of effort during conflicts is continuity of personnel and experience. In the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. headquarters elements rotated their forces at roughly 12-month intervals. As command teams and staff rotated out from the operational-level joint task force headquarters so did their hard-fought combat experience and insight. New teams replaced them with new ideas and often limited combat experience.

Forsyth (2011) recommends a change to that structure, arguing:

> Major headquarters could serve extended tours in order to maintain continuity of effort. Or, major headquarters could modify the ways in which they conduct transitions of authority to sustain continuity of operations. Both have inherent advantages and disadvantages, but regardless of which approach is adopted we must improve the way we conduct business to facilitate a steady rate of progress in Afghanistan – or in any other theater now or in the future – to avoid the pendulum effect. (pg. 1)

He goes on to recommend two-year tours for all operational and strategic headquarters, with extended leave periods each year (Forsyth, 2011).

### Current Unity Efforts

In an effort to prepare for future conflict and "conduct operational planning, execute mission command over allocated and assigned forces, and promote interoperability" (Pilgrim, 2020, para. 3), the Army established several regionally aligned corps' headquarters. I Corps is the operational-level headquarters in the Pacific; III Corps is the forward headquarters in Iraq, managing Operation Inherent Resolve; and the recently reactivated V Corps operates a forward headquarters in the European theater (Pilgrim, 2020). This concept of regionally aligned forces, with a continuous presence in a geographical area, better provides sustained unity of command and unity of effort.

U.S. Army Sgt. Maj. Todd Crawford, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, speaks to Soldiers during a visit to Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Ghazni province, Afghanistan, April 19, 2014. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Dixie Rae Liwanag)

## Command Authorities

In a military force, there are many important positions beyond just the supreme commander. As the supreme commander passes down commander's intent, that intent is then disseminated throughout the different echelons resulting in different levels of command authority. These command authorities are *combatant command* (CCMD), *operational control* (OPCON), and *tactical control* (TACON) (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020).


The senior enlisted leader for the International Security Assistance Force, Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas R. Capel, helps pass out certificates to the newly promoted sergeants major of the Afghan National Security Forces, Kabul, Afghanistan, June 5, 2013. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Dustin Payne)

### Combatant Command

Combatant Command (CCMD) is at the highest levels of authority and encompasses both operational control (OPCON) and tactical control (TACON), which are inherent within CCMD. Additionally, CCMD gives commanders direct liaison with Department of Defense agencies (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020).

CCMD began out of a need to synthesize joint activities. In the early and mid-1900s, individual services often put their respective service's needs, budget, and reputation ahead of the joint mission, which created service rivalries. In Vietnam, for instance, the services ran multiple separate air campaigns with little to no joint coordination (Schlight, 1999).

In 1986, Congress enacted the Goldwater Nichols Act, which forced the separate services to work jointly. According to the Rand Corporation:

> Its passage resulted from dissatisfaction on the part of Congress and other influential policymakers with what they perceived as the U.S. military's stubborn refusal to deal with long-festering problems. These problems included an inability on the part of the military services to mount effective joint operations and an inefficient, unwieldy, and at times corrupt system for acquiring weapon systems. (Nemfakos et al., 2010, p. xi)

The act was the impetus behind much of today's joint doctrine and joint force structure, and helped usher in the concept of combatant command authority (Bryant, 1993). Today, as an example of CCMD, U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) would exercise combatant command authority by mobilizing thousands of service members from across the services in response to a homeland crisis.

### Operational Control

Operational control, as defined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2017), "is command authority that may be exercised by commanders at any echelon at or below the level of CCMD to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces" (p. III-5). Unlike CCMD, the law does not distinctly define OPCON; instead, it is an authority inherent in CCMD (Berry, 2010).

A recent example of OPCON in practice is 1st Infantry Division Combat Aviation Brigade's deployment to Europe. The brigade arrived in Dunkirk, France, on March 8, 2021, as part of a deployment to Europe in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve (Northcutt, 2021) where they conducted training events with NATO partners and allies. The brigade's home unit is the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas; however, the 1st Cavalry Division (Forward) is the European theater-level division headquarters. The 1st Cavalry Division (Forward) has OPCON over the brigade during their deployment to the European theater of operations.

There are restrictions to OPCON. Combatant commanders cannot delegate OPCON outside their command but can delegate it within their commands. Berry (2010) explains this as "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" (p. 64).

### Tactical Control

The last level of command authority is TACON, which, at the most basic level, is troop-level control often inherent in OPCON. For instance, a company commander sending orders via radio to platoon leaders in the field is a level of TACON. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2017) state, "TACON is an authority over assigned or attached forces or commands, or military capability or forces, made available for tasking" (p. III-5).

Conducted down to the lowest level, TACON is an important level of command; complementing combatant command and OPCON to achieve the national military

strategy. Moreover, joint senior enlisted advisors have the most expertise in implementing TACON.

## Importance

Senior noncommissioned officers in the joint force are advisors to the staff and commander. In order to be effective, they must understand the principles of command and command authorities as well as the commander's intent (Department of the Army, 2019). As senior leaders who best understand the dynamics of their formations, senior NCOs with years of experience are in a unique position to offer candid assessments and opinions to the commander and staff. Moreover, they can identify areas of concern regarding command principles and command authorities allowing the commander to best implement mission command throughout the force.

## Conclusion

It is important for current and future senior NCOs to understand the levels of command authority, as well as how to build unity of command and unity of effort to quickly and seamlessly create cohesion and mutual trust when working in multi-domain operations as part of a joint force. Creating positive command relationships and knowing their roles and responsibilities will help NCOs create a unified force ready for any challenge the future may bring. ■

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