



U.S. Army Capt. Shawn Thompson, right, talks with Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Moore, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, while watching for enemy personnel during a joint clearing operation with Concerned Local Citizens in Dura'iya, Iraq, Jan. 28, 2008. (Photo courtesy of Defense Imagery Management Operations Center)

# Command Authority

## A Guide for Senior Enlisted Leaders

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**W**ithin joint operations, subordinates, staff, and senior enlisted leaders (SELs) must understand command authorities to appreciate how unity of command complements unity of effort. This understanding is paramount because joint operations include two or more services, agencies, organizations, and/or nations. This article analyzes the three general principles of command relationships – command, unity of command, and unity of effort, and then compares these concepts with the command authorities of combatant command (COCOM), operational control (OPCON), and tactical control (TACON). Understanding

these concepts will empower SELs to better understand and embrace their role.

### Command

The art of command allows commanders and advising SELs to organize and employ military forces and manage risks while giving commanders the ability to delegate authority and promote decentralized execution (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017; 2020). The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) (2018) define command as “the authority a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment” (p. II-1). Joint doctrine states that

joint commanders handle their personnel's health, warfare, morale, and discipline (JCS, 2018). Since joint commanders cannot be everywhere, they empower their SELs to carry out their orders and intent. This unity of command ensures commanders can effectively control operations.

## Unity of Command

The JCS (2017) states, “unity of command requires that two commanders may not exercise the same command relationship over the same force at any one time” (p. V-1). While an organization may have more than one commander, each commander may not simultaneously exercise the same command authority. Unity of command enables a single commander to exercise authority over forces to accomplish assigned tasks.

During World War I (WWI), the Supreme War Council gave Gen. Ferdinand Foch command over French, U.S., and British forces to provide a single purpose and direction to finally gain momentum against enemy forces (Hope, 2008). Foch's example demonstrates why a single commander is vital to achieving unity of command in a theater, especially when elements come from other organizations or nations.

On the other end of the spectrum, joint leaders forgot this critical lesson when Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) passed operations to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2006. The mission change split operations between the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) (Hope, 2008). Operational uncertainty and command ambiguity produced challenges to not only leaders and subordinates, but also SEL planners.

### The SEL's role in Unity of Command

A SEL plays a significant role in operations and plans based on their experience and expertise. SELs help service members understand guidance and ensure units use service members appropriately. In 2006, with operations split between various commanders exercising the same command authorities, it was difficult for planners to know who handled what resourcing requests. In this case, SELs must identify when planners and subordinate commands are unsure of command relationships and communicate with higher headquarters to establish a hierarchy.

## Unity of Effort

The JCS states unity of effort is critical to planning and underlies successful joint operations at the operational and strategic levels (JCS, 2018; 2020). The JCS (2017) defines unity of effort as “coordination through



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Jason Fernandez (right), a Soldier with 3rd Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Airborne Infantry Division, prepares his troops for air assault training with the Royal Thai Army as part of Cobra Gold 2022. CG 22 is the 41st iteration of the international training exercise that supports readiness and emphasizes coordination on civic action, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. This annual event takes place at various locations throughout the Kingdom of Thailand and increases the capability, capacity, and interoperability of partnered nations while simultaneously reinforcing our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Brendon T. Green-Daring)

cooperation and common interests” (p. V-1), while the Department of State (DOS) defines it “as a cooperative concept that refers to coordination and communication among USG organizations toward the same common goals for success” (JCS, 2018, p. I-9). Unity of effort emphasizes each participant's common objectives and shared interests since each may report to different leaders and have different end states.

In 2013, the Joint Chiefs of Staff realized more should be done to facilitate the Department of Defense's (DOD's) ability to work within a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational (JIIM) environment. The JCS (2013b) published Unity of Effort Framework Solution Guide in consultation with other agencies. Other U.S. agencies have similar unity of effort concerns and associated frameworks. Because emergencies can happen to anyone at any time, the Department of Human Services (DHS) often requires the help of various local, state, private sector, volunteer organizations, and other departments and agencies for assistance. The DHS (2019) National Response Framework is an excellent example of achieving unity of effort through unified action focusing on collaboration between the public and private sectors (pp. 1-5).

### The SEL's Role in Unity of Effort

Often, SELs may support JIIM operations at home and abroad. It is vital for them to quickly research all parties involved to get an overall understanding of the environment and situation. Understanding allows SELs to identify friction points for competing requirements



from personnel reporting to their parent organizations (JCS, 2018). They must understand each parties' roles, responsibilities, objectives, concerns, strengths, and limitations to better provide recommendations on employment. SELs should also assist the joint commander in conducting an ongoing assessment since strategic guidance and changes in the operational environment occur rapidly (JCS, 2020). Due to SELs' freedom of movement, they can interact with key individuals informally to assess the environment and help meet individual needs. Often the most influential and knowledgeable individuals are not in leadership positions, so SELs should interact with others daily and assess the overall climate to ensure mission success.

### Levels of Authority

Successful application of various command relationships helps joint commanders maintain the unity of command (JCS, 2018). Each level of authority prescribes responsibilities that help provide direction and support to assigned or attached forces (JCS, 2017). While other authorities outside command relationships do exist, such as administrative control (ADCON), coordinating authority, and direct liaison authorized (JCS, 2017), this article focuses on the relationship between commanders when conducting operations. The unified command plan (UCP) outlines the first level of authority, combatant command.

### Combatant Command

During World War II (WWII), dissatisfaction in the Pacific theater caused enormous friction between Army and Navy commanders. Eventually, in 1946, the first compromise emerged, establishing seven unified commands (JCS, 2013a). Title 10, United States Code, Section 164 gives combatant command (COCOM) to the commander of combatant commands (CCMD) as outlined in the UCP (JCS, 2017 p. V-2).

COCOM gives combatant commanders (CCDR) the authority to perform functions needed to organize and employ assigned forces based on their functional or geographical responsibilities. Unique responsibilities include "planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process input, assignment of subordinate commanders, relationships with Department of Defense agencies, and directive authority for logistics" (JCS, 2017, p. V-2). Combatant commanders cannot delegate COCOM to subordinate commanders. Therefore, an understanding of what COCOM does and does not govern is important for subordinate joint commanders when determining training requirements, logistical support, and personnel requirements.

An example of a COCOM is in Stuttgart, Germany, where the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) headquarters resides. EUCOM exercises COCOM over Europe-based service components primarily by delegating operational control (OPCON) and tactical control (TACON).

### The SEL's Role in Combatant Command

SELs play a significant role using their experience working at the tactical level to ensure warfighters are not only resourced but used appropriately during joint operations. SELs serving under a geographical combatant commander (GCC) need to understand COCOM because specific support requirements derive from the GCC (operational) versus service-specific channels. When SELs participate in training meetings, they must assess how training should nest with an upcoming deployment or operation. CCDRs give authoritative direction over joint training (JCS, 2018 p. III-3), so when SELs are concerned training is not in line with their CCDR's guidance, they can seek guidance from the CCDR's staff. Since CCMDs cannot delegate COCOM, they exercise command using OPCON.

### Operational Control

OPCON is inherent in COCOM. At or below the level of CCMD, commanders can delegate OPCON to subordinate joint force commanders (JFCs) to accomplish assigned tasks (JCS, 2017, p. V-6). OPCON gives JFCs the authority to delegate OPCON or TACON further, give direction over subordinates, employ forces, suspend or recommend reassignment of officers within the command, and establish support relationships between subordinate commanders. OPCON does not include discipline, administration, and internal reorganization



Alaska Army National Guard pilots, assigned to Joint Task Force-Alaska, fly out to the villages of Golovin and Koyuk, Alaska, Sept. 27, 2022. More than 130 members of the Alaska Organized Militia, which includes members of the Alaska National Guard, Alaska State Defense Force and Alaska Naval Militia, were activated following a disaster declaration issued Sept. 17 after the remnants of Typhoon Merbok caused dramatic flooding across more than 1,000 miles of Alaskan coastline. (Alaska National Guard photo by Pfc. Bradford Jackson)

(JCS, 2017, p. V-6-8). Since CCMDs cannot delegate or transfer COCOM, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) plays a unique role in exercising OPCON of SOF in Europe.

USSOCOM, as a functional combatant command, exercises COCOM over all active component and some reserve component special operations forces (SOF) worldwide (JCS, 2014). USSOCOM maintains COCOM through a theater or joint special operations task force or theater special operations command (TSOC) such as SOCEUR. USSOCOM gives OPCON of a TSOC to the GCC. The GCC leads special operations in their AOR through the TSOC commander (JCS, 2014, pp. xii-xiv).

### The SEL's Role in SOF

As a SOF SEL, it is essential to understand SOF capabilities and limitations and understand what the GCC can do with these forces. In garrison, SOF units report to USSOCOM's service component command (JCS, 2014). JCS (2014) states that when deployed, USSOCOM passes OPCON to the TSOC to command and control on behalf of the GCC. OPCON allows the GCC to direct all special operations and activities without changing SOF composition. Unity of command in special operations is complex, so a SEL must rely on the TSOC commander as the senior SOF commander in theater. Understanding where OPCON resides also helps the SEL gain resources needed for SOF units which differ between the GCC and USSOCOM. Logistics is a critical vulnerability since most SOF units can sustain for 15 days once employed (JCS, 2014). Since many military units reside in the continental U.S., they often deploy to theaters where standing organizations assume tactical control of forces.

### Tactical Control

JCS (2017) describes TACON as a level of command authority that limits commanders to giving detailed direction over designated forces to accomplish specific

missions or tasks (p. V-7). JCS Detailed directions often include movement, maneuver, and the application of force or combat power. The unit's higher headquarters maintains OPCON and ADCON over its forces. TACON does not allow commanders to employ the designated forces in a manner that contradicts the established agreement. Further, TACON does not give commanders the authority to reorganize the force or provide logistical support (JCS, 2017, p. V-8).

Often, a GCC requests SOF lead foreign internal defense (FID) programs. Not every TSOC has OPCON of permanent forces. JCS (2014) states that when SOF rotates into a theater for a specific exercise or FID operation, the TSOC assumes TACON of those rotating forces. When a TSOC has TACON, it cannot employ the SOF unit for other purposes outside of the approved deployment order/tasking without seeking further approval.

A TSOC SEL is heavily involved in exercise and operational planning. When SOF units come into the theater to support a GCC requirement, SOF units can typically self-sustain for limited durations, so TACON may not be a suitable arrangement for a rotating element. A SEL should recommend that planners push for the TSOC to gain OPCON of rotational forces to support their needs better.

### Conclusion

This article's analysis of joint doctrine demonstrates that applying and understanding the application of the three general principles of command relationships – command, unity of command, and unity of effort – with the command authorities of COCOM, OPCON, and TACON enables joint operations. SELs must understand how the levels of authority lead to the unity of command and assist in applying them appropriately. Unity of command enables unity of effort by providing transparent chains of command. SELs are often the backbone of joint operations, empowering commanders and units with their expertise and experience. ■

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