



Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician conducts post-mission analysis on sonar imagery that IVER unmanned underwater vehicle collected during Exercise Clear Horizon, Republic of Korea, November 2, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Daniel Rolston)

The Bureaucratization of the U.S. Military Decisionmaking Process

By Milan Vego

In forming the plan of a campaign, it is requisite to foresee everything the enemy may do, and to be prepared with the necessary means to counteract it.

—NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, *MILITARY MAXIM II*

Making a decision is one of the most important responsibilities of a military commander at any level of command and is especially critical in combat. Traditionally, combat decisions are made by using the commander's estimate of the situation. The term *estimate* highlights the

central role that the commander has in the entire decisionmaking process; the commander, and nobody else, should be solely responsible for making a decision. Hence, the commander must be deeply involved in each step of the estimate process. Making a decision is largely an art and not a science. The

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Table 1. Estimate Formats for U.S. Services and Joint Force

Service	Army	Marine Corps	Navy	Air Force	Joint Doctrine
Document	FM 6-0	MCWP 5-10	NWP 5-01	AFMAN 10-40 V2	JP 3-0
Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receipt of Mission • Mission Analysis • Course of Action (COA) Development • COA Analysis (Wargame) • COA Comparison • COA Approval • Orders Production, Dissemination, and Transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem Framing • COA Development • COA Wargame • COA Comparison and Decision • Orders Development • Transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission Analysis • COA Development • COA Analysis (Wargame) • COA Comparison and Decision • Plan or Order Development • Transition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission • Situation and COAs • Analysis of Opposing COAs • Comparison of Own COAs • Decision • Concept of Operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning Initiation • Mission Analysis • COA Development • COA Analysis and Wargaming • COA Comparison • COA Approval • Plan or Order Development

commander’s experience and judgment are the most critical factors in making a sound decision.

The Problem

The decisionmaking process as described in U.S. doctrinal documents violates some key tenets of German-style mission command (*Auftragstaktik*). Among other things, the mission statement consists of essential tasks and purpose(s) instead of being identical to the objective. The commander’s intent should be far more important than the mission, but it is not. The commander’s intent is too wordy. It includes elements that do not belong there. It also resembles a long list of tasks or even concept of operations (CONOPS). Since the early 1990s, the trend has been to progressively clutter each step of the estimate with poorly related or even unrelated considerations. This, in turn, has made the decisionmaking process cumbersome, rigid, and time-consuming.

Perhaps the single biggest problem is that the commander’s estimate has become de facto an integral part of the planning process. But it should *not* be. Many elements of planning and staff functions/actions have been meshed with decisionmaking. The result is the blurring or even eliminating distinctions between decisionmaking and planning. Also (and despite the statements in various Service doctrinal documents), the role and importance of a commander in the decisionmaking process have been greatly reduced. Throughout the decisionmaking process, the staff prepares briefings

for the commander for almost every step of the estimate. If a commander is fully involved in the decisionmaking process, however, there would be no need for any of these briefings. Another negative trend is an overemphasis on so-called risk management in almost all the steps of the estimate—apparently, caution is more valued than boldness in action.

Commander’s Estimate

Traditionally, the main method in making a decision is the commander’s estimate of the situation. In generic terms, the commander’s estimate is described as a logical process of reasoning by which a commander considers all the factors affecting a military situation to determine a course of action to accomplish a given mission. The estimate involves a thorough study of all the conditions affecting a given situation.¹ No relevant factors should be omitted or, worse, willfully ignored. Hasty and superficial considerations should be avoided.² All the steps should follow in a logical sequence. Each step should incrementally lead to a decision that, without these steps, could be arrived at only by accident.³ And each step must be justified by that which precedes it.⁴ Afterward, the decision is used as the basis for drafting plans/orders, followed by its execution.⁵ Yet the process in itself will not necessarily result in the best or even a sound decision.⁶

Format vs. Process

A standardized format is highly useful in ensuring that a certain logical process of

reasoning is applied in conducting the estimate of the situation.⁷ The potential danger is that commanders and staffs might become prisoners of the format. There is also often a great temptation to steadily expand scope and the amount of information in the estimate. All this could be avoided if commanders and staffs are focused on the mental process and making a quick and good decision. The format of the estimate should be flexible so that commanders can modify or adapt the form to their particular needs. The relative importance of the elements of the situation should be easily recognized so that the commander is focused on the essential elements of the situation.⁸ Rigidly applying the estimate’s format will invariably lead to a faulty application of the process and may well result in an unsound decision. Clarity of thinking also suffers when more time and effort are spent on formalities rather than on the essence of the estimate.⁹

In conducting the commander’s estimate, what matters most is the mental process itself, not the format used. The commander must weigh all factors bearing on the situation and then arrive at a sound decision in the quickest time possible.¹⁰ The soundness of the estimate ultimately rests on the commander’s earnest thought, mental ability, character, and experience.¹¹

Estimate Formats in the U.S. Military

In the U.S. military, each Service uses a different format for conducting estimates. They have many similarities with

Table 2. Estimate Formats and Solution

Service	U.S. Air Force	German Wehrmacht*	Suggested Solution
Document	JP 3-30	1937	
Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational Description • Purpose of the Operation • References • Description of Military Operations • Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mission b. Situation and Course of Action (COA) c. Analysis of Opposing COA d. Comparison of Friendly COA e. Recommended COA • Remarks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own Mission • Considerations of Own Situation • Assessment of the Enemy Situation • Conclusions • Decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission Analysis • Enemy Options • Friendly Options • Operating Area Estimate • Analysis of the Opposing Options • Comparison of Friendly Options • Decision

*Helmuth Greiner and Joachim Degener, *Taktik im Rahmen des verstärkten Infanterie-Bataillons*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Verlag "Offene Worte," 1937), 25–28.

each other but also many differences. A new version of the same document is issued after only 1 or 2 years after the last version was published. Within each Service, several documents address some aspects of the decisionmaking process. Often, they describe the same issue in very different ways. This, in turn, makes it difficult to know what the commonly accepted view on some aspect of the decisionmaking process is within a given Service. There seems to be less emphasis on warfighting, which is exemplified by the extensive use of the term *adversary* or the *threat* instead of simply *enemy*. If one wants to kill you, is the enemy not a political opponent or adversary? Current decisionmaking documents in the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy encompass six or seven major steps (table 1).¹² Each step consists, in turn, of a relatively large number of substeps. In contrast, estimate formats prior to the 1990s were much simpler and more straightforward.¹³ The Air Force apparently uses older Army methods of conducting the estimate.¹⁴ The Joint Air Estimate, which reflects the Air Force's views, includes five steps of the traditional estimate (table 2). Like the Army, the format in the latest version of the Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, cites seven major steps (table 1).¹⁵

In the Army and Navy, Mission Analysis is the first and most critical step of the decisionmaking process. The Army's Military Decisionmaking Process (MDMP) Handbook and Field

Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, cites not fewer than 18 substeps as part of mission analysis.¹⁶ Obviously, this number is too large. Instead of consisting of relatively few substeps directly related to the derivation of the mission, substeps include several planning and administrative matters (for example, substep 9: Develop Initial Information Collection Plan; substep 10: Update Plan for the Use of Available Time; substep 14: Present the Mission Analysis Briefing). The commander's intent, one of the most critical parts of the Mission Analysis, is barely mentioned. It is listed as substep 15.¹⁷ It is almost an afterthought.

Perhaps the most illogical inclusion is the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) as part of the mission analysis in the latest version of the Army's MDMP Handbook, issued in 2015. Intelligence estimate, however, should be one of the *staff's estimates*, not an integral part of the mission analysis. Once the commander receives the mission from the higher commander, intelligence should focus its efforts to provide all information pertaining to accomplishing the mission. The MDMP Handbook stipulates that IPB should include a "description of the operational environment's effects [by identifying] constraints on potential friendly [courses of actions] COAs, [developing] detailed threat COA models," and so forth.¹⁸ It also explains that the intelligence staff, in collaboration with other staffs, develops initial

priority intelligence requirements, a list of high-value targets and unrefined event templates. IPB should also "provide an understanding of the threat's center of gravity, which then can be exploited by friendly forces."¹⁹ However, the IPB should only collect and evaluate information on enemy forces and the operating area. Clearly, a list of high-value targets is not related to decisionmaking but planning. It is the commander and staff's responsibility to identify the enemy's (and friendly) center of gravity. That critically important responsibility should not be delegated to the intelligence staff.

Several other substeps in the Army's Mission Analysis (for example, Review of Available Assets, Identify Resources Shortfalls) seem premature. Shortfalls in forces are not known until the decision is made and CONOPS is fully developed. Likewise, the Risk Management step is already one of the tests (for acceptability) for each friendly option.²⁰ The Developing Initial Themes and Messages substep belongs to planning, not decisionmaking. The mission analysis briefing is aimed to inform the commander of the results of the staff's analysis of the situation.²¹ Yet one must ask why such a brief is necessary if the commander is in fact deeply involved in the entire process and not a bystander. There is possibly no greater responsibility for a commander but to make decisions on the employment of subordinate combat forces. Mission analysis in Navy Warfare Publication (NWP) 5-01, *Navy*



Soldier, assigned to 2nd Cavalry Regiment, adjusts aim of M777 towed 155mm howitzer, while conducting simulated call for fire missions during Saber Junction 17, at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, May 3, 2017 (U.S. Army/Zachery Perkins)

Planning, consists of many substeps, but not all are directly related to decision-making. For example, the Determining Critical Factors and a Friendly Center of Gravity substep properly belongs to the estimate of enemy situation; also, decisive points play a role in determining methods of how to defeat the enemy's center of gravity. Yet it is a stretch to include it in mission analysis. As in the case of the MDMP Handbook, mission analysis in NWP 5-01 includes a substep on initial risk assessment.²²

In contrast to the Army and Navy, the Marine Corps adopted "design" as an integral part of its decisionmaking process. It even went so far to use the phrase *problem framing* instead of the more traditional *mission analysis*. This decision is hard to understand; the purpose of design is very different from the decisionmaking process. Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-10, *Marine Corps Planning Process*, claims

that design is "appropriate to problem solving at strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Its purpose is to achieve a greater understanding of the environment and the nature of the problem in order to identify the appropriate conceptual solution."²³ Despite these claims, design deals with understanding all aspects of the situation at the respective levels of war. It can provide only *understanding* of the strategic, operational, or tactical situation and thereby create a framework within which the decision-making process would take place.

Mission analysis in MCWP 5-10 includes six substeps. Some belong to traditional mission analysis while others pertain to design (for example, Civil Consideration, Difference Between Existing and Desired Conditions, Information Environment).²⁴ Problem framing is actually an unnatural mix of design elements and those related to decisionmaking. Among other things,

it includes commander's orientation, understanding the environment, analysis of task (specified, implied, essential), analysis of center of gravity, developing assumptions, determining limitations, developing the mission statement, and presenting problem framing briefs.²⁵ Its results are a commander's course of action guidance and issuing a warning order.²⁶ Again, an analysis of the center of gravity should not be part of the mission analysis.

The first step in the Joint Air Estimate is a model of simplicity. It consists of only the joint force commander (JFC) mission statement and deduced Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) mission statement.²⁷

Each Service has a different approach in describing the meaning and content of the commander's intent. This critically important part of the estimate does not have high priority in U.S. doctrine and practice. In German-style mission



Republic of Korea tanks with 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division, head off firing line in formation during Korea Marine Exercise Program 17-6, at SuSong Ri Range, Pohang, Republic of Korea, March 23, 2017 (U.S. Marine Corps/Anthony Morales)

command, the intent was more important than the mission. It was virtually sacrosanct. The intent provided a framework within which a subordinate commander could act in the spirit of the mission issued by the higher commander.²⁸

Although the term *intent* is extensively used by the U.S. military, its true meaning and purpose are not always properly understood. In its simplest terms, the commander's intent is a concise description of the military conditions or the *effect* the commander wants to see *after* the mission is accomplished. The intent should inform subordinate commanders of what needs to be done to achieve success, even if the initially issued orders become obsolete because of unexpected changes.²⁹ Generally, the broader the commander's intent, the greater the room for freedom of action for the subordinate commanders.

A properly formulated commander's intent should only express the (military) endstate. It should not include, as the Army's FM 6-0 (2014) did, the purpose

(or so-called operational content of the mission) and key tasks.³⁰ Adding a long list of key tasks to already existing essential and specified tasks only unnecessarily complicates mission execution. The key tasks are usually larger in number than essential tasks. Moreover, some or most of them might either duplicate or be directly contrary to essential tasks. The commander should not include in the intent the methods (the how) by which subordinate commanders should accomplish their assigned missions. Both key tasks and methods would greatly limit subordinate commanders' abilities to act creatively and exercise initiative. Moreover, they clearly violate the purpose of the commander's intent. The latest version of FM 6-0 has a three-paragraph-long description of the commander's intent. Among other things, it states that the intent is "clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command."³¹ Apparently, the key tasks were dropped.

The intent should not include elements of CONOPS. The intent should reflect the commander's firm belief in the success of the mission. Hence, the intent should not include a discussion of risk that the commander is ready to accept (or not ready to accept).

NWP 5-01 stipulates that the commander's intent should consist of a purpose, method, and endstate.³² Yet properly understood, the intent should consist *solely* of a military endstate. In NWP 5-01, including the purpose and method is redundant. The purpose of the contemplated action is already known and should not be repeated. The method is described as the commander's explanation of the offensive form of maneuver, the alternative defense, or other actions to be used by the force as a whole.³³ Yet this should be clearly seen or implied in the commander's CONOPS.

The Marine Corps seems to have a different understanding of commander's intent than the other Services. For example, the 2014 version of MCWP 5-1

(now MCWP 5-10) explains that the “Commander’s intent is the commander’s personal expression of the purpose of the operation. It must be clear, concise, and easily understood. It *may* [emphasis added] also include end state or conditions that, when satisfied, accomplish the purpose.”³⁴ MCWP 5-1 correctly notes that the

*commander’s intent helps subordinates understand the larger context of their actions and guides them in absence of orders. It allows subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative—when the task assigned is no longer appropriate given the current situation—in a way that is consistent with the higher commander’s aims. This freedom of action, within the framework of the commander’s intent, creates tempo during planning and execution.*³⁵

A major error here is equating intent with the mission’s purpose, that is, with the objective. Only the military endstate can provide that broader framework within which a subordinate commander can have sufficient freedom to act and exercise initiative. The mission itself is inherently much narrower than the properly formulated commander’s intent. It is also incorrect to state that the intent “may” instead of “must” include the endstate. For some reason, the section “Commander’s Initial Intent and Guidance” is omitted in the current version of the same document (MCWP 5-10).

In the Joint Air Estimate, the intent is part of the second step, Situation and Courses of Action. It consists of the JFC’s intent and JFACC’s intent statements, respectively. This step also includes air component objectives and “effects required for their achievement.”³⁶

The most recent version of JP 3-0 (dated January 17, 2017) defines *intent* as the “commander’s clear and concise expression of what the force must do and the conditions the force must establish to accomplish the mission. It includes the purpose, end state and associated risk.” It also states that the commander’s intent supports mission command and allows subordinates the greatest possible

freedom of action.³⁷ The latest version of JP 5-0 (dated June 16, 2017) specifies that the commander’s initial intent should “describe the purpose of the operations, desired strategic end state, military end state, and operational risks associated with campaign or operation.” Moreover, it includes “where the commander will and will not accept risk during the operation.” It also states that intent may include “operational objectives, method, and effects guidance.”³⁸

Clearly, the latest version of JP 5-0 further compounds the problem of the proper understanding of the commander’s intent. For example, it is a major error to include a desired strategic endstate as part of the operational commander’s intent. A properly understood desired strategic endstate encompasses political, diplomatic, military, economic, social, ethnic, religious, and other nonmilitary conditions that the highest political-military leadership wants to see in a part of the theater at the end of hostilities. It is not part of the operational commander’s intent but of strategic guidance formulated and issued by the highest political-military leadership. The operational commander’s intent should contain simply only a military endstate and nothing else. Both JP 3-0 and JP 5-0 include risks as part of the operational commander’s intent. This cannot but further stifle the initiative on the part of a subordinate commander. It is also contrary to the very purpose of the commander’s intent.

The commander should be *solely* responsible for formulating and articulating his intent. However, he should consult with his chief of staff and other staff members before issuing his intent to subordinate commanders.³⁹ Yet the Army’s FM 6-0 (2014) assigns the responsibility for briefing the current mission and commander’s intent to the chief of staff or executive officer.⁴⁰

In articulating intent, the commander should seek input from these subordinate commanders to ensure their full understanding. The intent statement can be written or issued orally. The higher the command echelon, the more likely that the commander’s intent will be provided

in writing or in message format. It should:

- be written in the first-person singular and use compelling language
- fully reflect the personality of the commander
- be read quickly and with full understanding
- be concise so subordinate commanders can remember it⁴¹
- be no longer than four or five sentences⁴²
- be written in clear and precise language⁴³
- be issued to subordinate commanders *two levels down*.⁴⁴

The subordinate commander’s intent, in turn, must support the intent of the higher commander. In the U.S. military, the intent is inserted as subparagraph 3a of an operation plan/order. However, if the true mission command is applied, the intent should follow paragraph 1 (Situation) and ahead of paragraph 2 (Mission).

None of the Service decisionmaking process documents makes a clear distinction between the processes of estimating the enemy and friendly situation and developing, respectively, the enemy and friendly COAs. The emphasis is clearly on developing friendly COAs, which is reflected in the titles of the individual steps for the estimate. For example, the MDMP Handbook contemplates eight substeps in the COA Development step. This includes Assessing Relative Combat Power, Generating Options, Arraying Forces, Developing Broad Concepts, Assigning Headquarters, Developing COA Narratives and Sketches, Conducting COA Briefings, and Selecting or Modifying COAs for Continued Analysis.⁴⁵

One of eight substeps in the Army’s COA Development is to develop a broad concept aimed at describing how friendly forces would accomplish the mission within the commander’s intent. However, this step has little resemblance to the traditional way of describing friendly COAs. It is more like a CONOPS. Among other things, it includes:

- purpose of the operation
- statement where the commander would accept the risk
- identification of critical friendly events and transitions between phases (if the operation is phased)
- designation of reserve, including its location and composition
- information collection activities
- essential stability tasks
- identification of maneuver options that may be developed during an operation
- assignment of subordinate area of operations, scheme of fires, themes, messages (and means of delivery), military deception operations, key control measures, and designation of the operational framework (deep-close-security, main and supporting effort, or decisive-shaping-sustaining, and designation of the decisive operation, along with its task and purpose, linked to how it supports the higher headquarters' concept).⁴⁶

If this template is literally followed, it is difficult to see how to make a clear distinction which friendly COA would offer higher chances of mission accomplishment than the other. Similarly, the step Developing COA Narratives and Sketches is so complex that it defies logic. Among other things, each friendly COA requires a narrative unit, subordinate unit boundaries, line of departure or line of contact, information collection graphics, assembly area, battle positions, strong point, engagements area and objectives, fire support coordination and airspace coordinating measures, main effort, location of command posts or template locations, and population concentration.⁴⁷ This in essence is a mini-plan, not a description of a friendly COA. This step of the estimate also envisages a COA briefing.⁴⁸

The NWP 5-01 step COA Development includes analyzing relative combat power, generating COA options, testing for validity, recommending command and control relationships, preparing COA sketches and narratives, and preparing COA briefings.⁴⁹ COA sketches include unit or command boundaries;

unit deployment/employment; control graphics; sequencing of events; designation of the main supporting, shaping, and sustaining efforts; and adversary known or expected locations.⁵⁰

MCWP 5-10 stipulates that during COA Development, planners use the products carried forward from problem framing to generate options or COAs that satisfy the mission in accordance with the commander's intent and guidance.⁵¹ This step includes sub-steps such as Establishing Battlespace Frameworks, Arraying Forces, Assigning Purpose and Tasks, Integrating Actions Across Time and Space, Determining Control Measures, and Considering the Adversary's Most Dangerous/Most Likely COAs for Every Friendly COAs. This step also includes COA graphics and narratives, task organization, synchronization matrix, and supporting concepts (such as intelligence, fires, or logistics in the order or plan).⁵² In a Marine Corps' textbook on the decisionmaking process, the initial COA includes forms of maneuver, type of attack, designation of main attack, requirements for supporting efforts, scheme of maneuver, sequencing essential task accomplishment, task organization, use of reserve, and rules of engagement.⁵³

The MCWP 5-10 section "Commander's Wargaming Guidance and Evaluation Criteria" greatly expands the traditional evolution criteria for friendly COAs (feasibility, suitability, adequacy, acceptability). It includes a list of some 19 criteria including limitations on casualties, defeat of the adversary's center of gravity (COG), information operations, opportunity of maneuver, speed, risk, phasing, balance between mass and dispersion, weighting the main effort, timing of the operation and reserve, logistical supportability, force protection, political considerations, and impact on local population/issues.⁵⁴ Clearly, this large number of criteria makes their true value highly problematic.

In the Joint Air Estimate, COAs are part of the step Situation and Courses of Action. Each COA must include information on required combat; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and

support forces, respectively, and personal recovery capabilities.⁵⁵

The MDMP Handbook and FM 6-0 envisage eight substeps in the COA Analysis. The focus is on wargaming. The supposed purpose of this step is to enable commanders and staffs to identify difficulties or coordination problems and also probable consequences of planned actions for each friendly COA. It is also meant to identify potential execution problems, decisions that must be made, and requirements for contingency planning COA analysis (wargaming).⁵⁶ It requires that each critical event is wargamed by using an action-reaction-counterreaction model of friendly and enemy forces interaction. This should help the commander to synchronize warfighting functions. In addition, the commander would be able to anticipate operational events, determine conditions and resources required for success, determine when and where to apply force capabilities, identify coordination needed to produce synchronized results, and determine the most flexible COA.⁵⁷ MCWP 5-10 stipulates that the main purpose of the COA War Game step of the estimate is to "improve the operation plan." Wargaming is conducted in terms of action-reaction-counterreaction.⁵⁸

The COA Analysis step in NWP 5-01 also includes many planning elements such as synchronizing warfighting functions and determining decision points and branches.⁵⁹ Like actions of the main forces, warfighting functions are wargamed in terms of action-reaction-counterreaction.⁶⁰ However, all this clearly belongs to planning. It should be obvious that so-called warfighting functions (intelligence, fires, sustainment, command and control, protection, movement, and maneuver) cannot be synchronized until the entire plan/order is prepared. But most fundamentally the problem is that this should not be part of wargaming at all.⁶¹ NWP 5-01 also includes part of the COA Analysis testing validity of measures of effectiveness and measures of performance and further refines assessment plan development.⁶²

The Army tends to use more than the other Services' various quantifiable



Air Force Combat Controller, part of 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, watches Jordanian UH-60 helicopter approach during Eager Lion 2017, annual U.S. Central Command exercise, Amman, Jordan, May 11, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Christopher Lange)

methods in assessing the combat potential of both friendly and enemy forces (for example, relative combat potential, historical minimum planning ratios, and measures of effectiveness).⁶³ Yet there is a great danger in overemphasizing the importance of these methods. Any force includes a multitude of intangible elements, and they are difficult if not impossible to quantify in any meaningful way. The tactical commander should not allow mathematical computations to drive his analysis.⁶⁴ The commander and staff must fully consider human factors, such as the enemy's intentions, will to fight, morale, and discipline.⁶⁵ Despite many claims to the contrary, quantifiable methods are of limited usefulness. It is inherently difficult and uncertain to properly assess and anticipate the results of the highly dynamic interactions between

the physical and human elements of the situation.

COA Analysis should not include any planning elements (for example, synchronization matrix, task organization, timelines) because they are not directly related to making a decision. Moreover, task organization and synchronization are based on the sequencing of actions by friendly forces, and they are not definitely known until a decision is made and CONOPS is fully developed.

In contrast to other Services, the Joint Air Estimate step Analysis of the Opposing Courses of Action seems pretty simple. It requires highlighting the "adversary" capabilities and intent (if known) that may have "significant impact on friendly COAs."⁶⁶ The last step of the estimate in MCWP 5-10 and NWP 5-01 is the COA Comparison and Decision. In

this step of MCWP 5-10, it is the commander's responsibility to evaluate each friendly COA and compare it with the others. A COA believed to be the best to accomplish the mission is then selected as the basis for the decision.⁶⁷

In NWP 5-01, the COA Comparison and Decision step includes substeps such as Providing Staff Estimates, Applying Risk Mitigation, Comparing Friendly COAs, Summarizing Advantages and Disadvantages, Reviewing COAs, Testing for Validity, Conducting the COA Decision Briefing, Stating the Commander's Decision, Preparing the Synchronization Matrix, and Developing the CONOPS.⁶⁸

In the comparison of friendly COAs of the Joint Air Estimate, the commander is required to submit to the JFC only the conclusions and a short rationale



Landing craft air cushion vehicle lands on beach, in tandem with Australian counterparts, as part of large-scale amphibious assault during Talisman Saber 17, Townshend Island, Australia, July 13, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Sarah Villegas)

for the favored air COA. Also, the JFC has to discuss relative advantages and disadvantages of the alternative air COAs in case this could assist the JFC in reaching a decision.⁶⁹

The MDMP Handbook explains that the COA Comparison step is aimed to evaluate each friendly COA independently from each other and against set criteria approved by the commander and staff and to identify strengths and weaknesses. It includes two substeps: Analysis of Advantages and Disadvantages and Comparison of COAs. Those COAs offering the highest chances of success are retained for further development into a plan or order.⁷⁰ In this step, the MDMP Handbook and NWP 5-01 include so-called decision matrix, while MCWP 5-10 does not.

For some reason, the MDMP Handbook calls the last step in the estimate COA Approval instead of Decision. After the decision briefing, the commander selects the COA that offers the best chances of accomplishing the mission. If the commander rejects all COAs, the staff has to start COA Development again. After the best COA is selected,

the commander issues the final planning guidance. The staff then issues warning orders to subordinate headquarters.⁷¹ The last step in the Joint Air Estimate is Recommended COA in which the JFACC recommends the best COA to JFC.⁷²

Common to all three Services is that none of their currently used decisionmaking process documents clearly highlights the paramount importance of the decision. This is, after all, the main reasons for conducting the estimate of the situation. Hence, the estimate should end with the Decision as a separate step. Also, Decision and its constituent parts, and CONOPS in particular, should be described in some detail.

A Possible Solution

The Services need to reevaluate and then make drastic changes in both doctrine and the decisionmaking process. Perhaps there is nothing more important than making sound decisions in combat. That responsibility cannot be delegated to anyone else. It must be, as the term clearly implies, *solely* the responsibility of the commander. Hence, the old name “the commander’s esti-

mate of the situation and the decision” should be restored. The commander’s personal involvement is driven by the time available for the estimate, his or her personal preferences, and the experience and accessibility of the staff. Yet ideally, the commander *alone* (but with inputs of the staff) should write the estimate of the situation and the decision.

The commander’s estimate should be restored to its previous importance in the U.S. decisionmaking process. Conceptually, the commander’s estimate is simple and should be easily understood. It does not mean that making a sound decision is easy. It is not. The commander must not only be well educated but also have experience and good judgment in making decisions. Both the process and format used by Services are ill-suited for quick decisionmaking. It requires a lot of people and time to conduct the estimate. The ultimate purpose of the estimate is lost because so many planning and administrative steps are included in the format.

The commander’s estimate must stand alone. This means that it must be decoupled from the planning. Each step of the estimate must be literally purged

from all elements that are unrelated to the decision. Staff functions/actions during the decisionmaking process should be described in an appendix to the decisionmaking manual. The *decision* must be clearly highlighted throughout the process; it must also stand as a separate and the very last step in the estimate of the situation.

The number of steps in the estimate is not as important as making sure that all the aspects of the situation are properly assessed. The steps in the commander's estimate might differ depending on the level of command and whether predominantly ground, naval, or air forces are employed. Perhaps most importantly, format must not dominate the decision-making process. The aim should always be to conduct a quick estimate ending with a good, but not necessarily best, decision. Full involvement of the commander should drastically reduce the number of various briefings. They require involvement of many members of the staff and are time consuming. Ideally, the number of briefings for a tactical commander should be zero.

In generic terms, the commander's estimate might encompass the following main steps:

- Mission Analysis
- Enemy's Options
- Friendly Options
- Estimate of the Operating Area
- Analyses of Opposing Options
- Comparison of Friendly Options
- Decision (see figure).

The mission statements used today by the U.S. military do not reflect true mission command but at best a semi-centralized command and control. In contrast to longstanding practices, the U.S. military should emulate the German model; that is, the mission statement is *identical to the objective* to be accomplished. This would not only simplify writing the mission but also greatly reduce the time for the mission analysis. But most importantly, a subordinate commander would be solely responsible to deduce tasks that have to be carried out to accomplish a given objective. This would also show that the higher

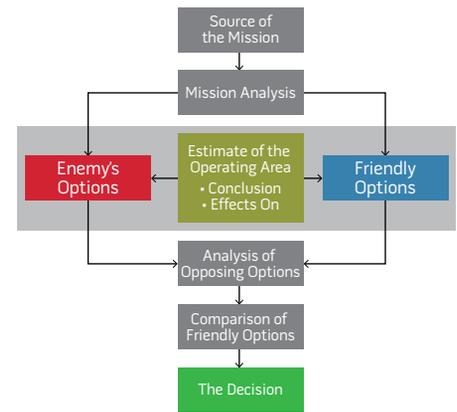
commander trusts his subordinate commanders and would further enhance the need for their professional education and training. The higher commander always has the opportunity to review the tasks derived by subordinate commanders and either approve or reject them.

The Mission Analysis step of the estimate should contain relatively few substeps. Each substep should be directly related to the decision. If the mission equals the objective, then a subordinate commander only needs to derive tasks. There would be no need to identify specified, implied tasks and essential tasks. Besides the mission, key elements in the mission analysis is obviously the commander's intent, planning assumptions, and limitations (constraints and restraints) in the employment of friendly forces. If the estimate is conducted quickly, as it should be, then planning guidance and warning orders should not be issued until the decision is made.

In general, making a combat decision would require from commanders and their staffs sound estimates of enemy and friendly situations. The focus should be on these enemy or friendly forces that would be engaged in the course of mission accomplishment. The end result of these estimates should be enemies and friendly options; respectively, the term *option* rather than *course of action* should be used. A course of action implies that the commander knows for certain what the enemy commander's intentions are. While the friendly commander is more in control of his own actions, he is really weighing various options in the course of the estimate. The option offering the best chances of accomplishing the mission could be called the friendly course of action, but it is not identified until the very end of the estimate process.

Enemy and friendly options should be expressed clearly and succinctly. Each option should include deployment of a force as a whole, followed by the possible actions against enemy forces, answering the questions *who* (Service/functional component or force element), *what* (type of action), and *where* (location of action). At this step in the estimate process, it should not include *when* (the

Figure. Commander's Estimate and the Decision (in generic terms)



time) or *how* the particular task should be carried out. The timeline should be part of only the CONOPS. Each enemy and friendly option should be presented both as a narrative and on a map/chart. The higher the level of war, the broader the terms in which an option should be described and depicted.

Instead of the phrase *COA Analysis*, the phrase *Analysis of the Opposing Options* should be used. This step should be the heart of the estimate. It is the first time that friendly and enemy options interact in a dynamic setting. The commander and staff should first reexamine the mission to make sure that it is still valid. Instead of the action-reaction-counterreaction method, perhaps the simpler and more effective method is to array each friendly option against each enemy option. If the outcome of an interaction is negative (mission failure), then a given option must be revised and played against the same enemy option. Some quantifiable methods can be used in assessing combat potential of the opposing forces for each interaction. However, such methods should never be allowed to drive the analysis. It is the commander's experience and judgment that are critical in assessing probable outcome of each interaction. The commander should then judge whether a given outcome of an interaction accomplishes the mission. Friendly options with the largest number of positive outcomes should be retained for the next step of the estimate.



Marines with 3rd Marine Division, III Marine Expeditionary Force, post security on patrol during Forest Light 15-1, at the Oyanohara Training Area in Yamato, Kumamoto prefecture, Japan, December 9, 2017 (U.S. Marine Corps/Warren Peace)

In the step Comparison of Friendly Options, the focus should be exclusively on evaluating advantages and disadvantages of each friendly option. Identified disadvantages must be remedied and thereby improve the chances of success of individual friendly options. Each friendly option should be then tested for feasibility and acceptability. After weighing the relative merits of each friendly option, the commander should select the best and second-best friendly options. Afterward, these should be converted into the best and second-best courses of action.

The commander should present both the best and second-best courses of action to the higher commander. He should point out what could be accomplished under the circumstances and, if necessary, request additional forces or more time. It is then the responsibility of the higher commander to approve, modify, or reject the subordinate commander's best courses of action.

The Decision is the final and most important step in the commander's estimate of the situation. The decision is the true purpose of the commander's

estimate, not the so-called production of plans and orders. It should always stand alone as a separate step. The commander should make a decision based on his knowledge and experience. Again, the responsibility for making a decision rests *solely* with the commander.⁷³

A written decision should contain the decision statement, final commander's intent, and CONOPS for both the best and second-best courses of action. The decision statement should express in broad terms what the force as a whole has to do, where, and why. It should be expressed in the first person. It should be written clearly, concisely, and in commonly accepted and understood doctrinal terms. The commander should review the initial intent and change or modify it to be fully aligned with his decision and also the higher commander's intent. The main purpose of a CONOPS is to further clarify the commander's restated mission and intent. Among other things, a CONOPS should be simple, avoid patterns and stereotyped schemes, be novel and thereby ensure surprise and speed of

execution, include deception, and ensure smooth cooperation among diverse forces of one or more Services. A CONOPS should explain in some detail where, why, and when each force functional/Service component or force element would be employed and contain sufficient detail to allow the planners to draft operation plans and orders—but not too many details, which might limit flexibility during the subsequent planning process.

The single most important responsibility of the commander in combat is to make decisions for combat employment of subordinate forces. Making a decision at any level of command is an art rather than a science. Hence, each commander should be free as possible to find the best method of conducting estimates and making a decision. This means the commander should modify, alter, or even abandon various substeps in the estimate format if they do not contribute to a decision. What matters most is not the method (how a commander reached the decision) but whether that decision was made in a timely manner and ensured mission success.

All the Services should drastically reduce the number of substeps in each step of the estimate. The trend toward adding more and more substeps must be reversed. Decisionmaking should be based on a simple and easily understood process, which should be fully reflected in all manuals on decisionmaking; otherwise, they would be of little or no use to commanders and staffs in the field. The Services should also drastically deemphasize their literal obsession with risk management or risk mitigation in the decisionmaking process. This only further reinforces the unhealthy zero-error tolerance in the U.S. military. And the latter is a glaring contradiction to the very purpose of the mission command. JFQ

Notes

¹ Frank H. Schofield, "The Estimate of the Situation," lecture delivered at the Summer Conference, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, June 1912 (1913 edition), box 1901-1914, Record Group (RG) 4: Publications 1915-1977, Naval Historical Collection, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 2; Roger S. Fitch, *Estimating Tactical Situations and Composing Field Orders* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1909), 1; Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, eds., *On the German Art of War: Truppenfuehrung* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 28.

² Department of Operations, *The Estimate of the Situation with the Order Form*, rev. ed. (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, June 1926), 1.

³ Condell and Zabecki, 28.

⁴ G.B. Wright, *The Estimate of the Situation*, July 21, 1933, folder 1663, box 55, RG 4: Publications 1915-1977, Naval Historical Collection, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 3.

⁵ "Notes on the Applicatory System of Solving War Problems, with Examples Showing the Adaptation of the System to Naval Problems," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 38, no. 3 (September 1912), 1015.

⁶ Wright, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Department of Operations, *Sound Military Decision (including the Estimate of the Situation and the Formulation of Directives)* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 1936), 20.

¹⁰ George H. Miller, "Logical Thinking in Military Situations," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 74, no. 3 (March 1948), 1.

¹¹ Department of Operations, *Sound Military Decision*, 20.

¹² Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), *Military Decisionmaking Process*, Handbook No. 15-06 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, March 2015), 8; Navy Warfare Publication (NWP) 5-01, *Navy Planning* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, December 2013), 1-4.

¹³ For example, the U.S. Army's Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, issued in 1932, consisted of five steps (Mission, Opposing Forces, Enemy Situation, Own Situation, and Decision). The same document issued in 1984 also had five major steps (Mission, Situation and COA, Analysis of COA, Comparison of COA, and Decision). See Rex R. Michel, *Historical Development of the Estimate of the Situation* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Field Unit, Systems Research Laboratory, October 1990), 5.

¹⁴ Joseph Anderson and Nathan K. Slate, "The Case for a Joint Decisionmaking Process," *Military Review*, September-October 2003, 12.

¹⁵ Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 17, 2017), II-6.

¹⁶ CALL, 11; FM 6-0 C1, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, May 11, 2015), 9-7.

¹⁷ CALL, 12, 23; FM 6-0, 9-7.

¹⁸ CALL, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²² NWP 5-01, 2-1-2-14.

²³ Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-10 (formerly 5-1), *Marine Corps Planning Process* (Washington, DC: Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, May 2, 2015), 1-3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-8-2-9.

²⁷ JP 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, February 10, 2014), B-1.

²⁸ John F. Natal, "Forward Command: The Wehrmacht's Approach to Command and Control in World War II," *Armor*, November-December 1991, 28.

²⁹ Lawrence G. Shattuck, "Communicating Intent and Imparting Presence," *Military Review* 80, no. 2 (March-April 2000), 67; Edward J. Filbert, "Command, Control and the Commander's Intent," *Military Review* 67, no. 8 (August 1987), 56.

³⁰ FM 6-0, 9-14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ MCWP 5-1, *Marine Corps Planning Process* (Washington, DC: Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, August 24, 2010), 2-3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ JP 3-30, B-1-B-2.

³⁷ JP 3-0, II-7.

³⁸ JP 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 16, 2017), IV-18-IV-19.

³⁹ Walter N. Anderson, "Commander's Intent—Theory and Practice," *Armor*, May-June 1998, 47.

⁴⁰ FM 6-0, 1-11.

⁴¹ Filiberti, 55; R.W. Glenn, "The Commander's Intent: Keep It Short," *Military Review* 67, no. 8 (August 1987), 52-53.

⁴² FM 6-0, 9-14.

⁴³ Anderson, 47.

⁴⁴ Glenn, 52-53.

⁴⁵ CALL, 28; FM 6-0, 9-16.

⁴⁶ CALL, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹ NWP 5-01, 3-1-3-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

⁵¹ MCWP 5-10, 3-1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3-3-3-4.

⁵³ *Student Guide Expeditionary Warfare Staff Planning*, J-2G-0048 (San Diego: Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Pacific, August 2014), 57.

⁵⁴ MCWP 5-10, 3-4-3-5.

⁵⁵ JP 3-30, B-2.

⁵⁶ CALL, 39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁸ MCWP 5-10, 4-1.

⁵⁹ NWP 5-01, 4-15-4-16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-16.

⁶¹ The list of these functions (actually, combat support—for tactical actions or operational support for major operations/campaigns) is faulty; only intelligence, information operations, fires, logistics, and protection should be listed as combat support.

⁶² NWP 5-01, 4-21.

⁶³ Norman M. Wade, *The Battle Staff*, 2nd rev. ed. (Savannah, GA: Lightning Press, 2005), 2-28.

⁶⁴ FM 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, May 31, 1997), 3-30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-28.

⁶⁶ JP 3-30, B-2.

⁶⁷ MCWP 5-10 (May 2, 2016), 5-1-5-2.

⁶⁸ NWP 5-01, 5-2-5-5.

⁶⁹ JP 3-30, B-2-B-3.

⁷⁰ CALL, 59.

⁷¹ CALL, 63.

⁷² JP 3-30, B-3.

⁷³ Department of Operations, *Sound Military Decision*, 3.