



The 20th International Scientific Conference
**“DEFENSE RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
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**EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DEFENSE RESOURCES
MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

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**Can military effectiveness be enhanced through?
Mission Command – lessons learned from recent conflicts**

Introduction

The ability to comprehend and influence the environment during competitive interactions and deterrence phases, without resorting to armed conflict, is crucial for multiple reasons. Firstly, it minimizes the risk to military forces by avoiding direct confrontations. Secondly, understanding the nuances of the environment allows for the strategic allocation of limited resources, ensuring they are used where most effective. This strategic insight also enables a nation or organization to wield influence more effectively and gain informational advantages. By shaping perceptions and controlling narratives, entities can outmanoeuvre opponents, making informed decisions that leverage geopolitical dynamics to their benefit, all while preserving peace and stability.

This is the case of the recent military conflicts and tensions worldwide that have varied in intensity and scope, touching on various geopolitical issues and regions. On the other hand, the Mission Command concept, known for promoting decentralized decision-making and the autonomy of leaders, has deep historical roots in military practices, evolving through the ages to meet the shifts in warfare dynamics and leadership theories. To understand Mission Command fully, it's essential to trace its origins, pinpoint its early adopters and distinguish between the German strategy of *Auftragstaktik* and the modern interpretation of Mission Command. The inception of Mission Command dates back to the reforms of the 19th-century Prussian military, instigated by the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. These reforms aimed to introduce greater flexibility and encourage initiative among lower-ranking officers, a need highlighted by the inflexible command structures that previously led to Prussian defeats. It was during this era that the Prussian General Staff system was established, setting the foundation for *Auftragstaktik*, which would later be refined into today's Mission Command¹.

Within the operational framework of the United States Armed Forces, for example, the principle of Mission Command plays a crucial role in achieving mission success. It prioritizes a decentralized approach to carrying out orders, creating a setting in which initiative, discernment and innovation are highly valued. This strategy depends significantly on mutual trust, proficiency and a common comprehension among leaders, their teams and Allies. It ensures that all involved parties are dependable and adept in fulfilling their duties². This concept, as well as the values derived from

¹ Echevarria, Antulio J. II, „*Auftragstaktik, or Directive Control, in the German Army*”, Military Review, 2000

² <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2020/May/Mission-Command/>(accessed 12.11.2024)



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it, has been embraced by the majority of the doctrines of the Allied states that are fighting for global military supremacy and represents the cornerstone in the effectiveness of executing any military conflict, particularly in regards to recent military conflicts that have bloodily marked the planet in the last few decades. Additionally, this approach is grounded in seven fundamental pillars (the maximum number of fundamental pillars that are doctrinally embraced at the level of the majority of the Allied navies, which have broad perspectives regarding doctrinal development to facilitate mission execution): commander’s intent, competence, mission orders, mutual trust, shared understanding, disciplined initiative and risk acceptance³.

My intention in the following lines is to highlight the main recent major conflicts (at least the most important two) and to explore whether from these conflicts certain lessons have been identified or learned in order to examine the relationship between military efficiency and the concept of Mission Command. It’s possible that in certain conflicts, especially those where the United States of America is not directly involved, the concept of Mission Command might not be as prominently felt. This is based on a personal premise that, in recent conflicts where the USA was directly involved with troops, Mission Command has decisively contributed to the military efficiency on the ground and, consequently, to the tactical victory of the conflict. It’s important to note that there are aspects within an armed conflict that cannot be won by military tactics alone - for example, „the past two decades of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. It details how the U.S. government struggled to develop a coherent strategy, understand how long the reconstruction mission would take, ensure its projects were sustainable, staff the mission with trained professionals, account for the challenges posed by insecurity, tailor efforts to the Afghan context and understand the impact of programs”⁴.

In an effort to logically structure this paper and set the stage for what follows, I believe it’s necessary to also reference the time period from which I have chosen to analyse several major conflicts that employed the concept of Mission Command. Based on reports and analyses provided by military experts and analysts, it can be observed that battlefield military effectiveness is closely linked to the pillars and principles of the Mission Command Concept. The term „recent”, when referring to conflicts around the world is flexible and depends on the context in which it’s used. Typically, it might encompass the last 10 to 20 years, aligning with the 21st century’s new geopolitical dynamics, technological advancements in warfare and significant global events affecting security. This timeframe enables the analysis of modern conflicts, including their origins, tactics and global reactions. It provides insight into the current security challenges and the evolution of military strategies, particularly in discussions on how Mission Command can enhance military effectiveness.

Analysing the aforementioned timeframe and at the same time to somewhat support my theory that the concept of Mission Command is present and enhances military effectiveness when American troops are directly involved in the conflict (at least for the duration of ground military operations), I have chosen to focus on two major conflicts, namely: the conflict in Afghanistan post-2000 and the Ukraine Crisis.

As can be observed, these two major conflicts share a common denominator, which is the involvement of the United States, although this involvement does not occur to the same extent in all conflicts (various levels of involvement such as direct or indirect).

³ Headquarters Department of the Army, *ADP 6-0 Mission Command – Command and Control of Army Forces*, Army Doctrine Publication Washington D.C., 2019, p. 12;

⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, Crystal Drive, Arlington, Virginia, 2021, p. 4



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1. The conflict in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

It is characterized by several key phases: the U.S.-led Invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the NATO-ISAF Mission in Afghanistan (2003-2014), the Resolute Support Mission (2015-2021) and the U.S.-Taliban Agreement and Withdrawal (2020-2021).

Analysing the specific lessons from the Afghanistan war, particularly in terms of whether the Mission Command concept was correctly applied or not and its impact on military effectiveness, requires an understanding of the broad strategic, operational and tactical contexts. Official sources do not explicitly provide examples framed around the Mission Command concept, or even events specifically tied to its pillars.

2. Pillars of Mission Command

In a personal approach, bearing in mind the pillars of the Mission Command concept I can highlight the following: However, they do offer insights into key aspects of military effectiveness and decision-making that can be associated with the principles of Mission Command. These include:

a. Underestimation of Time and Resources: The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, creating unrealistic timelines and expectations. This led to prioritizing spending quickly, which increased corruption and reduced program effectiveness. A key aspect of Mission Command - understanding the operational environment - was overlooked, as U.S. officials ignored ground realities, leading to unsustainable short-term solutions that could not create conditions for a successful U.S. withdrawal.

- emphasizing situational awareness and local dynamics within the framework of Mission Command could have countered the tendency to underestimate the complexities of rebuilding Afghanistan. By fostering a deeper understanding of the operational environment, military leaders might have set more realistic timelines and allocated resources more effectively, avoiding the pitfalls of rushed expenditures and unrealistic expectations;

- by applying the principles of Mission Command, particularly decentralized decision-making, U.S. forces in Afghanistan could have been empowered to make on-the-spot adjustments based on ground realities. This flexibility might have mitigated the impact of corruption by allowing for a more targeted and accountable use of resources, enhancing the overall effectiveness of reconstruction efforts;

- Mission Command's emphasis on a commander's intent could have provided a clearer focus on long-term objectives rather than short-term gains, encouraging strategies that built sustainable systems and infrastructure. This approach would likely have promoted initiatives that aligned more closely with Afghanistan's specific needs and conditions, rather than imposing quick fixes that did not contribute to lasting stability;

- the principle of mutual trust, a cornerstone of Mission Command, might have facilitated better cooperation and understanding between U.S. forces and Afghan counterparts. Establishing strong, trust-based partnerships could have led to more effective collaboration and knowledge exchange, ultimately producing strategies that were more attuned to the nuances of the Afghan context and more resistant to corruption;

- leveraging the full spectrum of Mission Command to foster initiative among troops and leaders could have led to innovative solutions tailored to the unique challenges of the Afghanistan operation. Encouraging initiative would have allowed for more flexible and adaptive tactics, potentially uncovering unconventional but effective methods to address the deep-seated issues of rebuilding and stabilization, thereby laying a firmer foundation for a successful U.S. withdrawal.



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b. Interoperability and Collaboration in the Afghan Mission Network (AMN): The AMN was a critical enabler of coalition information sharing, illustrating the Mission Command principle of creating a shared understanding among diverse partners. Enhancing collaboration and enabling interoperability on the AMN required relaxing various security constraints that had previously impeded the transfer and accessibility of mutually beneficial data. This approach fostered a „need-to-share” culture over a „need-to-know” mindset, critical for Mission Command to thrive in coalition operations⁵.

3. Core principles of Mission Command

From a personal perspective, considering the core principles of the Mission Command concept, I would like to emphasize the following:

- leveraging the Afghan Mission Network (AMN) to enhance interoperability and collaboration among coalition forces exemplifies how the Mission Command principle of creating a shared understanding can significantly boost military effectiveness. By easing security constraints, the AMN facilitated a culture of information sharing, ensuring that all partners had access to vital data, thereby enabling more coordinated and effective operational decisions;

- the transformation of information-sharing practices within the AMN, from a „need-to-know” to a „need-to-share” mindset, directly reflects the Mission Command’s emphasis on trust and mutual understanding. This shift not only improved the flow of crucial operational intelligence among coalition members but also amplified the collective capability to respond to emerging threats and challenges in a unified manner;

- the strategic adjustments made to the AMN to promote greater interoperability and collaboration underscore the importance of adaptability and flexibility under the Mission Command framework. These changes allowed for a more dynamic and responsive coalition force structure in Afghanistan, enhancing the ability to navigate the complexities of the operational environment through improved communication and shared situational awareness.

a. Cultural and Historical Understanding: A broader lesson from multiple interventions in Afghanistan, including British, Soviet and American efforts, highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural, historical and geopolitical context of the operational environment. Overconfidence and a lack of appreciation for Afghanistan’s complex social fabric, geography and history of resistance against foreign invaders led to repeated strategic failures. Mission Command emphasizes the importance of informed decision-making based on a deep understanding of the operational environment, suggesting that a lack of such understanding can severely impact military effectiveness⁶.

Conclusion

From my viewpoint, taking into account the fundamental principles of the Mission Command concept in relation to military effectiveness, I wish to highlight the following:

- Mission Command’s emphasis on informed decision-making, grounded in a profound understanding of the cultural, historical and geopolitical nuances of Afghanistan, suggests that appreciating this complexity is crucial for enhancing military effectiveness. The failures of past

⁵ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR302.html (accessed 12.11.2024)

⁶ <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2021/09/lessons-from-afghanistan.html> (accessed 12.11.2024)



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interventions by British, Soviet and American forces underscore the dire consequences of overconfidence and insufficient respect for Afghanistan’s intricate social fabric and history of resistance;

- by promoting a deep appreciation for Afghanistan’s unique context, Mission Command principles could mitigate the strategic oversights that have historically undermined foreign military interventions. Recognizing the importance of cultural and historical awareness in the operational environment aligns with effective Mission Command, potentially averting the strategic missteps driven by a lack of such understanding.

The above examples demonstrate the multifaceted challenges faced in the Afghanistan war and underscore the importance of adhering to Mission Command principles such as understanding the operational environment, building cohesive teams through trust and exercising disciplined initiative. Each case reflects on how deviations from these principles can affect military effectiveness and the outcome of operations. Additionally, in this conflict, we can observe the abundant application of the principles of the Mission Command concept in attempts to achieve military effectiveness. With the United States directly involved in the conflict, there is also a continuous effort to adapt the Mission Command concept with the goal of enhancing military effectiveness. This proved challenging to implement throughout the duration of the conflict, but the majority of post-conflict reports demonstrate and confirm the interdependence between the pillars underpinning the Mission Command concept and military effectiveness in area of operations.

On the other hand, I have set out to analyse a more current conflict that is actively unfolding, which means that the process of collecting identified lessons so they can be learned is in continuous flux. In this context, I will attempt to explore the interdependency between military effectiveness and the application of the Mission Command concept. It’s important to remember that Ukraine, from a doctrinal perspective, is in the process of embracing and testing the concept, lacking the experience of a state with a long history of practicing the concept over time. Furthermore, it’s crucial not to overlook the fact that the United States is not directly involved in the conflict, which results in the application of the Mission Command concept being different compared to the previously analysed conflict. Therefore:

The Ukraine Crisis. The ongoing conflict following Russia’s invasion has seen little territorial change despite intense military engagements. International sanctions against Russia have shown limited impact, underscoring the importance of continued support for Ukraine from the global community⁷. This conflict has proven to be more of a war of attrition, where resource planning and management continue to be crucial. Even under these conditions, there are several elements to analyse regarding the impact of the Mission Command concept on military effectiveness.

a. Logistical challenges and poor planning: the Russian military’s logistical system faced considerable challenges due to poor training and planning. This inadequacy was evident in the initial phase of the war during the Russian advance towards Kyiv, where logistical vehicles were not properly protected, leading to inefficiencies in moving supplies to forward units. This logistical inadequacy severely impacted the effectiveness of Russian long-range strikes, highlighting a failure in Mission Command principles of enabling initiative and providing clear intent for logistical support⁸.

⁷ <https://toda.org/global-outlook/2024/five-conflicts-to-keep-an-eye-on-in-2024.html> (accessed 12.11.2024)

⁸ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-ill-fated-invasion-ukraine-lessons-modern-warfare> (accessed 12.11.2023)



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My approach to addressing the logistical challenges and poor planning during the Russo-Ukrainian War involves the application of Mission Command pillars and principles to enhance military effectiveness by:

- Mutual Trust: building stronger trust between commanders and logistics units could ensure more adaptive and protected supply lines;
- Clear Commander’s Intent: articulating a clear and achievable goal for logistics would guide efficient resource allocation and protection;
- Mission Orders: Empowering logistics commanders to make decisions on the ground could optimize supply routes and protection measures in real time;
- Disciplined Initiative: Encouraging logistics personnel to proactively address and solve supply chain vulnerabilities without awaiting direct orders.

These approaches emphasize the importance of flexibility, initiative and clear communication within the Mission Command framework to overcome logistical challenges and at the same time military effectiveness.

b. Underestimation of Ukrainian response and Western support: the planning and execution of the Russian ground offensive were based on incorrect assumptions about the Ukrainian military’s and population’s response, as well as the extent of Western support. This miscalculation led to difficulties in controlling occupied territories and integrating combined arms for seizing and holding Ukrainian territory. The force was also inadequately sized for its objectives, failing to block Ukraine’s Western border to stop the inflow of foreign aid, reflecting a breakdown in Mission Command elements of understanding the operational environment and leveraging unified action⁹.

Regarding this Underestimation of Ukrainian response and Western support, my personal approach to how the Mission Command concept could enhance military effectiveness is through:

- Comprehensive intelligence: deepening intelligence efforts to better understand Ukrainian capabilities and Western support intentions;
- Adaptive planning: dynamically adjusting military strategies in response to real-time feedback from the field;
- Decentralized execution: empowering lower-level commanders to make swift decisions based on their understanding of the situation;
- Leveraging joint capabilities: integrating various arms of the military more effectively to create a cohesive force;
- Prudent risk management: calculating risks more accurately to make informed decisions regarding force size and objectives.

These steps emphasize the importance of flexibility, local initiative and a deep understanding of the operational environment in enhancing military effectiveness.

c. Failure in cyber operations and electromagnetic warfare: Russian offensive cyber operations and electromagnetic warfare attempts to disrupt Ukrainian command and control were unsuccessful. Ukraine managed to counteract most cyberattacks with robust cyber defense strategies, aided by private companies and Western governments. This failure indicates a lack of effectiveness in employing all means of national power and leveraging innovation and initiative within the cyber domain, which are key aspects of the Mission Command concept¹⁰.

⁹ Idem (accessed 22.03.2024)

¹⁰ Idem (accessed 12.11.2024)



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To enhance military effectiveness in cyber operations and electromagnetic warfare during the Russo-Ukrainian War, applying Mission Command principles could have led to improvements in the following areas:

- Innovation and flexibility: encouraging a culture of innovation within cyber units to develop more effective electromagnetic warfare tactics and countermeasures;
- Integrated operations: ensuring cyber operations are fully integrated with all military activities, enhancing overall operational effectiveness;
- Continuous learning: implementing a system for rapid learning from both successes and failures in cyber operations to adapt strategies in real time.

These actions emphasize the importance of agility, coordination and learning in enhancing effectiveness, especially within the cyber domain.

In conclusion, whether we are analysing established conflicts that have spanned a longer period, like in Afghanistan, or ongoing crises, like the Ukraine Crisis, military effectiveness can and should be developed by fully leveraging the Mission Command concept. This involves developing all the pillars of the concept down to the last soldier in the hierarchy, ensuring a comprehensive and unified approach to military operations. However, it is observable that the depth to which belligerents have ingrained the principles of the Mission Command concept into their military doctrine correlates with their success in achieving enhanced military effectiveness.

Additionally, enhancing military effectiveness through Mission Command, as demonstrated in recent conflicts, involves leveraging its principles to address challenges such as underestimating adversaries, logistical shortcomings and cyber warfare failures. Key lessons highlight the importance of comprehensive intelligence, adaptive planning and fostering innovation within cyber operations. These approaches ensure more effective military strategies by promoting decentralized decision-making, mutual trust and continuous learning, crucial for overcoming operational challenges and achieving tactical victories in complex environments like those seen in Afghanistan and the Russo-Ukrainian War.

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