

Response to the
Call for Papers on Operational Challenges

Topic #4

How to ensure the speed of decision-making
keeps pace with the speed of action on the battlefield

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Due to the speed at which technology is advancing, the military faces an ever-increasing pace of battle that decision-makers must be able to match. This is particularly important when considering future conflict against adversaries with capabilities similar to the U.S. and our allies. There are two primary roadblocks affecting timely decisions: doctrine which empowers decision-making at the lowest practical echelon and effective training programs focused on supporting and implementing that doctrine. Therefore, understanding the shortfalls and inconsistencies of current doctrine is a critical first step.

Technological evolution continues to gain speed and technological proliferation has reached unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, U.S. military forces struggle to keep pace. Doctrine that once provided a framework for a comprehensive national strategy is now outdated or insufficient. Furthermore, areas of emerging technological capability have ill-defined or undefined doctrine with respect to effects employment. Consider the cyber call-for-fire: it does not exist in any concrete format, does not define the qualifications necessary to make the call, and does not define a unit type responsible for responding to or executing the actual effects delivery¹. New technology must be incorporated into doctrine as quickly as possible to allow latitude for tactical warfighters to attack and defend against an adversary with the widest array of capabilities available. It must also be done with consideration for the strategic implications of effects capabilities. For example, it may be beneficial for a non-commissioned officer (NCO) located at an infantry battalion to call for a cyber-attack against an opposing force located in close proximity. It may not be practical, however, for that same NCO to have the latitude to call for a cyber-attack against a power grid facility in enemy-occupied territory, which has a much higher likelihood of causing unwanted secondary and tertiary effects.

Developing doctrine at a joint level is not a new concept; joint publications exist across the entire spectrum of warfare. Additionally, it may not be necessary to create new doctrine for each type of emerging technology. Instead, adapting, modifying, subtracting from, or adding to existing doctrine may be all that is necessary to fully integrate the latest technologically-advanced weaponry. The example noted above concerning the cyber call-for-fire demonstrates this. Instead of composing an entirely new piece of doctrine, one which at a joint level would mostly likely take a long time to compose, a small addition was made to an already existing publication. Although the idea was sound, the execution was vague and incomplete.

It may be that a technology as far-reaching as cyber warfare requires its own doctrine which is then broken down into components across the spectrum of warfare based on applicability. Even in this case, there does not necessarily need to be an overhaul of how the U.S. military writes doctrine. Rather, the U.S. military should focus on ensuring that doctrine is developed in a timely fashion with a sense of urgency by acknowledging delays have a direct impact on the tactical warfighter. Further, an emphasis must be placed on ensuring that doctrinal ideas are as complete as possible, directive in nature when outlining roles and responsibilities at every echelon, and allowing for maximum flexibility and responsiveness within those roles. Doctrinal circulation is easily accomplished via digital technology. Manuals and publications may be disseminated instantaneously across an entire service via email, websites, and other means. None of this will be easy, but none of it should require additional funding or a drastic change in approach. Doctrinal composers are already required to consider a wide array of possibilities while succinctly constructing systems that can effectively respond to almost any conditions in a rapidly evolving, high-tech battlespace.

In many cases, U.S. military doctrine composers have enabled the tactical warfighter to make rapid decisions to influence the outcome of an engagement for the better. In the Air Force, this latitude can be found prevalently in Air Support Operations Squadrons, where enlisted Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) are empowered with the authority to call for weapons employment at the behest of the supported commander. In combat, this doctrine empowers the tactical warfighter to the greatest extent possible and relies heavily on higher level echelons disseminating critical information down in order to build the situational awareness of the tactical warfighter. This information enables that

¹ AFTTP 3-2.6 (2016) JFIRE MULTI-SERVICE TACTICS, TECHNIQUES, AND PROCEDURES FOR THE JOINT APPLICATION OF FIREPOWER

warfighter to make time-critical decisions to influence a local fight in order to achieve or enable an operational or strategic level end-state. Despite established U.S. doctrine, the current situation in many forward deployed U.S. military locations is far from empowering to the tactical warfighter. Continuing with the example of Close Air Support (CAS), clearance authority to employ even relatively small munitions, such as MK-82 500lb bombs comes from (often higher ranking) JTACs in a Joint Operations Center (JOC) on the command authority of a general officer. The result is that when a tactical situation requires CAS, the on-scene supported commander does not always have the authority to authorize munition use, and the co-located JTAC (if there is one) requires higher level authorization before calling for munitions release.

This current departure from doctrine is not a new phenomenon: for the past 15 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other theaters, tactical forces have at times found themselves waiting on authorization for weapons employment. This departure from doctrine is not without several well-considered reasons, the most prescient of which is concern over the diplomatic repercussions of conducting tactical weapons deliveries that have strategic implications. International realities dictate that U.S. military forces in other nations display extreme deference when conducting operations, and this causes an understandable retraction of doctrinal delegation. The strategic consequences of tactical errors are easily identifiable in multiple case studies throughout the past fifteen years, most notably in the AC-130 strike conducted on a hospital in Kunduz in 2015. The failure of the tactical warfighters to strike the correct target resulted not only in a missed opportunity to engage and destroy the enemy forces, but worse, it killed innocent civilians and medical personnel and galvanized an international outcry against operations that the U.S. was conducting. In this particular instance, the lack of situational awareness and a higher level 'strategic' picture of the battlespace contributed to a catastrophe. These cases clearly demonstrate the positives of retaining effects authorization at a higher echelon. The solution to this problem however, is not to retract weapons effects approval authority to a higher level than doctrinally established, but to provide the training and information flow required for tactical level decision makers to quickly authorize weapons effects while maintaining the safety of friendly forces and non-combatants.

In addition to legitimate arguments for deviating from doctrine and maintaining tactical decision making authority at operational or even strategic levels, there are several invalid arguments that bear refutation. The most egregious of these is the propensity of higher level echelons to put lower levels under a microscope when the pace of warfare momentarily slows down due to a limited number of units in theater or a limited number of operations occurring simultaneously. This effect is evident not just in current deployed locations for U.S. forces, but in military units in garrison, and even civilian institutions. It is human nature to focus on the only thing that appears to be occurring at the time, but when that focus turns to a propensity to meddle, interfere, or intervene the consequences can be disastrous to the tactical warfighter. Higher headquarters at all levels can and should take an active interest in the actions of their subordinate echelons, but only insofar as they should look to provide support and information. Once tactical decision-making has been taken from its doctrinal level and established at echelons above, the decision-making speed up and down the chain slows and the entire military becomes less flexible, less adaptive, and less responsive.

Doctrine is constantly being updated; it is rare to find a joint publication that was last updated more than five years prior. However, a more concerted effort must be made to include emerging technologies sooner. A gap exists between when a technology is developed and when it is finally fielded by U.S. forces. Another gap often ensues between initial fielding of that technology and dissemination of doctrine concerning the application of the technology. Doctrinal composers cannot close the former gap; that is for acquisition managers to address. The latter gap however, can be addressed. Across the Air Force, various career fields are invited to provide inputs to update doctrine relevant to their specific Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) every few years. While this does a good job of ironing out the minutia of established doctrine, it does not effectively include new technology, because there is no awareness of these emergent capabilities. A solution to this problem is to include the various weapons test and development units in the actual writing of doctrine. Weapons testing and development takes place across the U.S. military, and the members of these units are not only the most knowledgeable about new

weapons technology, they are often experienced tactical operators who understand how new weapons effects could best be applied. Continual collaboration between Service doctrinal writing centers and test and development personnel would produce doctrine that is complete, or nearly complete by the time the technology is fielded. In order for these changes to doctrine to be fully effective, they must be supported by reinforcing this focus consistently through improved training.

The US military effectively trains its NCOs and Company Grade Officers (CGOs) to execute their specialties as systems experts. Because these operators understand the best way to employ their weapons system, higher headquarters gives them leeway to execute under their own volition. This idea provides the basis for the centralized command and decentralized execution doctrine. Higher echelons trust that lower echelons will execute their tactic to achieve success on the battlefield. This trust is instilled because commanders at all levels understand that the airmen, sailors, soldiers, and marines received training that allows them to be successful.

To increase the speed and flexibility of decision making on the battlefield, formal training should go beyond systems and employment for commanders leading units as small as companies in the Army, 4-ship flight leads, mission commanders of strike or ISR packages, and similarly echeloned forces across the joint community, and be manifest in the form of a formal school for CGOs. Every officer should have some combat training and/or experience before the proposed training to instill a better understanding of how different capabilities can integrate in the battlespace. By training lower echelons to be more mindful of the strategic and operational effects that their decisions may have, the effectiveness of their decision making and positive impact on the battlespace increases. Lower echelon commanders can also benefit from an understanding of how to synthesize a breadth of information. Providing CGOs in all services a comprehensive knowledge of how the joint force plans and executes, will better prepare them to anticipate the second and third order effects their decisions may have across other branches of the military. A joint CGO integration course should include basic knowledge of different warfighting capabilities and functions in each service along with familiarization of the differences between service cultures and how they operate.

Teaching CGOs the tactical capabilities of assets across the Joint spectrum will help them better understand what can and cannot be achieved. This understanding would help streamline their tactical level planning and give them a better idea of the lower limits of possibility (executing without any support) to the upper limits of firepower (executing with all available support). Likewise, teaching fighter flight leads, or mission commanders in bomber/C2 aircraft will instill trust and understanding in how other assets employ and allow them to integrate closer together. For example, if Air Force or Navy CGOs understand the basic goals of Army company level maneuver units, they may be able to provide more actionable intelligence, more meaningful battle damage assessments, and more pertinent advice to maneuver unit commanders in real time via their vantage points above and across the battlespace. The advantages gained by a thorough understanding across the Joint Services will allow lower echelons to execute the intent of higher headquarters in line with decentralized execution doctrine. Furthermore, by understanding each service's unique culture tactical leaders will better understand their counterparts, ultimately allowing them to break down barriers and enable battlefield commanders to make rapid decisions.

An example of how understanding joint operations can enhance mission effectiveness already exists in the Air Liaison Officer (ALO). The ALO has a comprehensive understanding of the Joint Air Ground Command and Control system from planning and executing large scale maneuvers to the Air Tasking Orders system. This knowledge empowers ALOs to know where and when it is appropriate to inject changes that have occurred on the dynamic battlefield. Maneuver units submit Joint Tactical Air Request forms to requesting battlefield support. These requests rely on accurate information and requests for effects instead of specific assets. However, the level of specificity needed may be difficult for smaller unit commanders to understand. The ALOs' knowledge of sister service capabilities help their Army counterparts understand that more than one asset may be able to deliver the desired effects. Thus, understanding the difference between effects and assets provides the intended results, while providing maximum flexibility to higher echelons and enables faster decision-making when tasking assets.

Providing more CGOs with this type of joint perspective will prime them to think of specific attributes or weaknesses of the enemy that will help streamline their requests and provide more effective coordination on the battlefield.

Ideally the training outlined above would be administered as a joint class, including computer simulations allowing the students to apply and test the knowledge they gain on a simulated battlefield. Real-world application and practice of these lessons already occur in joint exercises such as Joint Readiness Training Center or National Training Center scenarios. This proposed joint class would be taught by experienced strategists and tacticians, experts in different weapon systems, and commanders from appropriate echelons that understand how to integrate their respective weapons systems into the larger conflict. Each service would be responsible for funding the training of its individuals, and it is recommended that this class serves as a replacement for each service's respective CGO Professional Military Education for select individuals. By training CGOs in a joint environment early and giving them better insight into strategic effects on the battlefield, the force structure will not change. The difference will be that the experience lower level officers have with their joint counterparts at an earlier stage, and the knowledge they hold to integrate their respective assets.

Maintaining military superiority in the technology-age means the DoD must remain agile and flexible while making timely decisions that match the speed of action on the battlefield. The instruments needed to adapt our current posture are doctrine and training. Through updated and comprehensive doctrine, teams will be empowered to make appropriate decisions. Proper training for leaders on how to make those decisions effectively, especially as a part of the Joint fight, is the vehicle with which that doctrine can be implemented. Allocating the proper resources as identified above to address these key concepts will enable our forces to keep pace with the evolving nature of battle.