USS Theodore Roosevelt, Allied Force.

U.S. Navy (William L. Vandermate)

NATO Command and Control for the 21st Century

By THOMAS-DURELL YOUNG

Many advocates of a revolution in military affairs argue that technological breakthroughs will bring greater operational speed. Global communications systems spurred by the explosion in microprocessing and digital technologies will provide commanders with unprecedented advantages. Given such advances, there has been speculation that the Armed Forces of the future will be able to overwhelm any enemy *in extremis*.

But despite extensive study of the impact of new technologies, there has been insufficient analysis on how such innovations will affect political oversight. This dearth in the literature has been particularly glaring with regards to alliance and coalition warfare. The political leadership of any assemblage of democracies will want to exploit greater speed in order to bring a war or peace enforcement operation to a quick and just conclusion. Given that Western democracies only rarely

Thomas-Durell Young is the European program manager for the Center for Civil-Military Relations at the Naval Postgraduate School and the coauthor of *NATO After 2000: The Future of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance.*

conduct operations unilaterally, the immediacy of this issue takes on added importance.

Political oversight in alliances and coalitions is effected by a formal standing body like the North Atlantic Council or through ad hoc political consultative forums. It becomes the province of multinational parties in either case. In the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), decisionmaking by 19 nations often occurs at a languid pace that may not be conducive to high-speed maneuvers. This should come as no surprise, given that governments are loath to surrender their forces to foreign command without provision for close political monitoring. The success of NATO as a longstanding military alliance and the growing worldwide application of its basic procedures make it worthwhile to revisit the current definitions and practices of its command authorities, their compatibility with the expectation of a revolution in military affairs, and the capacity of NATO to translate future political decisions into rapid military action.

The Challenge of Change

Delegation of command authority to multinational commanders remains one of the least developed areas of Alliance force employment policy. Land operations present singular problems because ground commanders require greater authority than naval and air commanders. The missions and operational limitations of ships and aircraft are a function of their design. Naval vessels and planes can best be thought of as integral weapons and systems platforms that can be allocated to nonnational commanders for specific tasks. Hence for naval and air forces, only a few command authorities need be transferred to a multinational force. Land forces, on the other hand, are combined arms teams that must be organized for a specific mission. The cross-assignment of units, the frequent need to change missions rapidly to respond to a developing situation, and the legitimate need for a commander to establish supply and training priorities are among the more sensitive powers nations are reluctant to turn over to an Alliance commander.

Table 1. NATO Authorities

Operational Command (OPCOM)

The authority granted to a commander to assign missions or tasks to subordinate commanders, to deploy units, to reassign forces, and to retain or delegate operational and/or tactical control as may be deemed necessary. It does not of itself include responsibility for administration or logistics. May also be used to denote the forces assigned to a commander.

Operational Control (OPCON)

The authority delegated to a commander to direct forces assigned so that the commander may accomplish specific missions or tasks which are usually limited by function, time, or location; to deploy units concerned; and to retain or assign tactical control to those units. It does not include authority to assign separate employment of components of the units concerned. Neither does it, of itself, include administrative or logistic control.

Tactical Command (TACOM)

The authority delegated to a commander to assign tasks to forces under his command for the accomplishment of the mission assigned by higher authority.

Tactical Control (TACON)

The detailed and usually local direction and control of movements or maneuvers necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned.

Coordinating Authority

The authority granted to a commander or individual assigned responsibility for coordinating specific functions or activities involving forces of two or more countries or commands, or two or more services, or two or more forces of the same service. He has the authority to require consultation between the agencies involved or their representatives but does not have the authority to compel agreement. In case of disagreement between the agencies involved, he should attempt to obtain essential agreement by discussion. In the event he is unable to obtain essential agreement he shall refer the matter to the appropriate authority.

Integrated Directing and Control Authority

(employed only by commanding general, I German-Netherlands Corps)

This authority provides the commander with powers that are identical or similar to those vested in a commander of a national corps or with powers that are altogether new. Sovereign national rights (in the narrowest sense) are excepted. The commanding general has the right to give instructions to all subordinate military and civilian personnel and may issue directives to the binational and national elements of the corps and set priorities.

Source: NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions.

The four official levels of NATO command authority—operational command (OPCOM), operational control (OPCON), tactical command (TACOM), and tactical control (TACON)—have not been revised since the early 1980s (see table 1). Their definitions are legalistic and not readily understandable. Authorities do not cover important peacetime responsibilities appropriate for multinational formations such as training, readiness, and logistics. Because of broad NATO interpretations of command authorities, members often indulge in the practice of employing caveats, creating even more ambiguous terms such as OPCON+ and OPCOM–. During peacetime, with the exception of I German-Netherlands Corps, multinational commanders of formations earmarked for NATO do not have command authority per se. Rather, they wield coordination authority, which does not allow any directive control.

F–16C, Allied Force.

U.S. Air Force (Joe Cupido)

Closely related to the issue of command authorities is the question of when forces should be transferred from national command structures to a multinational land force commander. This decision has a major effect on when important matters such as training and logistic requirements can be directed rather than merely coordinated.

Alliance forces in Bosnia and Kosovo revealed severe weaknesses in NATO definitions and their use in practice

After the Cold War, with its luxury of facing a single coherent and predictable threat, vague NATO definitions and obscure practices did not keep pace with geostrategic realities. The central region chiefs of army staff (CR–CAST) in the early 1990s became acutely aware of the problem during multinational exercises. At the Central Region Chiefs of Army Staff Talks in May 1994, General M.J. Wilmink, Commander, Land Forces Central Europe, recounted an incident when he directed a subordinate contingent to reallocate assets to another national force. The time required for the commander to gain approval from his national authorities nearly cost the battle. Allied Rapid Reaction Corps experienced similar crippling limitations in its authority to direct and task organize forces during fast-moving exercises. These troubles presaged difficulties during the force deployment to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995–96.

The use of Alliance forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo revealed the severe weaknesses in NATO definitions and their use in practice. General Klaus Naumann, Chairman of the Military Committee, stated in the aftermath of Operation Allied Force,

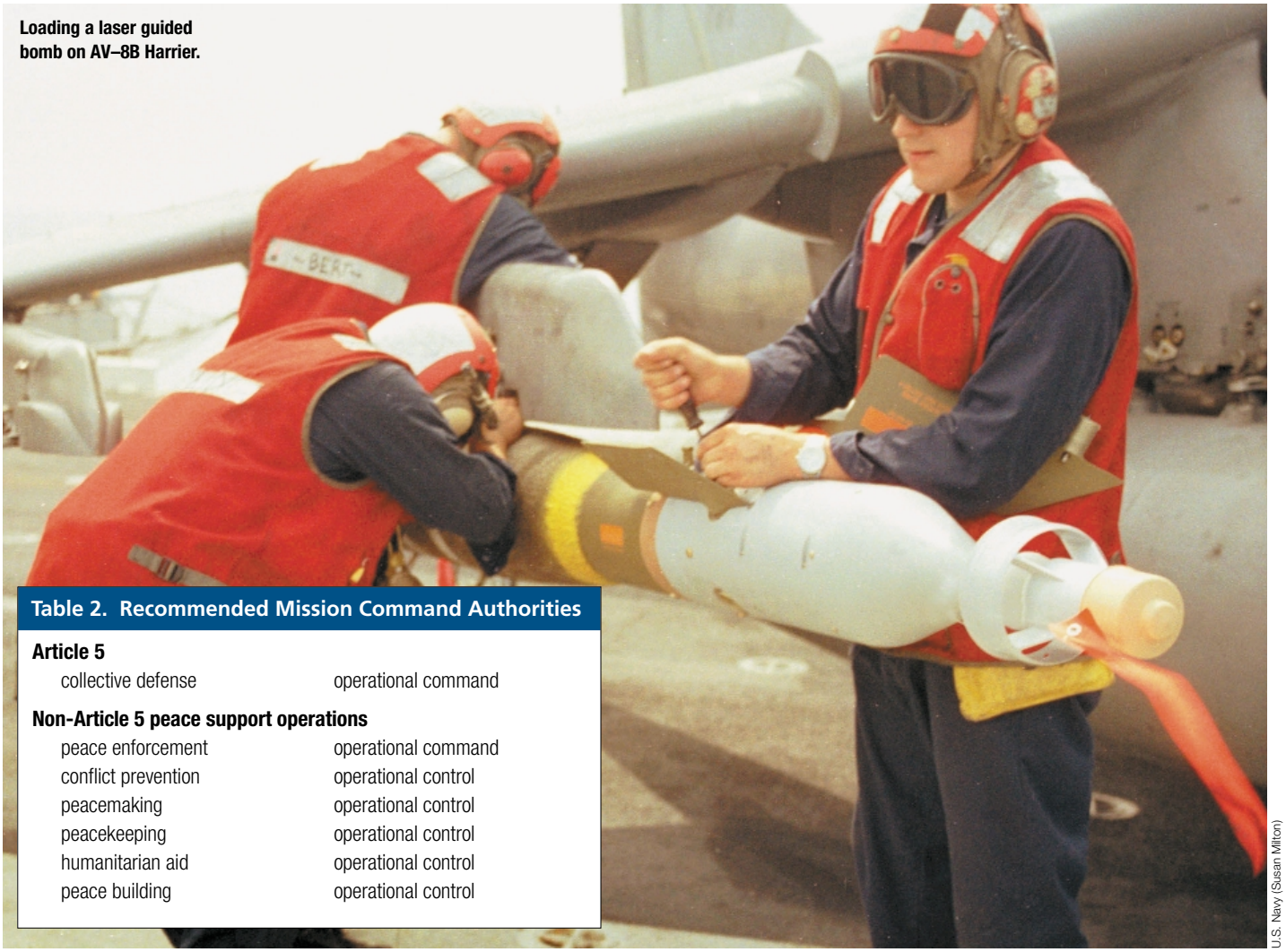
I think one has to make sure that a NATO commander is given the maximum unity of command and the right to really see it through. Nations . . . should prepare to think through to which degree they are really willing to transfer authority to NATO.

Three Faces of the New NATO

Commanders have discovered three trends that are reshaping how Alliance capabilities are employed.

Multinational forces. Integration of multinational land forces was almost exclusively effected on the corps level during the Cold War, the exception being Multinational Corps Northeast (located in Stettin, Poland). To protect force structure and maintain expertise on higher levels of command, there exist multinational land formations declared to the Alliance down to corps and even division levels. Sadly, there is no NATO policy, let alone a common approach, to establishing command authority requirements on specific levels of command. Moreover, there has been no concerted effort among the 19 members to ascertain if current definitions match the mission requirements of multinational force commanders. To be sure, issues related to administration (such as promotions and transfers), referred to in NATO as *full command,* will always remain within the purview of a sovereign state. Yet no one would seriously challenge the responsibility of a national corps or division commander to meet the training and readiness standards set out by higher authorities. Command arrangements and practices in NATO hinder the achievement of these goals at present.

New missions. The range of possible tasks for forces declared to NATO has increased dramatically. Serving as reaction forces for non-Article 5 peace support operations is the dominant mission of most elements, as opposed to meeting less immediate collective self defense missions. These new operations have two important characteristics. First, they almost exclusively tend to be executed within a multinational formation. Second, while the missions and mission essential tasks are not as demanding as combat missions, they are nevertheless rigorous in the context of political military issues. Nations have found the ambiguity afforded by nuanced command authority definitions to be an advantage because they



Loading a laser guided bomb on AV–8B Harrier.

U.S. Navy (Susan Milton)

Table 2. Recommended Mission Command Authorities

Article 5	
collective defense	operational command
Non-Article 5 peace support operations	
peace enforcement	operational command
conflict prevention	operational control
peacemaking	operational control
peacekeeping	operational control
humanitarian aid	operational control
peace building	operational control

allow the appearance of multinationality without actually giving up authority for commanders to carry out assigned tasks. While such arrangements might be politically appealing, they reduce operational efficiency.

Reorganized commands. One of the least recognized problems has been caused by reorganization of the integrated command structure without accompanying review and reform of command authorities. The revision of the integrated command structure and the introduction, but not as yet full acceptance, of the combined joint task force concept have not resulted in a reconsideration of the number of command authorities and their definition to ascertain if they support new structures.

Conflict in Command

Under the U.S. system there are three distinct levels of command supported by three different levels of command authority: combatant commanders in chief for combatant command, component commanders for operational control, and service commanders for tactical control. During the Cold War, NATO developed command authorities that fit neatly into a similar logical construct: supreme commanders for OPCOM, major subordinate commanders for OPCON (+/–), subordinate commanders for TACON (+/–), and national corps commanders for full command.

These existing relationships have proven inadequate for dealing with missions, organizations, and new formations. The integrated military command structure of NATO has been reorganized but is largely guided by political, not military considerations. Thus levels of command and span of control over subordinated units do not clearly or logically match command authorities.

A CR–CAST working group determined that command for a multinational force ought to be decided in a bottom-up fashion, where the mission should be the starting point for identifying appropriate authorities. For example, the group offered recommendations to guide the selection of command authorities for a multinational corps commander.

Command center, Allied Force.

NATO

UH–60 near Prejidor, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Lemuel Casillas)

It recommended, for example, a higher command authority (OPCOM) in collective defense and peace enforcement. The group recognized the possible requirement to carry out combat operations, the most demanding tasking, and to allow the commander to protect the force. But while these recommendations appear logical, thus far NATO has made little progress in implementing them. Alliance initiatives have fallen short of matching the operating realities of the emerging strategic environment.

Alliance initiatives have fallen short of matching the operating realities of the emerging strategic environment

Political decisionmaking is unlikely to change significantly. Although technology can provide sophisticated decision support technologies, making such decisions will remain an inherently human responsibility driven by both foreign and domestic policy concerns. Assuming that digital communications continue to evolve, it appears that communications between the operational/tactical commander and national political leadership will become more refined and instantaneous, making for more consultation, not less. Assuming continued improvement in the ability of commanders to affect the operational speed, it should be clear that future tensions loom large in the critical and delicate area of civil-military relations.

New Wine in New Bottles

The basis for ascertaining command authorities should follow the key recommendation of the CR–CAST working group study, basing command authority requirements on the given mission. If command authorities in a particular operation fall short of what is needed, replacing them should be a clear political decision as opposed to the application of ambiguous command definitions or idiosyncratic interpretations of their meaning. Moreover, given recent evidence of the difficulty of carrying out multinational land operations, any reform of the current system of definitions and procedures should err on the side of addressing singular requirements of land forces. In this respect, the need for multinational commanders to assign and change missions and task-organize

NATO peacekeepers near Gnjilane, Kosovo.

55th Signal Company (Bronco A. Suzuki)

subordinate formations must be addressed. These are admittedly politically sensitive issues, given that they affect the very constitution and employment of armies. However, without acknowledging the peculiar nature of multinational land forces, any reform is likely to be incomplete.

Apropos the actual reform of command authorities, consideration should be given to the terms themselves, which have proven less than useful in quickly and clearly conveying intent. For example, the term *commandement operationelle* (OPCOM) as used by the French is essentially defined as *full* or *national* command, unlike NATO where it is considered to be subordinate to full command. Indeed the simple use of terms such as *command* could be counterproductive. After all, operational command implies authorities that all but constitute sovereign responsibilities and even sounds all too similar to full command.

One solution is regarding command authorities in the same manner as nations approach the employment of force. The advantage of considering the delegation of command authorities in the same way as formulating rules of engagement, for instance, is that those rules are mission specific and structured to avoid doubt whether an action is allowable.

But mission-oriented command procedures cannot be created out of whole cloth. They must be formally developed, evaluated, and validated. Extensive politico-military seminars, command post exercises, computer assisted simulations, and perhaps even a small part of planned field exercises should be conducted before implementing such radical reform.

Some work is already ongoing. The ABCA Armies Standardization Program—whose membership includes America, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—has existed over fifty years and has provided a forum for the five armies to discuss areas of mutual interest that affect interoperability. One of its aims is improving combined operations. For example, the program recently published a useful coalition operations and logistic planning guide.

A recent meeting in Washington addressed the issue of command definitions for coalition operations. ABCA armies accepted a challenge to take the lead in formulating a methodology similar to the one suggested by the CR–CAST working group.

The jury is still out on reform and likely to remain so for some time. It is clear that, if for no other reason, global and instantaneous communications are likely to continue improving, thereby compressing levels of command. If greater operational speed is also realized through new technologies, one can foresee serious civil-military challenges which will most acutely affect alliances and coalitions. As yet, there remains no firm formal understanding among Alliance members on exactly which authorities a multinational force commander requires. This is a critical issue that must be addressed with deliberate action for the difficult times ahead. **JFQ**