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Multinational Mission Command: From Paper to Practice in NATO

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

With the 2022 update to NATO's AJP-01 Allied Joint Doctrine, mission command was elevated from an important component of a joint command philosophy to the alliance's overarching command philosophy – a shift in written doctrine raising concerns about its practical application across the multinational force. This study explores the gap between written doctrine and operational practice, highlighting the complexities of implementing mission command within NATO's diverse military landscape. Through 33 interviews with NATO senior leaders, the analysis highlights challenges in achieving human interoperability in a multinational environment. We show that NATO commanders lack some of the mechanisms held in the literature to be efficient means to ensure its implementation in national settings. Ultimately, while the doctrinal emphasis on mission command is a positive step, its successful implementation requires operational commanders across the NATO command structure ensure that doctrine is read and discussed, and that training activities designed to facilitate prudent risk-taking are arranged. Finally, we call for a focus on the use of simple language to promote mutual understanding. These steps might aid the transition from paper to practice, and enhance human interoperability.

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INTRODUCTION

> Mission command is NATO's command philosophy, it shapes the command styles, attitudes and behaviours of commanders and subordinates. It is based on empowered leadership, which enables decisions to be made by those best placed to make them, exploiting opportunities that emerge from competition. (NATO, 2022, p. 84)

In December 2022, NATO introduced mission command as a key doctrinal tenet with the publication of a revised edition of the keystone doctrinal manual AJP-01 Allied Joint Doctrine. Written doctrine is one element in NATO's interoperability efforts. In NATO, interoperability has three dimensions: technical interoperability, which concerns systems and equipment; procedural interoperability, which concerns common doctrine, procedures and terminology; and human interoperability, which concerns mutual trust and understanding (NATO, 2022, p. 71). This article uses the doctrinal elevation of mission command into the overarching command philosophy as a case study to discuss the challenges of multinational interoperability. While mission command is not new to NATO, the updated version elevates it into the overarching command philosophy within the alliance. The academic literature already points to differences between what is written in doctrine and what militaries do in practice (Ben-Ari, 1998; Johnston, 2000; Long, 2016; Shamir, 2011). Therefore, introducing mission command as a key tenet in written NATO doctrine raises questions about how NATO members will embrace it in practice.

Mission command has been studied extensively in national contexts (Muth, 2013; Nilsson, 2020; Shamir, 2011; Vandergriff, 2013). The problem of implementing it is often depicted as a clash of cultures between a bureaucratic, industrialist, or managerial way of war that emphasizes deliberate planning, foresight, and control, and a way of warfighting that emphasizes non-linearity, friction and change. Put more simply, while mission command is officially recognized, commanders and their staff are, in practice, evaluated on compliance with requirements that have little to do with it. Mission command is simply challenging to practice in a bureaucratic or administrative setting (Barno & Bensahel, 2020; Nilsson, 2020). Some have emphasized that contemporary operations with strategic implications, low acceptance of risk and casualties, combined with newer technology, have led to centralized and detailed modes of command (Nilsson, 2021; Ochs, 2020). Others say that staff focus on deliberate planning, fixed procedures, templates, and control, leading to centralized and bureaucratic command forms (Sjøgren, 2023a; Storr, 2022). These known challenges in national contexts aside, the *how* of mission command in a multinational context remains largely unexplored.

One part of the problem is that different nations have their own approaches. Three examples illustrate these differences. In the U.S. Joint Warfighting publication, mission command is mentioned as a subset of Joint Command in only a handful of sentences, while the U.S. Army has a 110-page separate doctrine on mission command; in the UK, mission command is described in the Land Operations doctrine and incorporated in the joint UK defence doctrine as one of three tenets. In Denmark, mission command is a part of the defence-wide leadership doctrine addressed separately in a five-page appendix (Department of the Army [U.S.], 2019; Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2022; Forsvarskommandoen, 2023; Joint Chief of Staff, 2023; Land Warfare Development Centre, 2017). While these approaches should be harmonized with NATO doctrine, there are differences between a 110-page dedicated doctrine and a five-page appendix. In the NATO context, mission command may be a so-called suitcase term carrying multiple meanings, notwithstanding its definitions in NATO doctrine.

Based on 33 interviews with contemporary and former senior NATO officers, this article asks: What are the prospects for and challenges of mission command in a multinational NATO context? Or, in NATO terminology: What are the challenges in moving from procedural interoperability to human interoperability related to mission command?

Taking AJP-01 (edition F) and its description of mission command as the point of departure, we first outline the meaning of mission command according to NATO doctrine. Next, we outline the central aspects of mission command and the challenges to its implementation as set out in previous academic research. Based on the interview material, we present our analysis of perspectives on mission command and the problems of achieving human interoperability in a multinational NATO context, itself based on the themes of the simultaneous importance and inadequacy of written doctrine; intercultural communications; and the importance of conducting exercises. In the concluding discussion, we describe the challenges of moving from

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paper to practice in a multinational context and suggest means by which the NATO command structure and member nations might bridge some of the gaps to promote interoperability.

MISSION COMMAND IN NATO DOCTRINE

AJP-01 introduces mission command on the first page as one of four central doctrinal tenets. The other three tenets are the behaviour-centric approach, the manoeuvrist approach, and the comprehensive approach (NATO, 2022, p. 1). Mission command is built on the fundamentals of trust and mutual understanding.

"Trust" is described as a prerequisite of command. AJP-01 states that "the level of trust between the commander and a subordinate dictates the level in which the subordinate can and will be free to decide how to execute their mission and task within the framework of the higher commander's intent" (NATO, 2022, p. 85). The degree of confidence a commander has in their subordinates plays a pivotal role in determining the autonomy granted to them in carrying out their assigned tasks. A lack of trust inevitably shifts towards more detailed and controlling command forms. The preferred approach is for commanders to place trust in both their superiors and subordinates. AJP-01 underscores the notion that trust is not automatically granted but must, rather, be earned, emphasizing the importance of being open to mistakes in the trust-building process.

"Mutual understanding" entails commanders comprehending the obstacles confronting their subordinates and subordinates comprehending the higher commander's intent to proactively exercise initiative within that established framework. Therefore, mutual understanding not only harmonizes subordinates' perspectives with those of their commanders but, akin to trust, appears to be a two-way street. AJP-01 emphasizes that mutual understanding relies on shared doctrine and a shared command philosophy.

From the concise description of mission command fundamentals, AJP-01 outlines various challenges to the successful implementation of mission command in NATO. Neither trust nor mutual understanding can be taken for granted in a multinational context since the nation's officers might not share experiences, doctrine, and understanding. Trust and mutual understanding also seem mutually dependent: mutual understanding is described as a component of trust. The ability for subordinates and commanders to trust one another rests on understanding of this kind – although under closer analysis, the argumentation becomes circular.

While AJP-01 elevates mission command to NATO's command philosophy, it does not describe in detail how commanders trying to implement it should proceed to move from written doctrine to comprehensive practice or, in NATO terminology, from procedural to human interoperability. Therefore, to understand the prospects and challenges of mission command in a multinational context, we will turn to the academic literature.

KNOWN CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING MISSION COMMAND

Many Western armies have embraced the idea of mission command as a superior command concept. Now recognized as NATO's overarching command philosophy, it essentially idealizes the decentralization of military command based on the assumption that commanders in direct contact with the battle will have a superior grip of the situation and should, therefore, be empowered to make judgement calls, exercise initiative, and take advantage of contingent opportunities as they arise (Friedman, 2017; Lind, 1985).

Conversely, a centralized command that requires permissions and tight coordination from the top of the military decision system is held to afford slower decision-making and reaction. But centralized command has clear advantages regarding the synchronization and management of capabilities and effects (Alberts & Hayes, 2006). While these two approaches to command both constitute strategies for the management of the uncertainty that is an unavoidable feature of battle, military history demonstrates the decided advantage of the former (van Creveld, 1987, p. 274).

Although the advantages of mission command are widely recognized in scholarship on military command and military doctrine, several challenges to the translation of the philosophy of mission command into military practice have been identified. These largely relate to the

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inherent properties of military organizations, which form contexts that may be more or less susceptible to the exercise of mission command in practice.

First, the exercise of mission command fundamentally depends on a significant degree of trust between commanders and subordinates (Ploumis, 2020; Shamir, 2011). The application of mission command requires command through stated mission objectives while leaving significant leeway to subordinates regarding how to fulfil these objectives (Freedman, 2022). Simultaneously, delegation does not absolve the commander from responsibility regarding mission completion or how subordinates resolve their tasks. A key precondition for the ability and preparedness to delegate command is, therefore, an appropriately high degree of trust in the motivation and competence of subordinates; conversely, mission command requires a reciprocal degree of trust in the judgment and competence of commanders on the part of subordinates (Ben-Shalom, 2021, pp. 6–7). Thus, the degree of trust within a military organization directly relates to the potential for exercising mission command in that organization; the absence of trust will encourage the adoption of centralized and detailed systems of decision-making.

Trust between commanders and subordinates is expected to grow through the establishment of cohesive military units, where professional competence and interpersonal relations are forged through shared experiences of exercises and training and proven combat capability (Ben-Shalom & Shamir, 2021). In contexts with little time for socialization, team members may still form *swift trust* around surface-level characteristics such as rank and membership of a particular group (Wildman et al., 2011).

Second, information management and communication within the military organization significantly influence how it exercises command. Above all, the establishment of mutual understanding is believed to constitute a precondition for mission command. Doctrine is an important device in this regard since it provides a common point of reference for how the organization is supposed to operate (Finkel, 2011). To make independent decisions and take initiatives aimed at fulfilling the mission at hand, subordinates must also understand the commander's thinking and assessment of the mission (Vogelaar & Kramer, 2004). In this regard, the formulation and communication of the commander's intent are of central importance as these provide subordinates with the key point of reference regarding what is to be achieved. The communication of intent, as opposed to direct and detailed orders, is supposed to equip subordinates with a common understanding of their own objectives and how these objective contribute to the overarching goal of the mission while leaving significant room for autonomous decision-making and planning (King, 2019, pp. 366–371; Sjøgren, 2022). Conversely, excessively detailed orders and instructions, as well as detailed control of subordinates during mission execution, will delimit their room for initiative and thus counteract the purpose of mission command (Nilsson, 2023). A recent critical account of current land command practices in the UK and other NATO members contends that command systems have developed in a fashion that directly contradicts the principles intended to facilitate mission command. The command process, it is pointed out, involves superfluous staff and is overly bureaucratized, and as a result, produces exceptionally long and detailed orders that amount to a slow, inefficient and highly centralized exercise of command (Storr 2022).

Third, mission command is also associated with the need for the commander to cede control and, hence, to accept *risk*. One rationale for mission command is that uncertainty is an intrinsic feature of combat and warfare that cannot be fully alleviated by attempts to establish situational awareness (Vassiliou & Alberts, 2017). Tolerance for uncertainty is, therefore, a precondition for the delegation of military decision-making, as opposed to attempts to address uncertainty through centralized and detailed command (Elron et al., 1999). To be timely, decisions and actions must be taken within limited timeframes and often based on imperfect information, which unavoidably also implies the possibility of mistakes (Vandergriff, 2019, p. 140).

Risk is thus an inherent feature of mission command that, if it may be mitigated to an extent, cannot be eliminated. For decentralized command to truly empower subordinates, the initiative must be encouraged through an accepting attitude towards risk and mistakes. Conversely, a military organization that consistently seeks to minimise risk and has a low tolerance for errors will also suppress its officers' ability and willingness for initiative.

So far, we have discussed a set of core preconditions for mission command: trust founded in professional competence and common experience; mutual understanding established and communicated through doctrine and commander's intent; and the propensity to accept risk

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and uncertainty. These preconditions can be said to form the lowest common denominator for mission command to function in practice in any national setting. Yet these simplified and abstract categories leave much room for interpretation and variation (Storr, 2003); indeed, while most Western militaries claim to adhere to the principles of mission command, there remain considerable differences in its implementation. This speaks to the observation that any military organization will implement and adapt a philosophy or method of command, even if based on identical fundamental assumptions, under the organization's specific military culture (Long, 2016; Shamir, 2011; Ploumis & Pilalis 2018). Moreover, military cultures are not uniform even within one national context.

Previous research has examined the effects of cultural differences between military branches, units, and even subcultures within units, showing how these differences influence the writing and interpretation of doctrine and, ultimately, unit performance in the field (Høiback, 2013; Sjøgren, 2023b; Gudmundsson, 2023; Mansoor & Murray, 2019; Soeters, 2021). It has been acknowledged, that is to say, that cultural differences among military organizations significantly affect the implementation of mission command, posing a potential obstacle to adopting it as a joint command philosophy in a multinational context like NATO.

The research cited immediately above has, to a considerable extent, focused on national settings, whereas the exercise of command in multinational operations and the room for the implementation mission command in that context still needs to be explored. It is, however, reasonable to expect that national differences in understandings and practices of mission command will have consequences for the ability for its implementation in a multinational force. Whereas previous scholarly work on variances among different national militaries operating together within a coalition or an alliance framework is scarce, several existing contributions demonstrate how national specificities within multinational forces can help understand differences in military behaviour and performance. For example, the different national forces participating in the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon implemented the mission mandate differently due to dissimilarities in how they interpreted the operational environment and based on their previous experience (Ruffa, 2014).

Multinational operations are characterized by factors that complicate command and coordination, including deployment in sensitive and often dangerous environments, differing organizational and authority structures, hasty deployment with limited opportunity to form an integrated force, and the temporary nature of both the mission and its personnel (Elron et al., 1999). It has been argued that the complexity inherent in the command of multinational forces places a specific demand on commanders for the acquisition of intercultural skills and flexible and consensus-oriented approaches to command. Moreover, even though a multinational force may be composed of militaries that embrace some form of mission command, its meaning and employment may exhibit significant differences, consequently necessitating a more centralized approach to command (Egerton, 2024; Stewart et al., 2004).

A recent interview-based study of mission command in a NATO context underscored the inconsistency with which it is applied (Ochs, 2020). While mission command is defined by official doctrine, there remains significant variation in its interpretation and practice. The study attributed this to a lack of common training and exercises and differing command practices at the tactical level. Language was considered a significant problem, as proficiency in English and terminology was found to vary among allied forces. Moreover, political influence can impede the application of mission command through different national restrictions and Rules of Engagement (ROE). While increased efforts to conduct common exercises and to improve language skills can partly address these problems, a very significant precondition for the ability to execute mission command harks back to the fundamentals described in the beginning of this section and the ability to successfully implement these in a multinational context: the commander must promote trust and mutual understanding within the force and be able to communicate intent while signalling and demonstrating a tolerance for mistakes.

Indeed, this observation places a very significant expectation on the commander as an individual leader. The application of mission command in a multinational context requires the commander to overcome linguistic and cultural differences to promote trust and ensure unity of effort through mutual understanding (Matthijssen & Strikwerda-Verbeek, 2023; NATO STO, 2022).

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Building on these observations from previous research, we seek to enhance understanding of the challenges and possibilities of securely establishing mission command as NATO's overarching command philosophy, drawing on the perspectives of NATO officers with significant experience in a multinational milieu and operations.

METHOD

Between March and November 2021, one of us interviewed 33 former and current senior NATO officers. The interviews, centring on the role of the commander with regard to the staff and the role of doctrine in contemporary command at the divisional level, included discussions of challenges with mission command and multinationalism. All interviewees were army or U.S. Marine Corps officers across the NATO alliance. Most of the flag officers interviewed had worked in NATO headquarters in Brussels, the NATO-led ISAF headquarters in Afghanistan, or as part of the NATO senior mentor system, thus sharing a network of familiarity. Others had served either as subordinate commanders or in the staffs of these generals, particularly during operations in Afghanistan.

Our analytical approach has been inspired by theory grounded in constructivism (Clarke, 2003; Rapley, 2010). After an initial open coding, identifying elements in the interviews dealing with multinationalism or mission command, we worked together to develop situational maps and, subsequently, categories. These categories form the structure of the analysis and are presented in the most intuitive way, beginning with the importance of written doctrine and proceeding to practice.

The following includes interviewees who have consented to be quoted by their names; others are anonymized. Active-duty officers are anonymized by default due to military security.

FINDINGS

In the following, our exploration of the issues begins with written doctrine and ultimately proceeds to multinational interoperability. The key finding is that the NATO system is deprived of some of the means considered in the literature to effectively promote mission command at the national level. This places parts of the responsibility for translating and promoting the strategy into the hands of already busy operational commanders. The analysis is divided into three sections: the importance but insufficiency of written doctrine; simplicity in communications; and the importance of conducting exercises. These three findings are, however, also interconnected.

THE IMPORTANCE – AND INSUFFICIENCY – OF WRITTEN DOCTRINE

The interviewees generally underline the importance of written doctrine. Doctrine forms a benchmark or a common baseline so that officers and commanders should have a common idea of how forces operate. This promotes mutual understanding and, hence, interoperability. A NATO doctrine writer formulated the purpose of doctrine in this way:

> NATO doctrine is set out to provide the sort of benchmark. Now, commanders don't need to adhere to NATO doctrine, but what they do need to do is understand it. If they understand it, then they understand that all the forces come together to go on the operation. All of those forces have a common baseline. It is very much a baseline; you then advance that. As a commander, you stamp your own impression upon that. (Colonel, UK Army, personal interview, 12 April 2021)

This way of perceiving doctrine as the common standard allowing commanders to anticipate the actions of their colleagues was put similarly by another respondent:

> One of the things that doctrine does as well when using doctrine as a point of departure is it allows units, particularly units dispersed on a battlefield, to have at least a basic understanding of what other units are doing. I have found there to be a great danger when one unit is so innovative and so far removed from what is expected that they can't coordinate well with other units on the battlefield. (Lieutenant General, US Marine Corps, personal interview, 8 May 2021)

The central premise of these two excerpts Is that doctrine is read, or at least understood and followed, to some extent. It is, however, also a military truism that "nobody reads doctrine". One doctrine writer formulated this tendency in this way:

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> Until I started writing doctrine, I didn't read doctrine either. No, we don't read routinely. Why is it there? Well, the answer to that is quite simple: It is because we have educational establishments that teach us doctrine. (Colonel, UK Army, personal interview, 12 April 2021)

Military officers are socialized into doctrine through staff courses and throughout their careers. Given both that NATO does not have regular staff courses teaching doctrine and that nations still formulate their own, there will likely be differences in what is written and perceived. Thus, NATO's commanders cannot rely on their officers having a common understanding of doctrine. Indeed, in a multinational context, the dominant nation in the headquarters tends to revert to its national doctrine and procedures. German Lieutenant General Bruno Kasdorf reflected on his experiences working in the NATO headquarters in Afghanistan:

> I went to Leavenworth for one year as a young staff officer, and later on, as a colonel, I also attended the war college at Carlisle. It was very important to have these experiences, and I knew how Americans do business. (Lieutenant General Bruno Kasdorf, German Army, personal interview, 8 October 2021)

A common written doctrine in NATO is merely a single step to ensure mutual understanding. Kasdorf underlines the importance of exchanging students at different nations' staff colleges; the way a nation "does business" might not align with written doctrine – even its own, let alone that of NATO. In a multinational context, it would be a useful step to ensure that everybody reads doctrine, and since the default seems to be that doctrine is something that officers are socialized into, incorporated in standards and rarely questioned, there is a danger that officers presume that they are discussing the same thing when they refer to it. They may be referring to national doctrine or simply to what they have been socialized into. Common doctrine aside, nations "do business" differently.

There are also differences in understanding the principles of mission command and actually practising it. One major general compared his nation's staff officers with others in a multinational NATO headquarters: "We are raised with mission command and act in accordance with the commander's intent. Not all nations are able to do that. They know the word mission command, but to practice it is something different" (Major General, Army, personal interview, 8 April 2021). In this case, the Major General emphasizes the difference between written doctrine or agreed-upon concepts and the actual behaviour of the staff officers. According to this informant, mission command should be a practice understood in a particular way and, thus, more than definitions in a manual. "Mission command", that is to say, is a loaded term – a suitcase term with many meanings.

SIMPLICITY IN COMMUNICATIONS

Language barriers

Officially, NATO has two working languages: French and English. NATO doctrine, however, is only available in English, and the working language in most multinational headquarters is English by default. Still, language proficiency is a challenge. English native speakers sometimes overlook the difficulties non-native speakers may have in clearly articulating their thoughts, thus sidelining them. Belgian Major General Hubert De Voss recalled a case from his time in the NATO-led ISAF headquarters in Kabul, where a staff officer was sidelined in the name of efficiency:

> He was an extremely knowledgeable, experienced engineer with great ideas and an absolute capacity for analysis and synthesis. The only issue he had was that he could not use the English language to express his ideas. And unfortunately, due to that, he sometimes was neglected and, or, you know, disapproved because the others didn't want to lose time; they would move on. (Major General Hubert de Voss, Belgian Army, personal interview, 24 September 2021)

Expressing ideas in a foreign language might be a real challenge, and not being able to use a language does not necessarily imply operational incompetence, notwithstanding the risk of being sidelined. The language problems also extend to written doctrine. Failure to understand the written doctrine will not allow the written doctrine to become a natural benchmark. Doctrine must be written in a way that is accessible. While simplicity in doctrine might be

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a worthwhile objective in NATO, where English is a foreign language to most, the ability to speak English may also be an essential parameter when assigning personnel to duties in multinational contexts.

Simplicity as a principle for interoperability

The problems of language proficiency spill into the process of giving orders. To many of the interviewees, simple orders are conducive to mutual understanding. But one staff officer who served in 1 U.S. Marine Division during the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected on General Mattis's command style and how his insistence on short orders made it harder for the staff to produce them:

> His commander's guidance was very direct, very innovative, very clear. There was no ambiguity. … It was actually kind of a dichotomy; it made the orders very much simpler in that they were very short, but it made it harder in that everything that we did was new and written literally from scratch. (Colonel, US Marine Corps, personal interview, 30 March 2021)

The colonel reflects that concise orders are much harder to write since very few things can be reused. This put a lot of work on the already busy staff. The ability to issue short orders rests on a solid doctrinal foundation, however. As the colonel put it:

> We left out all the other stuff, that doctrinal stuff, so many that came into it without a good doctrinal baseline, and I actually had a couple of people like that weren't sure how to do the standard logistics types operations that needed to be done to support that operation. That's a negative to having this good innovative easy-to-read order. Somebody who wasn't adept enough on the doctrinal side might have been lost. (Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps, personal interview, 30 March 2021).

The reader should notice that in 2003 1 U.S. Marine Division was neither a multinational nor a NATO formation but purely a U.S. division. Perhaps this solid foundation is not even achievable to the same extent in NATO formations. Indeed, there is a tendency in NATO, recognized by every respondent, for written orders to be very long. When asked why that was, German Army General Hans-Lothar Damröse, former commander of Joint Force Command Brunssum responded:

> Maybe we are too many? We think every detail must be written there … Maybe it is just a complicated process somehow? But the bone is the intent, and then the other two, the first two paragraphs, if you will. What is the mission? What is the intent? What do you want to achieve, and what is my mission then? (General Hans-Lothar Domröse, German Army, personal interview, 7 September 2021)

The general, we see, recognizes the tendency for staff to write orders accounting for every detail; his suggestion is that this issue might arise from an over-extensive staff; as the U.S. Marine Corps colonel explained above, it might equally arise from a lack of shared understanding and a solid foundation. Without this foundation, simple orders could suffer from ambiguity by leaving too much room for interpretation.

However, the most relevant part of the order, regardless of its length, is the intent and the mission – what General Domröse calls "the bone". This may offer a means to resolve the call for simpler orders. Indeed, U.S. Marine Corps General James Mattis emphasized that not everything needs to be written in detail. Instead, commanders and staff should focus on what could be left out of the order:

> What is important is what you leave out of your orders … The idea is to leave so much freedom that when something unexpected happens, an opportunity or a disaster in the making, cascading disasters or cascading opportunities, junior officers ask themselves, and staff officers ask themselves: If Mattis was here, what would be his order? And then go 110%. Go for it! (General James Mattis, U.S. Marine Corps, personal interview, 29 March 2021)

According to General Mattis, subordinates cannot show initiative and execute mission command if everything is covered in the written order. There must be enough freedom to allow

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subordinates to act according to the commander's intent. This approach and General Domröse's focus on intent and mission as the "bone" of the order starkly contrast with the contemporary tendency to produce extensive orders. This may be an effect of larger staff, as General Domröse seems to imply, a failure to leave space for improvization, as General Mattis suggested, or the impact of not having the solid doctrinal foundation needed to rely on short order.

EXERCISES TO BUILD TRUST

One central component of trust in the military organization is one's ability to do one's job. This form of trust is built on training, and every respondent emphasized the need for both training and exercises in which commanders and staff officers can function in their jobs, affording them the opportunity to provide guidance and to train their staff and subordinate units. Some form of trust is embedded in rank and position: a major is expected to be able to do certain things; a general, others. The nations that put these people into positions of power are expected to ensure that they are capable. This form of trust is formal and organizational. But rank and position are only starting points. Military personnel must also show they can be trusted by proving themselves capable in the military organization, particularly on exercises if not in actual combat.

Finally, there is a premium on informal trust in which commanders, subordinates, and the staff get to know each other in cross-cultural encounters outside the hierarchical military organization. Relationships are built on trust, making the achievement of mutual understanding easier. The respondents deemed a feeling of camaraderie and a common purpose to be essential – but it must be acknowledged that these are things requiring both deliberate practice and prioritization among all the other things that also need to be prioritised. Such encounters also allow for cross-cultural discussions that help to determine values and priorities influencing how operational problems are understood and solutions arrived at.

According to the interviewees, exercises can take several forms and do not have to involve units in the field. Respondents emphasized the need to occasionally bring troops into the field to experience the Clausewitzian friction that arises simply from having units coordinate. This embodied experience is essential if commanders and staff officers are to be able to determine how long things take and what is possible in practice. Other forms of theoretical training were also encouraged. Training was unanimously underlined as something conducive to the building of trust up and down the chain of command, particularly through exercises that challenge commanders and staff to exceed adherence to procedure.

Respondents pointed to a problem with NATO's current training regime. Exercises, both those conducted by individual nations and by NATO, are too few and far between. In NATO, in particular, exercises are designed and scripted to allow for the evaluation of headquarters and units against standing criteria. This contrasts with the more free-flowing exercises designed to pressure commanders and their staffs. One NATO officer put it this way:

> Training in NATO is not training. Training in NATO is evaluation. … And NATO has never pretended that it is training. They call them training exercises, but that is in name only. They are evaluation exercises because NATO expects troops to turn up trained. It is not NATO's business to train troops. NATO's business is to evaluate them against the standing criteria. (Colonel, UK army, personal interview, 12 April 2021).

There is insufficient overlap between what commanders want from exercises, those that pressure commanders and their staff and subsequently build trust, and the evaluation exercises in which they are asked to participate. However, several respondents also recognize that one needs to know the basics before transitioning into free-flowing exercises. Due to the often-ad hoc nature of the multinational context and heavy personnel rotation in standing multinational staff, achieving that level of training can be challenging. It is often unclear who is responsible for multinational training, while the NATO command structure has a firm grip on multinational evaluation and certification. Thus, trust may become procedural, and the knowledge that the units have been certified to display in an evaluation exercise may also provide a basic level of trust in the individuals appointed by their nations.

Indeed, the interviewees make a general call for forms of exercises where ideas can be tested and commanders can take prudent risks, learning from the consequences. One respondent put this idea about being comfortable with risk:

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> You need to accept risk; you need to love risk; you need to play with risks and practice as much as you can on exercise to feel comfortable with it. That's my controlling idea. In any situation, there will be risk. … The acceptance of risk is a combat factor. It's a combat factor with material effects, like engineers or artillery. I always tell my guys you've got to think of risk that way. (Lieutenant General, French Army, personal interview, 22 March 2021)

The respondent also underlines that risk is a combat factor with material effects. An adversary willing to take risks will have more options, forcing the other party to develop contingency plans and to keep reserves out of the fight to counter surprises.

Risk reluctance

A reluctance to take risks, linked with a perceived lack of training opportunities in which prudent risk-taking can be rewarded and encouraged, was a central theme in the interviews. Indeed, a tendency towards zero tolerance for failures was noted instead. As U.S. Army General David Petraeus explains it: "Too often, in my experience, there was a reluctance to take risks in training that would help us be ready for combat operations (General David Petraeus, US Army, personal correspondence. 27 September 2021).

General Petraeus' comment is representative of the respondents' discussion of risk. The military organization shows a surprising reluctance to take risks. While there is evidently a tendency towards an aversion to risk, the source of this tendency is unclear. Sometimes, the reason is placed outside the military chain of command, in policymakers, political leadership, or media. At other times, it seems to be a product of a bureaucratic striving for control, even though the interviewees also continuously emphasized that risk is inherent to the military profession. When reluctance to take risk creeps in, risk is treated as a threat requiring mitigation, not as an opportunity possibly affording positive outcomes. Major General de Voss explained:

> I've often seen that risk management taken at a military level hides what I would call risk aversion. … When zero risk is enforced upon a military plan, it probably kills the bigger part of your creativity or your possibility to be creative and accept a certain level of risk. (Major General Hubert de Voss, Belgian Army, personal interview, 24 September 2021)

Acceptance of, or willingness to meet, a particular level of risk is difficult to convey directly. It is not something that can simply be mathematically solved; it derives, rather, from mutual understanding based partly on the staff's analysis of the given mission and the possibilities within the initial intent. Commanders express their willingness to take risk in indirect terms. They formulate the initial intent and the commander's critical information requirements; the staff will then need to ascertain the prudent amount of risk related to what is essential to the commander. This indirect conveyance of appetite for risk, relying in part on a mutual understanding of these vague formulations of prudent risk-taking, will differ from commander to commander.

Informally, the commanders emphasized that the willingness to take risks does not start with the formulation of the intent behind a given operation; like trust, it relies on expectations being clarified well before operations. Commanders used different forms of storytelling to set these expectations. A U.S. Army lieutenant general said:

> Number one, you have to say it. I mean, you have to declare in every public venue what your expectation is and put it under your commander's guidance. Put it in the command philosophy so in the public-facing statements and documents, you have to make it that it's a priority. Secondly, mistakes will inevitably be made when people start taking risks. That's why it's called a risk. You have to be willing to grit your teeth and protect that officer or sergeant who makes the mistake that might happen if it was done with the intention of accomplishing the desired outcome, but something terrible happened or whatever. You've got to protect that so that everybody needs to see that you protect that. … Everybody needs to see that. Then the third thing: publicly highlighting, promoting, and by example taking risks. Not sitting around waiting for orders. I've always believed that the first principle of leadership is accepting responsibility. Not waiting to be told what to do. (Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Personal interview, 9 April 2021)

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The common denominator in this three-step process is to make the expectations public and to ensure that when mistakes inevitably occur they are not punished but, rather, highlighted as an attempt to complete the mission within the commander's intent. In a national context, the promotional system can be used to support the development of such a culture. Multinational commanders are deprived of that option since the promotion and manning of multinational formations is a national issue.

When process becomes purpose

One perceived obstacle to trust, to acceptance of risk, and ultimately to the application of mission command, is the size of staff and their bureaucratic tendencies. This is linked to the evaluation exercises the interviewees are asked to participate in. Generally, management and control are left to the staff. The problem is that the objective may shift from fighting the enemy to focusing on internal processes – or simply pleasing higher headquarters. A U.S. Marine Corps colonel put it this way:

> I think too often, the focus becomes higher headquarters and not necessarily the enemy or the mission at hand. … I mean, we get fixated with answering emails. You know, here's an email; I gotta stop everything I'm doing and answering emails. (Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps, personal interview, 30 March 2021)

Similarly, other respondents described how staff would build up "encyclopaedias" so they had answers to any question that the commander might come up with. These were sometimes driven by standard operational procedures (SOPs) developed in response to questions from a commander that the staff could not answer, now procedurally implemented to ensure that these questions be answered in the future. The problem is that managing a set of answers and keeping data up to date requires work from the staff and constant inputs in the form of answers from lower formations. Management and control do not have a logical endpoint, and without guidance staff seem to incline towards control and an inward focus on management and governance. The issue is not that staff officers distrust subordinate commanders but, rather, that they operate according to bureaucratic logic. From the perspective of those on the receiving end, this may create the impression of distrust and a failure to provide forces on the ground with precisely what they need – no more, no less – to accomplish their mission. This level of full control is only achievable in situations that are fully predictable. Again, the respondents themselves point to free-flowing two-part exercises to help commanders and their staff learn what is essential and what is not.

FROM DOCTRINAL TO HUMAN INTEROPERABILITY: MULTINATIONAL MISSION COMMAND IN NATO

Our analysis recognizes many of the well-known challenges set out in previous literature concerning both the difference between written doctrine and the actual behaviour of armies in the field, and the conflict between a bureaucratic and risk-averse culture and a culture that that prizes non-linearity and unpredictability. Since officers tend to be socialized into doctrine rather than engaging with it by reading it, there might be a gap in NATO's approach to the achievement of interoperability with mission command. The NATO command structure and its commanders are deprived of some of the mechanisms indicated by the literature as effective in the promotion of mission command and the achievement of the desired level of human interoperability.

AJP-01 provides a common *doctrinal* reference and standardized terminology. However, while the alignment of definitions is a crucial first step, their functioning as a working benchmark is premised on commanders and their staff knowing NATO doctrine rather than national doctrine alone. Since NATO does not have staff colleges that teach doctrine, it probably falls on individual commanders and their training branches to ensure that doctrine is read and understood. A typical occurrence in multinational headquarters is that the leading nations' officers simply "do business" as they know it through socialization. Maintaining exchange students at foreign staff colleges and exchange officers in national and multinational headquarters is one way to facilitate interoperability.

Increased awareness of written NATO doctrine is essential, and some NATO entities are experimenting with distance learning, podcasts and similar means to promote the manuals.

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Yet another approach is to encourage every member nation to align its own doctrine closely with that NATO, to use NATO doctrine with national amendments, as the UK currently does, or to simply adopt NATO doctrine, as Denmark has done in the land domain. While this might not change how nations "do business", it will ensure that they have, at least, read the same manuals and can thus discuss approaches with the same (written) baseline.

The analysis underlines how rank and position are merely starter capital requiring nurturing to build trust. The primary catalyst for this is the achievement of good performance during exercises. However, in a multinational context, exercises are sporadic; they tend to constitute formal evaluations and provide the training interviewees call for only on occasion. The responsibility for the training of multinational units and formations falls on the individual commander in coordination with higher headquarters. The NATO officers call for more free-flowing exercises challenging commanders and their staff. While large-scale exercises can be resource-demanding, some of the same effects might be achieved through wargaming, smaller command post exercises, tabletop exercises, staff rides, or the study of military history (see Enstad, 2022; Hagen, 2022; Sabin, 2014). However, evaluation exercises and auditing are also essential in ensuring that staff officers in the headquarters are formally qualified to do their jobs. The knowledge that the units and the individuals of which they are composed have been certified in an evaluation exercise may also provide a basic level of trust in the individuals appointed by their nations. The evaluation approach allows for the instantiation of swift trust.

The interviewees also emphasize the need to develop informal trust and the building of a sense of camaraderie through shared experiences outside the job. While camaraderie is deemed essential in any military setting (and perceived to be even more vital in the multinational context), its tangible effects are challenging to measure and its development requires resources and time that could be spent on more tangible outcomes. The respondents also recognized that staff are internally inclined towards control and management aimed at efficiently synchronizing capabilities and effects (Alberts & Hayes, 2006). Therefore, it is up to commanders to set expectations for the staff regarding the appropriate amount of control.

A clear intent and short orders promote mutual understanding. The intent and the mission form the "bone" of the order. Commanders and staff should carefully consider the content of the order since what is left out is just as important as what is put in. Mutual understanding also implies that the order should contain only essential information, which, in turn, requires a solid doctrinal foundation to fill the gap. Multinational settings raise specific challenges to achieve this common foundation, requiring continuous effort to ensure that staff and commanders are current on the latest NATO doctrine. This may also require doctrine to be more actively discussed and read in operational units rather than mainly taught at staff colleges. A form of self-enforcing regress currently promotes the production of very long orders. Headquarters overcompensate for the lack of common doctrinal or mutual understanding with the assumption that this problem can be overcome with more details –which is, paradoxically, counterproductive: more details produce less understanding. Without a solid doctrinal foundation, however, fewer details might also increase ambiguity.

Language remains a challenge that English native speakers tend to neglect. A good working proficiency in English should be required for general staff officers and commanders in multinational contexts (see also Skilleås & Grande, 2024). Nevertheless, multinational decision processes may still be time-consuming since non-native speakers need time to formulate their ideas. Excluding non-native speakers from processes to save time will alienate staff members and subordinate commanders. The application of mission command in multinational headquarters thus requires the staff to sacrifice efficiency for the sake of mutual understanding and interoperability.

The interviewees emphasized that officers must learn to be comfortable with risk since combat-related events cannot be controlled. Risk may be an essential element of the military profession that can be leveraged to one's advantage – but a willingness to meet risk cannot be directly conveyed. It is understood and ascertained, rather, through the intent and the commanders' critical information requirements. Storytelling and episodes from military history exemplify how commanders set expectations for their subordinates' behaviour related to risk and disciplined initiative, coupled with the acknowledgment that commanders remain responsible for the outcome. The interviewees also observed risk aversion in training and operations. While it was

unclear where this stemmed from, risk aversion was nevertheless deemed to have material effects on the planning and execution of operations.

This study has a few limitations. The literature shows that cultural differences exist between military branches; the interviewees here are all Army or U.S. Marine Corps officers. With the inclusion of perspectives from Air Force and Navy personnel, we may broaden our understanding of mission command as a joint doctrinal tenet. Similarly, not every NATO member is represented in our study. Future studies may wish to cast an even wider net. We have also focused exclusively on the NATO context. Exploring mission command in even more diverse settings, such as UN missions, might generate essential insights. Moreover, the prospect that differences in overarching strategy and political aims among states participating in multinational military operations may trickle down to affect the possibilities of exercising mission command in the field is an underexplored but potentially important dimension. While this remains outside the scope of this study, it could present a rewarding avenue for future research. Since our study is founded on interviews, there may be differences between what is being said in the interviews and what is practised in the headquarters. And case studies focusing on specific missions or exercises will also be useful in illuminating how mission command is practised.

CONCLUSION

We began this article by asking the question "What are the prospects and challenges for mission command in a NATO context?" We conclude that many of the challenges previously described in the literature detailing differences between written doctrine and the actual behaviour of armies are recognized in this study. The same can be said for previously known challenges to the application of mission command in a national setting, which seemingly become compounded in multinational units since commanders and the command structure are deprived of some of the mechanisms deemed by the literature to be effective.

Defining mission command in written NATO doctrine is, however, essential to the alignment of allied forces under a common approach to command. Our analysis indicates that NATO's introduction of mission command as a doctrinal tenet is essential to improving the efficiency and agility of command practices within the alliance. Still, the difficulties identified regarding implementing mission command must be taken seriously; defining concepts on paper will not produce changes. The preconditions of trust and mutual understanding must be part of an active discussion regarding command practices in NATO, formulated in simple and clear terms and exercised in scenarios that allow for prudent risk-taking.

This discussion should not only be about existing and normatively preferred practices of command – it also needs to address the place of mission command in the context of a broader development of military capability where technology, information management, communication and cross-domain integration all have consequences for the practice of command. In this article, we have highlighted some of the "soft" and intangible but enduringly important aspects of command – the ability of commanders to build trust and cohesion within their forces, which is an inescapable precondition for translating mission command practices into battlefield effectiveness.

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