



OPCON, PARR... LIKE THE MOON?

Transfers and delegations of authority: confusion and contradictions

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Expériences alliées

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Under the pretext of interoperability, an absurd version of the concepts of operational or tactical command and control, based on counter-sense, has gradually been imposed on French national organisations.

This trend has been aggravated by the exclusive attribution of one level of authority to each level of command, in clear contradiction to the spirit and letter of the definitions. The doctrine expressed in the joint reference documents, the obvious sex hiding of a "war of buttons" that is as ferocious as it is counterproductive, is contrary to reality and a source of intense confusion. It is inconsequential as long as no incident occurs, and will inevitably lead us to disaster when we have to face a real enemy.

In the beginning were the hard requirements of tactical flexibility and the sovereign freedom of action of the leader in combat. Until the turn of the millennium, in the French army, units and elements were articulated, attached and detached, without attaching great importance to Florentine distinctions which seemed to be of a theoretical nature.

Then, even in purely national organizations, the semantic uses that had come from NATO became the norm. There was no longer any attachment and detachment, but only "tea-oh-ah" and "levels of authority". Faced with the difficulty of grasping the concrete meaning of cryptic definitions, attempts were made more or less skillfully to summarize them for the common man by means of tables or sketches that were not always easy to understand. Then it was thought to be simplified by attributing to each hierarchical level the exclusivity of a particular "level of authority".

From the endless and lively conversations around the coffee machines to the endless glosses in staff training courses, concepts designed to simplify and clarify the exercise of

multinational command ended up clouding the minds of those involved in national operational organizations.

Command in combat, marked by adversity and uncertainty, requires four fundamental conditions: freedom of action and decision for the leader, which means that the leader can do what he wants with the forces assigned to him; flexibility, which implies that the leader can articulate his means as he sees fit; trust between leaders and subordinates, including the certainty of being obeyed; and mutual understanding, which implies, among other things, that words mean more or less the same thing to everyone.

In order to achieve these conditions, modern armies gradually established so-called "organic" commands, i.e., commands that were exercised over a unit, large or small, joint or not, with a standardized theoretical composition and roughly constant capabilities. Formed and trained in peacetime, employed in wartime in the same organization and under the leaders who had formed them, composed of organic subsets each with equal composition and capability. These commands could arrange their means with great flexibility thanks to combinations of circumstances known as "articulations" consisting of reducing certain units by "detaching" elements from them and strengthening others by "attaching" them.

The experience of the world wars in coalition warfare highlighted the difficulty of effectively coordinating increasingly complex operations when the leader does not know exactly how much obedience he can expect from foreign subordinates even when they are formally subordinate to him. Anxious not to repeat in a new European conflict their setbacks in Tunisia, Italy, or Normandy, the Allied forces were anxious to avoid a repeat of the setbacks of Tunisia, Italy, or Normandy. From the beginning of the Cold War, the Allied forces endeavoured to define precisely the prerogatives associated with transfers and delegations of authority between Allied forces.

Compared to full command, which expresses command in its classic, integral, national sense, Allied doctrine defines four degrees of authority that a national command can transfer or delegate to a leader of another nation or to an Allied leader: operational command, giving the receiving leader full authority over the forces thus entrusted to him, but relieving him of administration and support; operational control, which confers only limited authority, restricting the leader's freedom of action, prohibiting him in particular from changing the unit's mission or giving orders to separate elements; tactical command, universally misunderstood and never used because of its vague and paradoxical definition (1) tactical control, a simple authority, common sense and without political consequences, attached to the responsibility exercised over an area or a mission, and requiring detailed coordination of the action of all actors.

In principle, the existence of prerogatives automatically associated with internationally recognised levels of authority (STANAGs) responds to the need for understanding, trust, discipline and guarantees the freedom of action of the chief at least by telling him what he can legitimately request.

The Allied practice in reality only retains OPCON and TACON at any level of command. OPCON is the result of a political-military decision. (2) This is an expression of the freedom of action that a national high command is willing to give to an allied commander on the use of forces loaned to it. It would be inconsistent to give less authority than OPCON or to impose narrower limits on the freedom of action of a leader entrusted with forces.

OPCOM is never conferred except when the Allied chain of command passes through a leader of the contributing nation at each level. (3). TACON is merely the delegation, narrowly circumscribed in time, space and mission, of the duty to coordinate manoeuvres and movements so that units belonging to different commands but moving in the same area or participating in the same action do not contradict each other. It is the result of a local decision, taken by any tactical leader.

Two developments led the French command to apply these definitions to the command of national operations: the adoption of the principle of modularity by which the continuity between the organisation of peacetime and wartime was abandoned; and the return to the integrated structure of the Alliance which was at the origin of many modes. There was in fact neither advantage nor necessity in imposing these definitions: In conventional terms, the units that make up a command for the duration of a campaign or "mandate" are said to be assigned, and those that the command preaches are said to be assigned to a "mandate", and those that the command preaches are said to be assigned to a "mandate". Those that the command lends for the duration of a particular mission to a particular subordinate by borrowing them from the subordinate to whom they are assigned are said to be detached and attached. And to express the limits of this loan, expressing them in words is more effective than using foreign vocabulary that is notoriously misunderstood. All the more so as an incoherent French doctrine would soon aggravate the misunderstanding.

Renouncing the meaning of foreign expressions as incomprehensible as operational versus tactical, transfer to delegate, command to control, mission to task, the editors (4) of the Joint Doctrine Centre had the brilliant idea of assigning each degree of authority to a rank level in the French operational chain: the CEMA was therefore supposed to exercise alone, FULCOM on the grounds that it is the most senior or *primus inter pares*, and OPCOM, on the grounds that the exercise of the "... " is not a matter for the French Army. The force commander had OPCON reserved for himself since the "operational command" exercise was his *raison d'être* according to the decrees in force. The component commanders were assigned TACOM on the grounds that they commanded and that they were the first "tactical" level; the others were left with TACON, the only mention of which is therefore found in all French land organisation charts!

This "Neapolitan slice" logic is based on the misunderstanding of false friends and ignorance of the realities of operations.

CEMA cannot exercise full command, which on the contrary refers to the organic authority exercised by the Chiefs of Staff, as opposed to the notion of "operational command", which is the essential attribute and *raison d'être* of CEMA.

The "operational command" as understood in the French regulations covers authority over the operations of the French armies and over the French forces participating in operations, in comparison with the organic or hierarchical command. This meaning has nothing to do with the notion of OPCOM as understood by NATO, which distinguishes it above all from national command. (5). The Force Commander's authority cannot be limited to OPCON since, in fact, no one disputes the Force Commander's authority to assign missions to his subordinates or to re-articulate their elements.

The Component Commander, at least as far as sailors and land-based personnel are concerned, obviously has the authority to articulate and re-articulate his means, to assign missions as well as "tasks" to them, to impose constraints, all things that only OPCOM allows.

Any corps commander designated to form an ATIG continues de facto in theatre to exercise his organic or hierarchical command over the units and personnel in his regiment assigned to his AIMTF, giving him greater authority than the ECS actually exercises over him. It is strongly hoped that no one will challenge the right (or duty) of this battalion commander to write an initial order for his mission of a few days' duration, in which he will impose an ideological and operational requirement on the battalion. It is very much hoped that no one will challenge the battalion commander's right (or duty) to write an initial order for his mission of a few days, in which he will impose an ideal of manoeuvre, articulate his means by lightening one to reinforce the other, possibly give a stand-alone mission to a detachment commander of two or three subordinate levels, etc. These are all responsibilities which in reality belong solely to FULCOM and OPCOM.

This head of the IATF, still de facto, exercises at least OPCOM over all the elements assigned to his IATF for the duration of the mandate, since he does not note or administer their personnel but can give them any order, on a daily basis as well as in operations. He cannot be granted less than OPCOM on the elements attached to him for the duration of a specific mission and, still in reality, he is granted OPCOM with reservations. He is obliged to exercise TACON on any element transiting or stationed in the area of action for which he is responsible, and he may be delegated TACON for the duration of the action, on a unit of a neighbouring command participating in a joint action on either side of its boundary.

In other words, the reality absolutely contradicts the doctrine in force, which is incomprehensible at the same time. There are many misunderstandings and misinterpretations: Operational command is not synonymous with "operational command". Operational means at the same time "relative to operations", "limited to operations" and "operative"! The word "mission" does not have the same meaning as the allies give to mission and would be better translated by task. The verb deploy refers exclusively to the act of moving a unit from its garrison to a theatre of operations.

All this constitutes an inoperative doctrine because it is inapplicable and inappplied, with no consequences as long as there is no crisis or combat. These formulas absolutely contradict principles asserted with the last vigour such as unity of command or freedom of action. They encourage tension, justify "chapel wars" to the detriment of the common interest, allow the mediocre to cover themselves by restraining the most capable. It is urgent to put an end to these errors before they give rise to conflicts of authority, rigidity and waste, as soon as the real rigours of combat have to be faced again.

1 TACOM is defined as "delegated authority" - whereas command is not delegated and no other definition gives authority for the delegated war - "allowing tasks to be assigned to fulfil the mission", while it is not clear whether "the mission" is that of the delegated or the "delegated" unit. In practice, this notion is almost never used in interallied practice, because of its confusing definition.

2 OPCOM and OPCON alone are subject to a transfer of authority (TOA) through the issue of a formalized political-military level message, called ORBATOA.

3 OPCOM is thus systematically found in all cases where an American unit is under the authority of American commanders at all levels. The British have the same practice.

4 There are several indications that these drafters were airmen. Only an airman could imagine that guiding aircraft into the control zone of an airport or aircraft carrier was tactical control, when such action would be better termed "technical control"; only an airman could imagine that the Component Commander could not have several subordinate levels of command; and only an

airman at last could forget that the Component Commander might need to re-articulate the assets assigned to him.

5 OPCOM is full command without the rights of ownership and without the responsibility for administration and support, which remains a national responsibility in the Alliance. This distinction of support does not apply, for example, in the UN, because it funds its own support organization and pays for the forces assigned to it, giving it much greater flexibility and freedom of action, at least in theory. As for the authority of the CEMA, it would be much more aptly compared to COCOM or combatant command, an authority attributed to the major American theatre commanders.

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