

Mission Command and Logistics Interdependencies

■ By Dr. Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic Jr.

In this article, the fourth in a series of Blind Spot commentaries, we examine one more aspect of the relationship between mission command and logistics. This time we consider how best to deal with the *mélange* of organizational and process interdependencies that are vital to the health of our defense logistics enterprise.

For this discussion, we draw on James D. Thompson's 1967 book, *Organizations in Action: Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory*, as a theoretical underpinning for what we hope are useful and practical considerations for the logistics community.

Although unity of command is a longstanding principle of war, it cannot be a principle of logistics—at least not dogmatically at the enterprise level. Too many players and systems are involved to centrally regulate what is essentially a heterarchical, complex, adaptive, and interdependent network.

This network is continuously changing and shaped by many interacting events: war and politics, defense appropriations, science and technology, industry dynamics, international treaties and agreements, viability and reliability of transportation networks, sources of critical raw materials, and so forth.

It is hard to predict how these multifarious interactions unfold and what secondary and tertiary effects result as we inevitably tinker with just one or many of them. In other words, we need logisticians who cautiously exercise initiative as they intervene among these complex interdependencies. To help the logistics professional diagnose the interdependencies, we will lay out what we characterize as “degrees of coupling.”

The least coupled degree of interdependence is what open-systems the-

orists call “pooled interdependence.” (We don't make this stuff up—you can Google this term.)

We will illustrate using a sports analogy of a swimmer competing in an individual event. The overall outcome of a swim meet is largely determined by the relatively independent performance of the individual swimmers. A logistics example would be how the armed services, according to Title 10 of the U.S. Code, are responsible for logistically supporting their own formations.

Deconfliction is a management approach that works well in pooled circumstances—as long as one effective organization or process is not interfering with another, the overall outcome should be okay. A joint task force commander, for example, may decide to use service subordinate component commands as operational headquarters, establishing no requirement to share or provide mutual support among the components.

The middle range coupling is described as “sequential interdependence.” A sports analogy here would be baseball, where the final score is based on players rounding the bases dependent on the previous batter's performance and so forth.

Likewise, a defense manufacturer's assembly line relies on a supply chain. Process methods, such as Lean and Six Sigma, reflect an approach to managing efficiencies in sequential interdependencies.

The highest degree of coupling is called “reciprocal interdependence,” where the output of one organization becomes the input for others and vice versa. A good sports analogy is the fluidity found in a basketball or soccer game, where running, dribbling,

passing, and shooting are dynamic, interrelated actions that may also make categorical definitions, such as offense versus defense, seem paradoxical because they are concurrent opposites.

Reciprocal interdependent partners' performance requires complex forms of continuous coordination. It is what the modern military refers to as the “common operational picture,” which provides real-time knowledge of each other's actions in time and space to enable near-real time synchronization of requirements, procurements, and distribution at the enterprise level.

Also, as operational logistics capabilities are increasingly reciprocated among the functional components and others—interagency partners, allies, and the like—a key task for logisticians is ensuring well-established trusting relationships and systems for lateral communications across the joint logistics enterprise.

We propose that the more coupled interdependencies are, the more obscure the doctrinal tenets of mission command become because a single commander's statement of intent is inadequate. Understanding interorganizational degrees of coupling may help logistics policymakers and operational commanders appreciate the interdependent complexities of logistics at the enterprise level.

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