

Joint Targeting and Air Support in Counterinsurgency

How to Move to Mission Command

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In December 2006, the US Army and US Marine Corps jointly published Field Manual (FM) 3-24 / Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3.33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, to much fanfare and interest from both the civilian media and military circles.¹ The colead writers of this manual, Gen David H. Petraeus, USA, retired, and Gen James N. Mattis, have both enjoyed professional success and favorable public notices for their efforts. In April 2009, FM 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, appeared, defining in more detail the application of the doctrine originally espoused in FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5.² In October 2009, the Joint Staff followed with Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, which reiterates many of the basic counterinsurgency (COIN) principles found in the initial US Army/US Marine

Corps document.³ It makes several subtle but important changes, however, while ignoring others made in FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 as well as FM 3-24.2, thus actively undermining the entire joint effort within COIN operations. Apparently, JP 3-24 did this to reinforce service component tenets that do not work in guerilla/low intensity conflicts, as verified by the historical record and research and as addressed by FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 as well as FM 3-24.2. Specifically, in the realms of targeting, air support, and command relationships, there remains a distinct lack of coherence in the joint understanding of COIN—and the blame for that deficiency lies in the joint publications. These disparities reveal a fundamental flaw in the review process for joint publications that must be addressed immediately for the sake of the mission in Operation Enduring Freedom and elsewhere, and for the safety of the men and women engaged in combat operations today.

The Doctrine

Command and control for COIN, as identified in FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, focus on mission command, which “is ideally suited to the mosaic nature of COIN operations. Local commanders have the best grasp of their situations. Under mission command, they are given access to or control of the resources needed. . . . Thus, effective COIN operations are decentralized, and higher commanders owe it to their subordinates to push as many capabilities as possible down to their level.”⁴ FM 3-24.2 further identifies the application of this principle: “Once a BCT [brigade combat team] is given an AO [area of operations], they, along with the Host Nation, should be the controlling headquarters for all other elements in their AO. This should include the temporary attachment for control, if not command, of any element that is physically within their AO.”⁵ As applied in combat operations, this decentralized mode of command, control, and execution is tasked as such: “Each subordinate element is tasked to find, fix, finish, and exploit all enemy forces in their area within their capabilities.”⁶ FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 and FM 3-24.2 repeat the theme of decentralized control, but the

joint publication on the same subject fails to mention this concept, addressing execution as the only decentralized aspect: “Successful COIN is normally conducted with decentralized execution based upon centralized vision and orders.”⁷

Unique to the joint publication, the phrase “centralized vision and orders” is found nowhere in either FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 or FM 3-24.2, as is the case with the preference for mission command. Furthermore, the phrasing in JP 3-24 has changed to match Air Force doctrine’s first tenet of airpower (limiting all decentralized actions to execution alone and mandating centralized control): “The mosaic nature of COIN is ideally suited to decentralized execution.”⁸ This apparent desire to have joint doctrine match Air Force doctrine often stretches to extremes. According to JP 3-03, *Joint Interdiction*, “Marine aviation’s philosophy is one of centralized control and decentralized execution.”⁹ Compare this to the statement in MCWP 3-2, *Aviation Operations*:

Central to the concept of employment for the ACE [aviation combat element] is the philosophy of centralized command and decentralized control. . . . The ACE commander also wants to optimize the flexibility, versatility, and responsiveness of aviation by allowing control of assets to be conducted by subordinate agencies. These subordinate agencies are both responsive to the commander and in touch with the changing dynamics of the battle (i.e., decentralized control.)¹⁰

This concept of centralized control and decentralized execution is enshrined within the Air Force’s doctrine and philosophy, which insist that “centralized control is commanding airpower and should be accomplished by an Airman at the air component commander level who maintains a broad focus on the JFC’s [joint force commander’s] objectives to direct, integrate, prioritize, plan, coordinate, and assess the use of air, space, and cyberspace assets in any contingency across the range of operations.”¹¹ This concept is at direct odds with that of mission command developed by what one should nominally consider the supported services within a COIN: the ground components. Misrepresentations aside, Marine Corps doctrine embraces the concept of mission command, as does the Army’s doctrine of close combat at-

tack (CCA), demonstrated by decentralized command, control, and execution acting as an integrated unit in support of a subordinate maneuver element.¹²

The confused nature of the preferred command and control relationship evidenced here is but one of several conflicts between the ground component and joint doctrine—and this is no longer merely an intra-service consideration. A white paper by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff dated 3 April 2012 highlights the joint deficiencies insofar as it mandates the incorporation of mission command into Joint Force 2020: “The basic principles of mission command—commander’s intent, mission type orders and decentralized execution—are not new concepts. They are a part of current joint and service doctrine. But this is not enough.”¹³

Targeting in Counterinsurgency

FM 3-24.2 addresses the modes of targeting across the seven COIN lines of effort. The COIN targeting cycle includes four processes: decide, detect, deliver, and assess.¹⁴ The air tasking order forces these processes into a 96-hour targeting cycle, but the nature of COIN operations most often renders this timeline too long for utilizing effective air support.¹⁵ The cycle for targeting addressed in FM 3-24.2 obviously conflicts with the joint procedure highlighted in JP 3-24, which models the six-step joint targeting cycle in JP 3-60, *Joint Targeting*.¹⁶ Within the joint targeting concept, the dynamic targeting steps incorporated into step five of mission planning and execution further complicate matters. Here the six steps include find, fix, track, target, engage, and assess.¹⁷ JP 3-60 defines the “fix” portion as follows: “The fix step of dynamic targeting includes actions to determine the location (fix) of the potential target.”¹⁸

Compare this to FM 3-24.2’s description of strike operations as the mission to “find, fix and finish insurgent forces.”¹⁹ The plain reading of “find” seems to equate to JP 3-60’s notion of “fix.” Both the Army and

FM 3-24.2 appear to use the same definition of the term *fix*: “A tactical mission task where a commander prevents the enemy from moving any part of his force from a specific location for a specific period to [sic] of time.”²⁰

JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, misses the opportunity to rectify the conflict by failing to define the term *fix*.²¹ JP 3-24 addresses targeting in COIN in less than one page, reiterates some basic phrases without specificity, and quickly references JP 3-60.²² FM 3-24.2, however, dedicates a section to targeting in COIN, again involving a different process than that defined in JP 3-60, which fails to mention COIN or irregular warfare at all. By only cross-referencing major combat operations (MCO), JP 3-60 neglects the development of COIN-specific doctrine, thus revealing a surprising lack of intellectual honesty. Joint publications are not known for nebulous, vague descriptions left to the imagination of the JFC or his or her staff—witness the 275 pages of infinitesimal detail in JP 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*. FM 3-24.2 offers a sound targeting cycle designed for COIN that is neglected in order to embrace the MCO-centric JP 3-60. This situation results in the ground tactical commander’s utilizing doctrine developed by the land component but remaining dependent upon conflicting doctrine for fixed-wing air support. The tactical air control party utilizes the joint / Air Force doctrine, so Army brigade or battalion headquarters must use different processes again, with different command and control philosophies and, consequently, conflicting doctrinal foundations. Taken in this context, Gen Stanley McChrystal’s tactical directive limiting the use of fixed-wing air support in Afghanistan was a tactical and strategic necessity.²³

Close Air Support in Counterinsurgency

The most obvious problem created by this doctrinal morass occurs where the air and land components meet most closely: close air support (CAS). Regardless of its length, JP 3-09.3, the publication on CAS, offers surprisingly little on doctrinal foundations, leaving the war

fighter to study the Air Force's counterland doctrine—Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 3-03, *Counterland Operations*—which encompasses both CAS and air interdiction and remains vital to an understanding of the concepts underlying current joint doctrine. Ironically, *fix* as a doctrinal term makes another appearance, this time in concurrence with the Army's doctrine and definition.²⁴

AFDD 3-03 establishes several concepts, such as the need for terminal control. Of the document's 100 or so pages, only one paragraph identifies the possibility of CAS not supported by the joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) and its emergency nature.²⁵ Because the JTAC is a company-level asset for the majority of maneuver elements, however, we can often assume that no JTAC support will be available during typical COIN operations, which often occur at the platoon or squad level.²⁶ The Air Force declares that, by definition, CAS "is the only way to get air support against enemy targets in close proximity to friendly forces," a false statement since the Army's CCA provides equal, if not superior, air support in close proximity to the enemy.²⁷

CCA doctrine integrates airframes and pilots as integral members of the combined-arms maneuver team. It reflects the integration of many different branches and capabilities customized to the mission at hand and can support periods as long as a year or as short as a few hours. The taskable aircraft can conduct independent operations at the discretion of the aircrews within the framework of the operation or as directed within the fight by the senior ground commander. In the context of COIN / guerilla warfare, they usually make their greatest contribution as the eyes of the ground forces, leveraging their aerial perspective. Within COIN, the ground commander may not wish to employ aerial-delivered ordnance against identified targets due to casualty concerns. Rather, Army aviators will direct and order ground forces towards possible threats, remaining capable of ordnance delivery in support as required. Although precision munitions have done much to mitigate collateral damage, the individual rifleman firing a single shot remains our most precise capability on the battlefield and

provides the commensurate information operation advantages of such precision. Formal CAS, designed to maximize survivability against an integrated tactical air defense threat, cannot supply this flexibility. Conversely, CCA employed against a mature air defense threat would be prohibitively risk laden. There is a time and a place for both.

The author utilized CCA from AH-64Ds numerous times in Afghanistan at ranges as close as five meters and felt that this type of attack, with its decentralized control, habitual relationship, and common doctrinal language, served as a better form of air support in the small-war environment. AFDD 3-03 assumes a linear battlefield, developing its doctrine accordingly.²⁸ Its opening section of “Foundational Doctrine Statements” specifically notes that “the success of both offensive and defensive CAS operations in contiguous, linear warfare may depend on massing effects at decisive points—not diluting them across the entire battlefield.”²⁹ Historically, this statement in nearly all instances is correct. However, it implies that the converse situation would call for the opposite effect, but the “Foundational Doctrine Statements” fail to mention combat that isn’t “contiguous” and “linear” so the implication remains only that—an implication, unincorporated into Air Force and joint doctrine. In light of the fact that this noncontiguous, nonlinear form of warfare has dominated since World War II, perhaps it should find its way into that doctrine.

AFDD 3-03 holds close the concept of centralized control, wishing away the flexibility desired by ground components by defining the preferred tactics for ground commanders: “A deliberate attack occurs when adequate time for planning and coordination exists; this is the preferred mode of ground advance.”³⁰ The source of this proclamation remains a mystery since neither FM 3-90, *Tactics* (July 2001), nor JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (11 August 2011), includes it. Nevertheless, the declaration does justify what appears to be a predetermined service bias. From a maneuver commander’s perspective, deliberate attack—designed for use against a prepared enemy—is probably the least preferable. Pursuit and exploitation arguably provide maximum

opportunity at minimum risk. Forces can conduct these operations, though, only in a decentralized manner; thus, regardless of the inherent maneuver advantage, one must apparently subordinate these concepts to the sanctity of the air tasking order. In yet another example, even the term *close proximity* ties into the obvious service bias, defined by AFDD 3-03 as “the distance within which some form of terminal attack control is required.”³¹

The History

Overall, AFDD 3-03 is an extremely well developed explanation of Air Force doctrine. As doctrine designed around the concept of joint operations or support of the land component in COIN, however, it appears to conflict with both FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 and FM 3-24.2 in terms of tenets and concepts. The various disagreements between these doctrines mostly deal with the concept of control and who should wield it—the combatant commander’s staff and the air and space operations center assigned to it or the supported ground elements. Determining the preferred direction requires a brief historical analysis of air support in COIN. Depressingly, today’s debate echoes a common refrain dating back to World War II, and the body of published work on the repeated failures of US CAS doctrine is shocking in its depth.

In Korea the failure of doctrine was such that Col George Reinhardt of the US Army proposed that the Navy take on the mission of all CAS “Tac Air” for both ground components. He realized that the use of “penny packets,” instantly available to the ground commander and under his control, represented the preferred method of CAS. Gen Douglas MacArthur’s exclusion of Air Force assets at the Inchon landings tends to support the notion that the least useful branch of service was the same one identified by Colonel Reinhardt.³² Existing Marine Corps CAS doctrine, based upon principles that considered CAS an extension of and integrated with the ground commander’s forces and available as the ground commander saw fit, reinforced this lesson learned.³³

The RAND Corporation undertook an analysis of the application of CAS in COIN in 1964, seeking to identify the best lessons of Malaysia, the Philippines, Algeria, Burma, and other conflicts. It noted the particularly effective use of helicopter or aircraft command posts serving forward ground commanders in combat situations.³⁴ Vietnam saw a vast increase in the publication of analyses of the optimal method of air support in COIN. There, such concepts as colocated and decentralized command were considered optimal, which directly led to the colocated Army aviation task forces seen today throughout Afghanistan.³⁵ Although joint CAS procedures are clearly identified as a highly detailed process, rotary-wing pilots were discovering that simple, decentralized procedures were both safe and highly effective in COIN when conducted by units habitually operating together.³⁶ By the end of the Vietnam War, even the masses of aircraft employed did not ameliorate the conflicts occurring with Air Force support to the Army in COIN CAS, as highlighted in the interestingly titled article “Close Air Support: Sixty Years of Unresolved Problems,” published in 1970.³⁷ RAND bookended the Vietnam War in 1971 with yet another exhaustive study which, unsurprisingly, concluded that the foremost disagreement between the Army and Air Force dealt with command and control relationships.³⁸ Predictably, the Army desired decentralized control, and the Air Force mandated centralized control.

Concurrent with American involvement in Vietnam, Rhodesian forces were developing their own COIN doctrine, which saw the expansion of air roles in support of the ground commander.³⁹ Under Rhodesian doctrine, air support had five separate subtasks, including CAS. The Rhodesian definition of CAS mirrored the American, but the doctrine then expanded and developed concepts such as immediate air support, indirect air support, preplanned air support, and tactical air support. Immediate air support, an entirely different support concept than CAS, was “designed to meet the specific requests which arise during the course of battle and cannot be planned in advance.”⁴⁰

Aside from our own forces' experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, which sees the same arguments and proposed solutions replayed, one of the best ongoing debates involves the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) experience in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2009.⁴¹ Israel entered the 2006 campaign with a fighter pilot as chief of staff of all combat forces and a doctrine firmly rooted in effects-based operations, largely drawn from current US Air Force and Joint Forces Command doctrine.⁴² The Lebanon campaign—which saw airpower (under centralized command and control) used in a completely disjointed fashion during a halfhearted and largely ignored ground campaign—ended at best in a tactical draw but a clear strategic and political defeat.⁴³

Based upon these results, Israel completely revamped its CAS doctrine for Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, reverting to decentralizing control down to the maneuver-brigade command level (called practical control by the IDF), which produced much greater success and decreased both friendly and civilian casualties. This occurred despite the condensed, urban nature of the campaign in Gaza as compared to that in southern Lebanon.⁴⁴ This adjustment affected not only CAS but also all fires and targeting, including what one would normally call interdiction.⁴⁵ The Gaza test bed proved so successful that its methods are now official IDF doctrine. A retired Israeli Air Force officer and Israeli defense analyst commented that

Cast Lead was three notches above Leb II. The theater was saturated with air assets available to the lowest ground command level. Some assets at company level. Physical meetings between aircrew and ground forces at the lowest levels. Air assets involved at the lowest level of ground fighting, [unmanned aerial vehicles] clearing around the corner at urban fighting, Apaches doing enemy suppression for company commanders, fast jets even clearing the terrain [of improvised explosive devices] and other ground obstacles prior to ground movements. Unprecedented.⁴⁶

Though not conclusive, the historical analysis is illuminating. US ground forces regularly repeat the call for decentralized control of CAS and are regularly rebuffed by doctrinal guardians within the US Air Force. Other countries find mechanisms to maximize the effectiveness

of their air support through variations in doctrine or expansion of available options to meet the mission requirements. Envisioning multiple forms of CAS doctrine (as the US Army has done with CCA and the Rhodesians with their five forms of air support) or delineating the fact that there are times for both centralized and decentralized control, depending on the circumstances, would constitute simple first solutions. There is an art to warfare, and good-intentioned people can disagree for all the right reasons, but the arguments of the supported unit should carry the most weight. Within COIN, the need for decentralized control is even more pronounced. As David Galula notes in his discussion of the “primacy of the territorial command,”

The counterinsurgent's armed forces have to fulfill two different missions: to break the military power of the insurgent and to ensure the safety of the territory in each area. It seems natural that the counterinsurgent's forces should be organized into two types of units, the mobile ones fighting in a rather conventional fashion, and the static ones staying with the population in order to protect it and to supplement the political efforts.

The static units are obviously those that know best the local situation, the population, and the local problems; if a mistake is made, they are the ones who will bear the consequences. It follows that when a mobile unit is sent to operate temporarily in an area, it must come under the territorial command, even if the military commander of the area is the junior officer. In the same way as the US ambassador is the boss of every US organization operating in the country to which he is accredited, the territorial commander must be the boss of all military forces operating in his area.⁴⁷

A JTAC on the ground does not meet this requirement. The demands of battle can change instantaneously from that of close fires; to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; to interdiction; to pursuit. At a minimum, all forces operating in support of the mission commander must remain under the tactical control of that senior ground commander, especially in the confused COIN environment. The idea of a theater-level air and space operations center having omnipotent knowledge over an area as vast as Afghanistan is questionable. Even the postage-stamp-sized Gaza (at 45 square kilometers) and the

10 kilometer sliver of southern Lebanon proved too large for such a control relationship.

The Way Ahead

This problem must be fixed at the joint level. If joint doctrine is written to justify service doctrine, regardless of the service, then some will ignore it and some will use it, defeating the whole purpose. It must be the best analysis possible, prepared by experts and senior leaders of all the branches with a vested interest. That FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 is considered the defining doctrine and JP 3-24 an afterthought stands as an indictment of the entire joint publication system of writing, review, and approval. The author's own branch of service, the Army, appears derelict in treating these critical tasks so carelessly—even to the point of mission failure. The Marines, too, should not have let such a glaring misrepresentation of their own aviation doctrine go unchallenged and uncorrected.

Specific to the CAS issue, MCOs and COIN are fundamentally different missions and, as such, require completely different tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as completely different doctrine. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 was not a stand-alone document. FM 3-24.2 took the earlier document's theory and attempted to describe the tactical application for ground forces. To truly adapt to what was unquestionably the predominant form of warfare in the past 60 years and will be in the foreseeable future, the Air Force must make a similar effort. The decentralized nature of effective COIN mandates that our most mobile and critical force multiplier, the aircraft, operate and be controlled in a similarly decentralized manner by the supported element. CAS doctrine, freed from trying to bridge the gap between mass-fires-based MCO and decentralized-maneuver-based COIN, can then be rebuilt, thus maximizing the revolution in combat operations led by remotely piloted vehicles and precision-guided munitions. Similarly, the Air Force can free interdiction, currently tasked to shape the ground battle, to expand to theater deep strike and concen-

trate primarily on the JFC's operational needs as they expand beyond mere ground-battle considerations.⁴⁸

This is not to say that during COIN, current doctrine would not remain preferable in certain circumstances. During the siege at Khe Sahn, Vietnam, Gen William Westmoreland saw fit to integrate all Marine fixed-wing assets under a single air component commander to facilitate the effective use of airpower against a massed enemy.⁴⁹ Certainly in such a situation, deliberate planning arising from our current doctrine remains the best option to deconflict great numbers of aircraft operating in a small area. Events like these, however, are unquestionably an anomaly during most COIN campaigns. We simply can't expect a one-size-fits-all doctrine to operate throughout the spectrum of decisive operations. As Gen Martin Dempsey, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observes, "Our fight against a decentralized enemy has driven home the necessity to decentralize our capabilities and distribute our operations."⁵⁰

Regardless of the methodology used to correct our current failings, the disconnect between doctrine and mission leaves the latter at risk as well as the service personnel we ask to accomplish it. If the unwieldy bureaucracy that the joint community has become is incapable of properly adjusting, despite the apparent best efforts of the current chairman, then we must find interim solutions to ensure that mission success and not service parochialism stands in the forefront of our thinking and actions. The best first step would eviscerate the 64-year-old Key West agreement, based upon assumed nuclear combat against a Soviet Union now 20 years absent. Long-term integration of a doctrine joint in both name and actuality would represent the optimal and necessary culmination. Doing so would help incorporate the trust required to successfully integrate the chairman's vision of successful joint operations embracing mission command.⁵¹ ✪

Notes

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