Staff Facilitation of Commander Decision-Making in LSCO

NO.23-758
April 2023

Lead Analyst

Payne, Mitchell, LTC
Mission Command Training Program

Contributing Analyst

Watts, James, LTC
Mission Command Training Program

One of the primary functions of the staff at any level in large-scale combat operations (LSCO) is to facilitate the commander's ability to make timely and accurate decisions. Recent observations across multiple warfighters have shown that staff processes often fail to meet the necessary information requirements that facilitate the commander's decision-making. While doctrine prescribes and describes the process to formulate the commander's critical information requirements (CCIR), the differentiation between doctrine and execution indicates a gap either in doctrinal application, training, or doctrine itself.

This article will examine how military staff personnel develop CCIR and suggest an alternative approach to CCIR development based on observations across multiple warfighter exercises. Additionally, this article will discuss common commander decisions in LSCO. This will inform staff leaders on how to better anticipate and facilitate commander decision-making. Finally, this article will briefly discuss the relationship between decision-making, organizational agility, and risk.

I. CCIR Development and Decision-Making

In current U.S. Army doctrine, CCIR is comprised of two elements: friendly forces information requirements (FFIR) and priority intelligence requirements (PIR). Broadly speaking, FFIR encompasses the information about friendly forces necessary to make decisions while PIR focuses more directly on the information requirements associated with the enemy or the terrain. Paraphrasing Sun Tzu's famous dictum, if you know yourself, know the enemy, and know the terrain, you will be the master of a thousand battles.[i]

But when are units supposed to develop CCIR? The current doctrinal approach directs that initial PIR are formulated early in the military decisionmaking process (MDMP), specifically in the mission analysis. On one hand, this makes sense given that one of the outcomes of mission analysis is the shared understanding across the staff regarding the terrain and enemy. Acknowledging this, however, one must note that military planning still takes place in the human domain. This means that all planning efforts are – to some degree – beholden to human cognitive biases. One such cognitive bias is known as the anchoring trap, in which people latch onto the first piece of information they come across and evaluate all subsequent information anchored to that first notion.[ii]

Observations over numerous warfighter exercises show that staff leaders often fail to assess their initial assumptions, which is a recurrent requirement throughout the entirety of MDMP. One can conjecture that this is because the staff becomes overcome by competing requirements (someone must build the synchronization matrix after all), or

because once anchored to the initial PIR, staff personnel simply have difficulty conceiving of other options or additional information requirements. In either event, this failure to assess planning assumptions is evidence of the anchoring bias at work.

To some degree, however, all CCIRs are ultimately intended to support commander decision-making. A potential gap in current doctrine is that by directing PIR formation in the mission analysis step of MDMP, the staff starts developing CCIR in a data-rich environment that at the outset remains outside of the context of potential decisions. To tie CCIR to decision points (DPs), there are two broad approaches.

Method 1 – The Data-Centric Approach

The first approach is characterized as the "data-centric" approach. This is by far the most common approach that staff personnel use, particularly given the U.S. Army's current doctrinal constructs. This approach starts with personnel in a data-rich environment. The staff gathers all the information they can know (facts) or need to know to continue planning (assumptions). These assumptions then formulate requests for information (RFIs), which drive information requirements and subsequent information collection efforts.

As the staff continues to sort through the data at hand (or assumed to be at hand), they then apply a degree of analysis to determine the most important information they need. This analytical process requires staff personnel to winnow through the breadth of the data – all potential indicators – to identify one or two small pieces of information in a course of action (COA). These critical pieces of information inform subsequent planning and can often lead to recommended DPs as identified in the COA analysis process. This process may be graphically depicted in Figure 1.

There are two main critiques of this process. First, because of the broad nature of the PIR developed early in the MDMP, subsequent CCIRs are often too broad to inform timely or accurate decisions. [iii] Examples of this include "How will the 1st Division Tactical Group defend wet gap crossing sites?"

Figure 1. Data-Centric Decision-Making.

The second critique of this methodology is tied to the first critique. If the various PIRs associated with this method are too broad to inform timely decisions, then they will necessarily fail to be tied to a specific commander DP. When one PIR is tied to six or seven different commander DPs, that is evidence the PIR is too broad to be meaningful for decision-making. Examples of this include PIR such as "How will the 1st Division Tactical Group integrate indirect fires throughout the division area of operations (AO)?" Such broad PIR fail to adequately support the commander's decision-
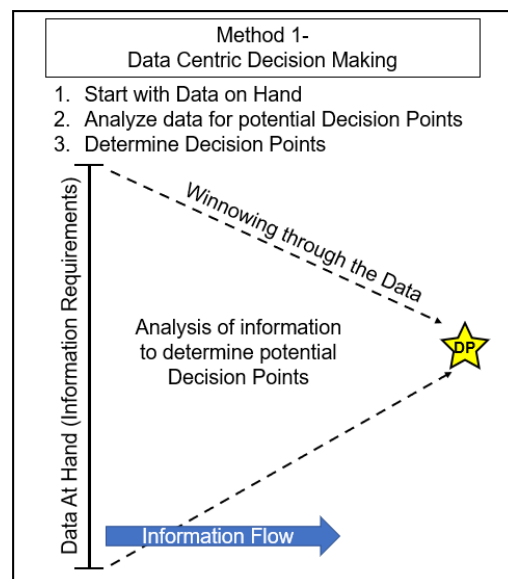
making and are of little use to the collection asset assigned to collect information on this PIR.

Method 2 – The Decision-Centric Approach

Unlike the first approach, the second methodology can be characterized as a "decision-centric" approach. This approach runs somewhat contrary to a popular understanding of planning doctrine[iv] but to a large degree, this approach may present a better path for the staff to meet the overall intent of supporting commander decision-making.[v]

The main way this approach differs from the previous one is that it starts with the identification of the required decision. Once that decision is identified, the staff can begin to identify what information they need to know to support that decision. This information can either be related to friendly forces (FFIR) or the enemy or terrain (PIR). Once the staff identifies the information they need to know, they can then conduct another level of analysis to determine what the potential indicators might be to feed those CCIRs. This is graphically depicted in Figure 2.

To some degree, this approach to developing CCIR tied to DPs uses the same planning methodology endorsed by maneuver planners at all levels. Doctrine asserts that when planning offensive operations, one starts with the decisive operation and works backward from there.[vi] This decision-centric approach uses this same methodology. If you accept the premise that CCIRs fundamentally exist to support commander decision-making, then by first starting with identifying the commander's decisions, the process of developing CCIRs is necessarily nested with each decision.

Figure 2. Decision-Centered Decision-Making.

An example of this methodology at work might center on the decision to transition from offensive operations to defensive operations. Tied to that decision, an example of the FFIR necessary to make that decision might be "1st Brigade is less than 60 percent aggregate strength on combat platforms (Tanks and Bradleys)." An example of PIR associated with this decision might be "Will the 753rd TANK REGIMENT move into sector through NAI 3?" Indicators associated with that PIR might be "identification of 20 plus T-90s moving east to west through NAI 3 along RTE BROWN."
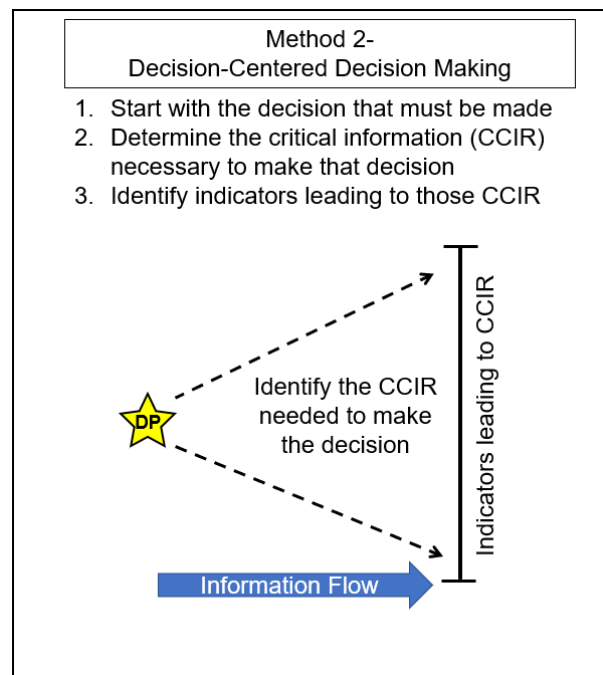
The main critique of this approach is it relies on the staff to correctly anticipate or identify potential DPs. If the staff misidentifies decisions (either through incorrect analysis or omission) then the organization can face significant friction in dealing with risks they did not forecast. Despite this critique, however, this approach is recommended because the first approach lacks effectiveness, whereas a decision-centered approach ties CCIR to DPs to a greater degree. One way to mitigate this critique of misidentifying decisions, however, is to examine the most common commander decisions in LSCO.

II. Commander Decisions in LSCO

The execution of LSCO presents one of the most complicated aspects of warfare. The scale of combat exceeds many of the expectations and normative attitudes developed during the last 20 years of counterinsurgency-centric operations. Changing conditions against a robust and near-peer threat is complicated enough, but the modern Army must now learn to operate in multiple domains to achieve a convergence of effects.[vii] However, despite these complicated operating conditions, observations across multiple LSCO warfighter exercises show that most commander-level decisions can be characterized into six broad categories.

Operational Transitions

"The decision to transition into a defense may be the first and earliest decision a division commander has to make."[viii] A senior mentor made this observation, and it has held across multiple subsequent warfighter exercises. The necessity to manage transitions requires foresight, planning, and an understanding of the commander's visualization to effectively anticipate those transitions. Whether the transition is from the offense to the defense, or from the defense to the offense, each transition represents a DP for the commander. The commander must allocate planning power, resources, and guidance to mitigate the inherent friction of these challenges.

Additionally, the deliberate execution of organizational-level missions[ix] – such as aviation attacks or gap crossings at the division level, or joint forcible entry operations (JFEO) – also represent a sort of operational transition. As such, each organizational-level mission should bring a deliberate planning effort and conditions check to ensure all risks have been deliberately mitigated or accounted for by the appropriate risk authority. The decision to execute those division or corps-level missions can be considered a transition from planning to executing.

Control Measure Changes

The second type of decision that commanders will face in LSCO is the decision to change or shift boundaries. This applies across multiple warfighting functions (WfFs) because boundaries inherently represent areas across which two organizations must coordinate. These boundaries might include unit-level boundaries between brigades (at the division level) or divisions (at the corps level). Shifts in organizational boundaries represent

significant changes to responsibilities for direct fires, indirect fires, air space, and general security concerns.

At times, however, organizations may look to adjust other control measures that may change associated areas of responsibilities. While unit boundaries define battlespace for units, the intelligence handover line (IHL) and fire support coordination measures (FSCMs) also represent areas where units establish coordination with higher assets to synchronize efforts.

In either case, whether unit boundaries or functional coordination measures, the coordination necessary to adjust those control measures represents another area of DPs for the commander. This is primarily because any changes to unit boundaries, FSCMs, or the IHL directly impacts the higher-level organization's responsibilities to apply their assets and mitigate areas of risk. As the potential benefits begin to outweigh the associated risks, such decisions may be warranted, but they require commander-to-commander dialogue and ultimately commander decisions.

Task Organization Changes

The third category of commander-level decisions is tied to the previous two – the decision to adjust subordinate task organizations. As changing conditions warrant transitions or adjustments to various control measures, commanders may decide that the current arrayal of forces is not sufficient to meet the emergent tasks at hand. On the other hand, organizational assessments may suggest that the current arrayal of forces may not have the sufficient combat power to reach the desired correlation of forces and means (COFMs) and end state. The decision to make significant adjustments to a subordinate unit's task organization requires deliberate staff work to holistically understand the risks and benefits of the decision. This may also apply to shifts in support relationships (direct support, general support, etc.). If large enough, the staff recommendation to adjust a subordinate unit's task organization or support relationship may drive a commander-level decision.

Shift Priorities

The fourth broad category of commander-level decisions is the decision to shift priorities. As organizations transition between different aspects of the operation, they will need to make deliberate decisions to shift their priorities. Organizational priorities can take many forms across multiple WfFs. The commander's decision to establish priorities of support, fires, and protection all directly correlate to how forces are arrayed on the battlefield and directly speak to the basic elements of the division-level fight. Within the targeting realm, the decision to shift priorities on the high payoff targeting list (HPTL) is another commander decision that will drive subsequent collection and fires decisions. Shifts in the HPTL may also drive a further commander-to-commander discussion to leverage assets from the higher HQs. Finally, organizational shifts between the main effort and supporting effort also imply redirection of organizational assets in terms of task organization or sustainment assets and may rise to the level of a commander-decision.

Commit The Reserve

As battlefield conditions change, commanders may find that conditions warrant the reallocation of combat power through the commitment of the reserve element. This can be done either to reinforce success in a penetration or breakout, or to bolster beleaguered forces and prevent unanticipated culmination. Staff personnel may also support the commander's ability to make this decision by anticipating future friction points and positioning the reserve forward based on meeting the anticipated commitment criteria.

Move Command and Control Nodes

The final broad category of decisions that commanders may make during LSCO is the placement of specific command and control (C2) nodes within their AO. From a doctrinal perspective, divisions and corps executing LSCO organize into three main C2 nodes – the main command post (MCP), the rear command post (RCP), and the tactical command post (TAC).[x] The movement of these nodes inherently involves risk to the organization's ability to perform C2 functions, and therefore whenever possible should be a deliberate decision. Organizations should have a deliberate method of handing specific responsibilities from one CP to another, whether internally or in conjunction with subordinate headquarters. The decision to move a C2 node also may bring with it control measure changes. One example of this is the decision to move the RCP, which may impact higher command boundaries.

Equally important to this category of decisions is where the commander chooses to place themselves within their AO. The commander may choose to move with the mobile command group, within a specific C2 node, or with a subordinate brigade. As commanders execute battlefield circulation, they are also able to get a better feel for the fight and interact with their subordinates to understand the risks from a more nuanced perspective. Since the commander is by default a C2 node in and of themselves, the movement of the commander on the battlefield also represents a command-level decision to move a C2 node.

III. Decisions and Risk

Experience across multiple warfighter exercises indicates that commanders face decisions that can be characterized across those six categories. It also stands to reason, however, that not every commander has to make every decision. The decision to delegate authorities and empower others to make decisions is a critical decision as well, although one that is not necessarily tied to LSCO. The decision to delegate decision authorities should also be a deliberate process that understands, articulates, and balances the various aspects of risk associated with each decision.

Balancing the risk can be conceptually thought of as a seesaw, where organizational agility and the ability to make rapid decisions through empowered subordinates are balanced against the risk to the organization about the use and allocation of resources. If leaders make decisions to allocate resources against one part of the fight, that will

necessarily take resources away from another part of the fight. Every delegated decision therefore comes with an opportunity cost that presents a degree of risk to the organization's mission.

In LSCO, reallocating resources to destroy "what is attacking me now" may put at risk the ability to destroy the "enemy assets that will kill me tomorrow" or in the deeper fight. Commanders and staff personnel at all echelons must be prepared to understand and articulate their recommendations to balance the risk to mission and risk to force, allowing their commanders to make the ultimate decisions on how to delegate the appropriate authorities to subordinate decision makers at echelon. Organizations should also employ processes to continually reassess and codify the decisions to delegate authorities to enable responsive decision-making at echelon.

Conclusion

Decision-making in LSCO is difficult because of the inherent complexities of LSCO. Fighting against a near peer threat requires that organizations clearly think through and plan how they envision their operations will unfold. Observations across multiple warfighter exercises suggest that using a decision-centric approach is a better method to allow staff personnel to facilitate commander decision-making, because a decision-centric approach necessarily ties decisions to information and indicators.

Commander decisions in LSCO can be broadly characterized across six categories, and well-trained staff personnel can use the COA analysis process to anticipate and predict where those decisions will take place. Approaching decision-making from this perspective allows all personnel to understand how to mitigate risk and make better decisions in a timelier fashion. Success in LSCO depends on an organization's ability to out-think the enemy. Personnel at all levels must remain mentally agile and be responsive to changing conditions, which requires that staff understand both the decisions that the commander must make as well as the process by which they make coherent recommendations to the commander.

Bios:

LTC Mitchell Payne is an observer coach/trainer (OC/T) with the U.S. Army Mission Command Training Program and a PhD candidate at the Regent University School of Business and Leadership. His research areas include human resource development, organizational behavior, ecclesial leadership, and organizational culture. He has previously published works on organizational assessments, rapid decision-making, leader cognition, and the Army ethic. He has previously served as a BN/TF commander, 3ID; BDE and BN XO, 188th Infantry Brigade, First Army; and BN/SQDN XO, 1-25 Stryker Brigade Combat Team (BCT).

LTC James Watts is the lead M2 OC/T with the U.S. Army Mission Command Training Program. He holds a master's degree in adult and continuing education from Kansas

State University. He has previously served as aviation OC/T, MCTP; aviation advisor, USMTM; IG, U.S. Army Contracting Command; and Squadron XO, 1-6 Cavalry.

---

[i] Sun Tzu (1910). The Art of War (Lionel Giles, trans.). Allandale Online Publishing, page 11.

[ii] Hammond, J. S., Keeney, R. L., & Raiffa, H. (1998). The hidden traps in decision making. *Harvard business review*, *76*(5), 47-58.

[iii] Mission Command Training Program (2021). *FY 21.1 MCTP Key Observations Bulletin.* Center for Army Lessons Learned.

[iv] Department of the Army (2022). *FM 5-0 Planning and Orders Production (16 May 2022)*, pg. 5-11.

[v] ADP 6-0 para 3-20 does state, "commanders designate an information requirement as a CCIR based on likely decisions and their visualization of the operation." This implies that staff personnel should not be using method 1 for CCIR per the doctrine, but simply based on the sequencing of PIR development during MA, it is altogether too common to see minimal changes to PIR once they have been established early on in the planning process.

[vi] FM 5-0, page 5-28.

[vii] Department of the Army (2022). *FM 3-0, Operations (01 October 2022)*, page 3-4, figure 3-1 "Convergence".

[viii] LTG David R. Hogg, 10 June 2016

[ix] An operant definition of "organizational level missions" are missions that involve two or more subordinate units, requiring explicit oversight and coordination at the higher-level echelon.

[x] Department of the Army (2019). FM 3-94, Armies, Corps, and Division Operations (23 July 2021), pages 5-6 to 5-8.