An OPFOR Perspective on Multinational Interoperability

CPT DAN DIPZINSKI
CPT ERIK PRINS

In the current threat environment, the U.S. and our allies face a complex, near-peer, hybrid threat which has the capability, experience, and will to fight. However, defense budget constraints and the current force structure leave NATO in a place where no single army on the continent can fight and win on its own. Previous NATO doctrine depicted interoperability occurring echelons above brigade. That is no longer a reality. The Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) at Hohenfels, Germany, has been building and proving concepts for interoperability at the brigade level and below. Brigades, battalions, and even companies have been fighting with attached allies and partners to meet the combat power levels needed to achieve assigned missions.

The 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment — the opposing force (OPFOR) at JMRC — faces a similar problem at the battalion level every rotation. The unit is currently manned just above 600 personnel and has historically fought with fewer than 500. However, the Warrior Battalion is regularly called to fight brigades of more than 4,000 Soldiers. The OPFOR has to rely on interoperability with attached units to achieve success. Some of the units have a long-term relationship with 1-4 IN which simplifies integration. However, many units come for one rotation only. Additionally, attached OPFOR units are frequently not part of NATO and do not have shared doctrine. 1-4 IN uses the six principles of mission command to achieve success with allied partners. The attached multinational units actually provide a forcing function to exercise good mission command. Mission command philosophy provides a framework for improving interoperability, while the inherent friction of interoperability also provides a mechanism for improving the practice of mission command.

U.S. and German Soldiers strategize during exercise Allied Spirit X in Hohenfels, Germany.
(Photo by SGT Brandon Jacobs)

Build Cohesive Teams through Mutual Trust

Team building is complicated business. Learning to trust a stranger is even tougher. Add a language barrier and a time-contained environment, and it's a recipe for disaster. But what history has demonstrated is that not all combat operations occur at predictable or convenient times. Units must learn to work together and develop a comfortable level of trust quickly. The intent is to create a mentality and start doing the little things that treat all units the same. One way the Warriors accomplish this is through social interaction. The experience of being a soldier is similar across many cultures, and the human dimension between persons is a step that should never be overlooked or simplified. A conversation sharing about homes, families, and military experiences goes a long ways to building trust. In addition to social interaction, the layout of command posts and work areas is important. Sharing assembly area space as opposed to separate staging areas builds trust and also familiarizes units with foreign equipment. The 1-4 IN motor pool frequently sees soldiers from two or three different countries testing out each other's weapons, sharing similar complaints about the tight spacing in the back of armored personnel carriers, traversing a turret in a foreign tank, or comparing optics and systems. It's easier to trust someone when you know their name, where they come from, and what their nickname for their tank is — thus bridging the cultural gap. With the baseline team building established, you can start to build a unity of effort toward a common goal.

Create Shared Understanding

Units need shared understanding to prevent missed opportunities or misplacement of units on the battlefield. The Warriors approach multinational augments and seek to gain an understanding of adjacent units by asking three simple questions:
- "What type of formation does the unit have?"
- "What capabilities/limitations does the unit have?"
- "How can I as the commander best emplace this unit on the battlefield?"

This dialogue builds the baseline for shared understanding. Units will have no issue telling you what they are trained on or like doing, and they also are usually willing to share what they are not comfortable doing. But the effectiveness of that unit on the ground is what matters to a maneuver commander, which requires firsthand observation and experience. To create understanding, 1-4 IN conducts maneuver training with augmenters. Company teams develop short situational training exercise (STX) events that test limitations and capabilities of adjacent multinational units

in small scenarios that test mission essential task list (METL) tasks. These events can be very simple — movement to contact, attack, or even just tactical movement or vehicle dismounting drills. The company command team usually serves as observer-controllers (OCs) and drives the after action reviews (AARs) that increase understanding to both units and share tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs). The intent is not to grade or evaluate but to increase shared understanding by observing the unit in person. Obviously, this experience goes both ways. It also provides good opportunity for commanders to see their organization from the outside (what picture am I providing to my augmenter right now?).

Provide Clear Commander's Intent

Commander's intent is where interoperability begins to become complicated. Commanders face the usual problem of trying to convey their intent to another person. In addition to this problem, language and cultural differences amplify the complexity. In a way this problem becomes its own solution — commanders cannot rely on the "cookie-cutter" intent of expanded purpose, key tasks, and end state or count on "do it like last time" mentality. Commanders need to have a face-to-face discussion with their subordinates to ensure they understand the thought process and key aspects of a plan and clearly articulate what the battlefield should look like at the end of the operation. Commanders benefit greatly from simplicity of language used, end states, and objectives. This communication can be in plain language or back and forth discussion, both being preferable. However, it is critical to still publish a written order with the doctrinal intent for subordinates to reference back to. It is often easier to understand written words when English is not your first language than relying on solely verbal communication. The augmented units will be able to reference the written order for any terms or aspects that become unclear.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

Disciplined initiative starts and ends with trust between commander and subordinate. Clear task and purpose, intent, and end state trump means and methods in enabling subordinates to conduct operations. When faced with a multinational problem, leaders must understand that direct leadership — or any form of micromanagement — is simply not possible; encouraging disciplined initiative is the only way to lead. Exercising disciplined initiative should not start once a multinational partner or ally enters a U.S. formation. Multinational interoperability must start from the very beginning of the training calendar when commanders build a culture of empowering subordinate initiative. Commanders must train their units to a standard — as well as be willing to assume risks — until they become comfortable enabling squads and platoons to operate independently.

An OPFOR Soldier with the 182nd Infantry Regiment, Massachusetts Army National Guard, prepares to fire a training FGM-148 Javelin while conducting a town defense scenario during Exercise Combined Resolve VIII at the Hohenfels Training Area in Germany on 12 June 2017. (Photo by SPC Gage Hull)
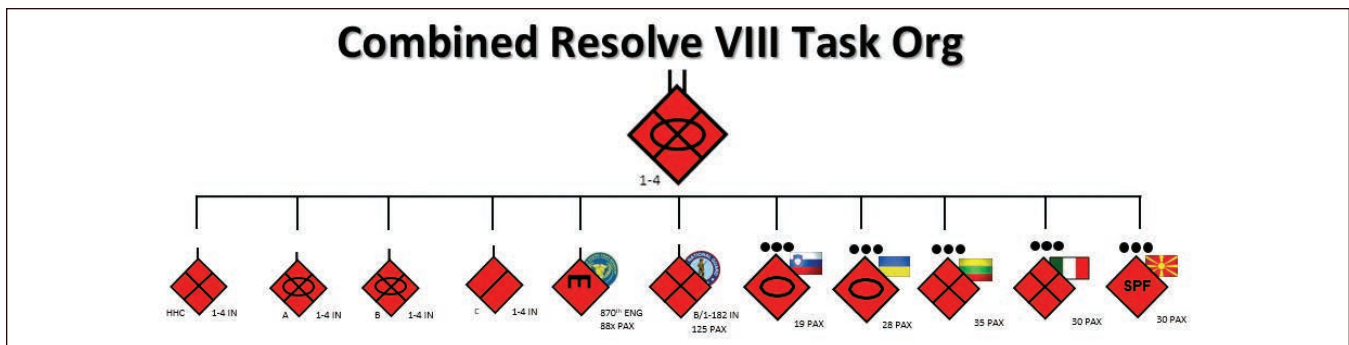
Figure 1 — Combined Resolve VIII Task Organization

To assist units in exercising disciplined initiative, 1-4 IN attaches liaison officers (LNOs) to all augmenting units. The role of LNOs is not merely to serve as a retrans platform between two units, as is often the stereotype. Rather, the Warriors use LNOs as the commander's representatives to attached units to serve as the continuity of the commander's intent. Whether the liaison is a staff officer or an entire attached platoon, Warrior commanders trust their LNOs to meet and know their intent and be able to accomplish the mission because the LNOs operate with similar style of mission command on a regular basis. Their role is to bridge the cultural and language gap and tighten cohesiveness at a deeper level than the commander in order to translate intent.

Use Mission Orders

If an operation is going to fail with multinational units, it's because of communication. Interoperability boils down to the ability to pass information rapidly across the battlefield from one unit to another. By knowing they cannot count on many of the technical solutions to mission command, commanders are forced to rely on actual mission command and trust their subordinates. It is simply not possible to work otherwise. Communications difficulties are a two-way street. This is why the planning process is absolutely vital to interoperability.

When working with a multinational contingent, one cannot count on making large changes once the operation order (OPORD) is issued. Language barriers, technical incompatibility, and the fog of war severely inhibit the ability for commanders to rapidly change plans and directions with multinational units. Though LNOs mitigate the risk of confused communications, the answer is an overwhelming reliance on very clear commander's intent during the OPORD. This means that the issued OPORD must be clear, concise, and have room for flexibility built into it. Additionally, contingencies and intent must be clearly briefed when orders are issued. This is where having multinational augmenters really becomes a forcing function. By removing the option to "clear it up in a FRAGO" (fragmentary order) or call out changes in a net call, commanders do the proper planning and orders issuance up front.

Accept Prudent Risk

For an OPFOR it is easy to understand and accept prudent risk in a tactical environment. OPFORs conduct six to eight rotations a year as opposed to once every two years for a standard unit. Commanders and subordinates have multiple reps in a force-on-force environment. Together, the two authors of this article have conducted more than 20 decisive action training environment rotations as planners and more than 12 rotations as commanders. OPFOR commanders have multiple experiences where they made major mistakes and still achieved success. They also have experiences of doing things right and still failing. The multiple reps at a Combat Training Center (CTC) allow the OPFOR to understand the difference between a good result and a good decision. This perspective makes it easier for them understand the necessity of risk. It is obviously more difficult in a real-world environment or as a training unit, but accepting prudent risk is necessary to succeed. There are several key risks that need to be controlled, balanced, and then accepted for an integrated multinational formation to be successful.

First, U.S. commanders need to understand the cultures of their attached units. Attached units may have recent significant conflict with another unit in the formation or with the enemy. The U.S. does not have a long history of deep conflict with another culture. This makes it difficult for us to understand the emotions and mindset of our attached units. Commanders need to understand their attached units may have a deep level of hate that goes beyond what we can understand given our cultural background. Commanders also need to understand that different

cultures have different risk tolerance. Some units will be comfortable with a much higher level of risk than U.S. units. They may take risks that will jeopardize the mission without seeing it as a significant problem. Contrarily, other militaries may have a very low risk tolerance. Assigning them a "risky" mission may result in poor relations or even a departure of a unit. We need to see our blind spot, understand it, and account for it when assigning tasks.

Second, commanders and staffs need to balance the experience in LNOs between attached and organic units. Commanders may have to pull one of their best officers or NCOs to liaise with an attached unit. Commander may have to assume risk in their organic formations to build common understanding with attached multinationals.

Third, commanders need to balance assets and enablers between units. They need to take into account a unit's organic capabilities when assigning enablers. A U.S. commander will be better prepared to employ close combat attack (CCA) or close air support (CAS) than a multinational commander. The higher headquarters might need to prioritize artillery to other units in order to offset the reduced CCA or CAS use. Obviously this is not an all-inclusive list, but it does provide some thoughts commanders can use when dealing with attached multinationals.

In conclusion, by properly employing the principles of mission command, a unit can achieve success in integrating multinationals. By understanding multinational interoperability, a unit can achieve success in exercising mission command as the inherent difficulties of integrating attachments can be used as a forcing function to reach a higher level of command.

CPT Dan Dipzinski currently serves as commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment (Opposing Force), at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Germany. His previous assignments include serving as a platoon leader and executive officer (XO) in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) as well as a JMRC rotational planner and commander of A Company, 1-4 IN.

CPT Erik Prins currently serves as an observer-coach-trainer and team operations officer with JMRC's Panther Team. His previous assignments include serving as platoon leader and XO in the 10th Mountain Division as well as a JMRC rotational planner and commander of C Company, 1-4 IN.