



What Military Commanders do and how they do it: Executive Decision-Making in the Context of Standardised Planning Processes and Doctrine

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how contemporary military commanders understand command in the context of standardised planning processes, doctrine, and a supporting staff organisation. The article is based on 30 interviews with former and current NATO commanders and senior staff officers. I describe the interplay between commanders and their staff, including its clear division of labour, authority, and responsibility. I argue that commanders make key decisions in the planning process based on professional judgement. Commanders recognise the usefulness and limits of structured decision-making processes and doctrine while acknowledging also the need for surprise, creativity, and risk-taking. Left unattended, the military staff tends to develop mechanical behaviour by following a bureaucratic logic of rationality, control, and optimisation. In this context, command is a distinct and necessary function for the making of key decisions that allow for creative applications of doctrine, while avoiding any succumbing to predictable textbook solutions. Finally, the article points toward the importance of developing future commanders and their staff officers to understand the limits of doctrine and procedural approaches and develop professional judgement.

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The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. (Clausewitz, 1989, p. 88)

NATO define command as “the authority vested in a member of the armed forces for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces” (NATO, 2021, p. 29). Authority, that is, central to any understanding of command, is an attribute agreed to belong to an individual. Following Clausewitz, the most far-reaching act this individual must make is the definition of a mission – an act of professional judgement. Under the designation “C2”, command and control have often been treated as a single concept. Militaries have pursued technical or bureaucratic solutions to control or manage operations (Jeffery, 2000). This leaves, however, the human aspects of command unexplored.

Personal memoirs of military officers writing about their experiences as commanders are certainly pertinent to the understanding of command. But given the unique and contextual perspective, they often treat the command function superficially and deeply embedded in a specific historical context or situation. But such memoirs do, however, provide material for the empirical discussion of issues of command. Classic approaches in the literature tend to focus on the failure or success of individuals, often at the highest level (Cohen, 2003; Freedman, 2022; Keegan, 1988; Ricks, 2013; van Creveld, 1987). Very few studies consider the organisational aspects of command. The most well-known examples are contrasting Allied and German perspectives in World War II or the interwar period, or discuss mission command (Samuels, 2019; Shamir, 2011; van Creveld, 1987).

Recent sociological studies have framed command as an emergent collective or networked effort (Holting & Damkjer, 2020; King, 2019, 2021; Nørgaard & Linden-Vørnle, 2021). Most prominently, the British sociologist Anthony King argues that the scope of command has changed, and a new paradigm of collective command has emerged (King, 2019). King builds his argument on a reconfiguration of what he calls the “command trinity”, comprised of three functions: *mission definition*, *mission management*, and *leadership* (p. 70). His findings are drawn primarily from an empirical analysis of contemporary mission management and are linked to broader debates about the transformation of power (p. 25). This means that decision-making related to mission definition is mainly left untouched. But, as Clausewitz and the NATO definition remind us, mission definition comes first; mission management and leadership follow. This study attends to the commander’s executive decision-making related to mission definition.

Military doctrine describes rather lofty ideas about the commander’s use of judgement, experience, or intuition before quickly prescribing procedural matters on how to plan or manage military operations. This element of control inherent in the NATO definition of command is typically the realm of the staff organisation. Articles close to the military profession also remain abstract when discussing command. As an example of the genre, U.S. Army General Montgomery C. Meigs summarised generalship with four essential characteristics: intellect, energy, selflessness, and humanity (Meigs, 2001). Lauer adopts a similar approach to discuss how operational art expresses the commander’s imagination and rests on their experience and talent (Lauer, 2016). This echoes Clausewitz’s idea of military genius. Clausewitz (1989, p. 102) assesses the qualities of a great commander to be “first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.” While Meigs’s characteristics, Lauer’s operational art, and Clausewitz’s glimmerings of inner light might be necessary for commanders, they do not offer any insight into what commanders do and how they do it. They might be so abstract that they border on mysticism. Furthermore, they leave the organisational context in which the commanders are situated, such as the staff organisation, doctrine and planning processes, unattended.

A NATO conference in 1998 and its subsequent proceedings considered the human and organisational aspects of contemporary command, noticing that the organisational response to increased complexity on the battlefield made military organisations bigger and more

bureaucratic (Jeffery, 2000). This, in turn, leads to organisations that focus on perfection and zero deficits (Cherrie, 2000). The Canadian Lieutenant General Raymond R. Crabbe then asked: “How does the commander exercise boldness in the context of standardised planning procedures military doctrine and a political setting that has focus on control?” (Crabbe, 2000).

This article seeks to understand how contemporary commanders understand command in the context of standardised planning processes and doctrine. Empirically, it builds on interviews with 30 former and current NATO commanders and senior staff officers. It offers an empirical analysis of military organising, emphasising the interplay between commanders and their staff.

This article begins with a brief sketch of standardisation in the military organisation, which it links with a summary of the academic literature on professional judgement and decision-making. It goes on to present the research context and methods used. After this, it presents the findings by ordering them in three major themes: (1) understanding of command, (2) developing and training of command, and (3) examples of command as acts of professional judgement, where each section is summarised into a proposition. It then offers a discussion of the implications of these findings, concluding that from the perspective of contemporary commanders, command is still vested in individuals. Without explicit guidance, missions will be managed according to the staff’s internal logic of rationality, control, and optimisation. Command is a distinct and necessary function to guide the military machine; only the commander is authorised to make executive decisions.

STANDARDISATION AND THE MILITARY

In order to have an efficient fighting force on a larger scale, we not only need to drill our soldiers’ physical movements. We also need to prime our officers’ way of thinking. They have to think along the same lines in order to get the machinery to work well. (Høiback, 2016, p. 187)

The Norwegian officer and philosopher Harald Høiback writes that doctrine concerns efficiency or “getting the machinery to work well.” Standards and standardisation are not foreign to the military. Even the most capable generals rely on standards and delegation of authority to manage their organisation (Cohen & Gooch, 1990; Hittle, 1961; Høiback, 2013; Jackson, 2013). A general’s executive decision-making occurs in a profession where officers are encouraged “to think along the same lines” but similarly acknowledges that a too-standardised approach to operations will make one predictable and thereby less effective (Cohen & Gooch, 1990; Høiback, 2013; McInnes, 2007; Palazzo, 2008). Fuller famously warned that doctrine is “apt to ossify into dogma” (Fuller, 1926, p. 254).

There is an ongoing debate on what kind of knowledge doctrine is and how it should be formulated. Contemporary researchers of military doctrine tend to focus on doctrine in its written form (Angstrom & Widen, 2016; Erdeniz, 2016; Høiback, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Paparone, 2017). This debate has connotations to the classic discussion on whether positive knowledge can exist in war, typically pitted as a debate between two 19th century military thinkers: Clausewitz and Jomini (Clausewitz, 1832; Jomini, 1996). Clausewitz denied the possibility of positive knowledge in war in his belief that theory should serve as an aid to judgement. In contrast, Jomini believed warfare could be reduced to a rational science like physics. While most contemporary Western doctrine officially leans towards descriptive doctrine in the Clausewitzian tradition, scholars argue that the majority of written doctrine and models used to discuss doctrine rest on positivist, and thus Joministic, principles (De Munnik, 2012; Jackson, 2013; McInnes, 2007; Paparone, 2017; Sjøgren, 2020; Zweibelson, 2014). Practitioners applying a pragmatic approach will argue that while doctrine might have positivist or rationalist underpinnings, that does not mean that it is necessarily used in that way (De Munnik, 2012; Parton, 2008).

We can arrive at another way of describing the context of command by turning to the German sociologist Max Weber’s theory of bureaucracy. Weber argued that the “ideal type” bureaucracy is the most efficient and rational way to coordinate human activity; for him, bureaucracy was “rational” in character: “rules, means, ends and matter-of-factness dominate its bearing” (Weber, 1946, p. 244). A bureaucracy needs standards (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010, p. 72). The sheer size of a modern Western division with 20,000 troops and 400 staff officers in its headquarters calls for bureaucratic devices to operate (Burket, 2019; King, 2019) efficiently.

Standards enhance interoperability by making soldiers and units interchangeable, better coordinating and predicting the behaviour of others (Cohen & Gooch, 1990; Stinchcombe, 2001; Weick, 2001; Wilson, 1989). However, military problems differ from optimal synchronisation and coordination in the ideal-type bureaucracy. Clausewitz reminds us that war is characterized by reciprocal action: the actions of one party alter the options of the other, and vice versa (Clausewitz, 1832, 1989). This presents a paradox: if an optimal and efficient response to a problem does exist, then it might also be predictable. If the solution is predictable, it might not be very effective and, hence, not optimal since the opponent will have time to counter this response.

MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM

According to prevailing military wisdom, professional proficiency starts with a procedural, instrumental, or standardised approach that lays a foundation for the novice from which the expert can and indeed should transcend (Bondy, 2004; De Munnik, 2012; Lund, 2017; Pugsley, 2011; Tillberg, 2020). This has led military sociologists to treat bureaucracy and professionalism as opposites. The former is static problem-solving and rigidity; the latter should entail innovative thinking (Bondy, 2004; Freidson, 1989; Snider, 2015). But this is a false dichotomy (Holmes, 2009). Large organisations, such as bureaucracies, cannot operate efficiently through case-by-case reasoning. Military operations rely on standards and standardised procedures. Consider the study of the accidental shooting-down of two U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters over Iraq in 1994 by two U.S. Airforce F-15C fighter aircraft. The American army officer and organisational scholar Snook argued that, in this case, the demand for local efficiency slowly uncoupled practice from the official written procedure. This instance of non-compliance with standards set the conditions for the accidental shoot-down (Snook, 2002). In some settings, that is, adherence to procedure is professionalism in action. As the sociologists Timmermans and Epstein (2010, p. 71) observe, depending on one's motives, "the opposite of standardisation might be flexibility, discursion, interpretation, diversity, individualism, uniqueness, arbitrariness, anomie, or chaos." Militaries also struggle between balancing an instrumental approach, required for interoperability, the facilitation of coordination, and efficiency, against the need for flexibility, creativeness, effectiveness, and decentralised decision-making (De Munnik, 2012).

In sum, executive military decision-making occurs in an organisation employing standardisation and bureaucratisation to get the military machine to function. Complete arbitrariness would make coordination on the battlefield impossible and decision-making random. At the other end of the spectrum, a mechanical or machine-like approach to operations would render one's actions predictable or dogmatic. Doctrine cannot prescribe every eventuality, and the available doctrine might be ill-suited for the specific context. Thus, military professionalism sometimes entails adherence to procedure, structure, and doctrine; sometimes, it does not.

STRUCTURED AND NATURALISTIC DECISION-MAKING

NATO (2016 pp. 2-3) doctrine describes two basic ways of making decisions: the *structured approach* and *naturalistic decision-making*. According to the doctrine, the structured approach ensures that "commanders consider, analyse, and evaluate all relevant factors" while naturalistic decision-making "is the act of making a decision that emphasises recognition based on knowledge, judgment, experience, education, intellect, boldness, perception, and character." However, neither NATO doctrine nor the wider literature claims that one approach is inherently better than the other. In practice, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and the selection of one over the other depends on the availability of "time and information" and "on the experience of the command and the staff."

In the decision-making literature, this is generally contrasted between the heuristics and bias approach (HB) popularised by Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2011) and Klein's *recognition primed decisions* (RPD) model presented in *Sources of Power* (Klein, 1998). Often thought of as theoretically contradictory, Klein and Kahneman co-wrote an article in 2009 concluding that their sharpest differences were "emotional rather than intellectual" (Kahneman & Klein, 2009, p. 518). The RPD approach originates in a natural setting, initially chess players and later among firefighters, tank commanders, and air control crews acting under time pressure. The general observation is that skilled persons could recognise patterns

by drawing on a repertoire of patterns they had collated from experience (Klein, 1998). Building skill requires that the environment be sufficiently predictable and offer ample opportunity to learn (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Thus, one cannot be skilled in intuitive decision-making in random environments or without training.

In contrast, the HB approach grew out of inconsistencies related to clinical judgement. Simple algorithms outperformed the clinician's ability to forecast. The HB approach, therefore, treats intuition with scepticism. Bias and unwarranted heuristics are sources of error that can and should be checked using procedural or even algorithmic approaches (Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

The military decision-making process is an organisational process in which the commanders use their staff to make decisions and in which several individuals must coordinate their actions. To some extent, staff procedure might even be characterised as a tightly coupled process which warrants strict adherence to procedure. But it is not necessarily as time-constrained like the empirical data from which Klein draws conclusions. Nor is military decision-making a matter of forecasting events as Kahneman's HB approach stems from. Rather, the military organisation aims to change the operational environment. The environment will again respond to what the organisation does. This is Clausewitz's reciprocal action (Clausewitz, 1832, 1989). In an adversarial environment, the ability to make and quickly implement roughly correct decisions might be more important than the capacity to make decisions that are entirely correct but arrived at or implemented too slowly (Storr, 2009, 2022).

In this section, I have pointed out the false dichotomy between processes or standards and professionalism. Military operations rely on standards to increase speed and get the machinery to work well. Thus, commanders' function in the context of standardised planning processes and doctrine.

RESEARCH CONTEXT, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTICAL METHODS

The empirical data analysed in this study were collected as a part of a project that seeks to understand the use of doctrine at the divisional level. A division is a military combined arms formation comprising up to 20,000 troops organised in brigades or regiments. The commander is a two-star Major General supported by their own staff organisation. In the analysis, I primarily draw on 30 interviews with former commanders and senior staff officers across NATO. Secondary research is drawn from written NATO, U.S. (Joint, Army, and Marine Corps), British, German, and Danish doctrine. Finally, I draw on field notes compiled following the one-year training cycle of a NATO Multinational Division. My initial interest was how doctrine was put to work within the divisional headquarters and the role of the commander *vis-à-vis* the staff organisation therein.

A precondition for this research is that I am an insider (Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972; Wegener, 2012). I have a military background and have previously worked in a divisional headquarters. The respondents are commanders and senior staff officers across NATO. Many had either worked together or been a part of the NATO senior officer's mentorship system. I used snowballing sampling and asked for leads after each interview. I followed leads until they either went dead or the officers of a particular group started saying the same thing or referring to each other. At one point, I used the defence attachés at the Danish embassies in Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw to establish communication with specific individuals or organisations recommended by respondents. Twice, I used LinkedIn to establish a contact. At the time of the interview, the youngest of the generals was in his mid-50s, the oldest in his mid-80s. All were male. The staff officers tended to be younger and had often served in the referring general's staff as operations officers (G3) or as planners (G5). It is essential to note that military commanders are not necessarily generals and that generals are not necessarily commanders. Often, an army career involves a recurring transition between command at different levels and staff postings. Thus, the interviewed generals have also served as staff officers while the staff officers have also commanded at lower levels. The interviews were conducted from March to November 2021. Most interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed by me. Other interviews were conducted via telephone, the Danish Armed Forces' VTC system, and one in-person interview. Transcripts for such interviews were compiled from handwritten notes immediately

after the interview. Retired officers who have given their consent are quoted by name; others are anonymised. Active-duty personnel are naturally anonymised to observe the obligations of military security.

My insider status enabled me to ask questions relating to details of the planning process with a broad knowledge of military history, different doctrines, and practices as the backdrop. I have also served as an infantry officer in some of the generals' operations on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, providing common points of reference. Military professionals have their professional terminology, often abbreviations. This is reflected in some of the excerpts. I have provided clarifications where needed.

My initial inquiry revolved around three questions: (1) the role of doctrine in training and operations; (2) distinctions and tensions between the roles of commander and staff; (3) creativity and risk management in operations. This article is primarily informed by two sub-questions on the theme of the roles of commander and staff: "How did you develop the initial intent?" and "What does the commander bring to the table at the decision brief?" Answers concerning the formulation of intent are particularly important here.

The analytical approach has been inspired by constructivist grounded theory (Clarke, 2003; Rapley, 2010). I printed notes and transcripts and read offline. I marked the text with different colours and written codes in the margins. These codes originate in the text and are not theory-driven. I proceeded to order these into situational maps and, from there, into categories. These maps were made up of these chunks of codes combined with initial reflections stemming from both convergence and divergence in the material.

Generals and staff officers used different forms of reasoning when justifying military decisions: the staff officers explained actions based on analysis according to the planning process and coherence with doctrinal principles. Although some claimed "that doctrine is just a guide," nobody offered any examples where the creative application of doctrine was not directed, or at least not encouraged, by the commander or the chief of staff. In contrast, commanders drew on empirical examples from military history and used words such as "experience," "gut feeling," and "judgement" when justifying actions.

The following analysis stems from this difference in reasoning, with the main emphasis on the commander.

FINDINGS

In the following section, I present the main findings. First, I explore how commanders understand their executive function and role in balancing the need for both an instrumental approach and a need to be responsive and flexible. Second, I show how the respondents promote certain events as particularly formative experiences in training for command. Lastly, I show examples of command as acts of professional judgement and sketch the main controversy in the material on staff-led versus command-driven headquarters.

UNDERSTANDING COMMAND

The first concerns the respondents shared were the demands placed upon commanders. Such demands stem from the sheer size of the military organisation. In the United States, the modern standard division comprises 20,000 troops with up to 400 members in the staff organisation. This makes staff four times larger than their Cold War predecessors (Jeffery, 2000; King, 2019; Storr, 2022). Divisional headquarters in Afghanistan were up to 800 staff (King, 2019). The former commander of 3 UK division, Major General James Cowan, described the procedurally driven headquarters as a necessity:

Well, let's face facts. The army is not exactly renowned for being a repository of intellectual activity. It is not like the Law, or the Church or the City of London, or something. It is full of reasonably normal people. Staff headquarters are quite clunky and process-driven because they have to [be]. If you allow headquarters to do what it does, which is to be very like a machine pumping out solutions, it will tend to come to answers that are textbook correct, but profoundly wrong." (Major General James Cowan, personal interview)

Major General Cowan explains how clunky processes do not manifest themselves because the military organisation is particularly strange or poor, but because the organisation is comprised of reasonably ordinary people. Many mundane routine work processes need to work if the machine is to function. According to the respondents, left unattended, optimisation of these processes will guide the organisation workings. The need for guidance, which includes encouragement to divert from doctrine and standardised procedures, stems from this. Indeed, doctrine and the subsequent coordination and synchronisation of available means have a similar lure, as explained by U.S. Marine Corps General James Mattis in a personal interview with me: “Doctrine is where we will start. It is not where we will end. ... When you start focussing on internal matters that you’re principally managing your own resources, people are not looking out the door at the enemy.”

The simple management of resources can consume the entire staff. While doctrine and process exist to make coordination and synchronisation efficient, as noted by General Mattis, if it is not guided, blind compliance with doctrine can run the risk of becoming an end in its own right rather than a means to an end. Polish Lieutenant General Andrzej Fałkowski explains the tendency for a univocal focus on compliance in this way:

We are too much into keeping the doctrine, keeping these standard operating procedures we are coming with the same solutions, which is a big mistake [as] we don’t have a science of war; however, a lot of things are very quantitative. We have an art of war. Suppose we are keeping those rules and regulations too much in our mind. In that case, we start to lose the element that is called unpredictability of the operation and unpredictability of war. So, there must be a kind of margin for improvisation. There must be some margin for finding solutions that are outside the box.” (Lieutenant General Andrzej Fałkowski, personal interview)

Lieutenant General Fałkowski points to the dual nature of standards. Standards work by demanding attention be paid to some things rather than others (Bondy, 2004; Bowker & Star, 1999; Erdeniz, 2016; Papparone, 2017). Implicit in Fałkowski’s statement is that the quantifiable gets prioritised. The respondents acknowledge the need for doctrine as a known point of reference and procedures primarily related to the structured planning process as essential in getting around the problem. Furthermore, they suggest a balanced approach, which means commanders become aware of both the strengths and limits of the procedural approach. According to U.S. Army General John Nicholson:

I think it is important to understand the doctrine and not just make it up as you go along. I think that it can be used as an excuse by people not to hold onto standards, and it sort of excuses anarchy or complete flying by the seat of your pants, which I don’t think is appropriate either.” (General John Nicholson, personal interview)

General Nicholson and Lieutenant General Fałkowski show how both doctrine and the will to depart from doctrine are needed in the planning process. The commander has a central role in providing staff inputs that allow or even promote this. This is broadly known as guidance or formulation of the initial intent, which is a central element in mission definition. This guidance should not be confused with a detailed order or how to do things.

One staff officer framed the commander’s responsibility this way:

The commander’s responsibility ... is to outline the commander’s intent and guidance. Commander’s intent is not a recipe; here are all the ingredients to this. This is how you mix up ingredients, and this is what you get, you know? This is your cake. But very few commanders are able to really articulate succinctly, and in a minimal amount of words, their intent for the operation and any guidance that they feel is critical for everybody to share. (Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps, personal interview)

Guiding the machine is neither micro-managing nor providing every detail needed to plan operations. According to this respondent, few commanders seem to be able to outline intent and guidance clearly. The best commanders are those that can articulate their intent or guidance succinctly. Therefore, if staff develop machine-like behaviour and predictable plans, the problem might be with commanders not providing the needed intent and guidance or

adhering to a policy of no guidance. Doctrine still forms the foundation, as one respondent formulated very directly:

The commander sets the tone on the degree of innovativeness that is going to happen. Although doctrine and being too doctrinaire can be dangerous, doctrine forms the foundation or the skeleton that people hang innovativeness on. It never starts with a clean slate. (Lieutenant General, U.S. Marine Corps, personal interview)

Understanding command in the context of doctrine and standardised procedures, the respondents point to the need for a balanced approach. Left to its own devices, the military machine will tend to focus inwards on processes, procedures, and compliance. Commanders understand their task as guiding this machine but with doctrine as the foundation. This does not mean squaring away doctrine or procedures but ensuring they are a means to an end that the commanders have defined or approved.

Proposition 1: Left unattended, military staff tend to develop mechanical behaviour guided by a process logic that focuses attention inwards on matters that are controllable and governable. Commanders balance this machine by issuing intent and guidance. Doctrine forms the foundation but being doctrinaire is not an objective.

DEVELOPING AND TRAINING COMMAND

The respondents describe free exercises as very formative; through these, they learned the limits of the procedural approach. The former commander of the Royal Netherlands Army, Lieutenant General Mart de Kruif, recalls a training experience as a commander of the first Dutch rotation that went to the combined manoeuvre training centre in Hofenfels in Germany in 1996:

We applied our current doctrine, then, in the field, in operation as the basis for the way to conduct an attack or defend against the OPFOR.¹ We used this three-to-one mathematic approach. We did a doctrinal defence with certain lines, penetrations, counterattacks, and support, you know? And we were smashed to pieces by OPFOR. We were completely smashed to pieces by OPFOR! Why? Because we declared doctrine as the absolute principal guideline for operations. And doctrine is just a framework for thinking. If you don't add surprise, creativity, and risk towards doctrine, it will get you nowhere. It will get you nowhere." (Lieutenant General Mart de Kruif, personal interview)

A similar notion on the importance of realistic exercises and the embodied experience was shared by a U.S. Army Major General:

I have been in the army for 30 years, and I have commanded at every level and been to a combat training centre in the United States at every level. I can tell you: you get beaten most of the time. ... That's how you become better. You get bruised, and you get hurt. The other part of it as you go into the after-action review or post-exercise review process where you really identify what's wrong. (Major General U.S. Army, personal interview).

According to the respondents, free exercises offer a space to test assumptions and to experience the influence of the Clausewitzian *friction* and *fog of war*. These are conditions that the procedural approach implicitly promises may be overcome, or at least managed. The free exercises show the limits. They remind commanders that the premises needed for the structured approach are unstable conclusions that stem from other processes, intelligence estimates, or things such as standard planning parameters. While assumptions are required to get the process to work, they also contain the possibility of being wrong. Second, applying a purely procedural approach will make one's actions predictable. Something needs to be added outside or on top of the procedure if one is to avoid getting "smashed." This something hinges on the commander: the authority, responsibility and will to define a mission and to install planning parameters or values that transcend the analytical. This involves professional judgement, and it entails risk. Since only commanders are authorised to assume risk on behalf of their units, the final decision formally lies with the commander (NATO, 2016, 2019).

1 Opposing forces.

The issues here are linked with the issue of positive knowledge in war. Danish Lieutenant General Kjeld Hillingsøe explained:

We do not fight actual wars on the divisional level. Such warfare is pure theory. ... I return to the idea of free exercise. We must face the commanders with an enemy that fights to win. Not a script that confirms doctrine, but an adversary that fights to win. ... The solution is free exercises where commanders can be allowed to try the unexpected and see for themselves that what is expected seldomly works. (Lieutenant General Kjeld Hillingsøe, personal interview, my translation)

Thus, the focus on these exercises should test the validity of one's assumptions against an adversary that reacts. At levels above the brigade, free training is replaced with simulated exercises, since fielding large units is very resource-demanding. In simulations, there is a danger that commanders and their staff learn to play the game and thus optimise their performance towards playing the game rather than fighting a battle (Curry & Perla, 2011; Sabin, 2014). The retired United States Army general David Petraeus explained how this mechanism resulted in the loss of two Apache helicopters during the invasion of Iraq in 2003:

One occasionally serious drawback is that in the simulations, commanders and staffs tend to learn the algorithms and simulation anomalies and must remember that when they transition to actual combat, where the enemy's iron gun air defenses are not, e.g., suppressed by SEAD² in the same way that they are in the simulations. This mistake resulted in an entire 72-Apache attack helicopter brigade being taken out of the fight, with two shot down and many others shot up, during an initial deep attack during the invasion of Iraq. By contrast, I did not allow our attack brigade to fly over cities and avoided that threat, recognizing the difference between the simulation and the battlefield." (General David Petraeus, email correspondence)

From the simulations, commanders and staff had deduced that, as a rule, enemy air defences would be suppressed. General Petraeus himself, however, weighed the probability of effectively stopping the various kinds of air defences operating in Iraqi cities against the hazards for the aviation brigade in his division and decided it to be not worth the risk. Thus, based on his professional judgement, he made an executive decision to prohibit flights over cities. While any staff officer could have reached the same conclusion, they would not have had the authority to implement it. It shows how executive decision-making is not only reserved for mission definition but also for establishing key constraints or key encouragements in the process. The example also shows how the training regime can become an echo chamber when it runs on a script or an algorithm. Exercises reify specific ways of thinking (Öberg, 2020). Even they can become dogmatic. The generals call for the exercises that make processes, decision making, and doctrine to be singled out for evaluation rather than having them run in the background, shielded from critical inquiry.

Having navigated through such experiences and given time to reflect on them seems to constitute experience. This, in turn, translates into the personal confidence needed to produce the initial intent and to apply a similar approach in choosing one course of action over another at the decision brief. When asked what the commanding general brings to the table at the decision brief, former British Chief of Defence Staff General Sir David Richards formulated it this way:

Well, hopefully, a general has been put in there because of his instinct and experience, and if you believe someone like Patton, he has something inside him. He has a relatively unique understanding of his profession and confidence that without being arrogant is obvious and justified. He brings all those different qualities together in one person. ... I think the confidence that comes from experience, training, and understanding of history. All these things. All in one person. That's what he brings. The rest are specialists on the whole. He's the generalist, the general who can combine within his heart and brain or synthesize all the different elements of this campaign and instinctively reach a coherent decision which his judgment tells him he can implement successfully. (General Sir David Richards, personal interview)

2 Suppression of enemy air defences.

Synthesising all the different elements into a coherent whole drawing on professional judgement and previous experience is the commander's task. As General Sir David Richards explains, this ability is what the commander brings to the decision brief.

The capacity for using judgement in day-to-day operations is not reserved for commanders. Staff officers also need to use judgement when developing courses of action:

Procedure is important, but it's not at all sufficient. The procedure goes over analysis; how do you analyse the problem? How do you come to synthesis, which is already more difficult? We are masters in analysing an issue. We are quite good and make a sound synthesis of what is now the crux of the issue, all right? But then comes the big gap. Because the second phase is now what? How do you solve the issue? Now comes the creative part of developing a workable course of action, the development of a sound plan of how to tackle the issue you are confronted with. (Major General Hubert De Vos, personal interview)

Still, none of the respondents dismissed the value of the deliberate and structured planning process. Rather, the structured decision-making process is recognised as a tool that ensures that every aspect of an operation is considered, securing a coherent and shared understanding of the situation. When asked what makes the general choose one course of action (COA) over another at the decision brief, General Petraeus responded:

We religiously followed the MDMP,³ though we did compress it on some fast-moving situations. We did not skip any step, particularly the briefing on the COAs the staff should wargame (having done that one time when I was a Div G-3 and paid the price for it during the decision brief at the end, when the CG⁴ asked us why we had not considered another COA). In the end, I chose the COA that most effectively would accomplish the tasks and associated purposes in the missions assigned to us. (General Petraeus, email correspondence)

As a divisional staff officer in the operations section, General Petraeus learned what happens if you skip steps of the structured process: it might lead to missed opportunities. Structured decision-making does have its merits, as Petraeus explained. One of these is that the general knows the steps through which the process has gone, and can feel confident that alternative options have been considered, thereby choosing the course of action that they think would most effectively accomplish the mission.

Procedural reasoning is a way to check the soundness of the premises on which the plan is based – but there is more functionality to planning than developing a plan. U.S. Army General John Nicholson explained:

We had a very detailed planning process because the planning process, you seldom actually followed the plan that you wrote, but the process of planning enables you to have a shared understanding of the problem and a shared visualisation of how you were going to solve the problem. This was really the important thing that emerged from deliberate planning. Not the solution itself. The solution seldom resembled what you came up with, but you had a shared visualisation of how of what you were trying to achieve and a shared understanding of the situation. (General John Nicholson, personal interview)

The plan is not a script. The goal is a common point of reference or a common understanding serving as a foundation for action improvised in response to the situation's inevitable changes. This common understanding allows for delegation of decision-making authority. The problem that the military machine faces is, thus, of a different kind to that faced by Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy. To the military machine, the optimal is not necessarily an efficient use of means. The goal is to subvert an adversary effectively.

Military units operate on standards that also require professional judgment in the application, paraphrasing NATO's definition of doctrine (NATO, 2021, p. 44). Structured decision-making

3 Military decision-making process.

4 Commanding general.

processes cannot infer mission definition and critical decisions regarding constraints or encouragement to think beyond doctrine or process.

Proposition 2: Procedure is important but not sufficient. Commanders emphasise the importance of having learned the limits of the structured approach. This is best done through free exercises against an opponent that fights to win and, secondarily, by studying military history or wargaming. The structured decision-making process is however essential to ensure one circumvents the problem.

COMMAND AS ACTS OF PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

In the interviews, the commanders provided several examples of how they have made executive decisions related to mission definition, or the imposition of key constraints or encouragements, drawn from judgement of the situation and from lessons learned from previous experience. The following section provides a range of illustrative examples.

INITIAL PLANNING GUIDANCE AND THE CONTROVERSY OF COMMAND-LED OR STAFF-DRIVEN

The main controversy in the material stemmed from how much the commander should be involved in the planning process and how and to what degree the commander should be assisted in the executive function. A British staff officer explained how the military profession typically understands commanders' characteristics:

There are two types of military commanders: You have command-led headquarters and staff-driven headquarters. In the command-led headquarters, you will have commanders who will do their own homework and make a decision based on what they think is best. ... Then you have other commanders who will set up the problem and tell the staff to go away and come back with the options for solving the problem. (Colonel, British Army, personal interview)

In command-led headquarters, the commanding general will issue firm guidance with fewer options for the staff to consider, perhaps even to the extent of issuing the general plan, which the staff will coordinate. The staff-driven headquarters will develop different courses of action for analysis based on the commander's initial assessment. Often, respondents identified as one type by distancing themselves from the extreme position of the opposite type. When I asked for specific examples of how commanders provided their initial intent, however, they were very alike. Contrast these two anonymised examples:

I gave the purpose of the operation and maybe how I saw the task handled. A rough sketch of the operation, if you will. The staff must govern details.

And:

It's up to the commander to have the big idea or the vision. He must write down that first paragraph of the intent and scheme of manoeuvre, which gives you the overall picture. Then it's for the staff to go away and come up with ideas.

The first, a general, identified as a believer in the staff-driven process; the second respondent identified as an adherent of the command-led process. Related to the issue of intent and guidance, the approaches seem very similar. Staff-driven headquarters still need commanders who issue guidance; command-led headquarters still need a staff to conduct analysis. Still, many respondents addressed a difference between the more command-centric approaches of the United States and Britain and the more staff-driven German approach with NATO doctrine as a form of middle (or battle) ground. Lieutenant General Bruno Kasdorf, former head of the German army, explained:

If you look at the American way, the commander plays a central role in initiating a planning process. Even at a very early stage, he is required to have very far-reaching ideas. Not a rough picture, but already something very detailed. That is how I see it. In our case in Germany, it's different. And that is how we teach our future commanders and staff officers: if you are confronted with a change in the situation

or a new situation, you normally gather your key personal. For commanders, this is the chief of staff. He can extend it to his G3 and his deputy if he wants. Then he discusses the situation with these in a closed circle. Then it is up to the chief of staff, which is really a key figure in our system, to develop and propose what we call *Auswertung des Auftrages*.⁵ Then he comes back to the commander, and they talk again. And the commander then says, OK, I think that's the new situation or the new mission that we got. It requires this, its essence is this, and the main task is this. And from there, everything else flows through the entire staff work. (Lieutenant General Bruno Kasdorf, personal interview)

According to Lieutenant General Kasdorf, the organisational difference concerns the number of details provided in the guidance at the early stages of the process. The role of the chief of staff is also different. In the German approach, the chief of staff is required to perform some of the functions typically reserved to the commander. As a principle, the commander always discusses options with the chief of staff before issuing guidance. While American and British commanders also shared ideas with select staff members, here it seems a matter of personal preferences rather than a doctrinal principle. General Petraeus provides an example:

I personally built templates well in advance of major exercises and combat operations to ensure that I provided all necessary planning guidance and then adapted them to the actual situations we encountered. I shared them with key staff members for feedback in advance, but then refined the guidance myself. (General David Petraeus, email correspondence)

German General Hans-Lothar Domröse, the former commander of Allied Joint Force Command in Brunssum, provided an example of a multinational “closed circle”:

I tried to think with my MA,⁶ and very often, but there was a personal relationship with my British deputy in Brunssum. He was a British infantry army three-star, and we had the same broad in thinking about this. I said, well, let's talk about this. In this private circle, if you will, in my office with many cigarettes, we produced the first initial intent (General Hans-Lothar Domröse, personal interview).

Such informal sessions provide feedback that informs or checks the commander's application of judgement or intuition before the initial guidance is issued. Rather than a random discussion over cigarettes, it's a way of having conversations about operations that allow for reasoning and the use of judgement outside the formal planning process. However, in both systems, it is the commander, and the commander alone, who makes the final call.

Proposition 3: Commanders habitually involve others in developing guidance and initial intent. In some systems, this is a doctrinal principle; in others, it happens in a more ad hoc fashion. While this executive decision has collective elements, it is in the form of feedback. It is the commander that provides guidance. Sometimes, this may be delegated to the chief of staff, acting on the commander's behalf.

Proposition 4: The controversy of command-led vs staff-driven seems to question the degree of detail provided as guidance. Neither approach suggests an absence of guidance nor an absence of staff analysis. To understand the nuances, it would be more prudent to explore the question empirically by observing commanders and the functioning of staff.

THE COMMAND CLIMATE

Commanders recognize the danger of staff officers telling them what they would like to hear (an artefact of the hierarchical structure of military organisation). Indeed, commanders rely on their ideas being interrogated. General Mattis explained this tendency:

There's nothing closer to God on earth than a general on a battlefield, frankly. I mean, people even laugh if you tell a stupid joke. Everybody is there to pat you on

⁵ “Analysis of the mission.”

⁶ Military assistant

the back and say that you're a good guy. You need to keep a couple of contrarians around. (General James Mattis, personal interview)

The "contrarian" is not necessarily a person but a function. In a hierarchy and the planning process, rank does have privileges. More precisely, certain positions within the staff often aligned with rank decide what gets pushed up through the chain of command and what does not. Staff actively regulate the status of their priorities themselves. Several of the respondents recognise that something could be wrong with their conclusions, and therefore they need staff officers to be vocal when they see things differently. They describe how they or others have tried to establish so-called command climates where they were encouraged to disagree. One respondent recalled how a commander of the Multinational Corps in Iraq tried to establish this:

He had this thing called phase one, phase two. In phase one anybody could argue, push back, or disagree in public. When it was phase two that means that the decision had been made. End of discussion. (Lieutenant General, US Army, personal interview)

A French Lieutenant General, meanwhile, explained how he deliberately pushed his staff during the planning of exercises by issuing direct guidance that prioritised surprise, thus liberating the staff from the usual constraints found in the textbook approach:

I used to tell my guys: I want one that is for cocaine users! You will go, yeah! Let's do that one! I always said I'm not sure I'll be that crazy in real life but in exercise. Everyone will find the standard practice course of action. I want another completely bizarre one! (Lieutenant General, French Army, personal interview)

This is all to say that the generals are aware of the risk of staff officers becoming passive or risk-averse, or of simply telling the commander what they think they want to hear. The key is training – but a precondition is the creation of a command climate conducive to alternative thinking and challenging assumptions. This does not mean that planning is unbounded play. Creativity is still exercised within the limits of reason: military professionals must provide justifications for their recommendations or ideas to convince the general who has the ultimate authority to decide. But the encouragement might allow staff officers to play with planning parameters and to challenge accepted wisdom. Generally, the ability to explain one's reasoning is a two-way street. Commanders are not free to make ungrounded inferences. They must also explain why they think a specific intent is correct or why a particular course of action is preferable to another. Ultimately, somebody will have to put their lives on the line to comply with the intent.

Proposition 5: Commanders need to establish a command climate with room for disagreement. Plans need to be tested and challenged, which is best done in the company of others. Even the most capable need a second opinion and an intellectual testing ground for their ideas.

MILITARY HISTORY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Respondents recognise the value of the study of military history. This is, however, rarely systematised and rarely central. It is often a matter of secondary concern, driven by personal interests, if study is made at all. This is not just a question of resources but a question of approach; history is so rich that the phrase "studying history" is impractically vague. The most successful seems to be a version of applied history in the Clausewitzian sense, where military history is used to train one's judgement (Clemmesen, 2014; Murray & Sinnreich, 2006; Schøning, 2021). The human factor, friction, the influence of morale, surprise, and the hazards of an unclear understanding of the situation at hand, especially, are things that make themselves known through the study of history more effectively than through training and the reading of doctrine alone. Some commanders described how they had used historical analogies as a part of their initial intent; General James Mattis drew on two World War II examples leading up to the Kandahar operation of 2001: the British raid against St Nazaire and Field Marshal Viscount Slim's operations in Burma (General James Mattis, personal interview). Military history is intelligence best turned to for inspiration rather than imitation. And it is often linked to or mixed with personal experience. Both provide justifications for the establishment of the initial intent.

Proposition 6: Personal experience combined with the study of military history provides a necessary backdrop for the application of professional judgement and the production of guidance. Neither

DISCUSSION

This article has focused on how commanders understand their function. Empirically, the article finds that command in the form of executive decision-making is an organisational imperative. Staff working in accordance with procedure tend to develop machine-like behaviour and to produce rote solutions. The respondents recognised a tendency for the military organisation to turn its attention inwards along the logic of efficiency that standards and procedural approaches hinge on. Thus, management and synchronisation of resources can consume the entire staff. The point is not to do away with standards or management. Standards are rational and needed to coordinate operations but they are a means to an end. The end in question is not the efficient or optimal use of resources but the accomplishment of the mission.

Commanders are authorised to constructively defy procedure and to instil values, norms, constraints and to offer encouragement. Often, they invite key personnel to help them think the problem through before issuing guidance. The best commanders will succinctly formulate the intent without getting overcome by details or succumbing to pure abstraction. This should not be confused with collective command. The responsibility for the intent and the decision rests solely with the commander.

Theoretically, we can add that setting direction involves critical judgment-based decisions. This includes formulating the initial intent and possessing the authority to define and impose constraints on the subsequent analysis. Authority is also required for risk to be assumed on behalf of units under command. Encouragement is always required if the usual planning parameters are to be constructively violated in pursuit of a higher goal of tempo or surprise. Developing and applying judgement is neither a mystical act nor something that only Clausewitz's military genius can access. It is a learned ability. Klein's recognition primed decisions (RPD) model aligns very well with what the commanders described as formative lessons learned through free exercises or from military history (Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Klein, 2007; Klein, 1998). The respondents were later able to recall and use these lessons in support of their decision-making.

We might ask if the article has found nothing more than expert generals who are able and authorised to make decisions based on professional judgement and others, staff officers, who are not. As we learned from propositions one, two, and five, however, the commander provides a distinct and necessary function for guiding the military machine and balancing the structured approach. The commander is a central figure in the military machine. According to the NATO definition of command, it is the individual vested with authority for direction, coordination, and control. But the staff officer tasked with developing workable courses of action or invited to discuss or challenge the commander's assumptions will also need to apply their judgement in parts of the planning process. Thus, while professional judgement is not the exclusive preserve of commanders, they are the only ones authorised to act on it by default.

Second, the article finds that the respondents support a traditional or doctrinal definition of command, thus refuting recent moves to understand command as a collective or networked effort. According to the respondents in this article, command is not a triad consisting of mission definition, mission management, and leadership, but a hierarchy in which other functions follow mission definition. King does acknowledge that his thesis of a collective command paradigm is "potentially radical – even unwelcome" and that he argues against "military tradition and even the self-perception of officers and generals" (King, 2019, p. 21). This article has demonstrated that, left unattended, the military machine will turn inwards and focus on managing its resources according to a logic of rationality and control. Somebody is needed to provide guidance and to define the mission. While this might be both military tradition and an element in the self-perception of the officers, it stems from an organisational need. This is the part of commander's responsibility that cannot be delegated and is probably why King's otherwise splendid empirical work is questioned on its theoretical conclusions and normative suggestions (Freedman, 2020; King, 2019, p. 21; Klitmøller & Obling, 2021; Storr, 2022). In this light, King's work has more to do with 21st century staff work related to mission management than with command.

This study also has implications for future research as well as for the military's professional debate.

First, we are obliged to consider how militaries prepare officers for command. It is said that the expert knows when they don't know while the non-expert does not (Kahneman & Klein, 2009, p. 524). In the absence of expertise, something else might take its place. Berejikian and colleagues (2022) showed that students at the general staff courses in the United States tend to uncritically resort to specific international political theories (realpolitik or realism) when tasked with developing courses of action with insufficient information. They argue that this singular focus hampers creative thinking. Following the two approaches to decision-making in this article, it seems that the officers uncritically fill knowledge gaps with theories in order to make the structured approach work. Checking assumptions or explicitly using different theories in such situations to analyse problems could be a way to think more analytically (Jakobsen, 2022). This calls for more critical intervention in doctrine, theory, and procedure instead of thoughtless application. We might ask whether doctrine is currently written and taught in a way permitting officers to similarly develop in-depth knowledge and professional judgement.

Second, to understand the phenomenon of intuitive executive decision-making, it may be useful to focus on case studies of how commanders arrived at certain critical decisions, the analogies or previous experiences they drew from, their justifications, and the technologies they used in the process. In the related field of international politics, work has been done on how perception, personal experience, specific historical lessons, and analogies shape actions and judgment (Hironaka, 2017; Horowitz & Stam, 2014; Jervis, 1976; Khong, 1992). Personal memoirs might contain the empirical data needed for such analyses. In this article, the respondents emphasised free exercises as formative events in which they got bruised and hurt and learned from the rigorous after-action review process. During exercises, they embodied the limits of the procedural approach and the need for professional judgement. This requires a learning environment where it is safe to fail: failing and getting bruised contribute to knowledge formation. Several respondents, however, also mentioned that, being resource-heavy, free exercises with troops are rare. There might be other ways to learn the effect of reciprocal actions, military history, or rigorous wargaming, even if such approaches are not without pitfalls. It is an open question whether such training events can provide the same embodied experience.

Third, a related (and perhaps emergent) question concerns the role of technology, including the ways in which decision support and battle management systems mediate perception and decision-making (Akrich, 1992; Nørgaard & Linden-Vørnle, 2021; Orlikowski, 1992; Singer, 2010; Verbeek, 2011). This study might suggest that while some machine-like behaviour could be delegated to a machine, staff officers must also exercise their professional judgement, particularly in developing workable courses of action. Thus, some of the work processes delegated to the staff officer might be delegated to machines while others might not.

Fourth, if King's account of an increasingly complex command environment arises from the integration of more military and non-military means at increasingly lower levels, the picture is more complex still. Kahneman and Klein argued that the development of expertise required an environment with sufficient consistency and training for the rules forming that expertise to be understood (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). If contemporary military problems are "wicked," as particularly intractable problems are termed in the literature of planning and policy, and as some have argued (Greenwood & Hammes, 2009; Soeters, 2020), then there is still a need for someone vested with authority to set the parameters to make the organisation act in that environment. In wicked environments, causal relationships either do not exist or are difficult to understand. This is the point of departure for the emergent turn to design thinking in military planning (Wrigley et al., 2021; Zweibelson et al., 2021). But militaries might not need more extensive staff to analyse, understand, or design through the wicked problems. Perhaps smaller staff who can direct interaction with the environment combined with the ability to respond very quickly, relying on standards to increase the tempo, would be more prudent. It is often argued that increased complexity is the driver behind bigger a staff (Jeffery, 2000; King, 2019; Storr, 2022). However, if a staff tends to develop mechanical behaviour, this might add to the tendency. It is a military truism that when a staff reaches a certain size, it can generate enough work to keep itself busy. Perhaps a smaller staff would increase both efficiency and effectiveness (Storr, 2009, 2022).

The six propositions developed in this article also offer avenues for further research to confirm, reject, or develop them. In what circumstances do staff tend to develop mechanical behaviour? What are the conditions for staff officers' use of professional judgement in a process that might be characterised as tightly coupled? How can doctrine be written and taught to accommodate both the need for procedure and the need to depart from procedure? From the staff officer's perspective, what are the most salient differences between the command-led and the staff-driven headquarters? How do staff officers experience the command climate, and what are the consequences? King and others have opened the door to the study of the functioning of a staff (King, 2019; Malm, 2019; Öberg, 2020). Hopefully, this will serve as an invitation to more empirical work in the field.

CONCLUSION

I began this article by asking how contemporary military commanders understand command in the context of standardised planning processes and doctrine. First, the need for command stems from an organisational need. Staff need guidance to add surprise, creativity, and risk; only the commander is authorised to assume risk on behalf of their units. Commanders recognise this need by drawing on previous, embodied, experience or military history in which the doctrinal or procedural approach proved insufficient. From the perspective of contemporary commanders, command is still vested in individuals, and executive decision-making is a distinct and necessary function to guide the military machine. A staff's methodological reasoning informs commanders to validate their assumptions, analyse what is possible and the consequences, and sort out details. The structured planning process starts with initial guidance based on the commander's professional judgement. This intent might be discussed with peers either ad hoc or as a doctrinal principle. The responsibility for issuing the intent and the authority to do so remain with the commander. Mission definition is one of the central executive acts of command. Without explicit *mission definition* and guidance, missions will be managed according to the staff's internal logic of rationality, control, and optimisation, cranking out machine-like solutions.

In contrast to mission definition, *mission management* and subsequent questions of synchronisation and coordination are managerial problems whose optimal solutions can be deduced, or at least heavily informed, by knowledge of doctrine, planning parameters, and structured analysis of the given task. This is the realm of the staff organisation. However, from research on standardised work methods, we know that standards must also be translated to work according to local needs. Neither command nor staff work is pure rule-following, and professional judgement is not reserved for commanders. Staff officers also need to apply judgement to develop workable courses of action, test, and challenge plans, and participate in the required professional discussion as a part of military planning.

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