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UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTED/SUPPORTING INTERRELATIONSHIPS

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"If the band played a piece first with the piccolo, then with the brass horn, then with the clarinet, and then with the trumpet, there would be a hell of a lot of noise but no music. To get harmony in music, each instrument must support the others. To get harmony in battle, each weapon must support the other. You musicians of Mars must not wait for the bandleader to signal you... You must each, of your own volition, see to it that you come into this concert at the proper place and at the proper time."[1]

– General George S. Patton, Jr.
Address to the U.S. 2nd Armored Division, July 8, 1941

Introduction

NATO is increasingly using supported/supporting interrelationships (SSI) throughout Allied Command Operations (ACO) headquarters to leverage capabilities across the Alliance and national headquarters. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) utilizes SSI to establish ACO-wide coherence of planning and execution, and the prioritization of resources over time and geography, across the competition continuum (peace – crisis – conflict). Using SSI in command and control (C2) structures provides the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) flexibility to create tailorable strategic options and conduct joint effects and actions at the speed of relevance. However, recent NATO documents and observations identify the need to clarify the purpose and role of SSI during military operations. Misapplying SSI leads to delays in planning and execution and could present C2 structure inaccuracies and misunderstandings to senior leaders within ACO.

THIS ARTICLE LOOKS to define SSI, explains the purpose of SSI, and makes recommendations when to use SSI, and when SSI are not appropriate during a military operation. Ultimately, this article argues that SSI should be used as a means to reinforce mission command during NATO operations and enhance unity of effort across military echelons to achieve effects and objectives.

Seamless Utilization of SSI

At this moment, although there is no NATO-approved definition of SSI, Allied joint publications (AJPs) and NATO documents provide an adequate amount of guidance to implement SSI.[2] However, SSI are difficult to comprehend if a staff officer does not understand the meaning of an "interrelationship" and mission command. An interrelationship is two or more things having an equal relationship. In a military context, an interrelationship means two or more headquarters that have the same or equal amount of influence and hold no authority over one another. SSI are reciprocal relationships, traditionally directed by SACEUR, for a specific contingency or mission and should be limited in scope, time, and space during one or more phases of an operation.

ACO headquarters, organized by joint force commands (JFC), single service (SSC), functional, and theatre component commands (TCC), have an interrelationship and receive their direction and guidance from SACEUR.

Each ACO headquarters is responsible for a specific domain, function, or assigned geographic region. They provide SACEUR with planning and advice for their assigned role within ACO, and in the event of a crisis or conflict, can command combat forces. These existing interrelationships within ACO commands achieve desired effects through unity of effort.

Correctly utilizing SSI begins with a headquarters having shared understanding of four terms: 1) establishing authority, 2) supported command, 3) supporting command, and 4) mission command. Without this understanding, NATO commands will likely misapply SSI within their C2 structures.

At a minimum, there are three leaders responsible for the seamless utilization of SSI: the establishing authority, the supported commander, and the supporting commander(s). Each leader has distinct roles and responsibilities to enable successful SSI.

Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Christopher G. Cavoli
Photo by NATO

Establishing Authority

The establishing authority is the military officer with the greatest level of command authority over all other assigned NATO commands. In NATO military operations, the establishing authority will likely remain SACEUR, who is traditionally granted operational command (OPCOM) by NATO during a military operation. The OPCOM authority enables a commander to deploy units, assign or reassign missions and forces, and delegate operational or tactical control to subordinate commanders. Only under OPCOM can a commander task organize the force structure to accomplish a mission.[3] A commander with OPCOM has the authority, and is the establishing authority, to direct SSI amongst the subordinate headquarters they command.

The establishing authority directs priorities, outlines in sequence the desired effects and objectives to be achieved, assigns forces and resources, and delegates authorities and responsibilities to subordinate commanders. The establishing authority assigns a supported command based on which command is best suited (with the appropriate level of expertise) to plan, coordinate, and synchronize the designated activities to achieve one or more effects. The establishing authority will next assign one or more commands as a supporting command to the supported commander based on the joint or multi-domain requirements to achieve the effect. The establishing authority should ensure that each supporting command is resourced appropriately to achieve the effect and mitigate risk.

Supported Command

The supported commander is the commander who maintains primary responsibility for accomplishing the effect(s) assigned by the establishing authority. Supported commanders have no command authority over designated supporting commands due to the nature of interrelationships. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the supported commander to provide intent and general direction to all supporting commands. The supported command is the lead headquarters to plan, coordinate, and synchronize all the joint and multi-domain activities to achieve the effect.

Supporting Command

Supporting command(s) accomplish the actions needed to achieve the desired effect for the supported commander. In this role, the supporting command assists the supported command with planning by determining the capability requirements and employment concept, based on the supported commander's intent. The supporting commander uses their command authority through the orders process to task their assigned forces to achieve the effect for the supported command. If the supporting command does not have adequate capabilities to achieve the desired effect or mitigate risk, it is the obligation of the supporting commander to inform the establishing authority and request additional resources.

The Importance of Mission Command in SSI

Mission command is NATO's command philosophy.[4] Embracing this philosophy begins with the understanding of why mission command enables optimal command and control in NATO military operations. Mission command emphasizes the importance of understanding the higher commander's intent and the desired effects rather than specifying to subordinates how the intent and effects are to be achieved. This requires mutual trust between superiors, subordinates, and peers — and trust that each command will accomplish its task.

There are four requirements that guide the effective application of mission command:

1) Commanders ensure that subordinate and supporting commands understand the intent, and each command's expected contributions towards task accomplishment.
2) Commanders exercise minimum control over subordinate and supporting commands, while retaining responsibility for their actions.
3) Subordinate and supporting commands are told what outcome they are contributing to, the effect they are to create, and why.
4) Subordinate and supporting commands are allocated the resources they need to carry out their assigned tasks, with subordinate and supporting commands deciding for themselves how best to achieve their superior's intent.

A commander's responsibility for mission accomplishment is total. However, mission command promotes a decentralized style of command where subordinates are delegated needed decision-making authority in an effort to increase initiative and operational tempo. Mission command gives subordinate commanders freedom of action to execute operations according to the commander's intent, while also remaining responsive to additional superior direction. A mission command leadership style is not unbounded. Commanders remain in control and prevent misunderstandings by subordinates by clearly directing priorities, intentions, and restrictions, and identifying which decisions remain at their level.

Benefits of SSI

• In a resource-constrained environment, the establishing authority is able to efficiently use and prioritize available means across time and space to have the greatest effect, while minimizing risk across the strategic environment.

"Using SSI in C2 structures provides SACEUR **flexibility** to create **tailorable strategic options** and conduct **joint effects** and **actions** at the speed of relevance."

• SHAPE and SACEUR, as the establishing authority, are able to remain at the strategic level, while detailed operational-level staff work and tactical application is completed and executed between ACO subordinate commands.

• To accomplish the intent of the supported command, the supporting commander determines the best use of their assigned combat power to conduct the required tactical actions to achieve the desired effect.

• When applied correctly, SSI enhance unity of effort and synergy across SACEUR's area of responsibility by applying the principles and philosophy of mission command.

SSI embrace the emphasis placed in AJP-5 on parallel and collaborative planning activities to harmonize plans across all levels.[5] Collaboration, across all ACO commands, enables mutually supportive, compatible, and whenever possible, concerted planning. To maximize the benefits of SSI, each leader must complete their roles and responsibilities in a timely manner. Once the establishing authority nominates and provides the purpose for each support relationship, the desired effect, and priorities, the supported and supporting commands work together to achieve the desired effect.

Supported and supporting commands accomplish the desired effect through direct interaction in accordance with the SSI terms and conditions determined by the establishing authority. With no direct authorities over supporting commanders, both parties (supported command and supporting command) should develop technical arrangements prior to execution that state requirements by each participant, coordinating instructions, and contingency considerations. When SSI disagreements occur, the establishing authority resolves or arbitrates issues, oftentimes via prioritization of assets and additional direction and guidance.

Deciding to Use SSI

Throughout the competition continuum, NATO will decide on the most appropriate C2 structure that embraces the fundamentals of C2 and mission command, and optimizes flexibility of NATO resources. C2 structures are determined based on various things such as the nature of the conflict, mission, geography, and force composition requirements.

Command at the strategic level is complex and challenging, particularly when operating in an alliance or multinational coalition. To mitigate these challenges SSI can be used as a means to promote mission command and instil unity of effort. SSI are particularly beneficial when mission or geographic requirements, or limited resources, prevent a commander from task organizing one or more all-domain joint task force(s) (JTF). When a single all-domain JTF is an appropriate C2 structure for the mission, SSI are not required and should not be used.

When deciding to use SSI, various supported and supporting commands will likely be assigned throughout a NATO operation. It is possible that multiple NATO commands will be both a supported and supporting command during distinct portions of an operation and across geographic regions, due to the size of SACEUR's area of responsibility (AOR). In other words, it is possible that one ACO command could be a supporting command in one geographic area, but also be the supported command for a separate strategic effect. When this occurs, SSI roles and responsibilities do not change.

It is incorrect to assume that commanders, who own battlespace, will always be the supported command in their assigned joint operations area (JOA). Although this may be appropriate at times, supported commanders are assigned based on the *best-suited* headquarters to plan, coordinate, and synchronize all the activities required to achieve the desired effect(s).

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Below are some fictitious examples that illustrate different ways an establishing authority could direct SSI during a military operation.

Example 1: To accomplish military strategic effect (MSE) — freedom of navigation across the AOR ensured, SACEUR, as the establishing authority, determines that the Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) is the best-suited supported command due to their expertise in the maritime domain. In this particular example, JTF-South is assigned as a supporting command because one of the geographic priorities regarding freedom of navigation for SACEUR is located in JTF-South's JOA. SACEUR thus assigns Commander JTF-South operational control (OPCON) of the anticipated force capability requirements to accomplish their portion of the MSE (see Figure 1, p: 34).

Example 2: To accomplish MSE — adversary anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems degraded, SACEUR, as the establishing authority, determines that JTF-North is the best-suited supported command due to the limited scope of the conflict and location of adversary A2/AD systems in JTF-North's assigned JOA. SACEUR assigns Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) as a supporting command because many actions required to achieve the MSE take place in the air domain. SACEUR assigns Commander AIRCOM OPCON of the anticipated force capability requirements to accomplish their portion of the MSE (see Figure 2, p: 34).

In both examples, the established SSI remains in place until the MSE is accomplished or the establishing authority provides new direction and guidance. The next examples illustrate two C2 structures that provide feasible SSI options to SACEUR (see p: 35).

Example 3 — Regional Model: In this fictious training scenario, NATO is confronted with a state of crisis. To combat the crisis, SACEUR establishes one JTF with a regionally focused JOA. The JTF requires an all-domain joint force to achieve their directed mission; however, SACEUR wants to retain a centralized approach in the air domain due to other priorities within the AOR. SACEUR, as the establishing authority, designates the JTF HQ as the supported command with AIRCOM as a supporting command. AIRCOM establishes a component command to best support the JTF HQ but retains command authority over its assigned forces. The SSI succeeds because the establishing authority provides clear purpose and priorities, the supported commander provides intent and direction and guidance to the supporting commander, who in turn clearly states the force capability requirements they need to achieve the desired effect and mitigate risk (see Figure 3, p: 35).

Example 4 — Mission-Specific Model: A limited-duration contingency operation is occurring in SACEUR's AOR. A JTF is assigned to command and control the operation and is granted command authorities in the land domain over ground and sustainment forces. However, the JTF still requires operational effects in all domains to achieve the mission. SACEUR, as the establishing authority, assigns the JTF HQ as the supported command and directs MARCOM, AIRCOM, and NATO Special Operations HQ as supporting commands. Assigned TCCs establish a component command to best support the JTF HQ but retain command authorities over their assigned capabilities. The SSI roles and responsibilities do not change due to the nature of this mission; all headquarters assigned to support this contingency mission must work together to achieve unity of effort. For the JTF HQ, liaison officers from each supporting command are pivotal to ensure the supported command can properly plan, coordinate and synchronize all the activities needed to accomplish the mission (see Figure 4, p: 35).

Exercise DYNAMIC MARINER. Photo by MARCOM

SSI Key Conclusions

• SSI are not a command relationship. Supported and supporting commanders have no authority over each other. SSI are mutual interrelationships, directed by an establishing authority, for a specific contingency or mission and designed to be limited in scope, time, space, and purpose. Conflicts of interest should be resolved through joint mechanisms at the supported commander's level or by the establishing authority.

• SSI should not be confused with the designation of a main effort, although this is often the case. SSI establishes the interrelationships between SHAPE, JFCs, TCCs, and functional commands, while the "main effort" provides a focus for activity that a supported commander considers crucial to the success of their mission.[6]

• NATO established SSI to flatten traditional C2 structures. SSI headquarters must work together. All commands participate in the preparation of the plan and coordinate with each other across geographic and functional boundaries to achieve synergy. Liaison officers play a pivotal role during planning, coordination and synchronization activities.

Figure 1
MSE: Freedom of navigation across AOR ensured

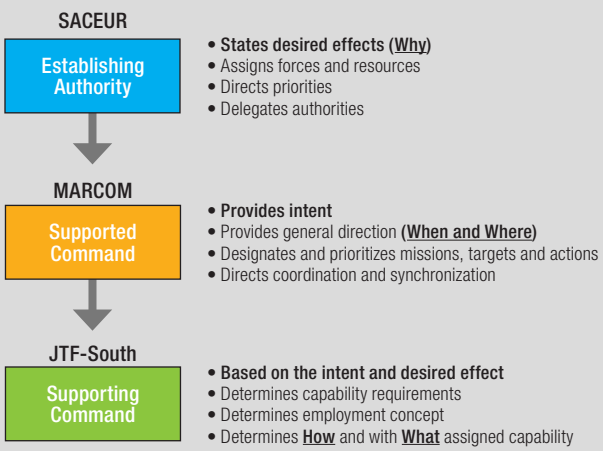


Figure 2
MSE: Adversary A2/AD systems degraded

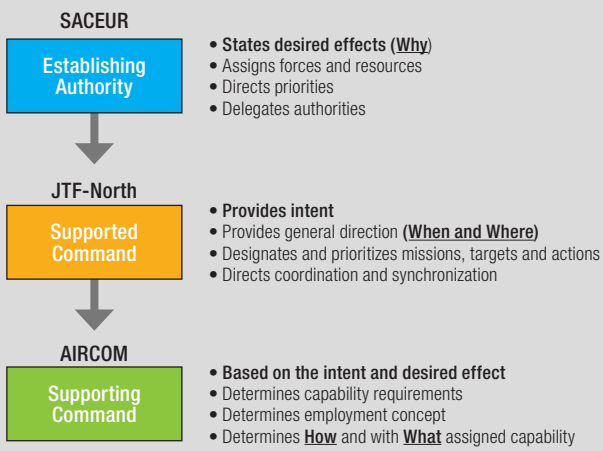


Figure 3: Regional Model

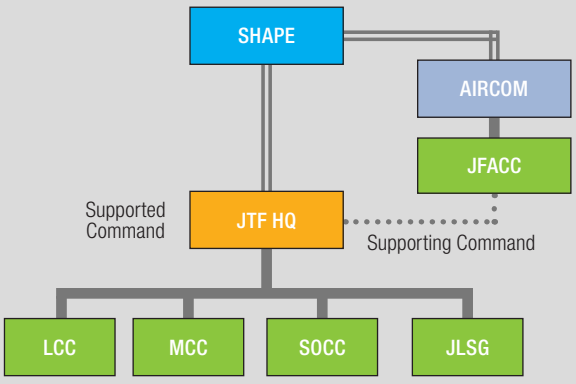
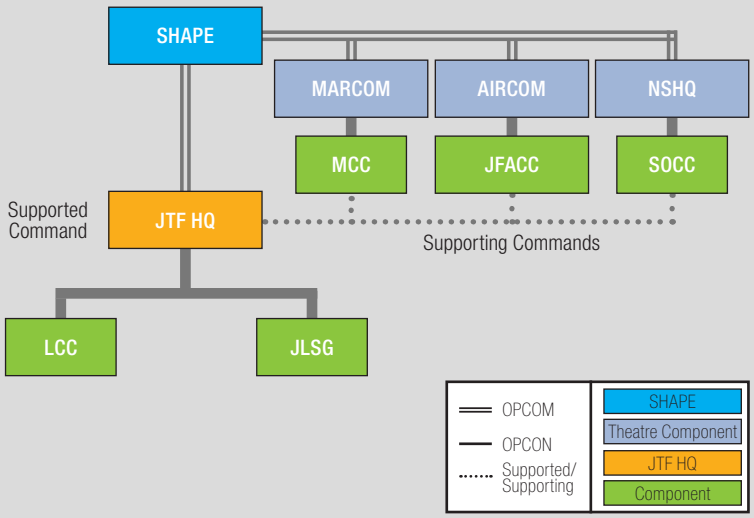


Figure 4: Mission-Specific Model



The fictitious graphic renditions are the author's own design

• The supporting command must clearly understand the supported command's mission, the desired effect, and the supported commander's intent. It is incumbent on the supported command to provide this information to ensure task accomplishment. Likewise, the supported command requires knowledge of the supporting command's capabilities and limitations.

• SSI are recommended when mission requirements, the size and scope of the AOR, and scarce resources prevent SACEUR from task organizing a single all-domain JTF. When this occurs, assigning supported and supporting commands provides the establishing authority with the greatest flexibility and likelihood of achieving strategic effects.

• SSI are not recommended when a JTF commander maintains sufficient command authorities and assigned joint and multi-domain forces to accomplish a mission. In this situation, commanders should use the orders process, and their authorities, to task subordinate forces and use "main effort" and "supporting efforts" to distribute combat power and provide clarity across the JTF they command.

Summary

Complexity throughout SACEUR's AOR will continue to grow in the future. To meet this challenge, it is crucial for NATO to consider how to best train ACO commands to operate across the AOR, and in multiple JOAs, with the optimal C2 structure. One option is to grow NATO exercises in scope and scale to increase Alliance and national military HQs' ability to handle anticipated complexities.

Another less demanding option is to create key leader and staff training events to foster C2 proficiency across a headquarters. The value of staff officers who know the fundamentals of C2 and understand how to create flexible C2 structures cannot be overstated. SACEUR will likely continue to use SSI as a means to reinforce mission command and develop tailorable C2 solutions and strategic options to achieve strategic effects. However, observations indicate that JTF HQs may benefit from further clarifying the purpose and role of SSI in commanding and controlling operations. Therefore, greater clarity and attention must be a focus in doctrine and strategic directives to SSI.

In the lead-up to STEADFAST JUPITER 2023, an ambitious NATO exercise that will challenge all training audiences, participants must mitigate C2 challenges and misunderstandings through professional development to create a proficient understanding on C2 relationships, authorities, and how NATO establishes unity of effort across the Alliance.

ENDNOTES

1 Charles Q. Brown Jr., "Developing Doctrine for the Future Joint Force: Creating Synergy and Minimizing Seams" (The Walker Papers No. 3, Air University Press, September 2005), 11.

2 See e.g. Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-1), Edition E Version 1 (February 2017); Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations (AJP-3), Edition C Version 1 (February 2019); Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations (AJP-5) Edition A Version 2 (May 2019).

3 AJP-3 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations (AJP-3) Edition C Version 1; February 2019, 1-40.

4 Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-1) Edition E Version 1; (February 2017, 5-1).

5 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations (AJP-5) Edition A Version 2; May 2019, 2-5.

6 Comment derived from consultation with General James Everard (Retired), Lead Senior Mentor (NATO Senior Mentor Programme), August 11, 2022.