



Photo by Torgeir Haugeard,
Norwegian Armed Forces

The J35

THE NEXT LEVEL IN NATO WARFARE DEVELOPMENT

by *Lieutenant Colonel José Díaz de León*
United States Air Force
Transformation Delivery Division
NATO Joint Warfare Centre



Photo by Viggo Holm,
Norwegian Armed Forces



Inherent realities of multi-domain deterrence and combat operations are simulated in Joint Warfare Centre's exercises.

IN 1871, PRUSSIAN Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke wrote, "No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main enemy forces." This has since been condensed into the more concise adage that "no plan survives first contact with the enemy." Nevertheless, the importance of operations planning has always been understood, and that understanding has only become greater and more solid within NATO in recent times. While a plan may not "survive" the initial stages of an operation in its entirety, it is undoubtedly always better than the alternative: no planning at all.

The importance of NATO operations planning is reflected in the exercise process. C-Block, as this stage of the exercise process is now known (formerly Phase IIB), may not be as "exciting" as the exercise execution phase (E-Block, formerly Phase IIIB) — after all, execution often throws training audiences into the early stages or even deep into active conflict, i.e. on or after D-Day. However, the C-Block planning phase is, in a sense, even more important than execution.

The operations planning portion of a major JWC-directed exercise is where the deep thinking happens about a problem set posed by a near-peer competitor threatening Alliance cohesion and territorial integrity.

In real operations, as with an exercise E-Block, plans must be adjusted in the form of fragmentary orders, or FRAGOs. How are the adjustments made during execution of the operation plan (OPLAN), for instance to regional plans? Let us begin by stating where these adjustments should not take place: the J33 or current operations staff in a headquarters should not adjust the plan. The J33 mission is to manage the joint operations centre, a watch with a staff drawn from across core joint headquarters staff functions. The J33 is to monitor real-time operations and operationally relevant strategic and tactical events. It reports what happens today. The J35, or future operations, staff take the information from the J33 during a handover/takeover and look at how the enemy "vote" has affected the plan that was written weeks, if not months, before combat operations began.

How Does Allied Doctrine View Planning and Execution?

NATO Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3, the Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations, does not define or describe what a J3 position does. Its Annex A describes the operations (J3) staff as "the focal point through which the commander directs the conduct of an operation."¹ It does not explicitly describe

the position of a deputy chief of staff (DCOS) for operations (Ops), or of an assistant chief of staff (ACOS) J3. Interestingly, if one looks at most NATO headquarters (HQs) with a J-staff construct, the chief of staff (COS) will normally have a DCOS Ops and a subordinate ACOS J3. This is how Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the three NATO Command Structure joint force commands (JFCs) are organized.

As a point of comparison, in the U.S. military, the J3 is described as "the JFC's principal staff advisor to coordinate the interaction of all fire support system elements, including [target acquisition], [command and control], and attack/delivery systems."² While AJP-5, the Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations, does not define or describe the role of J35 planning horizons, it does mention that modifications to an OPLAN will be conducted by means of a FRAGO. AJP-5 also mentions that planning activities are divided into current operations, future operations, and future plans.³

NATO Allied Command Operations' (ACO) Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive (COPD) expounds on the NATO operations planning process (OPP) described in the AJP-5. The COPD does not delve into the specifics of what a J35 should do. Yet, the function of the J35 has matured in recent years in





Above from left
Norwegian F-35 fighter aircraft, photo by Andreas Vekve, Norwegian Armed Forces; British soldier with the Allied Reaction Force badge, photo by NATO; JWC Grey Cell exercising civil-military cooperation, photo by PAO; MH-60S SeaHawk helicopter of the U.S. Carrier Strike Group Twelve, photo by Ole-Sverre Haugli, Norwegian Armed Forces; personnel aboard the Norwegian frigate HNoMS Roald Amundsen, photo by Helene Synes

SHAPE and in the JFCs. A strong J35 culture is more important than ever in NATO headquarters. It is the organization within a joint or component staff that bridges what happens on a given day, i.e. "today," when the enemy gets a vote in a notional war, when personnel, equipment, and therefore capability, are reduced. Someone must figure out what that would mean for "tomorrow" and in the mid-term future (days, perhaps weeks, but definitely not months). Eventually, the plan at the operational level — whatever it is called, e.g. OPLAN, or regional plan — will have to be examined for any necessary refinements, if not substantial changes.

Where Do Assessments Fit Into All of This?

AJP-5 addresses the importance of operations assessment.⁴ AJP-3 goes into further detail; its Annex A assigns responsibility for future operations planning and operations assessment to the J5 staff.⁵ Additionally, AJP-3 mentions synchronization and synchronized actions as standard practice to concentrate forces at a time and place of anticipated decisiveness. The COPD links mid-term planning with "joint synchronization."⁶ In turn, the latter is linked to execution through a joint coordination order (JCO),⁷ but there is no explicit linkage with

"The operations planning portion of a major JWC-directed exercise is where the deep thinking happens about a problem set."

the J35 function. The J35 function is hinted at but not spelled out. This is the current state of Allied joint doctrine on planning and operations. Yet, after many JWC-directed exercises, NATO HQs can write an OPLAN, hold a joint assessment board, a joint coordination board, and produce a JCO and FRAGOs. They are able to do this because of the inherent realities of deterrence and combat operations as simulated in exercises.

HQs plan for operations against a problem set, whether large-scale Article 5 scenarios or non-Article 5 peacekeeping. The plan encounters the enemy. The enemy gets a vote.

Something happens today (current operations monitored by a joint operations centre), and the HQ J-staff need to assess what that means in relation to the OPLAN. Current operations, i.e. the J33 function, does not assess that; the J-35 should, as it deals with horizons of more than 24 hours. The J35 should be providing the operational assessment (OPSA), which is why every NATO HQ ought to situate the OPSA function under its J35. The J5 should own the OPLAN, and the measures of performance and measures of effectiveness to measure operational effects required to achieve operational objectives. However, the J35 staff should determine what needs to be changed based on enemy action and adjust the original plan in accordance with reality via a JCO.

As we can see, the assessment process is critical to the adjustment of the OPLAN to fit the reality on the ground in time and space. Fortunately, NATO has the NATO Operations Assessment Handbook (NOAH). The NOAH is a useful guidebook that does a solid job of spelling out how to carry out operations assessments. This is the way the J-staff (ideally the J35 staff, but several joint assessment branches in NATO HQs do not reside within the J35) can "tell the story," collaborating with other branches with subject matter experts (SMEs) in the various joint functions.



In combat operations at scale, a key input with specialized lower levels of assessment encoded in Allied joint operations are the inputs from the joint effects, joint fires, and joint targeting SMEs in the J-staff.⁸

The Function of the J-35 in Relation to Joint Effects, Joint Fires, Joint Targeting, and Multi-Domain Operations

Joint effects is a North Atlantic Council policy dating back to the 2018 adaptation of the NATO Command Structure. It describes joint effects as consisting of joint targeting, strategic communications (StratCom), information operations, psychological operations (PsyOps), cyber operations, and lawfare capabilities. Joint fires includes, but is not limited to, joint targeting.

Some NATO HQs have a joint effects branch, a joint fires branch, and a joint targeting branch. Some have a joint targeting and effects branch. Some have a joint fires and effects branch. In other words, NATO HQs have organized themselves differently. What they have in common is that they have staff to support the commander to achieve operational effects through combat power, best described using the term "joint fires." Since some operational

effects are achieved only using joint fires, the joint fires or joint targeting staff in an HQ produces what is called a combat assessment.⁹

The combat assessment tells the joint commander "where we are in the fight" at the operational level. This assessment is fed into the overall OPSA, which measures the entirety of the campaign. For example, whereas the combat assessment might address the question as to whether the Allied forces are achieving a decisive condition of obtaining freedom of action through attrition of anti-access/area denial, the OPSA could answer the question whether NATO is maintaining the operational effect of securing a particular sea port of debarcation through host nation law enforcement. In turn, the combat assessment is fed partly by battle damage assessment of individual targets and systems with different phases of analysis.

There are many levels of assessments in the J-functions related to an operation, including, where necessary, the employment of joint fires at scale. What about multi-domain operations (MDO)? These are the orchestration of effects across the five NATO domains of air, land, maritime, cyberspace, and space. Some applications of joint effects, joint fires, and joint targeting are inherently part of MDO.¹⁰ Since the J35 falls under, or should fall under, a

J3 operations directorate, it is logical for a joint or component staff's joint effects, joint fires, or joint targeting personnel to be assigned in a branch under the J35.

The Way Ahead

As the NATO joint effects community of interest and MDO have matured in recent years,¹¹ the next step for NATO HQs is to develop and strengthen the relationship between their J33, J35, and J5. Joint effects, joint fires, and joint targeting are well understood at this point. These three types of staff need to maintain proficiency in processes and knowledge across post rotations in military personnel. The future focus for SHAPE and the JFCs is the understanding of the roles and authorities in the J33 (current operations), the J35 (future operations 24 hours and beyond), and the J5 (future plans). Perhaps AJP-5 and AJP-3 will be updated to reflect that optimal organization structure in NATO HQs. SHAPE has taken a large step towards implementing a more ideal structure by redesignating the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre as the SHAPE J35. The next step in warfare development is reflected in the growing strength of the J35 community in NATO HQs. ✦



Multi-domain operations represent a pivotal shift in NATO's approach. This transformative concept empowers the Alliance to strategically influence events, coordinate efforts with external stakeholders, and present formidable challenges to adversaries.

ENDNOTES

- 1 AJP-3, p. A-3, 2019
- 2 U.S. Joint Publication 3-09 Joint Fires JP-3-09, II-7, 2025. Additionally, the most recent Joint Publication 3-0, the 2022 version titled Joint Campaigns and Operations, simply names the J3 as, the "operations directorate of a joint staff (JP-3, II-9, 2022; *ibid*, GL-3).
- 3 AJP-5, pp. 1-6, 2019
- 4 AJP-5, pp. 1-2, 2019
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. A-4 and A-5
- 6 COPD v3.1, p.5-8, 2023
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-13
- 8 For the best document to date on the relationship between joint effects, joint fires, and joint targeting, read the 2021 NATO JALLC study Joint Fires in NATO. It is classified NATO RESTRICTED and available on the NATO SECRET network.
- 9 See AJP 3-9 on Joint Targeting for more information on combat assessment and battle damage assessments.
- 10 For more on NATO MDO, see the author's articles on the subject in Issues 36 and 37 of The Three Swords.
- 11 For further elaboration on the maturity of joint fires and targeting since 2017, see the other article by the author in this issue of The Three Swords, Advising Joint Targeting at the JWC: Best Practices and Insights since 2017.