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# Designating Information Operations as the Joint Force's Main Effort - What Do We Really Mean?

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**Editorial Abstract:** *The author describes the challenges joint commanders face when assigning operational roles to their functional components, and the added complexities information operations introduce into the process. Major Horowicz further suggests potential organizational and doctrinal solutions, and invites continued debate on these proposals.*

Assigning a main effort as part of a concept of operations is commonly understood. At the tactical level, the main effort is typically assigned to a unit, whereas at the operational level, the main effort is typically addressed in geographic or functional terms. In either case, the main effort is the commander's bid for success - it is directed at the object which will have the most significant effect on the enemy, and which holds the best opportunity for success.<sup>1</sup> This article explores some of the challenges a joint force commander and joint information operations (IO) cell chief might experience if IO becomes a joint force's main effort.

Designation of the main effort can be addressed in geographical (area) or functional terms. In developing the operational concept, planners determine those tasks essential to the accomplishment of the military objectives and assign them to subordinate commanders either as area (geographic) responsibilities or as functional responsibilities. Area tasks and responsibilities focus on a specific area to control or conduct operations. Functional tasks and responsibilities focus on the performance of continuing efforts that involve two or more Military Departments operating in the same dimension or medium, or where there is a need to accomplish a distinct aspect of the assigned mission. In either case, designating the main effort will establish where or how a major part of one's

own forces and assets are employed to attain the primary objective of a major operation or campaign.<sup>2</sup>

In most cases, a joint force commander's assignment of the main effort is easily understood, planned, and executed. For example, assigning Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) during the seize-the-initiative phase of an operation makes sense if an essential task for that phase is achieving air superiority. Acting in a functional main effort role the JFACC is the commander responsible for, and held accountable for, accomplishing this assigned essential task. All other assigned components support the JFACC to this end. Similarly the Joint Force Land Component Commander (JFLCC), Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC), or Joint Force Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC) might be assigned as a functional main effort. In all cases, a commander is responsible and accountable for carrying out assigned tasks as the joint force's main effort. These commanders have the preponderance of organic assets to carry out their assigned functional tasks, or they are properly weighted with capabilities from other components. Notably, functional commanders operate in domains that are, for the most part, distinct from other domains (air, land, maritime).

## The Challenges for IO as the Main Effort

A joint force commander who assigns IO the main effort faces challenges not normally associated with ascribing the same effort to functional components. My intent is not to argue that it is impossible or inconceivable to do so, but rather to point out some of these challenges and promote constructive dialogue within the joint IO community.

## The Information Environment

Unlike the air, land, sea, and space domains which are relatively easy to quantify, the information environment presents less clear boundaries in the context of IO as the main effort. The information environment is the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information. The actors include leaders, decision makers, individuals, and organizations. Resources include materials and systems employed to collect, analyze, apply, or disseminate information. The information environment is where humans and automated systems observe, orient, decide, and act upon information, and is therefore the principal decision-making environment. *Even though the information environment is distinct, it resides within each of the four (air, land, sea, and space) domains.*<sup>3</sup>

Based on this description, assigning IO as the main effort does not help clarify the commander's bid for success. Hypothetically, if a commander selects a functional component as the main effort - to be weighted with IO assets and capabilities in accomplishing the decisive IO tasks - he may likely find this simply isn't feasible.



*Studying the information environment (DefenseLink)*

## Measuring the Success of the IO Main Effort

When air, land, or sea functional components (JFACC, JFLCC, JFMCC) are assigned as the main effort, it is relatively easy to measure their success in terms of achieving domain superiority. Standard enemy order of battle analysis allows us to match corresponding combat assessment against remaining enemy capabilities in order to give relative confidence we've achieved air, land, or maritime superiority. Our ability to maneuver within these domains without effective enemy opposition is proof of the corresponding superiority achieved within each domain. Taking a similar approach to IO, it is nearly impossible to ascertain the joint force's achievement of information superiority within the joint operations area.<sup>4</sup> By assigning IO as the main effort, the corresponding ability to achieve and measure information superiority across all domains (as the definition of the information environment discusses) might be a bridge too far. A retired three-star general recently stated, "Assigning our best thinkers to infuse content into vacuous slogans such as

"information superiority"...is fruitless and wastes valuable resources."

## Who's In Charge?

As I mentioned earlier, main effort designation can be addressed in geographical (area) or functional terms. *In developing the operational concept, planners determine those tasks essential to the accomplishment of the military objectives and assign them to subordinate commanders either as area or functional responsibilities.*

When the main effort is addressed in geographic or functional terms, a commander is responsible for that associated area or function. When designating IO as the main effort, no equivalent authority exists. All functional components possess varying degrees of IO capabilities.<sup>5</sup> So when a commander states in his concept of operations that IO is the main effort for a particular phase of the operation, who is he really talking about? There is no Joint Force Information Component Commander (JFICC). IO is largely a staff function led by a J-39 IO cell chief on the joint force commander's staff. Commander US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) is responsible, per the Unified Command Plan for Fiscal Year 2004, for integrating and coordinating DOD IO that crosses area of responsibility (AOR) boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Who is responsible for coordinating IO within a regional combatant command or joint task force: the IO cell chief - not a commander, but a staff officer. Therefore, if IO is the main effort within the joint operations area, are we really holding a staff officer accountable for executing operational tasks that are the commander's bid for success? The IO cell chief lacks the authorities to execute such a role, plus the preponderance of IO capabilities reside within the functional components vice the joint force headquarters.

## Joint Doctrine - Is IO Really Decisive or is it an Enabler?

While joint doctrine is relatively consistent between JP 5-0 and JP 3-0 in addressing the concept of main effort, there are some distinguishing aspects (most notably in JP 3-0) that beg the question of whether IO is decisive, or if it is just an enabler for other decisive operations. JP 3-0 (revised final draft dated 23 Dec 2005) states:

The JFC may designate one component or line of operation to be the main effort, with others providing support, or the JFC may have a main effort with other components and functions performing operations in their own mission areas. When conditions or plans change, the main effort and focus of the operation might shift to another component or function. Some missions and operations (i.e., strategic attack, interdiction, and IO) continue throughout to deny the enemy sanctuary, freedom of action or informational advantage. These missions and operations, when executed concurrently with other operations, degrade enemy morale and physical cohesion and bring the enemy closer to culmination.<sup>7</sup>

## Potential Solution

Despite the challenges associated with designating IO as the main effort, there are some potential ways to truly operationalize IO as the main effort. One would be to establish a Joint Force Information Component Commander (JFICC). Assuming he had the preponderance of IO assets and capabilities under his operational/tactical control, the JFICC could execute decisive and synchronized information operations as the joint force main effort. This would solve current challenges associated with joint IO capabilities being spread throughout the functional



components. Additionally, this would place the responsibility and authority for execution of the decisive tasks under a commander vice under a staff officer (IO cell chief).

Another potential way to approach IO as the main effort would be to look at it from a traditional fires approach. Typically, a commander designating the main effort will also assign priority of fires as well. If we view IO as a joint force fires capability, a functional commander (JFACC, JFLCC, JFMCC) can be assigned as the main effort, with priority of joint IO fires to the main effort.

Similarly, a functional component commander could be assigned as the joint force main effort with priority of IO effort given to particular essential tasks. By doing this, all functional components would be synchronized in time, space, and purpose throughout all domains (air, land, sea, space, and information). Like essential fire support tasks (EFST), essential IO tasks could be issued as part of the commander's guidance and intent, which would then serve to create unity of effort throughout all domains.

Certainly IO could be assigned as the joint force's main effort for a given phase of an operation. We must consider

some of the challenges this presents to the IO cell chief and the joint force commander. Ideally this article will serve to stimulate further discussion on the topic of IO as the main effort, encourage continued debate, and identify additional solutions.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) -1 Chapter-4.

<sup>2</sup> Publication: JP 5-00.1 *Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning* Chapter: II

Campaign Plan Design Paragraph:  
4 Operational Concept

<sup>3</sup> Joint Publication 3-13 *Information Operations* 13 Feb 2006 pp. I-1

<sup>4</sup> JP 1-02 states Information Superiority is that degree of dominance in the information domain which permits the conduct of operations without effective opposition. JP 3-13 13 Feb 2006 - In Department of Defense (DOD) policy, information superiority is described as the operational advantage gained by the ability to collect, process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same.

<sup>5</sup> Per JP 3-13, IO capabilities are categorized as core, supporting, or related. The core capabilities consist of psychological operations,

electronic warfare, military deception, operations security, and computer network operations. The supporting IO capabilities consist of physical attack, physical security, counter-intelligence, combat camera, and information assurance.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> While JP 3-0 revision final draft is not authoritative until signed, it is telling of the views this joint publication might take concerning assignment of the main effort as it relates to IO. 