



## THE COMMANDER'S INTENT – MYTH OR REALITY WITHIN THE AIR FORCE? –

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*Over the time, spreading the commander's vision at the execution level has required a format as well as a language that could ensure the fluidity of information and their understanding, above all. This has taken shape in the concept that has been coined the "commander's intent", acknowledged as the key element in providing the necessary framework for expressing the freedom of action, playing the important role of strengthening and encouraging the initiative of subordinate commanders during mission accomplishment.*

*Keywords: intent; operations order; staff; operations plan; objectives;*



## CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

The modern operational environment (AAP-06, 2020, p. 94)<sup>1</sup> is an extremely complex, insecure and changing one, in which the commander is forced to deal with both a versatile opponent and multiple variables such as the terrain, weather conditions, staff morale, physical or mental exhaustion or support/lack of support under various forms. Under these conditions, ensuring the *freedom of action* of subordinate commanders can become the necessary and essential condition for the successful conduct of an operation.

Freedom of action means the degree of autonomy entrusted by the commander of the upper echelon, which ensures adaptation to unforeseen environmental situations and to the actions of the opponent. In the military environment, the best way to ensure it is the commander's intent. Directing subordinates involves ensuring not only freedom of action but also the timing and flexibility needed to streamline operations. A commander who does not synchronise the efforts of subordinate structures merely flirts with disaster, and when strengthening flexibility takes place to the detriment of synchronisation, he ensures only a coincidental coordination of missions and tasks.

For example, if a commander limits subordinate commanders in using a certain course of action, it does not matter how many courses of action the adversary has at his disposal, because he will have a significant advantage anyway. But, if the same commander, through his intent, ensures what his subordinates must do, but not by which means, then they will be able to adapt to any subsequent situation. By his intent, the commander ensures "*the freedom to operate in the general context of the mission rather than the restrictions of a concept of operations or of a scheme of manoeuvre*" (*Doctrina Armatei României*, 2012, p. 120).

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*Commanders must have the ability to synchronise events and actions, thus ensuring the decision-making flexibility for subordinate commanders.*

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<sup>1</sup> The *operational environment* is defined as a composite of the conditions, circumstances and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander.



The use of operations planning has shown that one of the important concepts that marks the development of a planning process, and subsequently its execution, is the *commander's intent*. Even if this concept already exists in the national doctrinal provisions, and the planners can define and locate it, reality shows that there still are ambiguities related to its formulation or communication.

At national level, there are no differences regarding the definition or presentation of the concept. *Doctrina planificării operațiilor în Armata României (Doctrine of Planning Operations in the Romanian Armed Forces)* makes a brief description of the concept, and *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor (Operations Planning Manual)* provides both its definition and its identification elements. Moreover, the same definition is found in the *Doctrina Armatei României (Romanian Armed Forces Doctrine)*, as shown in table no. 1.

Table no. 1: Defining the Commander's Intent

Definition	Source
Commander's intent – the general description of how the tactical problem is intended to be solved.	<i>Doctrina planificării operațiilor în Armata României</i> , Statul Major General, București, 2013, p. 105.
The commander's personal expression of what is being carried out and what he wants to accomplish. It is a clear and concise sentence/phrase about the whole mission, which takes a risk and results in an end state. It brings together own troops, enemy and terrain. It must be understood hierarchically at the level of the two echelons below, as it provides a general and formal framework through which subordinate commanders can plan and conduct operations, including when a plan or design is no longer implemented/no longer unfolds or the circumstances require that subordinates should make other decisions, but in support of the last ordered purpose.	<i>Doctrina Armatei României</i> , Statul Major General, București, 2012, p. 155.  <i>Manualul de planificare a operațiilor</i> , Statul Major General, București, 2016, p. 190.

The features of the *commander's intent* are best expressed at national level in the norms of the *Doctrina Armatei României* (*Romanian Armed Forces Doctrine*), as follows:

- It must include a brief presentation of the general purpose of the mission, the desired end state and the essential information on how to achieve the end state.
- It represents the direct expression of the commander's will.
- It must ensure the general framework so that subordinate commanders can fulfil their missions.
- It supports the practice of command and control based on the missions and objectives set by the upper echelon.
- It establishes the end state connected with the factors that influence the fulfilment of the mission: the adversary, the operating environment, the terrain, the forces, the future commitments.
- It predicts the expected results after the operation and how they influence the future operations.
- It must be clear so that subordinate commanders can develop their own plans and orders (ib., pp. 100-105).

At the level of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the specific documents governing the planning of operations address this issue separately. Thus, the COPD<sup>2</sup> presents the commander's intent as being *"the commander's vision for the conduct of the campaign or operation"* (COPD, 2013, pp. 4-52). The same publication emphasises that the foundation of the intent is the personal vision of the commander, expressed in terms of priority, phases, time and space. The intent highlights the nature and purpose of the main actions, leading to the achievement of objectives, without ensuring its format.

In the provisions of the *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, the intent represents the basis for operation design and represents *"the clear and concise expression of what the force must do and the conditions the force must establish to accomplish the mission. It is a succinct, written description of the commander's visualization*



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<sup>2</sup> *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*. At the national level, the COPD provisions of can be found in *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*.



of the entire operation and what the commander wants to accomplish” (AJP-5, 2019, pp. 2-3). In addition, the publication also has an approach to its format in the sense that “a generally accepted construct includes the purpose and objective(s)” (Ibid.).

## INTENT IN PRACTICE

The commander of a structure is fully responsible for the accomplishment of the mission, and the delegation and transfer of command authority to subordinates and their responsibility to act in accordance with its intent are important elements of decentralisation. By using the principle of *centralised command-decentralised execution*<sup>3</sup>, commanders give subordinates freedom of action to act in the spirit of the mission assigned, in situations where it is necessary to exploit favourable opportunities, thus encouraging them *to take initiative* and promoting timely decision-making (*Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, 2016, p. 16).

Intent is an integral part and one of the key elements of this principle and its success is provided only by the *ad litteram* compliance with it. Intent cannot be effective in a military organisation, in which the command and control relations are imprecisely defined or in which, the commander interferes or imposes rules to the decisions-making of subordinate commanders.

The advantages of the commander’s intent are greater in situations where execution is decentralised, because the subordinates’ freedom of action ensures the initiative and even independent actions that lead to the accomplishment of the assigned missions. In fact, the commander’s intent is much more visible at the tactical level than at the operational level, where possible cooperation with civilian organisations also requires the existence of non-military objectives. In this situation, centralisation is needed, which may diminish its importance. Based on these viewpoints, the commander’s intent can be assessed in the light of:

- the level of military art: strategic, operational or tactical;
  - the higher the level is, the greater the importance of intent for reasons of freedom of action is;

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<sup>3</sup> This principle is presented and detailed in *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor* (2016).

- services: land, air, naval or special operations forces;
  - intent is equally important among each service, but it is likely it is more present in the Land Forces, due to the scale in which it acts; however, this does not detract from its importance at the level of the other services;
- the characteristics of the participants in the operation;
  - a feature is the inter-agency coordination, in which case the intent loses a little of its popularity, as we have shown earlier;
- operational environment;
  - a congested and complex operational environment will result in an intent that is well-grounded in reality. This will be of major importance during the unfolding of actions.

However, despite of its importance, the commander's intent is not fully understood and, as a result, its use is more closely linked to the obligation of following a format. There are quite often situations in which the purpose, content and implementation are either misunderstood or misused. The fact that the importance of intent is closely related to the level of command, the missions of the structure and the type of operation or the nature of the operational environment is also misunderstood. Perhaps the main reason for these realities is the insufficient knowledge of the whole concept and the adjacent purpose.

For more experienced commanders, actually setting the intent can be a normal activity during a planning process or it can be time and energy consuming for those with less experience. In support of the less experienced, components or phases have been identified to help develop a balanced and useful product, both for the staff and for subordinate commanders. Thus, in one of the publications, the process of developing the commander's intent comprises four distinctive and perfectly harmonised phases: *formulation, articulation, communication* and *execution* (Vego, 2010, p. 141)<sup>4</sup>.

*Formulation* of the intent must be the responsibility of the commander and the alternative in which the intent/variants of intents are proposed by the staff or the planning group must not be taken into account. No one but the commander should write the intent (Ibid.).



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<sup>4</sup> In other publications, the development of the commander's intent includes: formulation, communication, interpretation and implementation (Shattuck, 2010, p. 70).



*In formulating the intent, commanders must realise very clearly that it will be communicated, in most cases, by completely different means than verbally. In these circumstances, to be able to match the advantage of verbal communication, the written intent must be concise so that it can be quickly read, memorised and remembered.*

In formulating the intent, the commander must take into account the objectives assumed and the state<sup>5</sup> that must be reached after the assigned mission has been fulfilled, the operational environment, the likely actions of the adversary, the phases and stages of the joint operation and the particularities of all participating forces.

Regarding *articulation*, the commander's intent must be formulated in the first-person, singular, using compelling language (Ibid, p. 142). This requires that the terms unequivocally express the commander's decision and are used in accordance with doctrinal provisions. I believe that complex grammatical constructions should be avoided and the articulation should leave no room for interpretation.

Regardless of the echelon or structure, the intent must reflect the commander's personality and tell subordinate commanders WHAT to do (but not HOW to do it) and WHY they should do it. When possible, commanders are welcome to explain the reasoning behind the intent and how they have reached the decision. The explanation of the reasoning helps subordinates understand the state desired by the commander of the higher echelon upon the end of the action or operation and, at the same time, makes them think their own intent in the same way.

Before *communicating* the intent to subordinates, the commander must visualise it quite clearly in his mind, and it is advisable that he/she discusses it with the chief of staff, the planning group or even subordinate commanders (*Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, p. 142).

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<sup>5</sup> Not to be confused with the *desired end state*, which represents the political and/or military situation to be reached at the end of an operation, which indicates that the objective has been achieved. (*Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, p. 196).

The necessary condition for the successful *execution* of the intent is the freedom of action of subordinate commanders (Vego, p. 143). The core of freedom of action implies that a commander does not specify or impose the manner in which subordinates must act. He must formulate and communicate his intent in due time (thus ensuring the time needed to implement it) and make sure that subordinates understood the intent exactly. Subordinate commanders are responsible for determining the way to act, according to the higher echelon commander's intent, so in order to ensure the fulfilment of the mission.

The first three components – *formulation, articulation and communication* – fall under the responsibility of the commander at the higher echelon. Subordinate commanders are responsible for its implementation. It should be noted that, while subordinate commanders have responsibilities in the implementation of the intent, there will be situations in which they must formulate and communicate their own intent to their subordinates, which implies the need to know this concept in detail.

If the first three components are practised during different forms of training (courses, applications, exercises), the *execution* does not benefit from the same optimal training conditions and, possibly, this can only be done in the real conditions of an operation. It should not be overlooked that practising the first three components is also quite difficult, as they are context-based and largely dependent on the experience of the trainers and the personality of the students.

### THE NEED FOR THE CONCEPT AT THE AIR FORCE LEVEL

Centralised control and decentralised execution, the fundamental principle of the Air Force (*Doctrina pentru operații a Forțelor Aeriene*, 2016, p. 16), directs and organises the Air Force's effort wherever necessary, by delegating execution authority to responsible commanders at lower levels. The achievement of this principle cannot be possible without the *commander's intent*, meaning the vision necessary to achieve the unity of effort. At the Air Force level, the *commander's intent* must reflect the personal vision of the tactical



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*The commander's intent provides the general framework for accomplishing the air tasks and missions. Although the situation may change, subordinates who clearly understand the purpose of an operation and act accordingly to achieve it can adapt to the various changes generated by the operating environment with the adequate risk management.*

level commander regarding the way in which the mission will be accomplished (*Manualul de planificare a Forțelor Aeriene*, 2020, p. 30).

Thus, the *commander's intent* provides the general framework for accomplishing the air tasks and missions. Although the situation may change, subordinates who clearly understand the purpose of an operation and act accordingly to achieve it can adapt to the various changes generated by the operating environment with the adequate risk management. In this way, subordinate commanders will be able to fulfil their mission on their own initiative by cooperating with other structures. Thereby, the formulation of requests and approvals for the higher echelon commander is avoided (whose flow of *information-approval-transmission* is time consuming). Thus, the logic of the intent is simple: the higher echelon ensures the freedom of action necessary to carry out the actions while subordinates take action in the spirit of fulfilling the set objectives.

Although the commanders of the various structures within the Air Force have already used a form of sending the intent regarding the mode of action of subordinates, this has never been actually materialised in a proper document. *The elaboration of the decision principles*<sup>6</sup> used to represent the act of command by which a commander expressed his concept on organising the actions of the structure in order to accomplish the received mission. Today it can be assimilated with the *commander's intent*, but the concept may have been introduced into the language and vocabulary of planners with the publication, translation and use of *GOP – Guidelines for Operational Planning*. The subsequent planning manuals took and modified this concept to the form known today.

At the same time, it is possible that frequent changes at national level of the provisions of the main doctrines or manuals or the emergence of new ones, without ensuring their concordance with the contents of the Alliance, have contributed to a dilution of the essence and importance of this concept.

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<sup>6</sup> This term appeared in the regulations specific to the types of weapons representative to the period of the '80s, obsoleted on the date of publication of this paper.

For Air Force structures, the *commander's intent* must be characteristic to the tactical level, in the sense that it must provide the framework for conducting air operations for a well-defined period of time. Since the definition of intent meets the features presented at national level, it is normal and logical, at the same time, that the development of intent should be done at the level of the Air Force by respecting the same phases or components presented above, but with small differences given by doctrinal provisions:

- Regarding the format, at the level of the Air Force it is specified that the intent should include *“both the desired end state and the purpose and can stipulate when, if and how high the risk that the commander is ready to accept should be”* (*Manualul de planificare a Forțelor Aeriene*, 2020, p. 30). At the same time, the intent must indicate the main activities (and their purposes) for achieving the objectives and whether they are carried out simultaneously or sequentially and conclude by connecting the whole operation with the achievement of the objectives and the desired end state (Ibid, pp. 30-31).
- Regarding the place, the *commander's intent* can be found in paragraph 3 of a concept, plan or order of operations (*Tactical Level Commander's Directions*) (Ibid., p. 73), thus ensuring the link between the mission and the concept of the air operation.
- The main points to be taken into account in the development of the intent refer to the knowledge and understanding of the nature of the conflict, of the command-and-control relations specific to the Air Force and the vision of the commander for the use of the available force package.
- Once formulated and communicated, the intent must provide the framework for the development, analysis and comparison of own courses of action. It should be noted that, during the planning process, when developing one's own courses of action, along with the intent, the mission of the structure and the forces available are the same, regardless of the number of courses.

In order to support the planners within the Air Force, *table no. 2* presents the main landmarks that must be taken into account when formulating, articulating, and communicating the *commander's intent*.



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Table no. 2: The Main Elements of the Commander's Intent

COMMANDER'S INTENT	MUST	MUST NOT
	- be formulated by the commander;	- be made available to the commander by the planning group;
	- tell subordinates WHAT to do and not HOW to do it;	- over-detail the tasks of subordinates because they will limit their freedom of action;
	- describe the state that must exist after the assigned mission is accomplished;	- set other objectives than those received from the higher echelon and assumed during mission analysis;
	- be the link between the mission and the concept of operation;	- represent a summary of the conception of operation;
	- be concise and clear;	- be a narrative description of the commander's vision of the action;
	- provide the framework for the expression of freedom of action.	- impose actions or missions.

*Commander's intent is the effect of what a commander wants to see after completing an assigned mission. In a system based on mission command and control, ensuring intent is the primary responsibility of the commander and an essential means of leading the structure.*

## CONCLUSIONS

Military art and science and, logically, the balance between them in planning operations have always been discussed. Going further, the same approach can be applied to the *commander's intent*, in the sense that art is the commander's ability to materialise the vision and science is the ability to transmit that pieces of information so as to ensure the smooth execution of the operation.

Commander's intent is a long-standing concept whose effectiveness has been proven over time. In essence, it is the effect of what a commander wants to see after completing an assigned mission. In a system based on mission command and control, ensuring intent is the primary responsibility of the commander and an essential means of leading the structure.

Practice has shown that the commander's intent is, in fact, a comprehensive view on operations and must provide the logical path that allows each subordinate to act so as to accomplish the mission, while maintaining support relations with other commanders. Understanding the commander's intent ensures the initiative of subordinates, in harmony with the commander's vision. If the events

are not unfolding according to the forecast or the assigned tasks cannot be carried out with the current developments, the intent has the role of ensuring the necessary continuity for mission accomplishment.



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