



## THEORIES, MODELS AND CONCEPTS OF MISSION COMMAND

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*This approach proposes an introspection within the existing theories and models that address the concept of Mission Command (MC) to identify the place and role within the operational art, capturing the essence of the concept by examining its emergence, development and applicability. The evolution of the risks and threats to the current security environment determines a conceptual adaptation regarding the approach of the mission command, starting from the basic principles of the concept and up to the ways of its application.*

*The mission command concept embodies a command-and-control philosophy that is based on mutual trust between commanders at different command levels. In this approach, we start from the premise that the essence of this concept has not only theoretical but also practical significance, related to the technological evolution, the doctrinal knowledge, the general strategy, elements that define the conduct of modern armed forces.*

*The first objective is oriented towards identifying the particularities of the concept from its emergence to its applicability, in relation to the principles underlying it and from the perspective of existing theories and concepts. The second objective is to identify command and control models and mission command perspectives within the theoretical approaches to these concepts.*

*The result of the endeavour will be able to predict that the concept of Mission Command can be imposed as a basic doctrine, representing a flexible and decentralized approach to the conduct of military actions at any level of military art.*

*Keywords: mission command; control; leadership; auftragstaktik; indirect approach;*



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to identify the place and role of the *Mission Command/MC* concept within the operational art, through considering existing theories and models, capturing the essence of the concept by examining its emergence, evolution and applicability.

Beyond the concept it represents, *Mission Command* means adopting mission-focused/tailored action decisions that today define a battlefield command model. While it can be suggested that this is a concept applicable only at the tactical level, the usefulness of application at the strategic level will be highlighted by identifying both the role and the influence it can have on the fulfilment of the mission at the operational or tactical level.

The concept has its modern origin in Prussian doctrine, but it can be said that the vein of its application is found in the first writings of the military strategy approach<sup>1</sup>, within the *Art of War* (Sun Tzu, 2012) and within the current principles (DAR, 2012, p. 21)<sup>2</sup> of the use of armed forces in military actions, today the concept representing the essence of the application of modern operational art through concrete actions.

The *mission command* concept consists of centralized command exerted from the central level and decentralized execution based on decision in the battlefield, speed of reaction, freedom of action, initiative and efficiency. In all these cases, information is the basic pillar in the analysis of the existing situation observed by the battlefield commander, in relation to the desired situation provided in the intention of the higher commander.

The evolution of the risks and threats to the current security environment determines a conceptual adaptation regarding the approach to the *mission command*, starting from the basic principles of the concept and up to the ways of its application.

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<sup>1</sup> See Helmuth von Moltke Sr. (1800-1891); Otto von Moser (1860-1931). *Ausbildung und Führung des Bataillons, des Regiments und der Brigade. Gedanken und Vorschläge.* Mittler-Verlag. Berlin 1914; Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (1956-2012). *Tratat de strategie*, vol. I, 2006, București: Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare. (A.N.)

<sup>2</sup> Initiative, surprise, morale keeping (A.N.)



The *mission command* concept embodies a command-and-control philosophy that is based on mutual trust between commanders at different command levels. In this philosophy, as well as from the point of view of modern operational art, the mission command is materialized by the independent execution of the orders by the lower echelon commander, an action that is based on a common understanding of the higher commander's intention. Thus, the concept is used to empower subordinate commanders to make decisions and act by applying the principles of actionable leadership without going outside the legal framework of the mission received.

The essence of this concept encompasses not only a theoretical meaning but also a practical one, related to technological evolution and doctrinal knowledge, to the general strategy, elements that define the conduct of the modern armed forces.

The first objective of this article is oriented towards identifying the particularities of the concept from its emergence to its applicability, in relation to the principles underlying it and from the perspective of existing theories and concepts. The second objective is to identify command and control models and the *mission command* perspective within the theoretical approaches to these concepts.

It can be foreseen that this concept can impose itself as a basic doctrine in the spectrum of modern leadership application models, representing a flexible and decentralized approach to the leadership of military actions at any level of military art. Thus, at the strategic level, the concept embraces a specific philosophy that has its essence in the school of thought of the current military leaders and is based on a specific national culture, aligned with the Euro-Atlantic allied commitments.

### MISSION COMMAND – BETWEEN EMERGENCE AND APPLICABILITY

From the early stage of expressing this concept, it can be seen that the flexibility and adaptability of actions on the battlefield are characteristics of the mission command philosophy. Sun Tzu presented, in his work, the role of the lower-level commander to make decisions adapted to the situation in the battlefield, depending on the reaction of the enemy, *“success in warfare is gained by carefully accommodating*

*ourselves to the enemy's purpose”* (Sun Tzu, ib., p. 49). It can thus be pointed out that, beyond the existence of the concept, its essence has been captured since the beginnings of military art.

The evolution of the concept was marked by the evolution of military art through the scientific footprint inherited from Helmuth von Moltke, Carl von Clausewitz, Antoine Henri Jomini, Otto von Moser, Hervé Coutau Bégarie etc.

The concept was used at an early stage in the form of mission orders by the Prussian army under the name *“Auftragstaktik”* (Gunther, 2012). Subsequently, the concept was adopted and applied by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke Sr. who predicted that a lower-level commander must know the purpose and desired end state of an operation. These two elements represented two determining components of the upper-level commander's intention. Moltke suggested that between the purpose and the end state there are certain conditions to be fulfilled, which a commander must fulfil by any means and by adapted, intuitive and applicable decisions (ib., p. 8).

The *“Blitzkrieg”* concept (Frieser, 2010) is the obvious result of the practical evolution of the *“Auftragstaktik”* concept, the latter being successfully applied by Germany during the Second World War when tactical-level commanders were granted the autonomy of action to respond effectively to the volatility of the conditions in the battlefield. Subsequently, this freedom of action of commanders was restricted by decisions at the strategic level, which led to multiple defeats of Nazi Germany (Deighton, 1981). The concept of *“Auftragstaktik”* has attracted the attention of theorists in the US Army being intensively studied, so that in the American doctrine (FM 100 5 Operations, 1986; 1993; Joint Doctrine, 2007), under the concept of *Mission Orders*, certain specific characteristics can be identified that today define the concept of *Mission Command*, namely actionable intensity, flexibility and confidence in the initiative of commanders, decision speed, clearly defined objectives, effort concentration.

The modern concept of *Mission Command* [AJP 01(D) Allied Joint Doctrine, 2010] is found for the first time in AJP 01(D) Allied Joint Doctrine, 2010 edition, summing up principles such as *“freedom of action, efficiency, opportunity”* (ib., p. 6 3). In 2012, in ADP 6-0 (Army Doctrine Publication), the *mission command* concept summed up confidence in the self and in subordinates, mutual understanding,



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the commander’s intention, clear mission orders, initiative, discipline, accepted risks. These are characteristics of the mission command that are stipulated in the documents as principles, as follows: “*Competence, Mutual trust, Shared understanding, Commander’s intent, Mission orders, Disciplined initiative, Risk acceptance*” (ADP 6-0 Mission Command, HQ Dept. of Army, p. 2). The 2017 version of AJP 01(D) Allied Joint Doctrine introduces principles such as initiative, speed of action, in relation to the intention of the higher commander and the tasks received by action order.

The influence of modern operational art is felt in AJP 01(F) Allied Joint Doctrine, 2022 edition, the essence of the *mission command* concept being the compliance with the intention of the higher commander and the fulfilment of the tasks by any means, as the “*commander’s primary responsibility*” [AJP 01(F) Allied Joint Doctrine, NSO, 2022, p. 84]. In this manual, the concept can be identified as follows: *mission command “shapes the command styles, attitudes and behaviours of commanders and subordinates. It is based on empowered leadership, which enables decisions to be made by those best placed to make them, exploiting opportunities that emerge from competition. Mission command offers a significant advantage when applied correctly, enabling the joint force to overcome a rival in the most chaotic and demanding circumstances by maximizing initiative to seize opportunities”* (Ib.).

Summing up these defining elements of the concept, it can be formulated that, in a modernist sense, the essence of the *mission command* is based on modelling, command style, attitudes and skills, leadership, initiative, opportunity, and the list of principles can continue. However, to outline the overall picture, further we will consider some theoretical approaches to the concept of *mission command* from its emergence to modern times.

### THEORIES AND APPROACHES TO THE MISSION COMMAND CONCEPT IN MILITARY STRATEGIC THINKING

Sun Tzu, in his masterpiece *The Art of War* (2023), emphasizes the flexibility, adaptability and wise use of initiative in military actions. Even if we do not find the *mission command* concept explicitly stipulated and defined as such, Sun Tzu’s approach, by promoting these principles, promotes a similar philosophy, highlighting

how important is the freedom of action of the lower-level commanders on the battlefield in achieving victory and establishing the outcome of the battle. Sun Tzu emphasizes the role of information, surprise and adaptability, these principles being part of the essence of the *mission command* concept.

Carl von Clausewitz, in his work *On War* (1932), highlights some perspectives that can be interpreted in terms of *mission command* principles. It emphasizes the freedom that provides certainty regarding the morale of the troops in conditions of uncertainty related to the evolution of the unpredictable situation on the battlefield compared to the dynamics and complexity of the conflict, elements of the presented concept.

Antoine Henri Jomini, a theoretician of the art of war, had his own perspective on what military strategy means. His approach can be also analysed through the prism of the mission command concept. Jomini stressed the importance of the lines of operations, which force the commanders to focus on the decisive conditions of an operation and to have the initiative to choose exactly the decisive point, corresponding to culmination of the battle, which can be seen as the freedom of action promoted by the *mission command*. It should not be overlooked that Jomini promoted a very well-defined command structure where freedom of decision could be oppressed at any time.

Helmuth von Moltke, a coordinator of the application of the *Auftragstaktik* concept in the Prussian army, foresaw that it was hard to predict all the variables on the battlefield. He promoted the need for a degree of autonomy in decision-making by subordinate commanders, which can be associated with the essence of the *mission command* concept.

Tayer Alfred Mahan, even if concerned with the importance of controlling the seas and the projection of American naval power on the seas and oceans of the world, also touched, along with the naval strategy, elements of command and control of forces, direct conduct of forces, their mobility, autonomy of command, initiative etc. In this context, Mahan stressed the importance of giving ship and fleet commanders the freedom to exploit opportunities in accordance with the mission objectives set by the higher commander (Mahan, 1890).

John Boyd, author of the OODA Loop (*Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action*) concept, offered a model of short-term decision-making



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adaptable to the dynamics of military action to gain a tactical advantage over the adversary. Boyd promoted adaptability, initiative and the ability to make quick and effective decisions by supporting the decentralization of conducting forces, aspects that also converge towards the philosophy of *mission command*.

Julian Corbett, as a military strategist, captured the principles of the *mission command* concept in a wider context, especially in terms of encouraging coordination and adaptability of forces to the dynamics of actions in the theatre of maritime operations. He was adept at the complementarity of land and naval forces at the seaside, demonstrating an overall vision of centralized leadership. Being a supporter of strategic flexibility, Corbett became the first supporter of freedom of action promoted from the strategic, political and military levels (Corbett, 1911).

Basil Liddell Hart (2022) was a military historian and theorist who developed the concept of *indirect approach* in the dialectic of the art of war compared to the *direct approach* concept stating that "in strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home. A direct approach to the object exhausts the attacker and hardens the resistance by compression, where as an indirect approach loosens the defender's hold by upsetting his balance" (Liddell Hart, 1991). In essence, *indirect approach* and *mission command* share the principle that success in operations is not always based on direct confrontation and brute force, but on the agility, innovation and ability to exploit the opponent's weaknesses. Liddell Hart advocated a leadership that allows great freedom of manoeuvre and initiative, aspects that are fundamental in *mission command*.

Colin S. Gray<sup>3</sup>, in his professional training as a contemporary security and strategy theorist, highlighted the complexity of modern conflicts and promoted the permanent adaptation of military doctrines to the current realities. Even if he did not explicitly address the concept of *mission command* at the level of his perspective as a strategist, he emphasized the importance of flexibility, adaptive strategic thinking

<sup>3</sup> Colin S. Gray, (1943-2020), Professor of International Relations and Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, UK, was an advisor on defence issues in the US and UK governments. Author of the works: *Modern Strategy* (1999), *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (2006), (A.N.).

and organizational culture while supporting innovation and initiative at the lower-level echelons through promotion at the strategic level. This approach affirmatively calls for the promotion of the dynamic and responsive approach in operational and tactical military leadership styles.

The result of the analysis of the theoretical approach, directly or indirectly, in the main works that develop or capture the *mission command* concept in its evolution, reveals that it has reached a maturity that captures all facets of the command-and-control tool of a military leader at any level of military art. However, the essence it embodies at each strategic, operational and tactical level is the subject of a separate study generated by the very complexity of the ways of using this command-and-control tool.

### MISSION COMMAND – A MODEL OF COMMAND AND CONTROL

In order to determine the command-and-control characteristic of the *mission command* and to identify an optimal model to use it as an established conduct tool, some existing command and control models in the military domain will be analysed in comparison with management models in the civilian field of leadership in order to capture certain advantages and limitations of the concept. Command and control models such as authoritative, participatory or delegative command will be considered [direct/authoritarian command, control-based command, detailed command vs. management by objectives (MbO) (*Sisteme, metode și tehnici de management*, 2015, p. 630) and management by delegation (MbD) (Ib., p. 64)].

Direct/authoritative command is a type of command and control in which the commander directly orders the tasks, objectives and the manner of execution of the mission without consulting subordinates. They are less involved in the decision-making process and have the role of executing the orders received exactly. Deviations are not allowed, the effect being a rigid organizational structure, a demoralizing and demotivating work environment. Such a model limits the innovation and performance of subordinates. With all these disadvantages, the model lends itself to being used at the lower tactical level of command, at the execution structures of team level, detachments etc.



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Control-based command is an authoritative command model similar to the previous one, but which involves strict monitoring and control over the activities performed by subordinates. The commander controls the execution of tasks and objectives, pursues the fulfilment of decisive conditions and creation of effects. Its decisions are made centrally, based on reports and information updates received from subordinates. Decisions are based on pre-established projects, plans or procedures where innovation, initiative, adaptation to unforeseen events do not take place. Despite the disadvantages, this model is sometimes suitable for use at the higher tactical command level, respectively at the level of battalion, regiments etc.

Detailed command is characterized by principles such as centralized control, specific and detailed orders, rigorous coordination, efficient and accurate communication, synchronization etc. Under this model, decisions are made at higher levels of command and are passed on to subordinates in the form of detailed orders. The main characteristics of this type of command can be detailed planning, efficient and accurate communication, supervision, monitoring etc. This approach ensures the transmission of all command-and-control elements established through an operational design so that all phases of an operation are strictly coordinated and aligned with its objectives and in accordance with the intention of the higher-level echelon.

The detailed command is mainly used in situations where the risks are high and the effects of the action are of great importance. Such a model can be found at the operational and strategic level, especially in operations involving inter-agency coordination. A specific field of application is that of logistics because logistics support operations are complex, so a deviation from the plan can have significant undesirable effects.

By comparison, the *mission command* style offers more flexibility and speed in response while previous models offer tighter control and precision. The choice between these models depends on the nature of the mission, the operational environment and the degree of risk accepted by the commander.

At the same time, there are similarities between *mission command* and other concepts in the civilian field of leadership that value flexibility and adaptability, such as management by objectives (essentially participatory) and management by delegation. These approaches

recognize the importance of setting clear objectives but allow team members to find the best ways to achieve those objectives.

The essential peculiarity of *mission command* is that this concept is deeply rooted in the military field. The need to increase trust and initiative in situations of uncertainty and high risk that higher commanders must grant to lower-level commanders can be observed: “Commanders who delegate authority to subordinate commanders need to state clearly their intentions, freedoms and constraints, designate the objectives to be achieved and provide sufficient forces, resources and authority, required to accomplish their assigned tasks” (COPD, v 3.0, 1.10, pp. 1-12).

## CONCLUSIONS

In general, the evolution of the *mission command* concept reflects a paradigmatic adaptation influenced by the strategic direction, the operational thinking and the evolution of the tactical situation moving from a centralized and hierarchical model to one that highlights adaptability, innovation and accountability at all three levels of military art.

It can be accepted that *Auftragstaktik*, the Prussian concept, is the precursor of the concept of *mission command* in its original form, and with the development of operational art, it has reached a level of coagulation that covers a wide range of principles and peculiarities, keeping the essence of the concept.

The new conceptual approach to *mission command* arose as a reaction to the rigidity and limitations of traditional command and control systems characterized by a manifest inhibition of individual initiative and a lack of freedom of decision, including inadequacy to the battlefield situation.

Today, we can speak of a reality favourable to the manifestation of a modern concept adapted to the principles of operational art, technological evolution, dynamic characteristics of the battlefield, as well as to training and leadership of the command act.

At the strategic level, the *mission command* provides an appropriate framework to promote the agility and adaptability of the decision-making process at the military level and the formulation of directives in the spirit of encouraging creativity based on the experience and critical thinking of the operational-level commander. This approach



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The “mission command” represents the foundation of the operational art through realistic adaptive approaches to the management of the combat forces, in relation to the evolution of the security environment, with the existing risks and threats, so that, from the military conduct point of view, the philosophy of the concept responds to the needs and challenges of the future war.

facilitates the development of command-and-control culture, the personal development of leaders thus increasing the self-confidence of commanders.

At the operational level, the *mission command* promotes flexible and adaptable ideas to the security environment and the dynamics of operations, is based on the sense of cohesion and provides a high degree of dignity to the commanded commanders and forces.

At the tactical level, the *mission command* promotes decision-making autonomy in relation to the information flow and the dynamics of military actions, encourages the initiative on the battlefield in order to achieve the objectives at the operational level by fulfilling the tasks of the mission at the tactical level.

The result of the analysis of the conceptual content of the *mission command* highlights that it combines flexibility, adaptability, initiative and understanding, giving higher commanders the opportunity to invest confidence and empower inferior commanders to maintain strategic direction, perform tasks and achieve the overall objectives of the mission by producing action-friendly effects.

From the point of view of execution and in relation to the command and control of the action, the *mission command* essentially means centralized conduct and decentralized execution. It can be mentioned that the modern approach to the concept contrasts with traditional leadership styles, such as centralized command and control, where decisions are made by the higher-level echelons, structured and transmitted rigidly, thus limiting the ability of the lower commanders to respond quickly to changes in the area of operations.

Today, the *mission command* represents the foundation of the operational art through realistic adaptive approaches to the management of the combat forces, in relation to the evolution of the security environment, with the existing risks and threats, so that, from the military conduct point of view, the philosophy of the concept responds to the needs and challenges of the future war.

The promotion of this concept is a permanent concern requiring a doctrinal adaptation, from the conceptual point of view, and the promotion of a flexible, adaptable and efficient approach in the management of military operations, from the actional point of view.

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