

New junctions of command

An interview with Captain Drs CL Turnhout (RNLN)

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Introduction

Due to financial constraints, armed forces are being down-sized, and due to the need for joint operations the organizational structure of the Dutch Armed Forces has changed drastically. Policy-making has been centralized. Navy, Army and Air Force are brought under one command and support has been concentrated. The services have been confronted by major changes and suffered a loss of autonomy. Services do not make policy anymore in their domain and their commanders in chief are history. Their wings are clipped even further because, from now on, acquisition and maintenance of equipment are concentrated for all services. Fifteen years ago, the idea was to decentralize authority and responsibility, because decision making and accountability at the work floor level was considered best suited to reality and the best incentive for effective and efficient organizational results. Now, we see authority and responsibility went up the chain of command again. According to theory, less responsibility means less motivation. The questions we would like to ask are as follows. Are the commanders of the services less motivated because of the new junctions of command? Are they annoyed not to decide on all aspects of the service they used to command? Is the separation between policy and implementation in reality the same as in theory? The main question is: how are the new junctions of command influencing the commanders' working life.

What is your relationship with the subject?

I was involved in shaping and implementing the new structure of command for the Navy. So I am aware of the consequences this new structure has, especially from an organizational and managerial point of view. The most striking change, in my opinion, was the strict division in the operational domain between supervision of the Commander of the Armed Forces and the executive responsibility of the operational commanders. In the former constellation the commanders in chief possessed the integral responsibility for the operational outcome of their service, including the management of personnel,

material and financial means. In the new situation the operational commanders are responsible for the operational readiness of the assigned assets, but are heavily relying on other authorities for the timely and sufficiently availability of the means. Also the supervising Commander of the Armed Forces within the corporate decision-making has to share the responsibilities for personnel, equipment and finance with other functional policy directorates.

Is the separation between policy and execution in reality the same as it is written on paper?

On paper, they made a clear separation between the Central staff, the Operational commands and the Shared Services, including the Defense Material Organization. This would shape the organization more effectively and would clarify the responsibilities.

It is a challenge to introduce such major changes, especially in an organization such as the armed forces. The key players are still tuning their place, responsibilities and mandates in the new structure. Central Staff has to learn to play the game and to combine all different aspect of operations, materiel, personnel and finance. Functional processes and goals have to be synchronized to make integral decisions. Some parts still need an improved fulfillment.

Do you expect this model to persist or are there shortcomings, through which modifications are required?

According to the new structure, the commanders of the Navy, the Army and the Air Force are responsible for achievement of their goals set by the Central Staff. In order to do so, they should be able to re-allocate their means. They should have the possibility to re-arrange their finances and to re-distribute their funds between exercises, training, education, maintenance and other support. This is only possible, if they are allowed to prioritize. This, however, until now is not fully possible, because only part of the finances are controlled by them. Other players, like the Defense Materiel Organization, are in charge of the budget for maintenance and they can change their priorities until the last moment. The introduction of a new client-server accounting system proves to be difficult. That is why not everybody is convinced yet.

Are the new junctions of command topic of conversation in the Defense organization?

The Navy implemented the new model totally, by a complete redesign of its processes and organization. All elements of the Navy are involved in the change-process. The fleet and the marines are integrated both operationally and managerially. This is, in accordance with the new philosophy of the model of command where maritime forces have to fulfill a more profound role in support of land operations. As a consequence of this complete business redesign the processes, connecting points and functionality of the Navy is fully tailored on the architecture of the new business model for the Netherlands Defense organization. The reorganization of the other commands has been less drastically. I expect the other elements of the armed will also follow to make further steps in adjusting their organizational set up to the new situation.

If theory proves right, by now, commanders should be less motivated to do their job due to the new structure. Policy-making and supervision are not a commander's responsibility anymore. Is the decrease of motivation really a problem according to you?

The new model of command fits is suited to joint and expeditionary operations, which are relatively new. During the Cold War, the "theatres" of the Army, Air Force and Navy were separated, also outside NATO areas. Because the "theatres" of the services are becoming more and more common, the services increasingly will have to work together. During the same period that joint operations appeared necessary, the budget has been decreased, which had to be countered by more efficiency. These two factors together inspired the drastic changes. Allocation of money and prioritizing of investments is easier when the artificial divisions between the armed forces as far as policy is concerned are removed. The budgetary decrease was countered by concentrating support functions and by integrating the formerly separated policy staffs.

We are, by the way, not the only country where armed forces are being reorganized. This is an undeniable trend within NATO member states. So, everybody in the armed forces will understand this change is a logical one.

If the new model of command would be implemented completely and according to the stated objectives, I still see a challenging and therefore motivating responsibility for the operational commanders to ensure the operational readiness of there assigned assets. This however requires that responsibilities and mandates are tuned in accordance with the original intention of the business model. Once the operational commanders will have access to the required levers of control motivation would not be a great problem.

The new setup calls for teamwork and teamwork always is a motivating enterprise.

What is your own experience regarding the implementation of the new model of command?

I believe it is a good model that will definitely be effective for the organization, but I do have my doubts about the new model's implementation. This is because the new model is not yet as operational as it should be and it is still in development. I expect that the model stays the way it is now, although the way it is implemented will always be a point of debate. Like in every large and complex organization teamwork is not always a nature of law but it requires the right distribution of responsibilities, mandates and instruments. This is the big challenge that I see for further implementation and improvement of the new defense organization.

Are the operational commanders still thinking long term, since they are mainly concerned with the short-term realization and are no more involved with policy development?

Central Staff focuses mostly on long-term policy but the operational commanders do have an advisory function and each operational commander has his own staff for managerial support and advice. This staff is engaged in the development, priorities and discussions.

To what extent does current policy conflict with the capacities and opportunities of the operational units and how are possible imperfections being solved?

An important aspect of the model is that the operational commanders are positioned directly under the Commander of the Armed Forces. This means, the latter has an important integrating role. He must be able to unambiguously preside over them. The decision-making has to be in line with financial, personnel and materiel considerations. This is a huge challenge, especially when new crisis response operations are started. The operational commanders have to guarantee these operations are possible. The operations need to be feasible in terms of materiel, personnel and finance. Decisions have to be made about the priorities, because such operations mean other things have to give way. All key-players have different interests, when allocation of resources is concerned.

That is why, on behalf of the operational commanders, the Commander of the Armed Forces has an important role to play. This fact is just dawning upon us.”

Do you believe the new model of command has a positive/negative influence on our organization?

I believe that the new model will be beneficial to the organization. It was clear that some changes were needed, mainly because of the new joint and expeditionary operations and by the shortage of finances. By cutting down the expenses and increasing efficiency, we are on the right track, but definitive checks and balances have to be made in the near future. The direction we are heading for is the right one. Attention should be paid to tools required by the new model. The communication between Central Staff and Operational Commanders is the aorta of the new model. This aorta should be kept open and treated with respect. Demand and supply of means for the commands and prioritizing are essential elements in the model. These elements still need more attention; otherwise the new model of command will fail. Also, an unambiguous policy is needed to improve the transparency of financial flows.