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翻译

TRANSLATIONS

**Mission Command
Is Not The Antidote**



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Mission Command is Not the Antidote¹

Cui Yiliang²

“Mission command” (*renwushi zhihui*) has become a buzzword across all branches of the U.S. military. The concept came into being in the early 19th century, borne from Prussian military experience, and became a treasured concept in Prussian/German military doctrine. Simply put, mission command is the delegation of decision-making power. The reason for delegating or subordinating decision-making is because, when compared with higher echelon command, front-line units often have better situational awareness of their given area, and delegation of decision-making authority can allow them to fully utilize this cognitive advantage and seize the time-critical battle initiative.

The important reason this concept is so valued by the U.S. military is that the U.S. military believes conditions for undegraded, unthreatened communications will not exist in a future great power conflict scenario, and mission command will be critical to create operational advantage for U.S. forces. In an information degraded environment, it will be difficult to maintain centralized command, and mission command can serve as a kind of antidote under these conditions. For example, the U.S. Air Force’s Agile Combat Employment operational concept emphasizes the widespread promotion of mission command. Similar calls exist widely in the U.S. Navy.

However, at least in the realm of naval warfare, mission command apparently cannot serve as the antidote for countering degraded communications.

First, the most granular tactical decision-making unit in the naval theater is the single ship, which, during combat, will often become part of a ship formation. The most powerful combat formation in the U.S. Navy is the Carrier Strike Group (CSG), but even a CSG is only comprised of approximately seven vessels, and the relatively small formation size dictates a flatter command structure. Mission command affords advantages on land battlefields by compressing the levels of command, but in naval theaters the command levels are already flatter by nature.

Moreover, due to the limited platforms and the difficulty of establishing sufficient forces in reserve, decentralized command of naval forces must withstand much greater pressure than

¹ 崔轶亮 [Cui Yiliang], 任务式指挥不是解药 [“Mission Command is Not the Antidote”], 现代舰船 [Modern Ships], no. 3 (March 2024), p. 15.

² Cui Yiliang (崔轶亮) is the editor in chief of *Modern Ships*, a monthly naval magazine published by a research arm of China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC). Aside from overseeing production of the magazine, Cui has participated in internal research projects, including on naval operational concepts and tactics.

decentralized command on land. Specifically, this is because the loss of any naval platform may severely impact combat effectiveness without the ability for rapid force replenishment. When there exists such a significant gap in shipbuilding capacity vis-à-vis one's main adversary, the determination to employ mission command becomes even less certain.

Second, mission command is not a new concept for naval forces, as the nature of naval warfare is inherently decentralized and distributed. Since the 1980s, the U.S. Navy has promoted combined warfare doctrine, which delegated decision making authority by domain, and adopted operational command by negation. Therefore, existing combined warfare doctrine already incorporates the concept of mission command.

Third, in modern naval warfare, the lowest-level decision-making authority has the problem of “long fists but short field of vision” (*quanchang yanduan*), with the quality and scope of its situational awareness likely inferior to that of higher echelon command. This is because the latter often has more means and options for communication.

Fourth, mission command emphasizes the need for upper and lower echelons to reach consensus on intent. Due to the powerful and comprehensive combat capabilities of naval warships, they can often achieve strategic effects (when attacking strategic targets); therefore, targeting decisions for many types of targets in naval warfare require authorization from the highest-level authorities (such as the Secretary/Minister of Defense or the President). When a single naval vessel exercises mission command, the captain will not only need to reach consensus with higher echelon command on operational intent, but s/he will also need to reach consensus with the commander in chief on strategic intent, and this is clearly not possible.

Therefore, at least in the realm of naval warfare, mission command is clearly not the antidote.