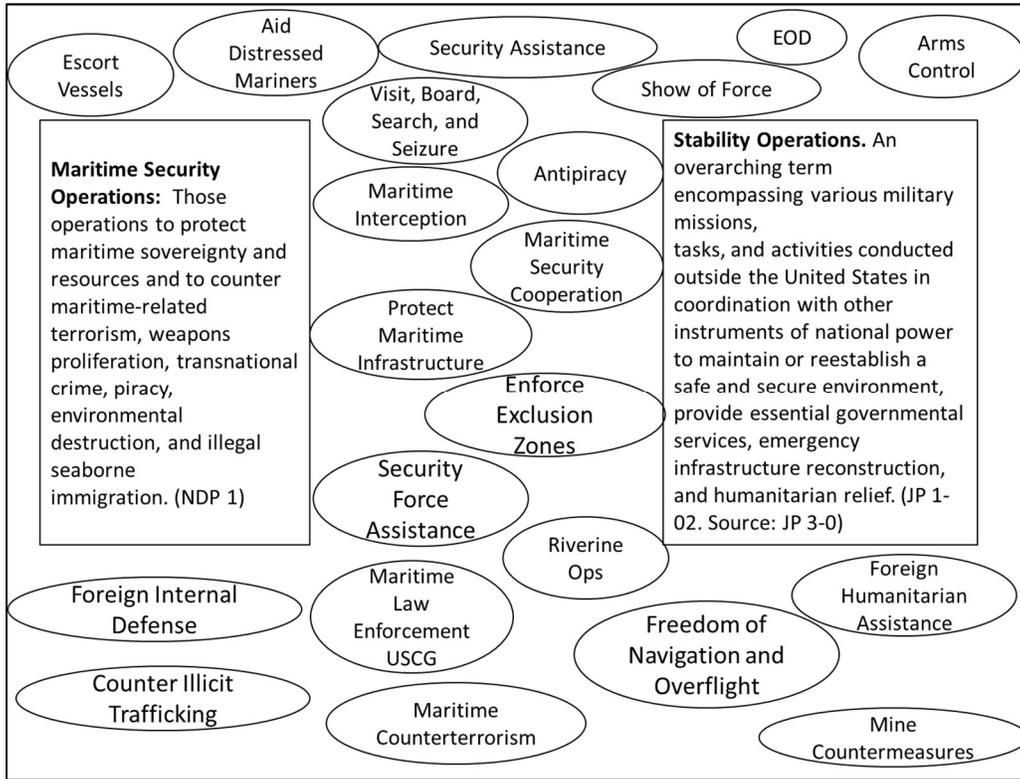


DISCERNING AMBIGUOUS TERMS IN THE CONTEXT OF PLANNING

By Kevin McKinley



In the arena of operational planning, there are frequent discussions amongst Navy planners and those that teach the Navy Planning Process about the importance of clarifying ambiguous tasks from a broad to a more focused perspective in the context of developing subordinate tasks. Understanding this perspective and being adept at how to translate tasks is an important skill an operational staff must possess.

There are a number of questions that should come to mind when reviewing operational tasks from higher authorities. Is mission command that provides the mission statement, intent, and concept of operation enough to provide purpose and direction to subordinate commands? At what point can subordinate initiative be stifled by providing too narrow a focus of tasks to them? What is the level of trust for each subordinate commander? Does the delegation of operational control (OPCON) influence the focus and verbiage of the task? How do authorities and permissions influence the task? Does the focus of the task incur more or less implied risk?

Let's use "conduct maritime security operations" to illustrate these thoughts: Naval Doctrinal Publication 1, Naval Warfare, describes Maritime Security Operations (MSO) in this way:

"Maritime security includes a *collection of tasks* that are derived from agreed-upon international law. *Maritime security operations are those operations conducted to assist in establishing the conditions for security and protection of sovereignty in the maritime domain.* Examples of MSO include missions to counter maritime-related terrorism, weapons proliferation, transnational crime, piracy, environmental destruction, and illegal seaborne immigration. These tasks include assisting mariners in distress, participating in security cooperation operations with allies and partners, sharing situational awareness, and conducting maritime interception and law enforcement operations. MSO involve close coordination among governments, the private sector, international organizations, and NGOs".

It is easy to discern that, as a maritime component commander (combined or joint - C/JFMCC), being assigned a task like this from higher headquarters (HHQ) leaves us flexibility and initiative to interpret what that means after reviewing all the purpose and direction being given to us from the Joint Force Command (JFC) in context. The analysis of the HHQ mission, commander's intent, objectives (for applicable phases), the authorities given to us, the concept of operation and how we fit into that concept all combine to interpret that task and leave us room to take the initiative as to how to plan for it. Do we want to do the same for our subordinates as well? It depends.

An aspect to consider is the level of trust that commander has in subordinate task force (TF) commanders. What is the size of the TF staff? Is it a standing task force or was it just established for the particular crisis? Does the commander have the requisite experience to interpret purpose and direction similar to what the C/JFMCC received? The answer may be a "yes", yet there still may be reservations as to what the focus of tasks should be that the command assigned to that force.

Another aspect to consider may be the level of authority the commander gives to the TF commander. OPCON? When OPCON is delegated, that may signal a level of trust that results in tasks assigned to conduct MSO in broader terms at the TF level. How broad are the capabilities within the task force? In preferred cases, the TF commander is able to retain the initiative and

flexibility to interpret tasks with regard to purpose and direction from C/ JFMCC. What are the risks for providing a too broadly stated task to the task force?

A facet to consider may be what level of authority to retain. Holding authorities at higher levels may signal the need for more focused tasks to subordinate commanders with clear guidance and intent.

Something else to consider is why the maritime component is conducting MSO. If the purpose is broad in nature, for example, to “demonstrate US resolve”, then a broader task may more suitable as opposed to a more narrowly specified tasks such as “suppressing pirates within a country’s waters”.

Another point of view to consider is the phase in which we are conducting “MSO like” operations. In one type of phased operation, phases I (deter) and IV (stabilize) may involve broader tasks to cover broad purposes and conditions whereas phases II (seize initiative) and III (dominate) may require more specific purposes that require more narrowly specified tasks. Is this a conventional operation or a stability operation? One may require more specific direction than the other in some cases.

So there may not be a “one size fits all” answer to the question of how a C/JFMCC takes broad tasks received from a higher directive down to specific tasks for their subordinates. Understanding the HHQ purpose and direction and applying operational art can assist in deciding the degree of detail to include in the task assigned to subordinates.

Let’s consider another potential ambiguous task to “conduct maritime stability operations”. Consider the same aspects as applied above to MSO and ask those same questions to determine the best approach. At the maritime component command level, this may very well be a suitably phrased task, but at the tactical level, it begs refinement for focus. Naval War Publication (NWP) 3-07, Maritime Stability Operations, can provide a framework to gain insight into what tasks are most appropriate to the situation and apply them to the aims of the operation.

The DOD dictionary defines stability operations as:

“An overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.”

To complicate things a bit, there are steady state maritime stability operations as well as crisis response maritime stability operations. Maritime stability operations can occur across the range of operations, so that implies that there are both combat and non-combat uses for these type of operations. To come full circle on this, the NWP 3-07 specifies that “naval forces’ *primary contribution to stability operations is the provision of maritime security* associated with protecting populations and maritime resources, while strengthening governance in ways that promote economic and political progress”.

The ability to fully discern tasks is not to be taken lightly during planning efforts. Planning team members must consider the verbiage and focus of assigned tasks from HHQ, and interpret those tasks in the context of the higher mission, intent, concept of operations and existing authorities. The result should be the “right sized” tasks based on trust, force capabilities, delegated or retained authorities and risk.

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