Theater Security Cooperation and the Maritime Operations Center

LCDR Andrew O’Connor, U.S. Navy

Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) is an all-encompassing term, and this article provides a general understanding of what TSC includes and what challenges the structure of TSC faces within the U.S. system. This article then lays out the role of the Maritime Operation Center (MOC) for developing relationships with partners and proposes using the Navy Planning Process as the way the MOC manages TSC activities at the staff headquarters. After two years into my second staff tour (first using the MOC construct) and one tour overseas working on Security Assistance at an embassy, these are the challenges that I (and other Foreign Area Officers) face when supporting the Navy in cooperating with regional partners.

TSC is Security Assistance, Training, and Engagement.

As with most broad terms, TSC can be difficult to define precisely and be understood generally. TSC has three major parts. The first two are generally coordinated by the Security Cooperation Office (SCO) that resides in the partner country. The name of the SCO and whether this office is collocated at the embassy depends on the country. The first part of TSC is Security Assistance, which generally relates to the military equipment sold to partner nations. For the U.S. Navy, the executive agency for equipment sales to foreign partners is the Navy International Programs Office (NIPO).

The second part of TSC is training, for which the Navy Education and Training Security Assistance Field Activity (NETSAFA) arranges for partner militaries to attend courses at U.S. Navy training facilities and to hire Mobile Training Teams. Generally, training uses the same funding processes as Security Assistance; and often, but not exclusively, the training relates to equipment purchases. Training also includes the programs through which partner nations send officers to attend U.S. service academies, war colleges, and other institutions that broaden and deepen our partners’ understanding of the U.S. military.

The third part of TSC is military engagement which primarily concerns the MOC. Per Joint Publication 3-0, military engagement is the routine contact and interaction between individuals or elements of the Armed Forces of the United States and those of another nation’s armed forces, or foreign and domestic civilian authorities or agencies to build trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities, and maintain influence. These activities involve the Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) staff as the strategic lead for military activities in the theater and the Service components who conduct the operations. Engagement activities are generally coordinated with the SCO and/or other in-country representatives as appropriate.

Synchronizing TSC is challenging.

The term TSC alludes to the idea that these three parts are synchronized. The ideal situation would clearly be as follows: a partner military purchases U.S. equipment with the
necessary logistics and follow-on support, completes the associated training at U.S. facilities, and then uses the new capability in exercises with U.S. operational forces. The introduction of the capability not only improves the partner military’s capability and capacity, but also supports U.S. strategic goals in the region. The partner nation’s forces and U.S. forces are also better able to integrate during operations because of the common equipment.

The usual result falls short of this ideal, not because any individual or group does not do its part well or lacks trying to synchronize the other parts, but because the structure of the relationship among those commands is too complex for any one command to synchronize the entire effort.

No single entity oversees the entirety of the processes involved in TSC. Multiple commands manage the three parts of TSC within the U.S. Navy, and the same is true for other Services and other countries. The various commands have different incentives, priorities, resources, and capabilities. GCC staffs want to leverage the various pieces of Services capabilities to support its strategy, but the military Service offices that oversee security assistance and training do not align to any one GCC. For the MOC staff caught in the middle, applying its international engagement expertise at managing this external challenge would serve the mission better than wasting time and energy overcoming internal processes as described below.

Connecting resources to operations and objectives is very challenging in any military Service, such as the acquisition of new ships and aircraft, and more challenging across services for joint resources. For TSC, partner nations’ cultures and political systems drive other incentives for purchasing equipment, pursuing training, and seeking engagement. Additionally, partner military Services’ functions do not necessarily align with ours, and communicating across services is challenging when working with a partner who is parochial about maintaining Service-to-Service relationships. For example, the work done by U.S. Naval aviation is often the purview of partner Air Forces, not of the partner naval forces. Simply communicating the needs and desires across these cultural, political, and military systems is a challenge. Reaching the goal of synchronized common objectives and matching the right resources to those objectives is thus all the more difficult. The variety of participants and incentives compounds the challenges to the point that the challenges outweigh the obvious benefits to synchronized efforts.

Despite these challenges, the effort to synchronize is worthwhile when it improves U.S. and partner military capability for the ideal presented earlier, and the MOC makes a valuable contribution to that effort.

The MOC’s role in TSC is engagement.

Engagement is the emphasis of TSC for the naval component command and other operational-level commanders employing the MOC. Engagement is a broad concept, and operational-level commanders have many opportunities to engage with partners. Exercises, staff interactions, and meetings of leaders all should build operational capability to achieve common interests in the region. The MOC staff should understand what information these engagements produce in order to provide better tasking for subordinate units.
Being attentive to the other parts of TSC adds value for providing a common message from the U.S. to our partners. Better coordination and communication among the U.S. commands involved in TSC helps, but alone does not necessarily overcome the structural challenges within the U.S. military or our differences with our partner nations and their militaries. Understanding the structure of the TSC relationships within the U.S. military provides key insight for context on what the other parts of TSC provide.

To achieve the benefits of synchronized TSC effort, a single division or N-code within the MOC cannot be the sole responsibility for synchronizing TSC. The effort for positive engagement with partner militaries must be embraced by all parts of the staff. When a part of the staff feels that it does not own part of the responsibility to ensure a successful partner engagement and is more concerned about the filling in of paperwork than success, that part of the staff does not know that it should attempt to understand the event, to ask questions to meet its own requirements, and to contribute its services to ensure success. Further, the information for the paperwork, especially when working with another country, is usually not readily available to meet requested timelines. When coordinating engagements, internal staff processes can be friction that inhibits reaching the engagement’s goal rather than facilitating its success. Processes that are more friction than facilitation can reflect poorly on the command when it shows during the engagement, such as problems with base access for foreign guests. For engagements to be effective, all parts of the MOC should understand and appreciate how they impact the outcome, regardless of whether the engagement is an exercise or a meeting.

Applying Operational Planning by the MOC to TSC activities at the staff headquarters

One example how the MOC could improve partner engagement is looking at how we host partner military leaders visiting U.S. staff headquarters for conferences and meetings among leaders, particularly when the Commander is not directly involved. Generally, to execute such visits, one action officer is designated as the lead for the event and all details are left to that individual to execute. The action officer is usually a subject matter expert on the topic of the conference or the country of the visitor, but is not a staff coordination expert who can ensure all the logistics of the meeting come together to effectively run the meeting. The action officer must go through a variety of disconnected processes to bring together the logistics for a single event. The result is an action officer, who is best qualified to determine the right message to deliver, is then bogged down finding conference rooms, reserving hotel rooms, and working building access for all participants. That subject matter expert is not spending his or her efforts untangling the structural challenges of TSC to ensure a message is delivered to our partners through the conference or meeting.

Using the MOC concept and planning process, when a leader determines that the staff will support an event and sets Commander’s Intent for the engagement, the assigned action officer can lead the staff to meet that intent.
Operational planning could be applied all sorts of engagements, not only employing tactical units for exercises with partner militaries, but also employing the staff itself as an operational unit. Much like an OPT work through the planning for an operation, a staff team should be able to come together to run an operation conducted at the headquarters. The MOC staff should be able to work together to ensure that the right message is delivered to the visitor. The Navy Planning Process taught at MSOC is an effective way to approach coordinating the staff to host the event. Below I outline the major steps of NWP 5-01 to illustrate how they apply to a bilateral conference with specific items to consider and frequent problems encountered.

Step 1: Missional Analysis would result in some fundamental understandings about the conference: stating the reasons to host the event; identifying the desired outcomes that support broader TSC goals; deciding a format of the due-out from the discussions; communicating some knowledge about the resources available to support the event; and discussing the processes involved to include those resources. With overt direction from leadership to support the conference, the action officer would ideally have the proper authority to direct the other parts of the staff for the necessary support to achieve the mission. Determining the specified, implied, and essential tasks focuses on the understanding that the desired outcomes of a conference are not achieved when the basic needs of a guest are not met. Four essential, inter-related tasks that take key for planning any event are the budget, the dates, the number of participants, and the venue; from these pillars all other execution details will follow. Identifying the externally imposed limits such as the partner’s budget, calendar, and travel requirements (visa requirements and flights) improves understanding what is feasible. Identifying superior and subordinate command relationships, higher headquarters’ strategic or operational guidance regarding desired outcomes of the conference are necessary for a successful conference. Subordinate commands may control implied tasks such as base access. At the end of this step, those involved should be able to state the purpose of the conference and the Commander’s Intent of the conference, which should allow the functions of the staff to come together to meet that intent.

Step 2: Course of action development matches the resources available to meet the explicit, implied, and essential tasks that meet the requirements to satisfy the Commander’s Intent. Entirely different COAs may not be available, but the event planners should be aware of the different resource options. Explicit tasks include reserving the conference space and putting out a schedule. Implied tasks include plans for lodging, transportation, food, and access for foreigners to the facilities. Essential tasks include ensuring the outcomes are documented in a format that will impact the ability to execute TSC strategy and goals. If the end state of the conference is an agreed document, then the planner must work through how and when the document is written and printed, which affects the schedule and the resources. For a conference that has the purpose of allowing time to talk through issues, a schedule full of informational briefs with few breaks does not allow time for personal interaction. As for food, the U.S. certainly inhibits itself in these meetings by not funding snacks and beverages when food is a valuable part of communicating how a command feels about its guests. Cultural aspects of
meetings with international partners are often overlooked. Not providing a beverage or a small gift could overshadow the conference.

Step 3: Course of action analysis would reveal the inter-relationship among the resources necessary for execution if this was not already clear. One conference location may have unique security requirements that require additional processes; another location may lengthen transportation time. Identifying the conference room, lodging, food, transportation, access, and identifying potential cultural sensitivities are details that have potential pitfalls when hosting a successful conference. The command’s processes for facility access to one conference room may be different from another conference room’s processes, which are separate from those of lodging. Social activities such as ship visits or dinners may be suitable to emphasize a message of the conference, but these activities can also impinge on the time necessary for discussion. One should understand how adding one, five, or ten people to the conference would impact plans and other resources. One should understand how the number of U.S. participants impacts the means to pay for social events related to the conference. Additionally, arrangements must be made to ensure the conference rooms have the right resources (projectors, printers, proper table arrangement).

To expand on this analysis, here is an example of applying planning and resources for base access by the foreign guests and the processes that add friction to the planning and execution. Foreign visit requests, base access, and building access are important functions to maintain information security, but they use separate bureaucratic processes and a variety of disconnected information systems. The foreign partners may wish to provide their own transportation, which suits their preferences and alleviates the need for U.S.-provided transpiration and escorting. However, not having a U.S. service member with the delegation impacts their ability to enter the base. Base access for foreigners is a sensitive issue; foreign military personnel clearly should not have open access to U.S. facilities. But a visiting four-star admiral denied access at the gate, would be an unfavorable message from the Command and the Navy. To ensure access and avoid any embarrassment at the gate, the action officer must spend a significant amount of time working through the variety of staff and installation bureaucracies and information systems to ensure the gate guard has the correct information for the delegation. Base access procedures have an independent approval and means to inform the gate guards. This process usually includes forms that request information about the foreign guests such as date of birth, which is awkward to ask, and not available as early as the facility requires. Then, after working through all of these processes, guaranteeing the gate guard will grant access is still oddly difficult. Base Security Departments often do not provide a response plan to the hosting command or the guest should a question occur at the gate. While filling in access forms or accompanying delegations may not sound like much effort, each part takes significant man-hours away from the action officer who must focus on the broader scope of the conference. The alternative to prior-approval is to provide an escort to accompany the foreign visitor through the gate. This simply shifts the planning effort to determining how to match a U.S. escort to the delegation during execution and other transportation concerns. The cumbersome processes
then complicate the other logistical considerations by taking away resources from execution or not having the necessary flexibility to account for the frequency of changes to the plan when executing. The hosting command should have the ability to inform base security of the access necessary with rapid and assured response that the access will be provided. Using the planning process, a Commander who knows when the base is not granting access to his or her conference attendees would be able to make action with the appropriate authority.

Step 4: Course of action comparison would allow a Commander to determine whether the right resources are applied to the conference and to make decisions about the arrangements to mitigate risks and to meet the conference requirements. With understanding of the resources and processes involved in execution, the Commander can provide clear guidance to the appropriate parts of the staff to execute the event.

Step 5: Plan or order development would put in writing what was understood in the planning process. A Command 5050 note is often used to codify these activities. The resources would be formally identified. The processes necessary to use those resources with any exceptions or deviations from policy would be identified.

Step 6: Transition into execution with a clear understanding of how to conduct the event and what resources are available when unexpected events interrupt the planned execution.

Some caution is necessary for the idea of using the MOC planning process for every engagement. The growth of internal planning meetings and the perception that the planning process itself is wasting time would detract from the value of planning process. Unclear direction about the engagement could easily cause a group to spend a lot of time working with little productivity. Team members more concerned about an individual role rather than about how the overall event comes together can divert the meeting onto less consequential details. To move the planning along, action officers who are tasked to lead the engagement need to know enough about what other parts of the staff can and cannot do in support. For the supporting staff assisting the action officer, instead of asking, “What do you need?” or stating, “Fill in this form,” attempt to understand the goal of the staff operation and provide the offer, “Here’s what I can do to support.” Meetings will be effective when the staff is able to receive enough information to perform its function but not use others’ time on processes that do not directly support the event. Forms are often created to facilitate the communication that could be done through the planning process, but interaction through paperwork usually lacks communicating how the requested service supports the Commander’s Intent, injects friction into the communication process, and represents more concerns about audits than accomplishing the mission. A leader providing direction and Commander’s Intent for headquarters events ideally provides the staff members and supporting commands what they need in order for their role to contribute to the success of the engagement.
Conclusion

TSC is a broad category of activity for our Navy. Working to have operational forces of different militaries cooperate to reach common theater security goals has structural challenges that inhibit the U.S. ability to synchronize its efforts. Successful engagement therefor requires the understanding and support of the entire MOC. The MOC has a valuable role to play within TSC, a role that clearly does not end with exercises done by ships overseas. When the operational command takes on the responsibility to host a guest for a meeting or a conference, the staff as a whole needs to consider how it works internally and externally to synchronize TSC efforts. The MOC that works together for staff headquarters engagements ensures the success of the Commander’s message when it is delivered at home. The MOC will recognize the benefits improved engagements when assessing its relationships in the region, but assessments are a topic for another article.

LCDR Andrew O’Connor, USN

*LCDR Andrew C. O’Connor is a Foreign Area Officer for the PACOM AOR and is currently the Northeast Asia country desk officer at U.S. Pacific Fleet N51 International Plans and Policy. Previous FAO tours include the Defense Language Institute for Mandarin Chinese, the Office of the Defense Representative Pakistan as the Deputy for Navy Programs, and the Naval Postgraduate School studying National Security Affairs – Far East, Southeast Asia. Before becoming a FAO, LCDR O’Connor worked on the OPNAV Staff in the Submarine Warfare Division after a division officer tour on the USS LOUISVILLE (SSN 724).*