Achieving Maritime Operational Cyber Effects: Successful Numbered Fleet-NIOC/CTF Partnerships

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Given the advances of U.S. Cyber Command and its service components in developing cyberspace operations as a core military warfare area, there is tremendous opportunity for the Numbered Fleets to effectively leverage cyber to achieve operational effects within the maritime domain. More specifically, with the maturation of capabilities at TENTHFLT over the past four years, and more particularly at its subordinate CTFs, each aligned to directly support a specific fleet, the Maritime Operation Centers have unprecedented potential to creatively integrate cyber activities within their fleet plans and mission sets. The partnership between FOURTHFLT and CTF-1040 (NIOC-TX) and the success it has achieved in supporting the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S) in countering illicit trafficking activity in the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean is a fitting example of this potential, and revalidates the axiom “it takes a network to defeat a network.”

Since 2011, FOURTHFLT, CTF-1040, NCIS South East Field Office and JIATF-S have worked closely to develop intelligence operations and processes that integrate and synchronize their respective unique capabilities to achieve measurable effects in countering illicit trafficking activity. CTF-1040 in particular has become a centerpiece of this intelligence enterprise, with its contributions extending beyond the traditional support most often associated with NIOCs, the manning of deployed platforms in support of SIGINT collection. At FOURTHFLT’s request, CTF-1040 has also partnered with NCIS in deploying intelligence teams aboard otherwise disadvantaged FFGs involved in countering illicit activity, and has supported FOURTHFLT N2 in theater engagement meetings to address the importance of protecting operational networks.

But CTF-1040’s most effective contribution has been its responses to credible human-derived reporting of pending illicit activity. With its unique capabilities and relationships with other agencies, CTF-1040 has been able to quickly provide follow-on reporting with more specific and accurate information that has routinely led to successful detection and monitoring by JIATF-S, and ultimate interdiction of illicit drug flow by U.S. Navy, Coast Guard and Partner Nation tactical units. In fact, CTF-1040 tipping was directly responsible for the abundance (nearly 90%) of all successful JIATF-S interdictions in the eastern Pacific in January, 2014. Simply put, CTF-1040’s responsive, agile, and accurate reporting process has in many instances enabled the interagency community to stay ahead of the decentralized, mobile, and aggressive drug trafficking networks.

However, simply possessing a practical capability of satisfying an operational need in support of a common mission is only half of what defines a successful partnership - there must also be a selfless eagerness by all members to contribute to the team’s objective.
CTF-1040 has consistently leaned forward in supporting FOURTHFLT and its role in countering illicit trafficking, and is recognized by the FOURTHFLT Commander as an integral element of his own intelligence enterprise. CTF-1040 routinely participates in the FOURTHFLT Commander’s Update Briefs, and its leadership often physically joins staff principals at FOURTHFLT when the Commander hosts a Flag or IC community leader of relevance. CTF 1040 has earnestly tried to say “Yes” to all operational requests, with the approval and support from its parent command, TENTHFLT.

Like any meaningful professional relationship, the partnership between FOURTHFLT and CTF 1040 did not just happen overnight. Instead, the culture of mutual trust, commitment, and support has been proactively managed and developed over time (months to years) - the daily interaction between the Fleet N2 and CTF-1040 Commanding Officer and their respective staffs serve as the essential bonding element.

The NIOCs/CTFs present a treasure trove of unique, unprecedented capabilities to Numbered Fleet planning and operations and should be harnessed, not overlooked or underestimated. It’s an exciting time to be in a MOC. TENTHFLT’s current investment in developing operational cyber capabilities, coupled with its subordinate CTFs’ commitment to their respective Numbered fleets, represents a true force multiplier and a proven formula to advance operational maritime mission sets.

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