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Editorial Note

Processes of Military Decision Making

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EDITORIAL

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the decision making process for the military leader tasked with fulfilling a mission imposed on him by the political echelon. The quality of the decision making process among the upper command levels is among the factors determining the army’s success in attaining the desired political goals, and some claim it is even more important than the combat itself.1 Similarly, more than anything else, history tends to associate successes and failures with the quality of the situation assessment and the decisions made by the military commander in preparation for operations and in their execution. Is military leadership an art or is it an orderly, organized analytical process? Is it the result of brilliance and intuition or of calculated, logical deduction? Or is it a combination of these and other factors? What are the major obstacles in the attempt to provide a process to guide military decision making using an orderly format so that the commander and the members of his staff can make decisions in an effective, harmonious, synchronized way? This essay examines the prevalent theoretical approaches to decision making and, with that as background, surveys practical models deemed appropriate to the military setting. The essay discusses and compares the relative advantages and disadvantages of each model, and then makes recommendations about their application to the military decision making process.

The key issues a commander and his staff face when planning operations are decisions regarding definition of the operation and definition of the method to execute it. To make these decisions, the command must understand the intention and goals of the upper echelon regarding the specific operation. While there are concomitant secondary processes, the core of the planning and its major outcomes lies in defining the task and the way to accomplish it.2 The mission is defined by the commander on the basis of a command or directive from the upper echelon or on the basis of his own initiative given his understanding of the situation and the responsibility with which he has been charged. Deciding on how to use force to fulfill a mission is an expression of the commander’s military leadership. In order to execute a decision making process the commander must gain an in-depth understanding of the operational problems and formulate the solutions that will attain the mission’s goals in the most efficient and effective way possible. Military doctrine tries to provide a process of decision making for the planning of operations to generate these two products, that is, definition of the mission and definition of the method, along with other aspects required of the command, from receiving operational tasks from superiors to giving operational tasks to subordinates. The decision making process is usually presented as a model consisting of steps and outcomes. A direct continuation of the decision making process during planning is the operational command and control process, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. The rational-philosophical current3 relies on logic as its primary tool, i.e., calling for as good an analytical assessment as possible of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks. The rational current perceives the decision making process as a logical analysis in order to identify the optimal alternative for action.

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Rec date: April 05, 2021; Acc date: April 20, 2021; Pub date: April 27, 2021

Citation: Bembady Bharathi (2021) Editorials of Processes of Military Decision Making.

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