

SEPTEMBER 2025

Ode to the EXORD

Why Execute Orders Should Matter More Than They Do

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Krista Auchenbach

A Report of the CSIS Defense and Security Department

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Executive Summary

The Pentagon's current management of operations is leading it toward strategic insolvency and increasing risks to warfighters in the event of great-power war. A slow but steady accumulation of mission and aggregating risk has depleted the United States' margins of military power. This condition is both dangerous and insidious, and the administrative management of operations—through *execute orders* (EXORDs)—contributes to part of the problem. EXORDs are the instrument to capture the president's direction, as commander-in-chief, to use military forces and effects. As the geopolitical environment changes, the Department of Defense (DoD) must take actions to calibrate, prioritize, and align the military element of power to serve strategic aims of policy.

An area ripe for greater examination is how currently assigned missions are assessed against future needs. Competition for resources and growing threats demand regular and comprehensive validation of strategic risk, as well as explicit understanding of how those risks are assumed and transferred across missions, geography, and time. The absence of such clarity and codification can inhibit commanders and lower echelons from taking deliberate, risk-informed initiative. Moreover, it impedes the assessment, adaptation, and oversight necessary to oversee the employment of forces and effects to achieve strategic aims at acceptable costs. Despite progress, this report argues that a renewed focus on EXORDs could serve as part of the solution to better position the DoD for the precarious global security environment ahead.

Key Takeaways

- The Pentagon has reached a state of “strategic insolvency” where the slow accumulation of missions and aggregating risk has reduced the United States’ margins of military power, creating both dangerous vulnerabilities and an insidious erosion of readiness that threatens warfighter effectiveness in potential great-power conflicts.
- *Execute orders* (EXORDs) represent constitutional instruments of civilian control that codify the president’s Article II commander-in-chief authorities, yet they are too often treated as administrative paperwork rather than the critical strategic management tools of command that can bridge the gap between political-military strategy and operational execution.
- The Pentagon’s tendency toward mission accumulation without deliberate mission termination creates an unsustainable cycle where operational demands consistently exceed what the services and defense industrial base can supply, leading to the consumption of readiness faster than it can be replenished.
- The department can improve its approach to EXORD management to reduce factors that contribute to strategic incoherence, address mission accumulation and incorporate corresponding termination, and thereby better enable the military tool of power to adapt to changing geopolitical realities and policy priorities.
- The institutional reluctance to regularly revise EXORDs—driven by fears that civilian oversight will result in reduced authorities—denies the Department of Defense the ability to adapt missions to changing circumstances, capitalize on operational successes, or acknowledge the strategic shortfalls of current approaches.
- Outdated and poorly maintained execute orders can put military commanders in positions to make strategic-level decisions without adequate civilian guidance, while simultaneously preventing civilian leaders from exercising effective oversight of military operations across multiple theaters and time frames.

Key Recommendations

- The secretary of defense could institute comprehensive annual EXORD reviews that not only validate individual missions against current strategy and available resources, but also examine the risk that has accumulated across missions, geography, and time to prevent further strategic insolvency.
- EXORDs could incorporate time-based sunset clauses and outcome-based assessment criteria to prevent mission drift, enable deliberate decisionmaking about mission continuation, and create feedback loops that connect operational effectiveness to strategic objectives.
- The department could modernize EXORD management through advanced data technology and artificial intelligence to provide real-time strategic visibility, enable rapid adaptation to changing circumstances, and create the transparency necessary for effective mission command across all echelons.

Introduction

“The problem of strategy is located at the fault-line between policy and the operational level of war.”

— Colin Gray¹

“The U.S. defense strategy and posture have become insolvent.”

— David Ochmanek et al.²

“We break the force with cumulative risk.”

— Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery³

After over 20 years of nearly continuous war, the DoD continues to face challenges in closing the chasm that exists between political-military strategy and military operations, as well as addressing resourcing strains between operations today versus preparedness for threats tomorrow. Execute orders (EXORDs), which are the mechanism by which the president directs military action as commander-in-chief, provide a means to clarify intent and adapt guidance to changes in the strategic situation and mission priorities. They are a tool to connect strategy to operations, identify responsibilities and articulate the bounds of acceptable risk, and empower lower echelons to take initiative. They answer the question of why military force is applied—the “in order to” part that is the crux of the EXORD.

The president, Congress, and DoD will benefit by strengthening the importance and use of EXORDs—capturing the written record of the president’s intent as commander-in-chief—to achieve

greater efficiency and effectiveness across the military element of power. Ultimately, orders are about command, and command is about leadership. This report argues that the department needs a reinvigoration of executive leadership in the stewardship, management, and application of the military element of power—particularly in how operations impact other responsibilities within the department. It provides considerations and opportunities for the secretary of defense to exercise “direct control of DoD” to manage the connection between operations and strategy with a more deliberate treatment of EXORDs, aligning department activities over missions, geography, and time.⁴ The report asserts that command, oversight, and accountability ought to be strengthened through communication and trust—not only within the department, but also Congress. Finally, it contends that greater understanding, transparency, and adaptation are needed at the strategic level to empower initiative throughout the department.

Looking forward, DoD strategy and operations will be challenged to keep pace with the changing character of warfare; moreover, the extended reach that U.S. adversaries are gaining across geographies and domains is broadening the potential attack surfaces that the U.S. military may be called to defend. Given the complexity and multitude of threats, the DoD must be able to adapt and communicate adjustments to strategic intent and operational guidance based on changes in policy, threat, or priority. Greater transparency and collaboration will therefore be necessary to evaluate preparedness, anticipate risks, and measure impact in the evolving global security environment. EXORDs offer a means to do this and more closely integrate command and control across different and interrelated missions and portfolios.

In learning from the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, the military foresaw the need to embrace “mission command”—an adapted approach to command and control that enables disciplined initiative using mission-type orders and agile, adaptive leadership.⁵ Since then, the department has made great strides in building technologies and doctrine to enable it at operational levels.⁶ However, without a clear and authoritative understanding of the ultimate commander’s strategic intent—that of the president as communicated through the secretary of defense—the department cannot fully empower the operational initiative and innovation it seeks from combatant commanders and warfighters to lead with unity of effort and purpose. Focus on strategic-level command is also warranted.

“In Order To”

Execute Orders’ Role in Military Operations

Constitutional Foundation

The decision to use military force begins with the president’s Article II authority as commander-in-chief, as authorized by Congress for the expenditure of funds and as laid out in the U.S. Constitution. According to the DoD Law of War principles, the decision to use force is designed to be deliberate, with clear aims and justifications for the necessity or threat of violence—thus, the intent.⁷ Such decisions most often follow the deliberations by the senior-most advisers and the president—whether that be through formal meetings of the National Security Council (NSC) or through ad hoc, situationally dependent decisionmaking. Once a decision is made to use force, the strategic intent and directive must be communicated to the military *and* Congress.

The instrument by which the president directs the use of military force is ultimately through a military order—sometimes initially communicated verbally (fully or in part) and then codified into a formal written order, known as an EXORD. Issued by the secretary of defense and communicated through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), EXORDs direct the DoD to initiate military operations.⁸ While seemingly administrative, EXORDs are the method to codify and record the delegation of the president’s Article II constitutional authorities as commander-in-chief to subordinate commanders of the military to execute. They are a mechanism of command at the highest echelons.

Mechanism for Command and Control

The modern framework for military command and control emerged from hard-learned lessons spanning nearly four decades. The 1947 National Security Act created the “National Military Establishment” with initially weak central authority, leading to the interservice rivalries and inefficiencies that plagued early Cold War operations.⁹ The 1958 Defense Reorganization Act attempted to address these issues by strengthening the secretary of defense while removing the service chiefs from direct operational command, aiming to create a more centralized, efficient defense establishment to manage the complex challenges of Soviet competition.¹⁰ It sought to close a gap between national strategic priorities and disconnected or competing operational approaches between the services.

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 represented the most significant reform of military command structure since 1947. The act strengthened joint operations and clarified command authorities from the secretary to the then-called “commanders-in-chief” (CINCs, now known as combatant commanders), removing military services from the operational chain of command and reducing their responsibilities to organizing, training, and equipping forces.¹¹ However, the act’s emphasis on joint command structures may have inadvertently contributed to the EXORD and global force management challenges the department faces today. Under the act, unified commanders gained significant autonomy while mechanisms for strategic oversight and coordination remained underdeveloped.¹²

The current imbalance, which biases toward supporting current operations, challenges the ability of force providers to sustain and optimally steward forces for training, readiness, and modernization purposes against the force employment demands of the geographic combatant commanders. This has led to what scholars describe as a “strategy-resource mismatch,” where a resource “gap exists between stated U.S. aims and the military capabilities needed to achieve them.”¹³ Both the Pentagon and Congress have acknowledged the challenge, further empowering the role of the CJCS with the strengthened responsibilities for “global integration.”¹⁴ Yet, when it comes to prioritizing resources and missions between and among the combatant commands and services, the decision rests with the secretary. As such, the secretary is the trustee of accumulated risk across multiple missions, commands, and time frames within the department.

Five-Paragraph Format

Execute orders are designed to be clear, executable, and easily communicated across and down echelons of command—setting the higher-level guidance to inform subordinate orders that combatant commanders provide to their operational units through operational orders (OPORDs) and then down to the tactical levels through tasking orders (TASKORDs).¹⁵ In general, military orders follow a typical five-paragraph format designed for clarity and execution: (1) Situation; (2) Mission; (3) Execution; (4) Administration; and (5) Command and Signal.

For EXORDs, some sections are of critical importance and reflect decisions made at strategic and national policy levels. First, the *situation* section articulates the context for which military force has been determined necessary and the strategic *intent* for why military action is necessary to

address that situation. Second, the next two paragraphs identify the military *mission* and provide *execution* guidance in terms of the *concept of operation* and key *tasks* required “in order to” achieve the mission *objectives*. Third, the order assigns responsibility to a designated *commander*, articulating the supporting relationships, resources, and reporting instructions. Finally, quite critically, EXORDs articulate any *constraints* (“must do”), *restraints* (“don’t do”), and additional guidance or permissions that may deviate from the standard rules of engagement. These aspects of *administration* and *command and signal* provide crucial details and guidance for coordination with other military units, defense agencies, and other U.S. government entities. It is from these sections that mission command can be executed and delegated. These sections may also articulate assessment criteria and reporting requirements, though such requirements are often established outside of the EXORD. Well-written orders define a feedback loop to connect operational effectiveness toward mission objectives and strategic intent.

Military orders follow a typical five-paragraph format designed for clarity and execution: (1) Situation; (2) Mission; (3) Execution; (4) Administration; and (5) Command and Signal.

Therefore, EXORDs capture the principles, priorities, and purpose for the use of military forces and effects. In issuing them, the secretary explicitly sets the bounds of acceptable risk, bestowing upon a commander both top cover and accountability, and allocating the risk that either the commander or secretary will assume.

Why EXORDs Warrant Greater Appreciation

EXORDs are crucial to the effective management and application of military power. While EXORDs are only one of several mechanisms related to operational activity, they often concern some of the most important aspects associated with military forces and effects since they manage a breadth of activity—from important, enduring missions to those of urgent necessity and response, or those missions and activities to deter, prepare, or respond to conflict (developed through deliberate planning processes). In such respects, they govern deviations from peace or the normal expectations for preparing and managing the nation’s defense.

Civilian Control

Once the decision is made, EXORDs represent a crucial mechanism for the secretary to communicate the president’s strategic intent while granting commanders the flexibility to execute missions effectively. Much responsibility rests on the secretary of defense to ensure the translation is accurate.

The challenge of maintaining effective civilian control while preserving military effectiveness lies at the heart of the EXORD issue. Samuel Huntington’s classic formulation of civil-military relations

suggests that civilian leaders must maintain strategic direction while allowing military professionals an appropriate level of operational autonomy.¹⁶ Yet political scientist Eliot Cohen contests this notion in his book *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, arguing that successful wartime leaders engage in an “unequal dialogue” with their military subordinates, probing deeply into operational details while maintaining strategic perspective.¹⁷ Reflecting on contemporary challenges, Janine Davidson, former under secretary of the Navy, points to a “broken dialogue,” describing how the necessary and conflicting perspectives of political and military leaders have led to miscommunication and friction.¹⁸ The friction stems from different cultural factors relating to how planning and decisionmaking are conducted. Presidents may iteratively examine options to understand risks and trade-offs before making decisions; military planning processes are more detailed, rigorous, and designed for “best military advice” based on explicit parameters that presidents are not often prepared to determine at the outset.¹⁹ The process can be frustrating, and the outcome is often a compromise. Therefore, once the decision is made, EXORDs represent a crucial mechanism for the secretary to communicate the president’s strategic intent while granting commanders the flexibility to execute missions effectively. Much responsibility rests on the secretary of defense to ensure the translation is accurate so that subordinate operational orders and derivative guidance align with the desired outcomes.²⁰

Strategic Alignment

While one of several tools, EXORDs can also provide a standardized mechanism for the secretary to align strategy with operations and communicate intent across the department’s vast span of control to drive unity of effort and purpose. When nested with other DoD planning processes and authorities, EXORDs can help policy and military leaders more tightly align various levels of operational planning and execution toward strategic aims.²¹ The orders connect (or disrupt) strategy and operations in deliberate communication of guidance and assignment of mission, or in the explicit acknowledgment of a deviation from stated strategy based upon “mission requirements” and emergent needs. Therefore, individually and collectively, EXORDs capture where the secretary has made operational decisions that shift risk between competing DoD priorities for implementing strategy, aligning resources to train and build the future force, and preparing for contingencies.

Unclear or outdated orders force military commanders to make strategic-level decisions, possibly without adequate civilian guidance, while simultaneously preventing civilian leaders from exercising effective oversight of military operations.²² In areas where specific requirements, risk, and thresholds can be identified in advance through planning processes, the secretary can delegate authorities for commanders to “be prepared to” or execute operations and activities without reaching back to Washington for approval. Such scenario-specific preparation can be critical for time-sensitive crises or incidents, such as defense support to civilian agencies and disaster response, where leaders have prepositioned authority and approval in specific instances.²³

Historical Accountability

EXORDs also provide a mechanism, if maintained properly, to assess the effectiveness of operations toward strategic and operational aims, clarifying changes in the situation, intent, or mission. As such, EXORDs are a historical record for decisions regarding use of force. Alarming, former Pentagon officials have acknowledged behavior in multiple administrations seeking to avoid codifying verbal orders into written EXORDs—as a means of avoiding congressional oversight or being seen as supporting guidance that deviates from the National Defense Strategy.²⁴ The avoidance of written orders compounds the “deeply contested” dynamic between executive and legislative branches over war powers, while passing risk downward to military forces.²⁵

Alarming, former Pentagon officials have acknowledged behavior in multiple administrations seeking to avoid codifying verbal orders into written EXORDs.

By maintaining and more regularly validating existing orders, individually and collectively, the department can provide a historical capture of why force was used and for what aims. This could help answer how and why missions evolved, what they cost, and how outcomes were evaluated relative to the strategic purpose. While only one piece of a broader context, written military orders can provide an authoritative record on the use of military power. Unfortunately, there is wide acknowledgment that political trust within executive and legislative branches has eroded to such an extent that those necessary conversations may not be possible, and if had, could even be harmful.²⁶

Risk Management

When considered collectively, EXORDs could also help the secretary understand risks across missions, geography, and time. In doing so, the secretary could address the cumulative risk that accrues as current operations consume readiness faster than the DoD can replenish it. EXORDs sit at an odd nexus between the joint planning and global force management processes.²⁷ Therefore, they provide a key piece to a three-part puzzle to measure and assess military risk across time and space, providing a critical element of a three-legged stool: operational plans for potential war fights (apportionment for anticipated forces needed in execution), ongoing operations for deterrence or steady state activities (allocation and assignment for current force employment), and readiness (current and anticipated force availability). EXORDS are both an outcome of deliberate planning, capturing the outcomes of debates of risk and priority, as well as a basis for justifying additional resource allocations to support the missions that are the subject of those debates.²⁸

By having a greater understanding of how trade-offs and risk transfer within and among this triad, the DoD could develop greater measurement and analysis of its operational potential, readiness, and resilience. This would enable understanding between the tensions related to resource

employment for deterrence operations today versus warfighting requirements for potential conflict tomorrow.

Globally Integrated Mission Command

A final set of reasons EXORDs are becoming increasingly important relates to their enabling of the tactical initiative required for the department's approach to mission command. Per a 2012 white paper from then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, "the conduct of mission command requires adaptable leaders at every echelon."²⁹ Those echelons include all within the chain of command—and in order for the department to succeed in today's complex environment, mission command cannot exclude, omit, or overlook the importance of the president and secretary of defense.

While the military excels at the operational approach to mission command, the United States has significant room for improvement in connecting the strategic levels in the waging of warfare to those of warfighting.

As noted by British historian Lawrence Freedman, written communications and reporting up and down echelons are critical to how well command leads to control.³⁰ While the military excels at the operational approach to mission command, the United States has significant room for improvement in connecting the strategic levels in the *waging* of warfare to those of *warfighting*.³¹ This is most necessary in managing escalation and deterrence dynamics with nuclear-armed adversaries—where the United States' approach toward nuclear conflict is one of centralized control, and not the decentralized command execution that conventional combat leaders desire.

CSIS scholar Benjamin Jensen describes the department's shift in focus toward mission command as being born from the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan and the inability of centralized control "to keep pace with battlefield complexity."³² Therefore, Jensen writes, "the central idea was that the basic principles of mission command, including commander's intent, mission-type orders, and decentralized execution, required adaptable leaders."³³ By understanding how and why the military element is being used, EXORDs create the hierarchy of guidance to connect echelons of command and empower initiative to subordinate levels—as well as across other supporting commanders' responsibilities or enabling elements of the U.S. government. This is particularly important in today's security environment, which includes a variety of threats and potential adversaries that extend across domains and current functional and geographic combatant command seams.³⁴

Technological Opportunities

Warfare continues to demand rapid adaptation at scale in contested environments. Technological advancements are providing more ways to enable command, control, and initiative at the

operational level and tactical edge.³⁵ The department is also incorporating advancements in information technology at higher levels of decisionmaking, including global force management, operational planning, and readiness frameworks.³⁶ As described above, since EXORDs sit at a nexus of these issues, their incorporation into data processes provide opportunities for greater measurement along mission sets, but also could facilitate change management and adaptation across hierarchies of orders. If incorporated, the DoD can use EXORDs as an additional tool to create greater transparency and understanding of strategic and operational interdependencies across the various combatant commands' mission areas. A reinvigorated approach to EXORDs can help bring strategy and operations together and truly enable the comprehensive approach mission command the military seeks to achieve going forward.

Imperfect Orders

Not All Orders Are Created Equal

The reality of any large organization means that the ideal standard for communicating guidance rarely matches practice. So too for EXORDs.

EXORDs cover a wide array of issues and therefore exhibit inconsistent quality.³⁷ They can include tactical orders for limited duration missions (e.g., repatriate this Guantanamo detainee to their host country or evacuate an embassy); disaster or crisis response (e.g., provide forces to assist in the missile defense of Israel or provide defense support to civil authorities after a hurricane); enduring peacetime or conditions-based missions (e.g., provide ballistic missile defense of the U.S. homeland or contribute U.S. National Guard forces to NATO's Kosovo Force [KFOR] for stability and deterrence operations); and multi-year campaigns (e.g., counterterrorism or countering adversary use of the internet).³⁸ EXORDs can even include standing global authorities that can be stitched together for various deterrence and assurance missions (e.g., bomber task force missions) or creative solutions to emerging problems.³⁹ While not required for the purposes of directing a mission, EXORDs can provide a combatant commander with authority and/or permission for the conduct of that mission.⁴⁰

Not All Orders Have Permissions (or Authorities)

One of the most challenging aspects of managing operations has been how variations in civilian-military affairs have impacted how EXORDs are interpreted and used. As a result, the DoD

may face incoherent alignment of policy, mission, authority, and permission to operate. While EXORDs are a way to clarify that alignment, too often, the DoD fears that civilian oversight will result in a reduction of authorities or permissions to use them—thereby complicating, curtailing, or ending missions that commanders may need to achieve their objectives.⁴¹ The inability to update and refit EXORDs to align with changes in policy has resulted in unhelpful dynamics. First, some authorities and associated orders have remained active despite massive changes to the situation, mission, and concept of operations (or, in the case of counterterrorism, changes to the enemy; in the case of cyber operations, changes to U.S. command structures).⁴² Instead, the withholding of permission has been used to exercise control or throttle back various forms of political risk. Termed “policy by CONOP,” a dynamic formed where White House permission to execute operations would be withheld absent interagency review of the proposed concept of operation—including fleeting operational windows that often strained high-value, low-density assets (e.g., special forces and overhead intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets).⁴³ To avoid similar situations, some within the department have sought broader authorities that could be more widely applied to achieve various objectives.⁴⁴ Yet policymakers and military leaders alike point to an unhelpful second-order effect. Overly vague or expansive authorities provide combatant commanders with broad interpretations of guidance as well as justification to demand additional resources to avoid risks to mission and forces—which, if provided, transfer risk to other combatant commands and services.

Not All Orders Are Well Maintained

Senior Pentagon advisers have noted that military and policy staff have faced difficulty in identifying the most recent modification or current version of an order.⁴⁵ The Joint Staff has made progress in managing the vast repository of EXORDs, yet the sensitive nature of some EXORDs necessarily complicates an accurate understanding of all active orders. While the Joint Staff has a relative monopoly on the expertise needed to manage the DoD processes for planning orders, execute orders, and global force management, practitioners have noted a relative decline in the department’s civilian and military staff expertise familiar with EXORD management.⁴⁶ In many respects, EXORDs are their own form of Pentagon vernacular; and often, they reflect compromises in language that are necessary to coordinate across multiple stakeholders. Yet, imprecise language can potentially impact the quality and clarity of orders to meet the intent of national policy while calibrating the operational flexibility afforded to the military commander. This can give way to commanders interpreting intent and authorities more broadly (or narrowly) than policymakers envisioned.

A regularized periodicity to review EXORDs—both individually and collectively—enables the department to validate missions, outcomes, resource costs, and priorities within the broader context.

While there have been reviews of operational authorities under the past two administrations to validate and review which EXORDs should stand, adapt, or end, regularized and deeper reviews are still warranted. Looking at the orders comprehensively and collectively could help the department better align operational outcomes toward strategic success. Such reviews could integrate the National Defense Strategy, Contingency Planning Guidance, and Unified Command Plan (UCP), connecting ongoing missions to potential contingency and “be prepared to” conditions; reviews would also ensure authorities are mapped to updated command structures and UCP mission assignments. A regularized periodicity to review EXORDs—both individually and collectively—enables the department to validate missions, outcomes, resource costs, and priorities within the broader context. This would enable the department to make more holistic assessments on the collective and accumulated risk across the department—juxtaposing multiple individual decisions that may be more prone to crisis response dynamics or when presented as one-off issues in the Secretary of Defense Orders Book.⁴⁷

The department could build upon the Joint Staff’s “Joint Risk Analysis Methodology” (JRAM), which provides a comprehensive approach to military risk assessment to support global force management, to examine additional factors. Such factors could include changes in the geopolitical or security environment, shifts in policy priorities or preferred strategic approaches across elements of national power, likelihood of operational success or failure, differing evaluations of cost effectiveness and exchange ratios (not only military or economic, but also political or reputational costs), and determinations that the continuation of certain courses of action may be unsustainable or unacceptable (due to long-term costs or inability to rearm or replenish military resources for higher priorities).⁴⁸ Since the decision to assign, curtail, or adapt a mission is the purview of civilian leadership, these additional political considerations are warranted.

Not All Orders Communicate Intent

Despite the importance of EXORDs in providing combatant commanders with responsibility, authorities, and mission, subordinate units are not necessarily required to understand or even read EXORDs. This is reasonable. By design, subordinate units can rely upon the combatant commander’s revised intent, communicated within a subordinate operational order (OPORD), to derive their guidance without examining the underlying authority or premise for action as laid out in the EXORD.⁴⁹ While this is suitable based on joint and individual service doctrines, it may be worthwhile for the department to reconsider this dynamic going forward as the character of warfare changes and becomes more complex across the DoD’s existing seams. As missions change, harkening back to the initial premise for military action (“*in order to*”) may be necessary to manage against “mission creep” or answer whether the current approach still makes sense. Years of counterterrorism operations are indicative of such a need. Differing interpretations of “contact with the enemy” in the concept of operations was found to be a factor in the fatal ambush against U.S. forces in Nigeria in 2017.⁵⁰ Asking military personnel to assume risk should respect the underlying context and justification for why that risk is a potentially worthy sacrifice, particularly as circumstances change.

Outcomes from Incentive Dynamics

There are several aspects where the incentives surrounding the department’s management of operations are driving unintended outcomes. While EXORDs are one mechanism to communicate the assignment of mission, the DoD often accumulates more missions than it curtails. Once a mission is assigned, incentives drive the dynamics with unintended outcomes.

Strategic Insolvency

Combatant commands have gained a greater voice in the demand for resources, and EXORDs provide an important justification for those requests within the Pentagon bureaucracy. Despite improvements in risk analysis with the Global Force Management (GFM) process, incentives to overestimate risks remain.⁵¹ Almost immediately after issuance, the Global Force Management Allocation Plan (GFMAP), which is the mechanism through which the secretary assigns forces to combatant commands to perform their directed missions, is challenged by real-world events.⁵² While each individual deviation from the plan is subject to review and approval by the secretary through the “orders book,” the cumulative effects of those individual force reallocation decisions over time increases risks to the force overall.⁵³

Compounded by budget uncertainty and the inability to keep pace with operational sustainment, readiness, and modernization, operational demands for resources exceed what the services and defense industrial base can supply. Frank Hoffman points to additional factors, including increased cooperation between adversaries, the changing character of warfare and new competitive domains, and the “perilous state of the U.S. federal budget,” leading to the view that the department’s “strategic insolvency is generating more risks than can be covered.”⁵⁴ At the same time, the number

of global conflicts has doubled in the past five years, while the threat of potential U.S. conflict with a peer adversary has risen.⁵⁵

The push to support recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan further drove the department to satisfy combatant commands' requests for forces over future requirements.⁵⁶ Despite the end of major combat operations, demand for resources has not abated as desires to deter or respond to threats from Russia, Iran, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have grown. Continuous surging and crisis-based posture reactions have impeded the desire of multiple administrations to enhance force posture in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁷ Even with the operational successes in recent support to Israel and actions against Iran's nuclear program, USCENTCOM request for additional forces to support operations drew ire and memes from those in USINDOPACOM.

Calls for combatant commanders to take an "appetite suppressant" are not new.⁵⁸ Yet, when making decisions about risk, the secretary is largely faced with the demand side of the equation coming from the combatant commands—justified by standing missions and EXORDs—showing the potential "risk to forces" and "risk to mission" if the requested forces are not provided.⁵⁹ Since no leader wants to assume risk to forces, the validation of the mission and its operational approach becomes more important. While the department has recently added "risk to strategy" as a key variable in the GFM decisions, the services are not yet prepared to provide authoritative readiness and sustainment data to articulate the risks on the supply side of the equation.⁶⁰ As a result, services are often directed to supply the forces requested, impacting maintenance, training, and other sustainment efforts.

Breaking the Force

The cumulative effect of sustained operations on military readiness represents a crisis hiding in plain sight. While well-intentioned and honorable, the military's "can do" attitude is compounded by the DoD's propensity to take on additional missions, trying to do "more with less," rather than prioritizing and cutting missions.⁶¹ The Navy's experience with surface ship readiness provides a sobering example of how a relentless operational tempo, driven by competing missions and reactions to real-world events, can degrade fundamental military capabilities.⁶² The 2017 collisions involving the USS *Fitzgerald* and USS *McCain* were not isolated incidents, but symptoms of a broader readiness crisis driven by the tension between operational demands, training certifications, and force maintenance requirements.⁶³

Similar patterns are emerging across all services as global commitments expand while force structure remains relatively static. Political demands to demonstrate military resolve, signal adversaries, or bolster deterrence by directing changes to U.S. force posture can also exacerbate areas where the force is already overextended.⁶⁴ Given the political reliance on military demonstrations of force or deterrence signaling, however, such demands from the White House are unlikely to dampen.⁶⁵ As such, the DoD may continue to expend readiness faster than it can be replaced—worsened by the almost certain challenge of budget uncertainty that undermines the ability to appropriately plan for maintenance and sustainment.⁶⁶ Programmatic, procurement, and maintenance delays threaten critical assets across all of the services, with rising and compounding costs for such delays.

Strategic Incoherence

Since operations are subject to changes in administration policy and preference, military leaders have a strong incentive to protect what operational authorities they have. In doing so, there is a tendency to avoid modifying or revising EXORDs for fear that it will result in authority taken away.⁶⁷ As such, the DoD denies itself the ability to adapt the mission to changes in the situation or policy—thereby keeping orders focused on the initial impetus for action and not the outcome of its successes or failures in operations. Similarly, changes in command structures should necessitate changes to how authorities, responsibilities, resources, and accountability flow.

This reluctance to regularly review and update orders is one of the ways in which the DoD accumulates missions that demand continued resources. While one-off risk in the commander's intent may be addressed by individual OPORDs, as adjusted by the respective combatant commander, it creates a path for cumulative risk to accrue at the strategic level—placing the onus on the secretary to discern and manage across the broader force. When authorities and accountability become so diffuse, it makes it more difficult for the chairman to support the secretary in global integration, impedes the secretary's ability to effectively manage strategic risk, weakens accountability within the department, and impedes oversight by Congress.

Challenges in Assessing Toward Outcomes

While some, not all, EXORDs have inserted assessment and reporting instructions, often as a means of control, military command and feedback to the secretary of defense and president are as much art as science.⁶⁸ Yet the United States has done poorly at honestly assessing the outcomes of its military efforts. Strategist and historian Colin Gray is quick to point out that “all too often, there is a gaping hole where U.S. strategy ought to reside.”⁶⁹ As military historian Hew Strachan notes in *The Direction of War*, “The problem of strategy is located at the fault-line between policy and the operational level of war. . . . The consequence of politicians pretending that policy is strategy and of soldiers focusing on operations has been to leave strategy without a home.”⁷⁰

Once the decision is made to use military force, key questions include: Who is responsible; is it working; and are the costs acceptable? While the DoD has a significant role to play in implementing and executing the decisions, it alone cannot answer these inherently political and strategic questions. Yet the proclivities of U.S. military culture, as described by multiple officers, is that the operational assessment criteria are often inconsistent and based on the subjective judgement of the commander. Too often, incoming commanders are incentivized to show progress over their tenure, repeating assessment dynamics that mask challenges, and can inhibit the ability to build upon success. One officer described this recurring dynamic as a “failure of generalship.”⁷¹

As detailed in Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*, the responsibility for validating such military assessments falls to the statesman. Cohen notes, “Civil-military relations must thus be a dialogue of unequals and the degree of civilian intervention in military matters a question of prudence, not principle, because principle properly opens the entire field of military activity to civilian scrutiny and direction.” He recalls Winston Churchill's reflections on World War II, in that, “It is always right

to probe.”⁷² It is because of this uncomfortable probing into military details, he contends, that great war statesmen succeed. In reviewing multiple U.S. operations from Vietnam through Operation Iraqi Freedom, Christopher J. Lamb, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for resources and plans, dispels notions of regular civilian micromanagement; instead, he draws attention to military micromanagement, noting the tension between mission command and military command and control—a tension that is manageable by good leaders.⁷³ Similar to Cohen, he urges prudence in how leaders exercise oversight at their discretion and when they do decide to intervene.⁷⁴ Perhaps then, even in lesser wars or recurring operations, such probing also matters—particularly amid changes in the geopolitical environment.⁷⁵

Difficulty in Grappling with Changes in Warfare

The character of modern warfare presents new challenges for EXORD development and implementation, although such a dynamic is not new, having persisted since at least the 1980s.⁷⁶ Multi-domain operations require unprecedented coordination across traditional service and command boundaries, while operations in cyber and space domains often occur below the threshold of traditional military engagement.⁷⁷ Moreover, the department’s approach to deterrence and shaping operations falls largely outside the EXORD purview but carries with it potential for incident and miscalculation that could quickly escalate into crisis.⁷⁸ Current approaches to command, feedback, and adaptation may need to adjust.

Current EXORD structures, designed for conventional operations, struggle to address these ambiguous operational environments where the line between peacetime activities and wartime operations becomes increasingly blurred. Additionally, the growing importance of interagency coordination in modern operations—from humanitarian assistance to counterterrorism—requires EXORDs to address authorities and responsibilities that extend beyond traditional military channels. The integration of civilian agencies, international partners, and private sector capabilities into military operations may create new complexities that current EXORD frameworks inadequately address.

Recommendations

A reinvigorated use of EXORDs would enable the secretary of defense to drive greater alignment in the strategic and operational levels of command to address the complexity of today's multi-threat security environment.⁷⁹ To do so, the secretary, with the assistance of the chairman, may consider the following actions.

- **Review EXORDs Individually and Collectively on an Annual Basis.** EXORDs should be reviewed individually and collectively on an annual basis to ensure that changes in strategy, policy, threat, or priorities reflect the president's intent. In conducting such a review, it is most significant to look at the demands on the force—in total—to validate the resource allocations for force employment across missions, geography, and time (current demands against potential future contingency scenarios) and discern where and how risk has accumulated.
- **Assess Mission Effectiveness Toward Strategic Outcomes.** The secretary should articulate outcome-based criteria within the EXORDs to drive intelligence analysis and comprehensive assessment. These assessments should enable the department leadership to have better informed discussions about the trade-offs across missions time, examining impacts on capability, capacity, and readiness, including for potential future contingencies.⁸⁰ For missions that are reactive or responsive to crises or other unforeseen events, EXORDs should be drafted with a time-based sunset clause, thereby requiring a deliberate decision by the secretary to extend the mission beyond the anticipated duration.

- **Revise EXORDs as Mission Validation.** Changes in the “situation” should be considered as grounds to revalidate mission, objectives, and approach. If for no other reason, the DoD should be prepared to capitalize on its success—or acknowledge the shortfalls of a current approach—as both would have an impact on the situation and require adjustment. Similarly, adversary actions and other unforeseen events may demand a shift in operational execution or mission priorities. The DoD must be able to codify, account for, and communicate changes in mission, responsibility, and risk. In capturing the need and responses to changes, EXORD revisions can serve as an authoritative validation of a mission’s enduring need. This can further enable DoD oversight and accountability to the DoD, the president, Congress, and the American people.
- **Nest Broad-Based Authorities in Mission and Threat-Specific Orders.** Underlying authorities with global applicability are most useful to the department when directly tied to specific objectives for a mission or threat. To align these broader authorities into a coherent theory of deterrence and victory, they should nest within the overarching mission-based EXORDs. To do so, the secretary should explicitly articulate strategic intent across the entire operational portfolio—bridging operations to the political objectives determined by the president. In doing so, the capture of intent creates a basis from which the secretary can: (1) drive unity of effort and purpose across the DoD to connect strategy to operations with an explicit theory of victory; (2) enable assessment and adaptation as the situation and policy demands; (3) identify and manage resources and strategic risk across theaters, threats, and time frames; and (4) empower initiative at lower echelons through transparency and change management.
- **Incorporate Global Force Management and Mission Command (Earlier) into Professional Military and Civilian Education.** Command and control will change because of the changes in the character of warfare, which will require greater trust and understanding among civilian and military leaders. To prepare the department for mission command, both military and civilian leaders who oversee strategy, policy, and operations need greater understanding of how to enable command and control at the tripartite nexus. Strengthening the understanding of EXORDs at the highest level could enable better guidance to lower echelons. To do so, a foundation must also be laid with respect to military readiness, operational planning, and global force management.⁸¹
- **Leverage Data Technology for EXORDs and Planning.** Military orders are a mechanism to leverage and adapt military practice to opportunities in data technology, creating greater transparency that can empower and enable mission command and initiative at the operational and tactical levels. Orders management, issuance, and adaptation can be supported by advancements in data technology, artificial intelligence, and advanced communications. Enabling initiative at the tactical edge can be better supported by operational command and coherence at the strategic level—and with greater emphasis on those connections in earlier phases of military education.
- **Acknowledging Costs and Trade-Offs.** As the DoD makes progress in understanding the resource expenditures and impacts on force supply and demand, there remain

greater opportunities to consider other forms of strategic and operational assessment and accountability. Greater humility, trust, and incentives to ask whether the approaches are working toward strategic outcomes at acceptable long-term cost are warranted. Understanding impacts between different missions and stovepipes could enable collaborative or creative solutions. Much of this depends on the leadership, incentives, and culture in which civilian and military leaders rise through the ranks—as well as the ability to strengthen transparency and trust with Congress.

Conclusion

Reinigorating the secretary’s management of EXORDs requires acknowledging their role as constitutional instruments of civilian control, not simply bureaucratic paperwork. After almost 25 years of nearly continuous war, the United States remains in a series of unrelenting crises—while trying to address readiness and modernization challenges. As the department prepares to issue a new round of strategic guidance documents, it is a natural opportunity to evaluate operational priorities and risk allocations. Greater transparency and appreciation of how and for what aims military forces and effects are being used, documented in EXORDs as these pages argue, may help the Department of Defense navigate competing demands and evolving security challenges today and beyond. While EXORDs can help align Department of Defense use of the military instrument of power, it is but one instrument that is made sharper by the success of other elements of national power and congressional stewardship of resources.

Appendix A

Research Approach

This report examines critical areas for the Department of Defense for which EXORDs are integral but could be better utilized: (1) clarifying intent and assigning mission responsibility; (2) assessing whether the current operational approach is succeeding in achieving the strategic aims at acceptable costs; (3) managing risk across mission, time, and geography; and (4) empowering mission command through clarity and transparency. In exploring these four areas, the paper identifies structural, procedural, and cultural dynamics and incentives that affect the mission area. The paper focuses on issues largely within the DoD's remit to address, and most directly, actions the secretary of defense may initiate. However, the president, executive branch leaders across the national security community, and Congress play considerable roles.

The research approach included a literature review, expert roundtable discussions, and interviews with current and former military and civilian leaders from the DoD and congressional defense committees. One critical limitation of the research is its unclassified nature. As such, specific reviews of decisions, authorities, and orders were not possible to include using primary source materials, except in the rare instance where some redacted documents have been released through the Freedom of Information Act. Ultimately, the paper focuses on the leadership and management of the authorities and decisionmaking processes—rather than an examination into the content of the decisions. Future work would benefit from a deeper exploration into a variety of operational and campaign-related case studies.

About the Author

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Endnotes

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- 2 David A. Ochmanek et al., *Inflection Point: How to Reverse the Erosion of U.S. Military Power and Influence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2555-1.html.
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- 17 Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).
- 18 Janine Davidson, “The Contemporary Presidency: Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (March 2013): 129-145, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43286700?seq=1>.
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- 20 General Military Law, 10 U.S.C. § 113.
- 21 Per joint planning doctrine, “DoD is tasked to conduct operations in support of achieving national objectives. To support the national strategy (as identified in the [National Security Strategy] and [National Defense Strategy]), the CJCS oversees the development of the national military strategy, [Joint Strategic Campaign Plan], global campaign plans, and global integration frameworks. In turn, [combatant commanders] CCDRs develop campaigns to support the global campaign and shape the [operating environment] in a manner that supports those strategic objectives. They conduct their campaigns primarily through military engagement, operations, posture, and other activities that seek to achieve U.S. national objectives, protect U.S. national interests, and prevent the need to resort to armed conflict while setting conditions to transition to contingency operations when required.” U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, December 2020), https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf.
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- 33 Ibid.
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- 66 CSIS workshop, January 2025. See also discussions of U.S. munitions expenditures and air defense operations versus production rates.
- 67 Interviews with current and former DoD officials.
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- 69 Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 111.
- 70 Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy from a Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
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- 72 Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 9-10.
- 73 Christopher J. Lamb, “The Micromanagement Myth and Mission Command: Making the Case for Oversight of Military Operations,” *Strategic Perspectives* 33 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, August 2020), <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=inss-strategic-perspectives>.
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- 76 The 1986 Packard Commission and command challenges that led to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Reforms pointed to the organizational structure of commands not being suited for the regional crises, tensions, and conflicts that were commonplace in the 1980s. Yet, further empowering the commands empowered operational voices over the military departments that were constrained to organizing, training, and equipping the force. As today’s challenges span organizational seams and responsibilities, it reignites discussion for a new round of reforms. In addition to the Packard and McInnis writings previously cited, see also Harold Brown, *Thinking about National Security: Defense and Foreign Policy in a Dangerous World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983).

- 77 See Eliahu Niewood, Greg Grant, and Tyler Lewis, “A New Battle Command Architecture for Multi-Domain Operations: Countering Peer Adversary Power Projection,” MITRE Center for Technology & National Security, December 2019, <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/prs-19-3703-new-battle-command-architecture-multi-domain-operations.pdf>; and Steven Aftergood, “U.S. Military Given Secret ‘Execute Order’ on Cyber Operations,” Federation of American Scientists, March 13, 2014, <https://fas.org/publication/execute-order/>.
- 78 See “Figure V-1: Range of Military Operations,” V-1, and “Figure V-3: Notional Operational Plan Phases versus Level of Military Effort,” V-6, in U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, August 2011), <https://www.benning.army.mil/mssp/security%20topics/Potential%20Adversaries/content/pdf/JP%203-0.pdf>.
- 79 General Military Law, 10 U.S.C. § 113.
- 80 As mentioned in previous sections, revisions to the situation, intent, execution (mission or concept of operation, and tasks), and forces necessary to support EXORDs may seek to further consider changes in security environment; shifts in policy priorities or strategy; likelihood of operational success or failure; differing evaluations of cost effectiveness and exchange ratios; and sustainability and duration (resilience, rearmament, and readiness for other scenarios).
- 81 Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) Phase II curriculum could be augmented to include this material, but there is merit in considering EXORD-specific training earlier in military career timelines to correspond with O-4 staff position timelines. General/Flag officer and Senior Executive Service (SES) Capstone courses are another mechanism for such training. Of note, non-career, political SES may require specific training as part of their onboarding, depending upon the roles and responsibilities they are to assume.

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