

TOPFAS: more efficient way to move operations forward

Written by AG

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Mr Mark Vermeiren from the NATO C3 Agency has introduced the concept of TOPFAS – Tools for Operational Planning Functional Area Service – to key personnel of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC NE) while visiting Baltic Barracks on 29 November 2011. More insight into what TOPFAS does was also presented by Mr Vermeiren during an interview.

What is actually TOPFAS?

TOPFAS is a suite of tools for operations planning functional area services. Basically there are three main tools in it that deal with systems analysis, operations planning and campaign assessment. If you wish to go for more details, they are written in the Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive, better known as the COPD.

What are these three tools about?

Mr Mark Vermeiren: NATO has understood that the crises nowadays are very complex and the military alone will not be able to solve them. In that respect there is the need to understand the crisis because if you don't, it is really difficult to come up with a potential solution to it.

The first part of TOPFAS is systems analysis. We look at the crisis and try to look into it as into systems, like actors. An actor works autonomously and has an objective. A state can be an

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actor but you could have also non-state actors, like a clan for instance. You look at those actors, how they react, how they are structured in order to understand them – that is part of the systems analysis which is done through the Systems Analysis Tool, in short – SAT. This is one of the three main tools that TOPFAS encompasses.

If you have that information, if you understand what the crisis is about, that knowledge has to be transferred to the operations planners. They have to understand where you want to bring it and what can be done in order to solve the crisis – this is done through the second TOPFAS tool: the OPT standing for the Operations Planning Tool. SAT is operated by analysts whereas OPT is done by more traditional planners who define what the concept is and how the crisis can be solved.

Additionally, we have noted that in order to understand how well you perform, you must do an additional assessment. We have always been doing some combat assessment but nowadays there is also the second element in it: it is not only about how well you do it but also whether the things that you do and the conditions that you create will bring us towards the desired end state. To be able to do that, there is the third tool called CAT – the Campaign Assessment Tool.

These three tools work together defying already the three main functions of TOPFAS: analysis, planning and assessment. The tools allow to work from the same database and exchange the information so that the consistency is achieved. You can even do that in a distributed collaboration without the need to be in the same room. Analysts, planners and assessors while being in different parts of the world can still work together on the same data.

Does it mean it is a kind of common platform?

I am thinking more about a network; the tools currently work on the NATO Secret wide area network. In this way TOPFAS uses the existing infrastructure but it can be used on the Internet if we wanted to.

Is TOPFAS a new thing in NATO?

It is as new as we started working on the Comprehensive Approach. The traditional way of planning operations from the 80s, 90s, or even 2000 involved purely military aspects only. Then NATO went into the Effects Based Operations Approach and that was the change. The need to do the analysis, additional assessment and to work together was identified. Right now we want to expand the military way.

In the earlier days, because of the lack of understanding among the levels you had three different plans as an outcome – the strategic military plan, operational level plan and all the

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plans of the components and units. As a matter of fact that didn't work. The plan that was really executed was one of the three or maybe yet the fourth one that was not even planned. There was clearly a lack of unity. Rather than making three plans TOPFAS enables to make just one plan that has a strategic, operational and a tactical aspect in it. If that plan is executed, you have the unity of intent, unity of effect, and then, if you can put unity of control over it, it should work better.

TOPFAS has been used on different levels at the same time but how does it work in practice?

That is why we need to train people. We all need to understand that the strategic level looks at different parts of the plan than the operational and tactical levels. It looks how to employ the different sources of power like military, economic or social, how to mix them and bring that to bear on that system to make the operation work. If you go to the operational level, then you start to concentrate much more on what is the military doing on that entire system, whereas the tactical level then goes even lower to the execution of how we do it. So they work together, yes indeed, all at the same time.

□ Talking about an ordinary member of an HQ like Multinational Corps Northeast, what benefit can this person have from the system?

It is really about the NATO network enabled capability. The aim is to provide sufficient information to all people at all levels so that they are able to make a proper decision. Any person here in this Headquarters, may he or she be part of the planning, analysis or assessment, would benefit because the information they need to make the correct decision would be provided. Later on, if it goes to execution, they will also know what a desired outcome should be. In its totality, it adds value for every person to the lowest level.

Who is actually feeding up the database with information?

Everybody. Analysts do their own bit and provide the information that is stored in a central database. That central database goes through the other tools as well; people having access to it add their own products. Analysis is mostly done at the strategic and operational levels, planning however is done at the three levels, whereas assessment – at the operational and tactical

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levels. So there is a number of people who work together collaboratively, at the same time.

What is the aim of training you provide for the users of TOPFAS? □

The training is in the use of the tool for their own functionality, as simple as that. Analysts, for instance, use a bunch of applications or software in their work but none of them is really providing information to all the other people; it all stays within their own domain, their own “cupboards”. With this tool they can do everything that they want but that information is now readily available to the rest of the people. That is the main difference. The same thing is for operations planners and campaign assessors. And we do not teach specialists to do their work; we train them how to use the tool, including some visualization or briefing techniques made available by TOPFAS.

And who is actually using TOPFAS in NATO?

It is used at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, all Joint Forces Commands, most of the components as well as those force commands that come for the NATO Response Force (NRF) rotations.

What is the aim of your visit to HQ MNC NE?

To give a presentation about TOPFAS: what is the aim and how it supports the processes. Many people may not know it especially if they come from a tactical level. If I asked how many planners here know about the strategic level planning, I bet that there will be not too many. They know their own part and I would like to put it into the perspective of the Comprehensive Approach to help them understand the full picture. And then I am going to present the tools and get them a flavour what they can provide.

Photo by: Cpl A. Konitzer, DEU A