



Cross-Domain Command, Synchronization and the Role of CIMIC in Multi-Domain Operations

Concepts, Interoperability, Capability Branch
2026

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of military doctrine, Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) are defined as the orchestration of military activities across all domains – Air, Land, Sea, Space, and Cyber. To generate timely and relevant converging effects, these activities are to be synchronised with those of non-military actors. Furthermore, the desired effects extend beyond the traditional physical into cognitive and virtual dimensions.

The Alliance concept of Cross-Domain Command (CDC) is an evolved approach to command and control that navigates this increased complexity in operational context and effects. It emphasises the responsibility and mindset of commanders to not only orchestrate military forces but also synchronise military activities with non-military actors and activities to gain a decision-making advantage, delegate authority, focus resource use, increase resilience, and maintain freedom of manoeuvre, thereby gaining an overall advantage over the adversary.

CDC defines synchronisation as the **collaborative alignment of military and non-military activities to achieve synergy through converging effects**. This process requires continuous, holistic collaboration with a Broad Partner Network (BPN) including non-military actors such as government institutions and services, industry, academia, commercial entities, and non-governmental organisations.

Unlike orchestration, which involves a structured command-and-control system within the military hierarchy, synchronisation can be less formalised. It does not legally or operationally confer command authority over non-military actors. As a result, effective synchronisation depends on pre-planned coordination mechanisms established at the strategic level well in advance of operations, through Day Zero Integration and Interoperability (DZI). This enables alignment at both the operational and tactical levels.

Finally, synchronisation differs from a Comprehensive Approach by its focus on leveraging non-military activities to support and enable military objectives rather than targeting broader political or civilian goals.



THE ROLE OF CIMIC AS THE PRIMARY FACILITATOR FOR SYNCHRONISATION

Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) serves as the primary joint function for synchronisation. It sets the conditions for successful synchronisation by integrating the understanding of the civil factors of the operating environment and enabling structured civil-military interaction with non-military actors. Through these CIMIC core activities, CIMIC enables commanders to leverage non-military capabilities – such as those provided by industry, academia, and civil organisations – in support of military objectives, whilst also mitigating the negative impact of non-military actors and activities on the operation. This enabling role is a key aspect of synchronisation within Cross-Domain Command.

SYNCHRONISATION ACROSS THE LEVELS OF COMMAND

1. Political-Military Strategic Level: Synchronisation of Instruments of Power

At the political-military strategic level, synchronisation involves aligning the Instruments of Power (IoP) – Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic – to achieve whole-of-Alliance/MDO approach. Political leadership, along with organisations like the North Atlantic Council, ensures that military actions are coherently aligned with political objectives, economic measures, and strategic communication.

Next to the IoPs, this command level increasingly seeks synchronisation with global private-sector players and academic institutions. By allocating funds, establishing high-level agreements, and creating coordinating mechanisms with these types of non-military actors, the Alliance can leverage cutting-edge innovation, increase industrial (defence) capacity, and research to support military objectives. This collaborative alignment ensures that the development of non-military activities and capabilities is synchronised with the Military IoP to create synergy and converging effects across the continuum of competition.

Vignette (Political-Military Strategic):

In response to an adversary's sub-threshold aggression, the Alliance initiates a synchronised response. The Economic Instrument of Power imposes targeted sanctions, while the Diplomatic Instrument of Power secures a UN mandate. The Military Instrument of Power adjusts its posture through increased vigilance measures to demonstrate resolve. At the same time, the Information Instrument of Power conveys a strategic narrative that exposes the adversary's illegitimacy. Together, these actions present a unified and coherent response from the Allies.



2. Military Strategic Level: Synchronisation with International Organisations

At the military strategic level, the focus is on campaign synchronisation. Strategic commanders set priorities, frameworks, and agreements that facilitate cooperation with international organisations and non-military partners across the theatre. This level establishes the governance, policies, and mechanisms necessary for effective synchronisation at lower levels.

Vignette A (Military Strategic):

To quickly reinforce the Eastern Flank, SHAPE collaborates with the European Union on Military Mobility. Military needs are coordinated with civilian infrastructure projects, and legal transit agreements are established beforehand. This preparation enables swift movement of forces in times of crisis without being hindered by civilian regulations or infrastructure constraints.

Vignette B (Military Strategic):

SACEUR establishes theatre-wide guidelines for the Protection of Civilians and synchronises these with the United Nations. Space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and AI-enabled analysis are used to identify civilian movement patterns, allowing the military campaign to be adapted to minimise civilian harm while maintaining operational effectiveness.

3. Operational Level: Aligning Military and Non-Military Activities

At the operational level, commanders are responsible for delivering synchronised multi-domain effects within a specific joint operations area. Synchronisation plays a crucial role at this level, as operational commanders (e.g. JFCs) actively seek complementary non-military actions from actors outside their command. Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) staff supports this process by conducting Civil Factor Integration and facilitating Civil-Military Interaction. This enables the identification and implementation of Complementary Non-Military Actions (CNMA) that align with the operational design.

**Vignette A (Operational):**

A commander needs to accurately identify a time-sensitive target. During the preparation phase, proactive synchronisation established a relationship with a commercial space-based ISR provider. Near-real-time satellite data is integrated into the command support system using AI-enabled tools, allowing for precise targeting while minimising collateral damage.

Vignette B (Operational):

The J9 branch identifies a critical shortage of medical supplies in a contested urban area using Civil Factor Integration. The commander coordinates military logistics with an international NGO to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. This approach, informed by human security, helps maintain the legitimacy of the mission and prevents the adversary from exploiting the situation for narrative advantage.

4. Tactical Level: Execution of Orchestrated and Synchronised

At the tactical level, commanders conduct orchestrated military activities synchronised with local non-military activities to create operational-level effects. Tactical synchronisation is often highly dynamic, involving Civil-Military Interaction with local authorities through Mil-Mil liaison (ensuring Host Nation consent) or local private-sector companies (see Vignette), the local population, and NGOs to maintain freedom of manoeuvre and ensure force protection.

Vignette A (Tactical):

A NATO Rapid Deployable Corps faces manoeuvre disruption due to an online influencer promoting civil unrest. The tactical commander collaborates with a local internet service provider and cyber units to counter the influence campaign while also delivering reassurance messages to the local population. This approach restores freedom of movement without resorting to kinetic escalation.

Vignette B (Lower Tactical):

A CIMIC liaison officer at the battalion level coordinates with local police and fire services to synchronise the evacuation of a village before a planned artillery strike. Civilians are moved through safe routes, which prevents casualties and maintains freedom of manoeuvre while adhering to the principle of distinction.



CONCLUSION

To fulfil the MDO requirement, synchronisation must be institutionalised at all levels of command, from the political-military strategic level – where Instruments of Power are aligned – to the operational and tactical level, where commanders synchronise with local non-military actors and activities.

Achieving this requires a shared MDO, thus a CIMIC mindset.

Synchronisation efforts must be explicitly included in the preparation phase / Day Zero integration to establish coordination mechanisms before crises arise.

By implementing synchronisation alongside orchestration through Cross-Domain Command, the Alliance can better navigate the civil factors of the operating environment, maintain initiative, generate a sustainable decision-making advantage, delegate authority, focus resource use, increase resilience and maintain freedom of manoeuvre in MDO.

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