

LESSON 5

COURSE OF ACTION COMPARISON AND DECISION

“The first law of war is to preserve ourselves and destroy the enemy.”
—Mao Tse-Tung

Lesson Introduction

The course of action (COA) Comparison Decision step of the MCPP provides the commander a means to identify and select the COA that *best* accomplishes the mission. This is the first step in which the commander directly involves his staff and subordinate commanders in the planning process. In preceding steps, the staff and major subordinate commanders have provided input into the planning process indirectly through their representatives in the operational planning team (OPT). Some MEF commanders may, however, choose to involve selected members of the staff or certain MSC commanders in the planning process up front and informally. Reasons for this decision may include the unique nature of the operation or the special relationship these MSC commanders have with the MEF commander.

Lesson Requirements by Educational Objective

Requirement 1

Objective 1. Recognize the inputs, tasks, and outputs associated with the COA Comparison Decision step.

Objective 2. Use the COA Comparison Decision step to create the appropriate outputs of this step in the context of an operational or tactical situation. [JPME 2(c),3(a)(c)]

Read:

- MCWP 5-1, pp. 5-1 to 5-3 (3 pages), review Appendix D pp. D-14 to D-15 (see Lesson 2, Requirement 2, for reading) (2 pages), and review Appendix F (familiarize yourself with the formats).

Although it has been extremely tempting thus far in the planning process to compare COAs against each other, it is critically important to resist. The focus of the COA War Game step is to compare the performance or potential performance of our COAs against potential enemy COAs. Now it is time to compare each of our COAs with each other using the commander’s evaluation criteria and the performance of our COAs as observed by members of the OPT. By now, staff members and MSC commanders have received feedback from their OPT representatives and have formed opinions and made recommendations for the MEF commander with regard to each COA. During this step, the staff and MSC commanders meet, work out problems, and hear varying perspectives. Naturally, the more that is ironed out informally, the smoother this session will flow. It is important that the various commanders and principal staff officers use this time wisely rather than letting details or minor issues, more appropriately resolved informally, reduce

the process to a form of dysfunctional gridlock. A major goal of the MCPP is to generate planning tempo through efficient and effective use of time. For this reason, either the commander, his deputy, or the chief of staff facilitates the COA Comparison Decision meeting.

Once the commander has made his decision, and depending on the magnitude of the modifications he desires, the OPT incorporates the commander's changes and quickly prepares the concept of operations. It is vital to ensure that both the concept of operations and the warning order, which is also prepared during this step, reflect the commander's modifications.

When making his decision, the commander may view elements of his evaluation criteria with varying importance. If this is the case, one useful tool for the commander is the weighted comparison matrix shown on the next page. Each COA is evaluated, just as in the simple ranking comparison matrix found on page D-15 of the assigned reading, but the score is multiplied by the weight of the criteria. In the example that follows, the best COA of the three receives a one (1) in the criterion row, the next best receives a two (2), and the next best receives a three (3). This is done for each evaluation criterion. The scores are then multiplied by the weight and summed to provide the final score to determine which COA most favorably meets the commander's criteria. The COA with the *lowest* total is favored. Using this same example, another way of scoring might be to give the best COA a score of three, the next COA a two, and the last COA a one, then sum the columns and use the *highest* score. Either technique should yield the same overall result. This second method is demonstrated in our example on the next page. In this example, COA 2 would be the one recommended for selection, based strictly on the commander's evaluation criteria.

COA COMPARISON MATRIX

<u>CMDR'S EVALUATION CRITERIA</u> (weight)	<u>COA 1</u>	<u>COA 2</u>	<u>COA 3</u>
CMDR's intent (4)	1 (4)	2 (8)	3 (12)
Defeat of enemy centers of gravity (6)	1 (6)	3 (18)	2 (12)
Exploitation of enemy vulnerability and friendly strengths (5)	3 (15)	2 (10)	1 (5)
Generates operational tempo (3)	3 (9)	1 (3)	2 (6)
Tactical flexibility (2)	2 (4)	3 (6)	1 (2)
Simplicity (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	1 (1)
Total	40	48	38

A matrix such as the one above could be created but instead of using the commander's evaluation criteria, we would place the staff section or warfighting function in the far left column. Each staff principal and warfighting function representative would vote on the COA that was best supported by respective staff or warfighting function. This is a useful technique used by some commanders. In any case, these matrices are merely tools and methods for attempting to quantify the information that might affect the commander's decision.

The interactive multimedia instruction (IMI) (Web/CD-based) product allows each student to use the COA Comparison Decision step in a practical application setting. You can accomplish objective 2 only by using the practical application portion of the IMI product.

**** View the interactive multimedia instruction for lesson #5 immediately following this lesson's summary.**

Lesson Summary

COA Comparison Decision is the commander's formal opportunity to decide on the COA he thinks is best to accomplish his mission. Extensive commander, deputy commander, chief of staff, principle staff, and MSC commander participation characterize the COA Comparison Decision step. Unlike the first three steps of the MCPP, this step directly involves all the senior leadership and decision makers. The OPT's role in COA Comparison Decision is purely supportive. Inputs such as the various COAs with their

supporting documents, the results of the COA War Game, the commander's evaluation criteria, and the refined staff estimates help the commander make his final decision. Outputs such as the final concept of operations, the warning order to subordinate commands, and the identification of branches for further planning are derived from COA evaluations and comparisons. The OPT will ensure that the commander's modifications are incorporated into the COA and are reflected in each output to include all supporting documentation (i.e., COA sketch and narrative, the synchronization matrix, and all planning support tools). All outputs from this planning step now go into the development of the operation order.

JPME Summary

AREA 1					AREA 2				AREA 3					AREA 4					AREA 5				
A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	
							X		X		X												