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# Operational art and asymmetric warfare

Der Autor betrachtet die Kunst der operativen Kriegsführung vor dem Hintergrund asymmetrischer Bedrohungsformen. Er kommt zum Schluss, dass das «operative Business» im Rahmen einer asymmetrischen Bedrohung komplexer ist als in regulären Kriegen. Einen wichtigen Grund hierfür erkennt er darin, dass das strategische Ziel in der asymmetrischen Kriegsführung weniger militärisch, dafür umso politischer sei.

Milan Vego\*

Any conflict or war is conducted for the purpose of policy and strategy. They provide the framework and set the conditions and limitations for the use of one's military sources of power. Also, all wars are ultimately won or lost at the strategic and operational levels. Hence, no amount of skill and brilliance in tactics can lead to final victory if there is a serious mismatch or disconnect between policy and strategy. However, the gap between tactics on the one hand and strategy and policy on the other cannot be overcome by physical combat alone. The tactical framework is too narrow and the strategic perspective too broad to ensure the most decisive employment of one's available sources of power. Therefore, another field of study and practice between strategy and tactics – operational art (or perhaps a better term is operational warfare) – must exist to properly synchronize or orchestrate all available sources of power for accomplishing the strategic or operational objectives in a theater. Otherwise, the ultimate victory will require far more time and resources.

## Operational art

Operational art can be defined as that intermediate field of study and practice of military art dealing with both the theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting, and sustaining major operations and campaigns aimed at accomplishing operational or strategic objectives in a given theater. It serves both as a bridge and as an interface between strategy and tactics. Strategy today is not concerned, as it was until the end of the nineteenth century, directly with the employment of one's armed forces in combat, but operational art and tactics are. The results of tactical actions are useful only when linked as part of a larger design framed by strategy and orchestrated by operational art.

Operational art can be applied across the entire operational continuum, from low-intensity conflict to high-intensity conven-

tional war. It is applicable in both symmetric and asymmetric warfare. However, because of the considerably different characteristics of the military objectives, it is much more difficult to properly apply operational art in asymmetric than in symmetric warfare.

The *objective* to be accomplished comprises the very heart of both the theory and the practice of operational warfare. Without a clearly stated and attainable objective, the entire military effort becomes essentially pointless.<sup>1</sup> Almost all aspects of operational art are related, either directly or indirectly, to the objective to be accomplished. Among other things, the objective determines the method of one's combat force employment, the size of the physical space for accomplishing it, the level of war, and also the level of command. Carl von Clausewitz in his *On War* said that the most essential factor in trying to bend the enemy to one's will is the political object (or objective) of the war. The latter, in turn, determines both the military objective to be accomplished and the amount of effort it requires.<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz also observed that sometimes political and military objectives can be identical.<sup>3</sup> This is usually the case in a war of conquest. Sometimes a political objective might not provide a suitable military objective. In that case, another military objective must be determined to serve the political purpose. In general, when the military objective and political objective are identical in scale, if the political objective is reduced, the military objective must be reduced proportionately.<sup>4</sup> In general, the more the nonmilitary aspects of the strategic objective predominate, as in counter-insurgency, the less the need for one's use of sources of military power. Then, the ultimate strategic objectives should be accomplished by properly harnessing political, diplomatic, financial, informational, and other instruments of national power. Expressed differently, the more nonmilitary aspects of the strategic objective there are, the more complicated becomes the use of one's military forces to accomplish that objective.

In general, the larger the military objective, the higher the *level of war*. Hence, three basic levels of war exist: strategic, operational, and tactical. The relationship between the levels of war may differ depending upon the unique circumstances of

a particular conflict or war.<sup>5</sup> Levels of war are not clearly delineated from each other. Distinctions among the levels are greatest in a high-intensity conventional war. It is there that the stratification of levels tends to be most complete and the levels' individual characteristics most evident.<sup>6</sup> When the nonmilitary aspects of the strategic objective predominate, as in the case of an insurgency, counterinsurgency, or so-called counterterrorism, the scope of the operational level of war is comparatively much smaller than that of the strategic and tactical levels.

## The art of warfare

The art of warfare at all levels is to obtain and maintain freedom of action – the ability to carry out critically important, multiple, and diverse decisions to accomplish assigned military objectives. At any level of war, one's freedom of action is achieved primarily by properly balancing the factors of space, time, and force.<sup>7</sup> The higher the level of war, the larger the factors of space, time, and force, and hence the more critical it is for commanders and their staff to properly balance these factors with the respective military objective. In determining the military objective, the operational commander and his planners must fully consider the enemy's factors of space, time, and force – collectively called *operational factors* when they pertain to the operational level of war. Then they should evaluate individual and collectively friendly factors of space, time, and force against the respective strategic or operational objective. The mutual relationships of the factors space, time, and force should be arranged in such a way that they collectively enhance the operational commander's ability to act freely within

<sup>1</sup> C. R. Brown, "The Principles of War," *Proceedings* 6 (June 1949), p. 624.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gary P. Petrole, *Understanding the Operational Effect* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 8 May 1991), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Erich H. Koenen, *Die operativen Ideen Mansteins hinsichtlich Nutzung des Raumes, Gewinnen der Initiative, Schaffen von Handlungsfreiheit und Wahl zwischen offensivem und defensivem Vorgehen. Eine Untersuchung anhand der Beispiele «Rochade» und Schlacht bei Kharkow des Winterfeldzuges 1942/43* (Hamburg: Fuehrungssakademie der Bundeswehr, November 1988), p. 2; Fuehrungssakademie der Bundeswehr, «Operative Leitlinie für die Führung von Landstreitkräften» (Oktober 1993), Arbeitspapier Operative Führung (Hamburg: Fuehrungssakademie der Bundeswehr, August 1992), p. 19.

## ZITAT DES MONATS

«Unausgebildete Leute in den Krieg zu schicken bedeutet, sie wegzuwerfen.»  
Konfuzius

given political, diplomatic, legal, or other limitations. In practice, operational factors will rarely be completely, or even approximately, in harmony with one another or with the assigned operational or strategic objectives.

Balancing operational factors with strategic or operational objectives is often much more complicated and time-consuming in asymmetric warfare than in symmetric warfare. One might contend that the side that applies an asymmetric response has a significant advantage over the stronger side that favors symmetric warfare. Hence, the stronger side must fight asymmetrically; otherwise, final victory will be elusive, or the war might never be won.

The military objective to be accomplished also determines the method of combat employment of one's forces. In general, the principal methods are tactical actions, operations (major operations, in U.S. terms), and campaigns. The operational objective is normally accomplished by planning and executing operations. They are conducted with combat arms/branches of a single or several services and are normally an integral part of a campaign. In a high-intensity conflict, a campaign consists of a series of related operations sequenced and synchronized in terms of place, time, and objective. A campaign is invariably aimed to accomplish a military or theater-strategic objective. Because of the nature of the strategic objective, a campaign in a low-intensity conflict, such as insurgency or counterinsurgency, consists largely of a series of related minor, and sometimes major, tactical actions, rather than operations. Additionally, nonmilitary sources of power will predominantly be used in some types of low-intensity conflict, while military forces are predominantly used in a supporting effort.

## Low-intensity vs. high-intensity

In contrast to high-intensity conventional conflict, the military situation in low-intensity conflict is predominantly composed of hard-to-quantify or unquantifiable elements. The ultimate strategic objective will be accomplished through a series of tactical actions rather than operations. In asymmetric warfare the analysis of critical strengths and critical weaknesses/vulnerabilities for both the enemy and the friendly side is more difficult than in symmetric warfare. The main reason for this is the inherent characteristics of asymmetric warfare. The intangibles of the military situation are dominant at all levels of war. Moreover,

even tangible or physical aspects of the situation might be difficult to know with any degree of certainty. This also makes it extremely difficult and time-consuming to determine which of the enemy's critical strengths represent the true center of gravity – a source of massed strength, physical or moral; or a source of leverage whose serious degradation, dislocation, neutralization, or destruction would have the *most decisive impact* on the enemy's or one's own ability to accomplish a given military objective. The nature of center of gravity in an insurgency or counterinsurgency significantly differs from that in a high-intensity conventional war, because the nature of the strategic objective is predominantly non-military (political, psychological, informational, etc.). In an insurgency, rarely do the antigovernment forces mass enough forces to constitute a tangible operational center of gravity. For the government, then, the rebels' top leadership or the guerrilla force as a whole might comprise a strategic center of gravity. In the case of Marxist (-Leninist) or fascist (whether secular or religious) movements, ideology should be considered an important part of the strategic center of gravity. The individual rebel commanders and their forces in the countryside would usually constitute tactical and, in some exceptional cases, operational centers of gravity.

For the insurgents, the government's legitimacy and its armed forces would normally represent a strategic center of gravity that needs to be severely degraded, weakened, and ultimately destroyed. Therefore, the government's task is to preserve and, optimally, enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the country's population. Legitimacy is a fundamental strength.<sup>8</sup> It is a condition based on the perception of the justness of the actions of the government. It is bestowed by the population. Without being widely accepted as legitimate, the government is unlikely to survive a determined insurgency. It is the governments' lack of legitimacy in many of the current and future trouble spots that provides the various hostile factions with the power to operate in the manner they do. For an insurgency to succeed, it must concentrate a major part of its efforts toward the drastic reduction or elimination of the legitimacy of the government. And this usually takes a lot of time. At the same time, a counterinsurgency effort cannot be successful unless the government's legitimacy is not only maintained but also increased in the eyes of the majority of the population. Legitimacy must be seen in the context of conflicts resulting from an increasing reliance on violence by a minority attempting to impose its will on the majority. This is where efforts must be focused to bolster the legitimacy of legal authority.<sup>9</sup>

## Operational functions

For maximum effectiveness in the employment of one's combat forces, a number of supporting structures and activities, arbitrarily called "functions," should be fully organized and developed. They should exist at all levels of command, both in time of peace and in war. Thus, in generic terms, tactical, operational, and strategic functions can be differentiated. The key functions are command organization (or command structure), intelligence, command and control warfare (C2W), fires, logistics, and protection. At the operational level of war, these functions are called *operational functions*. Each of them encompasses a rather diverse range of related subordinate functions, all of which should be integrated to the fullest extent to achieve the highest degree of efficiency and effectiveness. No subordinate function should be considered separate from the others, through political expediency or because it is believed to be more critical than another – for example, defense and protection against weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – or through just plain arbitrariness. The operational commander is responsible for properly sequencing and synchronizing not only joint forces but also operational functions, prior to and in the course of a campaign or major operation. It should be emphasized that the sequencing and synchronization of operational functions should not drive the sequencing and synchronization of the operational plans for the employment of joint forces.

Because of the considerable differences in the strategic objective to be accomplished, operational functions in asymmetric warfare also differ from those in conventional war. For the most part, the *operational command structure* might be inadequately developed prior to hostilities. A high degree of centralized command and control is often preferred in a low-intensity conflict. Yet this does not mean that the theater commander should not rely on the establishment of intermediate levels of commands in exercising his authority and responsibilities.

*Operational intelligence* should be a fusion of national strategic and tactical intelligence. The focus in intelligence gathering should be on the human-related aspects of the military situation. This means that the role of technical intelligence is relatively less important than that of human intelligence (HUMINT) in asymmetric warfare. *Operational C2W* plays a relatively much larger

<sup>8</sup>J. M. Petryk, *Legitimacy – A Center of Gravity for the Information Age* (Toronto: Canadian Forces College, ASMC 3/CSEM 3, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

role in asymmetric warfare than in high-intensity conventional war. It entails the integrated use of operations security (OP-SEC), military deception, psychological operations (PSYOP), electronic warfare (EW), and physical destruction, all supported by intelligence, to influence, degrade, deny information to, or destroy adversary command and control capabilities while protecting one's own command and control against such actions. It is applicable across the entire spectrum of conflict.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to high-intensity conventional war, operational C2W should be focused less on physical destruction and more on the synchronized use of PSYOP, EW, and deception.

Asymmetrical warfare calls for nonlethal rather than lethal *operational fires* – the application of firepower for a decisive impact on the course and outcome of a campaign or major operation. Nonlethal fires usually require more time and effort than lethal fires to be effective. They are also rather diffuse in nature and difficult to concentrate on a specific enemy force. The two most important types of nonlethal fires are EW and PSYOP. *Operational logistics* should be fully deployed theaterwide; otherwise, operational commanders would have great difficulty in synchronizing logistics and operations. Broadly defined, the term *operational protection* pertains to a series of actions and measures conducted in peacetime, crisis, and war that are designed to preserve the effectiveness and survivability of military and nonmilitary sources of power deployed or located within the boundaries of a given theater. This task is considerably more difficult in low-intensity conflict than in conventional high-intensity war, because the enemy forces might operate throughout a large part of a given theater. Full protection of key installations and facilities and friendly forces is an especially difficult problem in the urban environment. Only a single commander can successfully integrate and then synchronize all aspects of defense and protection in a given part of a theater.

## The commander

The commander's character and personality traits are as critical to ultimate success in asymmetrical warfare as they are in conventional high-intensity war. Operational commanders and planners must acquire operational thinking and have "operational vision." Among other things, they also must

<sup>10</sup> Joint Pub 3-13.1, *Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare (C2W)* (Washington, DC: 7 February 1996), p. 1-4.

have a thorough knowledge of the enemy's politics, society, traditions, and ideology. Operational commanders must have the ability to properly sequence and synchronize all sources of power under their command in asymmetrical warfare. Decisions and actions at the tactical level might sometimes have not only operational but even strategic consequences. This, in turn, requires more centralized command and control. It also requires that tactical commanders and their subordinates act with due regard for the possible negative political consequences of their actions.

## Planning

In planning a campaign in a low-intensity conflict such as insurgency or counter-insurgency, the desired (strategic) end state is much harder to determine than when planning for a conventional campaign. Because the nature of the strategic objective is more nonmilitary, the intermediate objectives in such a campaign are predominantly major or even minor tactical in their scale. One of the difficult problems is to properly match the ends and means with ways to accomplish a strategic objective that is predominantly nonmilitary. The method of destroying or neutralizing the enemy's strategic center of gravity requires not only physically eliminating the top and mid-level leadership but also countering the ideological appeal and support among the populace. This would include effective measures and actions aimed at delegitimizing the enemy leadership, disrupting or cutting off the insurgents' or terrorists' support networks (political, financial, propaganda, arms supplies, etc.). At the same, as a strategic center of gravity, the legitimacy of the friendly government must be continuously enhanced. The importance of strategic and operational deception is considerably enhanced in asymmetrical warfare. The new information technologies provide more, not fewer, opportunities for both the stronger and weaker sides to effectively use deception for accomplishing their respective objectives.

## Conclusion

The application of operational art is much more complicated in asymmetric warfare and generally requires great knowledge and skill on the part of operational commanders and their staffs. The main reason for this is that the strategic objective is predominantly political, diplomatic, psychological, economic, and social rather than military. This, in turn, requires more judicious use of one's military power. In contrast to conventional high-intensity conflict, a campaign in asymmetric warfare

consists largely of a series of tactical actions rather than major operations. The enemy presents few opportunities for the stronger side to achieve decisive victories on the battlefield. Hence, asymmetric wars are inherently protracted and require longer and highly intensive efforts in synchronizing both nonmilitary and military sources of power to achieve the final victory. ■

Hanspeter Ruckli, Adrian Urscheler

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