Chapter 3

Theater Strategic and Operational-Level Perspective

A major concept essential to understanding Army theater operations at the operational level is operational art and design. Key elements of operational art and design apply across the range of military operations. Commanders must understand these elements when they plan and conduct Army operations in theater. This chapter discusses the Army operational-level commander's employment of ways and means to obtain ends established by theater strategy and campaign plans.

No particular echelon of command functions solely at the operational level. Command echelons may vary with the nature of the campaign or major operation, strategic and military objectives, organizational structure, or size of the joint force. The intended purpose—not the level of command—is the primary determinant of whether a force functions at the operational level.

OPERATIONAL ART

FM 100-5 describes operational art as "... the skillful employment of military forces to attain strategic and/or operational objectives in a theater of operations through the design, organization, integration, and conduct of theater strategies, campaigns, major operations, and battles. Operational art translates theater strategy and design into operational design which links and integrates the tactical battles and engagements that, when fought and won, achieve the strategic aim."

Operational art links tactical events to strategic objectives. Using operational art, the CINC envisions the theater strategic and operational design. To achieve theater strategic design and objectives, the CINC arranges unified operations, joint operations, major operations, and tactical-level battles. Operational art at the operational level uses major operations in support of joint campaigns to sequence these events over time and space. Senior army commanders and their staffs practicing operational art may operate in a joint and possibly combined arena. They sequence Army operations to achieve theater strategic and operational objectives.

KEY CONCEPTS OF OPERATIONAL ART AND DESIGN

The theater strategic and operational concepts that explain operational art and design include center of gravity, decisive points, lines of operation, culminating point, indirect approach, positional advantage and strategic concentration of forces, and deception. The CINC and his principal subordinates should agree on what design features are most important to accomplishing the mission. The CINC establishes the first use and priority of these concepts. Subordinates' use and priority is a subset of the CINC's. For example, the CINC selects the strategic center of gravity, and subordinates select decisive points on the path to attacking the center of gravity.

Center of Gravity

The essence of operational art is concentrating friendly military forces and resources against the enemy’s main sources of strength (strategic center of gravity) in a manner that provides the JFC with the strategic and operational advantage and the initiative. The destruction, dislocation, or neutralization of the enemy center of gravity should prove decisive in achieving strategic
objectives. Similarly, the JFC must identify the theater friendly center of gravity and protect it.

The enemy center of gravity exists at all levels of war. A center of gravity is the foundation of capability—what von Clausewitz called "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends...the point at which all our energies should be directed." (On War, 1976) The center of gravity maybe seen in more complex components or abstract terms, such as the enemy’s alliance, solidarity, or national will and in actual examples such as strategic reserves, C, logistics, industrial base, and so forth. The center of gravity is most useful at the operational level of war as an analytical tool to focus the effort against the enemy’s strength.

In MOOTW such as disaster relief and humanitarian assistance the enemy’s center of gravity is the threat of hunger or the elements of the environment. The uniqueness of these operations requires the commander and his staff to understand the military’s role in relation to the total efforts of national power being used to resolve the situation. The military’s role supports the other elements of national power.

Decisive Points

Decisive points provide commanders with a significant advantage. They are the keys to defeating or protecting the center of gravity. Normally, there are more decisive points in a theater than there are resources to attack them. The commander designates the most critical points and objectives as a means of gaining freedom of maneuver to gain and maintain momentum. By correctly identifying and then attacking (or protecting) decisive points, the commander is able to defeat the enemy’s center of gravity. Decisive points serve as trigger points for friendly force actions that sustain the initiative. The AO will have more decisive points than available resources to commit against them. The commander and his staff must conduct a risk analysis to prioritize the friendly force efforts.

A stand-alone, individual information war action can be decisive. Winning the information battle before the war can be even more decisive than winning it during hostilities. Winning the information war before the war may preclude combat operations. The ability to get inside an adversary’s decision-making cycle (his operational ability to react) is critical to attacking his centers of gravity, exploiting his weaknesses, and effectively concentrating our own combat power. An area that must not be overlooked is using, and even driving, emerging technologies to access the tactical situation on the ground.

Lines of Operation

Lines of operation define the directional orientation of a force in relation to the enemy. They connect the force with its base of operations—from which it receives reinforcements and resupply—and its forward units—where it operates against the enemy. This concept is linked to the interior or exterior (or combination) directional orientation of a force in relation to the enemy. Lines of operation are used to focus combat power effects toward a desired end.

Culminating Point

The culminating point is the point in time and space at which the offensive becomes overextended, and offensive combat power no longer sufficiently exceeds that of the defender to allow continuation of the offense. While this point may not be precisely determined, the commander and his staff should consider it in the design concept.

A defensive culminating point is that point at which the defender’s capability is reduced to such a degree that continued pursuit could result in the defender’s defeat in detail. If the defender’s aim is to transition to the attack, then the culminating point is where the defender must revert to a holding action and await reinforcement. If the defender’s aim is to retain terrain, then the culminating point is where the defender must withdraw, delay, and so forth.

Indirect Approach

An indirect approach is a scheme that attacks the enemy center of gravity from unexpected directions or at unexpected times. The indirect approach seeks enemy vulnerabilities and avoids enemy strengths. The application of techniques to win the information war is one area that leads itself to the indirect approach. When possible, JFCs attack enemy centers of gravity directly. Where direct attack means attacking into an opponent’s strength, JFCs should seek an indirect approach. Examples include attacks of flanks, rear areas, or C capabilities. Vulnerabilities are boundaries or seams between forces, the relative weaknesses of unprotected flanks or rear areas, or unhardened
command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) facilities.

Positional Advantage and Strategic Concentration of Forces

Strategic realities indicate that force ratios may not favor friendly forces across the theater. Therefore, the JFC determines where to strategically concentrate force and in what areas to accept risk. Clearly, this aspect ties in with the center of gravity, indirect approach, positional advantage, and deception. Joint forces seek to obtain positional advantage relative to enemy forces. Such advantage includes control of territory—air, land, sea, subsea, and space—from which to better operate and attack. Having positional advantage includes denying this territory and freedom of movement to the enemy. Attaining this advantage involves combat operations.

Deception

Deception manipulates enemy perceptions about friendly force intentions, positions, and timing. Deception has strategic, operational, and tactical aspects, and its planning is as complex and detailed as the overall plan. Deception relies heavily on intelligence information, which helps commanders identify appropriate targets, develop a credible story, and determine the effectiveness of the effort.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THEATER AND OPERATIONAL DESIGN

The key elements of theater and operational design reinforce the concepts of operational art and design. The elements consist of the—

• Objective.
• Sequence of operations and use of resources.
• Phases.
• Branches and sequels.
• Sequential and simultaneous warfare.
• Logistics.

The senior army commander’s effective use of operational art and design elements translates theater strategy and the campaign into operational and, ultimately, tactical action. No specific level of command is concerned solely with operational art and design. The level of command that has the responsibility to link strategic aims with tactical execution varies in military operations.

The theater commander and subordinate operational-level commanders may control large military formations over great geographic distances while sequencing tactical military operations in pursuit of strategic or operational objectives. Conversely, operational-level commanders may control relatively small military formations conducting specific, short-term operations for the same purpose. Senior army commanders practice operational art across the range of military operations. Whatever the environment (peace, conflict, or war), the operational-level commander links theater strategy and campaigns to tactical execution by effectively sequencing operations over time.

Objective

The objective is the central element of operational design because it establishes the condition necessary to achieve the strategic aim. While the CINC initially keys on national or alliance strategic objectives, he also supplements them with theater strategic and operational objectives. To ensure clarity of strategic and operational intent when conducting subordinate campaigns, JFCs may identify and carefully describe operational objectives from the CINC’s specified and implied tasks.

Sequence of Operations and Use of Resources

The sequence of operations and use of resources are closely related elements of theater and operational design. The operational-level commander links theater strategy and campaigns to tactical execution by effectively sequencing major operations and battles over time. As described in FM 100-5, tempo and battle command contribute significantly to the effective sequencing of events.

The JFC visualizes the sequence of operations necessary to achieve the desired conditions of the strategic end state. Without this linkage, operations are apt to become a series of disjointed events less likely to achieve the desired theater objectives. The visualization includes identifying the enemy center of gravity and culminating points and protecting the friendly center of gravity. This process is useful when determining phases of a
campaign, applying resources against these phases, and enabling the JFC to envision requirements for branches or sequels.

**Phases**

Generally, the campaign is divided into phases that focus on major changes in the nature of the total effort, such as defensive to offensive, decisive maritime action, and decisive continental action. Some campaigns are naturally progressive in their phasing (establish sea control, gain a lodgment, initiate a major continental campaign), while others are more complex. The latter may be the case when the opponent has initiated hostilities and the theater commander must transition from an initial defense, to seizure of the initiative, and eventually to offensive operations to achieve the strategic goal. The main effort is to attack the centers of gravity simultaneously throughout the depth of the battle space. Often that effort is phased.

Each phase in the campaign should lay the groundwork for its successor until a final decisive effort can be joined. A phase may orient on a physical objective or on establishing a certain advantageous condition. The description of each phase should identify the strategic tasks to be accomplished, together with the ultimate purpose—the why—of the strategic tasks. The description should include a narrative of the theater commander’s strategic concept of how and when these strategic tasks are to be accomplished. It should also include an estimate of force requirements, as well as major supporting operations necessary for the effort.

These concepts and force estimates should be continually refined up to the time the operation order implementing that phase is required. Prior to terminating the phase or meeting the necessary conditions for moving to the next phase, planning will have begun and the refinement process to facilitate the transition will continue.

The phasing and sequencing of operations should not be slow or methodical. However, as soon as conditions permit, the JFC strives to overwhelm the enemy throughout the depth of the battle space. He conducts simultaneous attacks throughout the depth to paralyze the enemy and force an early capitulation.

**Branches and Sequels**

Besides phases, the JFC visualizes requirements over the full range of operations for branches to preserve freedom of action. Branches are contingency plans for changing disposition, orientation, or direction of movement and for accepting or declining battle. Sequels are actions taken after an event or battle and are based on possible outcomes—victory, defeat, or stalemate.

Sequels, for example, might reflect a potential transition from the strategic defense to a counteroffensive, to a withdrawal, or to an occupation. The visualization of branches and sequels is not simply a thought process of events. This visualization is a parallel planning process that provides the command a valuable resource-time.

**Sequential and Simultaneous Warfare**

In considering phasing, the JFC addresses the problem of deployment to ensure that forces arrive at times and places that support the campaign. Because of limited resources, geographic considerations, and our system for organizing the force, the US may go to war in sequential phases.

At the strategic level, sequential actions include mobilization, deployment, and sustainment of the sequential employment of forces. Because the US is strategically insular, plans are driven to exterior LOCs, and, with limited resources, the campaign is phased to achieve strategic ends.

At the operational-level, sequencing may be seen more in terms of employment. Additionally, sustainment is a critical consideration in sequencing campaigns. The campaign establishes requirements for the procurement and apportionment of national resources from CONUS-sustaining bases. Forward bases must be established, LOCs must be opened and maintained, intermediate bases of operations must be established to support new phases, and priorities for services and support must be established by phase. Logistics considerations, then, become key to sequencing the campaign plan.

Notwithstanding the generally sequential nature of campaign phases, some phases are conducted simultaneously—particularly in depth. Deployment may continue well after employment begins. Sustainment is conducted throughout. Redeployment may begin during posthostility operations. Defense and offense
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operations are always interrelated. Also, sequential operations may be conducted in a single operation, for example, the raid into Libya.

Logistics

Logistics is one of the combat functions that helps commanders build, sustain, and project combat power. It is also a major operating system at each level of war. Combat operations and logistics increasingly merge at higher levels of war. Neither can be conceived without consideration of the other.

Strategic and operational logistics support wars, campaigns, and major operations; tactical logistics supports battles and engagements. Strategic and operational logistics interface in the theater. The combatant commander provides strategic guidance and priorities for operations, while the service component commanders identify operational requirements to the national industrial logistics base.

Deployment and integration of forces and logistics in the theater are based on the combatant commander’s theater strategic design in his campaign plan. Centralized management and distribution of supplies and materiel at the strategic level facilitate decentralized execution of logistics at the operational and tactical levels. Further discussion of operational art and its corresponding components can be found in FM100-5.

RESOURCES

The resources provided to the operational commander are the means. The authoritative direction that governs the conduct of operations are the ways.

MEANS

The means allocated to the operational commander influence the selection of the operational objectives. Tangible resources include military forces and supplies made available to the commander. These may include other nonmilitary assets such as US civilian agencies or HNS and direct augmentation, for example, civilian reserve air, land, or maritime fleet transportation assets.

Intangible resources include the commander’s authority over forces not under his direct command; authority over certain nonmilitary aspects of theater operations, for example, refugees; and public and diplomatic support of military operations.

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The allocation of resources provides capabilities and constraints on the conduct of operations. The concept for operations emerges from these capabilities and constraints. The concept is tempered by contingency plans (branches) that include deception. The authoritative guidance for the operational concept is the ways of the operation.

The nature of the strategic direction may require that the use of military force be limited such as by ROE. Limiting factors dictate how the Army operational-level commander uses resources to attain a particular operational objective. The Army commander articulates these limiting factors in the form of restrictions and constraints.

Restrictions

Restrictions prohibit the operational-level commander from performing specific actions or categories of actions. The laws and treaties of the US embody some restrictions such as those on the treatment of noncombatants imposed by the Geneva Conventions. Others will be unique to the circumstances and locale of the particular conflict. Some restrictions may prohibit the use of certain weapons, preclude operations in certain geographical areas, or limit certain tactical methods such as the mining of harbors. Such restrictions may influence the achievement of operational-level objectives.

Constraints

Constraints shape operational alternatives. In contrast to restrictions, constraints denote actions that the commander must take or methods he must employ. Limits of advance and control measures in general are examples of constraints. The imperative to minimize casualties also may shape alternatives.

Methods may include objectives unrelated to operational military aims but which have inherent strategic significance. For example, the JFC may require the Army commander to
employ combined forces even though their use would make operations more complex from the Army perspective. Frequently, constraints require retaining or protecting areas deemed diplomatically or psychologically important but tactically insignificant. The retention of Verdun in 1916 constituted such a constraint on French operations, though it resulted in no military gain and cost nearly a million lives.

**OPERATIONAL-LEVEL COMMAND**

The Army may act as a service component, functional component, subunified command, or JTF subordinate to the JFC during the conduct of operational-level activities. The ASCC, or ARFOR commander, acting in one or more of these roles at the operational level, plans and conducts subordinate campaigns, major operations, and operations to attain theater strategic and/or operational objectives to support the joint force mission.

The JFC translates strategic guidance to operational terms in the form of an OPLAN or operations order (OPORD). This OPLAN/OPORD includes a clear mission and specific tasks to which the traditional military decision-making cycle is applied. The JFC provides a clear definition of the conditions that constitute the strategic and military end states. The conditions for the end states must exist before planning and execution of military operations can be effective. The Army operational-level commander may translate these conditions into a single military objective or phased military objectives expressed in major operations that support joint campaigns.

The Army commander participates in the joint concurrent (parallel) planning process to help the JFC translate strategic direction and aims into a clearly defined and achievable end state and objective. Usually, the more intense the conflict and the more predominant the military factors, the easier it is to translate strategic direction into operational-level objectives. When the nonmilitary elements of national power dominate, the full use of military capability may be limited. Joint Pub 3-O states that adaptive planning provides a range of options encompassing all the elements of national power (diplomatic, economic, informational, and military). The selection of military operational-level objectives tends to be more complex in MOOTW.