

Operational Level of War: A Tool for Planning and Conducting Wars or an Illusion?

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Abstract.

The operational level of war is a relatively new military principle introduced to the military lexicon by the US Army in 1982, almost out of the blue sky. Since then, the term was adopted first by the English speaking countries, and then by the NATO and eventually by the rest of the world's militaries. Before 1982 the term used by the military professionals and theorists around the world, including the American military establishment, was *operational art*. The latter was used for the first time by the Soviets in conjunction with the much wider terms *deep operations* and *deep attack*.

The theory of deep operations was developed in the '20s and '30s based on the experience of the newly established (in fact renamed) Red Army from First World War, the Russian civil war and the often forgotten Russo-Polish war of 1919-1921. A series of Soviet theorists, including Mikhail Frunze, Aleksandr Svetsin, Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Vladimir Triantafillov ended up with the theory of deep operations which survived up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The art of conducting deep operations was named *operational art*.

For centuries the understanding was that war was planned and executed at two distinct levels, namely the strategic and the tactical level. Though this division of war was practiced by military leaders for centuries, it was theoretically documented by the great Prussian theorist and practitioner of war Carl von Clausewitz in his monumental work *On war*. In his work, he defined strategy as "*the use of engagements for the object of the war*" and tactics as "*the use of armed forces in the engagement*". While the definition of tactics remained unchanged until today, the one of strategy progressively changed because of major changes in the character of war and finally made space for another level, the operational level of war.

For the most part of the history of warfare, the dominant strategy of war was the single point strategy of the decisive battle. According that, the general, who was the political and at the same time the military leader, led its army to a predefined place, at

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a predefined time, to meet the whole of the enemy army, in one decisive battle, whose outcome would produce also a decision for the war. The actual plan and execution of the battle was the realm of tactics.

The single point strategy of the decisive battle survived, in one way or the other, until the Napoleonic wars. The cataclysmic changes in warfare of this era led to subsequent changes in strategy. The enormous increase in the number of armies the nation-states were able to field and the improvement of the European road infrastructure led to important changes in the way the strategic commander conducted the war. Instead of the army moving in one column, it was divided in Corps, which, led by a lesser general, was sustained and moved independent towards the place chosen by the strategic commander to meet the enemy for the decisive battle. Even so, the strategy remained “*the use of engagements for the object of the war*” as defined by Clausewitz. The last battle fought in this way was the battle of Koningratz won by Moltke the Elder on behalf of the Prussian King against the Austrians.

Eventually the corps not only moved independently, but started fighting a series of battles for the purpose of the war independent of the rest of the army. This series of battles fought by parts of the army was called *operations*, and the art of conducting them *operational art*. The strategic commander, instead of planning and executing battles for the purpose of the war, he started planning and executing operations. With this new development, the war was planned and executed at three levels, the strategic, the operational and the tactical level.

It is obvious that the idea of dividing the planning and execution of the war into three levels was developed within the context of the industrial or 14lexiglas14n war. The question we need to ask ourselves, and most important to answer, is if this sort of distinction is applicable to other types of war. As noted by Martin van Creveld, the majority of the wars conducted worldwide after Second World War were of the type called limited war or Low Intensity Conflict. Even worse, the Armed Forces are progressively used in operations collectively characterized under the terms Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) or Peace Support Operations (PSO). The requirements for these “new” types of war are radically different vis-à-vis the old industrial or Trinitarian wars, causing doubts about the validity of the principle of the three levels of war. A thorough analysis of all factors involved shows that the principle of the tree levels of war should be applied with caution and on a case by the case basis, especially for Low Intensity Conflicts, MOOTW and crisis management operations, depending mainly on the purpose of the specific war decided by the politicians and pursued by the military.

Keywords: Operational, war, level, operations, operational art, strategic, tactical

1 Introduction

The operational level of war appeared for the first time in the 1982 edition of the US Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations. Today, there are hardly a few militaries in the world that abstain from using it in their official military doctrines. The general perception is that the theoretical background of the operational level of war is based on the concepts of operational art and deep attacks or deep operations of the Soviet military school of thought, developed in the 20's and 30's in the then Soviet Union, by military theorists like Svechin, Triantafyllov, Tuchashevski and others ([1]).

Despite the fact that the operational level of war today is widely accepted as a given, there also those who question the universal applicability of the concept. In this paper, we argue that the operational level of war should be applied with caution, after considering thoroughly its utility; in particular we examine (and question) its applicability vis-à-vis two important factors, namely the type of war we embark on and the size of the armies involved in the conflict and the subsequent complexity of the military operation.

The current orthodox view of the subject is the one depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Levels of war and relevant terms

As a point of departure, we will use the NATO's definition of the operational level of war, being representative of the views of 29 nations' militaries and a number of others in some way connected with NATO (Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative:

The level at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations ([2]).

2 War and Campaign

We would like to clarify first an aspect of the terms *war* and *campaign*. A state's political leadership resorts to war as a means to manage an ongoing crisis, in an effort to impose its will to its opponent. The general military activity (intelligence collection, movement of military units, logistics, etc) conducted in the context of the war in the face of a specific enemy is denoted by the general term (military) operations; this should not be confused though with the specific term *operations*, which will be addressed later in the text. The general military operations conducted in the context of the specific war in pursuance of a political goal is collectively called *campaign*. Therefore, as a point of departure, we accept that in the context of a specific war there is only one campaign. The war, being "the continuation of politics with the addition of other means" ([3]) and therefore a state's affair, is not restricted to the military domain, but includes also other relevant activities (economic, diplomatic, informational, etc); as such, war as a general is the responsibility of the political leadership, while the planning and conduct of the campaign falls under the responsibility of the military leadership.

Of course that does not mean that there are not wars consisting of more than one campaign, but this happens only under special and rare circumstances. In the wars before Napoleon a campaign was planned with seasonal rather than geographical criteria; the campaigns primarily were used to start in summer season for the very practical reason of being able to feed the army off the enemy's land. If the campaign failed to produce a decision, it was disrupted and repeated next year about the same time. The Spartans, during the first years of the Peloponnesian war, used to invade

Attica every summer, because the Athenians every year, in application of the Periclean strategy ([4]) (the one later becoming widely known as Fabian strategy), withdrew within the city walls avoiding to play on the Spartans strong points, namely the land battle. On the other hand, in the post-Napoleonic era, there are wars consisting of two concurrent campaigns, provided that the state possesses the required capabilities. Such examples can be found almost exclusively in the context of the two World Wars, where the capabilities of the states involved were such that allowed them to conduct simultaneous operations in geographically separated theaters, as was the case with the European and Pacific American theaters of war. Our take away from this short reference to *campaigns* is that for big powers whose national interests and the power projection capabilities extend worldwide it is possible to have more than one campaign in the context of a single war, while in the case of peripheral and small powers the most likely case is the existence of a single campaign in the context of a single war.

3 Strategy of the Decisive Battle

The campaigns before Napoleonic-era were led by the commander in chief (CINC), who in the majority of the case was the military and political leader of the political entity engaged in the war. The CINC raised the biggest army he could get, including mercenaries, and led it as a block, seeking to engage his opponent in one battle. The battle, usually short in duration, produced a decision for the war as a total. This battle was later called decisive and the respective strategy, strategy of the decisive battle.

The strategy of the decisive battle dominated wars almost until 19th century, not without exceptions though. And this because for such a battle to take place, in most cases it required the consent of the enemy; if he decided to avoid battle at all, as Fabio did in the Second Punic War (218 to 201 BC) against Hannibal, or to leave the battlefield once he realized that defeat was inevitable, as Darius III did in the war against Alexander the Great, the engagement of the two armies in one decisive battle was, if not impossible, at least very difficult.

If therefore strategy is the use of battles in pursuance of political ends ([6]), then its work was limited to “when” and “where” the decisive battle would take place.

Once this was decided, then the rest of the war was a matter of tactics and the respective commander, who almost always was the strategic commander himself. It seems then that the war was planned and conducted at two levels, the strategic and the tactical, which is clearly depicted in the Clausewitz's work.

4 The RMA of the Napoleonic-era

The first Revolution of Military Affairs (RMA) appeared during the Napoleonic-era (with the second being the creation of nuclear weapons). With war retaining its nature, its character changed radically, mainly in duration and geographical coverage, in the size of the armies involved and the lethal capacity of the weapons used. This RMA caused an unprecedented increase in the complexity of the war and rendered the strategy of the decisive battle at a single point of the theatre of war obsolete. Generals were very reluctant to risk the decision of the war in a single battle. The achievement of the political end would now require not a single but a series of battles. The campaign, as a rule, consisted therefore of more than one battles. In this new and complex war environment, strategy was complicated; the decisions needed to be made by the CINC, who was not the political leader any more but a professional military officer, were harder and more complex. Despite all these changes though, as a rule, war still consisted of one campaign, planned and conducted at two levels, namely the strategic and the tactical.

The growth of the armies in size created problems vis-à-vis their movement and logistics within the theater of war, as well as its command by a single commander. This inevitably led to the division of the army in smaller units, which were used to move towards their objectives in more than one routes, always in distances facilitating the mutual support, each one under the command of lesser generals, converging at the place decided by the CINC for the decisive battle. This practice eventually led to the independence of the formations, not only for reasons of movement, logistics and command, but also for the engagement with the enemy. The CINC was not any more able to monitor and direct the military operations, and therefore he depended on his subordinate generals to plan and conduct the individual battles. The formations started engaging with the enemy in a series of battles, independent of the other

friendly formations, but always in cooperation with them in the context of the general plan of the campaign designed by the CINC. The respective military concepts had to be adjusted according to the new situation in the theatre of war. In addition to the existing military terms of *campaign* and *battle*, a new term was added to denote the series of tactical engagements planned and conducted by those lesser generals: *operations*. According to the new situation in the theater of war, the *campaign* consisted of one or more groups of military activities, which today are called *operations* or *major operations*. Such an *operation* consisted of a series of battles or other tactical engagements conducted by a formation which was only a fraction of the whole army, in the context of a *campaign* for the achievement of an operational objective within a fraction of the theater of war. That means that the war consisted of one *campaign*, which in turn consisted of one or more *operations*; each operation consisted of a series of battles or other tactical activities.

In conclusion, in the new military environment of the post Napoleonic era, the strategy of the decisive battle could not be applied any more. Instead of the (conceptually) simple move of the main army (as a whole or in parts) to meet the hostile army in one decisive battle, the strategy had to analyze the overarching aim of war in partial or intermediate (operational) objectives, which had to be assigned to more than one military commanders, each one responsible for one *operation*. Each of those operations was a series of battles aiming at achieving one operational objective.

5 Conclusion: Causes for the Adoption of the Operational Level of War

The term *operations* appeared at the end of the 19th century in the German military literature, as depicted in the writings of the German Field Marshal Colmar von der Goltz. Some years later it appeared in the Soviet military literature more systematically and with a better theoretical background, through which it was made known to the world. An *operation* is a series of tactical actions in the context of a *campaign*, in pursuit of operational objectives. The general perception is that war consists of one or more *campaigns*, each of which could comprise, not necessarily though, two or more *operations*. For example, the first Gulf War was a war of one campaign, comprising of two operations, namely Instant Thunder and Dessert Storm.

On the other hand, the Falklands war of 1982 between United Kingdom and Argentina was a war of one campaign and one operation.

It seems then that the appearance of the operational level of war is due to the following reasons.

- The drastic increase of the armies and the subsequent geographical expansion of the theater of war and/or operations, the increase of the distance of the theater of war from the “center” and the protraction of the duration of the war and its conduct throughout the year.
- The complexity of the military operations. War, from some time on, was not consisted of one (decisive) battle or a limited number of battles, but comprised a series of simultaneous or subsequent battles, organized in *operations* and *campaigns*. The complexity increased with the size of the armies involved and the size of the theater of operations, which means that the complexity is more likely to appear in wars conducted by superpowers or big powers, whose interests and respective power projection capabilities extent worldwide. In additional, the complexity of the war created also serious command and control issues; this further complicated the planning and prosecution of war.

The aforementioned reasons, in connection with the lack of technology for the oversight and direction of war by the political and military leadership, created the requirement for the insertion of another commander, responsible for the planning and conduct of a portion of a campaign, called *operation*. This new type of commander was called *operational commander* and the respective level *operational level of war*.

6 Limited wars

As with most military concepts developed in the past (Center of gravity, lightning war, deep operations, etc), the concept of the operational art and the respective level of war were developed in the context of unlimited (and even total) war. In the post WWII military environment though, with a few exceptions, the

majority of the wars were limited ones ([5]). Today, the probability of a state being engaged in an unlimited war is very low.

As a general rule, in the context of a limited war, the military concepts take a different meaning and their validity and implementation should be reconsidered. Therefore, under the light of the dominant type of the future war, all military concepts, including the operational level of war, should be revisited.

In the case of a limited war the political aim might be both vague and fluid (NATO's operation Unified Protector in Libya being a recent example), in the sense that it can change even after the start of the shooting war, and therefore the close cooperation of the political and military leadership is not only required but also imperative for the successful prosecution of the war. A requirement stemming from the vagueness of the political aim is the careful assessment and subsequent decision for the suitability of the military option as the right tool for the resolution of the crisis, examined in connection with the restrains and constrains expected to be imposed by the political leadership; restrains and constrains expected to be more and stricter compared to the case of an unrestricted war. In such a fluid and restrictive environment for the use of military power and under the condition that war will not escalate into an unrestricted one, the military force is expected to be engaged in a series of a limited number of tactical engagements (even in just one) in the context of only one campaign (which automatically excludes the existence of independent operations) for the achievement of the chosen political aim, before the (most likely) intervention of international organizations and a possible cease fire. Therefore the requirement of the political leadership and the CINC to exert close control on the military operations is obviously more imperative compared with the case of an unlimited war; this requirement in no case is served by the insertion of an extra level of command and control, namely the operation level of war.

In conclusion, in a war of this type, with limited political aims, limited military forces expected to be engaged in a limited number of military operations within a restricted theater of war, independent operations should not be expect, but rather a limited number of tactical engagements (even just one); in such a case there is no room for independent operations, the employment of operational art and the existence of an operational level of war and a respective commander.

6 Crisis management

A special case for the use of military power is that of a crisis management, without escalation to a shooting war. Crisis management requires the orchestration of a state's elements of power, under the direction of the political leadership; in this case, by far the most important element is diplomacy. It is more than obvious that in such a fluid, restrictive and fast evolving environment, the role of military power (and the other elements of power as well) is supportive to diplomacy; the implicit threat of use of power aims at exerting pressure to the opponent for the achievement of the aims of diplomacy. The military forces in the crisis area are under the absolute and immediate control of the CINC, who works in full coordination with the political leadership. For this purpose, the CINC needs to have a detailed appreciation of the situation in the crisis area, in order for him to be able to prepare its proposal to the political leadership for the employment of the military forces, at any point during the crisis. The requirement for direct communications of the strategic commander with the local tactical commander practically precludes any thought for the insertion of an operational level commander between himself and the tactical one. The strategic commander is the one who plans, monitors and directs the tactical activities in the crisis area, always in concert with the political leadership. Therefore, in a crisis management, the existence of an operational level of war and the respective commander is not only redundant, but most likely dangerous for the effective management of the crisis.

7 Epilogue

The operational level of war has an actual life of about 30 years; it is already part of the operational doctrine of almost all militaries of the world. Even though the division of the war in three levels, including the case of mere use of military force in crisis management situations or MOOTW, should be the starting point of the campaign planning for the strategic commander and his staff, all doctrines "require[s] judgment in application" ([2]). The careful assessment of the security environment and primarily the analysis of the goal pursued by the political leadership with the use of military power, could lead to the adoption of two, instead of three, levels of war, as

a simpler and more efficient approach to its prosecution. We would dare to posit that the only sure case for the application of the operational level of war is the unlimited type of war, and even then under certain circumstances.

On the other hand, the operational level of war is a relative new concept which has not been tested long enough in real life. It is also true that the ultimate judge of the validity and usefulness of any military concept is war itself, whose judgment we should wait.

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