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# AIRLAND BATTLE IN NATO, A EUROPEAN VIEW

by

ARIE VAN DER VLIS

**T**his article will present one European's personal view of US Army AirLand Battle doctrine and discuss some possible implications of the doctrine for NATO. It is not my intention to try to cover all aspects of the doctrine. The discussion will focus on the following subjects: first, the command and control structure (i.e. echelons above corps) in the context of NATO; then, some aspects of the AirLand Battle doctrine at the strategic level; and last, some elements of the doctrine important to the operational level of war.

The present command and control structure of NATO seems to me a very logical one. The way the various NATO countries are grouped together in Europe, and the fact that climate, terrain, and other conditions vary a great deal from country to country, make a division into three subtheaters, each commanded by its own commander-in-chief, inevitable. The Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces Central Europe (CINCENT) is responsible for an area the forward edge of which, to be covered adequately, requires at least eight army corps. It is impossible to command that many corps from one headquarters. This problem has been solved by introducing two army group headquarters, each commanding at least four army corps. Of course, the name of this echelon of command is confusing, because an army group commander normally commands armies and not army corps. Nevertheless, the task of this echelon is clear: to prepare, and in case of a war to implement, the general defense plan of CINCENT in its sector.

In terms of levels of war, I want to relate the echelon of CINCENT both to the strategic and, even more, to the operational level of war. Army group headquarters are typically related to the operational level of war.

Having followed the discussions that are going on in the US Army on the subject of echelons above corps in relation to the command and control aspects of AirLand Battle, I must ask whether there is any need for the introduction of a separate, national echelon between the level of army group and army corps, i.e. an army headquarters. I am not referring to a peacetime headquarters like Seventh (US) Army but to a national army headquarters having operational responsibilities in wartime. The answer to the question is clearly no.

The main reason for this judgment is that the introduction of an additional echelon in NATO's command structure will make the command and control structure too complicated. It will inevitably result in a duplication of tasks, in consuming more time to make and implement decisions, and in decreasing the flexibility inherent in the present structure.

All the tasks that might be executed by a national army headquarters in wartime can and should be done by the respective NATO army group headquarters, with one or two exceptions, of which logistic support is the most important. However, having an army commander with no operational responsibilities, and responsible only for the logistic support of some army corps, makes no sense.

Logistic support can be assured by a national support group, which in wartime operates according to national guidelines but also in consonance with operational guidelines from the respective NATO commanders.

Outside Europe, the situation may be different. However, the deployment of a force greater than an army corps seems to me very exceptional. If this statement is true, I wonder whether most of the command and control problems cannot be solved by combining the tasks of land component commander and army corps commander and by structuring the corps as an independent corps having its own logistic elements.

I want to add a few words about coordination with air force elements, a very important subject in relation to the AirLand Battle doctrine. In NATO very centralized air allocation procedures exist. These procedures are applied theater-wide. AirLand Battle, however, relies on the early allocation of air power to support the ground commander. This is possible only in an environment in which a decentralized use of air power is accepted, which is obviously not the case in NATO. Therefore, as far as this aspect is concerned, difficulties will arise when the AirLand Battle doctrine is applied in NATO. The way NATO allocates air power also was one of the major factors affecting the doctrine for the attack on follow-on forces as developed by the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR).

**L**et me now turn to some of the problems related to the implementation of the AirLand Battle doctrine in a NATO environment from the strategic and operational points of view. The preface to Field Manual 100-5 states that the manual is consistent with NATO doctrine and strategy. This is not quite true. The doctrine has been criticized on both the strategic and operational levels of war. It should also be remembered that General Bernard W. Rogers made very clear in an interview in *Army Times* that the AirLand Battle doctrine and NATO's strategy and doctrine are not identical.<sup>1</sup>

The strategic objectives of US forces in a future war can, according to FM 100-5, be translated into something like "winning the war by destroying the opposing enemy force." I well realize that FM 100-5 is not meant to formulate a military strategy.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, sections of it (e.g. the introductions on pages 1-1, 2-1, and 8-4) at least give the impression that the AirLand Battle doctrine is to support the strategic objective mentioned above. NATO, however, talks neither of winning wars nor of the destruction of the enemy force. NATO's objective in war is to preserve or restore the integrity and security of the NATO territory. Keeping in mind that there is no disagreement about the fact that our most important task is to deter war in peacetime, it is obvious that the two wartime objectives differ. It might be that semantics play a role in the chosen formulations—of course, you do not write in an operational manual that your objective is to lose a war—but I believe that there are also differences in the two perspectives.

NATO has always been careful in emphasizing its defensive posture and the related limited objectives in war. There are several reasons for this. The first is the certainty that the majority of the European countries will not support a more offensive strategy, one aimed at winning a next war and destroying the Soviet forces. Attempting to adopt such a strategy would result in the loss of public support for NATO, a support which is based on the terrible experiences of World War II

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and the wish not to be involved in a war like that again.

Second, Europeans generally feel that a more offensive attitude does not contribute to NATO's security. They believe that it would further strain relations with the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw Pact countries, which in turn might lead to a higher risk of war.

Moreover, in Europe the general feeling is that there are not winners and losers in a direct, violent confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries. To Europeans, thinking in terms of winners and losers reflects an underestimation of the catastrophic consequences of any major war in Europe.

You might say that NATO's strategic objectives in wartime are more limited than the objectives that can be derived from FM 100-5. If I understand NATO's strategy well, NATO thinks more in terms of winning battles than of winning a war, in defeating elements of the opposing forces rather than trying to defeat completely the enemy force, in trying to restore as quickly as possible the situation as it was, rather than in pursuing objectives beyond that aim. Therefore, I think, for example, that in geographical terms there will be great political pressure not to go beyond the objectives of restoring the integrity of NATO's territory. To summarize, NATO does not seek a military victory over the USSR.

Another aspect at the strategic level is the role nuclear weapons would appear to play in a future conflict. NATO's view on this is very clear; nuclear weapons belong to a different level of conflict than conventional force. Thus the use of nuclear weapons does not mean the introduction of just another form of firepower; it means not only the well-defined escalation of a conflict to a higher level of intensity, but also to a higher level of risk in the direction of general nuclear war. The decision to use nuclear weapons, even so-called "battlefield weapons," is a decision of pronounced strategic importance. The main purpose of an escalation to the use of nuclear weapons will be to restore deterrence and to speed the termination of the war.

The text of FM 100-5, however, implies another attitude toward the use of nuclear

weapons. There is no clear distinction in the manual between a conventional battlefield where the battle takes place under the threat of nuclear weapons, and the nuclear battlefield. This distinction is not only important from the strategic point of view but also at the operational and tactical levels of war, where the actual use of nuclear weapons has great implications; for example, in creating the capability to launch a deep attack. Instead, FM 100-5 emphasizes the integration of the employment of nuclear weapons with conventional and other means. References to nuclear operations are scattered throughout the manual. Additionally, the manual looks at nuclear weapons, once released, as another form of firepower, emphasizing the tactical use of nuclear weapons aimed at the destruction of the enemy forces. I do not deny the fact that in certain situations nuclear weapons can restore an otherwise hopelessly deteriorating tactical situation. However, the main purpose of nuclear weapons, including the so-called tactical nuclear weapons, has to be derived from their strategic impact on the possibility of restoring deterrence and terminating a war. Too much emphasis on the tactical advantages of nuclear weapons will lead to a misunderstanding of the real purpose of these weapons and inevitably result in conflicts with other NATO countries, especially the Federal Republic of Germany, on whose soil these weapons would be used.

**F**rom the operational point of view, two elements of FM 100-5 are striking: the emphasis on the offense, and the deep battle. On page 8-1 the manual states: "The offense is the decisive form of war, the commander's only means of attaining a positive goal or of completely destroying an enemy force." It is interesting to bring forward here a statement from von Clausewitz:

We have already stated what defense is— simply the more effective form of war, a means to win a victory that enables one to take the offensive after superiority has been gained, that is, to proceed to the active object of the war.<sup>3</sup>

In this light, two comments on the statement on page 8-1 are relevant. First, one has to understand, given the expected force ratios in Central Europe, that it would be unwise to give up the more effective operational form of war too early. Von Clausewitz clearly indicates that the offense should be assumed only after superiority has been gained. A simplified example illustrates best. An average army corps, like I (Netherlands) Corps, consists of ten brigades. As long as it sticks to its defensive posture, this force is capable of defeating an enemy force which is considerably stronger, due to the potential advantage accruing to the defender. If, however, one commits two brigades to an offensive action during the early stage of the battle, the result might well be short of that which could have been attained had the commander waited to exploit the greater strength of his force in its defensive role. This continues to be true until that certain turning point in the battle is reached where the defender has so successfully degraded the strength of the attacker that it is possible not only to launch, but more importantly, to sustain an offensive action into enemy-occupied territory. It is doubtful that enough forces would ever be available to CINCENT to reach this point.

The picture painted above is not one in black and white. Of course, it might be necessary to launch a counterattack in the early stage of the battle in order to maintain a cohesive defensive system. And clearly, if the Soviets make mistakes in the early phases of the battle, we should exploit them. Generally speaking, however, in Central Europe it appears that it is better to exploit, as much as possible, the inherent advantages of the defender, rather than risking forces and capabilities in the offense before the time is ripe.

A second remark about the offense derives from an earlier point of discussion. Such an offense must fit into and be in direct pursuit of NATO's strategic objectives. This will have a limiting effect on the operational objective, especially as it pertains to geography.

The previous points are also applicable to the deep battle. To me, it seems unwise to

think of the commitment of ground forces to the deep battle, certainly in the early phases of a war. As mentioned earlier, force ratios at any point in time are the determining factor. Other means, except NATO air forces, are hardly available at the moment. Helicopters are very vulnerable if they operate beyond the Forward Line of Own Troops in the air defense environment that would be encountered in Central Europe. A deep-striking, accurate artillery system, including the related information-gathering and position-locating equipment, is not yet available.

These observations do not mean that the philosophy behind the deep battle is illogical. An unhampered approach of follow-on forces toward the defensive positions is unacceptable. That explains why SACEUR has developed the Follow-On Force Attack concept (FOFA). It is not my intention to compare extensively this concept with the deep battle feature in the AirLand Battle doctrine.<sup>4</sup> The FOFA concept is based upon the use of NATO conventional air power, used in interdiction missions against deep targets like enemy forces and especially transport facilities like railways and airfields. It is to be applied theater-wide, which requires centralized preparation and execution. The needed airpower will be allocated and tasked according to existing NATO procedures. It seems inevitable that the FOFA concept will impose severe limitations on the availability of air assets for the eventual execution of the deep battle in the AirLand Battle doctrine.

**H**aving said this, FM 100-5 certainly deserves credit for imposing a broad view of the operational and tactical options available to commanders. A mind-set restricted only to defense and defensive actions is not only wrong, but dangerous. It paralyzes the commander at those moments when unexpected opportunity arises to unbalance the attacker, and it takes away his ability to determine that critical point when the roles can be changed after the defending forces have achieved their objectives.

Therefore, NATO should examine which elements of AirLand Battle can be in-

corporated in NATO's doctrine, given the existing force ratios and given the capabilities of its forces. One of the problems within NATO is that because of the great number of countries involved, changes in doctrine are very difficult to implement. These changes have to fit within the strategy of flexible response and the concept of the forward defense. They also have to be applicable within the organizational structure of NATO. Most importantly, these changes should be accepted by all concerned member countries. It makes no tactical sense to have two US Army corps in Europe following AirLand Battle doctrine while the adjacent corps of other nationalities are prepared to fight in a different way. This is dangerous, because it could create situations on the battlefield that could be exploited by the Soviets. I earlier referred to the problem of allocating scarce resources to conflicting tasks. I am also thinking of problems like the creation of large open flanks and insufficient coordination while combatting approaching enemy forces close to the corps boundaries. A particular point of concern is that great

differences in doctrine hamper a flexible integration of multinational forces.

New ideas like AirLand Battle doctrine should be thoroughly discussed within NATO, without emotional national feelings obscuring such a discussion. The elements of agreement should then be included in NATO's doctrine. That is the only way to get to a common NATO doctrine which is understood and supported on both sides of the Atlantic.

#### NOTES

1. Charles Doe, "AirLand Concept, NATO Tactics Differ," *Army Times*, 10 October 1983, pp. 19-20.
2. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: US Department of the Army, 20 August 1982), p. 2-3.
3. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 370.
4. For an extensive discussion on this subject, see Colonel John B. Landry et al., "Strategic and Doctrinal Implications of Deep Attack Concepts for the Defense of Central Europe," in *Strategy in Transition: Defense and Deterrence in the 1980s*, ed. Keith A. Dunn and William O. Staudenmaier (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, forthcoming).

