

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 17
Number 1 *Parameters* 1987

Article 11

7-4-1987

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Recommended Citation

Green, Michael A., and Paul Tiberi. "CONTINGENCY PLANNING: TIME FOR A CHANGE." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 17, 1 (1987). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol17/iss1/11>

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Contingency Planning: Time for a Change

MICHAEL A. GREEN and PAUL TIBERI

This article proposes changes in planning for future contingency operations. The aim is to improve direct linkage between campaign planning for contingency operations and the strategy that such planning must serve. No attempt is made at redressing joint doctrinal issues; libraries are replete with recent publications describing needed military reforms. Nor do we seek to blaze a new trail; we merely hope to straighten out one of the bends in the existing one. The method comprises three parts: a brief review of central geopolitical imperatives, a description of the problem, and some recommended fixes.

The Geopolitical Context

The world approaching the 1990s is a dramatically different world from that of 1914 or 1939.¹ Indeed, the world is more advanced and more complex than it was in the early years of the nuclear age; and global instability threatens the United States and its interests in ways heretofore unapparent. While the Soviet Union continues to pose the major military threat to the United States and its allies, terrorism, regional conflicts, and Marxist-sponsored insurgencies pose tremendous challenges to our national security. In 1985, the military forces of 29 countries were involved in conflicts in five major areas of the world: Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Each of those areas and many of the countries involved are of strategic importance to the United States. This heightening of global tension and instability creates increased opportunities for Soviet adventurism throughout the Third World. Moreover, the proliferating transfer of conventional armaments to surrogates portends even more ominous challenges in the years ahead.²

As long as the geopolitical interests of the United States remain inherently global, the military strategy that serves those interests must also be global. The forward deployment of US military forces reflects this thread of continuity between national policy and military strategy. Forward defense undoubtedly strengthens the deterrence of aggression. Accordingly, the United States deploys ground and air forces in Europe, Japan, and Korea, and naval carrier battle groups and amphibious forces in the Atlantic, the western Pacific, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean.

Forward deployment of our forces also makes them immediately available for combat in coalition with our allies, permits their integration with allied forces in peacetime, and represents a clear manifestation of the US commitment to the common defense. In essence, forward deployment gives unmistakable credibility to US policy and increased capability to directly confront the major Soviet military threat. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, however, offers this sobering caveat to war planners:

Few illusions are more resilient, alluring, and dangerous than the idea that we can forecast with confidence all the threats we will face. Technicians seek certainty. But if the past is any guide to the future, it will be the unanticipated conflict in an unexpected place or form that poses the most difficult challenge.³

The significance of this geopolitical sea-change can be illustrated by the following analogy: the preventive and defensive measures firefighters must take against an advancing range fire are radically different from the defensive techniques required when confronting an arsonist. In the former case, the defense is deliberate, linear, designed for containment. The latter case calls for aggressive detection and prevention, rapid reaction, and a pre-packaged array of firefighting tools to meet any contingency. Similarly, the linear, forward-deployed military posture of the past meets only part of our overall defense requirements. The increasing spontaneity of current security

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threats requires the flexible, rapid-reaction capabilities of an anti-arson squad. The important point is that the world is changing, and in all likelihood the tempo of change will increase in the future. So, too, as our national policy evolves beyond all-or-nothing simplicity, the planning process which aims at deriving the optimum campaign design in response to global contingencies must evolve concurrently. The full effects of the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 are yet to be felt in this area, but certainly they will be important. By strengthening the authority of the CINCs at the expense of the separate military departments, for example, the act is likely to increase substantially the contingency planning responsibilities of unified and specified commanders.

Defining the Problem

The nature of the geopolitical environment facing the United States in the future suggests that global contingencies requiring military intervention will entail, *inter alia*, the following characteristics:

- US interests at stake
- Pressure for quick, clear victory
- Uncertain mission, situation, and threat
- Centralized control
- Constrained air and sea lift
- Diverse operational options, e.g. forced entry, noncombatant evacuation, peacekeeping, extended combat operations

It seems plausible that in situations where the use of military force is being considered, the risk associated with applying that force is least during the onset of the crisis. At that time, the potential adversary will have had the least opportunity to develop his own options and counter-options. Consequently, the early insertion of military force tends to paralyze the enemy's initiative while restricting or narrowing his options. Applying the wrong force or applying a force for ill-conceived purposes, however, can lead to military defeat, hence political disaster. Similarly, simply getting there—to demonstrate national resolve, for example—can be equally catastrophic.

One need look no further back than to 23 October 1983. A lone terrorist penetrated the Marine compound in Beirut and detonated explosives which killed 241 servicemen. The painful memory of that act has been etched indelibly in our minds. Lost in the rhetoric which ensued is the proposition that the disaster might have been avoided had the Marines been sent into Lebanon with a clear objective—one that defined their strategic purpose more explicitly than “to provide a presence.”

Congressman Newt Gingrich, citing Clausewitz, asserts that “anyone who would take the first step without having thought through the last step is a fool and should not be allowed in the councils of war.”⁴ No one

perhaps has documented the case better than Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer when writing about the escalating military stalemate in Vietnam:

The frightening vision of years of fighting and tens of thousands slain, with nothing to show for it all, sobered Washington's strategists. Rather late in the game Department of Defense wordsmiths began casting around for a definition of victory, for the meaning of "win." In response to a query from Secretary McNamara, a Pentagon study group, comprised both of officers and civilians, had written in mid-1965, "Within the bounds of reasonable assumptions there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will—and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations." The working definition used by the study group said victory "means that we succeed in demonstrating to the Viet Cong that they cannot win." McNamara himself tried to wriggle off the hook in February 1966, saying he preferred to avoid "color words" like "victory" or "win." He suggested using the euphemism, "favorable settlement" With that kind of thinking at the top, it is not surprising that a debate raged for the duration of the war over just what would constitute a win.⁵

The point is clear: the political predilection for a rapid insertion of military forces to safeguard US interests must be weighed carefully against the need to define success unambiguously. If only we could feel confident that current plans, having had the benefit of historical examples and analyses, in fact do define this condition. Given the dilemmas and dichotomies which confront the National Command Authority (NCA) during crisis situations, moreover, it is paramount that our military leadership press for a definition of this crucial condition early in the planning stage of a contingency operation.⁶

To be sure, strategic planners have progressed light-years in pursuit of both means and methods for deploying US military forces. Clearly, the Army of Excellence design is a move in the right direction.⁷ Actually, it is a return to the structure employed in World War II where lower levels of command fought the battle while higher levels of command provided them the wherewithal. The adoption of light infantry also recognizes strategic reality. While some might argue that light infantry forces should not be grouped as divisions, the unique capabilities and deployment characteristics of light infantry can serve US strategic needs well. Airlift and sealift enhancements during the past decade, particularly the conversion of former commercial container ships to Navy sealift vessels, are further indicators that our leaders recognize the need to deploy military forces worldwide rapidly.

Unfortunately, the progress made in strategic thinking has not effected a commensurate evolution in the way we plan for military contingencies. The actual planning cycle goes about like this: from an analysis

of national security objectives and detailed global threat assessment, the Joint Chiefs of Staff assign responsibilities to commanders of the unified and specified commands. The CINCs then embark on the deliberate planning process by issuing the commander's concept. Detailed planning then continues through a series of steps including development, coordination, dissemination, review, and approval. While details of the Joint Operations Planning System (JOPS) are widely available and in use, there are two fundamental characteristics of the system that are not described in any of the instructional material: first, the employment concept drives the whole train; second, the process is endless. With each refinement of assumptions, or reallocation of forces, or change of CINC, or revision of the threat assessment, the planning begins afresh.

Such deliberate plans do serve many useful purposes. They play a vital role in our national policy of deterrence, for example. They also serve as resourcing blueprints for potential regional contingencies. Further, they can induce greater cooperation among service components and focus their attention on regional peculiarities. And they can serve as conduits to enhance international relations by encouraging liaison visits, exercises, and other bridge-building contacts.

These benefits notwithstanding, the deliberate planning process constitutes an intellectual as well as a physical impediment during a crisis. The deliberate planning sequence may be well-suited for those forward-deployed units that live, train, and plan to fight on familiar terrain in a mature theater, e.g. Europe and Korea. Because forces in these theaters respond to a narrow range of mission-enemy-terrain-troops-time (METT-T) variables, detailed employment schemes are both feasible and useful. Given the scope of US interests, however, these situations are atypical. Hence, for most regional contingencies, the deliberate planning process is too cumbersome to meet real-world needs.

To see further why this is so, let's examine deliberate planning in action. A crisis develops in a CINC's area of responsibility. He gets his mission to counter a threat or react to an emergency. Forces are alerted while the CINC and JCS consider possible courses of action. When they look at the approved operations plans for the region, they review the

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products of the deliberate planning cycle—detailed force lists, operational and support concepts, and detailed employment schemes—all based on precarious assumptions and particularized METT-T factors. *If* the assumptions are realized and *if* all METT-T factors have remained valid—manifest improbabilities—then the approved plan need merely be executed. But it is virtually certain that many variables, including guidance from the NCA through the JCS, will lead the CINC to discard the approved plan in favor of an ad hoc operation order produced in the heat of crisis. History confirms that plans on the shelf are the *least* likely to be executed.

The result of this predictable gap between pre-written, pre-approved plans and actually executed plans is a system gone awry. Elegant plans sit on shelves. Not only are they not executed, they are not properly exercised. The associated Time-Phased Force Deployment Data (TPFDD) and related deployment documents are not evaluated because, among other reasons, peacetime lift resources and competing operational requirements preclude it. The TPFDDs themselves have become bureaucratic monstrosities. Often the regional planning effort is also impeded by reluctance to define unambiguously the military condition that must be produced to achieve the strategic goal (itself rarely expressed clearly by national authorities). Realizing that for most contingencies in his theater the enemy will not present an orthodox array of forces, the CINC may be unable to plan with any degree of accuracy an explicit series of tactical maneuvers that would produce a decisive battle under terms most advantageous to the friendly force.

Accordingly, only *after* receipt of the warning order (and its concomitant distribution of intelligence) can commanders begin deriving appropriate employment concepts. Because these concepts must be produced in a tense and compressed time frame, the analytic process assumes enormous importance. Just as reapers winnow the harvest to separate the grain from the chaff, so must the analysis of data be purpose-oriented. It is imperative that analysts have a clear understanding of the commander's operational concept so they can isolate the golden grains of strategic-operational-tactical opportunities from the endless stream of raw information. The deliberate planning process is ill-suited to fulfill all these needs in the "fast-forward" pace that contemporary reality imposes.

Overall, then, there is good reason to doubt that approved operations plans can ever play a significant role in the deliberations that lead to contingency deployments. And this is not surprising, since such plans do not give the decisionmakers what they need. No doubt the decision whether to respond to some threat or other crisis is a difficult one for the national leadership. But it is surely no easier to decide how or with what to respond. A central purpose of the military operational planning system should be to facilitate such decisions.

Potential Fixes

As noted, many military reforms have been implemented already. We suggest four refinements of the present military operational planning system to accommodate timely and sound decisions by the NCA and unified commanders:

- Change the focus of regional campaign planning for contingency operations.
- Improve force packaging modules.
- Strengthen joint operating procedures.
- Redirect training and exercise methodologies.

Let's discuss each of these in turn.

Regional Planning Focus. Owing to the CINC's operational dilemmas, the regional planning focus must be oriented differently from what is appropriate for a forward-deployed force. Attempts to put on the shelf a series of detailed plans are onerous endeavors; and, because any resemblance they might have to actual contingencies is practically coincidental, the benefits incurred are hardly worth the costs. The time and effort spent on developing such superfluous plans can be used with greater benefit to enhance the staffs' skill in the critical aspects of operational method. To achieve the primary objective of military planning—effective application of military force in the service of strategic goals—the whole military command structure must reorient its emphasis toward crisis-action planning. Rather than producing series of cumbersome and unessential documents, the system would better serve unified commanders by presenting each with *one* regional (“omnibus”) plan. That the plan should be oriented toward *winning the war* seems almost too obvious to state, but experience shows that this simple truth cannot be emphasized too often.

Victory, as an absolute set of military conditions, will depend on the strategic policy expressed for that theater of operations once the crisis develops. Consequently, a regional plan must accommodate the possibility of more than one war-winner. For example, the best-case victory may be the complete destruction of the enemy's war-making capabilities, while the minimum acceptable case may be the *status quo ante bellum*. Between these two points exists a continuum of intermediate victory conditions as well. The unified commander can and should define the probable war-ending conditions as gradated options, or branches, to his regional plan. Each option, of course, should define its related military conditions for victory and the force required to produce those conditions. Then, during an actual crisis, the CINC selects the appropriate branch of the plan consistent with the stipulated strategic aim. If the subordinate command structure is proficient in crisis-action planning, the CINC's selection will be tactically supportable and strategically sound.

Crises typically develop over a period of weeks or months. But the decision process that leads to the initial commitment of military forces often occurs in hours or days. We must pursue every means available to ensure that the unified command structure is responsive to the legitimate, time-sensitive requirements of the NCA. It is encouraging to note that "omnibus"⁸ campaign planning for possible exigencies is establishing itself in certain of the unified commands.

Force Modules. The need to balance the contingency force against available deployment assets is another operational dilemma that a unified commander faces during a crisis. More often than not, limitations in strategic lift and at debarkation points will require the force to be divided into assault, support, and follow-on echelons. Clearly, each of these echelons must fully integrate all deploying combat, combat support, and combat service support forces consistent with the tactical commander's operational employment concept. Current TPFDDs, however, do not lend themselves to this task.

Pre-tailored force modules can be the means by which the tactical commander develops a detailed deployment schedule during time-sensitive planning consistent with the unified commander's intent. The CINC's choice of one branch of his plan, coupled with a clearer picture of METT-T factors, provides sufficient parameters for tactical commanders to refine their force packages. What we are proposing is a series of improved US Army force modules ranging from various brigade- to corps-size packages completely integrated with accompanying combat support and combat service support components.

In fact, the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan already requires the services to codify various force modules for file in the Joint Deployment System Force Module Library. These serve as base documents to be individually tailored during time-sensitive planning. However, we suggest that these modules be built and maintained *by the units themselves* and pre-tailored for specific contingency operations.⁹ This method contrasts with the present system which employs standard generic data from Tables of Organization and Equipment.

The net effect of these enhanced modules is the capability of the tactical commander to tailor his entire force rapidly (in less than 24 hours) consistent with the operational concept. Using tailored automated unit equipment listings as base data to produce force modules and interfacing these records with current Joint Operation Planning System software represent a simpler and more rapid means of tailoring TPFDDs to meet contingency requirements. Furthermore, force modules, once tailored, more accurately identify the right type and size of force for responding to the particular crisis, the deployment cost, and the force deployment times—three pieces of analysis that will assume great importance as the CINC, the

JCS, and the NCA deliberate over which course of action to select. Just as significantly, when these packages are part of the Joint Deployment System data base, for the first time the CINC will select forces from an array of packages designed by the tactical ground commander whose force will be required to do the fighting.

Joint Procedures. Almost by definition, campaign planning is a joint undertaking. Service interoperability, therefore, is the third area that needs fixing if we are to achieve the optimum effect from the commitment of a military force to a contingency operation. This is another area where much has been accomplished already.

The spirit of increased Army-Air Force interoperability has been made manifest by a number of joint initiatives, e.g. the proliferation among Army units of Air Force tactical air control parties, the institutionalization of battlefield coordination elements, and the promulgation of joint procedures for suppression of enemy air defense and attack of the second echelon. The Navy's and USMC's endorsement of JCS Pub 26 is another major step in unifying the campaign effort.¹⁰ But while these major endeavors are a necessary condition for effective service interoperability, they are insufficient to assure the degree of interactive compatibility required for contingency operations.

Establishing a joint Army-Air Force approach to warfighting is clearly a high-water mark, but it isn't enough. More has to be done to integrate Navy and USMC procedures more fully with those of the Air Force and the Army. Even between conventional and unconventional Army forces, we must bring about a fusion of procedures at the tactical as well as the operational level. Each component's methods and techniques must permeate the others' standing operating procedures. And the exact means by which one service discharges its functional responsibilities must be correlated with the systems of the other services. A joint systems architecture can help identify these critical nodes of interoperability.¹¹

Service interoperability may very well be the operational commander's most important task as the architect of the campaign. Only in so doing can he minimize the associated risks and ensure the synchronization of the unified force toward a singular objective. The dynamics of our profession and constantly shifting global conditions dictate further that these procedures be refined continuously lest they ossify to brittle documents relegated to another shelf to gather dust.

Exercise Methodology. The redirection of training and exercise methodologies is the last of the four recommendations aimed at improving campaign planning. First, all major unit training should incorporate joint operations. This principle is axiomatic; it simply requires us to be more forward-looking and more outward-looking—to effect earlier and better coordination. Its corollary is equally compelling: exercises should be conducted under a joint umbrella *with a warfighting orientation*.

The joint contingency community presently “exercises” deliberate plans. But the fact that these plans will not be executed as written suggests that exercises should be preceded by time-sensitive planning. That is, a scenario should be presented before each joint exercise which causes components to examine and modify an existing plan, or to develop a new one altogether. At the same time, service components should be required to develop a tailored and detailed force package sequenced according to the concept of operations. *Then the force should be required to deploy.* Resource constraints may prevent the entire force from actually embarking. Nonetheless, all of the force should displace sufficiently to permit a valid evaluation, and that part of the force that can deploy should actually be loaded in proper modules and moved according to proper time phase as it would were the contingency operation itself being executed. Gaming the force deployment as part of the overall exercise will provide some assurance that the regional joint deployment concept is not significantly flawed. Most planners have committed to heart the elder von Moltke’s assertion that plans will not survive the initial stage of a war. Fewer recall his corollary that an error in initial disposition of forces cannot be overcome.

In all likelihood, our suggestion would if adopted result in fewer joint exercises—perhaps a disturbing proposition for some CINCs. But the benefits of the type of exercise we propose would transcend regional peculiarities and have a more profound impact on the warfighting potential of the contingency force. Having joint exercises less frequently does not mean less beneficial exercise in the aggregate. Since international circumstances may require strong, rapid US military response, our exercises must be tailored to prepare our forces to meet that need. Current exercises, with their focus predominantly on employment phases, can produce an incomplete if not misleading picture since there is insufficient analysis to confirm whether in fact the force can be deployed and arrayed as required by the approved employment scheme.

The fundamental thrust of this recommendation is that contingency exercises must be conducted under conditions similar to those expected at the outbreak of hostilities. The intellectual as well as the physical agility of the warfighting elements must be practiced. Moreover, all of this must be done under the stress of a compressed period of time—hours and days, not weeks and months.

To Conclude

The ideas proposed here are not altogether original. Many have been previously discussed; some have been implemented in some places to varying degrees. Our purpose has been to establish the overall context that gives them meaning and to substantiate the need for their adoption and institutionalization.

The conclusion is clear. If our *raison d'être* as a fighting force is to promote national interests, we must adopt an approach to warfighting that accommodates rapid refinements to operational concepts, assumptions, and conditions, an approach evolved long before hostilities commenced. We must also develop the mental agility to overcome the tendency toward paralysis when confronted with ambiguity or unexpected situations.

As in the past, success in future contingency operations will depend on the insight, imagination, selflessness, and resourcefulness of a joint force that prepares for operations well before the execution order arrives. We should exploit these preparatory efforts so that we are ready systemically and intellectually to deviate from on-the-shelf plans when faced with overwhelming logic to do so. At a time when the likely use of military power again threatens to create its own pattern of compulsions, making rational force projection all but impossible, it is surely worthwhile to adopt that process which promises our pressed decisionmakers the soundest possible operational design for military response.

NOTES

1. *The Global 2000 Report to the President* (Washington: GPO, 1980, 1981), Vols. I-III. Other sources reach similar conclusions. For example, see William J. Taylor and Steven A. Maaranen, eds., *The Future of Conflict in the 1980's* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1983) for a series of articles on this subject by James R. Schlesinger, Robert Komer, Robert S. Leiken, and others.

2. See, for example, Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger to the Congress, on the FY 1987 Budget, FY 1988 Authorization Request, and FY 1987-91 Defense Programs* (Washington: GPO, February 1986), p. 70.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4. Speech by Rep. Gingrich at the Infantry Conference, Fort Benning, Ga., 10 April 1986.

5. Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1978), pp. 108-09.

6. The definition of victory as the first step in developing a campaign plan is also a pillar of the US Army's AirLand Battle doctrine. Specifically, the doctrine points out the need for the operational commander to define his vision of success by answering three critical questions: What military condition must be produced in the theater of war or operations to achieve the strategic goal? What sequence of actions is most likely to produce that condition? How should the resources of the force be applied to accomplish that sequence of actions? (US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 [Washington: GPO, May 1986], p. 10).

7. The 1984 "Army of Excellence" study recommended streamlining of divisions and strengthening of the corps (by reducing organic division elements and centralizing them at corps), thereby increasing operational flexibility.

8. "Omnibus" as used here is an approach to theater planning that includes a baseline plan which accounts for the most probable METT-T factors, and a series of options at identifiable decision points to account for METT-T variations or changes in the specified strategic purposes for the campaign.

9. Specifically, we suggest the use of Computerized Movement Planning and Status System (COMPASS) data, especially the Automated Unit Equipment Lists (AUEL), rather than the indiscriminant Type Unit Characteristics (TUCHA) files. Whereas TUCHA portrays unit profiles inexactly in unfamiliar JOPS format based on Tables of Organization and Equipment for whole units, the force modules we propose are constructed on the basis of Modification Tables of Organization and Equipment and AUEL data, pre-tailored for probable contingencies.

10. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Theater Counterair Operations (From Overseas Land Areas)*, JCS Publication 26 (Washington: GPO, April 1986).

11. XVIII Airborne Corps has made considerable strides in this area. For nearly a year, its systems and procedures have been interwoven with those of I Marine Amphibious Force, II Marine Amphibious Force, and 1st Special Operations Command to produce a Joint Operations Procedures manual. Indications are that 9th and 12th Tactical Air Forces and III Marine Amphibious Force will join this effort. Corps planners hope to fuse these procedures with those of the numbered Navy fleets and equivalent headquarters to integrate detailed joint procedures which apply each service's warfighting doctrine.