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# Operational Art in the Joint and Combined Arenas

DWIGHT L. ADAMS and CLAYTON R. NEWELL

**A**lthough it has been part of the Army's doctrine since 1982, the concept that warfare has three broad levels—military strategy, operational art, and tactics—has yet to be fully understood. The material written to explain what operational art really means has become a minor cottage industry.<sup>1</sup> Why then yet another article on the subject? Simply because there is not available a clear explanation of how the Army's view of the three levels of war applies to the so-called real world. The concept will fit, both theoretically and practically, the current US organization for joint and combined operations. This article offers some practical suggestions on how operational art can be useful in the United States' unified command system.

In current terms military strategy governs how the military element of national power accomplishes national policy goals. This level of war sets strategic military objectives for the operational level. At the operational level, commanders of joint and combined formations use the forces assigned them to achieve specific strategic military objectives selected to support the war's political objectives. The essential difference between the strategic and operational levels is that operational-level commanders concentrate on military operations whereas strategic-level commanders must consider the use of all elements of power, of which the military is only one.

The Army has always recognized three levels of war, even though it may not have always used that terminology. While understanding that the strategic level of war was driven by policy, the Army's school system concentrated on war in the theater and below. In doing so, it dealt with formations ranging in size from squad up to army group, and with combat activity ranging from the tactical level of war up to campaign strategy in the theater of war. However, the introduction of the operational level of war in 1982, and operational art in 1986, was especially confusing because it was not commonly recognized that these were merely new terms describing an

old activity.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Army doctrine writers further clouded the issue by using the well-established Soviet term, operational art, which in Soviet doctrine does not equate to current Army use.<sup>3</sup>

During the Vietnam War the tactical level of war preoccupied most of the Army. Although there was some operational-level planning, the apparent confusion over strategic objectives made it largely ineffective.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this tactical experience, the Army's doctrinal writers of the 1976 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, overemphasized the tactical level of war. Until the publication of the 1982 edition of FM 100-5, the Army recognized nothing larger than a corps in its combat doctrine.<sup>5</sup> This created a void in the Army's study of war even though, paradoxically, US Army officers were commanding, and US Army staff officers were serving, at the army group and field army level, that is, at the operational level of war, in combined and joint commands in Korea and Europe.

The Army's focus on tactics was an aberration in its study of war. There were several reasons for this: doctrine writers and their bosses were veterans of Vietnam, a war conducted at the tactical level; analysis of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War by the Army's Training and Doctrine Command concentrated on tactical lessons and ignored operational-level implications;<sup>6</sup> and the Army, under the politically driven spur of NATO, developed an obsession with a shallow, linear defense of the inner German border in Europe.<sup>7</sup> This tactical focus, however, changed when FM 100-5 reintroduced the Army to the operational level of war in 1982.

**W**ith the appearance of the 1982 edition of FM 100-5, the Army once again included the concept of theater-level operations in its doctrine. As described in this manual, the operational level of war was marked by use of available military resources to attain strategic goals within a theater of war; by provision of a theory of larger-unit operations; and by the planning and conducting of campaigns.<sup>8</sup> Of these three characteristics, associating the operational level of war with large units may have been the most misleading.

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The theory of large units may apply well in large-scale continental warfare such as that historically waged in Europe, Asia, and even in the United States during the Civil War. This approach, however, unfortunately excludes campaigns in which relatively small forces achieve strategic objectives, a characteristic of many of history's most important campaigns.

The 1986 edition of FM 100-5 states that operational art concerns the design, organization, and conduct of major operations and campaigns, while stipulating that no particular echelon of command is solely or uniquely involved.<sup>9</sup> This definition particularly well accommodates countries with maritime traditions such as Britain, Japan, and the United States because insular campaigns often lend themselves to the achievement of decisive results by relatively small land, air, and naval forces. Thus the operational level of war properly relates to the strategic aim, not to the size, echelon, or type of the formations involved, and it must be included in any American construct of war that pretends to completeness.

The World War II Japanese campaign to capture Singapore from the British provides a good example of how the strategic aim rather than size of formation supplies the defining essence of the operational art. The Japanese 25th Army, with only three divisions, supported by air and naval forces, defeated the British in a six-month campaign of successive envelopments down the Malaya peninsula. This campaign, consisting of joint operations by Japanese air, land, and sea forces, resulted in Great Britain's loss of Singapore, the surrender of 100,000 British, Indian, and Australian troops, and a complete disruption of the Allied strategic position in the Pacific. The Japanese forces in the campaign were relatively small, roughly the size of a US Army corps, but they achieved indubitably strategic results.<sup>10</sup>

Famous instances of relatively small forces achieving strategic aims include Wellington's peninsular campaign in Spain (1809), Scott's expedition against Mexico (1847), and the German Norwegian campaign during World War II. More recent examples are the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands campaign waged by Great Britain against Argentina in 1982 and the Grenada intervention by the United States in 1985. The common characteristic of these campaigns is the tightly sandwiched conjunction of the three levels of war, bringing the tactical and strategic levels rather close together. The operational level, however, is clearly present in the form of coordinated joint operations directed toward a strategic objective. In those rare and separate cases where manifestly tactical formations attain strategic objectives, the term "strategic raid" may be appropriate so as to avoid trivializing the term operational art. The 1986 American raid on Libya is a case in point.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the strategic aim, the concepts of theaters of war and theaters of operations also figure in distinguishing between the strategic and operational levels of war. The 1982 edition of FM 100-5 associated the

operational level with the theater of war. The 1986 edition of FM 100-5 confused the issue of theaters by retaining the theater of war but adding the theater of operations without a clear explanation of how these two theaters relate to the levels of war.<sup>12</sup> This is indeed unfortunate because a correct understanding of the relationship between the theater of war and the theater of operations is a useful guide to distinguishing between the operational and strategic levels of war.<sup>13</sup>

The US Unified Command Plan divides the world into a series of theaters, each headed by a CINC who coordinates US military activities in that theater. A theater, by JCS definition, is “the geographical area outside the continental United States for which a commander of a unified or specified command has been assigned military responsibility.”<sup>14</sup> There are, however, two different kinds of theaters: the theater of war and the theater of operations. An area (i.e. theater) of war is “that area of land, sea, and air that is, or may become, directly involved in the operations of war,” while a theater of operations is “that portion of [a theater] of war necessary for military operations and for the administration of such operations.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the large areas of the globe covered by the US unified commands, a theater of war may contain several theaters of operations. The geographical limits of theaters of war and operations are not restrictive and may well change during a prolonged conflict.

The theater of war CINC is at the strategic level of war working to insure that the military element of power works with the other elements of national power to achieve the desired strategic goals. The theater of operations CINC, however, is at the operational level of war, concentrating on applying the military power in his theater toward the strategic objectives assigned by the theater of war CINC.

The CINC of a unified command receives his broad strategic tasks from the National Command Authorities and translates them into a military strategy for his theater of war. In this process he prescribes strategic objectives for his subordinate theaters of operations. The theater of operations CINCs then design campaigns to achieve the assigned strategic objectives. The strategic and operational levels of war may merge when there is only one theater of operations in a theater of war or when the theater of war CINC elects to control both his theater of war and one (or more) of his theaters of operations.

Two examples will help bring this theater relationship into perspective. During World War II Field Marshal Wavell, the Allied Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, in 1941 had to deal concurrently with those Italian forces in Eastern Africa operating in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia; with Axis forces in North Africa which posed a threat to Egypt; and with Vichy French and pro-German forces operating in Syria and Iraq. During this period the Middle East was a theater of war, with three separate theaters

of operations, one in East Africa, one in North Africa, and one in the eastern Mediterranean. Wavell gave strategic direction based on political guidance and allocated resources to each of these theater of operations commanders who in turn conducted their own campaigns to achieve the assigned strategic aims.<sup>16</sup>

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility today, incidentally, approximates Wavell's theater of war. There are a variety of military activities going on in that area, including the Iran-Iraq war; an insurgency in Ethiopia; and the ongoing Soviet effort to pacify Afghanistan. In the unlikely event that the United States becomes actively involved in all of these military conflicts, CINCCENTCOM would be, like Wavell in World War II, a theater of war CINC with three theaters of operations: one in Ethiopia, one in the Persian Gulf, and one in Afghanistan. CINCCENTCOM, like Wavell, would then provide strategic guidance to the theater of operations CINCs. If there was not a subordinate CINC in any of these theaters of operations, then CINCCENTCOM would function at both the strategic and operational levels of war.

The second example is Allied Command Europe (ACE), a single theater of war comprising three theaters of operations: Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH), Allied Forces Central Europe (AFCENT), and Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH). In the event of war, the AFNORTH, AFCENT, and AFSOUTH CINCs will each conduct separate campaigns based on strategic guidance from the theater of war CINC, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR).

The SACEUR is at the strategic level of war as he deals directly with the political and military policymakers in NATO to translate their political directions into strategic objectives for the theater of operations CINCs. He thereby establishes a broad strategic plan to coordinate the efforts of the subordinate CINCs and allocate resources among them. These subordinate CINCs, each in a separate theater of operations, will use the allocated resources to conduct joint and combined operations and campaigns with their own army groups, tactical air forces, and naval forces to achieve the strategic objectives that SACEUR prescribes. The theater of operations CINCs, while certainly aware of the desired political goals, concentrate on achieving the assigned strategic objectives.

The theater of operations CINC deals at the operational level of war as he plans and conducts his campaign. In the absence of a subordinate headquarters in a theater of war, the CINC might operate at both levels, as in the earlier CENTCOM example. This could also be true of a theater of war which has only one theater of operations, a situation which occurred during the Korean War when MacArthur was acting at both the strategic and operational levels of war. With the size of the current unified commands, however, the theater of war CINC will continue to have strategic responsibilities even if there is only one active theater of operations.

Such was the case in Vietnam, where the theater relationships were never made very clear. The CINC of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC), was the theater of war commander, and should have been responsible for giving strategic direction to the war in Vietnam as well as to other subordinate theaters of operations of his vast command, including Korea. Vietnam, a subordinate unified command, was a theater of operations within CINCPAC's theater of war, and the Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) should have been the theater of operations CINC with full authority over all air, land, and sea forces in the theater. In practice, however, a multitude of organizations, both military and civilian, including the entire armed forces of Vietnam (who were not under COMUSMACV's command and control), conducted a variety of large and small operations which complicated any attempts to achieve unity of effort toward a common strategic goal. Further complicating efforts was the fact that the National Command Authorities often dealt directly with COMUSMACV, effectively cutting CINCPAC and sometimes even the JCS out of the picture.<sup>17</sup>

The confusing command relationships in Vietnam might have been simplified by formally establishing USMACV directly under the National Command Authorities as a separate unified command, thereby making COMUSMACV a theater of war CINC; or by making the nominal theater of operations commander, COMUSMACV, a true theater of operations CINC by putting all the land, sea, and air forces in the theater under his command, thereby enabling him to conduct a campaign aimed at achieving clearly defined military objectives assigned by the theater of war CINC, CINCPAC. A whole series of political-military-diplomatic factors acted to override the purely military desire for unity of command, of course, but it seems undeniable that a more serviceable command arrangement would have evolved had all the actors understood the concept of three levels of war and its relationship to the unified command system.

However, preventing a repetition of the confusing and disjointed command relationships experienced in Vietnam requires clearly understandable joint doctrine agreeable to all services. FM 100-5 has provided the foundation for that understanding and doctrine by clarifying to some extent the relationship among the levels of war. Now joint doctrine must specify how that relationship fits into the US unified command system.<sup>18</sup> Combined doctrine that takes account of the three levels of war is also sorely needed. NATO's integrated military command system, for example, has yet to secure approved combined doctrine for warfighting in Europe.

The Army has come a long way in developing its doctrine since first introducing the operational level of war in 1982. It is up to the joint and combined communities to develop the doctrine necessary to insure unambiguous command relationships at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war.

## NOTES

1. For example, the October 1987 issue of *Military Review* devoted about half the issue to operational art. *Parameters* has published at least 11 articles on the operational level of war in the past two years alone.
2. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, 1982), p. 2-3.
3. This is the first time the operational level of war appears in Army doctrine. In the 1986 edition of FM 100-5 (p. 10), the term operational art appears in place of the operational level, although the term levels of war also continues to appear in the text.
4. US Army Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, *Soviet Army Operations* (Arlington, Va., 1978), p. 1-3. This manual, published in 1978, presumably was available to the Army's doctrine writers when they published both the 1982 and 1986 editions of FM 100-5.
5. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1982), pp. 90-91. Summers makes the point that US operations were tactical and that the national security establishment was confused over the difference between tactics and strategy.
6. FM 100-5, 1976, p. 1-1. The first paragraph, as well as the rest of the manual, addresses only the battle, i.e. tactics. Chapter 3, "How to Fight," addresses the corps as the largest unit.
7. US Army Training and Doctrine Command, *Implications of the Middle East War on US Army Doctrine and Systems* (Ft. Monroe, Va., 1974). This previously classified study concentrates on the tactics and equipment used in the 1973 war.
8. FM 100-5, 1976. See especially Chapter 13, "Operations Within NATO," and Chapter 2, "Modern Weapons on the Modern Battlefield," which compares US and Soviet-Warsaw Pact weaponry and sets the tactical tone for the entire manual.
9. FM 100-5, 1982, p. 2-3.
10. FM 100-5, 1986, p. 10.
11. Louis Allen, "Singapore," in *Decisive Battles of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Noble Franklin and Christopher Dowling (New York: David McKay, 1976).
12. Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of Peace and War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), p. 112. Luttwak makes the point that the levels of war are constantly in motion with the boundaries between them moving further apart and then closer together depending on the situation.
13. FM 100-5, 1982, p. 2-3 and FM 100-5, 1986, p. 10. The 1986 edition drops the idea that operational art is the theory of large units and adds the theater of operations with no further explanation. The view that the operational level relates to large units is one widely held. In Chris Bellamy, *The Future of Land Warfare* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 6, for example, Bellamy specifies that his book is about "big war fighting," and on p. 105 he states that the "book concentrates primarily on the operational level of war." This leads one to conclude that the operational level of war is fighting big wars with big units. Similarly, in Gordon R. Sullivan, "Learning to Decide at the Operational Level of War," *Military Review*, 67 (October 1987), 17, Sullivan (Deputy Commandant of USACGSC) expresses the idea that "operational art describes the military operations of large-scale (larger than corps) combined arms forces."
14. US Army Command and General Staff College, Field Manual 100-6, *Large Unit Operations* (Coordinating Draft) (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans., 1987), p. 2-7. This draft manual covers the organization of theaters of war and theaters of operations, but it does not make clear their relationship to the levels of war. It does state that "the theater of operations commander focuses more on the conduct of military operations," which implies that he is at the operational level of war. Luttwak, in *Strategy: The Logic of Peace and War*, pp. 113-55, discusses theater strategy, but does not address the difference between the theater of war and theater of operations as defined by JCS.
15. US Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Chiefs of Staff Pub. 1 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1 June 1987), p. 370.
16. JCS Pub. 1, p. 34.
17. B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), pp. 109-27.
18. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 29-39. Palmer describes the debate over how to set up the command relationship with MACV in 1964, which did not change much during the course of the war.
19. TRADOC has recently been tasked by Department of the Army to develop a JCS Pub. 3, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*. It is hoped that this manual, when published, will standardize the concept of the three levels of war among all services.