



U.S. Army General Matthew Ridgway (second from left) in Ribera, Sicily, July 25, 1943

On Operational Leadership

By Milan Vego

There were commanders-in-chiefs who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction and cavalry commanders who could have led armies.

—CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

Success of any military organization depends on the experience and good judgment of its leaders.

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Ideally, all commanders should have a high level of professional education and training in addition to some critically important character traits. Moreover, the higher the level of command, the more important it is that commanders and staff meet these requirements. Wars

are not won or lost at the tactical level but at the operational and strategic levels. Hence, it is critically important that operational commanders are selected based solely on their proven or potential warfighting abilities and not their political connections or manage-

ment skills. Operational commanders are not managers but should be first and foremost warfighters.

Leadership vs. Management

Leadership can be defined as the art of influencing others and environments directly and indirectly and the skill of creating conditions for sustained organizational success to achieve desired results.¹ The quality of one's leadership cannot be quantified in any meaningful way. It is essentially intangible. Leadership and management are not identical things. Management deals with the allocation and control of resources—whether human, material, or financial—to attain the objectives of an organization.² Traditionally, superiority in materiel was one reason that the U.S. military emphasized management thinking and a business approach to solving military problems. Among other things, the strong emphasis on the managerial values and entrepreneurial ethics contributed significantly to the inability of the U.S. Army to perform well during the Vietnam War.³

Despite these negative experiences, the U.S. military apparently did not learn the proper lessons; a business approach to the conduct to war is alive and well in the U.S. military. An emphasis is still put on management and military efficiency instead of effectiveness. Various quantifiable methods called “metrics,” based on business models, are extensively used to evaluate the performance of U.S. forces in combat. But experience shows that one's military performance is bound to be dismal against a strong and skillful opponent unless there is a consistent and strong emphasis on leadership and warfighting in peacetime. Also, the conduct of war is largely an art and not a science or akin to a business activity.

The Term

In generic terms, *operational leadership* refers to those commanders and their staffs who need to think operationally instead of tactically in exercising their authority and responsibilities across the entire spectrum of conflict—that is, from peacetime competition to opera-

tions short of war and high-intensity conventional war. They range from an army corps and its naval/air equivalents (numbered fleets/air forces) to the theater armies/fleets/air forces and multi-Service (joint) theater commands (theater of war/theater of operations). Theater commands are the principal operational levels of command because they have sufficient forces to conduct campaigns/major operations. The lowest level of command that could plan and execute a major operation is the joint/combined task forces and in some cases even single divisions (as Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in 2003 illustrated).

Personality Traits

Successful operational commanders usually do not have some inborn qualities that set them apart from successful tactical commanders. Both operational and tactical commanders need to possess a good balance of the most important personality traits. In contrast to a tactical commander, the personality and command style of an operational commander is understood indirectly rather than directly through the chain of command. This is especially true in the case of naval or air operational commanders because their subordinate forces are deployed over a large part of a theater. Another major difference is that an operational commander cannot be successful without thinking operationally versus tactically in performing his numerous responsibilities in peacetime and in time of war.

Personality traits of commanders at any echelon include strong character, personal integrity, high intellect, sound judgment, courage, boldness, creativity, presence of mind, healthy ambition, humility, mental flexibility, foresight, mental agility, decisiveness, understanding of human nature, and the ability to communicate ideas clearly and succinctly. Clearly, no commander can ever have all these traits represented in equal measure. Perhaps the most critical of these for success are a strong character, high intellect, creativity, and boldness. These qualities

are developed throughout life and a military career—and through self-study.⁴

Operational Thinking

One of the principal requirements for success at the operational and strategic levels of command is to think broadly and have a broad vision.⁵ Such ability, which Germans call *operatives Denken* (operational thinking), is only in some rare cases the result of a commander's inherent predisposition to think big and far ahead of current events. Operational thinking is not identical to what information warfare advocates call “situational awareness” (SA).⁶ The extensive use of this term in the U.S. and other militaries is one of the best proofs of tactical vs. operational thinking therein.

Many classical military thinkers and practitioners of warfare have recognized the need for commanders to think in broad terms. Prussian General Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755–1813), for example, observed, “One has to see the whole before seeing its parts. This is really the first rule, and its correctness can be learned from a study of history.”⁷ Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Sr. (1800–1891), wrote, “All individual successes achieved through the courage of our [German] troops on the battlefield are useless if not guided by great thoughts and directed by the purpose of the campaign and the war as a whole.”⁸ He believed that “it is far more important that the high commander retain a clear perspective of the entire state of affairs than that any detail is carried out in a particular way.”⁹ Moltke, Sr., also wrote, “All successive acts of war are thus not premeditated implementations of some plan but spontaneous actions in response to the military situation of the moment. What is important, in each concrete case, is to see clearly through a mist of uncertainty, assess the facts accurately, guess the unknowns, reach a decision quickly, and then move to carry it out vigorously without letting oneself be sidetracked.”¹⁰

Importance

An operational commander should think operationally in exercising his



Lieutenant General George S. Patton, U.S. Third Army commander, pins Silver Star on Private Ernest A. Jenkins of New York City (NARA)

responsibilities and authority across the entire spectrum of conflict. Obviously, operational thinking is the most critically important in a high-intensity conventional war. Yet all types of operations short of war, such as combating maritime terrorism/piracy, counterinsurgency, and peace operations, also require that operational commanders think operationally rather than tactically.

Operational thinking helps the commander to employ friendly forces in such a way that each action directly or indirectly contributes to the accomplishment of the ultimate strategic or operational objective. Hence, an operational

commander must have the ability to build a strategic or operational “picture” of the situation in a theater. This means an uncanny ability to know and understand all military and nonmilitary aspects of the situation in a theater, reduce complexities of the situation to their essentials by properly differentiating between important and less important or trivial elements, link disparate events (“connect the dots”), deduce patterns, and envisage future trends in the situation for several weeks or even months. The operational commander who does not think operationally may eventually be successful but at substantially heavier costs for friendly

forces in terms of personnel, materiel, and time than the commander who skillfully applies the tenets of operational leadership. Moreover, there is always a great risk that a weaker opponent who thinks operationally could inflict large losses on, or even defeat, larger but poorly led forces.

Operational thinking is both a foundation and framework for developing *operational vision*—that is, the commander’s ability to envisage correctly the flow of events until the ultimate objective of a major operation or campaign is accomplished. This means the commander has to think like a good chess player in terms of combination (action-reaction-counterreaction) until the military endstate is achieved. As in a game of chess, the operational commander who views the board as a single interrelated plane of action and each move as a prelude to a series of further moves is more likely to be successful than an opponent who thinks only a single move at a time. Operational commanders should think of how to create opportunities for the employment of their forces while at the same time reducing the enemy’s future options.¹¹

By correctly anticipating the enemy’s reaction to his own actions, the operational commander can timely make a sound decision, act, and then prepare to make another decision to respond to the enemy’s reaction. The key to success is to operate within the enemy’s decision cycle. Without this ability, the operational commander cannot seize and maintain initiative, and without this initiative, his freedom of action is greatly restricted by the opponent.

Operational vision is inherently narrower in its scope than operational thinking, and in terms of time is limited to anticipated duration of a campaign/major operation. No campaign or major operation can be coherently planned and executed without a vision of how it should end. Among other things, operational vision ensures that an operational commander is focused on defeating or neutralizing the enemy center of gravity instead of being distracted by the pursuit of purely geographic or economic objectives. Practical application of operational

vision is in formulating and articulating *operational commander's intent*.

History gives many examples of highly successful operational commanders. Perhaps with few exceptions, most of them were both thinkers and practitioners of operational art; there is no contradiction between the two. Napoleon I (1769–1821), Moltke, Sr., and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein (1887–1973) belong to a small, select group of brilliant operational thinkers and practitioners. There is also a relatively large group of above average to excellent operational commanders of all three services who conducted successful campaigns and major operations, such as Field Marshals Albert Kesselring, Erwin Rommel, and William S. Slim; Marshal Georgy Zhukov; Generals Douglas MacArthur, George S. Patton, Bernard L. Montgomery, and George T. Kenney; and Admirals Ernest J. King, Chester W. Nimitz, Raymond A. Spruance, Andrew Cunningham, Erich Raeder, and Karl Doenitz. Since the end of World War II, there have been only a few operational commanders who performed excellently in combat. Perhaps one of the best but most underappreciated U.S. military leaders in the postwar era was General Matthew B. Ridgway. He performed superbly as the U.S. 8th Army commander by turning the situation around in Korea in the spring of 1951.¹²

The inability to think operationally has resulted in major setbacks or even failures of campaigns or major operations. For example, the lack of operational thinking was the main reason for the Allied defeats in Norway and France in 1940 and in Southeast Asia in 1941–1942. Besides the serious disconnect at the U.S. strategy and policy level, the Vietnam War was essentially conducted at the theater-strategic and tactical levels only; again, operational art was not applied.¹³ A major reason for the Argentine defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas War of 1982 was the lack of operational thinking. Likewise, the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988) degenerated into a war of attrition at the operational level because of the lack of operational thinking by both sides.

Attributes

Operational thinking encompasses several critical and diverse but closely related attributes. The most important for the commander are having an operational rather than a tactical perspective; balancing operational factors with the objective; fully understanding the levels of war and their interrelationships; understanding geography and operational features of the operating environment; making sound operational decisions; and fully comprehending the linkage among policy and strategy, operational art, and tactics.

Perhaps the most important proof of operational thinking is the commander's ability to have an *operational* instead of *tactical* perspective. In terms of the factor space, the operational commander's area of responsibility is a theater or major part of it. The size of a theater can vary from several hundred to millions of square miles. For example, U.S. Pacific Command encompasses an area of about 100 million square miles with 44 countries, while U.S. Central Command encompasses an area of about 21 million square miles with 51 countries. In contrast, the perspective of a tactical commander is much smaller because it pertains to a given combat zone/sector or area of responsibility. In terms of time, an operational commander has to assess a situation several weeks or even months ahead, while the time window for a tactical commander is from several hours to 2 or 3 days.

An operational commander should evaluate fully the influence of nonmilitary aspects of the situation (political, diplomatic, economic, religious, legal, environmental, informational, and others) on planning and employing forces. This requirement is not something entirely new as some leading proponents of information warfare falsely claim. For example, Frederick the Great pointed out that policy and military art must be taken into account in preparing for a campaign.¹⁴ He wrote that one should “know one's enemies, their alliances, their resources, and the nature of their country in order to plan a campaign. One should know what to expect of one's friends, what

resources one has oneself and see the future effects to determine what one has to fear or hope from political maneuvers.”¹⁵ Moltke, Sr., was the first German chief of the general staff to demand that military-political considerations be included in operational planning. He invariably based his plans on the advantages and disadvantages of the military-political situation.¹⁶

Needless to say, an operational commander should have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the theory and practice of operational art.¹⁷ Otherwise, he will not be able to have an operational perspective in assessing the situation in his theater and then to make sound decisions. At the same time, an operational commander must have solid knowledge and understanding of tactics in his chosen specialty and tactics of other combat arms/branches of his service. He also needs to have a full understanding of the tactical employment of forces of other services.

Another major problem is applying a “targeteering” approach to warfare—that is, when the focus of planning is on targets to be degraded, neutralized, or destroyed. It is also common to determine targets first and only then formulate objectives. In U.S. practice, many commands and agencies, from the Joint Staff to tactical commanders in the field, are involved in target development, selection, and approval.

Moreover, an operational commander will lose operational perspective if he grossly interferes with the responsibilities of his subordinate tactical commanders. By “micromanaging” subordinate commanders, an operational commander would spend time and effort on the things that would be better left to the commanders on the scene of action. This unwillingness to delegate authority is often the result of the so-called zero-defect tolerance or when the higher commanders do not tolerate mistakes made by subordinates. The end result of such a style of command is waiting on orders, lack of motivation, stifling creativity, and careerism on the part of subordinates. This cannot but have highly negative consequences on performance in combat. Another



Brigadier General Courtney Whitney, General Douglas MacArthur, and Major General Edward M. Almond observe shelling of Inchon from USS *Mt. McKinley*, September 15, 1950 (NARA/U.S. Army/Nutter)

problem is the false belief that advanced information technologies allow better assessment of situations by an operational commander than his subordinate tactical commanders. Frequent interference of an operational commander with the responsibilities of tactical commanders is the best proof that the operational commander does not trust subordinate ability to exercise initiative based on commander's intent. Moltke, Sr., stated that the most unfortunate of all high commanders is the one who is under close supervision and who has to give an account of his plans and intentions every hour of every day. This supervision may be exercised through a delegate of the highest authority at the headquarters or a telegraph wire attached to his back. In such cases, all independence, quick decisions, and audacious risk, without which no war can

be conducted, are sacrificed. An audacious decision can be arrived at by one man only.¹⁸ An operational commander's freedom of action is achieved primarily by properly balancing the factors of space, time, and force with a selected operational/strategic objective.¹⁹ These operational factors and, increasingly, information are critically important to make sound decisions. This means among other things that a deficiency or disadvantage in one factor or element must be roughly balanced by surpluses or advantages in others. Bringing these factors into harmony with an objective requires a thorough knowledge and understanding of all the military and nonmilitary aspects of the situation. Any serious imbalance could be among other things resolved by scaling down the size of the objective or reducing the factor of space or increasing

the factor time or force. Balancing of the operational factors versus the objective is largely an art rather than a science. The most successful operational commanders consistently displayed a high ability to harmonize the factors of space, time, and forces against the objective in planning and executing their campaigns and major operations.

Operational warfare is largely war on a map. Almost all successful operational commanders have had a solid knowledge of geography and a good appreciation of the operational features of the physical environment. Napoleon I was once asked how he always divined the intentions of the enemy so accurately. He responded, "I did not know beforehand the mistakes the enemy would make which I took advantage of; I simply studied my map." Napoleon I continuously studied the

enemy's possibilities and limitations on the map, much more than the enemy did. Yet the methods that brought Napoleon I his many successes in central Europe failed him altogether in Russia in 1812. In that instance, he failed to properly evaluate the factors of space and time versus the strategic objective. Rommel was known for his excellent knowledge of terrain and orientation.²⁰ MacArthur was also well known for his excellent knowledge of military geography, which greatly helped him to evaluate the factors of space, time, and force in planning and executing campaigns and major operations.

Operational commanders must fully understand the distinctions among three main levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical) and how decisions and actions at one level affect events at the others. Among other things, a comprehensive understanding of the levels of war and their mutual relationships is the key prerequisite for operational commanders and their staffs in sequencing and synchronizing the use of military and nonmilitary sources of power in accomplishing strategic or operational objectives. Each level of war is directly related to the corresponding military objective to be accomplished. Hence, tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war are differentiated. Moreover, military objectives determine methods of combat employment of one's forces (tactical actions, major operations, campaigns) and therefore the size of the area in which opposing combat forces would operate. The operational level of war exists when a single military- or theater-strategic objective has to be accomplished as in Iraq in 2003. The higher the level of war, the more complex the situation military commanders and their staffs must understand, evaluate, and synthesize. Both military and nonmilitary aspects of situations are critical for success at the operational and strategic levels of war across the spectrum of conflict. This is not necessarily the case at the tactical level, except in the posthostilities phase of a campaign or operations other than war.

Although related, levels of war and levels of command are not identical. The levels of war exist only in time of open

hostilities. In contrast, levels of command exist in time of peace and war. They are only prerequisites for conducting war at a given level in the course of accomplishing assigned military objectives. Yet if the respective theater commander does not apply the tenets of operational art in the use of his sources of power and instead focuses on tactics or, even worse, pure targeteering, he does not conduct war at the operational or theater-strategic level.

The highest art of operational leadership is making timely and sound decisions. The principal factors in decisionmaking should be the *mission* and *situation*. Among other things, the decision is a reflection of the personality traits, professional knowledge, and experience of the commander. In general, the higher the command level, the fewer but more important decisions are made—and more time is available to make these decisions. The much larger perspective at the operational level of command requires a more complex and challenging decisionmaking process than at the tactical level. A campaign or major operation is conducted over a much larger part of the theater and involves considerably larger and more diverse forces than tactical actions. The operational commander needs to evaluate the situation in all its complexity for several weeks or even months ahead. Often the operational commander must make decisions without having all the information available.²¹ Despite significant advances in technology, the information available is usually ambiguous, incomplete, or outright contradictory. It also often arrives late. In combat it is common to have incomplete knowledge of the situation. Hence, an operational commander must make many decisions based on assumptions that might be partially or even completely false.

An operational commander cannot be highly successful without having full knowledge and understanding of the mutual interrelationships and linkage between strategy on one hand and strategy, operational art, and tactics on the other. All three components of military art are closely related. Strategy dominates operational art, and the latter in turn dominates tactics. Actions and events at

the tactical level often affect strategy and policy in profound ways. Operational art is a critical link between strategy and tactics, and if that connection is weak or broken, no favorable strategic results can be achieved quickly or decisively. Whenever the ends and means at the national-strategic level are seriously disconnected or mismatched, brilliance at the operational and tactical levels—as the Germans consistently displayed during World War II—can only delay, but cannot ultimately prevent, defeat at the strategic level of war.

Obtaining Operational Thinking

The commander's ability to think operationally is a result of the influences of many factors. The societal and cultural framework determines to a large degree the nature of military institutions and hence professional education and training. Among other things, the commander's operational thinking is a product of the national way of warfare as a whole and the common operational outlook of the armed forces or a particular service. Sound joint doctrine and training are the main tools for acquiring a common operational outlook.

The most important direct influence in shaping the future operational commander's ability to think broadly is participation in field trips, planning/war games, large-scale exercises and maneuvers, and commanding large forces. Obviously, the most important of all direct influences is combat experience. However, most future operational commanders rarely have the opportunity to take part in combat. Hence, the best way to obtain operational thinking is to attend service/joint war colleges, preferably their resident programs. Another method is self-education. Officers should make continuous efforts to improve their professional knowledge over the entire length of their military career. The better educated the commander, the more he understands the big picture and the better he will perform (provided the commander has the essential qualities of character).²² All great captains in history, such as Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), Gustavus Adolphus

of Sweden (1594–1632), Henri de la Tour d’Auvergne, Viscomte de Turenne (1611–1675), Napoleon I, and Moltke, Sr., constantly worked to improve their professional knowledge. Napoleon I was known for untiring study and never failed to avail himself of an opportunity to perfect himself.²³ Moltke, Sr., was extremely well read in all aspects of the military profession.²⁴

The critical study of past wars, and campaigns and major operations in particular, is a major source for developing the operational perspective of future commanders. Because few military commanders have experience commanding forces at the operational level, the best way to educate them to think operationally is through the study of the successes and failures of great military leaders. Some of the greatest military leaders were also great students of history. Operational commanders should be students of history, not historians (a big difference exists between the two).

Future operational commanders should have a broad knowledge of foreign policy, diplomacy, geopolitics, international economy, finance, ethnicities, religions, and other issues that shape the situation in any given theater. They need to have a thorough knowledge of the area in which their forces will be employed. They should also have a deep knowledge of other countries’ histories, societies, and cultures.

Tenets

Success in combat is considerably enhanced when the operational commander applies certain tenets of operational art. These tenets are related but not necessarily identical to the principles of war. Perhaps the most important tenets of operational leadership are firm and unwavering focus on the objective, obtaining/maintaining freedom of action, exercising initiative, taking high but prudent risks, and applying overwhelming power at a decisive place and time.

The single most important element of operational art is accomplishing the military objective at hand. In addition to the levels of war, methods of combat

employment of one’s forces (tactical actions, major operations, campaigns) and their elements (for example, center of gravity, maneuver, deception, point of culmination) are directly or indirectly related to the scale of the objective. Thus, one of the most important tenets of operational leadership is to have a firm and unwavering focus on accomplishing the *ultimate objective* of a campaign or major operation. The objective, once selected, must be adhered to. However, the initially selected objective should be changed, modified, or even abandoned as demanded by the changes in the situation. The operational commander should realize that there is always more than one way to accomplish that objective.²⁵ There is probably no greater mistake than to determine and pursue several operational/strategic objectives simultaneously. Such a course of action can be taken only if one’s forces possess overwhelming power against any conceivable combination of enemy forces. Any effort to weaken the importance of a military objective, as the proponents of effects-based operations have done, is the antithesis of operational thinking and practice.

Also important is the commander’s ability to *obtain and maintain freedom of action*—that is, to act effectively at any time in meeting threats.²⁶ The operational commander should always try to obtain and maintain freedom of action.²⁷ Otherwise, his ability to exercise the initiative is lost.²⁸ The operational commander should also do everything possible to reduce the enemy’s freedom to act.²⁹ In practice, freedom of action for an operational commander is invariably subject to certain political, diplomatic, military, economic, social, legal, and, today, environmental limitations. In general, the more limitations on the operational commander’s freedom of action, the fewer the means and ways the political leadership will have for accomplishing its stated political strategic objectives.³⁰

Freedom to act is an absolute prerequisite for exercising the *initiative* on the part of subordinate commanders. The more freedom of action given to subordinate commanders, the more room they have to exercise initiative. To

ensure sufficient freedom for subordinate commanders, an operational commander should apply the German-style mission command (*Auftragstaktik*). In general, this method of command and control allows greater flexibility than centralized command and control for adapting rapidly to changing battlefield situations, dealing with unforeseen problems, and exploiting fleeting opportunities.³¹ Moltke, Sr., emphasized that the advantage of a situation would never be fully used if subordinate commanders waited for orders. Only if the commanders at all levels were competent for and accustomed to independent action would the possibility exist for moving large masses with ease.³² A higher commander provides only those details necessary for understanding and coordinating and leaves a lot of room for independent action for subordinate commanders in accomplishing the assigned missions.³³ The main prerequisites for the successful application of mission command were the commander’s proper understanding of the nature of war, common operational or tactical outlook, sound doctrine, excellent leadership, a high level of professional education and training, and common vocabulary.

The mission command method of command and control is most suited to a fast-moving and changing situation on the battlefield, as is in a high-intensity conventional war. It is a loose, decentralized method of command and control predicated on an understanding of overall mission requirements rather than on compliance with detailed direction from above. In general, it allows greater flexibility than centralized command and control for adapting rapidly to changing battlefield situations, dealing with unforeseen problems, and exploiting fleeting opportunities.³⁴ The single most important advantage of mission command is that it encourages creativity and initiative on the part of subordinates. It requires steady emphasis on leadership and warfighting at all levels of command. It also greatly enhances the role and value of professional education and training among officers and the rank and file. A major shortcoming of mission command



Iranian journalists jump from helicopter in West Front of Iran-Iraq War (Courtesy SAJED)

is that a subordinate commander may sometimes cause an unwanted escalation or worsening of the situation. In addition, lower decisionmaking thresholds and highly diffuse centers of authority can make coordination among command elements more difficult, thereby increasing the risk of loss of control by the commander. Another pitfall in applying mission command is incompetence in subordinate commanders. The successful application of mission command is also compounded when operational commanders interfere in purely tactical decisions and actions.³⁵ Risk aversion and zero-defect tolerance so prevalent in the U.S. and other Western militaries are the antithesis of the German-style mission command.

In general, mission command cannot be applied fully or at all when there is a need for an urgent action or where the highest leadership cannot afford an error that can easily lead to severe political or strategic consequences. Examples of such

situations today are in conflict prevention/management, posthostilities, and peace operations. The principal elements of mission command are the mission, situation, commander's intent, freedom to act, and initiative. These elements have to be skillfully applied by both the higher and subordinate commanders.

Commander's intent is the principal tool in ensuring freedom of action for subordinate commanders. In the German military prior to 1945, commander's intent was sacrosanct. The intent provided a framework within which an isolated subordinate commander could act in the spirit of the mission issued by a higher commander.³⁶ It promoted unity of effort in a fluid situation that failed to conform precisely to one's plans and expectations. The intent was aimed both to circumscribe and encourage subordinate commanders' exercise of the initiative.³⁷ The execution of the mission in accordance with the higher commander's intent required not only independence

and ability of analysis, but also what the Germans called "thinking obedience" (*denkende Gehorsam*). The Germans put great importance on the need to maintain the initiative once it was obtained.³⁸ Moltke, Sr., fostered critical thinking and independent actions among his subordinates. He believed that the best results are achieved when a commander acts within the framework of his higher commander's intent.³⁹

The higher the command echelon, the larger the area of uncertainty, and the higher the risks the commander should take. Despite all the advances in information technologies, there will always be a rather large area of uncertainty in any given operational or strategic situation. Among other things, the operational commander rarely, if ever, has complete knowledge of all the factors in a situation. Moreover, he must often make operational decisions without waiting for complete information. Operational decisionmaking is inherently based on

taking *high but prudent risks*. The uncertainties regarding the enemy's intentions are much greater at the strategic and operational levels than at the tactical one.⁴⁰ The consequences of a failure at the operational level are much more severe than at the tactical level, and they cannot be overcome easily, if at all. At the same time, however, the potential gain is much greater at the operational and strategic levels of command than at the tactical level.

A willingness to take calculated risks has distinguished all the great leaders of the past. The attempt to fight a safe battle without taking risks has rarely been successful. The doctrine that leaves nothing to chance has not resulted in a decisive victory. For example, Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805) was always taking great risks. Those who take big risks in war nearly always seem to have luck on their side.⁴¹

Willingness to take prudent risks means making operational decisions in varying degrees of uncertainty. Such decisions are critical for success, especially when one's forces are weaker than those of the enemy. They are not gambles, but carefully made calculated decisions. An operational commander often achieves success by taking reasonable risks. Clearly, there is never enough time or enough resources, and most choices involve some risks. There are no certainties in war.⁴²

The operational commander should not arbitrarily decide what force size and mix should be employed to accomplish the assigned operational or strategic objective. In all circumstances he should use all the sources of military and nonmilitary power available or becoming available.⁴³ One is never too strong in a war if the aim is to achieve a quick and decisive victory.⁴⁴ There is simply no such a thing as being strong enough.⁴⁵ Hence, a decisive victory could come only by using one's *overwhelming strength*. The key prerequisite for success in combat is to be stronger than the enemy at the decisive point and to use speed, surprise, and deception. Admiral Nelson believed that only numbers could annihilate. Napoleon I remarked, "God is on the side of the big battalions." Neither Napoleon I nor Nelson thought in terms of strength

superiority overall. What they aimed at was to employ their available forces so that they could fall in overwhelming force on a portion of the enemy and, having defeated it, do the same to some other part.⁴⁶ The commander who tries to be strong everywhere or who wastes his forces on secondary missions acts contrary to this basic rule.⁴⁷

One of the key prerequisites for success in both operations short of war and high-intensity conventional war is quality and skills of commanders and rank and file. The higher the level of command, the more critical it is to have highly educated, trained, and skilled commanders and staffs. Among other things, an operational commander should have strong character, moral courage, boldness, creativity, and an uncanny ability to think operationally instead of tactically. Experience shows that there were only few leaders who had some inborn qualities to think broadly and far ahead into the future. For most successful commanders, operational thinking was acquired through consistent efforts in times of peace. Professional education, self-education in particular, and training are the principal means of obtaining operational thinking. The tenets of operational leadership should not be applied like a dogma but based on the mission and situation. Experience shows that overemphasis on technology at the expense of operational thinking cannot lead to success against a strong opponent. In a war between two strong opponents, victory will go to the side that thinks better and acts faster and with greater determination. JFQ

Notes

¹ Field Manual (FM) 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, June 21, 1987), 3.

² Cited in Brian Howieson and Howard Kahn, "Leadership, Management and Command: The Officer's Trinity," in *Airpower Leadership: Theory and Practice*, ed. Peter W. Gray and Sebastian Cox (London: The Stationery Office, 2002), 23.

³ Richard A. Gabriel, *The Antagonists: A Comparative Combat Assessment of the Soviet and American Soldier* (Westport, CT: Green-

wood Press, 1984), 83.

⁴ Werner W. Banisch, "Leadership at the Operational Level," *Army* 8 (August 1987), 60.

⁵ David Jablonsky, "Strategy and the Operational Level of War: Part I," *Parameters* (Spring 1987), 71.

⁶ This term has many meanings and is extensively used in both military and civilian world. In one military definition, *situational awareness* pertains to "a pilot's (or aircrew's) continuous perception of self and aircraft in relation to the dynamic environment of flight, threats, and mission, and the ability to forecast, then execute tasks based on that perception." See Aaron W. Schopper, "Measuring situational awareness of AWACS weapons directors," *Situational Awareness in the Tactical Air Environment: Augmented Proceedings of the Naval Air Warfare Center's First Annual Symposium, CSERLAC SOAR Report# 97-01*, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH, July 1997.

⁷ General Johann von Kielmansegg, cited in Norbert Hanisch, *Untersuchen Sie die operativen Ideen Manstein hinsichtlich Schwerpunkt-bildung, Ueberraschung, Initiative und Handlungsfreiheit an den Beispielen Westfeldzug 1940 (Sichelschnitt-Plan) und Operation Zitadelle* (Hamburg: Fuehrungsakademie der Bundeswehr (FüAkBw), January 15, 1988), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, "Motto."

⁹ Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 184.

¹⁰ Gérard Chaliand, *The Art of War in World History: From Antiquity to the Nuclear Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 768.

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Strategic Perspectives 17
The Indian Jihadist Movement: Evolution and Dynamics
by Stephen Tankel



India has been confronting a jihadist threat from Pakistan for decades. Expeditionary terrorism typically receives the

most focus, but indigenous actors benefiting from external support are responsible for the majority of jihadist attacks in India. The Indian mujahideen network, which announced its presence to the public via media in 2007, is the latest and most well known manifestation of the indigenous Islamist militant threat. As Stephen Tankel details in this paper, however, its members were active before then. Moreover, a small number of Indian Muslims have been launching terrorist strikes—with and without Pakistani support—for more than two decades. The dynamics of Indian jihadism and the nature of India's evolving counterterrorism response are not easy to comprehend. This is understandable given that, even among Indian security officials and analysts, a knowledge gap exists.



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