

President Obama and Vice President Biden hold meeting with combatant commanders and military leadership in Cabinet Room, November 12, 2013 (White House/Pete Souza)



Why War Plans, Really?

By Robert A. Gleckler

On the surface, “What are war plans for?” is a simple question. Clearly, these plans should state what we propose to do in case of war. From this point of departure, however, any further understanding of the role of war plans can diverge significantly. The fact is that war plans are used, leveraged, and cited for more than just war planning, and this carries inherent risks. The most common misuse of war plans usually stems from fundamental

misunderstandings of the role of any single war plan or war plans in general and of the conceptual timeframes for their execution.

This article is not meant to explore the dark arts of operational planning. Reams of articles and terabytes of blog space on the merits or failings of existing doctrine for joint operational planning have been produced, and read almost exclusively, by practitioners. Rather, this article seeks to describe how war plans are

used (and even misused) at the strategic and policy levels, often as a result of diverging interpretations of their nature and value. Pointing out these pitfalls could help current and future strategists and policymakers avoid problems in the future, thereby enriching the civil-military dialogue that should take place throughout plan development.

What War Plans Are Really Telling Us

The term *war plans* is a colloquial substitute for operation or contingency plans.¹ In addition to direct conflict, they can also address other condi-

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During second battle of Libya, before zero hour, brigadier commanding tank units in Tobruk instruct tank commanders on operations using sand table for demonstration purposes (Courtesy Library of Congress/Official British Army photo No. BO 773 [BM 7241])

tions such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, defense support to civil authorities, or any other type of contingency that may call on resources from the military. Our joint operation planning framework includes the activities that combatant commanders and joint force commanders undertake to respond to contingencies and crises. Plans can serve as a basis for dialogue from the joint force to national leadership.² From planning guidance directed by the President, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, combatant command and joint force command planners develop “campaign plans and contingency plans *based on current military capabilities* [emphasis in original].”³ Formal planning guidance from these leaders is provided

biannually in the form of the Secretary of Defense’s *Guidance for Employment of the Force* and the Chairman’s *Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan*.

The campaigns and contingency plans crafted in response to formal guidance documents are examples of deliberate planning. In the biannual revision of these documents, the Secretary and Chairman articulate planning requirements for specific contingencies and the level of detail required of those plans. These are the formal methods by which senior leaders tell us, “We really need to think about X.” Crisis action planning is used for these unanticipated emergent contingencies that were not captured in formal planning guidance documents. Crisis action planning is used to address the problems that we simply did not see coming.

Understanding the timeframe for deliberate planning requirements is critical for an informed discussion on the role of war plans. Plans written by combatant commands in response to biannual formal guidance documents are expected to be developed and reviewed within the same timeframe. Though these contingencies may never transition to execution, the conceptual timeframe for potential execution is likewise within the 2-year planning cycle. Therefore, the plans must be based on current military capabilities if they are to meet the criterion of feasibility.⁴ Campaign plans, though they are meant to span a 2- to 5-year timeframe, are also meant to be developed and reviewed within the 2-year window of the guidance documents. Campaigns are ongoing and at various stages of execution at any given

time. Crisis action planning addresses emergent contingencies, which are, by their nature, near term. In all the cases described herein, the plans must reflect the potential for near-term execution with the forces and resources available at the time.

To help inform planners of the realistic availability of forces in the near term, Services annually provide data in the form of apportionment tables that describe each Service's best estimate of the average availability of certain types of forces in the coming year. The data are not a perfect reflection of day-to-day availability of forces because unanticipated demands accumulate throughout the course of the year from the moment the ink dries on the annual revision. However, the estimate still provides a general picture of how many forces a Service could provide and the pace at which they could be made available in a contingency. Using this data to inform planning at the front end does not mean those are the exact forces that may be available at execution, but it should decrease the difference between what a commander expects and what a Service is able to provide at execution. Referenced early in the planning process, accurate force generation estimates may even drive a commander to have a discussion with policymakers regarding feasibility and the range of acceptable outcomes before initially embarking on deliberate planning.

What About the Future?

Given that deliberate and crisis action planning are directed at the near term—the adversary as we see him today and the forces and resources we can reasonably expect to be made available today and in the near term—how do we address the future? A planning process solely focused on near-term threats and availability of resources does not provide the impetus for long-term innovation, strategic planning, or programming. Not only will threats change over time, but our forces and resources will change as well. Within the Department of Defense (DOD) planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process, programming extends 5 years into the future, while planning extends

15 to 17 years. If plans written for today's threats with today's resources are used as the primary demand signal for future planning, programming, and strategy development, DOD could find itself constantly staring in the rearview mirror looking for hints of future demands.

This is where DOD Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA) has a major role to play.⁵ Defense planning guidance that covers the 5 years of the upcoming Program Objective Memorandum (POM) is published annually and gives specific scenarios for DOD to examine. Significantly, the scenarios use forces programmed at the end of the POM rather than those available today. In parallel, assumptions about how the adversary may have changed must also be projected to the same timeframe. This is vital in avoiding the pitfall of examining today's adversary with tomorrow's force. DOD provides direction on developing scenarios to support senior leaders as they deliberate on strategy and programming.⁶ In contrast to campaign and war plans, which are written by combatant commands and undergo review before being presented to the Secretary of Defense, SSA products are collaboratively developed by the Office of the Director for Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE), Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff using data provided by DOD components.⁷ The scenarios can range from near to long term, but they should be based on plausible (though not necessarily the most likely) challenges and are not meant to be used in evaluating current war plans.⁸

Plausibility in the scenarios should not be overlooked. This is where DOD senior leaders can take the liberty to explore alternative futures but not stray so far from reality that the exercise is either useless or counterproductive. This somewhat obvious point was not always a given. In his history *American War Plans, 1890–1939*, Steven Ross notes that as late as 1916, the Navy General Board was still presenting plans for a naval showdown on the high seas between the United States and Germany. The plan

was notably silent on the strategic question of why Great Britain—or any other belligerent—would simply stand aside and allow this to happen in the middle of World War I.⁹ Today's SSA scenarios are directed to focus on the strategic level of warfare and include “threat and friendly politico-military contexts and backgrounds, assumptions, constraints, limitations, strategic objective, and other planning considerations.”¹⁰ Accounting for the strategic environment that would lead to conflict is a vital part of the civil-military dialogue associated with any future scenario.

What Are the Pitfalls?

As noted, the greatest sources for misunderstanding plans at the strategic and policy levels come from differing views on the temporal aspects of the plan (the timeframe for potential execution) and the purpose or value of the plan. Below are a few observations on the pitfalls associated with these different interpretations.

If You Build It, They Will Come. A deliberate plan, developed by a combatant command in response to formal biannual planning guidance from the President, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman, is meant to address potential near-term threats using resources that could reasonably be made available. A plan that is drafted uninformed by any consideration of available resources (that is, force availability or logistics sustainability) or transportation feasibility does not paint a realistic picture of the types of decisions and tradeoffs that senior strategic and policy-level decisionmakers would be faced with should the plan be required to transition to execution. At best, an uninformed plan shifts the assumption of risk from the author (the combatant command) to the force provider (for example, the Services, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Transportation Command), or the transporter (U.S. Transportation Command) and masks potential shortfalls or lateness. At worst, it can paint a three-dimensional, overly optimistic picture that masks risk from all participants. A plan uninformed by resources becomes, “If you build it,



Soldiers plan for defense during decisive action rotation 15-02 at National Training Center on Fort Irwin, California, November 2014 (U.S. Army/Randis Monroe)

they will come.” An unrealistic projection of available resources becomes, “If the balloon goes up, we’re all in.” And a policymaker has no idea of the tough decisions that might converge at execution, such as mobilization options, disengagement from existing priorities, overlapping requirements, authorities needed, access and overflight required, time required to meet objectives, or resources.

Ideally, these conversations happen at the genesis of planning rather than deep in the planning process when time has been squandered. Despite shortcomings in the process, one of the great values of in-progress reviews of deliberate plans and campaigns is that they can serve as a training ground for civil-military policy discussions when the stakes are not nearly as high, so that the participants are ready to have these discussions during crisis action planning. This applies not only to the dialogue between military planners and policymakers within DOD, but also to the dialogue that includes interagency and potential coalition partners.

The “New York, New York” Approach to Sustainment Planning. One common argument for unconstrained plan

development is sometimes used during sustainment planning. Even when operational planners thoroughly adjust their force flow from the desired force to the realistically available force, logistics planners may stay fixated on sustaining the desired force. If the ideal, preferred force for the plan is larger than the force that could actually be generated, so the logic goes, then it is best to plan to sustain the larger force. If, at execution, a smaller force were provided, then certainly the plan would be sufficient to sustain that force as well. This is essentially the principle that “If you can make it here, you’ll make it anywhere.” Why risk being caught short if, by some supreme effort, the preferred force were actually generated?

The flaw in this approach is that it can lead to sub-optimized sustainment for the force that may actually arrive. Again, it is not only the size of the force, but also the timing of arrival. For example, food, fuel, or munitions could be programmed to arrive in time to sustain units that had not yet been generated, misaligning valuable cargo space for medical assets for the units that do arrive. Changes in the force

flow of joint capabilities—whether based on force generation timelines or transportation timelines—do not simply extend the operational timelines of the plan; they can drastically impact the entire scheme of maneuver for the operational commander—and even result in discussions about policy implications (that is, time needed, projected casualties, international or domestic pressures, and so forth). Capabilities that had been needed early in the ideal timeline may no longer serve their purpose by arriving later. The plan that is based on the realistic generation and arrival of forces could have completely different priorities for the arrival of sustainment capabilities from the plan that is based on a desired or preferred force.

War Plans in Strategy Development

We must concede that operation and contingency plans carry a certain gravitas that SSA scenarios lack, *especially* when the former are referred to as *war plans*. After all, in the case of planning contingencies formally directed by the President, Secretary of Defense, or

Chairman, war plans are developed in response to direction from the highest levels. They are designed to meet real threats in the near term, are developed by the responsible regional combatant command, formally staffed for comment, and reviewed by the Secretary of Defense or Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. SSA scenarios, as described earlier, serve a different purpose and are developed in a process led by CAPE, often exploring the plausible—though not necessarily likely—challenges of the future. This creates a disparity in the perceived value of both products that unfortunately can carry over to the development of strategy for the future.

When exploring how DOD might meet future challenges, working groups have a strong tendency to use today's war plans, rather than SSA scenarios, to articulate what the demands might be. As described earlier, a plan that is developed for today's adversary, with today's resources, and to meet today's policy objectives may be inappropriate for exploring tomorrow's threat with the resources that we believe will be available in the future. At best, this can result in a temporal mismatch between today's needs and tomorrow's threats. At worst, this creates an incentive to distort a war plan from a feasible near-term plan to a programmatic demand signal, where desired future capabilities are shielded by the argument that "this is what the war plan calls for." The nature of the war plan thus changes from an operational approach for today to a justification for future programs. When a war plan is distorted this way, it becomes difficult to amend to meet changes in the operational environment for fear of losing a programmatic demand signal. Using today's war plans for strategy development can also lower the incentive to explore innovative schemes or resource investments to tackle the problem—or reduce its likelihood—in the future. After all, who wants to argue with the demands of a war plan that has been reviewed by the Secretary of Defense?

One of the most unsettling manifestations of this tendency occurs when

strategy working groups combine existing war plans from today in an effort to get an understanding of the demands for combined execution in the future. Not only were the plans written considering today's resources for today's adversary, but they were also written independently of each other. Simply adding two plans together may not provide an accurate description of either the strategic environment or our national response to such a scenario. The strategic environment that led to conflict in each of the individual war plans might be completely different from the strategic background that would lead to simultaneous conflict with both adversaries at once. The operational approaches and the tolerance for different policy objectives and national resource availability may be completely different when the Nation is severely pressed by multiple adversaries, as compared to one at a time.

Take a Number, Please!

Plans that are tasked and developed in isolation from one another run the risk of missing the entire demand for resources that may arise during the contingency. While there is value in isolating a problem (a potential contingency) for deep examination by specific regional combatant command planners, the shortfall is that most contingencies will not be limited to a single combatant command problem. Even when planners are diligent in crafting a near-term plan informed by available resources, they may never have been formally tasked to take into account other related crises outside of their responsibility that would place competing demands on those same resources.

There is a growing acknowledgment within DOD that our approach to contingency planning needs to account for the range of demands that may be placed on the entire force during execution. A move to combine plans to understand the total demand must be more nuanced than simply adding together the requirements of several plans developed in isolation. It should lead to plans that are developed, from the outset, as collaborative approaches to a problem whose

main focus may lie within one combatant command but could require supporting efforts from other combatant commands, especially those with global or functional responsibilities.

Plans that are developed collaboratively from the start will expose potential policy-level decisions that would have been masked previously. This applies not only to potential conflicts over resources but also to opportunities that can be exploited, such as placing an adversary's interests outside the local theater at risk. As General Ulysses S. Grant snapped to a panicky subordinate after a hard day's fighting during the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864, "Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do."¹¹ A potential adversary whose threat is important enough for the national leadership to direct us to plan against it should not be addressed simply as one combatant command's problem, but as the Nation's problem. Our adversaries would not limit themselves to taking on a single regional combatant command, and we should not approach it that way either.

This holistic approach to plan development requires not only the involvement of multiple combatant commands, but also interaction with policymakers who can be exposed early on to gaps and opportunities that we may ask their help in addressing through inter-agency and international partners. This is especially important when trying to grasp what conditions might have existed prior to the crisis erupting.

Crisis versus Complacency

Our planning, both for war plans as well as SSA scenarios, places a heavy emphasis on the crisis portion (decisive action or Phase III) of a given contingency or scenario. War plans are often precluded by the phrase "and should deterrence fail," loosely translated as "when all hell breaks loose." Our planning construct describes contingencies as branches of the ongoing campaign plan, which is sometimes interpreted as "things were going fine, then we fell off a cliff." Our Joint Operation Planning and Execu-

tion System construct envisions triggers such as the declaration of a C-day (crisis) by the President, authorizing a whole host of force flow and mobilization activities. Our adversaries know this all too well, and they deliberately operate in the ungoverned white space of our planning construct that exists to the left of any sort of thresholds for crisis declaration.

For SSA scenarios, this crisis focus is especially problematic because it can lead to an overemphasis on the weapons systems and capabilities we may need once the sky *has* fallen. By envisioning a start point where all our efforts to set conditions between now and the beginning of a future catastrophe have been fruitless, we actually avoid some of the most substantial and informative policy-level dialogue about what we want to achieve in that ungoverned white space short of crisis between now and the future. While focusing on worst-case start points for crisis activities is important for understanding the highest bar of demand and for pushing the bounds of innovation, SSA scenarios can bring added value if they also explore alternative start points for future crises, envisioning the fruits of several years' efforts on access, overflight, availability, relationships, prepositioning, advances in medicine and technology, and so forth. Exploring alternative start points would not be intended to be unreasonably optimistic about the future but rather to actually inform ourselves, while the stakes are not as high, of the activities we may want to pursue to set better conditions should the crisis arise in the future.

In the End, It's Just a Plan

In the universe of demands placed on combatant commands, Services, and the entire DOD, war plans are simply one of many. In the midst of ongoing day-to-day operations, exercises, campaigns, and the Title 10 functions of man, train, and equip, war plans and scenarios designed to explore the future are sometimes not used or consulted.

Ironically, the further one gets from the factory floor of plan development, the more the notion of war plans seems to be

placed on a pedestal. War plans, to those outside the dark arts of operational planning, seem to carry an aura of importance that can make practitioners cringe when asked about them. War planners need to display utmost caution when responding to the question "How many *X* (brigades, carriers, squadrons, and so forth) are in the plan?" Key follow-up questions should be: "Who is asking?" and "For what purpose?" Raw data, removed from the context of time (today or in the future? total demand or phased arrival?), strategic environment (in isolation or combined? start point assumptions?), or purpose (plan refinement or strategy development?) can be less than helpful. Such data can actually be counterproductive, especially when accompanied by the declaration, "That's what the plan calls for!"

We must remember that any plan, whether deliberate or crisis action, is *a* way, not necessarily *the* way, that the military instrument of national power will be applied during execution. In an ideal world, near-term plans, based on the reasonable expectation of resources, serve to stimulate the civil-military dialogue early in the process. They identify potential decision points when resources or policy aims may be in conflict, and they explore the range of acceptable outcomes before devoting valuable time and energy to developing specific courses of action. Well-developed plans, frequently reviewed for changes in the strategic environment, can help narrow the gap between expectations during plan development and the reality at execution, when time is always short and pressure is abundant.

Though war plans can certainly inform strategy development, they must be understood for what they represent: an approach for today's adversary with today's resources. To misuse war plans as a signal for future demands is to walk backward into the future. This can stifle innovative ways to approach future challenges and even distort an existing war plan from a truly operational approach for today into a holding pen for programmatic demand signals for the future. When we use SSA scenarios

to explore innovative approaches to the future—even considering alternate starting conditions—we can foster a rich civil-military dialogue that captures risks and opportunities when the stakes are manageable and time is available. In understanding the roles of war plans and scenarios and their temporal contexts, DOD will be well positioned to address near-term challenges and to develop policy and strategy for the future. JFQ

Notes

¹ Examples of the legacy term *war plans* still in current use include the Joint Staff's Joint Operational War Plans Division in J5, Joint Strategic Plans, as well as Headquarters Department of the Army's War Plans Division, formally known as G-3/5/7, DAMO-SSW (Department of the Army, Maneuver and Operations, Strategic Studies, War Plans).

² Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011).

³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3141.01E, "Management and Review of Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP)-Tasked Plans," September 15, 2011, C-1: "(2) Feasibility. The assigned mission can be accomplished using available resources within the time contemplated by the plan."

⁵ Department of Defense Directive 8260.05, "Support for Strategic Analysis," July 7, 2011.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1890–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 64.

¹⁰ "Support for Strategic Analysis," 6.

¹¹ Noah Andre Trudeau, *Bloody Roads South: The Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May–June 1864* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 113.