



U.S. Marine Corps officer assigned to Company A, The Basic School, prepares his ammunition during "The War" field training exercise aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, April 16, 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps/Ezekiel R. Kitandwe)

# The Fourth Level of War

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Civilization began because the beginning of civilization is a military advantage.”<sup>1</sup> This observation by Walter Bagehot is not far off the mark. Warfare certainly matured along with civilization as a violent expression of political will and intent. We currently view the art of warfare in three levels—tactical, operational, and strategic—but it was not always so. In the beginning, there were strategy and tactics. Strategy outlined how and to what purpose war might be used to achieve political objectives. Tactics directed how the violence was actually applied on the battlefield. For most of military history, tactical art was able to achieve strategic objectives as tribes, forces, and armies marshaled on the battlefield to destroy the enemy’s ability to resist their master’s political will. Although much debated, operational art was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the size of armies, made possible by the development of the nation-state, rendered tactics unable to bring about political results. Civilization has moved on. From a doctrinal, theoretical, and practical point of view, it is now time to consider a fourth level of war—the theater-strategic level of war.

## Doctrine

There is little written about theater strategy in U.S. doctrine. Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, includes only a single paragraph on what would seem an important subject. U.S. doctrine acknowledges the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. However, doctrine also includes a theater-strategic level in an overlapping area that suggests this level bridges the operational and strategic levels.<sup>2</sup> Yet the *operational level* is defined as linking “strategy and tactics by establishing operational objectives needed to achieve the military end states and strategic objectives.”<sup>3</sup> So what is the theater-strategic level of war? What is theater strategy? The problem in placing theater strategy in some useful context is that we already have so many kinds of strategy and no real consensus on what they are.

On the menu of strategies, we can find grand, national, national security, national military, just plain military, and theater strategies. All of these are harnessed to serve policy, but each varies in its objectives and means. There is a wide range of definitions of strategy, most of which illustrate an attribute rather than its essential nature. They range from the general: Art Lykke's famous "strategy equals ends plus ways plus means"; to Lawrence Freedman's more poetic "a story told in the future tense"; to Colin Gray's more specific "the use or threat of military power for political purposes."<sup>4</sup> The Department of Defense (DOD) asserts that *strategy* is "a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and multinational objectives."<sup>5</sup> This suggests that strategy involves the whole weight of the U.S. Government in the pursuit of national policy. Does theater strategy likewise involve all elements of national power?

In the pursuit of U.S. national policy, DOD has divided the world into six geographic combatant commands. Combatant commanders oversee these areas of responsibility and develop theater strategies. By doctrine, a *theater strategy* is "an overarching construct outlining a combatant commander's vision for integrating and synchronizing military activities and operations with the other elements of national power to achieve national strategic objectives."<sup>6</sup> Combatant commanders can only seek to synchronize and integrate, not to direct other elements of national power in the pursuit of unity of effort. Theater commanders conduct business in the complex environment of national, international, coalition, and alliance policy. The theater is where policy meets the joint force. How is this done and to what purpose?

Combatant commanders work for the Secretary of Defense and President through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Charged with geographic responsibilities, they employ "theater strategy to align and focus efforts and resources to mitigate and prepare for conflict and contingencies in their AOR [area

of responsibility] to support and advance U.S. interests."<sup>7</sup> A theater campaign plan details the strategy and usually employs security cooperation, building partner capacity, and force posture, among other activities, to achieve the commander's vision, advance U.S. interests, and prepare for possible contingencies. This is eminently reasonable and desirable and is arguably effective, but it largely addresses steady-state or peacetime requirements. There is no doctrine based on theory or practice for developing or executing theater strategy in war. Specific contingency plans, whether directed by DOD or self-generated by combatant commanders, address specific threats, generally with operational campaign planning. Where does theater strategy fit in wartime, particularly with multiple theaters of operations? Does the scale of effort—the intermediate theater objectives as opposed to theater of operations objectives—justify a fourth level of war?

### Theory

The assertion that it is time to consider another level of war directly relates to how these levels are linked and why they now need to be expanded. The oft-quoted Prussian philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz, helped to establish the relationship between the levels of war when he noted that "the concepts characteristic of time—war, campaign, and battle—are parallel to those of space—country, theater of operations, and positions."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the relationship between the levels of war includes time, scale, objectives, effect, and, significantly, the influence of policy. All of these factors are interrelated—that is to say, interactive. For example, there is a temporal relationship between the levels of war. Things happen much faster at the tactical level than at the operational or strategic levels. Likewise, the conduct and results of operational campaigns take less time than the full implementation of national strategies. Indeed, strategic results may take years to fully realize or even manifest. Clausewitz pointed out that this is a natural consequence of the scale and objectives—the relationship between battle, campaign,

and war. To better illustrate the temporal relationship, the classic diagram of the levels of war should depict wheels of increasing size. At the tactical level, the wheels and events turn much faster than at the larger operational and strategic levels.

Size matters. War is waged in a geographic context. Each level of war has been historically associated with scale and scope of effort. The tyranny of distance contributes to the temporal relationship between the levels. *Tactics* is the application of technology to the battlefield to defeat the enemy and thereby gain immediate or cumulative military results. Operational art is applied to a spectrum of operations, connecting or synchronizing battles and major operations to achieve strategic effect. This is particularly the case when a single major operation such as *Urgent Fury* in Grenada (1983) or *Just Cause* in Panama (1989) can achieve strategic objectives. Theater strategy in war should seek to synchronize and arrange multiple campaigns in a theater of war or area of responsibility to achieve national strategic objectives. In other words, theater strategy synchronizes multiple theaters of operation.

Levels of war are also distinguished by objectives—how each level contributes to achieving the ultimate policy objectives. In cases where only one theater of operations is engaged in combat operations, there will be almost complete congruence between national, theater, and theater of operations objectives. Theater of operations planning and operations will dominate national attention. Theater of operations objectives and national objectives will be virtually synonymous, and theater strategy will be cast largely in a supporting role. This relationship and the role and function of theater strategy may well change, however, when the theater has multiple theaters of operations conducting military operations.

If, for example, war erupts on the Korean Peninsula, the national, theater of operations, and theater objectives will perfectly align, leading to a victory in Korea. The U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) commander will be cast largely in a supporting role while the

Korean theater of operations commander garners national attention and, likely, direct or close supervision by the Secretary of Defense and President. In this case, the USPACOM commander will be cast in a supervisory role, although it will be a largely supporting role. If, however, at the same time a conflict erupts with the Chinese over Taiwan or elsewhere in the region, the theater commander must now actively balance, prioritize, and synchronize major operations or campaigns in the theater to achieve national strategic objectives. In this scenario, theater strategy becomes an essential intermediary level of war due to the scope, scale, and nature of the conflict. Despite this critical theater-strategic role, political scrutiny will inevitably gravitate toward the theater of operations with the most domestic and international political consequences. This is an example of the critical role of policy as a distinguishing feature in the levels of war.

There is an ascending quality to the role of policy in the levels of war that provides both context and constantly exhibits influence. This, of course, is nothing more than reiterating Clausewitz's most famous insight that war is simply a continuation of policy by other means. But the role of policy varies with the level of war. The tactical art largely involves the application of technology to the battlespace, so technology has more influence than does policy at this level. Progressing from operational to strategic, the influence of policy grows, and at the strategic level, it predominates. Again, Clausewitz anticipated this relationship when he asserted that "Policy, of course, will not extend its influence to operational details. Political considerations do not determine the posting of guards or the employment of patrols. But they are more influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle."<sup>9</sup>

The extent of policymaker involvement in operational details has often been a sticking point in civil-military relations. Should the President be picking target points or making tactical decisions from Washington, DC? The answer invariably lies with the question of the potential

strategic or political effects of the tactical action. President Lyndon Johnson was famously involved in picking targets in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup> His concern was not tactical effects but the potential of hitting Soviet or Chinese advisors or personnel, which could catastrophically escalate the war. Likewise, President Barack Obama ordered and then watched the tactical raid that took out Osama bin Laden. In both cases, the effects of the action matched to policy objectives determined the relationship between the tactical, operational, and strategic.

Finally, the levels of war are distinguished by their tactical, operational, theater-strategic, and strategic effect. Chance and the unique nature of violence give war a nonlinear character, but the notion of levels of war enables us to visualize and arrange resources to purpose in a fairly linear or conceptual way. The purpose of each level of war is action—to get things done. In a practical reality, this calls for some orderly approach to thinking, planning, and executing military operations. Bounded, directed, and constrained by policy while wrestling with an adaptive animate enemy, planners and commanders seek to stack the odds in their favor. The levels of war are a construct that helps them achieve this. The theater-strategic level is no less a tool than the operational or tactical framework for planning and execution.

What is the relationship of the levels of war in terms of effects? Do we need success at the tactical level to assure success at the operational? Likewise, do we need operational success to achieve theater-strategic or strategic effect? Logic suggests that success at one level makes success at the next level more likely, but it in fact may be insufficient. History is full of cautionary examples where tactical or operational success does not guarantee strategic success. German military history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is certainly a case in point. The list of U.S. tactical or even operational success in the limited wars since 1945 leading to equally limited strategic effect might also be cited.

All the levels of war function simultaneously. Some may argue that there

is no linear relationship between the levels of war. Indeed, even doctrine recognizes that tactical events may result in immediate strategic effect. This may have increased in recent years due to the pervasive nature and potential influence of media coverage of world events. As an example, the raid to capture or kill bin Laden certainly comes to mind. This tactical or strategic compression is usually rare and the effects are most likely transitory. Despite the impact on U.S. public morale, al Qaeda and affiliated terrorists fight on without bin Laden. The temporal relationship between the levels of war, if true, would suggest that the most enduring effects at each level of war are most likely cumulative. In the planning and conduct of operations with enduring results, the relationship between the levels of war remains useful in arranging operations, assigning tasks, and allocating resources.

## Practice

Theater strategy is as old as empires contending for power and influence in distant corners of their reach. The leaders of the Roman, British, and French empires, as well as of succeeding empires, all sought to tailor strategy to specific regions while harmonizing those actions with the greater national purpose. As war spread around the world, beginning with the rise of the nation-state in Europe, theater strategy became ever more necessary. Some nations were better at it than others. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the British won and retained India but lost the United States. World War I demonstrated—and World War II confirmed—that theater strategy was a critical path to national strategic objectives and success. Much like operational art, however, historians have largely ignored theater-strategic art as a specific area worthy of interest and study. Narratives of battles, campaigns, and national strategies continue to dominate the story of military history.

For the U.S. military, current practice is rooted in World War II and postwar solutions to filling the power vacuums left by the destruction of the German



U.S. Marines with Golf Company, 23<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, Marine Forces Reserve, sign roster alongside Brazilian marine corps during UNITAS Amphibious 2015, Ilha do Governador, Brazil, November 16, 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps/Issac Velasquez)

and Japanese empires. Even before the war ended, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to retain the unified command system that had proved so successful. In June 1945, the Joint Chiefs issued a directive appointing General Dwight D. Eisenhower as commanding general of U.S. forces in the European theater of operations. In December 1946, President Harry S. Truman approved the Unified Command Plan, which established seven geographic theater commands.<sup>11</sup> Over the years, these commands have changed a great deal, but the requirement for geographic responsibilities and the need to plan and orchestrate both daily and potential military activities remain the same. The distinguishing factors among the levels of war—scale, objective, policy, time, and effect—have also been evident at the theater-strategic level of war.

**Scale.** Over the last decade, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)

has been involved in multiple theaters of operations in the war on terror. In terms of scale, USCENTCOM established separate theaters of operations as the war spread across the Middle East, South Central Asia, and Africa. Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa account for three separate theaters of operations. The potential for multiple and simultaneous theaters of operations within the same geographic combatant commander's area of responsibility is obvious, particularly in the case of the Pacific and European commands. These potential separate theaters of operations span the full range of conflict, from state to nonstate to hybrid, in every region.

**Time and Effects.** The temporal relationship between the tactical, operational, theater-strategic, and strategic levels remains constant. Most of the various campaigns in the Middle East and South Central Asia over the last decade have

involved counterinsurgency (COIN), building partner capacity (BPC), and counterterrorism operations. Things still happen quickly at the tactical level, but COIN and BPC are inherently slow and expensive. Counterterrorism operations may be less expensive and more discrete but, like COIN and BPC, the effects are cumulative. The strategic decision to surge troops into Iraq in 2007 enabled the operational decision to first secure Baghdad. The many tactical actions that actually extended security to Iraq's capital took place daily, accumulating to achieve operational effect. The tactical, operational, theater-strategic, and national-strategic effects were linked but not simultaneous and remain separated in time.

The tactical effects were undeniable and came quickly as U.S. forces worked to expand security in the capital region. The operational effects took more time,

however, as the number of violent incidents decreased, providing an appearance of incremental progress that did not reflect the reality on the ground.<sup>12</sup> It has also been argued that the troop surge allowed the operational consequence of supporting or enabling the Sunni Awakening that developed over the following year.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the debate about the operational effects of the surge, the strategic effects remain contested. Did military operations in Iraq achieve our national objectives of establishing a sustainable, friendly, and democratic Iraq? What is missing is a discussion of theater-strategic effects beyond the national objectives. How did our actions stabilize or destabilize the region? What effect did our conduct of operations in Iraq have on the other theaters of operations? How synchronized was our theater strategy? Clearly, the effects of the U.S. campaign in Iraq are still playing out in the region and continue to resonate across the theater.

**Objectives and the Role of Policy.** The theater commander will rarely be able to prioritize the theaters of operations within his area of responsibility. This is due to the increasing influence of policy at the theater-strategic level. With regard to objectives, the notion that theater and national objectives are absolutely congruent was confirmed as political attention swayed from Afghanistan to Iraq and back to Afghanistan. Domestic and international politics and Presidential and national credibility all circumscribed the theater commander's ability to plan and execute operations over time and across the theater.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the role of policy was certainly evident and increasingly influential at this level of war, so much so that the role of the theater—that is to say, the combatant commander—often seemed eclipsed.

This has been the case historically. For example, General William Westmoreland, USA, is remembered as the U.S. commander in Vietnam, but few can recall admirals Ulysses S. Sharp, John S. McCain, Jr., or Noel Gayler as USPACOM commanders during the same war. Similarly, few may recall the name of the USCENTCOM commander

while General David Petraeus, USA, commanded in Iraq in 2007.<sup>15</sup> To win in Vietnam and Iraq was the theater of operations, theater, and national objective. What, then, is the role of the theater commander? Is he an enabler or a supporter? Someone has to be looking after the region, not just the hot war. What have our military actions in the Middle East, taken as a whole, done for our position and our interests in the region? Did we single-handedly pursue the transitory main effort at the risk of losing perspective and balance in the region as a whole? Did we synchronize and orchestrate multiple campaigns in various theaters of operations across the entire theater?

If we look back at the last decade and ask why we may have failed to achieve our objectives, there are many possible reasons for the lack of complete success. One that is considered less often than others is the failure to think hard about the doctrine, theory, and practice of theater-strategic art. The theater-strategic level shares the same defining criteria in the relationship between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war—those of scale, time, objectives, effects, and the role of policy. If, in the future, we can expect near-simultaneous challenges or conflicts in multiple theaters of operations within a single combatant command, we may well profit from paying more attention to the fourth level of war. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard A. Preston and Sydney Wise, *Men in Arms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011), I-13.

<sup>3</sup> JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2013), I-8.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur F. Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (May 1989); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> JP 1, I-7.

<sup>6</sup> JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washing-

ton, DC: The Joint Staff, 2010, as amended through March 2015), 249.

<sup>7</sup> JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011), II-7.

<sup>8</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 379.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

<sup>10</sup> See Dennis M. Drew, "Rolling Thunder 1965: Anatomy of Failure," CADRE Paper, Report No. AU-ARI-CP-86-3, October 1986, available at <www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awc-gate/readings/drew2.htm>; Sarah Gordon, "Lunch with Robert Caro," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2013, available at <www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/5dae469c-50eb-11e2-b287-00144feab49a.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald H. Cole et al., *The History of the Unified Command Plan 1946–1993* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 1995), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 209.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 280: "What is militarily possible must be politically possible."

<sup>15</sup> "In beginning a partnership with Dave Petraeus that would last nearly four and half years in two wars, I would tell him that Iraq was his battlespace and Washington was mine." See Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 49.