

Soldier assigned to 182<sup>nd</sup> Transportation Company fires M240B machine gun as part of Operation ROM, hosted by 79<sup>th</sup> Theater Sustainment Command, at Fort Hunter Liggett, California, December 2, 2017 (U.S. Army Reserve/Heather Doppke)



# Operations Short of War and Operational Art

By Milan Vego

In peacetime, one's military forces are predominantly involved in conducting diverse and low-intensity actions, arbitrarily called operations short of war. Focus in these operations is almost entirely on strategy and tactics, while operational art—that critically important intermediate field of study and practice of the art of war—is

given short shrift. One reason for this unsatisfactory situation is the belief that operational art is applicable only to a high-intensity conventional war, but this is indisputably false. Operational art can, and should, be applied across the entire spectrum of conflict. Yet because of the more complex and restrictive strategic environment, operational art is much more difficult to apply than it is in a high-intensity conventional war. Comprehensive knowledge and understanding of theory of operational warfare are absolutely

necessary for the most effective use of one's combat forces not only in a high-intensity conventional war but also in operations short of war.

In generic terms, *operational art* can be understood as the theory and practice of planning, preparing, and conducting major operations and campaigns aimed at accomplishing operational or strategic objectives in a theater. The theory of operational art is universal because it is based on experiences of all wars, regardless of the era in which they were conducted. However, the application of

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Dr. Milan Vego is Admiral R.K. Turner Professor of Operational Art in the Joint Military Operations Department at the U.S. Naval War College.

operational art is largely an art, not a science. Operational art reflects a particular national or Service way of warfare and often the personality and command style of the commanders. The main components of operational art are:

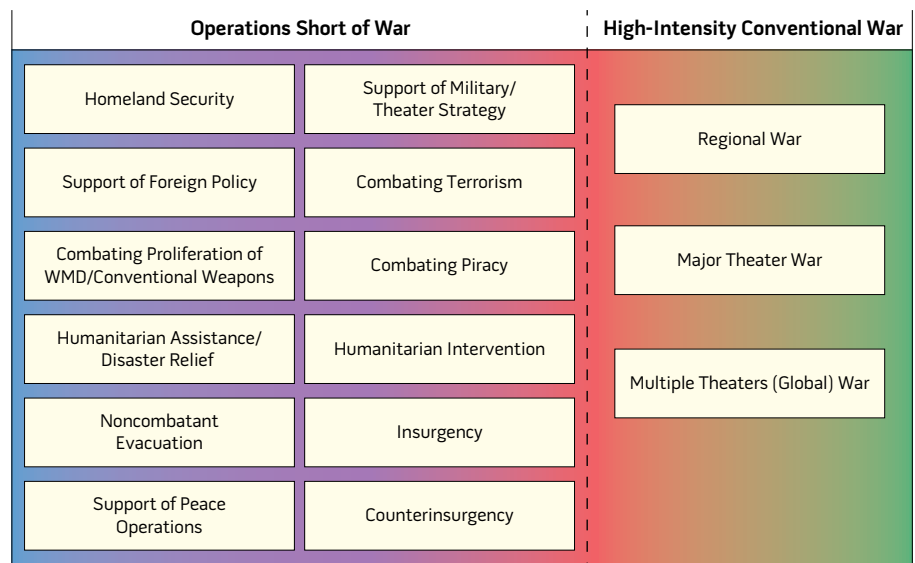
- the operational/strategic objectives
- the levels of war
- operational factors of space, time, and forces
- methods of operational employment of combat forces
- operational support
- operational command structure/ command and control
- operational design
- operational decisionmaking and planning
- operational leadership
- operational thinking
- operational doctrine
- operational training.

Various terms were used in the past in referring to the employment of combat forces short of high-intensity conventional war. Some of them were either too broad, others too narrow in scope. None of them were entirely satisfactory. For example, the term *operations other than war* was used in referring to all military operations other than combat and garrison activities. Related terms are *low-intensity conflict*, *irregular warfare*, *stability and support operations*, *global war on terror*, and *stability, security, transition, and reconstruction operations*.<sup>1</sup> The term *operations short of war* used here is a variant of *operations other than war*. It encompasses many diverse operations, ranging from homeland security to counterinsurgency (see figure 1).

### Strategic Environment

The future security environment will be characterized by increased Great Power competition. Rising regional powers will resort to intensified use of proxies to avoid direct conflict, minimize risk of escalation, and provide plausible deniability. By doing so, they will extend their capabilities beyond their respective region. In the future, some rising powers will be unwilling to support international organizations that

**Figure 1. Spectrum of Conflict**



underpin stable and secure international order. The international order could be put under great stress because many weak states might become failed states. Some rising regional powers might embark on a policy of “fracturing” weak neighboring states. Weak states might be internally further weakened because of poor governance and increased unrest by dissatisfied segments of the population. Future trends could also include proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist, insurgent, or criminal groups.<sup>2</sup>

In the future, ideological conflict will continue to evolve. Legitimacy of state authority in many weak states will steadily decline. Group identities will change rapidly. Advanced information technologies will generate new and more creative ways to build and maintain cohesion and common purpose among members of a group.<sup>3</sup>

The population in developed countries is generally stagnating or decreasing, while in developing countries it is rapidly increasing. The majority of people in developing countries are young.<sup>4</sup> The increasing urbanization in many parts of the world poses great challenges for the employment of forces. By 2025, about 60 percent of the world’s population will live in cities. About 80 percent of all countries border the sea and approximately 95

percent of the world’s population lives within 600 miles of the sea. Some 60 percent of the politically significant urban areas around the world are located within 62 miles of the coast and 70 percent are within 300 miles.<sup>5</sup> The lack of economic opportunity, civil strife, and regional wars could greatly increase mass migration from weak and failed states to developed parts of the globe.<sup>6</sup>

In operations short of war, the strategic situation can be quite complex. It is often diffuse and ambiguous. The security environment is volatile and unpredictable. The military situation is characterized by a great variety of both conventional and unconventional threats. Threats to one’s interests emanate from both state and nonstate actors. The true character of these threats is often hard to define. Some threats do not materialize, while others morph into different types of threats. In the future security environment, large states will have increasing difficulty maintaining a monopoly on violence. Individuals and groups will socialize globally. Nonstate and private groups will increasingly turn to violence. Commercial technologies will be further weaponized. Advances in computerization, miniaturization, and digitization will be exploited by transnational terrorists and criminal groups.<sup>7</sup> These groups will have little or no respect for commonly



Two Air Force B-52H Stratofortresses assigned to 96<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron fly in formation during Bomber Task Force Europe 20-1, October 23, 2019, over Baltic Sea (U.S. Air Force/Duncan C. Bevan)

accepted principles of the law of armed conflict, and the effects of their actions will be felt not only internally but often also externally.<sup>8</sup> Off-the-shelf advanced technologies will be available to potential enemies.<sup>9</sup> Poor infrastructure could greatly complicate the deployment and logistical sustainment of forces.<sup>10</sup>

Media and public opinion have a much greater role in operations short of war than in a high-intensity conventional war. The perception of reality is often much more important than reality itself. Public perception of military actions may matter more than the correlation of forces on the ground, as the examples of Somalia in 1994, Bosnia in 1992–1995, and insurgencies in Iraq in 2003–2007 and in Afghanistan since 2001 illustrate. In a media-intense environment, politicians and the public have become unforgiving of even minor mistakes and transgressions; therefore, even the

smallest aspect of military operations should now be planned with sensitivity to public perception of the situation.<sup>11</sup>

### Political vs. Military Objectives

Policy and strategy have a dominant role in both high-intensity conventional war and in operations short of war. One of the major responsibilities of the highest political leadership is to determine *political strategic objectives* prior to the employment of combat forces. The scope and content of a political objective in a high-intensity conventional war and operations vary greatly. In a high-intensity conventional war, a political strategic objective is accomplished by obtaining for oneself, or denying to the enemy, political or economic control of an area of vital importance for the security and well-being of a nation or alliance/coalition. It can be offensive, defensive, or a combination of the two.

Offensive political strategic objectives can be gaining political dominance in a strategically important part of the theater, overthrowing the enemy's political and social system, gaining a dominant economic position in a strategically important area, and obtaining a more favorable geostrategic position. Defensive political strategic objectives are just the opposite of these.

In contrast, political strategic objectives in operations short of war usually have a critical (not vital) importance for the country's interests. Their accomplishment could often be more important for a weaker friendly country than for its protector or supporter. They are much more diverse but mostly limited in scope. Political strategic objectives can be limited or unlimited. The accomplishment of a limited political strategic objective might require unlimited military objectives; the opposite is not necessarily true. Carl von

Clausewitz wrote that the most essential factor in trying to bend the enemy to one's will is the political object (objective) of war. The latter, in turn, determines both the military objective to be accomplished and the amount of effort it requires. Clausewitz wrote, "The political object cannot, however, by itself provide the standard of measurement. The same political object can elicit differing reactions from different peoples and even from the same people at different times."<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to a high-intensity conventional war, political strategic objectives in operations short of war often are poorly defined and articulated. Perhaps one reason is that politicians prefer not to be too specific for fear that publicly stated objectives will not be accomplished, which in turn would reflect on their prestige and influence. Yet if a political strategic objective is expressed in ambiguous and unclear terms, it is of little use to operational planners.<sup>13</sup> Senior policymakers often request military options before they determine policy objectives. Decisions by senior political leaders are often made untimely because of the supposed need to get more military options or operational details.<sup>14</sup>

In operations short of war, the accomplishment of a political strategic objective would normally require limited use of lethal force. The exceptions to this are insurgencies/counterinsurgencies and humanitarian interventions. Political and legal limitations significantly and adversely affect one's use of lethal force. Decisiveness of military actions is relatively rare. Consequently, the accomplishment of a political strategic objective requires much more time and patience than in a high-intensity conventional war.

Experience shows that U.S./Western political leaders often change or even radically alter their political strategic objective in the course of an operation. For example, in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conflict over Kosovo (Operation *Allied Force*, March 24–June 10, 1999), the strategic objectives of both the Alliance and the United States were unclear and poorly articulated. Moreover, there was a serious mismatch between the ends to be

accomplished and the means political leadership was willing to use to achieve those ends. These objectives also underwent several changes as the air offensive progressed. For example, in March 1999, the U.S. administration publicly stated that the objectives of NATO action against the former Yugoslavia were to "demonstrate the seriousness" of the Alliance's opposition to Belgrade's aggressiveness; deter the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosević from continuing and escalating his attacks on helpless civilians; create conditions to reverse his ethnic cleansing; and damage Serbia's capacity to wage war against Kosovo in the future or to spread the war to neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes, political leadership does not provide a political strategic objective, so the operational commander has to deduce the objectives from other sources. For example, in the U.S./NATO humanitarian intervention in Libya from March 19 to October 31, 2011, the initial U.S. involvement (Operation *Odyssey Dawn*, March 19–31) was intended as a short-term U.S.-led multinational effort to protect Libya's civilians. President Barack Obama made it clear that the United States wanted to transfer leadership responsibilities to its allies and coalition partners quickly.<sup>16</sup> Because of the lack of clear guidance from the administration, U.S. planners were left to deduce a political strategic objective from the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 of March 11, 2011.<sup>17</sup>

The Combined Joint Task Force in Naples stated that the objective was to help protect civilians or population areas under threat of attack. Obama also used a statement from UNSCR 1973 to employ "all necessary means" as guidance on the use of lethal force.<sup>18</sup> The biggest problem and concern were difficulty in getting a definite and consistent message from the White House and State Department.<sup>19</sup> By March 27, when the United States handed over the responsibilities to NATO (Operation *Unified Protector*, March 23–October 31, 2011), the U.S.-led mission had secured several limited objectives (protecting Libya's civilian population, setting the conditions for a no-fly zone, and establishing and maintaining a naval

embargo), yet it did not set the conditions for NATO to win the war.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important responsibilities of the operational commander is to convert political strategic objectives into achievable military strategic objectives. Sometimes, this can be difficult to do. In a high-intensity conventional war, a military strategic objective can be defined as one whose destruction, annihilation, neutralization, or control would have a drastic (or radical) effect on the course and outcome of a war as a whole. Clausewitz observed:

*Sometimes the political and military objective is the same. In other cases, political objective will not provide a suitable military objective. . . . [A] military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is reduced in proportion. This will be all the more so as the political object increases in proportion.*<sup>21</sup>

Generally, the smaller the importance of the political objective, the easier it would be to abandon it.<sup>22</sup> Sufficient resources should be provided to ensure the given strategic objective is accomplished. If the resources are inadequate, the scale of the strategic objective must be reduced, or resources must be increased in quantity or effectiveness. If this cannot be done, then a certain degree of risk must be accepted by the top political leadership.<sup>23</sup>

If a country has strategic interests in two or more theaters, then a military strategic objective is divided into two or more theater strategic objectives. The accomplishment of military or theater strategic objectives should lead to a drastic change in the situation in a given theater of war or theater of operations. In determining a military/theater strategic objective, a balance must be found among often contradictory requirements regarding which sources of military power should be used to accomplish all aspects of a political strategic objective. Generally, the more nonmilitary aspects of strategic objective predominate, as is often the case in operations short of war, the less need there would be for use of one's lethal force.



Air Force Special Operations Surgical Team members check gear on MC-130H Combat Talon II from 15<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, during rapid infiltration flight operations as part of exercise Emerald Warrior 19, January 16, 2019 (U.S. Air Force/Gregory Brook)

The political leadership often issues unclear, ambiguous, and open-ended military objectives to the operational commander. This, in turn, creates considerable difficulties for the operational planners. For example, during the Kosovo conflict of 1999, both President Bill Clinton and NATO officials stated that one of the objectives was to *degrade* (the same term was used in Operation *Desert Fox* in the 4-day bombing of Iraq in December 1998) Serb capabilities “to attack Kosovo civilians.”<sup>24</sup> In the second week after the start of bombing, Secretary of Defense William Cohen stated that the “goal of the air campaign was to demonstrate resolve on the part of the NATO alliance” or “to make [Milosevic’] pay a substantial price.”<sup>25</sup> This was a weak statement. British defense secretary George Robertson stated, “Our military objective, our clear, simple military objective will be to reduce the Serbs’ capacity to repress the Albanian population and thus to avert a humanitarian disaster.”<sup>26</sup> In mid-April, the Department of Defense stated that the military strategic objective was “to degrade and damage the military

and security structure that President Milosevic’ was using to depopulate and destroy the Albanian majority in Kosovo.”<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, terms such as *demonstrate*, *deter*, *help*, and *contribute* are too general and open-ended. Likewise, the terms *damage* or *degrade* imply that literally even the smallest percentage of damage or degradation inflicted on the Serbian forces or infrastructure would satisfy the stated strategic objectives. Unless classified orders to subordinate commanders were more specific, publicly stated NATO objectives were essentially useless for planners. The fact was that NATO did not have a plan B. The United States and its allies viewed the use of force simply as a tool of diplomacy intended to push negotiations one way or another. They were not prepared that it might have been necessary to actually accomplish their stated objectives on the battlefield.<sup>28</sup>

Normally, a military/theater strategic objective cannot be accomplished by a single action; several intermediate (operational) objectives must be accomplished to achieve the entire military or theater

strategic objective. The accomplishment of each operational objective should lead to drastic or radical change in the situation in a given theater of operations. In most operations short of war, operational objectives are rare. The exceptions are counterinsurgency campaigns and humanitarian intervention operations. In operations short of war, most tactical combat actions are major or minor in scale. This is especially the case in insurgency and counterinsurgency and in combating piracy and terrorism. The accomplishment of a major tactical objective would lead to a drastic or radical change in the situation in an area of operations. The accomplishment of a minor tactical objective would directly contribute to accomplishing the respective major tactical objective and also result in a drastic change in the situation in a given combat zone/sector.

### Methods of Combat Forces’ Employment

A given military objective determines the employment method of one’s forces. The principal methods of combat

employment are tactical actions, major operations, and campaigns. Tactical actions are aimed at accomplishing a single major or minor tactical objective. According to their main purposes, offensive and defensive tactical actions are differentiated. They can be conducted with or without the use of weapons. The principal tactical actions with the use of weapons are attacks, counterattacks, strikes/counterstrikes, raids, engagements, and battles. In operations short of war, most actions by far will be tactical in size. This is especially the case in insurgency/counterinsurgency, combating piracy, and terrorism.

The operational objective is normally accomplished by planning and executing major operations on land, at sea, and in the air. They are planned and executed by a single commander and according to a common idea (or scheme). In contrast to a high-intensity conventional war, major operations are rarely conducted in operations short of war because the great majority of objectives are tactical in size. The exception is humanitarian intervention operations. For example, NATO's *Allied Force* was a major offensive air/combined operation (not an air campaign, as airpower enthusiasts claimed). It consisted of a large number of air strikes and attacks conducted over 78 days that cumulatively accomplished a partial strategic objective. NATO's naval forces supported these operations by conducting missile strikes against selected Serbian targets and establishing and maintaining a naval/commercial blockade in the southern Adriatic.

The accomplishment of a single military or theater strategic objective in a given theater normally requires the planning and execution of a campaign, consisting of a series of major operations conducted on land, at sea, and in the air and numerous minor and major tactical actions. It is planned and executed according to a common idea (scheme) and by a single commander. In contrast, a campaign in operations short of war, such as the counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq in 2003–2008 and in Afghanistan since 2002, consists of numerous tactical actions and only rarely includes major operations.

## Operational Command Structure/Command and Control

In operations short of war, the existing operational command structure should be used or a new one established to ensure centralized command and control and the most effective operational support. The lack of such a command structure will have a negative impact on the effectiveness of planning and execution of operations. This is particularly true in the case of a counterinsurgency campaign. In command and control, the German-style mission command is generally applicable in all situations, except where errors by subordinate commanders might escalate the crisis and lead to open hostilities. The operational commander's authority and responsibilities are complicated because of the presence of various international, government, nongovernment, and private organizations and contractors.

## Operational Support

In a high-intensity conventional war, the success of an operation plan would be wanting unless fully supported by operational intelligence information operations, operational fires, logistics, and protection. These components are part of what is called operational support (*joint functions* in U.S./NATO terms). The operational commander is solely responsible for properly sequencing and synchronizing not only joint forces but also operational support.

The role and importance of operational support in operations short of war are different than in a high-intensity conventional war. For example, human intelligence generally has much more importance than in a high-intensity conventional war. This is especially the case in combating terrorism and counterinsurgency. The volume and type of information required in engaging a less sophisticated opponent are far less demanding than those needed in fighting a relatively strong and more skillful enemy.

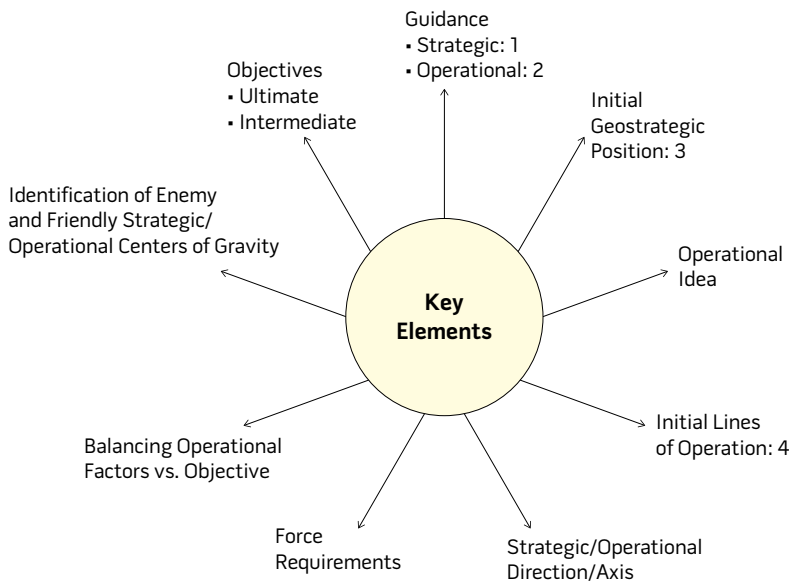
In operations short of war, the focus in most cases is on tactical versus operational logistics in providing support and sustainment to one's combat forces. The

exception is counterinsurgency campaigns and humanitarian interventions. Operational logistics would be primarily focused on satisfying the needs of the civilian population rather than those of fielded forces. Broadly defined, the term *operational protection* pertains to a series of actions and measures conducted in peacetime, crisis, and war that are designed to preserve the effectiveness and survivability of military and nonmilitary sources of power deployed or located within the boundaries of a given theater. This task is considerably more difficult in operations short of war than in a conventional high-intensity war because the enemy forces might operate throughout a large part of a given theater. Full protection of key installations and facilities and one's forces is an especially difficult problem in the urban environment.

## Operational Design

The framework for operational planning is provided by what is commonly referred to as operational design, a collection of selected elements of operational art directly related to operational decision-making and planning. Only a few of these elements would be incorporated into the operation plan. The elements of operational design should be discussed by the commander and staff in some detail prior to operational decisionmaking and planning. Generically, operational design in a high-intensity conventional war encompasses the desired strategic endstate, ultimate/intermediate objectives, balancing of operational factors with the objectives, forces' requirements, strategic/operational axis (direction), geostrategic positions (central vs. exterior), interior vs. exterior lines of operations, identification of the enemy and friendly centers of gravity, and operational idea. Operational design for campaign and major operations in operations short of war would include most of these elements; however, their importance would vary greatly depending on the type of operation. For example, geostrategic positions play a small or no role in peace operations. The strategic/operations axis is not part of any counterterrorism or counterinsurgency campaigns (see figure 2).

**Figure 2. Operational Design**



**Notes**

1. Issued by the Highest Political-Military Leadership
2. Issued by the Operational Commander
3. For a Campaign
4. For a Major Operation

In preparing for the use of military force, one of the principal responsibilities of the highest political-military leadership is to determine and articulate strategic guidance. Properly formulated strategic guidance should spell out the desired strategic endstate and political strategic objectives.<sup>29</sup> It should also specify which military and nonmilitary sources of power are available or will become available, the limitations (constraints and restraints) where one's forces can and cannot be employed, the use or nonuse of certain weapons, and the rules of engagement.

The desired strategic endstate consists of broadly expressed political, military, diplomatic, economic, financial, social, ethnic, religious, informational, and other nonmilitary effects that the highest political-military leadership wants to see in a given theater after the end of hostilities. Expressed differently, the desired strategic endstate is in fact a strategic "effect." In terms of the factor of time, the desired strategic endstate can be described for short, medium, or long term. Obviously, the longer the timeline, the more difficult it is to plan for and

achieve a desired strategic endstate. Also, the more ambitious the desired strategic endstate, the more resources and time are required to accomplish it. The process of determining the desired strategic endstate in operations short of war is far more complex and elusive than in a high-intensity conventional war, yet senior political and military leaders must give some thought to the strategic situation they want to exist after the end of hostilities. This is especially critically important in a counterinsurgency campaign and in humanitarian intervention operations.

The examples of the Kosovo conflict of 1999, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001–2002 (Operation *Enduring Freedom*), the Israeli attack on Lebanon in July–August 2006, and the U.S./NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 showed little, if any, understanding for stating clearly the desired situation in the aftermath of the hostilities. Israeli political leadership decided to attack Lebanon on July 11, 2006, without any clear idea of how the hostilities were to end.<sup>30</sup> During the U.S./NATO humanitarian intervention in Libya in 2011,

U.S. military planners did not receive from the White House the expected clear desired strategic endstate.<sup>31</sup> The military mission changed from mostly "humanitarian and mobility operations to the use of lethal force with associated changes in objectives and endstates."<sup>32</sup> Guidance from the White House and the Pentagon was confusing. Many staffers at U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) were unsure as to whether regime change was an intended option as stated by the President or whether operations had to be focused solely on protecting civilian life and providing humanitarian assistance to refugees.<sup>33</sup> Also, the political advisors at USAFRICOM never received any clear direction from the Department of State.<sup>34</sup>

After the strategic (for a campaign) or operational (for a major operation) objective is determined, the next step is to balance it with the operational factors of space, time, and force (source of power). Each of the operational factors should be harmonized individually and collectively. This balancing is more difficult in operations short of war because in the factor of space, the human space—not geography—predominates. Also, the factor of "force" is often nonmilitary in its character. Any major disconnect between operational factors and the objective should be resolved; otherwise, the objective has to be either scaled down or abandoned. This process is largely an art, not a science. Additionally, the operational commanders should evaluate the influence of information on each of the operational factors.

The regressive planning method is fully applicable in planning campaigns or major operations in operations short of war, as it is in a high-intensity conventional war. The ultimate objective (strategic or operational) is divided into a number of intermediate (operational or major tactical) objectives. These, in turn, can be accomplished in succession and/or simultaneously. The operational commanders and planners should also fully consider desired military and nonmilitary effects generated after a given operational or strategic objective is accomplished.

Central and exterior geostrategic positions (for a campaign) and interior and



Cavalry scouts with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, maneuver toward cover after air assault during exercise Platinum Lion 19, at Novo Selo Training Area, Bulgaria, July 9, 2019 (U.S. Army/True Thao)

exterior lines of operation (for a major operation) have relatively less importance in operations short of war than in a high-intensity conventional war. Again, the exception is humanitarian interventions and counterinsurgencies.

One of the most important elements of combat employment of one's forces is center of gravity: a source of massed strength—physical or moral—or leverage whose serious degradation, dislocation, neutralization, or destruction will have the most decisive impact on one's own or the enemy's ability to accomplish a given military objective. Expressed differently, a center of gravity is the enemy's or one's own greatest strength that represents the single greatest obstacle in accomplishing a given military objective. Any center of gravity is directly related to the corresponding objective to be accomplished.

Military objectives invariably dominate the corresponding center of gravity, not the other way around. Any time a military objective is radically changed, the entire situation must be evaluated and the new center of gravity should

be determined. Normally, in operations short of war, centers of gravity are strategic or tactical in size; operational centers of gravity rarely exist. For example, in combating piracy, the strategic center of gravity is usually the top leader and his inner circle. Sometimes, hostages might become the center of gravity because they would be a source of leverage. At the tactical level, there is a multitude of centers of gravity—usually leaders of individual pirate bases and groups of pirate boats.

In combating terrorism, the strategic center of gravity is the leader and his inner circle and the secular- or religious-based ideology at hand. For example, the strategic center of gravity in combating al Qaeda was Osama bin Laden and his inner circle plus jihadist ideology. Elements of the inner core of the strategic center of gravity also included consultative councils (*shura majus*) and various committees (military, finance and business, religious, and media and publicity). The tactical center of gravity in fighting al Qaeda was individual terrorist cells. Today's al Qaeda is similar in its

organization as it was under bin Laden. Its organizational structure is a combination of hierarchy and networks, which consists of numerous terrorist cells that are self-organized and self-enrolling.<sup>35</sup> The amir holds a direct responsibility over all religious, operational, and logistical activities.<sup>36</sup> The command council (Majlis al Shura) is the highest decision-making body; its members are selected by the amir. The command council is responsible for planning and supervising all al Qaeda activities. It consists of 7 to 10 members chosen every second year. It convenes twice a month.<sup>37</sup> Al Qaeda uses a vast logistical network to support worldwide activity. The networks are responsible for recruiting new members and safely transferring them to training camps and jihad areas.<sup>38</sup>

Centers of gravity in an insurgency or counterinsurgency differ considerably in content and number from those in a high-intensity conventional war. For both insurgents and counterinsurgents, there is a single strategic center of gravity. Because of the great number of tactical objectives,





USS *Barry* launches Tomahawk missile in support of Operation *Odyssey Dawn* on March 19, 2011 (U.S. Navy/Roderick Eubanks)

there is also a large number of corresponding tactical centers of gravity. Operational centers of gravity are normally rare because insurgents would rarely deploy large forces at a certain area and thereby risk their destruction by the government forces. The lack of operational centers of gravity is the main reason insurgencies and counterinsurgencies are a protracted effort. For example, the Moro rebellion in the Philippines lasted 14 years (1899–1913). The first communist insurgency in the Philippines (the Hukbalahap rebellion) lasted 12 years (1942–1954). The ongoing communist insurgency (by the coalition of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People’s Army, and the National Democratic Front) started in 1969. It took some 21 years (1968–1989) to defeat the communist insurgency in

Malaya. The communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army insurgency lasted for some 53 years (1964–2017). The ongoing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan started in 2002.

For the insurgents, the government’s legitimacy and its armed forces would normally represent a strategic center of gravity that needs to be degraded, weakened, and ultimately destroyed. Legitimacy is a condition based on the perception of the justness of the actions of the government. It is bestowed by the population. Without being widely accepted as legitimate, the government is unlikely to survive a determined insurgency. It is the governments’ lack of legitimacy in many of the current and future trouble spots that provides the various hostile factions with the power to operate in the manner they do. For an

insurgency to succeed, it must concentrate a major part of its efforts on drastically undermining the legitimacy of the government, and this usually takes a lot of time. Legitimacy must be seen in the context of conflicts resulting from an increasing reliance on violence by a minority attempting to impose its will on the majority. This is where efforts must be focused to bolster the legitimacy of legal authority.<sup>39</sup> For example, during the 20 years of the insurgency in El Salvador (1970–1990), the strategic center of gravity for the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front rebel coalition was the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government itself.<sup>40</sup> A similar situation existed in Colombia, where the government forces were engaged in a protracted counterinsurgency effort against Marxist-led guerrillas.

In Somalia in 1993, the United States allowed itself to be in a situation where its vital interests were not at stake, but the survival of the Somalian clan leader Mohamed Farah Aideded was. This dangerously asymmetrical situation allowed Aideded to indirectly attack the U.S. strategic center of gravity—the will to fight—by exploiting a well-known U.S. critical vulnerability: an aversion to suffering high casualties. With no survival at stake, the Clinton administration was unwilling to take actions aimed at sustaining popular and political support, while Aideded’s desire for independent power could be sustained indefinitely.<sup>41</sup>

In counterinsurgency, again, the enemy’s strategic center of gravity is usually a charismatic leader and his inner circle, a religious or secular ideology, and the will to fight. The tactical center of gravity is small units in the field and the morale and will to fight. In an insurgency, antigovernment forces usually operate in small groups and use hit-and-run tactics. Government forces rarely have the opportunity to destroy or neutralize them, unless they make the mistake of prematurely operating in larger formations. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban’s structure is highly decentralized and thereby hard to defeat. In mid-2017, the Taliban was organized in four main shuras: Quetta Shura with two subordinate shuras (Miran Shura, based in Miran Shah, north Waziristan [composed almost entirely of the Haqqani network], and Peshawar Shura, based in Peshawar); Shura of the North, with headquarters in Balkhistan and composed of several fronts; Mashhad Shura, based in Mashhad, Iran, and composed of one large central front; and Rasool Shura, based in Farah, Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> Territorially, the Quetta Shura claims responsibility for all Afghanistan except Loya Paktia and Logar, where Miran Shura is responsible, and eastern Afghanistan, where Peshawar Shura operates as the regional command. To complicate matters, the Shura of the North and Rasool Shura do not recognize the authority of Quetta Shura and its shadow governors, military leaders, and courts.<sup>43</sup> The strategic center of gravity

for counterinsurgents is probably the Quetta Shura’s forces combined with the top leadership and the Salafist ideology. Each of the four Taliban forces with its ideology and leadership deployed in Afghanistan can be considered an operational center of gravity.

In providing humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), the concept of center of gravity is not applicable. The exception is when forces delivering HA/DR face active opposition of insurgents or terrorists. The concept of weight of main effort or line of effort should be generally applied in HA/DR operations. In peace operations, the concept of center of gravity is not generally applicable, except in peace enforcement operations when the peacekeepers must use lethal force against the side violating the agreement.

The operational idea is the heart of the design for any major operation or campaign. It should describe in broad and succinct terms the operational commander’s vision for accomplishing the assigned operational or strategic objective.<sup>44</sup> A sound operational idea should be simple and creative. It should pose a multidimensional threat to the enemy. It should try to deceive the enemy. It should ensure high speed in execution. However, the operational idea for counterterrorism or counterinsurgency campaigns cannot be executed quickly; it might take weeks or even months, as the example of the initial Baghdad surge (February–June 2007) in Iraq shows, even in the case of a major/joint operation. The operational ideas for humanitarian intervention operations, as the examples of the Kosovo conflict of 1999 and Libya of 2011 illustrate, were unsound. In Kosovo, NATO’s operational idea posed a single-dimensional threat. Only the use of airpower was contemplated. To make the situation worse, U.S. and NATO political and military leaders stated publicly and repeatedly that no use of ground troops was planned.<sup>45</sup> The lack of a ground option greatly eased the problem for the Serbs, who were able to use their regular troops freely in support of security forces and paramilitaries in Kosovo instead of being forced to dig

in and fortify border areas for defense against a possible invasion. Mainly for political reasons, the operational idea did not envisage the most optimal use of airpower—that is, in mass to overwhelm and shock the opponent early in the operation. Initially, NATO did not have an all-encompassing plan to prepare and “shape” the Kosovo area of operations by simultaneously cutting off the potential flow of reinforcements and supplies over land routes and establishing a sea blockade off the Montenegrin coast.

In the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, the major flaw was that no conventional forces were deployed on the ground; emerging rebel forces were disorganized, with limited equipment and communication capability. Coalition special forces were helping the rebels on the ground, and there was limited ability to coordinate the ground and air efforts. Actions by NATO’s commanders were limited to the use of precision airpower to shape the operational environment, yet they did not have control over the rebel forces. They also had unrealistic expectations that the rebels would be able to take advantage of the effects on Muammar Qadhafi’s forces.<sup>46</sup>

In operations short of war, methods of destroying or neutralizing the enemy’s centers of gravity are different from those applied in a high-intensity conventional war. The main reason is the different content of a strategic objective. This, in turn, severely restricts the use of lethal force. The focus is on weakening or controlling rather than on destroying the enemy’s strategic center of gravity. For example, in a counterterrorism or counterinsurgency campaign, the main efforts should focus on countering the ideological appeal and support among the populace. This would include effective measures and actions aimed at delegitimizing enemy leadership and disrupting or cutting off the insurgent or terrorist support networks (political, financial, propaganda, arms supplies, and so forth). At the same time, the legitimacy of the friendly government as a strategic center of gravity must be continuously enhanced.



Marine with Kilo Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, runs through scenario during Marine Air Ground Task Force Integrated Experiment, August 5, 2016, at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California (U.S. Marine Corps/Thor J. Larson)

## Operational Decisionmaking and Planning

Traditional methods of operational decisionmaking and planning are largely applicable in most operations short of war. Combating terrorism and insurgency would require planning and execution of respective campaigns. Major/joint operations should be planned if operational objectives must be accomplished. This is usually the case in humanitarian intervention operations and occasionally in a counterinsurgency campaign. The most effective method in combating piracy is not antipiracy or counterpiracy tactical actions but planning and executing counterpiracy major/joint operations. In contrast to a high-intensity conventional war, the effect of the nonmilitary aspects of the situation on planning is generally much greater. This is particularly true in combating terrorism, counterinsurgency, and peace operations.

## Operational Leadership

Operational leadership has the same importance in operations short of war as in a high-intensity conventional war. One of the main requirements

for success at the operational level of command is to think broadly and have a broad vision. The term *operational thinking* is not easy to define concisely because it encompasses many diverse elements. However, operational commanders cannot be successful in exercising their numerous responsibilities without having an operational rather than tactical perspective. In purely physical terms, the operational perspective encompasses the (formally declared or undeclared) theater of operations plus an arbitrarily defined area of interest. This means the commander should use a reductionist method to reduce the complexities of the situation to the essentials. Afterward, holistic methods should be used to link disparate elements and events (“connecting the dots”) to see patterns and project trends in the situation for some time in the future. Thinking operationally does not come naturally to commanders. Among other things, operational thinking is acquired by having experience in commanding large forces and taking part in exercises and wargames. It also requires solid professional education and self-education in international poli-

tics, diplomacy, geopolitics, ethnicity, culture, religion, international law, and military/naval history.

Application of operational art in operations short of war is much more complicated than in a high-intensity conventional war. The main reasons for this are the highly diverse and unpredictable operational environment and the dominant role of nonmilitary aspects of the situation in determining objectives for the employment of combat forces. This, in turn, requires more judicious use of one’s military power. Opponents present relatively few opportunities to use one’s forces decisively. Hence, almost all operations short of war that require use of lethal forces are inherently protracted. The use of one’s combat forces is often restricted due to the content of the political strategic objectives, more restrictive rules of engagement, public perceptions, and the extraordinary influence of social media in shaping the strategic environment. Success in operations short of war requires sound use of both nonmilitary and military sources of power. The single greatest advantage in applying tenets of operational art to operations short of war

is in providing an operational versus a tactical perspective by operational commanders and their staffs. Finally, skillful application of tenets of operational art would preclude “tacticization” of strategy—that is, when tactical considerations dominate strategy. The single biggest problem is the lack of sound theory of operational art for operations short of war. Without it, no sound operational doctrine can be developed or realistic operational training be conducted. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The major error was to group stability and support operations with operations other than war because these operations properly belong to the post-hostilities phase of a land campaign. The term *low-intensity conflict* referred to localized hostilities between two or more states or nonstate groups conducted below the intensity of a conventional war. A stronger side uses lethal forces selectively and with restraint. The term *military operations other than war* (MOOTW) encompasses the use of one’s military sources of power across the range of military operations short of war. Yet for some reason, the focus in MOOTW was on arms control, strategic deterrence, conflict resolution, promoting peace, and supporting civil authorities in response to domestic crises. Clearly, arms control, strategic deterrence, and conflict resolution belong to the domain of policy and strategy, which is the responsibility of the highest political, not military, leaders. The phrase and acronym were coined by the U.S. military during the 1990s but have since fallen out of use. The British military uses an alternate term, *peace support operations*. Both MOOTW and peace support operations encompass peacekeeping, peacemaking, peace enforcement, and peace-building. The most recent term used by the U.S. military is *contemporary operational environment*, defined as “the entire set of conditions, circumstances, and influences that U.S. Armed Forces expect to face when conducting military operations to further the national interests of the United States, its friends, and allies.” See Field Manual 7-100, *OPFOR: Opposing Force Doctrinal Framework and Strategy* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2003), viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, July 14, 2016), 6–9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> NATO HUMINT Centre of Excellence, *Human Aspects of the Operational Environment—Final Report* (Oradea, Romania: CNI Coresi SA, 2014), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 3, *Expeditionary Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Navy, April 16, 1998), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *JOE 2035*, 10–11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Milan Podhorec, “The Reality of Operational Environment in Military Operations,” *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 3, no. 2 (May 2012), 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Shapiro, “Information and War: Is It a Revolution?” in *Appraisal: The Changing Role of Information in Warfare*, ed. Zalmay M. Khalilzad and John P. White (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), 124–125.

<sup>12</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Knopf, 1993), 90.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> William E. Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (September 2015), 19.

<sup>15</sup> President Bill Clinton, press statement, March 24, 1999; “Cohen, Shelton Joint Statement on Kosovo After Action Review,” *NATO Security Digest*, no. 198 (October 14, 1999), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in *Libya: Operation Odyssey Dawn (OOD): A Case Study in Command and Control* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 4, 2011), 8; Joe Quartararo, Sr., Michael Rovenolt, and Randy White, “Libya’s Operation *Odyssey Dawn*,” *PRISM* 3, no. 2 (2012), 150.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory K. James, Larry Holcomb, and Chad T. Manske, “Joint Task Force *Odyssey Dawn*: A Model for Joint Experience, Training, and Education,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 64 (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2012), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Todd R. Phinney, “Reflections on Operation *Unified Protector*,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 69 (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2014), 89.

<sup>19</sup> Quartararo, Rovenolt, and White, “Libya’s Operation *Odyssey Dawn*,” 150.

<sup>20</sup> John Stewart Williamson, “Through the Libyan Looking Glass” (Master’s thesis, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, 2012), 46.

<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Otto Groos, *Seekriegslehren im Lichte des Weltkrieges. Ein Buch für den Seemann, Soldaten und Staatsmann* (Berlin: Verlag von E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1929), 22–23.

<sup>23</sup> Donald E. Kirkland, “Rommel’s Desert Campaigns, February 1941–September 1942: A Study in Operational Level Weakness” (Master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1986), 14–15.

<sup>24</sup> Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Prepared statement of William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defense, to the Senate Armed

Services Committee, April 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Daalder and O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce B.G. Clarke, “Conflict Termination: What Does It Mean to Win?” *Military Review* 11 (November 1992), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Scott Wilson, “Israeli War Plan Had No Exit Strategy,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 2006, A1.

<sup>31</sup> Williamson, “Through the Libyan Looking Glass,” 45.

<sup>32</sup> James, Holcomb, and Manske, “Joint Task Force *Odyssey Dawn*,” 26.

<sup>33</sup> Quartararo, Rovenolt, and White, “Libya’s Operation *Odyssey Dawn*,” 150.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, “Al Qaeda’s Organizational Structure and Its Evolution,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 2 (November 2010), 1045.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1054.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1056.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1050.

<sup>39</sup> J.M. Petryk, “Legitimacy—A Center of Gravity for the Information Age” (Master’s thesis, Canadian Forces College, 2000), 13.

<sup>40</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador*, McNair Paper 8 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy J. Keppler, “The Center of Gravity Concept: A Knowledge Engineering Approach to Improved Understanding and Application” (Master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 1995), 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Taliban’s Organization and Structure* (Oslo: LANDINFO, Country of Origin Information Centre, August 23, 2017), 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> The meaning of this term is similar to that of *concept of operations* used in the U.S. military. The term *operational idea*, however, is commonly used to make a distinction between the concept of operations at the operational level and actions at the tactical level.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO’s Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 27.

<sup>46</sup> Williamson, “Through the Libyan Looking Glass,” 45.