

Three Levels of War

Modern military theory divides war into strategic, operational, and tactical levels.¹ Although this division has its basis in the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War, modern theory regarding these three levels was formulated by the Prussians following the Franco-Prussian War. It has been most thoroughly developed by the Soviets.² In American military circles, the division of war into three levels has been gaining prominence since its 1982 introduction in Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*.³ The three levels allow causes and effects of all forms of war and conflict to be better understood—despite their growing complexity.⁴ To understand modern theories of war and conflict and to prosecute them successfully, the military professional must thoroughly understand the three levels, especially the operational level, and how they are interrelated.

The boundaries of the levels of war and conflict tend to blur and do not necessarily correspond to levels of command. Nevertheless, in the American system, the strategic level is usually the concern of the National Command Authorities (NCA) and the highest military commanders, the operational level is usually the concern of theater commands, and the tactical level is usually the focus of subtheater commands.

Each level is concerned with planning (making strategy), which involves analyzing the situation, estimating friendly and enemy capabilities and limitations, and devising possible courses of action. Corresponding to the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war and conflict are national (grand) strategy with its national military strategy subcomponent, operational strategy, and battlefield strategy (tactics).

Each level also is concerned with implementing strategy, which must be reevaluated constantly (and usually on the basis of incomplete information) because warfare is dynamic. Therefore, a key to success in war and other conflicts is the ability to adapt rapidly to the changing situation and to exploit transient opportunities rather than strictly adhering to a predetermined course of action. The ability to adapt and exploit requires extraordinary judgment, a “feel” for the

situation and knowing what to do and how to do it. Exercise of this judgment is the art of war at each level.

Strategic Level

The strategic level focuses on defining and supporting national policy and relates directly to the outcome of a war or other conflict as a whole. Usually, modern wars and conflicts are won or lost at this level rather than at the operational or tactical levels.⁵ The strategic level applies to all forms of war and conflict from military activities short of war through insurgent, conventional, and nuclear warfare. This level involves a strategic concept, plans for preparing all national instruments of power for war or conflict, practical guidance for preparing the armed forces, and leadership of the armed forces to achieve strategic objectives. Determining US national security strategy is the responsibility of the NCA. The armed forces contribute through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, especially to the military component of the national security strategy.⁶

In the American experience, the strategic level usually has been concerned with the destruction, or threatened destruction, of the enemy's essential war-sustaining capabilities to the point the opponent no longer has the ability or will to wage war. Now, however, the strategic level has been expanded to include direct and indirect applications of the US military and other national resources in operations short of war. Such applications include support for insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, combating terrorism, peacekeeping operations, and some contingency operations to achieve national objectives.

To impose one nation's will on another, susceptible enemy centers of gravity should be attacked; and, of course, one's own centers of gravity should be protected. According to Clausewitz, a *center of gravity* is "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends." Historically, the "central feature of the enemy's power" has been the greatest concentration of his combat forces.⁷ Since war has widened to include much more than armies in the field, contemporary

use of the term includes the enemy's economy and industrial capability to wage war, will (governmental and popular), and alliances.⁸ For example, in insurgent warfare or terrorism, armed forces often are not a center of gravity. The probable winner in an insurgency is the side that mobilizes and maintains popular support because the center of gravity of both government and insurgent forces is usually the population and its social order.⁹

National security strategy should integrate the political, economic, informational, and military instruments of power. Clearly, military force can be detrimental or inappropriate to some objectives, especially if the force employed is perceived to be disproportionate to the objective or to be morally repugnant. When the use of the military instrument is appropriate, the enemy should be identified, objectives stipulated, forces and supporting resources allocated, and restrictions and limitations delineated.¹⁰

National military strategy should be established by the NCA with the advice and assistance of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. National military strategy translates policy objectives into strategic military objectives that can be achieved by using military resources and concepts (such as forward basing, forward deployment, and collective security).¹¹ This level also defines the area of a theater and which commander has responsibility for that theater. These authorities also can subdivide a theater into theaters of war (areas within a theater directly involved in operations of war) and theaters of operations (portions of a theater of war necessary for military operations to achieve an assigned mission and for the support incident to the operations). Depending on a conflict's complexity and the degree of guidance provided by the NCA, theater commanders may need to develop theater military strategies to implement the national military strategy.

The most crucial challenge for the military strategist lies in understanding the character of the imminent or occurring conflict and devising strategic military objectives that, once gained, will create the conditions necessary to achieve the political purpose. To do this, military strategy should include subordinate military objectives that

will create the conditions necessary to achieve the strategic objectives and thereby contribute to attaining political objectives. Thus, military strategy should ensure a clear and logical connection between ends and means.

In the post–World War II era, the most enduring military objectives at the strategic level have been the development, deployment, and employment of military forces to deter nuclear war, to deter other attacks against the United States and its allies, and to contain militant communism. There has been no lasting general consensus on how the United States should respond to lesser crises and conflicts because there has been no consensus on what other vital US interests are.¹²

Operational Level

The operational level is concerned with employing military forces in a theater of war or theater of operations to obtain an advantage over the enemy and thereby attain strategic military goals through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations.¹³ In war, a campaign involves employment of military forces in a series of related military operations to accomplish a common objective in a given time and space. In activities short of war, a campaign consists of a series of related military, economic, and political operations to accomplish a common objective in a given time and space. Commanders should design, orchestrate, and coordinate operations and exploit tactical events to support overall campaign objectives. Where and when to conduct a campaign is based on objectives, the threat, and limitations imposed by geographical, economic, and cultural environments, as well as the numbers and types of military resources available.¹⁴

A principal task at the operational level is to identify and concentrate operations against the enemy's most susceptible centers of gravity. As stated above, the enemy's combat forces may be one of the enemy's centers of gravity, but this is not always the case, especially in conflicts not characterized as war. The enemy's will to resist, political alliances, civil population, or other sources of power

may be the targeted centers of gravity. In any case, wars and other conflicts are likely to be lost if the enemy's centers of gravity are incorrectly identified or unsuccessfully attacked—or if one's own centers of gravity are not protected.¹⁵

Once the NCA has set national security strategy, including national military strategy, the theater commander and subordinate commanders design theater and subordinate military strategies. The commander's concept of operations should be a flexible approach to objectives that accurately reflects friendly strength and enemy weaknesses; that recognizes the operational environment; and that uses timing, surprise, maneuver, and multiple approaches to create advantages for forces operating at the tactical level. The concept of operations should be flexible enough to exploit changes in the tactical situation, but should visualize the final military disposition that will result in achieving its objective. Operational art, therefore, is based on intelligence, available resources and logistics, and command and control including strategic coordination and deception.

Tactical Level

In the traditional sense, the various operations that make up a campaign are themselves made up of maneuvers, engagements, and battles. From this perspective, the tactical level translates potential combat power into success in battles and engagements through decisions and actions that create advantages when in contact with or in proximity to the enemy. Tactics deal in the details of prosecuting engagements and are extremely sensitive to the changing environment of the battlefield.¹⁶ Thus, in nuclear and conventional warfare, the focus of the tactical level is generally on military objectives and combat. However, combat is not an end in itself; it is the means to achieve goals set at the operational level.

In the complex world of insurgent warfare and activities short of war, campaigns are made up of related political, economic, and military efforts designed to achieve operational-level goals. Military efforts in this environment may involve combat (as in some

contingency operations) or may be nonlethal (as in military assistance programs and foreign internal defense). When US forces are directly engaged in combat, tactics and the tactical level function as just described. When US forces are engaged in nonlethal forms of military activities, the tactical-level focus is on noncombat functions. These include logistics assistance, provision of training, and other forms of assistance. In these cases, tactics deal with the details of implementing assistance programs and are extremely sensitive to the total military, political, and social environment in which the assistance is provided.

Conclusion

There is nothing sacred in the division of modern war and conflict into three levels. The point is that modern war and conflict, because of their ever-increasing complexity, are more than what occurs at the battlefield, tactical level. The operational level bridges the gap between the tactical and strategic levels. Thinking of war and conflict as being divided into three levels is both a convenient concept when planning and a practical necessity when executing.

Notes

1. Benefits of thinking of war as divided into three levels are explained in Chris Bellamy, "Trends in Land Warfare: The Operational Art of the European Theater," *Defence Yearbook 1985* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985), 227–28; Lt Col Clayton R. Newell, "The Levels of War," *Army*, June 1988, 26–29; Clayton R. Newell, "Modern Warfare: Balancing the Ends, Ways and Means," *Army*, August 1986, 24–28; and Col Wallace P. Franz, "Maneuver: The Dynamic Element of Combat," *Military Review*, May 1983, 2–12.

2. For the Soviet view on the three levels of war, see Harriet F. and William F. Scott, *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982); United States Army Foreign Science and Technology Center, *Soviet General Doctrine for War, 1985–2005*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Intelligence Agency), June 1987, 2-6 through 2-21; William P. Baxter, *Soviet AirLand Battle Tactics* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986), 22–35; and John Hensley, *Soviet Troop Control: The Role of Command Technology in the Soviet Military System* (New York: Brassey's Publishers Ltd., 1982), 17–24.

3. Lt Col L. D. Holder, "A New Day for Operational Art," *Army*, March 1985, 22–28, 32. Holder was one of the principal authors of the 1982 Army FM 100-5, *Operations*.

4. War and conflict have increased in complexity because of technological developments and the greatly expanded scale and scope of war and conflict since the French Revolution. Among the variables adding to their complexity are dynamics of alliance politico-economic-military affairs, growth of the role of ideology, geographic scope of potential theaters of operation, numbers and capabilities of friendly and enemy forces, and the varieties of warfare in the spectrum of warfare.

5. Millett and Murray conclude from an exhaustive study of seven nations from 1914 through 1945 that politico-strategic decisions (not operations, tactics, civilian or military control, interservice rivalry, etc.) have been the key to success in war. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, "Lessons of War," *The National Interest*, Winter 1988–1989, 83–95. This article is based on the three-volume study they edited, *Military Effectiveness* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

6. For a discussion of American cultural, organizational, and historical factors mitigating against a systematic, rational approach to strategy, see Steven Metz, "Why Aren't Americans Better at Strategy?" *Military Review*, May 1989, 9–15. For an assessment of the efficacy of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 regarding rational defense planning, see Archie D. Barrett, David O. Cooke, and Philip Kronenberg, "Pentagon Reform: An Exchange of Views," *The Bureaucrat*, Fall 1988, 13–18.

7. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 485–91 and 595–96.

8. For a discussion of what Clausewitz meant by center of gravity, see James S. Schneider and Lt Col Lawrence L. Izzo, "Clausewitz's Elusive Center of Gravity," *Parameters*, September 1987, 46–57.

9. Alexander Atkinson, *Social Order and the General Theory of Strategy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), 36.

10. John F. Meehan III, "The Operational Trilogy," *Parameters*, Autumn 1986, 13.

11. Col Arthur F. Lykke Jr., "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review*, May 1989, 2–8. For a concise explanation of the strategy process, see Col Dennis M. Drew and Dr. Donald M. Snow, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, August 1988), especially 13–24.

12. US interests and national security objectives are outlined in such documents as *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 1996), 3–9; and in Frank C. Carlucci, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 17 February 1989), 5 and 33–48. These documents

are published periodically; however, deterrence and containment have remained constant themes for more than three decades. Various aspects of national security strategy also are detailed in classified national security directives. Samuel J. Newland and Douglas V. Johnson II, “The Military and Operational Significance of the Weinberger Doctrine,” in *The Recourse to War: An Appraisal of the “Weinberger Doctrine,”* ed. Alan Ned Sabrosky and Robert L. Sloane (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1988), 118–19, present a concise discussion of political, economic, and geopolitical “themes” regarding vital interests. Also see Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), chap. 8, “Vital Interests: What Are They and Who Says So?”

13. Although not officially introduced into American military vocabulary until the 1982 FM 100-5, the concept of an operational level of war did exist in both theory and practice during and before World War II. The Army has published a 90-page bibliography, *The Operational Level of War* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, December 1985). English, French, German, and Russian sections are provided. Of particular interest are Edward N. Luttwak, “The Operational Level of War,” *International Security*, Winter 1980–1981, 61–79; William S. Lind, “The Operational Art,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1988, 45–47; Lt Col David M. Glantz, “The Nature of Soviet Operational Art,” *Parameters*, Spring 1985, 2–12; Vasilli Y. Savkin, *The Basic Principles of Operational Art and Tactics (A Soviet View)*, translated and published under the auspices of the US Air Force (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974); and Col Roger M. Jaroch, “MAGTFs and the Operational Level of War,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1989, 61–65.

14. Lt Gen B. C. Hosmer, “Operational Art: The Importance of the Operational Level of War,” *Phalanx*, September 1988, 1–6, states that the essence of the operational level of war is discovering the enemy’s strategy and developing a counterstrategy. This corresponds with Clausewitz’s idea that the enemy is “an animate object that reacts” (emphasis in original). (Clausewitz, 149) Consequently, we must understand and react to the enemy’s mind-set. Drew and Snow, 19, define operational strategy as “the art and science of planning, orchestrating, and directing military campaigns within a theater of operations to achieve national security objectives.” See also Army FM 100-5, *Operations*, June 1993, 4-1–4-6.

15. Meehan, 14.

16. Drew and Snow, 20–21, define battlefield strategy or tactics as

the art and science of employing forces on the battlefield to achieve national security objectives. The classic differentiation between tactics and higher levels of strategy [or levels of war] remains relevant in the sense that tactics govern the use of forces on the battlefield while grand

THREE LEVELS OF WAR

strategy, [national] military strategy, and operational strategy bring forces to the battlefield. . . . Tactics are concerned with doing the job “right,” and higher levels of strategy are concerned with doing the “right” job.