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Operational Thinking

Vor allem die Niederlagen in der Kriegsgeschichte haben immer wieder bewiesen, dass das Denken der Politiker und Heerführer über den Krieg und die Kriegführung nicht mit der Strategie aufhören darf, sondern seine Fortsetzung im operativen Denken finden muss. Dr. Vego, Professor am US Naval War College, ist ein international bekannter Kritiker der «Network Centric Warfare». Er wirft den Autoren dieser Konzeption vor, dass sie das operative Denken im Krieg nicht nur vernachlässigen, sondern auf simple Taktik reduzierten. Seine Kritik ist durch die Ereignisse im Irakkrieg bestätigt worden. In geradezu stümperhafter Weise haben die Protagonisten von «Iraqi Freedom» die politischen und militärischen Herausforderungen, die die Besetzung eines grossen Landes wie des Iraks stellt, unterschlagen. Die Kritik von Dr. Vego trifft aber auch für das gegenwärtige militärische Denken in der Schweiz zu, wird doch hierzulande mit dem Projekt «Network Centric Operations» das strategische und operative Denken zu einem Werkzeug des Taktikers degradiert. Dies ausgerechnet in einem Land, das zwar über glänzende Taktiker verfügt, aber nur in begrenztem Masse strategische Denker besitzt.

A. St.

Milan Vego

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“There are commanders-in-chief who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction and cavalry commanders who could have led armies.”

Carl von Clausewitz

One of the key requirements for success at the operational and strategic levels of command is to think broadly and have a broad vision.¹ To be successful the operational commanders not only must have a combination of certain personality traits and solid professional education and experience, but also must think far ahead, beyond the realm of physical combat. Such ability, which the Germans aptly call “operational thinking,”² is not an innate trait of a commander. Operational thinking is a result of considerable conscious effort on the part of the commander, in both peacetime and combat. The penalties for the lack of an operational perspective in the commander or his subordinates can include huge wastes of time and sorely needed resources. Often, an exclusive focus on tactics leads to defeat at the operational and strategic levels of war.

Importance: Operational thinking is a prerequisite for the commander’s judicious use of military and nonmilitary sources of power in accomplishing strategic or operational objectives. This ability is especially critical for the commander who commands numerically inferior forces. Operational thinking is not identical to what the information warfare advocates call “situational awareness” (SA) – a term used in training one’s pilots. In its strict definition, situa-

tional awareness refers to the degree of accuracy with which one’s perception of his current environment mirrors reality. It is purely a tactical, not operational or strategic, term. The extensive use of the term situational awareness is perhaps one of the best proofs of the predominance of a narrow tactical perspective among information warfare advocates.

Operational thinking helps the commander to employ friendly forces in such a way that each action directly or indirectly contributes to the accomplishment of the ultimate strategic or operational objective. This means that the operational commander should have the ability to differentiate between events that are essential for the accomplishment of the ultimate objective and those that are outside the framework of a given campaign or major operation.

The operational commander who thinks tactically but commands multiservice or multinational forces may ultimately achieve an operational or even strategic objective, but at substantially heavier costs for his own forces, in terms of personnel and materiel, and perhaps the most important of all, much more time, than the commander who skillfully applies the tenets of operational leadership. Moreover, there is always a risk that a weaker but much more skillful opponent who thinks operationally could inflict large losses on, or even defeat, larger but poorly led forces.

Although operational thinking is one of the most critical factors for success in both peacetime and time of conflict/war, many operational commanders have never succeeded in thinking operationally. They have remained essentially captives of their narrow tactical perspective. To think tactically is easy; it is an area in which all commanders feel comfortable, because this is what they

have done for most of their professional careers. Too many commanders in the past failed because they were unable or unwilling to raise their perspective above the tactical level. To be successful, operational commanders must accept ambiguities and uncertainties as inherent features of warfare. They must fully understand the considerable influence that political, diplomatic, economic, and other nonmilitary aspects of the situation have on the use of one’s military sources of power.

The necessity of thinking broadly has been recognized by many classical thinkers and practitioners of warfare. The French marshal Maurice de Saxe wrote in 1757 that the commander “should not be involved with details on the day of battle so when he sees an occasion he can unleash his energies, hasten to the critical point at top speed, and lead his troops to victory.”³ Carl von Clausewitz wrote that small things always depend on great ones – the unimportant on the important, and accidentals on essentials; this must guide our approach.⁴ The Prussian general Gerhard von Scharnhorst reportedly said that one has to see the whole before seeing its parts. This is really the first rule, and its correctness can be learned from a study of history.⁵ Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Sr., wrote that “all individual successes achieved through the courage of our [German] troops on the battlefield are useless if not guided by great thoughts and directed by the purpose of the campaign and the war as a whole.”⁶ He believed that “it is far more important that the high commander retain a clear perspective of the entire state of affairs than that any detail is carried out in a particular way.”⁷ The commander has to make decisions throughout a campaign in conditions that are difficult to predict. Moltke, Sr. believed that “all successive acts of war are thus not premeditated implementations of some plan but spontaneous actions in response to the military situation of the moment. What is impor-

¹David Jablonsky, “Strategy and the Operational Level of War: Part I,” *Parameters*, Spring 1987, p. 71.

²The term “operational thinking” is a direct translation from the widely used German term “operatives Denken.”

³Maurice de Saxe, *My Reveries Upon the Art of War*, edited by Thomas R. Phillips, in *Roots of Strategy* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1985), p. 5.

⁴Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, edited by Dr. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Ferdinand Dümmler Verlag, 16th editions, 1952), p. 874.

⁵General Johann von Kiemannsegg in N. Hanisch, *Untersuchen Sie die operativen Ideen Manstein hinsichtlich Schwerpunktbildung, Überraschung, Initiative und Handlungsfreiheit an den Beispielen Westfeldzug 1940 (Sichelschnitt-Plan) und Operation Zitadelle* (Hamburg: Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr, 15 January 1988), p. 4.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Daniel J. Hughes, Editor, *Moltke on the Art of War. Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), p. 184.

*Milan Vego, Dr., seit 1991 Professor of Operations am JMO Department des U.S. Naval War College in Newport (RI).

tant, in each concrete case, is to see clearly through a mist of uncertainty, assess the facts accurately, guess the unknowns, reach a decision quickly, and then move to carry it out vigorously without letting oneself be sidetracked.”⁸

What Is Operational Thinking? The term “operational thinking” is difficult to define concisely, because it encompasses too many diverse elements. For a commander to think operationally means, first and foremost, that he has an operational rather than tactical perspective in exercising his numerous responsibilities, both in peacetime and in war. In physical terms, the *operational perspective* encompasses the theater of operations plus an arbitrarily defined area of interest. The operational perspective level provides the essential link between the tactical and strategic perspectives. In contrast, the tactical commander’s area of responsibility is a combat zone/sector or an area of operations plus an area of interest. The tactical commander is normally not concerned with using nonmilitary sources of power, but operational and strategic commanders are. Exceptions are the post-conflict phase of a campaign, peace operations, and the employment of combat forces in so-called low-intensity conflicts.

Among other things, operational commanders must have full knowledge and understanding of the mutual interrelationships and linkage between strategy and policy on one hand and strategy, operational art, and tactics on the other. The operational commanders must also fully understand the distinctions among the levels of war and how decisions and actions at one level affect events at other levels. In sequencing and synchronizing the use of military and nonmilitary sources of power, operational commanders must have the ability to focus on the big picture and not be sidetracked by minor or unrelated events.

The principal differences between war at the operational level and war at the tactical level are the size and complexity of the military objectives to be accomplished. At the operational level, the factor of space encompasses not only military but also nonmilitary elements of the situation on the enemy’s, one’s own, and neutrals’ sides in a conflict. An operational commander must properly sequence and synchronize the employment of both military and nonmilitary sources of power in the conduct of a campaign or major operation. Sound operational decisions must be made, although


the knowledge and understanding of some essential elements of the situation are far from satisfactory and uncertainties abound. For the operational commander there is a greater uncertainty in terms of the factors of space, time, and forces than for a tactical commander. Generally, a commander can more accurately measure the risks of an action or nonaction at the tactical level than at the operational level.⁹

The factors of space, time, and forces are much larger for strategic or operational objectives than for tactical objectives. Strategic and operational objectives are also much more complex because of the presence of nonmilitary elements of the situation. Many elements of the situation are hard to quantify or are unquantifiable. Hence, the process of balancing the factors of space, time, and forces against a given strategic or operational objective is much more difficult than at the tactical level.

⁸ Gérard Chaliand, *The Art of War In World History: From Antiquity To The Nuclear Age* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 768.

⁹ Christian Leggemann, *Die taktisch/operativen Ideen Mansteins hinsichtlich Schwerpunktbildung, Überraschung, Initiative und Handlungsfreiheit* (Hamburg: Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr, 4 January 1989), p. 2.

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in Weekly Newsletter, February 6 2006:
*Russia is ready to write off \$10 billion of
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On January 31, Russia's Deputy Finance Minister Sergey Storchak announced in London that Russia is ready to write off Afghanistan's debt to the former USSR to contribute to the development of the country. The debt is estimated to \$10 billion.
(REGNUM, January 31) A. St.

In contrast to the tactical commander, the operational commander has to evaluate the features of the physical environment in operational rather than tactical terms. This means, among other things, that characteristics of terrain, hydrography, and oceanography should be analyzed in terms of their effect on the course and outcome of major operations and campaigns, not battles and engagements. The operational commander is also far more concerned with the effects of climate rather than weather on the employment of joint or combined forces in a given theater.

The larger the scope of the military objective, the more uncertainties that fall within the scope of the commander's estimate of the situation. The operational commander must often make critical decisions without knowing many of the situation's essential elements. At the same time, the operational commander must have the ability to correctly anticipate the enemy's reaction to his own action and then make

decisions to respond to the enemy's actions. When the initiative has been lost, all considerations of an operational nature are ultimately based on the correct appreciation of or hypotheses regarding the enemy's future courses of action.

Thinking operationally also means that the commander clearly sees how each of his decisions and actions contributes to the accomplishment of the ultimate strategic or operational objective. All the decisions and actions of the operational commander should be made within the given operational or strategic framework; otherwise, they will not contribute to ultimate success and might even undermine it. As in chess, the player who views the board as a single interrelated plane of action and each move as a prelude to a series of further moves is more likely to be successful than an opponent who thinks only a single move at a time. The operational commander must think of how to create opportunities for the use of his forces while at the same time reducing the enemy's future options.¹⁰

The operational commander should also have the ability to properly evaluate the impact of new and future technologies on the conduct of operational warfare. However, he must not focus on specific weapons or weapon platforms and sensors but should anticipate the influence these will have on the conduct of campaigns or major operations when used in large numbers. Moltke, Sr., was one such rare individual, who understood the impact the new technological advances of his era, specifically railroad and telegraph, would have on the conduct of war and campaigns. Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen showed great enthusiasm and energy in adopting new technologies. However, in contrast to Moltke, Sr., he lacked the proper vision for future technical developments.¹¹

Acquiring Operational Thinking:
The operational commander's ability to

think "operationally" is acquired as a result of influences in the broader military environment, professional education and training, self-education, and practical combat experience. Specifically, operational thinking can be acquired through practical experience in combat, large-scale exercises and maneuvers, war gaming, and the study of military/naval history. But perhaps the most critical component in acquiring operational thinking is the commander's untiring efforts at self-study and practical experience, both in peacetime and in combat. Clausewitz thought that the most important component was combat experience.¹² Operational thinking is only in some very rare cases the result of a commander's inherent predisposition to think big and far ahead of current events.

Conclusion: The operational commander should think "operationally"; otherwise, he simply cannot succeed. Operational commanders should accept the inherent features of operational warfare – ambiguities and uncertainties – and the considerable influence of political, diplomatic, economic, and other nonmilitary aspects of the situation on the employment of military forces. A broader perspective is acquired by studying past major operations and campaigns and by experience. Operational thinking is not inborn; it requires great awareness, a determination, and much hard work to acquire it. It requires constant effort on the part of operational commanders and their staffs to keep ultimate objectives always in view as they plan and conduct major operations and campaigns. Many operational commanders have possessed the highest intellect, strength of character, courage, and boldness, and yet failed, simply because they never raised their sights beyond tactics. Tactical excellence has not been in the past, nor will it be in the future, a substitute for operational thinking. ■

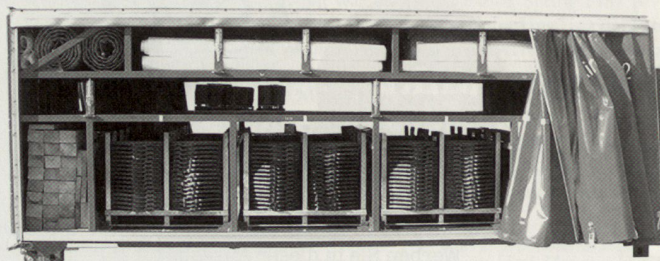
¹⁰Robert W. RisCassi, "Doctrine for Joint Operations in a Combined Environment. A Necessity," *Military Review*, June 1993, p. 24.

¹¹Guenter Roth, "Operatives Denken bei Schlieffen und Manstein," in Hans-Martin Ottmer and Heiger Ostertag, editors, *Ausgewählte Operationen und ihre militärhistorischen Grundlagen*; Series *Operatives Denken und Handeln in deutschen Streitkräften*, published under the auspices of Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Bonn/Herford: Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn GmbH, 1993), p. 283.

¹²Thomas H. Killion, "Clausewitz and Military Genius," *Military Review*, July–August 1995, p. 99.

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