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Operational principles

For several years, discussions have been held on the apparent operational gap between NATO's strategic objectives on the one hand and our tactical doctrines on the other hand. The missing operational level is certainly not a new area; however, within NATO, and in particular the Central Region, this level has been largely ignored in our formal publications. When it has been addressed, it has not been done jointly.

I have taken this concern into account. In autumn 1988, my 'Operational principles for the employment of land and air forces in defence of the Central Region' were issued to stimulate operational thinking. Its purpose is to act as the basis of our operational level thinking in peace, crisis and war. It should lead logically to subsequent conceptual papers and refinement of our main planning documents.

I assess the operational level of critical importance. If the Central Region does not have a superb operational art, we risk winning many tactical battles, but losing the operational campaign, if we are called for defence of our countries.

The case for operational art

Though a popular topic for discussion in military circles, the term 'Operational level of war' has raised the question of whether there really is a need to identify the domain which interrelates and links strategy and tactics and if so, what exactly is its focus?

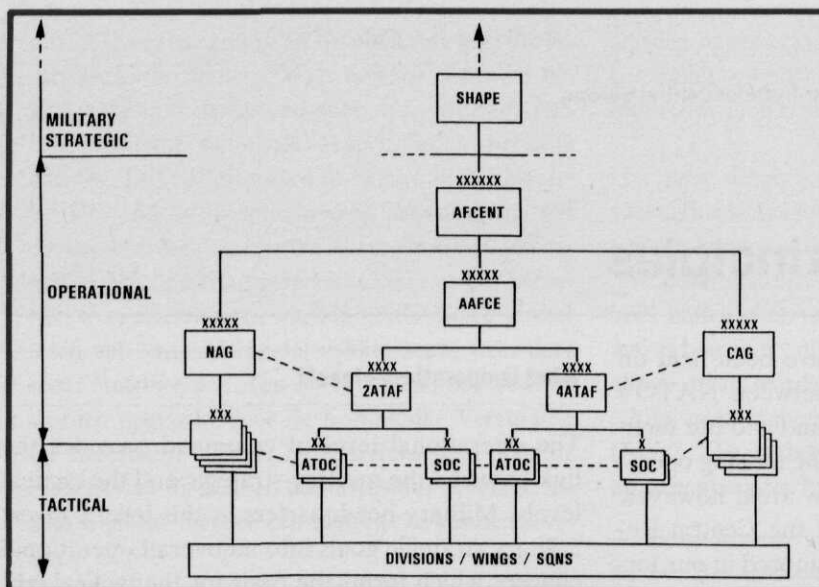
From my own point of view, I believe strongly in the development of operational art which translates the strategic objectives into operational concepts. These concepts then force the tactical engagements and supporting operations under the same unified operational idea.

What is operational level?

The operational level of command provides the link between the military-strategic and the tactical levels. Military headquarters at this level convert military strategic goals into an overall operational concept which forms the basis for the tactical employment of forces. In peace and crisis, an operational level headquarters coordinates and directs all large scale preparations, to include the build-up and deployment of forces and capabilities for the execution of major joint/combined operations. In war, this level is responsible for integrating all functions in support of its concept of operations. The operational level of command strives for the optimum synchronization of the operational factors time, area and force capabilities with the operational objectives.

We are all familiar with fundamental principles of war, such as selection and maintenance of the objective, freedom of action, initiative, etc. However, less understood is that the imaginative application of the principles of war is the core of operational art. Dogmatic thinking, narrow adherence to general defence plan perspectives, fixation on a pre-planned sequence of operations must be avoided. While the principles of war must guide the basis of operational planning, flexibility and, in particular, initiative and concentration of forces are vital. Gaining the initiative is almost always a precondition for success in battle. The enemy must be forced into a situation where he has to react.

This can be achieved, for example, in the overall context of forward defence, by counter-attacking when the enemy's attack has reached its culminating point or by concentrating air power to destroy enemy air forces before they can be brought to bear in battle. ▸



Level of command

Distinctive characteristics of the operational level of command are:

- the need to conduct synchronized land and air operations;
- the integration of specific large scale support operations into the operational concept;
- the participation in the process of nuclear planning and the coordination of conventional and nuclear operations;
- the consideration of other than purely military operational factors on the conduct of the campaign such as national interests and vital war crisis management.

Operational versus tactical

The tactical level should win battles. The operational level aims at winning campaigns. Tactics aim at destroying enemy forces with fire and manoeuvre. The primary emphasis at the operational level goes beyond this and aims at disrupting the plans of enemy higher commands and carrying through our own operational intent. Whereas the tactical level deals with current and near-term enemy capabilities, the operational commander is interested in the mid- and long-term theatre-wide enemy intentions.

The operational commander is not only interested in today's battle and the planning for tomorrow's, that's the prime responsibility of the tactical level. Although he takes into account the results of these battles and how they might affect future opera-

tions, his focus, however, is on orchestrating the different battles, on the planning 3-5 or more days ahead, on the air war, on the logistic sustainability, i.e., in the course and outcome of campaigns as a whole.

If we accept that 'operational art' is something in-between the tactical and strategic levels and the operational principles at both levels are basically the same, it is very difficult to provide a clear definition of the operational level. As a consequence, there is a particularly grey area between 'tactics' and 'operational art'. This creates a somewhat controversial debate about the 'operational levels of command', in the context of where the Corps belong. When applied to the Central Region, CINCENT (Commander-in-Chief Central Europe), COMAAFC (Commander Allied Air Forces Central Europe), and the Army Group and ATAF (Allied Tactical Air Force) Commanders are essentially operational commanders. However, under certain circumstances, Corps may also fight at the operational level. But it is important to bear in mind that, in general, the operational level is more determined by the kind of decisions to be taken rather than assigned to any specific command level.

As can be seen in the chart, the Corps can be viewed as the linchpins between the operational and the tactical level. It is my personal belief that the Corps represents the lowest operational level in the Central Region, even if it very often acts tactically. In my mind, there is a tendency to think of

'operational art' on too narrow a spectrum. Either one thinks of the classic definition of the movement of large forces in the wider dimensions of time and space, or more often nowadays, 'operational art' is used in context with a decisive counter-attack at the Army Group of regional levels.

Both are part of the operational art, but do not define it to the full extent. The dimensions of the Central Region, the force ratio at a critical moment, the availability of reserves and the overall logistical situation may determine whether the reserves are employed offensively or defensively; whether they are spread out or concentrated. These are decisions at the operational level.

More importantly, the factors of:

- integrated land/air operations;
- the integration of highly technical supporting operations, such as:
 - wide ranging surveillance and reconnaissance,
 - electronic warfare,
 - suppression of enemy air defence (SEAD), and
 - cover and deception,

develop their true meaning at the operational level. The fact that these crucial areas have been, in some ways, neglected for so long is partially rooted in the lack of the operational level. These factors do not make much sense at the brigade or divisional level. In addition,

- deployment,
- logistics, in its widest sense, and
- civil/military cooperation

under coalition warfare conditions can only be properly assessed and integrated at the operational level.

Especially these latter areas illustrate that, in contrast to the tactical level, more than just military factors influence the commander's decisions. That means planning and conduct of operations at the operational level of command. National positions, capabilities and sensitivities have to be considered as well as the impact of operations on the psychology of satellites and neutral neighbors. Therefore, it is virtually impossible, in my mind, to precisely link a specific command level to the operational art.

The task in the central region

NATO's military strategy aims at deterring any aggression by maintaining a credible defence posture. Should deterrence fail, NATO's main objective is to restore its territorial integrity and to end a conflict quickly on terms acceptable to NATO, in accordance with the strategies of flexible response and forward defence.

To deter any aggression, the Central Region has to maintain a credible defence posture, be able to react to any military aggression and to sustain operations as necessary. In peacetime, it must successfully demonstrate a visible capability to conduct, in war, large scale combined land/air operations at the operational level. These operations manifest themselves in the form of two interrelated campaigns: the combined land/air campaign and the related counter-air campaign.

CINCENT's initial regional objective is to defeat conventionally, at least the first operational echelon armies and tactical air forces as far forward and as quickly as possible. If successful, the attacks will come to a halt, the operational initiative will be regained and deterrence may even be restored.

The objective of operations against the second operational echelon, follow-on armies and remaining air forces is to break the aggressor's will and capability to continue aggression and to cause him to cease hostilities on terms acceptable to NATO.

Integration of land and air operations

The effective integration of land and air forces' operations is an essential operational principle. This combining does not require all Central Region air forces to be employed in direct support of the ground forces or joint commands at all echelons. It requires joint planning at all operational levels of command to focus both services' efforts on the operational objective. Due to their inherent characteristics of speed, range and flexibility, the air forces are essential resources for the operational commander. These characteristics allow the application of concentrated fire power rapidly, over great distances, to produce a wide range of effects. They also permit the achievement of region-wide operational objectives in a matter of hours when

compared to the employment of large land formations. The ultimate goal of the land-air campaign is, *inter alia*, to destroy enemy combat capability, to limit his freedom of action and to disrupt his scheme of operations while enhancing that of the Central Region and providing friendly forces the opportunity to seize the initiative. Air forces will be employed across the spectrum of conflict in counter-air operations to allow friendly forces freedom to operate; in offensive air support and air interdiction to defeat the leading echelon and to delay, disrupt and destroy enemy follow-on forces. When and where the follow-on forces will be attacked, must be decided at the appropriate level of command. The decisions will be based on the operational objectives; the ground scheme of manoeuvre; the assets available to detect, locate and attack critical elements of the follow-on forces. A major task of the operational level is to determine the balance of effort between air defence, offensive counter air, offensive air support and the FOFA-campaign as part of the interdiction effort.

Operational factors

The operational factors *time*, *area* and *forces* are interdependent and their relative correlation will change with the prevailing situation. Therefore, the operational commander will aim at synchronizing these factors with the achievement of his objectives.

The Corps, ATOCs (Allied Tactical Operation Center) and SOC (Sector Operation Center) plan and execute the current battle. This level is expected to react to changes of situation within less than a day's time. They integrate ground operations, corps organic capabilities and air. Forward planning for sustained operations, up to three days ahead, is of vital importance.

The Army Groups and ATAFs jointly plan for a number of days ahead, in coordination with the territorial commands concerned. The Army Groups coordinate the Corps operations, balancing varying Corps capabilities against their assigned missions and plan for the use of the operational reserves. The ATAFs are responsible for planning the counter air effort. Army Groups and ATAFs also play a key role in planning and coordi-

nating FOFA operations. COMAAFC is responsible for the overall development of the air campaign, in support of CINCENTS objectives. CINCENT plans for the mid- and long-term at the regional level. He ensures that the Central Region overall campaigns are conducted in a coordinated and cohesive operational pattern which meets the strategic objective. CINCENT directs and sets the sequence of land and air operations to achieve the regional objectives. He will influence the battle in the mid-term by setting objectives and priorities for the coordinated employment of land and air forces.

The operational factor time

In war, there is but one favourable moment; the great art is to seize it, Napoleon said. Commanders at the operational level will harmonize the significant time constraints, inherent in both their own and the enemy's activities, with the requirement to meet the optimum timing.

While the tactical level of command can react to changes of the situation in a matter of hours, the operational level's ability to react is considerably longer; ranging from a matter of hours for a decisive shift in the air forces' weight of effort, to a number of days for a Corps-size operation, to even some weeks for bringing external reinforcements to the battlefield. Furthermore, to disregard the time required for a sound logistics build-up will result in a sustainability penalty. Timely staff preparations, the commanders' final decision at the right time and rapidity of execution to ensure surprise are essential.

The operational factor area

The Central Region's limited geographical depth does not permit trading space for time at the operational level. However, the strategy of forward defence must not be misinterpreted as a purely static tactical doctrine, thus putting a successful conventional defence at risk from the outset. The available depth must be exploited for the necessary echeloning of the defence in-depth and for preparations of mobile offensive operations to reduce enemy penetrations. The limited geographical depth of the Central Region requires that

the defensive campaign must be extended into the enemy's rear by directing our long range fire power against his follow-on forces (FOFA) and their supporting structure.

The operational factor force capabilities

The operational level of command must have sufficient force capabilities at its disposal to achieve the military-strategic goal in the light of the threat, the area to be defended and the time available. Successful sustained defence operations in the Central Region depend on the timely availability of external land and air reinforcements. The effective employment of reserves is a decisive factor to maintain freedom of action and to gain the initiative. Their employment will be the decisive factor. The limited resources in the Central Region do not allow for operational reserves at all levels of command. Economy of effort and concentration of forces are principles which must be adhered to in the interest of preventing a piece-meal employment. The Army Groups must coordinate the employment of reserves, or may even take a Corps' reserve under control for a limited period of time. The Corps' loss of freedom of action must be carefully balanced against the freedom achieved at army group/ATAF level. Depending on the type, status and size of available reserves, the terrain and the air situation, the operational decision has to be taken on whether:

- it is more profitable to concentrate forces for one decisive operational counter attack, or:
- to allocate reserve forces in smaller portions to the Corps for a number of shorter ranged counter attacks in a more localized battle, or:
- whether the force ratio and the reserves available allow only the stabilization of the frontline to

gain time for later operational or strategic decisions.

Airmobile formations, when available as operational assets, might reduce the influence of the operational factors time and area.

The available forces in the Central Region are from seven, probably eight different nations. There needs to be a high level of interoperability, especially on the operational level, for the successful conduct of sustained operations with these forces. The Central Region's operational art will be heavily dependent on interoperability.

Impact on the Central Region

Let me summarize the operational principles for the employment of land and air forces in defence of the Central Region. The imaginative application of the principles of war is the core of operational art. Synchronization of the operational factors time, area and forces with the operational objective, is the challenge to be achieved. Integration of land and air operations, cooperation between NATO and national military authorities are of vital importance.

As the operational art and level of command are agreed upon within NATO, and especially the Central Region, the basis of operational level thinking is laid. Our thinking may be refined. This might even include a shift in forces from the tactical to the operational level. However, whenever our thinking is rising from the tactical to the operational level, the implementation of operational art is dependent upon interoperability. Interoperability, therefore, is and will remain to be crucial to the Central Region's implementation of operational art.

U bent actief dienend officier van KL of KLu,

maar gaat binnenkort de dienst verlaten.

**U wilt echter wèl graag maandelijks de Militaire Spectator blijven ontvangen?
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