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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

Levels of Failure: Why the Three Levels of Warfare Model Fails to Achieve its Purpose

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Levels of Failure: Why the Three Levels of Warfare Model Fails to Achieve its Purpose

Author: Major Knathan LeFever, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The three levels of warfare concept was not designed for and inadequately demonstrates the relationship between national policy objectives and tactical actions because of the expansion of strategy beyond the military domain, mission creep of three levels of war beyond the conceptual realm, and the changing nature of the military art.

Discussion: Originally introduced in the U.S. Army's 1982 version of FM 100-5, the operational level of war—and subsequently the three levels of warfare concept—was developed to link tactic actions to military strategic objectives. Over time, the purpose of the three levels of warfare concept expanded to model the relationship between tactics and national policy objectives, and the concept ineffectively models this relationship for three reasons. First, for much of its existence, strategy was generally defined as the employment of the armed forces to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force; however, strategy has expanded across multiple levels and is now used to determine military and policy objectives. This expansion explains why the three levels of war concept confuses strategic direction and strategy development and implies that strategy making only occurs at one level. Second, the three levels of warfare concept is also used to explain processes beyond its purpose, and as a result its original purpose has come out of focus. Third, the modern character of war has become progressively multi-domain, global and persistent because of the application of hybrid concepts and gray zone strategies to compete below the level of armed conflict. These characteristics of modern war require planning from a global perspective, and the current three level of warfare model does not—and cannot—represent these modern characteristics of warfare.

Conclusion: The author presents a new model—the three levels of effort—that better demonstrates the relationship between tactical actions and policy objectives. These levels of effort—national, operational and tactical—describe the three distinct levels at which the nation's overall grand strategy is implemented. Unlike the three levels of warfare concept, it delineates and explains the most critical link between military and policy objectives—the civil-military relationship. If implemented, the alignment of efforts across the instruments of national power towards policy objectives will occur at the most logical level—the national level—and military commanders could focus solely on the development of military operational objectives.

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Preface

I have always been fascinated by the path most conversations concerning the three levels of warfare seem to take. A deceptively simple concept, once you peel back the onion you find yourself immersed in some of the most complicated and perpetually contested facets of military theory. This research reflects my attempt to answer two questions. Do the three levels of warfare accurately model the relationship between tactical actions and national objectives? Is there a better way to model this relationship?

First and foremost, I must acknowledge my incredible wife, Kimberly. Keeping me motivated and on task, she was as important to getting this research done as I was. To my mentor, Dr. Paul Gelpi, who gave me the push to pursue this research when I had little confidence in its value or my capability to do it justice, thank you. I must also thank MCU research librarian Christi Bayha, who generously provided reference and research assistance, and Andrea Hamlen, who proofread my writing and guided me through the writing process. Their assistance was crucial and much appreciated.

Finally, I must recognize the vast body of academics, experts, and military professionals who have contributed to development of the theories upon which the three levels of warfare concept was designed. Even the modicum of value this research contributes to these subjects could not have been achieved without their phenomenal endeavors.

Introduction

After the Vietnam War, the U.S. military establishment experienced what is commonly described as an intellectual and professional renaissance from the late 1970s through the 1980s. For the U.S. Army, this period reflected a shift in focus from counter insurgency operations to the development of an operational concept primarily focused on the defeat of the Soviet Union—AirLand Battle.¹ Introduced in the 1982 version of FM 100-5, the essence of AirLand Battle is the maneuver-based, rapid application of violence against enemy weaknesses concurrent with deep battle actions to disrupt enemy forces in depth, and—for reasons that are unclear—presented the operational level of warfare.² Before the addition of the operational level of war in FM 100-5, war was sorted by two levels—strategic and tactical—with the purpose of strategy to tie tactical tasks to policy objectives; however, the U.S. Army viewed military strategy beyond the scope of the service, and—because of the recent trauma experienced in Vietnam—recognized the requirement to think and plan above the tactical level which resulted in the development of the operational level of war.³

Over time, what was once a cognitive tool that simply linked tactics to military strategic objectives would expand to model the relationship between national policy objectives and tactical actions, but the United States would continue to demonstrate misalignment between tactical actions and national aims. The three levels of warfare concept was not designed for and inadequately demonstrates the relationship between national policy objectives and tactical actions because of the expansion of strategy beyond the military domain, mission creep of three levels of war beyond the conceptual realm, and the changing nature of the military art. If left unaddressed, the disconnect between tactics and policy objectives will likely continue under the current three levels of warfare construct and associated concepts, but with proper diagnosis

civilian and uniformed military leaders need not again experience the tragedy of wasted tactical excellence because of strategic failure.

Literature Review

This literature review is organized by three themes: the military theorists, the advocates for, and the opponents against the three levels of warfare concept. The development of the three levels of warfare concept was influenced by military theory; however, it will be shown that military theorists did not conceptualize the stratification of warfare into three levels. The theorists held that war was subordinate to policy, that strategy was primarily a military affair with the purpose to align tactical actions to policy objectives, and that the Soviet theory of operational art was a cognitive tool to purposefully sequence tactical actions to achieve strategic objectives—not a level of warfare. Advocates for an operational level of war—and consequently the three levels of warfare concept—argue that there must be a level between strategy and tactics to expand the focus of military leadership beyond the tactical level, to tie force design to operational requirements, and to plan campaigns tied to strategic objectives. Finally, the return of a disconnect between national strategic aims and tactics would give rise to opponents against the three levels of war concept. The opponents argue that the operational level of war was the result of misunderstood Soviet doctrine, and that it actually causes what it was intended to prevent—the misalignment of tactical actions to policy objectives.

The Theorists

Considered by some to be the founder of modern strategy, the contributions of Henri Jomini to military theory and doctrine are vast and enduring.⁴ In his *Summary of the Art of War*, Jomini categorizes the art of war into these solely military branches: strategy, grand tactics, engineering, and tactics; however, he recognizes the importance of the relationship between

politics and war which he categorizes as a sixth branch—statesmanship.⁵ Jomini viewed the development of policy objectives and military objectives as distinct but linked activities, and that the realm of strategy fell under the military commander after the commander and head of state agreed upon the character of war.⁶ According to Jomini, the primary role of strategy was the establishment tactical objectives and lines of maneuvers that targeted critical strategic points.⁷ It is important to note the purpose of grand tactics was simply the execution of strategy, and tactics referred to minor tactics used by different arms.⁸ It is clear that both would fall under tactics in contemporary doctrine, and that any correlation of grand tactics with the operational level or operational art would be inappropriate.⁹

In his treatise *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz introduced his own trilateral concept to explain the relationship between the eternal constituents of war—emotional violence, the play of chance and probability, and war’s subordination to policy.¹⁰ Clausewitz states that, “A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship among them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.”¹¹ A fundamental concept of Clausewitz’s theory is that “war is *nothing but* the continuation of policy with other means”¹²—a concept that would be quite relevant to Army doctrine writers after the Vietnam War. It is also beneficial to note Clausewitz’s views on strategy as a military-oriented term, developed once political conditions were provided and focused on the assignment of these aims to tactical engagements.¹³ He does not conceptualize an operational level of war because according to Clausewitz, it is the role of strategy to tie tactical actions to policy objectives; however, the terms ‘operations’ and ‘operational’ are present in contemporary translations of *On War* despite their absence in the original German.¹⁴ In fact, it is clear that Clausewitz does not

stratify policy, strategy, and tactics into levels; they are fused means to achieve the ultimate end of relative peace.¹⁵

A review of the writings from Helmuth von Moltke—who is considered by many to be the originator of the operational art—is mandatory for any discussion about the three levels of warfare concept. Moltke considers himself a student of Clausewitz and agrees that war is subordinate to policy; however, he contradicts himself stating that strategy should be independent from policy in action and that policy should never interfere with operations.¹⁶ He also argues that a military commander should never let policy considerations alone affect the conduct of operations, but should focus on military success and that “what policy can do with his victories or defeats is not his business.”¹⁷ Moltke views strategy as a flexible “system of expedients” or means to attain an end, and that the role of strategy was to determine when and where to engage in battle and execution to the realm of tactics.¹⁸ In response to technological advancements, Moltke demonstrated the concept of strategic envelopment which involved operations—in Prussian army parlance, actions that concerned the movement of large units—over separate routes to quickly achieve mass and envelop the enemy with superior numbers to achieve decisive victory in battle.¹⁹ There is no evidence that Moltke intellectualized operational art or the operational level of war as purported by some;²⁰ however, the argument that he exemplified operational art through combat execution certainly has validity.

The next major contribution to military theory that is relevant to the three levels of warfare would come from the Soviet Union. Published in 1927, Aleksandr A. Svechin’s *Strategy* represents the confluence of the maturation of imperial Russian thought pre-1914 with the practical knowledge drawn from the World War I and Russian Civil War.²¹ The concepts of strategy and operational art as represented by Svechin were foundational to Soviet doctrine, and

provides insight into how the Soviet military apparatus viewed the relationship between policy, strategy, and tactics throughout the Cold War era.²² Like previous theorists, Svechin agrees in the subordination of war to policy, but he is the first to give the political realm a role in strategy. He argues that strategy is a tool of politics, that politicians should be familiar with strategy, and that the aim of strategy should be set by politicians.²³ He argues that the Moltke's concept of strategic envelopment to achieve swift victory in a single, great battle has been overcome by technology which has dispersed battle over a greater amount of time and distance. According to Svechin, modern war requires the sequencing of numerous battles and campaigns across space and time to ensure that battles have strategic value and ultimately contribute to political aims.²⁴ This is the role of operational art—which entails the deliberate planning and sequencing of tactical actions to strategic requirements. Svechin does not conceptualize strategy, operational art, and tactics as distinct levels of warfare, but argues that it is necessary to arbitrarily divide the military art to simplify its study.²⁵

Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart's *Strategy*—published in 1954 and revised in 1967—analyzes strategy going back to 500 BCE in an effort to reconstruct a theory of strategy. This requirement is based on Liddell Hart's argument that the work of Clausewitz has been misinterpreted and is incomplete.²⁶ He argues that Clausewitz's definition of strategy is defective because it ties strategy to the achievement political aims that are beyond the control of military leadership; he proposes a new definition of strategy: “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.”²⁷ Liddell Hart also introduces a new concept to theory called grand strategy, which guides the “execution of policy” through the integration of all elements of national power. Grand strategy implements military strategy and military strategy implements tactics, and he argues that the common dissatisfaction felt by both victor and vanquished upon

war's conclusion is caused by the misunderstanding of grand strategy. His concept attempts to subordinate war to policy and delineate strategy as “the art of generals” within the realm of their control; however, he cautions that while the compartmentalization of tactics and strategy benefits discussion—in reality they are entwined.²⁸

The Advocates

As presented by the theorists above—before the addition of the operational level of war and operational art—war was sorted by two levels and it was the purpose of strategy to tie tactical tasks to policy objectives. It would be the notoriously confident political scientist and well-known defense critic, Edward Luttwak, who would bring the concept of the operational level of war into U.S. public debate. Published in 1980, his “The Operational Level of War” article questioned why American military terminology did not have an adequate term for the operational level of warfare. He states that the operational level of war should be the most important to “the analyst” and states that the majority of military literature—including Clausewitz—is focused on the operational level. Luttwak argues that the lack of a term for the operational level reflects that officers do not think or know how to conduct war in operational terms, and he links U.S. reliance on the attritional style of warfare as the chief impedance to the development of operational thought.²⁹ He surmises that the operational level is not important in attritional warfare but is required for maneuver warfare, and he provides a historical operational example—the Blitzkrieg.³⁰ Ultimately, he argues that the current U.S. Army's counter-Soviet strategy of Forward Defense was politically imposed and prevented the application of the only operational method that could succeed—maneuver warfare.³¹

Army leadership was receptive of Luttwak's concept and his essay was provided to the doctrine writers for 1982's FM 100-5— then Lieutenant Colonels (LTC) Huba Wass de Szege

and Leonard “Don” Holder.³² Both Wass de Szege and Holder resisted the addition of the operational level of war in FM 100-5 based on the assumption that it would be too difficult for the army to grasp; however, the concept would be added per the direction of the newly assigned TRADOC commander, General Glenn K. Otis.³³ There is some debate behind why the operational level of war was added to doctrine without explanation. The addition was made based on strong recommendation from the Army War College to either give doctrinal jurisdiction to the Army’s Command and Staff College or serve as a doctrinal foothold upon which operational theory could be fully developed.³⁴ Regardless, Wass de Szege and Holder would again be tasked to undertake a new revision of FM 100-5, and their efforts would be predominately focused on understanding and defining the operational level of war.³⁵

The purpose behind LTC Don Holder’s 1985 *Army* article “A New Day for Operational Art” was likely to better explain the concept he felt was not ready for doctrine in 1982, and to prepare army officers for what would be coming in the 1986 version of FM 100-5. He links operational art to Clausewitz and Jomini, and credits Germany—and later Russia—with the development of operational concepts.³⁶ He states that the addition of the operational level of war might be the most important change to Army doctrine since World War II, and that the army is 30 years behind the Soviet Union with regards to operational thinking, planning and warfighting. According to Holder, the most important purpose of operational art is to select military objectives that will secure the strategic end.³⁷ He argues that the U.S. Army has to overcome the tactical mindset and points to Vietnam as an example of poorly executed campaign design.³⁸ He also presents the idea that the requirements for successful operational planning and fires are distinct from tactical or strategic levels.³⁹ As foreshadowed, 1986’s FM 100-5 replaced the operational level of war with operational art⁴⁰—a choice that would lead to much confusion.

The confusion caused by the replacement of operational level of war with operational art is best depicted in LTC Clayton R. Newell's 1988 article "The Levels of War." Newell argues that the three levels of war construct is "essentially a basic theory of war" and that there is a lack of common understanding between the services with regards to what that theory is. He states that need for clear definitions of the levels of war and explains that FM 100-5's introduction of operational art has intensified the problem because it makes unclear what falls between strategy and tactics; also, since operational art is a Soviet term the differences between the U.S. and Soviet meanings must be explained.⁴¹ Interestingly, he goes on to recommend definitions for the three levels of war and leaves operational art unaddressed. Of note, his recommendation for the definition of strategy includes implementation of all elements of national power—this goes beyond the 1986 version of FM 100-5's scope of the strategic level as military strategy.⁴²

Another article from 1988 by USAF Lieutenant General Hosmer introduces another important purpose for the operational level of war represented by the natural link between the operational level and joint-level geographic combatant commanders (CCDR). He argues that operational art must be applied to the development of force structure and procurement of systems to ensure alignment with CCDR requirements.⁴³ Hosmer's article also reflects the tendency to infer an association between CCDRs and the operational level of war. Along the same lines, the Marine Corps would also begin to make the connection between force capability, CCDR requirements and the importance of communicating Marine Air Ground Task Force relevance to the operational level.⁴⁴

The 1993 version of FM 100-5 saw the return of the three levels of war—strategic, operational, and tactical—with some significant modifications: the strategic level now included all elements of national power, the operational level was a level where joint forces plan

campaigns, and operational art represented the cognitive process to ensure tactical means align to strategic aims.⁴⁵ Coming to grips with the end of the Cold War, the army would begin to shift focus towards becoming a more strategically oriented force. The change in focus would lead to recommendations that the army begin to focus more on operational art in its doctrine.⁴⁶ Eventually, U.S. Army doctrine would deemphasize the levels of war and focus on the cognitive process of operational art, and it continues to be reflected as such in army doctrine today.⁴⁷ Current joint doctrine represents an expansion of the levels of war: now the operational level links tactical employment to national strategic objectives and the levels of war are linked to unit echelons. Also, levels of war have expanded to explain levels of command and control and decision-making authorities.⁴⁸

Opinions vary about the methodology behind doctrine development during this military renaissance period from which U.S. operational art concepts originated. According to Shimon Naveh, this period reflects the U.S. adoption of operational art aligned to the Soviet concept but via a separate path as a result of the adoption of a systems approach and the contributions of civilian operational reformers.⁴⁹ Colonel Richard Swain, however, posits that the process behind the adoption of operational art was “almost entirely synthetic, abstract, and imitative.” He claims that it reflects cumulative negotiations and not inspiration as argued by Naveh. Finally, he believes that the U.S. Army—coming out of Vietnam—was nostalgic for a war it would most likely not fight and found solace in historic campaigns and Blitzkrieg; however, operational art did provide a concept to enable military leaders to link tactical tasks to strategic outcomes.⁵⁰

The Opponents

The return of counter insurgency and the perceived disconnect between national strategic aims and tactics would give rise to opponents against the operational level of war. It would be

the British military historian, Sir Hew Strachan, who would first tie the operational level of war to strategic incompetence. In 2005's "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," Strachan argues that strategy—once primarily concerned with war and the application of military means—was appropriated by politicians and academics, and in response the U.S. military incorporated the operational level of warfare. He also claims that the source of the operational level was misattributed to the Germans—who thought in terms of strategy and tactics—for possibly political reasons, and misinterpreted Russian operational art—which was not a level of warfare.⁵¹ He argues that Blitzkrieg—a common example of operational art excellence—actually represents military strategy detached from policy aims and ultimately contributed to Germany's defeat.⁵² He contends that the appeal of the operational level of war is that it provides generals a policy-free zone that enables military action without political interference, and that operational thinking actually contributes to the deviation between military objectives and policy aims.⁵³ Ultimately, he recommends the return of strategy back to the military and focused on the alignment of war's objectives to political aims.⁵⁴

Justin Kelly's *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy*, argues that the once tactically-focused term of operational art has expanded to mean anything and everything thus losing its utility.⁵⁵ He argues that the responsibility to plan campaigns at the operational level obligates operational planners to incorporate elements of national power beyond their capability and authority.⁵⁶ He claims that campaign planning provided CCDRs with jurisdiction and that the operational level of war was incorporated in doctrine for bureaucratic needs.⁵⁷ He recommends placing the responsibility to plan national-level campaigns at the national strategic level, the incorporation of strategic art to orchestrate the instruments of national power, and the return of operational art—that is not a level of war—to a tactically-focused concept.⁵⁸ Based off

of historical study, he provides this definition for operational art: “the thoughtful combination of tactics and logistics to achieve assigned objectives.”⁵⁹ In his 2011 literary response to the dismissal of General Stanley McChrystal, Strachan will also argue that the operational level has moved into a space beyond its purpose due to the absence of strategy.⁶⁰

The final opponent against the operational level of war was the lead doctrine writer for the 1982 and 1986 versions of FM 100-5—the now retired Brigadier General Huba Was de Czege. In 2011’s “Thinking and Acting Like an Explorer,” he utilizes a metaphor of an explorer to explain the relationship between strategy and tactics. He states that operational art is not a level of war, but that it is the cognitive process of mediating strategic and tactical reasoning. He admits that the placement of operational art as a level of warfare was based on the mistranslation of Soviet doctrine which views operational art as a mental process. He then argues that operational art is not solely for “campaigning generals” but applicable at any level and that its application is equally useful across the spectrum of military operations.⁶¹ Later in 2011, he expands his idea and describes operational art as the synchronization of multiple short tactical decision cycles with long strategic ones, and he recommends the implementation of a deliberate, intermittent strategic problem-framing cycle to achieve harmonization between strategic and tactical cycles.⁶²

Summary

All of the military theorists held that war was subordinate to policy and that strategy was primarily a military affair with the purpose to align tactical actions to policy objectives. According to the theorists, the reduction of war into subordinate elements was arbitrary and is only useful if it aids in the study of war. None of the theorists articulated an operational level of war and the Soviet theory of operational art was a cognitive tool to purposefully sequence

tactical actions to achieve strategic objectives. Liddell Hart introduced a separate, distinct realm of strategy—grand strategy—to guide policy across the elements of national power.

The actual reason why the operational level of war was included in 1982's FM 100-5 will likely never be known; however, Luttwak's essay certainly influenced army leadership. His argument weakly links the operational level of war as a requirement for maneuver warfare, and he incorrectly attributes development of the operational level of war to Germany through the questionable use of the German Blitzkrieg to make his argument. Regardless, his sentiments appealed to army leadership, but army researchers would not begin to fully develop the three levels of warfare concept until after its addition to doctrine. With the view that strategy was beyond their scope, doctrine writers would substitute the war theorist's concept for strategy with operational art. Once the realm of strategy, now operational art would tie tactical actions to strategic aims, guide campaign planning, and align the development of force structure to operational requirements vice tactical capabilities. Eventually, joint doctrine would expand the levels of war to link tactical employment to national strategic objectives, and associate levels of war to unit echelons, levels of command and control, and authorities.

Finally, counter insurgencies and the return of the disconnect between national strategic aims and tactics would give rise to opponents against the three levels of war concept. They correctly argue that the operational level of war was the result of misunderstood Soviet doctrine and that it actually causes what it was intended to prevent—the misalignment of tactical actions to policy objectives. They argue that operational level of war provides a convenient zone free from political interference, that the once tactically-oriented concept has expanded past its usefulness in the absence of strategy, and that it places campaign planning at a level without the required authorities and access. Their recommendations to develop the concept of strategic art,

constrict operational art back to the tactical level, and to put campaign planning at the national strategic levels are all valid recommendations; however, the source of the problems they address go beyond operational art and the operational level. A concept that assures the alignment of tactical actions to political objectives is an objective of doctrine and a desired end-state for advocates and opponents alike. This paper will take a deeper look into the issues that prevent the concept as written from achieving this end-state and will recommend a solution.

Argument

What is Strategy?

As introduced, the purpose of three levels of warfare concept is to enable the visualization of the relationship between national objectives and tactical actions;⁶³ however, this concept was not designed for and will fail to achieve its objective. One reason why can be attributed to the expansion of strategy which has resulted in the development of strategy at multiple levels, and has bifurcated strategy to determine both military and policy objectives. The three levels of warfare concept is not a theory of war as suggested by LTC Newell,⁶⁴ but is a model that—as currently constructed—does not realistically reflect the relationship between the development of policy and military objectives. Once the realm of military affairs, strategy has expanded or—as argued by Strachan—has been appropriated by politicians and academics.⁶⁵ He recommends that strategy should be constrained back to a military oriented process, but this solution is unlikely because strategy-making beyond the military realm has become so prolific. The development of a concept that does model the link between national aims and tactical actions must account for the reality that strategies are developed at multiple levels and for purposes beyond those recognized by military theorists.

The diaspora of strategies across multiple levels to determine both policy and military objectives was evident in joint doctrine, which struggled to delineate and explain the variety of strategies. Until recently, joint doctrine recognized four levels of strategy—grand strategy, national security strategy, national military strategy, and combatant command strategy—and this did not reflect the recent addition of national defense strategy.⁶⁶ In 2019, joint doctrine would shift focus to the development of military strategy because national strategy was “outside the purview of joint doctrine,”⁶⁷ and reflects the continuation of the civil-military relations struggle to maintain a powerful military that does not become so strong that it disregards civilian direction.⁶⁸ Also, the current three levels of warfare concept associates the strategic level with the development of strategies, not the level from which strategic direction originates. Therefore, the existence of a strategic level in the current three levels of warfare concept incorrectly and unintentionally implies that strategy-making occurs at one level.

The three levels of warfare—strategic, operational and tactical—had the original purpose to tie tactical actions to military strategic objectives, and for this purpose the three-level concept was acceptable. It was within this framework that Lykke applied his ends, ways and means concept to explain the development of strategy. Published in 1989, Lykke’s model explains the development of military operational and force development strategies through the determination of military objectives or *ends* aligned to national policy objectives, and the application of concepts or *ways* with resources or *means* to achieve military objectives.⁶⁹ Recently, the Lykke model has been criticized as a narrow-minded, formulaic exercise that is too simplistic for the development of national strategy.⁷⁰ This criticism is misplaced because it critiques the Lykke model for its inadequacy to achieve something it was not designed to do—develop national policy objectives.

Understanding that strategy has expanded beyond its original purpose, civilian policymakers and national security professionals find themselves in a struggle to achieve consensus on what strategy is, and have identified the requirement for the development of theory for strategy or grand strategy.⁷¹ However, it has been shown that military strategy is supported by accepted theory, and in this environment the Lykke model remains relevant. The root cause of the misalignment between tactical actions and policy objectives is not the process by which military strategy is developed, but the continually complex relationship between civilian policymakers and the military.⁷² This critical civil-military link is not clear with the current three levels of warfare model, because it does not plainly delineate what are clearly two distinct but related processes—the development of policy objectives and the development of military objectives.

With the expansion of strategy comes the tendency to forget not all policy objectives are presented in national level strategies; however, the roles of other sources of national policy objectives are not clear in the current three levels of warfare concept. While studies continue to recommend that National Security Council staff operate more strategically, the reality is that many policy objectives come via necessarily reactive policy directives that may or may not be aligned to strategies.⁷³ With the current focus of the strategic level of warfare on strategy development, there is not a natural fit for the role of policy directives which clearly impact the development of military strategy.

In summary, once simply defined as the employment of the armed forces to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, strategy has expanded across multiple levels and is now used to determine military and policy objectives. The three levels of war concept confuses strategic direction and strategy development, implies that strategy making only

occurs at one level, does not effectively outline the civil-military relationship, and does not effectively demonstrate other sources of policy objectives beyond strategies.

Mission Creep

Mission creep—the gradual broadening of original purposes—best describes another reason the current three levels of warfare concept is an inadequate model of the relationship between national objectives and tactical actions. The application of the three-level model beyond the conceptual domain through the association of levels with capabilities, unit echelons, command and control, and authorities unnecessarily muddies the three levels of warfare concept. Examples of this mission creep can be found in both joint and service doctrine. According to Joint Publication 3-0:

Echelon of command, size of units, types of equipment, and types and location of forces or components may often be associated with a particular level, but the strategic, operational, or tactical purpose of their employment depends on the nature of their task, mission, or objective. For example, intelligence and communications satellites, previously considered principally strategic assets, are also significant resources for tactical operations. Likewise, tactical actions can cause both intended and unintended strategic consequences...⁷⁴

The U.S. Marine Corps' MCDP-1 reflects an older and therefore less ambitious three levels of warfare concept — it still models the relationship between tactics and *military* strategy—and states that the distinction between the levels varies dependent on the type of war. For example, in a conventional war the levels are quite distinct, but in a nuclear war there is no distinction because “strategic decisions about the direction of war and tactical decisions...are essentially one and the same.” With the introduction of a time variable, MCDP-1 further contributes to the confusion as depicted in figures 1 and 2.⁷⁵

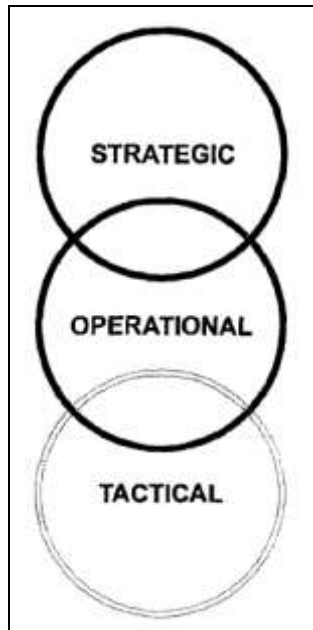


Figure 1. MCDP-1's Conventional Three Levels of War Model.⁷⁶



Figure 2. MCDP-1's Levels of War Compressed.⁷⁷

If the purpose of the three levels of warfare is to simplify the complex relationship between tactical actions and national policy objectives, then the use of the levels of warfare to demonstrate concepts beyond its purpose is clearly not helpful. Of course, the points that some tactical actions have a more a direct impact to policy objectives or that some authorities are retained by higher echelons all the way up to the NCA are important, but the levels of warfare concept should not be used to make them. Also, the idea that a unit or capability may be serving a tactical, operational, or strategic purpose—or perhaps all three at the same time—dependent on its task is illogical because the entire purpose of the levels of warfare concept is to ensure that tactical and operational actions serve strategic purpose.

The three levels of warfare concept should be exclusively focused on enabling the visualization of the relationship between national objectives and tactical actions—and the levels must be distinct. Distinction is key to categorization, and if the levels of warfare are not distinct then the model has little value. More importantly, the levels of warfare should be distinct

because they are distinct in reality. Even in a nuclear war, the levels of warfare are distinct and do not condense as presented in MCDP-1. The development of nuclear capabilities resulted from military force development strategies; the geographic locations of submarines and silos, target lists and rotations are determined by military operational strategies aligned to national policy objectives; and of course, the physical maneuver and employment of a submarine is governed by tactics. Just because the decision to employ a nuclear submarine's ordinance is held at the NCA does not compress or negate the distinction between the levels of war. The use of the three levels of warfare model to explain concepts beyond its purpose complicates the model, and it should have distinct levels exclusively focused on its primary purpose—to demonstrate relationship between national objectives and tactical actions.

The Changing Nature of the Military Art

The final argument that explains why the current three levels of warfare concept is inadequate for its purpose is its misalignment with the changing nature of the military art. Throughout history war's changing character has had a direct on effect on the nature of military art,⁷⁸ and modern war is characterized by increased globalization, hybridity and the use of gray zone strategies to compete below the level of armed conflict.⁷⁹ In response, the Title 10 authorities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) were changed to include global military integration, and the Chairman's concept for global integration was introduced in the 2016 National Military Strategy.⁸⁰ The 2018 National Defense Strategy introduced the Global Operating Model to describe how the Joint Force will be employed to compete effectively below the level of armed conflict.⁸¹ These changes have significantly transformed how future, globally integrated strategies will be designed, managed, and coordinated. Changes that currently are not—and cannot be—clearly delineated in the current three levels of warfare concept.

The Chairman's vision for global integration is the application of a global perspective to rising trans-regional problems by shifting from regional operation plans to a "campaign mindset."⁸² Designated as the global integrator, the Chairman determines the challenges that require Global Campaign Plans (GCPs), and while CCDRs are assigned as GCP coordinating authorities, the Chairman retains the authority to allocate resources.⁸³ The requirement to coordinate GCPs across geographic and functional boundaries is also retained at the CJCS level, and—in coordination with the Secretary of Defense, who is primary driver of GCPs—the Chairman as the "principal military advisor" to the NSC is responsible to synchronize GCPs with all efforts of national power.⁸⁴

It appears that the Global Operating Model has pulled the development of campaign plans from the operational level to the strategic level; however, this model does not fit neatly into the current three levels of warfare concept. GCPs are clearly different than strategy and require operational art—as currently defined—to develop, but GCPs are driven by the SECDEF, managed by CJCS and require synchronization with national elements of power—positions and actions associated with the strategic level. It is clear that the levels of warfare concept would need to be changed to represent the GCP process. A counter argument would be that GCPs do not need to be reflected in the three levels of warfare concept, but if modern warfare will have an increasingly global, hybrid character then surely challenges will increasingly require planning from a global perspective—as envisioned by the Chairman. Therefore, the three level of warfare concept should facilitate better understanding of how the CJCS global integration process ensures that tactical actions ultimately achieve policy objectives. Finally, the characteristics of modern war blur the once relatively distinct states of war and peace.⁸⁵ With the intent to compete below the level of armed conflict, GCPs will have an enduring nature that do not conveniently

align to traditional perceptions of war's essence, and a new levels of warfare concept should reflect this enduring facet of modern conflict.

To summarize, the three levels of warfare concept is misaligned with the modern character of war, which has become increasingly global due to the application of hybrid concepts and gray zone strategies to compete below the level of armed conflict. These characteristics of modern war require planning from a global—vice regional—perspective. The three levels of warfare concept cannot demonstrate how the CJCS global integration process aligns tactical actions to policy objectives as presently designed, and it should also be modified to reflect the persistent character associated with contemporary conflict.

Solution

It is clear that three levels of warfare concept is an inadequate model for the relationship between tactical actions and national policy objectives, but this research has identified the root problems that can be addressed with a new model. The new model—called the three levels of effort—represents the author's attempt to provide a concept that better reflects the relationship between tactics and policy objectives. The new model does not violate accepted military theory, stresses the subordination of military activity to policy, and clearly delineates the relationship between the development of policy objectives and military objectives. In recognition of the modern character of war, the levels have been recategorized as levels effort tied to the execution of grand strategy. Due to the expansion of strategy across levels and its divergence into the political as well as military realm, the levels have been relabeled as national, operational and tactical to prevent the inference that strategy-making only occurs at one level. The new model will have distinct levels and will not be used to explain other concepts like echelons of command, levels of capabilities, or authorities.

The national level will be distinguished by the development of national policy objectives, the requirement to coordinate GCPs, and will reflect the non-linear reality associated with the development of political objectives. The operational level will be distinguished by the development of military operational objectives influenced by the military operational strategy process outlined by Lykke, and the relationship between the tactical level of effort and the other levels will be more clearly delineated. Operational art will be more closely associated to its theoretical origins and focused on the alignment of tactical actions to military objectives, and strategic art will be introduced as recommended by the opponents against the three-level concept—with some modifications. Finally, priorities for military leaders at each level will be identified and focused on aspects critical to model's purpose—the alignment of tactical actions to national policy objectives.

The Three Levels of Effort Model

Aligned to the nation's values, grand strategy aims to secure and advance long-term, enduring, core interests over time.⁸⁶ The implementation of grand strategy transpires across three distinct levels of effort—national, operational, and tactical. The use of military force is subordinate to policy,⁸⁷ and the purpose of the three levels of effort model is to help commanders and policymakers visualize the relationship between tactical actions and national policy objectives. See figure 3.

The National Level

The national level of effort is distinguished by the development of national policy objectives. The focus at this level is the application of strategic art to align national policy objectives and military operational objectives to grand strategy aims through the orchestration of the instruments of national power.⁸⁸ National policy objectives are provided via national

strategies and policy directives. Typically, national strategies provide relatively long-term, enduring objectives, and policy directives are reactionary and/or have finite objectives that may not be represented in strategies; however, the development of most policy objectives will not reflect the linear process represented by any model. **Most** policy objectives will lack the clarity and accuracy required to develop operational military strategies to achieve **political** desires. This complex relationship between civilian policymakers and military planners has been—and will likely continue to be—the primary source of misalignment between tactical actions and national policy objectives.⁸⁹ The persistent management and cultivation of the civil-military relationship to harvest feasible policy objectives suitable for the application of military means should be the priority effort for military leaders at the national level.

While primarily associated with the development of policy objectives, some military operational objectives are determined at the national level. The character of modern war increasingly requires coordination with the instruments of national power—at the national level—to compete below the level of armed conflict against transregional threats. These efforts are managed by the Global Operating Model and associated global campaign plans (GCPs). GCPs are determined by the Secretary of Defense and coordinated by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and the enduring, transregional, and multi-domain characteristics of GCPs necessitate continuous, protracted coordination with the other elements of national power—hence its representation at the national level.

The Operational Level

The operational level of effort is distinguished by the development of military operational objectives. The focus at this level is the application of operational art which represents the continuous, cognitive effort taken by commanders and staffs to maintain alignment between

tactical actions and military operational objectives.⁹⁰ Military operational objectives are determined by military operational strategy, and military operational strategy is the art and science of employing the armed forces to secure national policy objectives by the application of force or threat of force.⁹¹ Military operational strategies are based on existing military capabilities, and are relatively short-term by nature with determinate objectives. Military operational strategies are developed through the determination of military objectives or **ends** aligned to national policy objectives followed by the application of concepts or **ways** with resources or **means** to achieve military objectives.⁹² The priority effort for military leaders at the operational level is the development of military operational objectives aligned to policy objectives—**not** means available. Ways are applied to means to achieve **preestablished** objectives, and policy objectives that have been assigned to the military instrument but cannot be achieved by military means must be addressed at the national level. Some national policy objectives require the development of long-range military conceptual strategies to design force capabilities based on forecasted requirements and threat environments. Military conceptual strategies are developed through the determination of ends aligned to national policy objectives followed by the development of concepts unconstrained by means.

The Tactical Level

Tactics is the employment, ordered arrangement, and directed actions of forces in relation to each other with the purpose to achieve military operational objectives.⁹³ All tactical **plans** should be designed to contribute to the achievement of military operational objectives aligned to policy objectives; however, the primary effort for military leaders at the tactical level is the continuous evaluation of the alignment of tactical **actions** in relation to military operational and national policy objectives. This comes with the obvious implication that military commanders at

all levels should be cognizant of both the military and political purposes behind military endeavors.

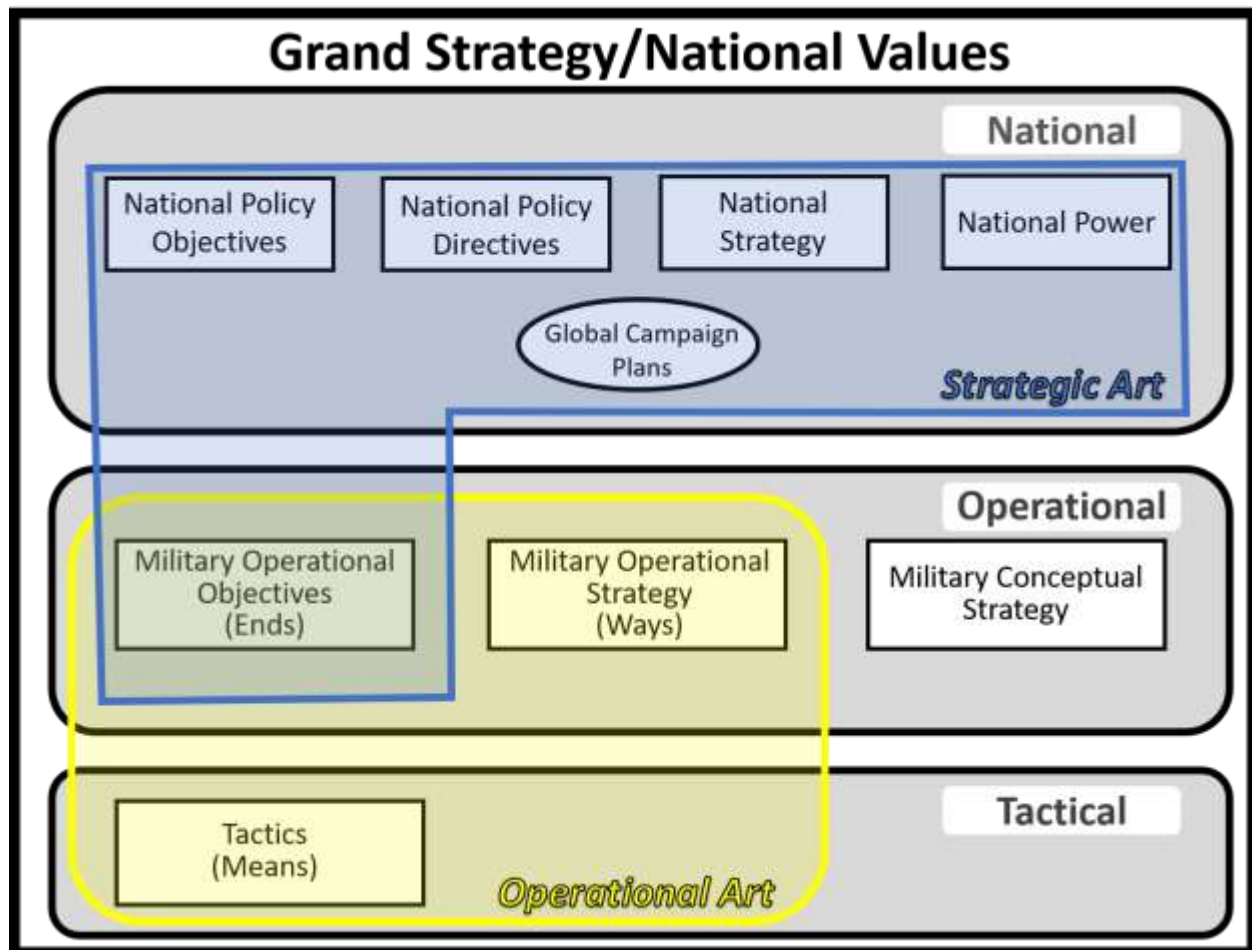


Figure 3. The Three Levels of Effort and Their Relationship with Strategic and Operational Art.

Conclusions

The three levels of warfare concept—strategic, operational and tactical—is not designed to conceptually link national objectives to tactical actions; however, this is its assigned function in joint doctrine. Given the critical nature of the relationship between war and policy, a concept that does assist a military leader's ability to cognitively link tactical actions to political aims is a worthy endeavor. The three levels of warfare concept is inadequate for this purpose because the term strategy—once a well-defined, military-oriented term supported by theory—has been

expanded and adopted by policymakers which has muddled its purpose; the three-level concept has been used to explain other relationships thus confusing its purpose; and it has not been updated to reflect the modern character of warfare.

For much of its existence, strategy was generally defined as the employment of the armed forces to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force; however, strategy has expanded across multiple levels and is now used to determine military and policy objectives. This expansion explains why the three levels of war concept confuses strategic direction and strategy development and implies that strategy making only occurs at one level. Most importantly, the current concept does not effectively outline the civil-military relationship, or adequately address the sources of and nonlinearity associated with policy objective-making.

Other concepts and processes have been shoe-horned into the three levels of warfare, and as a result its original purpose has come out of focus. The three-level model must have distinct levels exclusively focused on its primary purpose—to demonstrate relationship between national objectives and tactical actions. The modern character of war has become progressively multi-domain, global and persistent because of the application of hybrid concepts and gray zone strategies to compete below the level of armed conflict. These characteristics of modern war require planning from a global perspective, and the current three level of warfare model does not—and cannot—represent these modern characteristics of warfare.

With better understanding of the three levels of warfare concept's principal complications, a new concept was developed that more suitably demonstrates the relationship between tactical actions and policy objectives—the three levels of effort. These levels of effort—national, operational and tactical—describe the three distinct levels at which the nation's overall grand strategy is implemented. Compared to the three levels of warfare, it better delineates and

explains the most critical link between military and policy objectives—the civil-military relationship. To address the expansion of strategy beyond its theoretical roots, the three levels of effort concept removes the strategic level, but still reflects the role of strategy at the national and operational levels.

Updated to reflect war's modern character, the term warfare was removed from the concept to reflect the persistent nature of competition below the level of armed conflict, and the increasing indistinction between states of war and peace. Also, the relationship between national level GCPs—which will likely increase over time—and the three levels of effort are addressed in the new model. In the three levels of effort model, Lykke's logic for the development of military operational strategy fits nicely at the operational level, and the relationship between tactics and the other levels of effort is depicted. Finally, operational art is confined back to its theoretical purpose and strategic art is introduced to fully demonstrate the conceptual linkages between the national, operational and tactical levels.

Whatever shape the three levels of warfare concept takes in the future, it is clear that the relationship between U.S. tactical efforts and policy objectives has been troubled. Efforts must be taken to provide an improved model that accurately demonstrates the crucial relationship between the development of policy objectives, and the determination of military objectives aligned to those policies. If the levels of effort model was adopted, the alignment of efforts across the instruments of national power towards policy objectives will occur at the most logical level—the national level. This would leave military commanders focused solely on the development of military operational objectives that contribute to the achievement of national policy objectives; however, if left impaired, the misalignment between policy and war will likely

contribute to another conflict characterized by tactical success and strategic failure—as consistently demonstrated by history and theory.

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- ⁸⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 89; Bassford, "Tip-Toe Through the Trinity," Clausewitz.com; Paret, "Clausewitz," 199.
- ⁸⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 17, 2017), I-5; Kelly, *Alien*, 80-81.
- ⁸⁹ Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy*, 6-9, 40-49, 53-56.
- ⁹⁰ Svechin, *Strategy*, 97.
- ⁹¹ Lykke Jr., "Defining Military Strategy," 3.
- ⁹² Lykke Jr., "Defining Military Strategy," 3-6.
- ⁹³ Joint Chiefs, *Joint Operations*, JP 3-0, I-14.

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