

The Art of Strategy and Operational Warfare

GETTING IT RIGHT

By CHRISTOPHER R. DAVIS

Today, the U.S. military approaches war as a corporate affair, requiring authoritative guidance to synchronize thought and action. To harmonize diverse activities toward a shared goal, joint doctrine seeks to provide a common perspective for joint, interagency, and multinational efforts.¹ Doctrine, therefore, is the military's link to national political objectives. American military leaders point to the lack of collective doctrine as the culprit for poor performance in World War I.² The military transformation that awoke America from its post-Vietnam malaise and forged today's joint force started with doctrine.³ Its success in harnessing diverse organizational abilities

in the quest for national objectives depends on a number of factors; chief among them is providing a sound theoretical underpinning for arranging efforts. Joint doctrine should offer a useful mental model for the application of capabilities across the spectrum of operations and levels of war. To the extent that we get the fundamentals right, we increase our chances of achieving national objectives.

While war's nature is immutable, its character and conduct have clearly morphed.⁴ During the Cold War, our adversary was a state bent on global domination through ideological insurgency. Communism, fortunately, provided insufficient inspiration for enduring the litany of privations it created. Tapping into the primordial

reservoir of religion and ethnicity, today's stateless insurgents capitalize on the deep humiliation engendered by political and economic marginalization in their quest for regional hegemony. The increasing public ire over the current debacle in Iraq and Afghanistan is fueling demands that we adapt to the new character of war and conduct it in a more fruitful manner. Whether through inadequate planning or inept execution, we have failed to properly coordinate the instruments of American power. Congress is now considering creating interagency Goldwater-Nichols-type legislation to address this national failure.⁵ While some adjustment to joint doctrine is required for the sake of clarity, we must remain cautious in shifting too quickly toward unproven operational concepts.

Differing Means

The recently released Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, is an amalgamation of two previous capstone publications that, for the first time in years, clearly links joint doctrine to higher level strategic guidance. This latest revision reduces doctrinal clutter, and its crisp prose is a welcome stylistic improvement over previous versions—which hopefully portends the future of this literary genre. JP 1, however, inherited some faults from its predecessors. A case in point is the paradigm of power articulated in the handy mnemonic acronym *DIME* (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic). Understanding and analyzing the elements and instruments of power are exceptional conditions for the military strategist. While they are critically important planning considerations for joint operations, only their military aspects

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B-17 on bombing raid over Germany during World War II

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have an impact on operational execution. The eminent American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan provided perhaps the finest elucidation of national means when he identified a nation's geography, territory, population, character of the people, and governmental system as the "principal conditions" leading to "the sea power of nations" and thus to national power.⁶ He correctly postulated that a careful analysis of these geographical, economic, and social conditions—or elements of power—will determine the ability of a nation to create instruments of power employed by the joint practitioner.

The "sources of power" making their appearance in the Executive Summary of JP 1 seem remarkably similar to Mahan's principal conditions and, therefore, correspond to elements of power. Joint doctrine holds that these sources of power—culture, industry, geography, human potential, academic institutions, and so forth—are the elements that create the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power. But, in point of fact, they all represent elements of power. Whatever the classification of elements chosen, a nation creates its instruments of national power from its available elements just as a craftsman uses iron (an element) to create a plowshare (an instrument). Viable manifestations of national instruments of power include Presidential envoys, broadcast media programs, Army divisions, and economic sanctions that may correlate, respectively, to the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elemental categories.

This confusion creates a cognitive dissonance within joint doctrine that remains unresolved, seeing that any further exploration of this idea is absent from subsequent sections on this topic. By incorrectly referring to the diplomatic, information, military, and economic

elements of power as "instruments," joint doctrine fails to make the cognitive discrimination necessary to deal with the challenges we face and confuses our attempts to organize and apply American power.⁷ Clarity is important within a strategic framework. Only through a careful analysis of the *elements* of power can we visualize and create the *instruments* of power necessary to achieve national interests. The creation of this artificial construct, furthermore, with narrowly categorized terms of reference—recent commentators have proposed adding political, social, and psychological elements to expand the mix—can

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easily foster a misguided notional assignment of national responsibilities that stifles creativity and inhibits penetrating analysis.

What Mahan points out—and JP 1 fails to articulate—is that international actors wield the instruments of power within unique historical and cultural contexts.⁸ Access to elements of power and the instruments they spawn is not limited to states or nations. America is faced with thinking and enterprising adversaries who can now employ elements of power—either their own or those of others—to create instruments of power. Al Qaeda created, for example, a conventional combat unit—055 Brigade—to serve as a rapid reaction force in support of the Taliban government and to provide training to Qutubis fighting in other countries.⁹ Acknowledgment of the reality that our enemies are also pursu-

ing instruments of power is missing from joint doctrine, and recognizing that fact is critical to gaining an appreciation for the dynamic tension that exists between competing elements and instruments of power. The German and French experiences on the eve of World War II are illustrative. While the French created an armored force of greater quality and quantity than the Germans, it was the Wehrmacht's superior organization and operational prowess that provided the more effective instrument of power.¹⁰

JP 1 begins, nonetheless, to weave a web among the various elements of power. It now explicitly calls for considering other organizational partners in planning operations. Furthermore, it places diplomatic and military efforts on an equal footing while specifically recognizing the Department of State as the lead agency for foreign affairs. This represents a change to the historic unitary element of power orientation of the Defense Department and the single instrument of power domain of the combatant commanders that have previously combined to limit effective unified action.¹¹ It also places an increased burden on military officers to immerse themselves in the intricacies of diplomacy and foreign policy at a time when military operations are increasing in complexity.

It should come as no surprise, however, that a joint doctrine exhibiting only a specious understanding of the instruments of power also struggles to provide coherent guidance on their synergistic application. Where this is particularly debilitating is in joint doctrine's approach to the informational element of power.¹² Bosnia reflects just how important information is in pacifying regions gripped by sectarian strife.¹³ Information was central in the Alliance's effort to create international legitimacy, shape local perceptions, and engender cooperative behavior. Strangely, joint doctrine's stance that



Elements of 3^d Brigade, 1st Armored Division, 7th Corps move across desert in northern Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm

information has “no single center of control” is paradoxically at odds with our stated goal of integrating information into joint operations to “dominate the information environment.” One would assume that the top-down guidance provided by the “strategic communication” outlined in JP 1 would clear up this confusion, but this does not seem to be the case, as official national policy in this area is absent. This is a perplexing disconnect at a time when commentators increasingly identify the media as a “combatant” able to determine the outcome of battles.¹⁴ While America’s economy and culture represented important elements of power necessary for international competition at the turn of the previous century—and Mahan’s preferred instrument of power was a heavy fleet capable of decisive battle—America’s potential is far greater today but remains largely untapped.

sole province of the President and Secretary of Defense, this is rarely the case. In practice, American political objectives are often defined in the interagency process, by Country Teams, unilaterally by Congress, internationally by organizations such as the United Nations (UN), or through a compromise among competing governmental bureaucracies. Somalia provides a case in point where UN officials successfully expanded the international mandate to include—for the first time—peace enforcement and, unbeknownst to the President or the Secretary of Defense, committed the United States to a war for which it was psychologically and politically unprepared.¹⁷ UN action ultimately threatened the power base of the clan warlord Mohammed Farrah Aideed in Mogadishu, whose supporters subsequently lashed out and killed a contingent of 24 Pakistani soldiers. This resulted in a highly personalized UN-

power and the more common characterization of strategy as a deliberate planning process or behavioral pattern.¹⁸ The primary goal of strategy is to provide a basis for understanding, analyzing, and articulating the links between capabilities, actions, and desired policy outcomes. As such, strategy represents an intellectual paradigm for a disciplined approach to achieving clarity and precision in the process of creatively employing resources to effectively achieve a policy or political outcome. This is not a prescription for independent military action; indeed, pursuing national policies requires the artful creation of militarily achievable objectives and operations. Since the fundamental goal of governmental action (for example, war) is to achieve policy ends, strategy by necessity has this as its objective. To wit, doctrine provides the “way” for achieving national policy “ends” using military “means” within an environment fraught with “risk.” In effect, strategy transcends the levels of war to conjoin the political, operational, and tactical levels. Strategic formation is multidimensional, requiring the consideration of all elements and instruments of power in its creation. Using this definition, strategy is *not* limited to any particular level of war or operational phase and, thus, serves as the fulcrum for a broad range of activities.

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Strategy in Context

Strategic formation exists at every level of human endeavor to link resources, actions, and the desired political outcome, but the current penchant for labeling weapons, systems, or commands as “strategic” leads to confusion and creates unfulfilled expectations. Joint doctrine holds that at the inaptly labeled “strategic” level of war, the impact of events is political in nature and directly relates to national interests. It concludes that higher order effects of military actions should support national aspirations. Clarification requires renaming the “strategic” level as “political” to break joint doctrine’s ambiguous delineation of the bounds of strategy. National policies, furthermore, derive from politics and are the manifest representation of the desired political outcome. Titling the highest level as “political” reaffirms war’s true nature, borne out in Carl von Clausewitz’s axiom that war is an extension of politics by other means.¹⁵ It also clarifies the universal role of strategy in achieving national interests and serves to reverse the U.S. military’s misguided contention—in response to the supposed lessons of Vietnam and reflected in the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine—that military and not political considerations must be paramount in decisions involving the use of force.¹⁶

While the creation of strategic objectives, at least according to joint doctrine, is the

sponsored vendetta against Aideed that ran counter to American interests and ultimately resulted in the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Joint doctrine defines *strategy* as an “idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of . . . power . . . to achieve . . . objectives.” This definition is narrow and incomplete given its apparent confusion over instruments of

Joint doctrine provides an effective catalog of the participants and processes used in strategic formation, and JP 1 specifically tasks the combatant commanders with “thinking strategically” and preparing strategy. It falls short, however, in providing a useful strategic model, leaving the joint force practitioner in a quandary. Abhorring a vacuum, U.S. Army theorists developed the allegorical three-legged strategic stool while the U.S. Navy adopted the Bartlett circular depiction of strategy. These models, however, stress subtle but differing perspectives that can create conflicting approaches to national security issues. In the Army model, taught at the U.S. Army War College, each leg of the stool represents the means, ways, or ends, respectively.¹⁹ Upon the stool’s seat rests “national security,” unless risk cuts away at one or more of the legs to render the platform unstable. This model makes explicit the need to reconcile ends, means, and ways to “balance the stool”; however, it provides little guidance on the origin or nature of risk.

Physical forces play a similar role in the model that figures prominently at the U.S. Naval War College.²⁰ Ends connect to means by strategy in the first arch of this circular model. In the second half, means and ends again



U.S. Navy (David L. Smart)

connect, this time through risk. Resource constraints and the security environment exist on the periphery to disrupt the circle's equilibrium. The Navy model's strength lies in stressing the continuous and iterative nature of the strategic formation process missing from the static Army model. It fundamentally differs from the Army model by closely equating strategy with ways. In so doing, the emphasis on a balanced approach stressed in the Army model is lost. While neither model is perfect, they share basic elements, although their emphases differ. Each theory represents a systematic approach to strategy, which implies that creativity and flexibility are required to achieve national interests.

Operational art, as delineated in JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, comprises the components of the Army and Navy models and is, therefore, synonymous with strategy. It lacks, however, a coherent conceptual framework, even though the joint doctrine definition of strategy appears to adhere to the Navy model insofar as it places primacy on the ways—or “idea.” The recent “national” strategies proliferating from multiple agencies and departments all require close coordination to ensure that they achieve the desired levels of linkage and synergy. With no authoritative source or official policy on strategic formation, the risk of starkly differing approaches exists. The inevitable result is conflicting frames of reference across the various national security organizations. It is not entirely clear, for example, how the National Cyberspace Strategy's focus on sheltering commercial systems from “penetration” squares with the competing need for just such weaknesses against which to conduct the “offensive” operations advocated by our National Defense Strategy.²¹

Clausewitz counsels that “everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy” to draw attention to the unwavering fortitude required for strategic implementation. But we have yet to get over the first hump—an agreed and coherent conceptual model of strategy.²² Our future success depends on developing a unified and universally accepted strategic model. A synthesis of the Army and Navy models represents a useful start in developing such a common construct.

Unified Action

Substantially revised and reissued on September 17, 2006, JP 3-0 represents a significant shift in joint doctrine by introducing a systems perspective, adopting an effects-based approach, and clarifying the role of operational art. These changes reflect the continued evolu-

tion of an innovative American approach to war that began at the conclusion of World War I. The industrial era ushered in an attritional style of warfare that, while only hinted at during the American Civil War, reached its bloody culmination in the trenches of Europe. In response to mass-produced carnage, theorists postulated an approach to warfare that bypassed the massed forces aligned along national peripheries to strike at the soft underbelly of the enemy's economic and psychological base. Early advocates of this new school of thought, which was labeled “strategic bombardment,” sought not the traditional destruction of the enemy (which they deemed impossible or impracticable) but instead focused on physical neutralization through moral paralysis.²³

The change in operational thinking embodied in JP 3-0 traces its origins to the quest for paralysis advocated by Billy Mitchell and brought to culmination in the contemporary theories of John Boyd and John Warden.²⁴ Central to this approach is the existence of a complex system-of-systems susceptible to crippling attack.²⁵ Through the shotgun marriage of Clausewitz's “center-of-gravity” theory and the “enemy-as-a-system” concept, joint doctrine attempts to bridge the contradictions between war at the political level—governed by moral and psychological phenomena—and war at the tactical level—regulated by physical principles and rote mechanization.

But it is not entirely clear that this is a compatible marriage, as the Combined Bomber

Offensive approved by the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff in May of 1943 aptly demonstrated. A panel of American and British “experts” examining the German economic, industrial, and military “system” concluded that striking “six systems, comprising 76 precision targets” would paralyze the Axis war effort.²⁶ Striking these target sets proved both costly and ineffectual in destroying German resistance; only the suicide of Adolph Hitler prompted by the Allies overrunning the Third Reich accomplished American war aims. By focusing on systems, the Americans and British dismissed any analysis of the enemy's center of gravity—in this case, Hitler himself. Even in hindsight, the postwar Strategic Bombing Survey erroneously focused on the Allies' target set choices instead of analyzing German centers of gravity for vulnerabilities—for example, by suggesting that “aircraft engine and propeller production rather than airframe assembly would have made a better bombing target” because they represented a production bottleneck.²⁷

America's unique geopolitical position requires a military with the ability to respond quickly over great distances. This necessitates a force with an immediate global strike capability—both to slow an enemy offensive and demonstrate resolve—while tactical ground forces deploy to directly confront adversaries.²⁸ Today, the U.S. military increasingly views the former as a substitute for the latter, and many advocate its exclusive pursuit as the “new American way of war.” American political

Secretary of Defense and Chairman conduct press briefing at Pentagon



U.S. Navy (Chad McNealey)

culture, moreover, with its casualty aversion, technocentric concentration, and budgetary constraints, makes this a seductive approach. The result is a joint doctrine increasingly reliant on indirectly achieving psychological “effects” instead of the direct physical domination of the adversary. This new form of warfare has naturally found its greatest support within the Air Force and Navy as, respectively, effects-based operations (EBO) and sea strike. Indeed, the Air Force ostensibly recognizes the primacy of joint doctrine; nonetheless, it aggressively proselytizes its own doctrinal concepts—EBO being the most recent example.²⁹ Since the Navy lacks a doctrinal base, the EBO debate is primarily between ground- and airpower theorists.

The Air Force is seeking to go a step further and infuse joint air operations with the “3 Ds” of effects-based targeting—disruption, distribution, and duration—to create cascading, causal, cumulative, direct, function, indirect, operational, physical, psychological, strategic, systematic, second order, third order, or *n*th order effects while avoiding collateral or unintended effects.³⁰ While the recent inclusion of irregular warfare and homeland defense in JP 1 and JP 3-0 demonstrates that joint doctrine can articulate new threats, it is not entirely clear how the continued maturation of an effects-based approach will enhance the efficiency of the joint force. As a single-minded approach, this concept is both unverified in confronting the evolving security environment and unproven in creating the conditions necessary for achieving policy objectives in the face of protracted intransigence—as the recent American and Israeli experiences in the Middle East aptly demonstrate. These operations, in essence dealing with low-intensity insurgencies, show that there are no shortcuts to unilaterally effecting political outcomes when faced with a determined and capable adversary. Add in the U.S. experience in Kosovo, and it is clear that only a credible threat of physical destruction or the unconstrained domination of an opponent at the tactical level can accomplish objectives.³¹

In linking the systems approach to the operational level of war and stressing disruption over attrition, joint doctrine achieves a new degree of operational perception. Doctrine now envisions joint operations as integrating the abstract thinking of the political level and the mechanical aspect of combat found at the tactical level.³² At this intermediary level, the outcome of tactical actions is viewed not as physical products—territory seized, enemies killed, or tonnage sunk—but as functional

effects—communications interrupted, combatants surrendered, or fighter aircraft fled. The desired result is impotence and capitulation. Shocking a system into paralysis requires a “swift conversion of the enemy to our aim,” but the simultaneous high tempo operations required (exemplified in the theory of parallel attack) are difficult to produce.³³ “Shock and awe” is an elusive metric; exactly how much shock and what kind are needed to generate the disruption, disintegration, and fragmentation required for paralysis and collapse is not clear. Shock, moreover, has yet to achieve primacy in joint doctrine, which still holds series attacks—the proverbial boiling frog approach—on an equal footing with simultaneity.

Critics of the systems approach point to its inability to account for thinking, active, and imaginative enemies as its central weakness. They contend that without making accommodations for the intricacies of human behavior, it is impossible to anticipate adversaries or emerge from a linear perspective of

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war. Systems, furthermore, do not behave like their individual components, nor are their cumulative effects easily quantified. Given joint doctrine's underlying assumption that system structures are identical, there is some question over whether the technocentric network model is the most appropriate representation for conceptualizing our efforts.³⁴ Human-centric models that take a dynamic, moral, and psychological approach are more appropriate and may include, for example, models based on a synthesis of contemporary approaches to organizational and human behavior found in McClelland's achievement needs, Herzberg's hygiene-motivator, or Maslow's needs hierarchy theories.³⁵ Systems thinking can only prove a useful guide if it correctly orients our actions toward influencing complex social and organizational behavior—a difficult proposition at best.³⁶ The critical question still unanswered, moreover, is whether a joint doctrine based on systems thinking bridges the philosophical differences between organizations over what constitutes an acceptable approach to future joint, interagency, and multinational operations.

Operational theory and principles serve to link policy with battles. Joint doctrine holds

that the operational level is a separate and distinct plane of warfare; however, it fails to discretely delineate bounds. Joint doctrine also struggles to rise above the tactical morass and surmount its overidentification with the mechanized aspects of war spawned by the various Services. An example of this occasional digression from the operational to the tactical level, and consequent lapse in effects-based thinking, is evident in the giddy expectation of a *coup de main* through the promotion of the “opportunity to encircle and annihilate a weaker or less mobile opponent” as an apparent end in itself. Joint doctrine still favors the tactical preference for offensive action. At the operational level, offense and defense become two sides of the same coin, both pursued with equal vigor depending on the political outcome desired.³⁷ They are the *yin* and *yang* of war—neither exists without the other, and each exhibits primacy according to the interplay of the protagonists. During the Cold War, for example, American strategists in the Pacific theater relied on defensive operations to counter the communists in Korea while remaining strongly committed to offensive operations in Vietnam.³⁸

Finally, joint doctrine is essentially silent on the subject of operational reserves. During the Cold War, the American approach was to apply reserves against enemy success, while the Warsaw Pact employed theirs to buttress victory. But joint doctrine leaves both approaches unexamined. This omission is troubling since it reflects the uncritical acceptance of the premise that holding any forces in reserve is unnecessary in effects-based operations because the instantaneous collapse of the enemy makes such a force superfluous at best and an unconscionable squandering at worst. Mature operational thinking, however, requires the joint force commander to consider the role of a reserve when planning any operation or campaign.³⁹ Contemplating the purpose, generation, composition, placement, command, and employment of reserves is a prerequisite for a nuanced approach to operational design that is imprudently missing from current joint doctrine. Lacking joint doctrine on reserves handicaps the joint force by reducing the commander's flexibility to respond creatively to unforeseen events. This produces unacceptable levels of risk in today's uncertain and volatile environment. Properly construed, a reserve creates grand operational vistas that liberate the joint force commander while constraining our enemy's freedom of action.⁴⁰ The British,

for example, deftly used an air reserve during the Battle of Britain to stymie the Luftwaffe in 1940. But by omitting the subject of reserves, today's joint doctrine leaves the operational practitioner without the necessary insight to duplicate Air Marshal Dowding's success.⁴¹

Correctly calibrating joint doctrine's approach to strategy and operations is not merely an academic discussion, but it has far-reaching national security implications. The disagreement over target selection during the air phase of Operation *Allied Force* reflected the unresolved debate over the correct mental model of war that still bedevils Western military thinking. During that operation, senior military leaders remained divided over whether to psychologically strike Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian elite in Belgrade or physically attack the ground forces engaged in ethnic cleansing.⁴² The result was a potentially debilitating effect on the Alliance's unity of effort.⁴³ Operations in the former Yugoslavia highlight the danger of viewing the enemy as a target set (which if it was only bombed hard enough would capitulate) and distorting the nature of war.⁴⁴ In due course, the Alliance's political leaders were able to exert their influence to overcome these differences and ensure a successful political outcome.

Today, the challenge is greater and the threshold for error narrower. Our strategic cognition and operational perception must mature if we are to win the war on terror, and it is essential that joint doctrine serve as the basis for arranging our actions. A more holistic and synergistic approach to the instruments of power is critical if America is to capitalize on all available means. Ambiguous conceptual frameworks for strategy, furthermore, create organizational and interpersonal disharmony. A concise and universal strategic model is the ante for properly organizing our activities. The danger is that without clearly defined, explicitly understood, and consensually applied operational concepts, our foundation for warfare is flawed. The great shame of the American interagency process is that conflicting organizational agendas and interpersonal politics do not permit national unity of command below the Presidential level. This situation forces the pursuit of the lesser expedient of unified action based on negotiation and compromise—at best—in the quest for national security. We cannot expect this sad and dysfunctional condition to indefinitely escape the attention of the American people or their elected representatives. **JFQ**

NOTES

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