"Operational art is a cognitive process that links tactics to strategy that goes well beyond the dimensions of jointness."

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IN ALLIED DOCTRINE, operational art is defined as “the conceptual framework underpinning the planning and conduct of operations.” This is admittedly a very broad definition that leads to multiple interpretations. However, in practical terms, joint force commanders consider operational art mostly through the prism of jointness by achieving synergy and superiority over adversaries through the optimised employment of the joint force. The Joint Warfare Centre’s (JWC) experience of exercising at the joint operational level has revealed that such an approach routinely favours the use of physical forces over non-physical forces. Even with the emergence of new conceptual developments, such as multi-domain operations, operational art is still primarily focused on the physical domain and the current approach to training and exercises perpetuates this.

This article, however, posits that, both historically and for practical purposes in the current and near future eras, operational art is first and foremost a cognitive process that links tactics to strategy that goes well beyond the dimensions of jointness. As such, practitioners of the operational art need to focus on integrating multiple non-kinetic/non-lethal dimensions of warfare, which are of increasing importance in today’s geopolitical and operational environments. In order to increase operational readiness this needs to be captured in NATO’s training philosophy.

“Operational art is not a level of war, or the art of generalship. It is what goes on in the explorer’s mind, the mediating and balancing interaction between his strategic and tactical reasoning — from the top down, and from the bottom up.”

Brigadier General (Ret.) Huba Wass de Czege

ABOVE: Norwegian Coastal Ranger Command’s Stridsbåt 90N heads out from port during Exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018. Photo by Forsvaret
Jointness and operational art

Jointness, on the one hand, is defined as the cooperation and integration of different services and components in order to achieve operational objectives. NATO’s doctrine acknowledges eight joint functions and historically, those joint functions were developed to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic gains by combining arms and operating across domains. Joint concepts were also implemented to avoid single-service parochialism and some headquarters, as well as professional military education, became “joint” to generate mutual understanding between Service cultures and competencies across NATO’s militaries.

It is instructive that jointness was forged by the experience of two World Wars and the gradual process of the traditional Services (armies, navies, and air forces) having to work together through necessity. However, operational art is not linked historically to jointness; taking a simplified view, the roots of operational art can be seen to have two points of origin: the Soviet doctrinal developments following the Russian Civil War of the early 1920s and the post-Vietnam War U.S. Army reform (also known as the AirLand Battle doctrine of FM100-5, 1982 edition).

The essential premise of doctrine derived from operational art is the importance of scale, depth and breadth: operational art is focused on large-scale operations where depth is related to space and time: the requirement for an intermediary level of war stemmed from the inability of tactical and strategic concepts to provide the conceptual framework required to deal with large-scale military operations (corps, armies, and above) spanning over large theatres of operations with little prospects for “decisive battle(s)”. With this, there emerged a clear requirement to visualise through campaign plans the achievement of military objectives.

Breadth is about the comprehensive nature of the analysis of the factors influencing operations (including the political, economic and social factors) as well as the diverse nature of the forces employed in the struggle against a given adversary (including an ideologically driven consistent integration of “hard” [conventional use of armed forces] and “soft” [unconventional, psychological, political, informational and economic forces]).

This clear delineation between jointness and operational art described above is not what is observed in the large-scale joint operational level exercises that the JWC delivers. There is often confusion between jointness and operational art, to the extent that to many operational level staff officers, operational art has become synonymous to achieving jointness in order to accomplish operational objectives.

Achieving jointness in training remains a cornerstone of operational level training

There are sound reasons for prioritising jointness above operational art when training at the operational level. The necessity to optimise the combining of effects to achieve joint synergy is the most potent tool for achieving operational success. Jointness is of even greater relevance when there is a need to compensate for relative weakness in one or several domains, and when
"Joint commanders who manage to balance their components are better able to focus on the science of warfare.”

achieved, it can force a superior adversary to assume risk in a specific domain.10 Although probably less advertised, achieving jointness at the operational level will help to remove parochialism where joint commanders may otherwise inadvertently stumble into an approach that favours one Service to the detriment of the others. By arbitrating the relative priorities of Services in space and time to optimise their use,11 the joint commander plays a role similar to the conductor of an orchestra — however it should be noted that it can consume much of the commander’s time and energy to manage the desired “creative tension” that develops between component commanders. Additionally, joint commanders who manage to balance their components are better able to focus on the “science” of warfare, providing it with depth and substance and, in a way, shelter themselves from the risks of political micro-management.12

... But jointness is an insufficient, if necessary, condition to master operational art

Those that might consider the mastery of operational art as being synonymous with mastery of jointness fail to acknowledge what is being left out and the potential detrimental effects that has on the quality and relevance of training at the operational level of war. If one agrees with the definition of operational art as stated above (primarily as a way to connect the strategic...
level to the tactical level in orchestrating the military instrument of power in conjunction with the other instruments of power) then it cannot be ignored that many aspects of this are difficult to train.

For instance, the complex interactions between the strategic, operational, and component levels to harmonise tactical constraints with political realities are not immediately relatable to achieving joint synergy: while a joint targeting action might make sense from a purely military standpoint, it might prove disastrous from a political one. Furthermore, the powerful influence of non-kinetic activities over longer timeframes on freedom of action or even on the definition of the strategic objectives, cannot be easily explored or exercised with our current focus on high-tempo force-on-force scenarios. Thus, by mostly ignoring these critical factors for modern warfare, one creates a risk of drawing false conclusions on the very character of conflict NATO has to be ready to face.

Towards ways to enhance operational art training

There is a requirement to better capture those aspects of operational art currently missing without losing the obvious benefits of joint operational level training. To implement new ways to train realistically at the operational level and practice operational art require us all to be prepared to leave the metaphorical “comfort zone” of tidy linear training programmes and embrace a degree of uncertainty. This is arguably a small price to pay to achieve improved readiness and we have an exercise planning process that is sufficiently flexible to enable it.

The interactions that occur between the different instruments of power should not be limited to the initial analysis phase of operational planning, but be a persistent element of the critical decisions made at the three levels of war; a good example is the issue of the Protection of Civilians with far reaching implications for all three levels of war, but rarely considered in depth during exercises. So, a true representation of warfare is only possible if the influence of the non-military aspects are included convincingly and in a way that engages the joint commander, rather than being left in the margins to be handled by the various command group advisers.

“Achieving joint synergy in multi-domain operations will continue to be a cornerstone of operational art and requires permanent training.”

Operational art does need to be trained at the appropriate level, and categorically, that lies with the joint force commander at the operational level of war. In practical terms it requires the training audience programmes to be adjusted and for training providers to be present more often throughout the exercise process rather than just the execution phase, as the exercise culminates.

At earlier stages in the exercise process, leaders and their key staffs could be given operational dilemmas that accurately reflect the complexity of modern warfare using a mix of free-play wargames or table-top vignettes. It is likely that not all the conclusions drawn from these events come to be represented in follow-on planning and execution phases, but that would be to miss the point, the key is to ensure that the command group is given an opportunity (with limited constraints) to reflect on complex decision-making.

When it comes to adapting military doctrine and training to an evolving strategic and operational environment, history teaches us that successful nations and alliances tend to fall prey to the risk of perfecting an answer to an increasingly less relevant question.

To maintain its edge, NATO needs to focus its training effort on enabling its leaders to maximise opportunities to practice operational art when confronted with a rapidly changing operational environment. Achieving joint synergy in multi-domain operations will continue to be a cornerstone of operational art and requires permanent training, but the current and future operational environment demands a broadening of training to engender a more comprehensive understanding of the operational art to prevent potential adversaries from out-maneuvering the Alliance.
ENDNOTES


2 See AJP 5, Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations, section 1.2 “Operational art is the conceptual framework underpinning the planning and conduct of operations. It includes the concepts, operations design and operations management. Operational art seeks to clarify the situation, assess opportunities and risks, foster actions that continually gain advantage, and deliver logical solutions to complex problems.”

3 Although NATO does not have a single unifying definition of Multi-Domain operations (MDO), the concept of MDO, originating in the U.S. Services doctrine, seeks to codify the approach to warfare beyond the traditional confines of land, sea, and air, including cyber and space domains and to lower the level at which interservice cooperation is coordinated. See Joint Air and Space Power Conference “2019 Shaping NATO for Multi-Domain Operations of the Future”, https://www.japcc.org/what-is-a-multi-domain-operation/ accessed 1ST June 2020.

4 See AJP 5 Section 2 Terms & Definitions; Joint: “Adjective used to describe activities, operations and organizations in which elements of at least two services participate.”

5 Intelligence, movement and manoeuvre, fires, information, protection, sustainment, Command and control and civil military cooperation. AJP 3, Allied Joint Doctrine for Operations, Section 1.27


7 See United States. Department of the Army. FM 100-5 Operations.

8 Although that notion of scale needs to be examined in relation to the political strategic significance of operations — some operations may be of a limited military scale, but of a major political and strategic complexity and relevance, implying the use of operational art.


10 Towards the end of the Cold War, precision-guided weapons, delivered by the Allied Air Forces were employed to offset the numerical superiority of the Warsaw Pact armies.

11 Through the principles of supporting/supported roles of the different components.


13 This is true of all domains of warfare where the triggering actions and effects are separated in time and space, such as information warfare, cyber warfare and, generally speaking, the different forms of hybrid warfare.

14 Training provision remains by training audience invitation, but increased presence could be achieved throughout Phases 1 and 2, e.g. Academics, Key Leader Training and Crisis Response Planning.