THE IMPORTANCE
OF EFFECTIVE JOINT
OPERATIONAL LEVEL
WARFARE AND
HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

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Published on the online platform "War On The Rocks", an article co-written by Heather Venable and Jared R. Donnelly prompted me to consider how NATO approaches the concept of multi-domain operations¹ or joint operations² and the operational level³ as a vital level of warfare⁴ that is required for success in current and future competition and conflict.
"When faced with the extremely challenging problem of fighting a near-peer conflict in an anti-access/area denial environment, solving the tactical level of war is easier than providing solutions at the operational and the strategic levels."  

Heather Venable and Jared R. Donnelly  
Scaling the Levels of War: The Strategic Major and the Future of Multi-Domain Operations
Professional success is only possible through effective joint coordination and synchronisation

Almost each and every one of us appreciate that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". At the operational level, we must fully assess our own activities correctly, and do not assume that they are more important than those of other Services (the Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force). We must always consider the aims and objectives of the whole organization. If not, these two aspects can potentially hamper our ability to act efficiently, which is vital in our response to any adversary.

In today’s environment of strategic competition, all aspects of the "instruments of power" (DIME: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic; or MPEC: Military, Political, Economic, Civil) has to operate at their full potential to succeed. This again requires synchronisation of physical and cognitive activities. In other words, in order to dominate an adversary, it is more important than ever to obtain full joint effect as opposed to tactical level success through an individual approach, within a particular domain. In summary, a successful operational environment is only achievable with the joint coordination and synchronisation of all five warfare domains.

What are the challenges with effective joint operational level warfare?

While arguments above for joint operational level warfare are understandable, conducting it effectively may, at times, be quite challenging due to the intrinsic complexities of the "joint operational level". As an example, recent exercises showed that the Centre portrayed the training opportunity of campaign coordination and synchronisation mainly for the joint operational level headquarters. This is not an easy process and this observation should not be surprising, as there is usually little foundation nested in our military training to think and act "jointly". Most of us, indeed, are professionally trained at the tactical level in one service — my own predominantly in the land tactical domain. The educational system in most countries does not always fully encourage a profound understanding of the operational level earlier in a military career. In order to become "joint thinkers", education and training combined with as much practical experience as possible is required in peacetime to succeed in battles and conflicts.

The challenge is, therefore, that the average military staff officer has to be aware of the key abilities of the different Services and in which warfare domains they are able to operate. In addition, there are “joint enablers” at the operational level of warfare, such as the Joint Logistics Support Group (JLSG), the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) effort, the Psychological Operations Task Force (POTF) as well as the Cyber Defence Element, amongst others. We should not underestimate the task involved in understanding, planning, and implementing these Service capabilities and enablers across the five warfare domains. During exercises we must ensure that the operational and tactical levels of warfare keep up with the strategic level, which in turn will make it easier to identify...
and affect the fictitious adversary’s strategic Centre of Gravity within our synthetic scenarios. To achieve optimal training across the NATO Command and Force Structure Headquarters, joint coordination and synchronisation are of utmost importance.

**Ideas for increasing effectiveness**

I. Mission Command will provide the essence of success in a contested, degraded, and operationally limited environment.16

One argument could be that Mission Command is already well-integrated and that every lower-level echelon is acting in a timely manner within the boundaries of the given direction and guidance from higher authorities. However, there are always lessons to be learned. I believe that clear direction and guidance as well as short and simple written orders utilising the “KISS” principle17 are the first step towards eliminating any possible complexities and uncertainties. Milan N. Vego, the author of Joint Operational Warfare Theory and Practice, underlines this by stating: “Modern Command and Control and communications do not make Mission Command obsolete; just the opposite. The enormous increase in the volume of information makes it necessary not to centralise, but to further decentralise Command and Control throughout the chain of command. Successful operational leadership will continue to depend on freedom of action, the moral courage to make decisions and Command and Control through task-oriented orders. In the future, shaping the theatre in preparation for a campaign or major operation could become the operational commander’s most important task.”18

II. Force planners and commanders must always think strategically.

“As in the past, wars will be lost or won at the operational and strategic levels, not at the tactical level. Tactical commanders will neither have the forces nor the ability to sequence/synchronise the diverse sources of power that is the key to success at the operational or strategic levels of war.”19

Multi-domain operations require the synchronisation of effects far outside the individual component, service, and warfare domain. We should always remember to consider whether it is necessary to incorporate other instruments of power. The coordination required in a comprehensive approach cannot be a one-way street or scant regard paid to it without commitment from the individual pillars.

In order to maintain the best approach, the perspective of strategic thinking is required for all levels and this is particularly relevant for the operational level of warfare. Yet, this is nothing new. It is already described in detail in the NATO Crisis Management Planning Process and the Comprehensive Operational Planning Directive (COPD). Mastering these fundamentals is important and it may take time. Most importantly, it is the case that tactical actions must meet operational effects in order to support NATO aims at the strategic level. This is why prioritising strategy as a first step is key, in order to fully understand how to fight in a multi-domain environment.20

Additionally, we must also remember that the joint operational level continues to add value to warfare if we continue to put our professional endeavour into short-, mid-, and long-term planning, and to allocate tasks according to the levels of warfare.
III. Emphasising on the type of adversarial activities in overlapping warfare domains.

"Separate ground, sea, and air warfare is gone forever. If we ever again should be involved in war, we will fight with all elements, with all services, as one single concentrated effort." 21

We must focus on an holistic understanding; that is, why it is so important to be able to operate at the same time and in more than one domain. It is clear that parallel activities might generate multiple positive effects towards achieving the military objectives and will boost the understanding in military personnel of the requirement for proper synchronisation of different service activities across two or more warfare domains.

Today, we are faced with a highly complex battlespace management, where actors will cause a variety of intended and unintended effects in more than one domain. In developing and actively using artificial intelligence support, combined with critical leadership skills, it might be easier to synchronise all the different actors in the campaign. In addition to the previously mentioned evolution of the 21st century technologies, tactics will have to be applied and these tactics will influence the strategy and develop the military-political level, which consequently will challenge the joint operational level to act as the interlocutor.

IV. The need for coordination and synchronisation at the joint operational level is vital for campaign success.

"Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult." 22

Coordination and synchronisation ensure that each action occurs at the right time and delivers the desired effect. Therefore, a fundamental review across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels might be of significant value to be prepared to cope with current and future threats at the joint operational level. We must ensure that the operational level decision-making process allows for timely effective decisions and follow-on effects. Establishing many working groups and command boards, for example, may affect the fusion of all the key information to provide the decision-makers with timely advice, causing delay in the decision-making at the strategic

and tactical levels. More intensive use of new technologies will eventually ease this coordination and synchronisation process without destroying the concept of mission command.

V. Education and training is the foundation for joint operational level success.

"Joint culture depends on complex factors: education, operational experience and deep understanding of individual service capabilities." 23

As discussed already, our military officers are normally specialised in one service as opposed to that borne in cross-domain experience. Education and training make it even more important, with effective collaboration, to achieve better cross-tactical thinking. One way to achieve this is to implement earlier and more standardised education and training. Common knowledge and understanding of operations at the strategic level makes it easier to fully exploit areas within operational level warfare. In order to understand how our domains interact, we need to follow and apply to our COPD at every stage. A mechanism to instill this cross-domain thinking into practical application could be designed through an "operational level curriculum" in order to enhance the joint operational level knowledge and experience beyond the Comprehensive Operations Planning Course.
The follow-up to the "theory delivery" could be the implementation during the operational level exercises directed by the JWC. A key area for better strategic-to-tactical level understanding and campaign success will be the professionalisation of the Centre of Gravity, or COG analysis, a vital part of the COPD, which has already been discussed in depth within the NATO community.18

On the other hand, simple tools like Ends-Ways-Means and answering the five Ws (Who-What-When-Where-Why) by emphasising the Why, we could make improvements to understanding knowledge and proficiency in the whole of NATO Command and Force Structures, and therefore, on the joint operational level of warfare. I believe that we should collectively strive to craft better “joint thinkers” for the future of the NATO Alliance.

The five suggestions listed above are not fundamentally new, or overly complex. I believe that they are important to continue to deliver intended effects in future warfare.

As for future warfare, Vego wrote in 2010: “The nature of war, as explained by Carl von Clausewitz, will not change in the future. War is shaped by human nature, the complexities of human behaviour, and the limitations of human and physical capabilities. Even the most profound changes in technology, thinking, and doctrine will not change the true nature of war. However, the character of a war and the methods of conducting it will continue to evolve as they did in the past.”25

In order to continue to adapt constantly to these evolving elements and to think about how we bring value to our Alliance, joint thinking at the joint operational level of warfare is essential. The continuous application of operational warfare will ensure decisive wins and gains for our Alliance in future competition and conflict, whereas the principal prerequisite for the effective conduct of operational warfare will remain the mastery of tactics.

To conclude, a quote from Vego seems appropriate once again: “A broad or operational perspective and the ability to calculate and balance the factors of space, time, and force will remain the keys to success in planning and conducting major operations and campaigns.”26

ENDNOTES

1 As NATO does not use the term “multi-domain operation”, it is understood here as the activity of military forces in more than one warfare domain. NATO’s warfare domains are as follows: Land, Maritime, Air, Space, and Cyber.
2 Joint: Adjective used to describe activities, operations, and organizations in which elements of at least two services participate.
3 Operational Level: The level at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations.
(https://nso.nato.int/natoterm/Web.mvc)
4 Level of War: A level at which specific military objectives are accomplished in war or low-intensity conflict through the use of military and non-military sources of power; strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war are differentiated.
8 During the last years, some of the NATO Nations published papers which incorporated AI technologies, emphasising that the implementation of these technologies also requires an evolution on how we fight in the future.
9 Nowadays, adversarial activities are mainly found in the cyber domain, and commonly known as hybrid threats, which NATO defines as a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular, and asymmetric activities in time and space. (https://nso.nato.int/natoterm/Web.mvc)
10 Especially during TRIDENT JAVELIN 2017 and TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018, space community succeeded in showing NATO leaders the importance of space in operations. This space effort will continue in the JUPITER Series of Exercises and will be similarly done with the cyber domain in the future, without it interfering with the traditional domains of warfare.
12 This saying is supposed to be originally mentioned by the philosopher Aristotle, who lived in 384-322 BC.
13 See Deputy Commander JFC Brunssum, Lieutenant General Stuart Skeates, in command magazine “Northern Star”, April 2019, page 3.
14 Synchronisation: a process of arranging or initiating actions aimed at generating maximum relative (combat or non-combat) power at a decisive place and time; sound synchronisation must ensure that all elements of one’s force, collectively, generate synergistic effects that exceed the sum of their individual effects; depending on the purpose, tactical, operational, and strategic synchronisation is differentiated. (Joint Operational Warfare–Theory and Practice, Milan N. Vego, revised addition 2009, page GL-21)
15 The author is aware that there are more arguments for the use of joint operational level warfare existing, but constraint the argumentation in this article to just those two.
17 The KISS Principle: Keep It Short and Simple.
21 Dwight D. Eisenhower in memorandum to Chester W. Nimitz, April 17, 1946.
22 Carl Von Clausewitz, On War (1832), Book 1, Chapter 7.
24 It is highly recommendable to watch the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College videos, where Dale Elkmeyer is explaining the COG: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5B9K3jFhE