



# **US Military Doctrine: Strategy, Tactics, and the Operational Art**

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## **Executive Summary**

Within the prism of contemporary military doctrine, studies have assumed a renewed focus on issues of strategy, tactics, and the operational art. These are the major features of United States (US) military doctrine. Renewed approaches have also taken a front seat in US military practice, including joint frameworks analysis. The pace of doctrinal debate in the context of the US army and joint contexts has continued to increase, particularly with the seeming resurgence of asymmetric threats toward the turn of the millennium (9/11) but this increasing momentum is also driven by analysts conscientious of US military history and a the contrast between US military victory and defeat. In this report, I first distinguish between the highly contested and oft-times obfuscated concepts of *strategy*, *tactics*, and the *operational art*. I present their complexity in the realms of military affairs prior to applying them in a situational context. I use the war in Vietnam as the setting for discussing the relationship between these concepts and its possible success.

## Introduction

Prior to the United States (US)-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the claim was repeatedly made that the US and its military forces do not undertake military operations in which victory is assured. Strategic, tactical, and operational considerations were previously considered by the US government (USG), and in close cooperation a US military services, to such an extent that a string of military operations registered as remarkable victories beyond the tactical and operational spheres. Between 2003 and 2015, the US, according to some analysts, has become war-weary, and has become fatigued through several major and certainly long-term engagements. Afghanistan, for example, can be cited as a major military imbroglio for the USG and its military services. Smaller operations having taken place in Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle, what Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) analyst Micah Zenko referred to recently as “discreet military operations” have registered as tactical successes but have made no significant (positive) contributions to the so-called “(Global) War on Terror” ([G]Wot) – a immense and pervasive security arrangement not witnessed since the Cold War era and now referred to by the Obama administration as “Overseas Contingency Operations” (OCO). Prior to the United Nations (UN)-sanctioned coalition operation in Afghanistan, the US experienced its most costly battle since Vietnam. It is precisely these two major military embroilments that bookend the modern US military experience in warfare. The latter half of 2015 will bring the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the withdraw of US-led forces from Indochina – a major defeat strategically for the USG and its principle and overarching policy to prevent the spread of Communism in various parts of the world, known as “Containment.” This report reconsiders some of the seminal and often-debated features of contemporary US military doctrine, and are examined in the context of one of the US’ most traumatic military experiences in contemporary history.

## Conceptualizations

War, according to modern military theory, can be categorized along three lines, those of: *strategy*, *tactics*, and the *operational art*. Divisions between the three are based predominantly on the great wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially within the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War (American military writers like Arthur Wagner, Emory Upton, and Eben Swift drew from other experiences).<sup>1</sup> Modern military theory that organizes these so-called “levels” of warfare, as they are studied today, came about through the Prussian experience during the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>2</sup> As puzzling as it may seem, contextualizing these elements greatly facilitates a sense of blurring. The Soviets thoroughly developed level-based understandings of

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<sup>1</sup> M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> C. Bellamy, “Trends in Land Warfare: The Operational Art of the European Theater,” *Defense Yearbook 1985*, London, UK: Brassey’s Defense Publishers, 1985; M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*, 2005.

modern warfighting during and after the Great War. However, the context in which the Soviets considered them extensively has undergone considerable change. The US experience is not so different.<sup>3</sup>

Planning serves as a common element among what I refer to as “spheres.” The term “levels” implies the construction of separate entities that are either neatly connected (possibly hierarchically) or completely disconnected from one another. National Security Strategy (NSS) and Policy Directives partially delineate the three spheres, connecting strategy and operational by only by “theater campaign planning.” This formulation brings with it methodological and analytical obstacles that referring to the levels as spheres can help to overcome or avoid entirely. Adaptation and the need to continuously evaluate the objectives, costs, benefits, and steps necessary in obtaining a desired outcome are worthy of renewed discussion. Conceptualizations and the adoption of strategic, tactical, and operational tenets can be applied to changes in armament, communication, and mobility areas; training and education of commanders and staff officers; preparation of campaign plans; and mobilization plans.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Strategy***

Strategy is said to be something from which “victory is evolved,” highlighting the necessity of seeing the larger scale on which the concept of strategy operates.<sup>5</sup> This can be regarded as the strongest element (or the highest echelon) of the three organizational spheres (what are still regarded as levels). National policy tends to be influenced by the formulation of strategic sphere planning and has the strongest correlative relationship with the end results of war and conflict on a grand scale. It is within this sphere that wars are usually won or lost.<sup>6</sup> The strategic concept is vital to this sphere of planning, for it takes into consideration the final result of the orchestration of all three. It is a large-scale concept or design that guides an actor into commitment of its state- or non-state based forces and resources temporally and spatially. Success or planning of the subordinate “levels” (again, “levels” implies a hierarchical structure) can directly inform strategic outcomes. Moltke, for example, used operational and tactics movements in order to multiply strategic opportunity and fortune.<sup>7</sup> “Moltke was able to direct large armies in the field from great distances, thereby enhancing strategic flexibility through what he would refer to as operational direction.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> H. F. Scott and W. F. Scott, *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Sun Tzu (L. Giles [trans.]) *The Art of War*, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> W. Murray and K. Woods, “Thoughts on Effects-Based Operations, Strategy, and the Conduct of War,” Institute for Defense Analysis IDA, Alexandria, VA, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*. p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 113.



## ***Operational Art***

The operational sphere of war is what takes place on the battlefield and is akin to a strategic sphere of analysis when engaging with the tactical perspective. In other words, when employing the tactics of warfare, one can see the operational art as a grander set of tactics employed to reach an all-encompassing outcome. “Napoleon’s operational conduct consisted of envelopment of the flanks. At Jena, Napoleon defeated the Prussian Army by conducting a flanking attack while holding the center.”<sup>9</sup>

In the setting of the Great War in Eastern Europe, Kipp noted that Russia’s Aleksandr A. Svechin (professor at Nikolaevskaya Academy of the General Staff) described the operational art as the critical link between tactics and strategy, and “the means by which the senior commander transformed a series of tactical successes into operational “bounds” linked together by the commander’s intent and plan and contributing to strategic success in a given theater of military actions.”<sup>10</sup> Wolk also refers to the strategic decisions moving beyond the operational sphere of decision making of officers and leaders in times of war, reasoning that operational deployments were part-and-parcel to the strategic vision of the US during the Pacific War (1941-1945).<sup>11</sup>

## ***Tactics***

Tactics are particular modes of conquering within the battle-sphere of war.<sup>12</sup> “Moltke had conceptualized and situated [the tactical sphere] between the conduct of war and battle.”<sup>13</sup> In many instances of military endeavors, tactical victories have been overshadowed by the necessity of operational and strategic outcomes. Implications of what follows tactical orchestrations have eluded leaders in a number of historical circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Tactical uses of air power drew little attention by analysts in the face of the much-debated strategic use of air power during the Second World War in Europe.

The debate is critical for highlighting the necessity of conceptual nuance. That is, what the US referred to as “tactical airpower” (because it was subsidiary to the US’ strategic campaigns), was in fact the primary application of force by means of aerial

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<sup>9</sup> M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> J. W. Kipp, “The Origins of Soviet Operational Art: 1917-1936,” US Army Center of Military History (CMH), Fort McNair, DC, 2007, p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> H. S. Wolk, “Sixty-Five Years On: Plans and Strategy to Defeat Japan in World War II,” *Air Power History*, 57(3), 2010, para. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Sun Tzu (Giles, L. [trans.]), *The Art of War*, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> M. D. Krause (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on the Operational Art*, p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

machines for the British.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, one nation's strategic use of force is another's tactical modality of war. The same logic might also be applied to the use of drones as tactical instruments of warfare and discreet military operations by the US, the United Kingdom (UK), and Israel. When considering all three of these actors (so far the only three in the world to have used weaponized drones [by 2014]), there are certainly undulations in the way we understand their usage and what sort of support roles they are expected to perform, if any.

Notwithstanding the discordance that lies within the theory and practice related to tactics, much of this sphere is considered a lesser element of the strategic and operational ones. What constitutes the strategic and operational spheres of warfare are maneuvers and fighting engagements. The tactical sphere is also a decision-making process, the confluence of which renders advantageous conditions for realizing operational and strategic *interpretations* of success. Former President Harry S. Truman, having emphasized this idea, shows how a mix of "tragic conditions" (i.e., nuanced political, social, and economic conditions) had a much larger (or strategic-sphere) political and economic effect for the US during the Cold War.<sup>16</sup>

### **Vietnam: Strategic, Operational, and Tactical Implications**

Reevaluation of the dynamic relationship between the strategic, operational, and tactical elements of warfare during the Vietnam War has been an ongoing venture. There is no shortage of reading when it comes to this US military (and indeed societal) experience. While there remains no clear answer to the final outcomes of the Vietnam War with respect to these three spheres, there is certainly merit in moving away from strict adherence to traditional interpretations. A study recently completed by Caverley sought to fill a gap in one of the explanation of the outcome of the Vietnam War.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, the author turned to McAllister, who stated that the US chose "to lose Vietnam slowly."<sup>18</sup> Competing views therefore orbit around a core of ambiguous precepts, interpretations, and discursive orientations of the concepts main concepts within this report.

The concepts produce an untenable relationship given the shifting importance of each sphere at certain phases of the overall war. "Operation Rolling Thunder" (1965), referred to as the strategic bombing campaign, was strategic in and of itself;

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<sup>15</sup> P. Johnston, "The Question of British Influence on US Tactical Air Power in World War II," *Air Power History*, 2005, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> H. S. Truman, "President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947," Truman Doctrine, Archived at The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> J. D. Caverley, "Explaining US Military Strategy in Vietnam: Thinking Clearly about Causation," *International Security*, 35(3), 2010/11, pp. 124-133.

<sup>18</sup> J. McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam? Soldiers, Civilians, and US Military Strategy," *International Security*, 35(3), 2010/11, p. 122.

yet it was ancillary to the ongoing land battles taking place.<sup>19</sup> In the midst of the air and ground campaigns, talks about the best use of “substantial” ground and air strength against the adversary continued. Pacification was pitted against active patrolling as the best means of neutralizing the Viet Cong. There was still talk about the use of forces against an elusive enemy that seldom chose to stand its ground and fight the way that the US might have expected or probably even preferred.<sup>20</sup> An issue, not only of the relationship between US strategy, tactics, and the operational art, is emphasized, but also the relationship that should be considered between US spheres of planning and execution as they associate with those of the Viet Cong.

At different stages in the war, the US underscored different forces as the primary instruments for achieving the desired outcome. Prior to 1969, US land forces were the spearhead of military operations in Vietnam with air and naval forces supporting ground units. US domestic opposition altered this arrangement. While ground forces were still essential in winning the war, the strategic sphere of politics meant that “Vietnamization” of South Vietnamese (SVN) forces became a new component of strategic planning.<sup>21</sup> SVN forces were incapable of conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations on their own and could not be fully relied upon.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the US had to maintain focus on the use of tactical elements in order to support its strategic aims. Political aspects of the war and the Cold War hindered strategy building for both the US and the South Vietnamese.

The US engaged in limited bombing of North Vietnam but both the SVN and US forces avoided moving on the “center of gravity” in the North for fear of Chinese or Soviet intervention (the specter of China’s intervention in Korea when the US “went north” left military leaders uncomfortable).<sup>23</sup> Political divisions between China and the Soviet Union effectively neutralized both as potential interveners in North Vietnam. With the advent of this new political dimension, the US was in a position to fundamentally alter its limited bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong to become a full-fledged bombing campaign by 1972 (known as the “The Christmas Bombings”).<sup>24</sup> One of the most notable observations is the essence of flexibility that remained inherent within all three spheres of military doctrine despite the continuous challenges politically and pressures of asymmetric warfare that US forces were experiencing then. Not only was there a condition of support in the general relationship, there was a fundamental capacity for one to conceptually compensate for the changes taking place in another.

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<sup>19</sup> J. D. Caverley, “Explaining US Military Strategy in Vietnam: Thinking Clearly about Causation”, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> J. D. Caverley, “Explaining US Military Strategy in Vietnam: Thinking Clearly about Causation,” p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> J. Kurth, “The US Victory in Vietnam: Lost and Found,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p. 18.



The events of the Vietnam War provide a very difficult analytical setting for the various sphere or “levels” of military doctrine. This difficulty retains a stronger commitment to challenging efforts in determining whether the relationship that these elements shared was either successful or unsuccessful. The terms with which we use to describe the outcome of this relationship in the context of the war in Vietnam are both illusory and certainly not detached from conditions of normativity. The eventual consequences of the Vietnam War were still being played-out into the 1990s (and today still). North Vietnam’s victory ran headlong into the realities of globalization and brought the prospect of renewed and increased trade with partners overseas. Difficulty in determining the level of success of this relationship is amplified further when taking into consideration the question: *Who won?*

Strategically, both the US and North Vietnam *won* and *lost*. The US was dealt strategic defeats politically and militarily. Those terms ultimately changed as the Viet Cong realized that their victory in 1975 eventually brought the country to play by the same rules of the game in political, legal, and economic terms, 20 years later. The US suffered domestically from the strategic commitment. Servicemen and women suffered from the tactical and operational aspects of war. Given the nature of measuring these terms, and gauging these concepts, the outcomes of the war and the relationships studied in its context remain in a state of flux. In studying the strategic, tactical, and operational elements of military doctrine both *success* and *failure* can be observed.

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