

The operational level : What for ?

Sitting in between strategic decision and tactical action, the operational level is responsible for putting into action the decisions made by the government, in a national operation, or by the HQ of the international organization in charge of a multinational operation.

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An irreplaceable level of command...

Because of such a well-defined mission this command level is irreplaceable no matter how complex the situation is, and no matter the size of the operations to be carried out. That is true even when the operational aspect is not so visible during limited operations when tactical actions are relatively more significant.

To achieve his mission, the force commander (COMANFOR), in the framework of the mandate received from the strategic level, should permanently keep a general understanding of all aspects of the theater, not only the military. Because he should be able to quickly inform the national or multinational decision-maker, to direct and to coordinate the actions undertaken by the tactical level, and to ensure smooth continuity of action in the theater - throughout the whole spectrum of diplomatic and military choices. Because of its distance from the strategic level - whatever the effectiveness of the communication means - and of its involvement next to the tactical level, the operational level achieves a balance by having both the necessary distance and proximity to ensure balanced actions in the theater. Moreover, some of the theater operational issues can only be taken care of at a force commander level :

- this is the case with the humanitarian aspect of conflict resolution that requires decisions for civil-military actions adapted to the theater characteristics ;
- it is the case also for an official and organized dissemination of information about the action lawfulness ; it implies a directed communication job in connection with the media as well as a selection of information oriented operations (IOO) adapted to the characteristics of the environment and of the situation.

The selection of the right responses to the opposing actions in the theater, either 100, or any specific targeting, can only be a force commander decision.

He is the only one, ex officio, able to ensure and balance the relationships with the country officials, the population as varied as it is, the parties to the conflict, and other actors in the theater.

Integrating all theater realities can lead to a satisfactory way out of the crisis. Legitimized by the political decision and responsible authority because assuming the military command, the force commander embodies the consistency of the military action in view of a thorough conflict settlement.

Finally, even in case of the smallest force, theater actions necessitating some space management, more particularly in three dimensions, or the management of fires or of various combat actions, require the operational level to coordinate those various theater actions.

Because of its extent and of its nature, the set of responsibilities so described appears to be exclusive of any other one. It's not desirable to merge or to mix up the responsibilities of the force commander with those of the tactical commander, even if the deployed force is mostly from one force component, most often the Land component

... requiring simplicity and effectiveness

On the other hand, the above remarks should not be a reason for excessively multiplying the number of levels in the command system. No reason for "piling up CPs", in an unnecessarily complex way. But rather for organizing the command system so that it can simply and efficiently provide assistance in decision-making to the force commander and to the tactical commander in the field as well. By nature a more complex level, the operational one

must be able to supervise the components' action, without improper infiltration of their responsibilities, while efficiently dealing with the theater matters. While the operational and tactical functions should neither be merged nor mixed up, because of a concern for means effectiveness and economy, the HQs in charge of them could be.

A theater concept, nothing but joint...

From the beginning, that is to say during the concept of and the planning of an operation, all solutions should be fairly considered, any course of action of all components should be objectively studied. This study should then be a joint one in order to take advantage of all possible abilities. One isolated component would only work out courses of action in relation with its service know-how, and could leave out a particularly effective action that could be carried out by another component.

This remark on the joint character of an operation concept and planning mainly concerns the first intervention operations on a theater, it is not so relevant during stabilization operations that obey a different logic.

... thereafter, under some conditions, the operation could be entrusted to one single component

Under some circumstances, according to the situation and to the implemented means, the theater level could entrust a Service component with a planned operation. Most often, because of the nature of the current crises and conflicts, this component would be the Land component.

That kind of decision could also be suitable for stabilization operations that occur after a theater first intervention and that entail the commitment of mainly Land forces, because of the nature of the operations to be carried out.

Of course, this will take place with the operational level retaining all its role and capabilities, in a true joint spirit for the relations with other components in the theater. As a crisis evolves to more complexity, from a necessity for space management in three dimensions, or for a need for a fire or combat coordination, the situation should be reassessed and the operational command system deployed by the Land component could be given back a truly joint character.

Because of the importance and of the specificity of its mission in a theater, the operational level should not be merged nor mixed up with the

tactical level. However, that is not a reason not to make it simple in the way the command system is designed as an effective tool able to support decisions at both levels. The theater initial concept is mainly a joint business run in fact by the strategic level. However, it is possible considering entrusting a Service Component with the theater responsibility when the selected component has the most important mission. In the current operations, the Land Component is usually In this situation. However, the merging of command levels will not be an expected consequence of this special case. That decision should remain reversible, because an evolution of the crisis to more complexity could necessitate a quick change in the command organization and a return to a joint system of command.

As far as the future is concerned, it is worth noting that the current trend is to an increasing weight of the operational level in the command structure. Reasons for that are :

- first, the nature of the crises the world is troubled with that more and more often require a joint or interdepartmental response.
- second, the current thoughts and experiments about Effects Based Operations (EBO) that should noticeably reinforce the predominant role of the theater command.

Editor's note : The recognized fact of getting three command levels should be considered according to the deployed strength. That is a fact for Battle Groups 1500 in particular. The "caricature" of operations for which the strength necessary to the command level would outnumber that of the fielded forces should obviously be avoided.



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