

# A Civilian Guide to *Military Planning*

**by Brett Doyle**

Compared with civilian agencies, the military is often viewed as investing a striking amount of time and energy into planning. Civilians often report initial skepticism of military planning efforts, but then come to appreciate them as an asset for decision makers. The military's planning method can prevent surprise and provide for tactical flexibility.

This article is intended to provide civilian professionals working with military partners with an overview of the military planning and order issuing process, particularly in planning stability operations. It is not intended as a comprehensive primer on military planning. This article highlights how civilians can approach interacting with the military planning and order development process and provides a basic idea of when and with whom to engage. Tips or concepts to keep in mind are also supplied.

## **Why Civilians Might Participate in Military Planning**

Military actors sharing the same space as civilians can affect civilian activities and objectives. Typically, the military has substantially more money and manpower than civilian counterparts to apply to planning its operations. Ideally, these military planning resources can support and reinforce civilian actors, or, less positively, stand at cross-purposes with some civilian activities. The military uses its plans and orders process to allocate its resources, which can include synchronizing them with civilian actors. By engaging with the military planning and orders process, civilians can ensure that military partners are fully aware of and reinforcing civilian objectives and goals within their areas of responsibility.

Doctrine requires the military to plan for its involvement in stability operations, and military planners often aggressively seek out civilian input where possible. Unfortunately, there are often

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an inadequate number of civilians available to contribute to and inform all of the military's planning activities. Additionally, operational urgencies often compress planning times, which greatly limits the window of opportunity to solicit civilian input. The result is that military planning often lacks adequate input from

**The most relevant plans for civilians operating with military partners are: Campaign plans, Operations plans, Branches, and Sequels.**

knowledgeable civilian representatives and experts to shape effective operational activities. As a result of these constraints, military planners often make assumptions about U.S. civilian officials' work.

Additionally, the process of planning itself can be beneficial to civilian agencies. It clarifies roles and responsibilities, particularly as to who should take what actions in time of emergencies. It can foster a common understanding of the problems at hand, as well as a common picture of assumptions and the operating environment. A common quote that sums this up is "it's not the plan; it's the planning." The planning and orders process establishes parameters for when or, often just as importantly, when not to act. Examples of military plans that can significantly affect civilian operations include orders regarding the limits of military support for elections, and orders setting parameters for military involvement in engaging provincial or local government.

**Types of Military Plans<sup>1</sup>**

Military plans come in many forms and vary in scope, complexity, and length of planning horizons. Strategic plans establish national and

multinational military objectives and include multiple subordinate plans to support those objectives. Operational-level or campaign plans cover a series of related military operations and activities aimed at accomplishing a strategic or operational objective within a given time and space. Pragmatically, operational plans provide a bridge from strategic goals and objectives to tactical planning for "on-the-ground" activities and tasks. Tactical plans cover the employment of units in operations, including the ordered arrangement and maneuver of units in relation to each other and to the enemy within the framework of an operational-level or campaign plan. There are several types of plans and the most relevant for civilians operating with military partners are:

**Campaign plan-** A joint operation plan aimed at achieving strategic or operational objectives within a given time and space. These plans are issued by joint headquarters, with embassy input in a civilian-military environment.

**Operation plan (OPLAN) -** Any plan for the conduct of military operations prepared in response to actual and potential contingencies. An OPLAN may address an extended period connecting a series of objectives and operations, or it may be developed for a single part or phase of a long-term operation. An OPLAN becomes an operational order, or OPORD, when the commander sets an execution time or designates an event that triggers the operation. OPLANs are developed by field units, such as divisions or brigades, and are potentially the most important type of military plan for civilians in field locations.

**Branch-** Describes the contingency options built into the base plan.

**Sequel-** A follow-up to an existing plan.

## Executing Plans through Orders

Military plans are implemented through orders. Commanders issue these orders orally or in writing. The five-paragraph format (situation, mission, execution, sustainment, and command and control) is the standard for issuing orders.

There are three types of orders:

**Operation order (OPORD)** - Issued by a commander to subordinate commanders for the purpose of effecting the coordinated execution of an operation. Commanders issue OPORDs to direct the execution of long-term operations as well as the execution of discrete short-term operations within the framework of a long-range OPORD.

**Fragmentary order (FRAGO)** - An abbreviated form of an operation order, issued as needed to change or modify an existing order or to execute a branch or sequel to that order. FRAGOs provide brief and specific instructions, and they only address parts of the original OPORD that have changed. Pragmatically, FRAGOs tend to be the most common planning output of most military units operating in the field. The planning activities can be abbreviated in that the focus is mostly on the change or deviation from the fundamental OPORD.

**Warning order (WARNO)** - A preliminary notice of an order or action that is to follow. WARNOs help subordinate units and staff prepare for new missions by describing the situation, providing initial planning guidance, and directing preparation activities. WARNOs increase subordinate units' planning time, provide details of the impending operation, and list key events that accompany preparation and execution.

## How Plans and Orders are Made: the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP)

Military plans and orders are developed using what is called the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP). The MDMP is an iterative planning methodology that integrates the activities of the commander, staff, subordinate headquarters, and other partners to share their understanding of the situation,

### Three types of military orders: Operation Order, Fragmentary Order and Warning Order

to participate in course of action development and decision making, and to resolve conflicts before producing an operation plan or order for execution.

Preceding any deliberative planning, commanders must develop an understanding of the operational environment, frame the problem, define an end state, and develop an operational approach to achieve the end state. This is the “design” component. Unlike planning for combat operations, planning for stability operations requires a more conceptual design component where the commander must address and visualize less tangible aspects for which the more deliberate and detailed planning occurs.<sup>2</sup> It is essential that commanders appreciate and understand the interrelationships among military and non-military perspectives and activities<sup>3</sup>. Civilian partners are a primary source for the non-military perspective.

Throughout the process there is discussion and feedback between the military commander and his or her staff. The MDMP is a deliberate, analytical process organized into seven steps with an enhanced design component for civilian-

intensive stability operations. Simplified, there are four planning categories:

**Design-Visualization** - In stability operations ‘pre-step,’ commanders must come to understand the interrelationships of military and non-military perspectives and activities before conceptualizing the military mission to achieve the end state.

**Mission** - Steps 1 & 2 include Mission Receipt and Mission Analysis. In these steps, the military unit receives and analyzes the overall objectives and restates them in terms that relate to it.

**Courses of Action (COA)** - Steps 3-6 include COA Development, Analysis, Comparison, and Approval. These steps explore potential actions, produce estimates, and develop contingencies.

**Orders Production** - The commander’s selected COA is issued in Step 7 in the form of a plan or order.

This process can often be time and staff intensive. The various steps are often compressed depending on the need to adapt to changing battlefield conditions.

Key players in the MDMP process are:

**Commander** - The commander is the most important participant in the MDMP. More than simply decision-makers, commanders use their experience, knowledge, and judgment to guide the staff’s planning efforts. Commanders remain aware of the current status of the planning effort, participate during critical periods of the process, and make sound decisions based on the detailed work of the staff.

**Chief of Staff (CoS) or Executive Officer (XO)** - The CoS/XO manages and coordinates the staff’s work and provides quality control during the MDMP. He or she supervises the entire process, provides timelines to the staff, establishes briefing times and locations, and

provides any instructions necessary to complete the plan.

**Staff** – The staff’s effort during the MDMP focuses on helping the commander understand the situation, make decisions, and synchronize those decisions into a fully developed plan or order. During COA development and comparison, the staff provides recommendations to support the commander in selecting a COA. After the commander makes a decision, the staff prepares the plan or order that reflects the commander’s intent.

### **Engaging the Process**

Civilian staff working with military partners should keep these concepts in mind as they interact or participate in military planning and order development:

**Command vs. Consensus Based Styles** – Civilians interacting with military planning can often be frustrated by the planning style. Likewise, the typical civilian style of deliberative decision making, characterized by consensus, can be frustrating for military partners. The MDMP is designed to move forward in a time-efficient, linear manner. Revisiting prior steps involves substantial staff resources, time and generally can only be ordered by a commander. This differs substantially from the typical civilian decision-making style in which prior work or decisions can be subject to repeated review, particularly as new participants or new information are identified. As a result, civilians who are brought into an ongoing military planning process can feel that they are unable to address prior steps, or that they are being “left behind.”

From the other perspective, the military sees civilians as preferring to discuss issues in depth, repeatedly, and in different forums before deciding whether to act. Deciding how to act also appears to be a lengthy process. However

once these decisions are made, military partners can appreciate quick civilian application of intelligent solutions to difficult problems.

**Earlier is better** - Key civilian U.S. government representatives have the greatest opportunity to shape and influence the commander's concept of military operations at the design stage, prior to the commander issuing mission or planning guidance to the staff. Each step of the process narrows the range of possibilities in subsequent steps. In order to have the greatest impact on the process, civilians should engage as early as possible.

**Timeframes** - Military partners focus on shorter time cycles, often seeking immediate effects, or on projects that could be finished within the duration of their tours. State Department personnel tend to have longer time frames, while USAID personnel have even longer time frames for approaching development outcomes<sup>4</sup>. Each of these perspectives incorporates valid operational imperatives. A recommended approach to balance these imperatives is for civilians, particularly leadership, to attempt to balance actions with immediate results while continuing to think about the intermediate and long-term impacts.

This humorous quote, though a bit exaggerated, captures the divide in perspectives: "We joked that while the military thought of changes that could be made before the next daily Battle Update Brief to the division leadership, USAID thought about how its activities would impact the next generation!"

**Planning Location** - Civilian and military planning can take place at different locations and levels of hierarchy, which can cause confusion. Most civilian foreign assistance planning is done at the national or embassy level. Civilians in field locations are often working on implementation rather than planning. For the

military, field commands are responsible for planning operations, including the allocation of resources and sequencing events for their respective regions.

**Views on Resources** - Often civilian style planning begins with available resources, which informs all further planning. Indeed, civilians do not begin to conduct significant planning activities until after resources have been decided. For the military, as outlined above, planning begins with a mission (step 1), and resources are assessed and applied as needed throughout the planning process. These differences in approach can cause consternation for those not aware of them. This can lead the military to perceive that civilians are delaying

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the planning, while civilians are left wondering why the military is intent on starting so early.

**Planning Manpower** - Often, civilians will have substantially fewer staff members dedicated to planning than the military. Civilian planners are frequently individuals or small cells of a few people focused primarily on planning. The military often has entire offices dedicated to the process. This is particularly true in field locations, where civilians may not have full-time planners stationed at all. As a result, civilians can feel overwhelmed when attempting to engage with military counterparts. While this

might be unavoidable, engaging early and enlisting (often eager) military colleagues in dividing up labor can be a useful approach. Also in some cases, military commanders have even been known to co-locate or second military planners to civilian staff to promote integrated planning.

## Conclusion

Successfully interacting with the military planning process can be challenging. The military approach is complex, rigorous, and robust. It can easily overwhelm civilians unfamiliar with the MDMP. However, when considering stability operations, the military's own doctrine requires it to seek out and integrate non-military perspectives. Daunting as it may be, civilian participation and input is essential, but success requires flexibility on both sides.

When effectively integrated, civilian experts can make essential contributions to the military planning process. Such a process appropriately incorporates civilian equities and can bring civilian expertise and problem solving approaches to shared challenges. Furthermore, this approach can help avoid friction in implementing activities across multiple lines of operation. This can be achieved by de-conflicting related activities and through fostering a common assessment of the challenges and a shared understanding of how they are to be tackled.

Civilian-military planning today remains a challenge. However, time and practice will institutionalize civilian-military collaboration, especially in stability operations. In the meantime, meeting this challenge will produce results that more than make collaboration worthwhile. These ongoing efforts will set the stage for making future civilian participation a rule rather than an exception. **IAJ**

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## Notes

- 1 See Field Manual (FM) 5.0 *The Operations Process*, Appendix E, March 2010 for more information on military plans.
- 2 See Field Manual (FM) 5.0 *The Operations Process*, Paragraph 1-25, March 2010.
- 3 See Field Manual (FM) 3-07, *Stability Operations*, Chapter 4, "Planning for Stability Operations." This section addresses how military commanders must consider visualizing the synchronized arrangement of military and non-military forces and capabilities to achieve the desired end state that is formulated through more collaborative MDMP.
- 4 From Howard Van Vranken's "Civil Affairs and the QDR: Opportunity and Challenge".