

The End of Operational Phases at Last

by Gustav A. Otto

Operational phases are a way many in the military and Department of Defense (DoD) think about going to war. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* describes phases zero through five (0-V) and calls them “notional operational plan phases.”¹ JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* further describes the phases and their notional application. These operational phases were originally intended to help frame or construct planning. Sadly, to the detriment of U.S. national security, they became the milestones by which entire organizations, from the tactical through the strategic, drove activities. After 25 years of planning, participating, and evaluating the operational phases of military effort in the U.S. government, military leadership is not meeting the needs of the decisionmakers who lead the Armed Forces. And worse, these phases are adopted by other agencies and departments who suffer severe outcomes because the phases are not used properly.

The well-intentioned concept was poorly understood in the first place, then it was poorly implemented, and eventually became a cookie-cutter for planning activities. In the process, the concept unintentionally neutered the deliberate art and science of planning, and it continues to undermine both creative and critical thought. Notional operational plan phases cannot address the layers and levels of complexity in any environment. The erosion of the operational level of war and a growing and inextricable direct link between the strategic and the tactical (or direct) levels are other reasons the phased approach fails. The operational level of war may quickly be coming to an end, and though this is not the primary point of this article, it is an important premise. The combined and linear fashion of the levels of war and operational phases result in a race to the lowest common denominator and the prettiest slide, rather than any good solutions.

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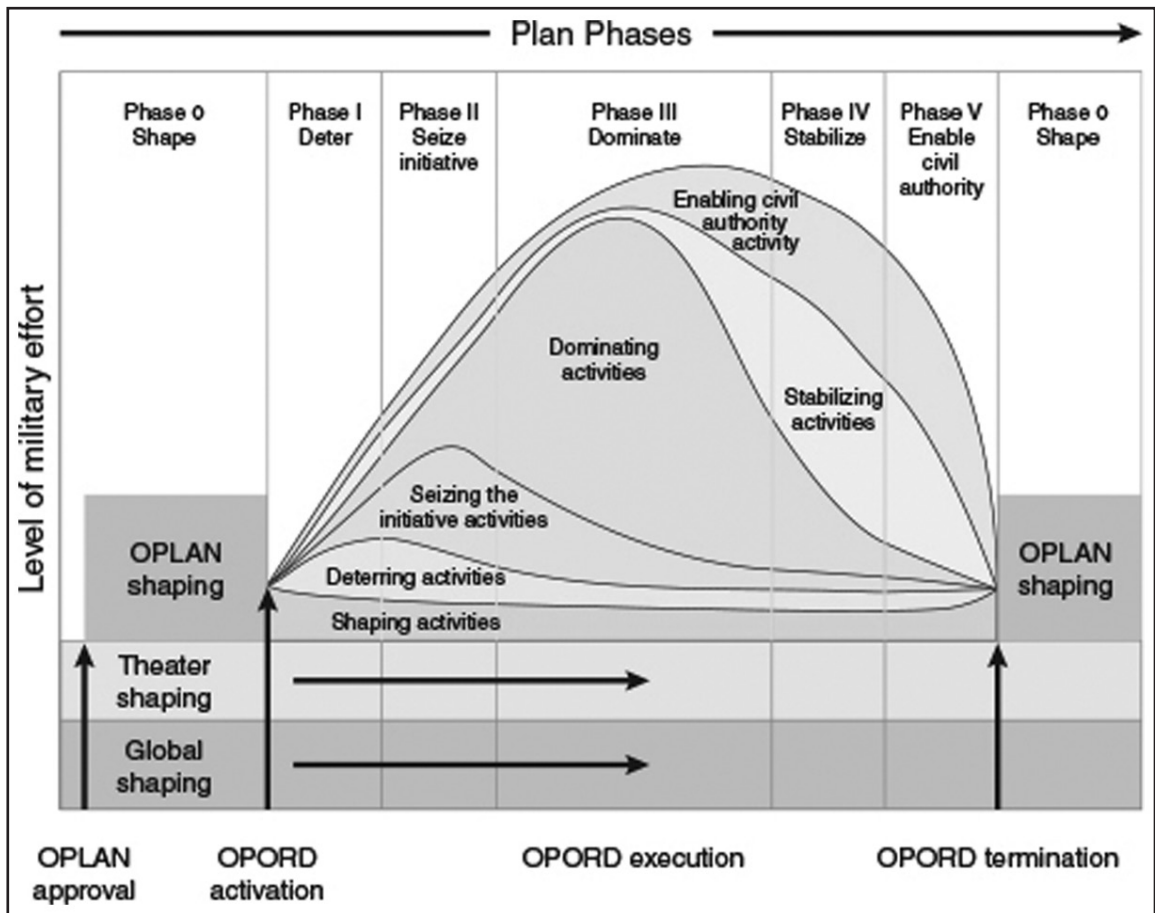


Figure 1. Phases of a notional operation plan versus level of military effort. OPLAN, operation plan; OPORD, operation order. SOURCE: JCS (2011).

Figure 1 is included to orient the reader of the phases. Along the vertical axis is the level of military planning and execution of any specific or even notional plan. The horizontal axis suggests a degree of activity or work done by the military. This graphic is well-understood by staff officers across the DoD, and each phase and level of effort carries a correlated textual description, as well as notional outcomes, activities, and checklists. There are precious few, thoughtful measures of effectiveness, measures of success, or desired outcomes or results linked to these. A dyed-in-the-wool planner wedded to the phases will counter that a good plan will not have those until the plan is developed. These notional levels at best suggest a broad shift in the type of work to be done by the military during a particular

phase. As a planning construct, particularly from a design-thinking perspective, this makes good sense. Design thinking is introduced to staff officers and leaders from the time they achieve mid-level status throughout the rest of their careers. Further, a good plan will start with a hearty discussion about the ways, ends, and means associated with the area or topic of discussion. Only when an end or set of ends or outcomes is established should planning begin. Only then, through deliberate design thinking, should it become an iterative approach between the ways, ends, and means.

The first shortcoming of this model is the gradual disappearance of the operational level of war. The explosive growth of communications and a globalized world finds even the youngest

and most junior military person, U.S. government civilian, or even U.S. government contractor with the ability to affect global change at the lowest and most direct levels. This change was described by U.S. Marine General Krulak in 1999 when he introduced the concept of the “strategic corporal” and the “three-block war.” This was the first of many bricks to pave over the increasingly-antiquated “tactical, operational, strategic” model.

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Broadly, the “strategic corporal” is a seemingly, low-level person whose actions may shape large-scale events or have lasting repercussions. The negative version of this is easiest to see. For example, consider someone who seeks the intentional desecration of a holy text, mistreatment of a captive, or leaks secrets to the press. These low-level, tactical actions inordinately set back U.S. and international security by complicating already complex national security endeavors and impair international relations between established allies. These low-level actions also drive a massive shift in diplomacy, information activities, military affairs, and even the economy. Strategic leaders are put on the defensive because they are forced to react to an unplanned circumstance. Further, there is little discussion or relevancy of the operational level when these events occur, rather the tactical/direct event is so catastrophic it instantly transcends the operational and lands squarely in the laps of the strategic leaders. The “three-block war,” Krulak cautioned, would find “U.S. Marines confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges in the span of a few hours and within the space of three contiguous

city blocks.”² He goes on to warn: “The lines separating the levels of war, and distinguishing combatant from “non-combatant,” will blur, and adversaries, confounded by our “conventional” superiority, will resort to asymmetrical means to redress the imbalance.”³

A gifted future thinker, Krulak’s predictions remain truer today and offer us much to consider for tomorrow. Yet the confusion of the operational phases and their purposes cloud thinking within the defense enterprise. For proof, look at any emerging or frozen conflict around the globe. From the Ukraine, to Syria, to Sudan, to Yemen, there is no shortage of fragile, failed, and failing states where a tactical event could catapult nations and other multinational actors into strategic engagements. Yet the military education system, policy, and doctrine-writing machines, along with their human resources systems for hiring, firing, retaining, and promoting remain woefully wedded to outdated models. It is for these reasons the “notional” is no longer present, and the less-than-discreet markers that exist between the levels of war and the phasing of operations are considered sacrosanct by so many in and out of uniform.

The military and DoD do some things incredibly well, especially grooming and growing leaders. Additionally, no one makes as deliberate, concerted, and well-developed approach to planning and leader development as the U.S. DoD. Service and DoD success is pursued by partners from around the globe, replicated by many across the U.S. government, and mimicked by select parts of the commercial world. However, the possible solutions are overshadowed or encumbered by this artificial phasing. For example, the phases and levels of effort are used in simulations, exercises, and scenarios across the departments. As a result, they are used like an anchor point diluting any real thought and hobbling any creative solutions. They serve as a milestone to nowhere or even the place you do not know how to leave (think Iraq).

They give a profound false sense of security both to lower echelons and to senior decisionmakers. Though I am not a fan of Clausewitz, even he recognizes the importance of the geometric challenges and complexity of warfare, the need for strategy to reflect “great spans of time and space [because] Armies do not burst from one theater of war into another; rather a projected strategic envelopment may easily take weeks and months to care out.”⁴

Air-Land Doctrine may now be obsolete, and new and more accurate thinking for the contemporary age is emerging. Multi-Domain Battle (MDB) moves previous doctrines forward to better synchronize and integrate the many domains of a four-dimensional, “three-block war.” The MDB approach recognizes the naturally-occurring chaos that may or will emerge and makes room for more complexity. Imagine how hard it is to apply the five phases of operational planning to the intricacies of a “three-block war.” Now make it infinitely more complex by multiplying it by at least six domains. We quickly get to so many planning considerations that even in the most complex, analytic systems, human error will reign supreme. Trying to use the operational planning phases in this context risks over-simplification, at a minimum, and is counterproductive in many cases.

Worse, planners and operators are impaired by the notion that there will always be three options for a decisionmaker at any level. In these plans, the phases and levels are described in a narrative. Planners find and replace the old words with new words to describe the geographic area. The new magical solution lies in the new version. Then three probable courses of action are quickly developed; although, one is almost always deemed a “throw away.” The distinction between the two remaining options is so vague or so minor the staff are content if either or a hybrid of the two remaining options are used. The lowest to the highest echelons remain within

the restraints of these two linear models, usually with too few people who have or are practiced at deliberate planning or design thinking. A better than average leader will make marginal changes, whereas a great leader will send them back to the drawing board. Oversimplified? Maybe. It is not malicious on the part of the planners or decisionmakers. It is routinized. This is what most planners grew up with; it is what their mentors used, and they were told it worked. It got them promoted, and it got them to retirement. It was praised by seniors, so it must be right. Right? Fortunately, those same planners and decisionmakers are starting to emerge from their haze and delusion and realize they have had it wrong for some time, possibly since the end of the Cold War.

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When learning to drive, did you always drive in a straight line and never turn, never stop, never parallel park? Of course not. This rudimentary example presents the same challenge as the use of operational phases. Their rigidity in conceptual thinking might offer ways to allow for synthesis, distillation, and reduction, if only these were encouraged and rewarded. As a cognitive approach to planning, it is and should be one of many ways to think about a problem. From a practical matter, you realize having a car without brakes, reverse gears, over-drive, and so much more may not be such a convenience. Likewise, the operational phases seek only to move forward in a largely monolithic fashion without finesse or elegance.

At some point, someone created the bell-like curves and colors to suggest many components of each phase are happening simultaneously.

They learned something from Krulak; yet, it is still layered, not integrated. It should be integrated and interdisciplinary. One looks at the macrocosm of a place such as Iraq or Afghanistan and says, “we’re in Phase IV,” when we are nowhere close. Even if we are in Phase III in both, they are different based on so many other factors. Clausewitz again teaches us: “The act of attack, particularly in strategy, is thus a constant alternation and combination of attack and defense.” When operational phases are considered, they are broadly applied to a nation. Clausewitz cautions us that the “objective...need not be the whole country; it may be limited to a part—a province, a strip of territory, a fortress, and so forth.”⁵ This is an important point to make, and operational and strategic commanders and diplomats understand this. The challenge is encumbered by the antiquated and excessively-rigid planning process thanks to the routinized operational phases.

The use of operational phases for strategic-level planning clouds judgement and unnecessarily misrepresents a possible problem and set of solutions.

Defense planners around the globe use operational phases. Many of the planners looking at rogue nations, hard targets, or legacy adversaries develop a reflex for painting other countries and scenarios in their areas of responsibility with the same brushes used in operational phases. They look at a country or even a non-state actor and apply an inflexible mindset to a shifting and complex reality. This is especially true with emerging or simmering situations, often in fragile, failing, or failed countries. These judgements may be valid; yet, when overlaid with operational phases, there emerges only one clear answer: “We must move to Phase III and get boots on the ground because

the other elements of government can’t or aren’t making it work.” On the contrary, a fragile, failing, or failed state does not reflect a foreign policy failure by the U.S. or anyone else. It may reflect poor governance, rule of law, economy, or even natural resources. It could also mean a manmade or natural disaster, shouting for U.S. or the international community’s intervention.

The operational phases inhibit the creative problem-solving the defense industry could provide. Their over-use and over-reliance drive military planning without allowing for sufficient development of rapport and collaboration among other U.S. agencies and departments. They assume there is a need for military intervention. The use of operational phases for strategic-level planning clouds judgement and unnecessarily misrepresents a possible problem and set of solutions. Often, when robustly and consistently consulted, the rest of government already had creative ideas and are implementing them in the field and around the world, which means there is always room for help and good ideas from DoD; however, there should be an awareness of mission creep toward Phase III. Just because a service member or defense civilian is tasked with developing a plan, does not mean operational phases are the right answers.

The following examples may help refine this point. In 2000, the status quo in Iraq between Saddam Hussein and the coalitions comprising military operation were largely static. The UN, several other intergovernmental organizations, several multinational corporations, and even many nongovernmental organizations were monitoring the activities in Iraq and were in some kind of dialogue with the Iraqi regime. In the year 2000, Iraq was Phase I and clearly not in Phase II. The 2008 Greek Recession, on the heels of the global recession, resulted in strained relations between Greece and its allies and trading partners in the West. Despite riots in the streets, use of domestic military force, and significant debt teetering on bankruptcy, this

fragile (some argue failing) nation persists today. The U.S. never classified our foreign affairs in Greece during this period as anything but steady state (Phase 0). Since its independence from the United Kingdom in the early 1930s, Pakistan has struggled to maintain and advance its political sovereignty. Many scholars and politicians suggest it has teetered on the brink of being a fragile or failing state. Despite being a nuclear power, the sixth largest national population, and its strategic importance, the U.S. has never considered Pakistan as anything but a steady state, Phase 0 nation. To suggest moving to a Phase I or more active military situation in Pakistan would risk further unrest in the region. This kind of destabilization is not only unwanted, it would be unwise. The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the terror this organization continues to afflict domestically and regionally has garnered the attention of the international media. Even after kidnapping hundreds of children, links to other global terrorism franchises, and continued mayhem, no Phase II emerged in Nigeria. Further, it does not currently represent an existential threat to the U.S., or even many (if any) of the countries in West Africa.

Critics of this position might argue this is because we are not at war in Greece or Nigeria; however, we were not at war in Iraq in 2000 either. If we are to commit to the operational phase notion, we should seek to remain perpetually in Phase 0. In fact, the State Department and most Ambassadors working for the U.S. and the President abroad would probably say they always prefer Phase 0 because it means we are successful.

The country team at any embassy is there before, during, and after most military actions and is often stuck holding the bag when the military moves on to Phase IV. This situation presents another challenge for the way the operational phases are used today. Phase IV should be the stabilizing phase. The military

and the DoD have been pressed to carry much of this load, though neither are designed to do so. Further, Phase IV, like Phases I and II, is not practiced, planned, or simulated like Phase III. The only incentive to get to Phase IV, as seen again and again, is to send troops home. Unfortunately, there are too many examples where the precipitous departure of the military and insufficient planning, measures of effectiveness, and achieved outcomes create a vacuum and subsequent instability.

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After repeated exercises, experiments, and scenarios, the military is comfortable in what many call the “race to Phase III.” There are myriad reasons for this. The first is the importance of the non-military, non-defense components of the U.S. government during Phase 0 and Phase I. The role of the military in relation to the whole-of-government, even the whole-of-society is minimal during the first phases. During the time of steady state and deterrence, there is little money to be spent on military equipment and, therefore, much more role for the rest of government and society. There is precious little opportunity to shoot tanks, artillery, mortars, or even train in small arms. This does not mean there is no role for the military during this period. The warrior ethos and the defense enterprise is not fully exercised, leaving it anxious for more sense of fulfillment. This fulfillment is found primarily during Phase III. The ideal might suggest moving away from or avoiding the notion of Phase III entirely and creating systems that allow for more peaceful solutions, with great emphasis on development and diplomacy. This means a systemic shift in how rewards are structured for promotions and

profit. Instead of incentivizing Phase III by focusing so much on it, the U.S. government is well advised to focus on rewarding success during prior phases. It need not be combat; a rewarding military career could mean helping a nation, ministry of defense, or partner army be more professional, responsive to civilian control, and supportive to the needs of their domestic stakeholders.

The U.S. Army's idea of regionally-aligned forces (RAF) may illustrate a greater investment in Phase 0. The RAF concept allows the Army to leverage its leadership and management skills in conjunction with its technical expertise, such as engineering, information management, and medicine to help partner nations grow during Phase 0 or I and avoid any kind of escalation. It also allows the military to support the other

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areas of diplomacy and development. After all, the civil affairs, Guard and Reserve sister-state programs, and other legacy exchanges have been working effectively in foreign countries for decades. Further, the defense attaches, as the military component of the U.S. Embassy's Country Team serve with distinction in many a fragile or failing state with no recommendation for war or operational phases other than Phase 0.

The DoD and the Services should not go to their colleagues at State and U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, and tell them what they are doing. Instead, through partnerships of equality, they should engage in a deliberate, patient, planning process that allows for better interorganizational alignment and greater synergistic effects over long periods. This might even allow those who believe the U.S. has a "grand strategy," to put their finger on it. It also

creates additional barriers to what some say is the risk of "militarization of American foreign policy," which popularized Karl W. Eikenberry.

Another challenge facing the DoD and Services is the use of wrong metrics and objectives, where desired outcomes energize bureaucratic momentum and become too hard to stop. Think about the notion of a leading question. In a leading question, the interrogative drives the answer. If an investigator asks if someone still beats his pet, no matter the answer, the person responding is guilty of something—he either admits to having abused his pet or of not stopping the abuse. Oversimplified perhaps, yet a powerful point to illustrate the wrong emphasis developed in today's phased approach. In many of the exercises, because there is a desire to get to Phase III and test the military's war footing, the milestones and markers used to rationalize this progression are largely contrived. Some will argue these milestones are developed to test the scenario. Maybe, but this gets back to the linear test of a series of non-linear events. Of course, the military and DoD exist to wage wars in a classic sense; however, as the world grapples with the future definitions of war and additional expectations are placed on the best-funded instrument of power, they must also change the way they employ forces during times of peace and conflict.

There is no reverse gear for the phased approach, so if Phase II is successful, can you go back to Phase I? The simple answer is it has never been tried. The operational phases make it difficult for planners and decisionmakers to shake off the oppressive mindset they are accustomed to. I am not sure they could construct a scenario to test it because it is anathema to their culture. It does not show clear combat success; it does not rationalize more equipment; and it does not advance contracts and bonuses.

Lack of a concept I call "strategic patience" points to the system-of-system shortfalls for the MDB environment the U.S. faces now and in the

future. Patience is hard for Americans, generally. Strategic patience is even harder. It is explicit in the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy. Generally, strategic patience means putting actions into motion that exceed one's time of command, one's rotation in a unit, or one's term in office. It is the set of actions put into place only after deep deliberation and contemplation. It is looking two or three people down the road in the leadership position. Some will argue, accurately, that they are already doing this. It is not carte blanche maliciousness or narcissism of leaders in the DoD and military industrial complex driving these efforts. Most of these patriots and public servants are well-intentioned, moral people. Rather, the system rewards people for spending money, for engaging in combat and warfare, and for using equipment. Currently, as demonstrated above, there is not a time when we can reward people for avoiding these facts, especially at higher and higher echelons.

So, what to do? There is no easy way to answer this question. In an exacerbated tone, a senior colonel asked me, "How do we plan without phases?" The fix lies in the system's thinking and deliberate planning the military is already so good at. The DoD is well-advised to distance itself from the operational phases and think strategically about the hard problems it faces. There are other really good, deliberate planning models out there, and the way we train, educate, and develop our leaders is changing. For example, the deliberate planning put in to operational phases is good. The military decision-making process (MDMP), embraced by the U.S. Army, feeds the operational phases. Do not throw out MDMP. Rather embrace the true nature of design thinking it grew from. For example, instead of focusing on the operational phases of war as the primary backdrop for any scenario, at any school, embrace the notion that volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions will persist and grow. Looking at MDB through a VUCA lens encourages a more dynamic, less linear understanding of the process.⁶ Taking a circular, even better, a spherical understanding would allow for better sense-making.

Keep words that have become common place like counterterrorism, irregular warfare, or counterinsurgency. They all have a place in a MDB, across a "three-block war," crisis, or natural disaster. Focus first on defining the problem. Focus on planning as President Eisenhower required. Do not restrict yourself so much to the operational phases that you get tunnel vision and lose the adaptability and agility to move in multiple directions. Synthesis of these points allows the U.S. government, the DoD, and the Services to focus on influence besides military force. Do not leave the military behind, but strive to better understand and utilize it. The flawed notion that a force, a unit, or a country controls or owns something is what mires thinking and adheres us (blindly) to the operational phases. Clausewitz directs us to his observation: "...intellectual activity leaves the field of the exact science of logic and mathematics. It then becomes an art in the broadest meaning of the term—the faculty of using judgement to detect the most important and decisive elements in the vast array of facts and situations."⁷

Operational phases are the albatross of military planning. They impede good judgement, they prevent holistic sense-making, and they retard critical and creative thinking. Keep the operational phases for analysis and evaluation, but de-couple them from synthesis in policy and doctrine. This bureaucratic dogma and its zealots slow our victories and cost us blood and treasure. We are running low on both. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Department of Defense, Joint Staff, 2001, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf>, accessed on July 8, 2017.
- 2 Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, Air University, U.S. Air Force, Montgomery, AL, 1994.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Michael Howard and Peter Paret, "Carl Von Clausewitz: On War," Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984, p. 14.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 VUCA was first introduced at the U.S. Army War College and has become a well-trod phrase to demonstrate complexity. It was first presented in a paper by James A. Lawrence (USDA Forest Service) and Lieutenant Colonel Earl N. Steck (US Army), "Overview of Management Theory," 1991, <<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a235762.pdf>>, accessed on July 8, 2017.
- 7 Howard and Paret, p. 585.



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