



OPERATION DESIGN AT TACTICAL LEVEL

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The release of the Operations Planning Manual at national level has led to rethinking of how to carry out the operations planning, at all levels of the military art: strategic, operational and tactical.

By implication, the new concepts and approaches proposed through the manual were taken up, explained and adapted to a certain extent to national specificities and applied by all levels, even though some of them needed different clarifications and approaches (such as operation design).

Keywords: operation, tactical level, operation design, planning documents, operational framework.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to open up that dialogue that can lead to clarifying the meaning of the concept of *operations design* and how it can be developed at operational and especially tactical levels. At the national level, there is a well-detailed planning process for the operational level which is based on the main concepts and tools of the operations design, but unfortunately there are no doctrinal references to the necessity and development of this concept for the tactical level.

Appeared in the military planners language with the now well-known COPD¹, *the operations design* was intended to be the process to base the “*development of campaign/operational concept and planning documents*”². The use and development of this concept has generated many problems for military planners at the operational level, and, above all, from the tactical level, through its lack of explanation in the manuals or in specific operational planning doctrines and the lack of examples. Although *the Operations Planning Manual* ensures that the concept is defined and places it in the process carried out by the operational level, it does not provide any clarifications or details on the approach of this concept by the tactical level. In these circumstances, I believe that the main elements that require deepening and a close clarification relate to the level and the way in which the operations design can be developed.

One of the most difficult issues to which planning groups or staffs from tactical level must find an answer is *the existence and development of the operations design* at this level. The problem is difficult because this concept is detailed only for the strategic and operational level and there is some uncertainty when discussed at the tactical level.

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¹ *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive. At national level, the provisions of the COPD are contained in the Operations Planning Manual/Manualul de planificare a operațiilor, Statul Major General, București, 2016.*

² *** *Doctrina Armatei României, Statul Major General, București, 2012, p. 150.*



In 2009, the former commander of US Joint Forces Command, US General James Mattis, established the elements of the relationship between design and planning: "Design does not replace planning, but planning is incomplete without design. The balance between the two varies from operation to operation as well as within each operation. [...] Executed correctly, the two processes always are complementary, overlapping, synergistic, and continuous".

Although *the Operations Planning Manual* makes it clear that "at national level, the design takes two dimensions – strategic design and design at operational level"³, it does not provide further clarification on the approach to the tactical level, while the same manual represents the foundation for the development of specific planning manuals of different force categories (services).

Even though the appearance of the concept has questioned at some point the existence and conduct of the planning process, the design should not be seen as a replacement for it. The current planning processes for strategic and operational levels clearly determine when the design is deployed, the specific products of this process and the way they ensure the fluidity of the subsequent process. In 2009, the former commander of US Joint Forces Command, US General James Mattis, established the elements of the relationship between design and planning: "Design does not replace planning, but planning is incomplete without design. The balance between the two varies from operation to operation as well as within each operation. [...] Executed correctly, the two processes always are complementary, overlapping, synergistic, and continuous"⁴. In these circumstances, the design and planning make it possible to transform the broad direction and orders of the commanders of the strategic and operational echelons into concrete missions and tasks for the tactical level.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN AT OPERATIONAL LEVEL

At operational level, the operation design is both a process and a product. It is a process due to the concrete steps to be taken to carry it out and a product because the application of the process aims at a combination of specific information and elements needed to continue the process. Produced as a result of the application of the operative arts⁵,

³ *** *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, op. cit., p. 18

⁴ General James Mattis, Former Commander, US Joint Forces Command, *Vision for a Joint Approach to Operational Design*, 6 October 2009, available at www.smallwarsjournal.com/blog/usjfc-com-releases-approach-to-operational-design-vision, retrieved on 23.01.2020.

⁵ *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor defines operational art as the employment of the military instrument to attain strategic and/or operational objectives through the design, organisation, integration and conduct of campaigns, operations and battles, linking military strategy and tactics.*

the operation design is the expression of the Commander's vision regarding the transformation of the unacceptable situation from the start of the campaign, into a number of acceptable conditions at the end of it⁶.

Achieving the design through the united input of the planning group and the commander allows the operational level to view the overall picture of the whole campaign and identify the elements that ensure smooth tactical actions. While the planning group is responsible for the development of the *operational framework* (series of specific concepts identified or determined in accordance with current specifications), the structure commander is required to establish and issue the *initial intention*. Together, these two elements form **the initial operational design**⁷.

At national level⁸, the operational framework is developed based on operational design specific concepts, which are aligned to those identified at Alliance level. Used in a progressive sequence, design concepts are needed to understand operational requirements and ease planners activities. National documents comprise 12 concepts, such as: desired end state, transition and termination, objectives, effects, performance and effectiveness indicators, criteria for measuring success, centres of gravity and the associated capabilities, requirements and vulnerabilities, decisive points and conditions, lines of operations, the geometry of the operation, sequence of actions and phases of the operation (established by applying the following operational concepts: timing, synergy and multiplier effect, simultaneity and depth, maneuver, operational tempo and main effort), contingencies – branches and sequels, culmination, operational breaks, direct and indirect approach⁹.



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⁶ *** COPD INTERIM V2.0, *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*, 4 October 2013, p. 4-52.

⁷ ***, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, Statul Major General, București, 2016, p. 114.

⁸ ***, *Doctrina planificării operațiilor în Armata României*, Statul Major General, București, 2013, p. 40.

⁹ Concepts are detailed in *Doctrina planificării operațiilor în Armata României*, op. cit., pp. 40-57.



But at operational level, the operational framework is achieved during Phase 3 of the planning process (*operational estimate*), by establishing *the decisive conditions, effects, operational and non-military actions, lines of operations, sequences and phases of the operation, branches and sequels of the lines of operation*¹⁰. This approach should be seen as a *logical route to the preparation of the operational framework, but may vary depending on the commander's directions and the planning group's experience*¹¹.

The commander's intention is stated during the *Mission analysis briefing*, at which point the operational framework is also validated, while the operational design as a whole will be approved during *the Decision briefing*.

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According to the provisions of the Romanian Army Doctrine, the tactical level represents the level "at which clashes and battles are planned and executed to accomplish the military objectives of the units and large tactical units"¹². The documents drawn up in support of planning and evaluation of operations or targeting process shall further specify the meaning that the tactical level begins with the force categories and operational components. This reality, irrespective of the force category (land, air, naval or special operations), requires that the operations planning for this level must meet the requirements and specificities of all component structures and the specificities of military specialty. Taking these elements into account, performing the operational design at the tactical level raises several questions about its opportunity and how it can be done, as well as the level up to which it can be applied.

I believe that the main issue of the operation design at national level is, first and foremost, its own definition. At NATO level, there is in the military literature the notion of "*operational design*" which, at national level, has been translated and implemented under the name

¹⁰ ***, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor*, op. cit., pp. 116-117.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 116.

¹² ***, *Doctrina Armatei României*, op. cit., p. 159.

“operation design/designul operației” and not as *“operational design/designul operațional”*, as would have been more accurate. For correct information, within the Alliance there are *“operational design”* and *“operations planning”* to distinguish between the level of planning and operation¹³.

Taking and translating the word *“operational”* from English with the word *“operațional”*, but at the same time also with the word *“operativ”*, has led to many difficulties or anomalies in national textbooks or doctrines. In these circumstances, the level between strategic and tactical is the *operative level* that makes an assessment of the *operational environment*, develops both *“operational”* and *“operative”* plans and meets *operational requirements*. The *operational design* at this level is based on *“operational framework”* (correctly taken from the English „*operational framework*”) and not on *“operative framework”* (in the logic of taking over the term “operational”) and the intention of the commander.

While at NATO level, *“operational design”* is linked to its operational level and its specific operation, at national level *“operation design”* can be understood as addressing to all structures carrying out operations. This has also introduced this uncertainty in the use of the concept.

Another aspect that makes it difficult to develop the operational design at the tactical level is the characteristics of the level itself. Tactical level analysis requires consideration of a quite large number of structures, starting from the force categories and operational components and ending with battalion or even company-level subunits. In these circumstances, it is impossible to perform the operation design, as it is impossible to comply with the standard format of the concept for all these structures. However, under these conditions the tactical level option would be limited to determining which structures can meet the requirements of the operation design.

One final aspect to be taken into account when discussing the operation design at tactical level is its concepts, which are simply



Within the Alliance there are “operational design” and “operations planning” to distinguish between the level of planning and operation.

¹³ COPD INTERIM V2.0, *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*, 4 October 2013, p. 1-3.



The primary element from which to start when discussing the operation design is the provisions of the planning documents. In order to be able to carry out the operation design, there shall be an operational framework and a commander's intention. Even if there is a commander's intention but, an incomplete operational framework, lacking in any important elements, the operational design, as outlined above, cannot be discussed.

not characteristic of this level, regardless of the efforts of planners in this manner. I believe that the main concepts that cannot be identified at tactical level, in the sense that they can contribute to the operation design, are *decisive conditions, effects and lines of operations*.

The primary element from which to start when discussing the operation design is the provisions of the planning documents. In order to be able to carry out the operation design, there shall be an *operational framework* and a *commander's intention*. *Even if there is a commander's intention but, an incomplete operational framework, lacking in any important elements, the operational design, as outlined above, cannot be discussed.* At both national and Alliance level, it is quite clear that, at the joint level, the operational framework and, consequently, the design is developed by establishing *decisive conditions along lines of operations leading to the achievement of operational level objectives and thus contributing to the achievement of the strategic objectives and the final end state*¹⁴. I believe that the use of the term “*operation design*” must be made in accordance with the definition, the terms and, above all, their meaning defined by the specific documents.

In these circumstances, analysis of the definitions and characteristics of the main concepts referred to above, as set out in the specific national documents, leads to the following main elements:

❖ *Decisive conditions* are critical to achieving an operational objective, the scope of this concept being far more comprehensive than the *decisive points*. While the decisive points can be used to achieve the operational design of force-on-force operations¹⁵, the use of decisive conditions is much closer to the reality of the operating environment and specific to “*current operations, as it better reflects the military contribution to the comprehensive approach*”¹⁶. The same conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of the definition of concepts in *Table 1*. For the tactical level, it is therefore appropriate to use,

¹⁴ ***, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor, op. cit.*, p. 20 and COPD INTERIM V2.0, *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*, 4 October 2013, p. 1-13.

¹⁵ ***, COPD INTERIM V2.0, *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*, 4 October 2013, p. 4-52.

¹⁶ ***, *Doctrina planificării operațiilor în Armata României, op. cit.*, p. 49.



where the situation requires, the “*decisive points*” and not the decisive conditions, which are far too generous and complex for this level. But under these circumstances, no further concordance with the definition and concepts of the above operational framework is achieved.

Decisive point	Decisive condition
A point from which a hostile or friendly centre of gravity can be threatened. This point may exist in time, space or in the information environment.	A combination of circumstances, effects, or a specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when achieved, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an opponent or contribute materially to achieving an operational objective

Table 1: Definition of the terms decisive point and decisive condition^{17, 18}

In general, an effect can be defined as “a change in the physical or behavioural state of a system or system element, which is created by the result of one or more actions”.

❖ In general, an effect can be defined as “*a change in the physical or behavioural state of a system or system element, which is created by the result of one or more actions*”¹⁹. Characteristic of this concept is that the effects are used in planning and carrying out operations at strategic and operational levels only²⁰, with tactical levels focusing on “*the tasks required to fulfil missions which, ultimately, lead to the achievement of the desired impacts at strategic and operational level*”²¹. Even if tactical level actions are logically followed by the normal effects of their development (according to the effect definition), I believe that *the effects* cannot be quantified at the true value at this level or, under certain conditions, may be confused with the objectives set at both the upper echelon level, and within its own structure. It is therefore logical that the tactical level should strive to identify the tasks needed *to carry out the received missions* from the operational level and not to *identify*

¹⁷ *Doctrina Armatei României, op. cit., pp. 148, 167.*

¹⁸ ***, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (English and French)*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NSO, 2016, p. 40.

¹⁹ ***, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor, op. cit., p. 187.*

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 17 and COPD INTERIM V2.0, *Allied Command Operations Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive*, 4 October 2013, p. 1-11.

²¹ ***, *Manualul de planificare a operațiilor, op. cit., p. 81.*



The concepts of operation design are logically developed – as previously mentioned – and are in a determining relationship, in the way that identifying a concept leads to the establishment and identification of the next. At the same time, however, the absence of a concept can create problems in identifying another concept or even make it impossible to establish the operational framework as it has been defined.

their effects. However, at tactical level, the structure commanders may make recommendations on actions that may be carried out by their own forces to achieve the effects set at the operational level;

❖ The line of operations is “*a logical sequence linking in time and space the effects and decisive points, on the road to the centre of gravity, in order to achieve an operational objective, in a campaign or operation*”²² and, usually, there is a line of operations for each objective²³. If the line of operations links effects, decisive points and objectives, logically, the absence of one or more constituent elements entails its cancellation. We therefore consider that, in the absence of decisive effects or conditions, no tactical lines of operations can be identified.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of operation design are logically developed – as previously mentioned – and are in a determining relationship, in the way that identifying a concept leads to the establishment and identification of the next. At the same time, however, the absence of a concept can create problems in identifying another concept or even make it impossible to establish the operational framework as it has been defined, in which situation is the tactical level today.

The operation design as adopted in documents elaborated at national level cannot be developed at tactical level due to the arguments presented above. However, there is a possibility that this may happen, either because of the provisions of the manuals at this level or because of an overzealous approach of the commanders or the planning group, by force-action of the effects, decisive conditions or lines of operations. *The effects* of such an approach lead to an overload of the staff involved and unjustified congestion of the process, with time being increasingly limited.

²² *Ibid*, p. 190.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 117.

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