

Operational Art:

A Necessary Framework for Modern Military Planning

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In today's wars and future conflicts, military leaders will face a wide variety of complex threats. They must be capable of addressing these threats in the context of Joint and multinational operations, and they must have the vision to understand how best to apply assets in a manner that will ultimately achieve US national policy aims. In short, leaders must employ operational art. A key question to ask is whether the United States—now that it has shifted its focus toward great power competition in an increasingly multipolar world—retains sufficient aptitude in operational art. A review of the history and development of operational art, as well as an assessment of its importance in a modern context, serves as a reminder of the nature and continuing relevance of operational art in a changing world. This article focuses on deriving classic lessons from operational art that will be relevant to American military planning vis-à-vis Russia, China, and smaller national and nonstate enemies in a counterinsurgency context.

Current theory defines operational art and planning as a process that allows for an efficient distribution of combined forces in ways that will achieve desired outcomes. According to Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, operational art represents “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.”¹

Current interpretations of operational art additionally emphasize its role in linking diverse units and forces together as a means of achieving key objectives through reliance on combined force.² Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning* states “operational art and operational design enable understanding, provide context for decision making, and enable commanders and planners to identify hazards, threats, consequences, opportunities, and risk.”³ Although such interpretations represent established ideas and frameworks that military decisionmakers apply within their dimensions of operational planning, they also reflect ideas that have evolved over time.

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1. *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [CJCS], June 18, 2022), xiii.

2. Chad Buckel, “A New Look at Operational Art: How We View War Dictates How We Fight It,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 100 (2021).

3. *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, December 1, 2020), xi.

A historical review of the evolution of operational art offers an evaluation of the theory's origins to demonstrate how the ideas underlying operational art derive from the foundation of modern warfare and military planning and how the concept matured and evolved. Assessments of the theory's impact on the US military experience show how it has shaped America's approach to operations at the service and Joint levels. This article ultimately demonstrates the relevance of operational art with respect to American planning as it relates to Russia, China, and counterinsurgency (COIN).

Operational Art and Planning: Historical Development and Evolution

In forming the plan of a campaign, it is requisite to foresee everything the enemy may do, and be prepared with the necessary means to counteract it. Plans of the campaign may be modified ad infinitum according to the circumstances, the genius of the general, the character of the troops, and the features of the country.

Napoleon⁴

The French and Prussian traditions of operational art not only inform the history, but also current practice and definition of operational art. Napoleon Bonaparte's restructuring of the French army into corps—semi-independent bodies with their own infantry, cavalry, and artillery—allowed for greater operational flexibility and is a direct antecedent to modern combined arms and joint warfare concepts present in today's operational art.⁵ This restructuring made the army more adaptable, able to execute complex maneuvers, and capable of responding to dynamic battlefield situations.

The Napoleonic method, especially during his early campaigns, exemplified the synchronization of efforts across the battlefield. Using a combination of speed, mass, and the interior lines of communication, Napoleon could concentrate his forces rapidly to achieve a decisive advantage. This notion of synchronized operations for achieving a higher operational tempo remains a fundamental aspect of current operational art.⁶ Although attributed more to Soviet military theory, the roots of the “deep battle” concept—targeting the entirety of the enemy's forces rather than just the forward units—can be traced back to the French emphasis on strategic depth during Napoleon's time.⁷ This has evolved and is reflected in contemporary definitions of operational art, emphasizing depth and simultaneity of operations.

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the chief of the German General Staff from 1857 to 1888, is often credited with developing the idea of allowing commanders significant

4. *The Military Maxims of Napoleon*, ed. William E. Cairnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 56.

5. Frederick R. Strain, “The New Joint Warfare,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 2 (1993).

6. Christopher Bellamy, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

7. Frederick W. Kagan, “The Rise and Fall of Soviet Operational Art, 1917–1941,” in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, ed. Robin Higham and Frederick W. Kagan (New York: Springer, 2002).

“operational freedom.”⁸ This emphasized flexibility and adaptability, concepts central to contemporary operational art. The Prussian General Staff system, which focused on meticulous planning, staff wargaming, and continuous officer education, instilled a sense of operational planning that is still recognized today.

Modern operational art reflects this in the importance placed on detailed planning and coordination across various forces. The Prussian tradition also emphasized *Auftragstaktik*, or mission-type tactics.⁹ This decentralized decision-making approach, where lower-level commanders were given a clear understanding of the commander’s intent and the freedom to achieve that intent as they saw fit, has been integrated into modern operational art as a means of fostering initiative and responsiveness.¹⁰

Over time, especially during the World Wars, military thinkers and practitioners synthesized elements from both the Prussian and French traditions. The World Wars saw an unprecedented scale and complexity of military operations, necessitating an evolved understanding of operational art that drew from both traditions. Modern doctrines, particularly in the West, reflect a blend of these traditions. For instance, the US military’s emphasis on Joint operations, combined arms warfare, decentralized execution—akin to *Auftragstaktik*—and operational synchronization all bear marks of this historical legacy.¹¹

In essence, while operational art as a formally recognized concept might be relatively modern, its roots in the practices of Prussian and French military traditions are evident. The successes and failures of these historical practices have directly informed the way operational art is understood and practiced today.

Operational Art and Planning: Connections to Technology

The evolution and maturation of operational art, rooted in the traditions of Prussia and France but now impacting all nations, has been deeply influenced by the concurrent evolution of technology and is a tale of adaptation and reinvention. Historically, every significant advancement in technology has challenged existing military doctrines, forcing strategists and tacticians to rethink how wars are fought. At times, these shifts might make it seem as if operational art is becoming obsolete; but, in truth, it is continually evolving to incorporate these new elements.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras saw the advent of mass conscription, transforming armies from small professional entities to large bodies of citizen soldiers. This, combined with advancements in artillery technology, allowed Napoleon to leverage massed

8. Richard Davis, “Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian-German Development of a Decentralised Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870,” *Defence Studies* 5, no. 1 (2005).

9. Eitan Shamir, “The Long and Winding Road: The US Army Managerial Approach to Command and the Adoption of Mission Command (*Auftragstaktik*),” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 5 (2010).

10. Michael J. Gunther, *Auftragstaktik: The Basis for Modern Military Command* (New York: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015).

11. Shamir, “Winding Road.”

firepower and maneuver in new ways, adapting the corps system effectively to the technological realities of his era. The use of visual signaling systems, such as the semaphore, played a role in coordinating and synchronizing Napoleonic operations across vast distances.¹²

After the Napoleonic era, the meticulous planning and coordination associated with the Prussian General Staff system were heavily facilitated by the advent of the railway and telegraph systems in the nineteenth century. These technologies enabled rapid mobilization and communication, allowing von Moltke to execute wide-ranging operations with greater synchronization.¹³ Operational art adapted as technological advancements in artillery, specifically the ability to conduct indirect fire, required a more detailed level of operational planning, coordination, and reconnaissance—all hallmarks of the Prussian tradition.¹⁴

The stalemated battlefields of World War I were a direct result of technological advancements—notably, machine guns and barbed wire—outpacing tactical and operational thought. The challenge of overcoming static defensive lines led to further evolution in operational art, emphasizing combined arms operations, especially the integration of infantry, artillery, and the nascent air forces.¹⁵ Operational art matured by reemphasizing maneuver, albeit in a different context.

In World War II, the combination of motorized/mechanized units and radio communications allowed for more fluid and dynamic operations. Tanks, supported by aircraft and effectively communicated with via radio, allowed for deep penetrations into enemy territory. Some thought traditional principles of warfare, deeply rooted in horse-and-musket-era thinking, were now irrelevant. This confluence of technology and doctrine is exemplified in the German concept of blitzkrieg, which bears both Prussian and French influences—a modern manifestation of older principles such as surprise, concentration, and maneuver.¹⁶ Post-World War II, the advent of nuclear weapons and electronic warfare equipment necessitated a new dimension in operational art, focusing on deterrence, rapid response, and electronic countermeasures. This era also saw the importance of operational security and deception reach new heights.

In the modern era, the digital revolution, cyber warfare, precision-guided munitions, space-based assets, and drones are once again reshaping operational art.¹⁷ The foundational principles derived from the Prussian and French traditions—including flexibility, synchronization, and combined arms operations—remain crucial. Yet they are continually adapted

12. Helena Rua, Alexandre B. Gonçalves, and Ricardo Figueiredo, “Assessment of the Lines of Torres Vedras Defensive System with Visibility Analysis,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 40, no. 4 (2013).

13. Davis, “von Moltke”; and Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

14. William Walworth, “Can Enduring Lessons Be Drawn from Previous Eras? Discuss with Reference to the Franco-Prussian Campaigns of 1870,” *Defence Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003).

15. Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904–1940* (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

16. James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

17. Daniel Byman, “Why Drones Work,” *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013).

to address the challenges and opportunities presented by new technologies. In essence, as technology evolves, so does operational art, always striving to best leverage the tools at hand to achieve strategic objectives.¹⁸

As the US military's involvement in the Global War on Terror highlighted, a technologically superior force can still find itself challenged by asymmetric threats and guerrilla warfare.¹⁹ Operational art is crucial in adapting traditional doctrines to counterinsurgency, urban warfare, and nation-building missions.²⁰ While technological advancements periodically challenge the relevancy of operational art, they never render it obsolete. Instead, they drive its evolution. Operational art remains a necessary framework for understanding and applying military force, ensuring that technology serves strategy, rather than dictating it. The underlying principles of operational art—such as coordination, concentration, and adaptation—are timeless, even as the tools of warfare change.

Operational Art in Past US Military Contexts

The United States, as part of the Allied forces, applied the principles of operational art in major offensives such as Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion. The integration of sea, air, and land components; the synchronization of efforts; and the maneuvering of vast armies across Europe epitomized operational art.²¹ In the Pacific Theater, island-hopping campaigns demonstrated the United States' grasp of operational depth and sequencing.²² The US Navy and Marine Corps had to seize, hold, and use a series of islands as stepping stones toward the Japanese mainland, each with its own set of challenges and objectives.

The initial stages of the Korean War saw a rapid North Korean advance. Yet the Inchon Landing, masterminded by General Douglas MacArthur, showcased operational maneuvers, catching North Korea by surprise and reversing the course of the war.²³ Later stages, particularly after China's intervention, saw a shift in operational focus, with an emphasis on holding ground and positional warfare.

A controversial chapter in US military history, the Vietnam War, posed challenges to the application of operational art. The United States had clear tactical successes—such as in the Ia Drang Valley—but struggled with operational and strategic alignment.²⁴ The

18. Shamir, "Winding Road."

19. Zalmay Khalilzad, "Afghanistan & Iraq: Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010).

20. Khalilzad.

21. Francis Mackay, *Overture to Overlord: The Preparations of D-Day* (New York: Pen and Sword, 2005).

22. John T. Hanley, "Creating the 1980s Maritime Strategy and Implications for Today," *Naval War College Review* 67, no. 2 (2014).

23. Robert D. Heintz, "From Our May 1967 Issue: The Inchon Landing: A Case Study in Amphibious Planning," *Naval War College Review* 51, no. 2 (1998).

24. Peter J. Schifferle, *The Ia Drang Campaign 1965: A Successful Operational Campaign or Mere Tactical Failure?* (New York: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015).

enemy's guerrilla tactics, the political constraints, and the difficulties of fighting in the dense terrains of Vietnam often made traditional operational planning challenging.

Though not a "hot" war, the Cold War period saw the United States engage in extensive operational planning, particularly in Europe, where the possibility of a Soviet invasion was a constant concern. Operational art was reflected in the development of plans to rapidly reinforce Europe, conduct deep strikes into advancing Soviet columns, and employ nuclear weapons as deterrence and, if necessary, in warfare.²⁵

Next, Operation Desert Storm showcased the United States' first application of operational art in conflict following the Cold War. The United States executed a vast enveloping maneuver, combining airpower, ground forces, and deception operations that decimated the Iraqi Army in a matter of weeks.²⁶ In Iraq and Afghanistan, the initial stages of both wars saw rapid US victories, but the subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns posed challenges.²⁷ While the US military showed tactical proficiency, there were criticisms regarding the alignment of operational objectives with strategic goals. The complexities of nation-building, tribal dynamics, and the insurgent nature of the enemy made operational art application intricate.

There is an argument to be made that during the Global War on Terror, the US military's emphasis on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations led to a de-emphasis on traditional operational art. Battles were often about hearts and minds, about building local alliances, and about nuanced political and cultural dynamics as much as they were about defeating enemy forces.²⁸ This shift in focus could have led to atrophy in large-scale, traditional operational planning.

Arguably, operational art remains an essential tool in military planning. Yet its application and emphasis can shift based on the nature of the conflict and the adversaries involved. While counterinsurgency might downplay certain elements of operational art, conventional warfare against near-peer adversaries—as seen in the increasing focus on great power competition—brings operational art back into the spotlight. Its importance might ebb and flow based on contemporary challenges, but it remains a crucial aspect of military thinking.

Operational Art and Future Foes

Russia: Universal Themes and Historical Value

Operational art, as a military philosophy, has its roots in synthesizing strategic goals with tactical actions, ensuring that each tactical engagement serves a broader strategic

25. Stephen Biddle, "Strategy in War," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 3 (2007).

26. Frank N. Schubert, *The Whirlwind War: The United States Army in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995).

27. Khalilzad, "Afghanistan."

28. Khalilzad.

purpose. This nexus of strategy and tactics is as evident today as it has ever been, especially in the context of Russia.

Historically, figures such as Carl von Clausewitz emphasized the importance of understanding warfare's center of gravity and ensuring actions taken on the battlefield led to decisive outcomes. As previously discussed, the Prussian and later German military systems, for instance, placed significant emphasis on operational maneuver, epitomized by concepts such as the Schlieffen Plan in World War I and the blitzkrieg in World War II. These operational plans were not just about achieving tactical victories but about using those victories to achieve strategic outcomes: encircling enemy armies, capturing critical resources, or rapidly advancing to force a political decision.

Russian military thought, inspired in part by its historical experiences with the likes of Napoleon and the Eastern Front of World War II, evolved its own brand of operational art. Concepts like the aforementioned deep battle emerged, emphasizing simultaneous attack across the depth of the enemy's formation, combining political, informational, and kinetic means.²⁹ This heritage still influences Russian military operations today.³⁰ The annexation of Crimea and Russia's war in Ukraine has showcased a blend of traditional force, political manipulation, information warfare, and irregular militia operations—a modern reflection of deep battle in the hybrid warfare age.³¹

The vast expanse of the Russian landmass, combined with its myriad of potential frontlines—from the Baltics to Central Asia—demands a detailed operational approach. The concept of operational depth becomes even more crucial, given the potential for multifront conflicts and the historical invasions Russia has faced, from Napoleon to Hitler.

Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine have revealed Russia's emphasis on integrating nonkinetic means into its operational art.³² This includes leveraging information warfare, cyber capabilities, and “little green men” (unmarked soldiers) to achieve objectives even without conventional warfare. The application of operational art here involves synchronizing these unconventional assets with traditional military might.

On the defensive side, Russia's development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities in places like Kaliningrad or the Black Sea aims to deter or delay Western intervention, shaping the operational space to Russia's advantage.³³ Operational art in this context would require NATO planners to find ways to neutralize, bypass, or even turn these capabilities to their own advantage.

29. Ronald Ti and Christopher Kinsey, “Lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict,” *Defence Studies* 23, no. 3 (2023).

30. Ben Sohl, “Discolored Revolutions: Information Warfare in Russia's Grand Strategy,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2022).

31. Ti and Kinsey, “Lessons.”

32. Ti and Kinsey.

33. Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, “NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge,” in *Survival*, ed. Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias (New York: Routledge, 2023).

Operational art, in its essence, remains the mastery of synchronizing various elements of national power and military capabilities to achieve a strategic goal. The challenges posed by Russia, with its hybrid warfare, vast territory, and intricate defense networks, underscore the significance of understanding and leveraging operational art. Just as the German Wehrmacht aimed to use tactical victories for strategic success in World War II or the Mongols utilized operational maneuver to expand their empire, modern militaries must see beyond the immediate battlefield. To successfully counter challenges such as those posed by Russia, military leaders must grasp not only the tools and techniques of the modern age but also the universal lessons from history. Operational art serves as that bridge between the lessons of the past and the challenges of the present.

China: Universal Themes and Historical Value

To understand the importance and relevance of operational art in the context of China, one must first appreciate the historical trajectory of Chinese military thinking and its contemporary ramifications.

China's military history is replete with strategies and tactics that focus on the operational level. Ancient strategies like "36 Stratagems" and the emphasis on *shi*—strategic advantage or positioning—reflect a deep cultural appreciation for the nuances of operational maneuver.³⁴ These concepts are not mere relics of the past but continue to inform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategies in the modern era.

China's current military strategy places a significant emphasis on the maritime domain, with the aim of breaking through the First Island Chain, a series of archipelagos that stretch from Japan to the Philippines.³⁵ The operational challenges here are immense, ranging from antisubmarine warfare to anti-access/area denial strategies against potential adversaries. Operational art in this scenario would involve coordinating naval, aerial, and missile assets to ensure sea control and dominance. Much like Russia, China has shown a proclivity for operations in the gray zone—actions that are aggressive but fall short of traditional warfare. The PLA's activities in the South China Sea, including the building of artificial islands and militarization of disputed features, are examples of this.³⁶ Operational art, in this context, is about achieving strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of open conflict.

Reflecting the modern battlefield's digital nature, China has emphasized the integration of cyber capabilities into its military doctrine.³⁷ Operational art here would involve synchronizing electronic warfare, cyberattacks, and kinetic operations to degrade enemy capabilities and communications.

34. Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, "Rethinking China's Rise: Chinese Scholars Debate Strategic Overstretch," *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018).

35. Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012).

36. Tara Davenport, "Island-Building in the South China Sea: Legality and Limits," *Asian Journal of International Law* 8, no. 1 (2018).

37. Richard Alan Clarke and Robert K. Knake, *Cyber War: The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do about It* (New York: Tantor Media, 2014).

On land, the Belt and Road Initiative's strategic implications require the PLA to be capable of securing and defending vast stretches of infrastructure, potentially even in foreign territories.³⁸ This again necessitates a detailed operational approach to coordinate actions across vast geographies.

While the tools and tactics have evolved, the essence of operational art remains the same: ensuring that individual actions serve a broader strategic purpose. China's contemporary military posture, whether in the digital realm or the physical expanses of the Indo-Pacific, requires an intricate dance of coordination, foresight, and execution—the very hallmarks of operational art. As one analyzes China's strategic posture, it becomes clear that the universal principles of operational art, echoing from the annals of history, remain critical. Just as Sun Tzu emphasized the importance of strategy, deception, and environmental advantage, today's military leaders must blend ancient wisdom with modern capabilities to navigate the complex strategic landscape posed by China.

Counterinsurgencies: Universal Themes and Historical Significance

Historically, insurgencies have been rooted in political, socioeconomic, and cultural grievances. Their asymmetric nature means regular armies often grapple with an enemy that does not confront them in open battles but melts into the civilian populace, making conventional military strategies less effective. The challenges posed by insurgencies have perennially necessitated higher-order coordination between strategy and tactics: the very essence of operational art.

Classic works on counterinsurgency, from British officer T. E. Lawrence's experiences in the Arab Revolt to French officer David Galula's doctrine derived from the Algerian War, stress the significance of understanding the local population and winning "hearts and minds."³⁹ The success of these campaigns often pivoted on nuanced, localized operations backed by overarching strategic objectives: operational art in practice. Modern COIN operations also emphasize protecting and winning over the civilian populace, recognizing that insurgencies thrive amidst civilian support. Operational art in this domain would entail coordinating military actions, civil affairs, and psychological operations to gain popular trust and isolate insurgents.

Gathering actionable intelligence is paramount in COIN. This requires seamlessly integrating human intelligence, signals intelligence, and other intelligence assets to guide kinetic operations. The synchronization of intelligence with military actions epitomizes operational art. Striking a balance between aggressive operations against insurgents and nonkinetic operations, like development projects and governance initiatives, is also crucial. Operational art here ensures

38. Sean Braniff, "Leveraging Regional Partners: On 'US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia,'" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2021).

39. Thomas Edward Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Graphic Arts Books, 2020); and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2006).

tactical actions, kinetic or otherwise, align with the broader strategy of stability and governance. Understanding local customs, norms, and grievances allows forces to craft effective messaging and strategies, undercutting insurgent narratives. Operational art in COIN involves marrying cultural understanding with tactical actions for maximum impact.

Operational art's universality in COIN operations is evident when one considers the delicate balance military leaders must strike. Every action, from targeted raids to community engagements, must serve the broader objective of stability, governance, and winning popular trust. Historically, the most successful counterinsurgency campaigns, whether by Lawrence in the deserts of Arabia or by Galula in the streets of Algiers, seamlessly blended tactical prowess with strategic vision, showcasing the timeless and universal essence of operational art.

In the kaleidoscope of modern warfare, counterinsurgencies stand out as complex, human-centric operations. Here more than anywhere, the enduring principles of operational art—harmonizing strategy with tactics, ensuring every action serves a larger purpose—are not just advantageous, but indispensable.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, it is really the commander's coup d'oeil, his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, that is the essence of good generalship.

— Carl von Clausewitz⁴⁰

Operational art can be dated back to Prussia and Napoleonic France, but the main conclusion of this article is that the tools of operational art remain relevant to the United States in the current and evolving threat landscape. Operational art will apply to planning vis-à-vis Russia, China, and counterinsurgencies. The toolset of operational art is relevant not only to third-generation warfare but also to fourth- and fifth-generation warfare. Theorists and planners must be flexible in how they import the lessons and precepts of operational art into the current and evolving threat landscape. ➔✳

40. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 578.

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