

THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSION ANALYSIS IN MODERN MILITARY OPERATIONS

George-Ion TOROI, PhD Candidate

Major, Superior Instructor, "Carol I" National Defense University
george_toroi@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The complexity of today's operational environment has a direct impact on the military instrument of power of every nation. Nowadays, conflicts have a much bigger unconventional component. This component lies in the types of actors involved and the methods used by them. Most contemporary conflicts are no longer classic confrontations between two states that use their military constituent to impose their will on the adversary. Today, the other instruments of power play an equally important role. The resolution of today's conflicts does not only require a military approach to the problem, which further complicates the mission of the military forces, as they are forced to focus on other areas outside the military. Today, non-state actors play a much more important role in armed conflicts. They often fail to comply with international conventions on armed conflict and use any means available to achieve their own goals. In addition, the unprecedented technological development of society in general, but also the unrestricted access to these types of technologies further facilitates the use of unconventional methods by malicious non-state actors in support of their own interests. Therefore, it can be seen that, nowadays, the complexity of armed conflicts has increased exponentially, and the identification and understanding of the problem, the causes of conflicts, as well as the ways to resolve it have become increasingly difficult to achieve. In this regard, I believe that the military should develop appropriate procedures to support the correct understanding of what needs to be done to achieve success and to insist on optimizing the mission analysis as part of the military operations planning process, analysis that should develop the correct understanding of the situation and should support viable future options to solve the conflict.*

Keywords: *conflict; planning; mission; analysis; operational environment; understand.*

Introduction

Military operations represent human struggles that aim to change the opponent's behavior and impose one's will on the other. They are conducted in a dynamic and insecure operational environment to meet the political objectives of the respective international actor. Military commanders are the ones entrusted with power to lay down a vision and implement it in order to solve the problem identified. To that end, they lead and direct the process of operations, create the conditions for the development of common understanding with respect to the situation they face and also apply creative and critical thinking for the development of viable options to fulfill the entrusted missions. They, supported by their staff, use the process of operations to understand the situation, to visualize and describe the end state of the conflict, but also to envision the practical ways to establish those essential conditions to be met at the end of the operation. In this respect, they frame a plan in order to facilitate the coherent and synchronized military actions that need implementation, the effects of which will conduct to the mission success. Commanders also use this process to make logical decisions that support the direction, leadership and evaluation of military actions to make sure they follow the plan previously issued.

The general framework for conducting any type of military operation involves undertaking four subsequent activities: planning, preparation, execution and continuous evaluation of operations, all of them being inter-related and interconnected. In addition, it is absolutely necessary to carry out a series of integrative processes whose results and products support the efficiency of the aforementioned activities. The most important of these are: the intelligence preparation of the battle space, the risk management process, but also the target management process. The main characteristic of the development of contemporary military operations is represented by their accentuated dynamics. Today, more than ever, given the current technological developments, but also against the background of perpetual and rapid

evolution of operations, time has achieved special importance with regards to conflicts' success, gaining new valences in terms of planning, preparation and conduct of operations.

Going back to the process of carrying out the operation, it is necessary to emphasize that all four stages listed before are equally important and only their coherent development can lead to the fulfillment of the entrusted missions. However, in order to prepare and execute complex military operations, such as those characteristic to the current operational environment, with increased chances of success, it is essential to carry out a thorough and accurate planning process.

In this article I will highlight the importance of the operations planning process in today's military operations, focusing my attention afterwards on what I consider to have gained a critical significance nowadays for the operations success, as part of the planning process: **mission analysis**. Timely and accurate understanding of the problem the force is dealing with is what mission analysis is all about. I will use the descriptive method in order to draw the attention to its importance, considering today's nature of warfare, and then explain what mission analysis is all about and how one can optimize this process so that it facilitates increased chances of mission accomplishment.

The growing importance of planning in modern operations

First of all, drafting a plan is how the operations process starts. Planning involves the development of viable options in order to achieve desirable conditions from an unacceptable initial situation. The current operational environment characterized as volatile, uncertain, ambiguous and complex further emphasizes the importance of planning as accurately as possible in order to achieve the proposed objectives. This is because, first and foremost, planning requires an appropriate understanding of that complex operational environment of today. Subsequently, based on this understanding of the situation, which is intended to be as accurate and thorough as possible, planning involves the development of viable options that should lead to the success of military operations.

There is no doubt that planning, carried out independently, cannot lead to the achievement of military objectives, but it is one of the essential premises of a successful operation. The execution stage is the one that materializes with the fulfillment or not of the desirable conditions needed to be achieved at the end state of the military operation. However, its planning represents the phase when all the aspects related to understanding the situation and the problem faced by the military force, related also to establishing the desired end state to be achieved and, perhaps most importantly, related to developing the concrete ways in which this desirable situation can be reached, are established. Therefore, it can be stated without any reservation that good planning of operations can lead to a good execution and, consequently, to the fulfillment of the mission, while faulty or superficial planning will certainly lead to the failure of the military operation in that specific area.

Planning is both art and science. It involves understanding a tactical situation, predicting a desired end state and establishing the most appropriate methods and ways to achieve it. It is a series of activities carried out by the military force, at all levels, and involves the development of viable options to achieve certain acceptable results from an unacceptable situation. The development of the planning process can lead to the identification of the military actions necessary to be undertaken, the effects to be achieved, the decisive conditions and the objectives necessary for the fulfillment of the mission.

Planning cannot predict exactly what the effects of military operations will be or exactly how the adversary will act. However, understanding and knowledge, resulting from the planning process, is perhaps its biggest gain. Although the precise execution of the plan resulting from the planning process is very unlikely, the advantage of its deployment is to ensure a deeper understanding of the tactical situation which can support future decisions to adapt the initial plan in accordance with the situation development.

Other advantages of carrying out the planning process can be considered the following:

- understanding the problems faced by the military structure and developing solutions to solve them;
- anticipating certain future events and adapting to certain changing circumstances;
- organizing forces to fight and prioritizing efforts.

Planning is a key element for the mission success. Benjamin Franklin stated that “if you fail to plan, you plan to fail”. And this could not be more accurate. Although spontaneity is good (in my view, a critical skill), it is always wise to back yourself by planning, because that sets your thoughts in order, considering that, very often, a task has multiple elements to it and solving a problem needs coordinating several lines of effort towards the end state. I do believe that rigorous planning with an engineering mindset is probably the best way to mission accomplishment.

The result of the planning process is the operations plan or order, which in fact implies a directive for the development of future activities. Although the most important actor involved in the planning process is the commander, its successful development requires collaboration and continuous dialogue between commanders and staff in order to develop a solid plan. Commanders issue plans and orders to subordinates to communicate their vision on the conduct of military operations with regards to that specific situation. The role of the plans is to synchronize the actions of the forces in time, space and purpose in order to achieve their objectives and successfully fulfill the mission. Also, the plans describe the tactical situation, establish the task organization and the conception of operations, assign tasks to subordinate structures and essential coordination instructions necessary for the synchronization of military operations. The development of plans can ensure the identification of how the actions taken and the resources used contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the operation. In essence, the plan is the foundation by which the military can adjust its actions according to the actual situation, and the high efficiency of a plan does not necessarily imply its implementation, as planned, which is very unlikely, but rather, the successful conduct of actions in response to unforeseen situations that may arise on the battlefield. Therefore, the flexibility of the plan must be one of its key features.

The main challenges of an effective planning are related with uncertainty and time. Uncertainty boosts as the time horizon for which it is planned increases. Ideally, planning could be carried out for as long as possible so as to facilitate the proper preparation of military operations. However, the more you try to plan activities that are far away in the future, the less the relevance and accuracy of the resulting plan decreases. And this is for many reasons. The level and accuracy of the information provided by the intelligence branch can be considered as the main argument in this regard because it is almost impossible to obtain information that maintains its relevance over time. Therefore, the purpose of planning is not to eliminate uncertainty but rather to develop an operational framework in which planned military actions can take place. Planning can also be considered a forecast of future events. It involves identifying and evaluating possible decisions and actions that could be taken, but also their consequences. Planning involves both identifying the means and methods by which the future can be influenced, and how to respond to certain events that may occur. The accuracy of any planning is directly proportional to the level of information held about all factors that may influence the achievement of military operations objectives, essentially mission variables (METT-TC - mission, enemy, own troops, terrain, time and civilian factors) and the operational variables (PMESII – political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure).

As I mentioned before, the planning of military operations is, in itself, a process. And, like any process, a number of stages are subsumed. These can be, and even are, in most cases, different from state to state. However, no matter what planning process is used, there are a few constants in all of them that can be considered the backbone of any successful plan. Thus, planning involves understanding the situation, establishing the desired final state, developing options through which to reach that state and choosing the best of them, which is the course of action chosen to fulfill the task entrusted.

Planning, in essence, is not a very interesting approach, not requiring special action. It can be considered a game of imagination using certain levers and information available. Consequently, there are some tacticians that decide to skip this part or do a very light planning process in order to gain time in engaging the adversary, so they get directly to the execution phase. Most of the times, this approach leads to failure because the main benefit of planning is not necessarily anticipating and forecasting the future, but rather developing a common understanding within the headquarters regarding the problem faced and possible solutions to solve it. To be able to succeed on the battlefield, you must plan, as Benjamin Franklin stated in the quote I previously used, and the first thing one needs to do when planning is to perform a thorough analysis of the mission.

Understanding mission analysis

Mission analysis starts when a new order is received from the higher echelon, containing the tasks that need to be implemented and timelines regarding their achievement and synchronization in space and time. Alongside the tasks to be completed, you should receive coordinating instructions in order to simplify things for you and deconflict some aspects related with the area of operations, objectives and timeline for their assault and conquering as the higher sees it unfolding. All of these parameters underlie the initiation of the analysis. This examination involves a broad process of thinking and transforming the data and information available into useful things that can be used in the continuation of the planning process and the development of viable options for the success of the operation. An effective analysis of the mission should conclude with three key issues for the smooth continuation of the planning process. First of all, it should develop a correct understanding of the mission and the contribution of the military structure within the comprehensive plan of operations of the upper echelon. And this is because, regardless of the level of the warfare, the actions of any military force should support the mission fulfillment of the higher HQs. Second, mission analysis should be about comprehending the tactical situation and the problem the force is facing. Finally, the analysis of the mission supports the knowledge development and understanding necessary for the military structure to be able to start the later stages of the planning process and to be able to establish solid courses of action that offer enhanced possibilities for success. Therefore, it can be seen that the mission analysis is, in short, a process of understanding. Its importance in the broader planning process is colossal in that this understanding underlies the development of courses of action, and a flawed or superficial understanding can create major deficiencies in the way the military structure believes the problem it faces should be solved. One could consider mission analysis as being the foundation of a good plan. And if the foundation is not strong enough then everything falls apart. This is why mission analysis is, in my opinion, the most essential aspect in the planning process. Albert Einstein once said that “If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and only five minutes finding the solution”. To be able to properly define a problem, you need a correct understanding of it, first. This is what mission analysis is about in the operations planning process.

Even though mission analysis is a process that involves a fairly large number of subsequent steps, it can be simplified into three main areas, which can be understood as vital categories. All this requires deeper examination, but, in the end, they support the development of a thorough understanding of the situation. These categories are related to understanding the force’s own structure and its role in the upper echelon plan, understanding the opponent, its organization, disposal and intentions, but also understanding the terrain and its effects on our operations and on those of the adversaries. These three categories support your sound understanding of the problem. Sun Tzu has so aptly synthesized: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle”¹.

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Rupa Publications India, New Delhi, 2016, p. 14.

An overwhelming importance for the development of the correct understanding of the situation, necessary for a good planning and execution of military operations, is the level, volume and accuracy of the information held, as highlighted by Cristian-Octavian Stanciu in the article *Implications of modern systems and technologies in redefining new doctrine concepts*: “No matter the type of confrontation, in order to reach the final goal, that is, defeating the enemy, the way operations are conceived and combat actions are performed must definitely be based on intelligence”². It is also said that a plan is as good as the information you have. Concerning this, the intelligence branch has an overwhelming job to do in creating the proper understanding of the operational environment. Nonetheless, their resources are limited in collecting, analyzing and disseminating information, so their efforts should be focused and prioritized only on those data and information of extreme importance for the operation success. The more the data collected the harder the process to produce viable information and the more chances to create confusion amongst troops. And with time being of the essence in today’s military conflicts, directing the intelligence branch towards needed, accurate, exact, timely and reliable information is of outmost importance. As stated before, the commander is the most important actor in the operations planning process. He is also the one channeling the intelligence branch efforts towards that information he considers of being critical to the operation’s success. In this regard, he issues the commander’s critical information requirements that become priority number one for the intelligence collection community. It is him who decides how to employ the intelligence assets he has available because, at the end of the day, it is his vision that should become the operation’s plan, him being the one responsible for the mission’s success.

The analysis performed during the mission analysis step of the operations planning process develops understanding, and in order to channel this understanding as well as possible, I believe a set of comprehensive predefined worksheets can better facilitate this. Their reasoning is to develop knowledge of those aspects essential to the success of military operations. As I previously outlined, mission analysis is all about understanding the problem. In order to optimize this, one needs to focus his attention on three main categories: understand itself, understand the enemy and properly assess the aspects and implications of the terrain and weather on military operations. Further on, I will try to elaborate on what these three categories mentioned above imply, by developing a set of subsequent information to be analyzed with regards to each category. This is certainly not a complete checklist, as it may differ depending on the specifics of the military structure performing the mission analysis and on the type of operation, but there are undoubtedly some key ideas that can be used regardless of the nature of the conflict or military organization.

The first main thing that needs to be done to comprehend the problem is to develop an understanding related to yourself and your purpose into the overall concept of operations. In this regard, you should analyze the higher headquarters’ plan in order to identify what your specified tasks are and how you fit into the higher overall vision for conducting the operation, because, in the end, your actions should serve to the upper echelon mission accomplishment. Knowing your higher mission and intent is crucial in this regard. Equally important is to identify the limitations, both constrains and restraints, imposed by the higher, so that you can incorporate it into your own plan. There might be times during the operation when you must cooperate with adjacent units, so, when analyzing the upper’s order you should also pay attention to what the neighboring units are told to do. Having a good understanding of what the higher headquarters wants from you, now you can start identifying other implied tasks that are a must in order to execute those imposed to you by the higher. At this time, you should have a clear picture of what you have to do to create those effects the higher wants from you. Next,

² Stanciu Cristian-Octavian, *Implications of modern systems and technologies in redefining new doctrine concepts*, Bulletin of “Carol I” National Defence University, no.1, Bucharest, 2015, p. 161.

you should examine these tasks in comparison with your own force, so that you can identify shortcomings with regards to your fighting power. Doing this, you can pinpoint your strengths to further incorporate it into your plan, but also your weaknesses and vulnerabilities, that you need to conceal so that it will not be exploited by the adversary on the battlefield.

Second, you need to understand your opponent. On this subject, everything should start with understanding his end state, what his mission is, what he wants to achieve and how he intends to do it. Knowing his end game can help you develop viable and feasible courses of action for mission accomplishment. Having a good idea on what his goals are you can further analyze enemy composition and disposal. This should facilitate you with information about any shortcomings he might have. Comparing his disposal not only with his previously used tactics and doctrine, but also the terrain impact on his operations, only then are you able to predict the enemy's courses of action. When analyzing his COAs you should struggle to reveal his vulnerabilities so that you may develop options that exploit it, but also discover the enemy's strengths in order to avoid them. Bear in mind that all you did by now, with regards to the adversary, is to foresee some actions, based on some data you believe is true, considering things and patterns of his. All of this data should be verified and at this point the intelligence collection branch develops a plan on how to use its assets to confirm or deny your assumptions with regards to the enemy. If, by the time you go into the execution phase, you do not have all of this information verified, then either you assume some operational risks or you develop some branch plans, "what if" plans, to cover the situations you think might happen.

Last, but not least, you should have a good understanding on how the terrain and weather may impact your operation and the adversary's and maybe exploit it in order to generate fighting power where necessary on the battlefield. The most efficient is to analyze all the aspects regarding the acronym OCOKA (Observation and Field of Fire, Cover and Concealment, Obstacles, Key Terrain and Avenues of Approach). That should give the understanding you need to further develop the plan. Although each type of environment (desert, urban terrain, mountains, forest etc.) offers different variables, there are features common to all and applying the above acronym when examining the terrain impact on the operations is still the best solution at hand. As for the weather, history gives plenty of examples when weather features overwhelmingly influenced the outcome of the military conflicts. When analyzing how the weather is affecting the operations, one should examine aspects such as the visibility, the wind, precipitations, cloud cover, temperature or humidity.

Here, too, I consider it is also necessary to comprehend how the civil environment affects the use of military capabilities. In contemporary military conflicts, characterized by a continuous struggle to influence the population in the area of responsibility, the exhaustive analysis of the operational environment, one of the main activities of the intelligence community, involves more than studying issues related to the enemy, weather and terrain. In such types of conflicts, for a deep understanding of the problems faced by the military force, it is imperative that the intelligence branch perform a complete analysis of the socio-cultural factors of the community in the area of responsibility, identifying all data on population, culture or local customs, information that might come in handy when executing the operation.

Having a thorough understanding of the self, the enemy and the operational environment, you can, at this time, continue the planning process with minimal risk of going in the wrong direction, concretely establishing those courses of action that highlight the practical ways in which the forces are organized and the types of military actions needed to be performed in order to meet their objectives. The commander is the one channeling the staff efforts towards those actions he envisions to bring about the end state's conditions. In this respect, the mission analysis step of the operations planning process ends with the commander's planning guidance to his staff.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe that one can acknowledge the importance of a scrupulous mission analysis that translates into a correct and coherent understanding of the operational environment in which military operations take place and its vital role for the mission success. This is because, today, the operational environment in which forces operate is a very complex and unstable one, being subjective to a large number of factors, many of which exceeding the field and the purely military confrontation, factors that have an overwhelming influence on the situation causing considerable risks to operations. Today, the pace and volume of information flow that requires analysis is very high and generates difficulty in predicting the effects for future actions. The current environment also implies an increased rapidity of changes in the situation that requires an adaptive, pro-active and innovative style on the part of decision makers. In this regard, it is essential to carry out a thorough mission analysis process that will generate the understanding that military decision-makers need to better manage the situation, thus providing them with the leverage needed to make the best decisions that will lead to mission accomplishment.

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