



OPERATIONAL APPROACH OF LAND FORCES IN THE HIBRID CONTEXT

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Visualizing the various operational contexts of recent Land Forces' employment, there were many situations where the nominated structures also faced unconventional adversaries, even though, initially, the nature of operation had been identified as having a conventional pattern. This particularity is perpetuated more and more aggressively, determining the conventional military structures of the Land Forces to operate in order to face both regular and irregular forces, even within the same AO. Based on these coordinates, the article triggers to identify the principles needed to adjust the operational approach of Land Forces, so that the organic structures can perform in engaging the adversary from AOs within current and future operations. Also, a subsidiary objective of the present research is to identify the mutations at the level of ACOAs based on which the adjustment of FFCOAs will be made.

Keywords: hybrid operational approach; ACOA, FFCOA; regular forces; irregular forces.

The various recent operational contexts have highlighted the fact that the approaches of participants to the military actions have undergone significant changes, the most conclusive being localized at the level of courses of action (COAs) adopted. It is not so difficult to understand how and why this formula was adopted, the justification being the opponent's intention to balance the combat power by diminishing the conventional advantages of friendly forces. Practically, friendly forces are determined to react to the permanent opponent's operational changes, the latter being able to correlate, optimally, actions of regular and irregular forces, even though in the same tactical area of operations (AO).

The reaction of the friendly forces has not taken long to appear, and in this sense the doctrines of different armies, out of the desire to improve their Land Forces' training, use the opposing forces (OPFOR), clarifying it, from theoretical view, as "a plausible, flexible, and free-thinking mixture of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements representing a composite of varying capabilities ... (doctrine, tactics, organization, and equipment)"¹. Organized and prepared to act in accordance with the opponent's doctrinal model, the usefulness of OPFOR is given by the possibility of understanding and combating opponent's tactics,

techniques, and procedures (TTPs) by developing and applying adversary COAs (ACOA), based on hybridization of his actions.

From the perspective of operational approach, the Land Forces have to rethink their options, either operating individually, which requires their own operational adaptation, or interagency, in close cooperation with other entities such as special operations forces (SOF).

Mutations in the opponent's COA and TTPs

In general, ACOAs are determined by performing the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) which, according to APP-28, is renamed as intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE), representing the "systematic process of analyzing the adversary (enemy), terrain, and weather in an area of interest to determine their (likely) effects on operations"². Although these two concepts differ, the IPB focusing on a more detailed analysis of the specific elements, while the IPOE approaching them more comprehensively and generically, supporting the commander in "identifying the adversary's most likely intent and COA ... strategy, vulnerabilities, and centers of gravity"³, in essence, both comprise the same activities, as follows: "define the operational environment, describe environmental effects on operations, evaluate the threat, determine threat COAs"⁴.

Therefore, at the level of adversary's visualization, the most conclusive mutations appear related to the threat's evaluation, respectively

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ACOAs' determination. The first variable, threat's evaluation, is pointed to "threat force capabilities and the doctrinal principles and TTP threat forces prefer to employ"⁵. Analysis of threat's evaluation highlights the fact that, until recently, the personnel specialized in intelligence from Land Forces (S2, G2) considered only the adversary's conventional component, somewhat omitting their correlation with unconventional capabilities and TTPs. As a result, at present, the threat's evaluation by S2/G2 should be much more comprehensive, including⁶:

- regular threats – probable hostile intentions of the opponent's conventional forces such as tactical military structures (battalion, brigade, and so forth) that have the ability to operate in a multi-domain manner; as a rule, the opponent's conventional forces are used when are created windows of opportunity, in other words, moments when friendly forces can be surprised;

- irregular threats – probable hostile intentions of terrorist/insurgent structures, transnational criminal organizations, nationalist entities, guerrilla elements, paramilitary structures, and so on, which exhibit an excessive degree of volatility in the use of their specific capabilities;

- hybrid threats – probable hostile intentions substantiated by correlating regular and irregular forces to generate effects and achieve common desired end states; as a rule, during the operation, the characteristic structures and entities complement each other.

Thus, in defining the adversary doctrinal model, S2/G2 personnel should capture the whole mixture of its forces and structures, starting from the regular ones to the irregular ones.

Regarding the determination of ACOAs, it is substantiated by integrating the threat's evaluation and developing event's template/matrix. Therefore, the adjustment of the threat evaluation, which as outlined above is an essential element, must also be transposed on the ACOAs' determination. More specifically, in the final form ACOAs must highlight very clearly the likely capabilities, intentions and actions of all entities involved, even if S2/G2 personnel may have difficulties in analyzing and estimating irregular forces. There are two possibilities for transposing all elements of the opponent: developing integrated ACOAs that picture all adversary's capabilities and probable actions; developing ACOAs dedicated to the

regular component as well as ACOAs specific to the irregular one. Although the first option is much more complex and demanding, the benefits of its applicability can be more conclusive, as it is much easier to visualize the likely conjugated effects on friendly forces COAs (FFCOAs).

Also, another pattern that should be taken into account in determining ACOAs is that of combining operational procedures specific to the regular forces such as area defence, deliberate offense and so forth, with irregular forces' TTPs. One such ACOA that somewhat follows the above pattern is the one used by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) for Mosul defence, determined at that time as the center of gravity (COG) of ISIS forces in Iraq. Broadly speaking, ISIS COA was based on adopting the task of area defence fueled by hybrid TTPs, manifested in the form of: integrating the Mosul city into the combat formation; using the indigenous population (seized by jihadists) as human shield; emplacing on main avenues of approach of the entire range of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), most of them vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIEDs) in nature, to acquire counter mobility of friendly forces⁷.

Concluding on this first part, it can be appreciated that the opponent should not only be interpreted in a divided manner, but rather in an integrated one that captures all elements of generating the opponent's combat power, on the one hand, respectively the probable intentions to direct it, on the other hand.

Principles regarding the hybridization of friendly forces COAs

Clarifying the issues related to the reconfiguration of ACOAs, further attention will be focused on analyzing the Land Forces' operational approach, in order to identify those elements that require interventions within it. First of all, taking into account the international military literature, the operational approach is understood as "a broad description of the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions required to accomplish the mission"⁸. From another theoretical perspective, the operational approach represents the head bridge which links initial state and desired end state, ensuring the overcoming of identified obstacles which are represented by ACOAs (Figure 1).

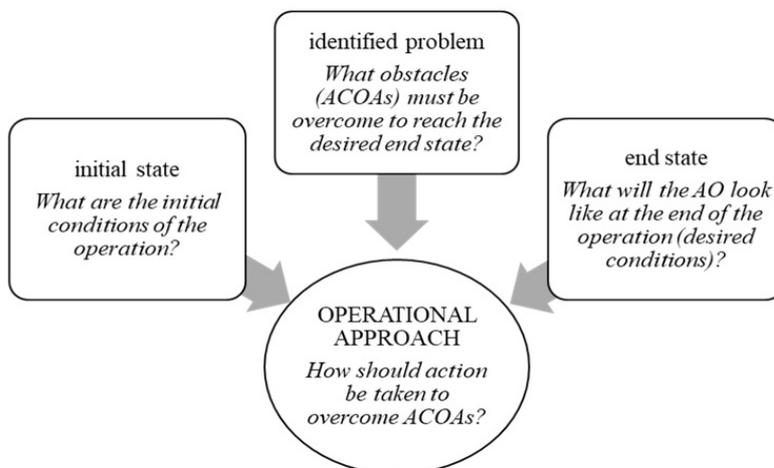


Figure 1 The operational approach within Land Forces
(Author's conception)

Identifying the answer to the question associated with the operational approach requires analyzing the issue of the FFCOAs' development specific to the Land Forces, so how they should be adjusted in order to ensure the overcoming of ACOAs. Representing "any sequence of activities that an individual or unit may follow... a scheme developed to accomplish a mission"⁹, FFCOAs, once developed and approved, must be able to "defeat all feasible adversary (enemy) COAs while accounting for all tactical activities"¹⁰.

By operationalizing the essential concept of the present research, the hybrid operational approach can be defined as a way to overcome ACOAs, correlating missions and tasks performed in the conventional, unconventional and/or hybrid spectrum by dedicated organic structures in order to create the conditions estimated for desired end state. Beyond the multi-domain operational support, focusing only on the action of maneuvering structures from designated AO, defeating ACOAs by the Land Forces can be done as follows:

- independently – it is more demanding, because it involves the prior preparation of organic structures to counter unconventional or hybrid actions;
- cooperating with SOF elements – involves a split of responsibilities, the Land Forces' structures engaging the conventional component of ACOAs, while SOF ensuring the desired effects on the unconventional one;
- cooperating with other elements responsible for carrying out the maneuver of the combat forces.

Thus, a relatively new constant to be introduced in the equation of the operational approach is

the employment of adversary unconventional component, the most convenient solution being the use of the SOF (Figure 2).

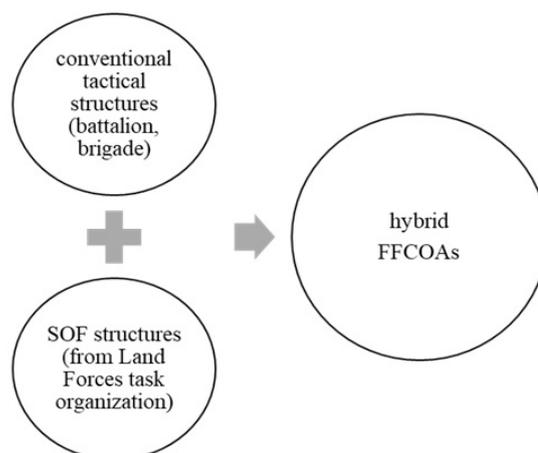


Figure 2 Hybridization of FFCOAs specific to the Land Forces – combat tactical structures
(Author's conception)

SOF structures can be an organic part of the Land Forces service, such as the American model, Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF), or a separate service, following the model of other armies. In order to facilitate the exercise of command and control (C2) and the development of operational cohesion, the first variant would be more appropriate (organic SOF), while the SOF, as a different service, is more likely suitable for operational and strategic objectives. In the above configuration, the SOF will have the "ability to operate in small teams and in friendly, politically sensitive, uncertain, or hostile environments ... unilaterally or with or through indigenous forces



and populations"¹¹. Along with very well-known lethal actions, the SOF will support the Land Forces' conventional structures with nonlethal actions, aiming at modelling the local security forces and gaining the support of the local population.

Within the hybrid operational approach of the Land Forces, the range of SOF component, in terms of missions and tasks, is defined by¹²:

- unconventional warfare – creating/supporting the resistance movement, the insurgency, acting through or with hidden auxiliary or guerilla forces;

- counterinsurgency – combating insurgent elements in AO; for the economy of the mission a key variable is to obtain the indigenous population's support;

- counterterrorism – combating terrorist elements and their infrastructure, using hidden, clandestine or low profile visibility means;

- assistance of the security forces – supporting the local/regional security forces in the AO in order to outline the Land Forces' unified action;

- direct action – "short duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted with specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets in hostile, denied environments ..."¹³;

- special reconnaissance – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities in hostile, denied environments, requiring specialized military capabilities;

- information support operations – usually psychological operations (PSYOPS) carried out in AO;

- civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) operations – engaging the local population and authorities for nonlethal effects;

- environment preparation – activities necessary for shaping the AO in order to create conditions for future operations; usually are information and security in nature;

- search, rescue and recovery – offensive activities issued to prevent, deter, preempt and respond to terrorist threats/acts that include the release of hostages, as well as the restoration of control over military and civilian capabilities and infrastructure.

The timely and effective fulfillment of the above missions and tasks by the organic SOF, will fuel the Land Forces with the ability to successfully strike the irregular elements of the opponent. Its conjugation with the action of conventional military structures

(battalion, brigade) will coagulate the Land Forces' capacity to simultaneously/successively engage all specific ACOAs' elements and capabilities, finally guarantying the achievement of all desired end state's conditions.

Conclusions

The Land Forces, facing the changes related to the continuous reconfiguration and adaptation of the opponent's regular and irregular forces, or their mixture, are required to identify those operational strategies whose applicability will guarantee their success. Clarifying the ACOAs' typology, at present, the following variants can be defined:

- conventional – shaped by the use of opponent's regular structures, with a quite a low usage probability, being applied mainly for deterrence purposes;

- unconventional – configured by integrating irregular elements such as terrorist, insurgent, guerrilla, organized crime, resistance movements, and so forth; having a moderate to high usage probability, it makes sense in situations where the friendly forces' combat power is superior, the opponent seeking to diminish the operational advantages created;

- hybrid – coagulated by the mixture of regular and irregular elements, in which the following essential configurations can be identified: conventional accentuated - unconventional diminished (low to moderate usage probability); moderately conventional - moderately unconventional (average usage probability); conventional diminished - unconventional accentuated (high usage probability).

Of all these, the most demanding challenges for the Land Forces' structures are generated by those ACOAs configured by hybridizing regular and irregular elements, their applicability having as initial purpose surprising the friendly forces.

Such a variant of the opponent's configuration needs to be solved through a similar operational approach, in other words a hybridized one (hybrid FFCOAs). At the level of Land Forces, a suitable and perhaps the most recommended solution is to include and develop inside their task organization a SOF component, which reaching fully operational capability (*FOC*), will have the ability to engage unconventional targets, either lethally or nonlethally.



At the end, it can be concluded that the Land Forces, generally, and organic structures, particularly, will have to significantly change their operational mentality, planning, preparing and executing the operations in a hybridized manner in order to defeat an accentuated hybridized adversary.

NOTES:

1 *** Army Regulation 350-2, *Operational Environment and Opposing Force Program*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC, 19 May 2015, p. 1.

2 *** APP-28, *Tactical Planning for Land Forces*, Edition A, Version 1, NATO Standardization Office (NSO), November 2019, pp. 2-19.

3 *** TM 2010-404, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield and Operational Environment – General Principles and Research Avenues*, Defence R&D Canada - Valcartier, November 2010, p. 21.

4 *** ATP 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC, March 2019, p. 1-3.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 5-1.

6 *Ibidem*, pp. 5-2 – 5-3.

7 *** TRADOC G-2 ACE, *Threat Tactics Report: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*, version 1.6, February 2016, pp. 7-8.

8 *** Joint Publication (5-0), *Joint Publications*, Joint Force Development, 1 December 2020, p. GL-11.

9 *Ibidem*, p. GL-7.

10 *** APP-28, *Tactical Planning for Land Forces*, Edition A, Version 1, NATO Standardization Office (NSO), November 2019, p. 3-3.

11 *** ADRP 3-05, *Special Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC, January 2018, p. 1-9.

12 *Ibidem*, pp. 2-1 – 2-9.

13 *** JP 3-05, *Special Operations*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 2014, p. x.

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