On Operational Coherence in an Environment of Low Intensity Conflict

The term "subsidiarity" in the Swiss Army is known as the use of armed forces to support civil security means in a situation of crisis. The field manual "Taktische Führung 95" stresses that the local civil authority is responsible of deploying attributed armed forces in situations short of war. However, the commanding officer has to worry about leading his men. This notion implies that in other circumstances – e.g. in war – the leadership and the process of decision making might differ from those in an environment of low intensity conflict (LIC).
This text explains why this isn't the case.

Shared understanding of the terminology of strategic, operational and tactical levels and their interdependence is a precondition for the insight that means and ways at one's disposal ought to be in accord with one's aims. In addition to that, one's own aims, means, and ways ought to take all the opponents possible ways of resistance into consideration when one formulates a strategic plan. Only with this shared vocabulary and insight can policy and strategy work coherently and therefore victory can promisingly be formulated.

Strategic Level
The strategic level of a clash of interest includes policy and strategy. Policy sets the aims in that conflict of interest which are to be attained. Strategy, on the other hand, defines ways to impose one's own will upon the opponent. For that end, strategy uses possible means of power such as diplomacy, economy, culture, ideology, information technology and armed forces as it sees fit.
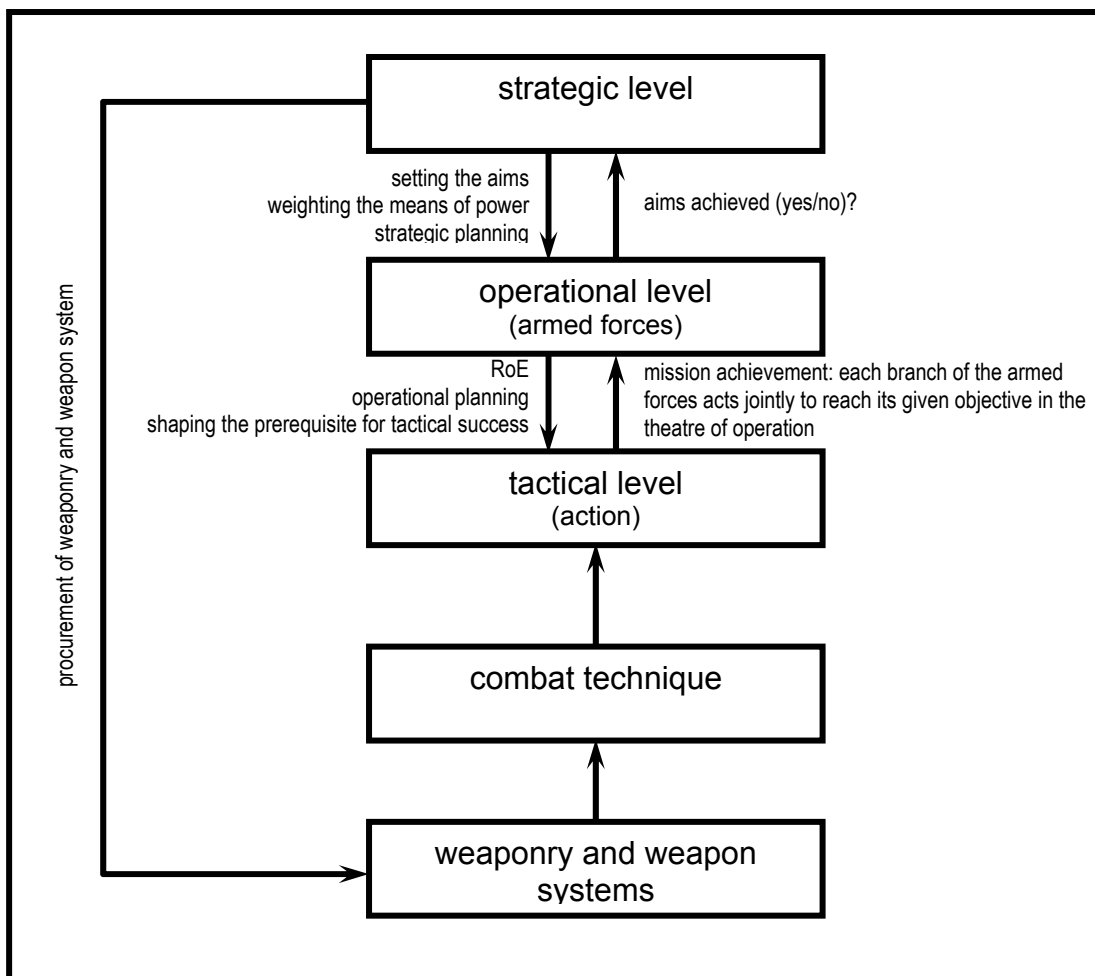

Fig. 1. Interdependence of strategic, operational und tactical level; following Beaufre (1963), p. 17, 41-42, 117; Orenstein (1995), p. 22

Strategy distinguishes between direct and indirect strategy. Direct strategy tries to convince the opponent to give in by mainly threatening the use or by using armed forces. On the other hand, indirect strategy tries to impose one's own will by using all other means of power at disposal.[1] Direct and indirect strategy aren't exclusive, but moreover act in harmony together.[2] The choice of means and ways – in other words, the weighting of direct or indirect strategy – depends not only on the opponent's vulnerability, but also on one's own opportunities as well as the desired end state of a conflict of interest.

Operational Level
The operational level translates allotted strategic aims into practise. In its ensuing operational planning the operational level portions the assigned aim into objectives.[3] Those objectives are then given to the best suited branch of the armed forces (utility). In doing so, these allotted objectives are able to be solved tactically. The operational plan tunes all objectives with the military means at its disposal. At the same time the operational planning makes sure that the way these objectives are reached is in harmony with the given strategic aim.
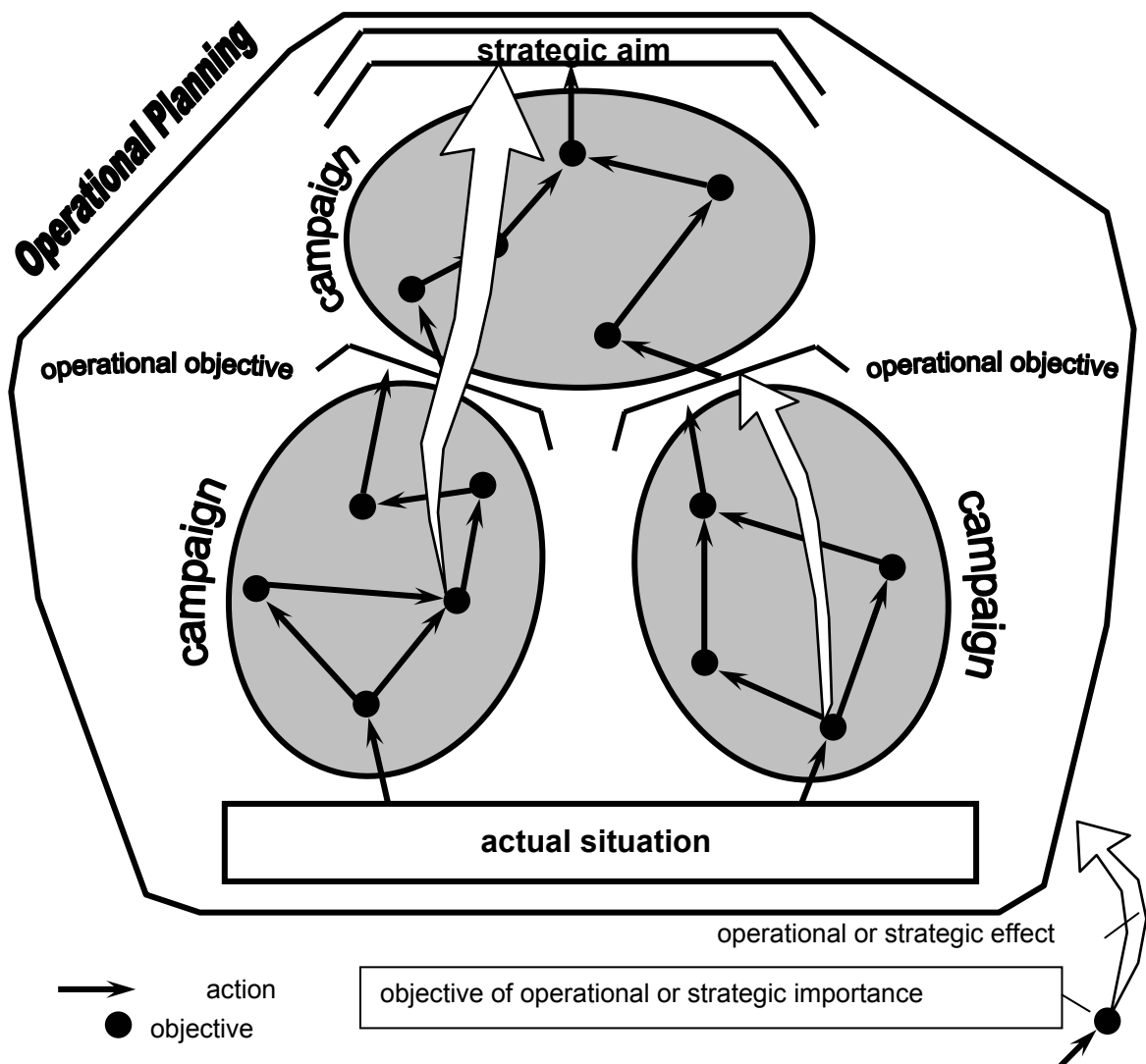

Fig. 2. Operational coherence; following Gray (1999), p. 17; Gray (1998), p. 61, 97f; Simpkin (1987), p. 255; Svechin (1997), p. 67-77, 217-218; Triandafillov (1994), p. xxxvi-xliv, 166.

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[1] Beaufre (1963), p. 37
[2] Beaufre (1963), p. 38
[3] Orenstein (1995), p. 26-27

The operational level ensures the concentration of its means on the opponent's weakest point of resistance. Through the formulation of rules of engagements and through synchronisation of all to the armed forces assigned objectives are met throughout the depth of the theatre of operation. That operational level's main concern lies in the shaping of the necessary precondition for operational success: ensuring logistical sustainability, operational surprise through *maskirovka* (masking, camouflage, deception)[1] and operational tempo[2], proportionality and legitimacy of the objectives. Because of this the operational level preconditions not only the tactical feasibility of its own strategic aims, but it forms the necessary framework in which every objective is achieved coherently **(o p e r a t i o n a l c o h e r e n c e)**. In that way, the operational level functions as a hinge between the strategic and tactical level.

Tactical Level
The tactical level implements through action the objectives allotted by the operational plan. Colin Gray states, "It is the realm of the actual employment of armed forces".[3] This is achieved by optimal cooperation between all means at one's disposal in the area of engagement. Actions are always done on the tactical level. However, the ensuing effects are called tactical, operational, or even strategic depending on the resulting support or attainment of strategic aim.[4] As a consequence, the following paradox might be quite possible: A failure on the tactical level might result in an eventual positive operational effect and with that will end in an operational success (and vice versa). According to Colin Gray, "… there is no such beast as "strategic" air power and there are no such things as "strategic" targets. (…). Weapons, broadly understood, will vary in range, lethality, and other effects, and even in relative significance, but they do not divide into strategic as contrasted with tactical types".[5] It is consequently wrong to speak about "strategic" weapons because one confuses employment of means with a possible resulting effect.
The area of engagement is growing in its complexity. One has not only to manage combined joint task forces (CJTF), but one has to synchronise and harmonise other actors there as well. Army, navy, air force, means in space and information technology have to be in tune with the media, nongovernmental organisations (NGO), private voluntary organisations (PVO), secret services and international business corporations. The actors on the tactical level must understand operational art and therefore need training and skills in that area of competence. Then every action or inaction will have a certain effect. On top of that, this effect is amplified by media coverage. Whether this effect promotes or spoils the chance of achieving the strategic aim or not, depends on its manner of execution which has to be in concert with the overall operational planning.

Who is responsible for the employment of military means?
In Switzerland many err in their belief that only in subsidiary engagements in an environment of LIC the responsibility lies on the shoulders of civil authority. This thinking leaves a foul aftertaste. Its implications are clear. Obviously, there has to be circumstances – such as war - when the primacy of policy does not apply. This is never the case. Every employment of any means for attaining strategic aims (e.g. to increase national wealth and to keep or increase freedom of action of the state) is an act led by the strategic level and therefore a result of its policy and strategy. The primacy of policy is all-embracing. The belief that this isn't the case with non-subsidiary engagements lets one fear that in such cases engagements follow the inner logic of tactical necessity. This represents the primacy of tactics. This understanding leads necessarily to actions that promote their own ends without attaining aims of strategic significance.

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[1] Orenstein (1995), p. xii
[2] Simpkin (1987), p. 53-55
[3] Gray (1998), p. 61
[4] Gray (1998), p. 148
[5] Gray (1998), p. 61

Failure is due without operational coherence

Whether the responsibility of engagement should lie on the shoulders of the local civil authority in any case should be questioned. From a certain escalation of LIC on, the local civil authority lacks power and operational knowledge to coordinate all necessary means to counter the threat coming from LIC. On top of that, from a certain point on, its credibility and authority to provide security is undermined by intimidation. Only synchronization, creativity, unity in aim and understanding for the desired end state of a conflict over all the levels of warfare, applied over the whole theatre of operation, ensures success. No engagement is to be decided upon by the strategic level and then left to execution by the tactical level without operational planning.[1] Only operational planning ensures operational coherence of action.

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[1] Schweizerische Armee (1994), p. 1: Die Entscheide für diese Einsätze [besondere Einsatzformen der Armee unterhalb der Kriegsschwelle] werden auf operativer und strategischer Stufe gefällt. Die Ausführung berührt im Rahmen des Assistenzdienstes primär die gefechtstechnische, im Rahmen der Kriegsverhinderung die operativ-taktische Stufe.