

Practical Advice to Thinking Above the Tactical Level

The Six-Step Process

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The United States Army consistently declares that as leaders gain experience at the tactical level they must eventually become operational and strategic thinkers. It is an evolution that seems easy to accomplish; however, there is no clear definition of how to do this from a practical standpoint. A plethora of operational and strategic concepts, doctrine, and definitions are introduced through one's service and professional military education (PME). The explanations used to define these ideas differ by branch and classical or modern military theorist. To further complicate this understanding, the lexicon of military concepts and terms has also entered every aspect of civilian life and business. All of this can be overwhelming and daunting to any leader who aims to think and function above the tactical level.

The intent of this article is not to provide conclusive definitions and descriptions of key terms and theories as much already exists across a wide spectrum of venues to address this that the reader may research independently.

Previous page: While on deployment to Iraq in 2019, Spc. Thomas P. Sarsfield, 1st Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Combat Aviation Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, reads a widely regarded historical account detailing the strategic- and operational-level activities leading up to and during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. U.S. Army success in the future demands greater efforts by U.S. soldiers at self-development to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the linkages between strategy and operations in the future complex operating environment, with particular emphasis on critical analysis of both successes and failures. (Photo by Sgt. Evan Stanfield, U.S. Army)

Rather, this article presents six practical techniques of self-development upon which military leaders may build a solid bedrock of knowledge and confidence before expanding above the tactical level (see figure 1).

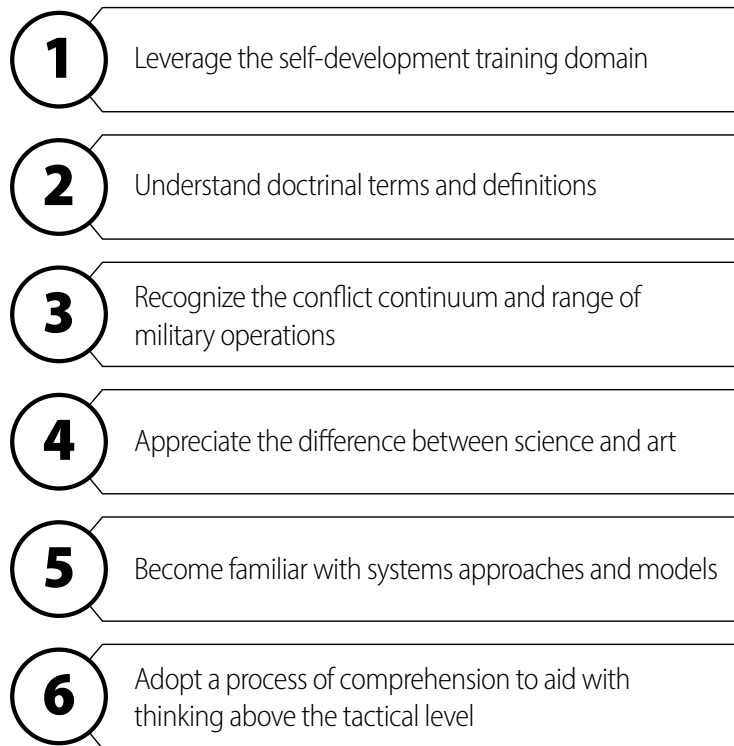
The goal of becoming an intuitive and visionary operational and strategic intellectual starts with understand-

ing the basics of the profession of arms. This is becoming ever more important as the world shifts back to an era of great power competition and the Army continues to anticipate possible future conflict through the prism of the multi-domain operations (MDO) concept. The six practical techniques that build off each other are: (1) leveraging the self-development training domain, (2) understanding doctrinal terms and definitions, (3) recognizing the conflict continuum and range of military operations (ROMO), (4) appreciating the

difference between science and art, (5) becoming familiar with systems approaches and models, and (6) adopting a process of comprehension to aid with thinking above the tactical level. Performing these six practical steps will assist with making the transition to operational thought, which in turn will make it easier to cultivate strategic thought in the future. Only after fully grasping these six areas will one possess the basic knowledge necessary to be comfortable and confident enough to progress by studying more complicated operational and strategic themes.

Step One: Leverage the Self-Development Training Domain

The first step to thinking above the tactical level is to accept that this responsibility rests with the



(Figure by author)

Figure 1. The Six-Step Process to Thinking Above the Tactical Level

individual. The Army develops leaders via three training domains: institutional, operational, and self-development. The institutional domain is accomplished through the various levels of PME that all must attend. The operational is attained by the practical experi-

ences that leaders gain through deployments, field exercises, and serving in key positions. Self-development bridges the gap between the other two domains by deepening and expanding the breadth and depth of one's knowledge. Ironically, it is the easiest domain to develop, yet often the most ignored.¹

To truly expand beyond thinking only at the tactical level, leaders must aggressively pursue their own self-development. Counting solely on the institutional and operational domains to accomplish this will not suffice. While these two domains are effective at building great leaders, they are not sufficient for the development of the type of operational and strategic intellectual acumen that is desired in the military profession.

There are several ways to conduct this self-development. The traditional approach typically suggested is reading, especially of military history. To aid with this, key Army leaders have traditionally issued reading lists aimed at developing leaders who are

capable of thinking and operating above the tactical level. Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chief of the Army Staff, has challenged soldiers to “read these books and to discuss, debate, and think critically about the ideas they contain.”² Exploring this traditional route and the

suggested literature will greatly assist with self-development efforts.

As mentioned, reading and studying military history have also been traditionally touted as the main topic for soldiers to study for self-development. Renowned British historian Sir Michael Howard argues that the study of military history will enable one to “understand the nature of war and its part in shaping society, but also directly improve the officer's competence.”³

However, while this is a sagacious statement, solely reading books on military reading lists may not take into account generational differences and the fact that some soldiers simply do not learn through reading alone.

Studies have shown

that millennials—the age group born from 1981 to 2004 that makes up today's junior- and mid-level leaders—learn differently than previous generations. Rather than learning via one traditional method such as reading, they prefer curricula that offer variety and incorporate multimedia options.⁴



Some Hollywood movies such as the recent World War I film *Journey's End* offer brilliant lessons for military leaders. When combined with historical readings, these movies can provide a unique multimedia approach in the self-development domain when learning to think above the tactical level. (Image used with permission from Fluidity Films/Lionsgate)

Fortunately, there is no shortage of nontraditional possibilities for leaders attempting to learn how to think above the tactical level. Reading partnered with online videos, documentaries, and even Hollywood movies, offers a solid and enhanced multifaceted platform for self-development. One example of online content is found with TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) talks. These short and often poignant presentations are given by a variety of leaders worldwide and offer numerous lessons on operational and strategic thought.⁵ Another option is viewing documentaries. Gone are the days of dry and poorly made products in this medium; today's streaming services offer countless well-made choices on every conflict in world history. Lastly, even select Hollywood movies can aid with learning, the latest example being the 2017 World War I movie *Journey's End*.⁶ When partnered with a history book on the conflict, the film offers brilliant lessons on flawed strategies, how they trickled down to the tactical level, and the effect this had on leaders.

Embracing the self-development domain is the first step toward developing a solid bedrock of knowledge and confidence to think above the tactical level. The above combined approach to learning is merely suggestive, as the options available are exhaustive. If desired, studying military history via a combination of traditional and multimedia platforms will develop the critical and analytical skills necessary to operate at higher levels.

Step Two: Understand Doctrinal Terms and Definitions

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In the 1987 cult classic film *The Princess Bride*, hero Inigo Montoya indiscreetly tells his pompous boss who repeatedly uses the word “inconceivable” for every situation, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”⁷ This is applicable to step two of the process: understanding

doctrinal terms and definitions. Words mean something; if one does not properly utilize the basic terms that are in the daily lexicon of the Army, they will never be able to progress to the convoluted muddle of theories and meanings that exist at operational and strategic levels.

Two works of reference exist to aid with this understanding. The first is the recently updated *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, which provides definitions and standardization to doctrinal terminology for the joint force.⁸ The second is Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, a guiding document for military symbols and, like the Department of Defense dictionary, provides definitions of Army vocabulary.⁹ These extremely helpful, yet often overlooked publications, for the most part, mirror each other, though there are some differences.

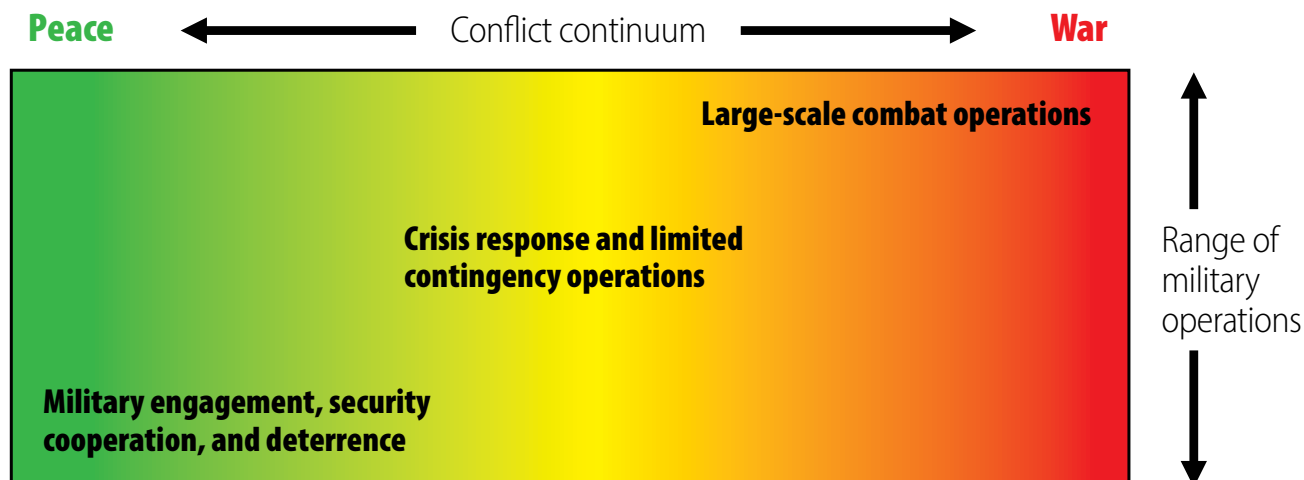
Leaders who misuse words, like Inigo Montoya's boss, instantly lose credibility with their listeners, especially their peers and superiors. To prevent this, and as part of a self-development program, one might begin each morning by reading two to five definitions from the aforementioned documents. (Each definition includes a reference to a manual that can be researched further for more information.) The proper understanding and use of military terms forms a strong internal library of references as one enters the realm of complex operational and strategic definitions. More importantly, the proper understanding and articulation of terms increases confidence in public speaking, especially when communicating with senior leaders. Step two is important, as it will help not only lay the foundation for clear communications with other military professionals but will also foster self-confidence and air of authority as a professional who knows of what he or she speaks; leaders must master the basic terms and definitions used in their profession if they are ever to rise above the tactical level.

Step Three: Recognize the Conflict Continuum and Range of Military Operations

Since 2017, the Army has championed the multi-domain battle concept across the force. However, reflective of the nature of conflict, Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, realized that the

word “battle” restricted the conversation about activity in the multi-domain environment to a strictly warfighting focus, stifling the concept’s development. Consequently, he replaced the word *battle* with *operations* to expand the concept into multi-domain

continuum. As the most recent *National Security Strategy* notes, our adversaries recognize that the United States “often views the world in binary terms, with states being either ‘at peace’ or ‘at war,’ when it is actually an arena of continuous competition.”¹²



(Based on original graphic from Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*)

Figure 2. The Conflict Continuum and the Range of Military Operations

operations (MDO), which is a term more reflective of the modern operational environment.¹⁰ Townsend’s actions are a fitting example of step three: recognizing the conflict continuum and ROMO, which provides the azimuth for developing the skills necessary to think above the tactical level in order to recognize that war is an extremely complex and multifaceted topic that includes more than just military activities (see figure 2).

Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, mirrors the joint concept of the conflict continuum and ROMO model to describe hostilities. The model ranges from the high-end of large-scale combat operations (LSCO) and war to various low-end scenarios across the ROMO that include peace.¹¹ To successfully operate above the tactical level, leaders must accept that the term *war* is extremely constrictive and not reflective of conflict in the modern era. When one solely uses the word *war* to describe hostilities, it tends to drive the listener to immediately think of LSCOs and restricts the thought process to just functioning at that level. When in reality, war is much more complex and can include numerous scenarios from across the ROMO simultaneously throughout the conflict

The threat of possible LSCOs due to the rise of rival strategic great powers is evident and has not been seen since the Cold War. However, most hostilities today are labeled as irregular or hybrid warfare and simmer in the middle of the conflict continuum. As the *National Security Strategy* declares, U.S. competitors have become “adept at operating below the threshold of open military conflict and at the edges of international law.”¹³

These types of events are often grouped within an area known as the Gray Zone because they occur in a range above peace and below LSCOs. Despite numerous examples from military history, today’s military operational and strategic leaders struggle with understanding this zone. As modern-day strategist Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II explains, a new thought process must be adopted by leaders—one that “must account for more than just the use of kinetic military force during wartime, and it must accommodate more than just the goal of dominating an adversary through decisive operations.”¹⁴ The sooner a leader can recognize the complexity of conflict, the sooner they can remove the restrictive notions that the simplistic term *war* encourages.

Moreover, conflict is not limited to military actions alone. As Echevarria contends, when examining nonkinetic scenarios in the Gray Zone, all instruments of national power— diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME)—must be leveraged and coordinated. The United States must also orchestrate efforts “with those of its allies and strategic partners. In some cases, it must also take into account the activities of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations.”¹⁵ For any situation across the ROMO, the U.S. Army cannot go it alone and needs a whole of government approach to achieve objectives. This will require robust interorganizational cooperation from all entities employed throughout the DIME. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill stated, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them!”¹⁶

Having a firm grasp of doctrinal terms and examples from military history, all learned through self-development, will assist in understanding the intricacies of conflict. Step three decrees that leaders must recognize that conflict is inherently complex, chaotic, multifaceted, and not restricted to military efforts alone. Comprehending and embracing this fact will allow a leader to move beyond the tactical emphasis of seeking decisive military focused engagements toward understanding how DIME and interorganizational cooperation contribute to success at the operational and strategic levels.

Step Four: Appreciate the Difference between Science and Art

The difference between science and art is one of the most complicated concepts to grasp. Both terms are used freely though they are mostly used when discussing operational art, science of control, and art of command—all of which are defined in Army and joint doctrine. Perhaps the Germans prior to World War II describe it best in the doctrine that guided their actions throughout the conflict. The opening sentence of the 1934 German army manual for unit command, *Truppenführung*, states, “War is an art, a free and creative activity founded on scientific principles.”¹⁷ Step four in developing the ability to think above the tactical level is appreciating that conflict consists of both science and art.

The science of control is defined as the “systems and procedures used to improve the commander’s understanding and support accomplishing missions.”¹⁸ Science is the more quantifiable and data

driven aspect during planning. For example, calculating the gallons of fuel it takes to move a brigade combat team a certain distance and all the practical planning considerations that go into that equation. It also speaks to sets of established guiding systems, procedures, and principles that will be discussed in step five. Skill in the science of conflict is often developed via practical experience gained during field exercises, assignments, and deployments.

In contrast, art is defined by both Army and joint doctrine as being driven by a cognitive approach to planning.¹⁹ It speaks to the reasoning, judgment, creativity, and mental abilities of leaders. Unlike science, art is more abstract and difficult to identify or define. As President Dwight Eisenhower declared at the 1958 Republican National Committee Breakfast regarding the mathematical odds of Republicans winning in various states and districts, “These calculations overlook the decisive element: What counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight—it’s the size of the fight in the dog.”²⁰ As Eisenhower recognized from his wartime experience, science is not adequate enough to predict conflict; sometimes the unappreciated can be pivotal. Like science, ability in art can be gained from practical experience; however, true proficiency in this area comes from self-development. Military history gives endless lessons in command and operational art and its effect on conflict that can be gleaned through its study.

While this is a simplified view of these subjects, this is all that is required at first. As noted in the *Truppenführung*, conflict requires a strong cognitive ability that rests on scientific military principles. Balancing both art and science at the operational and strategic levels of thought can be challenging. Simply recognizing that a difference exists, they complement each other, and experience can be gained throughout all the training domains is vital for tactical leaders to understand before proceeding further. Step four of the process is the appreciation of the difference between science and art, which then opens the door to further study of the concept.

Step Five: Become Familiar with Systems Approaches and Models

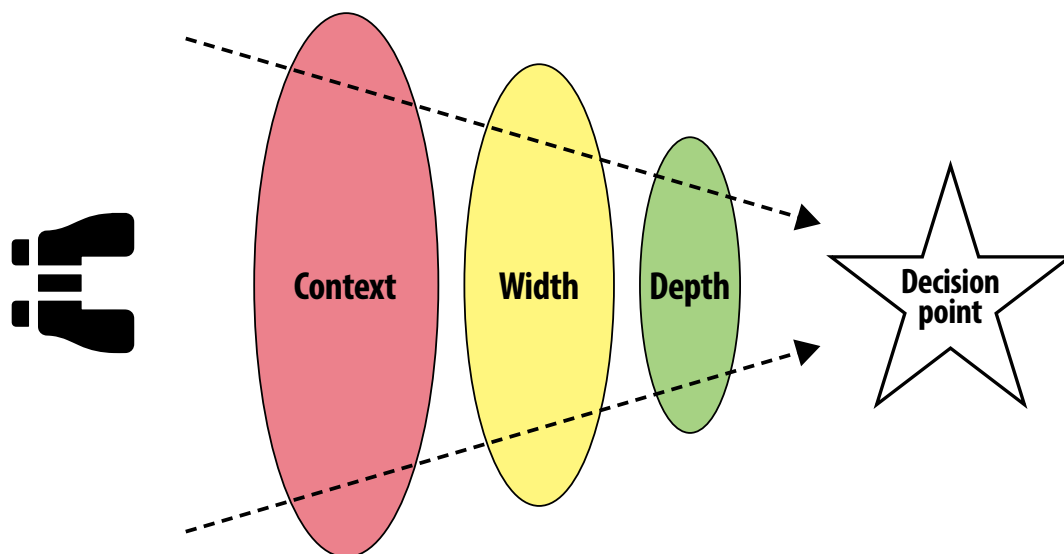
Army leaders spend the first half of their careers being exposed to systems approaches and models of thought. This starts with troop leading procedures and then progresses to five-paragraph operations

orders and the military decision-making process. Due to this, leaders are comfortable with constructed approaches that provide a structure to follow. As they begin to progress above the tactical level, they will encounter a slew of systems and models to aid with operational and strategic understanding and to comprehend art and science. To name just a few, these

the processes and frameworks as a way to achieve scientific answers that provide output-based facts and evidence. Confining one's thought process to established systems and models prevents critical and creative thinking. These constructs serve as a method to approach operational and strategic thought and to differentiate science and art, not as a crutch that restricts

you to one mode of thinking.

As discussed earlier, to effectively communicate and function at the operational and strategic levels, one must have a solid foundation in doctrinal terms. Step five builds on this by adding the requirement to become familiar with systems approaches and models. Conflict is a chaotic human endeavor; these constructs



(Figure by author)

Figure 3. Context, Width, Depth: A Process of Comprehension for Thinking above the Tactical Level

constructs include the warfighting functions, mission and operational variables, numerous principles and tenants, and DIME. Step five is to become familiar with these concepts.

Conflict is far too chaotic to be reduced to any single organizational framework that can be applied to all situations. Remember, at its core, conflict is always a human endeavor, and as such, cannot be forced neatly into categories.²¹ Operational or strategic systems and models are not set formulas, they simply offer a method to address the complexity of the subject in a coherent manner. Additionally, since all leaders were raised on these models, they also serve to organize and communicate operational and strategic messages to a larger audience.

No single system or model should be used to approach topics above the tactical level; rather, they can all be used to varying degrees to understand complex scenarios. In addition, one should avoid thinking about

serve to assist in organizing one's understanding of what is occurring but cannot provide scientific facts to act on. Utilizing the self-development domain through a regime of study will aid with seeing beyond the borders of these models and forming linkages between them, the conflict continuum, ROMO, and science and art.

Step Six: Adopt a Process of Comprehension to Aid with Thinking above the Tactical Level

The last step toward thinking above the tactical level is the adoption of a process of comprehension. Approaches toward this are as numerous as the various systems and models already discussed. Some, such as the Army design methodology, can be extremely complicated, overwhelming, and time consuming. Regardless of what processes are adopted, in order to assist with thinking above the tactical

level, a military leader must have a frame of reference that he or she can repeatedly rely on and exercise throughout his or her career.

To illustrate one possible process of comprehension, the historical framework of Sir Michael Howard is worth exploring. To truly understand historical lessons, he advises that one should study the topic via width, depth, and context.²² Using a slight variation on this concept, the methodology is reordered to context, width, and depth. When presented with a tactical dilemma, too often military leaders do the opposite. They react and attack the issue in depth, rather than first taking a brief pause to understand the context and width in which the tactical issue is occurring. This, of course, results in decision-making in a vortex that overlooks the possible operational and strategic implications of that decision.

Simply executing this three-step mental exercise will greatly aid with thinking beyond the tactical level in every situation. It does not need to be a lengthy process or take away from decisive action; leaders just need to take a moment to quickly frame their thought process to appreciate the context, width, and depth of the situation before acting (see figure 3, page 83). This brief mental exercise will help prevent hasty direct and tactical decisions that can result in unforeseen negative operational and strategic consequences.

Step six of the process builds on everything executed thus far. The context, width, depth model is just one suggestion and is not a magic formula. It does, however, provide a good practical start point in developing the ability to think above tactics and connect to the operational and strategic levels. Many other comprehension models exist; it is up to the individual to explore them and determine which one works best. Regardless of which process is used, leaders must adopt a process of comprehension that allows for a brief mental pause before tactical decisions.

Conclusion

Becoming an effective operational and strategic thinker is not an exclusive club that only a select few can join. Nor is it solely the result of the best military academies, PME, or mentorship by established leaders in the field. As noted by British Field Marshal Sir William Slim in World War II, the two best operational and strategic “high-class” planners who ever

worked for him were an academic from Oxford and an American National Guardsman.²³ “They were both of them absolutely first class,” Slim wrote in *Military Review*, “And you must have high-class planners.”²⁴

Through the self-development domain, one can become an effective operator above the tactical level; and though the six-step practical process to building a foundational understanding and confidence to think above the tactical level may seem overly simplistic, failure to have a solid grasp of the topics mentioned will result in one being completely overwhelmed when trying to study operational and strategic theories. The six-step process assists with building a holistic view of our multidimensional world, conflict, and all of its influencers. With the multitude of operational and strategic concepts, doctrine, and definitions that exist, the six-step practical outline and the knowledge base it provides will assist in navigating through these complex topics.

In addition, those who follow the six steps will be enabled to better read and comprehend operational and strategic narratives that are issued from higher echelons or civilian theorists. These narratives are important because they often form the commander’s intent and translate and feed into the commander’s guidance, military end states, and termination criteria. By not understanding the subject matter established through the self-development domain discussed in these narratives, leaders will be ineffective in forming linkages and translating written guidance into action.

Finally, in today’s era of rising great powers, “a number of complicating factors have arisen, including mass armies, qualitatively diverse means of combat, highly sophisticated technology, very deep columns, the difficulty of deployment into combat formation, and a complex supporting rear.”²⁵ This statement, written in 1936 by Russian Brigade Commander Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, one of the fathers of modern-day operational thought, predicted what future conflict would look like with surprising accuracy. His prediction in the interwar years can easily be overlaid with modern MDO theories. Isserson further realized that to understand the complexities of possible future LSCO, one must disregard frameworks that claim to produce concrete results; rather, leaders must understand them through a general theoretical context

assisted by science.²⁶ Today, his assessment is still valid and recognizable as the blend and balance between the comprehension and appreciation of art and science at the operational and strategic levels of war.

Possessing the basic knowledge necessary to be comfortable and confident at the tactical level allows one to progress toward studying more complicated operational and strategic themes. However, the six-step practical techniques to think above the tactical level—leverage the self-development training domain, understand doctrinal terms and definitions,

recognize the conflict continuum and ROMO, appreciate the difference between science and art, become familiar with systems approaches and models, and adopt a process of comprehension that works for the individual—will assist leaders in making the transition to operational thought. This, in turn, will make it easier to then move toward understanding strategic concepts. This becomes especially important as the Army prepares to operate in today's contemporary environment of great power competition and possible LSCOs within the MDO concept. ■

Notes

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