



Maj. Christopher Colyer, assigned to the Joint Task Force Civil Support (JTF-CS) future operations cell, gives a briefing 22 March 2022 during the command's spring mission planning conference at the Phantom Warrior Center on Fort Hood, Texas. The event was held to enhance mission understanding and interoperability among JTF-CS key mission partners. (Photo by Chief Mass Communication Spc. Barry Riley, U.S. Navy)

# Term of Art

## What Joint Doctrine Gets Wrong about Operational Art and Why It Matters

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Operational art is one of the most contested terms in the military lexicon. Few doctrinal definitions have fluctuated as much or have come to mean as many things as operational art. Unfortunately for planners, current joint doctrine overly complicates the term and offers a hollow definition that provides limited utility and no insights to the joint force. This is not just a matter of grammatical minutiae for doctrinal pedants—a confusing or unclear definition of operational art could spell disaster for the joint force in a twenty-first-century near-peer conflict as the future battlefield will likely involve the kind of distributed operations that *necessitate* an expert application of operational art. Rather than serve as a historical overview of the origins of the term, this article discusses the problems with the current joint definition, offers a remedy, and outlines why the joint force needs a clearer definition of operational art to prepare for modern challenges.

## Fixing the Problem

The 2020 edition of Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, defines operational art as “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, expertise, creativity, and judgement—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, means, and risks.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with this definition is twofold. First, it is overly wordy—the original sin for many doctrinal terms (albeit a common one). Second, even with the second clause removed, it is an empty definition that conflates operational art with the widely accepted ends, ways, and means formulation typically associated with strategy.<sup>2</sup> The joint force would be better

served by returning to the definition offered in the U.S. Army’s 2016 version of Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations*, or a variation thereof. The 2016 edition succinctly defined operational art as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part,

through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

There is, admittedly, one good component of the current definition of operational art. Expressing operational art as a “cognitive approach” does at least frame it as *a way of thinking*. Operational art as a cognitive approach arose out of necessity due to changes in the character of warfare. The genesis of operational art is the end of the era of decisive battle—after Napoleon, the scope and scale of battle precluded the single decisive battle from determining the outcome of a war.<sup>4</sup> As warfare shifted away from the war of a “single point,” battles came to be seen as parts of a larger whole, and a new way of thinking became necessary to organize battles into campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Modern operational art came into being as a cognitive activity that takes battles or tactical actions and purposefully arranges them into campaigns in order to achieve the overall strategic aim.<sup>6</sup>

Informed no doubt by the current, overly broad doctrinal definition, mischaracterizations of operational art abound. Operational art is not a level of war, and neither is it the “entirety of warfare.”<sup>7</sup> By defining it as “a way of thinking,” operational art can be thought of as an activity analogous to composing music. The operational artist arranges tactical actions for a broader strategic purpose as the composer arranges a symphony.<sup>8</sup> Individual notes played by desynchronized sections may be pleasing to the ear individually but taken together the result is incoherent and chaotic—noise without purpose. The composer must arrange them in time and space to create the song, mindful of things like time, changes in tempo, and how instruments interact with each other. While it can be framed as a methodology, operational art is *not* a prescriptive process. It is instead a “balancing mental interaction between strategic and tactical reasoning.”<sup>9</sup>

Operational art is not the same thing as strategy—it requires an independent definitional space. Thus, the inclusion of any reference to “ends, ways, and means” serves only to muddy the waters when discussing operational art, as that familiar triad is already associated with the Lykke model of strategy formulation.<sup>10</sup> Instead, operational art is the “servant” of strategy; it enables strategy by building the campaigns that help achieve strategic

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aims.<sup>11</sup> Strategy has a wider purview than operational art and considers the distribution and application “of military means to fulfill the ends of policy” more broadly, potentially across multiple theaters.<sup>12</sup> Since operational art ultimately serves strategy, the strategic aim of the campaign is the operational artist’s lodestar.

## Why a Better Definition Matters

The need to better define operational art extends beyond clarifying a doctrinal publication. Rather, likely changes in the future character of war—namely, modern distributed operations—necessitate a clear definition for, and deeper understanding of, operational art. Using the 2016 Army definition and emphasizing that the heart of operational art is the “arrangement of tactical actions in time, space and purpose” to achieve strategic ends better orients the planner or strategist on what James Schneider called the defining characteristic of operational art “the employment of forces in deep distributed operations.”<sup>13</sup>

Distributed operations—in every domain—will likely become a defining characteristic of the next evolution in the character of war. As scenario-based wargames are confirming, combat power in the form of ships, aircraft, or other forces are particularly vulnerable when gathered together to reinforce each other, given the type of modern weapons our adversaries are known to possess.<sup>14</sup> Mass has long been a principle of war, and while modern forces do not necessarily need to physically come together in order to concentrate the effects of combat power, military forces have historically tended to physically concentrate to fight. But, it is no surprise that if the joint force is aggregated and the enemy has modern long range fires, sensors, and networked systems, the force is vulnerable. For protection, the force will have to be disaggregated, for on the future battlefield—one defined in part by ubiquitous sensors—massing forces becomes a literal and figurative dead end.

Increased dispersion increases the need for disparate tactical actions to be synchronized in time, space, and purpose for their individual outcomes to register as cumulative operational effects.

In addition to anticipating changes in the character of war, a revised, simplified definition of operational art would better prepare the department to fight as a joint force. Joint doctrine consists of “fundamental

principles” that allow planners from all services to speak a common language; it “provides authoritative guidance from which joint operations are planned and executed.”<sup>15</sup> An imprecise definition results in hollow concepts that cannot be understood with any true meaning. For something as important as operational art, an unclear definition can have serious repercussions when tactical actions do not build toward a campaign that achieves a larger political purpose. Operational art organizes battles into a campaign for the purposes of the war—the strategic aim.<sup>16</sup> As single battles no longer win wars, operational art is *required* to serve as the cognitive bridge between tactics and strategy in the design of campaigns that accomplish strategic goals.

Defining and understanding operational art is the first step in ensuring the elements of operational art are synchronized. It is no great exaggeration that in any hypothetical conflict in the Pacific or in Europe, the United States and presumably allied and partner forces would be required to fight across great distances that would challenge operational reach. Operational reach challenges influence tempo and vice versa, which in turn impacts culmination—how are planners to integrate the elements of operational art if the overarching definition of the term does not illuminate for planners what the concept is meant to do? The answer is simple—we cannot expect planners to be skilled in operational art if we as a joint force cannot first succinctly define the term.

## Conclusion

The Army’s 2016 definition tells planners what operational art *should do* in ways that the current joint definition does not. Operational art is described as the “arrangement” of tactical actions—meaning tactical actions are the building blocks of operational art, and the operational artist takes those blocks to build the path toward strategic aims. Where tactics are limited in time and space and are concerned with the outcomes of battles, operational art seeks to stitch together those events for a larger purpose. While tactics determine conduct on the battlefield in relationship to the terrain and the enemy at specific locations and focuses on ending the engagement, operational art can be pictured holistically as the connective tissue that links those tactical actions to strategy through effective campaigns.<sup>17</sup>





Michael Collins, Joint Task Force Civil Support (JTF-CS) deputy to the commander, gives opening remarks during the command's spring mission planning conference 22 March 2022 at the Phantom Warrior Center on Fort Hood, Texas. The event was held to enhance mission understanding and interoperability between JTF-CS key mission partners. (Photo by Chief Mass Communication Spc. Barry Riley, U.S. Navy)





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Simply put, we must concisely define operational art as the arranging of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve strategic aims.<sup>18</sup> This succinct definition tells the joint force what operational art is meant to do while also implying that operational art requires an understanding of the overall strategic aims. The current definition, by comparison, simply tries to do too much and in doing so, loses focus and utility. Using the proposed, revised definition also serves a forcing function that is left out of the current definition; to arrange tactical actions in time, space, and purpose, one must understand the interplay of the elements of operational design (when assigned to a joint staff), and the interplay of the elements of operational art (on an

Army staff).<sup>19</sup> For a corps to employ operational art, for example, it is not enough to understand the need for basing—the staff must understand basing as it relates to tempo, operational reach, and culmination.<sup>20</sup> The joint force must discard superfluous phrasing and instead embrace thinking about operational art in these terms to better prepare for distributed operations across large areas—the type of conflict that would likely emerge during a conflict with our two primary competitors, China and Russia. ■

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## Notes

1. Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2020), IV-1, accessed 29 July 2022, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5\\_0.pdf?ver=us\\_fQ\\_pGS\\_u65ateysmAng%3d%3d](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5_0.pdf?ver=us_fQ_pGS_u65ateysmAng%3d%3d).

2. Arthur Lykke Jr., "Defining Military Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means," *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (May 1989): 2–8, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p124201coll1/id/504/rec/8>.

3. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 11 November 2016), 4, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/ADRP%203-0%20OPERATIONS%2011NOV16.pdf>.

4. Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, trans. Bruce W. Menning (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 16.

5. *Ibid.*, 19.

6. *Ibid.*, xi.

7. Huba Wass de Czege, "Thinking and Acting like an Early Explorer: Operational Art Is Not a Level of War," *Small Wars Journal*, 14 March 2011, 4, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/710-deczege.pdf>; Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, September 2009), accessed 29 July 2022, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2027.pdf>.

8. *Confutatis K.626 - Scrolling Score*, YouTube video, posted by "gerubach," 26 October 2011, accessed 8 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMwaiA581AQ>. This thinking is influenced by a video made to graphically represent a conversation from the movie *Amadeus* including the composition of a symphony between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri.

9. Wass de Czege, "Thinking and Acting like an Early Explorer," 4.

10. Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy," 2.

11. Kelly and Brennan, *Alien*, 2.

12. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 321.

13. James Schneider, "Vulcan's Anvil: The American Civil War and the Foundations of Operational Art" (unpublished manuscript, 16 June 1992), 28, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll11/id/9>.

14. Tara Copp, "It Failed Miserably: After Wargaming Loss, Joint Chiefs Are Overhauling How U.S. Military Will Fight," *Defense One*, 26 July 2021, accessed 29 July 2022, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/07/it-failed-miserably-after-wargaming-loss-joint-chiefs-are-overhauling-how-us-military-will-fight/184050/>.

15. JP-1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2013 [incorporating Change 1, 12 July 2017]), xxv, accessed 29 July 2022, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1\\_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967).

16. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 128. This is to paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote that "tactics teaches us the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war," in Book II of his seminal *On War*. Clausewitz's use of strategy is closer to our modern definition of operational art, which makes sense considering his historical context as a contemporary (and adversary) of Napoleon.

17. Dan Madden et al. *Toward Operational Art in Special Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), xvii, accessed 29 July 2022, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR779.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR779.html).

18. ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 4. This definition is inspired by and draws from earlier doctrinal definitions of operational art as opposed to the overly inclusive current definition.

19. Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 16 May 2022), 2-12, accessed 29 July 2022, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN35403-FM\\_5-0-000-WEB-1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN35403-FM_5-0-000-WEB-1.pdf).

20. See *ibid.*, para. 2-47–2-76, for an in-depth discussion of the elements of operational art.