



Maj. Daniel Bourke, task force executive officer for 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, briefs the command team 17 July 2019 during Exercise Hamel, part of Exercise Talisman Saber at McLachlan assembly area, Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. Exercises like Talisman Saber provide effective and intense training to ensure U.S. and Australian forces are capable, interoperable, and deployable on short notice and are combat ready. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Nicolas A. Cloward, U.S. Army)

# The Levels of War as Levels of Analysis

Andrew S. Harvey, PhD

*The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

**M**any field grade officers and Command and General Staff Officers' Course (CGSOC) students have difficulty distinguishing between the levels of war. This article attempts to clarify the levels of war by proposing that they should

be thought of as levels of analysis. Many disciplines have found utility in using levels of analysis to clarify thinking and as an approach to research and analysis. It seems reasonable to believe that approaching the levels of war as levels of analysis will do the same for CGSOC students. The advantages of this approach

a particular mission or task or objective belongs in. For students, the issue is classifying which *category* applies, and although the levels of war are not really categories, categories are commonly how students approach the levels of war. Doctrine tries to clarify the issue with the caveat that “the strategic, operational, or tactical

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will be discerned by looking at the levels of war and common issues students have with them, the levels of analysis framework (to include the unit of analysis issue), and the benefits of using the levels of war as levels of analysis to clarify thinking.

The concept of levels of war has a long history, starting with Carl von Clausewitz, who identified two levels: strategy and tactics.<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr A. Svechin, an officer in the 1920s Soviet Red Army, first proposed the concept of an operational level of war.<sup>2</sup> However, the U.S. Army did not adopt the operational level of war as doctrine until 1982 in Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*.<sup>3</sup>

Current doctrine regarding the levels of war can be found in both Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, and JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*.<sup>4</sup>

The three levels of warfare—strategic, operational, and tactical—link tactical actions to achievement of national objectives. There are no finite limits or boundaries between these levels, but they help commanders design and synchronize operations, allocate resources, and assign tasks to the appropriate command. The strategic, operational, or tactical purpose of employment depends on the nature of the objective, mission, or task.<sup>5</sup>

This description from JP 1 sets out the basics and also illustrates the epistemological issue inherent in the doctrinal concept. There are three levels of war (a classification construct), but “there are no finite limits or boundaries between these levels.”<sup>6</sup> This is an issue for students when they try to identify which level of war

purpose of employment depends on the nature of the objective, mission, or task.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say, *the purpose* of the action or objective is what determines the level of war. However, that does not completely rectify the epistemological classification problem. When there is no clear delineation of the limits or boundaries between the levels of war, it is still rather tricky to correctly classify the purpose. Doctrine in JP 1 creates a problem with how students can understand and use the levels of war in their thinking (see figure 1, page 77).

JP 3-0 does not help to clarify the issue and in fact reinforces the problem. A positive contribution, however, is the warning against the unit of analysis issue. The warning reiterates that there are three levels of war and that there are no fixed limits or boundaries between them. The student is warned against including the unit of analysis (e.g., echelon of command, size of units, types of equipment) in the levels of war classification. That is a useful warning because students often will make the unit of analysis mistake and conflate the echelon of command, size of units, or types of equipment with a particular level of war. On the other hand, the classification problem is still based on the nature of the task, mission, or objective. The place where JP 3-0 reinforces the epistemological problem is when it states,

For example, intelligence and communications satellites, previously considered principally strategic assets, are also significant resources for tactical operations. Likewise, tactical actions can cause both intended and unintended strategic consequences, particularly in today’s environment of pervasive

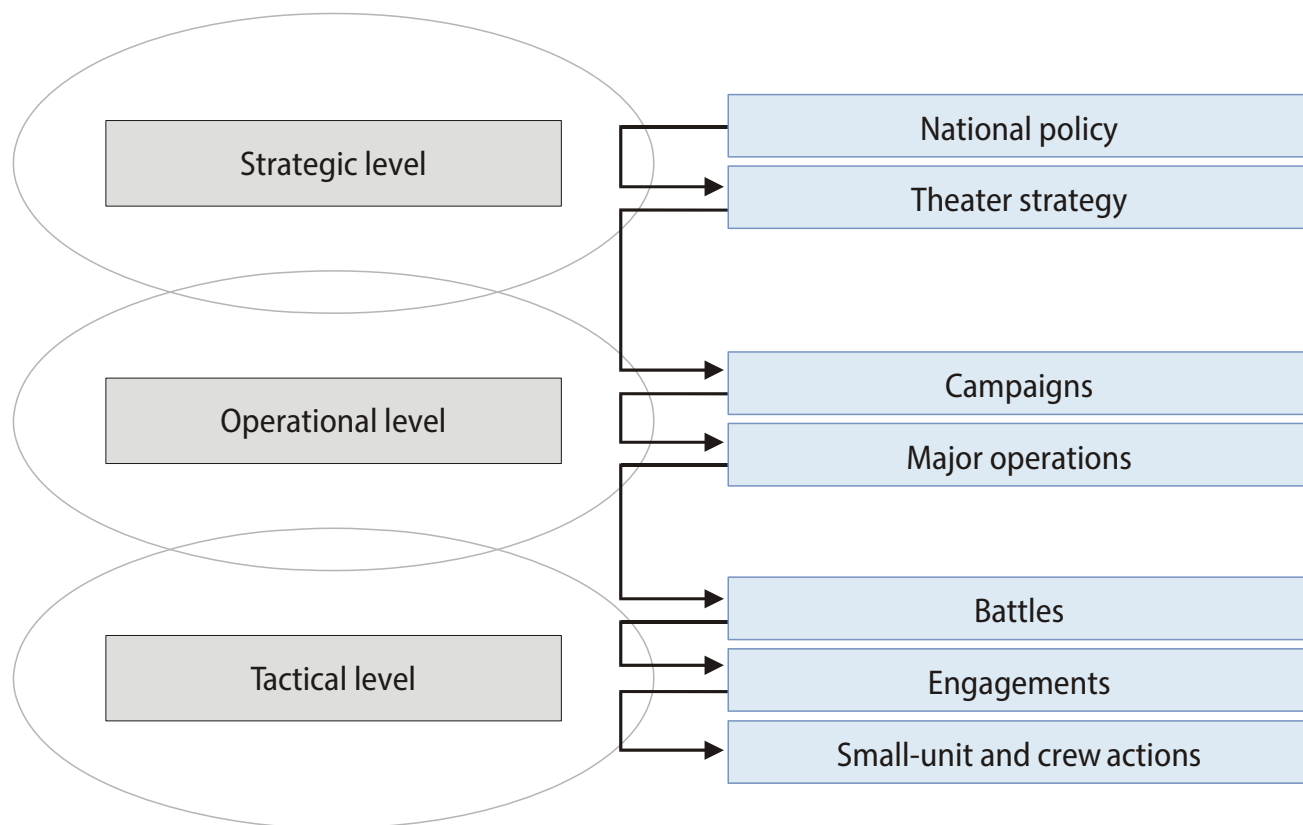


and immediate global communications and networked threats.<sup>8</sup>

Given that there are no fixed limits or boundaries between the levels of war, how does the student differentiate between them when strategic assets have tactical applications and when tactical actions have intended and unintended strategic consequences? A tactical action with an intended strategic consequence (purpose) would, from the explanation in JP 1 and JP 3-0, place that *tactical* action at the *strategic* level of war. Notice also that in this explanation from JP 3-0 that the operational level of war is not mentioned. It is no wonder that many CGSOC students in the Department of Distance Education have difficulty distinguishing between the levels of war; the doctrine has an inherent

epistemological issue regarding the clarity of the delineation between the levels (see figure 2, page 78).

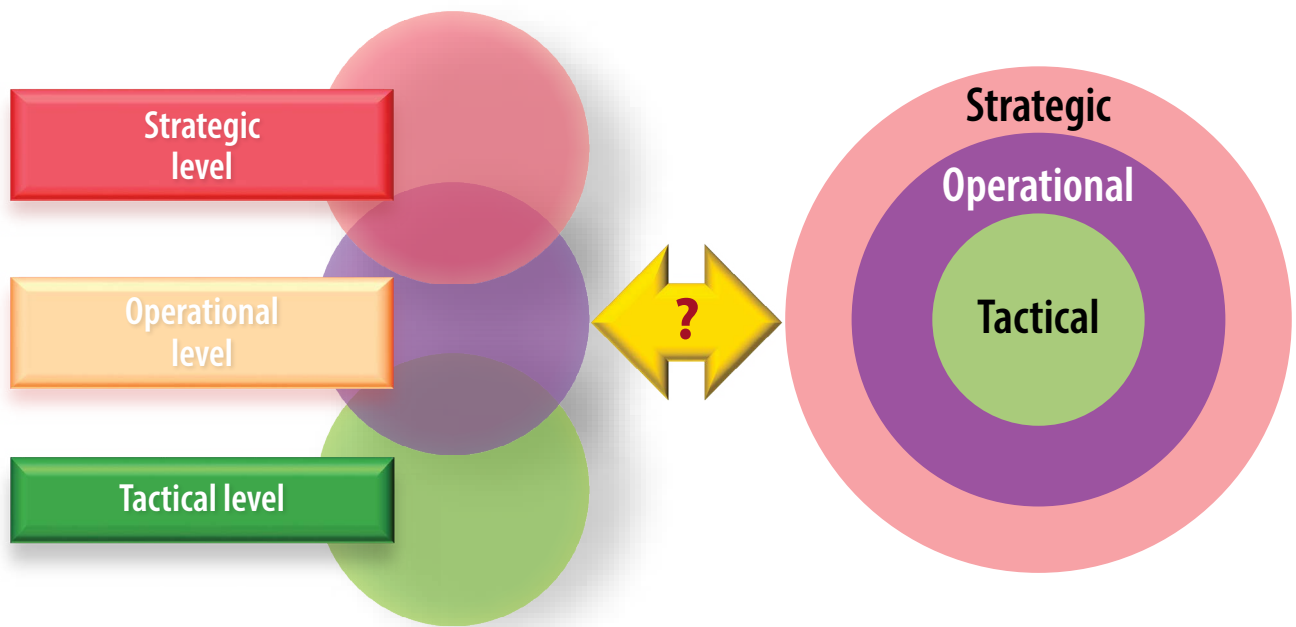
There are two common issues students have with the levels of war. First, they will often combine the levels of war. That is, they do not make any distinction between strategic (national and theater), operational, and tactical; the most common mistake is they will combine the strategic and operational levels. Those levels are the ones they have the least experience with. The other common error is mistaking actions or objectives at one level for those done at another level, either higher or lower. The result of these errors is analysis that is confused and entangled. The errors prevent students from thinking clearly through problems dealing with operational art and are a hindrance to their ability to



(Figure from Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*)

**Figure 1. Levels of Warfare**

This graphic shows the levels of war as a distinct hierarchy with marginally overlapping areas between the strategic and the operational and between the tactical and the operational. In this hierarchical structure, there is no overlap between the tactical and the strategic as suggested by the description in Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*.



(Graphic by DeEtte Lombard, CGSOC C200 lesson plan, academic year 2019–2020; reference Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*)

**Figure 2. Three Levels of War**

This graphic of the levels of war from a lesson plan in the Command and General Staff Officers' Course (CGSOC) C200 course shows a version of the distinct hierarchy graphic from Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, on the left but presents the levels of war as nested or embedded on the right. This would indicate that the tactical and operational levels are contained within the strategic level and that the tactical level is contained within the operational level. That graphic would better fit the example from JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*. On the other hand, if the levels are nested and embedded rather than distinct with a marginal overlap, how does the student differentiate between them?

grasp key concepts. Most students think about, and make connections with, their professional military experiences to provide context to new information. The usual approach is to relate the new concepts in CGSOC to a tactical framework since the majority of students' military experiences are at that level. This is a natural response and a common heuristic, but it leads to hasty generalizations and biased interpretation of information. There is little recourse currently to assist students struggling to understand the levels of war except to point them back to doctrine. What is needed is a new way to clarify and present the levels of war in a way that assists students in absorbing the concept in a new framework without trying to make connections

to their tactical experiences. A framework used in quite a few disciplines is called the level of analysis. That framework can assist CGSOC students to clarify their thinking and analysis.

The level of analysis is a tool found in various social sciences (e.g., political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology) that helps the scholar define the scale and scope of his or her research.

In any area of scholarly inquiry, there are always several ways in which the phenomena under study may be sorted and arranged for purposes of systemic analysis. Whether in the physical or social sciences, the observer may choose to focus upon the parts

or upon the whole, upon the components or upon the system.<sup>9</sup>

The example used here is from an international relations theory in political science, the field that this author is most familiar with. In political science, the level of analysis problem was described by J. David Singer in 1961, but he only described two levels: the international system and the state.<sup>10</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, in *Man, the State, and War* and in *Theory of International Politics*, proposes three levels of analysis that are now most commonly used: the individual, the state, and the international system.<sup>11</sup> These three levels allow a scholar to investigate phenomena from very different perspectives. For example, if the individual level of analysis is selected, then the research would focus on what the individual decision-maker does in terms of policy and why he or she made that decision. If the state level of analysis is chosen, then the focus would be on the internal workings of the state and how bureaucracies and groups make decisions (e.g., Graham Allison's work on the Cuban Missile Crisis<sup>12</sup>). If the international system is chosen, then the research would focus on the structure of the system and the interactions between actors in the system (e.g., looking at the structure of alliances and treaties prior to World War I).

The utility then of selecting a level of analysis is methodological; it allows the scholar to structure his or her research in a way that is clear and rational. It prevents concepts and ideas from becoming confused and entangled by limiting what is under investigation to those things that fit within its scope. If a scholar uses the international system as a level of analysis, that choice prevents, for example, the personality of the German Kaiser (individual level of analysis) to be considered as a factor in the international system of alliances and treaties prior to World War I. This does not mean that any one level of analysis is superior; on the contrary, all levels or perspectives regarding a subject are necessary to more fully understand it. However, using levels of analysis provides clarity and focus when examining complex subjects.

To further improve clarity in analysis, the military scholar must be aware of another concept known as the unit of analysis. The level of analysis is not the same as the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is the object that is the focus of the analysis; it is the thing studied. What is important is that the unit of analysis "depends

on the level of inquiry."<sup>13</sup> A unit of analysis could be individual(s), group(s), organization(s), state(s), or a system. The unit of analysis depends on the framework of the analysis, which is the level of analysis. If a soldier is looking at the strategic level of analysis, his or her unit of analysis might be *the actions of* a theater commander, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or the secretary of defense. It could also be *the actions of* a corporal, sergeant, or junior officer when *those actions* are at the strategic level. This meshes with doctrine as noted above regarding the unit of analysis and the levels of war when JP 3-0 states,

Echelon of command, size of units, types of equipment, and types and location of forces or components may often be associated with a particular level, but the strategic, operational, or tactical purpose of their employment depends on the nature of their task, mission, or objective.<sup>14</sup>

This is the doctrinal equivalent of stating that the unit of analysis depends on the level of analysis (level of war). Using the levels of war as levels of analysis fits doctrine and helps to clarify it.

There are several benefits of using the levels of war as levels of analysis. First, it clarifies doctrine. It clears up the epistemological issue described previously. This is rather simple and yet not intuitive to most students. Most students try to fit the information they are given into a level of war as a *category* during their analysis. Treating the levels of war as levels of analysis would require students to *first* determine the scope and limitations of each level of war in a given scenario *prior* to conducting any analysis of the subject. It changes the student's focus from trying to sift information into loosely defined and overlapping categories *during* analysis to starting his or her analysis with a framework having predetermined parameters for what defines each level of analysis/level of war. As with the social sciences, use of levels of analysis clarifies the scope

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of research and analysis by clearly describing what is to be the subject of investigation *prior to* analysis. The example from JP 3-0 describing a *tactical* action at the *strategic* level of war would be clarified. The unit of analysis is not the determinant. If the student is using the strategic level of war as a level of analysis, then that action would simply be seen as a strategic action regardless of which echelon of command or unit conducted the action. In fact, *the actions* (unit of analysis) conducted by a tactical unit can be tactical, operational, or strategic. That is much clearer. This is simply a change in approach and not a change in definition or parameters (scope) of each level of war.

Doctrine in JP 1 already establishes the parameters (scope) of each level of war in such a way that each can be used as a level of analysis. The strategic level of war involves national (or multinational) guidance and resources to achieve national- or theater-level objectives. The strategic level of analysis would analyze any actions taken that involve national (or multinational) guidance, resources, or objectives and end state. The operational level of war involves planning and execution of campaigns and major operations using

M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks of the 3rd Armored Division move out on a mission 15 February 1991 during Operation Desert Storm. An M2/M3 Bradley can be seen in background. (Photo by Photographer's Mate Chief Petty Officer D. W. Holmes II, U.S. Navy)

operational art to achieve military objectives. The operational level of analysis would analyze any actions taken that involve operational art and planning and execution of campaigns and major operations. The tactical level of war involves the planning and execution of battles and engagements by the "ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and the enemy to achieve combat objectives."<sup>15</sup> The tactical level of analysis would analyze any actions taken that involve those activities.

A good example is Operation Desert Storm. When the levels of war are set as levels of analysis using the parameters in doctrine, it becomes clear that VII Corps was functioning at the tactical level of war (planning and executing battles and engagements using "the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and the



enemy to achieve combat objectives”<sup>16</sup>). It is instantly clear that the objectives or actions (battles and engagements) and not the echelon of command (Corps) determine the level of war when applying the levels of war as levels of analysis.

There is then a final question of whether to view the levels of war as a hierarchy or as nested and embedded. Another aspect of the utility of using the levels of war as levels of analysis is that both approaches can be used. As with levels of analysis in political science (individual, state, and international system), an individual is embedded or nested within the state, which is also embedded or nested within the international system, but there is a hierarchy in terms of scope that expands from the individual, to the state, to the international system. Whether the levels of war can be considered as a hierarchy or as nested and embedded is a function of how the framework of the level of war as a level of analysis is used. Students can and should become comfortable with both ways of viewing the levels of war.

## Conclusion

Students have repeatedly demonstrated difficulty understanding and applying the levels of war in their coursework. That is because there is an epistemological issue with current doctrine and the students’ approach to the levels of war as categories to be used during the analysis process. They also often use their experiences at the tactical level as a heuristic, but that causes hasty generalizations and biased interpretation of information. These problems cause confused and entangled thinking, resulting in poor analysis. Using the levels of war as levels of analysis provides a method to clarify students’ thinking. This is a departure from the current approach primarily in terms of process. The main difference is changing the student’s view of the levels of war from that of several categories used in the analysis process, to levels of analysis considered as a framework to be applied to a scenario *prior* to the analysis. This will assist in eliminating the unit of analysis issue often made by students, as well as removing the epistemological issue of unclear boundaries between the levels of war. ■

## Notes

**Epigraph.** Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 132.

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (China: Sweetwater Press, 2006); Clausewitz, *On War*, 178. The idea of the difference between strategy and tactics appears in chapter 3 of *The Art of War*, “Attack by Stratagem.”

2. Jacob Kipp, “Soviet Military Doctrine and the Origins of Operational Art, 1917-1936,” in *Soviet Doctrine from Lenin to Gorbachev, 1915-1991*, ed. William C. Frank Jr. and Philip S. Gillette (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 88.

3. Huba Wass de Czege and L. D. Holder, “The New FM 100-5,” *Military Review* 62, no. 7 (July 1982): 56.

4. Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 12 July 2017), I-7-I-8, accessed 30 March 2021, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1\\_ch1.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf); JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 22 October

2018), I-12-I-14, accessed 30 March 2021, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_0ch1.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf).

5. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-7.

6. *Ibid.*, x.

7. *Ibid.*, I-7.

8. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, I-12.

9. David J. Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009557>.

10. *Ibid.*, 80-84.

11. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

12. Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

13. Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 31.

14. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, I-12.

15. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-8.

16. *Ibid.*