THE CONCEPT OF OPERATIONAL ART

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author defines operational art as the cognitive process that enables the design, organisation and sequencing of operations to link tactical actions and strategic objectives. He feels that the ongoing desire of western militaries to seek a decisive military battle may be largely at odds with the concept of operational art. According to the author, contemporary conflicts are complex and dynamic, requiring a multi-faceted approach that transcends military battles. Nonetheless, he notes that the concept of 'decisiveness' remains useful to contemporary operational art as it helps to prioritise and direct military efforts. The author discusses his views in three parts. In the first part, he explores the diminishing role of military force and decisive battles by highlighting the hybrid and multi-faceted character of contemporary warfare. Next, he focuses on the 'technology' aspect of warfare, noting that Western militaries continue to seek decisive battles due to technological hubris and the increased value of human life. Lastly, he highlights that while Western militaries' desire for a decisive battle is misplaced, 'decisiveness' and decisive effects that extend beyond the military domain are still useful constructs that can help Western militaries prioritise resources and efforts. The author concludes that while the ongoing desire for decisive battle is largely at odds with contemporary operational art, decisiveness remains a useful concept for Western militaries when perceived on a spectrum and applied to other domains such as the cognitive domain.

Keywords: Strategy; Planning; War; Modern; Operational Art

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, decisive battles were venerated as the great hinges that shaped the course of history. They were seen as the 'single blood-soaked day that decided whether ancient empires and cultures prospered or failed.'[1] In the mid-19th century, Sir Edward Creasy's classic work, *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, entrenched decisive battles in Western discourse.[2] Decisive battles thus became the 'strategic cul-de-sac' for Western nations, the ideal solution that commanders strove to achieve a strategic or political outcome.[3] Cathal Nolan terms this desire 'decisive battle-seeking,' with commanders who waged decisive battles successfully such as Napoleon and Moltke the Elder lauded, venerated, and studied.[4] However, the early 20th century saw the birth of the operational level of warfare and operational art, decreasing the likelihood that any single battle could be truly decisive. The importance of decisive battles waned with many commentators noting that in contemporary warfare, decisive battles often did not decide wars.[5] Despite this, Western militaries continue to idealise and pursue decisive battles even as it appears at odds with the concept of contemporary operational art.

In assessing whether Western militaries' ongoing desires to seek decisive battles are at odds with operational art, the definition of operational art bears further clarification. Operational art is a nebulous concept and was first coined by Soviet general Aleksandr Svechin in 1922. He defined it as the 'tactical creativity that links together tactical actions into a campaign to achieve the strategic goal.'[6] This link works two-ways and the operational artist must be adept to balance strategic objectives with tactical realities.[7]

Photo of Alexander Svechin taken in 1923.

US Army soldiers disembarking from helicopters in the La Drang Valley.

While this definition is useful, further elaboration is required on the 'art' aspect. The United States (US) Joint Planning Doctrine notes that operational art is a 'cognitive approach…supported by [commanders'] skill, knowledge, experience, creativity and judgment,' and the Australian Defence Force Joint Military Appreciation Process (ADF JMAP) defines it as 'the skilful employment of military forces….'[8] Synthesising the 'operational' and the 'art' aspects of the term, this essay defines operational art as the cognitive process that enables the design, organisation, and sequencing of operations to link tactical actions with strategic objectives.

This essay argues that the ongoing desire of western militaries to seek a decisive military battle is largely at odds with the concept of operational art. Contemporary conflicts are complex and dynamic, requiring a multi-faceted approach that transcends military battles. Nonetheless, this essay notes that the concept of 'decisiveness' remains useful to contemporary operational art as it helps to prioritise and direct military efforts. This essay proceeds in three sections. First, this essay demonstrates the diminishing role of military force and decisive battle by highlighting the hybrid and multi-faceted character of contemporary warfare. Second, this essay notes that Western militaries continue to seek decisive battle due to technological hubris and the increased value of human life. Last, this essay argues that while Western militaries' desire for decisive battle is misplaced, 'decisiveness' and decisive effects that extend beyond the military domain are still useful constructs that help Western militaries prioritise resources and efforts.

THE INCONGRUENCE OF DECISIVE BATTLE AND CONTEMPORARY OPERATIONAL ART

The desire for decisive battle stems from pre-Industrial Revolution battles where decisive tactical victory was perceived as the means to attain strategic success. Nations fought huge battles of annihilation and followed Clausewitz's advice that battles were a 'collision between two centres of gravity; the more forces we can concentrate in our centre of gravity, the more certain and massive the effect will be.'[9] Likewise, Jomini advised commanders to take massed offensive action at a decisive point, usually by achieving the interior line as opposed to the exterior line of the enemy force.[10] This classic military strategy was named the 'strategy of a single point' where 'the entire mission of the leader was reduced to concentrating…and throwing [his forces] into battle as one tactical

phenomenon.'[11] However, the Industrial Revolution brought about advances to transport that enabled large armies to be rapidly deployed across battlefields in unprecedented speed.[12] Thus, operational art was formulated to 'integrate temporally and spatially distributed operations into one coherent whole.'[13] This led to a dramatic increase in the theatre of operations and reduced the prospect of defeating the enemy in a single decisive battle.[14] Tactical battles could no longer be successful without 'a clear and unmistakable focus on operational art…the theatre-wide employments of one's combat forces and logistics.'[15] Thus, the emergence of operational art meant that tactical battles were unlikely to achieve a decisive strategic outcome.

In contemporary conflicts, operational art has veered further from decisive battles as conflicts are hybrid and consist of multiple Centres of Gravities (CoG) across time and space. Discourse on operational art has existed since the early 20th century but Anglo-Saxon countries only began to focus on it in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.[16] The operational level of warfare and operational art was introduced in the US' 1982 and 1986 versions of FM100-5 respectively, with CoG analysis being proclaimed as 'the essence of operational art.'[17] Undoubtedly, CoG is a contentious concept with endless debates on whether it is a capability, a focal point, a source of strength and whether it incorporates system design.[18] Despite these disagreements, most commentators agree that CoG analysis helps planners focus attention on the critical components of a system.[19] CoG analysis inform 'ways' and 'means' to achieve the greatest impact or decisive effect. However, locating a single CoG will prove difficult in contemporary environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.[20] Contemporary conflicts will most likely possess multiple CoGs existing across time, space and domains.[21] These CoGs also exist across different levels of war and are interconnected, disappearing and emerging dynamically based on the changing context. As such, the possibility of defeating the enemy's single CoG in decisive battle has diminished significantly in contemporary conflicts.

Decisive battle is also less relevant to contemporary operational art due to the dwindling utility of military force. Reflecting on the rapid decline of full-blown war, retired British General Rupert Smith noted that military force no longer decided outcomes, but merely 'creates a condition in which the strategic result [can be] achieved.'[22] He terms this 'war amongst the people' where military force is used 'sub-strategically,' usually at the tactical level.[23] Industrial wars are gone and in its place are a 'continuous crisscrossing between confrontation and conflict… [between] state or a non-state actor.'[24] This is because Western militaries gravitate towards decisive battlefield victories due to their military strength, while weaker militaries avoid direct confrontation and draw the conflict into other domains such as the civilian domain.[25] The stronger force would also avoid utilising its full strength as it would be disproportionate and incur significant political costs.[26] As such, contemporary conflict will be limited, hybrid, and continuous. American historian Antulio Joseph Echevarria labels these types of conflicts the 'second grammar of war.'[27] While the 'first grammar of war' is decisive military victory, the 'second grammar of war' is the ability to conduct graduated responses across a broad range of security operations. This second grammar requires the flexible and efficient application of all forms of national power and extends beyond the military domain.[28] Thus, contemporary operational art involves a synthesis of all elements of national power, making military battle less decisive.

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Contemporary operational art also requires a keen understanding of social and cultural elements as information is increasingly socially created as Western nations progress towards an information society. In the past, information was transmitted via traditional media that is primarily top-down and easily controlled. However, horizontal communication networks such as the internet have supplanted traditional mass media

and have led to vast networked communities.[29] These horizontal networks are socially constructed and are built around 'peoples' initiatives, interests and desires.'[30] Compared to traditional information flow, information is now primarily communicated laterally and is self-generated, self-directed and self-selected.[31] This leads to a society where virtual information and networks have become 'a fundamental dimension of reality.'[32] This new dimension requires the understanding of people and societies, including 'social construction, complexity theory and human and cultural geography.'[33] Thus, information dominance has become more than a competition of reach and accessibility, but a competition between opposing narratives.[34] These narratives blur the lines between political, social and military domains, marginalising the utility of decisive military battle in contemporary operational art. As prominent strategist Colin Gray noted, decisive battle in the 21st century will 'more and more carry the risk of yielding only a painful Pyrrhic victory.' [35]

Recent wars waged by Western militaries corroborate the assessment that decisive battles do not lead to strategic success and are at odds with operational art.[36] In the Vietnam War, while the US won all the battles, they ultimately lost the war.[37] This observation is best encapsulated in the oft-quoted conversation between Col Harry Summers and his North Vietnamese counterpart in 1975, where Col Summers noted that 'The United States has won all battles,' to which the North Vietnamese officer replied, 'That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.'[38] In Vietnam, the US was mired in doctrinal rigidity and saw overwhelming firepower as the solution to the North Vietnamese insurgency.[39] The US relied on the 'first grammar of war' and was unable to recognise the changing character of war.[40] The Vietnam War was also the first war where media and information were instrumental to the outcome of the war. The US was unprepared for the deluge of information and were unable to dictate and shape the public narrative for the war. Former US President Richard Nixon reflected that the media 'dominated domestic opinion about [the War's] purpose and conduct.'[41] American journalist James Reston shared a similar view, noting that 'the reporters and cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of war to the people.'[42] Coupled with the rising costs of the war, the US ultimately lost public support and the war despite winning multiple decisive tactical battles.

American F-15Es parked in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield (The first phase of the coalition's efforts against Iraq).

<blockquote style="color:red">
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Over twenty years later, the US' experience in the Second Gulf War continued to demonstrate the waning relevance of decisive battle in contemporary operational art. While the US-led coalition defeated the Taliban decisively in the initial phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, they were unable to convert that into any lasting strategic success.[43] US Forces were neither prepared nor adequately trained to conduct security operations and blithely assumed that Iraqi security services would oversee post-conflict law and order.[44] However, the HowhIraqi security forces disbanded after the war and this resulted in a security vacuum. Iraq quickly descended into chaos and lawlessness, setting in motion a host of complex challenges that US Forces could never fully address despite the prolonged commitment of manpower and resources.[45] Decisive battlefield victory did not translate into strategic success as the US failed to move from conventional military operations to security operations and reconstruction, failing to recognise the importance of winning over the populace.[46] Subsequent CoG analyses by Daniel Smith and colleagues also demonstrated that while decisive battle eliminated the Taliban forces, the CoG in Iraq existed at different levels and varied dynamically.[47] A focus on decisive battle was thus narrow and at odds with operational art, failing to recognise the dwindling utility of force and thus neglecting the need for a holistic and multifaceted approach.

THE ONGOING DESIRE OF WESTERN MILITARIES TO SEEK DECISIVE BATTLES

Despite evidence suggesting that decisive battle is anachronistic, Western militaries suffer from technological hubris and believe that technology would enable decisive battle. After the Vietnam War, the faith that technological superiority would be decisive was largely discredited.[48] However, the stunning victory in the First Gulf War revived the latent belief that technology would enable information superiority, and even certainty, effectively lifting the fog of war.[49] This technological hubris was seen in the 1997 US report 'Joint Vision 2010' where powerful networks and sophisticated modelling were vaunted as key enablers of information superiority and synchronisation across all levels of war.[50] Historian Williamson Murray noted that Western militaries often sought the technological 'silver bullet' and thus 'reduced the business of war to a search for simple, clear, engineering solutions.'[51] Furthermore, this led to a conflation of greater awareness with greater comprehension.[52] While technology enabled militaries to monitor their adversaries in real-time, humans still provide the sense-making and analysis.[53] As such, war is still fundamentally a 'social intercourse,' and cannot escape friction, uncertainty and chance.[54] New technologies that reduce friction may also inadvertently create new friction as technologies and systems become more complex.[55] One commentator astutely noted that militaries had a greater chance of failure when they believed friction could be eliminated and adopted certainty as the dominant condition of war.[56] Thus, the ongoing desire of Western militaries to seek decisive battle stems from misplaced technological hubris.

The increasing value of human lives has also inadvertently steered Western militaries towards decisive battles. Decisive battles are well suited to the political preferences of Western states—quick decisive action to avoid being embroiled in a lengthy war overseas while minimising casualties.[57] This preference also reflected the deep-seated belief that Western technological superiority would enable their militaries to outsmart its enemies without incurring significant human costs.[58] Professor Martin Shaw labels this Western way of war as 'risk-transfer wars' where Western militaries aim to fight wars at minimal human costs to reduce political costs.[59] The increased sanctity of human lives meant that long wars cannot sustain public support as images of violence and human suffering will quickly erode public support.[60] If militaries failed to offer a swift and decisive option, military action will be unpalatable to politicians and other means of national power such as diplomatic and economic means will be preferred. As such, militaries will often force planning and operations into the mould of decisive battle to ensure that the military continues to play a

significant role.[61] These political pressures are not new and reflect past trends of airpower theorists in the early 20th century who promised decisive victory while minimising own casualties.[62] These pressures, coupled with the increased value of human lives, explain why decisive battle continues to be perceived by Western militaries as the panacea to reduce political costs in waging wars.

THE VALUE OF A DECISIVE BATTLE IN CONTEMPORARY OPERATIONAL ART

In evaluating the value of a decisive battle in contemporary operational art, it may be prudent for Western militaries to view 'decisiveness' as a spectrum rather than an absolute. Colin Gray argues that 'decisiveness' is a meaningful concept but perceiving decisiveness as a clear-cut victory or as 'a clear-cut alternative to defeat' is problematic.[63] Instead, Gray suggests that decisiveness should be perceived as a spectrum where there are myriads of possibilities and outcomes.[64] Success and war is ultimately a cultural construct of which Western militaries tend to view in absolute terms.[65] An example is Clausewitz, who notes in *On War* that the true aim of warfare is to 'render the enemy powerless.'[66] A similar and more recent view by British historian Michael Howard notes that two conditions must be met for decisive victory—the defeated side must accept defeat and realise that the verdict cannot be overturned, and the defeated must become 'reconciled to their defeat.'[67] However, these prescribed conditions are absolute and anachronistic in contemporary wars that are hybrid and ill-defined.[68] Contemporary wars do not have clear-cut victors, and all victories and defeats lie on a spectrum. Russia's conflict with Crimea in 2014 is one such example. It could be argued that Russia's actions were not decisive as the annexation of Crimea did not lead to further gains in Ukraine.[69] However, it could likewise be argued that Russia's actions were sufficiently decisive as Russia regained influence over Crimea and 'shifted the onus of escalation onto the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).'[70] As such, Russia's actions were neither absolutely decisive nor indecisive. Furthermore, an assessment of decisiveness cannot be made without a complete understanding of Russia's strategic objective and cultural standpoint. Thus, decisiveness is subjective and best perceived on a spectrum.

When decisiveness is perceived on a spectrum, it helps prioritise resources and direct military efforts. In both Australia's and US' joint planning doctrine, operational design incorporates 'decisive points.' The ADF defines decisive points as a 'significant operational milestones' while the US Armed Forces defines it as a 'key event, critical factor, or function…[that] allows the commanders to gain a marked advantage.'[71] These definitions are not absolute and instead lie on a spectrum that facilitate the prioritisation of operational actions. Similarly, Joe Strange's famous Centre of Gravity, Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, Critical Vulnerabilities (COG-CC-CR-CV) construct that is adopted by many Western militaries provides an operational design that helps militaries identify critical points to achieve the greatest effect.[72] CoG analysis views decisiveness as a spectrum and the critical factors in CoG analysis are not absolute. Instead, they direct efforts to where the most 'decisive' battle can be waged. While prominent strategist Lawrence Freedman criticises CoG analysis for inadvertently steering planners towards military action, this criticism holds only when planners limit their analyses to the military domain.[73] The penchant for military planners to gravitate towards problems they prefer to solve, rather than solving the right problems, is more a problem of application.[74] When applied appropriately, the CoG construct can help direct military efforts to where it is most efficient and 'decisive,' even if it is beyond the military domain. As such, Western operational design that view decisiveness as a spectrum remains useful in contemporary operational art as it helps to prioritise resources and direct military efforts.

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The growing pertinence of narratives and information in contemporary conflicts also suggest that

the cognitive domain can produce increasingly decisive effects. While the ongoing desire to wage decisive battle is largely misplaced, other domains can still produce decisive effects. One such domain is the cognitive domain. Contemporary wars are fought among people and the importance of cognitive effects are increasingly significant.[75] These cognitive effects are critical as narratives determine legitimacy and public will. As Mao Tse-tung aptly notes, 'it is people, not things that are decisive.'[76] While the importance of armies' morale has long been emphasised, the cognitive effects today extend beyond armies and encompass the collective will of the nation and the people.[77] Western militaries can learn from Eastern thinkers such as Sun Tzu who expounded on the cognitive domain, emphasising the importance of diminishing the enemy's mind and morale.[78] Sun Tzu labeled this the 'indirect method' that 'breaks the enemy's resistance without fighting.'[79] This advice is relevant in contemporary conflict as technologies have become increasingly widespread and available, shifting the decisive domains to the human and the cognitive which are harder to train and replace.[80] Thus, the cognitive domain has gradually become more decisive and is a critical component of contemporary operational art.

CONCLUSION

While decisive battle has long been sought after by Western militaries, it is perhaps 'an anomaly in history' that is largely incongruent with contemporary operational art.[81] Contemporary Western conflict is hybrid, complex and waged among the people. These conflicts have multiple CoGs in time and space that cannot be addressed by a single decisive battle. Multiple wars have demonstrated this, such as those in Vietnam and Iraq. However, decisive battles continue to be pursued by Western militaries. This desire can be attributed to technological hubris that led to a reversion to the 'earlier, idealised prototype of a decisive military victory settling the fate of nations.'[82] Furthermore, perceived Western superiority and the increased sanctity of human lives has put political pressures on militaries to adopt decisive battles and reduce the political costs of war. While the desire for a decisive battle is largely misplaced, the concept of decisiveness remains useful when perceived on a spectrum. Evaluating what is 'decisive' in operational art helps militaries prioritise resources and direct efforts to what is most effective and critical. Furthermore, the pertinence of narratives and information in contemporary warfare has led to the cognitive domain producing increasingly decisive effects. Thus, while the ongoing desire for decisive battle is largely at odds with contemporary operational art, decisiveness remains a useful concept for Western militaries when perceived on a spectrum and applied to other domains such as the cognitive domain.

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