

Obsessed with tactics

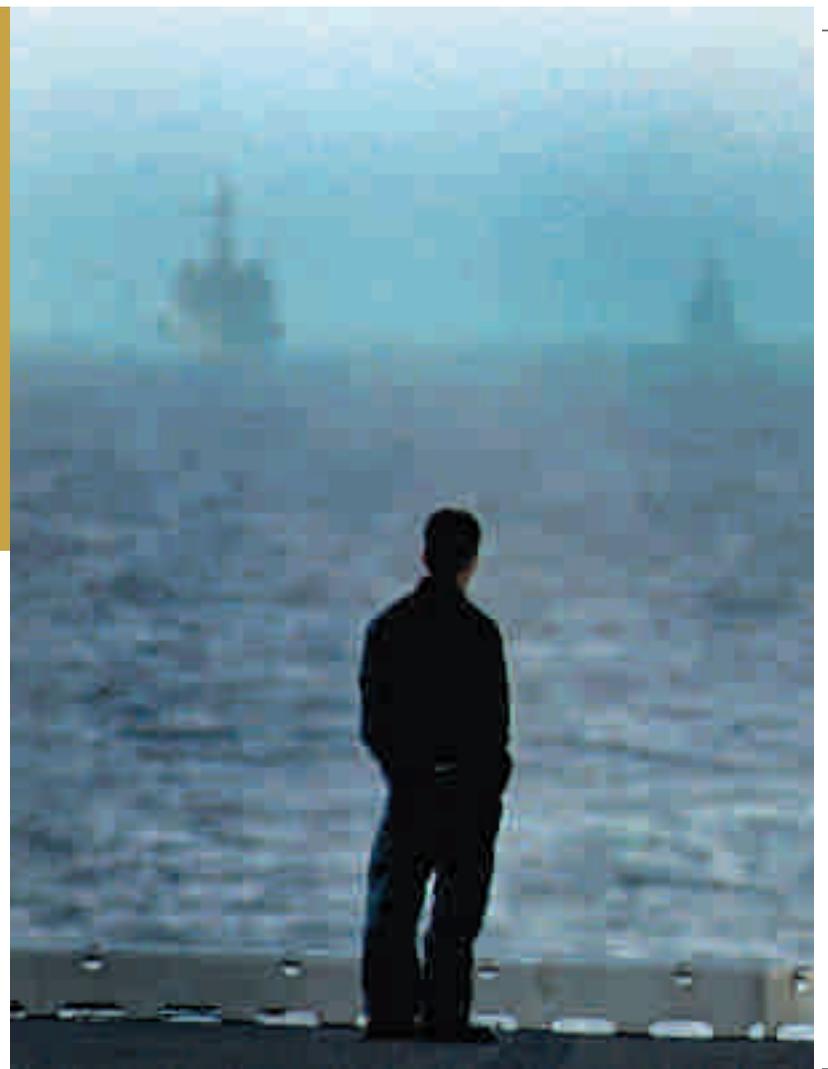
The Navy neglects the importance of operational art

BY MILAN VEGO

The Navy today is overly focused on the tactical employment of its combat forces, in its doctrine and practice. This might not be a problem in case of a conflict with numerically and technologically inferior forces. However, the Navy would have a much greater problem and possibly suffer a major defeat in a war with a relatively strong opponent that better balances the employment of his forces at the tactical and operational levels of war. The Navy's superior technology and tactics would not be sufficient to overcome its lack of operational thinking.

The Navy's over-reliance on technology is also one of the main reasons for its focus on the tactics of employment of platforms, weapons/sensors and combat arms. Moreover, the Navy grossly neglects tactics for employing several naval combat arms or combined arms tactics. Among numerous naval tactical publications, there is not a single one that explains the employment of

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surface forces, submarines, naval aircraft and combat arms of other services in combination. Another serious problem is that the Navy still lacks a doctrine for the operational level of war at sea. This lack of a broader operational framework greatly complicates writing subordinate tactical doctrinal publications.

Most of the Navy's attention is given to strike warfare, while so-called "defensive warfare" areas, such as antisubmarine warfare, defense and protection of maritime trade, and mine warfare, are given a short shrift. The fate of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in World War II shows what can happen when the focus is almost exclusively on tactics and offensive employment of one's combat forces. The Japanese were fixated on the single so-called decisive battle. That preoccupation guided the IJN's tactical doctrine and ship designs resulting in a powerful surface force that was one-dimensional and brittle. Perhaps there is nothing worse than confusing tactics with strategy, and strategy with the conduct of war, as the IJN did in the interwar years.

TACTICS AND DECISIVE BATTLE

The focus on the tactical employment of its combat forces is not new for the Navy. Its roots go to the teachings of the famous historian and theoretician Rear Adm. Alfred T. Mahan, who emphasized the importance of fighting a decisive battle and the critical importance of naval tactics for winning such a battle. In the interwar years, the Navy, the IJN and the British Royal Navy made great efforts to prepare for a decisive battle similar to the Battle of Jutland in 1916. The offensive action was deeply



NAVY

ingrained in the naval officer corps through study at the Naval War College at Newport, R.I., and during tactical exercises at sea. However, the Navy learned through trial and error in World War II to use its combat forces effectively at the operational level of war. It conducted a large number of successful major operations in the Pacific and the Mediterranean. Several major naval operations were conducted in the Korean War, notably the brilliantly planned and executed amphibious landing at Inchon in mid-September 1950 (Operation Chromite).

Since the late 1950s, the Navy's interest in theory and practice of operational level of war has steadily declined. One of the reasons was the widely held belief that because of the advent of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, any major war in the future would not be fought with conventional weapons. The Navy would not fight another high-intensity conflict. The emphasis on tactics has accelerated since the 1950s largely because of the introduction of more advanced information technologies and long-range and precise weapons.

Obviously, the Navy's performance at the tactical level is critical for the ultimate success in operations short of war and in a high-intensity conflict. Regardless of the soundness of policy, strategy and operational art, its objectives simply cannot be accomplished by inadequate or poor performance at the tactical level of war. At the same time, exclusive reliance on naval tactics would invariably lead to force-on-force or attrition warfare at the operational and strategic level. Yet tactical victories, no matter how decisive, cannot compensate for the lack of

operational competence and disconnect or mismatch at the policy and strategy levels. For example, the Navy did not match tactical skills with the Japanese in night fighting during the protracted struggle for Guadalcanal (August 1942–February 1943). However, the Allies ultimately won because they matched means and ends at the operational and strategic levels better than the Japanese. Expressed differently, they won primarily because they thought operationally, not only tactically.

The results of tactical engagements must be in harmony with operational art and strategy. A naval tactical action should not be fought unless it is part of the larger operational framework. Tactical victories are meaningless if they are unrelated to the accomplishment of the given operational objective. For example, in the Battle for Leyte in 1944, Adm. William F. Halsey, 3rd Fleet commander, won a tactical victory in the Battle off Cape Engano with his Task Force 38 over a much smaller and weaker Japanese carrier force. However, that tactical success also almost led to the failure of the entire major supporting naval operations because it was fought outside the given operational framework. The 3rd Fleet's principal mission in the Leyte operation was to provide distant (operational) cover and support to the Allied forces that landed on Leyte. Only Vice Adm. Takeo Kurita's decision to turn north toward the San Bernardino Strait with his 1st Diversionary Attack Force and to leave the scene of action saved the Navy from suffering a humiliation at the hands of a much weaker force.

THE NETWORK-CENTRIC FACTOR

The Navy's over-reliance on tactics has become even more pronounced with its adoption of network-centric warfare, now commonly referred to as network-centric operations (NCO). The Navy also became one of the strongest proponents of the so-called effects-based approach to operations (EBAO). Despite claims to the contrary, NCO and EBAO use tactical techniques and procedures to accomplish the objectives across the levels of war. Yet purely tactical actions such as strikes cannot replace, major operations as the main method of accomplishing operational objectives, at least not yet

NCO also provides, through the FORCEnet network architecture, the key component for the execution of the Navy's vision for the 21st century, Sea Power 21. Except for some elements of Sea Shield and Sea Basing, Sea Power 21 is not focused on the operational level of war. For example, one of the major components of Sea Power 21, Sea Strike, is essentially a tactical concept. Among

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other things, it envisages that “netted fires and automated decision aids will accelerate the launching of precision attacks on critical targets in order to create appropriate effects.”

The Navy’s narrow and tactical focus is highlighted in almost all its official statements regarding the employment of major tactical forces — the carrier strike groups, expeditionary strike groups, strike or theater ballistic missile surface action groups, and maritime prepositioning groups — as the principal forces subordinate to joint force commander. The numbered and theater fleets, such as the 7th Fleet and the Pacific Fleet, are rarely mentioned. Yet only theater forces have the capabilities to accomplish operational and strategic objectives in war at sea.

Today’s Navy is almost entirely focused on conducting strikes, raids and attacks. No major naval operations as defined in the theory of operational art are ever mentioned. This is obvious from even a cursory reading of various position papers and statements by high officials. At the same time, various tactical methods of employment of naval forces are poorly or not defined in the Navy’s or joint doctrinal documents.

In generic terms, combat naval forces can be employed to accomplish tactical, operational and, in some cases, a major part of the overall strategic objective. Major or minor tactical objectives at sea are accomplished by conducting naval tactical actions — a cumulative term for diverse actions ranging from patrolling and surveillance to naval attacks, strikes, raids and battles. In some cases, these actions can lead to the accomplishment of an operational objective. The most frequently used methods for accomplishing a minor tactical objective is a naval attack — a combination of tactical maneuver and weapons used to accomplish a minor tactical objective. It is usually an integral part of a strike. A naval attack can be conducted by a single or several types of naval platforms.

STRIKE, RAID, BATTLE

Strike emerged as one of the most important methods of combat employment of naval forces with the advent of missiles and other long-range, highly precise and lethal weapons. A strike can be conducted by firing missiles, guns, torpedoes and/or dropping bombs sequentially and/or simultaneously by a single or several platforms (ships, submarines, aircraft and coastal batteries). In some cases, a massive missile strike can accomplish even an operational objective.

A broader form of strike is a naval raid — carried out by a single or sometimes several naval combat arms to destroy the enemy force, coastal installation or facility, or by landing a small

force to temporarily deny the enemy the use of some position. A naval raid can be also planned to boost morale or to divert the enemy’s attention from the action of friendly forces in a sector of the main effort. A naval battle, in turn, consists of a series of attacks-counterattacks and strikes-counterstrikes synchronized and aimed to accomplish a major tactical objective. A naval battle is relatively long — several hours or longer. Several naval combat arms, and often the combat arms of other services, might take part in a naval battle in littoral waters.

In some cases, diverse naval tactical actions can accomplish an operational objective, but only with time, the employment of relatively large forces and high losses in materiel and personnel. By conducting tactical actions against a strong opponent, the stronger navy will invariably fight attrition warfare at the operational and even strategic level. This, in turn, also ties down the navy in a certain part of a maritime theater, making it difficult or impossible to carry out other urgent tasks in another sea or ocean. This is what happened to the Allies in the struggle for Guadalcanal. The initial major naval operation — the amphibious landing on Guadalcanal — was highly successful. Afterward, the Allies became progressively involved in a series of small but costly actions with Japanese forces on land, at sea and in the air. This attrition phase lasted almost seven months before the Japanese decided to give up attempts to regain control of Guadalcanal. By then, the protracted struggle had considerably slowed the Allied operational tempo in the southern Pacific. No further major landings up the Solomons chain were possible until Guadalcanal was secure. A good argument can be made that had the Allies conducted consecutive major naval or air operations, the struggle for Guadalcanal would have ended much earlier and with far fewer Allied losses.

One of the most serious problems is that the Navy (like the Air Force) does not recognize a major operation as the main method of employment of its combat forces for accomplishing an operational objective in combat. Hence, it is not surprising that neither the theory nor doctrine for major naval operations exists.

Major operations are properly defined, however, in the U.S. joint doctrine and also by the Army as “a series of tactical actions (battles, engagements, and strikes) conducted by various combat forces of a single or several services coordinated in time and place, to accomplish operational and sometimes strategic objectives in an operational area.” The best and proven method of avoiding attrition at the operational level of war at sea is to plan and execute major naval operations. If successful, a major naval operation will achieve decisive results in

the shortest time possible and with the least losses. The side that plans and executes a major operation imposes the initiative over the enemy and selects the area and the time for accomplishing an operational objective. A naval commander who properly applies tenets of operational art can often decisively defeat a much larger force that relies on tactics.

The Navy uses a broad and imprecise term “naval operation” — defined in the joint documents as “a naval action or the performance of naval missions, which may be strategic, tactical, logistical or training.” This definition does not make the necessary distinction between objectives to be accomplished at sea and corresponding methods of combat force employment. It mixes the combat employment of naval forces with logistics and training. An alternative meaning of the same term is “the process of carrying out or training for naval combat to gain the objective of any battle or campaign.” The Navy’s Naval Operations Concept 2006 further confuses the issue by using the terms “globally networked operations” and “distributed operations” which have little, if any, linkage with what is considered a major operation in theory of operational warfare at sea.

The Navy apparently believes that the levels of war and the levels of command are the same thing. Although related, they are not the same. The levels of war exist only in operations short of war and in time of war. The larger the scale of the military objective — the higher the level of war. Three basic levels of war exist: strategic, operational and tactical. In U.S. terms, the strategic level comprises two sublevels: national and theater-strategic. The operational level of war is conducted to accomplish a single theater-strategic objective. The method of combat force employment is a land or maritime campaign or in some cases a single major joint/combined operation. Each level of war at sea encompasses a certain part of a maritime theater. For example, the operational level of war is conducted in a formally (or informally) declared theater of operations; a subset of a maritime theater (of war). In contrast, levels of command exist in time of peace, operations short of war and in war. They are only prerequisites for conducting war at a given level in the course of accomplishing assigned military objectives. The levels of command are clearly differentiated from each other, while levels of war are not.

The Navy’s emphasis on establishment of maritime headquarters (MHQ) with maritime operations centers (MOC) is entirely focused on the command structure and technology, or FORCEnet, underpinning command and control. MHQ/MOC is described as a multimode system of systems. Each headquarters

is a node, and each node relies on other nodes as well as other naval organizations such as the Office of Naval Intelligence and the National Maritime Intelligence Center. This creates a global network that depends on commonality and standardization. MHQ with MOC is supposed to enhance the Navy’s capability to standardize assessment, planning and execution at the operational level of war. However, MHQ with MOC will not significantly increase the Navy’s ability to operate either independently or jointly unless it fully and unreservedly embraces the theory and practice of operational warfare at sea. As it stands now, the MHQ with MOC is purely an administrative organization. Such a command structure cannot be ultimately successful unless the commanders and their staffs fully comprehend and properly apply the tenets of operational art.

THE JOINT ISSUE

The Navy’s lack of all-encompassing understanding of the operational level of war at sea considerably weakens its case in internal deliberations regarding the responsibilities of the high maritime commanders. The current emphasis on highlighting the responsibilities of the joint/combined force maritime component commander (JFMCC/CFMCC) is long overdue. However, there is a lack of clarity at which level of command the JFMCC/CFMCC should be established. Based on the military objectives to be accomplished, the lowest level of command with joint force commander should be the joint/combined joint task force (JTF/CJTF). In its proper context, the JTF/CJTF is the operational-tactical level of command. It is also the lowest command echelon that can employ multiservice forces to plan for and execute a major joint/combined operation. Directly subordinate to a maritime JTF commander should be major tactical commanders — the service component commanders (maritime, air, land and special operations forces). Having joint force component commanders unnecessarily complicates command and control, logistical support and sustainment, and other tasks. This is an example of where jointness goes too far and reduces military effectiveness. The JFMCC/CFMCC should be established only at the theater-strategic and theater of operations commanders. Its responsibility should be to plan for, prepare and execute major naval operations as part of the theater commander’s campaign in the littorals or in a maritime theater.

The Navy’s excessive focus on tactics hurts its case to have clear responsibility for obtaining and maintaining air superiority

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Release authority for national and international media was held “at higher levels,” such as a joint task force command, said Maj. Dean Whitford, the former judge advocate general for 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, during the brigade’s 2006 deployment to Afghanistan. “Everything’s going to have to come through there and probably be approved another level up,” he said.

By the time information was approved for release, U.S. forces were behind the

power curve in some instances, he said. On the other hand, brigade and battalion commanders could get facts out in a timely manner by holding news conferences with local leaders. The Afghan media put out this information in their print, broadcast and radio news in a timely manner, Whitford said.

Jones, the RAND expert, said having the National Directorate of Security — the Afghan government’s intelligence service — work with local tribal leaders and mul-

lahs to counter the Taliban’s message was the best approach. “The issue comes down to: Who are locals likely to believe?” he said. “Not the central government, certainly not international forces. It’s understanding who they will listen to and it’s getting counter-messages out through those people. I think that’s your strategy. It’s a surrogate warfare strategy.” **AFJ**

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in the littoral area. The Air Force successfully argued that joint/combined force air component commander (JFACC/CFACC) should have that responsibility. However, these and similar claims are hard to justify based on the peculiarities of the war at sea, particularly in the littorals. Obtaining and maintaining sea control in the littorals is highly dependent on the ability to obtain air superiority. In World War II, for the first time, control of surface, subsurface and the air became almost inseparable. Without control in the air, naval forces could operate only with great difficulty. Today, without air superiority, sea control simply cannot be achieved in the littorals. Nevertheless, for all its value, air superiority cannot replace control of the surface and subsurface. It makes little military sense to divide the responsibilities for obtaining and maintaining sea control between the JFACC/CFACC and the JFMCC/CFMCC. In a war with stronger opponent, such a divided command could have significant adverse, even fatal, effects on the outcome of the struggle for sea control in the littorals. The optimal solution is to entrust the JFMCC/CFMCC with the responsibility for employing subordinate forces, including those of the Air Force.

All navies that willfully neglected or ignored the importance of operational art ultimately failed. This problem might not look serious today because the Navy does not yet have a peer competitor. However, that situation might change, and the Navy would not have the time to recover quickly enough from many years of neglect of the most important field of theory and practice for war at sea — operational art. **AFJ**