

## **MAIN EFFORT – THE ENGINE OF THE CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS**

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***Abstract:** Main effort is one of the components of the concept of operations, therefore integral to the operational design. However, it is inherent when the commander communicates his/her intent to also designate the main effort. Hence, we could say that it belongs to operational art as well.*

*Moreover, considering that through its designation, a commander not only prioritizes the enablers support, but also states the supported / supporting relationship between subordinate commanders it leads us to believe that main effort plays a part of the operational management.*

*Both main effort and supported/supporting relationship are poorly integrated in the contemporary planning of the Romanian forces.*

***Keywords:** main effort, operational art, operational design, operational management*

### **I**ntroduction

It is through Operational Art that the commander puts forward operational ideas regarding the center of gravity or the operational framework (shaping, decisive and supporting actions). The ideas are then internalized and refined by the staff in the operational estimate, thus generating the operational design. However, as George S Patton Jr. stated in his writing “Main concepts - strategy tactics leadership” while planning and executing a mission “*the promulgation of an order represents not over 10% of your responsibility; the remaining 90% consists of assuring, by means of personal supervision on the ground, by yourself and your staff, proper and vigorous execution*”. Therefore, the operational management

actually takes control during the execution of the operation. During this phase, the main effort should be the common reference point for all the subordinates.

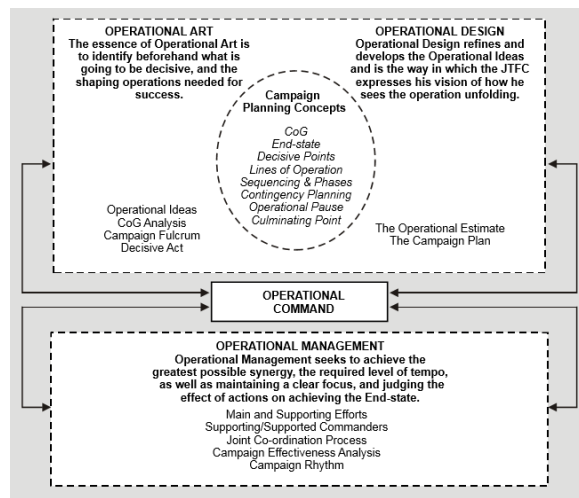


Fig.1 An overview of campaigning (JWP 5-00 Joint Operations Planning)

The main effort materializes one of the principles of war – concentration of the forces on the main directions – and enables another one – the maneuverist approach – according to which the commander should use the combat power to exploit the vulnerabilities of the enemy. As defined in the British joint warfare publication for joint operational planning, “*the main effort is the principal method by which the commander makes his/her overall intent clear to his/her subordinates and will usually be supported by allocation of resources*”. This paper discusses the main effort as a hinge between the operational art, operational design and operational management.

### Designating of the main effort

The commander designates the main effort in his/her area of responsibility in order to concentrate the effects of the combat power and resources at the time and the place in which he/she deems necessary to accomplish the mission. In establishing main effort, the commander and staff visualize and describe conceptually the way in which the units assigned

to the key tasks act on the lines of operation. A simple approach is described in the United States doctrine ATTP 5-0 “*After identifying the tasks, leaders next determine the purpose for each task. There is normally one primary task for each mission. The unit assigned this task is the main effort*“. However, some of these tasks are bound to a specific phase of the operation, and focus may shift from one task to another, hence the necessity to sequentially designate the main effort if the unit assigned the initial task depleted its combat power or is not suitable to carry out the next key task.

Usually, the support units that carry out tasks to the benefit of the unit established as main effort will be designated as supporting effort. These are prioritized based on their importance of tasks that they execute in support of the main effort. The importance of the supporting effort is described by the ADRP 3-0 Operations: “*forces often realize success of the main effort through success of supporting efforts*”.

The commander designates the main effort on one of the lines of operation (usually, although not mandatory, the decisive one) in conjunction with his/her intent as to where and when to create superiority in relation to its enemy. If the main effort is designated sequentially, then it can also be switched on the other lines (shaping or supporting) depending on the phases of the operation. For instance, in a high intensity offensive operation, the initial main effort could lie with the ISR units that support the situational awareness and the targeting process in order to allow the detection of the enemy capabilities and layout.

### **Support of the main effort**

At the tactical level, the implementation of the main effort consists in prioritizing the intelligence, fires and protection functions. This is used by the higher headquarters as a tool to enable the subordinated units to achieve their mission. As opposed to the units designated as main effort, the other units usually receive the minimum capabilities required to fulfill their tasks in the overall concept of operation of the higher headquarters.

Therefore, during the planning process, the higher headquarters commander and his/her staff anticipate the needs of the main effort unit ideally without limiting its future concept of operations; at the same time, commanders of the subordinated units should understand the higher echelon concept of operations and therefore submit realistic support requests that are

strictly necessary to the completion of the tasks, in order to avoid the waste of resources. The competition for resources will be undoubtedly won by the main effort unit.

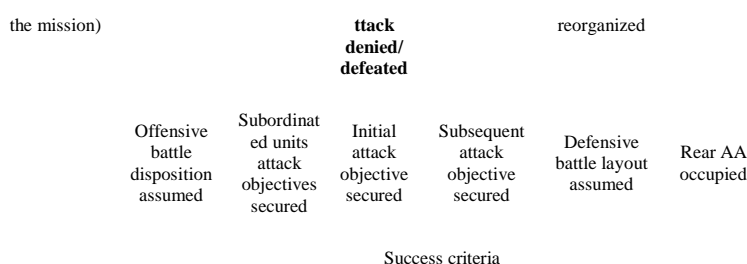
Prioritization and shifts of the main effort must be described during the design of the operation. The example presented below illustrates one of the many possible versions of an operational design for a generic offensive operation. The aim of the example is to provide further ground for analysis rather than a solution (the latter depending on the experience and intellectual capacity of the commander and the staff).

We can easily identify the way in which the main effort shifts with different phases. Thus, in the first phase, the main effort serves to provide critical commanders information requirement which is the base for the decision-making process. Although they act on the shaping line of operation, this can draw in this phase more logistic support for the ISR units, dedicated control measures (such as airspace control measures, no firing areas and restricted movement areas) or even other operations from the combat units that can conduct demonstrations or feints in order to deceive the enemy and entice him to react and disclose his battlefield organization.

		Decisive points (conditions)						
		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Objectives	
		Battle disposition	Attack	Exploitation	Consolidate	Reorganize		
LINES OF OPERATION	Shaping (set/ preserve condition for success)	<b>ISR system set</b>	Enemy fixed  Breach established	Flank and front of the enemy fixed	Enemy higher echelon counterattack denied/ defeated (contribute)	<b>Enemy resistance pockets reduced</b>	RIP executed  Rear AA secured	Enemy destroyed or defeated
	Sustain (generate/maintain/ protect the combat power)	Logistic lines established  Lines of communication secured	Line of departure secured	HOTO line with 2 <sup>nd</sup> echelon secured	Flanks covered	Logistical maneuver executed	<b>Resupply executed</b>	Unit in the AA ready for future operations
	Decisive (accomplish)	Execute movement	<b>Breach created</b>	<b>Enemy counter</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> echelon TO battle</b>	Battle disposition	Execute movement	AO secured
							END STATE	

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*Fig 2. Sequential main effort across the operational design – example*

In the Phase 2 and Phase 3 (partially) the main effort switches to the unit in contact with the enemy in the breaching sector in order to neutralize/destroy/defeat the defending enemy and create the breach. This possibly comes with the first priority for the fires (artillery, combat aviation or CAS) for that maneuver unit which completes the tasks along the decisive line of operation. The engineer units accomplishing tasks on the shaping line of operation could draw the second priority. All other units contributing to the breaching of the enemy defense area by fixing its forces in other sectors and interdicting him to reinforce the gaps will probably get the third priority. Nevertheless the assigned priorities can be reversed in accordance with the estimate of the staff and the commander’s assessment of the situation. If for instance the actions of the engineers can be effectively masked, then the second and the third priority can be reversed.

Immediately after securing the first objective, when entering Phase 3, the 2<sup>nd</sup> echelon unit that takes over the battle will most likely be designated as main effort until the second attack objective has been conquered. Subsequently, during Phase 4, depending on the level of encircled resistance enemy pockets, the focus could switch again to former 1<sup>st</sup> echelon units that will mop up the enemy in the area of operations.

Not surprisingly, Phase 5 could have as main effort the logistic units that need to resupply and replenish the stocks. Therefore, other units can be tasked to secure the lines of communication. The air defense, CBRN or EOD assets could also be prioritized in support of these units.

**The relationship between the main effort and the supporting efforts**

If the process of the prioritization is a well known subject (although many times not applied) the relationship between supported / supporting

commanders are next to unknown; oversized egos and lack of vision impede upon the implementation of one of the most important principles of war: an action is not a purpose in itself but a stage in fulfilling a higher purpose. Most of the times this is biased by “my action is the most important” therefore leading to misunderstandings and disagreements. Instead of supporting the higher commander’s intent, the lower unit commanders argue and seek pretext not to be assigned tasks that are not convenient ending in an unavoidable micromanagement of the higher headquarters.

The examples of the 1941 campaign are still visible today “*some of the operation orders limit the freedom of action and initiative of the units that have to execute them. Although they knew their mission and had the situational understanding they couldn’t act until receiving inspiration of the higher headquarters. This leads to a slow tempo. As soon as a unit receives a mission, it needs freedom to act and use the support that has been allocated....The control of the execution is not to be mistaken with and is not to be transformed in the detailed command*”.<sup>1</sup>

According to the NATO AAP-6 the supported commander is “*the commander having primary responsibility for all aspects of a task assigned by a higher NATO military authority and who receives forces or other support from one or more supporting commanders*”. In other words, the supporting commanders put forces, equipment or logistics to the use of the supported commander. However, we can also expand this in the domain of actions (interdict, secure) and effects (neutralize, destroy). The “follow and assume” respectively “follow and support” tasks are illustrative of this method. In the case of the former, the supported commander is the commander of the second echelon, due to fact that his unit will be used in a decisive moment of the battle while in the latter, the supported commander is the commander of the first echelon that needs to maintain/regain contact with the enemy and cannot afford to have his rear unsecured.

### **A wrong way to plan – the national issues**

The way operational planning is applied in the exercises at the tactical level with respect to designating the main effort is usually this: we nominate a main direction/axis which is to be attacked in the offensive and interdicted

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<sup>1</sup>Arhiva Militară, *Învățămintele din campania împotriva Rusiei 1941*, Corpul 5 Armată.

in the defense. The actions and effects on the other directions are not combined and synchronized during the planning, therefore not integrated in the operational design. Hence, the commanders of the units that are not on the main direction/axis have no vision of the higher commander's intent with the exception of some graphic measures of control. This looks more like the detailed command rather than mission command we are trying to get acquainted with and more recently, to incorporate in our doctrine.

What happens if the enemy does not attack on our main defensive position that we interdict? Are we going to canalize, delay or block? What happens if he does not defend his assets on our main axis with significant forces? Are we supposed to exploit, secure, envelop or turn? This is not considered in the planning and let to the cast of dice or at best, to the inspiration of the commanders.

Another excerpt from the lessons learned in the 1941 Eastern Campaign illustrates this confusion that holds on to our times: *“we have to erase the fear that flanks and rear are vulnerable because the tactical units (battalion) have no such things. They have to continue to advance because even when they are encircled, there are units in the rear that will act to break the encirclement.”*

The designation of the main effort and supporting efforts is meant to guide initiative towards commander's intent and not to the achievement of small, personal objectives which could potentially even endanger the mission.

### **Main effort in the full spectrum operations**

The full spectrum operations opened the way to a different outcome of the main effort designation, nevertheless, based on the same approach. In stability and support operations for instance the civil-military dimension could constitute a solid main effort while the maneuvering units would mainly be supporting efforts. Similarly the specialized units in collecting and processing information from the battlefield (EOD, RCP, HUMINT) could be designated as main effort during a counterinsurgency operation when we are supposed to attack the enemy's network.

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<b>Campaign theme / type of operation</b>	<b>Designation of the main effort</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Peacetime Military Engagement	Units that ensure the protection and evacuation of the civilians	HURRICANE KATRINA – TF ORLEANS / NATIONAL GUARD
Peace Support Operations	Units engaging unconventional elements endangering peace	OPERATION UPHOLD DEMOCRACY HAITI 1994 10THMTNDIV
Counterinsurgency	Units that control large population centers	ISAF RC SOUTH KANDAHAR 2009 - TF K, 2011 TF SPARTAN 3 BCT
Major combat operations	Units with significant combat power, high morale, experience and training that can deliver a decisive blow to the enemy	1942 CRIMEA – BATTLE OF KERCH OPERATION BASTARD HUNT – D22 PANZER

*Fig. 3 Examples of main effort across the spectrum of the operations*

### **Conclusion**

Although we tend to seek methodologies to define our conceptual construct, the operational art and the commander's experience and intellect are decisive in finding a potent and suitable main effort. However, the designation of the main effort as well as establishing the supported/supporting relationship are integral elements to all three operational domains: art, management and design.

They should be exercised and used in all situations because they provide a much better insight into commander's intent than any other measures of tactical or administrative control.



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