

# What is it all about

by Harald Høiback

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TITEL:

Military Operations Planning and Methodology

–Thoughts on military problem-solving

FÖRFATTARE:

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PLANNING IS CENTRAL to all military endeavors, regardless of size. If you are to accomplish anything at all, you must prepare, as “a goal without a plan is just a wish.”<sup>1</sup> The most important element in planning is to frame the problem you are facing. The first question that Marshal Ferdinand Foch asked of any issue was thus: “De quoi s’agit-il?”–“What is it all about?” What are the critical issues, as opposed to mere symptoms and less important matters?

When you have answered Foch’s question, next in any planning process comes Vladimir Lenin’s old question: “What is to be done?” The core of operations planning is thus to find out what is wrong, and what you can do to fix it.

For a heterogeneous alliance such as NATO to agree on the questions “what is it all about” and “what is to be done”, it has developed a plethora of rather cumbersome concepts, techniques and methods. Robert Erdeniz’s task in his thesis is to take a hard look at some of the finer details of these.

Erdeniz’s thesis (Licentiate thesis in Philosophy and Military studies, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, 2017) consists of two published papers and an introduction.

Paper I focuses on the *Allied Joint Doctrine for Operational-Level Planning* (AJP 5) and discusses the methodological distinction between two, out of three, approaches to Operational Art, i.e. the ‘Design’ and the ‘Systemic’ approach.<sup>2</sup> Erdeniz shows convincingly that the methodological distinction between these two approaches is vague.

After addressing the vagueness and inconsistencies, Erdeniz proceeds by showing a possible way out. By designing his suggestion around what he calls “Value-focused thinking”, which requires explicit statements of military and non-military stakeholders’ values, Erdeniz argues that a military commander can actually choose from two distinctly different approaches.

Paper II focuses on the *Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive* (COPD) and looks at two specific planning heuristics. The first heuristic relates to the Systemic approach, and the other to the third approach, denoted the ‘Casualist’ approach, applicable within Operational Art. Erdeniz argues that NATO’s description of the Operational-Level Planning Process suffers from a methodological contradiction, and concludes that parts of the AJP 5 and the COPD should be revised. According to Erdeniz, the revision ought to

include making a “handbook of methodology”, to better explain and describe the methodological challenge of conducting military operations planning. Again, this is a stringent and well-argued paper, and Erdeniz’s main argument is actually vindicated, in the sense that later versions of AJP 5 has not only revised the planning approaches, but deleted them all together.

The aim of this review is not to rehash Erdeniz’s arguments further, but to take issue with some of the underlying philosophical presumptions of his arguments. The point is not to question the value of his work, or undermine his main message, but to use the thesis as a springboard for further philosophical elaboration. I think Erdeniz and his similar thinkers expect too much from science and methodology, and even from ethics. In the following pages, I will explain why.

## Military scientism

The gist of Erdeniz’s thesis, and similar academic projects, is the idea that better thinking and better methodology will improve the chances for military and strategic success. If we *think* better, we will presumably *act* better. This is an idea that comes very naturally to the modern mind. Science and meticulous thinking can literally take us to the moon, so why not assume that it can help us to win our wars too? Symptomatically perhaps, we must go to a philosopher at the dawn of modern scientism to find second thoughts.

Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian officer during the Napoleonic Wars and his tome *Vom Kriege* gave him a posthumous reputation of being long-winded and hard to comprehend. Nonetheless, Clausewitz is also one of very few military theorists who has stressed the limits of his own undertaking. Theory can help you up to a point, but

winning wars is not really about making theories:

The conduct of war itself is without doubt very difficult. But the difficulty is not that erudition and great genius are necessary to understand the basic principles of warfare. [...] Extensive knowledge and deep learning are by no means necessary, nor are extraordinary intellectual faculties.<sup>3</sup>

When Erdeniz writes that: “one of the remedies of the inconsistencies of the AJP 5 and the COPD is an improved academic education”, I think he is only partly right.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of academic education should also be to show the students the limits of methodology.

Clausewitz is of course not alone in questioning the value of philosophy and theoretical education. If, for instance, Leopold von Brenckenhoff had been given a choice between an army of savages and an “army of educated troops whose officers [were] experts in the sciences and philosophy”, he would have preferred the former.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, according to Brenckenhoff, “[p]hilosophy clarifies our mind and makes us better human beings, but worse soldiers”.<sup>6</sup> Brenckenhoff wrote in the second half of the eighteenth century, but you will find similar worries in our own time.

The retired American officer Ralph Peters wrote in 2007: “Pragmatism is at the heart of America’s cultural and economic success, and it long remained the key to our military success. When we began to theorize, we began to lose. In the military context, theory is a killer. Theory kills both actively and passively”.<sup>7</sup> It will be impossible for me to agree fully with Peters, as he also wrote: “My own experiences with officers who pursued doctoral degrees have ranged from the ludicrous to the horrifying. One lieutenant colonel, upon receiving his doctorate, took

to smoking a bent-stem pipe and wearing a cardigan. I would've had him shot." I also sincerely believe that sound theory will help us to clarify our mind and sharpen our terminology, and that better thinking may give better practice. However, our recent problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, to mention just a few, are not primarily connected to bad theory or bad methodology, but to bad politics and bad strategy. There is also very little to suggest that our opponents had better methodology for operations planning than we had.

The problem in our era is thus not too *little* theory, but too *much*. Military planners have to the best of their ability desperately tried to save flawed political assumptions and strategical expectations by ever more sophisticated planning tools. Instead of challenging bad strategy and confronting their political masters head on, generals turn to what they find more comfortable, namely crank another turn on their ever-evolving planning machine. Instead of saying "No, Mr. President" and risk their career and reputation, they go to their staffs and shout: "How can you help me out of this mess without embarrassing our political leaders or top brass? Get me some magic plans please, now."

By continuing down this track, we are cluttered down by too much philosophy and too much theory. We forget Clausewitz's advice that:

The conduct of war resembles the workings of an intricate machine with tremendous friction, so that combinations which are easily planned on paper can be executed only with great effort. The free will and the mind of the military commander, therefore, find themselves constantly hampered, and one needs a remarkable strength of mind and soul to overcome this resistance. Many good ideas have perished because of this friction, and we must carry out more sim-

ply and moderately what under a more complicated form would have given greater results.<sup>8</sup>

## Dirty dishwater

In close relation to military scientism, we often find trust in the value of consistency, accuracy and clarity. It is, however, philosophical hubris to expect the same standard of precision in all areas of life. According to Aristotle: "it belongs to an educated person to look for just so much precision in each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits".<sup>9</sup> Clausewitz also made a similar point about strategy: "The reader expects to hear of strategic theory, of lines and angles, and instead of these denizens of the scientific world he finds himself encountering only creatures of everyday life. But the author cannot bring himself to be in the slightest degree more scientific than he considers his subject to warrant – strange as this attitude may appear".<sup>10</sup>

Even in the hardest of sciences, physics, a precise, definite and explicit terminology is too much to expect. In 1933, the German theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg was on vacation in a simple hut with among other his Danish colleague Niels Bohr, where the Dane started to talk about language:

Our washing up is just like our language. We have dirty water and dirty dishcloths, and yet we manage to get the plates and glasses clean. In language, too, we have to work with unclear concepts and a form of logic whose scope is restricted in an unknown way, and yet we use it to bring some clarity into our understanding of nature.<sup>11</sup>

When Erdeniz criticizes the design and systemic approaches for being methodologically vague, he is probably correct, but it is on a par with criticizing the ocean for tasting

salt. It would be more practical if it were otherwise, but it is not.

## Climbing the ethical high ground

Let us leave the limits of science and language here, and address another of Erdeniz's main points. In paper 1 Erdeniz writes about something he calls "Value-focused thinking": "If no explicit values have been stated, or if important stakeholders' cannot agree upon critical values, this must be requested and managed from the higher organizational levels (strategic or political)."<sup>12</sup> This may seem like a prudent idea, but when NATO went to war over Kosovo, for instance, the NATO-members could in no way explicitly state their values. They agreed on almost nothing, except that they would like Milosevic and the Serbs to stop mistreating Kosovars. It was similar with Afghanistan. The Western world had very little in common with Pakistan regarding values and the future fate of Afghanistan. The same occurred over Libya in 2011, where NATO was almost torn apart. Moreover, how would the Second World War have ended, if Churchill and Stalin had to agree about values?

Erdeniz's solution to the problem of the design approach will consequently have little practical value. In fact, he is in danger of making matters far worse by insisting on openness and ethical frankness in coalitions. In order to keep any coalition together, I think it is important to practice the very opposite of Erdeniz's suggested remedy.

An important precondition for getting from politics to action in any area of life is a mutual willingness to avoid pushing controversial questions too far. The philosopher John Rawls's ideas about "Justice as Fairness" give us a taste of this method of avoidance:

[W]e try, so far as we can, to avoid disputed philosophical, as well as disputed moral and religious, questions. We do this not because these questions are unimportant or regarded with indifference, but because we think them too important and recognize that there is no way to resolve them politically [...] Thus, justice as fairness deliberately stays on the surface, philosophically speaking [...] The hope is that, by this method of avoidance, as we might call it, existing differences between contending political views can at least be moderated, even if not entirely removed, so that social cooperation on the basis of mutual respect can be maintained.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, coalitions have to reach consensus by toleration or "constructive ambiguity", or founder.<sup>14</sup> The "method of avoidance" is a supreme military skill in coalition warfare, but one rarely appreciated. Erdeniz's suggested medicine would thus kill the patient.

## A never-ending journey

I doubt that any general in the future will say that the reason he succeeded was that he in 2017 read a paper by Robert Erdeniz. I may be mistaken, but my experience is that very few generals ever share any of their glory with bookish people, unless they are German of course. However, that is no reason not to philosophize or investigate NATO's rather overelaborated documents and planning tools. War and military operations are serious business and our planning tools should therefore be as good as they can possibly be. Improving them is a mission without an end.

As Wittgenstein wrote in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in

essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.”<sup>15</sup> That sounds depressing, but that is what philosophy is all about, not about solving problems, but sharpen our cognitive abilities, and for that purpose Erdeniz’s work is perfect.

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## Notes

1. The quote is attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.
2. Robert Erdeniz used the 2013-edition of both the COPD and AJP 5 in his thesis.
3. von Clausewitz, Carl: *Principles of War* (1812), Dover Publications, Mineola, New York 2003, p. 60.
4. Erdeniz, Robert: *Military Operations Planning and Methodology -Thoughts on military problem-solving*, p. 71.
5. Gat, Azar: *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 65.
6. Ibid.
7. Peters, Ralph: “Learning to Lose”, *The American Interest*, vol. 2, no. 6, July/August 2007, p. 25.
8. Op. cit. von Clausewitz, Carl, see note 3, p. 61.
9. Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs, Focus Publishing, Newburyport, MA 2001, p. 2.
10. von Clausewitz, Carl: *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 193.
11. Heisenberg, Werner: *Physics and Beyond, Encounters and Conversations*, Harper & Row, London 1971, p. 137.
12. Erdeniz, Robert: 21st ICCRTS, “C2 in a Complex Connected Battlespace”, Approaches to Operational Art Revisited: Theoretical and Practical Implications of Methodology, Topic 5: Battlespace Understanding and Management, Paper, no. 47, p. 19.
13. Rawls, John: “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1985, p. 230.
14. See more about this in Høiback, Harald: “The Noble Art of Constructive Ambiguity” in Edström, Håkan (ed.): *Approaching Comprehensiveness, Two grand strategic options and some of their consequences*, Oslo Files on Security and Defence – 03/2009.
15. Wittgenstein, Ludwig: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), Routledge, London 1981, p. 29.