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## JOURNAL

## The Missing Operational Level

### COIN, Afghanistan, and IJC

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*Editor's Note: Readers of my blog have seen my thoughts about the lack of management knowledge in DoD. In our daily operations and even in combat, we could take a page from adroit managers and business leaders that focus on **coordinating actions in time and across functions**. Niels Vistisen argues that the command focus and structure at IJC fails to do just this by instead focusing on a tyranny of tactical tasks in the COIN fight. I urge readers to take in his first-person account and add their own observations or counters.*

This article is conceived and written at the end of my six month deployment to ISAF Joint Command CJ35 FUOPS, as a psychological operations planner, in the spring of 2010. In the beginning I was greatly frustrated with two things. Firstly, the internal works of the command, its meetings and its processes. Secondly, I had problems fully understanding the overarching counterinsurgency concept as applied in the planning and campaigns. Realizing that critical papers are always frowned upon within military organizations, I decided to collect my thoughts and considerations in a paper, where I set out to analyze the full context of the perceived problems and relate them to each other, in order to provide a full and comprehensive paper. Despite the negative outset, I openly admit that I worked with a great number of very competent people, with the best intentions. The purpose is to develop the organization and provide constructive criticism, not to just criticize. Counterinsurgency campaigns are inherently difficult to master, and require continuous rethinking. This should add to that end, and not just be perceived as criticism.

#### **Background and thesis**

The common explanation of the existence of two commands within Afghanistan are, that HQ ISAF is up and out, i.e. strategic, while ISAF Joint Command, IJC, was a necessary operational level HQ between HQ ISAF and the regional commands, based on the lack of this level, as identified in 2008-2009, during the rethinking of the US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan. This mirrors a similar construct in Iraq, which is associated with the successful ending of the war in Iraq in 2007. The reason behind establishing the IJC was thus to include an operational level, that could better direct the actual fight and campaign, than the then HQ ISAF with its very political tasks, many oriented back towards NATO and troop contributing nations.

#### **Operational level and operational art**

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the operational level within ISAF Joint Command Headquarters, the operational level and current application in all ISAF operations, and how the operational level is used in a counter insurgency campaign.

In order to investigate the thesis of the lack of a real operational level and operational construct it is

beneficial to further define the operational level and what it can entail.

“The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or areas of operations. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve the operational objectives, initiating actions, and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they ensure the logistic and administrative support of tactical forces, and provide the means by which tactical successes are exploited to achieve strategic objectives.” [US Department of Defense](#)

The above US definition appropriately describes the problems concerning the application of an operational level, not only to a counterinsurgency campaign, but to all forms of warfare. The operational level is intended to connect the strategic objectives and the tactical actions, via an operational design, carefully thought out and applied. It must be carefully nested within the strategic objectives and desired end states given, and it must adequately direct tactical forces, not just in a synchronized manner over time and space towards desired effects, but ideally in an integrated manner, that is based upon the operational environment considering both own capabilities and that of the opponent. The operational level have often been described as difficult to grasp, and it certainly does overlap into the below tactical level and into the strategic level above it. The exact boundaries are, or can be, fluid.

The current NATO operational guidelines for COIN contained in Bi-SC Counter-Insurgency (COIN) Joint Operational Guidelines (JOG) define the operational level as follows:

“0409. **Operational.** The operational level links multinational, national and military strategic objectives to the tactical employment of forces, and the focus is on campaigns and major operations. The operational level requires the use of operational art and design. Operational art is the application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs, supported by their skill, knowledge and experience. The operational design is the framework for the commander’s efforts and includes operational objectives. Operational objectives change a condition at the theatre level and are consequently broad in scale and size or space. In COIN, actions at the operational level are normally protracted in nature, as successfully achieving operational objectives requires cumulative tactical successes over time. Achieving strategic objectives similarly requires cumulative operational successes over time. Long-range planning, complex situations, large spans of control, and working with other agencies are also indicators for operating at the operational level; however, it is the level of the objective that is the determining factor.”

The key point of the operational level’s importance in COIN is, though, stated in the below paragraph, concerning the corresponding definition of the tactical level, where it is clearly stated that:

“Tactical COIN efforts are normally decentralized with a centralized vision and message. However, NATO commanders must avoid having a “strategy of tactics”. In other words, commanders must have an overarching framework and plans that tactical efforts nest within.”

This is further elucidated within the document regarding the operational design:

“0440. The development of an operational design is fundamental to operational planning. It represents the formulation of an overarching idea for the operation, based on a general estimate of the situation and the mission analysis, and embodies the commander’s intent. Operational design provides design elements to help visualize and shape the operation to accomplish the mission. Elements of operational design help to visualize the arrangement of joint capabilities in time, space and purpose to accomplish the mission. The key to operational design involves understanding the strategic guidance, determining the end state and objectives, identifying the adversary’s principal strengths and weaknesses, and developing an operational concept. Operational design for COIN should reflect a comprehensive approach applicable to each phase of the campaign.”

The real difficulty at the operational level is to develop an operational design, rising above the doctrinal use of forces at the tactical level. The operational design is a less rigid application of the forces, but carefully managed in order to achieve specific effects on an opponent. The Germans mastered operational art in the early years of World War II, when divisions were orchestrated operationally in campaigns in Denmark and Norway, France, the Balkans and Greece. Notwithstanding the tactical superiority of the German forces, the operational plans were of such quality and ingenuity that they defeated superior forces.

The second Gulf War, 1990-1991, saw General Norman Schwarzkopf develop a sound operational plan for the defeat of the Iraqi army in swift maneuver action in the desert.

Doctrine alone can be a guideline for operational planning, but never a solution to the extent at the tactical level. Operational planning and design must be tailored more specifically based upon analysis of the opponent, and the cumulative effects of bringing together all available assets in a specific timing, synchronization, and location.

The above definition of the operational level centers on the distribution and prioritization of available resources to the tasks of the operational headquarters, and sequencing these tasks. It is explicitly stated that the operational level implies a broader dimension of time and space than the tactical level. It is important not to relegate the operational level to concern itself solely with this expansion of the tactical level. The operational planning must present the simple, logical series of argument of why exactly this application of tactical assets together will achieve the right effects to achieve the objective. Rarely is an operational plan simply sequencing tactical actions, based on availability and supply.

The operational commander, and the corresponding plan, must possess the elusive “coup d’oeil” – an eye for the operational, and the ability to conform this to the campaign and the battlefield. Tools for the operational plan, and for executing and implementing it into actions, must begin with a concept of operation, which clearly and concisely establishes the comprehensive picture of how the objective is envisioned reached, by exactly the use of forces described. The concept of operation should explain to the reader how all elements on the battlefield come together to achieve the end state.

### **OP OMID - HOPE**

The standing operational order, IJC OPORD 001-2009 OP OMID, denoting the first operational order from ISAF Joint Command, contains a construct for the development across the combined joint operations area, within its timeframe. This construct consists of five lines of operations throughout phase 3 of the strategic NATO campaign, spanning late 2009 to late 2010. The operational goal seems to be to gain the initiative, but the exact wording is obscure. The five lines of operation run parallel in time, with decisive points and a synchronization matrix. The only division in space is by dividing geographic areas into three tiers. The five lines of operation are complemented by a set of supporting concepts, 17 in total, spanning

from partnering, over reintegration to medical support. In the annex A of the operational order, the “concept of operation” is more explicitly written. It is though, more or less, a copy paste of the content of the order main body, although with a very general expanded explanation of the counterinsurgency concept. The tactical concepts of Shape, Clear, Hold and Build are explained in paragraphs, and the tactical succession of these are explained. But, there is no clear phasing or clear logical argument in the concept of operation. All the components are not summed up into a theater wide operational concept of operation. All elements stand more or less alone, and with as many as 17 supporting concepts, there is no real priority between them, or a deeper understanding of a succession or prerequisite of one over another.

Certainly, lines of operations are identified, a number of supporting efforts are in place, and a time/space synchronization of most of these aspects occur with the key terrain district road map, but there is no clear description of, how this will come together as a an operational plan that will ultimately succeed.

#### Vignette:

Throughout the spring of 2010 two major planning efforts were underway: Freedom of movement and anti-corruption, being staffed within respectively future operations and future plans cross-functional teams. Freedom of movement aimed at achieving effects within the 60-day horizon, whereas anti-corruption were to have effect at the longer term. By June, when the two fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) for the two plans were issued from IJC, they rapidly became known as twins separated at birth by the staff and recipients, mainly because there was so much common ground between the two. The freedom of movement FRAGO identified corruption as a major hindrance to freedom of movement for the Afghan people, including illegal checkpoints, etc. The efforts, recommendations and tasks within these two planning efforts were not sufficiently coordinated during the planning process, which effectively resulted in two unconnected plans on the same issues. This task was very hard to meet by the regional commands (RCs) and others, who were actually to act upon these orders and plans. Besides the lack of connectivity between the planning efforts, it was neither clear where they were nested within OP OMID’s line of operation or supporting concept, nor was it addressed in a larger concept of operations. The two FRAGO’s became examples of the lacking operational plan within which they could have nested.

#### **Execution of the plan**

OP OMID serves as the basis of all IJC planning and operations in the realms of current and future operations, and future plans. Overall tracking of the ongoing efforts and operations are conducted through chief of staff plans steering group, and joint plans update. This is where a tracker is kept over all efforts in order to control output of the headquarters and its sections, and it is overseen by the cross functional team leads and functional leads (CJ2 Intelligence, 3 Operations, 4 Logistics, 9 Civil-Military Operations, 10 Coalition Operations, etc.).

In the daily conduct of operations and planning, the operational plan is only controlled by the assignment of planning tasks. When a planning team is conducting planning tasks within a cross functional team, the efforts are hardly coordinated with the rest of the effort, other than by the vague guidance of the lines of operation or the supporting concepts. Several examples can be presented to support this fact. When a supporting concept like reintegration undergoes continuous planning within future operations, and with cross staff presence, a plan is developed, and a course of action (COA) is briefed to the Chief of Staff and Commander of IJC for approval. Most often, the plan is approved, and a FRAGO issued ordering IJC

subordinates to conduct certain activities in support of reintegration.

The Chief of Staff's plans steering group reviews and assesses the current planning activities and gives guidance on the synchronization and prioritization of planning efforts against the operational priorities and on the efforts across the staff, and its cross functional teams. It is more a task managing and tracking forum, rather than a forum for analysis on operational art, if nothing else due to the vast amount of planning tasks. Furthermore, the meeting feeds the Joint Plans update, and aims at looking "over the hill" for emerging planning tasks. As a staff function, the plans steering groups and working groups do not amend or guide any sort of operational level plan or concept for conduct of operation, beyond tracking and assigning the individual tasks mentioned above. The cross-functional team leads meets weekly to discuss planning efforts, also based on a tasker tracker. It is hardly a forum for analysis and/or debate on the progress of the campaign, and prioritization of the operational plan.

The ownership of an operational plan, with its perspective and analysis, as well as a certain application of operational art, belongs to a staff's operations section, heavily influenced by the command level, as well as with input from the intelligence side.

In the current construct of ISAF Joint Command, the original sections of CJ3, CJ3/5, CJ5 and CJ2 have been depleted of personnel fed to the cross-functional teams. This effectively means a staff organization that must complete tasks in a hurry, but with little coherency at the CJ level, as the deputy chief of staff of a branch has very few, or no, staff officers working for him on general operational planning, encompassing all tasks. In reference to the planning process, the individual specified tasks get a lot of attention and effort, while the course of action in its entirety receives little or no attention, or planning effort. It again falls back to a focus on individual tasks, which perhaps support the overall course of action, but in essence are uncoordinated and not properly fitting into an operational construct. This depletion of the original CJs to the point where they can no longer provide functional area guidance and products were duly noted in a staff assistance visit conducted in the spring of 2010, but no action was hitherto taken to remedy the depletion. The cross-functional teams remain the dominating mantra of the IJC.

This staff orientation and mantra of completing tasks across the staff results in a huge production of FRAGOs. The month of May saw a production of no less than 98 FRAGOs including daily FRAGOs, from IJC. This must be seen in perspective from the RC staffs who receive these orders and are expected to act on them. All FRAGOs refer back to the base OP OMID order and its operational design, but the dominance of the individual planning effort is again prevailing over the overall operational plan. As a result, the subordinate commands regularly receive new fragmented orders on efforts and supporting efforts that are often not set in context of an overall plan, at least not with the necessary attention to operational art, priority amongst all efforts, and interrelations to all other tasks. This means in practical terms that while one week, RC responsibilities for the ammonium nitrate ban are ordered, without priority, while the following week guidance and orders on reintegration may be issued. While both plans and efforts by themselves are sound, they have not been coordinated, and this cannot be prioritized or referred back to an operational plan where their role can be seen as part of a bigger picture. This could have the effect of a campaign being run from one visible effort to the next, shifting often, not sticking to an overall long term plan, and falling back on baseline tactics conducted, rather than following an operational design.

Vignette

The SIAG – Synchronized Information Activities Group, was established in order to coordinate all information activities. The group sits above the functional areas of Information operations, Public Affairs and the PSYOPS Task force. At a working group meeting where the process were to be established, there was a bigger group of lieutenant colonels, majors and other staff officers from Information Operations, Public Affairs and Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force. The group was looking at tracking a calendar of events in order to figure out responses to these events, as well as tracking stability projects in the working group to get them out as good news stories. Public affairs wanted the group to produce a weekly list of the top three issues that “could blow up” to the commander; “he must know this.”

Several severe faults, symptomatic of the lacking staff emphasis on operational art, are evident in this process. Synchronization and coordination is only viewed as tracking and assigning tasks in this staff environment. What needed to be done was an operational level analysis and prioritization of Information activities. The current, but not fully identified problem is, that an information operation, like poppy pre-planting, can make its way into the Future Plans Cross-Functional Team, undergo a planning effort by a planning team, resulting in a FRAGO ordering a fan of activities and programs throughout the combined-joint operating area. The problem being, that such an effort is not being put into context of a planning effort in Future Operations where a FRAGO can order activities in support of Kandahar operations, that collide, in a multitude of ways, with the ones ordered by the poppy pre-planting FRAGO. A simple synchronization between all planning efforts is necessary, but needs to be elevated to an operational analytical level. There needs to be an operational plan where these information activities nest. Simply synchronizing planning effort across the staff is mere management. The operational level plan must be based on a planning effort, military information operations mission analysis, where it for example could be deduced that reintegration may be the main information activity, over enabling ANSF or other lines of effort. Only by such an operational plan, can guidance be given to planning efforts within cross-functional teams across the staff, and these planning efforts ensured nested within an overall operational concept.

### **Counterinsurgency Tactics, but Nothing More Than Tactics**

COIN, as it is described in the manuals by Nagl, Kilcullen and others, and in the guidance given in theater, is only a tactic. The concept of counterinsurgency with its base premise of protect the population is sound, and particularly applicable at lower tactical levels. There is ample guidance on how a soldier, a platoon, or a company should and should not act in order to win the population. It includes a vast amount of tactical guidance on driving/convoy procedures, ways to avoid civilian casualties at checkpoints, female engagement teams, use of CERP funds at district level, and several other things. Although all these tactical concepts and recommendations are good and well tested, it does not amount to an operational plan or a logical link to the winning of a counter insurgency fight. (I presented this idea, that COIN is only a tactic and nothing more, to quite a few people at the headquarters, IJC / ISAF, even senior officers with experience in COIN from this and other theaters, and they all reacted with a certain amount of surprise and realization. They all agreed and most conceded after a few minutes of deep thought: “You are right, I have not actually seen it like that before.”) It is as if the operational plan is to do enough good tactics all over, then eventually the insurgency will be strangled, or the population will finally rise against the insurgency.

The COIN concept as described speaks of the population as the center of gravity, for both parties, insurgents and for us. This stated strategic center of gravity is directly transferred to the tactical level. The focus on protecting the population and the transfer of this goal from the strategic to the tactical level means that it is almost forgotten in operational planning.

COIN is a complex concept to understand for most militaries, and its recent conception seems relatively new, ascribed to the change of tactics and strategy that was implemented by US forces in Iraq in 2007. A natural outcome of this complexity is a limited capability to further develop the concept, and a tendency to adhere to it blindly, not adapting to both the specific conditions and the operational level. Moreover, the COIN concept has been revered almost as a religion in military circles, people frequently describing Gen McChrystal as a “preacher” preaching COIN with religious conviction. This atmosphere results in a group-think reverence to the importance of doing COIN, but a lack of true understanding of COIN. In such a situation it becomes natural to focus on “understandables”, that is, the tactical aspects of COIN, and how it is conducted. If these psychological conditions take hold of an organization, such as a higher headquarters like ISAF Joint Command, and to some degree ISAF HQ, it will, by sheer mass smother any attempts to develop a sound operational concept. They will spend far too much staff focus on, tactical levels. This results in an information overflow, and a sort of micromanagement in both current operations and planning efforts, that are counterproductive to the staff’s comprehension of the operational level.

### **CAAT and Red Team**

ISAF has a Counter Insurgency Assistance and Advisory Team (CAAT) as an in-theater think tank about the conduct of COIN. This CAAT could provide the vital link between the conduct of the campaign and the appropriate theory and doctrine behind COIN, in order to point out the lack of a cohesive operational plan. Instead, the CAAT conducts courses for low level coalition force commanders in COIN tactics, as noted above. This is no doubt influenced by the conclusion that COIN, in its current conception, is only a tactic, lacking an operational aspect. CAAT thus becomes a lessons learned and teaching center for tactical level COIN.

The red team, of which one is attached to IJC, analyzes operational plans in order to identify critical and decisive points, and to point out those where the risk or the consequence is highest. The analysis of the plan is still based on the soundness of the general plan and concept, not questioning the approach as a whole, but rather identifying the points of severe risk. All analysis is based on the premise that assumptions and facts of the original order are correct. The Red Team can thus not alter or suggest changes and flaws in the overall campaign concept, but only point at individual parts of the plan that are associated with risk or grave consequence at failure. This stays well in line with the rest of IJC focus on singular efforts and tactical level operations.

Where the CAAT and the Red Team effectively could have provided a sanity check to the overall concept, or pointing out the lack of cohesion in plan and the lacking overall operational plan, it becomes, rather as the rest of IJC, predominantly focused on individual, isolated efforts.

### **Effects-Based Approach to Operations**

The use of objectives and effects were a part of the planning conducted at ISAF Joint Command, and they were duly identified during planning and orders. But the proper use of effects calls for a very thorough systems analysis and system of systems analysis at a country level, if the correct effects are to be identified. The correct effects, if achieved by the combined team, will ensure the objective. These effects will then determine the carefully planned actions that the combined team take, in order to achieve the effects and in turn reach the objective. The magnitude of the campaign, as well as conflicting doctrine, nevertheless, hampered the appropriate use of objectives and effects at IJC.

In British doctrine the use of Effects are as described above, with a careful analysis of what Effects, with capital E, must be achieved. The American doctrine, rather, speaks in terms of endstate, method and tasks. This confusion is evident in the daily use of the word effects and how it affects planning and the fragmented ordering described above. When conducting planning, effects for a planning effort are

identified. Relaying back to the examples of freedom of movement and anti-corruption, the respective planning teams set out to identify the actual effect to be achieved to reach the objectives. Each planning effort begins with the identification of a desired end state, which inherently is wrong when done in a fragmented planning team, and not part of an overall identification of the necessary effects, but rather a spawn of further effects being added continuously. The mechanism to curb this, the Joint Plans Update, has been described above as insufficiently capable of managing it.

Particularly, when planning based on emerging tasks and objectives, the process adds a large number of tasks and actions to the whole campaign, actually complicating the conduct of the counterinsurgency fight. One of the main reasons for this is the application of effects in planning. When effects are not derived as part of a delicate analysis of the system that the effect is intended on, effects becomes nothing more than a list of all the possible actions that can be directed towards the objective, often based upon the capabilities at hand, rather than the needed effect. Effects actually come to represent actions, rather than actually desired effect per NATO doctrine.

### **Theater vs. Operational Level**

One can question whether ISAF Joint Command, in its 2009/2010 construct was truly an operational command. IJC is responsible for the campaign “in and down” in Afghanistan, essentially leaving the international relations and ministerial level relations to HQ ISAF. If ISAF HQ is strategic, then IJC must be the operational level below it. One issue is that the RC level is also to a great extent operational, and not merely tactical. A regional command owns its battle space, operations area, and a large number of assets, effectively making the RC span of responsibility an operational level. The RC has to combine assets and units not normally available to a normal maneuver division. The inclusion of extensive strategic communication, so that there is a large (local) political dimension, is beyond the normal military responsibilities. The planning of the campaign at RC level also has an operational aspect, in that it is over time within a large battle space, with several separate task forces.

ISAF Joint Command is roughly the equivalent of a corps command, its commander being a three star general, its core derived from a standing NATO corps command. But its responsibilities are not according to the traditional military corps role. IJC owns no units, as the RCs are a special subordinate, with many national caveats from RC to RC. (The relationship is formally OPCON, as a RC as a whole, but for all practical purposes, the actual forces attached to a RC HQ is delivered in a sort of TACON(-) to NATO, not even to the RC's. This leaves no opportunity for command levels to transcend any national boundaries with 40+ troop contributing nations.) There are virtually no corps level assets to assigned to the different RCs over time and/or space. During processes within IJC it is often stated that the commander IJC is an asset for the fight, sending him out for key leader engagements at Kabul level, and sending him down to RCs to create publicity. Whether or not this should actually be considered a corps level asset, proactively, can be debated, but in the sense it seems to be the only corps level asset to be coordinated and assigned makes the corps rather impotent besides planning and guidance.

There are also no operations spanning RC borders. That is, actual operations, not lines of operation, and not counting effort that are taking place within each region. The corps level leadership and guidance would be appropriate in a maneuver scenario where the subordinate divisions would be moved, directed and there would be a need for large cross divisional boundary coordination. In ISAF RC boundaries are fixed, and there are no cross boundary operations. All operations take place within an RC's assigned battle space, and are naturally lead from the RC HQ or below. The corps level operations described above are not a corps lead operation, which requires corps level real time guidance between RCs, but rather just an order to the RCs to plan according to the decided line of operation, not an operation actually ran by IJC. It thus seems more like the IJC has a theater level role, rather than an operational role.

## **Summary**

This paper was intended to point to the lacking operational construct of the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan 2010, and to identify some of the operational planning flaws of the ISAF Joint Command.

It is discernible that OP OMID does not actually achieve the purpose of an operational plan, namely to present a logical, coherent concept of operation, to properly explain how the described lines of operation and supporting concept exactly come together above the tactical level, to achieve synergy and defeat the insurgency nationwide (and perhaps wider) in Afghanistan. Especially when designed after proven, but tactical, counterinsurgency concepts, it could have been an ambition for “OP OMID” to achieve the operational level of design and “coup d’oeil” instead of settling for a simple synchronization of key terrain districts, where tactics are employed.

The construct of the ISAF Joint Command, innovative as the cross functional teams are, nevertheless presents a number of serious challenges to attaining proper leadership of the operational managing of the campaign, but much of the reason for this must be found in the underlying and surrounding factors regarding COIN and OP OMID. The basis for all of these deficiencies must be found in the other presented subjects in this paper, namely the fact that COIN as we know it is only a tactic, and that its religious importance demands officers to rely on it. Combine that with the cultural lack of the operational level, and the tendency to rely on overwhelming amounts of tactical action, that inevitably must win, as a deeply rooted concept in the minds of officers. These two facts went together into the first OP OMID and gave it its distinct tactical content and lack of an innovative operational construct for the Afghanistan campaign.

To execute this operational campaign plan, the IJC was constructed, with no clear role to fill the void between ISAF HQ and the regional commands. The outcome of all of this was a slightly mismanaged campaign in the first year of life of IJC. No doubt, all officers, men and units did their best under the construct and circumstances, but the outset was so compounded by above factors, that it had to reflect on the daily workings and control of the headquarters.

## **Perspective for an operational level in Afghanistan**

The need for an operational level, and an operational construct, is a given in any campaign, lest it be a strategy of tactics, as described earlier.

The campaign in Afghanistan is not lost to the application of a logic coherent operational plan. The initiative is in many ways “on the fence” as the population is so often described. This means there is every opportunity to seize the initiative. It requires planning on how to seize it: real operational planning. Planning that would start with the whole environment and couple all the lines of operation and supporting concepts, and show their interdependence and reinforcing, above and beyond a sequencing of the decisive points in a campaign.

The opportunity in a fighting environment where everyday business is well conducted by the regional commands, to elevate the operational command’s focus towards a true operational level, without deliberately meddling into tactical affairs and incidents, is fully present. It just needs to be grasped.

Planning the operational concept would focus on the key concepts, not 17 supporting efforts. It would establish a logical and simple concept of the overall campaign, and leave the tactical planning to the regional commands.

## **The operational level that disappeared**

I set out in this study to capture some of my observations of IJC through my deployment. I outlined what I saw and what I found, and none of the criticism above is directed towards the many of the fine individuals I worked with. Rather, it was intended to point towards some of the culturally inherent problems facing a complex counter insurgency fight, compounded by history, duration, construct of command and headquarters and so on.

I hope succeeded in pointing towards some key challenges, on many different levels, in order to create awareness. Awareness should hopefully create the opportunity to catch the problems before they arise and improve the conduct of the campaign.

I named the paper “the missing operational level” because I find the lack of operational thought, planning and execution the biggest detriment. Also the best solution, as an operational level focus would affect many of the areas where there are now problems.

### About the Author



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Niels Klingenberg Vistisen is currently in Afghanistan as the political advisor in the Nahr-E Saraj district, Helmand province, since May 2011. He deployed in 2010 first as a major in ISAF Joint Command, Future Operations, and following this as the Chief Governance Planner in Regional Command South West until December 2010. Besides being an Army Officer, Niels Vistisen holds a masters degree in military history.

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