



RETURNING TO THE OPERATIONAL ART?

THE CANADIAN FORCES JOINT OPERATIONS GROUP

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Aim

The aim of the paper is to examine the current and future ability of the Canadian Forces (CF) to execute operational level contingency missions under the aegis of the recently formed Canadian Forces Joint Operations Group (CFJOG). It will address some of the numerous debates about Canada's ability to engage in operational level warfare, illustrate how the Canadian military is currently fighting operationally, the need for effective command and control of forces at this level, and how the CFJOG is meeting this challenge. Finally, I would like the discussion to explore how the CFJOG may influence the future of Canadian defence policy development.

Definitions

There is considerable argument both in the defence establishment and the academic community surrounding what exactly is strategic, operational, and tactical level fighting, and also what defines something as joint as opposed to combined or even a coalition. Though there is a general agreement on the definitions of strategic and tactical, the definition of 'operational' remains in dispute. Having reviewed a great deal of the seemingly infinite literature, I would argue that the operational level is what binds the tactical to the strategic, in the sense that operational warfare consists of the stringing together of a series of tactical successes in order to achieve a strategic end state. That being said, there will not always be an easily identifiable operational level of fighting in every war. If for example, a Canadian infantry

section patrolling in the Hindu Kush (a tactical mission) suddenly ferrets Osama Bin Laden out of a cave, they have arguably achieved a strategic victory. Therefore it is important not to apply harsh constraints when looking to define tactical, operational, and strategic, considering that none of the levels exist in exclusion of the other. Finally, the conduct of operational level warfare often – but not always – requires a combination of arms and services, hence why this level is often tied to the concept of joint operations.

Definitions aside, one may simply ask, “Does Canada’s military act at the operational level?” The quick answer is often “NO”, followed by a string of reasons proving why. These include:

- a. Historically, the Canadian military achieved little operational level success in war.
- b. Presently, DND and the CF in particular suffer from undeveloped and untested operational and joint level doctrine.
- c. Of the three services, the army appears most perplexed by this issue. There has been significant debate within the pages of its professional journal, with many writers criticizing the Canadian Army’s adoption of manoeuvreist doctrine at the operational level.
- d. Realistically, the CF simply does not have the assets to conduct operational level warfare or joint operations.
- e. Point C is reinforced by the fact that the government seems little interested in providing DND with the mandate or the assets to carry out missions at the operational and/or joint level.

These are all interesting and often heard arguments, though one must question their degree of validity.

- a. Canada’s operational history suffered a decade and a half of unwarranted criticism and insult as politically motivated “historians” buried their grief with the present day senior command and control in distorted presentations of our military past. In a string of books and documentaries, military “experts” continually pointed out what was wrong with our way of warfare without ever explaining how such a misguided and poorly led force of arms managed to consistently defeat its enemy or keep the peace where there was often no peace to keep.

- b. Canadian operational and joint level doctrine has been continually tested perhaps since the First World War, but it may not seem like it if doctrine is perceived as a static and set-in-stone tool. Though at one time doctrine could be developed that would last a few years, in the modern age with rapidly advancing societies and technology, doctrine may be valid no longer than a few months. Constant reassessment and change is often perceived by outsiders as a sign of inability, when in fact a fluid evolutionary approach to operational and joint level doctrine will likely be the key to continual success on the battlefield. However, like other countries and militaries, DND and the CF in particular are struggling to define their Joint Vision and doctrine for the next decade or two, but again this is not due to some incompetence. Nobody has a crystal ball to see the future, and like any organization we make a best guess on what may be demanded of Canada down the road.

- c. Canada does have the assets – though I agree it is not a huge pool of resources – to conduct joint level operations. To be fair to the Directorate of Army Doctrine, and the other services for that matter, Canadian military visions, missions, and doctrines must often be defined based on our equipment capabilities rather than Canadian national security strategy or policy. Furthermore, Canada’s defence policy readily concedes that higher-level command and control will likely rest in a coalition or allied force. Fortunately, the winds of change are upon us.

- d. Fourthly, while DND may still carry on its political battle to obtain better resources, any Canadian government – Liberal or otherwise – will feel increasing pressure to become proactive in the defence of its sovereignty and the collective security of its allies. The 1990s has shown us this already, and many of us feel that we stepped through a door on September 11th, through which we no longer go back. Like other countries, Canada will have to come to terms with the fact that the warranty on its fireproof house has run out, and we no longer no with certainty who is holding the match.

Background on the CFJOG

During the last decade of war fighting and peace enforcement Canada deployed its military beyond its borders no less than thirty times, into Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and

Australasia. On many occasions these deployments consisted of a mix of sea, land, and air elements and demanded a sophisticated degree of joint command and control in order to successfully execute the mission. However, despite years of planning and preparing for combat within a coalition, the Canadian Forces fetish with interoperability with our allies seemed to eclipse the need to bring our own forces together under the aegis of a single joint command. The result during the 1990s was a string of ad hoc command and control organizations quickly duct taped together in response to the seemingly endless wave of new missions. After decades of Baden Baden, STANAVFORLANT, and Cyprus, the Canadian Forces was suddenly faced with Bosnia, Kigali, Dili, Aviano, and the Strait of Hormuz, and it was not well prepared to lead such missions, let alone fully participate in them.

This leads one to ask, "Why couldn't the Canadian Forces do this?" Some of the reasons included:

- a. Government political and financial restrictions and political intervention into the smallest details of an operation (often related to obvious concerns about things happening that may embarrass the government);
- b. DND and NDHQ micromanagement of CF commanders in the execution of their missions;
- c. Serious contradictions between government strategy, DND policy, CF strategic and operational doctrine, and joint doctrine.
- d. Perhaps most important, what is taught to would be commanders in the joint and service level schools is very different or notional compared to what is applied in actual situations. Having both lectured at CFC Toronto and participated in its exercises, I am somewhat amazed that we continue to design scenarios for students consisting of Cold-War style coalitions outmaneuvering a weak and disorganized adversary, and concerning ourselves more with the formatting of our staff work and less with the strategy and tactics of command. (sign cSc).

As a result of the above-mentioned factors, every time the CF mounted a new mission in the 90s it tended to reinvent the wheel on how to command and control it, especially when

more than one service was involved.

Catalyst

The first post-Cold War decade ended the routine for Canada's deployed military and launched it into a series of wars and crises that required high-readiness, high mobility, and flexible joint level command and control. It wasn't easy to make such a transition, and I would argue that ten years is not an unrealistic amount of time for a military to change from one way of life to another. Hard lessons learned in Somalia were difficult to apply in Bosnia and Central Africa, but started sinking in by the time we went to Kosovo. The Canadian Forces, needed a joint level formation to properly command and control the increasingly complex missions like those faced in the 1990s, and were likely to face in the decade to come. The decision, in June 2000, was to stand up the Canadian Forces Joint Operations Group (CFJOG), based at CFB Kingston in Ontario.

The mission of the CFJOG is to provide a rapidly deployable, joint operational-level command and control capability for complex domestic and international operations. In layman's terms it is the link between the military strategic and the tactical components, ensuring that the CF can deploy rapidly and effectively to crises anywhere in the world. It is responsible for operational planning, contingency operational planning, theatre activation, strategic reconnaissance, and joint task force command and control. It oversees mission closeout, supports the Disaster Assistance Response Team and the Joint Space Support Team, and will support complex domestic operations as required. The CFJOG maintains a high-readiness (some members on 48 hours NTM), and can deploy worldwide on very short notice. In fact on more than one occasion it has already done so.

There are those who would argue that the CFJOG is superfluous. That it is just the creation of yet another unnecessary headquarters organization sapping resources from an already strapped CF. Others have tried to label it as another white elephant commanding paper forces. Some even think it is just a holding pool for staff officers waiting their next posting....and the list of comments goes on.

While I won't take up time challenging each of these catcalls, there are some things that need to be stressed before the debate goes on.

- a. First, Joint is not an organization, formation, or unit. It is a mission, and ultimately it is the responsibility of every member of the CF to embrace. Taken to its roots, joint operations is just a clever way of telling the services to work together to achieve the common objective. This means maximizing our resources collectively to achieve the mission. A case in point – the Navy is seeking to acquire new logistics vessels – and one of its selling points was that the ships may provide some degree of strategic sealift for the army in order to avoid anymore GTS Katie incidents. While it may seem that the navy is getting a ship and the army is getting squat – what the army is getting is more freedom to deploy and thus the ability to increase its own abilities.

- b. Given the current and likely near future missions that the CF will face, the CF's ability to execute joint operations may well determine whether or not any budgetary or manpower relief will be delivered to any of the services. The public, and thus the government, are more likely to support a well-oiled machine than three separate quarreling branches, none of which by itself can provide Canada with total defence. As I eluded to earlier, we would do well to focus on our own interoperability right now and perhaps a little less on that with our allies. Yes, we will likely fight alongside the USA and thus need to be able to work with them, however if we achieve the first, the second will come more easily.

- c. Finally, complex joint operations demand a well-trained high readiness command and control element. Area headquarters and ad-hoc national command elements, redesigned for nearly every mission in the 1990s, simply don't cut it. As the CFJOG demonstrated over the past two years in Turkey, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Macedonia, Bosnia, the Middle East, Afghanistan, and even Tampa, its presence was critical to the success of the mission.

Has Canada returned to the operational art? Perhaps, but despite the evidence of the late 1990s I will concede that it is probably too early to tell. Regardless, joint operations, a critical aspect of operational level warfare in the modern day, must be embraced if the CF is to make a difference in today's defence of Canadian sovereignty. The creation of the CFJOG, while perhaps not the end state, is a step in the right direction.

