# Producing Strategic Value through Deliberate War Planning

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T he U.S. military invests sizable resources in deliberate war planning to prepare for future operations in defined crisis conditions. However, the actual value of current deliberate war planning to military readiness and future combat performance is questionable. This article starts with a brief assessment of the modern U.S. war planning system, then addresses two factors that would enable the deliberate war planning community to deliver greater strategic value.

The first factor, oriented toward prospective planners, is promoting awareness of tensions in both bureaucratic politics and civil–military relations that pervade the process and influence the outcomes. Failure to understand and respect the power of these two tensions equates to letting them become the dominant forces in deliberate war planning to the detriment of any operational or strategic value planning is supposed to provide.

The second factor is the construction of a theoretical framework to understand the actual and potential value added by deliberate war planning. This theoretical framework consists of seven dimensions of planning utility that are sorely needed to counteract the bureaucratic politics

and civil–military relations tensions that currently pervade the process and curb its effectiveness. The potential advantage of these planning factors is that they can be applied empirically to gauge the value of a given deliberate planning effort.

This is not the first attempt to undertake empirical research on war planning.[1] The new contribution sought here is greater understanding of the utility of the activity. Such an understanding could set conditions for increasing effectiveness in future practice. Based on the presumption that deliberate war planning positively influences the manner in which the United States applies military force, this matter is vital to U.S. national security.

## The Modern U.S. War Planning System

The United States is the only country in the world that currently professes to "underwrite international security … uphold our commitments to allies

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Soldiers from the 329th Regional Support Group, based in Virginia Beach, Virginia, team up with soldiers from the 1030th Transportation Battalion from Gate City, Virginia, 13 November 2010 to rehearse for a staff exercise during their annual training at Camp Dodge, Iowa. The soldiers focused on improving military decision-making processes, improving communication from group to battalion level, and setting conditions for better future operations during the annual two-week training period. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Andrew H. Owen, Virginia National Guard PAO)

Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma (*standing left*) meets Lt. Gen. Tim Evans, commander, Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (*seated fifth from left*), and other members of the exercise staff during the Latvia Cabinet of Ministers Exercise Kristaps 2015 on 10 November 2015 at Lielvārde Airbase, Lielvārde, Latvia. The exercise combined the majority of ministers, the president, and military leadership in a national-level simulated emergency cabinet session to discuss crisis response plans. (Photo by WO 2 Dan Harmer, GBR Army/NATO)

and partners, and address threats that are truly global."[2] Under these guiding principles, the U.S. military's role is to "ensure, by timely and effective military action, the security of the United States and areas vital to its interest."[3] This is a tall order.

One of the military's key enabling mechanisms to carrying out its role is deliberate war planning, a function intended to "enable understanding and facilitate the development of options to effectively meet the complex challenges facing joint forces throughout the world."[4] This intellectually resource-intensive mechanism seems as though it would naturally contribute strategic value. However, the utility derived from deliberate war planning has been widely debated. Some contend that military doctrine and education are ill suited to deal with unfamiliar problems or to satisfy civilian policy-makers' needs.[5] Others criticize the common tendency to focus on point scenarios without considering branches, sequels, or the need for rapid adaptation.[6] Still others argue that the military services' cultural preferences of planning for future interstate conventional wars impedes effective planning for the more likely unconventional scenarios that the United States has engaged in much more often, a tendency

reinforced by the need to justify high-end conventional military modernization programs.[7]

Beyond the contemporary debate, the utility of deliberate war plans to the past one hundred years of U.S. combat performance is not encouraging. In most of the cases that necessitated U.S. involvement in wars, the deliberate war plans that were available at the time of need were not relevant. For example, following the 11 September 2001 attacks, the U.S. national leadership directed the military to initiate a campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan and other locations. At that point, the military had a sizable inventory of war plans, but none of them dealt with this specific need. This lack of relevant war plans also existed when the United States entered the First World War, the

Korean War, the Vietnam War, the War for Kosovo, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

## Doctrine and Definitions

U.S. military doctrine provides a detailed treatment of the role of joint operational planning, but does not adequately characterize deliberate war planning as a distinctive subcomponent within that larger planning construct.[8] The doctrinal definition of deliberate war planning—"a planning process for the deployment and employment of apportioned forces and resources that occurs in response to a hypothetical situation"—fails to capture the essence of the discipline, as we shall see.[9] The result is a chaotic diversity of practice carried out by a disparate and distributed community of practice exposed to influence by powerful forces that degrade strategic value.

Thus, a more precise definition that would enable objective evaluation, unity of effort, and value-adding practices is *the process undertaken by multiple disparate organizations to conceptualize military options, support future U.S. government efforts and objectives, and generate knowledge and understanding—all oriented on assumptions-based, defined future circumstances*. This definition is superior because it emphasizes three key value-adding concepts: deliberate planning as a mechanism for cross-organizational connective tissue, for subordinating military activities to a broader U.S. government campaign, and for individual and organizational learning. The internal and external tensions that adversely influence these value-adding concepts are addressed next.

## Bureaucratic Politics: Military-Internal Participants

The U.S. military deliberate war planning enterprise is vast in terms of depth, breadth, and diversity. As a result, bureaucratic politics have a powerful influence on the inputs, processes, and outcomes of deliberate war planning. The point is not that bureaucratic politics should be eliminated, because it will always be present in any large-scale, multiorganizational effort. The idea is to become aware of the role that bureaucratic politics plays, thereby allowing the deliberate war planning community to mitigate adverse influence where possible, as well as amplify the benefits that come from a cross-dimensional enterprise effort.

The vast scale of the undertaking becomes apparent by considering the aggregate effort: over six hundred military professionals engage in full-time deliberate war planning, and several thousand more are integral but part-time contributors.[10] The full timers are predominantly field grade officers in the prime of their professional careers. Beyond aggregate scale, practitioners represent a diversity of organizations, including geographic and functional combatant commands, service component commands, subunified commands, and the military services. These organizations' interests and motivations sometimes align but often conflict.

There are nine combatant commands whose geographic and functional roles are established by the president in the biannually updated unified command plan.[11] Six combatant commands are geographically oriented and together cover the entire globe, including the global commons outside the sovereignty of any state. Three functional combatant commands focus on specific military missions that cross geographic boundaries: strategic deterrence, global distribution, and special operations. Combatant commanders are directly responsible to the secretary of defense for deliberate war plans. As a result, the combatant command plans teams form and lead the plan-specific joint planning groups within which the rest of the community is represented and serve as honest brokers to achieve joint interdependence and unity of effort.

The problems that deliberate war plans deal with do not typically conform to geographical or functional boundaries, so combatant commands must collaborate on mutual challenges. The result is an interwoven web of supporting relationships and interactions. Because the geographic boundaries, functional roles, and force assignments established by the unified command plan rarely change, each combatant command has developed a unique philosophy and way of doing business, which corresponds to varying regional security environments, as well as differences in the commanders' personalities and the staffs' culture. Combatant commanders with overlapping jurisdiction for a particular future contingency scenario understandably view that scenario from different perspectives. Furthermore, relatively constant resource and planning prioritization establish an informal hierarchy among combatant commands. For example, U.S. Central Command's stature has recently been accentuated because its area of responsibility encompasses the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters of war.

Individual combatant commands are not monolithic organizations. They consist of a range of

sub-organizations, including component command headquarters from each of the four military services and from U.S. Special Operations Command. Component command headquarters serve two masters: their combatant commander and service chief. Thus, the perspectives and motivations within a combatant command enterprise are not identical. The combatant commander and his or her staff focus primarily on war plans that can generate strategic outcomes and do so through joint interdependence. The service chiefs and their staffs have a narrower, single-domain focus, and thus concentrate on the contribution made by land, air, or sea power. This is not to say that the services have malicious intent; they simply have the responsibility to ensure that operations in their domain are effective. When conflicts arise, or when combatant commanders' guidance is vague, the services wield the more powerful influence because they control resourcing.

Another important bureaucratic relationship within combatant commands is between the "J5" strategy and plans directorates and the "J3" operations directorates. The J5 directorate produces and maintains deliberate war plans on a continuous basis. If the scenario that a war plan focuses on actually materializes, then a transition process is triggered. During transition, the J5 directorate transfers the relevant war plan to the J3 directorate to form the framework for necessary military operations. The J3 directorate must deal with the present in concrete terms, so if the plan is not presented well, it will seem irrelevant and be ignored, wasting the time that went into it. The outcome of this transition process, which, as a result of the crisis nature of such situations that generally occur under stress, is the ultimate litmus test of the strategic value of a given war plan.

The military services are also important stakeholders in deliberate war planning. Military services rely on war plans to guide their readiness-generation efforts, such as training. This is also the case with Special Operations Command and the National Guard Bureau. In this way, established deliberate war plans provide a common reference point to cope with future uncertainty. However, at some point, the military services' use of deliberate war plans becomes problematic. For example, when services become involved too early, they tend to introduce nonstrategic and biasing concepts intended to establish requirements and drive resources by reverse osmosis. At the other end of the spectrum, when the military services

shift focus from near-term readiness generation to long-term defense strategy choices, deliberate war plans become much less suitable. The Department of Defense has a separate function called *support for strategic analysis* (SSA), which provides plausible scenarios and alternative futures for these types of uses. In practice, the uses of deliberate war plans and SSA scenarios are often mixed up.[12]

One implication of the size and scale of the planning bureaucracy is the impossibility of adding value through an elite, small group of planners. While a roundtable format comprised of handpicked planners appears on its surface to offer the greatest prospect for free-flowing ideas and flexibility, in practice such an approach excludes the participation of individuals and organizations the view points and expertise of which will be vital if the scenario covered by the war plan comes true. Thus, value-added planning must be explicitly carried out to bridge organizational barriers and establish networks up front that will become essential in a crisis.

Another implication is that organizational reform to enhance the effectiveness of deliberate war planning might be part of the answer, but, in isolation, even reform cannot eliminate the intrinsic reality of bureaucratic politics. Therefore, the operative question is how to understand and accommodate the influence that bureaucratic politics has on the potential strategic value of deliberate war planning.

## Bureaucratic Politics: Interagency Stakeholders

Bureaucratic politics between the U.S. military and other U.S. government agencies is an equally influential determinant of any value derived from deliberate war planning. This is the case because the military activities described in war plans are necessary, but usually insufficient, to achieve national strategic objectives. Some would disagree by invoking the classic example from the European Theater during the Second World War, where the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered Gen. Dwight Eisenhower to "enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces."[13] Eisenhower's mission could be (and, indeed, was) carried out with purely military tools. However, ultimate victory relied on the pursuit of sequential objectives that were primarily pursued through nonmilitary tools: the reestablishment

A British officer provides guidance to his tank commanders during a sand table rehearsal prior to a battle for Tobruk, Libya, in 1941. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress/Official British Army photo No. BO 773 [BM 7241])

of democratic societies structured so that it would be difficult to re-create empires, thereby ensuring that a global, near-unlimited war would not occur again. In Germany, this was accomplished by the occupation, the civil–military government, and, ultimately, the Marshall Plan.

Thus, the military activities envisioned in deliberate war plans must be designed as an initial step to generate a new normal that enables the U.S. government to employ the nonmilitary tools that actually generate the desired conditions. This need to employ nonmilitary tools to achieve national objectives has major implications for the manner in which the military activities are carried out. Recent U.S. military doctrinal changes, such as the addition of legitimacy, restraint, and perseverance as principles of war, lend credence to the need for nonmilitary tools.[14]

As we have seen, the nonmilitary U.S. government agencies responsible for nonmilitary tools are important deliberate war planning stakeholders. But a disparity between them and the military in planning capacity prevents commensurate participation: none

of the nonmilitary organizations comes close to matching the military's capacity for deliberate war planning. Additionally, culture clash among the military establishment and nonmilitary agencies frequently occurs due to different approaches to planning.

Military planners are more accustomed to assumptions-based, policy-unconstrained thinking than the intelligence community, the State Department, and other civilian-led agencies. This includes exploration of options that are not feasible under present-day U.S. government policy or resource constraints. Additionally, value-adding deliberate war planning requires an orientation on planning assumptions regarding the employment of nonmilitary agents that shape a future hypothetical political and social reality that may not ever materialize. However, the bureaucratic cultures of many nonmilitary agencies

President Barack Obama meets with combatant commanders and other military leadership 12 November 2013 in the White House Cabinet Room. (Photo by Pete Souza, White House)

do not see value in such hypothetical planning and resist military efforts to prod them in that direction.

Consequently, because of the disparity in capacity and culture between the military and other nonmilitary agencies that would have to be involved to achieve long-term political objectives associated with a potential conflict, the military deliberate war planning community finds itself operating in a vacuum. Thus, when left alone, interagency bureaucratic politics degrade the dimension of value-added deliberate war planning. This is reflected adversely in the emergence of a dysfunctional bias toward the use of military force in planning for situations where other value-added tools might generate better outcomes. Furthermore, the formidable expertise that resides in the intelligence community to guide planning is often left largely untapped.

Individual planners' initiative and major interagency organizational reform might help on the margins to resolve such friction, but attempts to achieve improvement through organizational reform have been mixed or even counterproductive. Therefore, what is important here is to understand and acknowledge the inescapable effect of interagency bureaucratic politics

and use that understanding to design a more effective theoretical framework to mitigate the most adverse political tendencies of the process.

Deliberate war planning is a mechanism that offers great promise to connect individuals across stovepiped organizations into a multifunctional community of practice. The challenge becomes one of promoting a broad understanding of the magnitude of these intangible benefits and utilities among those involved in planning. Positing such a framework to overcome this challenge will be a contribution of this article. With such an understanding, deliberate war planning can be carried out in a manner that increases its value to the national security community.

## Civil–Military Relationship Tensions

Civil–military relations are another source of tension that influences the strategic value offered by deliberate war planning. The relational dynamics between the officials in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and

uniformed planners is a central driver of planning progress, process, and content. These dynamics are complicated by competing perspectives on the utility of deliberate war planning.

For military planners, value-added deliberate planning starts with predetermined national strategic objectives that come from civilian officials. Such established national strategic objectives then become the goalposts toward which all efforts can be directed. As we have seen, the deliberate war planning enterprise is substantial, so clear direction is quite useful in channeling enterprise-wide effort along a relatively effective and efficient path. However, experienced military planners do appreciate that as the strategic and political environment evolves, guidance will evolve with it, requiring flexibility in planning. And, innovative planning practices can effectively cope with a finite range of policy preferences. Nevertheless, from the military's perspective, relatively stable and clear policy guidance enables more value-added deliberate war planning.

Civilian officials view war plans as mechanisms for generating decision space through development of a broad range of courses of actions with various mixes of military as well as value-added options. Such options enable high-level decisions that usually involve trade-offs between equally important priorities. Thus, if the outcome of deliberate war planning is a broad range of options that correspond to a broad range of potential policy choices, then this buys valuable time for arriving at the optimal decision. At the practitioner level, this desire for decision space amplifies because there is the added pressure of not getting ahead of the secretary of defense or key Department of Defense undersecretaries.

Neither civilian nor military perspectives are superior over the other. The most productive way to reconcile them is to have awareness and respect for the role that civil–military relationship tensions have on the process for and content of deliberate war plans. With greater awareness, both sides can achieve a better dialogue, and do so at all levels from principals to practitioners.

In summary, bureaucratic politics and civil–military friction become overbearing in the absence of a guiding theory. Individual planners' personality and talent can provide some mitigation, but to achieve a broader increase in added strategic value, a need exists for the theoretical framework that is the topic of this article. As Carl von Clausewitz advised, "So long as no acceptable theory … of the conduct of war exists, routine methods will tend take over even at the highest levels."[15]

## Conceptualizing the Elements of Deliberate War Planning Utility

This section offers a theoretical framework that will enable the military planning community to cope with the tensions described above, thereby adding increased strategic value to deliberate war planning.

The proposed framework conceptualizes the abstract concept of planning utility into seven dimensions: military validity, strategic validity, organizational learning, organizational networking, resourcing influence, flexibility, and clarity. These dimensions can then serve as propositions to help current and future planning leaders and practitioners to assess the value that their efforts are adding. The dimensions also can aid data collection and analysis for future research oriented on historical case studies.[16]

**Military validity.** The first dimension of utility is *military validity*. Military validity (or invalidity) is observed when a deliberate war plan is implemented in actual war. Deliberate war plans are militarily valid if the actual operations carried out resemble the course of action described in the war plan. Conversely, if a war plan was largely abandoned at the time of need, then that would indicate it was invalid.

Military validity is measured by calculating the extent to which the war plan matched the battlefield outcomes, from three perspectives: whether the planning assumptions upon which the war plan was designed were validated, whether the adversary's anticipated course of action matched what the deliberate plan predicted, and whether the U.S. military forces actually adopted the operational approach the war plan called for.

**Strategic validity.** The second dimension is *strategic validity*. As with military validity, strategic validity can only be observed when a war plan is implemented in actual war. Deliberate war plans are strategically valid if the military operations they prescribe are strategically successful. To illustrate the difference between military validity and strategic validity, the achievement of military objectives does not automatically lead to strategic victory. A good example was the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, where the achievement of the initial military objective, the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime, did not result in strategic victory. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion

of Iraq was militarily valid but strategically invalid, because the assumptions undergirding the policy direction to the war proved false.

**Organizational learning.** The third dimension is *organizational learning*. The process of designing a deliberate war plan should generate insights and innovation that otherwise would not emerge. President Dwight D. Eisenhower characterized the value of learning through the medium of planning in a quote that is often invoked in the contemporary American prewar planning community: "Plans are useless but planning is indispensable."[17] Approached from this perspective, deliberate war planning can add value by facilitating individual and organizational understanding of complex problems.[18] Organizational learning as a dimension of war planning utility is measured by observing the number of doctrinal changes and professional journal articles published because of the planners' insights and innovation.

**Organizational networking.** The fourth dimension is *organizational networking*. Deliberate war planning should breach organizational stovepipes and connect communities of interest. Organizational networking is measured by observing the formation of networks (at all levels) that would not have otherwise occurred had the planning effort not taken place. Additionally, experience should validate that such networks proved to be invaluable in a crisis.

Unfortunately, in some cases, organizational networking is inhibited when deliberate war planning becomes exclusionary because of formal security compartmentalization, informal information sharing barriers, or even restrictions established by the chain of command. Exclusivity is sometimes necessary because of operational and political sensitivities, though it reduces the effectiveness of organizational networking.

**Resourcing influence.** The fifth dimension is *resourcing influence*. Effective deliberate war plans should influence the military's investments in technology, equipment, organizational restructuring, and overseas basing posture. Resourcing influence is measured by observing changes in military resource allocations that resulted from the plans.

**Flexibility.** The sixth dimension is *flexibility*. War plans should offer a range of options, thereby providing a wide enough range of planning latitude to effectively adapt to unpredicted situations.[19] Flexibility is measured by determining the number of potential adversary actions that the plan anticipates as well as the number of options it provides for the U.S. military commander to deal with such actions.

**Clarity.** The seventh dimension is *clarity*. War plans should articulate an operational approach that is clear to multiple different organizations and users, thus increasing the possibility of unity of effort and lowering the probabilities of miscalculation and miscommunication.[20] Clarity is measured by observing accurate cognition by operational planners in a crisis and service planners in steady-state readiness generation.

Note that the last two dimensions, clarity and flexibility, are inversely related. How to manage this tradeoff is a pervasive question being grappled with by contemporary practitioners and thus must be accounted for in any useful model. In doing so, Albert Einstein's advice is instructive: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler."[21]

Military planning doctrine accounts for aspects of these seven dimensions (see the footnoted references). But their articulation as separate analytic concepts is insufficient. Elaboration of the dimensions into a theoretical framework is the contribution sought here. To be sure, this theoretical framework is not a panacea, but there is plenty of room for incremental improvement, as we have seen.

Further research is needed to validate the theoretical framework, potentially through its application to a series of case studies from U.S. military deliberate planning experience. Case studies would ideally include the definitive U.S. military deliberate war planning efforts: Plan Orange, 1924–1941; the General Defense of Western Europe, 1945–1989; and Plan 1002/1003, 1991–2003.[22] Ultimately, this research will equip future practitioners with a framework to overcome the tensions that will otherwise pervade the process and generate greater satisfaction at all levels.

## Conclusion

While deliberate war planning has real benefits, the environment in which it is carried out today is riven with competing tensions that at best impair its effectiveness and at worst render it irrelevant. This outcome is, perhaps, inevitable. The way to improve the benefits of deliberate planning is not to tinker with the process. The process brings all the relevant parties together. What is needed is a way to improve the outcomes of the process.

The solution proffered here is a theoretical framework populated by an objective set of criteria that can be used to assess the validity of a plan objectively and, in so doing, shift the focus from institutional and bureaucratic concerns to the strategic merits of war plans and war planning. ◼

## Notes

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6. Paul Davis, senior principal researcher at RAND, conversation with author, 7 April 2016.

7. Robert M. Gates, *Duty* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 118 and 143.

8. JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, chap. 1.

9. Ibid.

10. The figures presented here are based on preliminary analysis: twenty full-time planners in each of the nine combatant command plans divisions (180); ten full-time planners in each of the thirty-six service components (360); sixty full-time planners in the joint staff J5 and Office of the Secretary of Defense, Plans; and sixty full-time planners serving as doctrine writers, instructors, and information technology specialists.

11. For more information on unified command plans, see Edward J. Drea et al., *History of the Unified Command Plan: 1946–2012* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 2013).

12. Robert A. Gleckler, "Why War Plans, Really?" *Joint Force Quarterly* 79 (4th Quarter, October 2015): 71–76, accessed 13 October 2016, http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-79/jfq-79_71-76_Gleckler.pdf.

13. Combined Chiefs of Staff, "Combined Chiefs of Staff Directive for Operation Overlord," 12 February 1944, ibiblio website, accessed 13 October 2016, https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/ETO/Overlord/Overlord-CCS-Dir.html.

14. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 11 August 2011), A4–A5.

15. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* ed. Beatrice Heuser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105.

16. Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002), 3–9. Yin describes exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research strategies.

17. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference," 14 November 1957, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project website, accessed 13 October 2016, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10951.

18. The U.S. military's planning doctrine accounts for the value that prewar planning provides to individual and organizational learning in "Constant Change, Learning, and Adaptation," JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, I-6–I-7.

19. Ibid., I-5–I-6. This theory is best described in JP 5-0's "Providing Options, Aligning Resources, and Mitigating Risks."

20. Ibid., I-16–I-18. This theory is best described in JP 5-0's "Developing Commander's Planning Guidance."

21. Paraphrased from remarks by Albert Einstein in "On the Method of Theoretical Physics," *Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 2 (April 1934): 163–69.

22. Plan Orange refers to a series of joint Army-Navy war plans focused on potential scenarios for war with Japan during the interwar years. The General Defense of Western Europe refers to war plans relating to the defense of Europe, specifically against the threat posed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Plans 1002 and 1003 refer to war plans for fighting in Southwest Asia.