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WORDS MEAN THINGS: WHAT IS THE DECISIVE POINT?

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

WORDS MEAN THINGS: WHAT IS THE DECISIVE POINT?

Many principles and concepts exist within the idea of operational design. Although most of these elements link their importance and historical roots to the classic military thinkers – Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Jomini, arguably, one of the most important is the concept of decisive point. As defined by Joint Publication 5-0, a decisive point is a “geographical place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success.” While this definition may sound clear and understandable, in actuality it does not adequately link the doctrinal use of the term to the original ideas of the classic military thinkers. Thus, the premise of this essay is to demonstrate that the joint definition for decisive point is worded in a context that is improper and, therefore, could promote confusion and inhibit commanders from framing a clear picture of the operational environment and subsequent development of a plan.

Introduction

While planning for joint operations, commanders and their staffs use operational art or vision to “integrate ends, ways, and means across the levels of war...to visualize how best to efficiently and effectively employ military capabilities to accomplish their mission.”¹ On the other hand, commanders and their staffs use operational design as a conceptual framework to translate this “art” into reality by analyzing the operational environment and developing a plan for subsequent execution.² Within the framework of operational design, key elements or joint doctrinal terms exist to define critical concepts and principles that provide the foundation of and parameters for operational level planning. Commanders use these key elements and associated doctrinal terms as a guide to describe concisely the operational environment in relation to the friendly and enemy situation. More importantly, when used properly, the elements foster a common understanding and clarity that assists in streamlining the planning process. Thus, while operational art is the catalyst and operational design is the control, the design elements are the essential ingredients that provide clarity to the operational environment.

As mentioned above, many principles and concepts exist within the idea of operational design. Although most of these elements link their importance and historical roots to the classic military thinkers – Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Jomini, arguably, one of the most important is the concept of decisive point. As defined by Joint Publication 5-0, a decisive point is a “geographical place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Operation Planning. Joint Pub 5-0. (Washington, DC: 26 December 2006), IV-3.

² Ibid., IV-4.

materially to achieving success.”³ While this definition may sound clear and understandable, in actuality it does not adequately link the doctrinal use of the term to the original ideas of the classic military thinkers. Thus, the premise of this essay is to demonstrate that the joint definition for decisive point is worded in a context that is improper and, therefore, could promote confusion and inhibit commanders from framing a clear picture of the operational environment and subsequent development of a plan.

To validate this argument, this essay will first demonstrate the importance of the concept of decisive point by establishing its conceptual linkages to the idea of center of gravity. Second, it will compare the joint definition of decisive point with the originators of the concept –Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Jomini. Third, it will show the inconsistent use of the concept in both the joint and service component doctrinal publications and their inadvertent divergence from its historical underpinnings. Finally, it will address a possible change to the joint definition of decisive point by analyzing the description of the term as provided by the Joint Publication 5-0.

Why is this discussion point important? Words mean things. The improper use of terminology and phrases can promulgate confusion from the lowest levels in the operational chain to staffs working in concert with U.S. planners. Although seemingly well defined in Joint Publication 5-0, the actual definition of the doctrinal term “decisive point” is ambiguous at best, which could lead to misinterpretation during the operational design of full spectrum operations.

³ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

Center of Gravity

The concept of decisive point derives its conceptual significance from its linkage to the concept of center of gravity. Thus, before an in-depth discussion on decisive points can be initiated, one must first address the classic military thinkers' ideas on the concept of center of gravity. The purpose of this is to not only establish a foundation for the analysis of the term decisive point but also trace the historical underpinnings of this term to its current usage within joint doctrine.

In the early eighteenth century, Carl Von Clausewitz developed the conceptual idea of center of gravity. "Clausewitz maintained that to achieve a war's ultimate end, that is, breaking the enemy's will, a nation must direct all of its efforts at a center of gravity."⁴ Keeping this train of thought, Clausewitz described the concept of center of gravity in the following manner:

"What the theorist has to say here is this: one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed...[i]f the enemy is thrown off balance, he must not be given time to recover. Blow after blow must be aimed in the same direction: the victor, in other words, must strike with all his strength and not just against a fraction of the enemy's. [Only]...by constantly seeking out the center of power, by daring all to win all, will one really defeat the enemy."⁵

Later in his writings, Clausewitz reinforces his concept of center of gravity by stressing the importance of identifying the enemy's source of strength or its will to fight. Although Clausewitz acknowledges that there could be multiple sources of strength, "[t]he first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest

⁴ Paul K. Van Riper, *Planning for and Applying Military Force: An Examination of Terms*. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 6.

⁵ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595-596.

possible sources, and ideally to one alone.”⁶ By doing so, one can defeat the enemy not only decisively but also quickly in order to meet the war’s ultimate endstate. For clarification, Clausewitz gives examples of possible centers of gravity such as the enemy’s army, capital, principal ally, leadership, and public opinion.⁷

Sun Tzu’s interpretation of center of gravity is a little more ambiguous than that of Clausewitz. As Michael Handel writes, “that which is explicit in Clausewitz’s work is only implicit in Sun Tzu’s.”⁸ While Clausewitz’s idea of center of gravity stresses the physical interaction between opposing forces governed by the laws of Newtonian physics, Sun Tzu’s view is on a much higher level or in the cognitive realm.⁹ Regarding war, Sun Tzu stresses that in order to defeat the enemy “what is of supreme importance...is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”¹⁰ Thus, while Clausewitz seeks a physical route through direct engagement, Sun Tzu suggests that the enemy’s center of gravity, his plan, is not physical at all, and therefore, can be indirectly attacked through the “acme of skill” – logic and intuitive prowess.¹¹ Although Sun Tzu prefers the indirect approach by defeating the enemy without fighting, he does acknowledge that physical centers of gravity do exist. These physical centers of gravity mirror those identified by Clausewitz and include alliances, armies, and cities.¹² Despite this alignment with Clausewitz, Sun Tzu stays true to the primary principle of attacking the enemy’s strategy throughout his maxims.

A third strategist, Antoine Henri Jomini, seems to bridge the gap between the thoughts of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, although like the latter, he does not identify the concept directly in

⁶ Clausewitz, 617.

⁷ Ibid., 596.

⁸ Michael Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd ed., (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 53.

⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰ Samuel Griffith, trans., *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 77.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 78.

his maxims. Jomini evolves his idea of center of gravity around two concepts – *DECISIVE* strategic points and objective points. Jomini first introduces the idea of center of gravity in his discussion on strategic lines and points in Article XIX in *The Art of War*. Jomini remarks that “there are points which have only a secondary importance, and others whose importance is constant and immense: the latter are called *DECISIVE* strategic points.”¹³ [Capitalization is from original the text.] A few pages later, Jomini elaborates on his idea of center of gravity or *DECISIVE* strategic point, but renames it as an objective point.

“In strategy, the object of the campaign determines the objective point. If this aim be offensive, the point will be the possession of the capital, or that of a province whose loss would compel the enemy to make peace. In a war of invasion the capital is, ordinarily, the objective point.”¹⁴

Jomini makes this transition in terms to delineate it from the separate conceptual idea of decisive point – the method of indirectly attacking an enemy’s center of gravity.

“Although these are most intimately connected, since every objective point ought necessarily to be one of the decisive points of the theater of war, there is nevertheless a distinction between them; for all decisive points cannot be at the same time the objective of operations.”¹⁵

Like Sun Tzu, Jomini does allude to the need to understand the interactive game between the enemy’s military capability, political goals, and alliances in order to determine the true center of gravity. All three should be considered because they are “intimately connected with plans of operations, and may decide whether an army should attempt or not to occupy the hostile capital.”¹⁶ Thus, while Jomini remains true to Clausewitz’s Newtonian ideals of a physical center of gravity, he also rallies behind Sun Tzu’s premise that an enemy’s center of gravity can exist in the cognitive realm.

¹³ Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*. Translated from French by G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill, (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1892), 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

By combining the conceptual ideas of the classic military thinkers into one definition, Joint Publication 5-0 defines center of gravity as “the set of characteristics, capabilities, and sources of power from which a system derives its moral or physical strength, freedom of action, and will to act.”¹⁷ Given the definition, it is obvious that it not only has strong ties to Clausewitz’s original interpretation, but also Jomini’s and Sun Tzu’s vision of the same concept. After identifying the center of gravity, the next step in the operational design process is to determine how to attack it.

Decisive Point

After the above discussion, it is clear that the identification of centers of gravity is a crucial aspect of operational design. Simply put, if you want to defeat your adversary you must first identify their center of gravity, find a way to destroy it, while at the same time protect your own. In order to do so, Joint Publication 5-0 states, “[t]he decision facing the commander is whether to attack the [center of gravity] directly, indirectly, or through a combination of direct and indirect approach[es].”¹⁸ Thus, while the direct approach focuses on attacking the strength of an opponent, the indirect method seeks to exploit critical vulnerabilities in the enemy’s center of gravity to ensure defeat or to eventually allow for a transition to direct attacks if required. When using the indirect approach, joint doctrine postulates the need to identify “decisive points.”

So, what is a decisive point? Joint Publication 5-0 defines a decisive point as a “geographical place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to

¹⁷ Joint Operation Planning, IV-8.

¹⁸ Ibid., IV-18.

achieving success.”¹⁹ To provide additional understanding, the Joint Publication goes a step further and describes the difference between the concepts of decisive point and center of gravity (COG) adding, “[a]lthough decisive points are not COGs, they are the keys to attacking or protecting them.”²⁰ Next, the publication groups decisive points into three different categories: physical point, event, and system. An example of a physical point could be “a constricted sea lane, a hill, or air base,” while an event could be, “attainment of air or maritime superiority [or] commitment of the adversary’s reserve.”²¹ Finally, a system could be “a node or combination of nodes which, when acted on, can substantially affect the adversary.”²² The publication sums up the idea by explaining, “[d]ecisive points can be thought of as a way to relate what is ‘critical’ to what is ‘vulnerable’.”²³ In short, the Joint Publication broadly defines a decisive point as something that can be either attacked, manipulated, or leveraged in order to exploit a vulnerability in an enemy’s center of gravity.

The origin of this doctrinal definition traces its historical roots primarily to the works of Jomini, but Clausewitz and Sun Tzu play a role too. Clausewitz uses the idea of decisive point in a manner that is reflective of his fascination with the physical realm of warfare. He does so by attaching it to a point to mass resources, rather than merely selecting locations to position forces for occupation or control. For example Clausewitz says, “[i]t thus follows that as many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point...[t]his is the first principle of strategy.”²⁴ Clausewitz goes further in his analysis by

¹⁹ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Doctrine for Joint Operations. Joint Pub 3-0. (Washington, DC: 10 September 2001), IV-12.

²⁴ Clausewitz, 195.

acknowledging the importance of correctly identifying the decisive point in order to alleviate the possibility of wasting valuable assets and resources in defeating one's adversary.

“Relative superiority, that is, the skillful concentration of superior strength at the decisive point, is much more frequently based on the correct appraisal of this decisive point, on suitable planning from the start; which leads to appropriated disposition of forces, and on the resolution needed to sacrifice nonessentials for the sake of essentials.”²⁵

Finally, Clausewitz sums up his thoughts on decisive point with the maxim, “[t]he best strategy is always to be very strong; first in general and then at the decisive point.”²⁶

Although Clausewitz is thorough in his discussion of the importance of identifying the decisive point, he does leave ample room for determining what this “point” actually is.

In similar fashion to Clausewitz, Sun Tzu's visualization of decisive point is focused on a single enterprise, but he too does not attach a specific label such as a time, place, or event. First, Sun Tzu acknowledges that decisive points exist when he writes, “[i]n contending for advantage, it must be for a strategically critical point.”²⁷ He continues his thought by recognizing the importance of delineating the difference between direct and indirect methods of attack by declaring, “[h]e who knows the art of the direct and indirect approach will be victorious.”²⁸ Finally, Sun Tzu aligns with Clausewitz in premise of massing at the decisive point and contends that by doing so one can severely hurt an adversary. “Then, if I am able to use many to strike few at the selected point, those I deal with will be in dire straits.”²⁹ In short, while it becomes obvious that Clausewitz and Sun Tzu's understanding of the concept of decisive point are similar – a single enterprise – their vagueness and lack of specific

²⁵ Clausewitz, 197.

²⁶ Ibid., 204.

²⁷ Griffith, 104.

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

²⁹ Ibid., 98.

examples leave much room for interpretation. Jomini, on the other hand, clears up this ambiguity with his ideas on this concept.

Jomini jumps in feet first with respect to the concept of decisive point, which he defines as, “those [points] which are capable of exercising a marked influence either upon the result of the campaign or upon a single enterprise.”^{30 31} Additionally, he goes a step further by noting that these points can be a geographic location, a critical event, or a grouping of systems.

“The decisive points of a theater of war are of several kinds...first...geographical points...whose importance is permanent and a consequence of the configuration of the country...[and] [t]hose points the possession of which would give the control of a junction of several valleys and of the center of the chief lines of communication in a country.”³²

Later, Jomini reinforces his idea on the concept of decisive point by declaring, “[t]he decisive point of a battle-field is determined...by the character of the position, the bearing of different localities upon the strategic objective in view, and...by the arrangement of the contending forces.”³³ Jomini does recognize that although there are many important points on the battlefield, not all of them are decisive.

“[A] strategic point is such essentially and by nature, and, no matter how far distant it may be included in the field by some unforeseen turn of events, and thus acquire full importance. It would, then, be more accurate to state that all strategic points are not necessarily decisive points.”³⁴

In the end, Jomini ties up his thoughts by specifying that decisive points are determined by three things, “[t]he features on the ground...[t]he relation of the local features to the ultimate

³⁰ Jomini originally calls the concept of decisive point “decisive strategic point,” but drops the term “strategic” just a few lines later. Additionally, this term is differentiated from the one that means center of gravity by the word “decisive” being in the lowercase.

³¹ Jomini, 86.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 186.

³⁴ Ibid., 85.

strategic aim...[and] [t]he positions occupied by the respective forces.”³⁵ Thus, while Clausewitz looked at a decisive point as a singular point to be demolished and Sun Tzu’s vision was of a point or system to manipulate, Jomini believed it to be a point, or series of points, to leverage against the enemy’s center of gravity.³⁶

Interpretations of Decisive Point

Based on the previous analysis, it seems clear that the joint definition of decisive point is based on the ideas of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Jomini. However, this observation does not necessarily convey to the individual services. For instance, the Army and the Marine Corps establish their roots to decisive point in a land-based, Clausewitzian offensive perspective. The Army defines it as a place, key event, or enabling system that “allows commanders to...greatly influence the outcome of an attack.”³⁷ The Marine Corps, although not defined directly, devote an entire chapter to the subject in their “operations” doctrinal publication and agree with the Army by recognizing that “[s]ince war is fluid and opportunities are fleeting, focus applies to time as well as to space. We must focus effects not only at the decisive location but also at the decisive moment.”³⁸ In short, while the joint definition insinuates that the decisive point is something to attack, manipulate, or leverage, the land-based services view it primarily as something to attack.

Unlike the Army and Marine Corps, the Navy agrees with and uses the joint definition of decisive point; however, they diverge from its use in practical application. In a discussion on naval operations, Julian Corbett says that, “the most common situation in naval war is that

³⁵ Jomini, 88.

³⁶ Van Riper, 7.

³⁷ Department of the Army. Operations. FM 3-0. (Washington, DC: June 2001), 5-7.

³⁸ U.S. Marine Corps. Warfighting. MCDP 1. (Washington, DC: 20 June 1997), 41.

neither side has the command; that the normal position is not a commanded sea, but an uncommanded sea.”³⁹ He continues by saying, “[y]ou can not conquer sea because it is not susceptible to ownership.”⁴⁰ In agreement with this point, Milan Vego, a naval theorist, develops this further by explaining that decisive points are “usually maneuverable, but they could also be fixed. In both instances, their military importance in a given situation is usually transitory.”⁴¹ Thus, the Navy describes the practical application of a decisive point as something that is transitory or “neutral in nature.”⁴² In other words, the Navy’s vision of a decisive point is something that can be manipulated or leveraged rather than attacked as believed by the land-based services.

While the other services have developed the concept of decisive point, the Air Force fails to either define or incorporate the term as an element of operational design. For clarification, while it is not listed as a doctrinal term in the Air Force glossary, the service does briefly mention the concept when discussing the use of close air support (CAS). As an example, the Air Force’s *Basic Doctrine Document* says, “[t]o be most effective, however, CAS should be used at decisive points in a battle and should normally be massed to apply concentrated combat power and saturate defenses.”⁴³ In addition, while defining pull and push CAS, the Air Force acknowledges the existence of decisive points by saying that push CAS is “used when the decisive point on the battlefield cannot readily be determined” and pull CAS is used as “[a] proactive distribution technique designed to concentrate CAS effects at the decisive point on the battlefield without a formal request.”⁴⁴ So, while the Air Force

³⁹ Julian S. Corbett, Some Principals of Maritime Strategy. (London, England: Longmans, Green & Co, 1911), 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁴¹ Milan Vego, Operational Warfare. (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2000), 167.

⁴² Department of the Navy. Navy Planning. NWP 5-01. (Newport, RI: January 2007), C-5.

⁴³ Department of the Air Force. Air Force Basic Doctrine. AFDD 1. (Washington, DC: 23 November 2003), 45.

⁴⁴ Department of the Air Force. Air Force Glossary. AFDD 1-2. (Washington, DC: 08 June 2006), 56.

recognizes that the concept of decisive point may exist, they do not formally define it as an element of operational design.

As a result, there is a disconnect between the joint definition and practical application of the concept of decisive point in both the joint community and the individual services. While the Army and Marine Corps use the term within a Clausewitzian geographical and offensive minded approach and the Navy as a transitory or neutral point to leverage or manipulate, in Jominian and Sun Tzuian fashion, the Air Force practically disregards the concept all together. Thus, for a common understanding to exist between the services, the joint definition must not only be clear, but also usable while maintaining its linkages to the original concept of the idea.

The Mixing of Words, What is Decisive about a Decisive Point?

As illustrated in the previous section, a problem exists between the joint and services' interpretations regarding the concept of decisive point. This may be attributed to a number of reasons including service culture, types of forces available for employment, or, maybe even, service rivalry. Unfortunately, a more viable reason could be the broad way that the joint term is defined.

The broad definition of decisive point could be considered an attempt by the joint community to provide an all-service or "purple" approach for an otherwise specific concept. A way to illustrate this point is to restate the joint definition using some of the services' doctrinal terms (respective services are noted in parenthesis). A decisive point is "a key or decisive terrain (Army), critical point (Army), or focus of effort (Navy) that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or results in a

decisive action (Marine Corps).”⁴⁵ Although this definition does not provide the clarity required for practical application, it does illustrate the link between the joint version of the definition and the services’ approaches. To further support the notion that an all-service approach exists, one simply has to look at the examples given in the doctrinal publication. For instance, the doctrine lists “a constricted sea lane (Navy), a hill (Army, Marine Corps), town (Army, Marine Corps)...or airbase (Air Force)” as examples of possible physical decisive points. Similarly, the doctrine lists event decisive points as “attainment of air or maritime superiority (Air Force, Navy) [or] commitment of the adversary’s reserve (Army, Marine Corps).”⁴⁶ Although it would be difficult to argue that a joint perspective is not necessary in the development of joint doctrine, one could make the point that, while it is important, the result should not deviate from the original intent of the concept being defined.

Even though the joint definition of decisive point tends to be very broad, the joint publication does attempt to narrow its understanding, but in doing so, it tends to add to the confusion. Decisive points are not decisive if they are not linked to the enemy’s center of gravity. In *The Art of War*, Jomini made it clear that though there may be many important points in a theater of operations, not all of them are decisive in nature. He describes these other points as “strategic points.”

⁴⁵ Key terrain (Army, FM 101-5-1) – Any locality, or area, the seizure or retention of which affords a marked advantage to either combatant. See also vital ground. Decisive terrain (Army, FM 101-5-1) – Key terrain that has an extraordinary impact on the mission...[t]o designate terrain as decisive is to recognize that the successful accomplishment of the mission, whether offensive or defensive, depends on seizing or retaining it. See also key terrain. Critical point (Army, JP 1-02/FM 101-5-1) — 1. A key geographical point or position important to the success of an operation. 2. In a point in time, a crisis or a turning point in an operation. Focus of effort (Navy, NTRP 1-02) – The most important task to be accomplished by the force. It is the critical vulnerability chosen to exploit, the paramount objective desired to accomplish. All actions should be oriented on that task. Decisive action (Marine, MCDP 1-0) – achieves mission success with the least loss of time, equipment and, most importantly, lives.... [f]or an action to be truly decisive, it must lead to a result larger than the action itself. Decisive action creates an environment where the enemy has either lost the physical capability or his will to resist.

⁴⁶ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

“[A] strategic point is such essentially and by nature, and, no matter how far distant it may be from the scene of the first enterprises, it may be included in the field by some unforeseen turn of events, and thus acquire full importance. It would, then, be more accurate to state that all strategic points are not necessarily decisive points.”⁴⁷

In contrast to the works of Jomini, joint doctrine does not overtly recognize that any other type of point exists. Instead, it attempts to label all of the important points in the operations area as decisive while at the same time hinting that some points may be more decisive than other points based on their relationship to the center of gravity.

“Although [operations areas] may have numerous decisive points, *only a few* will truly have operational or even strategic significance relative to an adversary’s COGs. [My emphasis in italics.]”⁴⁸

Next, the doctrinal publication requires planners to prioritize this group of decisive points from least to most important and then allocate resources to them accordingly for eventual attack.

“Normally, *there are far more decisive points in a given [operations area] than can be attacked, seized, retained, or controlled...*planners should study and analyze potential decisive points and *determine which of them offer the best opportunity to attack the adversary’s COGs indirectly...*[t]he commander then designates the most important decisive points for further planning and allocates sufficient resources to produce the desired effects against them. [My emphasis in italics.]”⁴⁹

Thus, while not directly recognizing the existence of Jomini’s concept of strategic points, the joint publication does imply that two types of points exist in an operations area: decisive points and “the most important decisive points.” Unfortunately, by proceeding in this manner the doctrine adds to the confusion in identifying what is and what is not a decisive point.

Now it is reasonable to conclude that while there may be many important points in an operations area, only a few are actually decisive. Therefore, the joint doctrine misses the

⁴⁷ Jomini, 85.

⁴⁸ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

mark not only because of its attempt to address this concept using an all-service approach, but also because of its confusing description that inadvertently introduces the new concept of strategic point. Simply put, the joint definition of decisive point coupled with its description provides too much latitude for interpretation, which makes it difficult for the planner to identify the difference between decisive point and the most important decisive point.

Redefining the Joint Concept of Decisive Point

While the joint doctrinal publication opens the door for inclusion of Jomini's concept of strategic point, it also provides a glimpse of the true meaning behind the joint concept of decisive point. By analyzing the joint description in detail coupled with a little deductive reasoning, a new joint definition seems to emerge. This definition is not only narrower in scope, but also keeps with the thoughts of the classic military thinkers.

When the description in Joint Publication 5-0 opens, it immediately stresses the importance of identifying decisive points during operational design. "Commanders and their staffs identify decisive points to help them determine where and how to apply friendly capabilities to exploit adversary vulnerabilities."⁵⁰ Later it opines that "[t]he art of identifying decisive points is a critical part of operational design."⁵¹ Shortly thereafter, the publication quickly establishes its connection with and difference between the concept of center of gravity by professing, "[a]lthough decisive points are not COGs, they are the keys to attacking or protecting them."⁵²

After setting the foundation of the importance of understanding and including decisive points in operational design, the doctrinal publication addresses the direct relationship

⁵⁰ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

between decisive points and centers of gravity through the joint doctrinal concept of critical factors. Joint doctrine establishes the concept of critical factors and their relationship to centers of gravity by saying:

“Planners should analyze COGs within a framework of three ***critical factors*** – critical capabilities, requirements, and vulnerabilities – to aid in this understanding. ***Critical capabilities*** are those that are considered crucial enablers for a COG to function as such, and are essential to the accomplishment of the adversary’s assumed objective(s). ***Critical requirements*** are the conditions, resources, and means that enable a critical capability to become fully operational. ***Critical vulnerabilities*** are those aspects or components of critical requirements that are deficient, or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack in a manner achieving decisive or significant results. Collectively, the terms above are referred to as ***critical factors***. [Bold and italics from original text.]”⁵³

In keeping with this methodology, joint doctrine declares that “[t]he *most important* decisive points can be determined from analysis of critical factors. [My emphasis in italics.]”⁵⁴ In addition, Joint Publication 3-0 adds insight by remarking, “[d]ecisive points can be thought of as a way to relate what is ‘critical’ to what is ‘vulnerable’.”⁵⁵ Joint Publication 5-0 continues by stating, “*most...critical factors* will be decisive points,” and concludes by explaining that “[t]he commander then designates the *most important* decisive points for further planning and allocates sufficient resources to produce the desired effects against them. [My emphasis in italics.]”⁵⁶

Going forward, if the “most important” decisive points come from the analysis of critical factors, “most...critical factors” are decisive points, and only the “most important” decisive points are planned, then one could conclude that the “most important” decisive points are “the most important” critical factors. In short, by combining these statements and applying

⁵³ Joint Operation Planning, IV-11-12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., IV-16.

⁵⁵ Joint Operations, IV-12.

⁵⁶ Joint Operation Planning, IV-16.

deductive reasoning, it emerges that a decisive point is simply a critical factor that can be exploited either directly or indirectly to attack a center of gravity.

To summarize, based on the previous analysis, the joint term decisive point can be redefined. The joint definition for decisive point should be re-written as “a critical factor that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contributes significantly to achieving success.” This definition, while simple, clear, and easy to understand, not only compliments an element of operational design, critical factor, but also directly maintains its roots in the concept of center of gravity and the spirit of the classic military thinkers’ concept of decisive point.

Conclusion

As military operations increasingly become joint, the doctrinal terms that the planners use must be clearly defined and concisely described. This admission is especially important for describing the operational environment as a part of the operational design process.

Unfortunately, the joint concept of decisive point, a critical element of the design process, misses the mark in this endeavor because of its broad definition and confusing description in joint doctrine. Thus, the joint definition for decisive point should be reworded to not only promote a common understanding, but also to alleviate any confusion or gaps in translation when planning for contingency operations abroad. In short, by doing so, an unambiguous definition will allow commanders to frame a clear picture of the operational environment and subsequent development of a plan.

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