



An Institute of Land Warfare Publication

Tactics for Small Wars

by

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War no longer exists.

General Sir Rupert Smith, 2005¹

[M]ake the existing state of war and martial law so inconvenient and so unprofitable to the people that they will earnestly desire and work for the reestablishment of peace and civil government.

Brigadier General J. Franklin Bell, 1902²

Army Chief of Staff General George W. Casey, Jr., in an essay in *ARMY* magazine, wrote, “Today, we are at war and live in a world where global terrorism and extremist ideologies are realities. . . . I believe the next decades are likely to be ones of persistent conflict.”³ The small wars conducted during a period of persistent conflict will require the use of force to attain policy objectives. The use of force alone may not produce decisive results, but it must absolutely establish conditions for policymakers to declare victory or at least a form of status quo that can be called victory. The art and science of tactics must recognize the changing conditions requiring the use of force.

Officers in our Army, engaged as they are, must participate in the debate that will precede the refinement of existing doctrine. The Department of Defense recently sent a report to the Congress on the state of the implementation of Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, *Military Support to Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations*. A footnote in the report states that the Army will have “a coherent body of current stability operations doctrine spanning tactical and operational levels” by 2008.⁴ This coherent body of stability operations doctrine will be incomplete if it does not include an update of Army Field Manual (FM) 3-90, *Tactics*, and an exploration of the science of employing units in battle and in relationship to the enemy, terrain and the civil population amid which the Army will fight.

Army and joint doctrine still articulate the levels of war: strategic, operational and tactical. The art and science of tactics includes levels of command from squad to corps, albeit with a different focus at each level. Nonetheless, the changing conditions of war or the use of force necessitate that the Army consider what tactics are in the persistent conflict or small wars of the 21st century. There must be open debate within the profession as we come to grips with the changing conduct of war

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and how to educate ourselves to plan and execute the tactics required for success in the small wars of the 21st century.

The current definition of tactics in FM 3-90 is “the employment of units in combat. It includes the ordered arrangement and maneuver of units in relation to each other, the terrain, and the enemy to translate potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements.”⁵

FM 3-0 defines tactics as “the employment and ordered arrangement of forces in relation to each other (CJCSI 5120.02A).”⁶

To fight in the small wars of the 21st century, the Army must redefine tactics as “the employment of units before, during and after combat. It includes the ordered arrangement and maneuver of units in relation to each other, the physical, human, and information terrain, and the enemy to ensure successful battles and engagements.”

Tactics is the business of corporals to lieutenant generals, although the February 2008 FM 3-0, *Operations*, states that divisions are the principal tactical headquarters in the Army and corps will primarily orient on joint task force missions.⁷ The current definition in FM 3-90 focuses on three elements: terrain, friendly forces and enemy forces. In 21st century tactics, actions before, during and after combat must be taken into account as commanders arrange and maneuver forces. A series of tactical victories will not produce victory, although victory cannot be achieved without tactical success. Tactical victory is a necessary but not sufficient condition for strategic success. Wars are won at the operational and strategic level, so tactical success must be linked to attaining higher-level objectives. Tactics must be redefined and restructured for warfare in the 21st century.

Tactics executed before combat begins must include the arranged arrival of forces into a theater of operations or their posture to enter a theater of operations. This arrangement of forces must support the operational and strategic goals set in the opening phase of an operation and could lead to the prevention of combat. This tactical execution before combat must end with forces postured for a successful transition to combat operations. Errors in the initial placement of forces are difficult if not impossible to overcome during the duration of a campaign.⁸

Tactics executed during combat, from squad to division and corps, must sustain a series of successful battles and engagements that are linked to attaining operational and strategic objectives. While no plan can look with certainty beyond initial contact with the main body of enemy forces, the successful execution of tactics during combat and stability operations will establish conditions for victory.⁹ Victory in the 21st century also requires the successful execution of tactics after combat.

The arrangement of forces on the ground relative to the remnants of enemy forces and the population of the country in which operations are conducted, as well as the swift return of security for the people, ensure the successful execution of tactical operations are linked with attaining operational and strategic objectives. Attaining these objectives ensures that U.S. policy objectives are met, which is the real victory. Making all of this come to pass will require many actions from within our Army. Setting conditions for successful tactical execution will require many activities ranging from force structure decisions to changing doctrine and the necessary education effort to teach the level of understanding required for changed tactics.

To successfully address the tactics required to win in small wars the Army will need a truly network-enabled force with an ability to have broadly shared database access from corps/division to the company/battery/troop and platoon levels. This is not merely a statement of material need, technique and procedure; it is a method of war that recognizes the power of sharing information rapidly with machines serving the Soldier. Leaders and commanders at these levels must be mentally agile enough to use and contribute to these databases and to act on changing information.

This network-enabled force must be empowered to act and rely on commander's intent. To capitalize on commander's intent, tactics—offensive, defensive and stability—must be designed for exploitation operations when information that can be acted on regarding the enemy is discovered. Tactics and tactical thinking must evolve from linear to non-contiguous in every way. To evolve from a linear mindset to a non-contiguous mindset, the Army must change its schools and training.

Army schools must reimagine how to teach tactics, from the basic noncommissioned officer and officer courses through the staff and war colleges. Basic and advanced courses must teach small-unit offensive, defensive and stability operations tactics based on sharing information via the network and focused on exploitation when the opportunity presents itself. The staff and war colleges must teach higher-level division and corps tactics. These institutions must develop true commander's intent tactics. There must be a common understanding of what tactics are at these levels and how to structure and sustain battles. The linkage to operational-level effects happens at division level now that corps will focus almost exclusively at the operational/joint task force (JTF) level. Redefined tactics require education in how to produce the theater-level effects operational commanders require.

The paradigm of tactics must shift. FM 3-0 makes it clear that tactics must include a view toward a blend of offense, defense and stability actions. We must expand our understanding of tactics to address the tactics of stability operations. Offensive and defensive operations could well be the shaping operation in a division tactical concept with stability operations as the decisive operation or main effort. Current tactical doctrine states, "Tactical commanders focus primarily on employing combined arms in an area of operations."

FM 3-0 goes on to state that "tactical commanders [may] receive missions that divert combat power from tasks that seem more urgent at lower levels."¹⁰ This reality of combat presents certain tensions for commanders, who are admonished to recognize and resolve such tension. Normally commanders should expect to have clearly defined tasks—defeat the enemy and occupy objectives—but "normal" is an ill-defined word in the 21st century, so tactical thinking must adapt to 21st century conditions to continue to meet this requirement for tactical commanders. Getting to "normal" will be the challenge. FM 3-90, *Tactics*, competently addresses offensive and defensive operations—based on 20th century experience. Updating tactics to reflect the integration of stability operations is the key.

FM 3-0 cites the Joint Publication 3-0 definition of stability operations:

. . . various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.¹¹

FM 3-0 states, "Stability operations promote reconciliation, strengthen and rebuild civil infrastructures and institutions, build confidence, and support economic reconstruction to prevent a return to conflict."¹² The operational-level field manual makes very clear the expectations of successful stability operations; how to meet these expectations is left to the realm of tactics.

The current edition of FM 3-90 (July 2001) contains very thorough explanations of the tactics of offensive and defensive operations. Stability operations were not a part of the lexicon of tactics at the time. A step toward incorporation of stability operations tactics into the 21st century American way of war will be an expansion of the definitions of common doctrinal terms and the development of new terms to fit the tasks. FM 3-90 must be rewritten to be in accord with the new direction stated in FM 3-0. Full-spectrum operations require full-spectrum tactics. As a means of exploration, changes to the concept of mission command, commander's intent, gaining and maintaining enemy contact, exploitation and pursuit, and area defense, among others, must be made to better fit into a framework where the main effort in a division area of operations is stability operations.

The elements of mission command are straightforward and require no adaptation for the conduct of stability tactics. The execution of mission command requires a clearly articulated commander's intent; subordinates empowered to exercise initiative through the commander's intent; mission orders, which include a brief concept of the operation that ties all task execution together; and minimum control measures. Mission command also requires a statement of resource allocation and the naming of main and supporting efforts.¹³ While the elements of mission command remain straightforward, applying them in the execution of the tactics for small wars will require education and practice. Attaining the goal of a clearly articulated commander's intent will require some thought for the tactics of the 21st century.

Commander's intent was defined in the 2001 edition of FM 3-0 as "a clear, concise statement of what the force must do and the conditions the force must meet to succeed with respect to the enemy, terrain, and the desired end state." FM 3-0 now defines commander's intent as "a clear, concise statement of what the force must do and the conditions the force must establish with respect to the enemy, terrain, **and civil considerations that represent** the desired end state." [emphasis added]¹⁴ The subtle changes in definition will require deep thought on just how to articulate the meaning of the civil considerations that represent the desired end state.

The blending of offense, defense and stability operations within the tactical realm will be enhanced by a clear expression of intent. Principal stability tasks for Army forces as expressed in FM 3-0 are civil security, civil control, restoration of essential services, support to governance, and support to economic and infrastructure development.¹⁵ Tactical units will naturally gravitate toward civil security and civil control as they most readily rely on techniques and procedures with which Soldiers and leaders are familiar, to wit: security. The experiences the Army gained in Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia and Iraq will carry over into an understanding of what these tasks mean to a tactical unit. Civil security operations are designed to protect the populace from internal and external threats. Civil control operations are designed to regulate "selected behavior and activities of individuals and groups."¹⁶ Effective and actionable intelligence will play the dominant role in designing these operations, resulting in tasks ranging from information efforts to dissuade people from certain activities to establishing traffic control points to slow the pace of traffic or movement of people. The doctrinal term "secure" can be used in expressing the commander's intent as well as tasks to subordinate units in the concept-of-operations paragraph of an order.

"Secure" is defined in our current lexicon as "a tactical mission task that involves preventing a unit, facility, or geographical location from being damaged or destroyed as a result of enemy action."¹⁷ Tactics for the 21st century require an expanded definition of "secure." A small-wars definition could be a tactical mission task that involves preventing a unit or facility from being damaged or destroyed, or a geographical location and its population from being disrupted as a result of enemy action. The word "disrupted" will assist in analysis as it requires understanding of a pre-hostilities base line of what was "normal" for that particular geographical location. Understanding of a pre-hostilities base line of normality will also ensure that the accumulated tactical successes are linked to post-hostilities transitions that will ensure that tactical success is linked with attaining operational and strategic objectives. Success in conventional operations requires gaining and maintaining contact with the enemy to prevent surprise. This concept must be adapted to 21st century tactics.

The concept of gaining and maintaining contact is presented in FM 3-90 as a vital component to success in offensive operations and as an enhancement of the security of the attacking force. Gaining and maintaining contact contributes to the commander's situational understanding of his battle space. Updating this concept for 21st century tactics requires thought about how to apply it to stability operations and tasks. Clearly the struggles for the hearts and minds of the people are paramount for ultimate success in 21st century operations. Gaining and maintaining contact with

the people is a requirement for the success of stability operations and the situational understanding required for these forms of operations.

Stability operations are designed to establish or reestablish a safe and secure environment for the people of a country in which U.S. forces are operating. Stability operations might also be executed to assist in the reconciliation of local or regional adversaries, establish or reestablish systems of political, legal, social and economic import and assist in the transition of responsibility to a functioning host-nation government.¹⁸ The requirement to gain and maintain contact with the people clearly is important in accomplishing any of these tasks. FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, explicitly states, “Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is ‘normal’ or ‘rational’ are not universal.”¹⁹ Cultural knowledge enhances and is enhanced by gaining and maintaining contact with the people. This notion is then an imperative for 21st century tactics and the development of division-level plans and orders that combine offense, defense and stability operations in reaching the objectives set by the operational-level headquarters. Reaching these objectives demands that the understanding of exploitation and pursuit operations also must be expanded for execution of 21st century tactics.

Exploitation and pursuit are types of offensive operations. Exploitation “rapidly follows a successful attack and is designed to disorganize the enemy in depth.” Pursuit is “designed to catch or cut off a hostile force attempting to escape, with the aim of destroying it.”²⁰ A pursuit usually follows a successful exploitation such as was executed by Napoleon’s cavalry after the battle of Jena-Auerstadt and by Patton’s Third Army after the breakout from the Normandy beachhead. The definitions need to be updated for 21st century tactics, especially regarding stability operations.

Exploitation in stability operations can be viewed as the follow-through after assessing the success of a stability task or tasks (for example, civil security and restoration of essential services). Exploitation of success in a stability operation will be primarily in the form of information operations. Just as conventional exploitation requires a mobility advantage over the enemy, exploitation in stability operations requires an information advantage over the adversaries; also required is an intellectual advantage in understanding the culture of a region in order to broadcast successes in a manner that will be received by the people of the local area and the wider region. Building on the situational understanding of an area, achieved through maintaining contact with the populace, exploitation of success is broadcast through means most suitable for positive receipt by the populace. From increased interaction with the populace and building on the exploitation of positive events that materially affect the lives of the populace, pursuit can be executed in the form of offensive operations to further drive the adversaries from a wider area and away from population centers. A network-enabled force with a depth of situational understanding will be able to pursue an enemy force through the exploitation of documents and a shared database of enemy patterns of activity. Exploitation operations will build on successful execution of stability operations and result in the physical pursuit of enemy forces as the effect of positive contact with the people builds situational understanding. Here again these tactical tasks must be in concert with the operational-level objectives and tied to setting conditions for strategic effects.

Stability operations cannot take place in the presence of organized enemy forces, either conventional or irregular. These threats to the populace and the friendly forces conducting stability operations must be reduced or eliminated. The conduct of defensive operations to ensure the continued security of both the friendly force and the populace will be in the form of area defenses.

Defensive operations and tasks to sustain security are not the same as civil security tasks conducted in stability operations. Defensive operations defeat enemy attacks, buy time, allow a higher commander to economize forces, and develop conditions for offensive operations. Defensive

operations also retain decisive terrain or deny vital areas to the enemy. Conducting defensive operations to retain key terrain and deny the enemy access to the people and sources of supply is the aim of shaping operations in a division area where the main effort is conducted by forces executing stability operations.²¹ A successful defense is necessary for the conduct of civil security tasks as the forces conducting the defense will focus on external threats to the population, while forces conducting civil security operations will focus in internal threats. This difference in task and purpose will require thought on the part of a staff and commander.

FM 3-0 articulates the conduct of full-spectrum operations.²² The mission of the division will determine the relative weight of effort among the tasks assigned to subordinate brigade combat teams. The division mission may further influence subordinate brigade combat teams' own weighting of efforts on offense, defense and stability operations tasks relative to the situation in the brigade zones of action. In the specific case of a division conducting stability operations with a requirement to defend population centers, the task of defense will of necessity include civil security and civil control tasks.

Defense within a division area may not involve establishment of final protective fires, dug-in fighting positions for combat vehicles, mines and obstacle belts, but will incorporate actions such as civil control. Established and roving checkpoints will limit the mobility of the enemy. Unmanned aerial vehicles and reconnaissance patrols will monitor named and targeted areas of interest. The conduct of a defense in support of a stability operation will conceptually resemble a defense at the operational level and the offense at the lower tactical levels. The mobility advantage of Soldiers and information over the enemy force will enhance contact with the people and result in a continual update of the understanding of the situation. Agility in information-sharing among networked units will enable pursuit of enemy forces after the conduct of raids. The function of the division, brigade and even battalion headquarters in this type of defense will be to sustain the fighting done by company teams and ensure information is as agile as the engaged forces.

The small wars the Army will face in the 21st century require a new appreciation of the conduct of tactics. Doctrine is introducing the blending of offense, defense and stability operations in a box as a device to portray the combination of activities. Thinking about the tactics required to accomplish the necessary tasks will require the officer and noncommissioned officer corps to think "outside the box."

The Army must have a coherent body of doctrine for 21st century operations. The Army officer corps must participate in the debate and discourse that will precede the refinement of existing doctrine. This coherent body of doctrine will be incomplete if it does not include an update of FM 3-90, *Tactics*, and an exploration of the science of employing units in battle and in relationship to the enemy, terrain, and the civil population amid which the Army will fight. The concept of stability operations should be addressed in a dedicated field manual; however, the tactical considerations of employing Army units in the conduct of full-spectrum operations must be considered as a whole, not piecemeal. The longer we engage in the fiction that tactics are considered only in combat, the longer we will continue to confuse the field Army. Tactical tasks must not be addressed in different field manuals.

Endnotes

- ¹ General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force The Art of War in the Modern World*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, p. 3.
- ² Brigadier General J. Franklin Bell, cited in Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 2002, p. 123.
- ³ General George W. Casey, Jr., “The Strength of the Nation,” *ARMY*, October 2007, p. 20.
- ⁴ Report to Congress on the Implementation of Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, *Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations*, report dated 1 April 2007, http://www.defenselink.mil/policy/downloads/Congressional_Report_on_DoDD_3000-05_Implementation_final_2.pdf.
- ⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-90, *Tactics*, July 2001, p. 1-1. Hereafter cited as FM 3-90.
- ⁶ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, p. 6-3. Hereafter cited as FM 3-0.
- ⁷ The February 2008 version of FM 3-0 is ambiguous on this topic. On page C-4 it states that “when required, a corps may become an intermediate tactical headquarters” and goes on to state that the corps is also “a primary candidate headquarters for joint operations” as either a joint task force or land component command headquarters. Our doctrine is ambiguous, appearing to place the primary focus of the U.S. Army Corps at the joint task force level. This has profound implications for the conduct of operations, not to mention the curriculum at the Command and General Staff College. There could be war plans in the future that have a land component command/field army directing multiple corps thus squarely placing corps again at the high end of the tactical level of war. We ignore tactical operations at the corps level at some risk. On page C-5 the manual clearly names the division as the Army’s primary tactical warfighting headquarters.
- ⁸ The final line in this paragraph is drawn from a quotation attributed to Moltke the Elder, a lesson I learned from Dr. Jim Schneider of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS).
- ⁹ This sentence is also drawn from Moltke the Elder and Dr. Schneider’s classes in SAMS.
- ¹⁰ FM 3-0, p. 6-2.
- ¹¹ FM 3-0, Glossary, p. 13.
- ¹² FM 3-0, p. 2-9.
- ¹³ FM 3-0, p. 3-6.
- ¹⁴ FM 3-0 2001, p. 5-14, para. 5-61 and FM 3-0 2008, p. 5-10, para. 5-55, emphasis added. This is yet another undebated change in doctrine, along with the notion that objective equals center of gravity at the tactical level.
- ¹⁵ FM 3-0, pp. 3-13 and 3-14.
- ¹⁶ FM 3-0, p. 3-13.
- ¹⁷ FM 3-90, Glossary, p. 24.
- ¹⁸ FM 3-0, pp. 3-12/13.
- ¹⁹ Headquarters, Department of the Army. Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C., December 2006, p. 1-15, para. 1-80.
- ²⁰ FM 3-90, p. 3-4, paras. 3-9 and 3-10.
- ²¹ FM 3-90, pp. 8-1–8-4, paras. Introduction, 8-1–8-6.
- ²² FM 3-0, p. 3-1, fig. 3-1.

***About the author . . .** Colonel Kevin Benson retired from the U.S. Army in July 2007 in the rank of colonel after 30 years of service. His final position prior to retirement from active service was Director, School of Advanced Military Studies. He also served as the Director of Plans, C/J-5, Combined Forces Land Component Command and Third U.S. Army at the opening of hostilities in Iraq, from 2002 to 2003. He works for McNeil Technologies and is currently a seminar leader at the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies. He gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Colonel Robert Burns, Director of the Center for Army Tactics, U.S. Army Command General Staff College, and Professor Michael Mosser, School of Advanced Military Studies, in the development of this essay.*

