

## UNCERTAINTIES IN MILITARY STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

*“Great parts of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by the far greatest part is of doubtful character.”<sup>1</sup>*

Carl von Clausewitz

Although von Clausewitz probably thought of a battle or a campaign when he wrote this sentence the uncertainties he points at exist at all levels of military decision-making. Hopefully this paper will, if not prove, at least make it credible that uncertainties are and will always be one of the big headaches of a military commander and his helpers, and that there are good reasons to think about how to handle these, in many cases unavoidable, uncertainties.

### **Military Strategic Decision-Making**

To begin with, to my mind there is no such thing as military strategy today – not in the classical sense, where the military was the most important component in achieving the political goals of a government when there was a conflict where the use of force was considered as an option.

In earlier periods, when countries to a large extent were self sustained and the international community accepted wars as a means for conflict resolution there were few other ways to impose your will on an opponent except by the use of force, or the threat of using military means.

During the Second World War and to some extent also during the Cold War you needed an intermediate level between what was, or is, called Grand Strategy and Operations. The scope of activities was so large that the political level just could not cope with all the political, economic, scientific, military and other factors that were involved in the war effort. The military component was also of decisive importance. Therefore it was convenient, or rather necessary, to create a level where very large scale military operations could be handled. Hence Military Strategy. Interestingly enough smaller countries, as Sweden and Finland, have not introduced the military strategic level in their thinking. There exists no intermediate level between security policy (“strategy”) and operations. Probably rightly so.

Today all military operations are conducted in a highly political context. There is no room for what could be called “pure” military strategy – how to use primarily military assets to win, or avoid losing, wars. Or most preferably, as already Sun Tsu<sup>2</sup> and Carl von Clausewitz<sup>3</sup> stated, use military force to win political advantages without any fighting at all. To achieve those goals there are so many other factors involved so that it would be misleading to call it military strategy. For all practical purposes today the level below the strategic, political, level is operations, sometimes even the tactical level.

This paper will therefore mainly deal with the uncertainties that military officers at high levels have to handle regardless if they lead operations or have to advise their political masters in a strategic context.

It will therefore not cover the type of politico-military uncertainties General Eisenhower had to face when trying to figure out how he should win the war in Europe. Besides, which strategic decisions was Eisenhower’s to take without involving the political level? Was he for example free to use his British units in any way that he wished? No, he had to think about what kind of impact his decisions might have on the public in Britain as well as in the US. He also had to take into consideration how the conduct of his operations could influence the prestige of both countries.<sup>4</sup>

**The boundaries between different levels of military and political activities as creating doctrines, decide on a strategy, make operational or tactical plans have always been blurred and will continue to be so. Perhaps more so than ever.**

It might well be the case that the uncertainties that commanders as Eisenhower in Europe and Lord Mounbatten in the Far East had to face now to a large extent have spread to the operational and in some cases even to the tactical level. I have therefore chosen to look at uncertainties in a general way, not trying to connect them with a certain level, except that they occur on what might be called as “high levels”.

Of all the uncertainties that military high level commanders and their aides will be confronted with I will concentrate on five: the time factor, intelligence, the dependence on subordinates, the international character of today’s operations and lastly, their political masters.

## **The time factor**

The probably most important difference between the strategic or operational level and the levels below when it comes to creating uncertainties is the time factor. The longer the time is from the moment you start to consider an option until you take concrete action the more can happen that might upset your plans. This might sound

self evident, perhaps not even worth mentioning but it is a very real problem – your freedom of action diminishes with each decision you take to implement a plan.

Just to look at one ingredient in an operation. Once you have decided how to logistically support (or how not to support) a reasonably large military operation you have excluded quite a number of options on how to conduct operations in that theatre. You have also made some assumptions on what the enemy might or might not do. Decisions like this often have to be made several months before an operation starts. In practice this means that decisions like this often can not be made on hard facts about enemy dispositions or resources in a certain area. The opponent might not even have a plan at that stage.

One example on how earlier decisions hampered the possibilities to meet new developments is the Soviet conduct of the invasion of Poland 1920. In that case the Soviet commanders had few options when the Poles started their counteroffensive on 13 August 1920 as they had made their plans on the assumption that they more or less had won the war. Their different units were mostly locked in battle, sometimes in hot pursuit of what they thought was a beaten enemy, and therefore had no possibilities to reinforce each other.<sup>5</sup> In this case the uncertainty that time creates when the Soviets had to finalise their plans before they knew the enemy's intentions led to a strategic victory for the Poles.

If you are unlucky even bigger events, than the opponent regrouping his forces, can have an impact on what you might encounter when your planning is transformed into activity.

One can imagine the surprise of the American and South Korean commanders when China joined the Korean War in October 1950. In this case, just four months after the Korean War had started the Commanders of the UN forces had planned just for a war with North Korea. Now they had to take on the Chinese Army. This at a moment when almost everyone in the UN forces thought that the war would soon be over. No preparations had been made for a winter campaign against a very potent enemy.<sup>6</sup>

A classical example of how early decisions rob you of much needed freedom of action is the Austrian planning in the beginning of the First World War. In this case the Austrians had planned to deploy 28 divisions against Russia and 8 divisions against Serbia. Another 12 divisions were held as an reserve prepared to go in either direction. In late August it was decided that they should be sent to Serbia. On the 31 August, when it became clear that Russia would join the war, a new decision was taken, the 12 divisions should be redirected towards Russia. Unfortunately, for the Austrians, the movement in the direction of Serbia had already started. Out of logistical reasons, mainly transport, it was impossible to reroute the movement. Therefore the

12 divisions first had to go to the Serbian border and then start a new movement to the Russian front. This took time. The end result being that they did not participate in the early fighting in either place and the Austrians getting a bloody nose in the north as well in the south.<sup>7</sup>

**Uncertainties multiply with the time it takes to implement a decision.** Strategic decisions most often cover a long time span. The unleashing of a nuclear war might be an exception.

## **Intelligence**

Although uncertainties connected with intelligence to a very large extent is a function of the time factor I would like to comment on it separately.

I will use two historical examples to illustrate how intelligence assessments always will be one of the really great uncertainties that confront military commanders, especially at higher levels. This does not imply that lower levels live in a world where the picture of the enemy is any clearer but there is one big difference. At the tactical level you will probably not lose a war, or a whole campaign, if you get wrong. On the strategic or operational level you might. This puts the highest commanders in a particularly stressful situation which can influence their decision making. Probably Admiral Jellicoe was very aware of the fact that "*Jellicoe was the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon*"<sup>8</sup> when he led the Grand Fleet in the Battle of Jutland 1916.

There is an endless number of problems connected with the assessment of the opponent, his strength, resolve, intentions, disinformation and others. All important and creating different uncertainties. The phenomenon that I would like to comment on is what I would call: **knowing the enemy's plan but nevertheless getting it wrong.**

At the beginning of the Second World War one of the big questions on the allied side was: if the Germans invaded France, how would they do it? Would it be a repetition of the Schlieffen Plan of the First World War, with the main effort through Belgium, or would it be some thing else?

The conclusion was that the Germans would try to do something similar to what they had tried 1914. One reason being that the Ardennes was considered unfavorable for large military operations.<sup>9</sup> The Allies made their dispositions to counter such a plan, moving into Belgium to meet the Germans as early as possible, the so called Plan D.<sup>10</sup> They were right. The original plan that the Germans prepared during the autumn of 1939 had its main effort in Belgium and Northern France.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, for the Allies the Germans made a new plan during the winter. One reason being that Hitler thought that the plan had been compromised and therefore

should be altered. The other was that some German high ranking officers, General von Manstein perhaps being the initiator, thought that the initial plan would lead to a stalemate and therefore had to be replaced with a more ambitious one.<sup>12</sup> In this new plan the main effort was moved to the Ardennes sector. The result was, as we all know that France was defeated within few weeks.

The observation that can be made from this example concerning uncertainties is that even correct intelligence at one point does not have to be correct at a later stage. The risk of course becoming greater the longer the time is before a plan is executed. At strategic and operational levels the time most often is quite long.

The other example I would like to use to illustrate the phenomenon is the German invasion of Crete 1941. Also in this case the Allies, or rather the British, knew the German plan.<sup>13</sup> The difference here being that the Germans acted exactly according to the plan that the British had in their hands. Regardless of that the British failed.

Here we see another phenomenon, misinterpreting what you see. The German plan envisaged an airborne invasion of the island. Nothing like that had ever been undertaken before in history. The assets that were to be used, airborne troops, were known to the British in principle but as they had no experience of that kind of warfare they did not fully understand its potential. Perhaps the fact that the British had a vast experience of seaborne invasions made them apply their own way of thinking on the Germans also?

In any case the result was that the defenders of the island came to the conclusion that the airborne assault had to be followed up by a seaborne operation, and made their plans accordingly. Therefore, when the invasion started they, in some areas, were reluctant to engage their reserves against the airborne units as their mindset to a certain extent was guided by the thought that they (the reserves) would be needed to meet a seaborne force at a later stage.

This example shows misconceptions about how a war will be conducted has to be taken into account when considering uncertainties on operational and strategic level. Even the best intelligence will not help you to make the right decisions if you are guided by prejudices or can not free your self from the very frequent phenomenon of mirror imaging – that is the belief that the opponent thinks in the same way as you do.

### **Dependence on subordinates**

It is obvious that military commanders at higher levels have to depend on subordinates to get things done. There has to be intermediate command levels to handle the units and functions that take part in a larger military operation. The operational and

strategic level has to work through these persons, more or less capable. That creates uncertainties in itself.

But what I would like to comment on is an aspect that is mentioned quite seldom, the commanders dependence on his staff. At higher levels it is impossible for a commander to gather and process all the necessary information needed to guide a large scale operation. The larger the operation the more dependent will he be on advisers and other people who provide the information.

Here we have at least two problems. How good are the staff officers that are supposed to help the highest commanders to reach the best possible conclusions? Are they prepared to present uncomfortable information and will they dare to tell their superiors that they (the superiors) should reconsider earlier statements or decisions?

As a high level decision maker you normally have few possibilities (or time) to check if the information that you are provided with is correct or not. This concerns most activities that you have to consider. Politics, your own troops, logistics, personnel, the opponent, allies or whatever it may be. You have to trust the people who are providing the information.

But you will always have at least three options to consider when you are given advice.

- You are receiving correct information by a competent person.
- You are receiving wrong information from a competent person, as in the Crete example mentioned before – the information was misinterpreted by, what must be considered as, capable people.
- You are briefed by someone who is either incompetent or who has a personal interest in arranging the information to suit his purposes.

An example of the latter could be how information about the enemy was handled by different commanders before the Allied airborne operation at Arnhem 1944, which ended in disaster. So many people, at different levels, had so much to gain if the operation was a success so that they suppressed uncomfortable information from the intelligence branch.<sup>14 15</sup>

Another angle of a similar problem is, however competent the persons are, that surround the commander, will they dare to stand up for their convictions? In most, probably all, military organizations officers are dependent on their superiors for promotion or interesting assignments. How does that influence a staff officers behaviour? Is everyone prepared to tell his superior "Sorry sir, I think that you are wrong".

It is no coincidence that some armies, normally the good ones, have organised special branches, sometimes called general staff officers, to create officers that are specially trained to support higher commanders with good advice and have such ethics

that they are prepared to stand up for what they believe is right, regardless of what it might mean for their own careers.

The German manual HDV 100/100 describes the characteristics of a good general staff officer as: "The commander needs the support of loyal, critical, and independently minded aides. Their task is to provide information, give advice, prepare decisions, see to that orders are executed and follow up on going activities. If needed they should push the commander to take decisions. Their thinking and actions must be guided by the wishes and the intentions of their commander"<sup>16</sup>

### **Today's operations are international**

The tasks that are to be solved normally cover a much broader spectrum than just trying to win a military operation. Sometimes your command is not even part in the conflict. The task may be to create some kind of peace between other warring parties.

Apart from the uncertainties that emanate from the different factions and their agendas like the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds in today's Irak you have a still greater source of uncertainty, the International Community.

Although not all nearly 200 states in the UN pursue different agendas there are enough players on the field that can influence the way a high level military commander can run an operation. In this context NGO:s and the media often have to be regarded as important actors. Their priorities can very well be decisive when taking, or being ordered to take (by the political, strategic, level), operational decisions.

Uncertainties due to different countries national agendas and media events are an integral part of international operations. Here I think there is also reason to return to one of our earlier uncertainties. The Commander having to rely on his staff for information and to get things done. In a national staff you at least know according to what principles an officer is trained and you have possibilities to get some information on what to expect from certain individuals. In an international staff you in reality know nothing about the people you have to rely on, at least not in the beginning. You always also have to give some thought to where different staff officers might have their loyalties in the end. With the units of their home country, the policies pursued by their government or with the commander to whose staff they are assigned to at the moment?

The NATO Multinational Corps North East in Szczecin might give an idea of the complexity of the problem. The Corps consists of units from mainly three countries Germany, Denmark and Poland providing each one division and some 10 other units

as artillery, engineers and different intelligence assets. Smaller contingents from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and The Czech Republic can also be attached. The Corps Staff consists of officers from all these countries as well from the United States.<sup>17</sup>

One can well imagine the still greater uncertainties a commander faces in this respect if his command also consists of units and staff officers from countries not belonging to the same alliance, where to some extent it at least might exist common procedures and similar goals. Although, as the Spanish and Italian withdrawal from Iraq shows belonging to the same alliance is no guarantee for a common outlook on how a conflict should be handled.

## **Superiors**

Lastly I would like to mention some of the uncertainties a commander at the strategic, in today's world probably also operational, level might have to face when it comes to his superiors. To begin with who are his superiors? For a US four star general it is seldom a problem. Most US operations are mainly controlled by the US Government, that is the President. But how about the rest of us?

If it is a UN operation is it the Security Council that has the overall responsibility? If it is a EU operation, sanctioned by the UN, who is then the one whose thoughts the commander should try to read? What influence do the different countries, that have contributed troops, have on the conduct of the operations? As mentioned most operations today are conducted by coalitions. Does the home country of the commander want to have a say? That this factor, the superiors, is one of the greatest uncertainties for a commander that has to work in the grey zone between military operations and politics can be illustrated by countless historical examples. Just to mention one.

Lord Gort as commander of the British expeditionary force in France 1940, had to keep both his French military superiors and the British government (who were under pressure from the French government) happy. This at the same time when he had come to the conclusion that the campaign was lost and that his duty was to try to save his army, this regardless of what his French superiors thought or wanted. Which he did at Dunkirk.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, Napoleon probably had a point when asking, "does the person have luck" when considering high level appointments.<sup>19</sup> The many uncertainties that are and always will be present in high level military decision-making calls for a certain amount of luck on behalf of the persons involved. **The unexpected will always happen.**



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> von Clausewitz 1968, p. 162.
- <sup>2</sup> Sun Tzu 1993, p. 34.
- <sup>3</sup> von Clausewitz 2002, pp. 48 and 52.
- <sup>4</sup> Ryan 1974, pp. 46–49, describing how Eisenhower had to take British and American public opinion in to account when organizing his forces.
- <sup>5</sup> Davies 2003, pp. 208–218, gives a good description on how Soviet units were unable (or unwilling) to help each other and also shows how a muddled chain of command (also an earlier decision) enhances the problems when an uncertainty becomes a nasty certainty.
- <sup>6</sup> Paik Sun Yup 1992, pp. 82–90.
- <sup>7</sup> Liddell Hart 1972, p. 47.
- <sup>8</sup> Liddell Hart 1972, p. 276, quoting Churchill.
- <sup>9</sup> Berben & Iselin 1969, p. 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Deighton 1980, pp. 134–137.
- <sup>11</sup> Divine 1959, p. 24.
- <sup>12</sup> Fraser 1993, pp. 153–156.
- <sup>13</sup> Beevor 2004, pp. 110–116 and App C.
- <sup>14</sup> Whiting 1974, p. 33.
- <sup>15</sup> Ryan 1974, p. 95.
- <sup>16</sup> Millotat 2000, p. 5, the translation from German in to English is made by the author of this paper.
- <sup>17</sup> www.mncne.pl, Affiliated units, 2006-04-10
- <sup>18</sup> Divine 1959, p. 39 and 54.
- <sup>19</sup> Lindqvist 2006, p. 231.