Lifting the Fog Regarding Operational Assessment

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Assessment at the maritime operational level of war (OLW) remains fundamentally misunderstood by staff officers and HQ principals. Much of the confusion lies in the English language itself. “Assessment” is defined as “the act of making a judgment about something” or “an idea or opinion about something.” The trouble with assessment at the OLW tends to be the context of the “something,” as individuals across the staff frequently are called upon to make judgments and form opinions. The question then becomes, “What is the ‘something’ that should be assessed at the operational level?”

JP 1-02 clearly addresses the focus of operational assessment which is described therein as “a continuous process that measures the overall effectiveness of employing joint force capabilities during military operations; determination of the progress toward accomplishing a task, creating a condition, or achieving an objective.”

Despite these clear definitions, many staff officers often fall back on their own intuitive understanding of assessment, often inaccurately associating “making an assessment” with merely forming an opinion, conducting an evaluation, distributing a survey, or making a prediction.

As an observer and trainer of combatant command, Joint Task Force (JTF), Fleet and component command staffs regarding the operational assessment process over the past dozen years at the low-strategic, operational, and high-tactical levels of warfare, I’ve come to study and better understand the context of “good” operational assessment. This article seeks to take the confusion out of a process that, because it has been misunderstood, has received a bad reputation.

Planning: the Foundation of Effective Operational Assessment

Operational assessment is a specific process that is often confused with the assessment of staff processes, readiness, or even the efficient movement of information. The reality is that operational assessment is simply determining whether or not the assigned force is meeting the commander’s intent, and whether or not the fulfillment of that intent is having the desired impact. Staff officers have the responsibility of supporting their commander’s decision-making, using an operational assessment process to determine how well forces are executing tactical missions. Additionally, the process must identify whether or not the accomplishment of those missions collectively are contributing to the accomplishment of maritime objectives. While this might appear straightforward, many
staffs struggle to develop a comprehensive maritime support plan that fully captures the commander’s intent, as well as the corresponding assessment methodology to track the plan through execution.

Planning is an art exercised by the commander and his planners. The more they understand each other, and the more comprehensively the plan describes the intent, the more likely it is that the plan will be successful. Ultimately the plan includes not only the commander’s “purpose, method, and end state,” but also his acceptable level of risk, keys to progress, an execution timeline, the priority for each part of the force, the way he intends forces to support each other throughout the operation, and the individual aspects of the crisis he sees as critical to change. In short, the plan is the intent, encapsulating the exact method the commander means to employ to support mission partners, degrade enemies, and leave the battle space having accomplished the mission.

Assessment is a planning activity. During the operational planning process, the assessment cell “works for” the lead planners and Maritime Planning Group (MPG). The assessment cell spends most of its time assisting with the development and refinement of the plan working alongside Operational Planning Teams (OPTs) and the MPG. If the plan is not fully developed, does not capture commander’s intent as it changes, or it is too broad (i.e. “establish maritime superiority”), then the assessment cell has to build the road while they’re driving on it, so to speak.

Since operational assessment measures the ability of the force to achieve commander’s intent, then the first order of business for any assessment cell is to help the OPT develop a plan that links subordinate tasks together for a common goal. Tasks are not conducted in a vacuum, and must be accomplished in a synchronized and sequenced manner for specific purpose to achieve operational conditions that progress the plan. The assessment cell can often assist the OPT to establish clear objectives and realistic phase transition conditions. Normally, planners arrange prioritized tasks and decisive points through lines of operation (LOOs). The timing, scope, scale, and scheme of maneuver of the force must be comprehensive enough to measure temporally. Each task must have a purpose and each purpose must contribute to conditions that achieve a decisive point, allow transition to the next phase (or achieve an “off-ramp” opportunity). Actions are always conducted to cause desired changes in the “battle space,” and these actions create effects that contribute to achieving the commander’s desired conditions and intent in each phase of operations. Effective assessment cell planners in the OPT will ensure every tactical action measurably contributes to the commander’s intended phase conditions. They will develop an assessment plan designed to measure whether or not those actions are actually having the desired effects and accomplishing the commander’s intent. Plans that lack the purpose for each task, the conditions required to be set in each phase, and a methodology to capture the progress of the plan are often “PowerPoint deep,” inhibit the operational assessment process, and will not help the commander make effective decisions during execution.

Assessing Intent in Execution

During execution, the operational assessment process begins to measure the approved plan and the achievement of commander’s intent. The assessment cell continuously measures each task and effect to determine whether the force is executing as the commander intended. The assessment cell doesn’t do this in isolation; they frequently pulse the staff to measure, collect, analyze, and assess the effects on the battle space. The cell also develops a subordinate collection plan to measure and inform whether or not forces are fulfilling their tasks, as planned. The staff should not measure “everything,” but should focus on measuring those aspects of the operational environment most critical to the commander as he makes informed decisions; particularly those directly related to the accomplishment his intent. Put simply, the assessment cell must tell the commander whether or not the force is “on plan” and if the plan is working.

The operational assessment cell must also understand and describe the attributes of “off plan.” One way to do this is to fully appreciate the commander’s acceptable level of risk.
Risk is an aspect of execution that effective commanders spend a good deal of time determining. The assessment cell must apply the commander’s definition of acceptable and unacceptable risk to the assessment process, measuring aspects of the environment most likely to create risk to the force or to the mission. Assessment products must include measures and an operational threshold for a decision (called a “decision point”) based on a context of unacceptable risk that will take him “off plan,” as well as possible recommendations to mitigate risk through planning and execution.

Additionally, planners are often forced to make planning assumptions while developing a plan. Planning doctrine and effective practices dictate that such assumptions must be continuously validated. If an assumption proves false during execution, the assessment cell must measure and identify trends that indicate the flaw in the plan. As with risk, measures and thresholds for decision points must be based on the context of assumptions that were not mitigated in planning.

A decision point is normally reached when the commander realizes the plan is not progressing as intended, and directs the execution of a branch or sequel, either emplacing a “soft patch” to get back on the original plan (and intent), or changing the intent to address the changing crisis. The assessment cell is often not the only group tracking decision points. The Fleet Command Center (FCC) may already be tracking decision points through Commander’s Critical Information Requirements (CCIR), so the assessment cell must coordinate closely with other functional groups to ensure their products reflect a cross-functional process.

Many plans are designed to overcome the most likely enemy course of action (COA). In the case of a non-combat or HA/DR mission, planning focuses on the most likely support scenario for the lead agency. When the threat (or environment) changes for the worst, the assessment cell must identify this as quickly as possible. Even though they may be subtle, there are often measurable indicators that invalid assumptions, increasing risk, and/or changing enemy COAs are moving the force “off plan.” The operational assessment process must include developing indicators that these conditions are occurring, having a continual dialogue with planners, and identifying planning recommendations to get the force back “on plan.”

The assessment process at the maritime component level differs from a tactical level assessment that may be conducted by a task force, a campaign level assessment conducted by a JTF, or a theater strategic assessment conducted at the combatant command level. The JTF or Joint Force Commander (JFC), if the combatant commander retains joint operational C2 responsibility, conducts a campaign assessment, focused largely on the objectives, end state, and conditions in every phase of operations. The JTF typically expects subordinate components to track their own execution as well as conditions they are establishing in the current phase only, providing an assessment of supporting / supported operations in the near- to mid-term. Tactical staffs simply need to track the orders they’ve been given and their execution. Inputs to higher headquarters (HHQ) regarding the accomplishment of tasks are normally provided through regular situational reports (SITREPS) or other reporting data as well as Common Operational Picture (COP) inputs. An effective practice in some Fleet HQ is for the commander to hold a regular update with his CTF commanders in order to get their personal assessments of progressing operations. Although subjective, it may be the best source of opportunities and risks to feed the operational assessment process.

The Operational Assessment Must Help the Commander Make Informed Decisions

Finally, the assessment cell, supported by cross-functional staff interaction, planning coordination, and subordinate assessments, must provide the commander with decision-quality information. All too often, the daily Commander’s Update Brief (CUB) provides
inordinate amounts of data, to include functional “assessments” (e.g. an intelligence assessment, a logistics assessment, etc.). Frequently, when the assessment cell provides input at the end of the CUB, it is sometimes seen as restating the obvious. The key in the operational assessment process is to take into account all the staff assessments, the current planning priorities, the commander’s intent, the changing environment, the temporal execution of the force along LOOs, and to provide the commander true operational feedback. Since operational assessment is a planning process, products developed to address these planning issues must be staffed through the MPG, and should include the following considerations:

- How has the force executed the commander’s intent (assets, timing) in accordance with the approved plan? What are the next decisive points, key tasks, and action priorities in the commander’s execution timeline, and what is the status of achieving these?
- When is the commander required to make the next decision?
- What indications are there of impending CCIR? Are there indications that a risk to mission and/or force has reached a critical threshold, that planning assumptions have been invalidated, or that the threat / environment is taking a turn to the “most dangerous” COA? In short, is there a danger of going “off plan?”
- What operational opportunities exist that didn’t exist during planning?
- What is the status of the conditions necessary for the commander to recommend transition to the next phase?
- Are there any shortfalls in maritime component support to supported commanders or HHQ?

Product and Results

The operational assessment process is not about “second-guessing” the commander, but is an analysis of a large cross-section of data that enters the command every day. It must be focused on the information most relevant to the achievement of commander’s intent. Cross-functional coordination and planning coordination through the OPTs and MPG is critical to a proper operational assessment process. Assessment products not only identify “problems” but also offer planning solutions vetted across the staff.. If provided to the commander during a CUB or other briefing, it is highly recommended that assessment products and recommendations be immediately followed by MPG recommendations for adjustments to planning, priorities, force allocation, redistribution, messaging adjustments, support requirements, requests for additional forces, Rules of Engagement (ROE), Command and Control (C2) arrangements, or even proposed intent.

Operational assessment is fundamentally about measuring the achievement of commander’s intent. It is a planning activity and as such must be integrated into the planning process. It is a process that must integrate a running risk and opportunity assessment, and avoid simply creating a Power-Point slide that re-states the obvious takeaways of the CUB. Finally, operational assessment is a process that relies on cross-functional coordination, subordinate inputs, and close collaboration between the assessment cell and the MPG in order to provide the commander with decision-quality planning recommendations. The operational assessment is a focused planning activity; it is not intended to be an opinion, evaluation, survey, or prediction of “something” associated with the MOC. It is specific to measuring the attainment of conditions associated with the commander’s intended use of the operational force.

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