



A Naval Approach to Relative Combat Power Analysis (RCPA): Why Conducting a RCPA Can Enhance Planning and Directing Naval Operations

By Sean. P. Henseler, CDR, USN (Ret.) & Eugene Augustine, LtCol, USMC (Ret.)

For Issue #2, October 2013

Last Updated: Monday October 28, 2013 03:00

Over the past several years many Navy operational level of war (OLW) planners concluded that conducting a relative combat power analysis (RCPA) as outlined in the 2007 NWP 5-01 Navy Planning manual added little value to the navy planning process (NPP). Planners across the fleet observed that deriving “relative force ratios” was ground-centric, outdated, and largely irrelevant in the maritime environment. However, while some might be content to discard RCPA as an historical anachronism unworthy of continued application, a small group of individuals at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island worked diligently to develop a RCPA approach that would not only be relevant to the NPP but actually enhance it. The result of those efforts can be found in Chapter 3 Course of Action Development of the forthcoming 2013 NWP 5-01 Navy Planning manual. Additionally, Appendix E of the NWP includes a user friendly RCPA worksheet that planners can tailor to fit either deliberate or crisis action planning.

This article is intended to stimulate a renewed appreciation for the value of conducting RCPA during the planning and execution of maritime operations and to encourage Maritime Operations Center (MOC) staffs to embrace the new, naval-focused, “Planning Considerations” RCPA methodology that will appear in the 2013 NWP 5 -01 as they strive to constantly improve their ability to plan, direct, and monitor naval operations.

What is “combat power” and what is a “relative combat power analysis”?

Combat power is the total means of destructive/disruptive force which a military unit/formation can apply against the opponent at a given time.¹ It is created by combining the elements of intelligence, movement and maneuver, fires, sustainment, protection, command and control, information and leadership.² Optimally, planners should strive to ensure that naval forces are able to generate overwhelming combat power when and where necessary in order to accomplish objectives. Put another way, planners, and those charged with monitoring and directing operations, should always seek to ensure that friendly forces have the ability to gain and maintain the relative combat power advantage required to accomplish the mission within the risk parameters set forth by the commander. A relative combat power analysis (RCPA) is simply a comparison of those friendly and adversary tangible (quantitative) and intangible (qualitative) factors that allow each to

generate combat power at a given time and location.³ Such an analysis can be useful to both planners as well as those charged with monitoring and directing the execution of an operation.

How does a RCPA relate to other steps in the NPP?

At the outset of, and during, COA development planners will find it useful to apply the "Planning Considerations" RCPA methodology. Doing so will provide planners with a deeper understanding of friendly and enemy force numbers, capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses relative to each other at a given point in time in a particular geographic location and relative to competing objectives. When conducting a RCPA, any quantitative comparison of major air, surface, and subsurface platforms must be balanced by comparing the actual capabilities of what are often multi-mission platforms.⁴ Indeed, a qualitative assessment is as or more important than a quantitative assessment. Intangible factors such as: will to fight, training, the presence or absence of an alliance/coalition, leadership, morale, discipline, soundness of doctrine, and combat readiness, etc. may be compared when conducting a RCPA.

Of note, many of the inputs required to conduct a RCPA will have been generated prior to the COA Development step in the NPP. For example, tangible and intangible factors related to time, space, and force identified during the Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment (JIPOE) should be compared when conducting a RCPA.⁵ Similarly, information derived while conducting the enemy center of gravity (ECOG) analysis such as critical strengths and weaknesses, critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities should also be considered when conducting a RCPA.⁶ Additionally, the results of both the friendly center of gravity (FCOG) analysis as well as the "analysis of friendly forces and assets" generated during the Mission Analysis phase of the NPP should feed into the RCPA.⁷

What is the value added of conducting a RCPA?

While conducting a RCPA is a subjective endeavor, by comparing each force's size, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, planners can gain insight into: (1) US/coalition capabilities pertaining to the operation, (2) the types of operations possible from both friendly and enemy perspectives, (3) how, when, and where friendly and enemy forces may be vulnerable, (4) what additional resources may be required to execute the mission, and (5) how to best allocate existing resources to gain and maintain a relative combat power advantage.⁸

If COAs are divided into phases, planners must consider whether or not friendly forces possess sufficient combat power at the right time, and in the required geographic locations (e.g. previously identified decisive points) to accomplish the mission.⁹ During the later COA Analysis and COA Comparison steps of the NPP, planners should remain cognizant of whether or not the COA ensures that friendly forces possess the ability to generate the required amount of combat power at the right time and in the right location, especially in the vicinity of identified decisive points, to accomplish the mission within an acceptable level of risk.¹⁰ If the relative combat power advantage cannot be achieved as planned and required then the validity of the COA might be questionable.

How might conducting a hasty RCPA assist Current Operations (COPS)?

Maritime OLW staff involved in execution, specifically those that monitor and direct operations, must also be keenly aware of whether or not friendly forces retain the planned relative combat power advantage, at the right time and location, required to accomplish the mission.¹¹ As such, COPS personnel should have the ability to conduct a hasty RCPA. If friendly forces lack the requisite amount of relative combat power, then unless modifications are made with respect to one or more of the operational functions (movement and maneuver, protection, intelligence, sustainment, command and control, and/or fires) it may be wise to delay or withdraw.

Conclusion

Historically, US ground forces employed RCPA methods that resulted in mathematical force ratios that would help planners determine the size of force required to conduct an operation. However, these land-centric methods proved insufficient to maritime planners for several reasons to include the multi-mission nature of many platforms, the qualitative difference between various nations' platforms, and the characteristics of the maritime domain itself where forces simultaneously operate on, under, and over the water and land as well as outer space and cyberspace.¹²

Ideally, conducting a disciplined RCPA will help planners gain perspective in assessing whether the forces applied against a particular task or objective are adequate in size and capability as compared with the adversary. The 2013 NWP 5-01 Navy Planning manual introduces a "Planning Considerations" RCPA methodology that focuses less on mathematical force ratios and more on the subjective comparison of friendly and adversary tangible and intangible factors that are relevant to COA development. The "Planning Considerations" RCPA methodology is easy to utilize and can be tailored as required depending on the mission. MOC staffs are encouraged to embrace the new, naval-focused RCPA methodology as they strive to constantly improve their ability to plan, direct, and monitor naval operations.

The authors are associate professors in the College of Operational and Strategic Leadership at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island and were involved in the development of the new RCPA doctrine contained in the forthcoming 2013 NWP 5-01 Navy Planning publication.

¹ Draft NWP 5-01 Navy Planning, p. 3-3, August 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. p 3-4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Material contained herein is made available for the purpose of peer review and discussion, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Navy or the Department of Defense.