



# The Operations Process and the Commander's Decision Cycle

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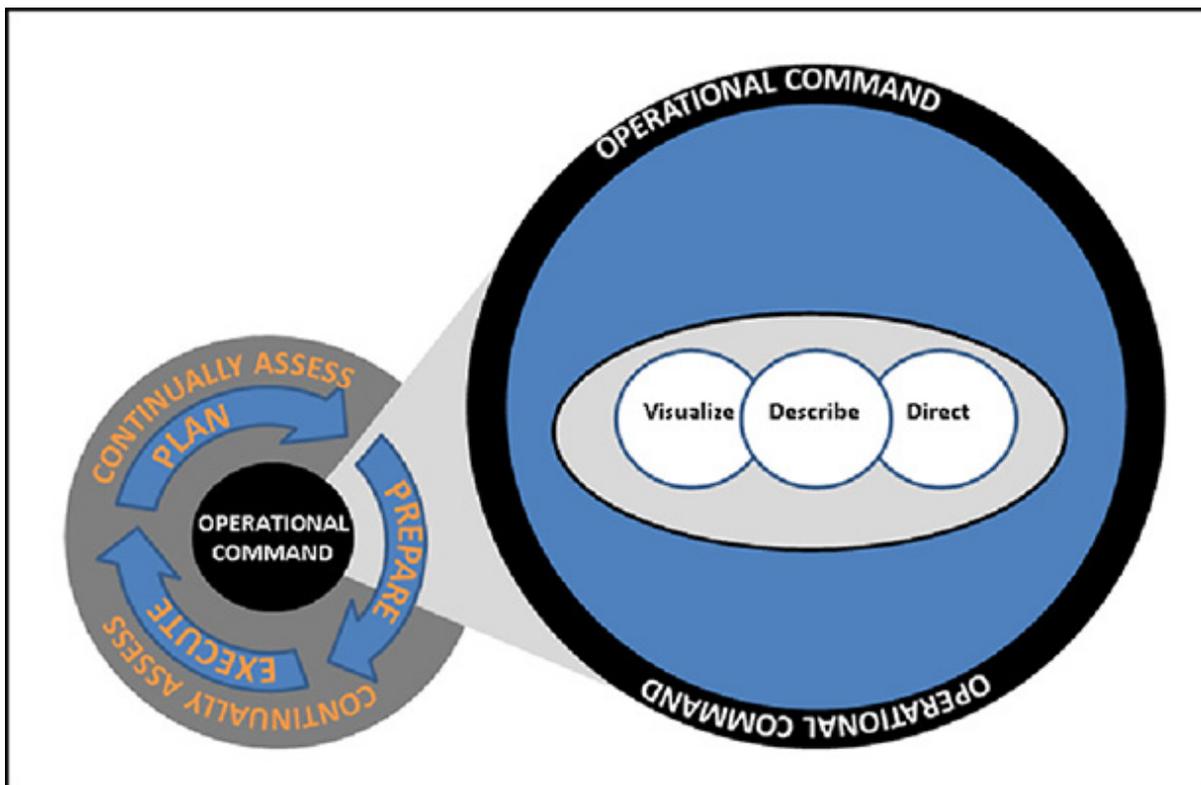
Maritime forces conduct operations in environments characterized by complexity and uncertainty. In the midst of this uncertainty, the commander and his staff must build, maintain, and revise their situational understanding in order to anticipate, learn, adapt, and manage effectively. This article explains the utility of employing the commander-driven "Operations Process" to accomplish Maritime Operations Center (MOC) objectives and argues that staffs can best support commanders by using the "Commander's Decision Cycle."

## The Operations Process

Simple in concept, the four-step operations process (plan, prepare, execute, and assess) is actually dynamic in implementation. The operations process is used to integrate numerous activities throughout the MOC, which must plan, prepare, execute, and assess multiple lines of operations (LOOs) simultaneously.

The operations process is built on five fundamental principles:

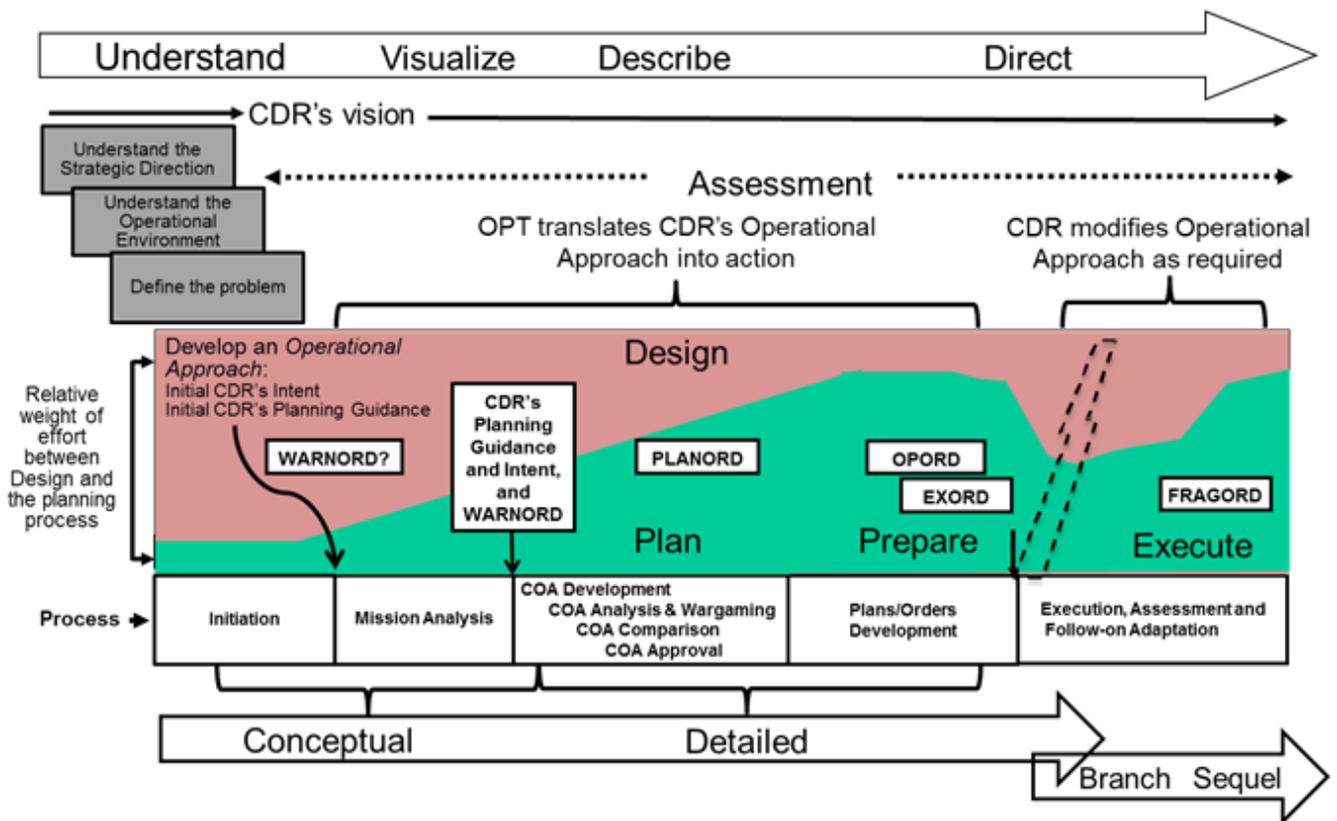
1. Commanders drive the process, which is founded upon the time-honored naval tenet of centralized planning/de-centralized execution through mission-type orders.
2. Situational understanding is fundamental to effective command and control (C2) and is dependent on continuous intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE), staff estimates, and assessment feedback which enables organizational learning and adaptation.
3. Critical and creative thinking aids in understanding and decision making.
4. Design permeates the process.
5. Operational command, the art and science of understanding, visualizing, describing, and directing operations against a hostile, thinking adversary, requires commanders to integrate the six operational functions (C2, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment) in order to synchronize forces in time, space, and purpose. This integration and synchronization is complicated by the need to plan, prepare, execute, and assess simultaneously across multiple missions and LOOs.



**Figure 1. Operational Command and the Operations Process <sup>1</sup>**

Maritime component commanders drive the operations process through the commander's decision cycle and ultimately by generating and issuing mission-type orders. The activities of the operations process (plan, prepare, execute, assess) may be sequential, especially at the start of an operation, but once an operation begins the MOC often conducts parts of each activity simultaneously, because planning and preparation are ongoing and inextricably linked. While preparing for or executing an operation, commanders and staffs often refine base plans or plan for branches and sequels. Preparation begins when a MOC receives a mission and accelerates when planning details are developed. During execution, the actual C2 of forces is added to the other activities. Assessment is continuous and influences the other three activities. The commander, aided by the staff, makes decisions throughout the operations process. The battle rhythm is established to align staff actions with the commander's decisions.

At the center of the operations process is the art and science of understanding, visualizing, describing, and directing, forces to accomplish missions (See Figure 2). Commanders are the most important participants in the operations process. The staff and subordinate commanders assist commanders in the exercise of C2 during all activities of the operations process.



**Figure 2. Operations Process Methodology**

## Plan

Planning is the art and science of understanding a situation, envisioning a desired future, and crafting effective ways of bringing about that future. Planning can be both conceptual and detailed. Conceptual planning includes thinking through ends, ways, means, and risk, framing the problem, framing the environment, and developing a broad operational approach to achieve a desired end state. Conceptual planning aligns with operational art and design and is commander-led. In contrast, detailed planning conducted through the Navy Planning Process (NPP) by planning teams translates a commander's broad concept into a complete, feasible, and practicable plan.

The result of planning is a plan or order, focused on achieving a desired end state, that effectively communicates the commander's intent to subordinates. While planning may start one iteration of the operations process, it is continuous as commanders and staffs will frequently revise plans and develop branches and sequels throughout the conduct of operations.

## Prepare

Preparation consists of activities designed to improve execution and includes, but is not limited to: back-briefs; crosswalks; walk-throughs; map exercises; confirmation briefs; rehearsals; increasing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; enhancing coordination through positioning liaison officers; conducting inspections; and actual movement of forces. Preparation requires staff and subordinate actions designed to help transition the force from planning to execution. Preparation activities help commanders, staffs, subordinates, and other components better understand their roles in upcoming operations, allow them the opportunity to practice complex tasks, and potentially identify problems and resource shortfalls that require further planning or coordination.

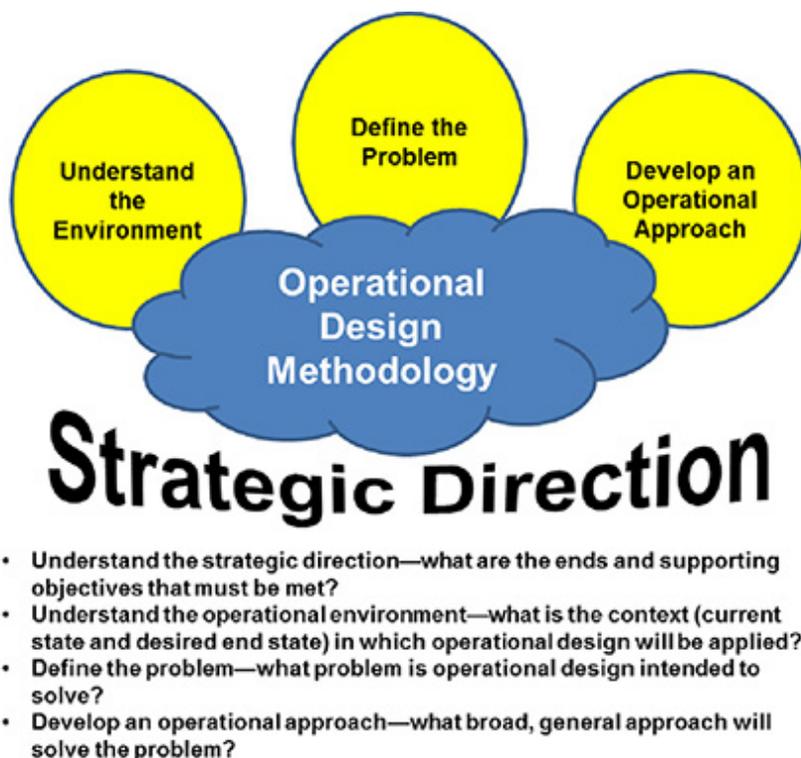
## Execute

Execution occurs when a plan is put into action by applying combat power. It focuses on concerted action to seize and retain the initiative, build and maintain momentum, and exploit success. Naval forces generate combat power by converting potential combat power

into effective action. Combat power can be constructive as well as destructive. In peacetime operations, such as a disaster relief operation, combat power is applied mainly for constructive purposes.

## Assess

Assessment involves continuously analyzing the operational environment to help judge how operations are progressing toward achieving objectives and the desired end state. Assessment is a primary feedback mechanism that enables the command as a whole to learn, adapt and make adjustments as needed. During planning, assessment focuses on developing and maintaining an understanding of the situation and developing an assessment plan. During preparation and execution, assessment focuses on monitoring the situation and evaluating the operation's progress toward stated objectives. At times, assessment will result in recommendations to modify a plan if objectives are not being accomplished.



**Figure 3. Design Methodology**

## Design

Design permeates the operations process and supports the effective exercise of command, providing a broad perspective that deepens the commander's understanding and visualization. Figure 3 illustrates the basic tenets of design methodology. Design is used to develop an operational approach. The operational approach is a description of the broad actions the force must take to achieve the desired military end state. It is the visualization of how the operation should transform current conditions into the desired conditions at end state—what the commander wants the operational environment to look like at the conclusion of operations. Once the commander approves the operational approach, it provides the basis for the operational planning team (OPT) to begin detailed planning using the NPP. The commander and staff should continually review, update, and modify the approach as the operational environment, end states, or the problem change.

**Direction** from higher headquarters (HHQ) initiates planning. It can come in a number of forms, from written warning orders to verbal direction from the HHQ commander. The commander and staff must analyze all available sources of guidance for the mission. These can include written documents, such as the Guidance for Employment of the Force (GEF)

and Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP), United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs), HHQ written directives and estimates, oral instructions from HHQ, domestic and international laws, and policies of other organizations that are interested in the situation.

The **operational environment** is the composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander. The commander must be able to describe the current state of the operational environment and how the environment should look when operations conclude (i.e., desired end state) before an approach to solving the problem can be visualized. By comparing current conditions in the operational environment with the desired end state, commanders and staffs can identify broad actions that should be taken in order to bring about the required change in conditions. Identifying end state conditions and termination criteria early in planning will help the commander and staff devise an operational approach with lines of operation that link each current condition to a desired end state condition.

**Defining the problem** is essential to solving the problem. It involves understanding and isolating the root causes of the issue at hand. The commander and staff must identify and articulate:

1. Tension between current conditions and desired conditions at the end state.
2. Elements within the operational environment which must change or remain the same to achieve desired end state.
3. Opportunities and threats that either can be exploited or will impede the commander from achieving the desired end state.

A concise problem statement can be used to clearly define the problem. It considers how tension and competition affect the operational environment by identifying how to transform the current conditions into the desired end state—before adversaries begin to transform current conditions to their desired end state.

The **operational approach** reflects an understanding of the operational environment and the problem while describing the commander's visualization of a broad approach to achieve the desired end state. The planning team uses elements of operational design to provide details to the commander's operational approach and to facilitate detailed planning within NPP.

There are three purposes for developing an operational approach:

1. It provides the foundation for the commander's planning guidance to the staff and other stakeholders.
2. It provides the model for execution of the campaign or operation and development of assessment for that campaign or operation.
3. It enables a better understanding of the operational environment and of the problem.

The commander provides a summary of his current understanding of the operational environment and the problem, along with his visualization of the operational approach, to the staff and others through his commander's planning guidance. The format for the commander's planning guidance varies but should adequately describe the logic underpinning the commander's understanding of the operational environment, the problem, and his operational approach.

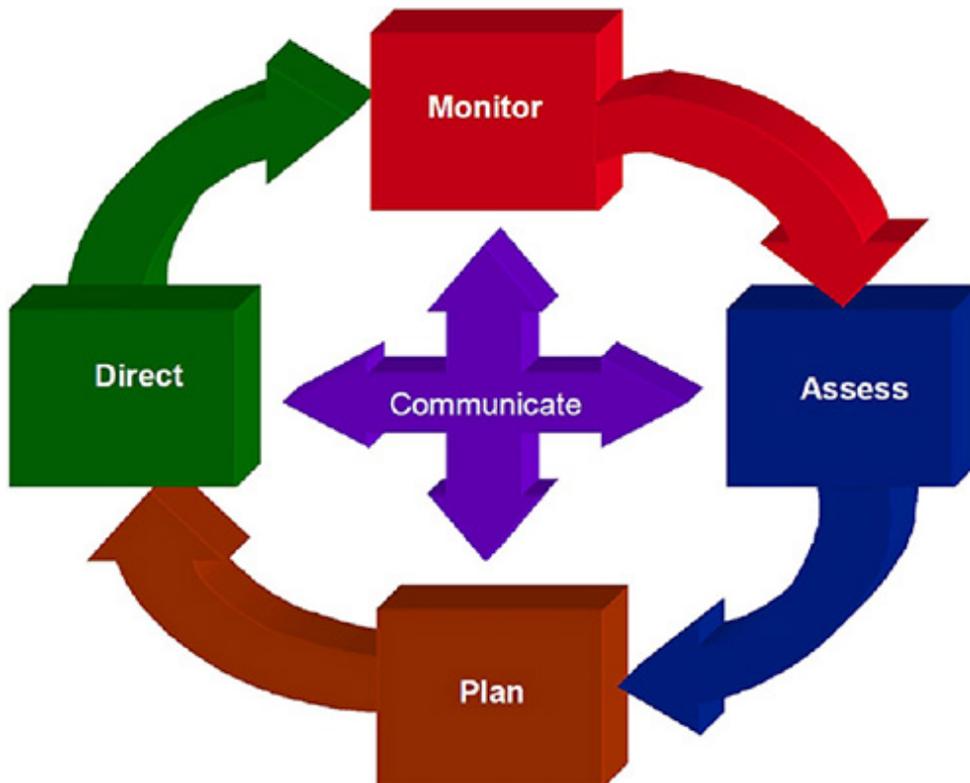
The commander should also provide his initial intent along with his planning guidance to the staff before they embark on the NPP. Commander's intent describes the purpose of the operations, the method of approach, the desired military end state, and may include the degree of risk the commander is willing to accept. Commander's intent should help the staff and subordinate commanders understand his intent for unified action and must allow for decentralized execution. It provides focus to the staff and helps subordinate and supporting commanders take actions to achieve the military end state without further orders, even when operations do not unfold as planned.

## **Commander's Decision Cycle and the Operations Process**

Navy Warfare Publication 3-32, *Maritime Operations at the operational Level of War*, defines the commander's decision cycle as a mechanism for focusing the operational staff to support the commander's critical decisions and actions. The commander's decision cycle categorizes the major MOC staff actions designed to support the commander in making timely and informed decisions into planning, directing, monitoring, and assessing. The commander's decision cycle is different from, but related to, the operations process.

The commander's decision cycle underpins and supports the operations process in that it helps the commander and staff understand the environment and focuses both staff actions as well as information flow. It includes staff procedures required to prioritize and resource planning efforts, maintain the flow of orders and directives that reflect commander's intent, ensure unity of effort, and evaluate progress. The staff supports this cycle through cross-functional boards, bureaus, cells, centers and working groups within a coordinated battle rhythm.

Whereas the commander's decision cycle is a process that assists the commander in focusing the staff to support his critical decisions and actions, the operations process consists of activities performed prior to, during, and after operations to realize the benefits of operational art. Planning, preparation, execution, and assessment may overlap and may be recurrent as circumstances demand. The commander and principal staff members can use the operations process to help determine when and where to perform leadership actions such as making decisions, issuing guidance, providing command presence, and terminating operations.



**Figure 4. Commander's Decision Cycle**

**A Comparison of the Operations Process and the Commander's Decision Cycle**

<b><u>Operations Process</u></b>	<b><u>Commander's Decision Cycle</u></b>
Art	Science
Cognitive	Constructive
Commander-centric	Staff-centric
Synchs and aligns processes	Focuses staff to facilitate decisions
Delivers guidance and approach	What/So what/ Now what?

Translates vision into action	Problem solving
Synthesis	Analysis
Leadership-driven	Staff-driven
Alignment	Provides options and recommendations
Inductive reasoning	Deductive reasoning
Knowledge/Understanding	Data/Information
Command	Control

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration adapted from Army Doctrine Publication 5-0, The Operations Process. The US Army uses term "Mission Command" vice "Operational Command".

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