U.S. 6th Fleet Completes First Fleet 360 Wargame
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U.S. 6th Fleet completed the first Fleet 360 Wargame, an iterative planning game involving the U.S. 6th Fleet maritime operations center (MOC) and a thinking red cell opponent at the Navy Warfare Development Command (NWDC). This initial wargame was developed over a six-month joint exercise life cycle between NWDC and the 6th Fleet staff and culminated in three successive wargame moves from October 2017 through January 2018. The MOC staff and the Red Cell each planned their respective moves simultaneously in isolation, which were then played out and adjudicated by a White Cell at NWDC.

While the scenario and contents of the wargame moves are classified, I can tell you that this was a very challenging “High North” scenario in the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) area of responsibility. The wargame developed our U.S. 6th Fleet MOC and advanced our real-world planning efforts by concentrating on a Phase 1 deterrence problem, and transitioned to kinetics and Phase 2 only as deterrence faltered late in the wargame. This differed from most headquarters exercises, where the push is typically to get into late Phase 2 and ultimately the Phase 3 effort ashore. Instead it demonstrated that wargames do not have to be spent fighting a war to be useful. The wargame also differed from a headquarters exercise in other ways – more on the benefits of this later.

The Fleet 360 wargame itself matured as well – the concept evolved out of NWDC’s Strike Group 360 wargame, a tactical staff exercise for carrier strike group staffs in the early stages of their respective training cycles. NWDC rose to the challenge throughout the planning and playing of Fleet 360 to keep the wargame at the operational level of war (OLW).

As we were the first MOC to conduct the Fleet 360 wargame, we had some growing pains and some experiential learning to do. Throughout the planning and execution of the wargame, I collected some observations and recommendations that should help other MOCs as they plan and execute their Fleet 360 wargames against challenging problem sets in their respective theaters of operation.

First, focus your wargame on your most challenging problem set at the OLW. This is what the wargame is intended for and what your fleet MOC staff should be training for. We used our Fleet 360 wargame to help in the development of an immature operational plan (OPLAN). Other MOCs should do the same, or plan against other emerging challenges at the OLW. Our
wargame moves generated some 250 requests for information (RFI) – critical questions that will inform our real world planning effort against our most challenging OPLAN which is in development at the U.S. 6th Fleet level.

Next, build a solid team. Throughout the three moves we brought in staff and subject matter experts (SME) from II Marine Expeditionary Forces, Carrier Strike Group 10 (CSG-10), Naval War College’s Russia Maritime Studies Institute, and analysts from CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Office of Naval Intelligence. Having a team of experts gives the staff valuable outside perspectives, builds long-term relationships that may be called upon later in a real contingency and is critical to fully evaluating the problem set you face in your wargame.

Block off time to plan. There are numerous ways to schedule and conduct the Fleet 360 wargame, but we scheduled three one-week wargame moves across three months, where we could clear our schedule (mostly) and focus on the wargame for a short period of time. Upon conclusion of each move, we set it aside while the White Cell adjudicated, then we came back to the problem fresh and incorporated previous lessons learned. We could then see how the scenario evolved through Red Cell moves and adjudication, and look back to re-evaluate our processes and planning.

Incorporate a “Move 0.” Following the main planning conference in late July 2017, we realized we needed a Move 0 to set our forces before starting the wargame. In addition to force laydown, we used Move 0 in September to increase the staff’s familiarity with the wargame construct and scenario, and do some initial analysis and planning to get ahead of Move 1. Also in Move 0 we realized the extent of staff augmentation required, including not only the SMEs mentioned earlier, but also NWDC White Cell representation. Having a White Cell member on station during each move made our wargame easier by removing the time zone and distance support challenges to quickly answer RFIs, requests for forces (RFFs), and basic wargame questions.

Finally, and maybe most significant for the long-term: Use Fleet 360 to learn and grow. Build your bench, experiment, and don’t be afraid to fail. As this wargame is not a certification event and doesn’t have a higher headquarters depending on your outputs, no one is counting on you for products or evaluating you. It is your chance to try hard at something with the potential to fail, and learn through the process of trying something new. This allowed many junior and midgrade officers on our staff to plan and brief at the OLW for the first time, and also allowed us to experiment with things like assessing deterrence and evolving how we look at risk – starting
with an operational risk management-based model and resulting in assessments of operational and strategic risk.

There is, however, a downside to playing a strictly fleet-centric wargame without direct participation by other headquarters. At the OLW, there is an inherent joint nature to the fight requiring input, coordination, and de-confliction with land and air components as well as with the geographic combatant commander. Initially, the lack of component and higher headquarters elements was a challenge, but NWDC again rose to the challenge to fill these roles. It was also a challenge to keep both our staff and NWDC focused at the operational level, given the details required to plan against such a complex scenario, but we did so with the help of staff augmentation from CSG-10 and others who helped with the problem at the tactical level. Further staff augmentation from combatant commander and component staffs is certainly desirable and should continue to be requested to support Fleet 360 wargames.

NWDC is a great resource, best known for its warfighting publications and for its models and simulations in support of headquarters exercises. However the 360 wargames (both Fleet and Strike Group) are a great asset and the Navy should do what it can to resource and develop them further. A few other recommendations for NWDC and the MOCs who will follow 6th Fleet in the Fleet 360 wargame include:

- Keep the Fleet 360 wargame at the operational level of war. Resist the urge to be pulled down to tactical details that subordinate staffs will plan for. Focus on the planning process and articulating clear commander’s intent, which the White Cell requires and will use to play the part of your CTFs and forces during adjudication.
- Continue to improve the White Cell’s capability to execute and adjudicate non-kinetics within Fleet 360. This includes space, cyberspace, information operations, and special technical operations. To fully adjudicate the effects of non-kinetics requires a set of expertise and clearances that is not fully resident at NWDC, and in some areas (e.g. space) doesn’t exist at most MOCs.
- Continue to build the White Cell’s capability and capacity to play the role of higher headquarters. Build the “up-and-out” framework in the OLW Fleet 360 wargame by incorporating other service components and their efforts against a common mission, and lean into other aspects of the high-end fight – other components will provide reinforcing capabilities, and certain authorities from higher headquarters will be required. These are things the MOC staff should anticipate during wargaming, well ahead of when it might be needed in a real-world scenario.
• Finally, improve the Strike Group 360 wargame by giving East Coast CSGs a “High North” problem based on the first Fleet 360 wargame. There is currently one U.S. Pacific Command scenario for CSGs from both coasts, but much of the work to develop a High North CSG wargame scenario has now been done by NWDC in building our 6th Fleet wargame. Once in place, East Coast Strike Group 360 wargames can inform 6th Fleet planning by carving off a chunk of our planning effort to look at through the CSG lens. This model of interplay between 360 wargames and real world planning should continue to develop as NWDC rotates Fleet 360 among the Fleet MOCs over the next few years.

The 6th Fleet staff benefitted greatly from our Fleet 360 wargame in many ways – a better trained and experienced MOC warfighting staff, greater staff exposure to the complexities of our most challenging OPLAN, and analysis that is shaping our real world planning effort. We were also able to provide feedback to NWDC throughout the wargame which will further improve future Fleet and Strike Group 360 wargames. This was a tremendous effort on the part of the Navy Warfare Development Command which paid off greatly for 6th Fleet – for this we express our sincere thanks as you are facilitating high velocity learning throughout the Fleet. Keep it up!

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