



LEVELS OF WAR

Last Reviewed: 27 Feb 2015

Warfare is typically divided into three levels: strategic, operational, and tactical. These divisions have arisen because traditional war constrained forces to engage force-on-force, on the surface, at the tactical level, allowing effects to aggregate up from that level to the level of campaigns and other major operations, and finally to the level directly affecting an adversary's ability to wage war altogether. However, Airmen should not define a given level by the specific weapons used, or on the targets attacked, but on the level of desired effects one wishes to create. A given aircraft, dropping a given weapon, could conduct a "tactical," "operational," or "strategic" mission, depending on the planned results. Given airpower's inherent flexibility, any tactical mission with a given aircraft dropping given weapons can deliver a mix of intended effects, at all levels, from tactical to strategic.

Effects at the strategic level of war impair the adversary's ability to carry out war or hostilities in general. Strategic effects should neutralize the adversary's centers of gravity. At this level, the United States determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) security objectives and guidance and uses all national resources to achieve objectives and desired end states. These national objectives in turn provide the direction for developing overall military objectives, which in turn are used to develop the military objectives and strategy for each theater or operation. Strategy is aimed at outcomes, thus strategic ends define this level. In some circumstances, there may be value in distinguishing between the nation's strategy as a whole and what might be termed the "theater-strategic" level, at which particular combatant commanders determine and direct the overall outcomes of major operations (or "wars") taking place within their particular areas of responsibility, explicitly tying these "theater-strategic" aims to overarching national strategy and policy. In general terms, **the strategic level of war addresses the issues of WHY and WITH WHAT we will fight and WHY the enemy fights against us.**

The operational level of war lies between the strategic and tactical levels. At this level, campaigns and major operations are designed, planned, conducted, sustained, assessed, and adapted to accomplish strategic goals within theaters or areas of operations. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they orchestrate tactical successes to achieve objectives at higher levels. The decision-making products at this level of planning identify required forces and resources balanced against operational risk. Operational effects such as air superiority, space superiority, cyberspace superiority, defeat of enemy surface forces, isolation of enemy forces in the battlespace, and disruption or destruction of enemy leadership functions

are the means with which the operational commander supports the overall strategy. Operations involve the integration of tactical military missions and engagements to achieve strategic ends. Planning at **the operational level of war determines WHAT we will affect, with WHAT courses of action, in WHAT order, for WHAT duration, and with WHAT RESOURCES.**

At the lowest end of the spectrum lies the **tactical level of war**, where individual battles and engagements are fought. While resulting effects may be described as operational or strategic, military *actions* occur almost entirely at the tactical level. Thus, even a global strike mission intended to produce a direct strategic effect on an adversary COG is ultimately a tactical action. To the Airman, the distinction between this level and higher levels of war is fairly clear-cut; Airmen tend not to fight large-scale battles (as surface forces use the term) but focus at the tactical level on individual engagements and “missions.” The tactical level of air, space, and cyberspace warfare deals with how forces are employed, and the specifics of how engagements are conducted. Tactics are concerned with the unique employment of force, so application defines this level. In short, **the tactical level of war deals with HOW we fight.**
