When military headquarters do not properly understand the operating environment or do not correctly frame the problem, it often leads to an oversimplification of the root causes that are driving instability in a region. As crisis response planning continues, this oversimplification leads to headquarters developing generic military response options, predictable operational designs, and limited operational actions to affect the relevant conditions needed to reach the military end state. This article argues that framing the problem is the most important step prior to an organization developing their method of achieving success in an operation.

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"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."
"I don’t much care where."
"Then it doesn’t matter which way you go."

The conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Introduction

A recurring challenge seen throughout the lifespan of an exercise developed by the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) is a training audience’s difficulty with understanding the strategic and operational problem(s) created as part of the exercise scenario. Exercise scenarios are complex and cover both contemporary military and non-military challenges within the operating environment. When military headquarters do not properly understand the environment or do not correctly frame the problem, it often leads to an oversimplification of the root causes that are driving instability in a region. As crisis response planning continues, this oversimplification leads to headquarters developing generic military response options, predictable operational designs, and limited operational actions to affect the relevant conditions needed to reach the military end state.

Although many nations and military services have different processes for planning military operations, conducting mission analysis is often considered the most important step. This article argues that framing the problem, traditionally a doctrinal step in mission analysis, is the most important step prior to an organization developing their method of achieving success in an operation. Developing a problem statement is not a formal step at any echelon (strategic, operational, or tactical). With no compass to steer an organization towards the desired end state, developing a comprehensive approach and maintaining unity of effort to solve complex problems will remain extremely difficult.

This article has three aims: 1) inform NATO military practitioners on the importance of framing the problem, 2) describe why NATO should consider incorporating the development of a problem statement as a doctrinal step in mission analysis, and 3) reinforce that framing the problem and the development of the problem statement should occur at all echelons to increase understanding, synergy, and unity of effort across the joint force.

Framing the Problem Across Echelons

In today’s increasingly complex and multi-domain military operations no echelon, from a squad to a joint force command headquarters, will have a single problem to solve. Having a clear understanding of the major challenges and problems that are present within an operational
environment begins at the start of planning activities and remains throughout execution of an operation. Although subordinate units should trust the analysis provided by their higher headquarters, this does not negate the need for each echelon to understand the operational environment and analyze the major challenges from their perspective.

Initial strategic guidance normally provides a description of the unacceptable conditions in an environment. However, the root causes of these conditions may not be clearly articulated to operational and tactical level headquarters. Therefore, the first task of each headquarters is to understand the problem in order to visualize potential solutions.

Achieving understanding requires two activities: framing the problem and mission analysis. Each echelon in NATO doctrine has a different name and sequence to understand the environment and frame the problem during the NATO Operational Planning Process. At the strategic level, understanding comes during the “develop a strategic appreciation of the crisis” step and involves contribution from the component commands. At the operational level, military organizations “frame the operational level problem” during mission analysis. Within Phase 1 at the tactical level, military units “understand the situation and problem.”

To develop a thorough understanding of the problem, NATO doctrine stresses the need for each echelon to provide feedback on their understanding and appreciation of the strategic environment during the initial stages of planning. This feedback enables SHAPE to develop recommended military response options that provide the best military advice to political decision makers. As the military progresses into execution of an operation, each headquarters across all echelons must have processes in place to continually evaluate their understanding of the environment and reframe their assessment of the problem. Through vertical and horizontal information sharing, each echelon has a responsibility to report changes in the environment to increase shared understanding and enable any adjustments to the plan.

### Framing the Problem

Albert Einstein is famous for stating that, “if I were given an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about the solution.” The information needed to understand the problem depends upon how one defines it, and the solution depends upon how one understands the problem, or how one answers the question: *what is causing this problem?* Taking deliberate steps to frame the problem serves as a baseline for learning throughout a headquarters.

Framing the problem begins with collaborative staff analysis, but does not fully take shape until the commander is integrated into the process. The goal of framing the problem and developing a problem statement is understanding all essential and relevant actors, tendencies, tensions, potentials, and trends in the operational environment. Through command group and staff analysis and dialogue, a headquarters must understand and analyze the complex contextual situation in the environment and develop a logical well-structured working hypothesis.

Developing this logic starts with asking the right questions. Some example questions to analyze and answer with the command group are the following:

- What is the difference between the unacceptable state of an operational environment and the desired end state?
- What is preventing the command from reaching the desired end state?
- What needs to change versus what doesn’t need to change?
- What conditions do other actors want to achieve that are unacceptable to us?
- What are the threats, opportunities, and challenges?
- What identified tensions will preclude us from achieving our end state conditions?
- What are the similarities between other actors’ desired end-state and ours that may offer opportunities for synergy?
- What risks will we impose on the environment if we do (or do not) achieve our desired end state conditions?
Asking and answering the right questions through analysis and collaboration enables a headquarters to determine what military and non-military actions are achievable and what is not. As questions about the environment are answered, it is common for headquarters to develop link diagrams, a system-of-systems analysis, and graphically depict trend analyses on maps to visually display areas of tension and opportunities throughout an operating area. Through analysis of the environment and critical thinking, framing the problem enables learning and a shared understanding across the staff.

Other steps needed to properly frame the problem from each echelon is reviewing historical analysis, reviewing previous lessons identified, as well as reviewing strategic and political guidance. Mission command and clarity of ones’ mission are only achieved once guidance and direction is provided. However, sometimes strategic and political level guidance does not provide the level of clarity a subordinate headquarters requires. When this occurs, planners must look beyond the initial direction and guidance and analyze other relevant sources to enable subordinate echelons to clearly understand the higher headquarters’ desire. Additional guidance may come from political speeches, transcripts from NATO Summits, strategic strategy documents, and more recently posts on official social media sites. Taking the time to deliberately frame the problem provides a headquarters the valuable analysis needed to transition into the other steps of mission analysis. With compressed timelines common during planning activities, headquarters should develop and rehearse the processes they will use to frame the problem. The staff and command group can then practice their process to ensure it is fit for purpose and developed in a timely manner.

In summary, framing the problem attempts to answer the question: what is the organization trying to accomplish? The advantages of framing the problem as one of the initial steps in mission analysis enables a headquarters to focus the majority of their effort in determining the relevant and essential aspects that need to be solved to reach the military end state. The output of framing the problem should be a well-defined problem statement approved by the commander. The problem statement then provides a focus that fuses planning efforts towards solving the problem.

Once this step is completed, the commander takes ownership of the problem statement, which helps facilitate a commander’s dialogue with higher and subordinate headquarters to ensure understanding and consensus across the joint force.

Devising a Problem Statement

There are three key inputs to assist planning groups as they transition from mission analysis to course of action development: a problem statement, mission statement, and commander’s intent. As stated earlier, the problem statement describes the key issues that must be solved in the operational environment to reach the desired end state. The mission statement describes what problem an organization needs to solve and why. Lastly, commander’s intent describes the methods the organization will use to solve the problem statement and accomplish the assigned mission.

During the mission analysis briefing, all evidence and analyses presented to the command group is in direct support of the problem statement. Just as each echelon has a mission statement, they also require a problem statement. Developing a problem statement is currently not a step during mission analysis in NATO doctrine or the SHAPE Headquarters Comprehensive Operational Planning Directive (COPD); however, the development of a problem statement is becoming more mainstream and desired by NATO military commanders. For example, students conducting the NATO School’s Strategic Operations Planning Course develop and brief their problem statement to the lead senior mentor, who replicates the commander.

There is no directed length for a problem statement, so it is incumbent upon the staff to know how their commander likes to receive information. However, there are three characteristics that make an effective problem statement that should be described in narrative form:

• The ideal or desired conditions
• The current reality in the environment
• The consequences, or “so what” if no action is taken

If possible, the problem statement should also describe the timeframe needed to solve the problem so that it best conveys the headquarters’ understanding of the problem.

Developing a problem statement takes practice, experience, and command group involvement. Through practice and collaboration with the command group, a staff learns how to convey only the essential information a
The commander needs to know to understand the environment and approve the problem statement. The commander will then use the problem statement as one of the key documents to develop their commander’s intent. The key is to identify the essential problems associated with the relevant operational variables, examine relationships among the problems, and then synthesize the analysis into a narrative that aids the commander’s thinking, and informs the overall planning process.8

To assist the reader, below are some examples of problem statements.

**EXAMPLES OF PROBLEM STATEMENTS**

Blue text depicts the ideal or desired conditions. Black text describes the current realities in the environment. Red text depicts consequences, or the "so what". Lastly, underlined portions emphasize key points in the problem statement.

**Korean Peninsula Modern Day Problem Statement**

U.S. Forces Korea and the Combined Forces Command seek to maintain a stable balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, one that deters North Korean provocations, defends South Korean territory, and allows South Korea to prosper economically. North Korea, however, actively attempts to undermine these goals. As a result of its crumbling economy, its inability to feed its own people, and its reliance on illicit means of maintaining control of its population through propaganda and coercion, North Korea engages in a calculated effort to raise tensions in order to win foreign concessions. It does this, primarily, by actively developing nuclear weapons, expanding the range of its ballistic missiles, and committing occasional acts of violence against the south. Even if the Alliance succeeds in deterring North Korea from conducting a major attack, the continuance of such provocations and other acts of defiance serve to destabilize, not only the Korean Peninsula, but the larger region as a whole.9

**General George Washington Yorktown Campaign (1781) Problem Statement**

Although the Continental Army retains possession of large areas in the 13 Colonies, American stagnated efforts to regain key terrain have resulted in poor morale, indecisive recruiting efforts, and a loss of faith in the American Congress. This is mainly due to historical poor coordination between the French Navy and American Land Forces and limited supplies and funding for the Continental Army. The hub of British Power remains in New York City and their naval superiority has enabled them to secure key port cities throughout the colonies to maintain their economy of force missions. However, with British General Lord Charles Cornwallis’ forces now conducting an operational pause on the Yorktown Peninsula, there is an opportunity to isolate and defeat a large British Army in Virginia if the French Navy can dominate the Chesapeake Sea area and land forces can reach Yorktown in time.10

**Return-to-Work (COVID-19) June 2020 Problem Statement**

Due to the Joint Warfare Centre’s (JWC) reduced manning regulations since mid-March 2020, any gap in information and knowledge management within the organization will affect its mission performance, while the Centre continues to adapt to the global crisis. During this period of teleworking, conditions and priorities within the JWC programme of work have changed. As the JWC’s pre-pandemic programme of work activities return, there is a need to inform and recalibrate the staff on the revised programme of work through clear direction and guidance. Additionally, once conditions allow the JWC to resume programme of work activities, there will remain multiple national, higher headquarters, and host nation regulations that must be adhered to.11
Developing a problem statement provides the headquarters the compass they need to ensure planning efforts are focused and headed in the same collective direction to solve the problem. During mission analysis and course of action development, the problem statement ensures that: 1) the mission statement is adequately written with the correct essential tasks and purpose to achieve the military end state, 2) commander’s intent and direction and guidance describe the methods the organization will use to solve the problem statement and achieve the assigned mission, and 3) the development of the operational design describes the conceptual approach for how the organization will solve the problem statement and achieve the needed conditions to reach the military end state.

Conclusion

Although the initial strategic guidance a subordinate headquarters receives is prompted by symptoms that are unacceptable to the NATO Alliance, the dynamics of the root problem require more analysis across all echelons. Therefore, the first task of each headquarters is to understand the problem in order to visualize possible solutions.

“Developing a problem statement provides a headquarters the compass they need to ensure planning efforts are headed in the same collective direction.”

Framing the problem is relevant to all levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical) because all levels view the environment through different lenses. Framing the problem, with an approved problem statement narrative, enables commander dialogue across echelon to clearly define the needed actions to solve the problems and reach conflict resolution.

If NATO does adapt their doctrine to include the development of a problem statement as part of framing the problem, NATO organizations will likely improve the additional outputs required during mission analysis and course of action development. This will also create more opportunities for headquarters’ staff and command group interaction, which is an integral part of developing a problem statement.

Presently, the difficulties in properly framing the problem have led many NATO commands during recent JWC exercises to oversimplify the problem leading to predictable military response options and an operational design with little hope of creating favorable conditions to reach the military end state. In today’s increasingly complex environment, where peace, crisis, war, and stabilization are often blurred, oversimplifying the problem presents increased risk to your operation and inadequately organizes the processes needed to drive the commander’s decision-making process.

Framing the problem and the development of a problem statement are key steps in mission analysis. The problem statement forms the foundation for which all solutions are developed. When these steps are completed correctly, a military headquarters better understands the complexities throughout the environment, is able to develop a plan with a reasonable chance of success, and puts processes in place to better adapt planning when effects are not achieving the desired results. With a problem statement in-hand, a headquarters has the focus they need to ensure planning efforts head in the right collective direction to solve the problem. As such, a well-defined problem statement is crucial to the operational planning process.

ENDNOTES:

4. Problem Statement provided by the Joint Forces Staff College: Joint and Combined Warfighting School – Strategy and Campaign Design (“Define the Problem” lecture).
5. Problem Statement provided by the author during a Yorktown Campaign-Battlefield Staff Ride.
6. Problem Statement provided by the author as part of the JWC COVID-19 Operational Planning Team.