

Strategy, tactics and techniques — Three of a kind

By Sid Heal



The most irreducible element of any plan is the scheme that it describes. To a greater or lesser extent, every plan attempts to maximize the likelihood for success by focusing effort, affixing responsibility, distributing authority and allocating resources. Depending on the scope of the plan, it may be broad and far-reaching or tightly focused and detailed. Plans that are wide-ranging in application and/or far-reaching in the future are said to be “strategic.” Conversely, those that are more narrowly focused on specific near-term objectives are “tactical.” It has been said that “tactics win battles but strategies win wars.” Accordingly, successful operations will require both.

The differentiation of strategy and tactics is a relatively recent understanding and is usually attributed to the Swiss-born¹ military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini, who wrote during the Napoleonic era. Since that time the concepts have been refined and are

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now taught at every military academy in the world. Notwithstanding, much confusion remains, especially because the differences are largely in degree and not kind.

At a risk of oversimplification, *strategy* may be defined as the planning and development of large-scale and/or long-range operations to ensure a satisfactory end state. By nature, strategies employ a broad per-

spective and look at the problem as a whole. It goes without saying that a flawed strategy will have momentous consequences.

Similarly, *tactics* may be defined as the methods and concepts used to accomplish particular missions. Thus, they are in a supporting role to strategy. In fact, it has been said that “tactics are the handmaidens of strategy.” Even if successful, tactics without strategy will not progressively promote the accomplishment of the overall objectives. Conversely, strategy without tactics lacks the ability to adapt and adjust to circumstances and so becomes stymied by relatively minor obstacles.

While the differences between strategy and tactics may seem confusing, one tactics instructor explained it this way. The story is told of a hiker lost in the desert who climbs a small hill and discovers the tracks of a bicycle leading off into the distance toward a mountain pass. Having no better



alternatives, the hiker realizes that they provide the best route to safety and so studies them carefully and begins to follow them. As the hours pass he notices that the path is not really straight as it zigs and zags around rocks and bushes. In fact, the tracks from the front wheel are continually making minor corrections to avoid these and many other obstacles that would otherwise stop the bicyclist. It is only when looking at the tracks from a distance that they look straight.

The bicyclist is clearly focused on the mountain pass and makes corrections quickly after surmounting the many minor obstacles. The point of the story is that the bicycle track leading to the mountain pass is the long-range direction that provides the essential focus. Without it, every small detour around the rocks and bushes could easily lead the bicyclist astray. On the other hand, without the ability to navigate around

obstacles the bicyclist would be stopped by the first serious obstruction. So it is with strategy and tactics.

A third related concept is called a *technique*. A technique is simply a procedure or process for performing a specific task or function. Techniques almost always involve the employment or utilization of a weapon or piece of equipment. Using the same analogy of the hiker lost in the desert, techniques would be those procedures the bicyclist uses to stay on course, maintain balance and traverse obstacles. So it is in tactical operations which utilize techniques for everything from sighting a weapon while wearing a gas mask or speedily clearing a malfunction to pulling the pin on a diversionary device without losing grip on a weapon or building a field expedient litter. Techniques provide the specific “know how” for complex assignments and are the major component of hands-on expertise;

consequently they provide the critical individual skills lacking in tactics.

In the law enforcement community, an example of a strategy is the “default” *surround and negotiate* strategy used for hostage situations. Common examples of the supporting tactics include establishing a containment, conducting a crisis or stealth entry, using a coordinated long rifleman-initiated assault, and so forth. Techniques would include everything from how weapons and equipment are carried to how they are used.

While strategy and tactics tend to be more closely associated with operations that involve adversaries, they are critical for other types of disasters also. Consider a large brush or forest fire that threatens homes. A strategy is needed for whether to encourage early evacuation, last minute evacuation, or shelter in place. Tactics are needed for conducting an evacuation, protection of life and property and avoiding interference with firefighters. Techniques are needed to alert the homeowners, avoid traffic congestion, and so forth.

Much of the confusion about strategy, tactics and techniques occurs because there is no sharp line between them. They are more similar to each other than they are different with the only clear distinction being their particular focus. Notwithstanding, each play a critical role in providing the essential capabilities for successful tactical operations. The importance for commanders to understand their nuances needs no further justification. ◀◀

Endnote

1. While Jomini was born in Switzerland, it was as a French officer under Napoleon and later as an officer with the Russian army that he gained his greatest fame.