

Agility Theory

...Thus, an army without flexibility never wins a battle. A tree that is unbending is easily broken...

—Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching (~4th Century B.C.)

I. Introduction.

Agility is a tenet of operations that exists alongside convergence, endurance and depth. Defined in Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, the tenets of operations are desirable attributes that should be built into all plans and operations, and they are directly related to how the Army's operational concept should be employed. Moreover, commanders use the tenets of operations to inform and assess courses of action throughout the operations process. Agility, therefore, is defined as *"the ability to move forces and adjust their dispositions and activities more rapidly than the enemy."*¹ Agility is necessary for units to gain and maintain the initiative and mitigate risk. It is enabled by the elements of operational art (OpArt) as depicted in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (see Figure 1). We incorporate the elements of OpArt to develop operations, and we must ensure that the tenets are built into such plans. Effective employment of all the elements of operational art enables agility, yet the most vital elements are *tempo*, *decisive points*, *phasing & transitions* and *risk*. Tempo dictates the relative speed of operations while phasing and transitions ensure that rapidly changing conditions are accounted and adapted for. Concurrently, simultaneously impacting multiple decisive points mitigates the relative risk posed by delayed sequencing of effects.

Agility is empowered by OpArt, which enhances freedom of action and ensures unrestricted operational dexterity. *Dexterity*, while not



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Elements of Operational Art:

End State & Conditions
Center of Gravity
Decisive Points
Lines of Operations & Lines of Effort
Tempo
Phasing & Transitions
Culmination
Operational Reach
Basing
Risk

Figure 1

doctrinal, is defined as readiness and grace in physical activity, especially skill and ease in using the hands; mental skill or quickness.² In this case, operational dexterity refers to a commander's ability to execute operations, as a physical activity, with both skill and quickness. As such, this article is not meant to serve as a "how to" guide for achieving agility in conflict – it is a brief discussion of a set of principles and how their application may enhance the reader's understanding of agility as a tenet of operations.

II. Agility Principles & Outcomes.

The tenet of agility aids commanders in the following principles: *understanding*, *deciding*, *acting*, *assessing* and *adapting* to difficult circumstances during the tumult of battle.³ Before acting, the commander is required to *understand* the battle through situational awareness and then *decide* upon courses of *action* necessary to win. Therefore, upon review of the totality of actions taken throughout the battle, *assessments* inform command-driven *adaptations* to evolving conditions.

1 FM 3-0, *Operations*, 01 October 22, p. 3-3

2 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "dexterity," accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dexterity>.

3 FM 3-0, *Operations*, 01 October 22, p. 3-3

Isaac Newton's third law of physics suggests that for every action there is an equal and opposite

Analogously, the figure below, which the author describes as the “Pendulum of War” (Figure 2), depicts *agility* as the pulley mechanism by which a commander is best able to maintain control of both *tempo* and *initiative*. Thus, the commander is enabling the rapid execution of multiple *decisive points*. This advantageous paradigm is compounded by synchronous effects enacted by timely responses to evolving conditions. Reactions determine shifts in *phasing* and are adapted to by deliberate *transitions* during operations. Regarding relative positions on the **initiative scale** (puck 1, x-axis at the bottom of the figure), the most agile commander is assured ownership of advantage and initiative. Most importantly, along the “z-axis” (puck 2), **risk mitigation** is an intrinsic by-product of the most agile commander. As shown in the

decision dominance is necessary for a commander to gain the initiative and determine the flow of battle over an adversary

figure, the risk continuum mirrors the pendulum's sway. The "y-axis" (puck 3) denotes the line of initiative gain for opposing forces. In other words, as the whole-of-pendulum (tempo, phasing and transitions) is controlled by the most agile commander, risks are mitigated and the overall risk level remains low.

By incorporating agility to dictate the sway of the "Pendulum of War," the commander's level of decision dominance is enhanced. Defined as *"aspirational, situationally dependent and always relative to an opponent...to understand, decide and act faster and more effectively than the threat,"*⁵ decision dominance is necessary for a commander to gain the initiative and determine the flow of battle over an adversary. In this manner, not only does the most agile commander control tempo and the initiative, but he also compels the enemy force to operate within the friendly commander's decision-making outcomes.⁶ This outcome is primarily enacted through physical means which, in turn, affects the human dimension with respect to perceptions, decision making and behavior. As the lethal and non-lethal means of war impact the enemy more rapidly and at multiple decisive points, the enemy commander's psyche is put into a state of desperation, which results in self-inflicted mistakes in decision making.

IV. Conclusion.

This article examines agility as a tenet of operations and how understanding its principles enhances a commander's ability to gain and maintain the initiative, as well as dictate tempo. By viewing agility through the many

lenses inherent to OpArt, we are better able to understand how agility enables the commander to mitigate risk and achieve decision dominance relative to the enemy commander's actions and reactions. It is in this way that Newton's Third Law is challenged and exploited to the friendly commander's advantage. By forcing the "pendulum" to swing at will and without ever crossing the line of initiative gain, the friendly commander is best able to move forces and adjust their dispositions and activities more rapidly than the enemy, as well as understand, decide and act faster. Within the realm of Large-Scale Combat Operations, agility is the tenet that enables lethality and rapid action resulting in decisive victory.

References:

Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, 01 October 22.

Army Doctrinal Publication, 3-0, *Operations*, 06 October 17.

"Dexterity." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dexterity>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2023.

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5 FM 3-0, *Operations*, 01 October 22, p. 3-14

6 FM 3-0, *Operations*, 01 October 22, p. 3-13