

# CULMINATING POINT AND DESIRED END STATE

In this essay, the author relates two key elements of the operational design. The culminating point of the attack and the defense at the different direction levels as an important concept for decision making in order to reach the desired end effect.

By Jorge Paulo Barrales



## INTRODUCTION

The concept of culminating point was developed by Clausewitz in the context of terrestrial armed conflicts of his times. According to his dialectical approach to war, the attack and defense are permanently interacting causing the multiple factors that drive forces, both moral and material, of the attack and defense, to increase on the one side in the same proportion they decrease on the other side.

This complex and multiple interaction results in a relative power relation that favors one of the parties, but it is always prone to be modified with the conflict dynamics and it is crucial to acknowledge when it is an irreversible trend.

We can take Clausewitz's thought about the war as a tool for politics: what the assailant gained with their attack by means of a power relation<sup>1</sup> that is favorable but decreasing

before the reduction of this supremacy prevents them from doing so<sup>2</sup>.

For this reason, the assailant should not go beyond a point, from which the favorable power capital begins to reduce until everything gained is lost. At this point, called by the author "Culminating Point of the Victory", the assailant should stop and defend themselves.

1. At the operation and tactical level, this power relation is called Relative Combat Power.

2. Clausewitz, Carl von; De la Guerra; Editorial Labor, Barcelona, 1976, Libro VII, Cap. 1 "El Ataque": "We must respond to this, of course, in the following way: supremacy of military forces is not an end, but a means. The end consists in either defeating the enemy, taking at least part of their lands, in order to place oneself in a position to make advantages gained to be relevant for the conclusion of peace."

*The importance of the culminating point lies in the fact that when the military leader acknowledges he has reached it, he is obliged to make a decision, whether to change the attitude to prevent them from failure or to persist in the attitude they had being aware of the implicit risk.*

Clausewitz dealt with this issue in Book VII of his work on Attack relating it to a limit that the attacker should not pass. For this reason, successive thinkers referred to this as “Culminating Point of the Attack”. Throughout the years, other thinkers, pursuing an analogy with defense, gave origin to the idea of “Culminating Point of the Defense.”

The desired end state (or final desired situation) is a concept subsequent to the culminating point which was recently included in our joint military doctrine. It represents the situation aimed to be reached at the end of a conflict by means of the use of military, political and economic power (general and military strategic levels) or the military force in a major manner (operational level) or in an exclusive manner (tactical level).

The culminating point and desired end state are two elements of the operational design<sup>3</sup>.

#### DESIRED END STATE

The desired end state is determined for all levels of conflict.

At the Strategic and Military Strategic levels, the desired end state includes political (including diplomatic and sociocultural), economic and military aspects. At the operational level, aspects are mainly or exclusively military, unless there is an only theater of operations in which case the considerations for the Military Strategic level are valid. As regards the Tactical level, considerations are exclusively military.

Moreover, at the Strategic and Military Strategic levels, there is a maximum and a minimum end state. The maximum end state of the attack correspond to their highest acquisition aspiration and, for the case of the defense, it expresses their highest preservation expectation.

On the other hand, the minimum end state means for the attack that they have not obtained all they wanted but they did obtain more than they had before the conflict started maintaining the proper negotiation power by means of what they have obtained at an acceptable cost. For the defense, it implies preserving what is reasonably acceptable at the end

of the conflict according to the relation of forces of the opposing forces.

At the Operational level, it is justified to establish a maximum and minimum end state when there is an only theater of operations. At the tactical level, given its concrete, simple and merely military nature, it is not reasonable to determine maximum and minimum criteria.

#### CULMINATING POINT

This concept is applicable to the three levels of conflict and, within them, to the attack and the defense.

We can define it as:

The situation given during the development of a conflict, in which the power relation among the actors within the space in which they interact prevents one of them (or a group of them who form an alliance) from maintaining the strategic attitude, operational attitude or tactic operation in force with a reasonable success expectation forcing them to assess whether it is convenient to adopt a change of direction that prevents them from a highly probable failure.

However, in spite of the fact that crossing (in a conscious or unconscious way) the culminating point nearly always leads to failure, a brilliant feeling, the physical or psychological impossibility to change or, simply, failure to perceive that this point has been reached, may lead a leader to “go past it” and be successful anyway<sup>4</sup>.

#### CULMINATING POINT: LEVELS OF CONDUCTION

At the strategic and military strategic levels, the concept of power<sup>5</sup> involves the political, economic and military components and the power relation is the result of the interaction among opponents within the theater of operations and/or conflict that has them.

Among others, these are some of the causes that may lead one of the parties to their culminating point:

- › Erosion of the national fighting will
- › Decrease in popular support that is particularly vulnerable to the extension of the conflict and excessive toll
- › International punishment and isolation
- › Questioning the legitimacy of actions
- › Industrial incapability to sustain the replacement of losses as they occur (responsibility of national strategic and military level)
- › Breaking key alliances and other aspects

These causes may be part of the weakening of the Napoleonic conjunction between government, people and army (“people in arms”)<sup>6</sup>.

At the operational and tactical levels, the concept of

power refers to the combat power and the relative combat power relation resulting from the interaction of opponents within the theater of operations (operational level) and within the battlefield (tactical level) that includes them.

One of the causes that lead to reach the culminating point at operational level is the purpose of achieving multiple objectives during the campaign without taking care of space, mass and time dimensions, having the last one of these five meanings: time opportunity, pace, duration, sequence and simultaneity<sup>7</sup>.

### CULMINATING POINT OF THE OFFENSIVE

In theory, we can consider that this culminating point of the offensive is the space- time situation in which the superiority of the attacker is not enough to reach, with a reasonable success perspective, the minimum desired end state (political, economic and military) at the General Strategic and Military levels and the military desired end state at the Operational and Tactical levels<sup>8</sup>.

This means that the attacker in these conditions should, of course, fail but the unexpected from war may lead him to victory.

### At the strategic and military strategic levels

This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors that had an offensive strategic attitude within the theater of war and/or conflict must, at the minimum, adopt a strategic pause or, at the maximum, turn to a defensive strategic attitude in all theaters of operations or, at least, in the main one with the purpose of maintaining their capacity to comply with the finalization criteria that correspond to the military strategic desired end state expressed in minimum terms<sup>9</sup>.

### At the operational level

Es la situación espacio-temporal en la que el o los actores, This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors that had an offensive strategic attitude within the theater



3. Escuela Superior de Guerra Conjunta; "Manual de Estrategia y Planeamiento para la Acción Militar Conjunta. Nivel Operacional - La Campaña"; MC 20-01; 2011; Art. 3.04.3.10.

4. Clausewitz, Carl von; op. cit. Book VII, Chapter 1 "The Attack": "Actually, it may even happen that, in spite of the fact that the attacker may have lost force, supported by moral forces that are mainly in the attack, they may find it less difficult to advance than to stop."

5. Pertusio, Roberto; Estrategia Operacional; Escuela de Guerra Naval; third edition; 2005; Chapter 1: "Strategy is the art of dialectics of wills that uses power to manage conflicts."

6. Pertusio, Roberto; op. cit.; Chapter 14: "Napoleonic wars, which are the result of the French Revolution, promote what has been called people in arms or, rather, a setting inherent to the government, people and army fighting all together for the same cause. The interpretation of this phenomenon made by

Clausewitz resulted in his famous trinity."

7. Ares, Carlos Alberto, Captain, Professor of Operational Strategy at the Escuela Superior de Guerra Naval; course notes, 2009.

8. Author's note: Interpreting the culminating point of the offensive as the situation in which the combatant combat power no longer exceeds the defender's power (MC 20-01-Art. 3.04.3) may be denied by reality. Example: at the tactical level, if the attackers maintains his offensive with a relative combat power of between 1,5 and 1, he will still have a greater relative combat power and his offensive will probably fail.

9. Escuela Superior de Guerra Conjunta; op. cit.; MC 20-01. Art 3.03.1. "The military strategic end state and the operational end state may be expressed in minimum and maximum terms."

of operations must, at the minimum, take an operational pause or, at the maximum, turn to a defensive operational attitude with the purpose of maintaining their capacity to comply with the finalization criteria that correspond to the operational desired end state (or the minimum operation state if there is an only one theater of operations).

This defensive operational attitude will materialize by means of a detention defensive operational maneuver<sup>10</sup>.

*For the change of operational attitude to be considered as made, it is enough for it to have been made in the main operational effort and, in this case, the secondary operational efforts may continue in the offensive at tactical level although the operational attitude will have changed.*<sup>11</sup>

Among the causes that lead to this change of attitude, especially in the offensive, those of logistic nature will prevail over those of tactical nature (example: strangulation of logistic chain).<sup>12</sup>

#### **At tactical level**

This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors that conducted an offensive operation in a battlefield of a theater of operations must, at the minimum, adopt a “combat pause”, which can be mobile, of zone or mixed<sup>13</sup> in order to maintain the capacity to contribute to the compliance with the operational desired end state.

Among the causes that lead to this change of attitude, especially in the offensive, those of tactical nature will normally prevail over those of logistic nature (example: loss of the OODA loop, observe, orient, decide and act<sup>14</sup>, exhaustion of “tempo”, etc.<sup>15</sup>)

#### **CULMINATING POINT OF THE DEFENSIVE**

Taking into consideration that the culminating point of the defensive is the space time situation in which the remaining power of the defender applied to make a timely change of attitude will allow him to keep, at the expense of

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space, a mass capital and/or time with a certain possibility to effectively reinvent it in the context of the immediately superior conduction level.

#### **At strategic and military strategic levels**

This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors that had a defensive strategic attitude must redistribute the power remaining in the theater of war, reinforcing the main theater of operations at the expense of the secondary theaters before losing the opportunity to reach the military strategic desired end state with the minimum finalization criterion.

The causes that lead to this change of attitude are similar to those of the culminating point of the offensive.

In the case of an only theater of operations, the defender will bet everything to a defensive operational attitude that allows him to reach the minimum finalization criterion of the military strategic and operational desired end state which, in this case, would coincide.

Under this circumstance, it would be key for the defender to capitalize the passage of time aiming at reinforcing his internal front (national pride, survival spirit, etc) while those of the attacker are weakened (adverse public opinion and international condemnation to his condition of assailant, among others.)

#### **At operational level**

This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors, who had a defensive operational attitude within the theater of operations materialized by a detention defensive operational maneuver, do not have the military ability to keep it but they do have enough ability to adopt a retardant and/ or withdrawal defensive operational attitude<sup>16</sup> that actually contributes to the minimum desired end state of the pertinent Military Strategic level.

#### **At tactical level**

This is the space time situation in which the actor or actors who conducted a defensive operation on a battlefield of a

theater of operations must change their defense which may be mobile, of zone or mixed<sup>17</sup> due to a delay, retreat and/or withdrawal before the cohesion loss prevents them from making this change.

Causes that lead to this change of attitude may be:

- › Incapacity to conduct operations inherent to the defense dynamic, especially counterattack.
- › Loss of mutual support among strong points of the defensive system.
- › Early loss of tactical mobility, etc.

With the same criteria taken into consideration for the culminating point of the offensive, the culminating point of the defensive must offer an alternative to the defender in this case through a timely change of attitude, delay, retreat and/or withdrawal and not by leading them to collapse due to their loss of counter-attack capacity as stated by some lines of thought<sup>18</sup>.

### Planned and assessed Culminating Point

Based on the dialectic approach of Clausewitz, we can deduct that at every moment of the offensive-defensive interaction, four culminating points coexist, two of which correspond to the attacker and two to the defender<sup>19</sup>:

- › On the side of the attacker:
  - › The culminating point of the offensive established in their operational design so that they reach the objective before reaching that point.
  - › The defender's culminating of the defensive assessed by the attacker.
- › On the side of the defender:
  - › The culminating point of the defensive established in their operational design so that they take as long as possible to reach that point.
  - › The attacker's culminating point of the offensive assessed by the defender that will act on them so that the attacker may early cross them.

*One of the causes that lead to reach the culminating point at operational level is the purpose of achieving multiple objectives during the campaign without taking care of space, mass and time dimensions, having the last one of these five meanings: time opportunity, pace, duration, sequence and simultaneity.*

In both cases, culminating points established in the operational design will have the impact of the *frictions* of war that affect everything that has been planned while the culminating points assessed will be affected by the fog caused by the lack of certainty inherent to an assessment over the enemy.

In the mind of commanders who are opposed, the culminating point they find in the enemy influences over the one they have planned making them conduct themselves with greater or lesser care with respect to the last one according to the effects they consider they have produced in the culminating point they assessed for their opponent.

Additionally, at the operational level, even the very own culminating point is difficult to be identified and it is therefore perceived retrospectively<sup>20</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

Professional training and experience, involvement with the intention of the superior command and, lastly, their capacity to decide with instinct are the tools of the commander (at all levels) to adopt a decision when they are about to reach their culminating point which will, for sure, impact on their own desired end state and on the superior command that includes them.

10. Escuela Superior de Guerra; Bases para el Pensamiento Estratégico; Volume III; "Operational Strategy"; Buenos Aires; 1993; Chapter V; Section III.

11. Ares, Carlos Alberto, Captain, Professor of Operational Strategy at the Escuela Superior de Guerra Naval; course notes, 2009.

12. de Salas, Oscar; Introducción a la Estrategia Operacional Terrestre en el Marco Conjunto para Oficiales Navales; 2002; Chapter 10, p. 158.

13. Argentine Army; "Reglamento de Conducción para el Instrumento Militar Terrestre"; ROB-00-01; 1992; Sections II and III.

14. Lind, William; Maneuver Warfare Handbook; translated into Spanish by Sergio Gustavo Robles; Biblioteca del Oficial; Círculo Militar; Buenos Aires; 1991; p. 25.

15. de Salas, Oscar; op. cit.; Chapter 10; p. 159: "The culminating point of the defense is reached when the higher level element of a defensive system has lost its capacity to counterattack to reestablish the system balance resulting in collapse and, therefore, the impossibility to continue the defense."

16. Escuela Superior de Guerra; op. cit.; Volume III; "Estrategia Operacional", Chapter V; Section III.

17. Ejército Argentino; op. cit.; ROB-00-01; Sections II and III.

18. de Salas, Oscar; op. cit.; Chapter 10; p. 159: "The Culminating Point of the Defensive is reached when the highest level element of a defensive system has lost its capacity to counter attack the balance of the system, which leads to collapse and, therefore, the impossibility to continue the defense."

19. Escuela Superior de Guerra Conjunta; op. cit; MC 20-01, Art. 3004.3: "A proper operational design must make all efforts to prevent their force from reaching their culminating point, while they try to make their adversary reach that point."

20. Pertusio, Roberto; op. cit.; Chapter 15: At the operational strategic level, it is extremely difficult to determine in advance when the culminating point is going to be reached as it depends on many factors. At that level, unlike the tactical level, it is sometimes only perceived retrospectively, that is, after it has been produced."