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## Strategic Insights: Un-"Steady" State Operations: Redefining the Approach to Phase Zero in a Complex World

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June 20, 2016 | LTC Thomas R. Matelski

In recent months, there has been much discussion in the U.S. Department of Defense and its subordinate components over the conduct of steady state operations, or as defined in the Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP), Phase Zero (Phase o) operations.<sup>1</sup> While important to military planning, the current construct for Phase o is improperly framed. Planning must be re-evaluated and redefined in order to reflect the changing nature of conflict and the myriad hybrid challenges faced by the United States. These challenges exist below the threshold of armed conflict and full spectrum conflict.<sup>2</sup> Politically, they do not necessitate full-scale U.S. military responses. Potential adversaries exploit the gap between peace and armed conflict, leaving the United States with limited ability to counteract them.

One case in point is how the United States currently deals with the unresolved situation of Taiwan. The People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to take political and economic action, attempting to facilitate Taiwan's reintegration with China. For example, a recent article in the *Naval War College Review* points out that Chinese strategy in its own Phase o operations is to make a concerted effort to "create the perception that the PRC is locally too strong, [U.S.] allies are too few, [U.S.] economic and military costs are too high, and victory is too difficult to risk coming to Taiwan's aid."<sup>3</sup> China knits the elements of national power into a Phase o campaign, resulting in considerable strategic influence. Chinese military leaders implemented a long-term campaign to meet its national objectives. As such, China is attempting to create future stability through manageable instability over the short term. The result is U.S. operational planning that is insufficient to meet the Chinese challenge, as well as a lack of a detailed and coordinated U.S. strategic response. Our Chinese counterparts redefined the "steady" state by creating an un-"steady" state.

## **Phase 0: Misunderstood, Maligned, and Under-Resourced**

The concept for Phase 0 operations was not defined until 2006, when the Deputy Commander of U.S. European Command, General Charles F. Wald, published "The Phase Zero Campaign." In the article, General Wald defined the doctrinal concept of Phase 0 as consisting "of shaping operations that are continuous and adaptive. Its ultimate goal is to promote stability and peace by building capacity in partner nations that enables them to be cooperative, trained, and prepared to limit conflicts."<sup>4</sup> Since then, the JOPP has included Phase 0 as a part of the five-phase planning construct.

Although Phase 0 has been a consistent part of the U.S. military operational construct since 2006, its application has been uneven. Phase 0 is considered by military commanders as an environment of relative peace consisting of a lack of conflict or low level armed conflict. Their respective planning staffs consider it an opportunity for security cooperation, future contingency planning, and setting the conditions for major combat operations, if directed. The end result is that Phase 0 is misunderstood and under-resourced as a way to build partner capacity or to set theater actions for future conflicts. Further complicating the disjointed view of Phase 0 is the recently published U.S. Army Operating Concept that fills the gap from strategy to doctrine. The concept essentially tells the Army what to focus on while providing guideline on how to operate. It proposes that future soldiers must be able to "prevent conflict, shape security environments, and win wars."<sup>5</sup> Preventing conflict, ideally, would occur in Phase 0. While the concept is sound, the Army's vision for what it seeks to achieve in "preventing conflict" is unclear.

Conflict prevention requires very sophisticated understanding of the root causes of conflict and the impact of human interaction. For the U.S. military, it means the military is not in charge — an ambassador is — and robust permission and coordination measures are required. The need to redefine Phase 0 is about the need to develop a more cooperative and coordinated approach to implementing U.S. foreign policy. The challenge of operating in a Phase 0 construct is that it is neither "steady" nor easily "shapeable" as defined in the military planning context. Phase 0 represents the most fluid and unpredictable environment. Consequently, it consists of more numerous aspects for consideration than that of traditional military planning.

A good example of this need is found in the Theater Campaign Plan (TCP) and associated Country Action Plans (CAPs) produced by the geographic combatant commands and their service component commands. The integration and synchronization of efforts in the TCP represent current U.S. military activities in Phase 0. In any given year, there are a multitude of operations, actions, and activities that occur in any particular country. On paper, these can look overwhelming. They are based upon the willingness of a country to partner and develop relationships with their U.S. military

service counterpart. But questions still remain: To what end are these activities taking place? How do these activities complement or mutually support national objectives? What U.S. national interest is being met? Do the activities address the complex nature of the operating environment? Finally, how and who is evaluating the impact of the activities?

Coordination and synchronization between the U.S. military and its international partners take place once or twice a year in a repetitive cycle. Unfortunately, the all too often responses from our international partners emphasize their frustration with these programs and often sound something like: "Enough already!" or "How many more times can we conduct the same program of instruction that we have repeatedly done over the last 10 years?" or "We are tired of conducting instruction on intelligence preparation of the battlefield."<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of partner engagement, the U.S. Army undertakes hundreds of opportunities to address a complex operational environment. From the U.S. perspective, military planners sometimes wrongly assume that presence in a given country is an end unto itself, as the sum total of engagements do not address the commander's CAP. In some countries around the world, this is not the case, but consistency remains a challenge in the operational and strategic contexts. In the same country, sometimes in the same week, a host-nation partner force might engage with, for example, Soldiers from a battalion of a regionally aligned force (RAF), others from the U.S. Army National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP), others still from an operational detachment of Special Forces, and perhaps even Soldiers from the logistics Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE) program. From the partner's perspective, that is a lot of activity. From the Army's view, they are separate, distinct, and often unrelated activities. These are generally not well-synchronized, and do not result in meaningful outcomes.

### **Redefining the Phase o Approach for the Un-"Steady" State**

The need to redefine the U.S. military's approach to Phase o is not a push for more authority or to change the authority of the chief of mission, as spelled out in National Security Decision Directive (NSDD)-38. The need is to properly design a more nuanced U.S. operational approach to a complex world. This is accomplished by redefining Phase o as a more comprehensive, synchronized approach to existing and future military activities. The military needs to look at preventing conflict with the same rigor and balance as it does in shaping the security environment and winning wars. Looking beyond setting conditions in theater and building partner capacity, Phase o should focus instead on conflict prevention and mitigation, which "is less costly (in both blood and treasure) than the reactive approach to crisis . . . invest fewer resources in a pre-crisis situation to avoid an exponentially larger expenditure later."<sup>7</sup>

Redefining Phase 0 does not guarantee that the United States will be better prepared to respond to actions by future strategic competitors. Framing the discussion in clearer terms with appropriate actions will allow better synchronization of the disparate parts of military activities. From the U.S. foreign policy standpoint, the military instrument of national power will be more integrated and able to support diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments. Ambassadors and geographic combatant commanders will be able to provide national leaders with greater options for preventing crises and conflicts, rather than responding to them.

### **Better Prepared for the “New Normal”**

As the operational environment becomes more un-“steady” through the actions of China (and other nations), U.S. military planning and execution need to be equally fluid and adaptive. Critics in diplomatic and development circles will argue how a redefined concept of Phase 0 is another step to increase military action or justify the need for maintaining larger land forces and budgetary allocations. These critics believe the military should be limited to armed conflict and major combat operations. “[Phase 0] should only be applied in a linear, progressive manner once a military campaign commences . . . or applied as a part of an on-going military campaign with forces engaged in full spectrum operations.”<sup>8</sup>

Preventing war is not defined in either Joint or Army doctrine. Although appropriately considered a part of the Army doctrinal concept of stability operations, preventing and mitigating conflict is incorrectly associated with post-conflict operations, and viewed with reluctance for planning and execution.

The U.S. military has the tools and abilities to execute a redefined Phase 0 appropriately. The efforts need to be systematic and conducted in an integrated, logical fashion to respond to the complex challenges that face the United States. Until a redefined concept incorporates elements of conflict prevention and mitigation coupled with increased collaboration and coordination, the U.S. military will be steps behind actors like China and Russia, who have already redefined their concepts and approaches and are employing them successfully.

The un-“steady” state that defines the operational environment is difficult and unpredictable, yet manageable. The changed environment necessitates rethinking operational planning concepts. Redefining Phase 0 is an opportunity that should and must not be overlooked.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, August 11, 2011, p. III-40.
2. The threshold of conflict requires an armed military response, but not necessarily major combat operations, i.e., flexible deterrence operations or surgical airstrikes.
3. Scott D. McDonald, Brock Jones, and Jason M. Frazee, "Phase Zero: How China Exploits It, Why the United States Does Not," *Naval War College Review*, Providence, RI: Naval War College Press, Vol. 65, Summer 2012, p. 130.
4. General Charles F. Wald, Deputy Commander, U.S. European Command, "The Phase Zero Campaign," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, Iss. 43, 4th Quarter 2006, p. 73.
5. Training and Doctrine Command, U.S. Department of Army, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, Fort Eustis, VA: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, October 31, 2014, p. 16.
6. Interviews with confidential partner-nation military forces, February 2012; and a former U.S. division-level intelligence officer, conducted by the author July 2015.
7. Wald, p. 73.
8. Colonel Thomas M. Rhatican, *Redefining Security Cooperation: New Limits on Phase Zero and "Shaping"*, Strategy Research Project, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, March 15, 2008, pp. 17-18.

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