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## Failing to Plan Is Planning to Fail

Major Dustin Silmser

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# **FAILING TO PLAN IS PLANNING TO FAIL - AN ANALYSIS OF THE UTILITY OF THE CAF OPERATIONAL PLANNING PROCESS IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**

## **AIM**

1. This paper will demonstrate to the Director General of Plans of the Canadian Joint Operations Centre that the Canadian Operational Planning Process (OPP) is not only sufficiently flexible to keep pace with, but also adapt to, the changing face of war within the context of conventional forces. This paper will advocate that the OPP, as a framework process, aptly addresses the CAF planning needs in the present and the foreseeable future. It will also suggest some further analysis that must be conducted on the employment of, and training in, the OPP in order to ensure that it continues to remain a timeless and powerful planning tool. The OPP is a thorough, adaptive, and intuitive planning tool that all CAF planners should be using.

## **INTRODUCTION**

2. The OPP is often critiqued by planners as being cumbersome in both time spent adhering to linear steps, as well as the amount of staff required to undergo the process. This is not unique to just the Canadian OPP; the Military Decision Making Process adopted by the United States of America, and to a lesser extent the Seven Questions adopted by Great Britain, are subject to many of the same complaints. The plethora of critical articles written on the subject in their respective nations' professional journals evidence this.<sup>i</sup> These written critiques, however, could be due to improper training and use of the processes, an apprehension or reluctance to embrace the processes, rigidity of the planner(s), or a combination of all these factors and others. If properly trained in the OPP, and sufficiently resourced with the appropriate time, staff and planning guidance, the OPP is an intuitive and thorough planning tool that can be adapted for any mission, including domestic and expeditionary. Further, it aptly compliments a Whole of Government (WoG) approach within a rapidly changing pan-domain environment. The discussion will address these critiques through analysis of the process itself, and the training and employment of the process across the CAF.

3. In order to demonstrate the relevance and utility of the OPP, this paper will first analyze its adaptability and flexibility by critically examining the process as well as studies conducted on the practical application of the OPP. It will then analyze the level at which the OPP is used pan-CAF and confirm if these are the appropriate, and consistent, levels. Finally, it will analyze if the CAF is teaching the OPP consistently to all officers and if there can be efficiencies gained in the training system to improve the quality of staff officer training.

## **DISCUSSION**

4. The OPP was designed to be adaptable and flexible and thus is suitable for the changing face of war. Although it was conceptualized in the 1990s owing to a requirement to create a planning process that was common across all elements, the OPP

was not formally codified and published until 2002.<sup>1</sup> The very nature of creating a common planning tool that works for the CAF in its entirety, including within a WoG approach, is a telling sign of how adaptable and flexible it is. Despite being oriented to the operational level, a modified version of the OPP, taking into account the unique inputs from Canadian elected officials, is in use at the strategic level within the Strategic Joint Staff, once again proving its adaptability.<sup>2</sup> Upon dissection of the OPP into its component parts (Initiation, Orientation, Course of Action Development, Plan Development and Plan Review), one begins to realize just how flexible and adaptable the OPP is. To illustrate this, these steps are inclusive and adaptive to any security environment across the entire spectrum of conflict. Specifically, the Initiation and Orientation steps, if done properly, allow planners to gain a thorough understanding of the security environment across all domains without prejudice. In the orientation phase, doctrine notes that mission analysis must be considered in relation to the “system of systems” that will exist in the theatre of operations.<sup>3</sup> This is an important note because it implies that all factors, including pan-domain environments and joint, inter-agency, multinational and political variables must be considered. This again proves that the OPP remains a timeless planning tool, able to keep pace with and adapt to the changing face of war. Further, the doctrine accounts for systemic operational design, Strange analysis and operational net assessments, both scientific and intuitive thinking processes designed to develop a more holistic understanding of the operating environment.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, the OPP demonstrates its true value in that it is a framework that can be easily adapted to the rapidly changing global security environment. Further, since the publication of the OPP doctrine in 2002, the security environment has changed significantly and pan-domain threats have evolved. Not only has the security environment changed, but the CAF has also undergone significant reorganization and restructuring.<sup>5</sup> Despite these significant changes that have and continue to occur, the principles of OPP have remained unchanged – a telling testament to its adaptability and flexibility.

5. The OPP is scalable and agile. Depending on various circumstances such as planning time allocated, the scope of the operation, or even the commander guiding the process, the OPP can be modified. The only limitation to OPP is those that believe it is a strictly linear process that must be rigidly adhered to. For example, various steps of OPP can be combined or separated as the situation dictates. This could range from combining Information and Decision Briefs, expedited and/or focussed Intelligence Preparation of the Operating Environment, directed courses of action, etcetera. While this is just an illustration of the scalability and agility of the OPP, the point to note is that OPP is flexible, and seasoned staff and commanders can adapt the process to any situation(s). While studies on the OPP are limited, some suggest that experienced military planners, when under constraints, will deviate from the rigid structure of military planning processes and use more intuitive processes. This is not to say that these military planners

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<sup>1</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. B-GJ-005-500/FP-000, Canadian Forces Joint Publication 5.0 (CFJP 5.0). Ottawa: DND Canada, 2010a, i.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence. 1258-3-007, Evaluation of Canadian Armed Forces Operations. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2007, 1.

reject the OPP or other military planning processes, but that they use the process as a foundation through which more intuitive planning can be done. To illustrate this, a study conducted by Dr. David J. Bryant, a Defence Research and Development Canada scientist, confirmed exactly this.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, during Exercise VIRTUAL RAM, a team of scientists was sent to study the utility of the OPP. Exercise VIRTUAL RAM, a computer-assisted exercise (CAX), injected many of the variables that a modern exercise would have, such as civilian agencies and pan-domain operations. It was noted that throughout the exercise, and upon various constraints such as time and staffing, the planning staff deviated from the doctrinal OPP procedures. While still adhering to the major steps of the OPP, it was observed that a significant portion of the sub-steps, especially individual functions, were carried out in a more intuitive matter than the analytical, almost scientific, methodology prescribed in doctrine. The planning team was also observed to expedite, omit or abbreviate different steps of the OPP throughout the four planning cycles, especially those considered of less importance or lacking sufficient information to analyze. It was also noted that the planning team still achieved desired results when they did not chronologically follow the steps of the doctrinal OPP, instead often looping back to various steps as required. Dr. Bryant concluded the study by noting that the application of the OPP at the formation level could be a variant of analytic and intuitive-decision making. On the surface, this appears to deviate from Canadian OPP doctrine, but in fact, it can be considered further proof of the scalability and agility the OPP provides.

6. Despite the inherent flexibility and adaptability of the OPP, its employment is not consistent across the CAF. Within the Canadian Army (CA), the OPP is used at formation (Brigade) level and above, but on occasion is used at the unit level.<sup>ii</sup> Within the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), the use of the OPP is limited at and below Wing level, thus officers do not get sufficient exposure to the process until they are employed in a joint environment at the operational level.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is extremely limited in their use of OPP at the operational level.<sup>iv</sup> This asymmetrical application of the OPP is troublesome and could be the cause for many of the critiques on the OPP. First, it does not provide sufficient exposure for officers until they are employed in an operational-level environment, often in a joint context. Not being exposed to the process early could also lead an officer to be overwhelmed and not as effective of a staff officer in the process had they been exposed earlier. This is further aggravated when an officer is employed in such a context, as the planning that takes place at this level leaves little time to train the staff officer. Second, it means that elements are not maximizing the potential of the planning tool, potentially limiting their ability to orient, understand and plan for an operation. If OPP is designed to be a “[C]oordinated process to determine the best method of achieving the desired end state in support of strategic guidance...[that] enables the Commander to translate strategy and objectives into a unified plan...”, then this author proposes that those elements not using the OPP consistently for operational-level planning may not be unlocking the full potential of their

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<sup>6</sup> Bryant, David J. “Can We Streamline Operational Planning”. Canadian Military Journal. Winter 2006-2007.

planning team(s).<sup>7</sup> Those elements that choose not to fully embrace the OPP due so at their own peril.

7. The OPP is not taught consistently across the CAF, thus limiting the effectiveness and utility of the planning tool. Within the CAF, the OPP is taught at different periods in an officer's and non-commissioned officer's career, however, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will only be on officers. Within the CA, officers often first learn the OPP while attending the Canadian Army Command and Staff College's Army Operations Course (AOC).<sup>8</sup> In comparison, many officers of the RCN do not learn the OPP until formally taught during Joint Command and Staff Programme or informal on-the-job training.<sup>9</sup> Balancing this, officers in the RCAF learn the OPP throughout different career courses (Officer Professional Military Education and the Air and Space Power Operations Course), a model similar to the CA.<sup>10</sup> Amongst the inconsistencies of teaching OPP across elements, it should be noted that the CA teaches CA students, and the RCAF teaches RCAF students. These elementally isolated courses, while in theory should be consistent, can be very inconsistent in nature often focussing only on their specific elements and further lacking focus on joint operations. Notably, the Canadian Forces College offers the Joint Staff Operations Programme (JSOP), intended for captains, naval lieutenants, majors and lieutenant-commanders that provide the staff skills required to conduct the OPP at joint headquarters.<sup>11</sup> This joint program alleviates many of the aforementioned concerns, however, its throughput is only 120 personnel per year, not nearly enough to accommodate all personnel requiring staff training. If this program was expanded upon and served as the foundation for all staff training within the CAF prior to an officer receiving their elemental-specific staff training, it could produce much better staff officers that are more prepared for joint operational planning. For example, if all Army personnel attended JSOP and then attended AOC, it may create more well-rounded and joint staff and create efficiencies in the training systems.

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<sup>7</sup> Department of National Defence, B-GJ-005-300/FP-001 Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.0 Operation 2010a., 5-2.

<sup>8</sup> Department of National Defence. Government of Canada. Canadian Army, July 15, 2021. <https://army.gc.ca/en/canadian-army-doctrine-and-training-centre/index.page#casesc>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of National Defence, Chief of Military Personnel. "Joint Command and Staff Programme." Department of National Defence, Chief of Military Personnel, Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian Forces College, Information Resource Centre, Web Services, February 23, 2021. <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/226-eng.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Captain Robert W. MacKenzie, "Air and Space Power Operations Course Breaks down 'Stovepipes,'" Skies Mag, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://skiesmag.com/news/air-and-space-power-operations-course-breaks-down-stovepipes/>.

<sup>11</sup> Department of National Defence, Chief of Military Personnel. "Joint Staff Operations Programme." Department of National Defence, Chief of Military Personnel, Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian Forces College, Information Resource Centre, Web Services, November 8, 2021. <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/230-eng.html>.

## **CONCLUSION**

8. Despite the OPP being the subject of frequent critique, this service paper has demonstrated that the OPP remains not only relevant but a powerful joint tool for military planning. It has shown that the OPP is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to the changing face of war and should remain so for an indefinite period of time. This service paper has also highlighted potential reasoning why the OPP faces frequent critique and scrutiny; that it is not taught, understood or employed equally across all elements in the CAF. In order to maximize the utility of the OPP, a common pan-elemental pedagogical model must be created, and it must be taught at the same time for all officers. Due to the aim and limitations of this service paper, the appropriate career point to teach all CAF officers the OPP was not analyzed and would need further research. Proper education and practical experience with using the OPP is the single largest factor in the planning tool's shortcomings. In other words, the apparent flaws with the process may be attributable to the user and not the mechanisms. The OPP is, and will continue to be, a highly effective and efficient planning tool, sufficiently flexible and adaptable to the ever-changing global security environment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

9. Adopt a universal OPP pedagogical model that is taught in a joint environment at the junior officer level (JSOP).
10. Conduct further analysis to determine the appropriate career timing that the OPP is taught to all CAF officers.
11. Review B-GJ-005-500/FP-000, Canadian Forces Joint Publication 5.0 to highlight and support the scalability, flexibility and intuition that exists within the process.
12. Introduce a CAF-wide directive that supports and enforces the use of the OPP at formation and higher levels, regardless of element.

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<sup>i</sup> There are a plethora of critical essays written and published by JCSP candidates, as well as numerous Canadian Military Professional Journal Articles supporting this claim.

<sup>ii</sup> The author was unable to find a scholarly reference to support this claim. This claim is based on the author's personal experience having been both a Brigade Planner and a Chief of Staff of a Battle Group on deployed operations.

<sup>iii</sup> The author of this service paper spoke to a sample of JCSP candidates in the Royal Canadian Air Force to confirm this claim.

<sup>iv</sup> The author of this service paper spoke to a sample of JCSP candidates in the Royal Canadian Navy to confirm this claim.