Joint Operation Planning Process

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "Nothing succeeds in war except in consequence of a well-prepared plan." Military operations, regardless of size and scope, are based on planning. Military operations are executed in a complex setting where events can move rapidly. This puts a premium on the ability of joint force commanders and their staffs to conduct operational planning under severe time constraints and pressures. Understanding how military forces plan operations, the elements involved in the planning process, and how public affairs is integrated into that process is critical for public affairs professionals.

As PAOs, you will be a key participant in the planning process, whether you are deployed as part of a joint task force or in garrison supporting a forward-deployed unit. The modern battlefield has changed drastically, as has the ability of news media to transmit live reports that could have strategic impact on a military operation. These realities must be considered when planning any type of operation. Just as we consider the capabilities of military forces when planning operations, we must also consider the capabilities and the needs of the news media. During operations a commander will ask the staff, “Are we on plan?” As part of the planning team it is important to understand when dynamics, whether enemy or friendly, are impacting the plan in a positive or negative way and taking you “off plan.” Moreover, monitoring the plan throughout the operation can help you recognize seams that may require special attention in order to “get back on plan.” While it is true that we fight the enemy and not the plan, it is normally the execution of a good plan that drives mission success.

Doctrine provides that commanders must anticipate and be prepared to support news media coverage of operations and it is your job, as the PAO, to prepare commanders and plan for support of news media. Your success or failure in this job can directly impact the success or failure of your unit's mission, and can have strategic consequences that impact the war effort in general. The lives of U.S. service members and host nation nationals alike can depend on your ability to craft and execute a flexible public affairs plan that supports the overall operations plan. During this lesson, you will learn about operational planning and what your role as a PAO will be in the process. Keep in mind that although much of the discussion in this lesson centers on planning at the strategic level, the steps listed will be followed at an operational and tactical level, as well. The bottom line is that although there may be some variances, at the local level, in how plans are developed the lexicon used in this lesson will be valid at all echelons of command.
Military Service Planning Processes

You all come from different services, each of which has its own doctrine and traditions. Regardless, all military leaders have to make decisions regarding how to tackle both administrative and operational problems. Each service, therefore, has its own military decision making process used to help leaders make these decisions.

**Army**

The Army uses the Military Decision Making Process. MDMP is a deliberate decision-making process used by Army staffs to produce written orders. It may be used in full, or partially, depending on the situation, the time constraints and the experience of the commander and staff. Its steps are:

- **Receipt of the Mission** - An order or directive is received from higher or from the commander.
- **Mission Analysis** - Commanders and staffs analyze the order or directive to determine how their unit contributes to the higher mission, and to identify specified, implied and essential tasks. This step results in a restated mission.
- **Course of Action Development** - The staff develops possible ways to accomplish the restated mission.
- **COA Analysis or War Gaming** - Each COA is played through from beginning to end, complete with opposing reactions and friendly counteractions, to evaluate each COA’s flexibility and effectiveness.
- **COA Comparison** - The advantages and disadvantages of each COA are compared, normally using a quantitative decision matrix. The staff selects a preferred COA and recommends it to the commander.
- **COA Approval** - The commander selects and approves a COA.
- **Orders Production** - The staff prepares an order or plan based on selected COA. The staff assists subordinate staffs with their planning and coordination.

**Navy**

The Navy has the Navy Planning Process. The NPP follows the Joint Operation Planning Process, which we will go into shortly. Like the MDMP, the NPP provides commanders and staffs with a coherent framework to use when making decisions. When planners are faced with a short timeline, the NPP can be flexed to support crisis action planning. The NPP organizes decision-making procedures into six steps:

- **Mission Analysis** - Review and analyze orders, guidance, intelligence and other information, and produce a mission statement.
- **Course of Action (COA) Development** - Develop multiple methods of accomplishing the mission.
- **COA Analysis or War Gaming** - Make an assessment of each COA and how it plays against enemy courses of action. This helps planners identify the strengths and weaknesses of each COA.
- **COA Comparison and Decision** - COAs are evaluated against established criteria and against each other, ultimately leading to a decision by the commander.
- **Plans and Orders Development** - The staff uses the commander’s COA decision to develop plans or orders that direct subordinate actions.
- **Transition** - The plan is handed to those tasked with its execution of the operation. Staffs maintain running estimates that allow for the refinement of plans and orders, and/or start the process anew based on a new mission or directive.

**Marine Corps**

The Marine Corps uses the Marine Corps Planning Process. The MCPP is used by commanders and staffs to help guide decision making at every level. Higher echelons tend to use a more formal and detailed approach, while commanders at lower echelons may modify the planning process based on the staff resources, time and information available. The steps of the MCPP are nearly identical to the NPP:

- **Problem Framing** - Review and analyze orders, guidance and other information to produce a unit mission statement.
- **Course of Action (COA) Development** - Use the new mission statement to develop multiple methods of accomplishing that mission.
- **COA War Game** - Each friendly COA is played against selected threat COAs to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of each friendly COA.
- **COA Comparison and Decision** - The commander evaluates all friendly COAs against established criteria and against each other. The commander then selects the COA that will best accomplish the mission.
Military Service Planning Processes (continued)

- Orders Development - Using the commander’s COA decision, the staff develops orders that direct unit actions.
- Transition - The plan or order is passed to those tasked with its execution.

**Air Force**

The Air Force has the Deliberate and Crisis Action Planning and Execution Segment program. DCAPES is a real-time collaborative software tool used for deliberate and crisis-action planning. Specifically, it is designed to help the Air Force interface with joint planning, which assists senior DOD leadership in deciding when, where and how to commit U.S. military capabilities. DCAPES links Air Force manpower, personnel and logistics databases to assess the impacts a given COA might have in response to directives from higher. It supports all levels of command, providing leaders and staffs integrated tools, a shared infrastructure and common data to use in wargaming and comparing COAs. AFI 10-403 (2012) still uses the term JOPES, but that should eventually change to Adaptive Planning and Execution System, or APEX, IAW JP 5-0 (2011).
The Adaptive Planning and Execution System and Joint Operation Planning Process

On today’s battlefield, we fight as a joint team and members of a joint staff must be able to plan as a team, as well. Let’s look at the decision-making process used by joint commanders and staffs.

The Joint Operation Planning Process, or JOPP, is the fundamental mechanism used by military planners at all levels to conduct detailed planning to fully develop options, identify resources, and identify and mitigate risk, and it will be our focus in PAQC.

Joint Operation Planning is directed toward the strategic employment of military power to achieve operational objectives by shaping events, meeting foreseen contingencies and responding to unforeseen crisis. Planning for the full range of military operations uses two closely related, integrated processes. The Adaptive Planning and Execution System, or APEX, and the Joint Operation Planning Process, or JOPP (adapted from JP 5-0, ch I).

APEX formally integrates the planning activities of the joint planning and execution community and facilitates the JFC’s seamless transition from planning to execution during times of crisis. The integration of joint operation planning with interagency and multinational partners begins with national strategic direction. APEX activities span many organizational levels, but the focus is on the interaction between SecDef and combatant commanders, which ultimately helps the president and SecDef decide when, where and how to commit U.S. military forces. The interactive and collaborative process at the national level guides the way in which planning and execution occurs throughout the armed forces. APEX is a two-part system that incorporates operational design and the Joint Operation Planning Process. Operational design is like an artist’s concept of a building and JOPP is like the blue print of the same building.

In preparing to deploy as a JTF member, however, you will likely be more directly involved in the JOPP. As a result, our lesson will concentrate on JOPP, the goal of which is to develop a plan or order to execute an assigned mission. It is very similar to the MDMP, NPP and MCPP we discussed in that it underpins planning at all levels and is used for missions across the full range of military operations. The difference is that JOPP provides common understanding across multiple levels of organizations and the basis for adaptation and change.

The Seven Steps of JOPP

Like the service-specific decision-making processes, JOPP is an analytical process providing an orderly approach to planning at any organizational level and at an point before and during joint operations. The focus of JOPP is on the interaction between a military commander, staff, and commanders and staffs of the next higher and lower commands. Although the ultimate goal of JOPP is the completion of an operational plan or order, the process is ongoing as a unit must continually plan and produce operational plans, orders and fragmentary orders for future operations and to make adjustments to current operations. The PAO must be fully involved in each step of the JOPP if we are to ensure that public affairs is integrated into all phases of operations. The PAO must ensure the JTF plans what they’re going to say (and show) as they plan what they’re going to do. The JOPP is divided into seven steps (JP 5-0, pp IV-1 – IV-57).

1. Planning Initiation: Joint operation planning begins when an appropriate authority recognizes potential for military capability to be employed in response to a potential or actual crisis. At the strategic level, that authority—the president, SecDef, or CJCS—initiates planning by deciding to develop military options. At lower echelons of command planning initiation will normally commence when a warning order is received. The JFC and staff will perform an assessment of:

  ✓ The time available until mission execution.
  ✓ The current status of intelligence products and staff estimates.
  ✓ Any other factors relevant to the planning situation.

Additionally, the JFC will often provide initial guidance to the staff, which may specify time constraints, outline
The Adaptive Planning and Execution System and Joint Operation Planning Process (continued)

initial coordination requirements and authorize the movement of key capabilities within the JFC’s authority.

2. Mission Analysis: The JFC and the joint staff conduct an examination of the problem and purpose of the operation and to issue guidance that will drive the next steps in the JOPP.

Inputs from higher headquarters used to conduct mission analysis may include:
- Planning directives
- Strategic guidance
- Initial staff estimates (including a public affairs estimate, which is covered in another class)

Mission analysis outputs should include:
- A restated mission
- The joint force commander’s initial intent statement
- The JFC’s planning guidance
- The initial commander’s critical information requirements (CCIR)

3. Course of Action Development: A COA is a potential way (solution, method) to accomplish the assigned mission. The staff develops COAs to provide options to the commander, all oriented on accomplishing the military end state. A good COA accomplishes the mission within the commander’s guidance, provides flexibility to meet unforeseen events during execution, and positions the joint force for future operations. It also gives components the maximum latitude for initiative. Public Affairs personnel should analyze COAs for their likely media, public information, public diplomacy, internal information and community engagement consequences. During the planning process, the PAO joins the planning team and works to develop a PA plan that fully supports each separate course of action being developed by the group. A PAO may be asked to develop PA separate courses of action, but normally the focus is on how the PAO will support each separate and distinct COA being developed by the planning team.

Each course of action consists of the type of military action to occur, the action’s purpose, who will take the action, when/where the action will occur and how the action will occur.

4. COA Analysis and wargaming: This is the analysis process of closely examining potential COAs to reveal details that will allow the commander and staff to tentatively identify COAs that are valid, and then compare these COAs. COA analysis identifies advantages and disadvantages of each proposed friendly COA. The commander and staff analyze each tentative COA separately according to the commander’s guidance. While time-consuming, COA analysis should answer two primary questions: Is the COA feasible, and is it acceptable?

A solid analysis of a proposed COA should include: potential decision points, task organization adjustment, identification of possible plan branches and sequels, identification of high-value targets, and the advantages and disadvantages of the COA.

Wargaming is the primary means to conduct COA analysis. Wargaming is a conscious attempt to visualize the flow of the operation, given joint force strengths and dispositions, adversary capabilities and possible COAs, the Operational Area, and other aspects of the operational environment. Each critical event within a proposed COA should be wargamed based upon time available using the action, reaction and counteraction method of friendly and/or opposing force interaction. The basic wargaming method (modified to fit the specific mission and operational environment) can apply to noncombat as well as combat operations. PA personnel must anticipate the strengths and weakness of each COA from the perspective of the media, the various publics (including our diverse internal audiences), key individual and group influencers, the public diplomacy environment and those communities that will be affected by the operation.

5. COA Comparison Process: In the COA comparison, the staff evaluates all COAs against established evaluation criteria and selects the COA that best accomplishes the mission. The commander
The Adaptive Planning and Execution System and Joint Operation Planning Process (continued)

reviews the criteria list and adds or deletes as he sees fit. The number of evaluation criteria will vary, but there should be enough to differentiate COAs. Consequently, COAs are not compared with each other, but rather they are individually evaluated against the criteria that are established by the staff and commander. Public affairs personnel must provide the commander and staff with substantive input regarding the supportability, advantages and disadvantages of each COA from a public affairs perspective.

6. COA Approval: Members of the staff brief their recommendation to the commander on the COA comparison and the analysis and wargaming results, including a review of important supporting information. The staff determines the best COA to recommend to the commander. (JP 5-0, pg IV-40) PAOs must also be prepared to recommend a particular COA and provide background and reasoning for such a recommendation. The commander then selects a COA for further planning. It should be noted that the commander may choose a COA different from the one recommended by the staff, or develop and select an entirely new COA based on preferred aspects of the briefed COAs.

7. Plan or Order Development: During plan or order development, the commander and staff, in collaboration with subordinate and supporting components and organizations, expand the approved COA into a detailed joint contingency plan or OPORD by first developing an executable CONOPS — the eventual centerpiece of the contingency plan or OPORD. This is the “blue print” for execution of the operation and all supporting plans. PAOs will be required to coordinate and complete the public affairs annex to an operational order and to provide public affairs input to all aspects of order development. In particular, public affairs input may be required in the detailed planning for civil affairs, military information support operations and information operations.
Deliberate and Crisis Action Planning

Joint operation planning is an adaptive process. It occurs in a networked, collaborative environment, which requires dialogue among senior leaders, concurrent and parallel plan development, and collaboration across multiple planning levels. Clear strategic guidance and frequent interaction between senior leaders and planners promote an early, shared understanding of the complex operational problem presented, strategic and military end states, objectives, mission, planning assumptions, considerations, risks and other key guidance factors. This facilitates responsive plan development and modification, resulting in constantly up-to-date plans. The focus is on developing plans that contain a variety of viable, flexible options for commanders.

Deliberate Planning: Deliberate planning encompasses the preparation of plans that occur in non-crisis situations. It is used to develop campaign and contingency plans for a broad range of activities based on requirements identified in the Guidance for Employment of the Force, Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, or other planning directives. Deliberate planning is executed through the use of APEX system and the JOPP as discussed previously.

Crisis Action Planning: A crisis is an incident or situation that typically develops rapidly and creates a condition of such diplomatic, economic, or military importance that the president or SecDef considers a commitment of U.S. military forces and resources to achieve national objectives. It may occur with little or no warning. It is fast-breaking and requires accelerated decision making. CAP activities are similar to deliberate planning activities, but CAP is based on dynamic, real-world conditions. CAP activities may be performed sequentially or in parallel, with supporting and subordinate plans or operation orders being developed concurrently. When circumstances impose severe time constraints on the executing command, the commander and the staff must allocate enough time to develop a feasible COA, time to coordinate critical details, and time to prepare for execution. The commander and the staff must be thoroughly familiar with potential contingencies or missions and the individuals involved with planning must know their roles in the planning process. If rapid planning is to be successful, both mission planning and preparation requirements are conducted concurrently. The speed with which a unit can plan an operation varies with the complexity of the mission, the experience of the commander and the staff, and mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available-time available factors.
**PA role within the Joint Operation Planning Process**

Although the PA’s role has been discussed throughout this lesson, the following is specific guidance from JP-3-61, Chapter III.

The first consideration in PA planning is the commander’s intent and desired end state. PA planners consider how desired and undesired effects of PA activities influence the information environment and the accomplishment of the JFC’s mission.

PA planners establish and maintain a routine, ongoing relationship with other planners within the combatant command and JTF. Synchronization across the staff facilitates the availability of services and support required to execute PA activities. PA planning should include coordination with the Host Nation, the country team, Official Government Agencies, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs, as appropriate (JP 3-61, pg III-6).

PA planners focus on developing situational understanding of the operational environment to include media infrastructure, capability and bias, as well as the social and cultural characteristics of key areas. PA planners must participate in all cross functional staff planning sessions and provide input at each phase of the planning process.

In all cases staff officers and NCOs in the PA shop will attend planning sessions. The battle rhythm of these planning sessions can be very intense and the PA representative must be diligent in attendance and meeting all suspenses. As with any meeting the PA representatives must keep the PA “actual” and other leaders in the PA office abreast of new developments and pending decisions that might affect the operation or require high level input.

A good place for the PAO to sit in Wargaming is with the “Red Team” that is role playing the enemy COA. In this framework the PAO can express the questions and challenges the media may exhibit on the operation (although the PAO should be careful to ensure the command does not identify or see the media as an enemy).

*Photo courtesy of www.todaysmilitary.com*
Conclusion

Today's battlefield is a dynamic, chaotic environment where communication plays a key role in the outcome. PAOs are postured to support the commander achieve mission success in this fluid, information-dominant battlefield. Military PA is also a critical link between the warriors on the battlefield and the citizenry they represent. It’s a critical and complex job. Yet, when conducted effectively the PA mission will have a significant impact on operations, from the individual service member and his family on through to the national strategic level. You should now have a basic understanding of how the PA planning process works and what your role will be in that process.
References and Additional Resources

JP 1 (2007, w/Change 1 2009) Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the US
JP 5-0 (2011) Joint Operation Planning
ADP 5-0 (2012) The Operations Process
Air Force Instruction 10-403 (2012), Development Planning and Execution
Navy Warfare Publication 5-01 (2007), Navy Planning