MCWP 5-10

Marine Corps Planning Process

U.S. Marine Corps

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FOREWORD

Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-10, *Marine Corps Planning Process*, was first published in January 2000 as MCWP 5-1. Since that time, Marine Corps forces at all echelons of command have used the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP) to conduct the range of military operations. The use of design over the last decade suggests that design is more than conceptual planning which establishes aims, objectives, and intentions.

A more critical role of design is to promote understanding of the current situation as a basis for broad solutions. While design establishes the nature of the problem, the inclusion of a design methodology in this revision aids commanders, staffs, and planners in determining the problem set and a framework for solving them. The publication's design methodology reflects a belief that sufficient complexity can exist at all levels of warfare and across the conflict continuum to include tactical situations that will require an understanding of the set of problems that hinder movement from the current state to the desired state of an operational environment.

Among all critical factors bearing on military operations, time is *defining*. The MCPP helps Marines win the time fight through a promotion of intuitive understanding, commander's intent, and the use of task and purpose when operating inside an established paradigm. Another time aid is the center of gravity techniques used to determine which of the actions that address a problem set will be decisive. These visions of decisiveness inform the convergence of combat power through main and supporting efforts and resource priorities.

The publication focuses primarily on commanders with staffs; however, any Marine required to plan operations should know the planning process well enough to determine the problem, envision a desired state, and develop options for achieving that state.

This publication supersedes MCWP 5-10, *Marine Corps Planning Process*, dated 24 August 2010.

MCWP 5-10 implements North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Standardization Agreement (STANAG) 2014, *NATO Formats for Orders and Designation of Timing, Locations, and Boundaries*.

Reviewed and approved this date.

CARLOS O. URBINA

Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps

Director, Command Element – Information Warfare Division

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CHAPTER 1

PLANNING OVERVIEW

Planning is the art and science of envisioning a desired future and laying out effective ways of bringing it about.

—Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 5, *Planning*

MCDP 5, *Planning*, describes planning as an essential part of the broader field of command and control. Command and control enhances the commander's ability to make sound and timely decisions. Effective decision-making requires both the situational understanding to recognize the essence of a given problem and the creative ability to devise a practical solution. Hence, an essential function of planning is to promote understanding of the problem—the difference between existing and desired conditions—and to devise ways to solve it. Planning involves elements of both art and science, combining analysis and calculation with intuition, inspiration, and creativity. The Marine Corps employs several planning processes:

- **Troop Leading Steps.** There are six steps that align with the acronym BAMCIS—begin planning, arrange for reconnaissance, make reconnaissance, complete the plan, issue the order, and supervise. While these steps have wide applicability, they are generally used by small unit leaders who lack a staff.
- **Marine Corps Planning Process.** For Marine units with staffs, the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP), as described in this publication, is a proven, intellectually rigorous approach to planning. It is a six-step process comprised of problem framing, course of action (COA) development, COA war game, COA comparison and decision, orders development, and transition. See figure 1-1.
- **Joint Planning Process.** Marine Corps forces also operate in a joint environment. Joint force commanders and their staffs use joint planning process, as described by Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning*, for strategic plans and operational-level campaigns. Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) command elements, which may serve as or interact with a joint force headquarters, must be capable of operating effectively within a joint planning process framework.
- **Rapid Response Planning Process.** Used primarily by Marine expeditionary units (MEUs), the rapid response planning process (R2P2) is a time-leveraged planning process that enables a MEU to begin execution of an assigned task within 6 hours. To do so, MEUs conduct the deliberate planning—within the context of the intended area of responsibility—as well as the rehearsal of potential missions, such as humanitarian assistance/disaster relief or noncombatant evacuation operations, during pre-deployment training. Accordingly, the R2P2, when coupled with the extensive use of standing operating procedures (SOPs), enables a MEU to focus its execution planning on those aspects of a problem unique to the current situation.

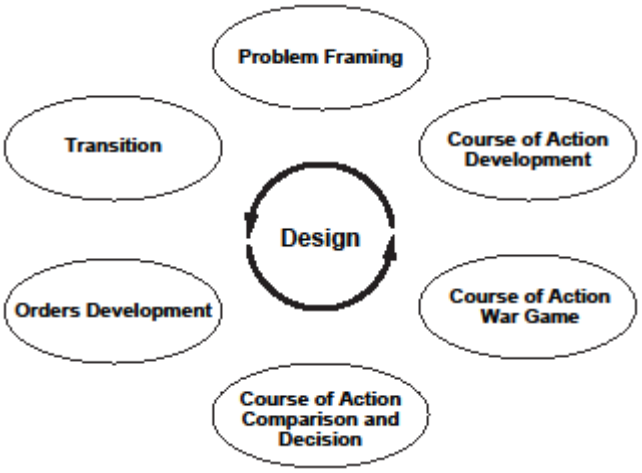

Figure 1-1. Overview of the Marine Corps Planning Process.

DOCTRINAL UNDERPINNINGS

Planning should never be viewed as an isolated activity or process. Not only is planning a critical element of command and control, but planning along with execution and assessment comprise the operation's process. Planning is the basis for execution while assessment determines how and why the environment has changed as a result of execution, which then informs subsequent planning and assessment. While that description suggests a sequence to the relationship, these three essential military activities are cyclical in nature. Individually and together, they interact and evolve over time through countless, interrelated events.

Because situations change continuously, Marines make decisions in the face of relative uncertainty. While it is natural to seek additional information to lessen that uncertainty, it usually comes at the expense of time. Success in a fluid environment demands Marines to think critically, examine the nature of the problem, as well as the purpose of the operation, and learn and adapt throughout the entire operation's process.

Many factors within the operational environment, some of which cannot be controlled, contribute to making planning endeavors complex and nonlinear. These factors include: enemy actions; the actions of other actors and stakeholders; other friendly, neutral, and threat networks; updated intelligence; changing resources; revised guidance from higher headquarters (HHQ); input provided as a result of operations; and concurrent planning by subordinate, adjacent, and supporting units. Planners and commanders should expect problems to evolve even while they try to solve them.

While this publication presents the six steps of the MCPP sequentially, planning seldom occurs in a straightforward, linear manner. For example, understanding gained during COA development and COA war game steps will often require planners to revisit the problem framing step of the

planning process. To better appreciate the lack of a rigid, fixed planning sequence, planners need to understand the planning hierarchy that is essential to the effective application of the MCPP.

As described in MCDP 5, *conceptual* planning is the highest level of planning. It establishes aims, objectives, and intentions and involves the development of broad concepts for action. In general, conceptual planning is a process of creative synthesis supported by analysis. It generally corresponds to the *art* of war. Developing tactical, operational, or strategic concepts for the overall conduct of military actions is conceptual planning.

At the lowest level of the hierarchy is *detailed* planning, which is concerned with translating the broad concept into a complete and realistic plan. Detailed planning flows from conceptual planning and generally corresponds to the *science* of war and encompasses the specifics of implementation. Detailed planning generally is an analytical process of decomposing concepts into executable tasks, although it likely involves some elements of synthesis as well. Detailed planning works out the scheduling, coordination, or technical issues involved with moving, sustaining, administering, and directing military forces. Examples of detailed planning include load plans and air tasking orders. Unlike conceptual planning, detailed planning does not involve the establishment of objectives. Detailed planning works out actions to accomplish the objectives.

Between the highest and lowest levels of the hierarchy is *functional* planning, which involves elements of both conceptual and detailed planning. Functional planning is concerned with developing and integrating the supporting plans for discrete functional activities that include at a minimum maneuver, fires, logistics, intelligence, information, and force protection.

Normally, due to the importance of conceptual planning, the commander directs the formulation of plans at this level. While the commander is also engaged in both functional and detailed planning, the specific aspects of these are usually developed by the planners and staff.

Conceptual planning provides the basis for all subsequent planning and should progress from the general to the specific. For example, the commander's operational approach leads to the unit's concept of operations (CONOPS) as well as to supporting functional concepts. These concepts then lead to the specifics of execution.

The planning dynamic does not operate in only one direction. Conceptual planning must be responsive to functional constraints. For example, the realities of deployment schedules (a functional concern) can dictate employment schemes (a conceptual concern). Functional planning in turn must be responsive to more detailed requirements of execution. In this way, the levels of planning influence each other. Conceptual, functional, and detailed planning are seldom conducted sequentially because the situation and available information are continually evolving. While conceptual, functional, and detailed planning are described in sequence, in practice they are conducted in a more interactive manner due to uncertainty and time.

During the Korean War, General MacArthur succinctly restated his campaign concept in his *Far East Message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, "Operation planned mid-September is amphibious landing of a two-division corps in rear of enemy lines for purpose of enveloping and destroying enemy forces in conjunction with attack from south by Eighth Army." Guided by this design, his staff planned multiple COAs. This planning revealed that the most strategically advantageous COA - an amphibious assault at Inchon - also involved the greatest operational risks. General MacArthur accepted the risks of landing at Inchon and subsequent staff actions focused on the functional and detailed planning necessary to both flesh out the COA and minimize attendant risks. The latter included using a discarded COA, a landing at Kunsan, as the basis for a deception effort.

In 1864 and 1865, General Grant's strategic concept called for coordinated military actions in Virginia, Georgia, and Tennessee. These actions were complemented by a naval blockade and put overwhelming pressure on all of the Confederate armies, thereby removing their ability to shift resources to reinforce any one army.

SYNOPSIS OF THE MARINE CORPS PLANNING PROCESS

A commander may begin planning on his/her own initiative, based on indications and warnings, or in response to specific guidance and direction from HHQ. The planning process is designed to promote understanding among the commander, planners, staff, and subordinate commanders regarding the nature of a given problem and the options for solving it. The plans that result may be considered hypotheses that will be tested and refined as a result of execution and assessment. The six steps of the MCPP are—

- **Problem Framing.** Problem framing uses a design methodology supported by staff actions to enhance the understanding of the operational environment and the subsequent problem set. Problem framing identifies what the command must accomplish, when and where it must be done and, most importantly, why—the purpose of the operation. The mission statement articulates the "in order to," the ultimate purpose of the operation. The commander's intent restates and amplifies the purpose of the operation, which is enduring. No amount of subsequent planning can solve a problem that is misidentified and/or insufficiently understood. It is imperative that commanders identify and solve the correct problem. Therefore, problem framing is the most important step in planning. The understanding that results from problem framing allows the commander to visualize and describe how the operation may unfold, which is articulated in the commander's operational approach, a broad framework for solving the problems identified. As planning continues, the commander's guidance becomes more detailed, providing additional clarity and operational context.
- **COA Development.** The COA development step produces options for accomplishing the mission in accordance with commander's operational approach. It provides options for the

commander and promotes further understanding of the environment, problem set, and the approach to solving the problem.

- **COA War Game.** This step seeks to improve the COA by testing and stressing it against an enemy and/or adversary, or other forms of friction in operations such as humanitarian assistance, in the operational environment. Planners identify and record flaws for correction in the refined COA. Done well, COA wargaming improves COAs while enhancing a better understanding of the environment, the problem set, and the forces (both friendly and adversarial) involved. Planners evaluate refined COAs using the commander's chosen criteria.
- **COA Comparison and Decision.** During COA comparison and decision, the commander reviews the advantages and disadvantages of the options. The commander decides how to accomplish the mission, either by approving a COA as formulated or by assimilating what has been learned into a new COA that may need further refinement and wargaming.
- **Orders Development.** The orders development step translates the commander's decision into oral, written, and graphic direction sufficient to guide subordinate planning, execution, and initiative.
- **Transition.** The transition step may involve a wide range of briefs, drills, or rehearsals necessary to ensure a successful shift of situational awareness from planning to execution. Transition addresses the human element. The written order is initially well-understood only by the small group that wrote it. Transition enables the far larger group of executors (current operations staff, subordinate unit commanders and staff, combat operations center members, etc.) to comprehensively understand the plan. A number of factors can influence the transition step, such as echelon of command, mission complexity, and most importantly, time available.

Throughout the planning process, commanders and planners must strive to increase their understanding of the problem set, the plan, and developments in the operational environment. Lead planners must seek a common understanding across the staff, to include those not assigned to the core planning team. Providing focused, preparatory readings for upcoming briefs to commanders and primary staff officers, with sufficient time for comprehension, will better prepare leaders and planners to engage in substantive discussions. Warning orders (WARNORDs) and other focused communications greatly facilitate concurrent and parallel planning, while driving a higher level of integration. Videos, graphics, and other modern media, used in all facets of planning, briefs, and orders, can greatly enhance knowledge and understanding.

TENETS OF THE MARINE CORPS PLANNING PROCESS

The tenets of the MCPP—top-down planning, single-battle concept, and integrated planning—derive from the doctrine of maneuver warfare. These tenets guide the commander's use of the staff to plan and execute military operations that include campaigns involving day-to-day operations such as security cooperation activities and exercises.

- **Top-Down Planning.** Planning is a fundamental responsibility of command. The commander uses planning to increase his/her understanding of the environment, the problem set, and the subsequent solution. The commander's personal involvement is critical to successful, centralized planning. The commander must not merely participate in planning, but must drive the process to the degree that the published plan is a clear manifestation of the commander's decision regarding how to best accomplish the mission. In keeping with our institutional warfighting philosophy, this commander-driven, centralized planning provides the necessary foundation for decentralized execution, an important way Marine Corps forces leverage the time-competitive nature of military operations to gain and maintain advantage relative to the enemy/adversary.
- **Single-Battle Concept.** In planning, to maximize opportunities for success, commanders and planners seek to purposely arrange forces in time, space, event, and purpose. Such arrangements, to include phasing, main and supporting efforts, and the relationship among decisive, shaping, and sustaining forces and activities, are well considered and never arbitrary. During execution, events, activities, or operations in one part of the battlespace often have profound and consequent effects in and on other areas and events. Commanders and planners must, therefore, always view the battlespace as an indivisible entity—a single battle. Commanders cultivate the single-battle mindset throughout planning, primarily through articulated understanding of their higher commander's purpose and their planning guidance and intent. Global integration is now the norm for conducting operations, so commanders and staffs must consider impacts beyond geographic boundaries that have traditionally bounded planning considerations.
- **Integrated Planning**. Leveraging top-down planning and a keen appreciation for the MAGTF single-battle concept, integrated planning seeks the coordination of actions by all elements of the force toward a common purpose. There are both hierarchical and lateral perspectives to planning integration. Hierarchically, the MAGTF command element integrates planning with each of its subordinate elements, as well as its HHQ. Laterally, the MAGTF's subordinate elements integrate their planning with each other to generate synergy and to leverage the full capacity and capability of the force. As Marine Corps forces fight as part of a larger force, lateral integration with adjacent and supporting joint and combined forces is equally important. Integrated planning results from the assignment of personnel to the operational planning team (OPT), to include joint and combined force planners, who are armed with an appropriate level of knowledge of their respective organization or functional activity. It will also likely include the provision of Marine Corps planners to other joint and combined units. The key to integrated planning is to involve the right personnel from the right organizations as early as possible to consider a broader range of factors, reduce omissions, and share information as widely as possible. See Appendix D for information on organizing for planning.

Overall, planning is a complex process of interacting activities with feedback loops. The six steps of the MCPP aid in understanding and generally follow a sequence. However, planning is not a simple sequence of steps. Any step in the process may inform previous steps. For example,

conceptualizing a COA generally follows establishing goals and objectives, but it is difficult to establish meaningful goals and objectives without some idea of how to accomplish them. Another example, new information received during orders development may reveal a weakness in the CONOPS that would require the development of new COAs or a branch plan.