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The operational objective drives the Center of Gravity (COG) analysis. A COG is the enemy's main source of strength in pursuit of that objective. Once identified, planners break it into critical capabilities, requirements, and vulnerabilities in order to design direct or indirect approaches with acceptable risk.

Analysis begins with the objective. Doctrine made clear that a COG is “directly related to the objective to be accomplished” (Vego, 2009, p. VII-26). It is the hub of strength, not a target or location. To identify it, planners use Critical Factors analysis. They list critical strengths, test them against the objective, and determine which strength delivers the result. From this candidate COG, they then deconstruct: critical capabilities show what the COG does, requirements show what enables it, and vulnerabilities reveal exploitable entry points. Importantly, the COG must come from strength. Weaknesses are not the hub. They are the seams that expose a path to affect the hub. Red Teams challenge the staff's assumptions by taking the adversary's perspective, which helps prevent mirror-imaging and sharpens the analysis.

At Leyte, the Allied operational objective was to seize the island to provide basing for follow-on operations in the Philippines and to interdict Japanese sea lines of communication. Allied strengths included fast carrier task forces for sea control, amphibious lift, mobile logistics, and

intelligence from ULTRA and guerrilla networks. Their weaknesses were divided fleet command arrangements, exposed amphibious shipping, limited escorts, and slow airfield development. Japanese strengths included the Center Force's massed surface power, interior access to multiple straits, land-based air on Luzon and Formosa, and proficiency in night surface tactics. Their weaknesses were acute fuel shortages, shortage of trained aviators, fractured Army-Navy command, and thin sustainment forward.

The Allied operational COG was the fast carrier task forces, since they enabled sea control, protection of the amphibious force, and interdiction of Japanese approaches. If those carriers were lost, the landings would have been isolated. The Japanese operational COG was the Center Force, the only concentrated surface strength able to threaten the Allied lodgment at the decisive place. Carrier decoys and land-based air were supporting, but they did not directly deliver the operational objective of defeating the landings.

Operational factors shaped this contest. Space defined the geometry: interior straits offered Japan flexibility, while long lines of communication stretched Allied logistics. Time favored the Allies once lodgment was secure, but Halsey's decision to chase carriers risked giving Japan a fleeting window at San Bernardino. Force balance showed Allied superiority in naval aviation, but Japanese mass in surface gunnery remained dangerous. Information tipped heavily toward the Allies through ULTRA, but uneven command arrangements blunted how that knowledge was acted on. COG analysis cannot be separated from these factors, since they frame whether an identified strength is sustainable or vulnerable.

Design flowed from this analysis. Commanders debated direct and indirect approaches. A direct approach would neutralize the Center Force before it reached the lodgment. An indirect approach would exploit vulnerabilities in fuel, scouting, and coordination. Means included carriers,

submarines, escorts, and afloat logistics. Risk appeared in how functions were weighted and sequenced. At San Bernardino Strait, misallocation of striking power and command friction allowed a Japanese penetration, nearly leading to disaster off Samar. That episode showed that accurate analysis of COGs does not guarantee success if execution misaligns functions against the objective. Protecting one's own COG while threatening the adversary's remains the test of operational design.

This analysis also highlighted the role of operational functions. Command and control, fires, protection, sustainment, and intelligence were all present, but not all mattered equally. Their weight depended on the operational objective. At Leyte, sustainment and protection had to be weighted alongside fires because the entire lodgment hinged on sea control and logistics endurance. Doctrine warns that failure to integrate these functions undermines effectiveness. Commanders cannot treat them as a checklist. The art lies in sequencing and balancing them against the operational objective.

Leyte showed that everything starts with the objective. From there, planners look for the enemy's real source of strength, name it as the COG, and then break it apart into capabilities, requirements, and vulnerabilities. That step gives them options. They can go at it directly, or work around it indirectly, hitting weak links until the COG falters. But the lesson runs deeper. Analysis points you in the right direction, but success is about how commanders actually put things together. They have to line up functions, factors, and resources with the objective. If they fail to do that, analysis alone means nothing. Protecting their own COG while pushing the enemy toward culmination is what turns planning into victory.

References

Vego, M. (2009). Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice. U.S. Naval War College Press.