

Preventing a Short Jump across a Wide Ditch

Fully Embracing Mission Command to Avoid a Multi-Domain Disaster

Maj. Robert Rose, U.S. Army

A short jump is certainly easier than a long one; but no one wanting to get across a wide ditch would begin by jumping half-way.

—Carl von Clausewitz

The American military risks a short jump across a wide ditch with the multi-domain operations (MDO) concept. The concept assumes an American advantage in rapid and agile decision-making due to mission command. Mission command provides the tempo and agility required to succeed in complex environments, pursue maneuver warfare, and succeed on the multi-domain battlefield. However, the Army has only partially embraced mission command. Unless the Army fully embraces mission command through organizational, doctrinal, and training changes, it could make a halfway jump into a military disaster.

In pursuing MDO, the Army assumes an advantage in mission command against peer threats. We need to challenge that assumption in Russia's case. The U.S. Army must recognize the strategic, cultural, and hierarchical pressures that inhibit such an advantage. To overcome those barriers to mission command and to enable maneuver warfare, the Army should (1) clarify the vision of mission command to allow soldiers to properly conceptualize the vision; (2) strengthen unit

cohesion and flatten hierarchies to produce an entrepreneurial organizational culture; (3) adopt a decision-making model based on satisficing that supports rapid and flexible decisions; and (4) conduct regular large-scale, force-on-force exercises that simulate the complexity of warfare to develop the frames of references necessary for mission command. These changes will enable the decentralized, high tempo, agile decision-making required for MDO to succeed.

MDO recognizes five domains (ground, air, maritime, space, and cyber/electromagnetic spectrum). Although the United States has dominated these domains in Afghanistan and Iraq, it must prepare to operate under conditions in which future adversaries have windows of dominance in select domains. According to MDO, competitors have invested in antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) systems to provide layered standoff. This standoff could allow them to use force to create a *fait accompli*, which the joint force would struggle to penetrate at an acceptable cost and without risking escalating a limited conflict to a general war. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet (TP) 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, states that "Army forces penetrate and dis-integrate A2/AD systems and exploit the resultant freedom of maneuver to achieve strategic objectives (win) and force a return



Marines with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment (Reinforced), Marine Rotational Force–Darwin, check the feed tray of an M240B machine gun on a support-to-ground-maneuvers range 23 June 2021 during Exercise Southern Jackaroo at Mount Bunday Training Area, Australia. Marines, Australian Army soldiers, and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers exercised their combined ability to provide mounted and dismounted support to trilateral maneuver elements utilizing direct and indirect fire support weapons. Defense ties between the United States, allies, and partner nations are critical to regional security, cooperation, and integration of our combined capabilities. (Photo by Sgt. Micha Pierce, U.S. Marine Corps)

to competition on favorable terms.”¹ In order to penetrate A2/AD systems, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, explains that the Army will exploit weak points and seize positions of relative advantage through maneuver warfare.²

Maneuver warfare seeks systemic disruption. In 1989, the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, *Warfighting*, provided the most succinct definition of maneuver warfare: “A warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope.”³ It repeatedly out-decides the enemy and exploits opportunities until they are in such chaos that they cease to provide effective resistance.

B. H. Liddell Hart described maneuver warfare as water overcoming an obstacle: the water does not approach the obstacle with a centralized plan. It tests it at countless points until it finds weaknesses then rushes in to create and exploit breakthroughs.⁴ Edward Luttwak explained that “the whole operation rests on the ceaseless maintenance of momentum,” which becomes supreme during the breakthrough phase.⁵ If momentum is lost, the enemy can plug his gaps and encircle vulnerable units that have broken through.

Achieving this tempo requires commanders to empower subordinates to act with disciplined initiative through mission command. Low-level leaders can more quickly understand the situation at their level and exploit opportunities than senior leaders.

William Lind argued that “only a decentralized military can have a fast OODA [observe, orient, decide, act] Loop.”⁶ A force that more rapidly cycles through OODA loops than an enemy will cause its foe to lose cohesion and collapse. By making decisions more quickly than the enemy can react, this form of decision-making can exploit enemy vulnerabilities that arise from the natural friction of warfare faster than enemies can fix them.

The concepts of OODA loop cycling and maneuver warfare provide a solution against modern adversaries. Our adversaries are complex and adaptive, and they possess the resiliency to react to our actions in difficult-to-predict, asymmetric ways. Centralized solutions cannot overcome such adversaries except through overwhelming attrition. OODA loop cycling and maneuver warfare can achieve a level of systemic disruption to overcome our adversaries’ resiliency at an acceptable cost. MDO attempts to pursue this theory of victory, but we must maintain a higher tempo of operations than our adversaries for this theory to succeed.

MDO assumes the American military can decide at a more rapid tempo than its adversaries. Gen. David Perkins, the former commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, called maneuver warfare our “ace in the hole” against adversaries such as Russia that take an attritional approach to warfare.⁷ Perkins claimed that we should pursue maneuver warfare, because the “enemy does not have that agility, does not empower subordinates to do that.”⁸ TP 525-3-1 similarly assumes that Russia “organizes and operates forces through highly centralized command and control structures that have difficulty adapting to rapid tactical changes or complexity.”⁹

These are dangerous assumptions. Robert Leonhard warned that overconfidence in maneuver warfare could prove disastrous if “the U.S. is engaged with a better rival [than Iraq] ... that is capable of showing initiative in every echelon of command.”¹⁰ If America was to attempt high-risk maneuver warfare against an enemy that operates at quicker tempo, it would risk disaster.

Gen. Mark Milley voiced concerns over the Army’s decision-making: “I think we’re over-centralized, overly bureaucratic, and overly risk-averse—which is the opposite of what we’re going to need.”¹¹ He observed a trend in America’s way of war. The Army has tended toward centralization and attritional warfare rather

than decentralization and maneuver warfare. It never fully embraced mission command.

The Army first codified mission command and maneuver warfare under AirLand Battle doctrine. Gen. Donn Starry produced the AirLand Battle concept in 1982. The concept owed much to Prussia’s *Auftragstaktik* (mission type tactics), which was translated into “mission command.” AirLand Battle introduced the operational level of war and revolved around four tenets: initiative, depth of operations, agility, and synchronization.

However, when Col. John Boyd, the father of the OODA loop, met the writers of the doctrine, he complained that *synchronization* was antithetical to maneuver warfare. He argued that *synchronization* means evening up the front line and waiting for slower units. “An army that relies on synchronization is not an army that practices maneuver warfare ... This idea of synchronization will ruin the Army.”¹²

MDO continues the chorus of synchronization. TP 525-3-1 tries to avoid using the word “synchronize” (only six occurrences) but delves deeply into the thesaurus to repeatedly use synonyms such as “integrate” (seventy-three occurrences), “converge” (ninety-four occurrences), “federate” (three occurrences), and “synergy” (twenty-three occurrences).¹³ The pamphlet begrudgingly accepts the trade-off between tempo and synchronization: “Commanders will invariably accept less-than-perfect multi-domain synchronization in order to maintain a higher tempo.”¹⁴ Leonhard’s criticism of AirLand Battle could apply to MDO: “The developers of AirLand Battle flirted with maneuver but have been unable to shake off American military traditions of the past ... the irresistible song of technology, fire, and mass destruction continue to lure American thought back to the battle calculus of attrition.”¹⁵ To understand America’s difficulty in adopting mission command and maneuver warfare, it is important to identify the mechanisms that gave rise to these concepts in the Prussian army.

Prussia’s Adoption of *Auftragstaktik*

Prussia’s geopolitical position provided the impetus for maneuver warfare. Prussia was economically weak and vulnerably located in the center of Europe. It needed to pursue wars that were *kurtz und vives* (short and lively).¹⁶ If its adversaries could concentrate

their resources on Prussia, they could overwhelm it in a war of attrition. This threat provided the impetus for *Bewegungskrieg* (maneuver warfare), which was enabled by “an army with a high level of battlefield aggression, an officer corps that tended to launch attacks no matter what the odds, and a flexible system of command that left a great deal of initiative, sometimes too much, in the hands of lower-ranking commanders.”¹⁷

Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder codified the concepts that became *Auftragstaktik*. He had a Clausewitzian understanding of war as the interplay of chance, friction, and the fog of war. Since no plan survives first contact with the enemy, as Moltke reputedly said, he put a premium on flexibility. Strategy was a “system of expedients.”¹⁸ He emphasized decentralized and rapid decisions. Victory depended on the ability of subordinates to identify and exploit fleeting opportunities for the benefit of the strategic objective. He prepared the army to take advantage of these chances with minimal guidance. During the Franco-Prussian War he “had no firm plan for his operation against France. He never had one for any of his campaigns.”¹⁹ No one had the foresight to plan the events that led to the decisive

Prussian victories over Austria at Königgrätz or the French at Sedan. Both battles came about through aggressive, independent action by subordinate commanders.

Prussia enabled *Auftragstaktik* through a flattened hierarchy amongst officers. The state was founded on a compact between the monarch and aristocrats who maintained near sovereignty over their fiefs and dominated the officer corps. Acknowledging their independence in battle was not only effective decision-making but part of the Prussian

social contract. It would have been unseemly to micromanage an aristocrat even though he was serving as a subordinate.²⁰ Prussian officers celebrated stories of subordinates defying their commanders to act with their own initiative. As Prince Frederick Charles admonished an officer, “His majesty made you a major because he believed you would know when not to follow orders.”²¹

The Difficulty of Translating *Auftragstaktik* into Mission Command

America has faced challenges adopting Prussia’s model. The United States has a strategic culture that promotes risk aversion during wars. The oceans provide safety while America’s industrial base ensures that time is in its favor. These advantages allow America to build up overwhelming combat power to win wars. With a few notable exceptions, often from periods of relative power equivalence such as Winfield Scott in Mexico, Ulysses S. Grant at Vicksburg, or Douglas MacArthur in Korea, America has followed an approach to war that emphasizes attrition over maneuver. As with Dwight Eisenhower’s broad front strategy, the attritional approach relies on synchronizing combat power to efficiently and dependably grind down opponents rather than achieving the tempo necessary to exploit the opportunities that lead to an enemy’s systemic disruption. This approach emphasizes risk mitigation and control over risk tolerance and subordinate initiative.

Recent operations have reinforced the Army’s risk aversion. Ideally, mission command would flourish in counterinsurgency, which should be driven by small-unit operations. Mission command allows low-level leaders the initiative to adapt to the unique situations in each of their areas of operation. Britain controlled its empire through an extreme version of decentralized control that was more akin to “umpiring.”²² However, with success so difficult to measure in Afghanistan and Iraq, commanders veered toward risk aversion. Commanders feared casualties and the “strategic corporal” whose tactical mistakes could have strategic impacts. They emphasized restrictive rules of engagement, constant oversight, and Byzantine approval processes. These methods were the antithesis of mission command.

American military culture further hinders mission command by a tendency toward technophilia.

Maj. Robert Rose, U.S.

Army, is the executive officer for 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He has previously served as the lead counter threat finance planner for Operation Enduring Freedom and as an observer controller trainer at the Joint Readiness Training Center. He commanded companies in 1st Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment; and 3rd Battalion, 353rd Infantry Regiment. He holds an MPP from Harvard University, an MPhil from Cambridge University, and a BS from the United States Military Academy.

It assumes technology can pierce through the fog of war. Robert Bateman expected that our improved communications capabilities would signal the “Death of Auftragstaktik.”²³ In the 1990s, the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) played into the “technological optimism that has historically animated U.S. defense planning.”²⁴ It engendered visions of a mystical silver bullet that would eliminate Clausewitz’s “fog of war” and allow for quick, decisive victory. Even with the obvious limitations of the RMA, technophilia has found a new lease with endless discussion of technological offsets and “decision dominance.”

“Decision dominance” provides utopian visions of perfectly connected sensors feeding into artificial intelligence (AI) to provide omnipotent understanding for commanders. It reinforces centralization and synchronization. This latest concept ignores the real world friction that prevents systems from talking even in highly regulated warfighter exercises in which simulations replace real sensors.

“Decision dominance” also puts unfound faith in AI. Current machine learning excels at developing algorithms to play games such as Go. Go provides perfect information, limited options, and millions of replays. When problems become less structured, AI fails. After high expectations and billions of miles analyzed, driverless cars have hit a roadblock and occasionally pedestrians. The founder of a failed self-driving vehicle company explained, “Supervised machine learning doesn’t live up to the hype. It isn’t actual artificial intelligence akin to C-3PO. It is a sophisticated pattern-matching tool.”²⁵ While useful for certain problem sets, modern machine learning is unsuited for decision-making in the fog and friction of war, which provides a data set of zero, novel situations, and an enemy who will actively deceive algorithms. If the Army’s investment in AI produces an operational system, opaque algorithms will freeze commanders, as their decision-making will be dominated by untrustworthy and untestable inputs.

Decentralized Decision-Making in Russia

While technology, recent operations, and culture have served to hinder America’s adoption of mission command, the Russian military has trended toward a decentralized, rapid, and flexible system of decision-making. This system emerged through Russia’s

geopolitical vulnerability, strategic culture, and military reforms. From the time of Red Army Chief of Staff Mikhail Tukhachevskii’s reflections on the Russian Civil War, Russian theorists have understood the importance of the operational level of war, the need for the disruption of continual, uninterrupted strikes, and the “operational shock” of maneuver warfare.²⁶ More recently, based on lessons from the 2008 Georgian War, the New Look Reforms have supported maneuver warfare by professionalizing Russia’s force, training rapid decision-making, and decentralizing capabilities. Russia has tested these concepts in Ukraine and Syria.

Russia shares Prussia’s sense of strategic vulnerability. Russia cannot win an attritional war against NATO or China. It needs to pursue a form of warfare that exploits weakness and achieves rapid victories. The Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, calls this “21st Century Blitzkrieg.”²⁷ To stand a chance against the West, Russia must act fast to achieve a *fait accompli*.

Instead of waiting for a synchronized strategy, Russian decision-makers pursue a strategy of tactics guided by a shared vision. Much as Moltke explained that strategy is a “system of expedients,” Russian strategic culture emphasizes flexible tactics adapted toward the current situation. Michael Kofman explains that Russian leaders pursue a strategy common to successful business startups. “The hallmarks of this approach are fail fast, fail cheap, and adjust. It is principally Darwinian, prizing adaptation over a structured strategy.”²⁸ Without a structured strategy, Russian decision-makers can rapidly adapt, exploit success, and abandon failures. “Moscow can fail and try again comfortably within a single U.S. decision-making cycle.”²⁹

The Russian military desires a quicker decision-making process than potential adversaries. Since Soviet days, Russian commanders have used a form of doctrinal template to provide a rapid framework for quick decisions. Russia generously estimates NATO forces require eight hours to produce a brigade-level plan. The Russian military aims to out-decide NATO by reducing its planning process to under six hours.³⁰ It is reforming staff systems to increase decision speed. With this rapid decision-making process, Russia hopes to gain and maintain an advantage in the decisive “initial period of war.”³¹

Russia further improved the decision-making processes of its military with investments in leadership



development and training. The New Look Reforms professionalized the army. By 2015, the number of contract soldiers exceeded the number of conscripts.³² Russia concentrated contract soldiers in a few formations to create a core of units with high levels of combat readiness. These professional soldiers provide initiative at the lowest levels.

Russia emphasizes that subordinate leaders must be comfortable planning without orders from higher as enemy cyberattacks and electronic warfare will disrupt communication. Russian military leadership has called for decentralized management of the battlefield: “Tactical commanders need the authority and initiative to conduct battles in order to meet rapidly developing and changing situations in an effective and timely manner.”³³ To provide tactical commanders with that authority, Russia decentralized cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Russian ground forces have dedicated cyber and electronic warfare assets at the brigade, battalion, and sometimes company level. Russia leaders across echelons practice rapid decision-making in snap exercises that dwarf Western training events.

Crimea proved the value in rapid and decentralized decision-making. As the Ukrainian government fell into disarray, Russia had no concrete plan to seize

Russian soldiers pack up things 7 October 2008 at the Georgian village of Karaleti. Russia had to pull out of the territory surrounding the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under agreements reached after its war with Georgia. (Photo by Sergey Ponomarev, Associated Press)

Crimea. Vladimir Putin instructed Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to create a contingency plan. On the night of 26 February 2014, Russia’s Crimean garrison and some paratroopers began seizing government buildings with minimal guidance.³⁴ Soon the rest of Russia’s networked system of power began arriving in Ukraine. On 28 February, veterans of Afghanistan and Chechnya, athletes, motorcycle clubs, and patriotic groups flew into Crimea to agitate for independence.³⁵ Russia’s rapid actions made it impossible for Kyiv to plan and implement any effective countermeasures.³⁶

By early April, armed groups emerged in the Donbass and proclaimed the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. A key actor in these initial days was Igor Strelkov. Though a retired colonel, there is scant evidence that Putin ever directly ordered Strelkov and his compatriots to the Donbass. Using his own initiative, Strelkov identified Slavyansk as a city vulnerable

to his fifty-two supporters and seized it.³⁷ His initial success led to the creation of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics.

By August 2014, Ukrainian forces threatened to cut the republics in half. Russia rapidly responded. It poured regular units into Ukraine. Ukrainian officials were dumbstruck. Prime Minister Victor Poroshenko took four days to publicly acknowledge the offensive. Before Ukrainian decision-makers could act, Russian forces surrounded several hundred Ukrainian soldiers in Ilovaisk. The Ukrainian commander understood that the Russians were cutting off his only escape route, but he could not obtain permission from his superiors in Kiev to withdraw.³⁸ Russia's rapid actions and Ukraine's slow response would leave hundreds of Ukrainian troops dead. America must recognize the progress Russia has made or risk one of its brigades suffering a similar fate.

To prevent such an outcome, the U.S. Army should adopt the following recommendations to embrace mission command.

Clarify the Vision of Mission Command

The U.S. Army needs to articulate a clear vision of mission command and how it supports maneuver warfare and MDO. Mission command provides the tempo and agility necessary to pursue maneuver warfare and to be successful in future wars, which will be fast, lethal, and complex. Gen. Martin Dempsey provided a vision of mission command in a white paper. He explained that “decentralized approaches will provide us with competitive adaptability and tempo advantages.”³⁹

Unfortunately, Dempsey also diluted mission command's meaning. He called for “all Army leaders [to] understand and apply the Mission Command philosophy habitually to everything they do—training, operations, routine military functions, and daily administrative activities.”⁴⁰ However, mission command is optimized for complex environments that require rapid decision-making. It is appropriate when chance, friction, and fog of war apply.

When problems are not complex and are only complicated, when analysis can reduce ambiguity, when outputs can be predicted, and when tempo is not critical, then centralized decision-making can provide more efficient outcomes than decentralized systems. When

a company is planning a training event, the Eight-Step Training Model provides the centralized control to ensure effective training. When a battalion conducts garrison maintenance, a detailed plan ensures vehicles follow their service schedule. Often, centralized decision-making has value.

To fully explain the value of mission command, the Army needs to provide a clear understanding of maneuver warfare as a theory of victory. Instead of the complete destruction of an enemy force, maneuver warfare seeks systemic disruption. In 1989, MCDP 1 explained maneuver warfare's theory of victory: “Maneuver Warfare is a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope.”⁴¹ Maneuver warfare requires decentralized decision-making to repeatedly out-decide the enemy and exploit opportunities until they are in such chaos that they cease to provide effective resistance. These insights recently resurfaced in TP 525-3-6, *The U.S. Army Functional Concept for Movement and Maneuver: 2020-2040*. This pamphlet explained that maneuver “achieves surprise and gains a temporal advantage. The aim is to shatter the enemy's cohesion ... avoid enemy strengths and attack enemy weaknesses from multiple positions of advantage throughout the depth of the battlefield. The ultimate goal is panic and paralysis for an enemy who has lost the ability to respond to friendly actions effectively.”⁴²

However, TP 525-3-1 does not clearly link mission command and maneuver warfare to a theory of victory. Part of the problem is the muddling of the term maneuver. The Army often defines it simply as the combination of fire and movement to achieve position of advantage rather than a definition based on the disruptive effect on the enemy. This definition leads to a weak conception of maneuver. Nearly every time the Army uses “maneuver,” the term “move” or “movement” would suffice. TP 525-3-1 regularly describes “maneuvering” to positions of advantage.⁴³ Moving to a position of advantage or presenting a dilemma to enemy is meaningless if the enemy can react in a manner and tempo that leads them undisrupted. TP 525-3-1 admits this by discussing the enemy's A2/AD system: “If given time, the enemy will regenerate the system through tactical adaptation, reorganization, and limited

reconstitution.”⁴⁴ Unless the Army is trying to grind down an enemy through attrition, positions of relative advantage and dilemmas only matter if they lead to the systemic disruption of an enemy. Systemic disruption occurs when the resiliency of his system is overcome by rapid and successive shocks that he cannot adapt to in time. It is the rapid and agile decision-making of mission command that allows the systemic disruption of the enemy through maneuver.

Increase Unit Cohesion

Mission command requires agile battlefield entrepreneurs that can make rapid decisions. Developing these entrepreneurs necessitates mutual trust, a shared frame of reference, and a flattened hierarchy as existed amongst the Prussian officer corps. Col. Brandon Teague, an observer coach/trainer from the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), explained,

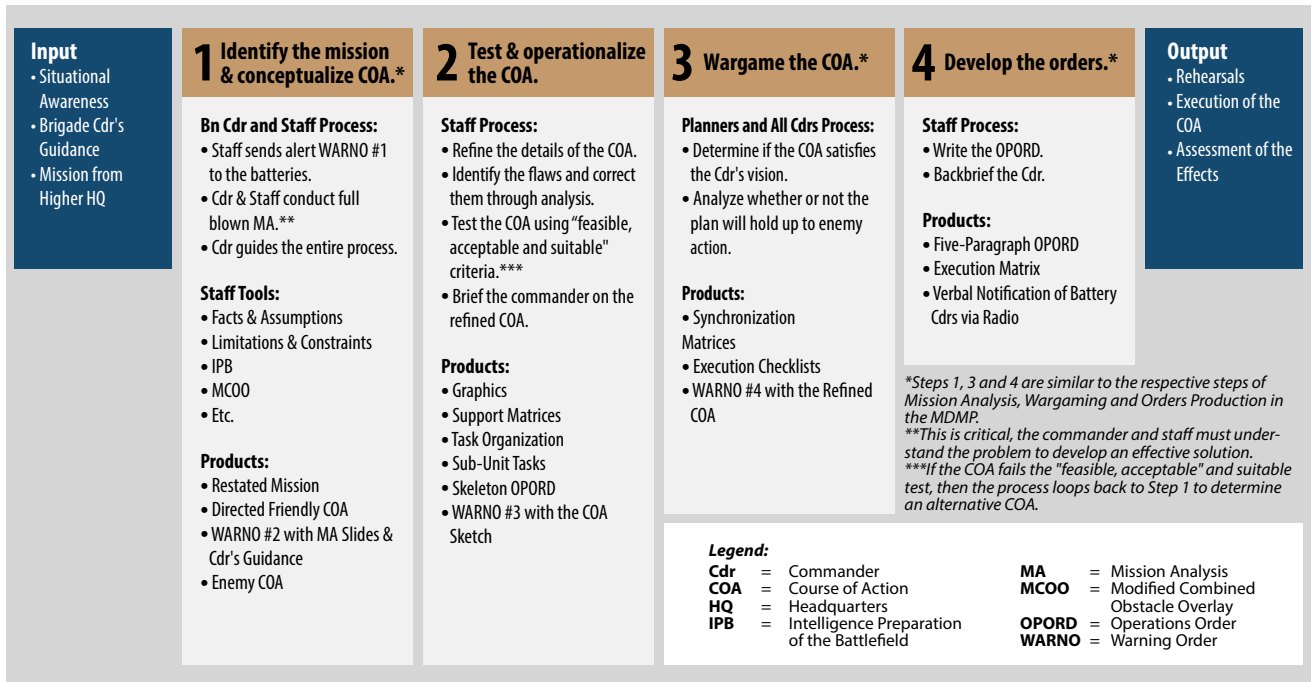
If a subordinate has the trust of his superior, then he is commanded (defined as given intent, task and purpose, and freedom to execute with minimal oversight: engage and report type mentality). If trust is lacking, then control is needed of the subordinate (control defined as reporting early and often, strict graphical control measures, limited assets to control at a lower level, not the unit you would task organize to another BN, etc.).⁴⁵

Trust is built on a shared frame of reference. A shared frame of reference is a common approach for handling abstract problems. Gen. Stanley McChrystal explained that Adm. Horatio Nelson developed a shared frame of reference. His “unique innovation lay in his managerial style and the culture he had cultivated among his force ... his captains were to see themselves as entrepreneurs of battle.”⁴⁶ His real genius lay not in clever maneuvers but in the years of innovative talent management and leadership that preceded it. He developed a shared frame of reference in his subordinates so he trusted how they would react in the chaos of battle. An example of a frame of reference is a unit standard operating procedures (SOPs). Units at every echelon require SOPs for frame of references for how they fight, but in reality, few units at the battalion and higher-level have the time to develop, evaluate, and inculcate SOPs that provide the frame of references for how an entire battalion, brigade, or division fights.

To facilitate frames of reference development, the U.S. Army needs to build cohesion through a regimental system. Under a regimental system, soldiers spend most of their careers within the same unit. The Duke of Wellington said the British Army’s secret weapon was the regimental system. It provided intimacy and familiarity.⁴⁷ Through familiarity comes the flattened hierarchies that enable decentralized decision-making. Before 1945, the German army maintained a regimental system. Its system of “organization represented a conscious determination to maintain at all costs that which was believed to be decisive to the conduct of war: mutual trust, a willingness to assume responsibility, and the right and duty of subordinate commanders at all levels to make independent decisions and carry them out.”⁴⁸ The German system was decentralized and personal. It put a priority on unit cohesion over administrative efficiency.

The American system of regular permanent changes of stations represents a misguided scientific management ideal of interchangeable parts. It made sense for an Army that had to rapidly grow for World War II. It had some logic for a large draftee Army during the Cold War. It is counterproductive for a small professional force. These moves cost over \$4.3 billion a year, disrupt soldiers’ families, and exact a high price in cohesion and readiness.⁴⁹ Recently, the Army has even begun forcing NCOs to move, whereas in the past some would spend years in a unit and serve as its backbone. Tom Odom gave the most damning indictment of the current system. He has over nineteen years as JRTC’s Center for Army Lessons Learned senior analyst and has observed 190 training rotations; he had never seen any improvement in overall negative trends because units have “no collective experience longer than a year.”⁵⁰ He explains that “no CEO in his right mind would tell everyone to change jobs every year; we do just that in the Army ... we discard the collective experience of 10 x 25 million dollar training rotations every year only to start all over again, every year for every unit.”⁵¹ We need to reject this costly and counterproductive system.

There are risks in changing to a regimental system. It could reduce the diversity of a soldier’s experience and cause groupthink within a unit. Ironically, the Army often allows senior leaders to command in the same battalion, brigade, and division, while forcing junior leaders to move, allowing groupthink to fester at senior levels. Turn this paradigm on its head. Company



(Figure from David A. Bushey and Michael Forsyth, "Recognition-Primed Decision Model: An Alternative to the MDMP for GWOT," *Field Artillery* 11, no. 1 [January-February 2006]: 10–13)

Figure. Recognition-Primed Decision Model

grades officers should serve in a brigade system, and field grade officers should be assigned to a divisional system. The Army should force senior leaders to serve in different units to break nepotistic networks. For junior leaders, the Army's system of professional development schools and broadening assignments will ensure a crossover of ideas. A regimental system would spur innovation because leaders would have the time horizons to test and implement long-term concepts. To enable flexibility, soldiers should be free to request transfers, but permanent changes of stations should not be regularly mandated. Such a change would bring incalculable morale, psychological, and family benefits, and only through such reform will the Army properly prioritize cohesion to enable shared frames of reference and mission command.

Adopt a Decision-Making Model Based on Satisficing

The Army requires a doctrinal decision-making process based on satisficing to enable mission command and maneuver warfare. Since the 1950's FM 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Procedures*, the Army

has used a rational choice model of decision-making. Over time, the steps have expanded far beyond the initial five-step analytic procedure. However, for decades, studies have shown that units do not follow this model in combat conditions.⁵² Today, the closest units come to fighting a high-intensity conflict is at combat training centers (CTCs).

The military decision-making process (MDMP) does not enable rapid decisions at CTCs. At the JRTC, Col. Brandon Teague observed, "I can only recall one time in the ten rotations that I conducted that a battalion gave a subordinate unit two-thirds and it was before they 'deployed' into country" (the Army calls for units to spend no more than one-third of time until an operation to plan for it and grant subordinate units the remaining two-thirds of the time).⁵³ Lt. Col. Brian Olson explained that "units will conduct deliberate MDMP during RSOI [reception, staging, onward movement, and integration] period, but after the joint forcible entry period devolve into hasty decision-making." (Hasty decision-making is no longer a doctrinal term, but they still do it.)⁵⁴ Lt. Col. William Adler highlighted the difficulty in

conducting MDMP in a contested environment at the National Training Center: “This model becomes almost impossible to execute in actively contested environments against peer competitors who may exploit options to target mission command nodes throughout the depth of the battlefield.”⁵⁵

Gary Klein has found that leaders rarely use rational choice models of decision-making such as MDMP in practice. Decision-makers seldom have the time to follow such models. While they seem to offer efficiency by allowing staff sections to break a problem to its component parts and work on multiple courses of action (COA) in parallel, in reality, junior officers create plans for complex problems of which they only understand a segment. The commander is often isolated from the process. Staff officers are regularly broken into an “A” team and “B” team, with the “B” team producing a throwaway COA. Alternatively, they might produce COAs with similar values leading to a zone of indifference in which the staff dithers on choosing between two equally suitable COAs. Often, staff members that worked on a losing COA do not feel ownership of the chosen COA. Klein argues that even when properly executed, rational decision-making processes do not lead to better outcomes.⁵⁶ He found that satisficing was more effective than rational choice models. He proposed the recognition-primed decision model (RPM) as an alternative to MDMP.

RPM provides the agility and tempo necessary for maneuver warfare. By emphasizing rapid decisions and the iterative nature of planning, it allows subordinate units the time to make their own decisions and provide feedback. RPM is commander-driven. It makes maximum use of a commander’s mental models developed over years of experience. After receiving a mission, a commander conceptualizes a draft COA based on his or her understanding of the situation. If a situation is unfamiliar, the system provides for a commander to use staff and subordinate commanders to help conceptualize a COA using an iterative process of mission analysis. In the second step, the staff tests and operationalizes the COA and begins producing products. In the third step, staff and subordinate commanders wargame the COA. Finally, the staff publishes the order. RPM provides for feedback loops throughout the process and allows for adaptation to changing situations.

Peter Thunholm tested RPM with the Swedish army. During the tests, a division staff produced more rapid, bolder, and more flexible plans.⁵⁷ Based on this evidence, the Swedish army adopted RPM. In 2003, a group of researchers tested RPM using an ad hoc American brigade staff. Even with minimal training in RPM, it produced orders in 30 percent less time than MDMP.⁵⁸ 4th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery successfully employed RPM during Operation Iraqi Freedom and said it produced battalion-level plans in four to eight hours. Their version of RPM is presented here (see figure, page 49).⁵⁹ My battalion, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, incorporated RPM into our planning SOP. At JRTC, RPM enabled us to rapidly plan an overwhelmingly successful defense and to condense the air assault planning process to under twenty-four hours.

RPM’s emphasis on satisficing reflects how effectively units approach decision-making at CTCs. Adler reported that “successful units place emphasis on the continuous nature of mission analysis based on unit reporting and commander’s assessments to inform the formulation of adequate command directed COAs.”⁶⁰ When combined with the previous recommendation of increased unit cohesion, RPM allows a commander to choose a framework for an operation from a unit SOP that his staff and subordinates will largely already understand and on which they can initiate movement. The rest of the planning process is spent operationalizing and testing that initial plan.

Train Mission Command through Force-on-Force Exercises

Army units must concentrate on large-scale, force-on-force exercises to develop the expertise and frames of reference required for effective mission command and maneuver warfare. Milley says, “We preach Mission Command ... if we’re going to have to operate like that in warfare, we have to train as we’re going to fight.”⁶¹ TP 525-3-1 acknowledges that “the Army does not always design our training programs and exercises that facilitate or require this type of decentralized decision making.”⁶² Since mission command’s purpose is to provide the tempo and flexibility to deal with the complex problems of future warfare, training exercises must replicate that complexity.

Complexity occurs under circumstances simulating Clausewitz’s chance, friction, and fog of war. German

Capt. Adolf von Schell introduced the concept of *Auftragstaktik* to the U.S. Army Infantry School during the interwar years. He explained the importance of training *Auftragstaktik* under conditions approximating war: “In peacetime problems, there is no uncertainty, nothing goes wrong, units are always complete ... In war, it is quite otherwise ... Teach your men that war brings such surprises and that often they will find themselves in apparently impossible situations ... Every soldier should know that war is a kaleidoscope, replete with constantly changing, unexpected, confusing situations. Its problems cannot be solved by mathematical formulae or set rules.”⁶³

Soldiers require training that teaches them to deal with ambiguity, identify opportunities to exploit, accept risk, and make rapid decisions. Lind recommended introducing force-on-force exercises early in training. “Only by encountering an active enemy who is trying to confuse, surprise and defeat them in an environment of uncertainty and rapid change can they begin to understand the nature of the business to which they have committed themselves ... Free-play exercises are critical to developing initiative, imagination, and new tactics.”⁶⁴

Observer coach/trainers recognize that the lack of repetitions hampers units conducting operations at CTCs. Adler states that “enemy vulnerabilities and tactical opportunities may be transitory and BCTs and BNs are often hampered in the exploitation of revealed opportunities because lower echelons lack the kind of agility gained through repetitive training.”⁶⁵ Units need to practice maneuver warfare if they are to succeed at it.

Germany realized that only large-scale maneuvers taught commanders to accept risk. These exercises became essential to officers’ careers. During the 1920s, even with the constraints of the Treaty of Versailles, Chief of German Army Command Hans von Seeckt prioritized training for the chaos of large-scale meeting engagements. These exercises created the doctrine and mindset that led to the Wehrmacht’s initial success during World War II. He stressed that the commander who would prevail was the one who could more rapidly recognize the situation and deploy his forces.⁶⁶

The German emphasis on unconstrained meeting engagements contrasts with the current scenarios at CTCs. CTC rotations follow predictable phases.

BCTs culminate the training through a combined arms breach that emphasizes synchronization over tempo. A notional division provides timely orders to a BCT that provide clear intelligence and perfectly predict when the enemy’s main body will attack. Units never have to develop the situation using their own internal assets through “reconnaissance pull.” While CTCs overconstrain exercises, divisional Warfighter exercises are worse. Units spend months wargaming and rehearsing for a couple of weeks of operations involving simulated troops that lack any individual initiative. Warfighters center on a wet-gap crossing to demonstrate how a division can synchronize its assets from the comfort of a command post tent city that would put P. T. Barnum to shame. Divisions need to get in the field with their brigades to face the fog and friction of war.

Only unconstrained force-on-force incentivizes soldiers to identify enemy vulnerabilities, use mission command, and exploit opportunities through maneuver warfare. The Army can provide time and resources for force-on-force by deprioritizing formulaic live fires, which often resemble theatrical productions. Live fires reinforce detailed, centralized planning rather than developing the adaptive decision-making required for the chaos of war. Commanders also must reject traditional training progressions. Not all crews, platoons, and companies need to certify before a battalion, brigade, or division exercise. It will not matter if those small units are combat ready if their higher headquarters cannot make a timely decision in the face of an enemy.

Conclusion

If the Army does not make these changes, it risks entering into a peer fight with a high-risk concept of warfare that is not supported by its decision-making capabilities. The current concept calls for BCTs to advance independently to seize positions of relative advantage. They will be moving semi-independently with vulnerable flanks during windows of enemy domain dominance. Without the tempo and flexibility provided by mission command, these brigades will not operate at a tempo required to prevent an enemy from encircling and destroying them. Unless the Army fully embraces mission command, it risks falling into a multi-domain disaster. ■

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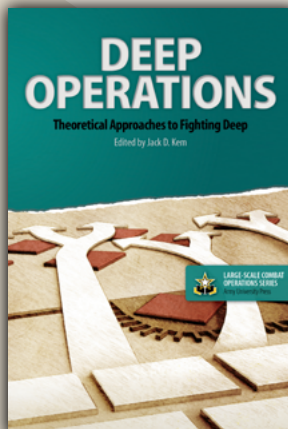
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