



Army modernization efforts extend across land, air, sea, space and cyberspace to ensure the future force can deliver overmatch on any battlefield. (U.S. Army graphic by Shelby Burns, Army Futures Command)

Embracing the Future of a Multidomain Army

By Sgt. Maj. Charles L. Wilson

NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

“The Army can no longer guarantee continued overmatch over a near-peer threat—an advantage that the U.S. has held for decades.”

(Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 2)

According to “The Army’s Modernization Strategy: Congressional Oversight Considerations,” the United States no longer maintains a qualitative and quantitative advantage over its near-peer adversaries and many of the Army’s leaders and Soldiers are untrained to fight against a near-peer threat. Therefore, the U.S. Army must transform itself

into a multi-domain force capable of achieving overmatch and defeating its near-peer adversaries during competition, crisis, and conflict. The challenge is daunting, but necessary. In the article “Multi-Domain Battle: Driving Change to Win in the Future”, General Perkins wrote about the need to change the Army’s operational concept. Perkins (2017) explains:

“Multi-domain battle is a concept driven by proactive choice and informed by the threat of failure. It is an evolution of the Army operating concept, detailing a response to our observations of developments in the South China Sea, Russian New Generation Warfare, and continued challenges in the Middle East. It is an acknowledgment that the United States is reaching the end of a period in which it can make change by choice, without having taken severe losses. The Army must evolve and change.” (p. 9)

Therefore, recent and future doctrine seeks to transition the Army from a force focused on counterinsurgency to a force focused on multidomain operations (MDO) by exemplifying the tenets of multidomain operations. The Army must embrace these tenets with unparalleled unity of effort to build an agile force capable of establishing convergence and decision dominance, with the endurance to consolidate gains, and ability to maintain competition short of conflict and large-scale combat operations (LSCO). To be successful in the multidomain environment, the Army needs new command and control systems, more realistic and demanding training, flexible and adaptable formations and capabilities, and leaders who understand mission command and disciplined initiative are the foundational elements enabling success in competition, crisis, and conflict.

Competition, Crisis, and Conflict

The U.S. has fought a two-front counterinsurgency war for two decades and has not consolidated any substantial gains or claimed any moral or physical victory. Yet, in this same period, our near-peer adversaries have advanced, trained, and consolidated gains in a period of competition below major conflict. Russia invaded Georgia and spent months massing on the Ukrainian border before their invasion. China continues to build artificial islands for military and industrial outposts in the disputed waters of the South China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), and both Russia and China are expanding their footprints in the Antarctica “using the guise of scientific research to stake further claims on the continent” (Feiger & Wilson, 2020, para. 3). If the U.S. continues to allow competitors to maintain their

initiative, future conflicts become inevitable.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur, in a farewell speech at West Point, credited Plato with saying, “Only the dead have seen the end of war” (MacArthur, 1962, para. 26). It is only a matter of time before competition and crisis lead the U.S. into conflict against a near-peer adversary. Conflict in the form of skirmishes or small engagements over resources, or in defense of countries such as Ukraine prior to the Russian invasion, are increasingly likely in the near future. These conflicts could also lead to large-scale combat in defense of the nation’s interests. The Army is not ready. In her annual address, the Secretary of the Army outlined six objectives for the Army, the first two specific to near-peer threats. The first was “to put the Army on a sustainable strategic path amidst uncertainty” (Wormuth, 2022, para. 3). The second she stated, “The Army must find a way to field the cutting-edge formations we need to conduct MDOs while facing increased fiscal pressures” (Wormuth, 2022, para. 3). Therefore, the Army’s sustainability and success against near-peer threats lie in its ability to execute multidomain operations. The time to prepare and train is now.

Before Army leaders can understand how they need to prepare and train, they must understand how they will need to fight against near-peer threats already using their own versions of MDO. Army leaders at every echelon must understand MDO and its foundational tenets and train themselves and their organizations in mission command and exercise disciplined



Soldiers assigned to Chaos Company, 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, operationally controlled by the 1st Infantry Division, advance on the target with fire support from a Bradley Fighting Vehicle during the Bull Run live-fire exercise in Bemowo Piskie, Poland, Nov. 23, 2022. The 3-1 ABCT is working alongside NATO allies and regional security partners to provide combat-credible forces to V Corps, America’s forward deployed corps in Europe. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Matthew Foster)



A UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter assigned to the U.S. Army Aviation Battalion Japan, prepares to touch down on the fantail of the Japanese Navy destroyer JDS Murasame (DD 101) at sea in the Pacific Ocean Sept. 1, 2013. This historic landing marked the first time a U.S. Army helicopter landed on a Japanese ship. (U.S. Army courtesy photo)

initiative down to the lowest levels. The foundational tenets of MDO are agility, convergence, endurance, and depth (Department of the Army, 2022, p. 3-2). Agility, endurance, and depth are vital to the Army's success in multidomain operations, but this article seeks to discuss the relationship between convergence, the successful employment of mission command, and decision dominance as the foundational pillars for success in multidomain operations.

Convergence

If the U.S. Army is going to be successful in multidomain operations, we must successfully employ all the tenets. This first requires restructuring of formations and reorganization of multidomain capabilities. Multidomain capable formations must be postured for employment within the theater of need. Convergence demands forces postured and capable of success in all domains. The Department of the Army (2022) states:

“Convergence is an outcome created by the concerted employment of capabilities from multiple domains and echelons against a combination of decisive points in any domain to create effects against a system, formation, decision maker, or in a specific geographic region” (p. 3-3).

In simple terms convergence is the employment of capabilities from multiple echelons and domains in unison to achieve a higher purpose. Convergence uses multidomain capabilities but is reliant on the employment of those capabilities and effects at the right time in space, synchronized to achieve a higher purpose or objective.

Convergence is a key tenet of multidomain operations, but its success demands effective mission command and decision dominance. By definition, command and control (mission command) and disciplined initiative enable convergence and are therefore essential to execute decision dominance. Commanders must consistently train and rehearse using the principles of mission command to successfully employ their multidomain capabilities.

Mission Command

According to the Department of the Army (2019), mission command is “the Army’s approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation” (p. 1-3). Commanders use command and control as a method to exercise their authority and provide organizational direction in order to accomplish mission objectives. When Army

formations have untrained and unproven subordinates, commanders must provide more control and direction to ensure mission accomplishment, but this is not the preferred approach. Decentralized execution occurs when subordinate leaders execute disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent or the intent of the theater campaign. Disciplined initiative cannot exist without competent and willing leaders. To achieve and promote disciplined initiative, commanders must disseminate information to the lowest levels to promote shared organizational understanding.

Shared understanding depends on two key foundational elements, the current situation, and the commander’s intent. The current situation is the operational environment, right now. The operational environment is complex, changes rapidly, and evolves, therefore information flow must be continuous. The commander’s intent provides clear purpose and details the commander’s desired end state. It is an important principle of mission command. Commanders must understand the importance of publishing their intent and not rely on staff to do it for them. According to Collins (2020):

“Too many times, the staff plans and develops operations without the commander’s input. The commander does not take an active role in the planning process and therefore does not adequately provide the needed intent. Without the commander’s intent, subordinates cannot use their judgment and initiative to make decisions that further their higher commander’s intent. The result is the cascading of an operation further from what the command may truly want executed” (para. 3).

An effective commander's intent provides the what, why, and how that leads to effective mission command and accomplishment. When commanders provide a solid commander's intent, they establish a shared understanding and Soldiers can achieve limitless accomplishments. Gen. George Patton famously said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity" (Cook, 2015, para. 2). To that end, the commander's intent helps subordinates develop a shared understanding, enabling them to act rapidly in the absence of orders, and to seize, maintain, and exploit the initiative. Disciplined initiative also requires commanders to accept risks, allowing subordinates to proceed beyond their initial guidance to achieve the campaign's intent and desired end state.

Commanders make decisions and assume acceptable risk to seize the initiative and accomplish the mission, but in this context, risk acceptance takes aim at empowering subordinates. According to Department of the Army (2019):

"Inculcating risk acceptance goes hand-in-hand with creating an environment where subordinates are not only encouraged to take risks, but one where mistakes are tolerated. Commanders realize that subordinates may not accomplish all tasks initially and that errors may occur. Commanders train subordinates to act within the commander's intent in uncertain situations. Commanders give subordinates the latitude to make mistakes and learn" (p. 2-7).

Risk acceptance is especially critical during tough realistic home station unit training, culminating in a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation. Subordinates learn best practices with good coaching from the commander, subordinate leaders, and Observer Coach/Trainers (OCTs) at the CTCs. These events promote mutual trust throughout the chain of command. Soldiers learn to exercise good judgment and disciplined initiative. It is vitally important commanders, leaders, and Soldiers at all echelons understand disciplined initiative extends beyond the foxhole and the front lines.

Successfully executing convergence and achieving decision dominance depends on staff and personnel at command posts and tactical operations centers (TOC) and their ability to rapidly process information and make decisions presenting multiple dilemmas for the enemy, maintain operational tempo and focus within Army formations.

Information does not flow in one direction from the staff. Leaders and soldiers in contested spaces must also be proficient at passing information up the chain of command and through the staff for processing. LSCO

requires reconnaissance from all domains and multiple delivery platforms. Sometimes the best reconnaissance comes from Soldiers on the ground, in observation posts, or behind vehicle optics.

U.S. military leadership assumes risk by task organizing their capabilities or their use down to corps or division level formations within contested environments. Personnel in competition and conflict throughout the organization must have a shared understanding, mutual trust, and the authority to exercise disciplined initiative in their organization's command and control systems to achieve success in multidomain operations.

Command and Control Systems

It is impossible to achieve convergence without trained proficient Soldiers, tested and proven processes, networks, and command posts. Talent management is critical to command and control system success within Army organizations. Commanders must understand the importance of talent management necessary for convergence, achieving decision dominance, and successfully executing MDOs. The Department of the Army (2021) states:

"The acceleration of innovation and change will increase the technical and cognitive demands on our personnel, generating new personnel and training requirements. We are transforming how we fight, what we fight with, and how we organize, but we must also transform how we train." (p. 27)

Training is vital to success. Commanders must understand that talent management demands they not turn their staff sections to dumping grounds for unqualified and incompetent Soldiers. Soldiers and leaders alike must remain proficient and continuously train on new and emerging technologies designed to transmit real-time and projected future changes to the operational environment, as well as enemy composition and actions, which come with the transition to MDOs. Staff members must be highly trained information conduits which allow commanders and subordinate leaders to make rapid and informed decisions (Department of the Army, 2021a).

Decision dominance stresses commanders, leaders, and Soldiers at all echelons process information, in seconds not hours or days, then make decisions at the point of friction or make informed recommendations to the commander for rapid decision-making. Quickly interpreting and delivering time-sensitive intelligence helps commanders and their formations exercise disciplined initiative and act decisively within their commanders' intent. Decision dominance at its core is an act of informed and prompt aggression performed to consolidate gains and prevent the enemy from gaining the initiative and achieving its own objectives. Trained, competent, and

disciplined Soldiers and leaders need efficient, effective, proven processes, networks, and command posts to drive successful decision dominance.

Decision Dominance

Decision dominance is a buzzword related to the Army's focus on MDOs and LSCO, but the term is not new. Nearly two decades ago, Merrick Krause introduced "decision dominance" as an operational concept, built on the previous concepts of "effects-based operations and rapid decisive operations" (Krause, 2003, para 1-2). Krause's definition focused on denying the enemy's ability to make decisions by dominating their decision-making process, not just destroying military assets and platforms. It centered on the theme that "when an enemy is unable to fight effectively because no viable options remain, it will cease fighting, perhaps before major casualties occur on either side" (Krause, 2003, para. 5). Krause, like today's Army leaders, believed decision dominance was possible by exploiting technology and achieving long-term success (Krause, 2003).

In the "Army Multi-Domain Transformation: Ready to Win in Competition and Conflict", Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville discussed the importance of technology and the Army's need for transformation. In Department of the Army (2021), McConville states, "This bold transformation will provide the Joint Force with the range, speed, and convergence of cutting-edge technologies that will provide the future decision dominance and overmatch required to win the next fight" (p. i). To accomplish decision dominance, Army commanders and leaders must first understand what it is. Department of the Army (2020b) states: "Decision dominance is a desired state in which commanders' sense, understand, decide, act, and assess faster and more effectively than their adversaries" (p. 8). This modern definition is an expansion of Krause's original definition, which failed to address the relationship between convergence, command and control (mission command), and decision dominance at depth and breadth.



Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, wait for another squad to clear a room before moving forward during Military Operations in Urban Terrain training on Aibano Training Area, Japan, while conducting a bilateral exercise with members of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's 15th Rapid Deployment Regiment during exercise Orient Shield 21-2 June 7, 2021. Orient Shield is the largest U.S. Army and JGSDF bilateral field training exercise being executed in various locations throughout Japan to enhance interoperability and test and refine multi-domain and cross-domain operations. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Anthony Ford)

Conclusion

The Army's multidomain concept will not survive first contact without developing multidomain leaders. Commanders, their staff, subordinate leaders, and Soldiers throughout the Army must embrace and understand the connection between effective command and control, MDOs, and decision dominance. Leaders must exemplify this change if the U.S. is to succeed in competition, crisis, and conflict against near-peer adversaries. New command and control systems, flexible and adaptable formations, and new capabilities are necessary for success, but leaders drive operations. Leaders must understand that mission command and disciplined initiative are foundational elements and key to the successful implementation and execution of MDOs. The Army needs leaders who embrace the need for change, study to become subject matter experts, and use tough and realistic training, grounded in mission command, to prepare their formations for the modern battlefield. Will you be that leader? ■

References

- Collins, R. (2020). *The commander's intent in mission command*. <http://fieldgradeleader.themilitaryleader.com/cdr-intent/>
- Congressional Research Service. (2020). *The Army's modernization strategy: Congressional oversight considerations*. <https://news.usni.org/2020/02/20/report-to-congress-on-u-s-army-modernization-strategy>
- Cook, K. (July 8, 2015). *Patton's big leadership lesson (and how you can apply it today)*. The Business Journals. <https://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/growth-strategies/2015/07/pattons-big-leadership-lesson.html>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (November 12, 2021).

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>

Department of the Army. (2018). *The U.S. Army in multi-domain operations 2028 (TP 525-3-1).* <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/pamphlets/TP525-3-1.pdf>

Department of the Army. (2019). *Mission command: Command and control of Army forces (ADP 6-0).* https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18314-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf

Department of the Army. (2021a). *Army Futures Command concept for command and control 2028: Pursuing decision dominance (AFC Pamphlet 71-20-9).* <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/07/19/b7aad354/20210714-afc-pam-71-20-9-concept-for-c2-pursuing-decision-dominance-approved.pdf>

Department of the Army. (2021b). *Army multi-domain transformation: Ready to win in competition and conflict.* <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/23/eeac-3d01/20210319-csa-paper-1-signed-print-version.pdf>

Feiger, L, & Wilson, M. (May 15, 2020). *The countries taking*

advantage of Antarctica during the pandemic. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/antarctica-great-power-competition-australia-uk-ed-states-britain-russia-china-arctic/611674/>

Krause, M. (2003). *Decision dominance: Exploiting transformational asymmetries.* Defense Horizons, 23, 1-8. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1014560/decision-dominance-exploiting-transformational-asymmetries/>

MacArthur, D. (1962). *General Douglas MacArthur's farewell speech.* <https://nationalcenter.org/ncppr/2001/11/04/general-douglas-macarthur-farewell-speech-to-west-point-1962/>

Perkins, D. (2017). *Multi-domain battle: Driving change to win in the future.* Military Review, July-August 2017. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20170831_PERKINS_Multi-domain_Battle.pdf

Wormuth, C. (February 8, 2022). *SECARMY message to the force.* <https://www.army.mil/article/253814/message-from-the-secretary-of-the-army-to-the-force>

Sgt. Maj. Charles L. Wilson is an instructor in the Department of Army Operations at the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A). Wilson is a graduate of the SGM-A class 69, and a Cohort 5 SGM-A Fellow. His most recent assignments include ROTC at Grand Canyon University, WTU-Balboa, 11th ACR, 2/18th Infantry Regiment, and 3rd ACR. He holds a Bachelors of Social Science in Business Administration, a Masters of Arts in Leadership Studies, and a Masters of Science in Instructional Design, Development, and Evaluation. Wilson is the 2022 SGM-A Instructor of the Year.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

