

PROTECTION INTEGRATION IN AN ARMORED CORPS: INSIGHTS FROM WFX 23–04

By Lieutenant Colonel Judd K. Young

In the 5th Century B.C., Sun Tzu wrote, ". . . the clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy but does not allow the enemy's will imposed on him."[1] The technological advancements that now enable unprecedented lethality during large-scale combat operations make his statement even more relevant today. Recently revised Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, not only introduces multidomain operations as the new U.S. Army operating concept but also redefines the protection warfighting function as ". . . related tasks, systems, and methods that prevent or mitigate detection, threat effects, and hazards to preserve combat power and enable freedom of action."[2]

The first multinational warfighter exercise (WFX) following the publication of FM 3-0 was rotation 23-04, conducted at Fort Cavazos, Texas, 18–27 April 2023, in which III Armored Corps (III AC) fought as a tactical-level multinational corps. Throughout the operations process, III AC sought to integrate a multifunctional, all-hazard concept of protection that leveraged active/offensive operations to deny enemy opportunities while more passive/defensive operations mitigated the remaining effects to protect critical capabilities and enable freedom of action.

Organizing

Unmanned aerial systems, loitering munitions, and long-range precision fires used against command posts (CPs) in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Eastern Ukraine changed not only the character of war,[3] but also the way that units must array their command-and-control nodes, logistics, and critical assets. In preparation for WFX 23-04, III AC deliberately abandoned the traditional tent-based, three-node CP concept (consisting of tactical, main, and rear command post [RCP] nodes), opting for a more agile and survivable design capable of being hidden in plain sight, thereby reducing visibility and exposure across the electromagnetic spectrum.[4] The experimental concept involved the dispersal of the CP across four nodes based primarily on function. Whereas three nodes (RCP, current operations, and future operations) were positioned inside the area of operations, long-range planning, analysis, and assessments were conducted via reach-back to a fourth node placed in relative sanctuary.

Led by the III AC Deputy Commanding General for Support, the RCP node was comprised of elements of the III AC staff, the 13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command, and maneuver enhancement brigade staff. The RCP node synchronized protection and sustainment operations throughout the corps area of operations and exercised command and control for all units operating within the corps rear area. Organized as a "fighting CP," the RCP node was capable of handling the responsibilities of a unit assigned an area of operations (as outlined in FM 3-0) but relied on the maneuver enhancement brigade staff and mission command information systems to control airspace, clear fires, and perform command and control of area security tasks.

Operating predominately from the RCP node, the III AC Protection Cell coordinated full-spectrum protection operations across the depth of the corps area of operations. The nodal command and control construct resulted in the dispersal of protection staff across three of the four CP nodes. Although deliberate talent management decisions placed personnel where they could exert the greatest influence, manning constraints prevented the staff from operating at capacity across all nodes. The Protection Cell focused its efforts on conceptual planning in support of targeting, maneuver, and sustainment operations by synchronizing protection resources 72–96 hours prior to operations, while relying heavily on the associated functional brigades (maneuver enhancement; military police; engineer; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear; air defense artillery; and civil affairs) to conduct the detailed planning via bottom-up refinement.

Planning

The III AC staff diligently worked to understand the situation from the enemy perspective. The commanding general coached staff members toward "picking up the red pen first," which enabled them to visualize the enemy's capability, intent, targeting priorities, and pending decision points. A clear understanding of the enemy's delivery methods and high-pay-off target list enabled the targeting of specific systems in order to deny the enemy the opportunity to strike and allowed the III AC Protection Cell to effectively prioritize critical assets (belonging not only to III AC but also to others in the area of operations, including the combined forces land component command, allied forces, and the host nation) and align appropriate protection assets to mitigate the residual risk. Protection Prioritized Lists (PPLs) were developed for each phase of the corps order and refined by key events. The initial PPL was further refined through corps engineer brigade modeling that depicted the operational and humanitarian impacts of a potential "black swan"[5] attack on host nation infrastructure (such as those now occurring in the Ukraine/Russia conflict[6]).

Specific protection planning guidance emphasized aggressive area security operations, dispersion, survivability, camouflage, decoys, concealment, and electronic signature management. Deliberately targeting special-purpose forces at echelon not only disrupted enemy long-range fires but also denied the enemy the ability to take direct action against critical assets arrayed in the close and rear areas. To protect logistics, the 13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command dispersed sustainment nodes across small, tailorable, mobile support packages inside "position areas for sustainment." Modeled after the "position areas for artillery" addressed in field artillery doctrine, position areas for sustainment enabled frequent survivability moves within a designated area and mitigated risks posed by enemy observation and long-range fires. Nesting the priority of engineer effort with the PPL, the corps engineer brigade allocated dig assets to improve critical asset survivability behind the published corps engineer work line.[7]

The III AC Commanding General specifically directed that ". . . the corps must 'spring-load' to maximize operational reach," positioning sustainment assets "almost uncomfortably" far forward, moving rear boundaries as soon as possible, and continuously consolidating gains.[8] According to the *Military Review* article "Three Perspectives on Consolidating Gains," ". . . successful consolidation of gains ultimately denies the enemy the time, space, and psychological breathing space to reorganize for continued resistance."[9] And although the current version of FM 3-0 rescinds the term "consolidation area,"[10] III AC anticipated a complex hybrid threat and deliberately task-organized the RCP node with the organic mobility, antiarmor, and indirect-fire capabilities required to defeat bypassed conventional forces (up to a Level III threat) as far forward as possible, deny enemy special-purpose forces freedom of action, and neutralize meaningful resistance in the rear area.

Preparing

Prior to commencing operations, III AC conducted a corps level protection rehearsal with its subordinate divisions and enabling brigades. Conducted using the same terrain model used for three prior rehearsals (combined arms, intelligence collection/fires, and sustainment rehearsals), the protection rehearsal synchronized protection efforts that supported the overall schemes of maneuver and sustainment. Using the "box method,"[11] protection planners and III AC subordinate units rehearsed critical events such as the forward passage of lines, wet-gap crossings, and rear-boundary shifts. The protection rehearsal enabled a shared understanding of the anticipated enemy actions, to-scale weapons engagement ranges, positions of assets on the corps PPL, subordinate schemes of protection, and terrain management challenges associated with each critical event. The protection rehearsal stimulated updates to the rear area terrain management plan, prompted candid discussions regarding boundary shifts, and managed expectations regarding the positioning of air and missile defense (AMD) assets.

Executing

The fluid nature of large-scale combat operations requires an agile concept of protection, well-defined transition criteria, and clearly delegated decision-making authorities. Rapidly expanding lines of communication followed by unexpected delays with frequent transitions from offense to hasty defense quickly rendered the initial synchronization matrix obsolete. During WFX 23-04, the Coalition Forces Land Component Command task-organized an air defense artillery brigade in direct support of III AC, which enabled the commander of the 32d Army Air and Missile Defense Command to synchronize theater AMD operations while supporting the mission of the main effort[12]; however, repositioning AMD assets in a timely manner initially proved challenging. After being delegated authority to reposition AMD assets, the III AC Deputy Commanding General for Support approved templated moves in advance under clearly articulated security conditions agreed upon by the 32d Army Air and Missile Defense Command and III AC. He also discussed AMD moves with his division counterparts on a daily basis; and once they reported that the stipulated conditions had been met, movement began almost immediately.

Leveraging mission command information systems, air defense officers and junior noncommissioned officers readily enabled III AC to counter unmanned aerial systems and ballistic missiles. Although protection professionals often use the Criticality, Accessibility, Recuperability, Vulnerability, Effect, and Recognizability (CARVER) Method[13] to assess risk to critical assets, the III AC targeting team was indirectly reminded that the CARVER Method was actually developed as a targeting technique.[14] By shifting focus to less-recuperable parts of the system, III AC targeteers enjoyed significantly more success in the counter-unmanned aerial systems fight.

Assessing

A deliberate protection working group (PWG) is essential for the assessment of current operations and mitigation of risk across all planning horizons. Although battle rhythms in large-scale combat operations are unrelenting, an effective PWG must be sequenced along the critical path so that its outputs directly feed the targeting cycle in a timely manner. Initially, III AC PWG assessed the previous 24 hours, conducted a systematic review of each PPL (synchronized by each air tasking order) over the next 72–96 hours, and identified the risks and the resources required to mitigate those risks. Over time, the PWG evolved to feed the corps assessment working group by evaluating protection-related transition criteria for the current and subsequent phases of the operation. The PWG served as a forum to ensure that bridging and boundary shifts remained on track. Once nested with the joint movement board process, the PWG not only synchronized security operations for critical resupply but also identified opportunities to emplace additional line-of-communication bridging to open lateral routes and shorten division lines of communication by more than 100 kilometers.

Conclusion

Given a determined enemy with persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, coupled with effective electronic warfare capabilities and massed long-range fires, the protection warfighting function is more relevant than

ever. Tasks intended to "prevent or mitigate detection, threat effects, and hazards to preserve combat power and enable freedom of action"[15] require an inherent combined arms approach and an offensive mindset throughout the operations process.

Endnotes:

[1]Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 5th Century B.C., with translation and commentary by Lionel Giles, Capstone Publishing, 2022.

[2]FM 3-0, *Operations*, 1 October 2022.

[3]Matthew R. Bigelow, "Protection and the Change in the Character of War," *Protection* 2022 Annual Issue.

[4]Sean C. Bernabe, "Observations from Warfighter Exercise 23-04: A Multinational Corps as a Tactical Headquarters in Large-Scale Combat Operations," Strategic Landpower Symposium, 11 May 2023.

[5]A "black swan" is defined as "a highly improbable event that is unpredictable, carries a massive impact and, after the fact, appears less random, and more predictable." (Nassim N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable,* Random House, 2007.)

[6]Dan Peleschuk, "Evidence Grows of Explosion at Collapsed Ukraine Dam," Reuters, 9 June 2023, < https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-security-service-says-it-intercepted-call-proving-russia-destroyed-2023-06-09>, accessed on 12 October 2023.

[7]FM 1-02.1, *Operational Terms*, 9 March 2021.

[8]Bernabe.

[9]Michael Lundy et al., "Three Perspectives on Consolidating Gains," *Military Review*, September–October 2019.

[10]FM 3-0.

[11]"The box method is based on a critical event in which a detailed analysis of a critical area is completed, such as an engagement area, a wet-gap crossing site, or a landing zone. It works best in a time-constrained environment, such as a hasty attack, and is particularly useful when planning operations in noncontiguous areas of operation. When using this method, the staff isolates the area and focuses on critical events." (U.S. Army Combined Arms Center [CALL] Handbook 19-18, *Commander and Staff Guide to Rehearsals: A No-Fail Approach*, July 2019.)

[12]Glen A. Henke, "Once More Unto the Breach: Air Defense Artillery Support to Maneuver Forces in Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Military Review*, March–April 2023.

[13]FM 1-02.1

[14]Christopher Schnaubelt et al., *Vulnerability Assessment Pocket Guide: A Tool for Center of Gravity Analysis*; RAND Corporation, 2014.

[15]FM 3-0.

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("A Diverse Strategy for a Diverse WFF," continued from page 5)

much; but collectively, and over time, significant improvement is realized.

The Army Protection Strategy will be organized along three main lines of effort: assess, develop, and educate. Primary processes will be associated with each of those lines. Individual DOTMLPF-P solutions (the means) will be subsequently identified and developed, leading to a significant number of unique solutions—all interlocked and supporting a defined outcome as well as the larger strategy.

As the Army and the joint force move toward large-scale combat operations, Army protection tactics, techniques, and procedures; programs; and systems must keep pace. By committing to a strategic approach of aggregation of marginal gains for the protection WFF, MSCoE will deliver the diverse and resilient program of steady protection improvement needed to support the Army division of 2030.

Endnotes:

[1]Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference," 14 November 1957, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-national-defense-executive-reserve-conference>, accessed on 11 October 2023.

[2]"How the Army 2030 Division Fights," TRADOC Proponent Office–Echelons Above Brigade, August 2023.

[3]The "Big Five" was a collection of procurement programs "designed to reestablish the technological supremacy of U.S. land forces and reinvigorate conventional capabilities in the Vietnam War; it included the Apache AH-64 helicopter, UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, M1 Abrams battle tank, Bradley fighting vehicle, and MIM-104 Patriot missile system (Robert Farley, "What if the Army's 'Big Five' Weapons Program Had Failed?" *The National Interest*, 24 July 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/hat-if-us-armys-big-five-weapons-programs-had-failed-165555>, accessed on 11 October 2023).

[4]AFC Pam 71-20-7, *Army Futures Command Concept for Protection 2028*, 9 April 2021.

[5]James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, Random House Business, London, 2018, pp. 13–14.

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