

THE CONTESTED SUPPORT AREA

Closing the Corps' Rear-Security Gap

By Captain Sam Carlson

Force protection is everyone's responsibility, which often means it becomes no one's responsibility. This is evident at the corps level, where no unit is doctrinally assigned responsibility for reararea security. In June 2025, Ukraine struck deep into Russia, destroying forty long-range bombers with drones.[1] This attack into the Russian rear area illustrates the kind of complex threats the United States will face in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). The rear area contains critical corps-level assets, including sustainment and command-and-control (C2) nodes.

The Army's current approach to rear-area security is not a unified, integrated force capable of countering LSCO threats. The Maneuver Enhancement Brigade is tasked with coordinating rear-area security, but its modular staff structure prevents it from owning the fight.[2] Effective rear-area security requires robust C2, clear authorities, and dedicated assets. Without changes to rear-area security doctrine, critical infrastructure—particularly logistics and C2 nodes—will remain vulnerable in LSCO. As persistent unmanned aerial systems (UAS), deep strikes, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) saturation make the corps' rear- area a significant vulnerability, the Army must replace today's fragmented, piecemeal approach with an active-duty, multifunctional brigade (BDE) headquarters capable of exercising continuous, integrated control of rear-area security.

The Army currently lacks a doctrinally assigned formation responsible for rear-area security at the division or corps level, leaving critical battlespace unowned. As a result, rear-area protection falls to units that lack established relationships, shared processes, and collective training, undermining mutual trust. This challenge was underscored by key FY24 Mission Command Training Program observations, which

An AH-64E Apache Guardian from the 1-151st Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, South Carolina National Guard sits on the tarmac at the Greenbrier Valley Airport. Members of various U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army National Guard, U.S. Air National Guard, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization member nations participate in Misty Dawn, a Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) joint readiness exercise that highlighted coalition interoperability and high-end integrated tactics, held in Lewisburg, West Virginia, May 5-8, 2026. The exercise focuses on coordinated integration of ground and air elements to conduct joint missions in a simulated contested combat area of operations. ***(U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edwin L. Wriston)***



U.S. Soldiers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 118th Infantry Regiment, 218th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (218th MEB), South Carolina National Guard, exfiltrate an objective achieved during the air assault portion of Operation Palmetto Fury 2024 (OPF24), a joint-training exercise involving over 1,000 National Guardsmen, Clarks Hill, South Carolina, May 18, 2024. Palmetto Fury is a multi-domain, large-scale operations (LSCO), training exercise, designed to enhance the readiness, capabilities, and interoperability of all major commands of the South Carolina National Guard and some specialized units from other military branches of the U.S. military.
(U.S. Army National Guard photo Sgt. 1st Class Roby Di Giovine)

highlighted the difficulty of integrating nonorganic units to protect the corps' rear area during the warfighter exercise. External elements were rapidly incorporated into the Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB), which in this case had conducted limited training with the corps it was supporting.[3] Without prior training and integrated planning, execution becomes increasingly difficult. Because an MEB is composed of reserve or National Guard units, it is often responsible for corps rear-area units it has never trained with and does not fully understand. The time required to build shared understanding across disparate formations leaves the rear area critically vulnerable to attack—especially in the complex, high-tempo environment of LSCO.

The Army's brigade combat teams (BCTs) have repeatedly struggled to execute rear-area security under LSCO conditions. A report from the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) shows that BCTs have faced persistent challenges securing the rear area over the past five years.[4] These problems stem from a reluctance to allocate sufficient combat power to the rear-area, as doing so diverts forces from the primary objective.[5] The issue is compounded by significant reductions in military police formations and the removal of the brigade engineer battalion from the BCT structure.[6] These formations traditionally provided rearearea security, and their diminished capacity limits the support available for a problem that is already expanding. JP 3-10 emphasizes the need for unity of effort and clearly defined command relationships to prevent gaps in rear-area security—conditions that do not exist under current doctrine.[7] The Army's current cobbled-together approach to rear-area security at the corps and lower echelons will only be magnified in LSCO.

The threats posed by LSCO are outpacing the Army's current approach to rear-area security. The ongoing Russia Ukraine War demonstrates this clearly: both Russia and Ukraine routinely employ drones to strike logistics hubs, airfields, and C2 nodes—low-risk, high-reward targets in the rear area.[8] Going forward, the rear area will remain contested, and its security must be based on the assumption that it is continuously targetable.[9] Emerging LSCO technologies, particularly UAS, are blurring the distinction between the close and rear areas.[10] Army doctrine reinforces that the rear area is not safe and that U.S. forces must be prepared to fight in all domains from the outset of conflict.[11] Persistent reconnaissance, long-range precision fires, UAS, and near-peer special operations forces all present threats to the rear area that must be mitigated in LSCO. Current rear-area security doctrine is not designed to address these threats. The resulting gaps pose significant risk during LSCO. The solution, however, is not additional personnel—it is a change in force design.

The multifunctional BDE headquarters provides a single headquarters with delegated authority over the corps rear area. This formation integrates military police; military intelligence; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear

Civilians role played by the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team out of the Oklahoma Army National Guard run to the Military Police seeking safety during an active shooter training scenario June 28th, 2017 at JMRC in Hohenfels, Germany. The 591st MP Company, 93rd MP Battalion, 89th MP Brigade out of Fort Bliss, Texas is training in preparation for their MNBG-E security mission.
(U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Nicholas Farina)



(CBRN); and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) units under one headquarters to control the corps' rear area. As an active-duty formation, the multifunctional BDE headquarters consolidates critical security assets and focuses them on the protection warfighting function. Its increased training readiness and access to resources make it better suited for LSCO. JP-310 emphasizes that rear-area security requires clearly defined command relationships to prevent gaps in protection.[12] A multifunctional BDE headquarters meets this requirement by integrating rear-area protection assets into a single formation with unique capabilities designed to exercise continuous, comprehensive control of the rear area.

The reorganization of units gives the corps commander a single formation responsible for rear-area security. The multifunctional BDE headquarters establishes an active-duty unit capable of training and integrating at the corps level. Consolidating diverse formations under one command enables more effective rear-area security planning and tasking. The protection warfighting function is often misunderstood or overlooked by planning staffs—a dangerous oversight in LSCO.[13] The multifunctional BDE headquarters elevates and prioritizes the protection warfighting function at the corps level. This prioritization is essential when constant competing demands seek to divert combat power away from the rear, as repeatedly observed at JMRC.[14] Commanders and staffs within a multifunctional BDE headquarters understand the corps commander's requirements because they work directly for the corps full-time. Additionally, subordinate units are already familiar with and trained by the headquarters, reducing the lag time typically caused by compositing units for specific missions. The multifunctional BDE headquarters fosters an environment of mutual trust and competence, strengthening rear-area security.

The reorganization of rear-area security units provides an opportunity to integrate additional assets tailored to LSCO. The multifunctional BDE headquarters offers a holistic approach to rear-area security through its unique capabilities. Transitioning to this formation enables the integration of assets such as organic ISR, a more robust C2 architecture, and counterunmanned aircraft systems (c/UAS) specifically designed for rear-area protection. The Military Police Corps is undergoing significant reductions in force structure, creating an opportunity to incorporate emerging technologies aligned with rear-area security requirements.[15] One such improvement would be equipping military police units with specialized UAS and c/UAS systems, along with tailored training, to enhance rear-area ISR and deny enemy reconnaissance. Effective rear-area security requires integrating capabilities and missions across formations. The mission-essential tasks of the Military Police Corps—logistics protection, C2 node defense, and route security—make it the best fit for strengthening rear-area security. Alongside military police formations, military intelligence, CBRN, and EOD capabilities can be more effectively leveraged under a multifunctional BDE headquarters. These unique assets



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Ronald Helsel, an explosive ordnance disposal team leader assigned to the 720th Ordnance Company, 18th Military Police Brigade, aligns his shot on an unmanned aircraft system with the TiTAN disruptor system at the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Demolition Range, U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria, July 8, 2025. The training enhances unit readiness by developing tactics and strategies to counter emerging threats. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Tanisha Karn)

are critical in LSCO and are too valuable to be assigned to a headquarters that does not fully understand its role. Providing specialized capabilities to rear-area formations significantly enhances their ability to protect the corps rear-area in LSCO, far beyond what current structures can achieve.

The Military Police Corps is the ideal foundation from which to build the multifunctional BDE headquarters. The tasks outlined in FM 3-39, *Military Police Operations*, align directly with rear-area security. Support to mobility, area security, reconnaissance and surveillance, and logistics security are all mission sets routinely trained and executed by military police in rear-area environments.[16] Given this training, military police are the bestprepared formation to control the corps rear area. The threats posed by LSCO require formations and Soldiers focused exclusively on protection. Commanders and staffs at the O-6 level within the Military Police Corps are dedicated to the protection warfighting function and understand the requirements of corps-level rear-area security. Ongoing changes to military police structure and equipment create opportunities to integrate new technologies and formations tailored to rear-area protection. Corps rear-area security demands a formation trained and experienced in the protection warfighting function. The Military Police Corps is the most capable formation to assume this responsibility through a multifunctional BDE headquarters.

In LSCO, the rear area will be contested, and the Army must adjust its formations to prepare for that fight. Emerging technologies such as drones and long-range precision fires mean rear-area security can no longer be treated as a secondary concern. At the corps level, the Army lacks an effective solution for rear-area protection. A multifunctional BDE headquarters provides a unit capable of integrating and controlling the corps' rear-area security. Its unique capabilities make it better suited to protect the rear area during LSCO. The Military Police Corps is the optimal choice for this formation, given its ongoing restructuring and mission set. The current organization of corps-level rear-area security is insufficient to counter LSCO threats—including long-range precision fires, ISR saturation, and UAS. To close this gap, the Army must adopt an active-duty, multifunctional BDE headquarters capable of providing unified command, clear authorities, and the integrated capabilities required to secure the rear area.

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Endnotes

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