

FRIENDLY FORCE INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS AS PROTECTION-INFORMED DECISIONS

By Lieutenant Colonel Michael Carvelli

On 2 March 2002, Operation Anaconda began in the Shahikot Valley of Afghanistan with a plan built on friendly-force assumptions that would not survive first contact. The concept of operations depended on Afghan militia blocking enemy withdrawal, U.S. Army insertions, and close air support to offset widely distributed forces.[1]

Within hours, those assumptions began to collapse. Afghan forces withdrew from their blocking positions. Bad weather delayed U.S. infantry insertions. Special operations presence constrained close air support. The friendlyforce conditions required by the original operational design no longer existed. Yet the staff lacked a formal, systematic mechanism to translate that degradation into a requirement for a commander decision.[2]

Friendly force information requirements (FFIRs) would not have prevented Afghan force withdrawal or delayed the weather, but a formal FFIR framework could have compelled the commander to determine whether the hammerandanvil approach remained viable once those conditions changed.

Ground forces were operating in a fundamentally different tactical situation than planned. Earlier recognition of those changed conditions—through FFIR thresholds and deliberate decision branches—might have mitigated exposure to casualties.

Seven years later, a similar pattern emerged at Combat Outpost Keating in Kamdesh Valley, Afghanistan. The chain of command accepted the assumption that the outpost could remain in place until closure, despite its position on low ground surrounded by dominating high terrain. By mid-2009, the outpost had degraded into a base-defense mission. Planned closure slipped as assets shifted; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) priorities changed; and force-protection improvements were deferred. Yet for months before the October 2009 attack, degradation was observable: 47 enemy attacks (triple the rate) and reports of large

A U.S. Army Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), mans a .50-caliber machine gun during a battle in Operation Anaconda, March 4, 2002. The battlefield is in eastern Afghanistan, south of Gardez in the Shah-e-kot mountain range.
(U.S. Army photo/Spc. David Marck Jr.)



4th Infantry Division Soldiers run through a series of obstacles during a division-wide physical training event honoring the Battle of Kamdesh at Fort Carson, Colorado, June 9, 2023. On October 3, 2009, near the town of Kamdesh in Eastern Afghanistan, 400 Taliban assaulted Combat Outpost Keating, defended by Soldiers of 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment of the Ivy Division. Honoring our heritage, Ivy Soldiers continue to grow adaptive and confident leaders of highly trained and cohesive teams of skilled and expert Soldiers. ***(U.S. Army photo by Cpt. Aaron Blevin)***

concentrations. When roughly 300 enemy fighters attacked from the surrounding high ground, eight U.S. Soldiers were killed and 22 wounded. [3] Like Anaconda, the staff lacked a formal process that forced a commander to decide whether the outpost remained defensible under changed conditions.

More than two decades after Anaconda, similar challenges persist. In Fiscal Year (FY) 23 and FY25, the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) observed multiple corps and division headquarters developing incomplete operational frameworks and lacking systems for adjusting them during execution. [4] These observations span counterinsurgency and large-scale combat operations. When staffs fail to integrate warfighting functions across planning horizons, the result is missed opportunities, operations that work at cross purposes, and increased risk to friendly formations.

The common failure is the absence of ownership for converting friendly status into decision thresholds tied to force protection—thresholds that tell the commander when combat power, sustainment, mobility, command and control, or protection capacity can no longer support the operation.

Several approaches could address this gap: real-time ISR feeds to commanders, predictive analytics modeling friendly-force degradation, or standing-decision matrices triggered by automated sensor data. This article argues that FFIRs offer a command-centric approach that assigns explicit ownership and forces deliberate decision making tied to warfighting functions. FFIRs put existing doctrine into practice rather than requiring new systems or technology. The solution requires four structural anchors: warfighting-function threshold matrices, FFIR columns in decision-support matrices, mandatory phase-transition reviews, and rehearsed decision branches. These elements should be implemented and tested during Command Post Exercises (CPX) 2 and 3 and during warfighter exercises.

The Problem

Doctrine defines FFIRs and places them within the military decision-making process. Commanders and staffs identify command critical-information requirements, which break down into FFIRs and priority intelligence requirements. Doctrine links FFIRs to decision points and places management responsibility with the operations officer.

But doctrine stops at definition. It does not prescribe how staffs validate FFIRs during planning, build thresholds by warfighting function, assign ownership during execution, reconcile degradation in real time, or rehearse decision branches when thresholds are crossed. The result is that staffs collect friendly-status information without consistent ownership, and FFIRs often devolve into status reports rather than driving protection-informed decisions.

4th Infantry Division Soldiers run through a series of obstacles during a division-wide physical training event honoring the Battle of Kamdesh at Fort Carson, Colorado, June 9, 2023. On Oct. 3, 2009, near the town of Kamdesh in Eastern Afghanistan, more than 300 Taliban assaulted Combat Outpost Keating (COP). The deadly attack caused Soldiers of the 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team of the Ivy Division, eight deaths and 22 injured. The Ivy Soldiers were later awarded and decorated for their heroic valor. Honoring our heritage, Ivy Soldiers continue to grow adaptive and confident leaders of highly trained and cohesive teams of skilled and expert Soldiers.
(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Woodlyne Escarne)



Critical Friendly System	Degradation Condition	Threshold	Decision Point
Fuel Supply (Forward Supply Point)	Supply depletes due to extended operations or MSR disruption	Falls below 3 days of supply	G-4reports to G-3; commander decides whether to establish forward resupply or transition to rationing
Ammunition (155mm HE per battery)	Combat consumption exceeds resupply rate	Falls below 200 rounds per battery	Battalion commander reports to G-3; commander decides whether to reduce fire mission tempo or shift to lighter fires
Main Effort Maneuver	Delayed assault due to enemy resistance or terrain	Has not crossed Phase Line Spartan by 1600 hours Day 2	Battalion S-3 reports to G-3; commander decides to continue attack, shift main effort, or transition to consolidation
Enemy Reconnsaisance Threat	Enemy scouts probe forward supply route	Company-size or larger element observed within 5 km of MSR	S-2 reports to G-3; commander decides to reinforce MSR security, divert traffic, or adjust supply timing
Enemy Force Concentration (Subjective)	Sustained enemy activity increases dramatically	Attack rate exceeds 15 per month OR confirmed force of 200+ fighters within 5 km	Intelligence officer certifies condition to S-3; commander decides whether defense remains viable or transition to withdrawal

Figure 1. Example FFIR threshold matrix

Anaconda and Keating show this gap. A friendly-force assumption is embedded in the plan but becomes dangerous when no one owns the threshold for reporting its failure. The commander receives data too late, receives ambiguous data, or receives no decision-quality information. The staff continues executing the original plan after friendly conditions no longer support it. The failure to assign ownership of assumption validation at decisive points breaks tempo, exposes forces across lines of operation and effort, degrades command and control, and introduces unacceptable risk.

Potential Solution: Four Anchors

FFIRs fail when treated as status reports. Corps and division staffs should establish FFIRs as a protection-informed command-and-control process. This requires four structural anchors, each with a specific doctrinal foundation and clear product.

First Anchor: FFIR Threshold Matrix by Warfighting Function

The operations officer (G-3) should direct the logistics officer (G-4), communications officer (G-6), engineer, air defense, fires, medical, maneuver, and protection staff sections to define degradation thresholds for each warfighting function. The output is a matrix for each functional area showing the following: the critical friendly system, the degradation condition, the threshold at which degradation makes the planned operation infeasible, and the decision point that threshold triggers. For example, a sustainment FFIR might read: 'Report when fuel supply within the forward supply point falls below X days of supply for planned operations,' or 'Report when ammunition supply of 155mm HE falls below X rounds per battery or weapon.' A maneuver FFIR might read: 'Report when the main effort has not crossed Phase Line Spartan by 1600 hours,' or 'Report when a confirmed enemy reconnaissance element of company size or larger is observed within 5 kilometers of the main supply route.' Each establishes a threshold tied directly to operational feasibility.

Staffs should distinguish between objective thresholds—such as fuel days of supply, ammunition counts, or

casualtyevacuation capacity—and those that require interpretation. For subjective FFIRs, the reporting staff section must certify that the condition exists before escalating it to the G3. For example, at Combat Outpost Keating, a formal FFIR might have read: 'Report when sustained attack rate exceeds 15 attacks per month,' or 'Report when a confirmed enemy force of 200 or more fighters is assessed within 5 kilometers of the outpost.' These conditions were observable months before the October 2009 attack, but without threshold ownership, the staff failed to convert degradation into decision requirements. Certification ensures that the reporting section owns both the observation and the judgment.

Second Anchor: FFIR Column in the Decision Support Matrix

Once the staff defines functional FFIR thresholds, they must connect each FFIR to a decision point and a responsible decision maker. The vehicle for this is a dedicated FFIR column in the decision support matrix (DSM). The DSM is a staff planning tool that lists key decisions, the information needed to make them, and when they must be made. Adding an FFIR column makes existing doctrine actionable in planning and execution. The DSM FFIR column records trigger FFIR, threshold, reporter, reporting timeline, decision authority, and branch plan.

Time standards should fall into three categories: "Immediate" (minutes) for fire support restrictions, mass casualty events, and loss of critical terrain; "Standard" (hours) for casualty evacuation delays, fuel supply degradation, and ISR unavailability; and "Predictive" (24–48 hours) for sustainment capacity projections, maintenance backlog growth, and morale indicators. Time standards may compress under tactical conditions. The commander and G-3 review whether time standards remain valid at each phase transition and adjust reporting timelines accordingly.

An example decision point might read: 'Advance into Phase II exploitation,' with a corresponding FFIR trigger of: 'Report when the maineffort maneuver battalion has defeated the enemy force in the assigned engagement area.' The DSM could assign responsibility to the reporter—the battalion commander—with an immediate time standard. The authority—the corps commander—then decides the planned branch: if the FFIR is confirmed, execute exploitation; if not confirmed by X time, execute the designated branch plan.

The commander pre-delegates FFIR authority during planning by phase and warfighting function. For example, the commander may delegate Phase II exploitation decisions to the division commander while retaining Phase III pursuit decisions. Similarly, sustainment FFIR decisions may be delegated to the G-4 while maneuver FFIR decisions remain with the commander. This delegation appears in the DSM and is rehearsed during CPX 3. If the delegated authority becomes unavailable, the next senior staff officer in the succession assumes the decision until the delegated authority returns.

Third Anchor: FFIR Review at Every Phase Transition

When operations shift between phases—movement to contact, assault to consolidation, exploitation to pursuit—prior FFIRs may become irrelevant. The G-3 and protection chief should conduct a formal FFIR review at each phase transition.

The review should ask: Which FFIRs from the previous phase remain relevant in the new phase? What new FFIRs become critical now? Which functional areas have new staff representatives who need to understand their FFIRs?

For example, as the operation transitions from attack to consolidation, FFIR priorities shift. During attack, FFIRs focused on enemy-engagement areas and supporting fires. During consolidation, FFIRs shift to sustainment capacity, casualty evacuation capability, command-post displacement, and rear-area security. FFIRs that mattered in attack (is air support available?) become background information.

Fourth Anchor: Rehearsed FFIR-Triggered Decision Branches

FFIRs must move from reporting into command action. Doctrine encourages rehearsals to use the execution matrix *and decision-support template*. The gap is that doctrine does not require staffs to rehearse FFIR-triggered branches as an explicit sequence.

Decision authority for FFIR-triggered branches should operate at three levels. Level 1 decisions require commander approval and typically involve continuing or transitioning between operational phases. Level 2 decisions rest with the G-3, chief of staff (CoS), or executive officer (XO) to address modification of support priorities, resource reallocation, and sequencing adjustments. Level 3 decisions remain with functional staff chiefs and involve resource redistribution within a single warfighting function. The commander, CoS/XO, G-3, and staff section chiefs pre-identify which FFIR triggers which authority level during planning and then rehearse the decision sequence during CPX 3.

The rehearsed sequence should follow a standard format: If [FFIR condition] is confirmed, then [named authority] directs [specific actions], with [specified units] executing [modifications], and [supporting functions] adjusting to [specified new priorities]. Each critical FFIR identified in the decision-support matrix should have a corresponding rehearsed branch.

For example, if bridge-crossing capacity drops below two lanes, the engineer reports to the G-3. The commander then directs that the main supply route shifts to Route Green with the G-4 issuing a fragmentary order for air-defense repositioning.

Implementation

Commands and staffs can implement this in the ramp up to, and during, warfighter exercises. In CPX 2, the focus is building the FFIR threshold matrix and testing it in war-gaming. The output of CPX 2 is a warfighting-function FFIR-threshold matrix, a decision-support matrix with an FFIR column, commander approval of FFIR and thresholds, and assignment of ownership for each FFIR.

Staffs should scale FFIR by echelon to maintain decision focus and prevent information overload. Corps-level operations typically manage 24–32 FFIR across two or more divisions, tracking main- and supporting-effort integration. Division-level operations require 12–16 FFIRs focused on main effort and supporting effort synchronization. Brigade-level operations typically require 8–12 FFIRs across all warfighting functions. Battalion task forces reduce to 4–6 FFIRs focused on main effort priorities. FFIRs roll upward: the battalion operations section (S-3) FFIRs feed brigade S-3 analysis, which feeds division G-3, which feeds corps G-3. This prevents each echelon from tracking the same information and ensures each focuses on decisions relevant to their command span. **Figure 2** illustrates FFIR count and focus by echelon. CPX 2 should test whether the identified FFIR set at each echelon is both necessary and sufficient for command decisions.

In CPX 3, the focus shifts to execution. The staff conducts the operation using the FFIR framework, emphasizing phase transitions and execution rehearsals. At each phase transition, the G3 and protection chief lead the FFIR review. During execution rehearsals, the staff practices FFIRtriggered branches. The observercoachtrainer team assesses FFIR management across three areas: recognition and reporting—whether the staff recognized when the FFIR threshold was crossed and reported the condition within the time standard; decisionmaking—whether the decisionmaker received decisionquality information and responded appropriately; and execution—whether supporting functions adjusted in time.

During the afteraction reviews for CPX 2 and CPX 3, there should be an explicit assessment of FFIR management performance. Assessment criteria should include:

1. Did the staff write the right FFIR? Yes, if FFIR thresholds directly tie to three or more decision branches and each FFIR is owned by a named individual or section.
2. Did the staff detect friendlyforce degradation early? Yes, if degradation is identified and reported 24 or more hours before the threshold is crossed, allowing commander decision time within the planned decision window.
3. Did the staff inform the commander in time? Yes, if the reporter certifies the condition, the G3 briefs the commander, and the commander receives decisionquality information within the established time standard for that FFIR category (Immediate, Standard, or Predictive).

Echelon	FFIR Count	Focus	Example
Corps	24-32	Main/supporting effort integration	Main effort division: report when main supply route blocked for more than 2 hours; Supporting effort division; report when medical evaluation response time exceeds 90 miunutes from request to pickup
Division	12-16	Main effort and supporting effort synchronization	Main effort; report when division has not defeated enemy force in assigned enaggement area by 1200 hours Day 3; report when division sustainability window falls below 5 days. Supporting effort: report when enemy bypasses division sector to reinforce main effort; report when division's rear area security posture degrades below acceptable risk threshold
Brigade	8-12	All warfighting functions	Report when main effort battalion has not crossed Phase Line Spartan by 1600 hours; report when forward supply point fuel falls below 3 days of supply; report when casualty evacuation queue exceeds 20 patients
Bn TF	4-6	Main effort priorities	Report when enemy reconnaissance element company-size or larger observed within 5km of main suply route; report when assault echelon ammunition for 155mm HE falls below 200 rounds per battery

| *Figure 2. FFIR scalability by echelon. echelon.*

4. Did the commander respond appropriately to the FFIR? Yes, if the commander issues a decision in accordance with the rehearsed branch plan within 30 minutes of receiving FFIR notification, or delegates authority to the appropriate level per predelegated FFIR authority.
5. Did the staff execute the branch? Yes, if supporting functions adjust to the new priorities, issue fragmentary orders, and execute modifications to the operation within two hours of the commander's decision.

Conclusion

FFIRs fail when staffs treat them as routine status reports. Operation Anaconda illustrates what happens when friendlyforce assumptions collapse without triggering owned decision requirements, and MCTP observations show the same problem persisting across years of warfighter exercises. Corps and division staffs must treat FFIRs as a protectioninformed commandandcontrol process that tells the commander when friendlyforce degradation renders the current plan infeasible. The practical solution is establishing four structural anchors: warfightingfunction threshold matrices, FFIR columns in decisionsupport matrices, mandatory phasetransition reviews, and rehearsed decision branches.

Consider how these anchors address the cases. In Anaconda, a formal FFIR column in the decisionsupport matrix would have tied the failure of Afghan force participation, U.S. insertion delays, and close airsupport constraints to a specific decision point: 'Continue hammerandanvil or transition to airground alternative.' The threshold—when any two elements of the original plan degraded—would have been owned by the G3. FFIRs would not have prevented these conditions, but they would have forced an explicit decision about the operation's viability once they occurred. At Keating, mandatory phasetransition reviews conducted monthly would have forced a decision when closure slipped and ISR was diverted. The review would have asked: Is the outpost still defensible under these conditions? That question was never formally posed. These anchors operationalize existing doctrine and close the execution gap that doctrine itself acknowledges.

Protectioninformed FFIRs give commanders decisionquality information in time to act. When staffs fail to convert friendlyforce degradation into decision requirements, commanders continue operating from plans that no longer match reality. The result is lost tempo, exposed support forces, and unnecessary risk across the close, deep, and rear areas. Corps and division leaders should mandate FFIR integration into CPXs 2 and 3, then rehearse the answer to one critical question: What friendlyforce degradation makes the current plan infeasible, and who must tell the commander in time to act? Warfighter exercises will test this framework and prepare commanders for largescale combat operations.

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Endnotes

1 Richard Kugler, Michael Baranick, and Hans Binnendijk, "Operation Anaconda: Lessons for Joint Operations," Defense and Technology Paper, no. 49 (2009), 5-7.
2 Ibid.
3 New York Times, "Executive Summary – AR 15-6 Investigation re: Complex Attack on COP Keating," 03 October 2009, https://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/ar15-6sum.pdf.
4 Mission Command Training Program (MCTP), FY 23 Mission Command Training in Large-Scale Combat Operation: Key Observations, 1; MCTP, FY 25 Mission Command Training Program Key Observations, 16.
5 Field Manual (FM) 6-0, Commander and Staff Organization and Operations (GPO, 2022), 2-3.
6 FM 6-0, C-1 to C-16.

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