Modernizing the Forgotten Warfighting Function: PROTECTION

By Colonel Michael T. Loftus

As famously stated, "The best offense is a great defense."[1] In September 2020, it seemed apparent from the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region between Azerbaijan and Armenia that good offensive maneuvers require great defense.[2] In the opening days of that conflict, unmanned aerial systems on both sides ran out of armored vehicles to target. Both sides waged a battle for an edge in information and truth via Twitter© and other social media outlets—seeking to gain political and, likely, military advantage or deception. Stand-off and denial of observation became the norm for weeks, with indirect fires providing some degree of stand-off as the militaries struggled to meet their respective objectives. The conflict evolved into one of dueling defenses that sought to create some opening for offensive action. The way in which the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict unfolded was influenced by many factors beyond the capabilities of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to enable precision indirect fires, but it does further reinforce what potential future conflicts between the United States and peer adversaries may look like.[3] Current war games support the theme of the enemy being able to "see everything" and effectively target with lethal and nonlethal means.

The U.S. Army seeks to defeat this dual threat of enemy intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and long-range precision fires, often referred to as antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD),[4] with evolutions of more technologically advanced solutions captured in the U.S. Army AimPoint Force Structure Initiative.[5] Perhaps implied, but not explicitly stated, in this endeavor is the need to modernize the Army's ability to protect itself across domains and echelons.[6] The Azeri-Armenian conflict certainly highlights the reason that the United States needs to defeat threat intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and fires; they are lethal and constant, and they disrupt options for offensive action. The ability of the Army to preserve critical capabilities and enable freedom of action is just as important as its ability to defeat an adversary's defenses.

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*, defines the protection warfighting function as ". . . the related tasks and systems that preserve the force so the commander can apply maximum combat power to accomplish the mission."[7] Protection is currently an economy-of-force effort. The critical capabilities and assets that enable freedom of action for maneuver forces are prioritized, and some form of protection is provided until the capabilities to provide that protection are exhausted. As available resources dwindle, remaining critical capabilities and assets receive localized protection. Additionally, protection capabilities reside in numerous functional branches. As conditions and priorities change, protection capabilities and tasks require constant synchronization. Protection cells at every echelon spend precious time integrating capabilities and tasks and ensuring unity of effort across echelons. From a mission command perspective, synchronizing protection takes place at the maneuver unit level—typically, with military police advisors. Individual units also conduct their own protection tasks such as enacting security measures, providing operational security, and seeking concealment. The Army has considered the problem of protecting its critical assets and invested in that protection for decades. Maneuver enhancement brigades currently provide some of the required capabilities and, when empowered, have a proven record of success. However, the Army must evolve beyond the current mindset of handling local and route security in land and air and deal with 21st Century threats. Put bluntly, the Army's concept and practice of protection are simplistic and antiquated.

Air, land, maritime, space, and cyber remain the domains of conflict. With the expansion of access to space, cyber, and electronic warfare systems, these domains will grow in importance relative to air, land, and maritime in the future. As highlighted by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, current protection expectations and approaches to "preserve" forces are no longer sufficient for success on the modern battlefield. Neither Azeri nor Armenian forces were capable of massing ground combat forces as their support areas faced near-continuous targeting. Protection must deny the enemy the ability to disrupt operations and provide the time and space necessary to position combat power. It serves as A2/AD for the sake of one's own offensive action. This approach drives the need to make changes to ensure that protection adds to the Army's ability to defeat emerging peer adversaries.

The first step in modernizing the protection warfighting function involves describing the required capabilities and visualizing protection at the division and corps levels. A rolling "A2/AD bubble" opens and closes, as needed, to allow combat power to consolidate or close on an enemy, similar to the shields of a vessel in a science fiction movie. Protection is truly about synchronizing multidomain active and passive capabilities to support a larger plan. Active measures, akin to spoiling attacks or deception plans, seek to "blind" or confuse an enemy. Jamming, the denial of access to spaces (land and air), physical and electronic obscuration, aggressive security operations, and preventative health are all forms of active protection. Passive measures include intelligence operations and analysis, the hardening of structures and networks, and operational/physical security measures. These equate to denying enemy access, which, in turn, enable the building of combat power. To be clear, a modernized protection concept does not just seek to deliver fires; it seeks to generate options to deliver effects on an enemy. Protection includes commanders' responsibilities to secure their

own forces; it does not replace them. Instead, it serves as a complementary function that denies enemy access and preserves capabilities that enable combined arms maneuver.

Determining how to transform the vision into reality during conflict is more important. Today, multiple staff sections or functional areas are responsible for executing these capabilities. There is no single subordinate commander or staff officer who is primarily responsible. Protection cell chiefs must use a broad commander's intent and coordinate through the orders process to ensure synchronicity and seize opportunities. The flaw with this system is that critical decisions may not reach commanders, thereby preventing them from acting in the expected hyperdynamic environment of the future.

One way to address some of these concerns is to leverage a protection coordinator (PCOORD) to directly synchronize these capabilities. A PCOORD leads the protection process to understand how an enemy may seek to strike the friendly force. Protection, which is a supporting function of the fires and operations processes, identifies the critical capabilities or activities necessary for maneuver. The capabilities and activities identified comprise what is known as the protection prioritization list.[8] Conceptually, just as the fire support coordinator leverages intelligence on the enemy to support offensive action, the PCOORD uses intelligence to build a resilient umbrella of protection to deny the enemy the ability to gain an advantage. The protection decision concept is a balance between risk to mission and capability to defend. But protection can be more than balancing risk and capability. A PCOORD can recommend active measures that can mitigate risk or deny access, leveraging the entire capacity of a formation. With assigned forces and relevant authorities, (unity of command and effort), the PCOORD can employ measures to deny the enemy access to friendly capabilities while simultaneously generating opportunities for maneuver, fires, intelligence, and command and control assets to exploit advantages.

To utilize an effective PCOORD, some organizational changes must occur. First, because the execution of A2/AD is complex, the operations and fires cells cannot manage all the details while simultaneously directing maneuver and fires; therefore, some elements currently linked to movement and maneuver control should be moved to a robust protection cell. Second, ad hoc teams that provide protection in vulnerable areas or sites must be codified into standing units that can train and operate together under one commander. Third, the best practices of the protection process must be modeled and included in doctrine within the context of multi-domain operations at tempo and at scale. Finally, technological solutions will enhance the execution of A2/AD and the Army's Project Convergence—and its spin-offs offer commanders and future PCOORDs with promises of the ability to visualize all-domain threats and opportunities.[9]

The PCOORD and organizational and doctrine shifts are necessary to improve and build upon the construct of maneuver enhancement brigades. The proposed changes will make the Army better and more competitive in the 21st Century. The recommendations acknowledge the complexity inherent in multi-domain operations and seek to offer focus and expertise in providing input for maneuver choices. The geometries of the future battlefield change how commanders visualize risk across domains. Rather than choosing where to expose themselves to risks, commanders must first decide where to place their own A2/AD assets to deny enemies that can see, and simultaneously strike, across all domains. The risk in the future isn't in how and when to maneuver; it is in what not to protect—and when.

Along with the rest of the Army force, the protection warfighting function must be modernized across organizations, doctrine, and technological lines. Opportunities for protection to evolve—not only as a concept but also as essential processes, systems, and capabilities—exist today. We must take advantage of the opportunity to shift approaches. A modernized approach to protecting friendly forces and information is the way to avoid battlefield stalemates such as those observed in Nagorno-Karabakh. The cost of not taking a modernized approach will be higher than the cost of investing in protecting ourselves now.

Endnotes:

[1]Jack Dempsey, *Good Reads.com*, <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/155647.Jack_Dempsey>, accessed on 3 August 2021.

[2]"The Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict Hints at the Future of War," *The Economist*, 10 October 2020, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/08/the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-hints-at-the-future-of-war>, accessed on 2 August 2021.

[3]"Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Design for Great Power Competition," *Congressional Research Service*, 4 June 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R46389.pdf>, accessed on 9 August 2021.

[4]Louis Simon, "Demystifying the A2/AD Buzz," *War on the Rocks*, 4 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/demystifying-the-a2ad-buzz/>, accessed on 9 August 2021.

[5]"The Army's AimPoint Force Structure Initiative," *Congressional Research Service*, 8 May 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF11542.pdf>, accessed on 9 August 2020.

[6]"Defense Primer: Army Multidomain Operations," *Congressional Research Service*, 22 April 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF11409.pdf>, accessed on 9 August 2021.

[7]ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 July 2019.

[8]ADP 3-37, *Protection*, 31 July 2019.

[9]Jed Judson, "Inside Project Convergence: How the U.S. Army is Preparing for War in the Next Decade," *Defense News*, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/defense-news-conference/2020/09/10/army-conducting-digital-louisiana-maneuvers-in-arizona-desert/>, accessed on 2 August 2021.

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