CHANGING MINDSETS:

THE NECESSITY OF CONSIDERING PROTECTION FIRST IN FUTURE CONFLICTS WITH PEERS

By Brigadier General Niave F. Knell

As the U.S. Army Futures Command, Austin, Texas, and the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Eustis, Virginia, modernize the Army to fight and win with WayPoint and AimPoint forces in the multi-domain construct, leaders must also revamp their thinking. By the time the Army's fully modernized force is in place in 2035, China is anticipated to have developed the capabilities of a peer competitor. The freedom of action that the United States has enjoyed under the blanket of air superiority will no longer exist, leaving us with significant antiaccess and aerial denial, electronic warfare, and cyber threats. Commanders may be able to employ offensive capabilities only during windows of opportunity—afforded only once protection has been set as the foundation. Winning tomorrow's wars requires a change in mindset—one in which protection is at the forefront of decision making.

Current thinking, as outlined in a recent *Military Review* article entitled "Fire Support in Time and Space," follows an intelligence-drives-fires, fires-drives-maneuver philosophy.[1] With accurate intelligence, fixed-wing assets can destroy deep-area targets, such as an integrated fires command node or long-range fire assets like rockets. This initiates the kill chain depicted in Figure 1, with field artillery then able to move closer to the enemy and begin destroying enemy air defense assets. This affords freedom of maneuver for attack aviation ". . . within the enemy's battle zone . . . seek[ing] and destroy[ing] . . . enemy assets, prioritizing enemy maneuver forces capable of destroying friendly armored forces and remaining air defense threats."[2] Field artillery actions allow ground maneuver forces to attack and seize terrain, enabling rocket artillery to position farther forward. Once that happens, the process can begin again.

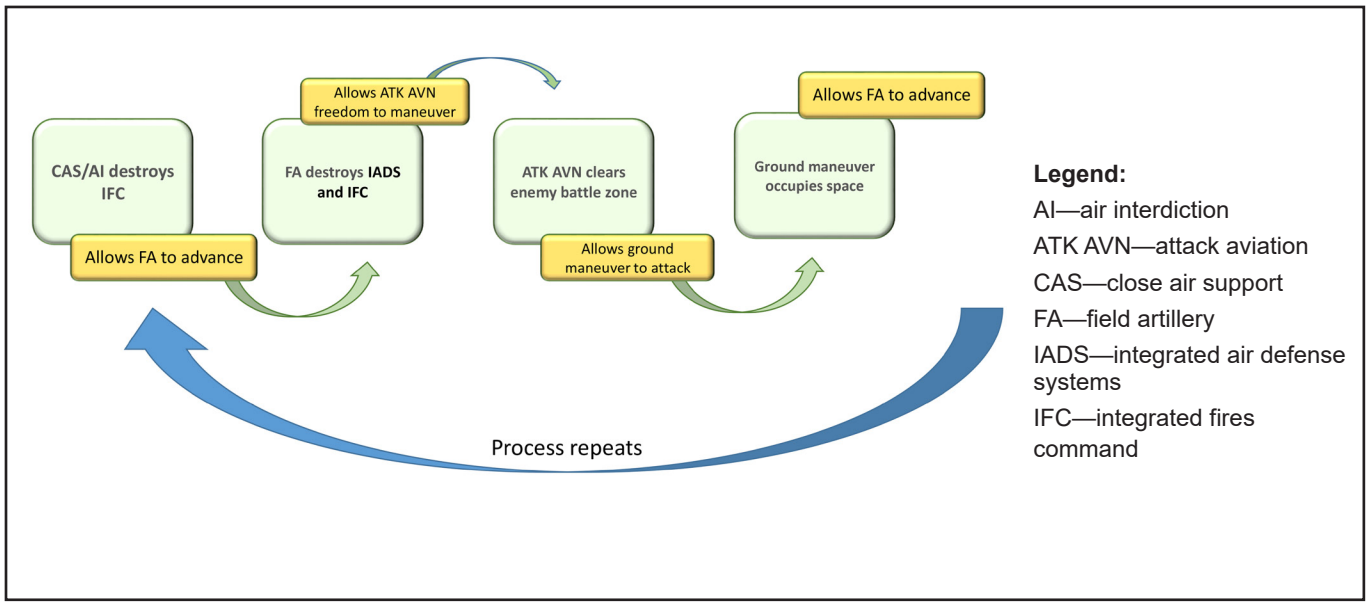

Figure 1. Kill chain to penetrate and disintegrate

Future thinking requires an acknowledgement that while Army forces are attempting to execute this kill chain, the enemy will simultaneously be pursuing the same process. Fixed-wing assets may be able to destroy only a certain percentage of long-range fire assets, meaning that the field artillery units would still require protection from long-range indirect fires in order to advance. However, those assets may not be available; they may be protecting a higher priority per the priority protection list. A peer threat could also employ electronic jamming to degrade the accuracy of friendly joint fires, or its terrain-shaping efforts could interfere with the ground maneuver attack. These actions would create kinks in the kill chain, requiring the anticipated and flexible application of protection.

To be prepared for the reality of contested maneuver in all domains, staffs need to integrate protection throughout the entire operations and intelligence process, starting at the beginning. Staff members should ask themselves, "What can we accomplish with protection, and when?" They should determine what is not protected and then develop courses of action that leverage those windows while mitigating risks. Additionally, the staff members will need to integrate protection into battle rhythm decision-making cycles, with protection assets allocated and/or shifted on the priority protection list during these cycles. The "clean" kill chain figure would then be modified; for example, it might look like that depicted in Figure 2.

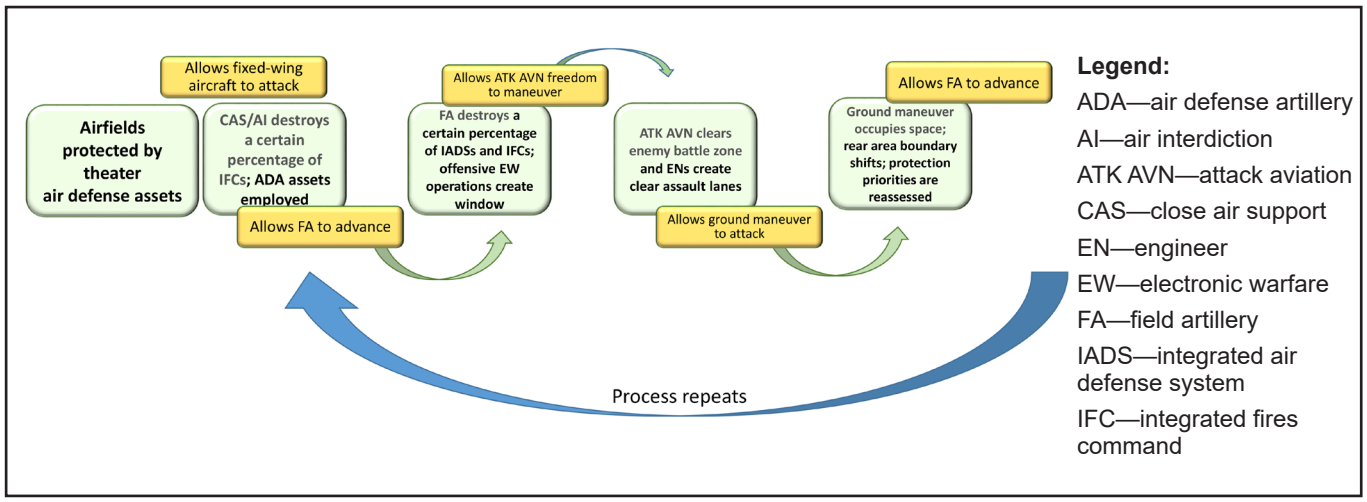

Figure 2. Modified kill chain

How can we begin to change the current mindset? The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) drives change through leader development and training executed by Professional Military Education at all centers and schools throughout the Army. The Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, conducts a virtual Protection Integration Course for staff members in echelons-above-brigade combat teams through corps. And beginning in fiscal year 2024, Intermediate-Level Education students will be able to take a semester-long protection elective. Students from all branches—and not just those assigned to the protection cell—should take these courses to expand their understanding. Additionally, beginning in fiscal year 2022, military decision-making process exercises in Captain's Career Courses across all schools will be simultaneously conducted using the command post computing environment to allow branches that contribute directly to the protection warfighting function to appropriately influence course-of-action development as the scenario dictates. TRADOC also conducts warfighter exercises through the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center Training and Mission Command Training Program with pilots to improve unity of command and efforts in protection being piloted in fiscal years 2022 and 2023. The Mission Command Training Program operations groups were organized by warfighting function, so there is now a team focused entirely on protection; separate midterm and final after action reviews will be conducted. Finally, the Combined Arms Center *Total Army Analysis 25–29 Force Design Update*[3] addresses additional capability and capacity in the protection cells at the division and corps echelons to ensure capacity and expertise for protection integration in all command posts and bureaus, boards, centers, cells, and working group processes.

By considering protection first in future conflicts with peers, these and many follow-on efforts will result in modernized forces that have windows of opportunity to execute the standard kill chain. Commanders and staffs will be trained to plan for protection within the kill chain, with the ability to visualize and decide how to protect the process and keep it moving. Winning tomorrow's wars depends on it.

Endnotes:

[1]Timothy P. Lewin and Marc S. Melfi, "Fire Support in Time and Space," *Military Review*, May–June 2021, p. 61.

[2]Ibid, p. 59.

[3]*Total Army Analysis 25–29 Force Design Update*, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, <https://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/08TAA.pdf>, accessed on 5 October 2021.

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