

Aligning Protection in the Operations Process

By Colonel Joan Sommers

In this age of great power competition and rapidly evolving multidomain threats, protection should be integrated into all operations. Protection serves as a combat multiplier in rear and forward areas. Commanders who master the protection warfighting function have the critical battlefield advantage.

Warfare is constantly evolving. While offense remains the desirable focus of operations, technological advancements and the growing presence of constant surveillance, autonomous systems, and long-range fires demand that protection be strategically reevaluated. The emerging generation of warfare must be appreciably focused on protecting units and ensuring their resiliency so that they can preserve themselves and withstand enemy attack. As defense is reinforced, tactics necessitate the reevaluation of traditional offensive strategies. It is now a critical time to innovate defense mechanisms, dispersed tactical formations, and multidomain protection methods that can be adapted to the challenges posed by modern technological advancements.

As demonstrated in Ukraine, the modern battlefield is characterized by pervasive surveillance and precise long-range engagements that render the traditional massing of forces both risky and strategically undesirable. Contemporary warfighting demands a paradigm shift in maneuver and protection strategies. Whereas logistics and foraging once shaped Army movements, forces must now disperse, converge for offensive actions, and quickly redisperse to avoid counterfire. Such a maneuver strategy highlights the need to embed robust protection measures to effectively safeguard combat power. This article advocates for the crucial integration of protection measures throughout military operations to secure mission success.

Prioritizing the Principles of Protection

The protection warfighting function is defined as “the related tasks and systems that preserve the force so the commander can apply maximum combat power to accomplish the mission.”¹ Peer adversaries may be able to rapidly detect and destroy Army forces with space-based capabilities, unmanned systems, and massed and precision fires, so units must prioritize protection throughout all operations.² Commanders must visualize how protection impacts operations while developing and integrating protection plans; in this sense, protection drives the characteristics of offensive and defensive operations. It can no longer be tucked away in Annex E of the base order. Protection planning is so critical to future fights that it should be prominently addressed in the first paragraph (Friendly Forces) of the order.

Protection may be so pivotal to future battlefield successes that the Army creates a sixth paragraph (Protection) that shapes staff planning and commander decision points.

One possible change to the battle rhythm would involve merging the protection working group into the targeting decision board. Protection working groups are useful for synchronizing protection efforts but may lack the right personnel and timing to effectively impact maneuver decisions. The protection cell and the protection working group are typically undermanned and are relatively low priorities, so outputs are often inadequate for integration into operations and targeting decisions. Protection working groups can also become overly focused on force protection and lag behind the tempo of the battlefield so that outputs may not synchronize with commanders’ decision points. As with operations orders, protection considerations must be prominently addressed in the targeting cycle. Another option might be to develop a multidomain decision board in place of the targeting decision board to synchronize multidomain assets and protection. The multidomain decision board could replace other meetings or be added to the pre-existing battle rhythm. Unfortunately, division/corps battle rhythms already leave little time for commanders to make decisions so white space is already at a premium. Regardless of the battle rhythm meetings, the goal is for the right people to be planning and synchronizing the protection warfighting function before targeting decisions are presented to commanders.

Shaping Operations With Protection

Just as intelligence has historically driven operations, protection must increasingly shape operational planning. The closest the Army has come to applying protection as a combat multiplier is through the suppression of enemy air defenses in air operations—a one-dimensional approach. The limit of the operational reach of a unit is its culmination point; operational reach balances the natural tension between endurance, momentum, and protection.³ In an increasingly complex era of warfare, protection becomes the most significant contributor to operational reach in combat operations. Beyond traditional hardening and concealment, protection of the force involves safeguarding communications, conducting cyberspace operations, and managing the electromagnetic spectrum. Protection starts at the individual Soldier level and continues all the way through to operational formations. Commanders must adopt a comprehensive view of protection that includes both physical and electronic dimensions to ensure that protective measures are adapted and integrated into offensive and defensive

operations. Commanders must understand, visualize, describe, and direct the protection of assets and capabilities alongside massing effects and conducting sustainment operations.

During offensive operations, commanders must employ cyberspace capabilities with electromagnetic radiation; however, these systems emit observable signatures and are susceptible to enemy attack. Protecting Army electromagnetic capabilities may require that Soldiers turn off equipment to limit emissions and reduce the effectiveness of enemy target acquisition systems. Strict requirements for protection slow operational tempo and the targeting process. On the other hand, turning on equipment and radiating strong electromagnetic signatures at multiple locations could deceive the enemy and impede its ability to target the location of the most valuable Army assets. These scenarios offer commanders a protection decision that can be used in conjunction with ongoing maneuver operations. In essence, commanders must balance dispersion with convergence and emission with target acquisition. The key is to balance protection with tempo so the Army can enable maneuver success.

Reconceptualizing Protection in Maneuver

As armament technology has advanced, body armor has progressed from leather, to wood, to metal, to Kevlar®. Yet, no level or numbers of layers of body armor will stop next-generation technologies from penetration. Current and potential future technologies are forcing commanders to understand that protection doesn't just consist of a Kevlar vest. Future operations dictate the need for protection throughout the duration of operations and depth of the battlespace—not just in the rear area.

Application of the protection warfighting function must be made a higher priority for commanders at echelon. Staffs—not just protection cells—should be prepared to synonymously assess and reassess protection alongside operations and targeting functions during current and future planning. Commanders can secure mission success by reconceptualizing protection measures throughout military operations. Protection must be viewed differently—not only for current threats but also for emerging threats that are yet unknown.

Endnotes:



¹Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*, 31 July 2019.

²ADP 3-37, *Protection*, 10 January 2024.

³ADP 3-0.

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