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Multi-Domain Operations: US Army and the Indo-Pacific

By Kaname Kuniyuki

SYNOPSIS

Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) is an evolving US Army concept that addresses the US Army's contribution to future joint operations against an adversary with well-developed anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD). The Indo-Pacific, with its challenging terrain and vast distances, provides the optimal environment to stress test the concept.

COMMENTARY

IN 1991, Operation Desert Storm demonstrated the speed and lethality of the US Army's AirLand Battle concept that it had developed in the 1970s to counter the massive military threat presented by the Soviet Union. AirLand Battle translated easily to a conventional fight in an open desert. In the war's aftermath, Army leaders realised such a feat would probably not be possible again as future adversaries would not afford the US military the time and the access to aggregate its combat power.

In the ensuing years, Russia and China have pursued military modernisation efforts to counter US power projection. They invested heavily in sophisticated anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD) systems and developed new strategies to obfuscate their actions and achieve their political and military objectives short of war. China's recent military parade displayed how far these capabilities have come. Recently, Secretary of the Army, Ryan McCarthy stated: "The Army must modernise today or we could lose the next war."

From MDO 1.0 to 1.5

Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) is one means to achieve the goal of modernisation. The concept has already borne fruit, and is poised to continue to inform and transform

the Army's modernisation effort with a focus on the Indo-Pacific. To date, there have been two iterations of the MDO concept, often referred to as 1.0 and 1.5.

The first iteration was called Multi-Domain Battle (MDB), and laid the foundation to replace AirLand Battle. MDB expanded the conceptualisation of the battlefield by extending its physical depth and breadth, while also adding space, cyber, electromagnetic spectrum, and information dimensions.

The concept introduced key ideas pertaining to ways to counter grey zone activities, and the need to "converge" capabilities across multiple domains to dismantle enemy A2/AD systems. It also contributed to the US Army's current "Big Six" modernisation priorities.

The second iteration replaced "battle" with "operations" to expand the scope of the concept and pull in the Inter-agency for whole-of-government contributions. The key ideas from 1.0 carried over to version 1.5, but with a few modifications such as: specifying a need for multi-domain formations; and, descriptions of what capabilities will converge at each echelon.

Wax Fruit or Real?

Whether MDO bears fruit of substance and quality will depend on a stringent assessment of capabilities in live and simulated exercises. In particular, these exercises will need to identify the necessary logistics, policies, and authorities that both the Army and the Joint Force will require for future operations with allies and partners across all domains.

Without these less exciting requirements, the Army will not be able to sustain a fight, let alone win it.

The concept is also vulnerable to the vagaries of US domestic politics and their effect on the defence budget. Already, there is concern that budget uncertainty will force the Army to delay its hypersonic weapon programme. With 2020 being an election year, the Army may have to exercise some tactical patience and wait for the political smoke to settle before it can take the next step toward meeting its modernisation objectives.

Fancy systems that cannot be built, deployed, and used effectively are wax fruit.

MDO in Indo-Pacific: Substance to the Form

In 2016, Admiral Harry Harris, the then USINDOPACOM Commander, said that the Army's contribution to joint operations in the Indo-Pacific region needs to include the ability to: sink ships; neutralise satellites; shoot down missiles; deny the enemy's ability to command and control its forces; and, restrict maritime movement.

Since then, US Army Pacific (USARPAC) has embarked on various efforts to achieve Harris' vision. During the last couple of US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises, Army AH-64 attack helicopters fired anti-ship missiles at maritime targets, and the US Army, in concert with Japan's Ground Self-Defence Force (JGSDF), successfully fired an anti-ship missile from a ground-based rocket launcher.

Additionally, the Army formed the Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) to experiment with capabilities and tactics that will inform the development of future doctrine. At the heart of the MDTF is the I2CEWS (intelligence, information, cyber, electromagnetic, and signal) concept which brings together tailored capabilities to act as a 'master key' to unlock temporary windows of opportunity through which joint capabilities can converge to attack their targets.

In September, the MDTF participated in the US-Japan bilateral exercise Orient Shield. Again, the focus was on converging capabilities to target enemy ground, air, and naval assets in the vicinity of the East China Sea. Next year, the Army plans to continue experimentation with the MDTF in exercises with Australia and Japan, and to possibly include the task force in its Pacific Pathways exercises.

As MDO efforts expand in the region, the US will need to synchronise diplomatic, information, military, and economic lines of efforts to manage perceptions while strengthening the trust and relationships with its allies and partners. The Army would should also consider offering a degree of transparency to the People's Liberation Army in order to reduce the chance of miscalculation and military escalation.

MDO 2.0

During a recent Brookings Institution event, Lt. Gen. Eric Wesley, Deputy Commanding General for US Army Futures Command, stated that there is a plan to publish version 2.0 in 2020. This next evolution will benefit from recent operational-level army war games, as well as joint war games in which the military services will test their operational concepts to identify best-of-breed ideas. Lt. Gen. Wesley added that version 2.0 will be an initiative to create a joint concept.

Futures Command is also planning to release a new modernisation strategy before the end of 2019. The strategy will depart from past documents by taking a more holistic approach to modernisation, covering everything from policies and authorities, to doctrine, organizations, and training.

With the appointment of former Army Secretary Mark Esper to Secretary of Defence, and the appointment of Army Gen. Mark Milley to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the stars are aligning to maintain the momentum for MDO's transition to a joint concept which on future fields of strife, to paraphrase Gen. Douglas MacArthur, shall bear the fruits of victory.

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