On Main Effort

Maneuverist Paper No. 15
by Marinus

Generally speaking, maneuver warfare comprises broad precepts rather than specific techniques. It is a "philosophy for action," as Gen Alfred M. Gray wrote in the foreword to the original *Warfighting*. It is a "mindset," as one of our critics has argued. It is a style of warfare discernible from other styles. These precepts include decentralized authority, high tempo, focused attack of enemy criticalities/vulnerabilities, ruthless exploitation of opportunity, strength against weakness, flexibility and adaptability, and pursuit of unpredictability and surprise.

Maneuver warfare generally does not prescribe techniques but rather leaves Marines free to choose or create the techniques most appropriate to the situation. Designating a main effort is one of the few prescribed techniques by which commander's implement maneuver warfare. (Commander's intent is another.) Alternative terms include point of main effort, focus of effort, and sometimes *Schwerpunkt*. In devising a concept of operations, the commander designates one of the subordinate units as the main effort, provides that unit with the lion's share of resources, and directs the other units to support that unit in accomplishing its mission—the rationale being that if the main effort unit succeeds, the overall operation likely will succeed.

From *Warfighting*:

> Of all the actions going on within our command, we recognize one as the most critical to success at that moment. The unit assigned responsibility for accomplishing this key mission is designated the main effort—the focal point upon which converges the combat power of the force. The main effort receives priority for support of any kind.[1]

The designation of a main effort is not unique to maneuver warfare, nor is it a particularly difficult or controversial idea. *Warfighting* devotes little more than a page to it. Before the maneuver warfare movement, U.S. military doctrine included the construct of a main attack and one or more supporting attacks within a concept of operations. The mere weighting of combat power at one point or another does not qualify as maneuver warfare. However, maneuver warfare practice, borrowing from the Germans, established the designation of a main effort as a requirement for all operations and assigned a moral quality to it. Maneuverists were fond of quoting Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who was reputed to have said: "A plan without a *Schwerpunkt* is like a man without character." There is something to be said for forcing yourself to prioritize one task and economize on the others. It compels you to decide what it important and make tradeoffs in allocating resources.

Designating a main effort is one of the only prescribed methods for tactical commanders to actually apply the tenets of maneuver warfare.
(Photo by Cpl Jamin Powell.)

The main effort serves three basic purposes. The first supports operational design, the second resource allocation during planning and execution, and last the exercise of mission tactics.

Deciding Where to Attack the Enemy System

First, the technique encourages commanders to assess the enemy system based on considerations of criticality and vulnerability to decide the best point at which to attack that system to disrupt its coherent functioning. (See Maneuverist No. 7, "On Criticality and Vulnerability" [*MCG*, Apr21] and Maneuverist No. 10, "On Defeat Mechanisms" [*MCG*, Jul21].) The reasoning is that of all the various tasks involved in taking down or disrupting the enemy system, the one that strikes at this criticality/vulnerability is the most important. Success at that point will contribute most to overall success. The technique of main effort thus encourages the commander to single out the main objective during operational design.

It is possible, we suppose, to decide that two or more criticalities are equally important to attack in taking down a particular enemy system. Even more likely, when striking an enemy on multiple lines it may not be possible to identify which is the critical effort until the operation has started to

> ## *… of all the various tasks involved in taking down or disrupting the enemy system, the one that strikes at this criticality/vulnerability is the most important.*

unfold. An effort may warrant being designated the main effort only after it has shown progress initially. These are legitimate considerations for avoiding designating a main effort, at least initially, but it is one thing to do so after careful consideration and another to do so out of reluctance to make difficult decisions. We suggest the technique remains a valuable forcing function as a general rule.

Aligning Resources with Priorities

Second, the technique provides a mechanism for aligning resources with that assessment of criticality/vulnerability. Typically, the subordinate element—or elements, grouped together for unity of command—assigned the task of attacking that critical vulnerability is designated the main effort and assigned the bulk of available resources such as priority of fires, logistics, intelligence support, deception efforts, reinforcements, and so on. The idea is to assign as much as you can afford to the critical task and only what you must to the other tasks.

Clausewitz clearly linked enemy criticality with friendly weight of effort:

> A center of gravity [*Schwerpunkt* in the original German] is always found where the mass is concentrated most densely.

It presents the most effective target for a blow; furthermore, the heaviest blow is that struck by the center of gravity [*Schwerpunkt*].[2]

Consistent with his observations of Napoleonic warfare, Clausewitz was advocating a decisive contest of strength versus strength: "by constantly seeking out the center of his power, by daring all to risk all, will one really defeat the enemy."[3] Today, we would rather concentrate strength against weakness in the form of some critical vulnerability/ vulnerable criticality, but the logic of massing the preponderance of combat power against the critical element within the enemy system (however that judgment is made) remains the same. In this way, the main effort forces every commander to prioritize, making potentially difficult decisions about which subordinate task within the concept of operations is most important at any point in time.

Harmonizing Initiative

Third, designating a main effort provides a harmonizing mechanism to help subordinates in exercising initiative. This harmonizing purpose receives the most emphasis in *Warfighting*:

> It becomes clear to all other units in the command that they must support that unit [i.e., the designated main effort] in the accomplishment of its mission. Like the commander's intent, the main effort becomes a harmonizing force for subordinate initiative. Faced with a decision, we ask ourselves: *How can I best support the main effort?*[4]

In fact, one interpreter of *Warfighting* goes so far as to list main effort as one of three parts of mission command.[5] *FMFM 1* used the term *focus of effort* to emphasize the focusing role; *MCDP 1* changed to the more common *main effort*. We certainly agree that main effort contributes to the practice of mission tactics, but its use extends beyond that into operational design and planning—as we have argued.

The key point is that in the face of the uncertainty and changeability of war, establishing a focal point in the form of a unit to be supported in accomplishing its task provides another critical mechanism for harmonizing or disciplining the potentially divergent, decentralized actions of commanders at all levels acting on their own initiative.

Shifting the Main Effort

Warfighting makes the point that the designation of the main effort should not be an irreversible decision:

> As the situation changes, the commander may shift the main effort, redirecting the weight of combat power in support of the unit that is now most critical to success. In general, when shifting the main effort, we seek to exploit success rather than reinforce failure.[6]

This may be easier said than done. *Warfighting* does not address the practical issues of shifting combat power (and perhaps a future revision should). Some resources are more easily shifted than others, long-range fire capabilities that lend themselves to direct support or general support missions, for example. Other resources typically do not operate independently but are attached to a base unit and are not so

easily detached and shifted elsewhere, especially once engaged in combat. As in so many things, there is a balance to be struck—between weighting the initial main effort sufficiently for success and maintaining the flexibility to shift the main effort later as desired.

One issue: Can only the commander shift the main effort, as *Warfighting* indicates, or can subordinate commanders, coordinating laterally and understanding the logic of the concept of operations, shift the main effort among themselves? For example, A Company, assigned the critical task of breaking through the enemy line, has been designated the main effort, with B Company supporting by fire. But A Company's progress is halted, whereas B Company is in position to execute the breakthrough. Can A and B Companies switch roles, with the latter now becoming the main effort? Clearly, this would be the ideal in a command system based on mission tactics, given that windows of opportunity may open and close quickly.

The Odd Case of the MAGTF

The technique of main effort developed in the context of ground combat within units based on a common type, usually infantry. For example, a division commander could assign the main effort typically to any of three similar regiments, each capable of being a supported or supporting unit. In that context, the idea of all other units supporting the main effort makes perfect sense, as does the idea of later shifting the main effort to a different unit that then would become the supported unit.

> ## Attempting to designate a main-effort domain or a main-effort function will be fairly meaningless.

Within the air, ground, and logistics combat elements of the MAGTF, the logic of a main effort generally holds. But at the MAGTF level, the idea does not apply so cleanly. The CE, GCE, ACE, and LCE of the MAGTF each have very different sets of capabilities and very different roles and as a result often have very specific supported and supporting relationships with each other. Many of the capabilities of the ACE and LCE are specifically designed to support the GCE, while the GCE has a limited ability to support the ACE and LCE beyond providing security. In this context, designating and shifting a main effort among the combat elements makes little sense, as the various elements already routinely support and are supported by each other according to their unique capabilities.

While there have been rare cases in which the ACE or even the LCE has been designated the MAGTF main effort, in the vast majority of situations those elements will support the GCE for the simple reason that that is what many of their capabilities are specifically designed to do. Of historical note,

in both the Vietnam War and Operation DESERT STORM, the MEF included two GCEs, restoring the logic of assigning a main effort at the MAGTF level.[7]

This oddity mainly affects the third of the three main purposes of the main effort, harmonizing initiative. The first two purposes, deciding where to strike the enemy system and aligning resources with that decision, generally remain valid at the MAGTF level.

We suggest that those who would like to designate a main effort among the warfighting domains—land, air, maritime, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum—or among the joint warfighting functions will face the same problem. The various domains and functions are not interchangeable but have specific ways in which they support or are supported by each other. Attempting to designate a main-effort domain or a main-effort function will be fairly meaningless.

Conclusion

Although a relatively simple and straightforward technique, the main effort remains one of the most recognizable features of maneuver warfare. Its simplicity belies its importance to operational design, allocation of resources, and execution through mission tactics.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, 1997).

2. Carl von Clausewtiz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

3. *On War*.

4. *Warfighting*.

5. B.A. Friedman, *On Tactics: A Theory of Victory in Battle*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017).

6. *Warfighting*.

7. In Vietnam, III MAF included 1st and 3rd MarDiv, while in the Gulf War, I MEF included 1st and 2nd MarDiv. In both cases, the divisions operated as separate maneuver elements directly under the MAGTF command element and not under a GCE headquarters. Similarly, a MEF could be assigned an Army division.