# Training for Decisive Action

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In traditional Western military thought, decisive action refers to massing combat power at the right place and time for achieving success. The 1910 *Field Service Regulations of the United States Army*, the doctrine of its day, states, "decisive results are obtained only by the offensive," and commanders will "make a powerful effort at the decisive point."[1] A decisive action would be the offensive effort—the main attack—that would win the battle. A decisive point would be understood as the place and time the main attack would occur. Commanders seized the initiative and sought out a decisive battle that would destroy their enemy's ability to resist.

Bradley Fighting Vehicles of the 3rd Armored Combat Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, from Fort Hood, Texas, move out for the live-fire portion of their decisive action training in January 2013 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by David Crozier, *NCO Journal*)

In contemporary joint doctrine, a *decisive point* is "a geographic place, key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success."[2] While this construct allows for more than combat operations at specific geographic locations, modern planners tend to use the idea of decisive points traditionally, to map lines of operation that synchronize actions.

In 2012, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, modified the foundational concept of what it means to be decisive in modern war. The Army now defines *decisive action* not as the massing of offensive combat power at the right place and time but as "the continuous, simultaneous combinations of offensive, defensive, and stability or defense support of civil authorities tasks."[3] Simultaneous combinations of tasks reflect a broader understanding of modern operations, which are not a sequence of set-piece linear battles with clear termination criteria. Instead, modern warfare involves flowing combinations of combined arms maneuver and wide area security against amorphous threats. Therefore, Army exercises need to prepare agile and adaptive leaders capable of combining offensive, defensive, and stability tasks successfully.

This article discusses ways the Army can provide training that ensures units are ready to conduct unified land operations through decisive action.

## The Right Operational Framework for Combining Tasks

Army unit leaders start by describing operations in terms of time, space, purpose, and resources. Consistent with Army operational doctrine and the "FORSCOM Command Training Guidance (CTG)—Fiscal Year 2016," Army combat training

Soldiers of the 173rd Cavalry Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, meet at a rally point after parachuting into the Urban Operations Complex in the Nevada Test and Training Range, Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, 18 November 2009. The soldiers are part of the biannual U.S. Air Force Weapons School Mobility Air Forces Exercise, which provides realistic training for air combat forces, air mobility forces, and U.S. Army personnel. (Photo by Michael R. Holzworth, U.S. Air Force)

centers (CTCs) are using the "Decisive Action Training Environment" (sometimes known as DATE) to replicate complex operating environments involving high-intensity conflict and hybrid threats.[4] This program offers complex, realistic training scenarios that require brigade combat teams (BCTs) to integrate limited resources such as combined arms battalions, aviation, information collection, information operations, and engineers.[5] In particular, a BCT executing an attack must ensure the integration of key enablers to identify disruption zones and main defensive belts in order to array forces for relative advantage. A BCT must synchronize and integrate information collection and joint fires to attrit an enemy's ability to increase its defensive posture.

Simultaneous to the integration of key enablers in support of the attack, a BCT also must execute offensive or defensive tasks along with stability tasks to secure the populace. The simultaneity of these tasks is essential for sustained situational awareness and shared understanding of the environment.

I (contributing author William Shoemate) served as an observer at the Army National Training Center (NTC) from June 2014 to July 2015. During my experience gained over ten training rotations, I found that units applying the deep-close-security operational framework conducted decisive action more effectively during training. Army doctrine encourages leaders to establish an operational framework for each operation but does not dictate a specific framework. ADRP 3-0 suggests three: deep-close-security, decisive-shaping-sustaining, and main and supporting efforts.[6]

In a deep-close-security operational framework, commanders usually articulate their vision in terms of the terrain and the sequence of events. They plan actions based on deterring the commitment of uncommitted forces while focusing on speed and mobility to

rapidly overwhelm the enemy in a critical place and time to exploit the initiative.

In a decisive-shaping-sustaining framework, they visualize a focal point—a decisive operation—that will determine the outcome. They plan based on a grand conceptualization that focuses resources on a singular operation that accomplishes the mission.

In a main-and-supporting-efforts framework, they prioritize the tasks of subordinate units based on capabilities. The main-and-supporting-efforts framework can complement other frameworks.[7]

Soldiers detach concrete barriers, also known as "T-Walls," from a crane during an effort to improve security in the southern portion of the Sadr City district of Baghdad on 3 May 2008. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

In the training events I observed at the NTC, when BCT leaders conceptualized engagements as deep-close-security, they were more likely to integrate enablers to attrit enemy forces early in the fight, while simultaneously focusing stability tasks across the area of operations to complement their ability to execute core competencies of combined arms maneuver and wide area security.

In all cases, conducting wide area security is essential for sustaining relative advantage and retaining initiative. Wide area security is "the application of the elements of combat power in unified action to protect populations, forces, infrastructure, and activities; to deny the enemy positions of advantage; and to consolidate gains in order to retain the initiative."[8] Activities such as protecting populations and infrastructure, and consolidating gains, imply stability tasks.

For example, during rotation 15-01 at the NTC, a BCT was challenged throughout to ensure relative advantage through simultaneity of operations. To leverage opportunities to employ limited resources, the unit's leaders continuously assessed the operating environment. They developed a shared understanding across the BCT, which allowed for timely decisions to sustain a relative advantage. The significance of this training was that any BCT would need to synchronize and execute wide area security while deterring the commitment of uncommitted forces through joint fires and information collection.

During three training rotations from September to November 2014, I observed that BCTs employing the decisive-shaping-sustaining operational framework limited their ability to analyze and assess operations in support of wide area security. The doctrinal language describing this framework, indicative of the earlier meaning of the word *decisive*, led staffs to only think of one decisive battle as opposed to combining effects. For example, during rotation 14-08, the BCT restricted its capability by focusing resources on the decisive operation. This allowed enemy forces to commit overwhelming combat power at their designated place and time to sustain a position of relative advantage. The BCT's framework for conceptualizing and integrating resources to apply overwhelming combat power at a specific place and time was degraded based on its inability to attrit enemy forces early.

## Historical Examples of Forces Combining Tasks in Operations

Coalition operations in Tal Afar, 2005, and in Sadr City, 2008, are examples of how U.S forces and coalition partners conducted operations in a manner consistent with the 2012 decisive-action operational

U.S. soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, conduct a combat patrol with Iraqi policemen during Operation Iraq Freedom in Tal Afar, Iraq, 29 April 2006. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Aaron Allmon, U.S. Air Force)

concept. The 3rd Armored Calvary Regiment, commanded by then Col. H.R. McMaster, employed combined arms maneuver and wide area security for persistent relative advantage at echelon.[9] In order to enable offensive operations within the city, the 3rd Armored Cavalry and Iraqi forces isolated enemy strong points through simultaneous offensive, defensive, and stability operations. Coalition forces mobilized Iraqi elements within the city to establish an inner and outer cordon. This task, secure-to-isolate, was supported through continuous area reconnaissance. Simultaneously, coalition forces made inroads with the local populace through repairing critical infrastructure and enabling freedom of maneuver around the city for commerce.

The 3rd Armored Calvary integrated joint fires and intelligence collection assets to close with the isolated enemy forces. They showed that a unit's ability to integrate joint fires and information collection assets to find, fix, and finish enemy forces is a key to successful operations. In Tal Afar, successful management of transitions and continuous enabler integration led to success.

Similar to Tal Afar, the 2008 battle for Sadr City demonstrated that simultaneous execution of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks can lead to successful operations.[10]

U.S. Army soldiers from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and Iraqi soldiers cross an intersection during a routine security patrol in downtown Tal Afar, Iraq, on 11 September 2005. The purpose of the patrols was to disrupt insurgent safe havens and to clear weapons caches in the area of operations. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Alan D. Monyelle, U.S. Navy)

The integration of enablers by 4th Infantry Division and coalition forces, from joint fires to information collection assets, shaped the operating environment and created multiple dilemmas for the dominant insurgent force, Jaish al Mahdi. In Sadr City, coalition forces conducted wide area security through ground maneuver, while engineers, protected by snipers, constructed a barrier to secure the population by isolating malign elements. Simultaneously, coalition special operations forces conducted raids against high-value individuals, while attack aviation interdicted enemy rocket teams.

The integration of enablers by coalition forces in Sadr City in 2008 was strikingly similar to CTC activities by the most successful BCTs I observed. Success in both training exercises and operations appears to hinge on the ability of friendly forces to transition rapidly between offensive, defensive, and stability tasks while further enabling mission command at every echelon. In Sadr City, this was achieved through the execution of combined arms maneuver and wide area security to isolate the enemy and seize the initiative. The elements of this version of decisive action were applied consistently throughout the fight.

The U.S. Army is not the only military force adopting simultaneous combinations of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks. For example, in the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah employed a sophisticated military strategy that integrated attritional guerilla warfare in the defense, offensive rocket fire, and stability operations in areas it controlled.[11] Hezbollah used unmanned aerial vehicles and rockets supplied by Iran in its equivalent of asymmetric main and deep fights.[12] The unmanned aerial vehicles enabled tactical reconnaissance and antiarmor ambushes, while the rockets attacked population centers in an effort to pressure Israel to withdraw. According to scholar Iver Gabrielsen in "The Evolution of Hezbollah's Strategy and Military Performance, 1982–2006," its fighters employed thirteen principles of warfare that emphasized aspects of

stability operations. For example, principles related to shaping civil conditions were, "The media has innumerable guns .... Use them in the battle!" and "The population is the treasure—nurture it!"[13]

During the Crimea and Donbass campaigns, the Russian military employed the Gerasimov doctrine. It calls for "the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population ... to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state."[14] This approach clearly seeks relative advantages through combining offensive, defensive, and stability tasks.[15]

An Israeli Merkava tank destroyed by the Hezbollah during its 2006 war with Israel. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

In Crimea, Russian forces used special operators and proxies to seize the initiative by combining propaganda to win over ethnic Russians while simultaneously using covert elements to seize key terrain such as airfields and ports. These actions were supported by long-range rocket and artillery fire. Additionally, they protected their forces using a sophisticated integrated air-defense network while using threats of strategic escalation (such as nuclear posture changes and snap military exercises) to deny external support.

## The Evolution of the Army's Operational Concept

When the 2012 ADRP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, replaced *full spectrum operations* with decisive action, the Army began to guide commanders to use continuous and simultaneous combinations of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks to seize the initiative and gain a position of relative advantage.[16] In contrast to the traditional idea of decisive actions as massing combat power, the reason for a change in meaning of decisive was explained as follows:

> The operational concept addresses more than combat between armed opponents. Army forces conduct operations amid populations. This requires Army forces to defeat the enemy and simultaneously shape civil conditions. Offensive and defensive tasks defeat enemy forces whereas stability tasks shape civil conditions. Winning battles and engagements is important but alone may not be the most significant. Shaping civil conditions (in concert with civilian organizations, civil authorities, and multinational forces) often proves just as important to campaign success. In many joint operations, stability or defense support of civil authorities tasks often prove more important than offensive and defensive tasks.[17]

The need for operating forces to combine and synchronize a wide range of tasks has remained consistent from past to present and will continue into the future. Like most Western militaries, however, the U.S. Army has a long tradition of defining decisive action as the application of superior firepower or maneuver elements against an enemy at the optimal place and time. In the 1923 *Field Service*

*Regulations*, decisive action implied "the ability of the command to concentrate forces at decisive points."[18] In 1976, FM 100-5, *Operations*, stated the application of superior forces included fires. The manual told soldiers that, "decisive results require skillful concentration of firepower."[19]

Starting with the introduction of "AirLand Battle" doctrine in 1982, the meaning of decisive started to expand in three significant ways. First, the doctrine, which called for using combat power to engage in deep strikes that destabilized the adversary, reintroduced an emphasis on maneuver. Whereas the 1976 "Active Defense" doctrine focused on firepower and using suppression to enable movement in the close fight, AirLand Battle advocated using both fires and maneuver in the deep and close fights. According to the 1982 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, "the AirLand Battle will be dominated by the force that retains the initiative and, with deep attack and decisive maneuver, destroys its opponent's ability to fight and organize in depth."[20]

Second, AirLand Battle introduced the concept of battlefield dynamics, and a broader understanding of combat power and the intangible factors that would determine outcomes in war. The manual defined combat power by its elements: "maneuver, firepower, protection, and leadership."[21] Each of these elements of military power had a role in helping commanders marshal the right mix of forces at the decisive point. Additionally, the manual referred to the range of intangibles shaping outcomes as the dynamics of battle. According to the manual, "force ratios and the effects of fire and maneuver are significant in deciding battles; however, a number of intangible factors often predominate, [including the] state of training, troop motivation, leader skill, firmness of purpose, and boldness—the abilities to perceive opportunities, to think rapidly, to communicate clearly, and to act decisively."[22]

Whereas the 1982 AirLand Battle doctrine extended the battlefield and the idea of what constituted combat power, in 1986, Army operational doctrine expanded the understanding of the range of battlefields. The 1986 edition of FM 100-5 explained, "guerrillas, special operations forces, and terrorists will seek to avoid set-piece battles and to strike at scattered points of vulnerability."[23] The 1986 manual stressed adapting AirLand Battle to contingencies short of major theater war.

Despite this broader focus, the 1986 manual still stressed deep attack against enemy high-value targets as decisive points on the modern battlefield. In fact, in the 1986 edition, the doctrine called for thinking across multiple battlefields and anticipating adversary adaptation. The manual also addressed the potential of precision munitions, stating, "potent ground and air systems, complemented by closely coordinated precision-guided munitions, will be able to concentrate enormous combat power, especially at decisive points."[24]

## From Effective Doctrine to Effective Training

The word *decisive* has evolved beyond its twentieth century roots. Today, a single, linear decisive battle is likely to be elusive. Forces often conduct operations between war and peace as, for example, in urban areas that do not lend themselves to massing combat power against a single, geographic decisive point. The unit able to simultaneously and continuously combine offensive, defensive, and stability tasks, as captured in Army doctrine, will be the one most able to achieve a position of relative advantage against an enemy. The operational framework, or frameworks, a commander selects—such as deep-close-security, decisive-shaping-sustaining, main and supporting efforts—greatly influences how the commander arranges the mix of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks. Every commander needs to arrange tasks in the way that best leverages combined arms maneuver and wide area security.

To enhance readiness, units need time and space for realistic home-station training. Training should emphasize individual-to-collective training on decisive-action skill sets, especially long-range fires, reconnaissance, security, and enabler integration. Additionally, staff exercises, consistent with the CTC model, need to be shaped to prepare agile and adaptive leaders capable of combining offensive, defensive, and stability tasks in a deep-close-security framework. ■

**Biographies**

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## Notes

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