

CONCEPTS UPDATE

Marine Corps Operations in Complex and Distributed Environments

11 January 2007

"For guerrillas the principle of concentration has to be replaced by that of "fluidity" of force. Dispersion is also a necessity on the side opposed to the guerrillas, since there is no value in a narrow concentration of force against such elusive forces, nimble as mosquitoes."

Liddell Hart, Strategy

Introduction to the Problem. The security environment as described by the "Arc of Instability," demands a multi-purpose Marine Corps that is capable of operating with greater autonomy across the spectrum of conflict. Our adversary's approach to warfare, along with the continually increasing lethality of modern weapons, has resulted in an ever increasing need for his dispersion. As stated in Mao's *On Guerilla Warfare*, "We must make war everywhere and cause dispersal of his forces and dissipation of his strength." Commanders are faced with larger "frontages" and complex areas of operation with potentially fewer forces conducting operations. The complexity of the modern operating environment, exacerbated by the presence of civilians and spanning the gamut of conflict, calls for extending the tenets of maneuver warfare through improved tactical decision-making at all levels. Our adversaries:

- Will distribute their operations to exploit our vulnerabilities and indirectly erode our influence.
- Will try to mitigate our advantages by fighting in complex terrain (urban, mountain, jungle).
- Will seek to complicate operations by engaging in war among civilian populations.

Additionally, urban and other environments create situations where units, while not geographically separated, experience relative isolation. There may be another platoon operating across the street but they may as well be in another city. The diversity of threats and activities coupled with relative isolation create the need for autonomy of decision-making and tactical action – even though the forces are not necessarily widely separated.

Small wars "...are usually of longer duration, are often waged in harsh, close terrain, and are characterized by extremes in climate. Additionally, small wars often take place in distant, logistically remote places against elusive opponents about which little is known and who do not fight according to the tactical and operational conventions that are *de rigueur* among modern, mechanized armies fighting (or hoping to fight) in open country." The enemy is largely "...light infantry accustomed to local terrain and climate and skilled at employing both, and masters of tactics of elusiveness in a manner that serves substantially to neutralize their "modern" opponents' marked advantages in firepower and technology." These challenges "...place a premium on rigorous physical and psychological conditioning, durable light infantry forces, logistical austerity, small unit cohesion, specialized and exacting training, and decentralized command authority...."

Jeffery Record, Beyond Military Reform

Distributed Operations Defined.

Distributed operations is a technique applied to an appropriate situation wherein units are separated beyond the limits of mutual support. Distributed operations are practiced by general purpose forces, operating with deliberate dispersion, where necessary and tactically prudent, and decentralized decision-making consistent with commander's intent to achieve advantages over an enemy in time and space. Distributed operations relies on the ability and judgment of Marines at every level and is particularly enabled by excellence in leadership to ensure the ability to understand and influence an expanded operational environment.

The Central Idea. There are no Distributed Operations specific units. MAGTFs and select units have practiced distributed operations before – circumstances now require us to institutionalize the ability across our operating forces. Just as a frontal attack can be applied strategically, operationally or tactically, distributed operations is applicable from the tactical through the strategic levels for all MAGTFs and operating forces. Against a conventional enemy, this concept might be applied to complicate the enemy's decision making process by disguising friendly intentions and thus placing the enemy "on the horns of a dilemma." When facing irregular forces or forces operating in complex terrain, distributed operations may allow the commander to expand his area of influence. During security cooperation, shaping, and deterrence, decentralized action enabled by distributed operations will permit wider, more diverse application of power and influence. This same capability afforded through distributed operations can be leveraged to enable rapid re-aggregation or reinforcement where military power projection must be quickly applied.

Implications for Combat Development. Distributed operations places a premium on the situational awareness and judgment of junior leaders, thereby necessitating enhancements to professional development and increased Marine Corps capability to:

- Empower Marines to assume greater responsibility and decentralize decisionmaking;
- Train and educate Marines to operate in diverse cultures;
- Provide more capable, lethal equipment and weapons;
- Improving training in the control and use of C2 applications, ISR, organic and joint fires;
- Organize in cohesive, adaptable, and deployable units;
- Ensure Marines are more survivable through access and training to organic, supporting and joint capabilities;

Accordingly, we have to give leaders the tools to execute distributed operations.

- Develop and field C2 systems that support greater distribution of units;
- Expand networks for communicating intent and providing ISR;

- Develop more survivable mobility means to cover greater distances on the battlefield—
 - Enhance ground and waterborne mobility means—i.e., MRAP, EFV, JLTV, LAV, V-22, CH53K, etc
- Develop ways to increase our ability to use our organic and joint fire support;
- Develop better ways to protect our forces and make them more survivable;
- Develop ways to reduce reliance on CSS (e.g. lighten the load);
 - Develop means to make equipment more fuel efficient, increase mean time between failure, more transportable.
 - Improve means of logistically supporting distributed forces over long periods.
- Develop adaptable organizations to improve Naval forward presence, build partner capacity and respond across the spectrum of conflict.
 - In particular develop the means (i.e., ships and connectors) to deploy and employ lethal, flexible, survivable forces from the sea to objectives.

Conclusion. Commanders must have confidence in the decision-making capabilities, skills, and equipment of their Marines to employ them in an increasingly complex and distributed operating environment. Since we never know what unit will be in contact in an uncertain world, the Marine Corps needs to provide COCOMs with forces organized, trained, equipped, and empowered to make sound and timely decisions in any environment. This does not equate to “DO Battalions,” but a Marine Corps capable of doing more in irregular complex operating environments while remaining capable of rapidly aggregating for more traditional missions. To successfully implement this concept, the Marine Corps will need to continue to improve leadership and ensure a “brilliance in the basics” that enables commanders to adjust their tactics or strategy in a manner relevant for the challenges of the environment.



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A concept for *Distributed Operations* was originally published in April 2005 in order to promote discussion and generate ideas for specific combat development initiatives. The ideas presented in that first edition have been the subject of much discussion, debate, and experimentation. They have also been tested by the crucible of combat as well as by the diverse challenges of the current security environment.

This revised edition of *Distributed Operations* incorporates the lessons learned to date and broadens our aperture to discuss the need for forces capable of selectively conducting either distributed or aggregated operations—at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels of war—as mission needs across the spectrum of conflict dictate.

The Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC), has designated Col Robert Durkin, Director, Fire and Maneuver Integration Division, Combat Development Division, the MCCDC lead for distributed operations. He will be responsible for the ongoing efforts to develop, refine, and implement distributed operations capabilities throughout the Marine Corps. Col Durkin may be reached at 703-784-5710 or by e-mail at Robert.durkin@usmc.mil.