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Connect to Succeed: Multi-Domain Operations Readiness on the Eastern Flank

GLOBSEC Future Security and Defence Council

Teaser

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"Multi-domain Operations is much more than command and control."

Gen. (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove,
Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of NATO Command Allied Operations

What reach and application does the concept of Multi-Domain Operations have along NATO's so-called Eastern Flank? The purpose of this report will be to contribute to the large and growing debate on MDO by examining its applicability to the Eastern Flank—those easternmost members of NATO found in the area stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, from Finland to Bulgaria. Upon describing its lineage and basic doctrinal ideas, it shows how Russia's military performance has largely validated MDO assessments in regard to Russia's electronic warfare, missile, and information and cyber capabilities.

As a doctrine, MDO has attracted concern, whether with regard to how it was conceived in the first place or how it might be implemented. Within NATO itself, members vary widely in how they regard specific elements of MDO as well as in the attention that they even give to the concept. Many writings on the subject concentrate largely on the United States and its Western European allies to the neglect of the eastern flank. Alas, any military conflict in Europe where MDO concepts will find their application will almost certainly involve them. Because those countries have been stepping up their defence investments while Russia continues its full-scale attack on Ukraine, now is the time to evaluate what MDO can do for the region.

Thereupon, it takes up the following questions. First, to what extent and how do Eastern Flank militaries articulate and incorporate? The answer here is that they seldom do so explicitly in official documents. Second, how do Eastern Flank militaries think of connectivity, broadly defined, whether between parts of governments, military units, and the platforms themselves? On this question, eastern flank militaries are thinking more and more about connectivity, but not all of them do. Third, how should Eastern Flank countries organise and test their MDO in terms of an operational campaign? Much, of course, depends on the specific context that a country faces. However, with respect to the Baltic countries, at least, they would do well to align the newly announced Baltic Defence Line with MDO principles because of the importance they should accord to sensory information and battlespace awareness. In Southeastern Europe, Bulgaria and Romania should note that in sinking a large portion of the Black Sea Fleet, Ukraine has had to develop and maintain extensive kill chains that require fusing information across multiple military units and government bodies.

Recommendations

1. Multi-Domain Operations are Much More than Command and Control

A common misconception regarding MDO is that it is largely about command and control. Yes, MDO serves to improve battlespace awareness on the part of command structures as well as to ensure that information travels along the chain of command in as timely and secure a manner as possible. Connectivity is thus a key facet of MDO. However, different combat arms need to be comfortable with working with one another in such a way that transcends their service parochialism and bureaucratic culture. Naval units cannot simply be comfortable with shooting at naval units, ground units at opposing ground units, and so forth. Moreover, automation does not obviate human judgment—to the contrary, human operators must still make decisions about the interpretation, sharing, and use of data within and across domains. MDO may very well require a deep cultural change so as to overcome interservice rivalries and other organizational barriers to data management, sharing, and employment.

2. Breaking Service Silos: Military Culture Must Transform

Culture is obviously difficult to transform. One vector through which to go about a change of attitude is through professional military education, especially at the general and staff levels. Military education across the region, whether at the Baltic Defence College or in national military academies, should impart MDO values and thinking. On the civilian side, civilian leaders must also contribute for there to be a meaningful cultural transformation by encouraging organizational practices and norms that reward jointness. That may require some degree of risk on their part because it could mean forcing the services to centralize certain tasks that they might otherwise be prepared to do for the sake of protecting their own turf.

3. Strengthening the Kill Chain: Prioritize Connectivity to Facilitate Operations

As a concept, MDO can be intimidating since working within just one military domain is tricky enough. The fact that different services and countries have their own interpretations of the meaning of MDO only adds to the complexity. NATO absolutely has the potential to set regulations and standards, especially in the context of European defence. Yet its ability to produce a universal understanding of MDO across the entire Alliance is easy to exaggerate.

To mitigate the sense of bewilderment that might attend MDO, the defence establishment should, at the very least, think in terms of connectivity. Specifically, they should be concerned with how different platforms—within militaries and across them—can link to one another in terms of widening and tightening the kill chain. In the Baltic countries, it also means how the various pieces relating to defence and deterrence—whether the enhanced Forward Presence, the Baltic Air Defence mission, the planned Baltic Defence Line, and their own national units—come together.

4. Connect to Protect: Sensor Technology Must Be Integrated Throughout the Baltic Defence Line

People live on land, and only ground forces can hold and occupy territory. Fortifications have thus proven their military value in the Russo-Ukrainian War by increasing the costs to both sides for undertaking assaults. Yet, fortifications alone cannot repel an invasion, a fact that France's Maginot Line and Israel's

Bar Lev Line lay bare. Different combat arms must be implicated in defensive operations, so military units from various services must be involved. In the NATO context, countries must understand what is happening and coordinate with one another to defeat the enemy as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Sensor technology will need to be incorporated extensively across any network of fortifications built along the Baltic countries' eastern frontiers. Data collected by those sensors would need to be linked to various command and control structures as well as to frontline units and their follow-on forces. Moreover, the Baltic Defence Line cannot be pursued in isolation from existing allied efforts—namely, the Baltic Air Policing mission and the enhanced Forward Presence.

5. Learn from the "Land Down Under": Dominate the Skies and Shores

Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has encouraged various Eastern Flank countries to expand their investments in coastal defence systems as well as in air defence systems. Some national defence establishments are thinking in terms of MDO, as in the case of Poland and its air defence. Most national defence establishments do not, at least not openly and formally, as their official documents can testify. Yet, an MDO approach is essential.

The case of Australia is instructive for countries in the region, with the caveat that its military is much smaller personnel-wise than Poland but larger than most if not all, other eastern flank militaries. Arguably, Australia has successfully gone about MDO based on how it has considered air and missile defence. It began devising a Joint Air Battle Management that integrated ground-based radars to develop situational awareness of what was happening in and around Australian air space and to direct aircraft to specific places at specific times for specific purposes. They began to fill in their air defence so that it would be integrated and thus able to defeat various types of threats. Electronic warfare, ground, and cyber capabilities would round out the system, with guided-missile destroyer-type ships contributing to air defence ships.

Those countries in the process of upgrading their coastal defences—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Romania, in particular—would be moving in an MDO direction by starting small while adding additional capabilities operating in different domains to cover the widest spectrum of threats. By taking on MDO piecemeal in this way, and for those Baltic countries with respect to the Baltic Defence Line, they need not get discouraged by how wide the military-technological gap that some eastern flank militaries might feel with some of their more powerful allies.

6. Stress-Test the Network: Push Connectivity to Its Limits Through Military Exercises

One reason why the Baltic Defence Line has value for thinking about MDO is that it offers an organizing framework to go about connectivity while having a theory of victory in mind. It trains the mind on a specific problem: the durability of the Baltic Defence Line itself in a scenario involving a ground invasion. Of course, a land assault from an eastern direction is not the only possible vector of attack. It is but one scenario.

Scenarios are practical because they increase the likelihood of everyone agreeing on a certain vision of the problem. More pointedly, a military exercise or war game organised around a particular problem can identify instances when friendly units have trouble communicating with one another, cannot share data across domains and units, as well as experience disruption due to EW. The geographical constraints are tight in Europe, so extensive MDO exercises are needed. However, Latvia's planned new training ground in Selonia may offer a unique opportunity for applying MDO at the outset in its design, considering its isolation from large population centres.

7. Mission-Driven Acquisition: Focus Procurement on the Mission, Not the Platform

Many defence establishments tend to focus their procurement and acquisition efforts on specific platforms. Those platforms may have significant military value, but they also can be expensive, carry with them high opportunity costs, and may not even have enough available personnel to operate them. The Australian experience is once again instructive for those defence establishments wishing to understand how to embrace connectivity at a much earlier stage. Facilitating the process is that there is one common acquisition group that does procurement and acquisition even if there are different branches of the Australian Defence Force. That common acquisition group helps build interoperability because it is focused on the mission (e.g., air defence) rather than on particular platforms, all while avoiding the stove-piping and redundancies that characterize the U.S. military.

An implication here is that private industry could get involved much earlier in the procurement and acquisition process for countries. Upon determining the mission(s) around which their armed forces will organize, defence establishments should consult with private industry to identify potential technical solutions—be it software or hardware—regarding data fusion that is relevant to their own military and geostrategic circumstances.

8. Learn from Ukraine: Balance Technological Optimism with Industrial Production

MDO hinges on militaries using common frameworks and operating systems across their platforms while taking advantage of the Internet of Military Things to exchange information more effectively via secure networks. The technical demands of going

about those needs are already high, even if they are within the realm of imagination, given advances in communications technology. Good reasons exist to be optimistic about what can be done, even if more connectivity and data fusion will still place big demands on how much coordination military establishments can really achieve.

Ukraine's defence against Russian military aggression remains a vivid, if bitter, reminder that industrial warfare requires significant industrial production. Russia depends on its artillery to make territorial gains. It had apparently turned the tide against Ukraine because it made up for its own shortages by receiving large amounts of ammunition and missiles from Iran and North Korea just when the United States was domestically hamstrung from providing more assistance. MDO is a moot point if under-investment and a lack of production leave countries quickly outgunned and depleted. Connectivity across domains is critical to the effectiveness of any military mission in the contemporary era, but military supplies are of existential importance.

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