

Operationalizing Multi-Domain Operations at the Tactical Level: SOSRA and Seven Steps of Engagement Area Development



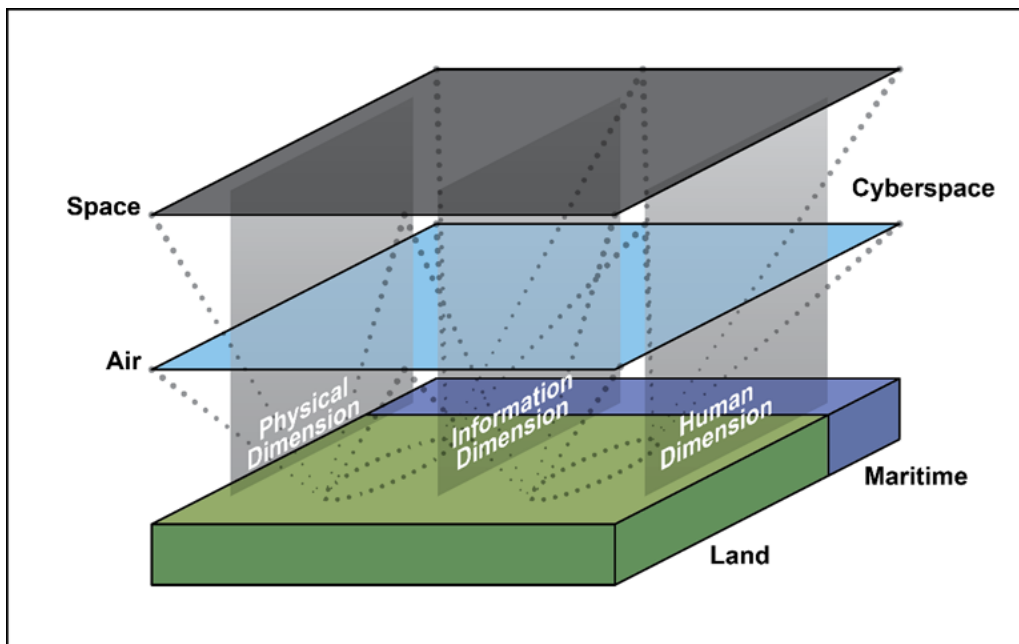
by Michael Soyka

The United States Army made a significant leap forward in modernizing its doctrine to align to current and future threats with the publication of FM 3-0 Operations in 2022. While the new FM 3-0 builds on the changes made in 2017, only the general framework to conceptualize the current and future fight was retained. However, the requirement to operationalize the big ideas and create shared understanding about how Corps and Divisions understand, visualize, describe and direct operations remains. This requirement can be met through the update of several downtrace doctrinal publications that build upon two existing doctrinal frameworks - the fundamentals of breaching, and the seven steps of engagement area development.

In 2017 the Army [issued an updated](#) FM 3-0 (Operations) focusing the Army on Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) and stating that against peer threats all operations are multidomain operations and that all domains will be contested. Those domains included the space domain, the information environment, cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. The manual said that since Army forces would not have the same advantages it had previously enjoyed, units were expected to create and exploit positions of relative

advantage.

With the publication of the new FM 3-0 (Operations), the Army describes its operational concept, multidomain operations, as the combined arms employment of Joint and Army capabilities that create and exploit relative advantages to achieve objectives, defeat enemy forces, and consolidate gains on behalf of joint force commanders. The Operational Environment was defined as five domains (land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace) understood through three dimensions (physical, information, and human). Understanding the physical, information, and human dimensions of each domain helps commanders and staffs see themselves, see the enemy, assess the operational environment, and anticipate the impacts of their operations.



FM 3-0- (Operations) Figure 1-4

FM 3-0 further added the tenets of operations (agility, convergence, endurance, and depth) as well as imperatives:

- See yourself, see the enemy, and understand the operational environment
- Account for being under constant observation and all forms of enemy contact
- Create and exploit relative physical, information, and human advantages in pursuit of decision dominance

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- Make initial contact with the smallest element possible
- Impose multiple dilemmas on the enemy
- Anticipate, plan and execute transitions
- Designate, weight, and sustain the main effort
- Consolidate gains continuously
- Understand and manage the effects of operations on units and leaders

While codifying multidomain operations as the Army operating concept, FM 3-0 does not give tactical level commanders below the corps level specific guidance on how their operations will differ from operations in the past. Building upon the doctrine and taking the imperatives and tenets into account, two commonly used concepts from previous doctrine can be adapted to the increasingly transparent operational environment to enable tactical planning: breaching fundamentals and the seven steps of engagement area development.

The second imperative of operations “account for being under constant observation and all forms of contact,” combined with the tenet of convergence, can be interpreted to mean that at any point on the battlefield you are in effect attempting to breach an overwatched obstacle. That obstacle may be in any domain and the overwatch similarly could originate in any domain. That means at echelon [the fundamentals of breaching](#) or SOSRA (suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, assault) should be considered as a part of all offensive operations.

The commander at echelon may not have control over the assets required to conduct each of the elements of SOSRA and may only be contributing to a portion of the overall effect. For example, at corps level, suppression and obscuration may be accomplished utilizing joint cyber assets or electromagnetic attack. Secure may be accomplished with ground forces securing position areas for artillery used for reduction through combinations of precision and massed fires. The assault force may be an armor brigade combat team or brigade air assault exploiting convergence. The SOSRA fundamentals are relevant considerations even for the movement from fort to port due to the global reach of near peer forces.

The primary echelon for achieving convergence is the corps due to the ability to access joint capabilities, and at the corps level the SOSRA construct can be used to plan and execute operations. At [the division level and below](#), where units are primarily the consumers of convergence, SOSRA is perhaps even more useful. The SOSRA approach to planning can help a Commander highlight where there is risk and assist in requests for allocation of

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assets and effects.

For example, if division commanders use SOSRA to conceptualize movement from ports to forward assembly areas they would see that they have several critical road or rail junctions and that there is the potential for the enemy to deny their use using capabilities from multiple domains. Since division commanders typically do not have the assets to either suppress enemy long-range fires or obscure the enemy's ability to see their movement in the ground and cyber domains they would need to request support from higher headquarters. That would lead the Commander to request allocation of assets or effects to ensure their freedom of maneuver.

This same analysis and conceptualization could occur at the brigade level and below to similarly inform discussions of risk and allocation of resources. While there will never be enough assets to fully mitigate every risk, the SOSRA approach gives commanders an option that is already relatively well understood. Having a common framework at echelon to describe and reduce risks will significantly increase situational awareness and help with visualization.

When considering defensive operations in a multidomain operational environment, the seven steps of engagement area development are another useful construct that can be broadened beyond their original meaning. Commanders at each echelon can execute the steps of engagement area development across domains and dimensions of the OE in the context of their assigned areas. When they overlay friendly and threat capabilities across domains and dimensions like layers of acetate graphics, they will find weaknesses and potential mitigations to improve their defense.

The [seven steps of engagement area](#) development are: identify all likely enemy avenues of approach, determine likely enemy schemes of maneuver, determine where to kill the enemy force, plan and integrate obstacles, emplace weapon systems, plan and integrate indirect fires, and rehearse. For example, if a Commander examines where the enemy's likely avenues of approach are in the cyber domain, they may find that they need to physically protect a specific key asset or node in the land or air domain with ground forces or ADA assets to ensure the integrity of the network.

This conceptualization, if utilized at echelon, will enable commander to commander dialogue about the allocation of assets to mitigate risk and create opportunities. Without this concept or others included in updated versions of FM 3-90 (Tactics), as well as FM 3-94 (Army, Corps, and Division Operations) and associated manuals, commanders at echelon will have difficulty in both conceptualizing how to operate in multidomain environments and

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communicating risk to justify the allocation of effects and resources with their higher headquarters.

There is no doctrinal reason not to use these two existing approaches to drive the conversation between commanders. In situations where they may not be useful, there will need to be a method for commanders to execute their activities in the operations process (Understand, Visualize, Describe, Direct, Lead, and Assess) that assists in those conversations. Further application of these concepts during experimentation and in Warfighter exercises will help leaders in charge of modernization refine which units need what capabilities at echelon to accomplish operations in a multi-domain environment, helping to refine the shape of the Army of 2030-2040.

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