

Protection:

The Fabric of the Warfighting Functions

By Lieutenant Colonel Michael Carvelli

The contents of this article do not represent the official views of, nor are they endorsed by, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

This article was edited with the assistance of AI tools, and subsequently reviewed and edited by relevant Department of Defense (DOD) personnel to ensure accuracy, clarity, and compliance with DOD policies and guidance.

Introduction

The Army uses warfighting functions to generate combat power and apply it against enemy forces.¹ The six warfighting functions are command and control (C2), movement and maneuver (M2), intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection. Each warfighting function has a common purpose that commanders use to accomplish missions and training objectives through a united group of tasks and systems.² Warfighting functions are a cognitive framework—a way to mentally organize complex military operations. The Army uses a variety of organizational tools, such as branches, staff sections, and types of battalions, to support this framework. Unfortunately, protection remains the most awkward of the warfighting functions because it has elusive boundaries, demands shared responsibility, and requires persistent attention at echelon.

The protection warfighting function encompasses the tasks, systems, and methods that prevent or mitigate detection, threat effects, and hazards to preserve the force, deny the enemy freedom of action, and enable commanders to apply combat power.³ Breaking this statement into three parts helps to understand the role of protection in support of Army operations. First, “prevent,” “mitigate,” “effects,” and “hazards” closely resemble the language and intent of risk management. Second, “preserve the force” simply means maintaining the maximum amount of available combat power. Finally, “deny the enemy freedom of action” is akin to maneuver. While not *purely* maneuver, commanders aim to establish a position of relative advantage over the enemy. Therefore, denying the enemy freedom of action—the ability to achieve their commander’s intent—places them at a disadvantage.

Risk management (RM) is the process of identifying, assessing, and controlling risks and making decisions that balance risk cost with mission benefits.⁴ The Army uses RM to help maintain combat power while ensuring mission accomplishment in current and future operations.⁵ Planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation

are the major components of the operations process.⁶ RM is foundational to the operations process. When the operations process is infused with RM and guided by the warfighting functions as a cognitive framework, protection is the result. At its core, protection is not just a standalone function—it is the connective fabric that weaves through and reinforces all other warfighting functions.

To reshape the formal definition of protection, the protection warfighting function could be defined as “applying the principles of risk management to maximize available combat power and position friendly forces in a position of relative advantage over the enemy.” From this perspective, is protection a separate warfighting function? Or is it the compilation of the other five warfighting functions viewed through a risk management lens?

Protection Through Risk Management

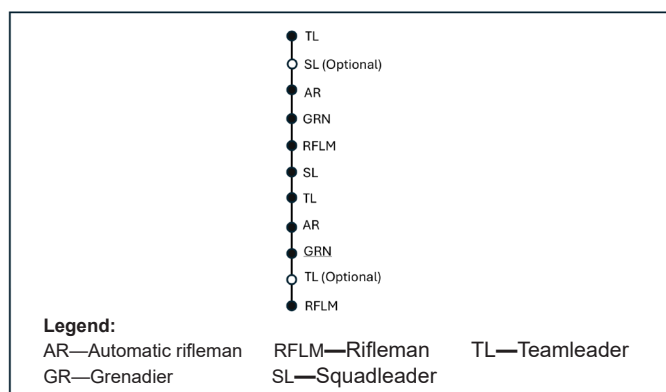
The following example illustrates how viewing protection through a risk management lens helps to understand protection. A division defines the decisive point of an operation as the seizing of Objective (OBJ) Seattle. The division determines that an infantry battalion is required on OBJ Seattle as the decisive force. Its seizure of OBJ Seattle defines the division’s decisive point.⁷ All divisional efforts, directly or indirectly, contribute to this effort. If only an infantry company arrives at OBJ Seattle, the division will fail to achieve its decisive point due to the absence of the designated decisive force. If the infantry battalion does not arrive at OBJ Seattle, the division will again miss the decisive point because the decisive force is not on the OBJ. Therefore, to position the decisive force at the decisive point, the other five warfighting functions (C2, M2, fires, sustainment, and intelligence) must act in concert to get the infantry battalion to OBJ Seattle. Clearly, the fabric of this course of action is the protection warfighting function.

The efforts of the division are concentrated across multiple elements of the plan, all aimed at ensuring one objective: delivering the decisive force intact to OBJ Seattle. Through the integration of those five warfighting functions and the

deliberate application of risk management, the division develops a course of action that places enemy forces at a relative disadvantage. Central to this plan is the seizure of OBJ Seattle by a complete infantry battalion, which puts friendly forces in a position of relative advantage. Interlacing protection throughout the division's plan ensures that sufficient combat power is available for each segment of the operation.

Through operational planning, the division arranges actions over time with specified forces to achieve the desired result. Inherent in the planning process is engaging enemy forces with the requisite combat power to complete each part of the mission. Reducing enemy capabilities and traversing terrain with specified combat power requires the integration of M2, fires, sustainment, and intelligence, coordinated through C2. For example, if an M777 battery engages an enemy rocket position, the friendly commander must preserve that M777's combat power for the engagement. This could require a mix of M2, sustainment, intelligence, fires, C2, and protection. Within the battery, guns would be dispersed to reduce the probability and severity of all six cannons being destroyed by a single enemy artillery shell. Protection is needed to keep the other warfighting functions functioning. If the enemy defeated the C2 network and the M777 battery could not control the cannons, protection would also fail.

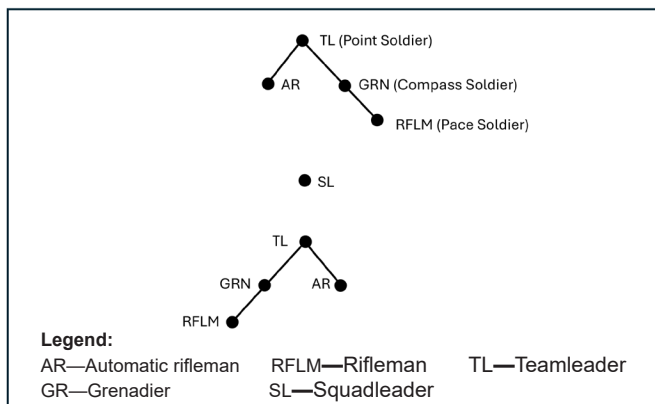
On a smaller scale, an infantry squad can illustrate protection within its echelon. Differing enemy intelligence estimates help the squad determine its movement formation. The formation arranges its Soldiers to maximize speed or security while adapting to terrain. If enemy contact is unlikely, a squad will move in a file, maximizing speed.⁸ However, if enemy contact is probable, the squad changes to a squad column with teams in wedge.⁹ The latter formation is a protective adjustment, shifting their movement into maneuver based on an enemy threat identified by the intelligence warfighting function.



Squad file

Mental Models

Mental models exist to provide a framework where participants need discrete organization. Many mental models are incomplete and/or flawed. Some models are flawed but remain useful. This is true of the warfighting functions model.



Squad column, fire teams in wedge

el. Even Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity is flawed; the discovery of quantum mechanics (new knowledge) showed that Einstein's theory has limitations and inconsistencies. So too do the warfighting functions. However, the Theory of Relativity has profoundly advanced scientific understanding. Similarly, while the warfighting functions model is not without flaws, it significantly enhances the Army's ability to conduct operations. Recognizing and understanding the flaws helps to illuminate gaps and generate new understanding.

When viewed through the other frameworks, it is evident that the Army has not consistently prioritized protection on par with other warfighting functions. Within the U. S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, there are multiple Centers of Excellence (CoE). Comparing the warfighting functions with the CoEs reveals a mismatch. There is a Maneuver CoE (M2), Intelligence CoE (intelligence), and Fires CoE (fires) that align well. However, the Maneuver Support CoE does not pair well with protection because explosive ordnance disposal, public health, air defense artillery, and defensive cyber remain with other CoEs.

Unit organizations are another framework consistently showing the disparity of the protection warfighting function. Infantry and armor battalions align well with the M2 warfighting function, just as intelligence battalions correspond directly with the intelligence warfighting function. However, engineer battalions exist in M2, sustainment, and protection. Mobility tasks align with M2, general engineering supports sustainment, and survivability efforts contribute to protection. Military police may support M2, protection, and intelligence, depending on their assigned mission. This overlap illustrates that no single organizational structure fully encapsulates the protection warfighting function as a distinct formation.

The Army has undertaken multiple organizational initiatives to address the challenges of the protection warfighting function. The original brigade combat teams had special troops battalions, which task-organized engineer, military police, chemical, signal, and intelligence units under a single command. Eventually, the Army formed maneuver enhancement brigades (MEBs), multifunctional formations responsible for a variety of functions that support operations.¹⁰ The

Army continues to explore protection brigades to organize around the warfighting functions and assign responsibility for protection to a subordinate commander. These organizational types are attempts at grouping units with protection-related missions under a unified command structure. The Army will continue to iterate as it grows its understanding of the protection warfighting function.

The Warfighting Function Framework

Several options within the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P) framework can be considered to address the warfighting function framework and account for its flaws. One option the Army could explore is the elimination of protection as a warfighting function altogether. This would change doctrine by reducing the number of warfighting functions to five (M2, C2, Intelligence, Fires, and Sustainment). This option would divest protection as a separate element of the warfighting function model and incorporate its tenets into the other five warfighting functions, which would inevitably result in another flawed model. An advantage of eliminating protection as a warfighting function is that RM would be brought to the forefront and understood as the fabric of the operations process. However, this approach also presents notable disadvantages. First, the responsibilities currently associated with protection would need to be absorbed by the other warfighting functions. Second, tasks that do not clearly align with the other five functions—such as chemical decontamination—would require deliberate reassignment.


Another option is for the Army to reevaluate protection-focused units. This is not to suggest that ADA formations are unnecessary; rather, it highlights the potential for MEBs and protection BDEs to be oriented differently. It could be argued that protection-focused units are, on a macro level, persistently engaged in defensive operations. Survivability, air defense, defensive cyber, and explosive hazards are generally focused on reducing risk and preserving combat power. Engineers dig hull defilade positions, enabling tanks to reduce their signature, destroy more targets, and eventually regain the offensive. These defilade positions reduce the risk to tank crews. Military police are not always focused on protection; they can enable the five warfighting functions and be sources of intelligence and movement as well. However, this option is also flawed; an ADA battalion assigned to a sustainment brigade does not fit well within a sustainment structure.¹¹

A third option is for the Army to designate a staff officer, deputy commander, or deputy commanding general as the protection officer. Using a division staff as an example, a light division typically assigns a Deputy Commanding General for operations, while a heavy division designates a Deputy Commanding General for maneuver. The Chief of Intelligence is designated as the G2, the Chief of Sustainment serves as the G4, and the Chief of Fires is the Fire Support Coordinator (typically the Divisional Artillery Brigade Commander). The Chief of C2 is less defined, as it is not a

specific role. If the protection warfighting function requires this level of attention, the Army should establish a standardized position—such as a Chief of Protection or Deputy Commanding General–Protection. If not filled by a general officer, then the role could be designated as a Deputy Commanding Officer–Protection or be assigned another appropriate title. Another alternative is to assign responsibility to an aligned MEB commander; however, MEBs traditionally focus on supporting operations in the division's rear area. The protection lead for corps and division echelons is often unclear, as organizations vary in how they designate responsibility—some assigning it the provost marshal, others to the engineer, and still others the chemical officer. The Army will benefit from standardization if it believes assigning a responsible individual will lead to the desired integration of the protection warfighting function. At a minimum, the nascent Protection Integration Course must expand to develop leaders through targeted education—including those responsible for integrating the protection warfighting function across formations.

Last, the Army could apply the Multifunctional Logistician model to the protection warfighting function. Perhaps officers from branches such as engineer, chemical, military police, air defense artillery, explosive ordnance disposal, and defensive cyber—among others—could form another branch, secondary specialty, or skill identifier based on experience and education. Over time, it could even become a functional area. The Army could determine this requirement and use it if the third option mentioned in this article was implemented, formally establishing the protection community.

Conclusion

To be sure, protection is the most amorphous of the warfighting functions. At times, it appears as risk management; in others, it resembles safety. In some contexts, it doubles as one of the other five warfighting functions, while in others, it can appear as a distinct warfighting function. Although uncomfortable, the Army should reconsider the current warfighting function model. While protection could be a separate warfighting function, it more often operates as the connective fabric of the other five. If the Army were to remove protection as a warfighting function, it would have to account for its elements and tenets as described in doctrine. As unpalatable as it may seem, the warfighting functions need to be revisited and perhaps even replaced to make room for a model that achieves a better cognitive framework—one that surpasses the limitations of the current one. 

Endnotes:

¹Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, 21 March 2025, p. 25

²Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*, 21 March 2025, p.17

³Ibid, p.19

⁴ADP 3-37, *Protection*, 10 January 2024, p.1-5

⁵Ibid

⁶FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 197

⁷A decisive point is key terrain, key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, enables commanders to gain a marked advantage over an enemy or contribute materially to achieving success. FM 3-0, p.67

⁸Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, 11 January 2024, p. 3-16

⁹Ibid, p. 3-16

¹⁰FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 44

¹¹*Author's note:* Warfighting functions can differ depending on the perspective or echelon. A sustainment brigade might see a truck company moving supplies as movement whereas an infantry brigade might see the same as sustainment. In a scout platoon, a recon could be seen as maneuver whereas the infantry battalion could see it as intelligence.

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Carvelli serves in First Army Division East, Fort Knox, Kentucky. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering technology from the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, and master's degrees in operations management from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; civil engineering from the University of Florida, Gainesville; defense and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island; and military operations from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Victory Starts Here!



Victory Through Skill!