



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Thomas Perry, chemical biological radiological nuclear noncommissioned officer, and Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Blackmon, antiterrorism security force protection noncommissioned officer, both with the 167th Theater Sustainment Command, instructs Army warrior task Hasty Fighting Position during a field training exercise (FTX) on Clarke Range Complex, Anniston, Alabama on May 2, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Maj. Myra Bush)

COMMANDERS: A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROTECTION WARFIGHTING FUNCTION

By Major Joshua Tosi

The contents of this article do not represent the official views of, nor are they endorsed by, the U.S. Army, the Department of War (DoW), or the U.S. Government.

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

The protection warfighting function is critical to the success of any military operation. Commanders must understand how the protection warfighting function safeguards the joint force by protecting personnel, equipment, information, and infrastructure through its strategies, capabilities, and systems. Fundamentally, it aims to minimize vulnerabilities and mitigate risks associated with both conventional and nonconventional emerging threats. As the modern battlefield evolves, so too must joint force strategies to ensure mission success. For commanders, a deep understanding of the protection warfighting function is essential for making informed decisions in the complex environment of multidomain operations (MDO).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies the rapid changes across the landscape of warfare. As General Randy George states, “We are learning from the battlefield—especially in Ukraine—that aerial reconnaissance has fundamentally changed.”^[1] His observation highlights the rapid evolution of sensors and weapons use on commercial aerial platforms

in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and how critical protection cells identify and mitigate both known and horizon threats. Commanders must understand how their protection cells create opportunities, integrate efforts, and synchronize actions across the organization and battlespace to counter evolving threats.

Revitalizing Protection in a Post-COIN Environment

In response to a post-counterinsurgency (COIN) environment, the Army has made significant strides in revitalizing protection capabilities. The recent Army doctrine publication (ADP) 3-37, Protection, revision continues to harmonize protection warfighting function actions and activities across the MDO battlespace.^[2] Commanders need to be aware of several challenges, including defeating standoff threats, securing and protecting bases and infrastructure, and managing activities in both rear and close areas.^[3]

Commanders must ensure that their protection cells, such as the Protection Working Group (PWG),^[4] are actively

addressing these problem sets during daily battle rhythm events. A chief of protection at echelons above brigade or a protection cell coordinator for brigades and below should utilize input from all staff sections to analyze these issues. For example, the intelligence cell should provide insight on enemy capabilities during the PWG, enabling the protection cell to identify vulnerabilities as the enemy attempts to isolate friendly forces and sever lines of communication.

The chief of protection must provide updated recommendations daily during the commander's visualization. During Warfighter 25-3, a U.S. Army command post exercise conducted in early 2025 at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, the 42nd Infantry Division of the New York Army National Guard chief of protection briefed the commanding general daily on protection issues and proposed solutions developed by the PWG and protection board. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these groups hinges on the commander understanding what the protection cell can contribute.

Integrating Protection Across the Staff

A thorough understanding of the protection warfighting function is vital for enhancing operational effectiveness in MDO. Commanders who leverage organizational knowledge in concert with their chief of protection can better anticipate threats and make timely decisions that directly contribute to the safety of their forces. In Ukraine, using protection warfighting function principles has helped commanders quickly adapt to new threats, such as drones and cyberattacks.

Moreover, commanders must recognize that the protection warfighting function is not an isolated function. It intertwines with all other staff sections. A comprehensive understanding of how protection integrates into all parts of a staff is crucial for operational effectiveness across all levels of military engagement.

The protection warfighting function encompasses a wide range of tasks, systems, and methods designed to assess risks to the force (though protection does not “own” risk, as many commanders believe) to preserve combat power and enable freedom of action in MDO.^[5] Understanding the protection warfighting function allows commanders to anticipate potential risks and make informed decisions that protect their forces and ensure that critical capabilities remain intact.^[6]

Effective risk management allows commanders to identify where the risks lie and determine how they can either mitigate or accept that risk.^[7] Additionally, during

joint operations especially, commanders must recognize the interdependencies of the protection warfighting function with other warfighting functions.^[8] Each warfighting function contributes to overall mission success collaboratively, rather than independently.

The 42nd Infantry Division demonstrates this integration by embedding its protection cell within other warfighting functions, allowing them to better utilize the outputs of the PWG. This collaboration has elevated the way the commander understands protection, allowing for higher-level decision making. Rather than simply presenting data, the staff ensures that the commander can visualize the implications, enabling informed decisions based on recommendations from the chief of protection.

“We are learning from the battlefield—especially in Ukraine—that aerial reconnaissance has fundamentally changed.”

– Gen. Randy George

Conclusion

A comprehensive understanding of the protection warfighting function is crucial for commanders in today's complex military landscape where threats are rapidly evolving. Integrating protection into operational planning allows commanders to anticipate threats and enhance force safety. The conflict in Ukraine demonstrates that adaptable forces prioritizing protection strategies are effective in MDO.

Recognizing the interdependence of the protection warfighting function and other warfighting functions fosters a cohesive approach to mission success—a priority for commanders. By emphasizing protection, learning, and collaboration within their staff, commanders can make informed decisions that preserve combat power. Ultimately, a thorough understanding of protection is critical not only for safeguarding assets but also for effectively navigating the complexities of MDO. 🇺🇸

Major Tosi is currently the Executive Officer for Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion of the 42nd Infantry Division, Troy, New York. He holds a bachelor's degree in marketing from King's College, New York, New York.

References

- 1 U.S. Army, “Army Announces Aviation Investment Rebalance,” 2024, https://www.army.mil/article/273594/army_announces_aviation_investment_rebalance.
- 2 U.S. Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-37: Protection* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023).
- 3 U.S. Army Futures Command, *AFC Pam 71-20-7: AFC Protection Concept* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2021).

- 4 U.S. Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-37: Protection* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.