

# PROTECTIVE FIRES

By Captain Michael E. McCallister

Is an artillery strike on an enemy munitions storage site in order to degrade enemy capabilities considered a fires warfighting function (WFF) or a protection WFF? Doctrinally, employing artillery against a target is undeniably a fires WFF. However, a thorough analysis of maneuver and fires tasks demonstrates that they fall more within the realm of the protection WFF than not.

The core concepts of protection are<sup>1</sup>—

- Preserving critical capabilities, assets, and activities (CCAA).
- Denying threat and enemy freedom of action.
- Enabling windows of persistent access.

Associating an offensive mindset with the protection WFF requires an examination of how actions and effects on the battlefield are considered in modern conflict. It demands that protection be purposefully integrated into the maneuver fight, fires plans, and all aspects of operational planning. This may necessitate additional terms, actions, and considerations (such as “protective fires”) to reframe our tactical, operational, and strategic thinking.

According to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations*, “A [WFF] is a group of tasks and systems united by a common purpose that commanders use to accomplish missions and training objectives.”<sup>2</sup> The key word in this definition is “purpose”; WFFs are doctrinally defined by their purpose. But, in practice, when grouping tasks into WFFs, the tasks are sorted based on who or what takes the action—a process that is critically incorrect.

The fires WFF consists of “the related tasks and systems that create and converge effects in all domains against the adversary or enemy to enable operations across the range of military operations”<sup>3</sup>; the broad purpose to “enable operations across the range of military operations” is narrowed through the method of “create and converge effects.” The protection WFF consists of “the related tasks, systems, and methods that prevent or mitigate detection, threat effects, and hazards to preserve combat power and enable freedom of action”<sup>4</sup>; the broad purpose to “preserve combat power and enable freedom of action” is narrowed through the method of “prevent or mitigate detection, threat effects, and hazards.”

These definitions lead to a comparison of enabling operations by creating and converging effects (fires WFF) and preserving combat power and enabling freedom of action by

preventing or mitigating detection, threat effects, and hazards (protection WFF). Returning to the example at the outset, firing artillery at an enemy munitions storage site to degrade enemy capabilities falls within the purpose of the second definition, making it a protection task/action—even though it involves firing of artillery. We mistake effects for actions.

Some tactical tasks are more directly protective in nature; these include—

- **Block**—a tactical-mission task that denies the enemy access to an area or an avenue of approach. A block is also “an obstacle effect that integrates fire planning and obstacle effort to stop an attacker along a specific avenue of approach or prevent the attacking force from passing through an engagement area.”<sup>5</sup>
- **Guard**—a security operation that protects the main body by fighting to gain time while preventing enemy ground observation of, and direct fire against, the main body.<sup>6</sup>

The entire problem set of modern conflict must take the core protection concepts (preserving CCAA, denying the enemy, and enabling access) into account. It isn’t easy to see the protective requirements connecting operations within offense or defense. Offensive fires are defined as “surface-to-surface indirect fires intended to preempt enemy actions in support of the maneuver commander’s concept of operations,”<sup>7</sup> whereas defensive fires are defined as “surface-to-surface indirect fires intended to disrupt discovered enemy preparations for an attack.”<sup>8</sup> But neither of these definitions covers the example provided; the definition of offensive fires is too broad, and defensive fires involve reactions to impending enemy attacks. The definition of offensive fires, which includes all preemptive actions in support of the commander’s concept of operations, is a catch-all definition that needs to allow for detailed planning. Fires could be divided into three categories—offensive, defensive, and protective. Under this scheme, offensive fires would be defined as surface-to-surface indirect fires intended to preempt enemy actions in support of the commander’s scheme of maneuver and protective fires would be defined as surface-to-surface indirect fires intended to degrade, neutralize, or destroy enemy capabilities, assets, or activities. Protective fires would bridge the gap between offensive fires supporting a scheme of maneuver and defensive fires disrupting planned enemy attacks.

Protection integration is not merely an academic exercise; the radical rethinking and reorganization of WFF responsibilities and tasks would force commanders to recognize protection as a critical consideration for all aspects of an operation. As emphasized in U.S. Army Futures Command (AFC) Pamphlet (Pam) 71-20-7, *Army Futures Command Concept for Protection 2028*, “Passive measures are insufficient to preserve CCAA and prevent threats in all domains, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the information environment, including obstacles and hazards, from degrading mission accomplishment and applying more combat power at suboptimal times and places. The protection [WFF] serves a role in targeting, all-domain command and control, and the operations process. Active protection processes should help characterize the threat and nominate protective denial or defensive measures, thereby expanding the preservation of CCAA throughout all domains, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the information environment. Denying enemy freedom of action is the active approach preventing the enemy’s ability to see, understand, and strike friendly force CCAA.”<sup>9</sup> The pam directly addresses taking active measures against enemy threats and provides the impetus for the fires WFF to be divided into offensive, defensive, and protective fires, as previously discussed.<sup>10</sup> The concept of future protection should also drive units—especially the division (as the unit of action)—to integrate protection participation in targeting and other vital processes.

To efficiently preserve our own CCAA, we must recognize enemy CCAA and deny their availability and/or effectiveness. We must recognize that tasks and actions traditionally considered fires or maneuver WFFs are actually protection WFFs and that protection must be actively considered in the analysis, selection, and execution of these tasks. Degrading, defeating, neutralizing, or destroying enemy CCAA results in the denial of threat and enemy action and enables windows of persistent access across domains.



#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>AFC Pam 71-20-7, *Army Futures Command Concept for Protection 2028*, 7 April 2021.

<sup>2</sup>ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 July 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>FM 3-0, *Operations*, 12 October 2022.

<sup>5</sup>FM 3-90, *Tactics*, 1 May 2023.

<sup>6</sup>ADP 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, 31 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup>FM 3-09, *Fire Support and Field Artillery Operations*, 12 August 2024.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>AFC Pam 71-20-7.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

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*Captain McCallister is the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center of Excellence (MSCoE) Harding Project fellow. He works in the Doctrine Division, Fielded Force Integration Directorate, MSCoE, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Illinois State University, Normal.*