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Updated December 8, 2020

Defense Primer: Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)

As an operational concept, Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) influence what types of weapon systems and equipment the Army procures, what types and numbers of soldiers are needed, and what type of training is required—significant legislative concerns for Congress. In this regard, an understanding of MDO could prove beneficial for congressional oversight activities.

What Are Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)?

According to the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC):

> Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) describes how the U.S. Army, as part of the joint force [Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines] can counter and defeat a near-peer adversary capable of contesting the U.S. in all domains [air, land, maritime, space, and cyberspace] in both competition and armed conflict. The concept describes how U.S. ground forces, as part of the joint and multinational team, deter adversaries and defeat highly capable near-peer enemies in the 2025-2050 timeframe.
>
> MDO provides commanders numerous options for executing simultaneous and sequential operations using surprise and the rapid and continuous integration of capabilities across all domains to present multiple dilemmas to an adversary in order to gain physical and psychological advantages and influence and control over the operational environment.

Why Did the Army Adopt MDO?

MDO is described in detail in a December 2018 Army publication titled *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*. MDO was developed in response to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which shifted the previous focus of U.S. national security from countering violent extremists worldwide to confronting revisionist powers—primarily Russia and China—that are said to "want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions." According to *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*:

> China and Russia exploit the conditions of the operational environment to achieve their objectives without resorting to armed conflict by fracturing the U.S.'s alliances, partnerships, and resolve. They attempt to create stand-off through the integration of diplomatic and economic actions, unconventional and information warfare (social media, false narratives, cyber-attacks), and the actual or threatened employment of conventional forces. By creating instability within countries and alliances, China and Russia create political separation that results in strategic ambiguity reducing the speed of friendly recognition, decision, and reaction. Through these competitive actions, China and Russia believe they can achieve objectives below the threshold of armed conflict.

Army leadership believes that if the Army—in conjunction with the other Services—prevails in these "competitions" in all "domains," that U.S. national security objectives should be achieved.

How MDO Is Intended to Work

The Army's central idea is to prevail by competing successfully in all domains short of conflict, deterring a potential enemy. If deterrence fails, Army forces—along with the Joint Force—are to do the following:

Penetrate enemy anti-access and area denial systems (layered and integrated long-range precision-strike systems, littoral anti-ship capabilities, air defenses, and long-range artillery and rocket systems) to enable strategic and operational maneuver of U.S. forces.

Dis-integrate—disrupt, degrade, or destroy enemy anti-access and area denial systems to enable operational and tactical maneuver of U.S. forces.

Exploit the resulting freedom of maneuver to achieve operational and strategic objectives by defeating enemy forces in all domains.

Re-compete—consolidate gains across domains and force a return to competition on favorable terms to the United States and allies.

How Will MDO Change the Organization of the Army?

As part of the release of *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, an Army official described to the media that specific Army echelons will be given different "problems" to address under MDO. Existing Divisions and Corps will be tasked with fighting and defeating specific components of the enemy's system. As such, the Army will no longer organize or center itself on Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) as it did under previous National Defense Strategies. Under the previous BCT-centered organizational construct, Divisions and Corps had a limited warfighting role, but under MDO, Divisions and Corps headquarters are to return to their historic warfighting roles, in which they employed subordinate units and allocated Corps- and Division-level assets to support subordinate units.

According to the online magazine *Breaking Defense*, MDO calls for the creation of Field Armies, an intermediate command level between already established Theater Armies—such as U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) or U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR)—and Corps. While one Field Army currently exists—the U.S. 8th Army in Korea—it is not known how many more Field Armies are envisioned under MDO, where they would come from within Army force structure, and where they might be stationed. These Field Armies would supposedly be capable of commanding multiple Corps against near-peer threats.

The Army's Way Ahead

Army leaders reportedly note that MDO will not only have an impact on Army organizations and operations; it will drive Army modernization efforts as well, in terms of development and acquisition of supporting capabilities and systems. Army leadership seeks to have MDO become a joint, multiservice operational concept instead of Army-centric.

Project Convergence

Started in the summer of 2020, Project Convergence is a new Army initiative designed to rapidly merge the Service's capabilities with Joint Force assets in the air, land, sea, space, and cyber domains. The Army currently plans to conduct Project Convergence in 2021 and 2022 and potentially beyond 2022 as well. Project Convergence is intended to inform and test MDO concepts, technologies, force structures, and procedures, not just within the Army, but as they also relate to the other Services, as well as Allies and Partner Nations.

(For additional information on Project Convergence, see CRS In Focus IF11654, *The Army's Project Convergence*, by Andrew Feickert.)

AimPoint Force Structure Initiative

The primary means by which the Army intends to build its MDO capability is through what it calls the AimPoint Force Structure Initiative. According to the Army, the AimPoint Force is to be a flexible force structure. While little change is expected at brigade level and below, the Army suggests major changes will occur at higher echelons—division, corps, and theater command—that have primarily played a supporting role in counterinsurgency operations such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under MDO, higher field headquarters will now be required to take the lead in coordinating large-scale campaigns against well-armed nation-states such as Russia and China. The Army also notes that the AimPoint Force will be resource-informed, meaning it will be subject to budget constraints and political considerations. Because of the geographic distinctions between the European and Indo-Pacific theaters, individual higher-echelon AimPoint formation force structure will likely differ by theater as opposed to current one-size-fits-all units.

(For additional information on the Army's AimPoint Force Structure Initiative, see CRS In Focus IF11542, *The Army's AimPoint Force Structure Initiative*, by Andrew Feickert.)

The Need for a Joint MDO Doctrine?

Some suggest a shared vision among the Services on multi-domain operations is insufficient and a joint doctrine for MDO is needed. Such a joint MDO doctrine could compel the Services to adopt a coordinated approach to MDO and ensure corresponding investments are made in systems needed to successfully prosecute MDO. The last joint doctrine, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (JP-1), was published in 2013 and updated in 2017, but this update does not fully take into account the current National Security or National Defense Strategies' emphasis on great power competition. Reportedly, a new Joint Warfighting Concept is in the final stages of development and is expected to be given to DOD leadership by the end of this year.

How the Joint Force Intends to Compete

The notion of the Army "competing" as part of the Joint Force is a novel concept. West Point's Modern War Institute suggests that central to competition is the notion of the "dilemma."

> Multi-domain operations as a concept proposes that the joint force can achieve competitive advantage over a near-peer adversary by presenting multiple complementary threats that each require a response, thereby exposing adversary vulnerabilities to other threats. It is the artful combination of these multiple dilemmas, rather than a clear overmatch in terms of any particular capability, that produces the desired advantage.

These dilemmas are described as "a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, especially equally undesirable ones. To present the enemy with multiple dilemmas across multiple domains and in multiple locations," the Army seeks to keep a situation from escalating to an open conflict.

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IF11409

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