

The Military Decision-Making Process: Applying the OPFOR's Approach

by Captain David Haines

Decision-making is the knowing if to decide, then when and what to decide.¹

The OPFOR at the National Training Center enjoys many advantages. The OPFOR knows the terrain and it knows how its enemy will fight. To offset this, BLUEFOR brigades possess a decided advantage in equipment capability in all of the battlefield operating systems. The BLUEFOR brigade's battlefield capability in equipment alone clearly outstrips the OPFOR on a vehicle-to-vehicle basis. How does the OPFOR overcome this?

The critical element that is rarely mentioned is the OPFOR's unique application of the military decision-making process or MDMP. In fact, the orders process and the OPFOR's METL proficiency gained from intensive and repetitive training is the cornerstone for the OPFOR's flexibility and lethality on the NTC battlefield.

How does the OPFOR differ? Contrary to some beliefs, the OPFOR has no "playbook" that it uses for operations. The OPFOR executes a full-up orders process that is similar to that used by their BLUEFOR counterparts, but there are a few distinct and important differences:

- The Regiment does not commit to one COA, but is prepared to fight up to four wargamed COAs.
- COAs are not eliminated but closely connected to the enemy situation and refined as the situation changes.
- Wargaming is continuous, but it does not drive or derail the process.
- Refinement of the COAs is closely linked to the wargame and the combined arms rehearsal conducted by the regiment.
- The regiment is focused on understanding task and purpose in relation to terrain, enemy, and friendly situation as well as desired end state. In practice, many units emphasize the importance of technique, method, or process.



OPFOR leaders game their approach to a coming NTC battle. They will use a shortened decision-making process and only commit to a course of action as the battle unfolds.

- A clear understanding of the commander's intent and aggressive, flexible, and violent action is the end state of the MDMP for the OPFOR.

- Staffs and sub-units are repetitively drilled on the fundamentals of the orders process and their battle drills.

Is it possible for U.S. Army units to plan and fight in this manner? For well-trained units, the answer is "yes." A unit that is proficient in its METL can fight with greater flexibility without sacrificing synchronization by applying the techniques that the OPFOR uses. A unit that uses this technique will be able to match the OPFOR, or any enemy for that matter, in flexibility and synchronization, in addition to far exceeding the combat capability of that opponent. Imagine a brigade combat team or task force that could be as flexible in its application of mass as the OPFOR regiment — this unique application of the MDMP can get you there.

Doctrinal Versus OPFOR Methods

The goal of the MDMP as defined in *FM 101-5* is to produce an order. This order must be flexible, tactically sound, and fully integrated and synchronized. The MDMP gives the commander and staff a structured analytical process to assist them in reaching logical decisions. This process uses thoroughness, clarity, sound judgment, logic, and pro-

fessional knowledge to reach a decision. It is a detailed, sequential and time-consuming process used to examine numerous friendly and enemy courses of action (COA).

The most detailed estimates cannot anticipate every possible branch or sequel, enemy action, unexpected opportunities, or changes in mission directed from higher headquarters.² Commanders and their staffs must continually analyze the enemy and friendly situation to identify or create opportunities as the situation develops.

The advantages of using the complete MDMP are that:

- It analyzes and compares multiple friendly and enemy COAs in an attempt to identify the best possible friendly COA and the best time and place to produce desired effects.
- It produces the greatest integration, coordination, and synchronization for an operation and minimizes the risk of overlooking any of its critical aspects.
- It results in task organization, priority intelligence requirements, the reconnaissance and surveillance plan, the fire support plan, and operations graphics. In short, a detailed operation order or operation plan.

A disadvantage is that it removes flexibility once the COA decision is

made. Instead of commanders and staffs focusing on the identification and exploitation of opportunities on the battlefield, the focus is on the synchronization and integration of the plan. The temptation (and often the result) is fighting the plan and not the enemy.

The Opposing Force (OPFOR) at the National Training Center uses a modified technique in applying the MDMP. The OPFOR follows the process as defined in *FM 101-5*, with one major exception — the COA decision is retained until the last possible moment on the battlefield. All courses of action are fully integrated and synchronized, and commanders and staff rehearse at least two of the COAs.

There are many advantages to retaining multiple COAs:

- The foremost advantage is the flexibility that it requires and allows the commanders and staff.
- In addition to focusing on integration, commanders and staff will be able to observe and assess what occurs on the battlefield in relation to the friendly and enemy situation to assist in making the best COA decision when the time is right.
- Subordinate commanders and staff will be able to assist the commander in making the best decision based on what is really happening, not on a template that is 24 to 48 hours old.
- Rehearsing multiple COAs also allows the commander to better express his intent through various COAs that may occur. He will better be able to answer the “what if” as it is addressed by his subordinates.
- Multiple COAs act as a forcing agent, requiring the S2 to continuously update and disseminate his situational template as information becomes available to facilitate the decision-making process. It forces commanders to be looking for conditions on the battlefield that would indicate a COA decision.
- Commanders will more readily recognize opportunity, and since there is no single COA determined yet, the commander may have the flexibility to capitalize on local opportunity. A unit may achieve some surprise during this local opportunity and the event broadens the chances for success for the entire unit.
- This technique emphasizes the importance of commander’s intent over adhering to a COA.

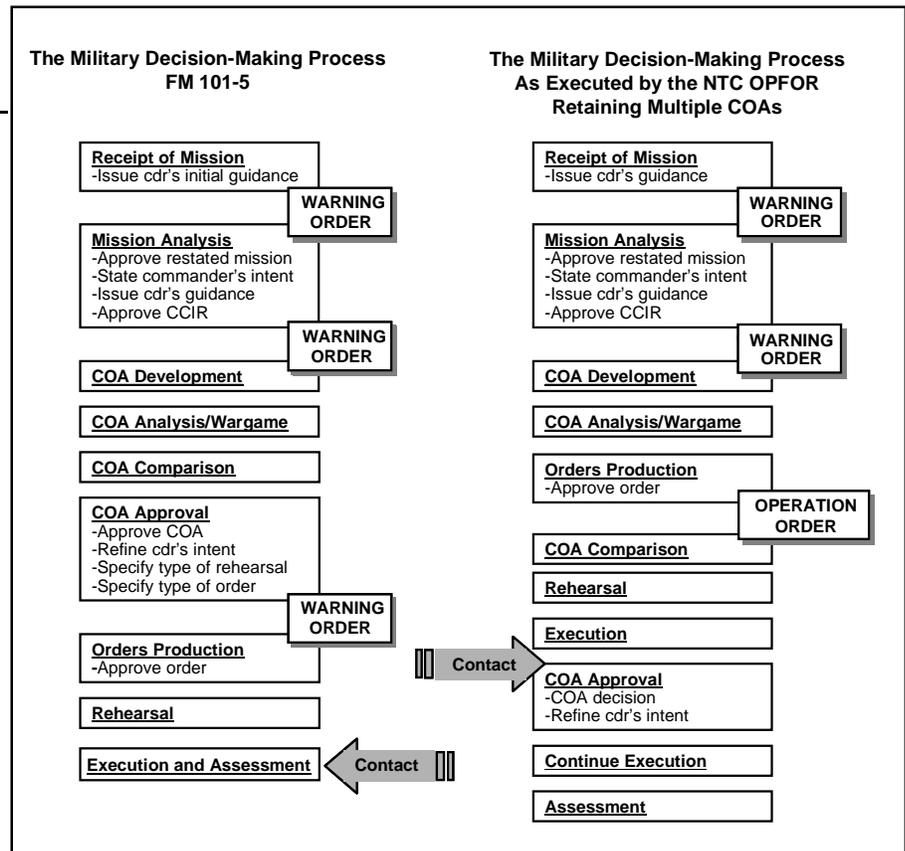


Figure 1.

This comparison chart tracks differences in the OPFOR and doctrinal orders process. The main difference is that the OPFOR decides its final course of action based on contact, while the doctrinal approach leads to a decision before contact with the enemy is made.

Disadvantages may be sacrificing some level of detail in the planning and integration. The key to minimizing this is to identify the similarities in the COA phases and decision points and ensuring the combat multipliers understand the overall commander’s intent.

The commander must ensure that his staff clearly understands his intent for their particular battlefield operating system (BOS). Giving the combat multipliers their critical tasks for each phase does this. Likewise, the staff must ensure their plans and actions support the commander and his subordinate maneuver units.

The combined arms commanders do this during the rehearsal, briefing their scheme in detail on the terrain board as the units are executing. This technique is heavily dependent on a strong working relationship between all the key players in a unit. This is something that is best developed at home station, not on the battlefield.

Units can train to use this adaptation of the MDMP. It will require some

fundamental changes in how the staff carries out the process, but with some training, it can be accomplished successfully. Some assumptions are required. The unit must have solid standard operating procedures that are read and understood at all levels; companies and platoons must be well trained in their basic battle drills; and lastly, the training needs to be repetitive at both the staff level and in the maneuver practiced at the platoon and company level.

THE OPFOR ORDERS PROCESS

Receipt of Mission/Mission Analysis

An explanation of the OPFOR orders process is probably required to understand how and where we adhere to the doctrinal MDMP and where we stray from it. The OPFOR Regiment receives combat battlefield instructions from Operations Group. This packet is the equivalent of an operations order from the regiment’s division headquarters. The OPFOR’s equivalent of warning order #1, the mission matrix, is issued

as quickly as possible. In this warning order or mission matrix is the combat power, task organization, and missions assigned to each motorized rifle battalion. The staff and commanders immediately begin their mission analysis. The OPFOR's mission analysis does not differ significantly from doctrinal guidelines. The S2 generates three to four unique enemy SITTEMPs for the mission analysis and in preparation for the wargame.

The commanders and staff may give feedback to the S2 on his SITTEMP. Mission analysis is completed and COAs are immediately developed following the briefing to the regimental commander. The commander's initial intent and guidance for wargaming constitute warning order #2.

Course of Action Development

There is one COA developed for each enemy SITTEMP. Normally 3-4 friendly COAs are developed using the S2's initial SITTEMPs and a generic array of forces for the OPFOR. These COAs are brief concepts of maneuver for the regiment that includes the MRBs and key combat multipliers. The regimental staff and commanders then begin wargaming the COAs. The line between COA development and wargaming blurs in this step as the staff is assessing the feasibility and suitability of each COA. The wargaming further tests these COAs and completes the initial plan. The focus of testing is not on whether or not it is feasible, but identifying under what conditions the COA would be feasible and its distinction from other COAs. In the wargame, the commanders and staff identify the critical tasks for each maneuver unit and the combat multipliers. Tentative decision points for maneuver, fires, and special munitions (chemical and FASCAM) are identified and recorded in a synchronization matrix by the staff. At this point, the initial integration and synchronization of the regiment has been planned and completed. The regimental commander is then briefed on the results of the wargame and the result of the COAs versus their respective enemy SITTEMP. The briefing includes advantage, disadvantages, decision points, and any critical issues in relation to the COAs.

Orders

A rotational operations order is published, which includes the most basic information about the operation. Weather

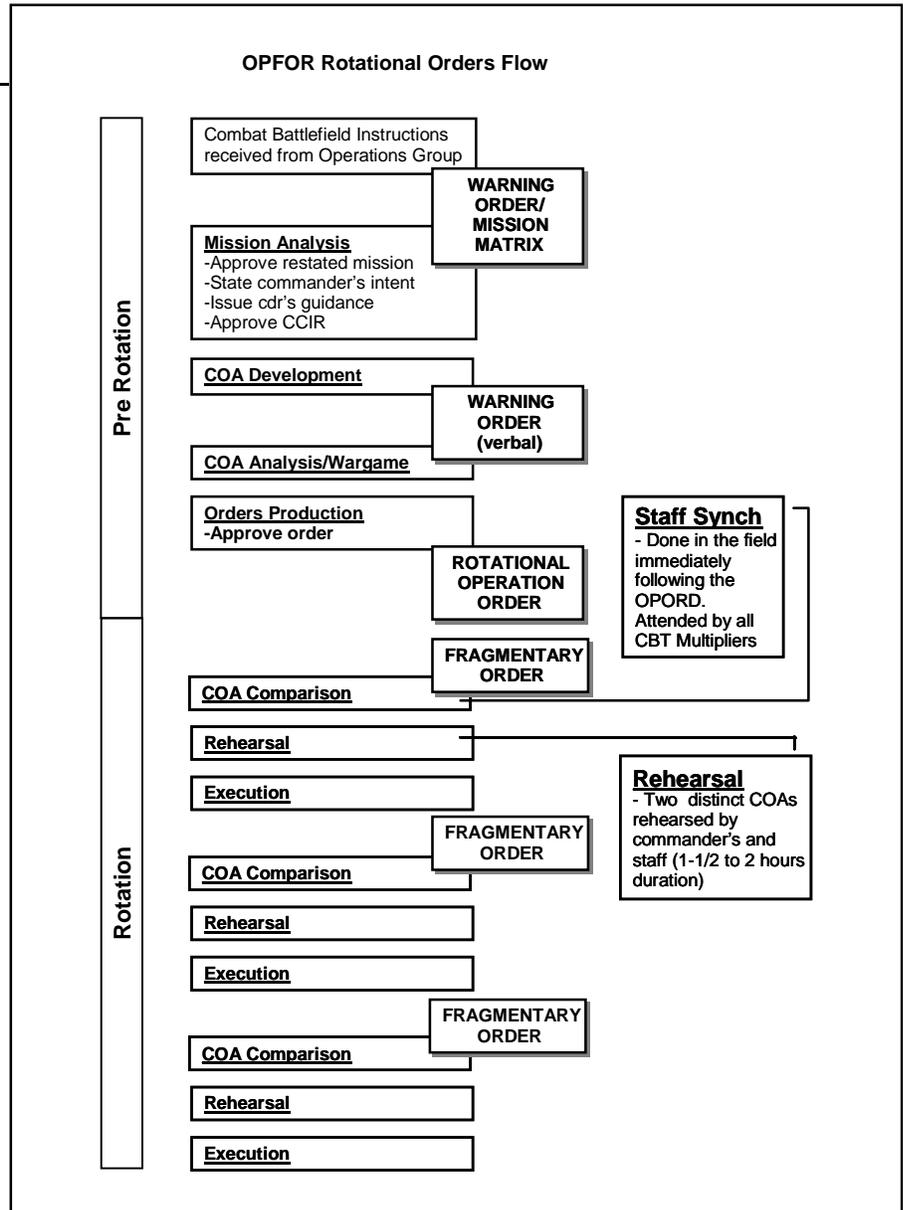


Figure 2.

er and light data, enemy order of battle, coordination matrices for orders, briefings and aviation, combat service support, and command and signal information. Specifics on scheme of maneuver are not covered. This would best correlate to warning order #3.

Fragmentary orders are then published prior to the mission that give the mission, commander's intent, COA sketches, and scheme of maneuver for all elements of the regiment. This FRAGO is the basis for the orders brief given to the regiment the day prior to the mission. The staff briefs commanders on updated enemy situation and scheme of maneuver to include all BOS. The commanders then back brief the regimental commander on their task and purpose and any initial issues.

Course of Action Comparison

Immediately following the back brief, the staff begins what should be considered the COA comparison for the regiment. Normally, it is still too early in the operation for COAs to be eliminated. The purpose of this meeting is to further refine the timeline, decision points, fires, and special munitions on the most recent enemy SITTEMP. The staff continually assesses feasibility as the enemy situation develops. CCIRs, HPTs, and HVTs are finalized and targeted.

The primary focus of this drill is continued refinement of all fires. When time allows, a decision support matrix is developed for the commanders that supports all COAs.

Combined Arms Rehearsal

The regiment conducts a terrain model rehearsal that takes about an hour and a half. It follows the rehearsal script as outlined in Annex G, *FM 101-5*. This rehearsal is conducted with all the key players in the battle (maneuver, fires, and other combat multipliers). The vehicle commanders of the regimental reconnaissance start the rehearsal on the terrain board, briefing their infiltration routes, positions, and reconnaissance focus. The S2 then briefs the first enemy situation. He will integrate whatever is known about the enemy up to this point into his setup. The players then follow a fixed agenda that goes through the battle, by critical events, by time once the regiment passes line of departure, and by individual combat multiplier. Once the S2 has finished his initial setup, all the players get on the terrain board. This includes the maneuver commanders, the fire support officer, air direction officer, engineers, electronic warfare, air defense, smoke platoon leader, and signal officer. Having all the players on the board facilitates the understanding of the entire battle and ensures that the combat multipliers understand the key events in maneuver that will trigger actions by them in support of the regiment.

The executive officer and the S3 are responsible for managing the agenda and the time, as well as capturing issues that need to be addressed. The executive officer will call off the time and the maneuver commanders brief their actions at that specific time. This brief includes location, combat power, actions, and anticipated actions preparing for the next turn. The combat multipliers briefing their actions will follow them. The fire support officer, air direction officer, and EW commander brief their focus of fires. The ADA commander will brief coverage, location, and anticipated actions similar to the maneuver commanders. The engineers will brief any key actions as needed. The smoke platoon leader and signal officer brief their support focus and retrans plan respectively. Commanders and combat multipliers will continue this process through the entire course of action. If there is no change for any element, "no change" is briefed. The regimental commander observes and refines his guidance as needed throughout the rehearsal. This is then repeated using another COA that is distinctive from the first one rehearsed. This one is somewhat shorter due to the

basic similarities of all the COAs (i.e., scouts, approach march, and support scheme for some of the combat multipliers).

The regiment completes the rehearsal and is ready to execute. The S2 continually updates the commanders on the enemy situation to allow the commander to refine his guidance or intent.

The FRAGO/COA comparison/rehearsal process is repeated throughout the rotation for every regimental level battle.

The COA Decision in Contact Execution

The movement or approach phase of execution is similar through all courses of action. There is a direct linkage between the critical events that occur before the commitment of the regiment. These events start with the movement of division and regimental reconnaissance and the regiment's truck mounted and air assault infantry. Division reconnaissance enters sector 36 to 48 hours ahead of the lead regiment of the division. Regimental reconnaissance moves into sector with the purpose of completing the picture for the regimental commander that was initially developed by divisional reconnaissance assets. Regimental assets are focused based on the success or reconnaissance "dead space" of division reconnaissance. Regimental reconnaissance is successful in routinely getting the commander a 90-95 percent solution on enemy locations. Additionally, regimental reconnaissance assets clear routes, landing zones, and dismount points in preparation for the infiltration of the light infantry. Reconnaissance assets establish observation throughout the depth of the battlespace, focusing on key terrain, avenues of approach, mobility corridors, large (company/team) enemy formations, high payoff and high value targets. The confidence in the ability of regimental reconnaissance to get this level of information is a critical factor in allowing the commander to retain multiple courses of action until the last possible moment. Regimental reconnaissance also serves as the primary "looker" for divisional and regimental indirect fires. These elements stay in sector, continually reporting and refining the enemy disposition. Near simultaneously, the regiment's light infantry is moving into sector to create further opportunities for the regiment.

The regiment normally employs two light infantry companies in the offense. The light infantry can have numerous tasks. Generally they are expected to destroy one company team each in the vicinity of key terrain to create weakness in the enemy formations. This will cause the enemy to reposition or react to the destruction of the company team. The infantry may also be tasked to clear or secure key terrain to allow the unhindered passage of the regiment. Once in sector, the infantry also becomes a valuable reconnaissance asset to the regiment. The success or failure of these units plays a large role in the focus of the next element of the regiment — the advance guard or forward detachment. This element is the first MRB-sized unit to move toward the enemy. It will move to capitalize on weakness created by the infantry or opportunities reported by regimental reconnaissance. At this point, the commander is prepared to begin eliminating courses of action, but he has still probably not made a course of action decision.

The regimental forward detachment (FD) or advanced guard (AG) is task organized to be decisive and self-sufficient. All the combat multipliers of the regiment are represented. Normal task organization consists of one tank company (+), a BMP I/II equipped motorized rifle battalion (+), 100 organic infantry, an anti-tank company, one to two mortar batteries, an SP artillery battery, mobility and counter-mobility assets, smoke vehicles, air defense assets, reconnaissance, command and control vehicles, and resupply. This large, powerful organization is focused on observed or created weakness. The commander of this organization knows it is his responsibility to maneuver his force to set conditions for deciding which course of action will be taken.

COA at the Decisive Point

The conditions that must be set at this point are fairly simple. Regardless of the operation, the commander must have a 90-percent solution on enemy disposition, down to company team level. A weakness must have been identified or created by the light infantry, the AG/FD, or fires. In other words, the enemy has begun to lose the initiative and is off-balance due to the previous actions of the regiment. In a meeting engagement, it is possible that the lead task force has been neutralized or destroyed. In an attack on a defense, the FD has created a point of penetra-

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At right, the Krasnovians begin their attack.



tion or breach in the enemy defense. Another possible condition is the seizure or control of key terrain in the enemy area of operations.

The AG/FD commander makes a recommendation to the regimental commander based upon his situation and how he sees the battlefield. It may or may not be accepted by the regimental commander. Ideally, the commander will be able to retain his course of action decision until the decisive point of the battle is reached — when the AG has destroyed approximately a task force, or the FD has achieved at least one or possibly two breaches in the enemy defense. Meanwhile the main body and main effort monitor the fight and maintain an adequate time or space distance to allow the fight to develop and be able to commit quickly into the battle. The reconnaissance patrols of the MRBs out of contact will move forward to provide first-hand reports of the situation to allow the main body commanders to start gaining situational awareness and assist the commander and staff in recognizing opportunities and recommending COAs. Simultaneously, as the AG or FD comes into contact, the S2 and the chief of staff will be utilizing all reconnaissance assets available to account for the enemy's remaining combat power.

Numerous things occur almost simultaneously at the course of action decision to support that decision. This is where the orchestration of the regiment is at its peak. Many of these assets may have gone uncommitted up to this point to ensure that they will be committed in support of the course of action decision. Collection assets continue to develop the enemy picture as the S2 and Chief of Staff disseminate a detailed enemy picture to the commanders and staff. In the close fight the AG/FD has gained a clear advantage in its area of operations and has employed its organic infantry to destroy remaining enemy forces in the area of a breach or on key terrain. Anti-tank assets and counter-mobility assets have been employed to protect a vulnerable flank of the AG/FD or the ap-

proaching main body. Mortar fires support the MRB and its infantry in the close fight. Artillery fires focus on destruction of forces to the immediate flank or rear of the fight to expand the breach or disrupt their maneuver. Rotary wing close air support will assist in expanding or exploiting the advantage created as well as serving as a mobile reserve to protect a vulnerable flank. Fixed wing close air support will destroy forces out of contact or forces repositioning on the regiment. Electronic warfare focus will switch from collection to jamming to disrupt command and control on identified nets. Air defense assets will focus on coverage of the close fight as well as the approach of the main body. Artillery and ground smoke will be used to obscure the breach as well as the approach of the main body. Persistent chemical agents and FASCAMs are employed to isolate identified forces to prevent their repositioning against the regiment. Non-persistent chemical agents will be used to disrupt command and control or maneuver of enemy forces. Simultaneously, the main body of the regiment is closing on the fight, committed to exploiting what the AG/FD and regimental combat multipliers have created.

Conclusion

The process works. After watching this process in action for over two years, first as an S3 Air, then as a troop and motorized rifle battalion commander, I am convinced that this process should not be dismissed as an “NTC-ism” or “OPFOR-ism.” Where it will fail is if it is implemented without the necessary thought, preparation, training, and rehearsal in its execution.

Army units can train to use this technique. Through outlining the process the OPFOR uses, units should be able to better understand how they can apply this adaptation of the process to their own units. The requirement for units to be able to execute this process is fairly simple to identify and somewhat harder to achieve. It is a well-trained unit and staff that are proficient in their METL and battle tasks.

This process can be a key to flexibility if applied with a thorough understanding of the terrain and enemy. Army units can train to match the OPFOR's flexibility on the battlefield. The U.S. Army will never have the home field advantage against any future enemy. We should stop using it as an excuse for the success of the OPFOR. The U.S. Army is and will be the best-equipped force in the world today and the future. We simply need to be more flexible and the process the OPFOR has developed through years of doing the MDMP on a monthly basis will make us the most lethal and flexible combined arms force in the world.

Notes

¹FM 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, May 1997, p. 5-1.

²Ibid., p. 5-27.

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