



CONSOLIDATING GAINS AND THE CONSOLIDATION AREA IN NATO DOCTRINE

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Consolidating gains is an integral part of combat operations that leverages tactical, operational, and strategic level advantages to retain the initiative and create irreversible momentum towards the desired end state (TRADOC, 2017). How successfully armed forces consolidate their gains often informs the outcome for how a conflict is viewed today. Successfully consolidating gains in NATO operations have a clear impact at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. By increasing the importance of consolidating gains and incorporating the consolidation area as a new geographic framework within Alliance doctrine, NATO will be better prepared to maintain the initiative, while creating the required momentum to achieve the military and political end state.

Keywords: NATO operations; NATO Doctrine; battlespace management; support area command post;

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Motto:

“Armies that win battles without following through to consolidate gains tend to lose wars, and the U.S. Army has experience on both sides of the historical ledger in this regard”.

Lieutenant General Mike Lundy,
Former Commanding General of the U.S. Army
Combined Arms Center

INTRODUCTION

Throughout modern military history, there are some notable examples where armies successfully consolidated gains after major offensive operations that ultimately led to the defeat of an adversary. Examples include the 1918 French and U.S. Army Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the 1944 Allied breakout from Normandy, and the Israeli counterattack on Egyptian forces during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

With the NATO Alliance being a strategic political and military organization, consolidating gains through stability and security tasks are essential to accomplish political aims. Deliberately disregarding the importance of planning how a unit will consolidate gains will impact the commander’s ability to maintain operational reach and tempo, while also decreasing the predictability of phasing and transitions. When reviewing the Allied Joint Doctrine of NATO, there is an important gap to be considered between consolidating gains and the transition between the close and rear area geographic frameworks for operations.

Success in a military campaign requires a comprehensive approach with synchronised consolidation-of-gains activities before, during and after the conflict. The ability of a commander to plan for upcoming phases and transitions is a mark of a successful commander; this is not a new idea. The U.S. Army Doctrine of World War II stated that, *“In his planning, the army commander must project himself well into the future; his plans must cover considerable periods of operations;*

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and while one operation, which may extend over many days or weeks, is progressing, he must be planning the next". (Field Manual 100-15, 1942).

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Without planning the necessary ends, ways, and means required to consolidate gains at all echelons, a military operation will entail significant risk. Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria indicates that consolidating gains after tactical success against enemy forces requires deliberate planning and sufficient combat power. While assigned as the Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster stated, *"The chaos in Afghanistan and the parts of Iraq and Syria then held by ISIS was the fault of multiple parties, but stemmed from a single cause: a failure to consolidate gains"*. (Tucker, 2017).

This article seeks to explain and recommend three things: 1) the importance of consolidating gains during combat operations, 2) after securing gains, land forces should immediately establish a consolidation area to maintain the initiative, and 3) recommend who should be responsible for commanding this transitional area between the close and rear geographic frameworks. This article ultimately recommends that NATO Joint Allied Doctrine adopts the consolidation area as a new geographic framework and elaborates on the importance of consolidating gains.

BATTLEFIELD MANAGEMENT AND GEOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORKS

A critical function for a commander assigned an area of operations (AO) is to coordinate and synchronise all military and non-military actions that take place within his/her area of responsibility (AJP-3, 2019). When elements are operating within a battlespace that are not assigned to a commander, such as logistical and non-governmental organizations, the commander must strive to de-conflict these activities through unified effort. The risk of uncoordinated action within

an AO leads to an absence of situational awareness and potentially friendly fratricide. Coordination and synchronization require effective Command and Control through information and communication systems to maintain a shared situational awareness throughout an assigned AO. A unit's battlespace management provides the necessary means to enable the effective synchronization and reduce risk across the joint force and non-NATO actors.

To assist with battlefield management within an AO, NATO doctrine conceptualizes three geographic frameworks for land operations: deep, close, and rear operations (ATP-3.2.1, 2018). These frameworks allow commanders to visualize the application of combat power in time, space, and purpose to achieve assigned objectives. Within this framework, offensive, defensive, and stability tasks, along with non-military activities, are organized within an operation to achieve unified action and the end state. To achieve the military end state, decisive shaping and sustaining operations are coordinated and synchronized within these three geographic frameworks. To organize battlespace management and geographic frameworks further, commanders assign boundaries to distinguish and organize areas of responsibility between subordinate units (AAP-6, 2019).

❖ *Close operations* are those involving friendly forces in direct contact with the enemy or operations in which commanders anticipate direct contact taking place (ATP-3.2.1, 2018). The close area is a portion of the land force commander's AO assigned to subordinate manoeuvre units. Close operations take place within the area of the Forward Line of Own Troops (FLOT) and include both military and non-military activities. Typically, decisive operations take place within the close area as military commanders look to defeat an opponent to set conditions for the military end state. Manoeuvre assets within the close area require mobility, protection, and fire power to rapidly concentrate overwhelming combat power at the right time and place to exploit success (FM 3-0, 2017).

❖ *Deep operations* are generally shaping operations to set conditions for friendly forces to achieve objectives within the close fight or in future operations. To set conditions for future action, deep operations can occur prior to, after, or concurrent with close



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operations. Long range fires, aviation, and special operation forces are typically used to shape the deep fight. Using a multi-domain approach, deep operations can also entail non-kinetic means such as information activities, cyber, and space effects. Division and corps level headquarters are normally the first echelon with the capabilities to conduct deep operations. Non-military activities at the strategic and operational level also occur in the deep fight to enable friendly forces to maintain the initiative as the FLOT continues to move forward within the battlespace.

❖ *Rear operations* are typically administrative, logistical, and security related, that fall out of contact with conventional adversary forces behind the close fight. To mitigate asymmetric threats, rear area security operations focus on securing lines of communication, command posts, and logistical bases. Operations within the rear area help sustain close and deep operations and involve military and non-military activities. Traditionally, international and non-governmental organizations operate within the rear area, and when coordinated, these organizations assist in supporting the organised comprehensive approach to achieve military and political objectives.

CONSOLIDATING GAINS AND THE CONSOLIDATION AREA

During successful offensive operations, friendly forces gain terrain by increasing the size of the close area until conditions shift rear area boundaries through phasing and transitions. Consolidation begins immediately after the enemy is defeated and/or an objective is secured to prevent the adversary from gaining time to reconstitute their forces or disrupt battlefield gains by counterattack (ATP-3.2.1, 2018, pp. 4-23).

To emphasise the importance of consolidating gains in high intensity operations, the 2017 U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0 Operations added the consolidation area as a new geographic framework. The consolidation area is considered a portion of the commander's AO designated to facilitate tasks related to security and stability operations that are necessary for freedom of action in the close area and to support the continuous consolidation of gains (FM 3-0, 2017, pp. 1-35). The consolidation area also enables friendly forces to reorganize and prepare for the next operation through shaping

and sustaining operations (see *Figure 1*). Although NATO doctrine does not use or define consolidating gains or a consolidation area, it defines “*consolidation of position*” as organizing and strengthening a newly captured position so that it can be used against the adversary (AAP-6, 2019, p.31).

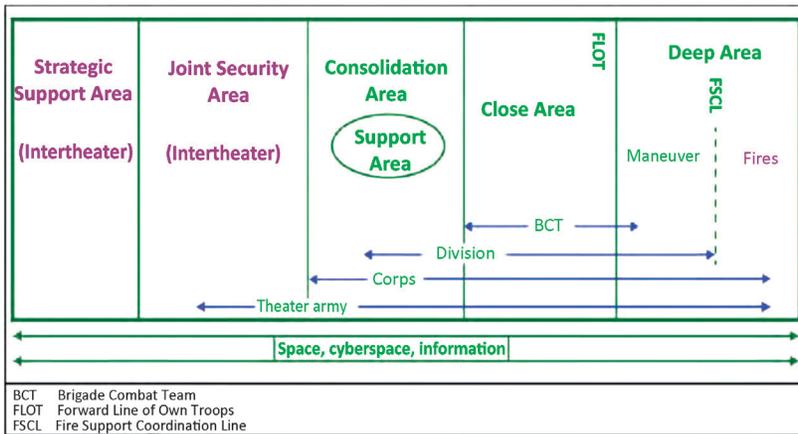


Figure 1: Corps area of operations within a theatre of operations
 U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, Operations,
 (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 2017, pp. 1-30).

Effective security operations within the consolidation area prevent gaps or seams within the close area that an adversary could exploit. A screen, guard, or cover operation are typical security tasks that can be an additional friendly force mission.

Planning and allocating a dedicated force to conduct security operations is essential prior to an operation to ensure the appropriate assets are allocated to protect friendly forces and maintain the initiative. Security operations are operations undertaken by a commander to provide early and accurate warning of adversary intentions while providing friendly forces with time and manoeuvre space to react to the adversary (ib., p. 115).

The concept of operation, coordinating instructions, and control measures provide subordinate units their tasks within the consolidation area. These include phasing, terrain selection, passage of line operations, and fire support considerations. Effective security operations within the consolidation area prevent gaps or seams within the close area that an adversary could exploit. A screen, guard, or cover operation are typical security tasks that can be an additional friendly force mission. Units with a high level of mobility should be assigned security operations as they are likely to achieve the greatest effectiveness. Command and Control, intelligence collection,



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sustainment, force protection, and civil-military cooperation activities are all critical joint functions that require coordination and synchronization to achieve specific effects within a consolidation area. Military police and engineering assets are also required within the consolidation area. During offensive high intensity operations there will likely be considerable tasks that military police and engineers have to complete to maintain operational tempo. These tasks include, amongst others, engineers repairing and maintaining critical infrastructure destroyed by adversary forces or military police units, securing prisoners of war, managing traffic control points, and protecting key command nodes.

Activities within the consolidation area are important for maintaining operational tempo, but also to legitimise the operation and reassure the local population through sustained stability operations. Before transitioning the consolidation area into the rear area, stability operations should focus on identifying, targeting, and mitigating the key causes of instability in order to set conditions for rebuilding local and national infrastructure. Completing these tasks will enable long-term development and consolidation of gains at the strategic level. Through a comprehensive approach, military and non-military stability activities should be coordinated and synchronized through civil-military integration and nest with the overall NATO campaign objectives.

Immediately following high intensity operations, an area of operations may be so depleted that a land force could easily become constrained by the stabilisation activities they must achieve. The quote below from a U.S. service member from World War II helps explain the importance of developing a comprehensive approach that incorporates consolidating gains with required stability and security tasks to win the peace. *“In many towns there had been so much destruction by bombardment and shell fires and the people so frightened and paralyzed that no local administration existed. In fact, in many cases all of the machinery of modern life had ceased to exist: there was no government, no police, no food supply, no water, no electric light, no transportation and no organized medical service. All of these things had to be reorganized from the ground up, the dead buried, the streets*

cleaned of debris, water and food brought in, etc.” (Coles, Weinberg, 1986).

The level of intensity within the operational environment (OE) will determine the balance of requirements within a consolidation area; but a commander dealing with a hostile population or large asymmetric threat will require more capabilities within the consolidation area to prevent any decreases in operational reach, tempo, and deliberate phasing and transition shifts. Using a “*minimum force*” mindset during military operations adversely affects the ability to consolidate gains at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels (Lundy, Creed, 2019). Accomplished tasks in the consolidation area have positive impacts within both the rear and close area. When these activities are completed, they rarely receive great credit; but when poorly planned and executed even the most competent commander can fail.

ESTABLISHING A SUPPORT AREA COMMAND POST

As friendly forces maintain the initiative through offensive operations the distance between the close and rear area grows. Establishing a consolidation area (between the close and rear area) helps organize the joint action required to stabilize and secure newly gained terrain. To coordinate and synchronize joint action, a dedicated consolidation area commander with a clear mission, tasks and authorities to direct action is prudent. Mobility, logistical, intelligence collection, security, and fire support missions are all activities expected to take place within a consolidation area. Without a dedicated subordinate commander to coordinate and manage shaping and sustaining operations to the rear of the FLOT, a land force commander could become distracted away from his main effort. Furthermore, the establishment of a support area command post (SACP) is a new imperative in war because threats in the consolidation area will likely be different from the close and deep areas (Fenzel, Torgersen, 2018, p. 49).

Depending on the situation in an OE, such as the number of ongoing operations, the size and location of an adversary threat, and the complexity within a battlespace, corps and division headquarters may establish multiple command posts (CPs). To maintain flexibility and effective mission command within these echelons, the U.S. Army



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recommends a main CP, tactical CP and SACP (FM 3-0, 2017, pp. 2-35). When the commander is not present, a dedicated deputy commander normally takes charge of alternate CPs.

The main CP includes the command group and most of the staff to control current operations, perform detailed analysis, and plan future operations. A tactical CP is an alternate command post and provides a location for the commander to exercise mission command while the main CP deploys or repositions. In a high-threat situation, the tactical CP may offset from the main CP to provide redundancy in the event of an attack on the main CP. When significant shaping operations occur, such as a passage of lines or wet gap crossing, a headquarters may employ a tactical CP to facilitate command and control for a distinct operation.

A SACP enables commanders to exercise mission command over the distinct functional units operating within a consolidation area that may exceed the effective span of control of a division or corps main CP (Center for Army Lessons Learned Handbook, 2017, p. 5). Support areas are designated into a consolidation area to facilitate the positioning, employment, and protection of base sustainment assets required to sustain, enable, and control operations (see *Figure 2*) (FM 3-0, 2017, pp. 1-34).

Together, the objective of support and consolidation areas ensures freedom of action and continuous operations. During high intensity operations the physical and doctrinal integration of protection, sustainment, and warfighting functions within a consolidation area is best controlled by a SACP (Fenzel, Torgersen, p. 49). The SACP must have the proper command authority and assigned forces to control and direct operations that may occur to the rear of the FLOT. Assigning a dedicated commander that outranks all subordinate commanders operating within the consolidation area is considered a best practice within the U.S. Army (US Army Combined Arms Center, p. 2).

When resourcing the requirements for a SACP, corps and divisions must include all joint functions. This will ensure that the SACP is capable of planning and executing the full spectrum of military operations while remaining synchronized with operations in the close and deep fight (Ib.).

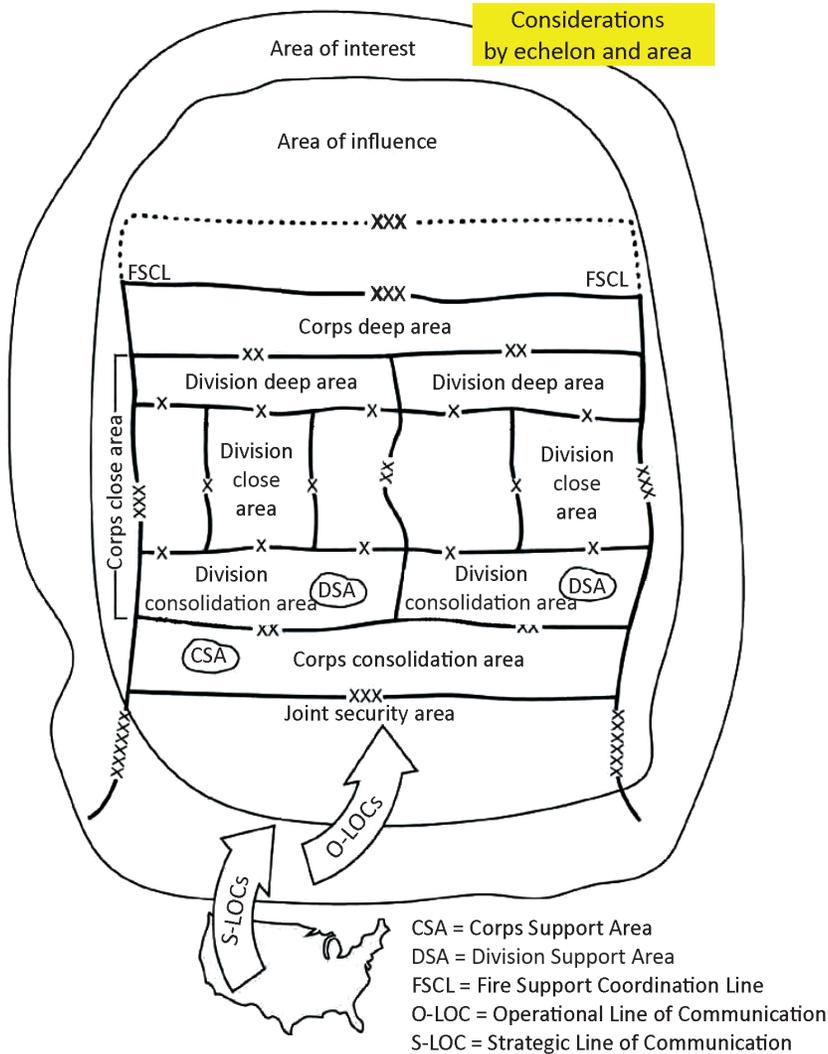


Figure 2 : Considerations by Echelon and Area. Author's chart rendition in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, Operations (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 2017, pp. 1-32).

CONCLUSION

Successfully consolidating gains in NATO operations have a clear impact at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. How well a joint force consolidates their gains will influence the level of success in a campaign, and ultimately, how a population views the conflict. With peer competitors now actively seeking to gain strategic



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advantages with advanced technologies in all domains, NATO must adapt and prepare to conduct high intensity operations against potential adversaries.

By increasing the importance of consolidating gains and incorporating the consolidation area as a new geographic framework within Alliance doctrine, NATO will be better prepared to maintain the initiative, while creating the required momentum to achieve the military and political end state. Having the appropriate force and capabilities to consolidate gains will have an exponential effect on the future battlefield (Pough, 2019, p. 45).

By not planning or allocating forces appropriately, the adversary could easily conduct disruption operations in the consolidation area, affecting both military and civilian forces attempting to stabilize and secure military gains. A dedicated commander with the right level of command and control authorities should lead the joint coordination and synchronization within the consolidation area via a SACP. Furthermore, establishing an effective SACP will allow the land force commander to concentrate on the main effort.

The long wars in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Iraq have taught the military that no politician desires a protracted conflict. The endurance of public support and political will in the 30 countries that form NATO's Alliance will determine how long individual countries will allocate their resources, specifically manpower and funding to an operation. When directed, the military must determine how best to quickly accomplish military and political aims. Incorporating the importance of consolidating gains with a new consolidation area geographic framework into NATO doctrine will assist the military to achieve these aims.

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