

Multi-domain task force takes on near-peer operations

By Col. Christopher Wendland

Headquarters, Department of the Army recently identified United States Army Forces Pacific and America's I Corps as the lead for the Army's new multi-domain task force (MDTF) concept. Seventeenth Field Artillery Brigade, *Thunderbolt*, a separate brigade under America's I Corps, is serving as the executor of the ongoing pilot program. The new Army MDTF concept is focused on developing methods to counter a peer/near-peer adversary's ability to conduct anti-access/area denial (A2AD) operations against U.S. power projection capabilities.

The *Thunderbolt Brigade* is tightly integrated with America's I Corps. The brigade commander dual-hats as the corps fire support coordinator and the brigade is a corps separate, which is also known as a direct reporting unit, to the corps headquarters. As the corps prepares for decisive action operations to support any world-wide contingency, the 17th Field Artillery Brigade staff routinely synchronizes warfighting functions with corps staff and typically delivers a large portion of the lethal shaping that a corps provides for its subordinate divisions.

With two attached High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems battalions, each with 16 launchers, one brigade support battalion and an attached signal company, the *Thunderbolt Brigade* has a great foundation to serve as a starting point for an MDTF. The Army is now deciding if/what other formations could be assigned or attached to the base foundation to expand the capabilities needed to counter a peer/near-peer adversary A2AD threat.

Since this is a “multi-domain” task force, the Army is looking to inform its evolving multi-domain operation strategy during the execution of the MDTF-Pilot Program. U.S. Army Pacific, U.S. Army Training Doctrine Command, and America’s I Corps have a series of exercises planned to test the integration of new formations and technology to provide sensor-to-shooter agnostic capabilities to a joint task force (JTF) commander assigned the MDTF. To achieve the true “agnosticism,” each of the upcoming planned exercises will integrate all service capabilities into the MDTF-PP. The end-state goal is to provide a JTF commander the ability to thwart a peer/near-peer adversary’s A2AD capability by synchronizing lethal and non-lethal capabilities across multiple domains (air, maritime, ground, cyber and space) near simultaneously, to create multiple dilemmas for the enemy and create a position of advantage for U.S./allied/partner power projection. The pilot is also looking to discern how requisite authorities could/should be delegated since if the MDTF supports an echelon or headquarters (coalition) that is unable to quickly approve certain missions, or those authorities are not delegated to the MDTF headquarters, the MDTF role is limited for execution.

In December 2017, America’s I Corps and the 17th FAB completed an inaugural MDTF-PP exercise together in conjunction with Japan’s annual Yama Sakura 73 exercises.

USARPAC and TRADOC augmented the *Thunderbolt Brigade* with non-standard cyber, electronic warfare and space capabilities during the exercise. Lt. Gen. Gary Volesky, I Corps and Joint Base Lewis-McChord commanding general, identified a portion of the exercises where U.S./Japan power projection was at risk. He instructed the MDTF-PP to develop a plan and integrate that plan into corps shaping to mitigate risk, provide a window of opportunity for I Corps and Japanese Ground Self

Defense Forces, and achieve a foothold in a peer/near-peer adversary’s A2AD environment from which they could advance future operations.

The MDTF-PP developed a convergence window of layered multi-domain effects that provided an umbrella of coverage for the U.S./Japan bilateral air assault and airborne insertion force during their greatest period of vulnerability. Considering most of the “task force” participants had not met prior to the exercise and were not fully aware of the capabilities each brought to the table, the exercise proved extremely insightful for future iterations.

USARPAC, America’s I Corps, and the *Thunderbolt Brigade* have a full schedule of exercises planned leading up to the summer of 2019. Each exercise will develop and iteratively test linkages to various service-agnostic multi-domain sensors and shooters. Using a plug-and-play methodology, different formations and emerging technologies will be attached to the 17th FAB MDTF-PP headquarters for short periods of time. The MDTF-PP headquarters will then develop and test linkages and processes, and the Army will analyze the data and determine how to build the “true” MDTF when the pilot program concludes.

Challenges continue to emerge. Seventeenth Field Artillery Brigade’s primary mission is to serve as America’s I Corps Force Field Artillery Headquarters (FFA). The *Thunderbolt* staff is attempting to balance the role of corps FFA (a responsibility to synchronize multiple field artillery O6-level commands — both FA brigade and DIVARTY— for a corps decisive action fight), the role testing a MDTF headquarters (bringing together non-traditional units and processes under the FA brigade headquarters), and their requisite responsibility of training their organic subordinate battalions for future decisive action operations.

In addition, specific to the MDTF role, there are notable challenges associated with creating communications linkages between the various service capabilities back to the MDTF-PP. The *Thunderbolt* S6 continues to request exceptions to policy or develop work-arounds to mitigate interoperability issues. Each challenge continues to press against the status quo and will eventually open up new doors and improve interconnections between services and the efficiencies to leverage multiple domains near-simultaneously. The *Thunderbolt Brigade*

headquarters tactical operations center is the central node that each sensor-to-shooter capability must pass and is arguably the most critical aspect of the pilot program.

Seventeenth FAB is routinely reviewing mission command shortfalls to provide the corps with existing capability gaps that must be addressed to ensure the MDTF can accomplish the mission. In addition to looking at service-agnostic sensor-to-shooter linkages, the MDTF-PP headquarters is also ensuring the linkages that hold true from the brigade to America’s I Corps will hold true for any joint task force headquarters.

Another challenge is the sustainment support for each of the new formations temporarily attached to the MDTF-PP. Although all field artillery brigades have an assigned brigade support battalion on their modified table of organization and equipment, the FA brigade support battalions are only comprised of a headquarters support company and are not sourced subordinate companies (no supply support activity, maintenance company, or Role II medical capability). These shortfalls require the FA brigade to look at sustainment augmentation for each of the Army plug-and-play units under temporary attachment for the various future exercises or to leverage corps assets to fill the gap. As the MDTF-PP becomes associated with non-standard units and deploys to exercises in austere locations, 17th FA Brigade is working to identify requisite sustainment requirements to ensure the MDTF will remain responsive to JTF counter A2AD requests.

Overall, the 17th FA Brigade is appreciative of the opportunity and privilege to serve as a pilot program for such an important joint force future capability. The *Thunderbolt Soldiers* and those attached Airman, Marines and Sailors are motivated to push the envelope on new technology integration and to challenge and re-negotiate authorities to allow more capability at lower echelons.

The *Thunderbolt Brigade* is proud to be the Army’s MDTF-PP and will work tirelessly with USARPAC, TRADOC and America’s I Corps to remain a learning organization and employ this opportunity to ultimately further the Army’s multi-domain operation concept.

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