CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

In Focus
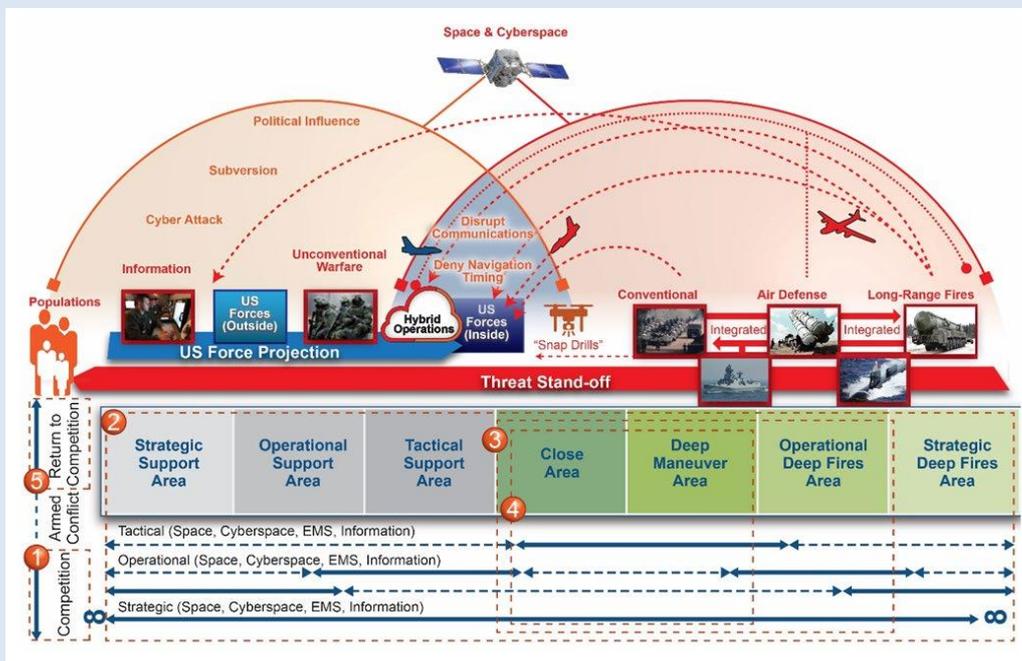
America's Multi- Domain Operations at 250: A Strategy, Concept or Mirage?

Ms Khyati Singh
Research Analyst, MP-IDSA

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-Domain_Operations#/media/File:Multi_Domain_Operations,space.png

Introduction

The United States (US)Army marks its 250th year in 2025, and places Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) as the vision for warfighting in the future. Despite this, MDO remains more of a concept than a concrete strategy, filled with aspirations but enmeshed with institutional constraints and the abstraction of doctrines. Hence, unless the Military grounds MDO in strategic clarity, joint operational design, and realistic resources, it risks repeating the mistakes of earlier doctrinal overreaches that weighed form over function.

General Mark Milley heralded the US Army's conceptual pivot toward the MDO with his remarks that the future conflict will be "fundamentally different" because of the convergence of informational, cognitive, and physical domains.[1] The doctrine of MDO was officially codified in the US Army Training and Doctrine Command's documents in 2018, and aims to address the loopholes in the existing legacy concepts like Air-Land Battle and the counterinsurgency-centric doctrine.[2] With the Army celebrating its 250th anniversary, MDO reflects a mix of strategic anxiety and institutional ambition, namely the hope of remaining relevant in an era of great power competition, hybrid threats, and technological upheaval. However, despite its elaborate, conceptual promise, it falls short of structural and operational merit, raising speculations about its viability.

The Strategic Assurance of MDO

The central idea of MDO is to enable US forces to converge effects across all domains – land, sea, space, air, cyber, and electromagnetic spectrum, in order to create overmatch and unleash multiple attacks and dilemmas on the adversary. As per the US Army Concept for Manoeuvre in Multi-Domain Operations, 2028-2040 concept, the US must prepare to penetrate and break down the sophisticated anti-access/anti-denial (A2/AD) systems developed and deployed by enemy states like China and Russia. MDO envisions the Army in the role of an integrator within the larger ambit of joint operations, providing long-range fires, expeditionary logistics and tactical manoeuvres in critical and contested environments.[3]

Changes in the international system largely shape MDO's current strategic relevance. While the United States is losing its military dominance, MDO enables it to adapt to the speed and complexity of multiple domains. Michael Mazarr and Frank Hoffman emphasise the importance of grey-zone competition and hybrid warfare- areas where MDO, in theory, provides an integrated solution.

MDO still lacks the articulation of a political theory of victory, even though it is theoretically appealing. In terms of political outcomes, the Army claims that convergence has created operational advantages; however, it is still unclear how these advantages form a political outcome. Unless the Army defines strategic success as measurable goals in terms of deterrence, control escalation, or the termination of a conflict, MDO runs the high risk of becoming a solution still searching for a problem.[4]

Administrative Restraints and Institutional Inertia

There is a misalignment between theory and practice. The MDO is still doctrinally underdeveloped and operationally untested. The Army's organisational culture is predominantly driven by decades of platform-centric procurement and service-based planning. The integrative approach of MDO encounters a bureaucratic quagmire. Outdated conventional systems like Patriot missile batteries and Abrams tanks, still dominate budgets, leaving little room for investment in cyberspace, electronic warfare, and autonomous systems.

Furthermore, the Army's personnel system, especially its talent management model, has not fully adapted to the demands of MDO. As has been remarked by LG (Retd.) David Barno and Dr Nora Bensahel[5] argue that the structure of the Army still remains conservative, prioritising conventional career paths over cultivating leaders that possess in-depth technical expertise in cyber, space and information operations.

Another aspect that further constrains MDO's trajectory is budgetary policies. The Army's modernisation must increasingly compete in a joint environment that is sliding in favour of naval and air power projections, especially in the case of the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the establishment of the Army Future Command to fast-track innovation, its integration with other services and allies remains largely uneven.

Inter-service rivalries are often the least addressed among the barriers hindering joint planning and progress. MDO assumes full integration with the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and Space Force, as well as allied militaries. However, the services continue to follow separate, uncoordinated, and parallel modernisation pathways. Without cross-institutional design tools to ensure joint synchronisations, as with the Goldwater-Nichols reforms, MDO will forever remain an Army-centred aspiration.

Scenario Disconnect: Is MDO Waging the Wrong War?

MDO appears to be tailor-made for high-end conventional conflicts against peers, particularly in the European theatres and the Indo-Pacific Region. Since, at its core, MDO is shaped by potential

confrontation with and challenges posed by peer competitors like China and Russia, it requires the United States to develop a force capable of penetrating and disintegrating layered anti-access/area-denial systems, operating across contested domains, and integrating joint and allied capabilities to achieve convergence at decisive points. Such networks- comprising integrated and disparate elements of air-defence, precision-strike, electronic warfare (EW), and the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems configuration- are predominant in the Indo-Pacific and European operational theatres. Therefore, the fundamental components of MDO- long-range precision fires, deep sensing, joint domain convergence, cyber-EW integration, and tiered decision making- are designed for major, high-tempo, high-technology, and large-scale conflict against advanced large state militaries.

In contrast, these requirements are not central to grey-zone, proxy, or irregular conflicts, where ambiguity, deniability, political signaling, and attrition- not cross-domain penetration- drive outcomes. Thus, MDO naturally aligns with peer-level, conventional scenarios and is less inherently adaptable to the low-intensity competition that dominates real-world military usage.

However, this creates a risk of over-investing in scenarios that might never materialise. Experts like T.X. Hammes[6] have shown caution against a force structure best suited for high-end warfare while being underprepared for proxy, protracted and grey zone conflicts.[7]

Furthermore, many of the technological tenets underpinning MDO, assuming resilient communications in denied environments, seamless cross-domain data integration, and uninterrupted sensor-to-shooter networks, seem out of place given the current realities of the battlefield. The basis of this assessment stems from the current Ukraine conflict, where one can observe Russian electronic warfare successfully disrupting Ukraine's ISR networks while jamming GPS, degrading drones, and interfering with precision-guided fires. The warfare demonstrated how quickly sophisticated digital networks can be routed in a contested electromagnetic environment. US government evaluations and GAO reports similarly highlight persistent vulnerabilities in American tactical networks, difficulties in maintaining secure communications under electronic attack, and incomplete joint data interoperability[8]. When peer adversaries like China and Russia possess mature capabilities explicitly designed to degrade or deceive these networks, any MDO concept that presumes information dominance, continuous connectivity, or flawless real-time data fusion risks becoming strategically brittle. If these systems cannot survive or function under high-end combat conditions, the operational logic of MDO gets weakened at its core.

What remains most worrying is the MDO mismatch with the political use of military force. When rivals operate below the threshold of a declared war, the ability to create cross-domain fires to "dilemma" the enemy is tactically constructive, but strategically useless. The Army's strategic

planner faces the question: how does MDO situate itself within the national policy objectives in the event of an imminent conflict?

Onto a Real Strategy

To implement the ambitious goals of MDO, there needs to be a major focus on the underlying theory of victory and design of the force structure to create strategies that are realistic and credible. Simply advocating political support for MDO is not enough. It is a concept that needs grounding. For MDO to work as envisaged, it needs to be incorporated into a real joint and coalition environment. This requires purposeful alignment with NATO's doctrine in Europe and close synchronisation with Indo-Pacific allies, particularly in the areas of intelligence sharing, domain awareness, secure communication networks, and combined operational fires. Without these political and military interoperabilities, MDO is destined to remain an Army-centric aspiration rather than a consolidated operational construct.

There are also parallels with the technological 'human capital' that the Army needs to invest strategically. Without leaders who think and operate in different domains, MDO will find itself with unachieved objectives. Structural redesigns will be required for flexible educational pathways and career systems. MDO should be treated with caution. It should not be treated as a simplistic justification for spending. Instead, 'spending' should come from an informed consideration of what capabilities to allocate, enhance, or eliminate.

Conclusion

At the striking age of 250, the US Army stands at a conceptual crossroads. Multi-Domain Operations offer a compelling vision for fighting and winning wars in an increasingly complex war space. However, history perpetually reminds us that without strategic clarity and institutional commitments, concepts often devolve into doctrinal mirages. For the MDO to achieve success, it must be more than a catchphrase and evolve into the Army's organising purpose. Only then can the Army remain not just operationally relevant, but also strategically decisive in its next 250 years.

Notes:

1 Huba Wass de Czege, "Commentary on 'The US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028'," *US Army War College*, April 2020, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/909/.. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

2 United States Army, United States of America, "United States Army Training and Doctrine Command Administrative Publications," October 01, 2025,https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

3 "The U.S. Army Concept for Maneuver in Multi-Domain Operations, 2028-2040," *U.S. Army Futures Command Futures and Concepts Center,* July 07, 2020, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1118627.pdf. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

4 Frank Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies,* December 2007, https://www.potomacinstitute.us/reports/19-reports/1163-conflict-in-the-21st-century-the-rise-of-hybrid-wars. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

5 David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "America is Not Prepared for a Protracted War," *War on the Rocks*, December 04, 2024, https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/america-is-not-prepared-for-a-protracted-war/. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

6 Dmitry Filipoff, "Force Structure Perspectives: Col. T.X. Hammes (ret.) on Experimenting for Adaptation," CIMSEC, October 28, 2020, https://cimsec.org/force-structure-perspectives-series-col-t-x-hammes-ret-on-experimenting-for-adaptation/.Accessed on October 30, 2025.

7 Michael C. Horowitz and Dan A. Shalmon, "The Future of War and American Military Strategy," *Orbis,* Vol.3, No. 2, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438709000106. Accessed on October 30, 2025.

8 Government Accountability Office, United States of America, "Contested Information Environment: Actions Needed to Strengthen Education and Training for DOD Leaders," 05, 2025.