Mission Assurance
Decisionmaking at the Speed of Relevance

By Ari Fisher

Thunderous was the sound of my sudden slip and fall in a tank motor pool that had become an ice-skating rink during this characteristic Polish winter. Turning around, the Army brigade commander generously attempted to soothe my embarrassment by stating he did the same thing in front of the commanding general a few days prior. On the clock to demonstrate port to fighting position posture, this rare staff officer excursion with the division deputy commanding general was to observe the brigade’s readiness. While good staff work identified desirable metrics and accounted for equipment debarked from rail cars, and subordinate command operations centers submitted daily personnel, training, and equipment readiness reports, the question remained: “When exactly is this brigade ready to fight?”

Later discussing that visit to the brigade’s motor pool, our team of staff officers realized that despite the metrics and reporting, the deputy division commander was unable to make decisions at a relevant speed. He needed to more adequately “see” his command in time and

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space. In an effort to refine understanding through daily dialogue, the brigade commander continued writing narratives to the deputy division commander. With the staff’s metrics, they not only helped visualize the command in time and space but also described what the command could do within that time and space. For example, with an assembled 50 percent aggregated strength of the maneuver battalions, 33 percent strength of organic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and 50 percent strength of the sustainment battalion, the brigade could conduct security and reconnaissance for 48 hours—east of the line of departure—not to exceed the next phase line. ISR assets are focused forward and to the south flank with increased risk to support areas in the east as well as delayed opportunity to regenerate combat power. To this brigade commander, he was always ready to fight. The only variance was relative to distance and duration. In this case, better decisions for the deputy division commander came from a valuation of the question: “What can I do right now?” He had to be able to diagnose his warfighting capacity, a function not only of what he fights with, but also how he fights.

In 2020, far from that Polish winter, on a sun-soaked hilltop overlooking Pearl Harbor, the COVID-19 pandemic had staff officers at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) asking similar questions relative to strategic warfighting readiness. After exhaustive planning groups and application of systems and processes as normal, it was clear that the combatant commander could not “see” what his command could do in time, space, or domain. More troubling, early on incubation periods of 5 to 10 days made it difficult to make decisions, allocate resources, or assume risk at a speed of relevance. As a staff, it was time to adapt. For the command’s mission assurance (MA) team, the lessons planted in a Polish winter bore fruit in a Hawaiian summer. To support decisionmaking, the concept of MA needed to become pertinent to how a combatant command executes strategic warfighting—a whole-of-command critical capability perspective. Relative to strategic warfighting, assuring warfighting performance must focus on command critical capabilities. Command critical capabilities designed for the competition continuum articulate how the command is currently fighting and will continue to fight at the simultaneous execution order of additional plans. These collectively applied actions, or the blocking and tackling of USINDOPACOM warfighting, needed
outpace the DOD ability to prioritize and deliver them in time, space, and domain. This is primarily due to the inflexible nature of the existing DCI-focused MA construct. Furthermore, this antiquated approach excludes key areas and stakeholders, beyond DCI, that can illuminate strategic critical weaknesses—accumulated emerging vulnerabilities, requirements, and applied mitigation affecting mission performance.1 Interestingly, the DOD 2012 Mission Assurance Strategy established a solid intellectual foundation.2 However, in application, the 2022 DOD MA instruction implements a model that depends on latent off-the-shelf operational plans offering only peace or war advantages.3 In fact, when reviewing what manuals and programs it incorporates and replaces, this instruction is DCI and asset protection by another name. Today’s rapidly adaptive gray zone and unrestricted warfare models render this method stale, which will invariably result in decisions and resources arriving too late. Consequently, DOD Global Security efforts must coalesce Service and combatant command proactive approaches to maintaining MA within critical defense mission areas and remodel the process by which senior leaders make risk-informed strategic decisions at the speed of relevance.4

In today’s globally integrated, competitive, joint, and multinational operating environment, the current and simultaneous execution of multiple plans demands a thorough analysis of critical capabilities, which is how we fight. This analysis must assess performance where it intersects in time, space, and domain to improve understanding and identify risk not previously revealed during the assessment of a singular plan. Unrestricted warfare, as envisioned by Qiao Liang and Wan Xiangsui, is a prime example.5 These authors describe warfare as fully inclusive, playing out in seas and contested territorial waters as well as in social, economic, and information spaces. Since a nation’s navy, coast guard, maritime militia, and state-sponsored fishing collective may only differ in degree, characteristically then, naval activity just below armed conflict in Northeast Asia manifests differently than naval and maritime cooperation in South Asia. Furthermore, global common and market integration means that what happens in one region or theater will affect another.

It is in this competitive continuum where MA can enable decisionmaking and give significance to emerging operational and strategic requirements in high demand, and DOD serves as a global integrator. As such, MA is a “whole of command” critical capability perspective, encompassing critical requirements—essential conditions, resources, and means—to enable mission execution within a given theater. Therefore, we achieve MA results from the identification, analysis, and management of risk affecting critical capabilities. This is crucial for the command to adaptively transition across the competition continuum.

**Strategic Warfighting Context**

DOD must recast mission assurance as an integral method to strategic warfighter in which the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning provides the appropriate grammar. MA can optimize leader decisionmaking to deliver risk-informed performance at the speed of relevance. Maximizing critical capability performance aims to provide and sustain resources with operational reach across the competition continuum while preventing potential culminating points to current or future military objectives. Differing from a binary peace or war offering across operational, contingency, and functional plans, the competition continuum provides an alternative logic where various states of relationships can exist concurrently within an operating environment and facilitate required civil-military dialogue. Relative to Great Power competition, critical capabilities—organized along the competition continuum—enable decisions to apply risk-informed performance at the time, space, and domain of consequence.6 Within this competition continuum, command critical capabilities dictate

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**Framing the Problem**

Outmoded mission assurance myopia, which identifies and remedies vulnerabilities complementary to Defense Critical Infrastructure (DCI), typifies a construct that is overoptimized for the things we fight with at the expense of timely decisions that affect the way in which we fight. Constrained resources’ vital role in assuring mission performance and how we fight will soon
operational need by generating critical requirements and demand obligation of limited resources from joint, interagency, and multinational partners.

**Critical Capabilities for the Competition Continuum**

The competition continuum—cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict—provides an effective frame to apply the command’s critical capabilities. Critical capabilities are a primary ability essential to the accomplishment of specified or assumed objectives.\(^6\) In practice, at USINDOPACOM, a critical capability is an action to apply essential means across the competition continuum to execute operations, activities, and investments (OAIs) and complete objectives organized along lines of effort (LOEs) to achieve regional or strategic goals.\(^7\) These actions comprise defeat, stability, or competition mechanisms as they help align military and nonmilitary activities.\(^8\)

Aligning our critical capabilities as mechanisms creates a common understanding and amplifies emerging critical requirements to the joint, interagency, and multinational (JIM) coalition by emphasizing operational impact or risk to current and future OAIs.\(^9\) Examples of critical capabilities with these mechanisms could be to:

- destroy adversary decisive points through joint forcible entry (defeat mechanism)
- create distributed power projection platforms (competition mechanism)
- preserve combat power regeneration areas (competition mechanism)
- disintegrate through lethal and non-lethal fires (defeat mechanism)
- isolate adversary command and control (C2) nodes through electromagnetic, cyber, and space effects (defeat mechanism)
- influence ally, partner, and host-nation populations (stability mechanism)
- position irregular warfare competency in adversary support areas (competition mechanism)

**Critical Requirements**

Critical requirements are frequently named “items” or “systems.” When named, these items add specificity to a general means or resource.\(^12\) As a result, specific critical requirement availability often reflects the readiness of the item performing or delivering the capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, or effects. In this setting, we commonly refer to the nomenclature of specific sensors, material handling equipment, logistics storage, communication or satellite devices, warfighting platforms, weapons systems, ordnance types, military occupational specialties, or authorities. This specificity is noteworthy when those items are synonymous with a requirement gap or are in short supply and the command must attain them instead of another combatant command to assure operational effectiveness of a critical capability. Examples of critical requirements, in italics, with their associated joint function and what the critical capability mechanisms could be, include:

- project F-35s to achieve air superiority (fires, destroy)
- protect command, control, computers, communications, intelligence with defensive cyber effects (C2, destroy)
- deploy 200 Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units of ammunition through SPOD X-Ray (sustainment, create)
- provide fuel to support air sortie regeneration (sustainment, create)
- protect air/seaport of embarkation, air/seaport of debarkation, and power projection from improvised threats (protection, create)
- establish logistics support areas (sustainment, preserve)
- employ joint electromagnetic spectrum operations activities (fires, disintegrate)
- disrupt adversary C2 with offensive space and cyber effects (C2, defeat)
- deploy medical specialists and personal protective equipment to support foreign humanitarian assistance (information, influence)
- conduct foreign internal defense (intelligence, position).

The articulation of critical requirements with their associated critical capabilities highlights the context and operational need of those capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, or effects. For example, limited or degraded Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (critical requirement) availability or readiness necessitates more of that resource or one that can deliver the same protection effect. Without it, the command is less able to preserve combat reconstitution areas (critical capability), resulting in increased risk to mission.

Joint functions provide a frame to identify command critical requirements. Joint functions group related capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, or effects to assist joint force commanders in synchronizing, integrating, and directing joint operations.\(^13\) Any discussion of incorporating critical requirements as essential means and conditions to critical capabilities must be synchronized, integrated, and directed through the joint functions. While this occurs most notably as OAIs, their derived operational impact or risk is fundamental not only to MA but also to supporting realistic and real-time commander visualization of what is possible given current and available critical capability and joint function performance.

**Critical Capability Identification**

As a doctrinal method, analysis of critical factors focuses on critical capabilities and requirements. This analysis can create a nested and shared understanding by linking the vulnerabilities of our critical requirements to critical capabilities and illuminating cross-functional strategic warfighting
risk. What results is an improved sight picture to support decisionmaking and the allocation of resources. In practice, at USINDOPACOM and across the competition continuum, a critical capability is an action applying critical requirements to complete objectives organized along LOEs and to achieve strategic goals. Accordingly, critical capability identification consists of a thorough review of the USINDOPACOM Theater Campaign Plan (TCP), the Decision Deterrence Framework, and operational plans.

The USINDOPACOM TCP articulates strategy during cooperation and competition. Four LOEs form the framing model to achieve regional campaign or strategic objectives below armed conflict. By analyzing these LOEs and their associated intermediate objectives, we can distill specific actions that are crucial to applying essential means, or those capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, and effects. They materialize as operations, activities, or investments to gain relative all domain positional advantage. Therefore, as defeat, stability, or competition mechanisms, USINDOPACOM critical capabilities contextualize OAI across an area of responsibility that spans five distinct regions and 52 percent of the globe where varying degrees of relationships exist. As a result, command critical capabilities must facilitate employment of flexible options.
The USINDOPACOM Decision Deterrence Framework delivers flexible OAI options within the cooperation and competition continuums but below armed conflict. Through analysis enabled by this framework, we can ensure critical capabilities support the exploration of deterrence options across time, space, and domain. Subsequently, these flexible options drive readiness awareness of critical requirements—those capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, or effects—that the command has or will need to win without fighting. Should deterrence fail, as defeat, stability, or competition mechanisms, USINDOPACOM critical capabilities in application permit the adaptive transition into operational plan’s LOEs to engage in armed conflict.

Operational plans articulate how we intend to engage in armed conflict with potential adversaries. Command critical capability performance from competition below armed conflict will frame—in time, space, and domain—the command’s initial warfighting potential to deliver effects. As a result, we organize command critical capabilities within the joint functions. This organization supports the synchronization and integration of OAs and supports the dialogue encompassing critical requirements as essential means and conditions to critical capabilities as crucial enablers in armed conflict. Therefore, not only in armed conflict but also across the competition continuum, the command must objectively determine critical capability performance potential or degradation.

**Critical Capability Analysis**

Critical capability analysis evaluates performance potential or degradation to support leader decisionmaking to allocate constrained resources and assume prudent risk. The command’s ability to see itself through the health of its critical capabilities hedges against adversary OAs to create or exploit vulnerabilities. Defense programs and activities (for example, antiterrorism, ballistic missile defense, and
Aggregating program readiness metrics is the principal method in evaluating critical capability performance. The joint functions contain associated missions, tasks, or processes to organize those critical requirements or essential capabilities and activities, all of which have program or activity owners. These offices of primary responsibility (OPRs) analyze through their own program measures to determine the readiness or effectiveness of capabilities, activities, assets, people, infrastructure, or effects as critical requirements. They then associate each measure to the critical capabilities they affect. While it is likely that each OPR measures its respective programs or critical requirements using differing standards, when we aggregate performance metrics across the community of interest, we will integrate those scores using a standard methodology to yield a total score. For this integration, we use CJCSM 3105.01A as our framework. As a result of this integration, we can place these OPR program metrics in context of one another, relative to a critical capability removing gaps between existing stovepiped readiness reporting methods.

Achieving a currency conversion for program measures is vital to achieving a performance score for each critical capability and joint function by region to support rapid and adaptive transitions within the competition continuum. For each program OPR, we inquire along two axes: impact and consequence. Impact is a function of assessed operational reach, bounded by distance and duration, a critical capability is performing. Consequence is the assessed probability that the OPR’s current program score will result in a culminating point. We then average these assessed probabilities and repeat the process for all five regions within the theater. Aggregation of these metrics occurs for each critical capability and then again by joint function regionally. This process results in risk-informed performance to support decisionmaking.

**Critical Capability Risk Management**

Maximizing critical capability performance aims to provide and sustain resources with operational reach while preventing potential culminating points to current or future military objectives. As a result, through analysis of risk drivers, MA risk management focuses on problem-framing, risk assessment, and risk characterization while enabling risk communication within the joint risk analysis framework.17

Problem-framing and risk assessment are a direct result of critical capability analysis and the aggregation of performance metrics. By assessing performance potential along the same probability and consequence scale, we can determine low, medium, significant, or high degree of performance degradation. Subsequently, the total performance score paired with risk to force, mission, or strategy builds an initial risk problem frame. Scores aggregating by critical capability and then again by joint function give quantitative significance to the operational need for constrained resources necessary to mitigate risk within the JIM coalition.

Risk communication occurs through the boards, bureaus, centers, cells, working group (B2C2WG) process to support decisionmaking by informing strategic estimates to improve the commander’s understanding of critical capability performance. The USINDOPACOM MA Division (J34) in the Operations Directorate (J3) serves as a joint function integrator through the MA Working Group (MAWG) to frame problems and facilitate initial risk assessment and characterization. Functionally and procedurally, this provides a shared MA community estimate as an input into other command processes and B2C2WGs. For instance, this assessment and characterization helps inform initial running estimates that the Operational Planning Group needs for the employment of critical requirements relative to the deterrence decision framework to execute OAs. In another example, this assessment and characterization helps inform the Joint Planning Group of emerging gaps or requirements ahead of transition within the competition continuum or phase of operation. This risk communication eventually elevates to the validation and steering boards for consideration as the commander makes decisions, allocates resources, or assumes residual risk. For specific actions taken to address identified risk drivers, the MAWG directly feeds the Mission Assurance Control Board, which is chaired by the command’s chief of staff who in this forum synchronizes and provides discipline across the staff. Additionally, for mitigating actions on risk drivers that come from outside the command, the chief of staff may apply emphasis and urgency up to the Joint Staff and DOD.

**Summary Recommendations**

Adversaries seeking temporary or sustained overmatch may only need to deny our ability to attain all-domain positions of advantage. As a result, the aperture for critical weaknesses is far wider and more networked than what DOD considers a DCI-critical vulnerability and spans potential cross-functional fissures that can exist between commands and Services. This is especially true in today’s all-domain strategic warfight where assuring mission performance extends across individual geographic (GCC) and functional (FCC) combatant command authorities and includes critical requirements, which may be supporting other strategic and global efforts.

Consider the Russia-Ukraine war. In the first 4 weeks of the war, the United States supplied Ukraine with approximately 4,600 Javelin antitank weapons of around 8,900 procured in a decade.18 While doing this must satisfy a near-term requirement, it must be done in context to the critical capability performance of all GCCs. For instance, how does this allocation of resources in Europe
affect USINDOPACOM’s ability to position irregular warfare competency? Furthermore, this case illuminates the challenge DOD retains in allocating resources to an active threat in Europe to the pacing of longer term challenges in the Pacific region. For example, how does subsequent funding support to Ukraine affect the Pacific Deterrence Initiative—an initiative that wants to apply more focus on fundamental critical capabilities? Therefore, DOD Global Security efforts must coalesce Service and combatant command proactive approaches to maintaining MA within critical defense mission areas and remodel the process in which senior leaders can make risk-informed strategic decisions at the speed of relevance.

Adapting USINDOPACOM’s MA concept to other combatant commands supports global security integration. This can occur by DOD directing GCCs and FCCs to identify command critical capabilities and adopting USINDOPACOM’s performance analytical model. This effort would require revision of DOD Instruction 2020.45, Mission Assurance Construct, shifting the focus from defense critical infrastructure onto critical capabilities across the competition continuum and the integration of programs and activities within context of their joint and theater warfighting application to defense critical mission areas. Nesting GCC and FCC command critical capabilities within defense mission areas enables a global visualization of the DOD strategic warfighting performance in real time, space, and domain. The added specificity and clarity will yield better global strategic risk decisions.

Remodeling our MA B2C2WG process must continue to break down silos and increase the opportunity for senior leaders to make risk-informed decisions. At the command levels, MA helps to remove stovepipes by placing different programs and activities in context with one another relative to a critical capability the command must execute with operational reach for mission success across the competition continuum. Similarly, DOD must modify existing steering groups to address critical weaknesses and vulnerabilities not only related to combatant command and Service critical capabilities but also among these commands. In today’s globally integrated environment, no command will compete below armed conflict or engage in armed conflict alone. This modification and strategic focus across GCCs and FCCs will support relevant risk dialogue at a speed that allocates critical requirements in time, space, and domain ahead of need. Currently, existing inflexible and singularly DCI-focused decision cycles that span months fail to keep pace with the increasing speed of strategic competition and only fractionally address how pacing threats view our critical weaknesses.

Shedding inflexible and outmoded practices to gain strategic flexibility requires a global MA model that identifies, analyzes, and facilitates risk management of critical capabilities crucial to strategic warfighting and adaptive transition within the competition continuum. Global security’s ability to remodel the decisionmaking process and coalesce Service and combatant command proactive approaches to maintaining mission assurance within critical defense mission areas will demonstrate MA as an integral method to strategic warfighting. This important paradigm shift, which is inclusive of strategic warfighting critical weaknesses beyond DCI, is the solution to assure mission performance with operational reach. By dually directing effort on our decisionmaking process focused on how we fight, our methods of strategic warfighting, DOD has more opportunity. Through the delivery of constrained resources enabling commands at echelon to seize initiative and retain positional advantage in an all-domain strategic warfight, not only will we keep pace, but we will also set tempo and dictate terms. JFO

Notes

9. Ibid., 12.
10. JP 5-0, IV-25.
12. Ibid., 200.
13. JP 5-0, III-1.
15. Ibid., 3-57.
16. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual, Joint Risk Analysis Methodology (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 12, 2021), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Manuals/CJCSM 3105.01A.pdf?ver=y3cH4s5UNyqJAXwxAhC5Q%3D%3D.
17. Ibid., B-2.