STUDY REGARDING THE ANALYSIS OF MOBILE DEFENSE AT THE LEVEL OF THE LAND FORCES

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ABSTRACT

From analysis of various doctrines belonging to NATO's armies, some inconsistencies can be identified regarding the use of operational procedures, one of which concerning on mobile defense. Taking into consideration the importance of this defensive task at the level of Land Forces, the study aims to clarify the principles of its use by organic tactical military structures, respectively to identify doctrinal similarities and differences, analyzing in a comparative manner different doctrines of NATO Land Forces. Also, highlighting the operation phasing the operation specific to mobile defense is more than necessary for the present study.

KEYWORDS:

Defense, mobile defense, delaying forces, fixing forces, striking forces

1. Introduction

The principles of using different capabilities during the military operations have undergone a number of changes and perhaps the most relevant aspect is the integration of nonmilitary capabilities from the increased need to correlate lethal and nonlethal effects. On the other hand, within Military of National Defense (*MoND*) this principle has a fairly wide applicability, involving all operation's levels ranging from strategic to tactical one, in various national and multinational exercises and training initiatives.

Referring to the operational approach of the Land Forces, this is in a continuous transformation, as it tries to identify some solutions regarding the engagement of the two opponent's components, respectively conventional and unconventional. Regarding the procedures of the operational approach for engaging the regular elements of the opponent, the most used are those specific to the combat operations, such as area defense, mobile defense, deliberate offense and hasty offense.

Of all these, special attention will be paid to mobile defense, justifying the fact that this is a task often used by most of the Land Forces within North Atlantic Treaty Organization (*NATO*), on the one hand, respectively the existence of some differences related to the operational use and the configuration of the employment force, on the other hand.

Also, it should not be omitted that in the context of current and future operations, the Land Forces' mobile defense needs to be supported multilevel and multidomain, involving the integration and use of a diverse range of lethal and nonlethal capabilities. Although mobile defense is justified in the context of using of an adversary's course of action (*COA*) purely conventional in nature, it may also make sense in the case of hybrid adversary's *COA*, where the probability of using regular and irregular elements is moderate. It is unlikely that the mobile defense task can be used if the opponent's *COA* has a pronounced irregular mark.

2. Methodology

The present study aims to analyze, in a comparative manner, the principles of mobile defense's applicability within Land Forces, both in national and allied (*NATO*) contexts, in order to identify doctrinal similarities and differences, as well as to highlight some solutions to solve the latter ones. Also, the research methodology is based on the study of relevant military literature but especially on the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (*SWOT*) related to mobile defense task.

3. Comparative analysis of doctrinal principles specific to mobile defense

In general, during combat operations, defensive activities/tasks are carried out "*to defeat an enemy attack, gain time, economize forces, and develop conditions favorable for offensive or stability tasks*" (ADRP 3-0, 2017, pp. 3-4). Other subsidiary purposes of defense are (ATP-3.2.1, 2009, pp. 6-1):

- diminishing the opponent's combat power;
- maintaining and preventing the opponent's access in a designated area;
- gaining time for preparing other operations;
- facilitating the concentration of other friendly forces in areas or on decisive directions;
- determining the opponent to focus on vulnerable areas or directions;
- protecting own capabilities and facilities of local population from the area of operation (*AO*).

On the other hand, defensive operation should be analyzed from the perspective of two objectives, the first consisting in maintaining the designated terrain, and the second aiming at neutralizing or destroying the opponent's forces. The latter will be used in the present study, as it is specific to mobile defense, although the first objective has an indirect applicability, transposing only on the fixing / blocking phase of mobile defense.

Related to the concept of mobile defense, it is defined by most of the Land Forces' doctrines (Table no. 1), being accepted even a common denominator in the *NATO* doctrine, of course for member states.

Table no. 1
Theoretical clarification of mobile defense

Doctrine	Definition
United States (US)	<i>“defensive operation that concentrates on the destruction or defeat the enemy through a decisive attack by a striking force” (ADP 3-90, 2019, pp. 4-3)</i>
United Kingdom (UK)	<i>defensive action “used to defeat an attack by focusing on the adversary’s forces, rather than seeking to hold ground ... combines a fixing element that denies the enemy freedom of maneuver, and an element to counter-attack” (AC 71940, 2017, pp. 8-19)</i>
NATO	<i>defensive operation in which “a fixing force denies the enemy his freedom of action while a striking force maneuvers in order to defeat him” (ATP-3.2.1, 2009, pp. 6-7)</i>

(Source: Author)

At first glance, it can be seen that there is a consensus in the conceptualization of mobile defense, the above definitions being somewhat similar. From the detailed analysis of the relevant sources, the main common elements in the theoretical approach of mobile defense are given by:

- purpose – destruction of the enemy;
- force task organization – fixing / blocking element, striking element (*Counterattack – CATK*), the latter being the one conducting the decisive;
- tactical mobility – at least equal to that of the attacking enemy;
- AO’s geometry – considerable depth that allows to attract and canalize the opponent in the engagement area (*EA*);
- structure’s level – division.

These are some common principles regarding the applicability of this defensive task. However, there are inconsistencies, the most significant being correlated with force’s task organization, respectively the level of the engagement structure.

For the first aspect generating differences, the force’s organization for conducting mobile defense, comparing the US and UK doctrines, at first sight it would seem that they are similar because both use

a fixing and striking element. However, the major difference that is perpetuated is related to the constitution and use of reserve, in the UK doctrine being the one that constitutes the striking force *“used to counter-attack”* (AC 71940, 2010, pp. 8-25), while in the US doctrine the reserve is constituted as a distinct element, having a double role, as follow: *“to support the fixing force ... exploits the success of the striking force”* (FM 3-90-1, 2013, pp. 8-3).

Regarding the structure’s level, most Land Forces doctrines agree that mobile defense can be conducted with higher tactical level structures such as division. Even so, there are some doctrines that provide the performance of mobile defense with lower level structures. An example of this is presented in SUTS2, according to which mobile defense can also be carried out by structures bellow division level, situation in which it is organized on the following phases (Larsen & Wide, 2017, pp. 3-8 – 3-9):

- gaining and maintaining the contact – identifying the enemy and confirming his COA;
- disrupting the enemy – shaping the enemy’s penetration in the EA;

- fixing – achieving the necessary conditions for the decisive operation (CATK);
- maneuvering – performing CATK by the striking force;
- transition – changing the defensive operation with the offensive one, after successful mobile defense.

Regardless of the doctrinal differences related to the mobile defense applicability, what is essential to emphasize is that it involves a mixture of delaying, defensive and offensive activities whose proper harmonization ensures the enemy's destruction.

4. Clarifications on using the task of mobile defense

To clarify the mobile defense, with regard to the specific configuration, three distinct phases can be established, each having specific role, as follows:

- delaying – it is executed by forces dedicated for this purpose, with high tactical mobility, aiming at weakening and canalizing the enemy main forces by adopting the task of defense from alternate or subsequent phase lines (PL);

- blocking – representing the second distinct phase of mobile defense, aims to diminish the offensive tempo or to stop the enemy, exploiting the terrain so as to ensure the configuration of EA defined within this task; normally, other forces are established (different from delaying and striking forces), being able to perform the area defense task for creating conditions specific to decisive operation;

- decisive striking – involves the execution of convergent CATKs by other forces (different from delaying and blocking forces) by adopting the hasty attack task to destroy the enemy in the designated EA.

Therefore, it can be understood that for the execution of the mobile defense it is necessary to nominate forces for each of the three dedicated phases, the first two having a shaping character, the last representing the decisive operation. For a better clarification of mobile defense, Table no. 2 stresses the results of SWOT analysis which will be used for follow up.

Table no. 2
SWOT analysis of mobile defense

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – high tactical mobility of forces (at least equal to the enemy to cover delaying and decisive striking); – accentuated maneuvering possibilities; – CATK forces (even the reserve) have amplified combat power; – striking forces are used at the decisive point; – high probability of using airborne elements to complete the decisive operation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – amplified dispersion of forces at the level of the three distinct phases that can be translated into a towards the opponent; – existence of a weaker second echelon during the blocking phase; – difficulty of exercising combat functions, in particular at the level of command and control (C2) and sustainment due to the dispersion of forces.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – encircling and destroying the enemy by successfully conducting convergent CATKs and using airborne forces; – adopting and developing the offense as a result of successfully convergent CATKs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – neutralizing/destroying of dispersed forces, especially those in charge with delaying phase; – impossibility to stop the enemy during the second phase of blocking; – impossibility of conducting the decisive operation due to the blocking of forces in charge with convergent CATKs.

(Source: Author)

As for the structure and nature of combat forces (CBT) that can execute the mobile defense task, it should be division level or in the most inappropriate case reinforced brigade, of course if the level of the enemy's offensive structure allows it. Exemplifying the use of a reinforced brigade at the level of the previously established phases, the distribution of CBT forces can be the following:

- delaying phase – mechanized battalion which in turn should be strengthened (usually armored company/companies) and whose tactical mobility should be at least equal to that of the enemy;
- blocking phase – at least two CBT battalions, which, benefiting from the advantage of terrain and having a developed system of natural and artificial obstacles (explosive, non-explosive), should be able to carry out all specific defensive tasks in the area defense;
- decisive striking phase – two mechanized or armored battalions able to achieve the convergence of CATKs that will eventually lead to the destruction of the enemy.

Consequently, if the operational situation allows, mobile defense can be executed with a tactical structure such as reinforced brigade that should have at least five CBT battalions in its task organization. In this situation we must take into account the fact that in the dedicated EA enemy forces captured should have the same value, because otherwise the mobile defense does not make sense.

Also, it can be chosen for using the battle groups (BGs), battalion level, formed by the mixture of CBT forces available, in which case there may be a number of implications in exercising the C2 during the execution of the operation.

Certainly, analyzing the Table no. 2, there are also a series of risks or delicate moments that commanders need to be aware of and analyze them in advance. These could be:

- *Does mobile defense make sense if the delaying PLs cannot be maintained in accordance with higher echelon's intention and concept of operations (CONOPS)?*
- *What happens if the PL of forward edge of the battle area (FEBA) cannot be maintained by organic forces?*

- *What can be done if the forces intended for CATKs do not reach on time the established PLs?*

Reactions to such operational challenges can be diversified, their quality largely depending on the combat experience of commander, staff and subordinate structures. If for the first question, the adjustment using fragmentary orders (*FRAGO*) of the times issued for maintaining intermediate PLs could be a solution to go on with the mobile defense, for the second question, a variant would be using decisive striking forces for area defense. For the last challenge, it can continue the issued CONOPS even by conducting the delayed CATKs, situation in which the value of enemy forces within EA will be significantly lower.

5. Conclusions

As presented, mobile defense, as a consecrated defensive task, has a special significance, especially in the context of combating current threats. Although there are significant approach differences, even within the national doctrines of NATO member states, there are a number of common principles related to its applicability.

Given the operational approach of the opponent, which according with recent analyzes is hybridized, most likely the Land Forces can apply the mobile defense task to counter the actions of the conventional elements from an opponent's COA

configured moderately conventional and unconventional. For other combinations of conventional and unconventional in the opponent's hybrid COAs, mobile defense should be excluded, even for those where the usage probabilities are low.

An essential factor in the success of mobile defense is given by the synchronization and coordination of all forces used during delaying, blocking and decisive striking, and in this sense some key moments are given by the change of the operation effort on battle handover line (*BHL*) from delaying force to blocking force, respectively ensuring the PLs and introducing into the battle the CATK forces to conduct the decisive operation.

On the other hand, a multidomain approach of the operation will provide Land Forces capabilities from all components of the operational environment. By correlating, integrating and synergistically directing all these various capabilities, the Land Forces' structures will be able to have a substantially amplified combat power during the progress of mobile defense.

Finally, it can be concluded that mobile defense is an essential task of NATO Land Forces' strategy to respond to various threats, both in the context of combating an adversary whose operational approach is based on using a purely conventional COA, as well as from the perspective of those which are hybridized in nature, able to integrate different conventional and unconventional elements.

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