
THE STAND-UP TABLE

Commentary, Opinion And Rebuttal

PLACE AND BETWEEN: A FUNDAMENTAL LOOK AT SUSTAINMENT CONCEPTS

Vincent J. Curtis writes...

I read the article by Major Devon Matsalla ("Practical Sustainment Concepts for the Non-Linear Battlespace," *The Canadian Army Journal*, Vol 11.2) with great interest because of two words in the title: concept and non-linear. The word "concept" caught my attention because it promised an attention to fundamentals; and the word "non-linear" because it is one of those buzzwords that have crept into the popular lexicon.

I believe that for the sake of clarity and accuracy, military theorists should refrain from using the expression "non-linear battlespace." In the first place, since the word "battlespace" refers to a three dimensional thing, the adjective proper to it is "rectilinear," not "linear" since linear refers to the quality of a line, a one dimensional thing. And since every battlespace is three dimensional these days, all battlespaces qualify as non-linear because all of them are volumes, not lines. What is probably meant by the term non-linear is "discontinuous" or "piece-wise continuous," to borrow other expressions from mathematics.

It is clear from reading Major Matsalla's piece that what he is speaking of is not a battlespace at all, which is where combat operations take place; but of a theatre, which is where military operations of all kinds take place, including sustainment. Hence, neither buzzword, non-linear nor battlespace is upon analysis applicable; and this is generally the problem when employing popular buzzwords in army doctrine.

The thrust of Major Matsella's piece is to describe how a sustainment doctrine that was developed for a theatre with a particular geometric picture in mind is applied to a theatre that has a geometric picture different in kind from that from which the doctrine was developed. This is why the word "concept" is so important, because when one is working with concepts one should ground them in fundamentals. Clearly, theatre geometry cannot be a fundamental of sustainment doctrine, because it was necessary to adapt the concepts of the original doctrine to a new geometry. Linear and non-linear should, consequently, have no place in a sustainment doctrine that is grounded in fundamentals. Instead, the fundamentals ought to be applicable unchanged to the particular theatre, and the doctrine ought to be merely elaborated to suit the peculiarities, to the accidental and temporary properties, of a particular theatre in which sustainment operations are to take place.

Permit me to offer two fundamental concepts upon which a hierarchy of sustainment doctrine can be developed. The concepts are: Place and Between. Under the category of Place, we can be put the theatre itself, the port of disembarkation, bases, support areas, delivery points, commodity points, strong points, camps, etc. In these Places, support services are performed as per normal doctrine. The communications zone and combat zone of current doctrine do not qualify as Places for they are zones, not places; and they are the product of a particular kind of theatre: one characterized by a front. Since we aim at a doctrine based upon fundamentals, concepts that are derived from accidental properties cannot be incorporated into it, except as common accidents.

Thus, the operational picture of the logistician is of a theatre with Places in it. Since the purpose of logistics is to move supplies from one Place to another, the fundamental problem of logistics can be posed as: to move a freight of a certain quality in a certain quantity from one place to another in a certain period of time.¹ Since the Places are not in physical contact with each other (i.e. they are not "contiguous"), the freight has to be moved through the Between. Some of the problems of the movement of freight in a theatre are closely associated with the Between. Pertinent qualities of the Between include the quality

of the road, the weather conditions, and the tactical situation. It is the tactical situation of the Between that differentiates standard sustainment doctrine, that is, doctrine developed with a front in mind, with the methods that Major Metsalla elaborated upon in his article.

Since logistics presently uses the terms “Administrative” and “Tactical” as contraries that span the genus of threat level, these can be applied to describe the level of protection required to move convoys through the Between. From this it follows that for a given size of convoy, the greater the need for protection the lower the carrying capacity of the convoy, for the more vehicles are required for protection the fewer are available for carrying freight. In addition, the time required to mount a tactical movement is greater than an administrative movement because more coordination and preparation is required for a tactical move than an administrative move.

Applying these fundamentals to the Afghan theatre brings out the adaptations that Major Matsalla reports in his article. A high threat level throughout the theatre obliges second and third level sustainment groups to congregate within a few tactically protected Places in order to economize the combat power needed to protect them. The tactical situation, then, requires the putting of the Places of second and third line groups in physical contact with the Places of forward second and first line groups. And since the Places are in physical contact, there is no Between. In the war in Europe, which was characterized by a front, the tactical situation away from the front was of low threat, and convoys and Places did not require much protection. Hence, it was possible to separate the theatre into a communications zone and a combat zone based upon the geometry of the theatre created by the front, and to create sustainment organizations named after that particular geometry: first, second, third, and fourth line. This suggests that organizations founded upon a particular geometry of a theatre may have to be reorganized if that particular geometry does not obtain, and that reorganization is what Major Matsalla described in his article: he expressed the new organization in terms of the old, as a mathematician would describe a new vector space using the basis vectors of the old vector space.

Major Matsalla concludes: “the current Canadian sustainment doctrine, while entirely relevant for the linear battlefield, is based upon a number of premises that are no longer applicable in a non-linear contiguous battlespace such as Afghanistan.” Neglecting the terminology, I agree with this statement and offer here a set of fundamental concepts upon which a hierarchy of sustainment doctrine can be developed which is independent of theatre geometry, or at least upon which theatre geometry is a particular variable. In addition, there is a formulation of the fundamental problem of logistics.

In establishing new doctrine may I further suggest that the writers refrain from buzzwords and metaphors since these kinds of terms are never true, and one can never be sure what the terms mean. But if one sticks with fundamentals, such as Place, Between, Time, Quality, Quantity, movement, and so on, the fundamental doctrine will apply with particular adaptations tailored to the particular situation. That which is fundamental and primary can be applied to any particular, but that which is particular can only be applied to other particulars that are like it. The discerning eye will perceive this approach as an application of the KISS² principle.

Endnotes

1. Place, Time, Quality and Quantity are fundamental categories.
 2. Keep it simple stupid.
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