Cross-Domain Concepts of the Malaya Campaign

by retired U.S. Marine Corps LTC Robert W. Lamont

History may well find January 2012 as a watershed moment in the evolution of American strategic thought. The Department of Defense planning guidance for that year signaled both a shift to the Pacific as a theater of focus and the realignment of budgetary resources needed to implement this new vision.[1,2] Supporting this top-level guidance was the release, also in January 2012, of the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) to address the challenges of emerging anti-access and area-denial capabilities along the Asian rimlands.

Following up, the Army and Marine Corps issued a joint concept paper in March 2012 dealing with gaining and maintaining access within the constructs of this new planning guidance. The fundamental theme for this new approach was the idea that cross-domain synergy would provide increased capability beyond the mere additive of combat power provided from the introduction of more units into the force mix.[3]

Domains are those dimensions of conflict, often thought of as the purview of selected services, in which opposing forces contest each other to assert their will and operational construct on their enemy to secure a desired end-state. These domains include land, maritime, air, space and cyberspace. This new approach uses advantages in one domain to offset shortfalls in another to complicate the opponent's ability to focus combat capability.

The purpose of this article is to review a historical example of how such interaction can support joint campaign objectives. While not including the domains of space and cyberspace, the Japanese opening moves of the Battle for Malaya (now Malaysia) are instructive as to the potential of this approach.

Terrain a factor

As with all military campaigns conducted ashore, terrain was a pivotal factor around which opposing strategies were formulated. During the 1920s, the British viewed the jungle-covered mountains that ran the length of Malaya as a barrier that would force any attacker to land directly on the island of Singapore.[4] However, the economic development of the Malay Peninsula's natural resources served to open routes through this barrier as rubber plantations and tin mines linked together. A road and rail network was forged down the west side

Figure 1. The British believed the terrain of neighboring Malaysia would force the Japanese to land on the island of Singapore. *(Map from **CIA World Factbook**)*

Figure 2. The British presumed that the mountains of Malaysia (current country indicated in cream color) would be a barrier to the Japanese. *(Map from **CIA World Factbook**)*

of the country that could support large-scale military movement.[5] Thus, the progressive development of the country's transportation system began to undermine a key assumption on the defense of Britain's naval base in the Far East.

Running the length of Malaya is a high mountain range that compartmentalizes the country into two parts. One of the reasons most of the cultural settlement occurred on the west side of this range was that the height of these mountains – 7,000 feet in some places – shielded the region from the monsoon rains coming in from the South China Sea.[6] The drainage requirements for this large volume of water could significantly affect any military campaign. Lateral movement out of a beachhead, and hence up or down the coast, required crossing many gaps at each point where the water reaches the sea. The Japanese had identified no less than 250 bridges that would have to be captured intact, or rebuilt, if they were to sustain a drive to Singapore.[7] This requirement would influence the organization and tactics of GEN Tomoyuki Yamashita's 25th Army, which was assigned to capture the British naval base at Singapore.

The last terrain feature that would affect the campaign, especially in the opening stages of the amphibious landings, was manmade. The Malaya-Thai border was to provide an undefended zone north of Malaya from which the Japanese could strike down the west coast.[8] If they were able to get ashore at Singora and Patani, the road network would support a converging move on the Muda River. The British also came to this conclusion and attempted to develop an opening strategy to counter Japanese plans without violating Thailand's borders prior to hostilities.

The British command viewed the neutral status of Thailand as a parallel to Belgium in Western Europe and as such drew a similar response. To retain the east flank of the Jitra position, once Japanese landings were detected at Patani, it was envisioned that Commonwealth of Nations forces would move into Thailand and secure defensible terrain. The area where the road rises off the coastal plain south of Patani was known as "the ledge" and became the objective of a spoiler operation call Matador.[9] This thrust to gain defensive terrain reveals the strategic intent of the Malayan command, which was to delay down the length of the peninsula until reinforcements could recover the battle.

The long littoral flank of the Malaya Peninsula further complicated Commonwealth deployment. The threat of a landing to the rear of troops delaying in the north forced the British to defend the length of the country. At the start of the war, the 3rd Indian Corps was assigned the north, east and center approaches. The 8th Australian Division held Johore in the south. Singapore was defended by a fortress garrison. Lastly, the 12th Indian Brigade was positioned at Port Dickson as a reserve.[10] The influence of seaborne landings prevented the British from massing their force at the expected point of contact in the north. This inherent maritime mobility is an example of cross-domain influence that complicated the landward dispositions of the defense.

Japanese tactics

Under the command of COL Toshiro Hayashi, a special Japanese staff section, later named the Taiwan Army Research Section, was established to study the requirements of tropical warfare. Analyzing geography, climate, unit structure and the diverse populations in the region, this section developed what training was necessary to prepare for the conflict and to validate campaign plans. Joint maneuvers were held, with elements of 5th Division and 5th Air Force group from Manchuria, to test deployment and communications arrangements.[11] In another field exercise, a reinforced infantry battalion landed on Hainan Island. It moved around the circumference of the island, covering 600 miles – or about the distance from Thailand to Singapore – to simulate an advance on the British naval base. The battalion destroyed and repaired bridges, practiced attacks and conducted other tests.[12]

The organization that emerged from these tests was a Japanese combined-arms force built around the infantry. Backed with artillery, tanks and an engineer element, the infantry commander had a force that could move rapidly on roads or infiltrate out to the flank along a jungle-covered route. The presence of engineer units well forward helped retain mobility when obstacles were encountered.[13] The presence of well-trained all-arms teams gave the Japanese commander tactical options his British opponent was unable to counter.

Japanese strategy sought to accomplish three objectives in conquering Singapore: first, isolate the naval base from air reinforcement via India by seizing the Kra Isthmus;[14] second, land at Singora and Patani in Thailand to secure the approaches to the maneuver corridor on the west side of the peninsula; and last, advance down the length of the country, using littoral turning movements when required to secure Singapore. The British anticipated all these events, hence the Japanese did not achieve strategic surprise. However, the speed at which the Japanese were able to operate resulted in tactical shock and provided them the initiative throughout the Malaya Campaign.[15]

Malaya Campaign

Kota Bharu is located at the northeast corner of Malaya at the end of a tenuous rail line that snakes its way across the center of the peninsula. Defending the beaches here was 8th Indian Brigade. Japan's Takumi detachment, 6,000 men of the 56th Infantry Regiment, arrived off the coast at night Dec. 8, 1941, and attempted a landing through six-foot surf. The strong current pulled the boats away from the planned landing area and scattered the assault wave into the teeth of the defenders. This was the only point at which the initial landings would encounter resistance on the ground.[16]

As daylight broke over the beaches, Hudson aircraft were able to strike the transports, scoring a hit on one and damaging several landing craft. The losses off the coast made the naval escort commander want to withdraw, but Takumi refused. As the day wore on, Japanese airpower recovered control of the sky, and troops ashore were able to expand the beachhead by infiltrating through gaps in the line. The appearance of these small bands of infiltrators behind forward beach de-

fenses led to a premature Indian withdrawal and ensured the Takumi detachment made it ashore.[17] Cross-domain success in the air provided a stabilizing influence to secure local landing operations.

In an effort to recover the situation at Kota Bharu, the overall commander in Malaya, LTG A.E. Percival, sent up reserves by rail.[18] This seemed inconsistent with the British strategic design. Dividing his limited combat power of the 3rd Indian Corps on either side of the central mountains diluted his ability to hold on to the main avenue of approach out of Thailand, but Percival must have been influenced by the reports coming out of Kota Bharu that put the size of the enemy landing there as a division.[19] This illustrates that when contact is first established, overestimation of enemy strength is common. By landing on multiple dispersed beaches, coupled with the interdiction of reconnaissance aircraft, the Japanese were able to magnify the confusion and uncertainty during initial contact.

Across the mountains, the Krohcol unit was waiting for orders to execute Matador and move up to defend the ledge. Hesitation in reacting to the Japanese landing and the slow pace of the move resulted in a loss of time that could not be regained.[20] The Japanese were able to put an infantry regiment, reinforced with tanks and artillery, ashore at Patani, and they lost no time in setting out for the ledge. In the encounter battle that followed, Japanese tanks overran the advance guard of the Krohcol unit and forced them over to the defense on ground much less suited for a stand than the ledge.[21] The tenets on which Matador had been planned were coming unhinged.

In the west, the 11th Indian Division, which had been waiting to execute Matador, crossed the Thai border about mid-afternoon. They were able to move 10 miles toward Singora and, together with two Punjabi companies, established a defensive position by dusk. An armored reconnaissance detachment from the Japanese 5th Division found these positions, and the sequence of events that followed would become a familiar scene during the Malaya Campaign. The lead tanks were stopped on the road by accurate fire from Indian anti-tank gun crews. The Japanese then dismounted and worked their way around the enemy's flanks, while mortar fire held the Punjabi companies in place. The British commander elected to withdraw to Jitra, destroying key bridges along the route.[22] Japanese tanks rapidly transitioned to pursuit and prevented the Commonwealth forces from establishing a solid defensive line.

This strategy ended the British presence in Thailand.

While operations were going poorly on the ground for the British, events at sea and in the air proved worse. Of the 110 aircraft available to the Commonwealth when war broke out, only 50 were still functional by nightfall.[23] Force Z, consisting of the *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*, put to sea under the command of ADM Sir Tom Phillips in an attempt to contest the landings at Singora and Patani. Located by the Japanese, these ships were sunk by torpedo plane attack. With their passing went any chance to counter Japanese moves afloat.[24] Thus, in the early stages of the battle, the Japanese gained control of the air and sea around Malaya. This was coupled with a strong foothold on the north end of the peninsula that provided a point of departure for the move to Singapore.

The Commonwealth move back into Malaya stopped at the Jitra and Kroh line. These positions had two fundamental weaknesses. First, they were not mutually supporting and each could be encircled and reduced at will. No plans had been made to defend these areas in-depth, and time spent on executing Matador had resulted in a lack of prepared fighting positions being dug. Second, a failure by the British to accurately reconnoiter the track from Kroh to Grik left this approach open to the Japanese 42nd Infantry Regiment. This placed the enemy in position from which to cut off the northern Malaya Peninsula and secure Port Weld in the process. The Japanese planned to use the Strait of Malacca for amphibious moves and had brought assault boats across the peninsula for this purpose.[25] The use of shore-to-shore movement was one cross-domain technique the Japanese 25th Army would use to avoid the obstacles formed by the drainage gaps that could potentially impede their advance. This littoral threat from the

Figure 3. Japanese troops mop up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

western seaward flank would further complicate British defensive planning ashore.

Jitra had a long and difficult frontage to defend. The 15th Indian Brigade held a four-mile front along the road with its right flank unsecured. Defending from the sea to 15th Indian Brigade's left flank at a distance of 12 miles was 6th Indian Brigade. This left 28th Indian Brigade in reserve under the direct control of the division commander, MG D.M. Murray-Lyon.[26]

The Japanese advanced from Singora with two regiments led by a reconnaissance battalion supported with tanks. The strength of this vanguard was able to smash the covering force near Asun and probe the length of the Jitra line. The weakness of the British east flank soon became clear, but the piecemeal commitment of the Commonwealth reserve managed to stabilize the situation. With his reserve used and the Japanese preparing to launch a set-piece assault, Murray-Lyon decided he had had enough and ordered a withdrawal that would not stop until they reached Singapore.[27]

The Japanese organization and equipment yielded a force that could react quickly. By having tanks well forward with the reconnaissance elements, they could attack directly from the line-of-march without losing time to reform. The strength with which these units could hit pushed aside all but well-prepared defenses.[28] Their infantry achieved this speed as well. Along the roads, Japanese infantry used any means at hand to retain their mobility. Bicycles were issued to each division for this purpose, but trucks, motorcycles and local transport were also drawn into service.[29] Off the roads, the Japanese retained the ability to maneuver by having their soldiers travel light – only small arms and lightweight mortars were carried; heavier supplies were moved by truck.[30] This force structure matched the tactical doctrine the Taiwan Army Research Section had outlined.

Conclusion

In summary, the influence of applying combat power across the domains of land, littoral and air allowed a Japanese force to seize and hold the initiative throughout the Malaya Campaign against a defender of equal size. The littoral threat forced the British to partition their forces across the length of the peninsula, creating opportunities for Japanese army units to mass on each defensive position in succession on the land. Japanese airpower was able to gain functional, but not absolute, control during the landings.

Success on land compelled a strong naval response to counter landings on multiple sites. Airpower in turn was able to negate forces afloat and open more maneuver options to forces ashore as the waters around the Malaya Peninsula became avenues of approach. Finally, the speed with which the land force could operate retained the strategic advantages gained prior to landing that forced the enemy to face an expanding array of tactical threats they were unable to counter on the ground.

Similarly, the U.S. Army's mounted maneuver elements provide the key forces of landpower within the context of a cross-domain campaign. The maturity of the Army Preposition Afloat force structure provides a strategically mobile hard-hitting brigade capable of being tailored to various levels of combat intensity. Its unique structure enables exploitation of speed and tempo within any joint theater of operation and thus provides the best vehicle to retain any strategic advantage gained through initial battlefield shaping, extended operational reach and exploiting opportunities across domains.

The Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) in particular, when properly reinforced, holds strong promise to provide the landpower component in many of the more austere Asian regions. The high rate of speed of the Stryker wheeled combat system, coupled with its reduced logistical demands, answers the challenge of the current JOAC to project and sustain military force. The full array of tactical capabilities resident in the SBCT organization provide the joint force commander with the means to present his opponent with a wide range of mounted and dismounted threats. This balance of a protected, mobile, combined-arms team allows the SBCT to operate over a wide range of terrain types as needed.

The Armor community has always been a strong advocate of the synergy found in combined-arms operations. It is a natural progression to extend this approach to the wider array of combat power found in the joint task force. The path ahead will demand refining both the manner in which landpower can exploit opportunities rendered by cross-domain operations and how the capabilities of ground forces can enable the success of joint forces operating in other domains.

As the modern joint force explores the complexity and interactions inherent in adding space and cyberspace domains to its operational horizon, this introduction increases need for multi-service cross-talk and communication. Operational experimentation is crucial to better understand and develop the manner in which these new combinations will allow the joint commander to exploit non-traditional defeat mechanisms. Issues of command relationships, priority of effort and operational interference and spillage compel our attention as we seek to optimize the contribution of each member of the joint task force within and beyond their respective domains. In this way, we can build on the historical lessons from the opening round of the last Pacific conflict to temper future outcome resolution in the region in a manner consistent with our national interests.

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Notes

[1] Department of Defense, ***Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defense***, Washington, DC, January 2012.
[2] Department of Defense, ***Defense Budget Priorities and Choices***, Washington, DC, January 2012.
[3] Department of Defense, ***Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)***, Washington, DC, Jan. 17, 2012.
[4] Falk, Stanley L., ***Seventy Days to Singapore***, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Willmott, H.P., ***Empires in the Balance***, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982.
[7] Ibid.
[8] McIntyre, W. David, ***The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base 1919-1942***, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979.
[9] Kirby, S. Woodburn, ***Singapore: The Chain of Disaster***, New York: Macmillan Co., 1971.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Morley, J.W., ***The Fateful Choice***, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
[12] Falk.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Willmott.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Falk.
[17] Kirby.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Willmott.
[20] Falk.
[21] Kirby.
[22] Falk.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Willmott.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Falk.

Acronym Quick-Scan

JOAC – Joint Operational Access Concept
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team