

# 'Rough-Cut CoAs' and Other Ways to Modify Military Decision-Making Process for Constrained Planning Timelines

by MAJ Gary M. Klein

Your brigade headquarters has just given your unit a tactical-operations order and told your battalion to execute in six days. The amount of time available seems adequate to conduct the military decision-making process (MDMP). However, your companies and platoons must conduct their own planning, and you need to conduct rehearsals, pre-combat checks and inspections to ensure readiness as well. For these reasons, the Army suggests a one-third, two-thirds rule whereby units use a maximum of one third of the available time for their own planning.<sup>1</sup> After reflecting on your planning timeline further, you realize you only have two days before you should issue your operations order. Suddenly, you worry that you do not have enough time to complete all the steps of MDMP.

Most leaders who have led MDMP or troop-leading procedures have experienced the tension between the desire to create the "perfect" operations order and the time available for planning. Planners can always use more time to add details, refine final products or develop branch plans. However, the reality is that planners have limited time and a duty to abide by the "one-third, two-thirds rule" (commanders use one-third of available time before mission execution for their planning, allocating the remaining two-thirds to subordinates). This rule enables their subordinate units to plan and prepare as well.

So the question then becomes: how can commanders and leaders modify MDMP to account for the time available? It is tempting to shorten the amount of time allotted to each step of MDMP; but without enough time, some steps begin to lose their value. Instead, planners should revise, rearrange or eliminate steps to save time during MDMP.

This article presents three ways to modify MDMP, and it qualitatively compares the resulting three processes along two spectrums: the amount of time required and the number of options each process creates. Finally, this article will introduce and recommend the use of "rough-cut" courses of action (CoAs) to enable the commander's involvement in the planning process and CoA development guidance.

MDMP is a planning methodology designed to help commanders and their staffs understand their assigned mission and situation, develop a CoA and create an operations order.<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1 for a schematic representation of full MDMP as per Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*.) FM 6-0 states that in a time-constrained environment, commanders may direct their staffs to conduct only those steps necessary to reach the required decisions.<sup>3</sup> It goes on to specify five time-saving techniques:

- Increasing the commander's involvement;
- Limiting the number of CoAs to develop;
- Maximizing parallel planning;
- Increasing collaborative planning; and
- Using liaison officers between echelons.<sup>4</sup>

However, it does not make any recommendations as to which steps of MDMP commanders and leaders might eliminate.

<b>Full MDMP, as per FM 6-0</b>							<b>Time:</b> Requires the most time	<b>Courses of action:</b> Generates and analyzes the most options
Receipt of mission	Mission analysis	Course of action development (CoA 1) Course of action development (CoA 2)	CoA analysis (CoA 1)	CoA analysis (CoA 2)	CoA comparison	CoA approval	Orders production	
<b>Option 1) Modified MDMP; CoA comparison/selection prior to CoA analysis</b>							Requires the second most amount of time	Generates multiple CoAs, like #1, but doesn't analyze each
Receipt of mission	Mission analysis	Course of action development (CoA 1) Course of action development (CoA 2)	CoA comparison	CoA analysis	CoA approval	Orders production		
<b>Option 2) Modified MDMP; "rough-cut" CoA comparison to enable a directed CoA</b>							Requires the third most amount of time	Generates multiple conceptual CoAs but only one complete CoA
Receipt of mission	Mission analysis	"Rough-cut" CoA 1 "Rough-cut" CoA 2	CoA comparison	Course of action (CoA) development	CoA analysis	CoA approval	Orders production	
<b>Option 3) Modified MDMP; directed CoA</b>							Requires the least time	Generates only one CoA
Receipt of mission	Mission analysis	Course of action (CoA) development	CoA analysis	CoA approval	Orders production			

Figure 1. Doctrinal, full MDMP and three modified MDMP options. The commander and staff are able to balance the desire to develop options with the amount of time required to plan by conducting CoA comparison (red block) and selecting a CoA earlier in the planning process.

### Directed CoA (Option 3)

The most common way to abbreviate MDMP is for commanders to limit the number of CoAs to develop. Along these lines, commanders sometimes direct their staff to develop a single directed CoA. A directed CoA negates the need for staffs to conduct CoA analysis on multiple CoAs and removes the requirement to conduct CoA comparison (Figure 1, Option 3). As compared to the doctrinal full MDMP, a directed CoA is one of the most effective ways to reduce the amount of time required for MDMP. However, it incurs risk by analyzing only one option. Developing a directed CoA risks constraining leaders' situational understanding and ability to adapt to unanticipated situations.

A CoA describes one understanding and visualization for how an operation might unfold based on a set of planning assumptions. Using an analogy of a traveler, a CoA represents one path for how a unit might travel from its current state to the desired endstate.<sup>5</sup> So, what happens when the unit has considered only one path, the planning assumptions prove to be incorrect and the operation does not go as planned? Having analyzed only one CoA, leaders must then change course in real-time without having explored different planning factors or alternative paths.

Developing multiple CoAs forces commanders and staffs to consider options, such as different task-organizations, priorities of support, avenues of approach, sequences of actions and ways to synchronize units. The completed operations order will necessarily prescribe one way of accomplishing the mission, but the other options considered during planning provide leaders a broader understanding of the situation and potential branch plans. If leaders must restrict themselves to developing one CoA, they can wargame critical events and areas of perceived risk to increase situational understanding and consider more options.

### Selection before analysis (Option 1)

Another way to modify MDMP is for leaders to conduct CoA comparison and selection before CoA analysis (Figure 1, Option 1). This method is similar to the British army's combat-estimate planning process, also known as the

“seven questions.” This planning process allows staffs to develop multiple CoAs but compares and selects one of them prior to CoA analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Conducting CoA comparison and selection prior to the CoA analysis reduces the amount of time required to conduct MDMP by requiring the staff to conduct CoA analysis on only one CoA. To save more time, staffs may elect to withhold developing all requisite control measures – a step required to complete the CoA – until after CoA analysis.

The risk inherent in this option is that the commander and staff discard a CoA before they are able to fully analyze it and compare the relative advantages and disadvantages of each CoA in depth.

## Rough-cut CoAs (Option 2)

Another option is for leaders to modify MDMP by developing “rough-cut” CoAs, following mission analysis to enable a directed CoA (Figure 1, Option 2). This method borrows from the U.S. Marine Corps’ planning process, which provides an option for the staff to present a rough-cut CoA brief to the commander as an informal review early in the CoA development process.<sup>7</sup> During a rough-cut CoA brief, the staff compares conceptual CoAs to enable the commander to select a single CoA early in the planning process.

Presenting rough-cut CoAs to the commander after mission analysis enables a good compromise between the amount of time required and the number of options created during planning. Rough-cut CoAs require the staff to develop and compare multiple CoAs – which is an advantage – but it does so conceptually, thereby saving time as compared to completing CoA development on multiple CoAs. This prevents the staff from spending time completing and refining CoAs that the commander would not have selected.

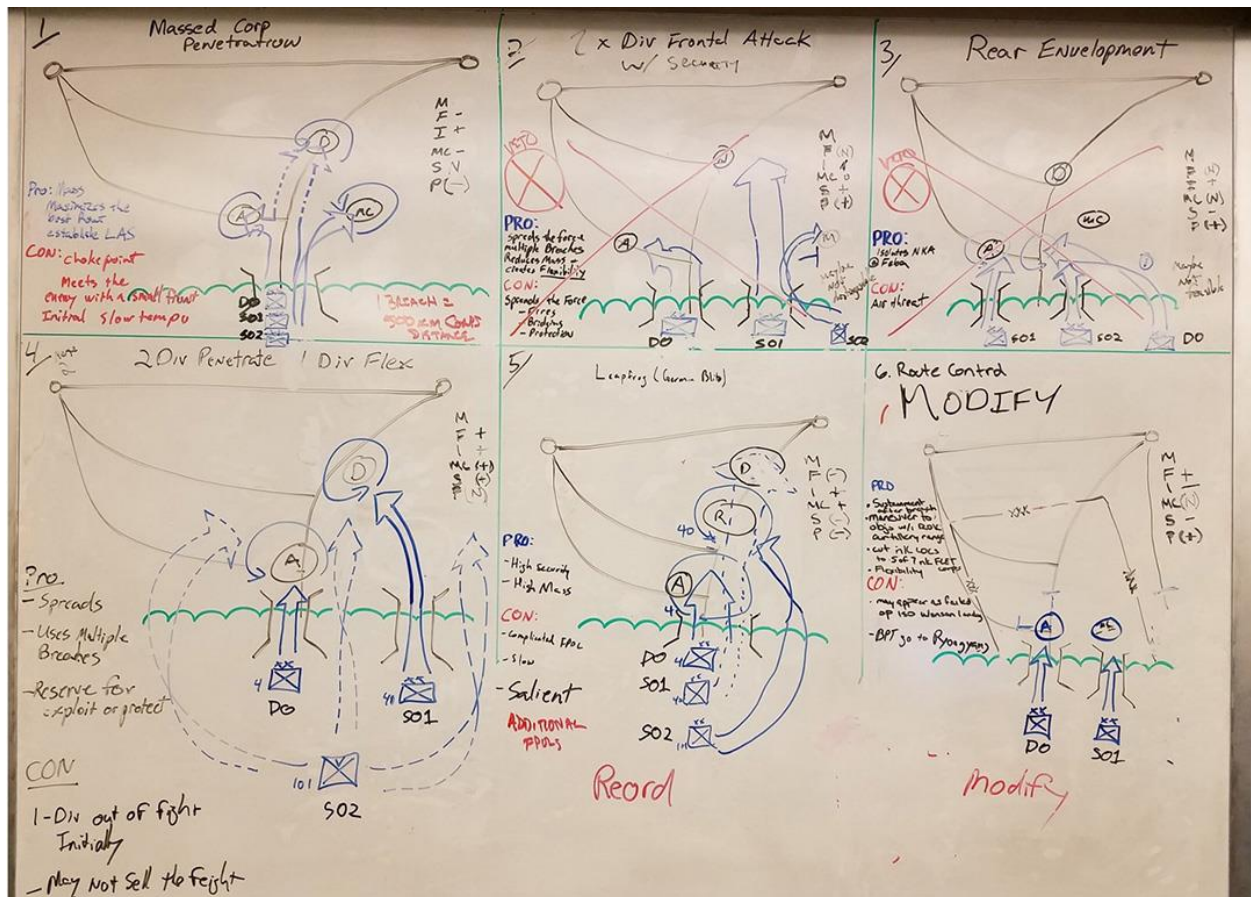


Figure 2. Rough-cut CoAs. These are whiteboard sketches of rough-cut CoAs created at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) in Spring 2018. They are noticeably unpolished, but they represent a valuable tool that

enables the commander's involvement, guidance and dialogue with the staff. For a more polished example, see Figure 3.

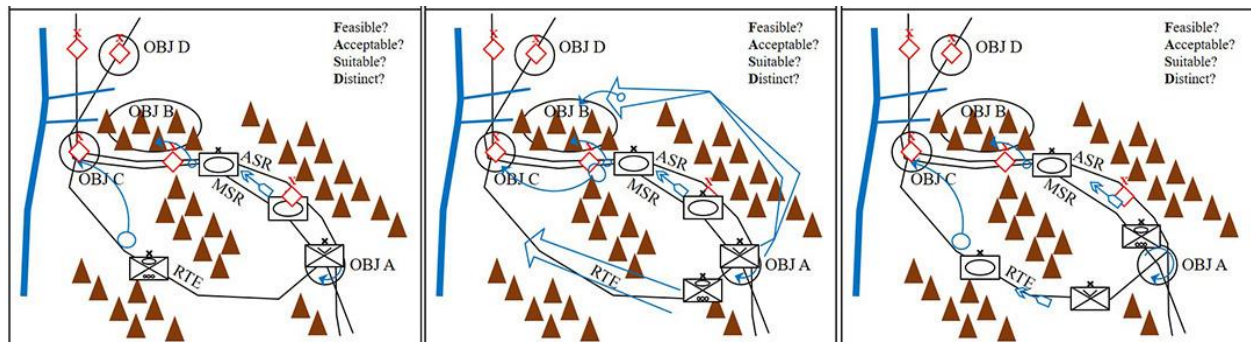
## Intro to rough-cut CoAs

Most leaders are unfamiliar with "rough-cut CoAs," so the next two paragraphs and the accompanying figures explain the concept using U.S. Marine Corps doctrine and the author's personal experience. Marine Corps doctrine does not deliberately define a rough-cut CoA, but based on the context of this term's use, a rough-cut CoA is an initial, unrefined or conceptual CoA. Presenting rough-cut CoAs enables the commander's involvement in the planning process and generates dialogue and guidance before the staff invests more time refining the CoA(s).<sup>8</sup>

Figures 2 and 3 are examples of rough-cut CoAs with a schematic representation of the terrain, templated enemy disposition, friendly units, axes of advance and tactical tasks.<sup>9</sup> These rough-cut CoAs included inputs from all warfighting functions to ensure they met four out of the five screening criteria (i.e., feasible, acceptable, suitable and distinct). These four criteria ensure the CoAs can:

- Accomplish the mission with the resources available;
- Balance risk vs. reward adequately;
- Accomplish the mission within the commander's intent; and
- Are unique from other CoAs.<sup>10</sup>

The amount of detail contained in a rough-cut CoA can vary, but Figures 2 and 3 lack enough control measures and do not have the details necessary to synchronize all warfighting functions. The staff completed those details later, after the commander selected one or more rough-cut CoA(s) for further development.



**Figure 3. Schematic rough-cut CoAs. These schematics are adapted from rough-cut CoAs developed during a 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division command-post exercise in Summer 2018. Left side: CoA 1: two up, one back, one in reserve. Center: CoA 2: one up, two back, battalion air assault. Right: CoA 3: two up, two back.**

## Conclusion

Leaders must balance the natural tension between creating the perfect operations order and the amount of time available for planning. This article presented three options for balancing these two demands and then qualitatively compared these options against two variables: the relative time required to complete MDMP and how many options (conceptual or complete) each option generated.

Full MDMP (Option 1) enables the greatest understanding and the largest number of options, but it requires the most time to complete. Options 2, 3 and 4 save more time respectively, but they do so at the increasing expense of a broader understanding and potential adaptability. Rough-cut CoAs (Option 3) balance the advantages and disadvantages of these methods and provide an outstanding tool to enable the commander's involvement in the planning process and CoA development guidance.

The three MDMP options described in this article rearranged the seven steps of MDMP to direct or enable selecting a CoA earlier in the planning process to minimize the amount of time developing and analyzing CoAs. It is important that leaders learn and understand MDMP doctrine. However, given the time-constrained environment leaders face on a daily basis, it may be even more important that leaders are able to deliberately modify these

steps to account for the planning time available. Leaders must recognize how to direct their teams to develop a plan that is good enough for the demands of their unique situation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Department of the Army, FM 6-0, **Commander and Staff Organization and Operations**, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Huba Wass de Czege, "Thinking and Acting Like an Early Explorer: Operational Art Is Not a Level of War," *Small Wars Journal*, March 14, 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/operational-art-is-not-a-level-of-war>.

<sup>6</sup> Directorate of Land Warfare, **The Staff Officer's Handbook**, Electronic Version, Warminster, UK: Land Warfare Centre, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Warfare Publication 5-10, **Marine Corps Planning Process**, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> MAJ Gary M. Klein documented these examples of "rough-cut" CoAs as a student in SAMS' Advanced Military Studies Program during academic year 2017-18 (Figure 2) and as a G-5 plans officer in 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division during Command Post Exercise 3 in Summer 2018 (Figure 3). Dr. Bruce E. Stanley and the SAMS faculty shared this planning technique.

<sup>10</sup> Department of the Army, FM 6-0.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**CoA** – course of action

**FM** – field manual

**MCCC** – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

**MDMP** – military decision-making process

**SAMS** – School of Advanced Military Studies