

Supporting the Future Close Combat Force at Night

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As the Army begins to modernize its “tip of the spear” focused on the close combat force made up primarily of infantry, cavalry scouts, and combat engineers, it can’t afford to lose focus on others who make the fight possible. Critical enablers to the close combat force are those in the combat support branches who ensure that Soldiers closing with and destroying the enemy have the ammunition, food, water, and fuel to sustain long duration combat. To ensure sustainment, those combat support forces must keep up with the close combat force and move to them when support is needed.

The Army is modernizing with the goal in mind of being able to defeat a near-peer adversary in direct conflict. What that doesn’t necessarily mean is counterinsurgency fights like the U.S. has been involved in over the last nearly two decades. It also does not mean proxy state conflicts, such as that which we have seen in Syria over the last nine years. The fight the Army is preparing for is direct conflict with another global military power, where dominance in any of the domains of warfare (land, sea, air, space, or cyber) is not guaranteed and can change at any moment. For most American service members, it is a daunting thought to imagine a battlefield where they are not assured that enemy aircraft, maybe even drones, will not be flying over at any time with a precision strike capability.

How does a night-vision or low-visibility capability fix these strategic challenges the U.S. is preparing to face? Holistically, it doesn’t, but it is a key piece of the puzzle to ensure mobility on the battlefield. The Army is focusing its resources to modernize its close combat force so it can operate semi-autonomously, in highly contested domains, and in a very fast-paced and constantly changing environment. The mobility of those formations that are in the thick of the fight is instrumental to maintaining the initiative. However, that initiative can only remain as long as those formations have the ammunition, food, water, and fuel to fight.

To ensure that close combat forces are resourced to continue the fight beyond short durations, they need assured access to combat support elements. This happens largely in two ways: Close combat forces move back to a major base of operations for resupply and refit, or combat support elements move to them. In the next conflict, we could face a near-peer professional adversary, lack our accustomed air dominance, and face the challenge of enemy extended-range artillery. In this type of fight, our major bases of operations become prime targets to cripple the force. That’s when mobility becomes essential among combat support elements and more specifically the capability to keep pace with the close combat forces.



The Army is laying out the plan to ensure that those forces in direct support of close combat forces can keep pace with the elements they are supporting through an Army Night-Vision Goggle Modernization Strategy. The Army identified those roles that are directly responsible for the successful sustainment of the close combat force. By considering the required capability of these roles rather than broad formations, the Army can ensure those who require particular capabilities have them and additionally reduce cost by leveraging legacy capabilities across the remainder of the force.

Some may argue that giving support elements increased capability for night vision is wasteful considering that these elements have been operating for decades with their current level of capability. Night vision is never mentioned as a stumbling block of the last 20 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, so why do we suddenly need to change our way of business? The answer lies in projecting an operational environment where the U.S. Army faces a threat we haven't seen in nearly 80 years, a threat that is our peer or comparable in defense spending and capability across all potential domains of warfare. We can no longer place combat support elements in large-scale footprints scattered throughout the battlefield. The adversaries we are modernizing to fight against have extended range indirect fires, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance and direct-strike capability, and perhaps the scariest thought of all for ground forces — loss of air superiority.

Combat support elements directly supporting those who close with and destroy the enemy need to maintain flexibility and mobility to ensure support; the ability to move at night is critical to that goal. Without that support, all of the modernization focus on close combat forces becomes relatively inert after about 72 hours, when they run out of ammunition, food, water, and fuel. To ensure sustainment, those combat support forces have to be able to keep up with the close combat forces and move to them when support is needed. Legacy night-vision capabilities just won't cut it anymore to support the close fight, but — good news — there are other options on the horizon.

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