

Restoring Offensive Maneuver

During a Reconnaissance Strike Complex Duel

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As military practitioners and policy makers alike continue to watch the war in Ukraine and ground war in Gaza, one cannot help but marvel at the reversion to clearly drawn lines on the map demarking one side from another. The assumed fluidity of the modern battlefield has reverted to World War I-style trench complexes and obstacle belts. Well-designed elastic defenses, supported by dynamic precision fires, punish fervent appeals to the offense. Instead of offensive maneuver, war (in Ukraine at least) has devolved into a duel of the opposing forces' reconnaissance strike complexes more indicative of a conflict of attrition than one of decisive battle. This can leave the military thinker in an uncomfortable place wondering: "How does one restore freedom of offensive maneuver in the stasis created by a reconnaissance strike complex duel?" This article proposes a mental model to do so.

First, because the reconnaissance strike complex does not exist in U.S. Army doctrine, it is important to clearly define it. In Soviet (later Russian), as well as British doctrine, the "reconnaissance strike complex" is one-half of the twin concept that comprises the "reconnaissance fire system." The second half is the "reconnaissance fire complex." While forces execute the reconnaissance fire complex at tactical echelons employing tactical artillery, the reconnaissance strike complex resides at operational and strategic echelons employing coordinated targeting of real-time intelligence prosecuted by high-precision, long-range weapons. The Soviet Union developed, then matured, this system now employed by Russia, to detect and destroy high-value targets in near-real time.¹ The current state of the reconnaissance fire system in Europe has shown that adversaries' strike complex capabilities have exceeded each other's fire complex capabil-



Above, Ukrainian soldiers with the 56th Mariupol Motorized Brigade conduct operations in December 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine via Wikimedia Commons)

ities. The resultant stalemate has spurred the search for a potential skeleton key from military theorists and the global military industrial complex alike. Various responses include organizations developed to organically conduct the reconnaissance strike complex mission (i.e., the UK's 1st Deep Recce Strike Brigade Combat Team); rapidly matured drone technology to conduct reconnaissance across the land, sea, and air domains; and intelligence systems supported by artificial intelligence to reduce the time required to transform data into targetable intelligence. Unfortunately, the only doctrinal solutions brought to bear on the problem return to the old soldiers' adage of "dig hard and dig often."²

Before you can break the stalemate present in the reconnaissance strike complex duel, you must first accept the stalemate exists. This is hard for military thinkers. Forces justifiably scorn and shun attrition. The dynamism of a Moltke-ian double envelopment or a Schwarzkopf-ian *Left Hook* are the standard. The grinding of the Somme or Bakhmut are not. But the reality of the current situation in Ukraine is inescapable. If you are in an attritional fight, own that fact — fight the enemy, not the plan. Or, to use a sports metaphor, "take what the defense is giving you," even if it is not what you would prefer or are best at.

What follows is a way for commanders and military thinkers to own their understanding of the current fight and, if patient, wear down the enemy in an efficient and effective manner to then restore freedom of offensive maneuver. The process is as follows:

- Be resourced and empowered to conduct offensive maneuver;
- Finish the reconnaissance strike complex duel (fighting it is unavoidable);
- Continually assess and reassess the duel to then...
- Identify and exploit discrete opportunities of localized superiority, nested within the overarching operational concept.

Friendly forces must be resourced and empowered at the strategic/operational/tactical echelons to execute offensive operations. They need to have or generate the resources, guidance, morale, and popular/political support to begin to resolve the reconnaissance strike complex duel. This also requires building strategic and whole of government depth that can absorb necessary resource losses/employment and regenerate combat power.

Next is to finish the reconnaissance strike duel (finish the fight). Executing the fight is unavoidable given the context of the current operational environment as well as the relative parity of adversaries. Resolution will come through degradation of enemy reconnaissance strike capabilities while protecting and preserving friendly reconnaissance strike capabilities. Winning (even if temporary) can occur in one of two ways:

- The first is through brute force overmatch, a technique characterized by massed and overwhelming effects to achieve results. Adversaries are more likely to employ brute force as it is unpalatable to western nations and militaries.
- The second technique is through dynamic time-sensitive targeting of discrete elements of the enemy's sensor-shooter linkage, through a period of convergence provided by echelons-above-brigade assets, to sever or slow the linkage such that the friendly sensor-shooter linkage is both faster, more accurate, and more dynamic.

The three components of the reconnaissance strike complex are the sensors, the command and control (C2) architecture linkages, and the strike assets. Forces must target all three components of the enemy's complex while preserving all three components of our own complex.

- Forces can target enemy capabilities through a combination of aggressive counter-recon at echelon, electronic warfare/cyber/space/information operations to spoof or disrupt their ability to communicate, and deliberate targeting of strike assets and counter-battery fires. Outright defeat may not be possible, but simply slowing the enemy reconnaissance strike complex such that the plurality of their strikes land late or harmlessly in the wrong locations is sufficient.

- Degradation of the enemy's reconnaissance strike complex occurs while actively increasing the surviv-

ability of friendly capabilities; this can be achieved through combining deception, dispersal at echelon (strategic/operational/tactical), signature discipline, passive/active counter-unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS), and deliberate planning on how to rapidly seize upon offensive maneuver opportunities.

Forces must determine if they have met measures of effectiveness (MOE) and measures of performance (MOP) goals by conducting continuous assessment of the effects of the duel (data of the battle, to information, to further refinements, to prior established win-conditions). The desire is to identify enemy weakness that may indicate areas of localized defeat. The lengthy continuous assessment process will require patience to execute as enemy capabilities are attrited.

Finally, identify and exploit areas of localized superiority to allow a modicum of offensive freedom of maneuver. This may not occur where desired but at a location pursuant to where the enemy has assumed risk. These fleeting opportunities are likely to be acute, discrete, and limited, but with continued exploitation they can accumulate over time and result in the regaining of the initiative and thus the return of offensive freedom of maneuver.

Risk is inherent throughout this process. Every individual targeting and protection decision is a deliberate assumption of risk the commander must make. A commander must also assume risk on the level of degradation desired of the enemy capabilities knowing complete defeat is impossible. Additionally, a commander must assume tactical and operational risk when identifying and exploiting areas of perceived localized superiority.

To paraphrase the meme, “you may not be interested in attrition, but attrition is interested in you.” Doctrinal wish casting will not solve the current military problem set in Ukraine or Israel. Assertions of “if only they achieved wider convergence” or “more closely adhered to aggressive offensive doctrine” they would restore offensive freedom of maneuver are farcical. In November 2023, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, then-commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, made this abundantly clear in his article “Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win in It.”³ In it, General Zaluzhnyi articulated his struggle to accumulate the resources to break free from the reconnaissance strike complex duel in the Ukrainian operational environment. Lack of air superiority, the inability to reduce mine barriers in depth, ineffective counter-battery (or not effective enough), insufficient personnel reserves, and a limited quantity of electronic warfare capabilities prevented him from arraying his forces to finish the duel. When a military is only empowered or resourced to find a skeleton key that facilitates winning a positional conflict, the resultant stalemate is unavoidable.

The modern battlefield is incredibly congested, and congestion breeds a slog akin to the battlefield of 1917 where forces are scraping for inches, not miles. Forces will achieve success through intellectually accepting the situation and orienting their military thinking around acute, patient, and discrete thrusts when the conditions properly align. Or, as General Zaluzhnyi observed, “the need to avoid transitioning from a positional form to a manoeuvrable one necessitates searching for new and non-trivial approaches to break military parity with the enemy.”

Notes

¹ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “The Russian Reconnaissance Fire Complex Comes of Age,” The University of Oxford Changing Character of War Centre, May 2018, 1, <https://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk/blog/2018/5/30/the-russian-reconnaissance-fire-complex-comes-of-age>.

² Richard Barrons, “Dig or Die: Trench Warfare in the 21st Century,” Universal Defence and Security Solutions, 6 February 2023, <https://www.universal-defence.com/blog/dig-or-die-trench-warfare-in-the-21st-century>.

³ General Valery Zaluzhnyi, “The Commander-In-Chief of Ukraine’s Armed Forces on How to Win the War,” *The Economist*, 1 November 2023, <https://www-economist-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/by-invitation/2023/11/01/the-commander-in-chief-of-ukraines-armed-forces-on-how-to-win-the-war>.

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