

“Battle without a *Main Effort* is like a man without character.”

—Von Hindenburg

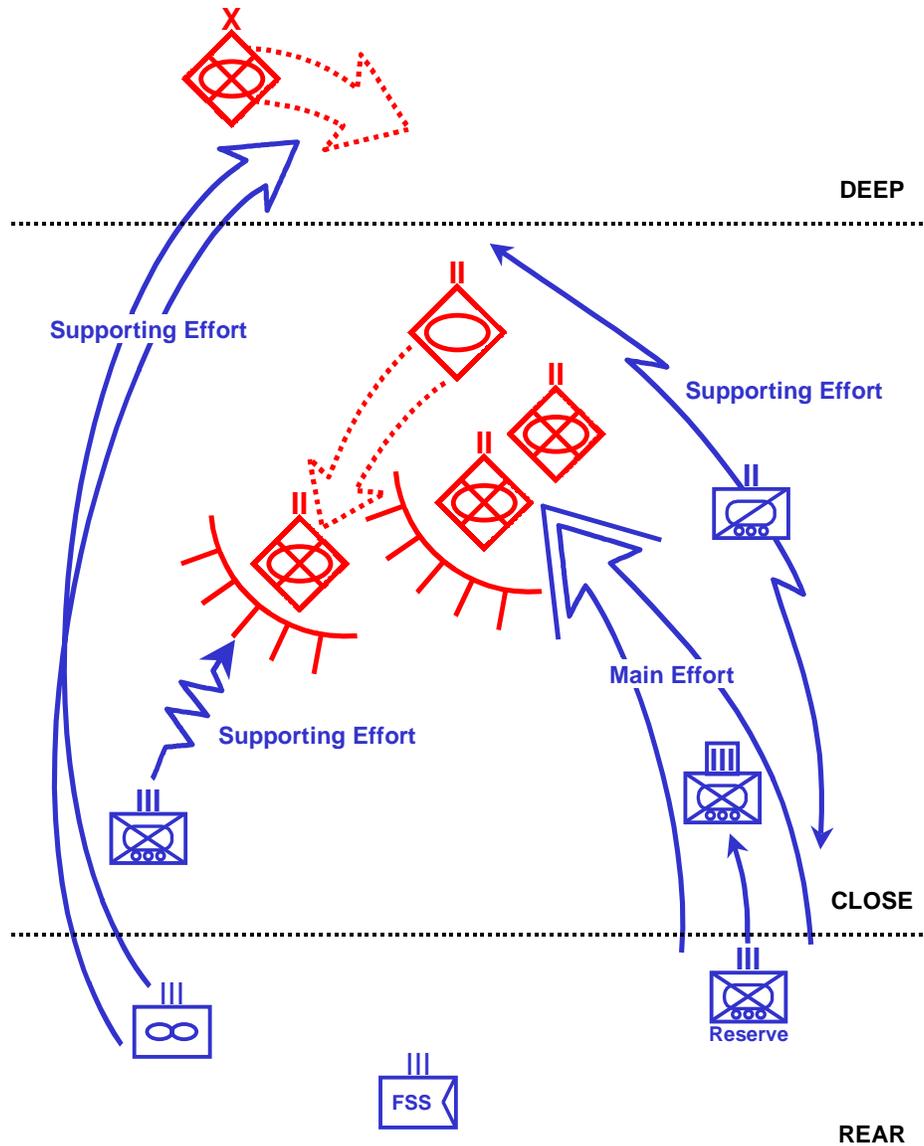
The main effort is a central concept of maneuver warfare. The main effort is that unit with which the commander plans to conduct the decisive action. It is the commander’s bid for success. Supporting efforts are actions by the rest of the command to help shape the battlespace to set the conditions for the main effort’s decisive action. Normally, there are multiple supporting efforts to the single main effort.

Observations by the MSTP during past exercises indicate that commanders and staffs experience problems planning for and using main and supporting efforts in operations. These difficulties include multiple rapid shifts of the main effort without regard for achieving a decision, subordinate commanders who do not understand their roles (either as a main or supporting effort) in achieving a decision, and a failure to properly weight the main effort for success. Commanders have not effectively conveyed—through their operational design—what they want their main and supporting efforts to accomplish. Commanders have been unable to link the enemy’s center of gravity and critical vulnerabilities and his own envisioned decisive action and desired effects with the main and supporting effort. These problems have resulted in failure to maximize combat power and focus subordinate initiative. The purpose of this article is to assist the commander and his staff in planning and employing main and supporting efforts to achieve a decision.

The main effort is the tangible expression of the commander’s vision of decisive action and a critical tool in achieving unity of effort. In the chaos of battle, the main effort is the commander’s bid for success. The main effort is a subordinate *unit* identified and tasked to conduct the commander’s decisive action. As such, this unit must be selected, supported, and reinforced accordingly. A unit from any element of the Marine air-ground task force may be designated as the main effort, such as the combat service support element during deployment, or the aviation combat element conducting deep operations.

The commander provides the bulk of his combat power or other assets to the main effort to maintain momentum and ensure mission accomplishment. The commander may do this in several different ways. He may task-organize the main effort, give the main effort priority of various types of support, or even narrow the main effort’s zone of action or area of operations (AO). All of these increase or focus the relative combat power of the main effort.

Supporting efforts complement the main effort. Supporting efforts are conducted for the sole purpose of ensuring success of the main effort. Conversely, commanders of supporting efforts should avoid any actions that do not contribute to success of the main effort. Like the commander’s intent, the main effort and supporting efforts become harmonizing forces for subordinate’s initiative. Commanders of the supporting efforts must clearly understand the commander’s envisioned decisive action to seek ways to support the main effort. Since there will often be more than one supporting effort, the commander must synchronize actions carefully so that they produce a synergistic effect for the main effort. These actions might include a feint to deceive the enemy as to the location of the main effort’s attack or a fixing attack to tie up enemy forces and prevent them from reinforcing against the main effort’s decisive attack. (See Figure 1.)



On order the division attacks in zone to defeat the first echelon. **Close Operations**—In the west a *mechanized regiment* conducts a supporting attack to fix the forward mechanized battalion and cause the commitment of the enemy reserve armor battalion. To support this attack our deception effort will focus on portraying this supporting attack as our main effort. Upon the commitment of the enemy reserve, our **main effort, consisting of a mechanized regimental task force, conducts a flanking attack through the gap between the two defending mechanized infantry battalions and defeats the enemy armor battalion.** Fires will disrupt any movement of the two mechanized enemy battalions and the enemy divisions command and control. The reserve is a mechanized regiment that follows the main effort and is prepared to defeat a flank counterattack from either enemy mechanized infantry battalion. If not committed against the two mechanized battalions, it will be prepared to block the enemy reserve mechanized brigade. **Deep Operations**—The MAG limits the reserve mechanized infantry brigade from reinforcing the first echelon. **Rear Operations**—A mobile combat service support detachment is prepared to follow the main effort and conduct refuel on the move to maintain operational momentum. **Security**—A light armored reconnaissance battalion screens the main effort's eastern flank.

NOTE: Main effort is denoted in ***bold, italicized*** text. Supporting efforts are denoted in *italicized* text.

Figure 1. Main and supporting efforts.

## Weighting the Main Effort

At the conceptual level, weighting the main effort is guided by the reciprocal principles of mass and economy of force. Emerging Marine Corps doctrine (MCDP 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*) states that to mass is to “concentrate the effects of combat power at the decisive place and time to achieve decisive results” while economy of force requires allocating “minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts.” The decision to mass requires strict economy of force and acceptance of prudent risk in selected areas. As past exercises have shown, over-simplified attempts to weight the main effort often mean attaching or prioritizing all available support to that unit at the expense of all other efforts. Conversely, indecision in weighting the main effort results in “spread loading” assets thinly throughout the force. To paraphrase Frederick the Great, when you try to be strong everywhere—you are strong nowhere.

When weighting the main effort the commander begins by selecting the basic type unit—based on the factors of METT-T<sup>1</sup>—that is most capable of accomplishing the mission. He then determines what additional assets are required to accomplish the mission and task-organizes the unit to enhance its effectiveness. Next he provides priority of support of appropriate capabilities, resources, and assets, such as air support, transportation and mobility assets, critical supplies (fuel and ammunition), and specialized units (civil affairs or psychological operations). Finally, the commander may adjust the unit’s zone of action or AO to increase the main effort’s superiority in relative combat power.

## Warfighting Functions

The warfighting functions are not prescriptive steps or actions, but useful aids in producing comprehensive plans. The commander and his staff use the warfighting functions to integrate the planning effort and supervise execution of the plan. This integrated planning allows the commander and his staff to synchronize the actions of the main and supporting effort. By using the six warfighting functions, commanders and their staffs can link the principles of mass and economy of force with the decisive action and the tasking and weighting of the main and supporting efforts.

**Command and Control.** Command and control is the exercise of authority and direction over assigned or attached forces in the accomplishment of a mission. The two elements of command are leadership and decisionmaking. In assigning a unit as the main effort the strength and experience of its leaders must be considered. Command remains a very personal function and the trust between a commander and his subordinate commander may be a critical factor in assigning the main effort. A commander’s competence, personality, and will represent a significant part of a unit’s combat power.

Control is inherent in command, it allows the staff to synchronize, coordinate, monitor the unit’s status, and make adjustments in accordance with the commander’s intent. Clearly, the ability, and professional competence of the staff is also a critical factor in assigning the main effort. Support to the staff’s control function such as personnel assignments, command and control systems, and communications equipment and architecture must be allocated to the main effort.

**Maneuver.** To move forces to gain an advantage over the enemy, the commander normally gives the main effort priority of various types of support, and it is also provided with the greatest mobility. However, overburdening the main effort with unnecessary assets can degrade its ability to move rapidly and decisively. Transportation and mobility assets such as heavy equipment transporters, assault support helicopters, bridging, and obstacle clearing engineer support may either be attached to the main effort or tasked to support the main effort.

**Fires.** Maneuver is rarely effective without firepower. Fire support assets may be attached to the main effort, however these assets can overburden the command and control, sustainment and mobility of the main effort. Normally, fire support to the main effort is provided by assigning priority of various

supporting arms (attack aviation, artillery, naval surface fire support). The targeting process ensures that fires—the lethal and non-lethal effects of weapons—are applied against high pay-off targets—those assets whose loss to the enemy is critical to the success of the friendly scheme of maneuver.

**Intelligence.** To allow for timely and accurate decisionmaking, the main effort must be supported with the appropriate intelligence support. This support may include focused intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) products, decision support tools, and a collection plan to support the intelligence requirements of the main effort.

**Logistics.** At the tactical level sufficient combat service support must be provided to preclude the main effort from reaching a premature culminating point. This support might include task-organized units like mobile combat service support elements, or priority of critical supplies like fuel and ammunition, and exchange or rapid repair of essential equipment. Because of their role in creating conditions for the main effort's success, the supporting efforts must also be sustained, but in cases where resources are limited, the main effort must take priority.

**Force Protection.** The ability of the main effort to maneuver and fire often prove ineffective without force protection to preserve combat power. While force protection does not imply over-cautiousness, all measures must be taken to protect the main effort's combat potential for use in the decisive action. Since risk is an inherent condition of war, risk assessment during planning can contribute to identifying and mitigating the risks to the main effort. Force protection may involve assigning specialized assets such as air defense to support the main effort, and may also include tasks or missions assigned to supporting efforts. For example: a unit tasked to screen the flank of the main effort provides force protection by preventing enemy ground observation and direct fire against the main effort.

## **Shifting the Main Effort**

While a commander always designates a main effort, it may shift—either planned or unplanned—during the course of a battle as events unfold. Preplanned shifting of the main effort without clear articulation of anticipated conditions or opportunities that can be exploited should be avoided as there are costs associated with shifting the main effort. These costs include time and effort required to shift resources and priority of support (fires, supply, transportation, medical, engineering). The larger the organization, the more costly this shift may be.

Although shifting the main effort may appear simple “on paper”, Marine expeditionary force exercises have shown that the reality of shifting the main effort is quite complex. Examples of difficulties involved in shifting the main effort include:

- Time required to move transportation assets.
- Failure to articulate the shift to all units in a timely manner (largely because the conditions for the shift were not clearly defined in planning).
- Unresponsive fire support due to displacing indirect fire assets and improperly armed aviation assets.

The commander must weigh the benefits and risks in shifting the main effort and should only shift the main effort when he is convinced this will lead to decisive action.

Unexpected success by a supporting effort during execution may result in the re-designation of that supporting effort as the main effort. For example, a supporting effort tasked with conducting a feint might find that the enemy unit they were attempting to deceive had withdrawn. This withdrawal may have, in turn, exposed the flank of the enemy unit against which the main effort was directed. In this case, the exposed flank is clearly an opportunity that can be exploited by re-designating the supporting effort as the

main effort and allowing them to conduct a decisive flanking attack against the enemy. Commanders of supporting efforts must be prepared to assume the role of main effort as the situation changes as a result of emerging opportunities or unforeseen setbacks. In general, when shifting the main effort, we seek to exploit success rather than reinforce failure.

### **Use of the Reserve**

When task-organizing the force, the commander must remember that the reserve may be tasked to support the main effort and often will become the main effort. Therefore, it is important that the reserve not be assigned nonessential tasks that might impede its ability to respond rapidly to exploit opportunities created by the main effort or to reinforce the main effort at the decisive time and place.

### **Orders Development**

MCWP 5-1, *The Marine Corp Planning Process*, clearly states that the operations order is “a written or oral communication” of “the commander’s intent, guidance and decisions in a clear, useful form that is easily understood by those executing the order.” The main and supporting efforts are included in paragraph 3 (Execution), sub-paragraph a. (Concept of Operations) and again in sub-paragraph b. (Tasks). These paragraphs should reflect the commander’s operational design—particularly the link between the enemy’s center of gravity and critical vulnerabilities and his own envisioned decisive action and desired effects with the main and supporting effort. Clearly expressing the concept of employment of the main and supporting efforts in the order helps to ensure unity of effort and the success of the operation.

### **Conclusion**

The decision to assign a unit as the main effort must be made with great care, as it is this unit that will achieve a decision. The operation in turn must be designed so that the success of the main effort ensures the success of the entire mission. The concept of employment of the main and supporting efforts must reflect the commander’s operational design and be effectively communicated to his subordinate units.

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<sup>1</sup> Mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, and time available.