

MCDP 8, Information

A new Marine Corps doctrine for the information warfighting function

by Mr. Eric X. Schaner

The Marine Corps is on the cusp of publishing a new doctrine. When Gen Berger, 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, signs *MCDP 8, Information*, it will become the Marine Corps' first doctrine to describe information as a warfighting function. Publishing *MCDP 8* will mark a significant milestone of a multi-year Marine Corps effort to understand what it means to have an information warfighting function. It will also mark a starting point for Marines to understand the role of information on every point of the competition continuum and to more effectively plan and conduct operations in any warfighting domain to create and exploit information-based advantages.

The goal of *MCDP 8* is to describe the purpose and mechanics of the information warfighting function and to make it understandable and accessible to all Marines for use in any situation. Applying its lessons will effectively resolve the information afterthought problem that has plagued staffs throughout the years. By making information a warfighting function, we make information the commander's business. From any warfighting domain, commanders can apply the information warfighting function to create and exploit a multitude of advantages and achieve objectives. The purpose of this article is to briefly highlight the path leading to *MCDP 8* and then summarize the main ideas and concepts contained within the draft doctrine.

The Path to *MCDP 8, Information*

The path to publishing *MCDP 8* began on 15 September 2017. This is the date when Secretary of Defense James Mattis signed a memo endorsing the establishment of the information joint function. Just two months prior to the

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Secretary's memo, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an out-of-cycle change to *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*, introducing information as a new, seventh joint function.¹ Around this same time, the Marine Corps was already deep into thinking about and debating the subject of information and related concepts, terms, and organizational change requirements.

By August 2018, several new information-related concepts had been published and new organizations were stood up to include the MEF Information Group and the Deputy Commandant for Information (DC I). To continue advancing the Marine Corps' thinking and to align with the joint force, Gen Neller, 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, signed a *Marine Corps Bulletin 5400* in January 2019 to formally establish information as the Marine Corps' seventh warfighting function. Then, in May 2020, Gen Berger formally tasked the DC I to assemble a small writing team to develop *MCDP 8*. The new doctrine is nearing its final draft.

Information Explained

In conducting the research for the draft doctrine, the DC I team observed that the subject of information is very broad and applicable to many disciplines and fields. There is no one single correct definition or description of the word information. To set the context for a focused purpose and scope, *MCDP 8*

acknowledges and explains the various ways in which the word information is commonly used. This includes information as it relates to intelligence, command and control (C2), situational understanding, fires and maneuver, decision making, and all forms of human and machine behavior.

Furthermore, the draft doctrine discusses that information is fundamental to the functioning of all societies, governments, and organizations. It also discusses information as an instrument of power, employed in concert with the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments to influence strategic outcomes, impose our will, or achieve other policy goals. The main point is the word information can convey different meanings depending on its use. *MCDP 8* devotes a considerable amount of text to explaining these different uses and to draw the reader into the publication's focus on information as a warfighting function.

Why Information?

Feedback received during an early staffing of the *MCDP 8* included a recommendation to start with the question of why. Why do we need an information function? This caused the DC I team to examine how America's rivals approach information as a primary element of competition and war. In our research, we concluded that information is central to our rivals' way of thinking and fighting—and it must therefore be a focus of ours. The U.S. and joint force are challenged in the strategic environment by rivals who effectively use information to gain a relative advantage. Marines should never assume they have an information advantage. The Marine Corps, as part of the joint force, supports U.S. policy goals by creating and exploiting information advantages in

all warfighting domains and the electromagnetic spectrum. This involves taking defensive and offensive actions to protect vital information, influence or compel decision makers, or use information to increase or preserve combat power effectiveness when necessary.

MCDP 8 explains that through the information warfighting function, Marines gain the ability to leverage the power of information to influence the decision making, behavior, function, and will of others, or steer the course of events in any military situation—including combat situations—by creating and exploiting information advantages. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, states: “*The essence of maneuver is taking action to generate and exploit some kind of advantage over the enemy as a means of accomplishing our objectives as effectively as possible.*”² *MCDP 8* draws from *MCDP 1* to explain the concept of creating and exploiting information advantages as a primary means of accomplishing our objectives and imposing our will.

How Do Rivals Approach Information?

Based on the feedback noted above, the DC I team was compelled to provide an expanded discussion in the draft doctrine of how our rivals exploit information and technology through advanced warfighting concepts. Beginning in the mid-20th century, a series of information and technology advances made information a global phenomenon. Rivals and adversaries have since become skilled at navigating and exploiting this phenomenon to challenge some advantages the United States held throughout, and immediately after, the Cold War.

To help Marines understand how rivals use information to their advantage, *MCDP 8* highlights the differences between rival and U.S. views of peace and war. A common goal of our rivals in competing with the United States and our allies is to win without fighting. This goal reveals a theory of victory in the strategic competition where our rivals avoid open conflict, preferring to achieve their goals through coercive gradual increments or opportunistic lunges.³

This goal illustrates how some rivals—such as the People’s Republic of

China (PRC), Russia, and Iran—see themselves in a constant state of struggle or war. Our rivals often use the word “war” to describe the enduring relationship between political actors in the international system. This relationship may rarely, or never, involve violence. This permanent struggle mindset is also common among non-state actors who hold similar views on the enduring nature and blurred divide between peace and war. This stands in contrast with views held in the United States where we have a tendency to think of these as being clearly divided: our Nation is either at peace or at war.⁴

MCDP 8 explains how rivals exploit our bifurcated viewpoint by laying out how they employ information as a central part of their competitive strategies. For example, one primary strategy the PRC uses short of open conflict is called the “Three Warfares.” *MCDP 8* explains the Three Warfares as the PRC’s comprehensive information-centric approach that involves three pillars: public opinion and media warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. The overall objective of the PRC’s use of the Three Warfares is to control the narrative and influence perceptions in ways that advance China’s objectives while frustrating the ability of its rivals to respond.⁵

The PRC is not the only political actor to employ the aggressive use of narratives, psychological warfare, disinformation, or propaganda. *MCDP 8* discusses Russia’s approach to rivalry as similar to the PRC’s approach but with Russian thinking in “hybrid” methods of warfare. To create exploitable ambiguity and blur the peace-war divide, Russia’s political strategy toward conflict asserts that nations should no longer declare wars.⁶ This concept for blurring the peace-war divide mobilizes elements who engage in the undeclared hybrid form of warfare. In Russian hybrid warfare, civilian actors actively coordinate with irregular elements to accomplish the government’s goals. This civil-military fusion includes Russian business owners, media organizations, and political leaders working in lockstep with the Russian military and security forces under an orchestrated political narrative and set of objectives.

Underpinning Russia’s hybrid method of warfare is the concept of reflexive control. *MCDP 8* explains that Marines should understand reflexive control as an information-centric theory rooted in manipulating perceptions and the actions taken to create confusion and paralysis or to influence opponent behaviors and steer events toward Russia’s favor.⁷ Reflexive control is a concept that scales from geopolitical rivals at the strategic level to enemies on the battlefield at the tactical level.

What Is Our Theory of Information?

MCDP 8 intentionally focuses on rivals to set the stage for explaining our theory of information—a theory that describes the overarching logic and mechanics of the information warfighting function. First and foremost, our information theory is rooted in leveraging the power of information that is available through the modern information environment (IE). It is hard to overstate the impact of the modern IE and its effects on the character of society, international relations, military organizations, and the overall global security environment. The modern IE puts the power of information into the hands of any individual or group with access to advanced communications and digital media technologies. Instant global communications, advanced technologies, and hyper-connectivity empower individuals, nations, and non-state political actors who seek to challenge the United States and exert their influence on a global scale.

War, like all other forms of competition, is fundamentally about the distribution and redistribution of power through a contest of wills.⁸ *MCDP 8* provides the framework for unlocking the power of information through the information warfighting function. Our theory and the mechanics of the information warfighting function are illustrated in the simple doctrine logic model shown in Figure 1.

All Marine Corps units generate, preserve, deny, and project information to create and exploit information advantages as a means of accomplishing their objectives and imposing their will. The draft doctrine establishes three

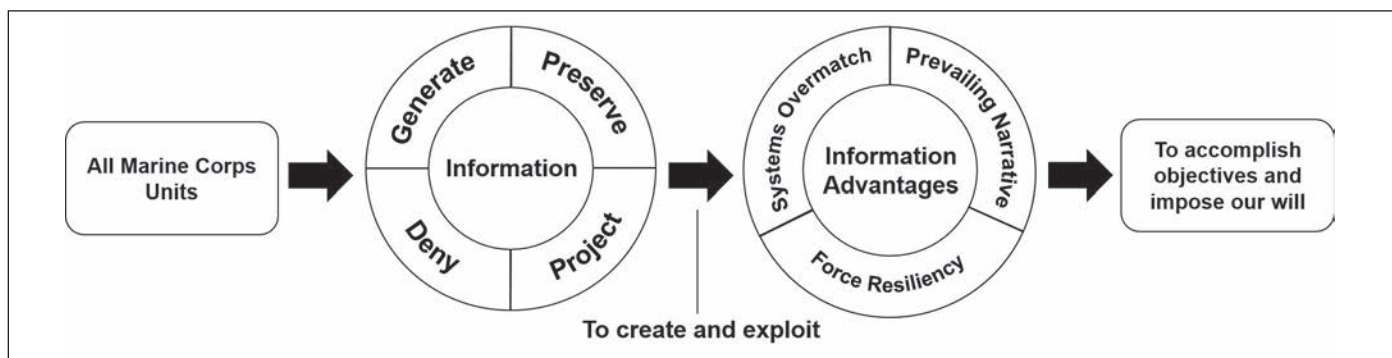


Figure 1. Information advantage doctrine logic. (Figure created by author.)

types of information advantages that Marines seek by applying the warfighting function: *systems overmatch*, *prevailing narrative*, and *force resiliency*. The intent of our information theory, as expressed by this doctrine, is to make the information warfighting function accessible to all Marines and useful to any commander who seeks to create and exploit information advantages in pursuit of mission objectives.

Systems Overmatch

MCDP 8 discusses systems overmatch to refer to the technical advantage of one side over another, yielding fires, intelligence, maneuver, logistics, force protection, or C2 advantages. All warfighting functions, and the systems used to perform these functions across the range of military operations, depend on assured access to trusted information. The same holds true for our adversaries and their respective functions and systems. By denying, degrading, manipulating, or destroying the information flowing to or within an opponent’s systems, such as weapons systems and C2 systems, Marines can sow doubt or confusion in the opponent’s mind, or disrupt their ability to function in a cohesive way. *MCDP 8* introduces the idea of information systems confrontation and destruction—which is effectively the ongoing offensive and defensive actions in the battle for systems overmatch. When these actions are combined with misinformation, disinformation, deception, propaganda, and supporting actions, commanders can generate significant military advantages, including combat power advantages.

Prevailing Narrative

In drafting *MCDP 8*, the DC I writing team spent considerable time researching and thinking about the concept of narrative and its role as a form of information advantage. Narratives play an important part in every operation and activity because they give meaning to a set of facts.⁹ Credible narratives are the most effective and a prevailing narrative is a credible narrative that resonates most with an intended audience. *MCDP 8* emphasizes the need to achieve a prevailing narrative that results in a public opinion or perception advantage by yielding trust, credibility, and believability in our presence, mission, and objectives.

Between any two opponents, the prevailing narrative can be compelling and can lead to the success or failure of one side over another, regardless of its truthfulness. For example, several negative prevailing narratives about U.S. involvement in Vietnam eroded U.S. popular support. The loss of popular support undermined U.S. tactical and operational successes and ultimately led to U.S. withdrawal from the conflict. To emphasize the importance of narrative, *MCDP 8* establishes the need for a command narrative. The draft doctrine describes the principles and actions commanders can take to create effective command narratives and to protect them from disruption. It also discusses some of the challenges and techniques for assessing narratives and replacing harmful narratives with credible ones that help the command achieve its objectives.

Force Resiliency

Resiliency is a defining characteristic of every Marine and is critical to stand-in forces persisting forward in contested zones. *MCDP 8* explains force resiliency as a form of information advantage. From this perspective, resiliency embodies every Marine’s ability to resist, counter, and prevail against adversary reconnaissance, technical disruptions, and malign activity such as misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. In short, Marines resist, counter, and prevail against any threat that targets our systems, people, and our psyche. *MCDP 8* urges commanders to instill the familiar “assault through the ambush” mentality against information disruptions and attacks. It goes further to explain that commanders must reinforce this mentality by developing unit and individual action drills and by making training in response to aggressive adversaries a regular part of individual and unit development.

The Four Functions of Information

Just like there are functions of logistics and intelligence, *MCDP 8* describes four functions of information that are applied in operations to create and exploit information advantages. The functions of information in Figure 1 are: *generate*, *preserve*, *deny* and *project*.

Information generation refers to all actions taken to gain and maintain access to the IE; build awareness of information-based threats, vulnerabilities, and opportunities; hold opponent systems at risk; and create the necessary information to plan and conduct operations. Whether operating from home station or deployed overseas, Marines

are always in contact in the IE. Information generation is the function of information that couples a persistent presence in the IE with a robust effort to understand all relevant aspects of it.

MCDP 8 describes information preservation as all actions to protect and defend the information, systems, and networks used to facilitate friendly operations against internal and external threats. The fight to preserve information is continuous and involves activities such as network operations, cybersecurity, defensive cyberspace operations, electromagnetic spectrum operations, and physical security measures.

MCDP 8 explains information denial as any action taken to disrupt or destroy the information needed by the opponent to understand the situation, make decisions, or act in a coordinated fashion. This includes disrupting the ability of an opponent to gather information. Marines achieve this by exploiting an opponent's vulnerabilities as a primary means of denying them vital information. The draft doctrine explains information denial actions to include offensive cyberspace operations, electromagnetic attacks, directed energy attacks, and physical attacks. *MCDP 8* also explains a passive way of denying the opponent vital information is to selectively alter or suppress the visual, electromagnetic, and digital signatures emanating from friendly forces. This includes implementing operations security measures, communication discipline, camouflage, counterintelligence, and signature management. Information denial and preservation go hand-in-hand.

Information projection is the function of information that Marines apply to communicate, transmit, or deliver information of any type to inform, influence, or deceive an observer or targeted system. *MCDP 8* explains this to include a range of activities from using official communication to inform allies and the American public to using various creative methods to deceive an enemy. The Marine Corps projects information in many ways, including direct communication such as radio and television broadcast, print media, cellular communication, face-to-face communication, and various digital media. Marines also

project information by taking physical actions knowing they are observable to create specific information effects. An example of this technique is conducting freedom of navigation operations in strategic locations. Marines always consider and coordinate the methods and objectives of information projection with information denial.

New Concepts and Ideas as Well as Familiar Themes

In addition to what has been discussed above, *MCDP 8* presents additional content to include some new high-level concepts and ideas, as well as some familiar themes. One of the new ideas introduced in the draft doctrine is the concept that any military objective can be viewed as having both a cognitive and functional component,

By distinguishing between thinking and unthinking processes, *MCDP 8* establishes that information is the substantive input to both. This approach sets up a framework for understanding how we can use, manipulate, or deny information to directly or indirectly target human perception, cognition, decision making, behavior, and will; target the basic functioning of information-dependent systems; or both. The result is effectively two avenues of approach in the IE to aid in planning capabilities and specific actions to directly or indirectly target the cognitive component (i.e., thinking process) or functional component (i.e., unthinking process) of any system or objective. Figure 2 provides examples of how Marines can directly or indirectly target both components of a hypothetical objective.

Objective: Render the enemy radar system unable to support air defense		
	Cognitive Component	Functional Component
Direct Approach	<p>Aim point and desired effect: Human operator deceived through the human-machine interface (radar display).</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Action: Employ decoys to generate false radar returns.</p>	<p>Aim point and desired effect: Radar transmitter and receiver (transceiver) rendered inoperable.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Action: Electromagnetic attack against transceiver overpowers (burns) system circuitry.</p>
Indirect Approach	<p>Aim point and desired effect: Human mind manipulated resulting in doubt in mission or cause.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Action: Tailored propaganda through direct messages (email and cell phone texts).</p>	<p>Aim point and desired effect: C2 node disabled and unable to provide radar information</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Action: Denial of service attack through cyberspace.</p>

Figure 2. Targeting the cognitive and functional components of a radar system. (Figure created by author.)

and that each component is directly or indirectly targetable. This idea stems from research that revealed the behavior of any system, whether a biological system or a manufactured system, can be understood by the way the system processes information. By taking a systems viewpoint, *MCDP 8* draws the reader to conclude that no matter how simple or complex an information process is, it can be distilled into one of two types: a *thinking process* or an *unthinking process*.

In addition to discussing some new concepts and ideas such as thinking and unthinking processes, *MCDP 8* provides extensive coverage of familiar themes and topics that anyone should expect to be in a publication about the information warfighting function. These include robust discussions on the concept of human will, human and machine deception, and the information aspects of the attributes of war (e.g., ambiguity, uncertainty, and friction).

The draft publication also discusses at length the physical, moral, and mental characteristics of competition and war, as well as the threats, vulnerabilities, and opportunities the modern IE provides relative to these characteristics.

In addition to the above, one primary recurring theme emphasized throughout the publication is that in a hyper-connected digital world, everything that Marines say and do is potentially visible across the globe in near realtime. Marines must therefore be extremely disciplined in the IE by carefully considering their actions and words, whether in garrison, on leave, or deployed. *MCDP 8* also highlights the extent to which instant, global visibility compresses the levels of warfare by making it relatively easy for hostile actors to reach across geopolitical boundaries and target our critical infrastructures, citizenry, political leaders, and Marines for influence and disruption.

Institutionalizing Information

MCDP 8 is a four-chapter book. The content discussed thus far is contained within the first three chapters. Chapter four focuses on what the Marine Corps must do to institutionalize the information warfighting function. It begins by reaffirming the purpose of the warfighting function and its focus on creating and exploiting information advantages. The purpose is highlighted in order to clearly distinguish it from all other warfighting functions.

The draft publication then provides a detailed discussion of the mutually supporting relationships between the information warfighting function and all other warfighting functions. The final chapter then lays out eight specific focus areas that must be implemented to ensure the Marine Corps can leverage the information warfighting function to its full potential. These include integrating information into the planning process; prioritizing information in strategies, campaigns, plans, and orders; leveraging allies and partners; using training exercises for real-world effect; practicing discipline in the IE; establishing command narratives; updating doctrine, training, and education programs; and implementing agile

acquisition strategies to keep pace with technology developments.

Conclusion

Information plays a vital role in every activity conducted by Marines. It is fundamental to intelligence, C2, situational understanding, decision making, and all forms of behavior. It is central to the functioning of all societies, governments, and organizations. Information is also an instrument of national power, employed in concert with the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments to influence strategic outcomes, impose our will, or achieve other policy goals. Marines should understand all these perspectives of information and should never assume they will benefit from an information advantage without competing and fighting for it. We must therefore approach information with a maneuver warfare mindset.

Information plays a vital role in every activity conducted by Marines.

From privates to general officers, we all leverage information to succeed in competition and armed conflict. Whether taking a mindful action to reinforce the Marine Corps’ reputational narrative, selectively revealing capabilities to send a message, or applying technical acumen to defend or attack critical information networks—Marines need to know how to leverage information to accomplish the mission and ultimately impose our will at the decisive time and place.

Marines, therefore, apply the information warfighting function to outcompete, fight, and counter aggressive rivals by targeting the cognitive and functional components of opposing systems. The purpose of *MCDP 8* is to describe our foundational theory for leveraging the power of information through the information warfighting function and to guide Marines in thinking about information as a primary means to mission accomplishment. The new doctrine

provides a starting point for thinking about what an information-enabled future force looks like in the context of lethality and effectiveness at competing against peer adversaries on every point of the competition continuum. However, the true value of education is its application. This must be embraced and implemented by all Marines.

Notes

1. James Mattis, *Secretary of Defense Memorandum, Information as a Joint Function*, (Washington, DC: September 2017).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-4, Competing*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
4. Ibid.
5. Elsa B. Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares,” *China Brief*, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, August 2016).
6. LtCol Timothy Thomas, “The Evolving Nature of Russia’s Way of War,” *Military Review*, (July–August 2017), available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil>.
7. Can Kasapoglu, “Russia’s Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control,” (Rome: NATO Defense College, November 2015).
8. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1973).
9. *MCDP 1-4, Competing*.

