



Network-centric Warfare: Dead or Alive?

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September 15, 2010

One of the guiding principles for the defense community has been network-centric warfare. Most, if not all, weapon systems developed in the last decade have been evaluated by this standard.

Recently, the Department of Defense announced the closing of Networking and Information Integration (NII), an office closely associated with network-centric warfare. With the past elimination of Future Combat Systems, the Office of Force Transformation and other high-profile endeavors, some are wondering if the emphasis on network-centric warfare is waning. Dr. Loren Thompson, in his [The Twilight Of Network-Centric Warfare](#) article, went as far as to say "...network-centric warfare is an idea whose time has passed."

If true, this would have enormous implications for those tasked with getting the best possible technologies to warfighters. The abandonment of this established doctrine of network-centric warfare would introduce a new variable in the already difficult task of providing combat systems. Has the idea that launched a thousand PowerPoint presentations really been discarded?

Not really, according to quite a few people. Dr. Thompson's article has inspired a broad range of opposition. One member of the "not-so-fast" crowd is Bob Gourley of [CTOvision.com](#). In his [commentary](#) on Dr. Thompson's article, he argues NII's "... functions will continue in the future in the new organization." In other words, it's a reorganization, not an elimination (if you check out Mr. Gourley's article, be sure to read the spirited postings at the end).

One of the most provocative responses to Dr. Thompson was by Dr. Sean Lawson in his [Is Network-Centric Warfare \(Finally\) Dead? Only Partly](#). He argues that network-centric warfare originally was a rational reaction to forces transforming our environment, and those forces aren't going away. "If Gates and company are declaring an end to the Information Age, I do not think that the rest of the world is going to get that memo."

However, Dr. Lawson also thinks that the doctrine of network-centric warfare has undergone significant changes since 9/11 and he doesn't like it. He's especially unhappy with Gates' approach, calling it "pseudo-luddite." Although, I disagree with his criticisms of Gates, as well as the hostility toward unmanned systems and counterinsurgency strategy expressed in his article, I found his historical overview of network-centric-warfare interesting and concise.



Even Defensesystem.com gets in on the act, sort of. Noting a "...distinct shift in emphasis being articulated by senior military leaders..." the defense technology website has changed its tagline from "Knowledge Technologies and Net-Centric Warfare" to "Knowledge Technologies and Net-Enabled Warfare." This reflects the greater emphasis on "...enabling the warfighter..." While it may not be officially part of the "Whither network-centric warfare?" debate, this subtle change reflects an awareness that this doctrine isn't what it used to be.

What is the significance of the debate for the defense industry? Even in normal times, the task of creating, validating and fielding new weapon systems before they become obsolete is like shooting at a moving target. Does the confusion surrounding this doctrine make that target even harder to hit?

No. In fact, the debate can help us get a better aim. While Dr. Lawson is correct in stating that the forces which forged network-centric warfare aren't going away, *neither are the obstacles which have frustrated its implementation.* In the competitive world of defense technology, the suppliers that understand these problems, and offer solutions for them, will have a distinct advantage.

Take interoperability, the backbone of network-centric warfare. One commentator on Mr. Gourley's article complained about turnkey solutions that treated interoperability as an afterthought, something that can be fixed with a bolt-on solution. Trying to achieve interoperability with a bolt-on solution is like building an airplane by sticking wings on a car.

As bad as the "bolt-on" solution is, it's still better than the other approach taken by many vendors, which is "ignore interoperability, and it will go away" (observers familiar with this issue will realize that I am not exaggerating). Clearly, the defense provider who deals with this issue head-on and incorporates interoperability early in the development process will have a major advantage over those who don't.

The widespread failure to deploy interoperable systems has led to a redundancy that increases the costs of procurement, logistics, and training. This leads to another major obstacle to network-centric warfare: expense. Dr. Thompson correctly points out that this doctrine was introduced during a period of prosperity and now must be reevaluated at a time of shrinking resources. As with interoperability, the vendor who can provide a solution that assists the Department of Defense with managing its decreasing assets will have a significant competitive advantage.

To see how AMREL delivers interoperability while maximizing the needed resources, visit www.commoncontrol.com.

Do you have an opinion about network-centric warfare? Email it to ocupros@amrel.com.