

# Information Paper

## Battlefield Coordination Line

### Origin

The battlefield coordination line (BCL) first appeared in MEF operations during Ulchi Focus Lens (UFL) 94. It was employed as a workaround “MEF internal fire support coordination line (FSCL)” since the combatant commander approved theater FSCL was too distant from the Marine close fight to be of any value. Essentially, the theater FSCL was so far out that it no longer identified the area beyond which less coordination was required due to its distance from friendly ground forces.

### Cultural Chasms

The extended placement of the combatant commander’s FSCL was due mostly to cultural and programmatic conflicts between the Army and the Air Force (read JFACC or in Korea, the CFACC). The point of contention has always centered on the area between the FSCL and the ground commander’s forward boundary. The Air Force has historically demanded that the Army “coordinate” strikes forward of the FSCL with the CFACC prior to execution. The Army doesn’t like the idea of having to coordinate (thus delay operations) with another component inside its own assigned area of operation, so to avoid the problem, they push the FSCL out to a point beyond their area of influence, ATACMS soliloquies notwithstanding. In effect, the FSCL became a de facto forward boundary.

### Adding Fuel to the Fire

To make matters worse, the combatant commander in Korea has always been an Army officer sympathetic to his Service’s plight, and has supported the distant placement of the FSCL. To be fair, the combatant commander must accommodate the abilities of our combined partners for which distant lines mean fewer changes. Nevertheless, to punish the Army for its gamesmanship, the CFACC has created a local rule that only sorties from the close air support (CAS) piece of the apportionment pie will fly short of the FSCL. This despite the lucrative interdiction targets of (non-engaged) enemy corps (during exercises) inside the FSCL, not to mention the doctrinal violation of defining CAS by the FSCL.

### Marine Victims

Enter the Marines with their TACAIR who, like the Air Force, prefer the FSCL closer to friendly ground forces (offense/defense dependent) to free fixed-wing aircraft to shape the enemy’s potential through air interdiction (deep air support (DAS)). But with the FSCL so far out, how might the Marines delineate the area beyond friendly ground forces where less coordination is required thus promoting a higher sortie rate on targets? So far, the answer has been to use the BCL—a technique borrowed from U.S. III Corps who employed a BCL to delineate targeting/fires responsibilities between their divisions and corps during an exercise with I MEF in 1992.

### Battlespace Geometry circa 1994

The MEF commanding general for UFL 94 and 95 was (then) LtGen Zinni. When it came to lines on a map, he was a minimalist; the fewer, the better. Consequently, there were no ground combat element (GCE) forward boundaries. The BCL served to delineate the division of labor between the division(s) and the MEF, thus connoting boundary-like characteristics. The division(s) would nominate the placement of the BCL; the aviation combat element (ACE) could comment; and the MEF would approve. In this manner, the division(s) could bite off as much battlespace as they could handle to include creating their own deep fight. Inside the BCL, MEF force fires would monitor and support the GCE(s); beyond it was the MEF deep fight, planned and conducted by the MEF, and predominantly executed by the ACE.

## **BCL Baggage**

As an internal fire support coordination measure (FSCM), the BCL created a new set of rules for joint air entering the MEF AO. Unaware of the BCL, joint air would require/expect terminal control for all sorties short of the FSCL, potentially in the same areas where MEF air could be conducting DAS sorties. Coupled with the preference to do their own CAS, the simple solution for the MEF was to avoid CFACC CAS sorties altogether despite the requirement to support three or more divisions with one air wing.

## **The Law of Unintended Consequences**

As a non-doctrinal term, prudence demands a clear definition to avoid confusion, but lacking that, operators are free to interpret/employ the BCL to their advantage. Moreover, combatant commander timelines for FSCL changes is six hours<sup>1</sup>, whereas the MEF uses two hours for the BCL. Thus the BCL has become the temporal elixir for all maneuver warfare woes.

## **The BCL Reaches Puberty**

Consequently, the MAGTF Staff Training Program (MSTP) has observed the BCL used both as a fire support coordination measure (FSCL, CFL, RFL) and as a maneuver control measure (lateral and forward boundaries, phase lines, limits of advance). Such apparent versatility has been the BCL's undoing. The following examples highlight the problem:

- Numerous, rapid-fire requests for BCL shifts or modifications well inside the two-hour window brought the MEF combat operations center to its knees attempting to accommodate the changes, losing all situational awareness about the current fight.
- A GCE modification to a BCL created an apparent lateral boundary, beyond which the division erroneously believed the ACE was protecting its left flank.
- BCLs used in addition to the theater FSCL, killboxes and multiple GCE forward and lateral boundaries led to a plethora of "fire support rice bowls" each with its own set of rules, thus creating a paradox whereby the BCLs reduced tempo.
- A MEF-controlled BCL inside the division's forward boundary led to confusion over who was controlling the fight in the division's AO.
- Belated MEF decisions to shift the BCL due to insufficient knowledge of the enemy's disposition halted GCE maneuver and denied the GCE the opportunity to interdict the enemy with its own fire support prior to a very close fight.

## **What now Toto?**

The BCL is now part of I and III MEF's operational lexicon—it has been incorporated in I MEF's TACSOP (a popular pub with the other MEFs) and their FSC Playbook. With such widespread and varied use, we need to consider the following:

- The larger issue of command and control, i.e., the MEF commander's ability to use battlespace geometry to relate his forces to one another in time, space, purpose, mission, and capabilities.
- Incorporation of the BCL into Marine doctrine to ensure a common understanding.
- Re-examination of appropriate combatant commands directives to determine if the MEFs can make the theater FSCL work for them.

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<sup>1</sup> The USCENTCOM CONOPS for Joint Fires of 10 Nov 99 requires six hours from recommendation to implementation. CFC Pub 3-1 (Deep Operations – Korea) of 1 May 99 requires pre-planned FSCLs 26 hours prior to ITO execution, and immediate FSCL changes (inside the ITO cycle) 6 hours from transmittal to implementation with nominal FSCL placement 12 to 20 kilometers from the FLOT. Both publications discuss the need to avoid confusion and fratricide via frequent FSCL changes, yet still retain the ability to accommodate rapid maneuver. Likewise, in both publications ground and amphibious force commanders will recommend placement of the FSCL, but the combatant commander is the approving authority.