

ASSEMBLING AT THE POINT OF DECISION

Building Combat Power from Dispersed Forces on the Transparent Battlefield

The objective is no longer to mass the force. It is to mass the effect, concentrating physically only for as long as necessary.

Executive Assessment

The modern force faces a contradiction. It must disperse to survive, yet it must still generate enough combat power at a decisive point to defeat an opponent. Persistent unmanned surveillance, thermal observation, electronic collection, rapid data fusion and precision fires have made prolonged physical concentration increasingly dangerous. The traditional answer - move a formation into an assembly area, complete preparation, issue final orders, form combat groupings and then move to the line of departure - creates exactly the pattern that a modern reconnaissance-strike system is designed to detect. The assembly area has not become impossible in every circumstance, but it can no longer be treated as a neutral administrative space. It is part of the fight. [1]

The argument of this paper is that a force can build combat power while remaining geographically dispersed, become functionally assembled before it is physically assembled, and complete its concentration through movement. The brigade does not wait to become a brigade in one place before it begins manoeuvre. Its intelligence picture, fires, reconnaissance, engineering, logistics, electronic warfare, command relationships and manoeuvre elements are progressively synchronized while separated. Movement then turns distributed preparation into temporary physical mass at the point where mass has operational value. The resulting concentration should be deliberately transient. The force becomes a brigade for the period required to generate decisive effect, then fragments again before the enemy can convert recognition into effective response.

This concept is described here as assembly through manoeuvre. It depends upon distributed preparation, adaptive convergence and transient mass. Distributed preparation means that the activities traditionally associated with an assembly area are conducted across multiple locations, times and methods without creating one obvious signature. Adaptive convergence means that routes, timings, command relationships and support arrangements can change while the force is moving as terrain, weather and enemy action alter the plan. Transient mass means that the force accepts physical concentration as a necessary but temporary condition rather than as a comfortable posture. The purpose is not to abolish concentration. It is to reduce how long concentration exists and to ensure it appears only when its combat value exceeds its exposure cost.

Terrain and weather are not background conditions to this process. They determine the geometry of convergence. A force can be dispersed across dozens of locations and still produce a single recognisable pattern if its components must pass through the same bridge, forest exit, hard-surface road or river crossing. Poor weather may reduce unmanned observation while simultaneously forcing vehicles onto predictable routes. Open ground can increase the cost of movement but simplify navigation and communications. Dense vegetation can conceal movement from some sensors while creating severe problems for radio, satellite navigation, thermal discrimination and lateral mobility. The relevant question is therefore not whether a formation is dispersed on a map, but whether its movement, sustainment and electronic behaviour remain difficult for the enemy to interpret. [1][7]

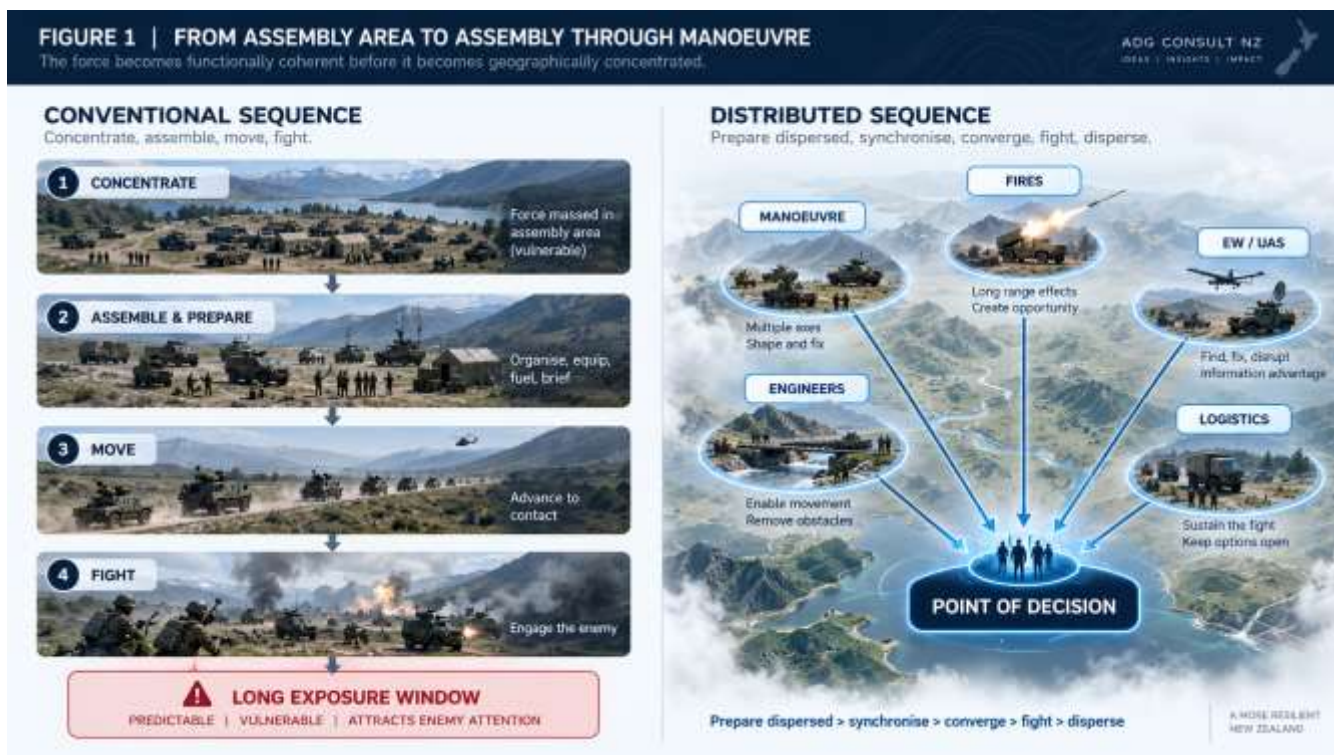
The day-night cycle remains important, but for different reasons than in previous generations. Darkness no longer means the absence of observation. Thermal-equipped drones, night-vision systems and other sensors can maintain surveillance and strike activity around the clock. Night instead changes the sensor mix, thermal contrast, human performance, navigation problem and electromagnetic behaviour of both sides. A formation may be harder for the enemy to interpret while simultaneously becoming harder for its own commander to control. The useful period is therefore not simply night. It is a temporal window in which terrain, weather, enemy sensor posture, friendly human performance and movement conditions collectively favour convergence. [6]

The recent fighting in the Lyman direction provides a useful setting for examining these ideas. Open-source reporting in September 2026 describes Ukrainian counterattacks north and northeast of Lyman, Russian withdrawals from some positions, pressure on the Russian salient, contested terrain around Stavky, Drobysheve, Kolodyazi, Terny and Ivanivka, and Russian difficulty maintaining an accurate picture of the front. The precise extent of Ukrainian gains remains uncertain, and open-source mapping is acknowledged to be incomplete. Russian reporting has also highlighted the operational consequences of inaccurate battlefield reports, while other reporting notes Russian efforts to strike crossings and near-rear logistics. [2][3][4] These conditions are ideal for a fictionalised vignette because they combine broken terrain, rivers, road dependencies, dense unmanned activity, adaptive opponents and uncertainty about where the front actually is.

The vignette in this paper is not a reconstruction of any current Ukrainian operation. It uses real geography around Lyman only to give the reader a credible physical setting. Unit dispositions, routes, timings, commanders and decisions are fictional. The purpose is to show how a brigade might build combat power without a conventional assembly area, how that plan can fail, how the enemy can recognise and adapt to convergence, and how the force must continue assembling even when the original sequence begins to break. The story is deliberately told from brigade headquarters down to platoon, unmanned systems, engineers and logistics because assembly through manoeuvre is only credible when it survives contact with the lowest echelon that must actually move.

The central deduction is simple. A force that cannot survive prolonged concentration must learn to create concentration as an event rather than a location. The decisive skill is not dispersion by itself. It is the repeated ability to move from dispersion to combat power and back to dispersion faster than the enemy can recognise the pattern, reconstruct intent and apply sufficient force to stop it.

The objective is no longer to mass the force. It is to mass the effect, concentrating physically only for as long as necessary.



1. The Assembly Area Has Become Part of the Fight

The assembly area solved several military problems at once. It gave commanders a place to account for people and vehicles, integrate attachments, issue orders, conduct rehearsals, refuel, rearm, repair, configure loads, check communications and establish confidence that the force was ready. Its attraction was organisational clarity. A commander could physically see the formation becoming coherent. The weakness was always that concentration produced vulnerability, but camouflage, distance from the front and the limited persistence of enemy observation often kept that vulnerability tolerable.

Persistent sensing changes the balance. Preparation now produces signatures long before the first assault element moves. Fuel trucks travel differently. Recovery assets reposition. Communications patterns change. Drone activity increases. Engineers reconnoitre crossings and routes. Ammunition moves. Commanders and liaison teams appear in different places. Satellite, electronic, acoustic, thermal and unmanned systems do not need to see every element in one field to infer that a larger operation is forming. They can assemble the story from correlations. [1]

The problem therefore extends beyond hiding vehicles. A brigade may successfully conceal armour while revealing the operation through the behaviour of its support system. It may disperse battalions while bringing their logistics into one obvious node. It may impose radio silence on manoeuvre companies while headquarters, air defence and unmanned units continue to emit at a level that tells the enemy that something unusual is happening. Modern concentration is first an information pattern and only later a physical one.

This does not mean a brigade should scatter randomly. Dispersion without synchronization produces fragility, delay and piecemeal commitment. The objective is disciplined distribution: elements remain separated physically but connected by intent, preparation, timing, shared understanding and support arrangements. The formation must become increasingly coherent without becoming increasingly obvious. That is a much harder command problem than simply occupying a large wood line and waiting for H-hour.

VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 16:40 - A Brigade That Does Not Exist

Colonel Yulia Prykhodko's operations map shows a brigade, but the ground does not. One battalion is holding a tired defensive frontage northwest of Lyman. A second has companies spread between several concealed areas, each completing a different part of its preparation. Armour is not parked beside infantry. Engineers are not waiting behind a marked breach force. The logistics group has no single refuel point. Drone crews are already working the sector as they have done for days. To an observer looking at one location, there is no offensive formation to find.

The staff has spent the afternoon doing what an assembly area used to do physically. Maintenance status has been reconciled through short scheduled reports. Ammunition states have been confirmed. Attachments have been assigned before they move. Company commanders have received the same intent but not the same movement plan. The battalions know what must be true at the point of decision rather than where every other sub-unit will be at every minute. Prykhodko is uncomfortable with the lack of physical certainty. That discomfort is deliberate. If she can see the whole brigade in one place, so can somebody else.

Major Sergiy Prokhorenko, commanding the lead battalion, does not ask whether his companies are assembled. He asks whether they are functionally ready. One company has completed ammunition preparation but still lacks a recovery vehicle. Another is ready to move but is waiting for a change in drone coverage. The engineer team has surveyed two possible approaches but will not join either company until the route decision is made. A short-range air-defence element is several kilometres away, supporting another task until the last possible period. Nothing looks tidy. The staff is learning to measure readiness without relying on proximity.

On the Russian side, Major Alexei Morozov's picture is similarly incomplete. He sees routine Ukrainian activity across multiple locations. There is more traffic than yesterday in one area, but less in another. Several drone orbits have changed, yet not enough to prove a main effort. He marks the anomalies and waits for correlation. His task is not to find a hidden brigade. It is to decide when several ordinary-looking activities have become one operation.

2. Build Combat Power While Dispersed

Combat power is often discussed as if it appears when enough troops and weapons occupy the same piece of terrain. Physical mass matters, but it is only one component. A brigade becomes dangerous when manoeuvre, fires, intelligence, engineers, electronic warfare, air defence, logistics, command and tempo are aligned against the same problem. Those functions can begin aligning long before the vehicles do.

Distributed preparation therefore breaks the assembly process into activities that can be completed independently. Individual crews service vehicles where they already are. Ammunition is moved in small loads. Orders are issued early enough that subordinates can plan without repeated conferences. Rehearsals become distributed rather than concentrated. Digital systems can support that process, but they should not become a requirement for continuous high-bandwidth connectivity. The better measure is whether each subordinate understands the commander's intent, the conditions for movement, the expected point of convergence and the actions to take when the sequence changes.

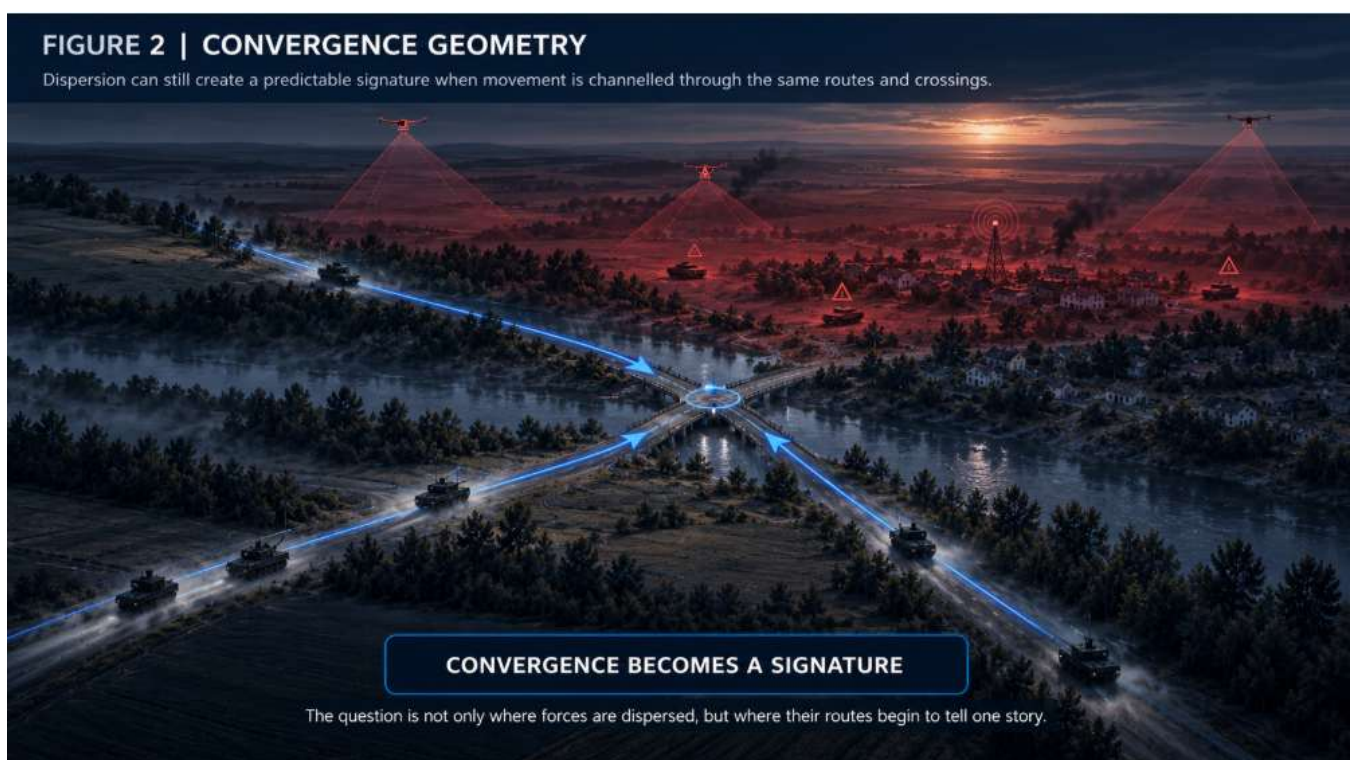
This requires a different understanding of readiness. The question is not whether every capability is collocated. It is whether the formation can create the required combination within the time available. A tank company thirty minutes away may be more useful than a tank company sitting beside infantry for six hours if the latter has already revealed the brigade's intention. An engineer asset that joins on a route may be more survivable than one parked with the assault force. A logistic package that intersects a manoeuvre element for twelve minutes may provide the same fuel and ammunition as a large static resupply point while producing a much shorter targetable signature.

The principle is simple but demanding: complete every task as early and as far away as possible, but delay every unnecessary act of physical convergence until the latest safe moment.

3. Terrain Is the Architecture of Convergence

Terrain determines whether distributed forces can remain operationally independent as they move. A map may show six routes, but only two may support heavy vehicles after rain. A forest may conceal a company but provide only one usable exit. A river may split a brigade into apparently separate groupings while turning the crossing sites into predictable signatures. A settlement may offer concealment from overhead observation while forcing traffic into a handful of streets. Dispersion is therefore only meaningful when the terrain allows different components to behave differently for long enough.

The Lyman area is useful because the physical environment is neither completely open nor completely closed. Forest belts, settlements, the Siverskyi Donets system, smaller rivers, roads and broken ground create alternating areas of concealment and exposure. Recent reporting also emphasises the importance of crossings and near-rear logistics to Russian interdiction efforts. [2][4] The operational effect is that a brigade can hide parts of its preparation while still becoming predictable when those parts have to pass through the same terrain bottleneck.



This is convergence geometry. Commanders need to understand the point at which separate movements begin to tell one story. Four companies leaving four different hides remain dispersed, but if all four arrive at the same road junction within forty minutes the enemy may not care where they started. Likewise, an apparently dispersed logistics architecture can collapse into one signature when multiple routes feed a single bridge. The decisive geometry is not the initial disposition. It is the pattern created as trajectories intersect.

Terrain analysis for assembly through manoeuvre must therefore examine routes as signatures, not merely as lines of march. The staff should ask where options collapse, where traffic becomes channelled, where halted vehicles will create visible clustering, where recovery becomes difficult, where communications degrade, and where the enemy can observe or strike the route from depth. The best route may not be the fastest route. It may be the route that preserves ambiguity the longest.

VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 22:10 - The Route That Turns Red

Captain Oleg Kozlov's company begins moving in packets rather than as a column. The first vehicles use a hard-surface road for less than two kilometres before turning beneath trees. A second group leaves later and uses a different entry. The plan looks untidy on a conventional movement table because there is no single start time and no clean column order. It is designed that way. The brigade wants the movements to resemble local repositioning for as long as possible.

Forty minutes later the weather changes the map. Rain that was expected after midnight arrives early and hard. A secondary track on the company's northern option deteriorates within minutes. One vehicle bogs, another attempts to bypass it, and the route that had existed on the staff map disappears in practice. Kozlov does not need a drone feed to understand the consequence. The company now has fewer ways forward, and every unit behind it is about to discover the same thing.

At brigade headquarters, the route network effectively contracts. Captain Anna Danylichuk's electronic-warfare picture remains manageable, but the mobility picture is not. Prokhorenko can keep the company dispersed by time, yet the ground is forcing it toward the same hard surface that another element is scheduled to use later. The plan has not failed because the enemy has done anything clever. It is failing because terrain and weather have begun producing the same signature that the brigade worked all day to avoid.

Prykhodko refuses the temptation to recover the original timetable. The staff pushes one supporting element onto a longer southern route and delays another. The immediate cost is time. The benefit is that the brigade does not allow a traffic problem to become an intelligence picture. The operation is already becoming less efficient and more survivable. That trade is the essence of adaptive convergence.

4. Weather Can Hide a Force and Channel It at the Same Time

Weather is often treated as a binary advantage: poor weather reduces drone effectiveness and therefore helps manoeuvre. The reality is more complicated. RUSI's work with Ukrainian formations notes that adverse weather can reduce UAV endurance and effectiveness while artillery and mortars retain utility. Reuters reporting in September 2026 similarly highlighted expectations that deteriorating autumn conditions could reduce some drone effectiveness and reopen opportunities for mechanised action. [1][5] Those observations are important, but a manoeuvre commander must also ask what the same weather does to the ground.

Rain, mud, snow and freeze-thaw cycles change route capacity. A period that degrades overhead observation may simultaneously force vehicles onto hard surfaces, slow recovery, increase fuel consumption and expose engineering activity. Wind can reduce smaller UAV endurance while complicating smoke and increasing the physical difficulty of operating certain systems. Fog can reduce optical collection while making navigation and traffic control more difficult. Weather therefore changes both sides of the detection-mobility equation.

The useful condition is not simply bad weather. It is asymmetric weather effect: a period in which the enemy's ability to understand and react degrades more than the friendly force's ability to move and coordinate. That asymmetry may last hours or less. It can also reverse quickly. A formation that delays too long waiting for perfect concealment may discover that the ground has become unusable before the sky becomes sufficiently opaque.

This is why the brigade should treat forecasts as operational timing tools rather than planning annexes. Terrain trafficability, drone endurance, thermal contrast, cloud, precipitation and wind belong in the same conversation as ammunition, fuel and enemy reserves because together they determine whether distributed preparation can become physical convergence before the window closes.

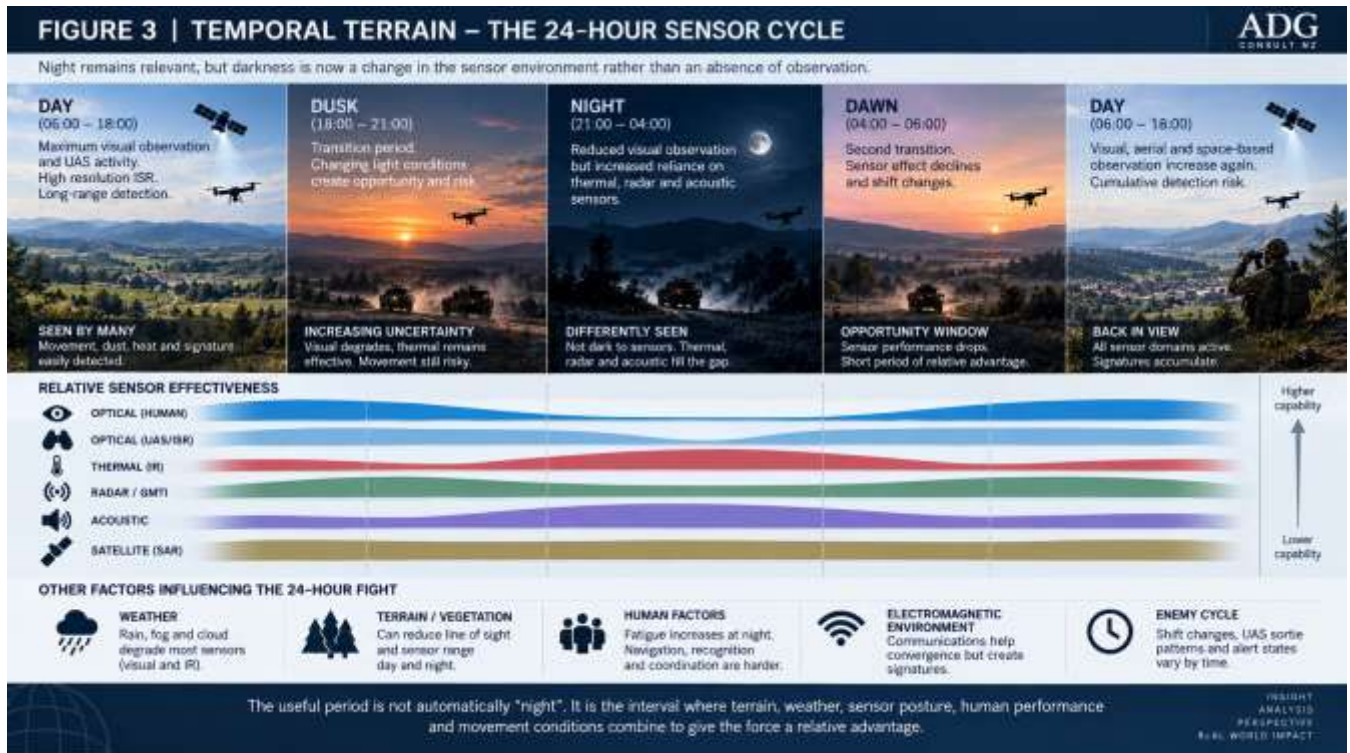
5. Temporal Terrain - Day, Night and the Twenty-Four-Hour Sensor Cycle

Night remains relevant, but it no longer offers the simple concealment advantage that shaped much twentieth-century practice. Thermal-equipped unmanned aircraft can maintain observation and strike activity after dark, and modern forces increasingly operate continuous sensor cycles. [6] Darkness changes the observation environment rather than removing it. Some visual sensors degrade. Thermal contrast may improve or decline depending on temperature and humidity. Human observers become less effective. Navigation, recognition and traffic control become harder. Electromagnetic dependence can increase because crews rely more heavily on digital navigation and communications.

The human consequences remain substantial. Moving a formation at night is cognitively expensive. Vehicle commanders and drivers work harder to maintain spacing, identify turns, interpret ground, avoid obstacles and prevent minor faults from becoming route blocks. Dismounted troops become easier to lose and harder to reorient. Recovery and casualty handling become slower. Night-vision equipment helps, but it does not erase fatigue, depth-perception problems, restricted field of view or the tendency for small mistakes to compound when several dispersed elements are trying to arrive within the same tactical period.

Technology adds a second contradiction. Blue-force tracking, navigation systems and digital command tools can make night convergence much easier for the friendly force. The transmissions required to maintain that awareness can also create an electronic pattern for the enemy. A brigade that demands perfect location data from every subordinate may improve internal clarity while advertising that multiple elements are moving toward the same area. The commander's problem is therefore visibility to self versus visibility to the enemy.

The more useful concept is temporal terrain. Every period of the day has a particular combination of light, thermal contrast, sensor activity, operator fatigue, traffic patterns and weather. Dawn and dusk may be especially significant because they are transition periods in which sensor performance, temperature and human routines are changing at the same time. There is no universal rule that movement should occur at night. The formation should move when the total environment creates the greatest relative advantage.



VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 01:55 - Night Is Different, Not Safe

The rain eases after one in the morning. Kozlov's drivers can finally see more through their night devices than through the earlier sheets of water, but the temperature has fallen and engines, exhausts and people stand out differently against the ground. Somewhere east of the company, a thermal-equipped Russian drone is still flying. Nobody in the company knows whether it is watching them, another route, or nothing useful at all. Darkness has removed certainty from both sides.

Lieutenant Pavel Danyluk's platoon reaches a junction that should have been empty. A recovery vehicle from another element is stopped short of the turn, working on a truck whose steering has failed. The simplest response would be to halt and wait. Danyluk sees the danger immediately. Waiting will build a cluster. A cluster becomes a thermal picture, and a thermal picture becomes something that an analyst can correlate with the increase in traffic already reported elsewhere. He pushes two vehicles through, sends the next packet around a farm track and accepts that the platoon will arrive out of order.

The brigade's digital picture briefly becomes worse. One packet is no longer where the plan says it should be. Communications are deliberately intermittent and Prokhorenko does not ask for constant updates. For ten uncomfortable minutes the headquarters knows less about its own company than it would like. The alternative is to force the platoon to transmit continuously until everyone is reassured. Prykhodko accepts the uncertainty. A commander who cannot tolerate temporary ignorance will eventually force subordinates to emit enough information to remove the enemy's ignorance too.

Danyluk sees the last vehicle clear the junction and only then sends the short report permitted by the plan. The brigade's map catches up with reality. Nothing about the episode feels sophisticated. A broken truck, a muddy track and a decision not to form a queue have done more to preserve the operation than any expensive system. Technology has changed the night, but fieldcraft still decides whether the night becomes useful.

6. Assembly Through Manoeuvre

Assembly through manoeuvre begins when movement is no longer simply relocation and starts becoming integration. A company joins its supporting engineers. A battalion receives its air-defence cover for the exposed period. Fires shift from shaping to direct support. Logistics packages intersect manoeuvre elements at planned points. Command relationships that existed on paper become physical combinations. The brigade is assembling, but the assembly is distributed across time and space rather than contained inside a perimeter.

The sequence must remain condition-based. If the enemy picture is recovering faster than expected, if one route collapses, if a supporting capability is delayed, or if weather changes the sensor environment, the force should not continue converging merely because a timetable says it should. The central lesson from the previous paper - that manoeuvre depends upon the enemy's reconstruction time - becomes even more important here. The force must compare its own convergence time with the opponent's recognition and response time. [1]



There is now a third clock: sustainment. A manoeuvre force can successfully converge, break into a position and still fail if fuel, ammunition, recovery and casualty evacuation cannot follow at the required rate. RUSI notes that defenders in Ukraine often find it easier to attack resupply routes than forces already in contact, causing manoeuvre elements to outstrip their sustainment and lose momentum. [1] The point of decision therefore exists only while three conditions overlap: the combat force is sufficiently coherent, the enemy has not yet reconstructed enough to disrupt it, and the support system can still sustain the tempo.

This makes the brigade commander's problem temporal rather than merely spatial. Combat power is perishable. The force is not trying to achieve a permanent state of perfect assembly. It is trying to create a short period in which enough things are true at the same time.

7. The Enemy Is Learning Too

A serious concept cannot assume a passive enemy. Russian forces in Ukraine have repeatedly adapted their reconnaissance, unmanned systems, electronic warfare, fires and infiltration methods. Recent reporting around Lyman describes continued Russian efforts to strike crossings and near-rear logistics, while Russian sources themselves have acknowledged the operational damage caused by inaccurate frontline reporting. [2][3] Both characteristics matter. An opponent may be technically capable of detecting movement and organisationally poor at interpreting it, or may correct those weaknesses during the operation.

The threat force should therefore be understood as a learning system. It observes friendly patterns, compares them with previous operations and changes collection priorities. It may move drones away from areas that appear quiet, then return them when traffic changes. It may stop trying to destroy every vehicle and instead target bridges, refuel points and recovery routes. It may deliberately force movement onto predictable surfaces. It may accept uncertainty in one sector while concentrating sensors on the terrain where multiple routes must eventually intersect.

Friendly tactics can also train the enemy. If every brigade uses darkness in the same way, reduces emissions according to the same schedule and increases drone activity in the same period before an attack, those protective measures become indicators. Adaptation therefore requires variation. The goal is not to develop one perfect rolling-assembly template. It is to create a formation capable of changing the method faster than the opponent can convert the previous method into a targeting model.

VIGNETTE / RUSSIAN VIEW | 04:30 - The Picture Starts to Form

Morozov has stopped looking for a conventional assembly area. Several months earlier he would have expected Ukrainian armour, support vehicles and headquarters activity to produce a recognisable concentration. That pattern has not appeared. What has appeared is more subtle. Two roads that are normally quiet have shown short periods of movement. Ukrainian drone activity has shifted slightly east. A bridge that usually carries civilian traffic was empty for twenty minutes and then busy. One electronic source disappeared from its normal area and reappeared elsewhere. None of these facts proves an attack. Together they are beginning to suggest convergence.

He orders his reconnaissance teams to stop spreading their attention evenly. One drone orbit shifts toward the approaches north of Lyman. Another watches a crossing rather than Ukrainian positions. The Russian response is sensible. Morozov does not need to find every Ukrainian element. He needs to find the terrain where those elements eventually have to become one force.

Prykhodko sees the adaptation indirectly. A drone that had been persistent over a defensive sector disappears. Another appears over a route that had previously received little attention. Danylchuk reports a change in the electronic pattern. Prokhorenko is already late because of the rain. The brigade's original assumption - that Russian attention would remain dispersed for another hour - is no longer credible.

There is no dramatic order to cancel or continue. Instead, the plan changes shape. One company is held farther west. A supporting element that was meant to join early is told to stay separate. A logistics package is divided. The brigade accepts that its combat power will arrive less neatly in return for making Morozov's new picture incomplete. This is adaptive convergence: not the preservation of the plan, but the preservation of the purpose.

Morozov receives a report of real Ukrainian movement before dawn. The report is accurate. What he still does not know is whether the movement represents the main effort, a reserve, a local counterattack or a response to his own pressure elsewhere. He asks for confirmation. The brigade has not remained unseen. It has remained difficult to classify. For another short period, that distinction is enough.

8. Logistics Is the Hidden Assembly

A dispersed manoeuvre concept will fail if its logistics remain concentrated and predictable. Fuel, ammunition, batteries, drone components, engineering stores, medical support and recovery capability generate some of the strongest signatures in a formation because they move repeatedly and often must use the same routes. If the fighting force disperses while the support system continues to operate from large fixed nodes, the enemy can attack the brigade by attacking the network that allows it to move.

The solution is not unlimited fragmentation. Very small logistic packets can become inefficient, difficult to protect and impossible to coordinate. The practical requirement is distributed support with short intersections. Loads are prepared away from manoeuvre elements, moved in packets, and brought into contact with the force for the shortest period that accomplishes the task. Refuel, rearm and maintenance become rendezvous events rather than places. Recovery assets position according to likely failure points rather than sitting with the combat force. Casualty evacuation plans should include multiple transfer options because a single obvious medical route can become a predictable pattern.

Uncrewed ground vehicles increasingly used in Ukraine illustrate one direction of travel. Reuters reported in September 2026 on the growing use of UGVs by Ukrainian formations for explosive tasks, resupply and casualty evacuation. [11] Their value is not that robots remove logistics from the battlefield. It is that they can shift some exposure away from personnel and allow smaller, more frequent support movements through areas that are difficult to service conventionally. They remain constrained by terrain, reliability, communications and payload.

Sustainment must also retain enough reserve capacity to absorb disruption. A distributed formation should expect some packets to miss the rendezvous, some routes to close and some vehicles to fail. The system becomes resilient when the loss of one planned intersection reduces efficiency without stopping the operation.



VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 05:40 - Fuel Is Combat Power

The brigade's manoeuvre elements are closer to the point of decision than at any time during the night, but the most important movement on Prykhodko's map is a group of fuel vehicles that never appear together. The original plan called for one short refuel event behind a forest belt. Russian drone activity over the approach has made that location unacceptable. Captain Olena Hrytsenko, running the forward logistics package, splits the load before the brigade commander asks her to.

One pair of vehicles moves to meet Kozlov's company. Another remains concealed and waits for the delayed element. A third is sent south with enough fuel to keep the engineer and recovery package moving if the main route closes. The result is inefficient by every peacetime measure. Drivers travel farther. Accounting becomes harder. The brigade loses the certainty of one controlled refuel point. It gains the ability to lose one logistic packet without losing the operation.

Kozlov's lead vehicles refuel quickly while the rest of the company remains separated. No one forms the neat queue familiar from training areas. The first vehicles leave before the last ones arrive. The logistics vehicles move away as soon as their loads are transferred. For a few minutes the company, fuel and recovery assets exist in the same place. Then the node disappears.

A Russian drone reaches the area twenty minutes later and sees signs of traffic but no useful concentration. Morozov's staff correctly judges that the location was used for support. The information is real and already stale. Hrytsenko has achieved the logistic equivalent of transient mass: enough capacity at the required moment, then absence before the enemy can make the observation actionable.

9. The Point of Decision Is an Event, Not a Grid Reference

The phrase point of decision can sound geographic, but in this concept it is better understood as a temporary alignment of conditions. The relevant ground matters, yet the decisive factor is that enough combat functions become available at the same time to overwhelm the local problem before the enemy can adapt. The point may therefore move as intelligence changes, routes fail or enemy reserves reposition.

Transient mass is the physical expression of that logic. There will still be moments when vehicles, soldiers, engineers and fires must concentrate. The difference is that the formation arrives already prepared to act. It does not use the decisive area to finish administrative tasks that could have been completed elsewhere. The time between physical convergence and combat effect should be as short as the mission permits.

The same logic applies after success. A force that captures ground and then establishes a dense static footprint has simply created a new assembly area under enemy observation. Consolidation remains necessary, but consolidation should not automatically mean concentration. Elements should spread, command functions should relocate, support routes should vary and the force should preserve enough ambiguity that the enemy cannot immediately convert the new disposition into a targeting solution.

The useful measure of success is therefore not how many combat vehicles can be placed on one grid square. It is how much coordinated effect the brigade can generate while controlling the duration and signature of that concentration.

VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 06:25 - Becoming a Brigade for Ninety Minutes

The first light has not yet reached the lowest ground when the pieces finally begin to feel like one formation. Kozlov's company is no longer moving toward a support package; the engineers are with it. A fires cell that has been operating from elsewhere changes priority. The short-range air-defence element joins the exposed movement. A second company appears on the other side of the sector, later than planned but still inside the commander's acceptable window. For the first time all night, the brigade's combat power is physically obvious to itself.

Prykhodko does not experience the moment as relief. She experiences it as danger. Every additional capability makes the formation more effective and easier to interpret. The same synchronisation that gives her combat power gives Morozov evidence. The question is no longer whether the enemy will understand. The question is how much the brigade can accomplish before understanding becomes response.

At platoon level the scale of the operation is invisible. Danyluk sees only the vehicles immediately around him, the line of trees ahead and a drone warning passed down from company. He does not know that a second battalion is changing posture several kilometres away. He does not need to know. The brigade's coherence exists in the alignment of actions, not in every soldier possessing the complete picture.

Morozov's staff reaches the correct conclusion shortly after sunrise. Ukrainian activity is no longer explainable as local repositioning. Fires change. Traffic patterns correlate. The crossing he has been watching becomes relevant. His response begins. Reserves are warned, drone coverage shifts and strikes are requested against likely routes. The Russian system has reconstructed the operation.

The reconstruction is not a Ukrainian failure. It is an expected phase. Prokhorenko's battalion has already crossed the most exposed part of its movement and the brigade is generating the intended local effect. For roughly ninety minutes the force has enough mass to act while the Russian response remains behind the sequence. That period is the product. Everything that occurred during the preceding night existed to create it.

FIGURE 6 | LYMAN VIGNETTE — FICTIONALISED SCHEMATIC

Real place names provide geographic context. Unit locations, routes, timings and actions are illustrative and not a reconstruction of current plans.



10. Dispersion Must Be Planned Before Concentration Begins

The most vulnerable moment may come after the tactical objective has been achieved. Success encourages forces to stop, account, replenish and reorganise. Those are sensible actions, but they can recreate the static signature that assembly through manoeuvre was designed to avoid. The force therefore needs a dispersal concept before it converges.

Dispersal does not mean abandoning the captured position. It means separating the functions that do not need to remain together. Vehicles should not remain clustered merely because they arrived together. Command posts should avoid occupying the most obvious successful location. Logistics should continue to intersect rather than accumulate. Air defence and electronic-warfare assets should reposition as enemy attention shifts. Reserve elements should remain sufficiently separated that a strike on the lead grouping does not destroy the formation's capacity to continue.

This creates a continuous cycle: disperse, prepare, synchronize, converge, fight, exploit, disperse. The force repeatedly becomes more and less concentrated according to tactical need. The commander's challenge is to make those transitions routine enough to execute under stress but variable enough that the enemy cannot treat them as a fixed template.

VIGNETTE / UKRAINIAN VIEW | 08:10 - Leave Before the Picture Catches Up

The immediate tactical problem has changed. The brigade has achieved enough of its purpose that the next danger is remaining where it has become understandable. Kozlov wants fifteen minutes to reorganise. Prokhorenko gives him less. The company splits. Damaged vehicles move toward one recovery route, not the route used to arrive. The engineers detach. The air-defence element shifts again. A logistics packet that had been waiting to come forward is redirected because the original rendezvous is now under observation.

A Russian strike lands on a road segment that mattered forty minutes earlier. It is not inaccurate. It is late. Morozov's intelligence picture is now substantially correct, but the formation it describes is already dissolving. Prykhodko watches the first reports of Russian fires and knows the window has closed. The brigade has no reason to pretend otherwise.

Danyluk's platoon ends the morning farther apart than when it began the final approach. The soldiers are tired, the vehicles are dirty and the operation looks nothing like a parade-ground attack. That is precisely the point. The brigade never achieved a stable period of comfortable concentration. It achieved enough coherence to generate the required effect and then gave up coherence before the enemy could exploit it.

Morozov understands the operation by mid-morning. His reconstruction is good enough to explain most of what happened. It arrives after the fact. The contest was never about preventing understanding forever. It was about ensuring that understanding matured too late to prevent the decisive period.

11. Ukraine Is a Laboratory, Not a Universal Template

Ukraine provides unusually rich evidence about warfare under persistent sensing, dense unmanned systems, electronic warfare and precision fires. It would be a mistake to turn those observations into universal rules. The method by which a brigade assembles through manoeuvre is inseparable from the physical environment, force structure, infrastructure, adversary and climate in which it operates.

The Ukrainian battlefield often combines extensive road networks, agricultural terrain, settlements, tree lines, rivers and significant areas that can be observed from the air. This encourages a particular form of signature management. Movement

across open ground is dangerous. Roads and crossings matter. Drone coverage can extend tactical observation deep behind the line. Artillery, FPV systems and other fires can punish concentrations quickly. A brigade therefore benefits from dispersing its support and delaying physical concentration until the latest possible period.

Dense Southeast Asian jungle changes the balance. Military Review analysis published in 2026 notes that canopy and vegetation can degrade radio-frequency communications, satellite navigation, electro-optical observation and thermal sensing, while humidity and terrain create severe equipment and sustainment burdens. [7] A force may gain natural concealment from some forms of overhead observation but lose the communications and navigation reliability that make distributed convergence easier. The battlefield becomes less transparent in one sense and harder to coordinate in another.

Operational distance also changes. Ten kilometres across a Ukrainian road network and ten kilometres through mountainous tropical jungle are not equivalent military distances. Lateral movement may be extremely limited. A company can be geographically close to another unit yet operationally separated by a ridge, river, swamp or absence of tracks. Roads, rivers, clearings and landing zones can become more important precisely because the vegetation makes the rest of the terrain difficult to traverse.

The lesson that should travel is therefore the requirement, not the method. Forces need the ability to generate concentration without depending upon prolonged concentration. How that is done in eastern Ukraine may be wrong in Kalimantan, Mindanao, Papua or mainland Southeast Asia.



12. Day and Night in the Jungle Are Different Again

The day-night distinction becomes particularly interesting in dense jungle. Canopy already reduces line of sight during daylight. Darkness may therefore provide less additional concealment than it does across open terrain, while imposing a greater penalty on friendly navigation, movement speed and control. Thermal sensing can also be complicated by humidity, dense vegetation and thermal crossover, reducing the simple assumption that night always advantages the side with better infrared equipment. [7]

In such terrain, night movement may still be essential, but the reason may be enemy routine, air threat, road exposure or human observation rather than darkness itself. A formation that moves off-track at night can rapidly lose tempo and cohesion. The same digital tools that might help navigation can struggle under canopy or create electromagnetic dependency. Mission command, analogue navigation, local knowledge, pre-positioned caches and simple control measures become more important.

The comparison reinforces the idea of temporal terrain. Time of day changes the battlespace differently in different environments. The commander should not import a Ukrainian answer such as 'move at night under degraded drone coverage' into a jungle theatre without examining what night does to route capacity, communications and human performance there. The relevant question remains relative advantage: when does the environment hurt the enemy's understanding more than it hurts friendly convergence?

13. Command and Control Must Tolerate Imperfect Knowledge

Assembly through manoeuvre places unusual demands on command. Headquarters will often know less than they would in a conventional assembly area. Sub-units may be separated, communications intermittent and routes changing. The instinctive response is to increase reporting. That can be exactly wrong if more reporting creates the electronic pattern the enemy needs.

Mission command is therefore a practical signature-management tool. Subordinates require enough understanding to continue when communications degrade, when a route closes or when the planned rendezvous disappears. Commanders should define conditions, priorities and decision boundaries rather than attempt to control every movement centrally. Distributed rehearsals can support this by allowing commanders and staff to build shared understanding without physically gathering large numbers of people in one place. U.S. Army writing has increasingly argued that large in-person combined-arms rehearsals themselves create unnecessary signatures and can be replaced by distributed methods. [9]

The command system also needs to distinguish between uncertainty that is dangerous and uncertainty that is merely uncomfortable. Not knowing the exact location of every vehicle for several minutes may be acceptable. Not knowing whether a bridge remains usable may not be. The staff should protect the information that actually changes decisions rather than demanding continuous completeness.

This requires trust. A force that has trained only under constant connectivity will struggle to accept temporary gaps. A force that routinely practises reduced communications, delegated decisions, route changes and independent timing can treat those gaps as normal operating conditions rather than crises.

14. Force Design and Training Implications

A brigade designed for assembly through manoeuvre needs more than different tactics. It needs the organisational capacity to prepare, communicate, sustain and repair while distributed. That favours mobile command posts, redundant communications, spectrum awareness, distributed maintenance, flexible logistics, organic unmanned systems, route reconnaissance, recovery capability and sufficient junior leadership to make decisions away from headquarters. The formation must be able to split capabilities without losing them and recombine them without requiring hours of physical coordination.

Training should therefore measure transitions. Can the brigade move from a dispersed posture to useful combat power inside a defined period? Can it do so when one route closes, a communications method fails, weather changes or a logistic packet is lost? Can it disperse again without creating a large static footprint? Can subordinate commanders continue when the digital picture is incomplete? These questions are more relevant than whether a formation can create a perfectly ordered assembly area under exercise conditions that remove enemy observation.

The enemy should also be allowed to learn during training. If an opposing force identifies the brigade's pattern on the first iteration, the next iteration should not reset the enemy to ignorance. It should begin with that knowledge. The friendly formation must then alter its method. This creates the adaptation contest that defines the real battlefield and prevents units from mistaking a rehearsed sequence for a durable advantage.

Finally, the training audience should include logistics and maintainers as part of the manoeuvre problem. A combat formation that can converge but cannot fuel, recover or evacuate casualties while dispersed does not possess a usable concept. Combat power is the whole system arriving at the required effect, not simply the assault echelon arriving first.

15. The Practical Model

The concept can be reduced to a practical sequence without turning it into a rigid template. The force begins dispersed and tries to complete as much preparation as possible without changing its observable behaviour dramatically. It builds a shared understanding of the terrain, weather, enemy collection and likely convergence geometry. It assigns support relationships early, but delays unnecessary physical joins. It then begins movement in ways that preserve multiple explanations for as long as practical.

As movement continues, the brigade watches for the point at which terrain, weather and enemy collection begin to collapse those explanations. Routes and timings are adjusted to preserve ambiguity. Supporting capabilities intersect manoeuvre elements for increasingly short periods. The brigade becomes functionally coherent before it becomes physically coherent. Physical concentration is then accepted deliberately at the point of decision because combat effect now matters more than concealment.

The formation fights inside a race between three clocks: its own convergence and exposure time, the enemy's recognition and response time, and the endurance of its sustainment architecture. Once the local effect has been created, the brigade disperses before the enemy's reconstructed picture can be exploited fully. The cycle can then begin again from a new disposition.

The sequence is not elegant. It will look inefficient compared with a force that can move safely through a protected rear area. But efficiency is not the objective. Survivable combat power is.

Conclusion

The transparent battlefield has not removed the need for concentration. It has made prolonged concentration more expensive and easier to punish. A force still has to create superiority somewhere. It still has to bring infantry, armour, fires, engineers, intelligence, air defence, electronic warfare and logistics into a coherent relationship. The change is that this coherence should increasingly be built while the formation remains dispersed and completed only when the tactical return justifies the signature.

Assembly through manoeuvre is therefore not a rejection of mass. It is a different way of producing mass. The brigade prepares as a network, moves as multiple apparently independent elements, converges as conditions permit, becomes physically concentrated for the decisive period and then fragments again. Terrain determines where that can happen. Weather alters both observation and mobility. Day and night change the sensor and human environment. The enemy learns and tries to force convergence into predictable places. Logistics decides whether initial success can become momentum.

The Lyman vignette illustrates the central point because the plan never survives intact. Rain closes routes. Night creates both concealment and confusion. Russian collection shifts. Fuel becomes as important as manoeuvre. A company arrives out of order. The enemy eventually understands. None of those developments invalidates the concept. They are the reason the concept needs to be adaptive rather than choreographed.

Ukraine offers a powerful case study, but not a universal template. In Southeast Asian jungle, canopy may reduce observation while degrading navigation, communications and mobility. The same principle remains: concentration should be generated according to the environment rather than copied from another theatre.

The modern brigade may spend most of its existence dispersed. Its decisive competence will be the ability to become a brigade for minutes or hours rather than days - to generate enough combat power at the point of decision, remain concentrated only while the effect requires it, and then disappear back into a distributed formation before the enemy can turn understanding into destruction.

A force that cannot survive concentration must learn to make concentration an event rather than a location.

Source Notes

This Insight Paper is an open-source tactical-operational assessment. The Lyman operational vignette is fictional and is designed to illustrate concepts rather than reproduce any current Ukrainian or Russian plan, disposition, route or vulnerability. Real place names are used only for geographic context. Assessment cut-off: 14 September 2026.

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