

Armored Forces: An Indispensable Component of Strategic Deterrence

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

Armored ground forces have long been a central component of America's land-power dominance. Despite a decade of predominantly light, motorized and decentralized security operations in Southwest Asia, Russian aggression in eastern Europe has again reminded the world that combined-arms teams of mechanized infantry, Armor, Cavalry, artillery, engineers and air-defense assets – and associated support systems – will remain a decisive factor in shaping the 21st Century geopolitical landscape.

Coalition efforts in defeating the Islamic State in the Middle East could potentially include robust ground offensives to retake fortified cities like Fallujah and Mosul. If our nation's leaders choose that course of action, there would be an emphasis on armored primacy. The focus on concentrated maneuver and joint synergy, incorporating the dynamic confluence of mobility, survivability and lethality found in armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs), finds greatest relevance in the irreplaceable strategic deterrence that only a robust mechanized force can provide.



Figure 1. An M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank from 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, encounters a camel during a weeklong bilateral exercise in February 2014. (Photo by SGT Marcus Fichtl)

Unified land operations of this scope consequently requires capabilities specific to ABCTs, complementing those of equally crucial infantry and Stryker formations, to allow multi-faceted scalability in nation-state deterrence. In the context of joint operations, this utility emerges prominently along two important dimensions of expeditionary power: combined-arms maneuver (CAM) by networked formations to defeat or neutralize opponents, and the projection of ground presence to serve as scalable instruments of national influence – both tangibly and symbolically to bolster allies or intimidate opponents.

While arguments against reduction of the army's mechanized corps, which is planned to comprise 30 combined-arms battalions (CABs) across 10 armored brigades by 2017, often emphasize historical necessity, the unrivaled shock effect of mobile protected firepower, and the recently proven value of heavy platforms in wide-area security operations, the greater imperative of strategic deterrence and the armored force's singular role in unleashing it, offers the most compelling of justifications.

Deterrence through CAM

The first and most dynamic aspect of armored deterrence, often culminating in decisive action, allows the United States to wield the ultimate expression of land dominance against intolerable organizations and nation-states. While the American defense arsenal contains a customizable panoply of threatening instruments, ranging from devastating air power to cyber warfare and Special Operations Forces interference, the Army's wide range of combined arms and joint potential remains the most comprehensive and irresistible means for definitively shaping security environments. Though hostile and rogue leaders stand acutely aware of the United States' multi-faceted capacity to destabilize and degrade their standing with rapid attacks by aerial and motorized formations, it is the potential of forcible entry by the Army's III Corps, now the greatest concentration of mechanized forces in the free world, that focuses attention on the realistic possibilities of regime change in many contested regions.

Influence of this scope, unchanged in its effect since the eras of Caesar, Napoleon and Eisenhower, and now confirmed again by Russian positioning and provocations in the Ukraine, remains the most compelling instrument for coercing nation-state behavior. It is the expeditionary invasion – which must usually contain large-scale ground formations to deploy, close with and destroy the enemy through both physical and psychological shock effect – that allows joint forces the ability to prosecute limited offensives against specific structures or comprehensive campaigns against unstable regimes. While the 1991 Gulf War – where an American-led coalition destroyed the Iraqi army with sweeping CAM – exemplifies the former, the 2003 opening phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom – where the United States and its allies invaded Iraq with unprecedented joint synchronization and synergy – provides a conditional example of the latter.

Just as the very existence of a robust armored force allowed the United States to forcefully conduct the decisive phases of these land wars, and the same prowess has facilitated coercive leverage against belligerent opponents since World War II, the absence of such strength would result in a conversely proportional weakening of influence. No longer able to threaten atrocious regimes in appropriately maneuverable regions with the imminent potential of mechanized invasion – as opposed to the often unrealistic option of massively destructive bombardment and the more conditional impacts of precision strikes and lighter ground attacks – the nation would eventually forfeit a significant measure of its global leadership status. This possibility alone, in addition to the diminishment of high-intensity tactical dominance that would ensue, is reason enough to argue for the preservation of an impactful quantity of heavy brigades. For evidence of this reality, observers need look no further than East Europe and Mesopotamia, where military advances by belligerent powers have directly benefited from reduction in American presence.

Deterrence through armored presence

A second aspect of strategic utility unique to armored forces is the option of forward-posturing ground formations in targeted locations to allow preemptive deterrence. Serving as a more graduated and passive measure than the finality of offensive operations, the positioning of armored brigades in appropriately maneuverable regions offers both a psychological and physical presence that no other BCT or military asset can match. While naval and air components generally influence with stand-off effects, and light, Airborne and Stryker organizations lack commensurate implications of permanency, penetrating operational reach and survivability, the heavy formations communicate a definitive statement of national resolve that cannot be ignored.



Figure 2. SPC Cody Winder, an M1A2 System-Enhancement Program Abrams loader for 2nd ABCT, 3rd Infantry Division, conducts bore-sighting procedures during live-fire accuracy screening. (Photo by SGT Richard Wrigley)

Even within the ABCTs themselves the deterring effect is adjustable, as various task organizations can offer greater or less degrees of intimidation and support. While main battle tanks – such as the M1A2 Abrams with its inherent implications of maximum lethality – serve as universal symbols of aggression and offensive capability, more versatile platforms, such as the M2A2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle and other armored personnel carriers (APCs) reveal a moderated posture that allows more nuanced communication of American intent. Taking the

organizational customization further, maneuver brigades can be readily empowered with greater ranges of internal combined-arms potency by task-organizing light, aerial, motorized and mechanized battalions under single commands. In this manner, the graduated utility of projecting heavy assets to buttress diplomatic endeavors, scaled to convey specific levels of preparedness, can produce a multiplying effect.

The positioning of armor-centric forces with combined-arms potential can thus be highly effective in bolstering allies in contentious regions. In long-term security agreements, like those the United States has maintained with South Korea, Germany and Middle East allies, the enduring presence of survivable and lethal ground formations transmits the depth of American commitment. In other situations where rapid deterrence is needed on behalf of a threatened partner, as exemplified by the developing crises in Ukraine and Iraq, the positioning of armored brigades or more diverse task organizations for allied training and readiness operations can have a powerful stabilizing effect. Going forward, this type of support will be extremely beneficial under Brigade Regional Alignment, as the deployment of CABs with tanks and APCs will contribute an empowering impact on relations with partnered relations.



Figure 3. A Soldier assigned to 3rd Armored Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, pulls security next to an M-2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle during a training rotation at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA. (Photo by SGT Eric M. Garland II)

If the bolstering of host and allied nations is beneficial to American alliances, then the conditional intimidation factor of armored forces is equally valuable. The sheer presence of formations with superior survivability, mobility and lethality in density across trafficable landscapes carries a degree of passive military and political intimidation that cannot be replicated by any other national asset and severely limits a belligerent state's offensive options. Once in position, even if aggressive maneuver operations are not militarily or diplomatically viable, the mechanized combined-arms force becomes a capital asset that cannot be attacked without risk of massive retaliation by superior American strike power. Consequently, the forward placement of heavy formations in maneuver proximity to hostile or rogue regimes allows a potent and coercive effect without resorting directly to kinetic action. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Operation Atlantic Resolve, which is intended to establish a strategic cordon against Russian influence in 2015, perfectly represents such limiting endeavors.

Conclusion

The Army Chief of Staff recently stated definitively that the U.S. Army's mission is "about deterrence and compelling others not to do things." To achieve this value, the nation's premier land-power service must be composed with enough armored density to support American interests in unified land operations across diverse environments. Following the Army's restructuring, one-third of its planned 32 maneuver brigades will remain mechanized across 1st Armored, 1st Cavalry and 1st, 3rd and 4th Infantry Divisions, reflecting a 21-percent reduction in ABCTs since 2012. Given the need to maintain a balanced force amid competing fiscal priorities, while still recognizing the irreplaceable versatility that infantry and Stryker BCTs provide in topographically restrictive regions and urban settings, the Army must resist the temptation to further downsize the heavy force from this historically

low stature. To do so would not only restrict America's strategic options but also place its capability to dynamically influence populations and resource initiatives in jeopardy.

In the final analysis, the imperative of American expeditionary land dominance will always fall to the national army. In pursuit of this mission, the ground force needs to maintain a robust armored corps that amplifies joint capabilities and is capable of meaningfully shaping operational conditions and outcomes through strategic deterrence. In the dimension of combined-arms warfare, the nation must have a maneuver component that can unleash shock effects against opponents with the highest intensity of mobile protected firepower. In the more graduated realm of strategic posturing, it requires an arsenal of mechanized brigades to serve as impactful instruments for bolstering allies and intimidating opponents. Given the potential damage that attrition to the remaining heavy formations would have on the nation's strategic and tactical capabilities, the imperative is clear: the Army must maintain a decisively capable armored force, and it must be sized to meet the security challenges of the 21st Century.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
APC – armored personnel carrier
BCT – brigade combat team
CAB – combined-arms battalion
CAM – combined-arms maneuver



Figure 4. PFC Adrian Echeverria, an indirect-fire infantryman with 2nd ABCT, 4th Infantry Division, prepares to load a 120mm mortar round during gunnery qualification near Camp Buehring, Kuwait. *(Photo by SSG Andrew Porch)*