

Balancing the Combined-Arms Force

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

The U.S. Army announced sweeping plans in Summer 2013 to reorganize its brigade combat teams (BCTs) across both Active and National Guard Components into lesser quantities of more robust organizations. Based on the 38th Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA)'s assessment of predicted "contingency plans" and "rotational requirements," the Total Force has since restructured to 60 BCTs with a tactical distribution of 34 infantry, nine Stryker and 17 armored.¹ Moving forward, even as it faces increased national security demands across five continents, the Army is expected to further reduce its maneuver capacity to between 56 and 50 BCTs due to continued budgetary constraints.²

The problematic result of this reorganization is an unbalanced maneuver structure that is disproportionately light and perilously narrowed in tactical potential. With the American joint force reorienting on emerging crises across the Middle East and Eastern Europe – operational environments that have traditionally demanded diverse combined-arms teams with dynamic operational reach and strike ability – the Army should consider moving toward a BCT distribution with more equal allocations of light and heavy formations. Rather than prioritizing the importance of one type over the other, adopting greater balance in fighting capacity would better achieve the CSA's imperative "to increase the Army's operational capability and flexibility."³

BCT optimization

The primary rationale for expanded equilibrium among BCT types, or at least prevention of further reduction in mechanized density, stems from optimized capabilities that infantry (IBCT), Stryker (SBCT) and armored (ABCT) formations contribute to regionally aligned forces and Guard mobilization. They each possess graduated degrees of mobility, protection, firepower and expeditionary rapidity, thereby providing specialized utility in landscapes ranging from open deserts and plains to restrictive mountains, jungles and cities. According to the Army's 2014 **Operating Concept**, each BCT, regardless of posture, is mandated to "prevent conflict, shape the security environment, and win wars" through "joint combined-arms operations." This requirement consequently demands structural depth in light, medium and heavy forces to support both contingency efforts and major campaigns.⁴

Beginning with infantry BCTs, the current array of six light, five airborne and three air-assault brigades on active service, in addition to 20 light brigades in the Guard, are doctrinally designed for "operations in close terrain, such as swamps, woods, hilly and mountainous areas, and densely populated areas."⁵ As the lightest BCTs with majority status at 58 percent of the Army's maneuver strength, they wield rifle battalions with high capacity for airmobile attack while fighting across immature combat theaters with minimal logistical support.⁶ Despite these strengths, the very structure that allows expeditionary rapidity also limits broader utility in high-intensity and high-consumption conflict. The IBCT's lightened signature – which includes only an anemic organic allocation of unprotected trucks for tactical transport – precludes inclusion of armored vehicles and large-caliber weaponry.

SBCTs, the Army's medium-level BCTs, are designed to bridge capability gaps between light and heavy forces. With a modest complement of eight Active and one Guard, brigade they represent 25 and 4 percent of their respective components.⁷ As wheeled formations that combine moderately protected transport with rifleman density, the newest of the maneuver brigades is, according to Army doctrine, "more deployable than the ABCT and has greater tactical mobility, protection and firepower than the IBCT."⁸ Despite these strengths, the SBCT's intermediate stature necessitates conditional disadvantages of both their lighter and heavier counterparts. While platform weight makes them less strategically deployable than infantry brigades, the Stryker's relatively light armor and weaponry leave it vulnerable against direct-fire cannon and area-denial technology.⁹

The final and heaviest formation – the ABCT – represents 31 and 25 percent of Active and Guard BCTs, respectively, while serving as the Army's premier forcible-entry force in major combat operations. As emphasized by BG Scott McKean, Chief of Armor/commandant of the U.S. Army Armor School, "the need for our armored force is increasing" and its singular ability to "close with and destroy the enemy using fire, maneuver and shock effect" is a critical capability ABCTs "bring as part of the combined-arms team."¹⁰ However, this optimization for high-intensity, high-consumption and industrial warfare creates converse limitations. Encumbered by mechanized platforms like main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles with intensive logistical signatures, constraints on

strategic mobility make them the least expeditionary combat units in the Army inventory and often require prepositioned fleets.

The outcome of varied BCT optimization – with units assigned to regional commands according to specialized capabilities – is that the Army requires balance to fulfill its self-described imperative to “allow joint force commanders” across expansive theaters “to dictate the terms of operations and render enemies incapable of responding effectively.”¹¹ Even as it must have infantry and Stryker formations to fight through restrictive and complex terrain, America’s landpower institution must possess an impactful armored corps to unleash maximal and scalable destruction. This requirement for relative parity in operational utility – a necessary compromise to sustain overmatch against emerging threats in Eastern Europe and the Middle East while remaining committed to the “Pacific Pivot” – can be best assessed according to the Army’s core competencies: combined-arms maneuver (CAM) and wide-area security (WAS).

CAM

The 2014 *Operating Concept* defines the Army’s primary mission as the projection of “mobility, protection and firepower necessary to strike the enemy from unexpected directions.” It achieves this effect, in a joint context, through CAM with regionally assigned units and task-organized teams against both predictive and unknown threats. Each type of maneuver brigade, according to light, airmobile, motorized or mechanized profiles, synergizes with joint, interagency and multinational coalitions to “defeat enemy ground forces, seize, occupy and defend land areas, and achieve physical, temporal and psychological advantages over the enemy.”¹²

Despite this reality, the BCT reorganization plan has catalyzed an institutional reorganization toward a lighter posture based on expeditionary responsiveness and economized platform distribution. As criticized by Gian Gentile in his controversial 2012 book *Wrong Turn*, “the U.S. Army has already shifted its organizational structure toward light infantry in place of mechanized armored forces” with “two thirds of the active-duty combat brigades” consisting of “light infantry, the shock troops of [counterinsurgency].”¹³ Under the current and emerging Total Force structure, this disproportional increase in infantry units, rising to 72 percent when combined with Stryker infantry, threatens to leave the Army equipped to support narrower ranges of expeditionary efforts.

This transition consequently undermines the United States’ capacity to execute several crucial joint endeavors. Beginning with forcible entry to defeat intolerable regimes, large-scale invasion remains a critical aspect of national power. This type of major combat operation often requires lighter elements to support heavier counterparts as they attack in-depth to shatter enemy fronts. As assessed by senior Army officers LTG H.R. McMaster, COL Mark Elfendahl and LTC Chris McKinney in their impactful 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article, armored forces with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles alone possess ability to “keep pace with fast-moving aircraft” across contested landscapes “when operating as part of an air-ground team.”¹⁴ Mechanized BCTs also possess the Army’s only cavalry capable of reconnaissance by force and artillery capable of firing while protected.

Just as infantry brigades proved their distinctive value during entry into Granada, Panama and Afghanistan, the singular importance of ABCTs in facilitating American dominance finds recent historical relevance in the 1991 and 2003 invasions of Iraq. First, in Operation Desert Storm, a large international coalition achieved overwhelming victory by enabling broad armored envelopment with a variety of supporting arms and massive airpower effects. Twelve years later, the opening phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom maximized net-centric synchronization and proved the potency of armor-centric teams attacking along narrow axes while supported by precision air and naval strikes.

A second, more versatile and flexible role that armored forces fulfill in CAM is providing decisive, yet scalable, overmatch in hybrid environments and high-intensity urban combat. Moving beyond sweeping confrontations of mass and scale, organizations with mechanized infantry, cavalry, engineers, artillery and tanks alone possess the mobile protected firepower required to move forcefully against strongpoints fortified by mined approaches and standoff weaponry. While infantry and Stryker forces can prove vulnerable against entrenched opponents in complex infrastructure, armor-centric teams have repeatedly proven their ability to excel against hybrid opponents in unpredictable and rapidly changing landscapes.

The tactical utility of diverse fighting teams – with a nuanced involvement by light, medium **and** heavy formations – was definitively proven in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In addition to combined-arms attacks that succeeded in

Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul, the 2008 Battle of Sadr City offers instructive lessons for such impact. Initially, according to a 2013 RAND study, Stryker forces attacking into the dense urban setting of East Baghdad “suffered heavily from [explosively formed penetrator] and other anti-armor systems” and lost six platforms in six days. The task force then galvanized success by augmenting with tanks and mechanized infantry to allow a critical “degree of tactical overmatch” while Strykers and riflemen provided “needed overwatch and security.”¹⁵ As proven in previous American wars, customizable combinations of heavy armor, motorized transport and dismounted soldiers proved ideal for negotiating fiercely contested terrain.

A final argument for empowering CAM through more equal distribution of BCT types is the reality of increasing anti-access and area-denial capabilities by potential opponents. As the U.S. military encounters both conventional and hybrid foes, advanced aerial and ground interdiction may stymie both airborne and motorized attacks. These threats, encompassing both emerging technologies and unsophisticated devices, find greatest concern in the proliferation of third-generation surface-to-air missiles like the Russian-built S-400 and in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) employed in recent years in Lebanon, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁶

The 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, in particular, provides a cautionary example for modern militaries – including the U.S. Army as it completes BCT reorganization – of how attacking prepared opponents without adequate combined-arms diversity can retard strategic success. In this case, according to RAND analyst Dr. David Johnson, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) “became generally incapable of the joint combined-arms fire and maneuver capabilities generally associated with major combat operations” and therefore “paid a heavy price in casualties for their lack of preparation.” The resulting lackluster ground campaign revealed for a global audience perils of embracing disproportionately light combat profiles with predominant orientation toward stability functions.

Later, in the 2009 Israeli offensive into Gaza called Operation Cast Lead, a refocused IDF attacked a similar hybrid threat with a more varied combined-arms mix. In addition to incorporating more Merkava tanks and armored infantry carriers to allow rapid advances through enemy obstacles and stand-off fires, they synchronized heavy engineers, artillery effects and air strikes to enable maneuver brigades to clear and suppress entrenched defenders.¹⁷ As the U.S. Army completes realignment, it should learn from Israeli interventions – in addition to its own experiences with combined-arms success in Southwest Asia – to prioritize and resource a truly full spectrum-capable force.

WAS

The second major Army competency is directly empowered by expertise in CAM. Doctrinally defined as “the application of the elements of combat power to protect populations, forces, infrastructure and activities to deny the enemy positions of advantage and to consolidate gains to retain the initiative,” WAS requires forces to pursue ranges of stability and partnered operations. As important elements in the Army’s regional-alignment strategy to both rotationally and permanently deploy forward elements to bolster allies and intimidate opponents, armored formations remain critical for meeting its mission to provide “the joint-force commander with reaction time and maneuver space.”¹⁸

The importance of maintaining balance in projection of light, medium and heavy elements has thus gained renewed importance as the joint force reduces presence in Afghanistan and repositions to engage new threats. Even as elements of American national power “pivot” toward the Pacific theater, where China and North Korea maintain large armored corps and improving area-denial capabilities, American commanders have been compelled to refocus on crises across the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Expeditionary operations in these regions – where combined-arms teams with mechanized capability have proven decisive in previous conflicts – demand preservation of a sizable, resourced and forward-deployed armored presence.

The redeployment of heavy units to settings where mechanized importance was recently de-emphasized, if only in prioritization of resources, illustrates the continued need for diversity within the larger panoply of U.S. military power. Task-organizing multi-faceted ground forces to conduct WAS offers customizable solutions for stabilizing crises and deterring foes. Among Army combat formations, ABCTs in particular possess the most scalable ability to, as defined by Johnson, “scale up” to face “high-lethality stand-off threats” or “scale down to confront irregular adversaries as part of a balanced force that includes light infantry.”¹⁹

This singular versatility has been recognized during stability efforts even in regions with restrictive terrain like Afghanistan, where the U.S. Marine Corps, the Netherlands and Canada deployed tanks to support patrols, attacks and defenses. As argued by MAJ Trevor Cadieu, a Canadian Army officer who commanded a Leopard II company in Kandahar Province in 2008, heavy armor “restored tactical mobility to the combined-arms team in Afghanistan through its ability to penetrate grape and marijuana fields, clear mine and IED belts, and breach mud walls and compounds that were previously impassable to the [Light Armored Vehicle] III.”²⁰ Furthermore, ABCTs alone possess unique support assets such as tracked engineers, medics and personnel transport that lighter units organically lack. Since IEDs endure as proven “low-tech” weapons of choice for guerrilla and hybrid resistance, these enablers will remain in high demand.

Another doctrinal aspect of WAS endeavors is forward positioning by regionally aligned and partnered forces to “preempt enemy actions and retain the initiative.”²¹ The re-emergence of territorial aggression in Europe, in particular, has compelled re-emphasis on the central role that survivable combined-arms teams hold in projecting credible strategic deterrence. As explained by McMaster in his recent *Military Review* essay, “the forward positioning of capable ground forces elevates the cost of aggression to a level that the aggressor is unwilling to pay and prevents the aggressor from doing what Russia has in Ukraine – posing to the international community a *fait accompli* and then portraying its reactions as escalatory.”²²

Among the entire U.S. arsenal, heavy brigades, typically task-organized with light and wheeled formations, telegraph unique implications of permanency while demonstrating resolute intent to support allied interests. Reversing recent trends that saw the complete withdraw of American mechanized battalions from Europe, multinational activity sets that include imposing Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles have returned under NATO’s Operation Atlantic Resolve in numbers. More realistic than threat of strategic bombardment, and less transitory than naval reinforcement, this type of armored presence, even in relatively small densities, communicates definitive strength of national will.

Given the need to preserve stability in former Soviet-bloc states, the Middle East and across East Asia, armored forces are once again proving their strategic value. As McMaster, Elfendahl and McKinney argue in their *Foreign Affairs* article, the emergence of destabilizing territorial aggrandizement – exemplified by Russia’s mechanized invasion of Georgia in 2008 and motorized occupation of Crimea in 2014 – requires the United States and its allies to “retain sufficient armored forces to deter and, if necessary, confront large, well-armed ground forces.” Taking the analyses further, the authors assess that America must maintain a “balanced force able to overcome their countermeasures – and [ABCTs] are a fundamental component of that balanced force.”²³

Toward more balanced force

When appreciating hard-won lessons from previous conflicts and requirements for tactical diversity among regionally aligned Active and Guard BCTs, the imperative becomes clear: the United States needs a robust armored corps to complement infantry and Stryker capabilities against complex challenges. This means it must be structured, as directed in the Army’s *Operating Concept*, to maneuver over “dispersed over wide areas” and “develop *situational understanding through action* while possessing the *mobility* to concentrate rapidly.”²⁴ Only balanced availability among light, medium and heavy formations, each with specialized optimization, can prosecute and dominate unified land operations against non-state, conventional and hybrid opponents.

Given these demands, the Army should first and foremost preserve its 17 remaining ABCTs and, if necessary, apply future force reductions to the 34 infantry brigades that comprise the Total Force majority. The reduced stature of the American mechanized corps, even as traditional allies like the United Kingdom have drastically downsized their own, already compels the U.S. joint force to accept risk in the eventuality of a major land war.²⁵ As a further, albeit more fiscally challenging, measure to improve institutional capacity, Army decision-makers should consider converting two IBCTs to ABCT status to allow increased operational flexibility. With multiple brigade-sized mechanized fleets remaining from recent BCT deactivations, these reorganizations would enhance strategic readiness while proving marginally cost-neutral.²⁶

In 2011 the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – an Armor officer who commanded varied formations in combat – wrote that “success in future armed conflict requires the Army to sustain the expertise we’ve developed in [WAS]” and “rekindle our expertise in [CAM].”²⁷ Since then the march of hostile armies in Crimea and

Mesopotamia, in addition to continued instability in Africa, along the Pacific Rim and in Persia, have proven him prophetic. To meet these threats, the U.S. Army requires balance among IBCTs, SBCTs and ABCTs to ensure breadth of capability in mobile protected firepower. Looking toward the 21st Century, let America's landpower institution remain tactically diversified and maximally prepared to defeat the enemies of the free world through full-spectrum dominance.

MAJ Nathan Jennings is a student at the Command and General Staff Officer's Course, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Previous duty positions include assistant professor of history, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 4-9 Cavalry, 2nd BCT, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX; commander, Troop C, 4-9 Cavalry, 2nd BCT, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX, and Kirkuk, Iraq (deployed 2009); platoon leader, Company B, 1-34 Armored Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, Fort Riley, KS, and Baghdad, Iraq (deployed 2006-2007); and 19D Cavalry scout, 2-2 Armored Cavalry Regiment (Light), Fort Polk, LA. His military schooling includes Air Assault and Airborne schools, Maneuver Officer Basic Course, Maneuver Officer Advanced Course and Cavalry Leader's Course. MAJ Jennings holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from Northwestern State University of Louisiana and a master's of arts degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin.

Notes

¹ GEN Raymond Odierno, Pentagon press briefing June 25, 2013; this quantity includes 14 infantry, eight Stryker and 10 ABCTs in the Active Component and 20 infantry, one Stryker and seven ABCTs in the Guard.

² Mathew Cox, "Army Must Shed 6 BCTs to Meet Proposed Budget Cuts," *Military.Com News*, Feb. 12, 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, Oct. 31, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michelle Tan, "Army outlines plan to inactivate 7 brigade combat teams," *Army Times*, May 5, 2014; this percentage excludes 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 75th Ranger Regiment and Special Operations Forces.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Field Manual 3-90.6, *Brigade Combat Team*.

⁹ Staff, "M1126 Strykers in Combat: Experiences & Lessons," *Defense Industry Daily*, Oct. 11, 2005; "Study Faults Army Vehicle," Jeffery Smith, *Washington Post*, March 31, 2005.

¹⁰ BG Scott McKean, "Chief of Armor's Hatch," *ARMOR*, October-December 2014.

¹¹ *Army Operating Concept*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, New York and London: The New Press, 2013.

¹⁴ LTG H.R. McMaster, COL Mark Elfendahl and LTC Chris McKinney, "Why the U.S. Army Needs Armor," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2013.

¹⁵ Dr. David Johnson, M. Wade Markel and Brian Shannon, "The 2008 Battle of Sadr City: Reimagining Urban Combat," RAND Arroyo Center, 2013.

¹⁶ John Gordon and John Matsumura, "The Army's Role in Overcoming Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges," RAND Arroyo Center, 2013.

¹⁷ Dr. David Johnson, "Preparing for 'Hybrid' Opponents: The Israeli Experience in Lebanon and Gaza," RAND Arroyo Center, 2011; Anthony Cordesman, "Preliminary 'Lessons' of the Israeli-Hezbollah War," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006.

¹⁸ *Army Operating Concept*.

¹⁹ Dr. David Johnson, "Heavy Armor in the Future Security Environment," RAND Arroyo Center, 2011.

²⁰ MAJ Trevor Cadieu, "Canadian Armour in Afghanistan," *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 10.4, Winter 2008.

²¹ *Army Operating Concept*.

²² LTG H.R. McMaster, "Continuity and Change: The Army Operating Concept and Clear Thinking About Future War," *Military Review*, March-April, 2015.

²³ McMaster, Elfendahl and McKinney.

²⁴ *Army Operating Concept*.

²⁵ Jack Simpson, "British Army Reduced to One Single Tank Regiment," *The Independent*, March 11, 2015.

²⁶ While conversion of Active Component IBCTs to ABCTs would be ideal to allow maximum readiness, reorganization of Guard IBCTs would provide similar benefit at less cost.

²⁷ GEN Martin Dempsey, "Win, Learn, Focus, Adapt, Win Again," *ARMY Magazine*, March 2011.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

BCT – brigade combat team

CAM – combined-arms maneuver

CSA – Chief of Staff of the Army

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

IDF – Israeli Defense Force

IED – improvised explosive device

SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team

WAS – wide-area security