

‘Kachi Kapshida!’

Rotational Armored Brigade Combat Team Experience in Korea

by COL Steven J. Adams and MAJ Nate Garner

A rotational deployment to the Republic of Korea (RoK) has a number of benefits to the operational force writ large and to the Army’s armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) in particular. This article explains some of our key takeaways from a rotational brigade deployment to the RoK but will not discuss whether or not an ABCT is the appropriate formation for such a mission.

Higher combat readiness

A rotational ABCT arrives in the RoK with a higher degree of combat readiness than a permanently stationed ABCT. An ABCT, for example, will go through an extensive train-up during the course of a year to hone its warfighting skills. The brigade begins by developing mastery at the individual and crew level while training and certifying its leaders. This training then progresses to collective-level proficiency at platoon through brigade level at home station, developing proficiency in all mission-essential tasks (METs). The training culminates with a rotation to a combat-training center (CTC) to validate the ABCT’s ability to conduct combat operations under realistic conditions. The result is a trained and certified lethal brigade combat team ready for a combat deployment or other operational requirement.

Training doesn’t stop here. Units deploying to the RoK continue with an aggressive training regime to sustain MET proficiency. The resources exist to effectively build combat readiness at the individual to platoon level throughout the rotation. Commanders and staffs at echelon are also able to increase their proficiency through a multitude of training events and exercises, both live and in simulation. A robust emergency-deployment readiness exercise program in support of the Korea mission also enhances a unit’s readiness. Units in Korea adopt a “fight tonight” mentality, which allows them to routinely alert and rapidly execute a series of tasks that make them ready for operations on a moment’s notice. This is a level of preparedness that many units don’t achieve at home station and a great benefit to ABCTs afforded the opportunity to experience a rotation to Korea.

Training in Korea not only builds on the decisive-action METs, but it also incorporates two more non-standard METs for the rotational ABCT: “conduct non-combatant evacuation operations” and “conduct weapons of mass destruction [WMD] elimination operations.” The new mission sets are challenging to resource, train and evaluate at home station due to limited expertise in these types of operations, but they are absolutely essential to the success of the brigade during the rotation. The rotational ABCT must spend a considerable amount of time training for these new tasks to rapidly gain proficiency, and training alongside our RoK partners is an added plus.

While training in the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO) comes with many advantages, there are some limitations that affect readiness. Range availability and maneuver space remains the single largest training constraint for ABCTs in Korea. Because of this, ABCTs tend to lose combined-arms maneuver proficiency at the company to brigade level over time. This requires units to leverage the live, virtual, gaming and simulation training aids available in theater to maintain proficiency. This goes back to the original point: an ABCT that conducts a full train-up at home station and a CTC rotation, with all the training areas and resources that come along with that, has the opportunity to achieve a much higher level of combat readiness than an ABCT permanently stationed in Korea.



Figure 1. A 120mm round from an M1A2 Abrams tank impacts one of many targets during the qualification course at Rodriguez Live-Fire Complex. (Photo by SGT Patrick Eakin, 2nd ABCT Public Affairs)

Building generation of leaders

Combined operations with the RoK army strengthen the alliance and develop leaders. With a continual rotation of forces to the Korean peninsula, we are building a generation of leaders who are able to work closely with RoK army allies at the tactical level and are familiar with operating in the KTO. Most of the training events in Korea are combined, affording U.S. forces an opportunity to continually work through problems at the small unit to theater level. These events generate incredibly valuable dialogue between leaders at echelon as they grind through and solve problems. The more leaders and units with this combined experience, the better prepared we are for anything that should happen on the peninsula.

Seeing the terrain and experiencing the environment first-hand is also invaluable to the force. The Korean environment is unique and generally doesn't look like other locations where we train ABCTs. The terrain is dominated by highly restrictive maneuver corridors with frequent river crossings. Maneuvering an ABCT in this type of environment requires special considerations that units in Korea have to struggle through. Also, the temperatures in Korea vary significantly from sweltering heat and humidity in the summer to frigid temperatures in the winter that freeze water supplies for both sustainment and decontamination operations. These conditions expose leaders to problems that are not easy to replicate all in one location. The Korean experience builds competencies in leaders that will set their units up for success.

Every Soldier within the ABCT formation will engage with the Korean people on some level. From combined training events, to partnered cultural events, to social interactions off duty, the U.S. Army presence among the Korean population is ubiquitous. This experience builds more adaptive leaders and grows a needed competency across the force.



Figure 2. An M1A2 Abrams tank from Bravo Company, 1-9 Cavalry, fires its 120mm cannon during qualification Table XII at Rodriguez Live Fire Complex. (Photo by SGT Patrick Eakin, 2nd ABCT Public Affairs)

Mastery of CBRN

To conduct counter-WMD, units must first be able to operate in a chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) environment. Mastering the fundamentals in CBRN tasks requires subject-matter expertise (which is limited in the ABCT), quality repetitions and, most importantly, leader emphasis. Developing a cadre of CBRN subject-matter experts to evaluate individual task proficiency to ensure Soldiers are meeting the standard is critical to closing this expertise gap. Incorporating CBRN enablers (hazard-assessment platoons and chemical-response teams) into leader-development events – and home-station training – builds a foundation of trust and confidence in this counter-WMD team.

The ABCT must conduct counter-WMD operations at home station, leveraging CBRN experts and technical enablers as part of its training plan. These company-level training events should be planned as separate situational-training-exercise lanes to allow units to focus the military decision-making process on this specific operation, providing the focus it requires to achieve proficiency. Fighting and winning on a contaminated battlefield depends on our Soldiers' abilities to detect, protect and decontaminate CBRN hazards. Units must also be able to treat casualties in a contaminated environment as well as effectively conduct subterranean operations, as WMD sites are often located in underground facilities.

In Korea, partnership with the RoK army is key to training and building proficiency in CBRN operations. Combined exercises allow the ABCT to practice how counter-WMD operations will be executed during a time of war. It helps to identify key points of friction with regard to interoperability of mission-command systems and standard operating procedures for tactical operations. While units will rarely have the opportunity to work with RoK army units prior to their Korea rotation, they will get substantial opportunities while on the peninsula.

In conclusion, the benefits of a Korea deployment are many:

- A rotational deployment in the RoK increases the ABCT's combat readiness as well as the U.S. Forces Korea's combat readiness to meet any challenge faced on the peninsula. An ABCT that conducts a full train-up at home station and a CTC rotation has the opportunity to achieve a much higher level of combat readiness than an ABCT permanently assigned to Korea.
- Rotations of ABCTs to the KTO are building a generation of leaders who can work with foreign partners, in this case the RoK army, in the Korean environment and terrain.

- Finally, a rotation to the Korean theater forces a (re)mastery of CBRN skills once heavily emphasized in the U.S. Army, but in recent years has not received the requisite amount of attention.

The rotational experience of an ABCT to Korea cannot be replicated at home station or at a CTC. The challenges posed by the Korean environment and terrain are crucial in honing the adaptability and flexibility of an armored force and its leaders. There are costs, for example, to training readiness over time, but the leaders and Soldiers who participate in a Korea rotation seed the force with invaluable experience.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

CBRN – chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear

CTC – combat-training center

KTO – Korean Theater of Operations

MET – mission-essential task

RoK – Republic of Korea

USMA – U.S. Military Academy

WMD – weapon of mass destruction