How the Stryker Brigade Fights
and the Alignment of the SBCT in Corps and Division Formations

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"The most lethal part of our fast, quiet Stryker vehicles is the superbly trained, rested, and aware nine-man rifle squad that comes out of the back."

— COL Stephen Townsend[1]

Then-commander of the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division

The purpose of this article is to examine how the Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) fights in multidomain operations (MDO) given its unique capabilities and limitations. It also examines how the Stryker brigade may further support the Army's shift in focus to the division and corps level by aligning an SBCT to each corps as well as the priority armored divisions, providing similar capabilities to what an Army corps had during the Cold War era. This would also provide corps and division commanders a much-needed increase in Infantrymen to augment an armored brigade combat team's (ABCT) number of Infantrymen (108 squads vs. 36 squads in an ABCT) to better allow for consolidation of gains. Aligning Stryker brigades to a corps and division can significantly enhance the warfighting capabilities of those formations and provide corps and division commanders better options in the fight. While the unique mission variables of a particular fight will often cause leaders to modify their employment, this article outlines how the Stryker brigade fights as well as provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of the brigade, a short review of how armored cavalry regiments (ACRs) were aligned with corps, and a recommendation on how to employ the SBCT in today's Army. Additionally, four of the six active-duty Stryker brigades are orphaned from any division structure and should maintain current enablers to provide the Army the greatest flexibility in future employment.

Soldiers assigned to 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, NATO Multinational Division Northeast, utilize a Stryker to engage targets during exercise Griffin Shock 23 in Bemowo Piskie, Poland, on 16 May 2023. (Photo by SGT John Schoebel)

Soldiers assigned to 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment dismount a Stryker during a live-fire exercise in Germany on 8 September 2023. (Photo by Kevin Sterling Payne)

How the Stryker Brigade Fights

The Stryker brigade is a combined arms formation built around highly lethal infantry squads with inherent maneuverability and speed to move to the decisive point on the battlefield. It is designed to move rapidly to a position of relative advantage, dismount, and fight effectively in close and urban terrain. The Stryker infantry battalions employ tactically mobile combat vehicles to reach final assault positions to close with and destroy enemy formations using a combination of dismounted infantry supported by 30mm heavy precision fire weapons, indirect fires, and anti-armor systems (Javelins; tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided [TOW] missiles; AT-4s; and M3 Carl Gustaf systems) employed primarily by infantry squads, scout teams, and engineer sappers. An example of this mobility has been validated recently during the 2nd Cavalry Regiment's deployments to and from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Poland by ground from their home station in Germany.

Infantry Battalions

When operating in open terrain, our three Stryker infantry battalions are, by design, more lethal in the defense than on the attack. When they do attack, they do so by exploiting periods of transition to rapidly seize key terrain and gain a position of relative advantage over an adversary. This forces the enemy to attack the SBCT in hasty defensive positions (preferably in complex terrain) where their numerous anti-tank systems, secured with dismounted infantry, can have the greatest effect. Infantry companies within the brigade must, therefore, be experts at repositioning rapidly, often covering extended distances at high speeds and then transitioning rapidly to a hasty defense in complex terrain to overwatch enemy avenues of approach.

The Stryker infantry carrier vehicle (ICV) is not a helicopter, nor is it a Bradley. A helicopter is designed to transport infantry to the battlefield, withdraw from the fight, and then extract them when complete. Conversely, a Bradley is an infantry fighting vehicle that provides mobile protected firepower on the battlefield secured by organic Infantry Soldiers. The Stryker ICV falls between these two systems. The Stryker infantry carrier is a system consisting of a rifle squad, a two-man crew, and a Stryker vehicle. The Stryker's primary mission is to transport Infantry Soldiers to the probable line of contact, provide supporting fires to enable their advance against the enemy, and then be prepared to resupply them when needed, evacuate them when wounded, or extract them when complete. Strykers are not cached in distant hide sites,

rendering their mounted firepower irrelevant to the dismounted Infantrymen, nor are they employed as an assaulting element in open terrain where their limited survivability can place 11 lives at risk simultaneously. While supporting dismounted maneuver, Strykers are crewed by competent and trained leaders who can maneuver all four vehicles in a platoon as a single unit or in split sections in support of the infantry squads.

Air Assault

All three infantry battalions are trained to execute air mobile and air assault operations to enable the vertical envelopment of enemy forces in the close fight. The brigade executes shallow insertions (less than 10 kilometers beyond the forward line of troops) with a deliberate plan for ground assault and link up by the unit's Strykers under the command of a tactical leader.

Reconnaissance

The reconnaissance squadron's primary job is to gain and maintain contact with the enemy throughout the depth of the brigade's operational environment to answer the brigade's priority information requirements that drive decisions and operational maneuver. The squadron is continuously active during combined arms maneuver and does not have periods of dedicated reconstitution. Given the brigade's superior ability to move rapidly out of contact, the reconnaissance squadron focuses its reconnaissance efforts on finding and confirming potential friendly avenues of approach that are free of significant enemy contact but allow infantry battalions to maneuver rapidly against assailable enemy flanks. Scout platoons in the reconnaissance squadron and infantry battalions are equipped to establish both dismounted and mounted observation posts using the Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System (LRAS3) system, inserted by ground or air. Additionally, the reconnaissance squadron is the executor of the brigade deep fight and employs intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); artillery; and aircraft to attrit and disrupt enemy forces ahead of the forward line of own troops (FLOT).

Fires

The brigade employs the towed M777s on specific targets that are essential to its scheme of maneuver. The brigade always seeks to mass the effects of at least two batteries on every brigade-level target. This

Soldiers assigned to 1st Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment fire 120mm mortar rounds during the Mortar Training and Evaluation Program in Germany, on 28 June 2022. (Photo by SGT Randis Monroe)

enables immediate effects on target and the ability to reposition rapidly to avoid enemy counterfire. Given their slower displacement and movement times, M777 platoons will bound to new locations after a number of rounds are fired. This requires agile batteries and fire direction centers that are highly trained at rapid limbering and emplacement procedures. Additionally, to maintain the rapid tempo of advance, the field artillery battalion generally has at least one battery moving to establish position areas behind the lead maneuver elements. The brigade employs reinforcing or general support rocket fires, when available, as its primary counterfire asset and to destroy enemy high priority targets in the deep area identified by the reconnaissance squadron. The brigade has 36 x 120mm Stryker mortar carriers which present an extremely lethal indirect fire capability to serve as the primary indirect fire asset to the infantry company and cavalry troop. In the attack, battalions leverage their mortars in the close fight primarily to suppress enemy defensive positions to enable the advance of dismounted infantry to a position of relative advantage.

Protection

For mobility and countermobility, the SBCT employs defensive obstacles to turn enemy maneuver forces into complex terrain where they can be engaged by their infantry squads' Javelins. The brigade conducts deliberate breaching using the principles of SOSRA (suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, and assault), but does so primarily in congested and complex terrain where it can avoid long-range fires from defending armor and heavy machine guns. Alternatively, battalions and companies are prepared to execute in-stride breaches in complex or urban terrain as part of continued offensive operations. For this reason, SBCT engineers are trained to support maneuver operations while decentralized in platoon formations. The SBCT currently has two sapper squads with Stryker Engineer Support Vehicles (ESVs). Keeping these like assets in the brigade is key to maintaining the speed and maneuverability of the formation. Other types of engineer battalions would not provide optimum support to the SBCT formation.

Sustainment

Since its inception, the SBCT has been lacking in sustainment assets. Originally designed as an interim force, the SBCT was short on logisticians with haul vehicles capable of being transported by C-130 (a requirement that has since been lifted). Given the limited logistics assets in a Stryker brigade, key capabilities are centralized in the brigade support area (BSA) where each battalion is represented by its forward support company command post. The brigade maximizes lift aircraft to push Class V and critical Class IX to all battalions to maintain momentum. The brigade support battalion (BSB) maintains a forward logistics element (FLE), commanded by the A Company/BSB commander, that positions behind the lead battalions to provide rapid ground resupply of critical commodities such a fuel and artillery ammunition.

The Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR)

During the Cold War, with the U.S. Army at a strength of 780,000 and 18 divisions, the three armored corps each included an armored cavalry regiment of 5,000 Soldiers that gave the corps commander a mobile armored force to perform a variety of missions.

The "Division of 86'" and the "Army of Excellence" restructuring during the mid-1980s changed the structure of the armored cavalry regiment. Restructuring was conducted for two main reasons:
1) It better supported the Airland Battle concept that relied on the corps commander to successfully execute the campaign plan, and
2) It helped to align the Army's combat requirements and force structure.

As the centerpiece of AirLand Battle doctrine, the corps required key assets to help influence the battle. The ACR was designed to reduce battlefield friction by providing the corps commander with detailed intelligence about the enemy and the terrain. The fundamental roles of cavalry formations are to perform reconnaissance and provide security in close operations. This intelligence allowed the commander to understand and control the critical portions of the corps' battlespace.

Soldiers from the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team maneuver through the Mojave Desert during National Training Center Rotation 22-08 at Fort Irwin, CA. (Photo by CPT Cory Johnson)

As inherently flexible and mobile organizations, cavalry units have historically executed various missions, including close reconnaissance, flank security, counterattack force, mobile reserve, covering retreats, and pursuit of the enemy. The regiment gained flexibility by possessing organic capabilities in all the battlefield operating systems (BOS): intelligence, maneuver, fire support, mobility and survivability, air defense, combat service support, and command and control. Field Manual 100-15, *Corps Operations*, prescribed a role for the cavalry regiment in both the close battle and the deep battle. In the close battle, the regiment conducts reconnaissance and security missions. In the defense, besides screen, guard, and cover, the cavalry regiment, usually augmented with infantry, could also conduct an effective economy-of-force mission.

How Can the Army Employ the SBCT Formation?

Because of the large number of mounted infantry with overwhelming firepower and anti-armor capabilities, the SBCT is well suited for a variety of roles for the corps and division commander to fill gaps, roles, or mission sets similar to the ACR in the Cold War era. With a disproportionate number of Infantrymen, the SBCT can fill gaps in the ABCT and provide light formations a highly mobile force with a significant upgrade in fire power, all while providing the optimal solution to consolidate gains.

Recommendations

Given the lack of world stability and an Army based mainly in the continental United States (CONUS), the need for an even more flexible brigade exists today. This is particularly critical since the Stryker brigade can deploy as part of a corps or division. The SBCT is equipped and structured to ensure the success of corps and division MDO operations. Its deployability, mobility, lethality, and versatility all focus on the necessity to develop the correct type of formation that the corps and division commander can use to augment their existing forces. Each corps should be aligned to an active-duty Stryker brigade. The remaining active-duty SBCTs should then be aligned to the priority armored divisions to allow for combined training opportunities (warfighter exercises, combat training center [CTC] rotations, etc.) and assigned mission sets. This would entail leaving the current Stryker brigade with its organic field artillery battalion, reconnaissance squadron, and brigade engineer battalion intact to provide the corps and division commander with a robust and highly maneuverable force that is able to fill a variety of missions.

"In urban combat, no better vehicle exists for delivering a squad of Infantrymen to close in and destroy the enemy. The Stryker is fast, quiet, survivable, reliable, and lethal. Most important, it delivers the most valuable weapon to the battlefield: a Soldier."

— LTC Michael E. Kurilla[2]

Then-commander of 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 1st SBCT, 25th Infantry Division

Notes

[1] "Accelerating Momentum: The Stryker Brigade Combat Team as a Learning Organization," Association of the United Stated Army Torchbearer National Security Report, June 2006, https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/TBNSR-2006-Accelerating-Momentum-The-Stryker_Brigade-Combat-Team-as-a-Learning-Organization.pdf.

[2] Letter to the Editor, *The Washington Post*, 5 April 2005, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/04/05/strykers-get-the-job-done/644b557f-84dc-4bed-ace1-bd2bbf581e31/.

LTC (Retired) Bill Koziar served as a military analyst for the Stryker Warfighters' Forum at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, for 13 years. During that time, he conducted more than 500 combat leader interviews of returning Stryker Soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan. He is a graduate of the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course and Cannon Battery Officer Course at Fort Sill, OK; the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning, GA (known as Fort Moore since 2023); and the Command and General Staff Course at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in government and a Master of Education from the College of William and Mary as well as a Master of Business Administration from St. Martin's University.