

Armored Forces: Mobility, Protection and Precision Firepower Essential for Future

by COL David B. Haight, COL Paul J. Laughlin and CPT Kyle F. Bergner

The U.S. Army's brigade combat teams will encounter a complex range of missions, environments and enemies, demanding units with appropriate balances of mobility, protection and precision firepower. Our forces must provide mobility, protection and precision firepower to ensure they accomplish missions across the full range of military operations. They must do this independently, as part of the Joint force and with international partners.

Units possessing the proper balance of mobility, protection and precision firepower operate with speed of action and the ability to combine firepower and maneuver to defeat the enemy rapidly and to accomplish the mission at minimal cost. Mobility, protection and precision firepower are essential to developing the situation in contact with the enemy and in overwhelming enemy forces in the close fight, ensuring we do not fight a fair fight. Battles in Sadr City, An Najaf, Fallujah, Tal Afar, Musa Qala and elsewhere bear witness to this basic requirement for mobility, protection and precision firepower – these capabilities proved requisite for success and were not organic to forces initially involved in these battles.

Our BCTs must be able to achieve mobility, protection and precision firepower in all conditions. While aircraft excel at mobility and can deliver precision fires, suboptimal weather conditions severely reduce their availability and capacity to deliver fire support, leaving some units without precision firepower or enhanced mobility. Units with mobility, protection and precision firepower in the proper balance are able to achieve decisive

overmatch with the enemy due to their cross-country mobility, survivability and persistent direct-fire capability,¹ while forces who sacrifice one trait to amplify another often experience mixed results. For example, units fielded mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles in response to increases in improvised explosive devices experienced significant reductions in their mobility because of overemphasis on protection. Furthermore, adaptations in the employment of IEDs reduced the protection of MRAPs.

While a perfect equilibrium is not feasible in every conceivable situation, the need for mobility, protection and precision firepower permeates light infantry, Stryker and armored units.

Mobility

The ability to maneuver cross-country with equal or greater ease than our adversaries is essential, even in the most restrictive terrain. Developed and employed to counter machineguns and battlefield obstacles, tanks restored tactical mobility in World War I, avoiding high casualties and disrupting the enemy through shock action. This tactical mobility under fire remains a requirement after a century of conflict.

For example, during and after World War II, armored combined-arms forces played a significant role in changing the character of war, as witnessed in the German blitzkrieg and the U.S. Army's breakout from the Normandy beachhead. In Vietnam, the mobility of mechanized forces from 1st Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 25th In-



fantry Division, 5th Marines and other units proved essential to Operations Lincoln, El Paso II, Cedar Falls and Junction City, among others.² The defeat of the Iraqi Army in Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom depended upon units' ability to fight for information and survive encounters with enemies while maneuvering through both open and restrictive terrain.

On the other hand, the imbalance of mobility, protection and precision firepower has often complicated missions, allowing enemy organizations to negate U.S. advantages and inflict unnecessary casualties. For example, during the initial phases of the Korean War, Task Force Smith's only effective anti-tank system was a single 105mm howitzer with six high-explosive anti-tank rounds.³ After North Korea's superior T-34 tanks destroyed the American howitzer, Task Force Smith lacked the mobility, protection and precision firepower required to defeat the enemy's tanks. North Korean forces quickly routed Task Force Smith, killing 150 Soldiers.⁴

As another example, during the Battle of Mogadishu, the Rangers' and 10th Mountain Division's wheeled relief columns could neither withstand enemy firepower nor maneuver through improvised obstacles to reach the cut-off Rangers.⁵ Pakistani and Malaysian armor were critical in extracting U.S. Army Rangers from Mogadishu and, shortly after the battle, 1st Battalion, 64th Armor, deployed to support U.S. forces in Somalia.⁶

Tactical mobility creates advantages in freedom of maneuver and speed of action. The ability to maneuver off-road creates tactical options for Soldiers and leaders on the ground, increases their unpredictability and allows them to surprise the enemy. Also, off-road maneuver deters adversaries from employing IEDs, mines and complex ambushes, since units can avoid routes that create predictable movement patterns.

The Israeli Defense Force exploited advantages in mobility and speed of action in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead, the IDF's 2008 operations against Hamas forces in Gaza. Recently an Israeli tank-battalion commander recounted an enemy communication intercepted during a counter-sniper operation into the Gaza Strip. Hamas forces reported the Israeli tanks were "moving too fast to be targeted" by Hamas' defensive belts, which consisted of modern anti-tank weapons.

The mobility of the mounted forces' protected precision firepower pairs favorably with dismounted forces, enhancing the strengths and mitigating the vulnerabilities of all members of these teams. Throughout Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, mounted forces provided highly mobile, protected, precision, direct-fire support to dismounted forces. This provided dismounted forces freedom of maneuver, allowing them to close with and destroy enemies, and to seize key terrain and objectives with greater success.

Recently the U.S. Marine Corps' 1st Tank Battalion provided mobility, protection and precision firepower to dismounted forces in Afghanistan, allowing both conventional and off-road routes to be cleared while dismounted forces provided close-in security. The armored forces' mobility allowed dismounted forces to achieve overmatch and operate with greater effectiveness.

Protection

Forces maintain protection through survivability and the psychological effect of their presence on the battlefield. The physical protection provided by modern armor allows Soldiers and Marines to survive both expected and unanticipated attacks from enemy anti-armor systems – including rockets, guided missiles,



U.S. Army M1A2 Abrams tanks maneuver in the streets as they conduct a combat patrol in the city of Tall Afar, Iraq, Feb. 3, 2005. The tanks and their crews are attached to the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. (Photo by SSG Aaron Allmon)

mines and IEDs. Two examples highlight this principle. In the first example, this protection proved important to the Canadian Army in recent operations in southern Afghanistan.⁷ The Canadians used anti-mine devices on armored vehicles to protect dismounted forces and used the vehicles as mobile bunkers when in contact with the enemy. In the second example – the Marine Corps' experiences in Afghanistan – the MIAs of the USMC's D Company, 1st Battalion, sustained 19 IED strikes over seven months, with only one minor injury. In all but two cases, company-level maintenance was enough to repair the damaged tanks.⁸

These examples show that the survivability of armored forces is much greater than that of light and medium forces.

Beyond surviving encounters with the enemy, a greater level of mobility, protection and precision firepower provides a beneficial psychological effect. Friendly forces and local populations gain confidence knowing they have forces with protection and mobile, precision firepower nearby. For instance, the USMC's 1st Tank Battalion's physical presence during operations in Afghanistan bolstered the local populace's confidence after the battalion quickly silenced the Taliban's attacks. Afghan road crews and their contracted security reported they accomplished more during the three weeks of the USMC's 1st Tank Battalion's presence than they had in the previous four months. The head contractor attributed the team's productivity to the tanks' disrupting effects on the Taliban's freedom of maneuver and will to fight.⁹

In his examination of Operation Cast Lead, Dr. David Johnson observed that Hamas fighters equipped with anti-armor weapons had to decide whether to hide and live or to engage the IDF tanks and become de facto suicide attackers. The ability of forces to bring overwhelming precision direct firepower to bear at any desired time and place intimidates and demoralizes adversaries, protecting friendly forces.

Precision firepower

The presence of forces with precision direct firepower on the battlefield provides an alternative to escalation directly from a Soldier's rifle to Air Force bombs:

- From its 120mm cannon, the Abrams tank fires several different precision rounds capable of destroying targets ranging from armored vehicles and hardened positions to obstacles and personnel. It also has .50 caliber and 7.62mm machineguns able to dispatch light-skinned vehicles and dismounted enemies as needed.
- The Stryker Mobile Gun System supports infantry forces against hardened structures, lightly armored vehicles and dismounted enemies with a 105mm cannon and .50 caliber and 7.62mm machineguns.
- The Bradley Fighting Vehicle's tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided antitank missiles, 25mm cannon and 7.62mm machinegun make it a valuable direct-fire support asset to infantry and reconnaissance units when faced with lightly armored and dismounted enemies.

All these vehicles have a variety of sights and fire-control systems that enable extraordinary precision under all conditions. Weapon systems like these allow Soldiers in contact to destroy enemy forces with scalable firepower – both at close range and beyond the maximum range of an enemy's weapon systems with discriminate precision. These precision direct-fire engagements minimize the collateral damage often caused by artillery, mortars or air strikes. Also, situational awareness and communication systems on armored vehicles enable Soldiers to engage enemies using indirect and joint fires with great speed and accuracy.

Multinational operations and Building partnerships

The U.S. Army is one of the few armies in the world with a balance of mobility, protection and precision firepower. This balance does not exist elsewhere in like quantity or quality – this includes the capabilities of many of our strategic allies. The U.S. Army can benefit from this unique balance in Europe, the Asian Pacific, the Middle East and other parts of the world through regionally aligned brigades.

In nations whose forces have this balance (for example, India, Taiwan, Australia, Indonesia, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia), American units will serve with like forces, mutually enhancing their tactical skills and understanding of combined-arms maneuver. In nations without these capabilities, American mobility, protection and precision firepower provide capabilities our partners cannot field.

Whereas many of our partners' land-based forces lack these capabilities, integrating our balanced forces into multinational operations creates a force capable of deterring and defeating enemy organizations. The deterrent effect of forces with mobility, protection and precision firepower stems from both their capabilities to deny an aggressor the prospect of achieving his objectives and from the complementary capability to impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor.¹⁰ These partnerships also afford U.S. Soldiers the significant advantage of operating alongside indigenous forces in times of conflict. On a broader scale, they bolster the confidence of our allies and shape the broader security environment through the relationships they foster.

Conclusions

The complex and shifting operational environment, the lessons of recent conflict and emerging threats to national security require the U.S. Army to sustain balanced capabilities. In the future, as in recent conflicts, mobility, protection and precision firepower provide the Soldier on the ground a decisive advantage against all adversaries. These combined-arms capabilities make the U.S. Army unique among the world's armies and are required to accomplish the Army's mission to:

- Prevent future conflict;
- Shape the broader security environment; and
- When called to action, win decisively.

Forces with these capabilities have the ability to overwhelm and defeat enemies in close contact with operational mobility, survivability and lethal firepower, and these forces are invaluable during operations in any environment – including counterinsurgency, stability and security operations. Mobility, protection and precision firepower ensure our Soldiers do not fight a fair fight and are critical not only to armored forces, but also – more importantly – to the balanced Army team comprised of infantry, Stryker and armored BCTs.



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Notes

- ¹ Barrick, Timothy LTC, "USMC Tank Operations in Afghanistan," after-action review published Sept. 14, 2011.
- ² Starry, GEN Donn A., *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1989.
- ³ Task Force Smith comprised 406 infantrymen equipped with two 75mm recoilless rifles, two 4.2-inch mortars, four 60mm mortars and six 2.36-inch bazookas. One hundred eight artillerymen augmented the infantrymen with six 105mm howitzers. The task force's Soldiers carried 120 rounds of ammunition and two days of C-rations – and only one sixth had seen combat. – Tucker, Spencer, *Task Force Smith*, <http://www.nj.gov/military/korea/factsheets/tfsmith.html>, February 1992.
- ⁴ Connor, Arthur W. Jr., "The Armor Debacle in Korea, 1950: Implications for Today," *Parameters*, Vol. 22 (Summer 1992).
- ⁵ Johnson, David E. Dr., Grissom, Adam, and Oliker, Olya, *In the Middle of the Fight: An Assessment of Medium-Armored Forces in Past Military Operations*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2008.
- ⁶ Rutherford, Kenneth, *Humanitarianism Under Fire: The US and UN Intervention in Somalia*, Herndon, VA: Kumarian Press, 2008.
- ⁷ Croteau, P. CPT, "Lessons Learned From the Use of Tanks in ROTO 4," *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 2, 2008.
- ⁸ Barrick and Anderson.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Department of Defense, *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

BCT – brigade combat team
IDF – Israeli Defense Force

IED – improvised explosive device
MRAP – mine-resistant, ambush-protected

OLC – oak-leaf cluster
USMC – U.S. Marine Corps