

# Subjective Thinking and the Relevancy of Heavy Armor in Modern Warfare

by CPT Thomas A. Rebuck

Since the end of the Cold War, many pundits – including some within the Armor community – have questioned the main battle tank’s legitimacy as an instrument of modern warfare. This assertion is based on a multitude of assumptions regarding the presumed and/or anticipated nature of 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflict, most – if not all – of which are highly subjective, dangerously misguided or horribly wrong. This isn’t surprising given the mad scramble of the 1990s to justify the Army’s existence in the post-Cold War world. In this environment, any idea, theory or initiative was acceptable provided it distanced itself from Cold War methods, equipment or organization. Because it was the perceived embodiment of our Cold War-era Army, to those caught up in the quest for institutional validation, the Abrams became a convenient scapegoat – a pariah to be belittled and marginalized at every opportunity.

Although allegedly based on progressive views on the changing nature of conflict, allegations that heavy armor is, or will be, superfluous in the contemporary and future operating environments are backward and regressive. Such assertions mirror the myopic perspectives of post-World War I conventional wisdom, which viewed the tank as a one-dimensional weapon system, useless except as a tactical tool for close support of the infantry. This same type of narrow-mindedness is driving the current debate over the significance of heavy armor since it is based on the perception that the tank’s sole purpose is to destroy other tanks. Since the Abrams was primarily designed to destroy Soviet heavy armor, it became easy for the unimaginative to see its *raison d’être* exclusively in the context of a massive confrontation of armor in a Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. Subsequently, once this threat receded with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed entirely reasonable to presume that the role of heavy armor in contemporary and future conflict had become superfluous.

While reference to other reasons questions the suitability of heavy armor for 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflict, these have little to do with its battlefield performance or capabilities, focusing instead on peripheral issues like logistical convenience and rapid deployment. In addition, critics have mistakenly equated the tactical mishandling of armor – as occurred in the First Chechen War (1994-95), for example – with armor being obsolete. In fact, over the past 90 years, almost from the moment of its first appearance on the battlefield, there have been continuous efforts to characterize the tank as a “legacy” system.

From general perceptions on the presumed end of conventional conflict, analysts have repeatedly pro-

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**“[T]he British army was an army supposed only to be ready for small wars. But was this small-war army in a fit state for war of any kind?” – Thomas Pakenham<sup>1</sup>**

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nounced the tank’s impending redundancy/obsolescence. The debate over the relevancy of heavy armor exists on two levels: specifically, the MBT’s utility and, generally, the accuracy of assumptions about contemporary and future warfare. While critics may dismiss the MBT’s defenders as conservative reactionaries uncomfortable with change, it is they who are wrong and on both counts. Not only is the Abrams functional across the full spectrum of conflict, the demands of sustained ground combat will continue to require the presence of heavy armor in the U.S. Army’s arsenal for many years to come. As we will see below, opposition to heavy armor has little, if anything, to do with its effectiveness or relevance on the modern battlefield, but with the subjective viewpoints or personal agendas of its critics.

## Transformation politics

Transformation began in the wake of the Cold War, when the specter of Soviet expansionism faded. After spending more than 40 years preparing to fight a single threat, the Army suddenly faced no apparent enemy at all. Confronted with the prospect of having to justify an annual budget with no specific enemy to prepare for, a movement grew within the Army that sought to make it appear “relevant and ready” by shifting its focus away from sustained ground combat and toward operations other than war. By marketing itself as a force to support humanitarian and peacekeeping missions around the world, it hoped to keep an unfriendly, if not hostile, administration and ambivalent legislature from slashing its budget. Thus, the effort to sell Transformation to Congress and the Army at large resembled nothing so much as an advertising and public-relations campaign rather than a true effort to implement Army reform.

This approach was manifest in the hyperbolic rhetoric adopted by the advocates of Army Transformation. In the March 2000 issue of *Soldiers* magazine, the hierarchy sought to present Transformation as the hip



new way the Army was going to operate. It asserted that Transformation would “provide to the nation an array of deployable, agile, versatile, lethal, survivable and sustainable formations which are affordable and capable of reversing the conditions of human suffering rapidly and resolving conflicts decisively.” It also assured us that the new Army would be able to “operate across the full spectrum of operations ... deploying to prevent, contain, stabilize or terminate crisis, deploying in stability-and-support operations to guarantee peace and protect forces, or deploying to major theater wars.”<sup>2</sup>

While the rhetoric was polished to a blinding sheen, the reasoning behind it was not.

What we were seeing, in effect, was the institutional equivalent of a mid-life crisis. After years of focusing exclusively on the Soviet threat, the demise of our archenemy seemed to have left us without purpose or direction. The Army’s response, like the 40-something individual who begins an emotional and usually superficial quest to find meaning in life, was less concerned with reinforcing or enhancing its fighting power than with justifying its existence in the post-Cold War world. Rather than placing it in an historical context, we chose to see the struggle against the Russian menace as an end unto itself, the end-all and be-all of conventional conflict. Thus we felt compelled to reinvent the Army by changing its mission focus and force structure once the Soviet threat receded.

While Transformation may have raised legitimate concerns regarding the Army’s Cold War organization and methods, the solutions it offered were, and remain, unsatisfactory. They represent more of an organizational and doctrinal shell game than a legitimate effort at comprehensive reform. In fact, its proponents seemed more interested in remolding the Army’s image than substantially improving its fighting power. Thus did the Transformationists feel compelled to reinvent the Army, scrambling to scare up any job they could to ensure an adequate share of the defense budget. Their motto could have been, “Have Army, will travel; peacekeeping and humanitarian support missions our specialty.” The Abrams had no place in this hip, New Age Army.

The true legacy of Transformation is a confused mishmash of theory, doctrine and reorganization. It threatens to cripple our capabilities for waging high-intensity warfare by discarding the means for successfully engaging in sustained ground combat. Conversely, while on a tactical level the Army has been adept at refining its tactics, techniques and procedures in Afghanistan and Iraq, the validity of those refinements remains problematic since it’s arguable whether its overall approach to counterinsurgency operations in general, or Afghanistan and Iraq specifically, is or was correct in the first place. The failure to reconcile the needs of both low- and high-intensity warfare threatens our ability to engage in either type of conflict satisfactorily. Like the British Army of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the U.S. Army is in danger of becoming a small-war army unsuited for war of any kind.

## Ground combat threat

The end of the Cold War saw the Army fall into the same theoretical trap that has ensnared politicians and military thinkers for more than a century. They assumed that the inevitable post-war technological advances, economic conditions and political realities make the threat of sustained ground combat unlikely, if not impossible. What is truly frightening is that all ranks of the U.S. Army, from private to general officer, to great extent internalize this assumption. It is a partial consequence of its exclusive 40-year focus on the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. The breakup of this threat created a massive vacuum in the Army’s sense of purpose, so it filled it by a similar all-consuming menace. Instead of using this breathing space to improve the Army’s generic quality – refocusing on military excellence in general rath-

er than a particular enemy in particular – it expended time, energy and resources on replacing its fixation on one mission (countering the Soviet threat) with that of another (low-intensity operations).

It is the inability to place modern events in an historical context that lulls the unwary into accepting that pernicious and oft-repeated fallacy that the threat of sustained ground combat has, for all intents and purposes, ceased and it is no longer worthy of serious attention. The seeming lack of an overt conventional threat(s) is, however, more apparent than real.

The only reason the threat of conventional conflict *appears* so remote is the *perception* the U.S. military can and will decisively defeat any attempt to engage it in sustained ground combat – a perception resting primarily on its success in operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. Should these perceptions change for any reason, their deterrence value suddenly becomes problematic, if not completely invalid. In fact, the assertion that low-intensity warfare will predominate in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a self-defeating prophecy, since refocusing the Army away from conventional conflict toward low-intensity operations will ultimately alter both the perception and the reality.

The perceived omnipotence of the U.S. military in the realm of sustained ground combat is itself far more fragile than conventional wisdom would have us believe. While many will claim that the Army’s performance in Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom proves it has attained an unprecedented level of military efficacy, such conclusions are not only highly subjective, they are dangerous. To presume the possession of unrivalled military excellence based on performance against an isolated Arab state possessing a third-rate military unable or unwilling to fight cohesively and lacking competent leadership at every echelon is dubious at best.<sup>3</sup> Even more egregious is the assumption that we would have defeated the Red Army with equal utility. Although the Iraqi armed forces were equipped with Soviet-style weaponry and trained in its doctrine, its cohesion, capabilities and resources were dwarfed by those of the Russians, making such comparisons spurious.

Another element contributing to the view that low-intensity warfare will predominate in the foreseeable future is the erroneous assumption that the ability to engage in sustained ground combat is the monopoly of a Soviet-style hoard equipped with heavy armor. In fact, the key element required to engage in sustained ground combat is cohesion and unity of purpose – the commitment and ability to work together toward a common objective – and not an army’s size, equipment or doctrine. During the years of extensive U.S. ground-force involvement in Vietnam, neither the Viet Cong nor the North Vietnamese Army opposed Free World forces with heavy armor (although they did commit light-armored PT-76s in limited numbers). Yet, their cohesiveness and unity of purpose made them an extremely dangerous and lethal opponent nonetheless, one which the tank was used against with great effect.

The notion that nations are too economically interdependent in general, or dependent on the United States specifically, to ever accept the risks of conventional conflict is also of dubious merit. This has been one of the favorite and most convenient excuses for neglecting national defense since before World War I. First, the economic hegemony the United States has enjoyed for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century no longer exists, having been significantly curtailed by various Asian nations – and our national wealth lost to oil-producing states in the Middle East. Second, it also ignores the threat posed by foreign investment and purchase of an increasing percentage of the federal debt. Might not the desire to secure those investments provide the incentive or excuse to embark upon military action? To dismiss this possibility is to take for granted a degree of continuity in internation-

al relations that has never existed in recorded history. Third, in the minds of most politicians and the public, economic self-interest is an abstract concept open to subjective interpretation that will never guarantee peaceful coexistence.

At this point, we also need to challenge the assumption that the U.S. military will always have the luxury of operating as part of a coalition and never face the possibility of either fighting a war alone, or fighting alone against a coalition of other nations. Since the early 1990s, the spirit of cooperation that unified the West against the Soviet menace has worn increasingly thin. The refusal of many of our European allies to support our efforts in Iraq and their minimal support in Afghanistan is evidence of this. So profound has this rift become that only the political courage of Prime Minister Tony Blair kept our staunchest ally of the past 60 years active in the Iraq coalition. Without the shadow of Soviet expansionism hanging over their heads to encourage cooperation, the visceral hatred many foreign politicians have for the United States has come to the fore and loosened the ties upon which our alliances and coalitions have been built. Thus, basing our plans on the unshakable assumption that such coalitions will always exist is not only complacent but also irresponsible.

Finally, advocating the wholesale reorientation of the Army's force structure and equipment ignores the difficulties of ramping up for sustained ground combat once this threat becomes a reality. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to rapidly transition the Army back to high-intensity warfare, either materially or philosophically. It is far easier to transition from high- to low-intensity operations than it is to transition from low to high. This is not to imply that we should be ignoring the requirements of low-intensity operations – particularly COIN – but that the baseline for Army readiness needs to remain sustained ground combat.

## Rapid deployment and pre-emption

One of the excuses for banishing the MBT from our military arsenal is the alleged need for creating rapidly deployable forces that can airlift into a theater of operations. This would, in theory, provide us with a capability for “reversing the conditions of human suffering rapidly and resolving conflicts decisively.” In other words, rapidly deployable forces facilitate a policy of pre-emption. Such perceptions, however, comprise the links in a circular chain of faulty reasoning:

- We need to downsize or eliminate our heavy conventional forces to create a lighter, more rapidly deployable force;
- Creating a lighter, more rapidly deployable force can facilitate pre-emption and prevent the escalation of conflict; and
- Facilitating pre-emption and preventing the escalation of conflict can downsize or eliminate our heavy conventional forces.

This logic seems flawless until the question arises of what happens when pre-emption doesn't work and events escalate out of control anyway.

First, even if there is a consensus that pre-emption is a legitimate instrument of foreign policy, there is no guarantee that a particular administration will possess the moral fortitude or political will necessary for its execution. Second, for pre-emption to be a viable option, it requires the approval and/or cooperation from any number of foreign countries for airspace clearance, ground access, airbases, ports, etc., which are likely to prove problematic unless an overt threat exists to the countries themselves. Note here Turkey's refusal to allow 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division egress into Iraq through its territory during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Third, it dismisses the probability that the deployment of U.S. forces is just as likely to result in escalation as de-escalation. The entire premise presupposes an unprecedented capability for micromanaging and manipulating the perceptions and reaction of foreign governments and non-governmental groups.

It is paradoxical that so much emphasis is on rapid-deployment capability when the preponderance of future missions, at least as foreseen by critics of heavy armor, do not inherently require rapid deployment. Peacekeeping, stability and support or other low-intensity operations do not require the large-scale, rapid deployment of U.S. forces. In fact, the approach for such missions should be a slow, cautious and deliberate manner to ensure that clear identification and definition of objectives and end-states. In light of this, does it matter whether it takes 96 hours or 96 days to position a force in a particular region?

The only scenarios in which the benefits of a rapidly deployable force could drastically impact our national-security interests are precisely those which a lightweight force is least capable of handling. Countering a Soviet invasion of Western Europe – which, if successful, would have drastically tipped the geopolitical scales against the United States – is the type of scenario re-

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**“It is easy for ignorant people to think that success in war may be gained by the use of some wonderful invention rather than by hard fighting and superior leadership.”**  
– GEN George S. Patton Jr.<sup>5</sup>

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quiring a large-scale rapid deployment of U.S. forces. Peacekeeping operations in the Balkans – or anywhere else, for that matter – do not.

At any rate, rapid-deployment capability should never take precedence over the mobility, survivability and lethality of a particular weapons system. As pointed out by COL Daniel Whiteside, “Whether or not a combat system can get on a C-130 aircraft must be a secondary consideration. Fighting vehicles, tanks and artillery pieces must be selected to defeat a specific threat – not on the ability to get them to a theater.”<sup>4</sup>

The only result of rapidly deploying forces that are incapable of successfully engaging a determined, cohesive and determined foe will be military and political disaster.

## Technology as panacea

For the past century, there has been an endless procession of military theorists touting the future dominance of one form of technology or another. While each of these “visionaries” may have been partially correct in one way or another, their overall claims were usually extremist and wildly inaccurate. For example, even after 90 years and an exponential advancement in aviation and weapons technology, the efficacy of strategic airpower has yet to meet the expectations of its original theorists. This obsession with technological gadgetry reflects a serious cultural flaw of Western militaries, namely the desire for painless, quick-fix, silver-bullet solutions. Rather than viewing technology as a tool in the Army's repertoire – the means to an end – this mindset views it as an end unto itself.

Coupled with such notions is the idea that “technological overmatch” will enable the U.S. Army to do more with less, allow-

ing us to slash our combat-arms components. While this kind of thinking plays well with politicians and pacifists, dovetailing nicely with a vision of the Army as an international constabulary / humanitarian-relief organization, it flies in the face of military logic and common sense. First, technology is not capable of replacing Soldiers in low-intensity/COIN operations, let alone under the conditions of sustained ground combat. This is a proven point in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we have been blocked by decentralized, low-tech opponents, requiring a larger commitment of “boots on the ground” than originally anticipated.

The belief is that network-centric technology will provide such complete and overwhelming situational awareness that we will be able to detect and destroy enemy forces before they ever get close enough to knock out our future fleet of unmanned drones or lightly armored combat vehicles. The most parochial armor officer would be happy to turn in the keys of his Abrams if the Army were to develop a smaller, lighter and more fuel-efficient combat vehicle, provided that it was (in and of itself) as lethal, mobile and survivable as the M1A2. However, implying that a complex network of automated systems somehow imparts the same level of survivability and lethality to a light armored vehicle as several inches of depleted-uranium armor and one 120mm smoothbore cannon is absurd. It ignores the possible – if not probable – development of effective countermeasures against such systems, or the potential for a catastrophic system failure of the network’s hardware or software. It essentially dismisses the fact that the capability of such systems is inevitably degraded under typical battlefield conditions – like dust and smoke – especially in urban environments, the presumed battleground of the future operating environment.

The other side of this issue is the rush to condemn an existing type of technology as obsolete because of the initial, but transitory, impact of a new counter to that technology. This occurred following the 1973 Yom Kippur War when theorists were writing the tank’s obituary based on the initial success of Egyptian Sagger anti-tank guided missiles. Although the Israelis were at first surprised by the Sagger’s effectiveness and initially suffered heavy tank losses, they quickly adjusted their tactics and were able to neutralize the Egyptian ATGM teams. The fallacy of the tank’s demise was, in fact, demonstrated even before the conflict was over; the Israelis went on to achieve a decisive victory in which their tanks played the predominate role.

One need also to consider the continued utility of the mechanically simple, yet extremely durable and reliable, A-10 Warthog to recognize that new is not necessarily better – and certainly not cheaper.

## Conclusion

The debate over the relevancy of heavy armor exists on two levels: specifically, the MBT’s utility and, generally, the accuracy of assumptions regarding contemporary and future warfare. In both cases, the MBT’s critics are wrong. Supposedly they base their arguments’ progressive views on the changing nature of conflict. However, their thinking is backward and myopic – backward in that it mirrors post-World War I conventional wisdom in viewing the Abrams as a one-dimensional weapon system; myopic since it presumes the threat of sustained ground combat is, essentially, nonexistent.

The Abrams is a versatile instrument of war, able to function across the full spectrum of conflict. It can instantaneously respond to any situation at any given time, literally transitioning from COIN operations to fighting enemy heavy armor in seconds. No other ground combat vehicle in the U.S. arsenal provides this capability or flexibility.

While suitable for low-intensity operations, it is doubtful whether a light armored vehicle like the Stryker Mobile Gun System could equal the Abrams’ performance under the demanding and lethal conditions of sustained ground combat. Furthermore, the notion that network-centric technology will impart the same benefits as several inches of depleted-uranium armor and one 120mm smoothbore cannon to a light armored vehicle is beyond comprehension. Until the Army develops a new combat vehicle that, in and of itself, possesses the same level of lethality and survivability as the Abrams, its elimination as an instrument of war will have negative, if not disastrous, consequences.

The critics of heavy armor will also aver that the threat of conventional conflict is essentially non-existent and the need for an MBT superfluous. Yet, the only reason this threat seems so remote is the perception that a) the U.S. military will decisively defeat any and all attempts to engage it in sustained ground combat, and b) the ability to engage in sustained ground combat is the monopoly of a Soviet-style hoard equipped with heavy armor – which apparently no longer exists.

On the one hand, refocusing the Army away from conventional conflict toward low-intensity operations will ultimately alter both the perception and reality of its warfighting dominance, thus eliminating its value as a deterrent to conflict. On the other, cohesion and unity of purpose – not the possession of heavy armor – are the primary requirements for engaging in sustained ground combat. In either case, once one looks past the original perceptions of the MBT’s critics, not only does the possibility of high-intensity conflict become increasingly real, each underscores the ongoing need for a lethal, mobile and survivable weapon system like the M1A2 Abrams MBT.



*CPT Thomas Rebeck commands Company C, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 103<sup>rd</sup> Armor Regiment, Wellsboro, PA. Previous assignments include S-4, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 103<sup>rd</sup> Armor Regiment, Lewisburg, PA; Armor liaison officer, 55<sup>th</sup> Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Scranton, PA; executive officer, Company A, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 103<sup>rd</sup> Armor Regiment, Ar-Ramadi, Iraq; and Armor platoon leader, Company B, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 103<sup>rd</sup> Armor Regiment, Sunbury, PA. His military education includes Combined-Arms Exercise (formerly Captain’s Career Course), Fort Dix, NJ; Armor Officer Advanced Course-Reserve Component, Fort Knox, KY; Armor Officer Basic Course, Fort Knox; and Reserve Component Accelerated Officer Candidate School, Fort Indiantown Gap, PA. CPT Rebeck holds a bachelor’s of arts degree in communications from Arcadia University.*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pakenham, Thomas, *The Boer War*, Avon Books: New York, 1979.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://dtic.mil/soldiers/mar2000/features/vision1.html>, 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> Note that the Israeli Defense Force – itself all but isolated and alone – routinely defeated multiple Arab nations simultaneously with the same expeditiousness as a coalition of nations disposed of the Iraqi army in 1991 and 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> Whiteside, COL Daniel, retired, *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Blumenson, Marvin, *The Patton Papers, 1885-1940 (Vol. I)*, Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1972.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**ATGM** – anti-tank guided missile  
**COIN** – counterinsurgency  
**MBT** – main battle tank