

# A Proposal for Modernizing BCTs for Hybrid Warfare and Great Power Competition

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As the Army moves away from major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and towards Great Power Competition (GPC), it has indicated a desire to switch back to a division-centered Army.<sup>2</sup> This article advocates an alternative option: maintaining brigade combat teams (BCTs) as units of action and reorganizing them by type, terrain, size, and attaching a Special Forces (SF) battalion in a general support partnership at their home station to form hybrid BCTs.<sup>3</sup>

It also advocates for an increase of indirect fire systems organic to the BCT. Because of the unique and changing circumstances around modern technology and the ability of near peers and others to use new technology for sophisticated artillery and drone strikes, there exists a need to decentralize these capabilities and authorities to the brigade level.<sup>4</sup> As will be discussed, BCTs should possess greater organic fires capabilities and other enabler assets to provide overmatch against potential opponents at the tactical and operational levels of war. Experimental doctrinal realignments like this can be tested at Combat Training Centers (CTCs), and data derived from those trials can provide additional insight into maximizing our ground forces' effectiveness in preparation for the next conflict.

Dr. Nicholas Murray explains it like this: "As the U.S. Army moves forward, and out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must think about how to deal with the future problems that we might have to face. We also face a similar problem to the French in the 1860s. How do we take the experience of the last years and convert it into lessons for the future? Normally the answer to this is we need to think about the experiences we have had, in order to come up with doctrine so that we can more effectively use our immense combat power. However, what happens if those lessons do not apply to the next conflict?"<sup>5</sup>

## **Aligning Conventional BCTs with Special Forces Battalions**

In their article "Future Special Operations Forces and Conventional Forces Interdependence," LTC Casey Galligan and CW5 Dennis Castellanos said, "The new normal will deliberately demand persistent interdependence between SOF [special operations forces] and CF [conventional forces] and complementary regional expertise. Although the current episodic models of successful SOF/CF interdependence support retaining the gains made over the last 15 years, a more enduring approach must be implemented as the Army moves forward to secure global threats."<sup>6</sup> One of the first ways to accomplish this is to permanently align a conventional brigade with a special forces battalion. This would help with integration, interoperability, and interdependencies (I-3) between conventional and special forces for future conflict readiness, driven by shared training schedules and similar geographic and cultural interests.

The next step in this BCT modernization would be to align BCTs along terrain-based lines of effort. Special Forces groups are currently aligned along Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) lines for cultural purposes. However, because the conventional Army does not have the dedicated cultural training tools SF has, aligning BCTs along similar geographic or terrain-based lines of effort could pay immense dividends in the future as skills in those areas are institutionalized at the BCT level. This will increase survivability for those units which will then be better prepared to conduct operations in those environments. For this article, jungle/forest, arctic/mountain, and urban/subterranean/desert is the alignment chosen, but alternative alignments can be used. According to MAJ Amos Fox, "[F]orce structure assessments in relation to factual environmental threat assessments are needed. This will assist in providing purpose-built forces, instead of continually falling back on historically aligned and built forces."<sup>7</sup>

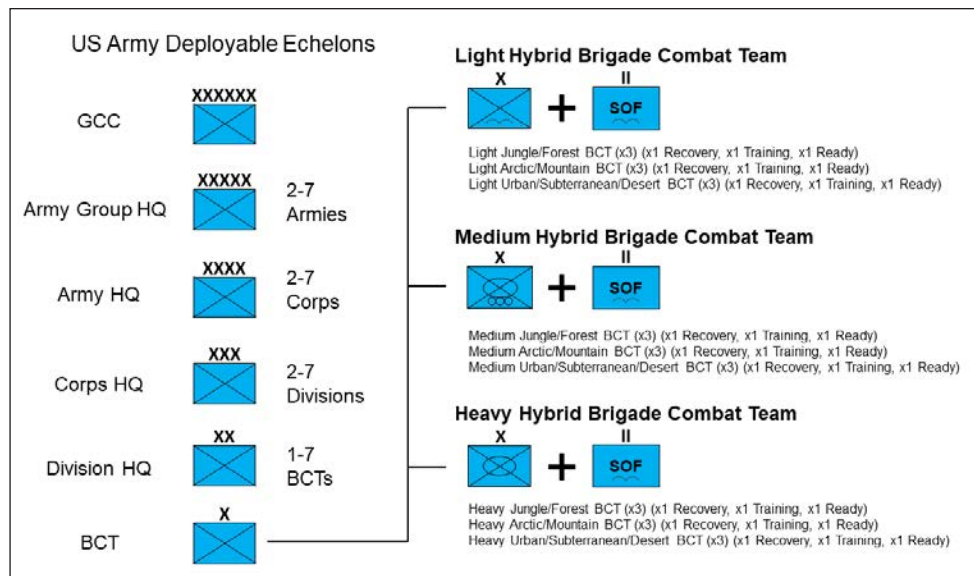


Figure 1 — Aligning Hybrid BCTs by Type, Terrain, and Size

This doctrinal realignment would allow SF teams to forward deploy while the conventional units continue to train at home. SF teams would bring back lessons learned and cultural lessons that the conventional units can apply if they are required to move forward. This could keep combatant command (COCOM) requirements down as they must use SF teams to first work “by, with, and through,” but if that fails the Army has a regional and terrain-familiar conventional brigade able to deploy if necessary. Figure 1 presents one potential template for a possible BCT realignment by type, terrain, and size.

### The Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) and the Reconnaissance-Strike Complex

*“In speaking on the efficacy of Russian reconnaissance, military analyst Phillip Karber states, ‘The Russians have broken the code on reconnaissance-strike complex, at least at the tactical and operational level...’*

*“The [Russian] BTG [Battalion Tactical Group] is a tactical formation that possesses operational indirect fires and air-defense capability, allowing it to have one foot in the tactical level of war, while the other foot is able to operate in and influence the operational level of war.”*

— MAJ Amos Fox<sup>8-9</sup>

While the United States has been engaged in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the Middle East, Russia and others have incorporated modern technology into robust and innovative new ground formations. One of these new developments is the Russian’s design and application of their BTG formations arising from the Gerasimov Doctrine.<sup>10</sup> The U.S. does possess some advantages against the BTG, and the reorganization concept depicted in this article attempts to leverage those strengths while countering the weaknesses. CPT Nicolas J. Fiore describes the advantages the U.S. possesses over the BTG as such:

*“Asymmetric calorie-burning strategy explained as sports metaphor: Imagine two teams with fixed rosters competing in a foot race. Team A chose to use a relay team of four runners. Team B is just a single runner who is much faster than any of the runners on Team A. In the first race, Team B wins with a comfortable margin. Then the teams race again. This time B wins as well but feels more tired than the runners on Team A. The third race ends in a tie, and Team A finally wins the fourth race. In the fifth race, the runner on Team B starts cramping, and Team A comfortably wins every race after that, no matter how many times the race is repeated. Even though the runner on Team B is a superior athlete, his metabolism can’t sustain running four times his competitors’ distance at a pace fast enough to win. Even with some time to rest, eat and hydrate between races, he can’t recover from the repeated exertion fast enough; the lactic acid will still build up in his muscles and joints. He must either forfeit most races or rotate with other runners on his team. Although the Russian Army has leapfrogged U.S. cyber, EW [electronic warfare] and ADA [air defense artillery] capability, in theater there are few of these systems relative to the number of U.S. platoons that need to be targeted. These systems and their personnel can’t operate 24 hours a day/seven days a week indefinitely, and Russian sustainment can’t rotate, repair, or replace the systems*

*fast enough to keep up with well-sustained U.S. troops maneuvering across a broad front. If a BTG tried to keep up with the 75 platoons in a BCT, they will wear out equipment and burn out key personnel — the equivalent of pulling a hamstring mid-race!”<sup>11</sup>*

**Giving Greater and More Responsive Kinetic Strike Capabilities to BCT Commanders**

Why do BCT commanders need these assets at the brigade level? Why rocket artillery? Commanders need the ability to do pinpoint kinetic strikes, but air superiority might not always be available (weather, enemy aircraft, enemy ADA, Global Positioning System [GPS] jamming, etc.). This still provides the ability of platoon and company commanders to call in heavy indirect fires even if air superiority is not achieved or not available. This pushes High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) capabilities to the BCT level for command and control. These units are therefore used at the discretion of the brigade maneuver commander and can provide subordinate units down to the team level with precision fires. This allows deep fires to nest with close operations as a default (heavy mortars/artillery can use high angle firing for use in urban or close-range battles). By attaching rocket artillery to the advancing ground unit, their advance pushes the artillery kill zone radius out further. By this mechanism, ground maneuver success is reinforced automatically and inherently with follow-up organic artillery operations if the ability to call in higher fires or air power is not available. This enables greater simultaneous operations more than sequential ones, or vice versa operation dependent. Additionally, if theater assets are limited, and frequently they are today, organic indirect fire assets can be used, and those valuable air assets can be used elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

In a 2016 *Infantry* article, MAJ Fox wrote, “U.S. Army land forces must be capable of fighting and winning without relying on airpower, whether that be rotary wing or fixed wing. It is a very real possibility that U.S. Infantry units and combined arms battalions might find themselves in a forward engagement, operating under contested skies, and having to fight and win with their organic equipment and direct support fire support. Leaders must acknowledge this environment and incorporate it into their unit training plans.”<sup>13</sup>

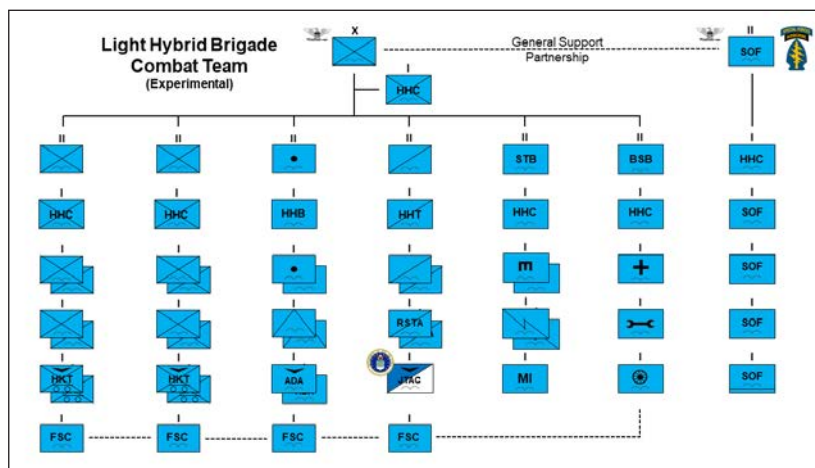
**Preparing for the Return of Urban, Subterranean, Siege, and Trench Warfare**

With the rise of megacities and siege warfare recently seen in Mosul and Eastern Ukraine, it is important ground units are given adequate formations that can execute the principles of war in any environment or situation.<sup>14-15</sup> That is the idea behind new formations such as hunter-killer teams (HKTs) and an expanded artillery suite at the BCT level. Increasing the organic indirect fires for the BCT commander gives him greater kinetic options to employ such as high-angle firing or other techniques for urban warfare. These doctrinal templates have been designed with this concept in mind. The HKTs also provide the BCT with greater mobility in and around population centers if Strykers or armored vehicles would result in unnecessary damage to the local infrastructure or if a lower profile presence is required.

**Light Hybrid Brigade Combat Team**

At their core, airborne Soldiers are light infantry and lose their maneuver advantage after they land. By combining

**Figure 2 — Proposed Light Hybrid Brigade Combat Team**



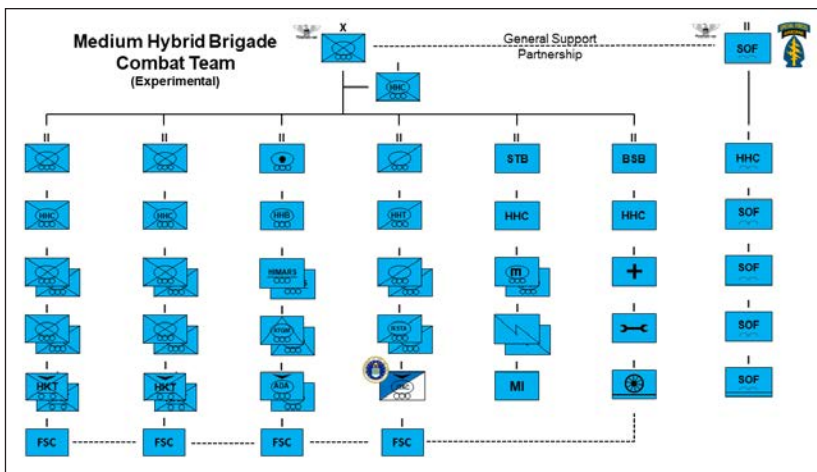


Figure 3 — Proposed Medium Hybrid Brigade Combat Team

airborne BCTs into “light” versions, the Army can maintain airborne capabilities while refocusing doctrinal tasks and functions. A version of a potential “light” airborne hybrid BCT is presented in Figure 2.

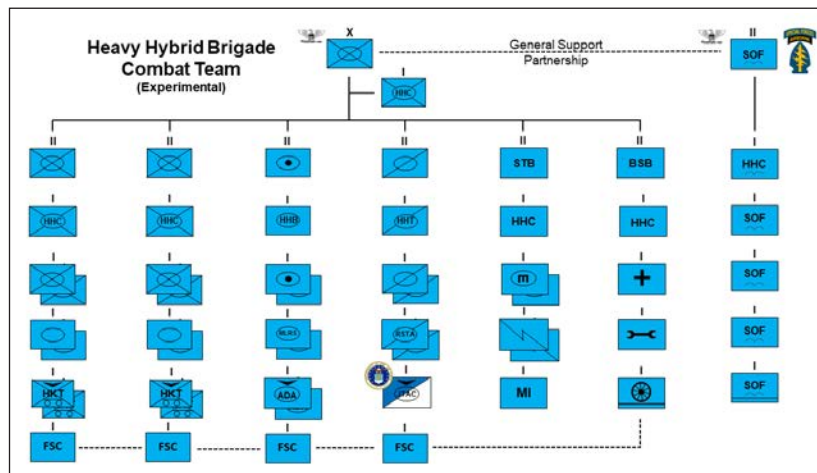
**Medium Hybrid Brigade Combat Team**

Medium hybrid brigades would maintain the need for fast and armored capabilities the Stryker platform currently provides. As technology or doctrine advances, the types of medium armored personnel carriers (APCs) can be upgraded or adjusted as needed. For instance, new vehicles developed by the Next Generation Combat Vehicle (NGCV) multi-functional team could be incorporated into this doctrinal template.

**Heavy Hybrid Brigade Combat Team**

The heavy hybrid brigade combat team is the most logistics heavy of the three, requiring additional heavy lift and equipment for a greater array of fire and maneuver resources. The three BCTs can also be seen to relate to their deployment time by size: Light BCTs can be deployed in hours; medium BCTs require additional transport logistics for the heavier equipment; and heavy BCTs require the most logistics and administrative footprint for continued operations.

Figure 4 — Proposed Heavy Hybrid Brigade Combat Team



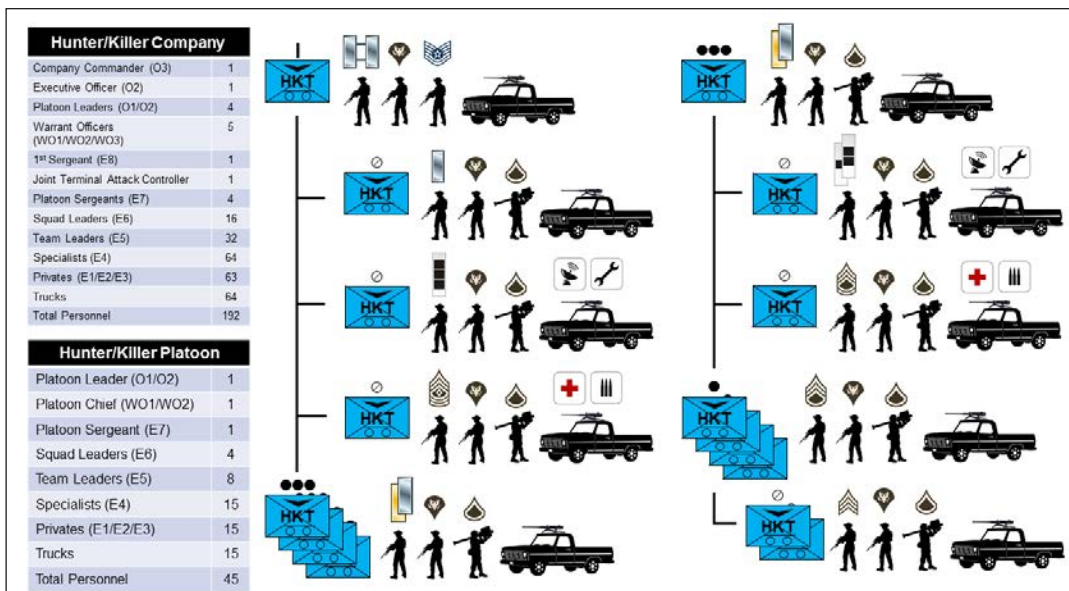


Figure 5 — Proposed Hunter-Killer Company and Platoon Table of Organization and Equipment

### Establishing Dedicated Hunter-Killer Teams

CPT Andrew Chack explains some background to the HKT concept in a 2021 issue of *Armor*:

*“Conducting zone reconnaissance against an opposing armored force without mobile anti-armor capabilities such as a tank or MGS [Mobile Gun System] will drastically slow the tempo of reconnaissance. Strykers by themselves do not have the firepower and protection to rapidly deploy, engage, and destroy enemy armor. Making contact with enemy armor will require dismounting three kilometers away and waiting for dismounts to maneuver within direct-fire range of a camouflaged, hull-defilade enemy. When the cavalry troop is assigned a tank or MGS platoon, the hunter-killer team is unlocked. Reconnaissance variants, or the hunters, have superior optics and low-target-signature dismount teams that allow for target acquisition at extended range. The hunters conduct target hand-off by sharing this information with the killers or the tanks. The killers are then able to initiate contact and facilitate the destruction of the enemy from a position of relative advantage. Afterward, hunters bound forward and rapidly continue forward movement. This cycle of target acquisition, target destruction, and forward progress occurs rapidly and can completely dislodge the enemy plans if a high enough tempo is achieved. Furthermore, with further repetition, the lethality of this partnership will increase through the rotation.”<sup>16</sup>*

Giving sniper, anti-tank, and anti-drone capabilities to these hunter-killer units across all three hybrid BCTs will give our commanders better tools with which to plan and execute successful missions if required during GPC, improving the lethality of hybrid BCTs and closing the kill chain. Providing these units with lighter and faster ground vehicles will raise risk by lacking armor but increase their mobility and speed to enable greater reconnaissance and maneuver.<sup>17</sup> This concept is explored in more detail in Figure 5.

### Establishing Weapons and Tactics Infantry Warrant Officers

*“Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn’t even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back.”*

— Heraclitus<sup>18</sup>

In order to incorporate HKTs into the force and to professionalize this impact change, I propose the establishment of weapons and tactics infantry warrant officers. Due to the increase in information-dependent technologies, infantry warrant officers can take the load off both the platoon sergeant and platoon leader, allowing them to perform better in saturated information environments. Overtasking at the platoon and company levels is currently a major issue, and this would help resolve it while increasing the institutionalization of combat arms professional knowledge.<sup>19</sup> This is similar to the master gunner warrant officer (MGWO) concept proposed in the Fall 2018 issue

Approx. Years of Service:	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20+	22	25+
Key Leadership Positions	Driver, Team Gunner, Leader	Squad Leader	Platoon Sergeant	Platoon Chief	Company Chief	Battalion Chief	Brigade Chief			
Military/Civilian Education	WLC Associate's Degree	ALC	SLC Bachelor's Degree	IWOC Bachelor's Degree		IWOLC		IMWOLC Master's Degree		
Broadening Opportunities	Staff Operations, Instructor, Recruiter			SFAB, Specialty Schools, O/C/T, Instructor, Division Weapons and Tactics Planner				Researcher, Instructor, Wargame Developer		
Military Training	Airborne, Air Assault, CLC, ARC, Ranger, Battle Staff			Arctic/Jungle/Urban Schools, Ranger, Sapper, Master Gunner, Sniper, RSLC				CGSC, SAMS, AWC, NDU, JAWS		

Figure 6 — Proposed Infantry Warrant Officer Professional Timeline Map

of *Armor* by Alex Turkatte. Creating armor and infantry warrants (not maneuver) would help improve the professionalism of both branches. The Armor Branch can follow a similar human resources structure as the proposed infantry warrant officer concept presented in Figure 6.<sup>20</sup>

One argument against this concept is that it will reduce the collective knowledge and skills of the NCO corps as the best and brightest E7s are initially promoted to infantry warrant officers. However, while this may reduce NCO end strength in the short term as high-performing platoon sergeants are selected and compete for the program, over the long term the return of these former NCOs to the platoons and companies as warrant officers will better influence, mentor, and educate junior NCOs, providing a positive feedback loop of infantry skills and experiences over the long term. This will be important as infantry weapon technologies develop rapidly or require greater technical proficiency. Tactical units will require dedicated experts on these systems and be able to educate new NCOs and Soldiers in the basics of their operation and application. More information on warrant officer development can be found in *How the Army Runs: A Senior Leader Reference Handbook 2011-2012*.<sup>21</sup>

### Information Dominance Company

In the 2020 article “Fire and Maneuver in the Cyberspace Domain,” the authors proposed an Information-Dominance Company (IDC) as a method to increase fire and maneuver lethality of the brigade in the information and cyber domains.<sup>22</sup> This concept could be implemented into the standard BCT template across the sizes and provide additional modern capabilities.

### Conclusion

*“With jointness, the concept of how we’ll fight has got murky. It used to be that the service chiefs were the ones developing the plans and strategy to fight the next war. They would figure out what war in their domain would look like, then build the force they needed to dominate in that kind of fight. Now that’s not the case. Now it’s the CCMDs [combatant commands] who are building the plans on how we’ll fight the next war, and the services simply have to figure out how to build a force to meet the numbers and requirements the CCMDs are saying their plans call for. That’s not a well-thought out way to be successful.”*

— Anonymous Retired Navy Flag Officer<sup>23</sup>

With this quote in mind, it is important we design a force readily available for combatant commanders’ requests, but also a force designed for any contingency in mind, outside the concurrent requests. While switching to a division-centered Army seems a prudent response to GPC with Russian and China, we can leverage BCTs as an effective tactical and operational asset to provide division, corps, and army commanders more lethal ground options to respond to GCC requests. As division commanders train using multiple BCTs, division level exercises can bring multiple types and terrain-based BCTs together, creating more dynamic training scenarios to prepare division and corps headquarters for deploying BCTs effectively in multi-domain ground combat.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> N.P. Milner, trans., *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 3.
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- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Army Logistics, "Hip-Pocket Guide: Command and Support Relationships," (2016), accessed from [https://alu.army.mil/alog/2016/JULAUG16/PDF/Command\\_and\\_Support\\_Relationships\\_Chart.pdf](https://alu.army.mil/alog/2016/JULAUG16/PDF/Command_and_Support_Relationships_Chart.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (NY: Hachette Books, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Dr. Nicholas Murray, "Officer Education: What Lessons Does the French Defeat in 1871 Have for The U.S. Army Today?" *Small Wars Journal* (January 2013), accessed from <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/officer-education-what-lessons-does-the-french-defeat-in-1871-have-for-the-us-army-today>.
- <sup>6</sup> LTC Casey Galligan and CW5 Dennis Castellanos, "Future Special Operations Forces and Conventional Forces Interdependence," *Armor Magazine* (Spring 2017): 55, accessed April 2021 from <https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Spring/ARMOR%20Spring%202017%20edition.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> MAJ Amos Fox, "Cognitive Blind-Spots and Dominated Strategies," *Small Wars Journal* (6 January 2021), accessed April 2021 from <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/cognitive-blind-spots-and-dominated-strategies>.
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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 3.
- <sup>10</sup> MAJ Amos Fox, "Hybrid Warfare: The 21st Century Russian Way of Warfare," (School of Advanced Military Studies, 2017), 25, accessed from <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1038987.pdf>. "Arguably, Russian hybrid warfare, as articulated by Gerasimov, is conceptually Soviet deep operations and deep battle, enhanced with Information Age technology."
- <sup>11</sup> CPT Nicolas J. Fiore, "Defeating the Russian Battalion Tactical Group," *Armor Magazine* (Spring 2017). Sidebar link: <https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Spring/Sidebar1-Fiore17-Asymmetric%20Calorie%20Burning%20Strategy.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> Patrick Tucker, "U.S. Army's Not Stupid for Wanting Long-Range Fires — But More Analysis Needed, Hyten Says," *Defense One* (6 April 2021), accessed from <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2021/04/us-armys-not-stupid-wanting-long-range-fires-more-analysis-needed-hyten-says/173181/>.
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- <sup>18</sup> Attributed to Heraclitus c. 500 B.C.[sic] in *The Tactical Rifle* (1999) by Gabriel Suarez; no earlier source has been found. Wikiquote. Accessed April 2021 from <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Heraclitus>.
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- <sup>20</sup> Alex Turkatte, "The Master-Gunner Warrant Officer," *Armor Magazine* (Fall 2018): 40, accessed from [https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2018/Fall/Fall2018\\_ARMOR\\_magazine.pdf](https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2018/Fall/Fall2018_ARMOR_magazine.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> U.S. Army War College, *How the Army Runs: A Senior Leader Reference Handbook 2011-2012*, 337-341, accessed

from <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a551164.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> COL Michael D. Schoenfeldt, CPT Matthew L. Tyree, and CPT William Malcolm, *Armor Magazine* (Spring 2020): 24, accessed from [https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2020/Spring/ARMOR\\_Spring\\_2020.pdf](https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2020/Spring/ARMOR_Spring_2020.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Kimberly Jackson, Natasha Lander, Colin Roberts, Dan Madden, and Rebeca Orrie, "Movement and Maneuver: Culture and the Competition for Influence Among the U.S. Military Services," Rand Corporation, 62. Accessed April 2021 from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2200/RR2270/RAND\\_RR2270.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2270/RAND_RR2270.pdf).

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