

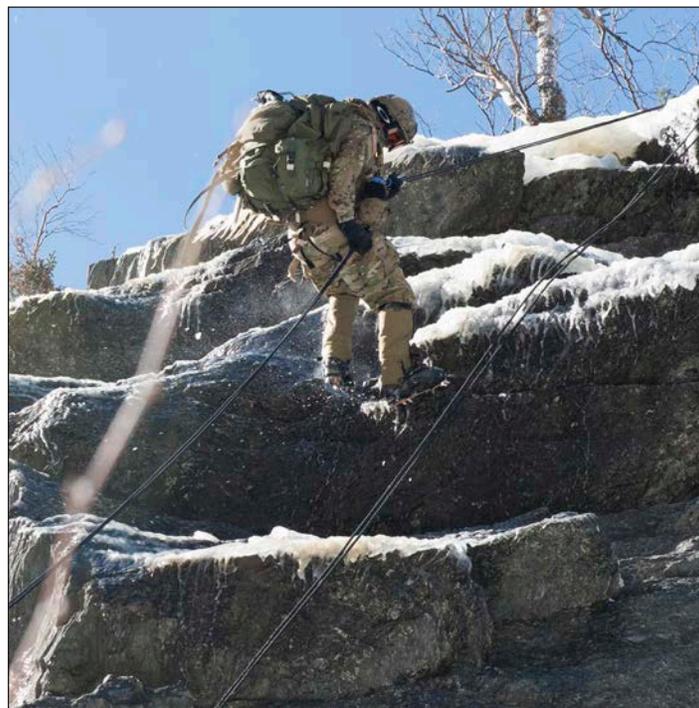
Mountain Alpine Forces for Strategic Competition

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Evolving light infantry divisions require direction, justification, and resources to meet the emerging threats of strategic competition. The Army must transition to meet current Russian and potential future People's Republic of China aggression. Historically, light infantry divisions provide the Army and the joint force with rapidly deployable forces able to operate in all environments, including in austere conditions, at altitude, and within the arctic climate. This article proposes that a light infantry division transforms into a mountain alpine infantry formation, capable of rapidly deploying and executing a broad range of missions across the joint competition continuum.

This article provides the *why*, the *what*, and the *how* necessary for developing the future mountain alpine infantry formation for the joint all-domain force. The scope centers on two primary questions: First, why must the Army man, train, equip, and organize future division formations to win in extreme cold weather, mountainous, and high-altitude environments? Second, what is the utility of light infantry formations within multidomain operations doctrine during a period of strategic competition? The simple answer to these questions is that a future mountain alpine division would offer the unique advantage of providing high-impact results at a low cost.

The mountain alpine infantry formation would provide the joint force with specific land combat power capabilities, including strategic mobility (depth), a decentralized and highly flexible organization (agility), low-cost modernization, and rapid integration to joint task forces (convergence) — all of which maintain its advantage of being able to strategically deploy faster and with fewer resources than mechanized forces (endurance). Alpine infantry formations would be uniquely capable of providing combined arms capabilities across multiple domains. Additionally, aligned with the original purpose of the light infantry division, the alpine infantry formations would use infiltration operations through rough terrain to create and exploit positions of relative advantage for terrain



A student at the Army Mountain Warfare School rappels a cliff face on Smugglers' Notch in Jeffersonville, VT. (Photo by SSG Nathan Rivard)

denial during periods of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict. The transformation of a light infantry division into a mountain alpine infantry formation requires low-cost modernization, worldwide partnered training opportunities, and the continued development and retention of the Army's toughest Soldiers and leaders.

The Why: Specialization for Alpine Domination

During the last 18 years, the Army has deliberately forged a modular force capable of fighting and winning independently in a complex world across a full spectrum of conflict. This evolution made the force more flexible during the global war on terrorism, including adopting a standardized structure for all division headquarters elements. This transition was a timely decision based on threat analysis, recent lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, and resource constraints.

Historically, great power competition required highly trained, rapidly deployable light infantry forces. Examples include the British actions in the Falkland Islands (1982), Israeli operations in Lebanon (2006), U.S. initial actions in Afghanistan (2001), the Second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2018), and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, which reveal that decisive forces do not always have to be armored forces. Historically, a light infantry division has a greater tooth-to-tail ratio than other Army divisions and will be deployable much faster than a heavy division. The light infantry division must also be an expeditionary force prepared to operate in all environments. They will also be available for contingencies elsewhere, including regions that lack a developed support infrastructure. Subsequently, light infantry divisions must still evolve and modernize to maintain strategic relevance and tactical effectiveness.

To remain relevant in strategic competition, a mountain alpine division must see the world as a globe rather than a map.¹ This approach allows the military to maximize the opportunities of the arctic "northern routes" to speed force projection from the continental United States to points around the globe. The arctic region extends across multiple geographic combatant command areas of responsibilities. A mountain alpine division must adapt, posture, train, and equip future combat power to support and enable multidomain operations in extreme conditions and rugged terrain over extended periods.

Additionally, regaining dominance in mountainous and cold weather environments provides new opportunities to engage and train with allies and partners as the division modernizes with Force Design Unit (FDU) 2030 and beyond. The Army's Arctic Strategy explicitly states that if there is an arctic contingency response, the Army forces responding must have the proper training for operating in the arctic environment, the right equipment that can function in the challenging terrain and extreme conditions, and then they must have the ability to sustain the force over extended distances.² Strategic competition takes place in many regions with mountainous or cold weather areas, thus requiring future mountain alpine forces to train with and assist new strategic partners.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) states that mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are an enduring strength for the United States.³ A mountain alpine infantry division can contribute to our nation's enduring strength with its many potential partners who share similar training environments. Training with allies and partners with like formations would strengthen our country's relationships and also provide opportunities to share lessons learned in mountainous and cold weather training and with special equipment. The alpine infantry formations' rapid deployability can provide combat forces to critical regions during competition and crisis. A mountain alpine force's presence could affect the outcome of hostilities by demonstrating U.S. resolve and capability during an accelerated transition from crisis to conflict.

The What: Alpine Infantry Formations

As an integrated deterrence force, alpine infantry formations must be combat credible and able to fight anytime, anywhere, and against any opponent. This demanding mission requires the highest degree of tactical excellence and unit readiness. To meet this challenge, alpine infantry formations must be capable of infiltration operations for terrain denial. The division will need to be able to deny the enemy key terrain using initiative, stealth, and surprise, especially in enduring regional competition and limited armed conflict. Alpine infantry formations will be "key terrain-focused" forces, experts in fieldcraft and masking, skilled in countermobility techniques, and quick to seize advantages provided by their tough Soldiers and NCOs. These formations will be a highly responsive division



Paratroopers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment provide covering fire during training in Italy on 3 October 2022. (Photo by SSG John Yountz)

organized for a wide range of missions during cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict, mainly where close-fighting terrain exists.

In addition to cooperation and competition below armed conflict, mountain alpine infantry forces can also be employed during large-scale combat operations (LSCO). During LSCO, mountain alpine infantry forces will require reinforcement with corps enablers to increase combat power and sustainability. The alpine infantry formations could assume supporting missions during LSCO, freeing Stryker and armored brigade combat teams for decisive points elsewhere. The alpine infantry formations will maintain organizational flexibility so they can be tailored for different missions. Mountain alpine infantry forces will habitually operate as combined arms teams with organic engineers, artillery, aviation, and air defense. They will operate independently at brigade, battalion, and company levels when suitably augmented and organized for specific missions.

Superb leaders, fighting Soldiers, and demanding training must be the hallmarks of mountain alpine infantry forces. Soldier Power will make the mountain alpine forces uniquely effective through their tough, patient, and self-reliant identity. Soldier Power derives from education, rigorous training, physical and mental toughness, field-craft, and innovative leadership. Mountain alpine forces will leverage innovative multi-level training, modernized high technology, and cross-domain convergence to give Soldiers a crucial edge over their future adversaries by Soldier-focused kill-webs. Mountain alpine infantry leaders will establish a resilient command climate and serve as role models for tactical skill and technical modernization, physical toughness, and moral behavior.

Additionally, alpine infantry formations must be specially equipped for the mission. Modernized technology will enhance command and control, firepower, sustainment, and ground mobility. Developing modernized mountain alpine capable equipment and combat resources will become an integral part of the Army's Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model (ReARMM) process. Modernized mountain alpine equipment requires reduced size and weight for strategic mobility and tactical effectiveness. Modernized communication sets to enable rapid integration into the Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) ecosystem are critical to becoming capable of multidomain operations. Having the right properly trained and led Soldiers, with the right skills and equipment, alpine infantry formations will make an impact wherever the mission requires.

Mountain alpine infantry formations must drive the modernization and transformation process for other arctic forces. The DoD enterprise must recognize mountain alpine forces' political, operational, and tactical utility as an

integrated deterrence “inside force.” The concept is relevant because it involves the development of highly mobile, rugged, and hard-hitting combat units with a higher ratio of combat-to-support capabilities with comparatively small modernization requirements. With modernization and strategic employment, the mountain alpine formation can be used to understand and shape the operational environment and operate as the premier “inside force” across mountainous and sub-arctic conflict zones. If funded and organized, mountain alpine forces will increase the Army’s combat power and, as a result, play a significant role in future U.S. contingency response.

In support of the 2022 NDS’s integrated deterrence effort, the alpine infantry formations will seek to develop their warfighting capabilities with allies and partners who also operate within cold, mountainous, and high-altitude environments.⁴ Through collaborations with key allies and partners, current light infantry formations such as the 10th Mountain Division, 25th Infantry Division, and the new 11th Airborne Division must re-address doctrine, training, and equipment. As mentioned in the previous section, a mountain alpine division would actively seek training opportunities with allies and partners with similar formations throughout the other geographic combatant commands.



A Basic Military Mountaineering Course student crosses a rope bridge over a mountain gorge during training at the Northern Warfare Training Center’s Black Rapids Training Site in Alaska on 15 August 2020. (Photo by John Pennell)

The How: Building the Mountain Alpine Infantry Formation

The mountain alpine infantry formations initiative cannot be “business as usual,” and these forces’ transformation must reach maturity quickly. Their mission is to deploy tonight and infiltrate to fight tomorrow. Many of the concepts of light infantry are already time proven. The evolution of the light infantry concept must remain within the constraints of combat readiness. Division missions, structure, equipment, and employment concepts must be carefully evaluated and should apply lessons to the other light divisions as well.

Personnel Readiness. Personnel readiness is the source of “Soldier Power,” and it must remain the top priority in alpine infantry formations. Mountain alpine infantry forces require quality officers and NCOs. Leaders must demonstrate critical skills and behaviors such as innovation, agility, endurance, diversity of thought, depth of cold weather, and mountain life experience. Leadership positions will require Ranger and mountaineer training. Unit commanders will be among the most experienced officers in the Army, and the most technically advanced, physically and mentally tough trainers must be available to fill NCO leader positions.

Austerity in the mountain alpine infantry design demands that the division have maximum personnel readiness. This will allow horizontal and vertical development across the ReARMM cycle. With a more stable unit environment, alpine infantry formations will produce tight-knit, self-confident, competent units capable of withstanding the most demanding stresses of war. The ReARMM cycle will be used to provide modernized mountain alpine infantry battalions beyond Army 2030.

Equipment Readiness. Mountain alpine infantry forces must test and modernize the most effective weapons and efficient cold weather equipment. The development of new lightweight weapons and equipment must consider the unique operating characteristics of mountain alpine infantry. The new design will include commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) equipment that is lightweight, highly deployable, man-portable, highly reliable, and simple to maintain and support at extended range over rough terrain.

Critical developments for mountain alpine forces are modernized anti-tank weapons, shoulder-fired air defense weapons, weaponized unmanned aerial vehicles, and longer-range precision artillery. Mountain alpine forces require modern lightweight, securable, anti-jam, joint communications equipment necessary for integration into the JADC2 ecosystem. Divestment of big and bulky vehicles that are non-conducive to mountainous terrain must be a priority to begin fielding vehicles better equipped for the harshest environments. Modernized equipment will enable the mountain alpine forces to conduct infiltration operations in a decentralized and independent method. Finally, mountain alpine forces will require additional electronic warfare, space, and information-dominance capabilities to achieve the depth and endurance under multidomain operations doctrine.

Supply Readiness. The unique support structure of the alpine infantry formations will require innovative logistics concepts, equipment, and organizations which take advantage of modernized technology and unit productivity enhancements. Operating in extreme environments will need innovative ways to manage batteries and generate water sources. Mountain alpine forces will require substantial increases in lightweight fire support systems similar to modernized, lightweight 105mm howitzers and 120mm mortars. Corps support enablers will augment the division when the mission or geography is required. Future support initiatives, programs, and funding must improve support to families, minimizing the impacts of frequent deployments and fostering the mountain community image of the Soldiers and families in the future infantry divisions.

Training Readiness. Training is the most critical element of the mountain alpine infantry concept. It must also promote cohesion when leaders and Soldiers share stress and hardships.

Individual training must concentrate on critical fieldcraft skills as well as basic infantry and support skills. Essential to individual skills in mountain alpine forces is expanding mountaineering skills through establishing the Special Qualification Identifier (SQI)-E (Military Mountaineer) and additional advanced training through course attendance at the Army Mountain Warfare School or Northern Warfare Training Center. Basic and advanced mountaineer courses teach light formations to operate effectively and safely across complex, high-angled terrain and extreme climates. Mountaineering skills also cultivate independence, initiative, navigation, and leadership skills within the officer and NCO Corps.

Training as combined arms teams will continue to be standard. Combat leaders will practice infiltration by integrating the initiative, stealth, and surprise inherent in mountain alpine infantry operations with the firepower



Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, and Chilean army soldiers assigned to 3rd Mountain Division, cross-country ski at the Chilean Army Mountain School in Portillo, Chile, on 27 August 2021. (Photo by SGT Gregory Muenchow)

of artillery, air defense, aviation, and joint support. Periodically, mountain alpine infantry must train with joint and NATO partner forces within the continental United States and abroad to meet a broad range of potential employment needs. A mountain alpine formation would seek foreign military mountain warfare schools to send their Soldiers and leaders.

Off-post deployments, including overseas training, must become routine so that leaders and units have maximum opportunities to develop and mature. Tailored mountain alpine infantry combined arms forces will train to meet constrained deployment times using emergency deployment readiness exercises from the company team through the division level. Frequent training with Air Force and Navy forces will be critical to MDO integration.

Conclusion

A mountain alpine infantry formation would provide the Army with a highly responsive, rapidly deployable force capable of operating in all environments, including in austere conditions, at high altitudes, and within the arctic climate. Mountain alpine forces will consist of the toughest and most resilient Soldiers in the Army. A mountain alpine infantry formation would be the unit of choice for all missions within the harshest of environments.

Notes

¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, “Regaining Arctic Dominance: The U.S. Army in the Arctic,” 19 January 2021, 3.

² Ibid, 10.

³ Department of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy Fact Sheet,” 28 March 2022, 1.

⁴ Ibid, 2.

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