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# The Relative Advantage of Tempo:

## *Fighting the Medium Brigade Combat Team Infantry Battalion at the National Training Center and Beyond*

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### **The Stryker Brigade Combat Team's (SBCT's) Role in the Army of 2030**

Our Army exists for one purpose — to defend the nation and protect our national interests as part of the joint force. One of the Army's strategic roles in support of the joint force is to prevail in large-scale combat operations (LSCO).<sup>1</sup> The division is the principal warfighting formation in LSCO and shapes the battlefield to enable brigades to win in close combat. Brigade combat teams are the Army's primary close combat force and designed to maneuver against, close with, and destroy enemy forces. The role of the Army's "medium" brigade — currently the SBCT — becomes an important case study as force design updates for the Army of 2030 and beyond begin to be implemented across the Army. Designed as an interim brigade almost three decades ago, the SBCT finds itself in a critical period of retaining relevance amid modernization and force design. It is unclear whether the SBCT will remain the medium brigade formation in the Army of

2030. What is clear is that the medium brigade — or "Regular Infantry" described by COL Huba Waas de Czege in his 1985 vision of the future of Infantry as "a mobile, infantry-centric formation that fights at the speed of an armored brigade but with the pace of a light brigade" — will remain a required capability in the Army's arsenal to enable the division as the primary tactical warfighting formation.<sup>2-3</sup>

Army doctrine defines four desirable tenets of operations — agility, convergence, endurance, and depth. Commanders use these tenets to continuously inform the operations process and as a tool to assess the probability of success in operations. Brigades, as the Army's primary close combat force, must focus on developing the tenant of agility — the

*Stryker crews from the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, conduct a field training exercise in March 2023. (Photo by CPL Tyler Brock)*





*Soldiers assigned to the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment advance towards cover during National Training Center Rotation 23-10 on 14 September 2023. (Photo by SGT Quincy Adams)*

ability to move forces and adjust their disposition and activities more rapidly than the enemy.<sup>4,5</sup> Tactical maneuver formations must use agility to influence tempo — the “relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy.”<sup>6</sup> This is the current relative advantage of the SBCT of today’s Army — and what the medium brigade of Army 2030 and beyond must develop capabilities towards. By investing in an infantry-centric, self-mobile fighting formation, the Army provides options for the joint force to dominate the land domain against the preeminent adversaries of the United States over the next 5-15 years — the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. The medium brigade provides the mass and tempo for sustained land power in LSCO that neither adversary can account for if employed properly.

The experience of Combined Task Force (CTF) Manchu during National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 23-10 in September 2023 provides a case study in the role of tempo in successfully fighting an infantry battalion in a medium brigade during LSCO. Comprising a battalion headquarters, a scout platoon, a mortar platoon, a sniper section, a medical platoon, two U.S. rifle companies, a rifle company from the Singapore Army, a support company, and an attached sapper company, CTF Manchu repeatedly used tempo and mass to overwhelm mechanized elements of NTC’s opposing force (OPFOR) — particularly in urban terrain. The lessons CTF Manchu learned during NTC 23-10 — principally the need to prioritize tempo above all other considerations — are pertinent for future force design, modifying the fighting doctrine of medium formations, and how to employ those characteristics against potential adversaries.

### **Current Near-Peer Threats**

NTC has more than 30 years of history of preparing our units, in training, for their worst days in combat. Although it

cannot replicate every variable of every environment, NTC does an exceptional job of stressing units across all warfighting functions and great distances. What we can learn from our tactical fights there can also teach us about what to expect in a close fight with our two main threats — the ground forces of the Russian Federation and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

The basic unit of the Russian Ground Forces, the mechanized rifle brigade, has several distinct advantages over its U.S. counterparts — mainly in its organic tank battalion, two artillery battalions (one self-propelled howitzer and one multiple launch rocket system [MLRS]), and two anti-aircraft battalions.<sup>7</sup> However, its main tactical unit, the motorized rifle battalion, faces a distinct disadvantage against its U.S. counterpart in its manning. The

Russian squads are generally four to 11 personnel, but the most common variant includes just seven personnel (vehicle/squad commander, driver/mechanic, grenadier, assistant gunner, machine gunner, senior rifleman, and rifleman) and can only dismount six.<sup>8</sup> To pull the thread on this, a Russian motorized rifle company in the defense could field approximately 60 dismounted infantry soldiers and 10 fighting vehicles. On the other hand, a U.S. SBCT infantry battalion in the offense against it would field almost 300 dismounts. While a U.S. infantry BCT (IBCT) has the same advantages in dismounted infantry as the SBCT, it would struggle with the endurance needed for multiple offensive operations, and a U.S. armored BCT (ABCT) would have a distinct disadvantage in dismounted forces available (approximately 80-160 dismounts in an ABCT battalion, based on type). This makes the SBCT’s mass of dismounted infantry a distinct advantage over contemporary Russian forces.

The PLA presents different challenges. First, the PLA’s combined arms brigades possess four motorized, mechanized, or armored combined arms battalions (compared to three in most U.S. brigades), which are organic to the brigade based on the type of formation.<sup>9</sup> The PLA ground force combined arms brigades also possess reconnaissance battalions, an artillery battalion, and an air defense battalion. PLA task organization at the battalion and below is similar to that of U.S. BCTs. The PLA’s ability at the brigade level to deny U.S. advantages in close air support or Army attack aviation, as well as its advantages in artillery, make the requirement for tempo in the close fight even more imperative. In any future fight against the PLA, the distinct advantage for U.S. forces would be in leadership; in the PLA’s modernization efforts, they’ve realized that their battalion commanders (usually majors) do not have sufficient staff to command and control combined arms operations.<sup>10</sup> PLA efforts over the past decade aimed at addressing this have added more staff at

the battalion level; however, these leaders and systems are untested. A formation like the SBCT, utilizing large amounts of dismounted infantry and U.S. doctrinal concepts for maintaining tempo (such as using multiple routes, dispersion, highly mobile forces, and piecemeal destruction of isolated enemy forces) could prove to be too much for untested PLA leaders in the close fight and also mitigate the risk posed by the PLA's superiority in air defense artillery and fires.<sup>11</sup>

### Tempo on the Transparent Battlefield

Current Army doctrine acknowledges the need for audacity and tempo as two of the four characteristics of the offense outlined in Field Manual 3-90, *Tactics*. The audacious commander dispels uncertainty by acting decisively and compensates for a lack of information by developing the situation aggressively to seize the initiative.<sup>12</sup> Doctrine for SBCTs notes that “while rapid tempo is often preferred, tempo should be adjusted to ensure synchronization” (or convergence at echelon) and adds that the combination of infantry squads and Stryker vehicles enable this.<sup>13</sup> This leads to a doctrinal template for a medium brigade where the formation travels in a mounted formation (generally traveling overwatch) until the probable line of contact; then dismounts its infantry to clear complex terrain before pulling its vehicles forward and continuing the process again and again. As COL Wass de Czege noted, “...to carry the array of heavy equipment it needs to do its job, regular infantry rides. But it fights dismounted — always.”<sup>14</sup> It is considered a cardinal sin in the SBCT to have infantry killed riding in the back of a Stryker, and a generation of SBCT leaders have grown up under the adage of “we don't drive through engagement areas.” The challenge for the SBCT on today's transparent battlefield is that it is always in one of the eight forms of contact, so the relative safety of utilizing micro-terrain to conceal vehicles while dismounted infantry attacks is no longer viable.

During NTC 23-10, CTF Manchu found that a rotational design required a much faster tempo than it had anticipated going into the rotation — this was exacerbated by the interoperability challenges that occur whenever U.S. forces work with allied or partner forces. Instead of being able to maneuver and dismount 5-7 kilometers away from an objective (maxi-

mum anti-tank weapon's range in open desert at NTC), CTF Manchu quickly realized that based on a multitude of reasons — convergence windows from division, synchronization with adjacent battalions, or time-based triggers — the battalion had to move much more rapidly than anticipated. This resulted in a mindset shift for commanders in the battalion. Rather than infiltrate dismounted companies under cover of darkness or terrain, the unit would do its best to set conditions with external fires or Army attack aviation and then accept risk by aggressively bounding forward (our mantra during the rotation became “bum rush”) while mounted in traveling overwatch — sometimes into engagement areas — until we made direct fire contact with the enemy. The unit would then dismount forces and rapidly conduct company- or battalion-level dismounted attacks, supported by consolidated mortars at the battalion level. This often overwhelmed the vehicle-centric OPFOR that struggled to defeat the sheer volume of dismounted infantry found in an SBCT infantry battalion.

Counter to current SBCT doctrine and 20 years of global war on terrorism (GWOT) experience, the fight during NTC 23-10 prevented the effective integration of Strykers as a local support by fire in almost any operating environment, except urban terrain, without the use of heavy suppression or obscuration. The multiple arrays of anti-tank munitions employed by the OPFOR meant that any time a Stryker exposed itself, it was struck. What CTF Manchu found, however, was the necessity to continue the initial mounted attack in a bounding overwatch until the lead unit made direct fire contact. The additional 2-3 kilometers of mounted maneuver into the enemy's defense enabled the organization to maintain tempo. By pushing the tempo and making direct fire contact, and then overwhelming a predominantly mechanized enemy with dismounted infantry, CTF Manchu found success in the offense.

### Three Lessons for Success in High-Tempo Operations

Factoring in the lessons CTF Manchu learned during NTC 23-10 and a relative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of our Army's potential adversaries, here are a few key takeaways for SBCT leaders to enable successful high-tempo operations:

**1. Make a Simple Plan Early.** Given the time constraints placed on units at NTC to plan operations this is often forced on units, but it goes without saying that a simple plan executed boldly has a decent chance of success. Planners at the battalion and brigade levels must issue orders that include commander's intent, sub-unit objectives, and other graphic control measures (limited) as well as provide a synchronized timeline that allows subordinate commanders to plan their operations. In CTF Manchu, we learned that providing companies with a task and purpose, their objectives, direct fire control measures to deconflict operations in time and space, and our required triggers were effective in the rapidly changing environment. Additionally, the development and

*A Stryker from the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment sits in a defensive position during NTC Rotation 23-10. (Photo courtesy of 4-9 IN)*



use of a common set of graphics by the brigade's geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) cell (in our case, the "Raider Special" map that included checkpoints, battle positions, and other known pieces of terrain) are invaluable in adjusting plans while on the move to accommodate for actual terrain and enemy actions. This is important for enabling tempo.

**2. The Role of Commander's Intent.** Battalion commanders must personally visualize, describe, and direct the fight based on their own experience and education. They must relay this intent to subordinates in a simple method that is understandable at the platoon leader level. CTF Manchu was most successful when the battalion commander described how our mission nested with the brigade and division's missions in his expanded purpose and when he limited his key tasks to the three to five things we must do to accomplish the mission and why. For example, during our brigade attack into Jin-Dong (formerly Razish), the commander described the battalion end state as: "Friendly: One company of combat power remains available. Enemy: North Torbian forces defeated in Eastern Jin-Dong and unable to effect 1SBCT operations. Terrain: Objective Bulls seized and the battalion consolidated in a hasty defense on BP 60. Civilian: minimized loss of life and damage to infrastructure, postured to turn over to South Torbian government control." When we came out of that extremely intense fight, all those conditions were met — except for the hasty defense on BP 60, which in turn led to an ineffective hasty defense against the OPFOR's counterattack. By clearly defining intent, commanders allow subordinate commanders to have informed discussions about risk; in our case, we did not have this discussion and it led to disastrous results (but also lessons learned).

**3. Command and Control.** It is the mission of subordinate units to maintain communications with their higher headquarters. What CTF Manchu found during NTC 23-10 was that if we could not maintain reliable voice communications with the brigade commander, we could not effectively communicate risk, opportunities, and decisions with our higher headquarters — the same went for company command posts to the battalion. To combat this, the battalion did away with the idea of a tactical command post (CP) except for limited periods during main CP jumps and instead utilized a mobile command group consisting of the S-3 and battalion commander's Stryker. The battalion commander would find the spot on the battlefield where he could communicate with the brigade commander on frequency modulation (FM) voice (the battalion main CP was ideal), and the battalion S-3 would move his Stryker to a location where he could talk to the company commanders and the battalion commander. By bifurcating command and control in this manner, the battalion extended its operational reach and enabled tempo by allowing its tactical operations center to further extend distances while maintaining the critical commander-to-commander link from company to brigade that enabled shared understanding across the battlefield.

## Conclusion

As the Army modernizes its force structure to maintain

a relative tactical advantage against our adversaries on the battlefields of 2030 and beyond, strategists and senior leaders must seek to maintain the medium brigade as a close combat force capable of maneuvering at the speed of an armored formation with the ability to rapidly mass dismounted infantry. This type of formation provides division commanders with an array of options and a relative tactical advantage over the close combat forces of our two primary adversaries — the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. Lessons learned by CTF Manchu, fighting as part of an SBCT, provide important insights into the importance of tempo and agility as well as how the Army can adapt medium brigade doctrine to the challenges of a transparent battlefield.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, July 2019, v-vii.

<sup>2</sup> COL Huba Wass de Czege, "Three Kinds of Infantry," *Infantry*, July-August 1985, 11, <https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/1985/JUL-AUG/pdfs/JUL-AUG1985.pdf#13>.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Hadley, Savannah Spencer, and Justin Martens, "How the Army 2030 Divisions Fight (Formerly Known as WayPoint 2028)," Version 3.5 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, 2 February 2023), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, October 2022, 2-19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, para 3-3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, para 3-8.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Lester W Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2016), 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 7-100.3, *Chinese Tactics*, August 2021, para 2-22 to 2-24.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, "The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army," in Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms, edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, February 2019) 363, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1748401/>.

<sup>11</sup> FM 3-90, *Tactics*, May 2023, 3-3.

<sup>12</sup> ADP 3-90, para 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> ATP 3-21.21, *SBCT Infantry Battalion*, March 2016, para 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> COL Wass de Czege, "Three Kinds of Infantry," 12.

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