



Sgt. Genevieve Braun, assigned to the 77th Sustainment Brigade, issues an assault pack to an Iraqi soldier assigned to the 71st Iraqi Army Brigade 26 October 2015 during an equipment issue at Camp Taji, Iraq. The Iraqi soldiers received assault packs and other military equipment through the Iraq Train and Equip Fund program. The equipment distributed by coalition members with Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve is one of the key elements in the coalition’s mission to build partner capacity. (Photo by Sgt. Charles M. Bailey, U.S. Army)

Setting the Theater

A Definition, Framework, and Rationale for Effective Resourcing at the Theater Army Level

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Setting the theater is an extraordinarily complex task often misunderstood by not only our military and intergovernmental partners but also by those responsible for its planning and execution. Such misunderstanding is largely due to a lack of a common definition of the concept among the services and our allies. Nevertheless, setting the theater is essential to the success of joint and combined operations around the globe. However, without a common doctrinal

This article highlights the impact of a doctrinal definition gap while also exploring why setting the theater is such an important requirement for the Army and joint forces. It also discusses the various divergent and largely insufficient descriptions found in doctrine and proposes a common definition and systems approach to facilitate the creation of a framework that will enable the theater army to analyze, plan, and, perhaps most importantly, resource future requirements.



definition of what set the theater means, it is virtually impossible to determine the necessary resources and requirements to do it right.

A theater of operations is never truly set. Setting a theater is supposed to be a continuous, long-term process that creates situational understanding and helps to shape conditions for the success of Army, joint, and combined operations. This understanding, in turn, should facilitate the successful opening and closing of the joint operations area in support of activities across the range of military operations. However, the absence of a common definition and an associated conceptual framework results in recurring misperceptions of the numerous tasks, required resources, and amount of time needed to set the theater.

1st Lt. Jordan Springer, contracting officer representative for the 104th Engineer Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 36th Engineer Brigade, based out of Fort Hood, Texas, asks a Liberian worker about making adjustments to a well pipe 13 January 2015 at an Ebola treatment unit in Tubmanburg, Liberia, in support of Operation United Assistance. Lack of a preplanning framework resulted in delays to preparatory set-the-theater actions for Operation United Assistance that presented significant obstacles to the humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operation. (Photo by Sgt. Ange Desinor, U.S. Army)

A Critical Joint and Army Requirement

The joint force must be able to execute a wide range of operations promptly and sustainably in support of

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national interests and the geographic combatant command (GCC) objectives.¹ To do this, planners cannot wait until a crisis occurs to set the theater. It must be an ongoing process in which one ultimately ensures critical capabilities are already in place to respond to crises and support operations.

Setting the theater is a critical joint requirement that the Army, through its theater armies, executes in support of the GCC across the range of military operations. The theater army does this through its Title 10 responsibilities, Army support to other services, and other executive agent responsibilities.² Just a few of the Army's historical set-the-theater tasks include command and control of joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of U.S. and coalition forces; establishment of forward support bases; and distribution of inland logistics.

Both contingency and steady-state operations underlie the requirement to set the theater. However, these become difficult without a firm grasp of the dynamics and complexities involved.

The Doctrinal Gap

In spite of its importance in joint and combined operations, a holistic definition of, and framework for, setting the theater does not exist in either Army or joint doctrine. Both currently take a piecemeal approach to describing slices of it, usually by warfighting or joint function. These descriptions are vague, disparate, and inadequate. Nowhere can a theater army planner find an integrated, comprehensive framework that examines all aspects of setting the theater; specifically, the critical requirements of protection, sustainment, intelligence, mission command, and partnership and access.

For example, Joint Publication (JP) 3-31, *Command and Control for Joint Land Operations*, describes setting the theater in terms of communications systems architecture; prepositioned logistics; maintenance of seaport and airport infrastructure; and reception, staging, and onward integration tasks.³ This list is far from comprehensive, focusing mostly

on sustainment activities, and leaving out protection, intelligence, and mission-command capabilities that enable the land-component command to shape conditions prior to and during operations.

JP 4-0, *Joint Logistics*, briefly mentions setting the theater in very broad terms, describing it as a shaping activity in support of major combat operations.⁴ This description is misleading, however. It creates the misconception that setting the theater is something we only do in response to a crisis or in preparation for a specific operation. In reality, setting the theater is a continuous anticipation process that allows us to understand and to shape conditions in support of not only major combat operations but also all activities across a range of potential military operations that also includes humanitarian relief.

Army doctrine also lacks an approved definition and is similarly plagued with conflicting guidance about when setting the theater occurs. Several different publications offer varying descriptions, although none offers a conceptual framework that explains what exactly set the theater entails or how to assess it.

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-93, *Theater Army Operations*, describes it regarding whole-of-government initiatives aimed at access and agreements, with a strong nod toward the importance of security cooperation activities.⁵

Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 4-0, *Sustainment*, approaches setting the theater from the perspective of access and the sustainment warfighting

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function, describing it as “activities directed at establishing favorable conditions for conducting military operations in the theater, generally driven by the support requirements ... and other requirements.”⁶

Field Manual 3-94, *Theater Army, Corps and Division Operations*, describes it as a “broad range of actions necessary to employ land power before and during a crisis.”⁷ It highlights the critical capabilities that a theater army can provide, such as force protection and a flexible Army headquarters able to meet mission command requirements.⁸

Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, expands the intellectual space for describing setting the theater, and even discusses Theater Army responsibilities in support of Combatant Commands.⁹ Unfortunately, the description of setting the theater in *Operations* is so broad that it could essentially encompass anything and everything the Army does, resulting in an inability to define success and the discrete tasks required to achieve it.

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command has published several pamphlets and articles that expound on setting the theater. However, these are future concepts subject to experimentation and future

implementation, and none specifically addresses the need for a common definition of the concept, a common conceptual framework, or specific enumerated requirements.

The 2014 *U.S. Army Operating Concept, Win in a Complex World*, identifies setting the theater as an Army core competency and proposes the following definition: “actions taken to establish and maintain the conditions necessary to seize the initiative and retain freedom of action.”¹⁰ It gives a much more expansive and accurate picture of what it means to set the theater, including critical capabilities in logistics, communications, intelligence, long-range fires, and air and missile defense.¹¹

Nesting beneath the *Army Operating Concept* is the Army Capabilities Integration Center’s Warfighting Challenge 16, “Set the Theater, Sustain Operations, and Maintain Freedom of Movement,” which describes setting the theater as “strategic activities directed at establishing favorable conditions for conducting Army and joint operations.”¹² This includes operational contract support and leveraging commercial sources for commodities, services, and construction.



Unfortunately, ADRP 3-0, *Operations*, and ADP 1, *The Army*, do not identify set the theater as a core competency, nor has the Army adopted the *Army Operating Concept's* definition into any published doctrine to date.

Operational Impact

This lack of a common definition and framework hinders the ability of theater armies to set the theater for the GCC. Ambiguous requirements cause planners to fail in identifying needed capabilities and resources. As a result, theater armies cannot make an informed request to resource these requirements through the Global Force Management allocation process.

Without a common definition or conceptual framework to evaluate and prioritize tasks, each theater army and GCC has developed its own approach to setting its respective theater based on how they define it, including potential posture locations, forces available, and the relative importance of U.S. interests at stake. This makes it difficult to achieve a consensus of what it means to set the theater and share lessons learned across commands. While this ambiguity may not significantly affect theater armies with sufficient resources—as they have assigned and allocated forces and an ample footprint to execute set the theater operations—those with limited resources have a much more difficult time. A common definition and conceptual framework would reduce ambiguity, eliminate the notion that setting the theater means different things to different organizations, and provide a baseline for all theater armies to request the necessary forces and resources to set the theater and assess the effectiveness of their efforts.

Two vignettes underscore the need to close this doctrinal gap. The first occurred following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. During the initial weeks of Operation Enduring Freedom, because planners

had not executed setting the theater as a continuous process, U.S. Central Command and U.S. Army Central had just four weeks to do so in preparation for airstrikes commencing on 7 October 2001, followed by the deployment of special operations forces into northern Afghanistan. In that short time, planners had neither identified the capabilities of the support infrastructure needed to sustain operations nor did they fully realize the difficulty of launching operations from austere regional bases.¹³ Fortunately, the commands were able to leverage a preplanned exercise, Operation Bright Star, as an intermediate staging base to introduce and sustain forces in theater.

On the other end of the conflict continuum, lack of planning framework and resulting preparatory set-the-theater actions for Operation United Assistance presented significant obstacles to a humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operation led by U.S. Army Africa (USARAF) in response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.¹⁴ Without understanding the conditions in the theater, planners were unable to identify capability gaps or resources needed to close those gaps. A key example was the initial identification of Roberts International Airport in Monrovia, Liberia, as the only C-17 and C-130 capable airfield suitable for strategic and theater airlift. A hasty runway assessment after the declaration of crisis revealed that the runway was in a significant state of disrepair and posed a potential runway collapse hazard to the heavy C-17s. USARAF identified the need for an immediate repair plan that took time to implement, and led to flight restrictions that limited force and equipment flow during the crisis.¹⁵ In retrospect, a requirement specified in a set-the-theater planning framework to conduct runway surveys prior to the crisis would have resulted in a better understanding of the conditions in theater and identified this deficiency.

Additionally, a lack of organic sustainment, intelligence, and protection assets limited the command's ability to shape conditions for success. While USARAF was able to overcome or mitigate these shortfalls, the requisite understanding and subsequent shaping of the joint operations area overrode all other support requirements on the continent to include those executed in support of other services.¹⁶ As a result, numerous security cooperation activities and exercises were either modified or canceled entirely to focus efforts on setting the theater.

Setting the theater properly demands close attention to planning and managing the disposition of enormous amounts of materiel, including tens of thousands of shipping containers and vehicles, and millions of pieces of Army equipment. Therefore, successful logistical planning demands the synchronization of efforts by a wide range of actors that include all military services, other U.S. government agencies, the governments and militaries of foreign nations, contractors, and nongovernment agencies. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

Although ultimately successful, these operations challenged the U.S. Army's ability to respond to crises, but it was an unnecessary challenge. Planners can create understanding and shape conditions long before a crisis occurs by prioritizing setting the theater as a continuous and enduring task. This allows U.S. forces to respond more rapidly and effectively. It also alleviates the avoidable strain that comes with trying to understand, shape, and open the theater—rapidly and simultaneously—after a crisis that has already occurred.

A Continuous Process

Setting the theater must enable access not only during times of crises but also during deterrence and steady-state operations as well. Gen. Gustavo Perna, commander of the United States Army Materiel Command, stated in a 2015 *Army Sustainment* magazine article, "The Army cannot be globally responsive when it takes weeks or months to deploy forces because of restrictive transportation nodes, poorly positioned equipment, and nonexistent access agreements."¹⁷

Accordingly, planners must continually use military engagements, security cooperation events, and other activities to assess and understand the current conditions within the theater. However, there is more to setting the theater than just understanding it. It includes shaping conditions to allow for the timely entry of joint forces, the successful execution of operations, and an acceptable level of risk for not only the mission but also for our soldiers.

Setting the theater is a critical joint and Army requirement. However, the current doctrinal gap has the potential to negatively affect our military's ability to conduct operations in support of strategic objectives around the globe. We need a doctrinal framework that includes both a conceptual definition and a planning construct that planners can use to continuously assess tasks and set conditions for success.

Proposed Definition and Framework

Given this background, USARAF has developed a definition and framework for setting the theater that allows the command to assess conditions, identify capability gaps, determine necessary resources, and plan activities required to close or mitigate those gaps. The proposed doctrinal definition developed by USARAF for setting the theater is

creating conditions through protection, sustainment, intelligence, mission command, and access and partnership that enable joint, Army, and combined forces to conduct activities across the range of military operations.

This proposed definition provides greater clarity than any previous definitions or descriptions. It also highlights the importance of setting conditions for future success. However, any attempt to define setting the theater is incomplete without an accompanying framework that divides this complex set of tasks into discrete and quantifiable components. By identifying specifically what setting the theater entails, we can create a common framework for use among theater armies and the joint force. USARAF uses a systems approach to develop such a conceptual framework that deconstructs the requirements and conditions necessary to set the theater for future operations (see table, page 61).

This framework is divided into categories, and each of these categories contain a list of requirements based on elements defined in doctrine. These requirements are further divided into conditions that identify required capabilities and help to inform the staff planning process. Many of these conditions are a joint responsibility that USARAF cannot directly affect. However, planners must still assess them to inform future planning efforts. Using this framework, USARAF is able to conduct a comprehensive assessment, identify gaps in capabilities, and either request additional resources to close them or develop alternate solutions that mitigate risk to an acceptable level.

Four of these categories nest within Army warfighting and joint functions: intelligence, protection, mission command, and sustainment. The first category, **access and partnership**, could have been divided among the other warfighting and joint functions; however, it was kept separate to ensure it received the appropriate level of visibility, given the importance of its role in setting the theater. Additionally, the functions of fires, and maneuver and movement are intentionally excluded due to the potential sensitivity among interagency and international partners to descriptions of set-the-theater activities that include potential combat actions.

Access enables overflight and entry for Army, joint, and combined forces and ensures the existing

Table. Set the Theater Framework

Access and partnership	Intelligence	Mission command	Protection		Sustainment
Access and infrastructure	Signals intelligence	Airspace control	Air and missile defense	Law and order	Contract support
Agreements	Geospatial intelligence	Information operations	Anti-terrorism	Operational area security	Finance
Partnerships	Counterintelligence and human intelligence	Mission-tailored forces	Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear	Operations security	Logistics
	Open-source intelligence	Network operations	Explosive ordnance disposal and protection	Personnel recovery	Medical
			Force health protection	Physical security	
			Intelligence support	Safety techniques	

(Table by Lt. Col. Joseph John Shimerdla)

infrastructure and posture locations are able to meet theater-entry requirements. Partnerships—especially enduring partnerships with our allied nations—are perhaps the most important. They underpin all of the other categories and are essential to establishing and maintaining the conditions necessary to set the theater. Thus, the theater army and GCC support the whole of government with its efforts to initiate, maintain, and enhance partnerships and secure access through engagements, exercises, and other activities.

Intelligence ensures situational understanding of the operational environment and enables the joint force to better shape emerging crises and seize opportunities. The theater army accomplishes this through the full range of intelligence-gathering disciplines, including signals, geospatial, counterintelligence, human, and open-source.

Mission command relates to the theater army's ability to provide a headquarters, tailored forces, and a theater communications architecture able to meet the requirements of a joint force.

Sustainment is the category most commonly associated with other descriptions of setting the theater, which view these activities largely through a logistics centric lens. This category not only includes logistics broadly but also underscores the need for distribution networks, contracting, and medical capabilities to meet operational requirements.

Finally, the **protection** category provides planners with an assessment of conditions within each country and key locations, to include the assets available to protect U.S. forces, infrastructure, and other critical requirements.

The framework developed by USARAF provides a systematic, analytical approach that identifies the requirements and conditions necessary to set the theater. Through collaboration with joint, interagency, and multinational partners, USARAF can identify information and capability gaps and then leverage military engagements, security cooperation events, and other activities to close these gaps. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, this approach enables USARAF to identify, plan, and request forces and

resources necessary to ensure it is prepared to conduct contingency operations within Africa.

Such a framework is applicable not only to USARAF area of responsibility but also to any theater where it is necessary to set the conditions that enable the projection of combat power in support of operations. It enables a theater army to better identify, articulate, and justify requirements necessary to set the theater.

Conclusion

Joint and Army doctrine needs a definition and framework that clearly outlines what it means to set the theater. Not only will these serve as impartial tools to inform future resourcing requests and

identify risks if these requirements are not sourced, but a common definition together with the conceptual framework derived from it will also allow for better sharing of lessons learned organized by commonly stipulated categories.

By identifying the specific conditions necessary to set the theater, a doctrinal definition and conceptual framework similar to the one developed by USARAF can scope down what has historically been a tremendously broad undertaking into something much more manageable. Most importantly, it will enable the theater army to meet combatant commander requirements across the range of military operations to protect and advance U.S. interests abroad. ■

Notes

1. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 17 January 2017), V-4

2. Department of Defense Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components*, 21 December 2010, 30, accessed 16 January 2018, <http://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/510001p.pdf>.

3. JP 3-31, *Command and Control of Joint Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 24 February 2014), B-1.

4. JP 4-0, *Joint Logistics* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 16 October 2013), IV-7.

5. Army Techniques Publications 3-93, *Theater Army Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, November 2014), 1-11, 1-19.

6. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 4-0, *Sustainment* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 2012), 2-1, 2-2.

7. Field Manual (FM) 3-94, *Theater Army, Corps and Division Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, April 2014), 2-8.

8. Ibid.

9. FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 6 December 2017, Change 1), 4-5. FM 3-0 describes setting the theater as a "broad range of actions conducted to establish the conditions in an operational area for the execution of strategic plans" and goes on to describe the Theater Army's role as responsible for "the planning and coordination of Army Capabilities to meet the combatant commander's intent to set the theater."

10. Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040* (Fort Eustis, VA: U.S. GPO, 31 October 2014), vi and 48.

11. Ibid., vi and 23.

12. Army Capabilities Integration Center and Sustainment Center of Excellence (ARCIC), "AWFC 16 White Paper (QAR Version)," 16-Set the Theater, Sustain Operations, and Maintain Freedom of Movement, milSuite, accessed 20 February 2017, <https://www.milsuite.mil/book/groups/army-warfighting-challenge-awfc-group/projects/16-set-the-theater-sustain-operations-and-maintain-freedom-of-movement/activity> (login required).

13. Donald P. Wright, ed., *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001-September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, May 2010), 61.

14. Center for Army Lessons Learned [CALL] Newsletter No. 15-09, *Operation United Assistance Setting the Theater: Creating Conditions for Success in West Africa* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL, June 2015). This CALL Newsletter describes the significant challenges faced by the U.S. Army Africa staff as they conducted activities in support of Ebola response in Liberia. Chapters 3 and 5 through 8 provide the reader with some of the salient lessons learned from Operation United Assistance.

15. U.S. Army Africa, "Operation United Assistance After Action Review" (Internal staff after action review document, 25 February 2015), 92-96.

16. CALL Newsletter No. 15-09, *Operation United Assistance Setting the Theater*, 30.

17. Gustavo Perna, "Setting the Theater: Planning Today Provides Options for Tomorrow," *Army Sustainment* 47, no. 6 (November-December 2015): 2-3.