

Coalition Interoperability: ABCA's New Focus



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THE U.S. ARMY is simultaneously transforming and fighting the Global War on Terrorism alongside foreign partners who are also transforming and aggressively working to advance battlefield interoperability. One of the best venues for that important work is the re-energized 60-year-old umbrella organization known as the ABCA Armies' Program—America, Britain, Canada, Australia, and most recently New Zealand, which became a member in 2006. Although not a formal alliance, ABCA has become an interoperability standard-bearer focused on the challenges associated with our current operating environment.

Professional Army leaders need to understand ABCA, its rich history, its transformation, and what it is doing to enhance global coalition readiness.

History

ABCA evolved from a World War II coalition, a security relationship between the United States and her Anglo-Saxon allies based on a common culture, historical experience, and language.¹ The ABCA Armies' Program was seeded in 1946 when British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery recommended to U.S. Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower that America, Britain, and Canada should “cooperate closely in all defense matters.” Added Montgomery, “Discussions should deal not only with standardization, but should cover the whole field of cooperation and combined action in the event of war.”² Later that year, the British Government concluded that these three countries should consider the feasibility of standardizing the weapons, tactics, and training of their armed forces.³

The 1947 “Plan to Effect Standardization” agreement led to ABCA’s standardization program among the American, British, and Canadian armies. Its aim was to remove doctrinal and materiel obstacles to complete cooperation.⁴

The 1954 and 1964 Basic Standardization Agreements replaced the 1947 Plan. The 1964 Agreement remains in effect today; however, a new memorandum of

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ABCA'S VISION

The ABCA Program will achieve the effective integration of the capabilities necessary to enable ABCA Armies to conduct the full spectrum of coalition land operations successfully in a Joint environment, now and into the future.

understanding to improve cooperation and program effectiveness is expected to be finalized by 2007.

The 1964 Agreement states that the program's aim is to "ensure the fullest cooperation and collaboration" and "to achieve the highest possible degree of interoperability among the signatory armies through materiel and non-materiel standardization."⁵

Not surprisingly, given the peculiar nature of multinational arrangements, standardization and interoperability have been hit-and-miss among the ABCA armies. Historically, the program's success was measured by the production of cold war-era tactical standards and pamphlets and hosted seminars or exercises.

ABCA Transforms

In June 2002, the ABCA Executive Council—composed of four-star-level generals—concluded that the new conditions and circumstances of our rapidly changing strategic and operational environments had outstripped the program's culture, structure, procedures, and practices. It was time to revitalize the organization and respond to new global security requirements.

A special working party identified four distinct phases of work: strategic assessment; vision, mission, and enduring goals; prioritization of efforts; and business practices. The group examined the international security environment and concluded that "the extensive range of threats requires ABCA armies to address those areas where it can achieve significant advances in interoperability . . . rather than allocating scarce resources to an expansive range of areas that may only achieve minimal outcomes."⁶

Focusing the program's limited resources on a smaller universe of advances in interoperability gave direction to the team's work on a new vision, mission, and goals. The new vision statement is much shorter than the old one. It focuses like a laser on the effective integration of the armies' capabilities in a joint environment. The new mission seeks to optimize interoperability through collaboration and standardization. The goals are ambitious: relevance and responsiveness; standardization, integration and interoperability; mutual understanding; sharing knowledge; and efficiency and effectiveness.

ABCA's new goal to be relevant and responsive was tested in late 2002, when the organization became an integral and critical part of coalition war



Signaller Allister Scott from the 1st Combat Support Regiment, Darwin, Australia, and PFC Kyle Summers from the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, Fort Richardson, Alaska, provide support to a combined night parachute jump by Australian and U.S. Forces as part of exercise Talisman Sabre 2005.

planning. ABCA assembled a cadre of urban operations experts to draft coalition procedures before the coalition's armies entered combat in Iraq. These procedures became a chapter in ABCA's *Coalition Operations Handbook*.⁷ The handbook has proven to be a valuable document. In addition to urban operations, it addresses such topics as forming effective coalitions, logistics, communications, and full-spectrum operations. In 2004, NATO used the handbook as the base document to produce the *NATO Handbook for Coalition Operations*.⁸ The U.S. Army's Battle Command Training Program has used the ABCA handbook for mission-rehearsal exercises to prepare units for deployments to Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The special working party took its cue from the narrowed mission and vision to define the program's new priority efforts as well. The new priorities include the contemporary operating environment and emerging threats, transformation and modernization, joint

ABCA'S Influence on Coalition Warfighting

ABCA has served a vital role in the development of coalition warfighting ability. ABCA-launched advances in partner interoperability, integration, and collaboration have enhanced coalition operations in complex environments throughout the globe, to include Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, ABCA-developed urban operations procedures are serving member and broader coalition forces well in their efforts to bring stability and security to the people of Iraq.

interagency multinational operations, capability integration, knowledge exploitation, and ABCA products. These priorities support the U.S. Army's transformation strategy, focus on the war on terrorism, and recognize that closing capability gaps among coalition members will provide armies needed punch.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), ABCA partners caught a glimpse of just how challenging capability gaps could be. British and American forces were interoperable to some extent because of shared procedural measures, the use of liaison officers, and doctrinal compatibility, but they didn't come close to satisfying requirements for interoperability called for by U.S. joint regulations.

ABCA's most visible program changes were in its business practices: prioritizing resources across identified interoperability gaps, particularly for combat operating systems. A futures concepts capability group worked with member armies to identify gaps. Other capability groups, formed around battlefield operating systems, produced solutions to close those gaps.

ABCA officers worked closely with forward-thinking transformers from the U.S. Army Transformation Campaign Plan's Objective Force Task Force to brainstorm and exchange ideas from the embryonic concept development stage through experimentation, doctrine, and equipment fielding stages. This was a significant effort that enhanced interoperability to depths and degrees never seen before.

In 2003, ABCA leaders reviewed the results of the yearlong program assessment and approved a series of radical changes focused on closing interoperability gaps among the member armies.

More ABCA Contributions

Today, the revitalized ABCA is active on many important fronts. The new program's first annual meeting took place in July 2004 at the National Defense University. Annual meetings have been guided by strategic guidance issued by the Executive Council, which stands up project teams to

tackle tough, combat-relevant coalition interoperability challenges. These teams are closely supervised by capability groups of subject-matter experts from the member armies.

ABCA's 2006 Strategic Guidance focuses on a range of critical stability operations tasks with an emphasis on the production of reports based on recent coalition battlefield lessons. Member armies take these reports to their appropriate commands for inclusion in doctrine, training, and standing operating procedures.

In April 2006, ABCA's national directors (one-star-level leaders from each member army) concluded that ABCA can no longer limit its valuable interoperability work to its five member nations. They directed the capability group leaders (of the command, act, sense, sustain, and shield domains) to produce battlefield-appropriate, universally applicable interoperability solutions that apply to all potential coalition partners and include the wide variety of missions required for the long war on terror.

ABCA's new way of doing business led to the creation of a Coalition Lessons Analysis Workshop (CLAW) to gather, collate, and analyze observations from current operations and exercises and to produce an annual report to inform the program directors and to support interoperability gap analyses. In addition, ABCA's CLAW seeks to identify best practices and then pass them to the nations to

ABCA Medical Interoperability

In 2001, a Royal Australian Army medical officer deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. That officer joined the U.S. 3d Medical Command where he used ABCA's "Medical Interoperability Handbook" to guide the development of coalition health capabilities. This ABCA publication was the catalyst for the creation of the Theater Coalition Health Working Group which brought together all coalition health assets into a single treatment and management system.

complement other findings. These products, which are closely monitored by the Department of the Army and the Training and Doctrine Command's Center for Army Lessons Learned, play a critical role for the revitalized program by validating its necessity.

To help prepare America's leaders for the ongoing coalition battlefield, the U.S. Army is working hard to incorporate ABCA products into its doctrine and to push ABCA products into its curricula and unit SOPs. Indeed, ABCA has already had an impact:

- As aforementioned, the U.S. Battle Command Training Program is using ABCA's *Coalition Operations Handbook* for mission-rehearsal exercises.
- U.S. Army Field Manual 3-16, *The Army in Multinational Operations*, acknowledges that "much of the information in this manual is based on the ABCA *Coalition Operations Handbook*."
- The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College uses the handbook as part of its elective course curricula.

ABCA is very much a joint forces player. For years, U.S. Marines have participated in ABCA meetings, but in 2004, the Marine Corps' assistant commandant became an official member of the Executive Council, and now Marine experts are active with ABCA capability groups.

Finally, ABCA hosts biennial exercises, with each army sharing the responsibility in turn. In the past, the purpose of the exercises was to validate ABCA standardization agreements, to identify areas for future standardization efforts, and to facilitate information exchange. In recognition of the new focus on interoperability and realistic operations, the program's national directors are considering designing an ABCA exercise hosted by the U.S. Army at one of the combat training centers. Using stressful combined arms training that approximates actual combat and reflects realistic future coalition scenarios, this ABCA-CTC "boots on the ground" event will look closely at interoperability.

Prior to the war on terrorism, ABCA exercises were especially helpful in preparing for real operations. For example, the 1998 ABCA exercise Rainbow Serpent was a dress rehearsal for a later, actual operation in East Timor, Indonesia. A brigade-level command post exercise involving an Australian deployable joint-force headquarters, Rainbow

ABCA and Law of War

ABCA's legal information team, which provides a forum to examine legal factors in military planning that may impinge on both coalition operations and interoperability, helps the partners to examine complex rules of engagement, law of war, host-nation issues, and much more.

Serpent '98 focused on peace support operations and operations other than war in a fictitious Pacific island. It resolved many interoperability issues. When the East Timor operation became a reality in 1999, the ABCA armies quickly responded. The United States provided logistic and intelligence support, and Australia, augmented by a New Zealand battalion, a Canadian company, and a British battalion with a Gurkha company, provided the bulk of the land forces.

The Bottom Line

ABCA has come a long way from 1946, when Field Marshal Montgomery and General Eisenhower created the program. Today, a revitalized ABCA addresses the post-9/11 security environment by providing relevant interoperability solutions to ensure the free world's ground forces meet their many important combat-related challenges. The U.S. Army understands the need to fight alongside our allies. It is aggressively working through programs such as ABCA to build interoperability with our coalition partners. **MR**

NOTES

1. After World War II, ABCA allies established peacetime security arrangements with the United States. Canada and the United States established the Military Cooperation Committee in 1946. Australia and New Zealand joined the United States in the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty in 1951. The 1954 Manila Treaty established the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which includes these partners as well.

2. Cited in Thomas-Durell Young, "Whither Future U.S. Alliance Strategy? The ABCA Clue," *Armed Forces and Society* (Winter 1991): 282.

3. Edward C. Ezell, "Cracks in the Post-War Anglo-American Alliance: The Great Rifle Controversy, 1947-1957," *Military Affairs* (December 1974): 138-139, as cited by Thomas-Durell Young in *Supporting Future U.S. Alliance Strategy: The Anglo-Saxon, or ABCA Clue* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1 June 1990), 7.

4. Ibid, 8. The other ABCA programs are the Air and Space Interoperability Council, the ABCA Navies Quadripartite Standardization Program, the AUSCANNZUKUS Naval Communications Organization, the Combined Exercise Agreement, the Combined Communications Electronics Board, and the Technical Cooperation Committee.

5. ABCA, "Basic Standardization Agreement among the Armies of United States-United Kingdom-Canada-Australia," 1 October 1964.

6. Special Working Group Program Review, "A Strategic Assessment of the Security Environment," 2 May 2003, C-21.

7. ABCA *Coalition Operations Handbook*, The American-British-Canadian-Australian Armies Program Primary Standardization Office (Arlington, VA).

8. NATO *Handbook for Coalition Operations*, no other information available.