

# Who Will Fulfill the Cavalry's Functions?

## The Neglect of Reconnaissance and Security in U.S. Army Force Structure and Doctrine

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PHOTO: Soldiers from Company B, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, patrol the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan's Kunar Province, 18 August 2009. The 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division soldiers have been battling insurgents in the valley since arriving in June. (Photo by U.S. Army SGT Matthew Moeller)

**A**FTER NEARLY A decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, counterinsurgency (COIN) theorists have emerged as the most influential voices in the intellectual debate shaping Army doctrine. The Army has gained COIN expertise at the expense of combined arms core competencies. The 2009 Army Capstone Concept (ACC) addresses this emerging imbalance by restoring the concepts of conventional action and initiative as centerpieces of Army doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Even as the 2009 ACC promotes the centrality of these themes to future Joint and Army doctrine, the Army has elected to dismantle the last unit organized and equipped to provide full spectrum reconnaissance and security at the corps and Joint task force level. When the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) converts to a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) in 2011-2012, the Army will face the future without a full spectrum reconnaissance and security force. Army leaders must reconsider the 3rd ACR-SBCT conversion.

Fiscal and manpower constraints stemming from the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, inefficiencies in the Army Force Generation model, and a misguided faith in the efficacy of remote sensors and unmanned platforms all contributed to this decision. Analysis of the long-term consequences highlights its shortsightedness. With the 3rd ACR-SBCT conversion, the abstract intellectual debate among Army officers and defense analysts as to whether the Army will be a force geared for counterinsurgency or one that deters and defeats conventional threats now has dire implications. If the Army continues to highlight COIN tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) over core combined arms competencies, the operational and tactical levels of the Army will suffer. Resolving this debate in a manner that considers both current operations and projections of the future operational environment is essential. The experiences of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and those of the Israeli Defense Forces in southern Lebanon suggest that combined arms competence must be a central tenet of an Army that can fight for information and develop situations through action.

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U.S. Army SGT Chris Miller talks with Afghan children inside Mahsaab High School construction site, Kohistan District, Afghanistan, 16 September 2009.

## The Future of Reconnaissance and Security

The 2009 ACC describes the capabilities that the Army will need to dominate across the full spectrum of operations in the period from 2016 to 2028. It notes technological advances and emerging threat capabilities that will inform the organizational and doctrinal requirements of the future force. To meet the challenges posed by enemies wielding both conventional and unconventional capabilities, the ACC introduced *operational adaptability*, a concept that emphasizes the fundamentals of mission command and decentralized operations.<sup>2</sup>

Operational adaptability enables Army forces to accomplish the diverse array of missions that brigade combat teams and subordinate small units will face in isolated, distributed areas of operation. A single Joint task force, for example, may receive the mission to destroy a conventionally armed

and organized enemy while simultaneously securing the area's population from insurgents using irregular means and methods. At the core of a Joint task force will be its brigade combat teams with sufficient combined arms combat power to defeat conventional enemies while retaining the ability to apply the hard-won irregular warfare TTP learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. These teams will have to be adaptable and able to fight for information against enemies with diverse capabilities.

Operational adaptability means that Army leaders down to the platoon and squad levels must have an understanding of the situation in context; that combined arms formations must have the ability to act in concert with Joint, interagency, inter-governmental, and multinational partners; that tactical formations have the requisite collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities to process information needed by commanders and units to continually assess, learn, and adapt; and

that units at all levels be sufficiently organized and equipped to exploit opportunities, consolidate gains, and transition efficiently between tasks and operations.<sup>3</sup>

These capabilities pertain to the entire future force, but have particular relevance to the reconnaissance and security capabilities required to mitigate the uncertainty and complexity of future battlefields. It is troublesome that current and projected Army force structure addresses reconnaissance and security shortcomings with technological solutions, rather than combined arms solutions. Combined arms capabilities, however, are the foundation of operational adaptability. The current organization of the ACR provides the ideal structure to achieve operational adaptability. New weapons systems that leverage the technological advances of the coming decade will enhance the ACR's broad capabilities. The Army can and should continue to field the ACR as its optimal full spectrum combined arms formation, even as it integrates the component tenets of operational adaptability in its BCTs by fielding new technologies and developing and educating leaders.

Ominously, the current trajectory of the Army—one that addresses current COIN commitments at the expense of full spectrum capabilities—does not reflect the themes of the ACC. The conversion of the 3rd ACR is emblematic of this trajectory. The loss of significant reconnaissance and security capabilities in the force portends difficulties in meeting the challenges of the future and in applying the 2009 ACC vision. The ACC's supporting ideas demand *greater* reconnaissance and security capabilities than currently exists. Even if the end product does not look precisely like the current ACR, the future Army needs formations capable of conducting full spectrum reconnaissance and security operations. The ACC presents a vision of future combat in which reconnaissance and security capabilities play the central role in the ability of the Army to successfully operate in uncertainty.

If the Army is to deploy largely to austere environments among populations with distinct non-Western cultures, predeployment engagement and analysis will be critical to the long-term success of the force. Regardless of the type of threat, the Army must retain the ability to fight for information to develop sound analyses of the physical

terrain and human dynamics confronting it. This places a premium on the collection and development of intelligence at all levels of command.

Furthermore, commanders at all levels and in any type of operation—from stability to high-intensity battle—must have the physical ability to exploit opportunities and control the tempo of operations. The ACC highlights this mind-set in its implicit call for leaders to maintain the freedom of action to seize and maintain the initiative and to develop any situation through decisive action.

Finally, the Army may find itself conducting distributed combined arms operations, with ever smaller units operating far from command and control and sustainment nodes. The forces executing such operations will rely upon decentralized authority at the point of decision. With authority, however, comes the heavy responsibility to make informed decisions derived from reconnaissance and security operations that require tactical commanders to understand and develop the situation through action in their operational areas.

*Action* and *initiative* are the common threads of these ideas that are implicit in the ACC's call for operational adaptability. Most significantly, these points all address the need for decentralized reconnaissance and security capabilities at the operational and tactical levels. In current force structure, the 3rd ACR is the only formation that fulfills these requirements; without the 3rd ACR, the Army loses much of its ability to retain initiative in full spectrum operations. The need for a combined arms force capable of reacting to developing situations and fighting and surviving in complex environments highlights the shortcomings in existing BCT structure. The ACR fields combined arms teams with greater mass and mobile, protected firepower than its BCT counterpart.

## **Army Force Structure for Reconnaissance and Security**

The 3rd ACR-SBCT conversion leaves the Army without full spectrum reconnaissance and security capabilities at echelons above the BCT. Current doctrine addresses reconnaissance and security in the context of COIN. It provides little substantive discussion of reconnaissance and security capabilities in mid- to high-intensity conflicts against enemies organized and equipped with even limited

conventional capabilities. The resulting vulnerabilities in Army force structure have not been evident in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they entail problems in future possible operational environments.

Battalion commanders have assigned reconnaissance and security functions to organic units in Iraq and Afghanistan, and corps and Joint task force commanders have been able to depend upon intelligence from BCT assets operating in their own dedicated areas of operation. Existing reconnaissance and security doctrine and force structure have been adequate in meeting unit needs in the current operational environment. However, they are insufficient in an environment that contains conventional and/or hybrid threats.

Conventional armies that serve governments hostile to the United States still exist. Russian, North Korean, or Chinese conventional forces, for example, employ counter-reconnaissance forces that can easily subdue existing BCT reconnaissance and security forces using superior mass and mobile, protected platforms. Such enemies will likely utilize

irregular means and methods in conjunction with conventional forces. For example, even though Hezbollah did not have the conventional combat power of even a single North Korean mechanized company, it employed a hybrid combination of weapons and TTP that overwhelmed Israeli forces in northern Lebanon in 2006.<sup>4</sup> The Israelis had not organized and trained to defeat forces with conventional capabilities. The U.S. Army today is similarly untrained and ill-structured to defeat such enemies.

The Army must recalibrate its doctrine and force structure to reestablish conventional dominance. In contingencies against conventional and hybrid forces, Army corps commanders will need reconnaissance and security capabilities to best inform the employment of BCTs. Current and projected Army force structure lacks sufficient reconnaissance and security capabilities. Battlefield surveillance brigades (BfSB) are not the solution. Current doctrine assumes that BfSBs can fulfill the role that the ACRs once performed for corps-level commanders. The primary mission of the BfSB is



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**SGT Sean Gray (far right) observes as PFC Khonesvanh Thephavongsa (center) prepares to change the barrel of a M240 machine gun while SPC Joseph Stout lays suppressive fire during team training at Contingency Operating Base Adder, Tallil, Iraq, 6 November 2009. The soldiers are with Company C, 38th Long Range Surveillance, 201st Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, Fort Lewis, WA, and will help train Iraqi Security Force soldiers on proper surveillance and intelligence gathering techniques.**

to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in support of a division, corps, Joint task force, other service, or multinational force, but *doctrine requires BCTs to augment the BfSB*.<sup>5</sup> The BfSB is ill-equipped to perform its mission in a full spectrum environment. Organized and equipped mainly for passive collection of information with a reconnaissance and surveillance squadron that provides only limited mounted reconnaissance and long-range surveillance capabilities to the brigade, the BfSB lacks organic, mobile, protected firepower. Thus, it lacks the ability to fight for information when necessary, to exploit operational and tactical opportunities, and to develop a situation through action.

Many of the issues that afflict the BfSB also hinder reconnaissance and security operations in BCTs. Armored reconnaissance squadrons of heavy BCTs and reconnaissance squadrons of infantry BCTs and Stryker BCTs, for example, lack sufficient dismounted manpower to conduct reconnaissance, surveillance, and security in COIN; furthermore, they lack the firepower and protection to conduct reconnaissance and security missions at the high end of the conflict spectrum. Although the armored reconnaissance squadrons seem to be the descendant of the division cavalry squadron, the reality is that they bear little resemblance in structure and capabilities. Many former Armored Reconnaissance Squadrons commanders are critical of the unit's table of organization and equipment, noting that insufficient manpower denied them tactical flexibility in COIN operations in an urban environment.<sup>6</sup> They adapted through combined arms competencies and used superior firepower and technology to overcome their structural deficiencies against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, enemies in higher-intensity conflicts may not yield as easily to superior American training, firepower, and technology.

The current modular U.S. Army has not fought capable conventional forces. Shortcomings in reconnaissance and security are worrisome in training exercises against opposing forces using conventional armored vehicles (such as Soviet BRDMs and BMPs) and insurgent teams with rocket propelled grenades and IEDs. Friendly platoons and troops habitually violated the basic tenets of reconnaissance doctrine. Cavalry formations are supposed to set the conditions for the decisive commitment of the main body, but insufficient manpower, protection,

and firepower caused these platoons and troops to become decisively engaged upon contact, often forcing the commander to commit more combat power to reinforce or relieve them.<sup>7</sup>

The ability of current reconnaissance and security formations in the Army's BCTs to set these conditions in mid- to high-intensity battle is doubtful, but at least they have dedicated formations to fulfill these functions. Joint task force commanders do not. It is unlikely that they would be willing to go into battle without dedicated reconnaissance and security assets. Using BCT units for reconnaissance and security or to augment BfSBs is the only alternative.

The loss of combat power that comes with trying to fulfill the reconnaissance and security requirements of higher headquarters affects the ability of commanders from company through brigade to fight for, analyze, and disseminate intelligence across their formations. Units will increasingly rely upon corps-level headquarters or unreliable networks for actionable intelligence. This perpetuates an outdated reliance on higher headquarters. Army leaders trumpet the idea of decentralization and call for diffusion of responsibility and combat enablers to the lowest feasible levels of command, but their decision to convert the 3rd ACR will trigger the opposite reaction. The continued dilution of reconnaissance and security capabilities, exemplified by the fielding of armored reconnaissance squadrons in heavy BCTs and the reconnaissance squadrons in infantry and Stryker BCTs, and the conversion of the 3rd ACR, will *centralize* information and intelligence at the corps and Joint task force level. This is not progress toward meeting future challenges, nor is it consistent with the 2009 ACC.

Another danger to the Army is the erosion of the professional expertise required to operate such organizations. The fiscal and intellectual costs of reestablishing it to field heavy reconnaissance and security formations will be prohibitive. The 3rd ACR today has the highest concentration of reconnaissance and security expertise in the Army. The skills and expertise of individual soldiers in scout sections and on regimental staffs will be relics of military history as the Army wrestles with force structure and procurement challenges and makes decisions that fail to address the complexity and uncertainty of the future. The concurrent fielding of BfSBs will put soldiers into positions that fulfill many of the

intelligence staff functions of the current ACR, but the skills related to the collection of intelligence—the ability to conduct doctrinally sound reconnaissance and security operations—will be lost as the Army neglects these skills in favor of population-centric COIN tactics, techniques, and procedures.

The impact of the 3rd ACR-SBCT conversion will be felt in the loss of full spectrum reconnaissance and security capabilities required to meet the versatile enemies of the future. The ACC contends that competency in combined arms operations is the indispensable foundation for future Army forces. At its core are ideas that will enable the Army to fight and win in *any* form of armed conflict. Of all existing brigade-sized formations, the ACR fields the most powerful organic combined arms capabilities down to the company level, a feature that gives it the requisite level of tactical flexibility to meet projected challenges. Defeating future adversaries will require organizations that can fight for information through physical reconnaissance and human intelligence, but the Army will not be able to field such capabilities in sufficient quantities.

## Conclusion

Mission command and decentralization are inseparable concepts that call for commanders to promote initiative at the lowest feasible level. To execute effective decentralized operations, BCTs *and* corps or Joint task forces must have *organic* reconnaissance and security capabilities. The BfSB currently is incapable of providing the requisite level of situational understanding in operations against conventionally armed and equipped formations or hybrid forces that employ both regular

and irregular means and methods. The BfSB lacks the assets necessary for corps-level security operations. Existing Russian, North Korean, and Chinese counter-reconnaissance capabilities accentuate this point. Furthermore, the BfSB's reliance on passive surveillance and the shortage of platforms that provide operational and tactical mobility hinder its flexibility for intratheater maneuver. Without an organization designed to perform reconnaissance and security, the corps or Joint task force commander must draw those capabilities from subordinate BCTs, depleting the already limited amount of combat power available to BCT commanders.

Combined arms competence is the requisite characteristic of a winning military organization regardless of where its mission falls on the conflict spectrum. To meet future challenges, the Army must field formations that can fight for information, develop the situation through action, and exploit operational and tactical opportunities. The ACC contends that decentralization of these capabilities will be beneficial for the future force. Changing the trajectory of the Army as it operates in Afghanistan and Iraq will be quite a task, but it is an urgent endeavor. Restoring these capabilities after the conversion of the 3rd ACR will be too costly and time consuming, leaving the Army vulnerable to adversaries' full-spectrum capabilities.

Political leaders dictate the types of conflicts the Army fights, but even as the Department of Defense enters a period of constrained resources, the Army retains the ability to shape the type of force it fields. A corps-level Joint task force headquarters lacking a powerful organic reconnaissance and security formation will be vulnerable, blind, and subject to the initiative of its adversaries. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, TRADOC Pam 525-3-0: *The Army Capstone Concept*, 2009.

2. *Ibid.*, 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 16-24.

4. Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA:

Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), xii-xv.

5. U.S. Army Field Manual-Interim 3-0.1, *The Modular Force* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2008), 1-15.

6. These observations are from personal interviews with various commanders from July 2007 to May 2009.

7. *Ibid.*