



# Mission Command in the Regionally Aligned Division Headquarters

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PHOTO: Brig. Gen. Wayne W. Grigsby Jr. speaks to the combined joint task force staff after the morning update brief during Exercise Eager Light in Jordan, 12 November 2012. Exercise Eager Light is an annual, bilateral command post exercise conducted between the United States and Jordan. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Pedro Amador)

“**L**IFE AT THE corners of 4 map sheets” is how then-Lt. Gen. Vincent Brooks, as the commanding general of Army Central Command (ARCENT), described the role of the regionally aligned force. The 1st Armored Division, as the first regionally aligned force division headquarters, has found that life at the intersection of those map sheets requires a change from old habits and mindsets. Success as an aligned force requires embracing mission command as a philosophy, establishing mission command systems to keep hands on the forward problem, and adopting a forward-focused mindset. Mission command enables the regionally aligned force to create shared trust and understanding within the headquarters, build the relationships and teams necessary to support the geographic combatant commander, and develop the flexibility necessary to provide mission-tailored command posts to the combatant command.

In May 2012, the Army expanded the concept of regionally aligning units from only brigade combat teams to division headquarters. Forces Command aligned the 1st Armored Division to support U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), making our team one of the first regionally aligned division headquarters. The chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Ray Odierno, outlined his intent for regionally aligned forces on 25 October 2012, indicating their purpose: “to provide the combatant commander with up to a Joint Task Force capable headquarters with *scalable, tailorable* capabilities to enable him to *shape* the environment.” Our 1st Armored Division team viewed alignment as a tremendous opportunity. Our commanding general at the time, Maj. Gen. Dana J.H. Pittard, described the division’s role in this way, nested with the chief of staff of the Army’s intent: “Our goal is to broadly collaborate our

understanding and build trust (at all levels), which will best allow our supported combatant commander to prevent conflict, shape the environment (as needed), and posture us to win (if needed).”

### **Before You Ask the Question: The Answer is Yes.**

First Armored Division committed early on in our regionally aligned force mission to provide complete support to our supported combatant commander. The question was, “How do we best, and in the most responsive way possible, add value to the combatant command?” The operating environment is already challenging—our view was that the regionally aligned force does not need to add additional challenges or complications. Combatant commands will sometimes encounter this type of response when requesting assets from Army units:

- Combatant commander: “I need 100 soldiers.”
- Supporting Army unit: “Acknowledged, we’ll send a brigade (or equivalent).”

Such inflexibility means that Army loses some credibility within the combatant command. If the combatant commander needs ten soldiers, that is what we will send. When a supported combatant

commander submits a request, the regionally aligned force should respond within the intent and guideline of that intent. The bottom line: before a supported combatant commander asks the question, the answer from the regionally aligned force should be “yes.”

### **Get in a Good Stance: Always Forward, Globally Connected, and Expeditionary**

Pittard encouraged our team to retain an expansive view of our role as a regionally aligned headquarters, to “keep our hands on the problem,” and to develop a mindset of being “always forward, globally connected, and expeditionary.” The further an organization is from the problem, the harder it is for that organization to fully understand the problem. We all tend to view the world through a lens that is familiar to us, which, if we are not careful, further inhibits our ability to understand completely the motivations and intentions of our regional partners. Our ability to influence the operating environment directly relates to our proximity to our partners. Regional alignment has required us to “get closer”; engaging partners without understanding the environment means that



The 1st Armored Division tactical command post integrated into the National Training Center rotation 12-09 at Fort Irwin, Calif, 30 July 2012.

we lose relevance and our partners will be less willing to engage us.

To keep our hands on the problem, our team applied the tenants of mission command to our staff and unit activities. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, defines mission command as both a philosophy and as a warfighting function. Embracing mission command as a philosophy required a change in mindset more than anything else we did. Organizational change is difficult, and moving a large team requires a “big idea.” In this case, that idea was retaining a forward footing. In 1st Armored Division, the staff had to buy into the idea that we must look forward to help us better manage transitions and add value to our supported combatant commander from day one. In exercising mission command as a warfighting function, the division staff has repeatedly honed its skills, including conducting the operations process, conducting inform and influence activities, and conducting knowledge and information management.

As part of supporting the combatant commander with what he requires, the division has built and fine-tuned what we call a tailored command post. In developing this concept, the division conducted multiple command post exercise iterations. These included a rotation at the National Training Center in July and August 2012, which was the first time in almost five years that a division level tactical command post deployed to the National Training Center and integrated into the rotation.

A typical pattern for a headquarters is to surge through a command post training event, gain a high level of staff proficiency during execution, but then return to the headquarters, recover equipment, and resume work in cubicles. Facilities are an important component to mission command, and the typical “cubicle farm” works against the principles of mission command. Such cubicles are neither truly private nor open, with high gray walls that discourage collaboration and hinder the building of teams and trust. Other organizational enemies include stove-piping of information in isolated staff sections and staff muscle atrophy—the erosion of individual and collective staff task proficiencies. Our current global operating environment is so complex, changing, and ambiguous that we cannot afford to conduct business this way anymore.

Rather than viewing command post training as a series of discrete events, the 1st Armored Division approach has been to create an environment at home station that allows us to train and operate in our command post every day. Our goal is to connect to the network using our digital systems and allow our soldiers’ daily repetitions to create a level of familiarity and understanding that makes us easily conversant about problems in our aligned region. In that command post—our division operations center—our headquarters links into CENTCOM and ARCENT battle rhythm events such as battle updates. If done right, approaches such as this can mitigate the problem of “the first 100 days”—that time when units are transitioning and there is great risk due to decreased situational understanding. Staying connected in this way means deploying with a staff that has at least a basic understanding of the operating environment.

The scope of a geographic combatant command’s area of responsibility is well beyond that which one division, or even corps, could successfully attempt to understand completely. The commander should designate an area of interest on which to focus the regionally aligned force. For 1st Armored Division, this CENTCOM-directed focus has been largely on the Levant, which includes Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. While not every geographic command will have a similar hotspot, it should still focus the division or corps on a particular portion of the area of responsibility.

***You cannot get there from a “cold start”; being of value as a regionally aligned force means that you have to constantly study, strive to understand, and work to reduce uncertainty as much as possible.***

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Our goal every day has been to understand the current operating environment, the combatant commander’s priorities, and potential contingency operations. You cannot get there from a “cold start”; being of value as a regionally aligned force means that you have to constantly study, strive to understand, and work to reduce uncertainty as much as possible.

## Building Relationships

The regionally aligned force at division and corps level can provide a valuable asset for the combatant commander's use in shaping operations (Phase 0). By keeping hands on the problem, the aligned force can enhance the combatant commander's shaping efforts. The force can build relationships with the lead federal agency (normally the Department of State), which will pay dividends when and if operations transition to deterring operations (Phase 1) and beyond. Additionally, designating a regionally aligned force in Phase 0 makes transitioning to Phase 1 easier, with the regionally aligned force headquarters prepared to set up the core of a joint task force or a combined joint task force.

Phase 0 activities focus on developing ally capabilities, improving information exchange, and intelligence sharing—all things the regionally aligned force does through mission command. The regionally aligned headquarters can be the consistent face of the U.S. military for the members of the partner nation's military and can establish long-term relationships to aid in building the capacity of our key allies. Such relationships are one of the ways the regionally aligned force can provide value to the combatant commander in the human dimension.

The 1st Armored Division established these relationships with members of the Jordanian Armed Forces, from general officer down through staff level at Exercise Eager Light in November 2012. The relationships proved valuable when the division fulfilled the regionally aligned concept by filling a majority of the positions in a CENTCOM forward-deployed command post. The relationships also led to the Jordanian military leadership specifically requesting 1st Armored Division to participate in Exercise Eager Lion in June 2013.

## Exercise, Exercise, Exercise (Politics, Perceptions, Tribes, and Money)

1st Armored Division also participated in two other partnered exercises: Earnest Leader Phase I (a seminar with Saudi Arabian partners at Fort Bliss, Texas) and Earnest Leader Command Post Exercise (in Saudi Arabia). Such exercises are tremendous opportunities and provide a venue for the regionally aligned force to meet the combatant commander's intent of forming teams across his operating environment.

Joint exercises also provide the opportunities for training within a fiscally uncertain environment, as there is significant funding at the combatant command level to conduct partnered training and to participate in relationship-building exercises. With the Army force generation programmed training reduced by budgetary constraints, this joint and partnered training environment is a great place in which to find additional opportunities to train.

Exercise management involves politics, however; the Army is in competition with other services to take advantage of these training opportunities, and there are sensitivities about who does what and who contributes where. Other services have built enduring, deep relationships with the combatant command-level action officers who plan and direct partnered training exercises, which makes getting the Army's foot in the door difficult. The regionally aligned force must become fluent in joint exercise language.

Establishing relationships in both the geographic combatant command and Army service component command should be a priority for every regionally aligned corps or division headquarters. Doing so can keep the force nested in the supported command's decision cycle and keep it responsive to the needs of the supported combatant commander.

The regionally aligned force staff must also become conversant in, and comfortable using, the Joint Operation Planning Process. Although exposed to this during Intermediate-Level Education, few Army majors know it well. Training for regional alignment should therefore include staff exercises using this process.

## The Regionally Aligned Force Community of Interest

The regionally aligned force must also be "comfortable being uncomfortable," by reaching out to others to challenge staff ideas, encouraging venues that expose the headquarters to different perspectives, and retaining enduring contact with partners across the joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environment. There are many nuances, key players, and narratives to consider when integrating into a region; therefore, we cannot afford to limit perspectives to those contained at Fort Bliss or any other installation. Academic outreach is therefore crucial for a regionally aligned force.

The regionally aligned force community of interest is the network of organizations that can share emerging training requirements and best practices with the regionally aligned force. The 1st Armored Division reached out to several academic institutions to develop such a network early on in regional alignment. The first academic engagement was with Leadership Development and Education for a Sustained Peace, which taught an excellent seminar on Levant culture, history, and politics. The network grew when the Army War College sent senior faculty to Fort Bliss to teach a seminar on establishing and leading a combined joint task force headquarters. Additionally, the U.S. Agency for International Development taught the Joint Humanitarian Assistance Operation Course in preparation for a potential humanitarian assistance mission.

The Joint Enabling Capabilities Command, particularly its knowledge management team, has provided valuable assistance to the division headquarters. For the regionally aligned force headquarters looking to integrate into a new operating environment, understanding the interagency environment is critical. Our regionally aligned force headquarters is just one part of a larger ecosystem in which our interagency partners have their own decision cycles, spheres of influence, and access to resources, as do military partners throughout our operating environment. We must be comfortable with this—and the only way to have a shot at understanding what is really going on is to challenge our perspective by embracing the processes, systems, and ideas of those other agencies who work as part of our operational environment. The Joint Enabling Capabilities Command helped the division staff understand how to “talk” in a joint environment and to identify critical processes and decision cycles across the operating environment so we could tailor our outputs to become inputs to other processes. Doing this helped us add value to our partners by taking an approach that accounts for their activities, ensuring that we were postured to enable systems and processes across the operating environment.

These organizations have all played an important role in supporting 1st Armored Division as the regionally aligned force, but this is just the beginning of what the community of interest can and should be. It must be a “big Army” effort to influence players

Army-wide and across the Department of Defense to become part of a network in support of the regionally aligned force. The Army can also make this network extend beyond the Department of Defense to include relevant joint and interagency partners who are players in the region, and establish a recurring event where all such players come together to collaborate with the regionally aligned force. This network would be a powerful asset for the combatant commander.

## Challenges with Being Regionally Aligned

Embracing regional alignment as an Army and best enabling follow-on regionally aligned force headquarters will require improvement in several areas, starting with the network. Regional alignment should grant units access to forward networks from home station, but bureaucracy at multiple levels (Army service component command, and combatant command) makes this a slow process and prevents an easy and seamless connection across our mission command systems with the supported combatant commander.

A second challenge is that the protocols for sharing information with coalition partners are neither fully established nor sourced. Issues here include an ingrained Army habit of over-classifying products and an associated foreign disclosure process that prevents the timely sharing of information with partners; both practices inhibit information sharing. Regionally aligned force headquarters need a cross-domain architecture that allows for rapid transfer of information. They also need hardware, such as additional server stacks, to establish a partnered mission command network. There is a financial cost associated with establishing this level of connectivity, but this is the price of readiness, particularly if the Army wants regionally aligned forces to have the mindset of “always forward, globally connected, and expeditionary.”

In lieu of that partnered mission command network, the staff should be prepared to go where partners are the most comfortable—that is, move to analog versus digital systems if needed. This can require a return to basics and training on skills, which have atrophied in the Army’s move away from map boards and overlays to the digital common operating picture.



(C. Todd Lopez)

**Sgt. 1st Class Grady Hyatt, with U.S. Army Africa, leads an after-action review with soldiers of the Ghana Army. Hyatt was in Africa as part of the Army's "regionally aligned forces" concept, meant to pair Army units with combatant commanders worldwide.**

A third challenge is the difficulty in establishing interorganizational unity of effort in a region. Many organizations tend to act unilaterally; collaboration in a region is often casual, and, at times, arbitrary. A regionally aligned headquarters can facilitate unity of effort among these organizations by creating venues, which enable collaboration, especially in information fusion and integrated planning. While the lead federal agency in Phase 0 is often the Department of State, the regionally aligned force can assist the Department of State in the region by providing the planning capacity inherent in the headquarters. This interagency coordination should not be reserved for deployments only, but should occur routinely at home station. Again, this will require an Army push to incorporate the right players into this network.

The Army, at the Department of the Army headquarters and the Army service component command level, also has a responsibility to the combatant commander to explain what the regionally aligned force brings to the table. The Army service component should also authorize discussion directly between the regionally aligned force and the combatant command to build relationships at both the action officer and commander level.

An additional challenge is that very little "juice" comes with regional alignment; it currently does not trigger additional resources of people, money, or equipment. The Army should therefore develop a force generation model for regionally aligned headquarters, which addresses personnel manning, additional resources (funding and equipment), and training requirements and opportunities. As an example, additional travel funds are required for

leaders to meet partners and build relationships, whether with partner nations or at the combatant command. These types of engagements should be part of the regionally aligned force generation model and scheduled early in the alignment period.

Finally, a challenge internal to the regionally aligned force is in fostering intellectual curiosity across the headquarters. All of the training and touch points described previously—be they academic seminars, relationship building, or command post touch points—all build understanding of the operational environment. This is just a beginning, however, and the staff must build on this understanding through its own reading. While leaders cannot instill curiosity, they can encourage it in the staff. The community of interest, for example, can collectively create a recommended reading list as a starting point for such individual studies.

Mission command and the regionally aligned force are mutually supportive concepts. Preventing conflict and shaping the environment in a region requires continued engagement, which the regionally aligned force can do through physical

presence or from home station. Mission command, as both a philosophy and a warfighting function, enables the force to do this. In its support of the combatant commander, the regionally aligned force can then demonstrate the value and necessity of mission command, as it builds relationships with partners in the region and keeps “hands on the problem.”

For 1st Armored Division, embracing mission command meant a shift toward conducting staff operations at home station the same way we do while deployed, including establishing a home station command post linked into the Army service component command and combatant command, setting a battle rhythm at home station similar to that used while deployed, and keeping a “forward mindset” all the time. While there is a cost involved in equipping the regionally aligned force to remain connected forward, this is more about “head ware” than it is about hardware. The regionally aligned force must adopt a forward-focused mindset to be most responsive and add value to the supported combatant commander. **MR**

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