

The Use of “Stryker” in Doctrine Is Limiting and Symptomatic of Doctrinal Shortcomings That Are Harmful to Small-Unit Leaders

Capt. Matthew Allgeyer, U.S. Army

In doctrine, the use of the term “Stryker” to refer to formations and their associated capabilities is unduly limiting.¹ It is symptomatic of shortcomings in the U.S. Army’s doctrinal framework behind

the medium-force concept. These gaps in the Stryker program’s doctrine, training, and materiel are causing the total Stryker concept to function sub-optimally as a whole. Changing “Stryker” to “Medium” in doctrine



would help drive any additional doctrinal changes necessary to allow small-unit leaders to think comparatively about peer-competitive concepts. This change would also help clarify the medium concept's place in the current Army brigade combat team (BCT) framework and establish the medium force's role distinct from infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs) and armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs).

A Problem of Words

At first glance, it may seem excessive to cavil over suggesting that simply changing a term could help induce a cascade effect that produces a paradigmatic change of thinking. After all, the first thing a soldier learns about a Stryker is that it is light, armored, and highly mobile.² Changing the name might be interpreted by many as merely using different terms uselessly to refer to the same thing. However, though it is true that changing the name of the Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) to medium brigade combat team (MBCT) with no other changes would be meaningless, changing the name would help signal a change in thinking surrounding the Stryker concept that would lay the conceptual groundwork for fostering other changes.

The Stryker concept currently exists in a vacuum. At present, the Stryker doctrine overlooks near-peer forces of similar makeup. In fact, U.S. doctrine does not currently possess the language to talk about other forces of similar material design to the Stryker concept. For example, if we were to try to talk about the closest peer competitor to an SBCT, the Russian motor-rifle brigade and regiment, or a peer friendly force like the German *Jägerbataillon*, our current doctrine hobbles thought as it is constrained by thinking circumscribed by one type of named weapons system.³ In contrast, doctrinal discussions would be less constrained if they substituted a term that enabled discussion of a medium-range class of general weapons systems rather than attaching it to just one specific platform.

An Infantry Carrier Vehicle Dragoon (ICVD) from Ghost Troop, 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, provides overwatch for a dismounted squad's maneuver May 2018 as part of a movement to contact during the ICVD/Common Remote Weapons Station mounting a Javelin missile (CROWS-J) operational test at the Joint Maneuver Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. (Photo by Tad Browning, U.S. Army)

To illustrate this point, let us consider discussion of the capabilities of a similar-type German capability. The *Jägerbataillon* fields the *gepanzertes Transport-Kraftfahrzeug* (GTK) Boxer, a vehicle remarkably similar in intent and design to the current generation of Stryker. The GTK Boxer, like the Stryker, is an eight-wheeled lightly armed vehicle capable of carrying troops. It also has multiple variants for different mission requirements, similar to the Stryker. Additionally, it fields the M3M .50 caliber machine gun, the modernized German version of the M2, or the GMG 40 mm grenade launcher as its primary armament. This armament is identical to the current generation of Stryker. In contrast, the Russian motor-rifle regiment fields the *Bronetransporty* (BTR) family of vehicles.⁴ The Stryker shares some similarities with the BTR vehicles but has some major differences. Each are both eight-wheeled, lightly armored troop carriers, but where the Stryker fields light weapons as its main armament, the later BTR models field a 30 mm cannon.

Though both of these units and vehicles have important similarities and difference to the U.S. SBCT and Stryker, the U.S. military has no term for a set of materiel and organization similar to those used by our peer units. For example, we cannot talk about the Russian SBCT because quite obviously they do not use Strykers, nor is it similarly appropriate to talk about the German motor-rifle concept. Here is the first place where we can see that the adoption of the term "Stryker" to refer to formations instead of just in-kind materiel is limiting to tactical thought.

The use of not just a term for material—for example, rifle—but the use of a materiel model name designator, Stryker, is patently inappropriate and unwieldy in any other setting. Referring to an infantry battalion as an M-4 battalion is clearly inappropriate, it does not acknowledge the other weapons systems or capabilities of the formation and focuses thinking on the most common type of weapon system. It may be appropriate to call a platoon of Abrams tanks a tank platoon, because a formation of "tanks" is a type of material that has specific capabilities and associated tasks.⁵ However, we do not call

Capt. Matthew D.

Allgeyer, U.S. Army,

is currently assigned to the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, Georgia. He holds a BA from Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. He previously served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a noncommissioned officer.



them, “Abrams Platoons,” because tanks as a concept in the setting of the ABCT and contrasted against a competitor mechanized force is much more important than the specific model of tank. To use the model type as a naming convention in these last two examples would result in the same issues as we have seen with the use of the term “Stryker.” Such narrow language use limits the scope of tactical thinking and requires further terminology to discuss comparable units. For example, how would we talk about Russian infantry? Using current Stryker doctrinal naming convention we would have to call them *Kalashnikov* companies. We would then be forced to invent a parity term to acknowledge peer formations and to discuss their capabilities. This may seem like a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, but it is the situation a U.S. soldier finds himself in when talking about peer medium formations. The SBCT’s break from established military taxonomy is not only verbally confusing, it is also doctrinally hazardous.

This inability to capture a common understanding of medium forces through preexisting doctrinal terms and an inability to use doctrine to adequately contrast and describe peer and threat medium forces can lead to real-world problems. Stryker formations in Europe

A BTR-82A armored personnel carrier from 27th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade took part in the Victory Day parade for the first time 12 April 2013 in Alabino near Moscow. (Photo by Vitaly Kuzmin, www.vitalykuzmin.net)

have made requests to field the “Dragoon” version of the Stryker infantry carrier vehicle outfitted with the 30 mm cannon, as well as other short-suspense fieldings to make up perceived shortfalls.⁶ This is in response to the near-peer threat posed by Russian motor-rifle formation fielding the BTR manufactured in the 1980s (BTR-80) and possibly the BTR replacement platform, the “Bumerang.”⁷ Both vehicles field a 30 mm cannon and optional antitank guided missile systems. In addition, the SBCT must also consider materiel shortfalls stemming from the standard Russian difference in medium forces. Russian motor-rifle regiments regularly attach tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to form a standard formation.⁸ The makeup and capabilities of these units are well known; U.S. military planners have been analyzing and planning against them since the Russians first created them during the Cold War.⁹ It would seem logical that when V Corps and its

subordinate ABCTs were deactivated and its mission given to the 2nd Calvary Regiment and corresponding SBCTs, these shortfalls would be identified.¹⁰ Once these shortfalls were identified, materiel fixes should have been implemented before arrival in the country, or at a minimum, they should have had a materiel solution and implementation plan beforehand.

to bear on the objective. To do this requires a much larger tooth-to-tail ratio and much more complex support trains. It will consequently take a great deal of time to build armored combat power in an area of operation.¹² We can easily contrast this BCT with another well-established BCT, the IBCT. The IBCTs, in many ways, are the inverse of the ABCT. They are slower and have less

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This issue is more complex than just doctrinal terms, but part of the reactionary nature of the current situation must be due in part to the fact that every leader does not immediately understand that the SBCTs near-peer competitor is the motor-rifle regiment. Common doctrinal understanding of medium elements, their similarities, and their differences would give planners a common starting point from which to work. As it stands, planners currently think of Stryker formations as a unique item. When they plan against peer and near-peer forces, leaders must consider the threat military's entire materiel makeup in totality, not start from a point of parity like sister BCT's planners.

A Problem of Words Leads to a Problem of Organization

Further exacerbating these issues of doctrine is the lack of doctrinal-shaped thinking about materiel and formations as a whole. Returning to the example of the tank, the term “tank” encompasses a group of materiel. That group of materiel is placed in a doctrinal framework with associated units that allows us to think holistically about the larger formations that drives its capabilities and creates its limitations. An American tank platoon will be part of an armor company and battalion. That battalion will have standard supporting materiel, like Bradleys and M-88 Recovery Vehicles.¹¹ The associated materiel and unit types are specific and selected to make up an ABCT. Supporting materiel and formations are selected with the primary intent of an ABCT in mind. Simply, an ABCT will maneuver quickly and bring a great deal of firepower

firepower but require much less support and take less time to build combat power.¹³ This is close to something that could be called bedrock Army doctrine.

So where does the SBCT fall into this planning spectrum? Most would reflexively say the SBCT falls in between the two: the ABCT and the IBCT. But that is too generalized a statement to be meaningful in combat-operation planning and materiel management. What are the specific aims of the SBCT? How does it bridge the gap between IBCT and ABCT? Current doctrine does not reflect a unified answer to this question. The purpose and method of a Stryker infantry battalion fielding traditional Strykers armed with M-2 .50 caliber machine guns and Mk 19 grenade launchers is much different than a Stryker battalion fielding the purported 30 mm cannon.¹⁴ The materiel change is significant and, perforce, will alter the overall employment of the Stryker platform. Another significant change to the SBCT organization happened recently, taking the mobile gun system platoons from the infantry battalions and task organizing them with the antitank guided missile systems in one troop under the cavalry squadron. This is a significant structural adjustment and signals a change in the way of thinking about the proper employment of supporting units.¹⁵

This is not just a higher-level strategic concern about when and how to utilize an SBCT as opposed to another type of BCT. The strategic problem is arguably of least concern. Division and higher staffs will do an exhaustive analysis of the employment of any troops into a combat environment. They will overcome most shortcomings caused by doctrinal uncertainty in the same way they



mitigate any perceived risk; through attachments, enablers, and other force multipliers. Though doctrinal issues might slow down the analysis, eventually solutions will be proposed, as in the case of the modification of the 30 mm cannon mentioned earlier.

The greater issue is that small-unit leaders within the SBCT may focus on contrary proficiencies depending on their experience, background, and inclinations. Two infantry company commanders in the SBCT could reasonably train at opposite ends of the tactical spectrum. One could emphasize the dismounted mission and train his or her company similarly to an IBCT using his Strykers as combat taxis. Another could focus on armored mobility and have his or her platoons operate in close proximity to the Stryker using it as a fire superiority platform like an ABCT. Both of these solutions may be correct depending on the situation. This flexibility and ability to operate in the gap between an IBCT and an ABCT is a key point to the Stryker platform; having two companies within the same battalion trained and operating on completely different ends of the tactical spectrum is a problem, however.

Current doctrine does not establish where on the spectrum the limits are. Doctrine and materiel need to

An Infantry Carrier Vehicle Dragoon (ICVD) from Ghost Troop, 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, overwatches the engagement area May 2018 from its battle position during the ICVD/Common Remote Weapons Station mounting a Javelin missile (CROWS-J) operational test at the Joint Maneuver Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. (Photo by Tad Browning, U.S. Army)

create focus and prevent commanders from training and fighting as an IBCT with better-armored transport or an ABCT with underpowered vehicles. It also needs to better identify proficiencies and firmly establish where and how the medium force will fight.

Changing a Term to Signal a Change in Thought

The starting point to reform doctrine is to remove Stryker from our terms and doctrine except where it refers specifically to the M11XX family of vehicles based on the General Dynamics LAV-III.¹⁶ The replacement term should signal our intent for our formations and understanding of peer-like formations. I propose “medium” as shorthand for medium-armored as originally used

by the 2001 RAND study commissioned by the Army.¹⁷ This would start to solve some of our current doctrinal problems immediately; SBCTs would become MBCTs, allowing us to talk about peer medium forces. It would give all soldiers a starting point from which to plan; for example, Russian medium forces field the 30 mm cannons as prime armament as opposed to German medi-

taxis? How do we balance the light fighting rapid deployability with the ability to fight armored units organically? How many additional support requirements are we willing to accept? (I personally believe we need to expand out materiel in the medium force beyond just the Stryker platform to other lightly armored platforms to be able to strike the proper balance and better meet both mission

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um forces that use .50 caliber machine guns and 40 mm automatic grenade launchers like the United States.¹⁸ This simple ability to use common terms to capture a shared idea allows junior leaders to extrapolate some simple but important ideas. If we were to integrate with the German army in a combined operation, for example, soldiers would easily understand that our forces are similar, and then the integration of the different platforms could use the same planning factors since they have comparable weapon systems. Conversely, if we were fighting the Russian army, we could expect to be overmatched by their standard equipment in their peer formation.

Once we establish “medium,” or some other Department of the Army-approved word, as the doctrinal term of choice to replace “Stryker,” we need to build off this change. This change will allow us to take a fresh look at what the medium force is and what the medium force is designed to do. There are a lot of historical and current answers to this question, and we need to find where the MBCT will fit into our current BCT framework. For example, do we expect the MBCT to fight near-peer armored units with its organic equipment? Do we expect the MBCT to fight near-peer threat medium forces like the Russian motor-rifle regiment? In both these cases, we need to analyze our materiel programs and doctrinal organization.

Currently, the SBCT fights at a disadvantage against these units and requires significant attachments to achieve parity. Similarly, will the Stryker platform be used to support the MBCT in dismounted operations to provide fire superiority or as quick lightly armored combat

requirements.) Regardless of how we decide to answer the current problems, the answers to these questions will be distinctly American. The answers must acknowledge other medium forces historically and in the present to be valid. However, it will be difficult to properly answer these questions in a larger holistic context being stymied by the unwieldy term of Stryker. Regardless of what the Army finally determines, doctrine needs to be firmly established and our common training tasks refined to give better guidance and oversight of the MBCT.

Once we have rooted in doctrine what the medium force can and cannot do, Stryker modernization should take place. A common doctrinal thesis will drive materiel acquisitions and reduce reactionary fixes. Doctrinal and material refinement of the medium concept along these lines will create a better and more synchronized force, which will be better able to meet and overcome new challenges posed by the rapidly evolving battlefield. Removing Stryker from our doctrinal terminology can lead us to being the premier medium force in the world today. The medium force concept has some very strong arguments for it. Medium forces perform very well in complex terrain.¹⁹ Medium force also offer a rapidly deployable option that allows us to bridge the gap between fast-deploying, low-footprint light forces and slow-deploying, large-footprint heavy forces. Stryker may have been appropriate to refer to all things medium when the program was new and we were just creating the Army’s current iteration of a medium force, but the time has come to refine and move forward.

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We can most easily start by dropping the term Stryker and expanding our thinking to encompass medium. ■

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