

# MEBs **side-by-side** With a BCT: Is the Gap Filled?

By Major Troy S. Parrish

**T**he contemporary battlefield is anything but linear. This notion is well documented and easy to confirm at any level from platoon to corps. As the United States and its allies continue to look into the future for ways to improve training, doctrine, and capabilities for combatting enemies, one modular brigade-sized organization that is targeted to fill a multirole capability is the maneuver enhancement brigade (MEB). The expectation is that a carefully organized MEB can function independently in its own operational environment and control an area of operations, much as a typical brigade combat team (BCT) does. Based on my education at the Command and General Staff College, multiple deployments to Iraq, and personal beliefs and understanding, the MEB seems best suited to perform a supporting role in any area of operations and should not be overwhelmed with the role of owning an operational environment. It is an atypical expectation for the types of units that normally comprise an MEB and introduces unnecessary confusion in an already confusing environment.

The majority of combat and stability/support operations in the operating environment are conducted in urban areas. Urban operations are complex and confusing and require complete immersion in the urban area. When combat operations of a lethal nature are conducted, the BCT—whether an infantry brigade combat team (IBCT), Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT), or heavy brigade combat team (HBCT)—is designed for that role. It seems logical that the organization that specializes in lethal combat operations controls the terrain that it is operating in, and supporting elements perform their responsibilities after careful coordination with the owner of the operational environment. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last eight years have proven that this ownership belongs with the unit that is managing all operations and is also capable of reacting to an increase in hostile, lethal operations.

Similarly, during stability operations it is expected that there is a shift in the role of the BCT. For obvious reasons, a BCT will not conduct lethal operations unless warranted

under the rules of engagement or national policy. Non-lethal operations demonstrate a significant decrease in the necessity for units capable of affecting a target with direct and indirect fires. However, at any moment, a seemingly peaceful area of operations can explode with hostile actions and demand action. For this reason alone, the BCT is prepared to respond much more convincingly than any other organization on the battlefield—including the MEB.

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The MEB typically deploys to an area of operations with engineer; military police; civil affairs; psychological operations; and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) units. It is important to note that these types of organizations greatly enhance the capabilities of the maneuver force commander in an area of operations. In fact, it is easy to conclude that a long-term operation would demand elements of each of those capabilities for a BCT to be successful. It is also easy to conclude that those units are reinforcing the existing capability already contained in the BCT. That is why I suggest that the MEB and its subordinate elements bring a combat capability to bear best during long-term operations. A BCT will have the capability—but during extended operations when the goal is to transition to stability operations, an MEB fulfills much of the increased requirement for stability tasks.

Although the MEB has a much greater responsibility during stability operations, it is not perfectly designed to own an operational environment. The implication is that the owner will be able to respond to any threat decisively and quickly. I believe that a major offensive operation by a determined enemy would challenge an MEB. It cannot be assumed that the transition to stability operations is going to be a step in the right direction without setbacks. The situation in Afghanistan, where the enemy is increasing lethal operations, is an excellent example. Rather than repelling sustained attacks, the MEB is structured to secure itself and fulfill a supporting role to maneuver commanders.

The MEB is best suited to fulfill an endless list of operational tasks in a supporting role. The units that are combined under the MEB headquarters all specialize in support operations with one exception—the battalion-size tactical combat force (TCF), with its commensurate impact on sustained combat operations if the MEB is an operational environment owner. Conversely, a BCT typically has multiple battalions with specialized training in combat operations. The logistics units in a BCT fulfill their roles under the protection of the maneuver battalions.

An argument can be made that BCTs are expected to perform stability tasks, despite their focus on major combat operations and maneuver tasks, and therefore that an MEB should be able to switch back and forth as well. I disagree with that argument. An MEB is designed to “enhance” the capabilities of the BCT. An engineer battalion does not function best solely as an engineer battalion. Instead, it accomplishes much more when individual companies are in support of ongoing stability and support operations within a BCT’s area of operations. The natural progression in combat operations is major combat operations followed by stability and support operations. Thus, BCTs transition to stability operations with the understanding that they will perform to the best of their ability while measures are taken to augment the BCT force with stability-focused units.

It is imperative that the strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities of the MEB—in contrast to a BCT—be carefully evaluated before an MEB is given complete control of an area of operations. We cannot make the fatal assumption that stability operations equate with an end to combat operations. That is simply not the case, and the price for such an assumption is casualties. The MEB is an incredible combat multiplier—a headquarters with a long list of capabilities that significantly improve the battlefield environment. But it is not designed to control an area of operations; leave this responsibility to the BCT, since it trains to that end state every day. The role of the MEB is highlighted in stability operations.



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