



Joint Operational Access and the Global Response Force Redefining Readiness

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PHOTO: A Stryker Infantry Fighting Vehicle assigned to 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 2d Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, offloads from a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft during a joint operational access exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA, 10 October 2012 (DOD)

ON THE NIGHT of 9 October 2012 the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, conducted a forcible-entry airborne assault into the fictional country of Atropia to seize an airfield and facilitate a noncombatant evacuation operation. The brigade received its orders 96 hours earlier at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and spent the limited time available alerting the force, conducting mission planning and rehearsals, and marshalling the force at Fort Bragg's Pope Army Airfield with all required support and sustainment organized for a combat airborne assault. The joint force deployed directly from homestation to the contested drop zone hundreds of miles and a time zone away. The emerging security environment requires flexible, versatile and rapidly deployable forcible-entry packages; the Global Response Force (GRF), a brigade combat team prepared to deploy anywhere in the world within 96 hours of notification, is designed as such, and should be continually developed as a unique asset for U.S. 21st century defense.

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has identified the ability to gain and maintain operational access a principle defense challenge in the 21st century.¹ In *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, the secretary of defense cited the chairman's Joint Operational Access Concept as a U.S. strategic imperative.² Concepts such as Air-Sea Battle address future programs, postures, and methods aimed at defeating long-range adversarial anti-access systems. Efforts to provide access are a shaping operation and cannot be expected to preclude the need to insert ground forces. Forcible-entry operations are designed to exploit the maneuver space enabled by operational access, and the GRF exists to conduct these operations.

Operation Atropian Reach (5-13 October 2012) was developed by the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana, in concert with joint

planning teams from the 18th Airborne Corps and the 82d Airborne Division, as a joint operational access exercise. It included key components of U.S. strategic response: the GRF, a joint special operations task force, U.S. Air Force mobility and strike assets, and a scenario that included the U.S. Department of State, and other agencies as well as various intergovernmental and multinational partners on the ground, portrayed by former members of these communities.³ Atropian Reach provides a great contextual backdrop to the larger discussion of joint operational access and the role of the GRF.

Joint Forcible-Entry and Joint Operational Access

*The ability to ensure operational access in the future is being challenged—and may well be the most difficult operational challenge U.S. forces will face over the coming decades.*⁴—General Martin Dempsey, *Joint Operational Access Concept*

The United States has identified the ability to gain access to areas of its choosing, whether opposed or unopposed, as a strategic imperative; tactically, joint response forces train and stand ready to seize, hold, and build lodgments to meet that end. Joint operational access comprises the numerous shaping operations that together carve a space for forcible entry, essentially bridging the strategic imperative and tactical mission accomplishment.

Forcible-entry operations are undertaken to provide access by a military force to a desirable position in the face of adversarial opposition. Often this position is an advantageous piece of terrain, known as a lodgment, from which a force can enable a larger operational or strategic objective. Lodgments may be airheads or beachheads or a combination thereof; in any case, there are conditions that must be set to successfully seize this key terrain, and operational access is required to do so.⁵ Consider, for example, the amphibious assaults at Normandy on D-Day an operation undertaken against great opposition to secure a strategic foothold on mainland Europe. The operation was enabled by separate lines of access, specifically, aerial access to conduct military deception at Calais, France, prior to the operation, as well as aerial access to support the invasion with strikes and an inland insertion of

airborne forces. Setting such conditions requires an initial level of access, the maintenance and achievement of which is growing increasingly difficult in the 21st century.

The emerging global operating environment includes adversarial gains in anti-access weapons and technology relative to U.S. capabilities and force projection posture. While the United States insists that access to the global commons and to select territories and domains is an imperative, and while the United States continues to maintain the ability to achieve that access, it is increasingly evident that potential adversaries have identified that their own relatively cheap investments in anti-access and area denial capabilities provide a high return.⁶

The Joint Operational Access Concept identifies three trends that complicate U.S. access in the current environment: the dramatic proliferation of anti-access technology, the changing U.S. overseas defense posture, and the emergence of space and cyber as increasingly important—and contested—domains.⁷ Additionally, the chairman's concept document on joint operational access points out 30 core tactical competencies that, when combined with cross-domain synergy, will help give U.S. forces the edge in the current and future fight for access. These competencies are at the heart of what rapid response forces must understand and what exercises such as Operation Atropian Reach help to foster through practice. Of the 30 specified tasks, four are highlighted below as especially pertinent to the relationship between joint forcible-entry and joint operational access.

First, the joint force must possess the fundamental capability to conduct forcible-entry operations, including raids and other limited-objective operations, as well as the initiation of sustained land operations.⁸ Considering that we have identified joint operational access as an imperative capability in the century to come, investment in training specially organized forces such as the GRF should follow. The training required to maintain the requisite level of proficiency on tasks such as airborne and amphibious assaults is extensive and resource intensive. Developing this readiness should be viewed as a nested cost within the broader concept of operational access. Training exercises such as Operation Atropian Reach, which bring together

teams from across the joint and interagency community, are critical events in building and maintaining this fundamental forcible-entry capability.

Second, operational access requires the capability to conduct en route mission command, planning, rehearsals, and assembly of deploying forces, to include linking up personnel with prepositioned equipment.⁹ This task implies that, as history has proven, the forcible-entry task force has a limited amount of time to plan and organize before deployment, and must be able to draw on mission command systems en route to gain the requisite visibility across the joint task force. Drawing on these systems often includes gaining early access into closed mission networks for concurrent planning and updates.

For Operation Atropian Reach, extensive work went into extending a closed mission network to Fort Bragg to ensure digital system integration during mission planning and assault force deployment. The assault force relied heavily upon organic Joint Network Transport Capability systems to affect this link-up. Although new ground was broken during the exercise, future iterations must continue toward the “installation as a docking station” concept. Here, units are able to plug into existing network enterprise centers at home station for planning, unplug to deploy, plug back in for en route mission command, unplug to assault, and plug in again on the ground. The same hardware and network is used throughout; the only difference is that on the ground, forces use their Joint Network Transport Capability systems, whereas at home and en route they can access the network through other established architectures. For example, in the event of deployment to North Africa, the Global Response Force would need U.S. Africa Command’s network accessible via the “installation docking station” at Fort Bragg, as well as en route (airborne or at intermediate staging); once inserted into an austere environment, the secure Joint Network Transport Capability systems could link into this network for seamless transition of digital mission command systems.

Third, operational access is contingent on enabling joint maneuver forces to penetrate sophisticated anti-access systems and close within striking range with acceptable risk.¹⁰ This task underscores the bridge between anti-access and area denial. Anti-access refers to longer range capabilities that prevent access from a distance, while area denial

refers to those measures taken to limit the freedom of maneuver of a force once it has gained access.¹¹ The forcible-entry airborne task force is trained and equipped to overcome area denial efforts such as short-to-medium range anti-aircraft weaponry or intentional damage to runways and airfields. However, if the force is prohibited from ever penetrating sophisticated enemy integrated air defense systems, for example, overall access—and the operation—will fail. Operation Atropian Reach was not driven by a scenario that required rigorous masking of sophisticated anti-access systems during aerial insertion; however, exercises such as the U.S. Air Force’s Mobility Forces Exercise, which takes place biannually in the Nevada Test and Training Range, practice this sort of sophisticated penetration of a forcible-entry task force and serve as great joint operational access training opportunities.¹²

Finally, the joint operational access concept identifies that we must be able to perform mission command in a degraded and austere communications environment.¹³ The battlefields of the future will likely present significant communications challenges involving either austere and immature infrastructures

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or sophisticated area-denial electronic and cyber attack from our adversaries. The joint expeditionary force must become practiced at fighting through the initial friction of a degraded communication environment and the transitions associated with the introduction of our hardened network systems. Operation Atropian Reach’s exercise design forced the airborne task force to practice the skills needed when communications are degraded, and then navigate through the challenges of establishing digital connectivity across ten battalion task forces—all under free-play enemy action, including electronic jamming and military cyber attack. Multiple iterations in complex training environments such as this ensure readiness across our joint forcible-entry task forces.

The Global Response Force

“We will resist the temptation to sacrifice readiness in order to retain force structure, and will in fact rebuild readiness in areas that, by necessity, were deemphasized over the past decade.”¹⁴—*Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*

The 82d Airborne Division maintains the GRF. Organized to conduct combat operations as the lead ground element for a joint force land component commander, the GRF’s mission is synonymous with the division’s overarching mission to strategically deploy and conduct forcible-entry parachute assault to secure key objectives for follow-on military operations in support of U.S. national interests. The GRF is a flexible, versatile, and rapidly deployable task force poised to be a key component of U.S. defense strategy in the 21st century.

The response force is a roughly 5,000-person joint task force comprised of specialists from across the range of warfighting functions. The core of the

formation is an airborne infantry brigade combat team. The brigade includes two infantry battalions, a reconnaissance squadron, a field artillery battalion, a special troops battalion, and a support battalion; all personnel are airborne qualified, and the units are tailored, along with special equipment, for insertion via airborne assault. In addition to these organic elements, the GRF includes a Stryker infantry company, a mechanized infantry company team (including M1 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles), a combat aviation battalion (including attack and assault helicopters), additional heavy artillery assets (towed 155mm howitzers and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems), a U.S. Air Force contingent (including a special tactics team, tactical air control parties, an air liaison officer, and a joint task force-port opening team), an explosive ordnance disposal team, a military police platoon, and additional engineer and military intelligence assets to augment those organic to the special troops battalion.



(DOD)

Paratroopers assigned to the 2d Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division, perform noncombatant evacuee operations as part of a joint operational access exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA, 11 October 2012.

The GRF deploys in two main echelons. The first, and lighter of the two, is organized to conduct an airborne assault onto a contested airfield, seize the lodgment, and prepare to receive the second echelon via air-landed aircraft. The response force and its associated enablers maintain specific preparedness standards at home station to meet rapid deployment timelines. However, the force package is extremely versatile and can be reconfigured from a decisive action forcible-entry posture into one configured for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief during the deployment sequence at the departure airfield.

The GRF or a component battalion task force has been called upon 18 times since 9/11. These missions include special tours in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, disaster relief missions following Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti earthquake, and combat operations with joint special operations task forces. Pre-9/11, the 82d Airborne Division maintained a somewhat similar response force known as the Defense Ready Brigade, or DRB. These ready brigades saw combat in Grenada during Operation Urgent Fury in 1983, conducted a combat parachute assault into Panama as part of Operation Just Cause in 1989, and proved to be an effective flexible deterrent en route to Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, as part of Operation Uphold Democracy in 1994. As well, the DRB planned for many other operations that were not executed.

Although the GRF has answered the nation's call to combat repeatedly over the last decade, the environment for which it must be prepared in the years to come promises new challenges. None of the recent combat deployments required forcible entry, and most were into combat zones with established communication networks and support systems. The operating environment of the future will be undoubtedly different. As Operation Atropian Reach exposed, joint forcible entry is a "team sport" and our forces require practice. Additionally, the ready brigade has changed significantly since it was last employed for forcible entry over 20 years ago. The DRB is now the GRF; acronyms aside, the GRF is larger, heavier, more technical, and capable of creating effects that far outreach its predecessor. Today, rather than simply more lethal combat power, the commander programs



The mature BCT TOC footprint for 2d Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division, during a joint operational access exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA, 13 October 2012. (DOD)

for the early introduction of a Joint Network Transport Capability satellite, followed closely by other automated battle command systems and platforms that enable three-dimensional mission command and networked systems up to the Top Secret-Sensitive Compartmented Information level. These systems are not only capable of being dropped into the most remote locations for operations but also increasingly necessary as our adversaries acquire increasingly sophisticated electronic and cyber attack capabilities.

Joint exercises that afford the opportunity to practice cross-domain synergy are invaluable. For Operation Atropian Reach, the GRF and joint enablers deployed from Hawaii, Alaska, California, Washington, Oklahoma, Texas, Kentucky, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Georgia. During the GRF's next operational access exercise, many of the same players will participate along with joint forces from the U.S. Marine Corps and multinational forces from the United Kingdom and Canada.

Noncombatant Evacuation Operations and Joint Forcible Entry

NEOs (noncombatant evacuation operations) usually involve swift insertion of a force, temporary occupation of an objective and a planned withdrawal upon completion of the mission.¹⁵ JP 3-68, *Noncombatant Evacuation Operations*

NEOs are a core mission for the GRF, and one that is increasingly relevant. The requirement to conduct a noncombatant evacuation precipitated Operation Atropian Reach, and by way of the exercise's well-developed scenario, the response force received invaluable training on a very complex mission set. Recent events across Northern Africa and the Middle East underscore the need to maintain a military force capable and ready to conduct a forcible entry to assure the safety of American citizens and interests abroad—a commitment that the secretary of defense recently reaffirmed as a defense priority.¹⁶

NEOs require special considerations with respect to mission command, planning, and execution that should be considered. First, mission command is unique because the decision to evacuate rests solely with the U.S. ambassador, and he or she maintains overall control of the evacuation operation. If military forces are needed, the request comes from the secretary of state to the secretary of defense.¹⁷ As the situation develops, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorizes the appropriate geographic combatant commander to lead the operation. Requests for forces such as the GRF are submitted through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the combatant commander stands up a joint task force if deemed necessary. During Operation Atropian Reach, the combatant commander stood up Joint Task Force-180 from the 18th Airborne Corps, which was specifically responsible for facilitating the noncombatant evacuation. The joint task force included an expeditionary force headquarters from the 82d Airborne Division and the GRF, charged with executing the forcible entry. Last year, in response to the deteriorating situation in Libya, U.S. Africa Command stood up a joint task force and coordinated for a potential evacuation operation that would include battlespace and assets from three separate combatant commands.¹⁸

In addition to complex mission command relationships, NEOs are characterized by uncertainty.

Military forces involved in these operations must not only be agile enough to deploy rapidly, but flexible enough to adapt to a swiftly changing situation. The security situation on the ground and relationship with the host nation may not initially suggest the need to overcome robust anti-access or execute forcible entry; however, task forces must remain prepared for the situation to deteriorate and plan to retain operational access and the necessary lodgments to complete the evacuation against armed resistance. During rapid deployment planning for Operation Atropian Reach the security situation moved from initially permissive to uncertain, driving the GRF to organize for an airborne assault. In the hours preceding task force deployment, the response force commander was able to conduct a secure video teleconference with the U.S. ambassador to Atropia to gain information vital to the evacuation operation.

Additionally, Joint Task Force-180 established an intermediate staging base at nearby Alexandria International Airport during the operation. Intermediate staging bases typically serve not only as a sustainment node but also as an evacuation safe area during a NEO. The GRF was able to conduct recovery operations, marshal American citizens, and transport them out of Atropia to the staging base via U.S. Air Force aircraft during Operation Atropian Risk. Numerous additional layers of friction, including an armed insurgent opposition, an immature communications environment, and an uncooperative host government security force around the U.S. consulate came together, resulting in a dynamic and realistic mission rehearsal for the GRF.

A New Focus

In many ways, Operation Atropian Reach is emblematic of a new focus for the joint expeditionary force. The combination of joint operational access and forcible entry to facilitate a noncombatant evacuation demands new skill-sets and a new focus. This dynamic training is an appropriate mission rehearsal for the GRF and the larger joint task force, because the next time the response force is called upon it will not be into an established combat zone, but into an environment characterized by uncertain conditions, multi-nodal threats, and an immature communications architecture.

Joint operational access has been identified as a national strategic imperative. The United States enters into a century in which the country's gaps in technological advantage are narrowing. The mass proliferation of relatively cheap yet sophisticated anti-access technology, a reduced force projection footprint abroad, and the growing threats associated with the cyber domain challenge our ability to gain and maintain access to the global commons, a piece of ground, or broader domains. To protect vital national interests abroad in this environment, we must invest in a range of capabilities designed to defeat anti-access systems and provide maneuver space within which to work. Further, we must invest in our joint forcible-entry capabilities such that when needed, they are equipped, trained, and ready to complete the mission.

The GRF is the nation's strategic forcible-entry package. Joint operational access exercises such as Operation Atropian Reach are critical readiness events, but are admittedly burdensome upon scarce resources. Nonetheless, these complex tasks cannot be practiced in a vacuum, and the synergy achieved through joint training iterations results in gained efficiencies across the joint force. A renewed focus and resource allocation pertaining to joint forcible entry as a key aspect of joint operational access keeps the force in step with the secretary of defense's pledge: "We will resist the temptation to sacrifice readiness . . . and will in fact rebuild readiness in areas that, by necessity, were deemphasized over the past decade."¹⁹ **MR**

NOTES

1. General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operational Access Concept*, version 1.0, 17 January 2012, ii, available at <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf> (16 October 2012).

2. United States Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, 7, available at <http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf> (16 October 2012).

3. The training served as the mission rehearsal exercise for 2d BCT, 82d Airborne Division, prior to becoming the Global Response Force.

4. Dempsey, ii.

5. Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 16 June 2008), 11.

6. Dempsey, ii.

7. *Ibid.*, i-ii.

8. *Ibid.*, JOA-016, 35.

9. *Ibid.*, JOA-015, 35.

10. *Ibid.*, JOA-017, 35.

11. *Ibid.*, i.

12. As of this year, the Mobility Forces Exercise is renamed Joint Force Entry (JFE) Exercise to fall in line with the joint terminology; it is the capstone exercise preceding graduation from the USAF Weapons School and consistently includes large mobility aircraft packages and sophisticated anti-access scenarios. JFE 12B takes place 26-30 November 2012 out of Nellis AFB, NV.

13. Dempsey, JOA-002, 34.

14. DOD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 7.

15. JP 3-68, *Noncombatant Evacuation Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 23 December 2010), ix.

16. DOD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 6.

17. JP 3-68, III-1.

18. Joe Quartararo Sr., Michael Rovenolt, and Randy White, "Libya's Operation Odyssey Dawn: Command and Control," National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, 2012, 141-56.

19. DOD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 7.