



U.S., Canadian, and Afghan forces boarding Army CH-47 in the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan

ABCA: A Petri Dish for Multinational Interoperability

U.S. Air Force (Jeremy T. Lock)

By ROBERT L. MAGINNIS

Creating multinational interoperable armies is the cutting edge of force projection in the 21st century. Like many “new” things, however, interoperability is a concept that has been around a long time. In fact, the U.S. Army’s most dependable allies in the global war on terror have been committed to a standardization program for more than half a century. Known as ABCA (for the armies of America, Britain, Canada, and Australia, with New Zealand as an

associate member), this standardization program is changing in response to new threats. Like the U.S. Armed Forces, ABCA is undergoing radical transformation as comprehensive requirements for combat interoperability emerge.

Capability Gaps

The ABCA armies have shared hardships and victories in such far-flung countries as Kosovo and Somalia. British and Australian forces were integral to Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, and warriors from Canada and New Zealand shared the burdens in Operation *Enduring Freedom*. As the United States

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continues to prosecute the war on terror, interoperability is paramount, especially among these most dependable allies.

Today's threat environment, including the war on terror, requires multinational forces that can interoperate anywhere in the world, in multi-dimensional responses, against adversaries who give little or no warning of an attack. It is too late to start focusing on interoperability after the "balloon goes up."

The U.S. Army always has been serious about training the way it will fight. Today that encompasses forging and integrating multinational interoperability into Army training. Mission-focused warfighters must have protocols and procedures for coordinating the actions of diverse multinational units in place. These preparations enhance political-military operations. They are important force multipliers. Ultimately, the capacity to bring allied soldiers to the fight enhances the deterrent effect of U.S. forces as well as their ability to fight and win.

To achieve this comprehensive level of multinational jointness, the Army must forge interoperability as an integral aspect of transforming the force. The investment in transformation is not matched by allied armies, the very forces that will likely deploy alongside the United States in future coalitions. Without a strong priority on standardization, disparities will arise, leading to incompatibilities. Such incompatibilities could undermine the effectiveness of multinational forces. Although capability gaps are affected by budgets, force structures, and threat assessments, gaps can be overcome through aggressive efforts to promote appropriate levels of interoperability among willing allies.

The origins of ABCA were grand. Its founders, General Dwight Eisenhower, USA, and British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, wished the program to improve the levels of standardization and cooperation the military achieved during World War II, which were characterized as mostly work-arounds and temporary fixes, leaving nothing enduring.

Montgomery, visiting North America in 1946, recommended that the United States, Britain, and Canada should "cooperate closely in all defense matters; discussions should deal not only with standardization, but should cover the whole field of cooperation and combined action in the event of war."¹ Later that year, according to the British press, the three countries were considering whether to standardize all weapons, tactics, and training.

The original ABCA program was established with the 1947 signing of the Plan to Effect Standardization among the American, British, and Canadian armies. One of the first standardization agreements coming out

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of the 1947 program was a standard thread pattern for nuts and bolts, the so-called unified American-British-Canadian screw thread.

The 1947 plan was replaced by several versions of the Tripartite Armies' Standardization Agreement until 1964. The current agreement, "The Basic Standardization Agreement among the Armies of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, 1964," became effective on October 1, almost a year after Australia joined the program. New Zealand gained associate membership through Australian sponsorship in 1965.

Relevant and Responsive

Although nuts and bolts remain fundamental to combat power, today's 21st-century armies have come a long way from that first agreement on a unified screw thread. Through these changes, in doctrine as well as in equipment and technology, ABCA armies continue to provide an effective petri dish for demonstrating how transformation to promote interoperability across national armies is possible. These allies, who have stood alongside the U.S. Army in hundreds of operations and exercises over the past half century, have embraced a radical ABCA program realignment that began with a landmark decision.

In June 2002, senior army leaders representing ABCA nations launched a top-to-bottom review to discover how to make the program more relevant and responsive. On May 2, 2003, an ABCA special working party announced the results of its year-long review, and the nations' senior army leaders, which included a former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General John Keane, approved the start of the proposed transformation designed to close critical interoperability gaps.

The radical reboot of ABCA started with a strategic assessment that shed light on changing geopolitical realities. In particular, the review noted the emergence of a transnational, asymmetrical, and nonstate actor enemy engaging on a more urbanized battlefield and possibly using weapons of mass destruction. The assessment resulted in a view

that comports with the accelerated requirements for armies that must fight in an intricately integrated land-sea-air-space-cyber and even geopolitical environment.

The program review also included an internal analysis of the stodgy Cold War culture and structure. Throughout the Cold War, ABCA had standardized mostly tactical-level doctrine and equipment. The new approach will meet the 21st-century concept of interoperability: the ability to fight together in a coalition, anywhere in the world, at any force level or structure. Modeled on the transformation of interoperable land forces, the program will address interoperability across all battlefield operating systems. ABCA will integrate combat lessons learned as well as lessons from exercises and training to maximize the punch that emerges from force structure transformations and constrained defense budgets.

The program will anticipate future interoperability demands as well. For example, at a 2002 conference for senior ABCA leaders, interoperability among Special Operations Forces (SOF) across the member armies was seen as positive, but the need for such forces to be interoperable in the same bat-

tiespace with conventional forces was identified as needing attention. Less than a year later, on the battlefield in Iraq, coalition SOF and conventional forces joined ranks, and in one instance

a special operations leader had conventional forces under his command.

The review team rewrote the program's vision, mission, goals, structures, and processes. The new vision has seized on the guidance of senior leaders within the defense forces of

member countries to focus on the integration of the armies' capabilities in a joint environment. The new mission seeks to optimize interoperability through collaboration and standardization. The goals are ambitious: relevance and responsiveness; standardization, integration, and interoperability; mutual understanding; sharing knowledge; and efficiency and effectiveness.

In the asymmetric post-9/11 security environment, ABCA seeks maximum responsiveness and relevance to the way the armies will fight. The new program will focus on the full spectrum of coalition land operations in a joint and interagency environment. It will prioritize resources around identified interoperability gaps, particularly regarding battlefield operating systems (BOS). A concepts capability group will assess the future security environment and its requirements. Capability groups formed around BOS will then assess when member armies can respond to the requirements and where there are gaps.

Fighting Seamlessly

Most standardization fixes were previously driven from the ground up by ABCA working groups from each nation, manned by subject matter experts. These specialists knew their systems but seldom saw the big picture. That approach bogged down because the efforts to standardize systems and doctrine failed to comport with the coalition armies' top priorities at the sharp end of the spear.

The new capability gap process and the top-down priority system are force multipliers. This new system will be managed by a chief of staff, who will work with a board of allied senior officers to close capability gaps. The first fix will be to stand up project teams focused on delivering specific products that close capability gaps and are responsive to the master priorities list. The teams will disband when they have finished.

The priorities of the participating armies will drive the master list. An example of how ABCA might work to this list was evidenced in recent multinational efforts. During opera-



Airmen from the United States, Great Britain, and Australia providing security for Iraqi Freedom

U.S. Air Force (David Donovan)

tions in Afghanistan and Iraq, ABCA allies fought almost seamlessly in several arenas. Special Operations Forces alongside conventional units from the United States, Australia, and Great Britain engaged regular and paramilitary enemy forces in northern and western Iraq. Similarly, U.S. SOF and regular forces were interoperable with British forces in the Basra region, capturing the city and the al Faw peninsula with the oil fields and the petroleum piers. Canada and New Zealand joined Operation *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan, rounding out ABCA armies' participation with both special operations and regular force packages.

As these operations demonstrate, advancing interoperability across ABCA allies is no longer a luxury, and the standardization program is leading the way among all multinational forums. The former British Army Chief, General Sir Roger Wheeler, put it bluntly: "There is simply no point, in my view, in developing battle-winning capabilities at the national level if it's muted through lack of interoperability in coalition."² That is why the U.S. Army has enthusiastically endorsed the new ABCA direction. Additionally, participating armies have been invited to assign standardization officers to the U.S. Army Objective Force Task Force Office, part of the U.S. Army transformation campaign plan. These standardization

officers will ensure the exchange of transforming ideas. Working together to develop cutting edge concepts will help the armies to become more interoperable through future doctrine and equipment.

Former Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, USA, agrees with Wheeler's assessment and the need to bring allies along the transformation path: "The coalition remains the essential framework for the application of military forces."³ That coalition framework must be flexible and highly responsive for political and military rea-

U.S. regular and special operations forces were interoperable with British forces in the Basra region

sons. Wheeler's point bears repeating: lack of interoperability at the coalition level is a dangerous drag on a nation's battle-winning capabilities.

ABCA has provided a platform for advancing interoperability through layers of standardization for more than five decades. The old program produced over 2,000 standardization agreements to help the armies become more interoperable. These agreements included standardization of operations and equipment as disparate as friendly nuclear strike warnings, biological agent detection, medical stretchers, and gas can nozzles. The purpose of

these agreements was to influence doctrine and equipment design to comply with the appropriate level of standardization: common, interchangeable, or compatible. Where the program failed to standardize through such fixes, it developed workarounds such as memorandums of understanding, liaison officers, or advisory publications listing national procedures to aid mutual understanding.

The new ABCA will go much further. Besides identifying high-priority interoperability gaps, it will help alert senior leaders to interoperability shortfalls before it is too late.

In 2001, the British ABCA head of delegation, Major General Christopher Elliot, was surprised to hear that he was about to approve a multi-billion-pound contract for new combat network radios, but did not know whether the system was fully compatible with the current or future radio systems of partner armies. The new proactive ABCA should help prevent such problems by thorough coordination across nations and frequent interoperability checks from concept to production.

By contrast with the old program, the new ABCA now has a top-down driven priority system that focuses limited resources on fewer issues, which are prioritized by various armies. The system is designed to alert members of interoperability questions such as that experienced by General Elliot. Further, ABCA has a mandate to produce faster fixes for pressing interoperability gaps. The program will be cost-neutral but produce far more relevant results.

Another example from *Iraqi Freedom* illustrates the present and future direction of ABCA and its responsiveness to perceived interoperability gaps. In December 2002, the program's leadership anticipated that war in Iraq could require urban combat with allies fighting together. They assembled a cadre of urban operations experts from each army to draft coalition procedures in advance. The procedures became a chapter in the ABCA *Coalition Operations Handbook*, which addresses such topics as logistics, communications, operations, and forming coali-

Canadian light infantry forces preparing to load Bombardier Iltis vehicle onto U.S. Army CH-47, Afghanistan



U.S. Army (Robert Hyatt)

British soldiers with Alvis Striker antitank vehicles in Kuwait, *Enduring Freedom*



tions. The program's quick response prior to operations in Iraq—3 weeks—shows that ABCA is now a critical part of war planning. To complete the task, program representatives will study the after-action reports to incorporate lessons learned into the procedures as well as the process.

Transforming Together

The new program is well established to maintain contact with the transformation revolution put in motion by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. As seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Secretary's ideas have significant implications for the U.S. Army and its work with ABCA allies.

The transformation revolution is grounded in the conclusion that the threat requires the U.S. land force to become lighter and more lethal and be able to move quickly to combat zones. Transformation is distinct from modernization, which focuses on equipment. The new threat requires new thinking first, then equipment and technology to manifest that thinking in a land-sea-air-space-cyber battlefield.

ABCA members were interoperable in Iraq primarily because of shared procedural measures, liaison officers, and doctrinal compatibility. Much remains to be done, especially as the armies transform technically and doctrinally.

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At the ABCA 50th anniversary celebration, General Shinseki emphasized the need for member armies to transform together: "Coalitions remain the essential framework for the application of military force."⁴ This viewpoint echoes former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's pragmatic perspective about allied operations: "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies; and that is fighting without them."⁵

General Wheeler was more specific about what makes an effective coalition. "We will have to think through very carefully how we organize and fight on future battlefields, and it will be essential that we do this together with our allies." He warns that "if we get too far out of synch [our armies will] not function effectively" together.⁶ ABCA seeks to prevent such decoupling, and promoting interoperability through standardization is key.

Historically, ABCA was a tactical-level standardization program that produced agreements promoting interchangeable or common equipment and doctrine. In today's incredibly diverse landscape, with the armies being transformed from without and within, ABCA is incorporating lessons from ongoing coalition combat and operational missions. Future work will not be fettered by previous constraints. Rather, ABCA will be free to roam the spectrum of the armies' needs, cross all BOS, and cover the range of operations from tactical to strategic.



Chief of Naval Operations and Australian Chief of Navy signing statement of cooperation, 2004

U.S. Navy (Johnny Bivens)

Secretary Rumsfeld's transformation emphasis helped push ABCA toward radical change:

We entered the century really arranged to fight big armies, big navies, and big air forces, and not to fight the shadowy terrorists and terrorist networks that operate with the support and assistance of terrorist states. And that's why we are so focused on transforming the department and the armed services. To win the global war on terror, the Armed Forces simply have to be more flexible, more agile, so that our forces can respond more quickly.⁷

Transforming while fighting the war on terror is not just a challenge; it is a necessity. The United States must stretch limited resources across the landscape of dangers. Washington must encourage greater cooperation with important allies, with true interoperability being of paramount importance. That is why the ABCA program is changing and remaining relevant.

During the program's first half century, it issued warehouses full of standardization agreements designed to align members' doctrine and equipment. ABCA products enhanced mutual understanding and increased effectiveness across hundreds of shared

combat, contingency, and training experiences.

Unfortunately, however, ABCA lost its original spark over the decades. It went the way of many creaking bureaucracies, preserving the status quo and preoccupying itself with survival. Now, after a period of self-examination, the ABCA Armies' Standardization Program has emerged with a new vision, mission, goals, and structure and a modern set of business practices. This reboot puts the program on a fast track to greater effectiveness in forging comprehensive combat interoperability in a global environment where the threat requires agile, multidimensional responses.

Indeed, a large part of the ABCA program review was a strategic assessment of the threat and security environment. Interoperability will not be pursued for interoperability's sake. ABCA will tailor its interoperability to the threat, because the U.S. Army trains as it fights. More often than not, it will fight in a coalition. That is called intelligent interoperability!

War, at its most fundamental, never changes. Yet how armies fight does change—because the enemy, technology, and geopolitics change. War remains the imposition of one nation's will, or a coalition's will, by force. In-

creasingly that goal is reached more quickly when coalitions of the willing fight in a highly interoperable manner. Interoperability is costly in time and money, but in the end it saves lives and treasure.

The British former ABCA head of delegation, Major General Anthony Pigott, explained the program's challenges in remaining relevant in a changing security environment. "ABCA is everything about procedures, equipment, standardization, but it is much more than that. . . . ABCA is about interoperability of the spirit and the mind."⁸ Interoperability of armies at the level of spirit and mind—the realm of esprit de corps as well as the soldier's trained thought process—represents change. Nevertheless, as General Shinseki stated, "We must transform our force to meet these challenges, and we must do it faster. . . . If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less."⁹

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NOTES

¹ Jon B. McLin, *Canada's Changing Defense Policy, 1957–1963: The Problems of a Middle Power in Alliance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 9–10.

² Kevin L. Robinson, "Interoperability Key to Future Success British Army Chief Says," *Army News Service*, October 19, 1999.

³ Gerry J. Gilmore, "Military Leaders Praise Five-Nation Partnership," *Army News Service*, May 17, 1999.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kay Halle, *Irrepressible Churchill* (New York: World, 1966).

⁶ Robinson, "Interoperability."

⁷ Donald H. Rumsfeld, Pentagon Town Hall Meeting, March 6, 2003.

⁸ Gilmore, "Five-Nation Partnership."

⁹ General Eric K. Shinseki, remarks at the Association of the United States Army Seminar, Washington, D.C., November 8, 2001.