

"We have learned many lessons over the last 10 years, but one of the most compelling is that - whether you are working among citizens of a country, or working with their government or Armed Forces - nothing is as important to your long term success as understanding the prevailing culture and values." Gen Ray Odierno, Army Live.

In March 2012, US Army Chief of Staff General Odierno announced an initiative to align brigades with each of the six global combatant commands (GCCs). This means committing Regular, Reserve, and National Guard units to generate individual soldiers and organisations trained, in languages, cultural awareness and local expertise, for specific regions of the world. Brigades are not assigned to a specific part of the world, but primed to deploy there, in smaller, platoon- and company-sized units, for training and advisory roles, as well as kinetic operations. Regionally aligned brigades will rotate annually; corps and division headquarters will not, writes Elayne Jude.

U.S. Army Special Operations Forces work with U.S. partner nations' military forces; the National Guard has its State Partnership Programme, and there is a long tradition of Foreign Area Officers, with their cultivated regional skills, who serve overseas as defence attaches, in security assistance or arms control, combat staff advisory roles, and planning. Regional alignment can be seen as an expansion of these relationships, in line with the 2010 National Security Strategy's call for stronger links with allies and partners, and in response to the experiences of extended interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In March 2013 the first of the brigades, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division Brigade, began support of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). They comprised most of the East Africa Response Force in Djibouti; trained a battalion from Malawi to serve in Congo, and worked with units from Chad to take on peacekeeping and quick-reaction tasks. About 1,300 of those soldiers will eventually serve in Mali, under the command of a lieutenant colonel from 2nd BCT. By October 2013, 1st Infantry Division headquarters were aligned with AFRICOM. The intent is to make the 1st Infantry headquarters a joint task force headquarters in the event of any major contingency. The timeliness of this first outing for regionalised brigades is demonstrated by the Kenyan mall attacks, and SF ops in Mali and Somalia.

Army chiefs are loud in praise of the concept, such as AFRICOM's General Rodriguez ("The demand for regionally aligned forces was always there") and FORSCOM's General Allyn ("From the indications I have, the impact of the regional alignment of forces concept is growing, and I am really encouraged by the positive responses from combatant commanders and Army

component commanders").

But the latest round of cuts to US Army will inevitably call into question the future of the fledgling policy. The smaller you get, the less you can afford to specialise. The cost and effectiveness of regionally aligned forces will be under intense scrutiny. What are its benefits and flaws ?

Advantages are many, and largely obvious. Enhanced understanding of local mores and sensitivities, with language skills, can be powerful force multipliers - more valuable, arguably, than the latest weapons technology. There are substantial cost savings in responsive overseas deployment, increased stability for soldiers and their families, which may aid their psychological health and in turn assist retention of valuable trained personnel. Operations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan Increased effectiveness in operations like Iraq and Afghanistan mean quicker, cheaper and possibly more durable results. Partner relationships with foreign states are enhanced by the security, consistency and longevity of an educated engagement.

There is a lot of logistic to get to grips with. Not all brigades are equal. Combat brigades can be regionally aligned without compromising overall capacity. However, support brigades, whose functions - sustainment, fires, combat aviation, battlefield surveillance, manoeuvre enhancement, through to civil affairs, engineers, military police, signal, medical - are often the very ones most prized by foreign governments, are not available to attach to the combat brigades on a permanent basis. Despite having potentially more access to and interaction with the local populace than their combat comrades, and despite their critical contribution to mission success, these specialities would continue to be assigned on a rotational basis. Their universality would make it impractical to develop region-specific specialities.

Much hinges on the question of mission focus. In terms of doctrinal focus, the camp divides roughly into pro-COIN and pro-FOS (Full Operations Spectrum). It is thought that one Army cannot properly do both. Post 9/11, post-Iraq and looking towards post-Afghanistan, the US Army has come down in favour of FOS.

The success of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations is hugely dependent on cultural awareness; regional alignment is mission-critical for a COIN-trained brigade. But this super-effective capability comes at the price of flexibility. No-one can predict in which part of the globe trouble will next flare, and highly adapted capabilities reproduced across the world in a state of perpetual readiness seems an expensive and unlikely scenario.

At the macro level there are fears that funding will follow the old favourites, with CENTCOM and PACOM scooping up the lion's share, and the rest left to scabble after what's left. And for individuals, the development and sustainment of region-specific specialisations may limit the scope for the career development and promotions they may currently anticipate.

The concept has momentum. General Odierno recently announced changes to soldiers' training programmes over the next couple of years, based on the rotation of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. At JRTC the 3rd BCT soldiers participated in the Decisive Action Training Exercise (DATE) rotation. The scenario included paratroopers assisting an allied foreign country against hostile forces, entering a foreign country with a joint force, evacuating people from another country and unconventional warfare in a joint, multinational environment.

There are clear benefits; more efficient and successful operations, simpler planning, enhanced international co-operation and amity; lower overseas security operations costs, and more knowledgeable and nuanced strategic thinking. The crunch, one suspects, is the cost-benefit analysis. Proponents of the experiment, and interested parties, may hope that the accountants are well-advised.