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The U.S. Army's Mobile Brigade Combat Team (MBCT)

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The U.S. Army is developing a type of formation called the Mobile Brigade Combat Team (MBCT) to enhance the mobility, flexibility, and survivability of Infantry Brigade Combat Teams (IBCTs). According to the 2025 Army Transformation Initiative (ATI), the MBCT is to eventually replace all of the 14 Active Component and 20 Army National Guard IBCTs as part of broader Army modernization efforts aimed at responding to evolving threats, lessons from Ukraine, and the demands of large-scale combat operations. The MBCT's structure incorporates new capabilities, emphasizing dispersed, fast-moving operations and integrating emerging technologies and platforms such as the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) (**Figure 1)**, unmanned aerial systems (UAS), extended-range precision weapons, and electronic warfare (EW) systems.

Figure 1. Figure 1. An ISV-Equipped MBCT Platoon Prepares for Operations

Source: https://www.ausa.org/news/armys-first-mobile-brigade-combat-team-prepares-jrtc, accessed November 19, 2025.

Background

The Army's IBCTs were originally designed for sustained operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, with a focus on dismounted infantry maneuver in low-intensity environments. IBCTs were categorized as airborne (parachute delivered), air assault (helicopter delivered), or light (foot-mobile). The Army considered the IBCT's relatively light footprint and limited mobility well-suited for counterinsurgency and stability operations, but considered the same characteristics a vulnerability in high-intensity, peer-contested scenarios. As demonstrated by the conflict in Ukraine and other theaters, contemporary warfare increasingly features precision fires, persistent aerial surveillance and attack, electronic targeting, and widespread use of unmanned systems.

MBCT Developmental Efforts

The following section is based on information provided to CRS by the Army.

In FY2023, the Army launched a two-year MBCT development and experimentation effort to assess how to increase IBCT lethality, survivability, and maneuverability without increasing the formation's size or logistics burden. This effort seeks to assess the ability of MBCTs to operate independently in dispersed, austere environments while maintaining the ability to concentrate effects and forces when necessary. The MBCT is part of the Army's broader transformation efforts designed to prepare for multidomain operations (MDO) and large-scale combat operations in contested environments. The 82nd Airborne Division's 1st IBCT and the 25th Infantry Division's 2nd IBCT participated in MBCT pilot programs in FY2024–FY2025, with full conversion of these units planned by FY2028.

Size and Composition

The MBCT is planned to consist of approximately 1,900 soldiers, compared with the standard 4,500 soldier IBCT, but with a reorganized force structure designed for mobility and autonomy. These troop levels include infantry, fires, sustainment, signal, medical, and information-advantage soldiers.

MBCT Key Features and Capabilities

Increased Mobility and Dispersion

The Army states that MBCTs increase tactical mobility by expanding the use of ISVs. In contrast to IBCTs, which are largely foot-mobile and road-bound once deployed into an area of operations, each MBCT rifle squad is to be equipped with a nine-seat ISV designed to be low-cost so as to accept its loss during a mission, with additional ISV utility variants fielded to support command and control (C2) and other roles. The Army maintains that increased mobility allows for wider dispersion and rapid repositioning, thereby improving survivability against enemy artillery, drones, and electronic sensors.

Enhanced Lethality and Protection

The Army contends that MBCTs enhance small-unit combat effectiveness by incorporating advanced weapons and sensors. An increase in small drones at all levels—squad through battalion—and the addition of loitering munitions are designed to allow MBCTs to gather real-time battlefield data and strike targets beyond direct view. Each MBCT squad includes Javelin missile teams and Carl Gustaf recoilless rifles to counter armored threats. Specialized drone and electronic warfare soldiers are embedded in the formations to give commanders more options to tailor capabilities based on mission needs. The MBCT possesses a Multi-Function Reconnaissance Company (MFRC), consisting of the Tactical UAS platoon (TUAS), EW platoon, Effects platoon, and Reconnaissance platoon. The TUAS and EW platoons are designed to support both brigade-level UAS and EW operations, and task organize separate teams to battalions and below to

support distributed operations. The Effects platoon currently possesses direct-fire anti-armor TOW 2B missile systems, which are to be replaced by loitering munitions and the Mobile Long-Range Precision Strike Missile system. The Reconnaissance platoon provides traditional ground-based reconnaissance and security capability designed to operate in tandem with the above-mentioned UAS and EW capabilities.

Additional Organizational Changes

The MBCT replaces individual Infantry Battalion assault companies with the new Multi-Purpose Company (MPC), which absorbs the battalion's mortar and scout platoons (previously under the headquarters and headquarters company), and adds a new Effects platoon. The Effects platoon possesses an organic counter-small UAS capability, as well as hosting the battalion's primary compliment of loitering munitions. By consolidating these platoon capabilities under a company commander, the battalion is intended to be more agile in maneuvering and positioning these capabilities in positions of relative advantage on the dispersed battlefield, according to the Army. Two future variants of the ISV, the ISV-Utility (ISV-U) and ISV-Heavy (ISV-H), are designed to support the MBCT's transition to a fully mobile formation. The ISV-U is to have command and control systems as well as modular systems including power storage and distribution, counter-small UAS, EW, precision fires, future mortar systems, and forward logistics capabilities. The ISV-H is to serve as a dedicated C2 platform at the brigade level to enable C2 on the move and increased power generation, storage, and distribution by means of a hybrid battery system.

Timeline

The MBCT's Initial Operational Capability (IOC) began in FY2025, with Full Operational Capability (FOC) projected by FY2028. The Army's FY2026 Budget Highlights document states that "over the next two years [i.e., FY2026-FY2027], the Army will expand this effort by converting 25 IBCTs into MBCTs." The Army intends to transition most IBCTs to MBCTs by FY2030, pending performance in additional MBCT experimentation, resource availability, and MBCT employment doctrinal refinement.

FY2026 Budgetary Information and Considerations

According to the Army's FY2026 Budget Request Overview, the FY2026 request would fund the conversion of five IBCTs into MBCTs and would provide funds to acquire enough ISVs for seven MBCTs. The Army's FY2026 budget request includes more than $300 million for ISV procurement and $75 million for loitering munitions aligned with MBCT development. Additional MBCT-related funds are allocated in Research, Development, Test, Evaluation (RDT&E) and base procurement accounts for further MBCT experimentation and organizational transition.

MBCT Operational Concerns

A February 6, 2026, essay in *Small Wars Journal*, "Who Consolidates Gains? The Enduring Requirement for Manpower in Army Formations," suggests that

> [t]he MBCT reflects an incorrect rendering of winning and losing in war that posits that thing[s] (e.g., drones, sensors, and artificial intelligence), not functional requirements, like controlling territory and defeating threat forces, fuels success and failure.

The essay further contends,

> This is because the MBCT possesses three fatal flaws. First, the MBCT's small manpower base means that it is uniquely prone to culmination [the point at which a force can no longer maintain momentum in its operations] if drawn into close combat or identified and targeted from afar. Second, the MBCT's limited manpower negatively impacts the formation's potential to exploit opportunities that are created by shaping and enabling operations. The MBCT itself is little more than a shaping-enabling force. Third, if exploitation is successful, and assuming the MBCT hasn't culminated, it lacks the capabilities and capacity to consolidate the gains generated during the shape-enable and exploit portions of an operation. Thus, the MBCT leaves the Army with a bedrock formation that is (1) highly sensitive to culmination, (2) unable to exploit the benefits of shaping-enabling activities, and (3) is unable to consolidate gains.

Potential Oversight Issue for Congress

As previously stated under ATI, the Army plans to convert all of its IBCTs into MBCTs, although the Army also notes it plans to conduct additional MBCT experimentation and doctrinal refinement, suggesting that not all IBCTS are to be converted to MBCTs. The *Small Wars Journal* essay raises a number of issues that arguably challenge the Army's decision to convert all IBCTs into MBCTs. Congress might decide to further explore the issues raised in the *Small Wars Journal* essay, not only with the Army, but with other defense analysts in order to gain additional insights into MBCT operational advantages and limitations. Another possible area for examination might be the Army's plan to convert all IBCTs into MBCTs. It is possible that a more balanced force of MBCTs and IBCTs could address some of the operational considerations and limitations cited in the *Small Wars Journal* essay.

Related CRS Products

CRS Report R48606, *2025 Army Transformation Initiative (ATI) Force Structure and Organizational Proposals: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert.

CRS In Focus IF11409, *Defense Primer: Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)*, by Andrew Feickert.

CRS In Focus IF13092, *The U.S. Army's Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV)*, by Andrew Feickert and Ebrima M'Bai.

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