

Rethinking Two War Strategies



B-1B crew chief during Bright Star.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Jim Vanheygl)

By MICHAEL E. O'HANLON

As new administration officials focus on the next Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in January 2001, they should rethink the two war construct. While some sort of multi-war capability is needed, the notion of two Desert Storms has outlived its usefulness.

It is not hard to find critics of the two-Desert-Storm approach—which had its origins in efforts by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and General Colin Powell to design a post-Cold War base force and gained more popularity under the Clinton administration during the Bottom-Up Review in 1993 and the last QDR in 1997. However, few have proposed an alternative approach. Specificity is both needed and overdue.

Replacing the two-Desert-Storm paradigm with a concept for force-sizing that could be called Desert-Storm-plus-Desert-Shield-plus-Bosnia (IFOR) warrants consideration. Though the term may be cumbersome; after a decade of the two-Desert-Storm jingle we have oversimplified force planning long enough.

This new approach might allow further modest personnel reductions. But its main effects would be on the structure, not the size, of the Armed Forces. Specifically, it would permit a force posture more conducive to executing the types of missions that have recently strained the military. The reasons why it would not jeopardize core national interests are developed below.

Out with the Old

The congressionally mandated report released by the National Defense Panel (NDP), which was published six months after the QDR

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report, concluded that “the two theater war construct has been a useful mechanism for determining what forces to retain as the Cold War came to a close. But it is fast becoming an inhibitor to reaching the capabilities we will need in the 2010–2020 time frame.” The panel regarded the two-Desert-Storm concept as little more than a bureaucratic device that was more relevant to institutional requirements than to real world threats.

However, the dismissive view of the NDP position went too far. Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-Il continue to threaten U.S. interests. We cannot drop the two war construct until convinced that any successor concept will afford adequate deterrent and defense capabilities. Vague musings by the panel about the two war framework, though useful as cover for debating this subject, hardly form the basis of a new national military strategy.

The way in which the panel dismissed the two war approach provided Secretary of Defense William Cohen with an easy comeback: which

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threat should be ignored, Iraq or North Korea? And which national interest should be abandoned, ensuring access to Persian Gulf oil or maintaining the security of South Korea (not to mention general stability and nonproliferation in both the-

aters)? As long as critics of the two war framework propose replacing it with a single war capability, they will lose the force planning debate to such forthright rebuttals. The ability to handle overlapping crises in two or more locations is indeed a sound strategic pillar on which to base U.S. forces.

In a broader sense, however, the NDP report was right. Positing two simultaneous replays of Desert Storm, most likely in the Persian Gulf and Korea, smacks of preparing to refight the last war. Moreover, it presupposes that we would use virtually identical types and numbers of forces in each case—six to seven active-duty ground combat divisions including Army and Marine Corps contributions, additional ground combat units from the Reserve Components, ten wings of aircraft, four to five carrier battle groups, and other assets. Whether operating on the open desert of Arabia or Bosnia-like terrain in Korea, and whether supported by relatively weak allies in the Persian Gulf or the capable forces of South Korea, planning documents call for roughly the same cookie-cutter U.S. force package—a slightly smaller version of that which fought Desert Storm.

If there were no opportunity costs to keeping the two-Desert-Storm planning framework, the Pentagon would suffer little harm in retaining it. But given likely fiscal constraints in coming years,

keeping a high-priced insurance policy against regional conflict would make it impossible to afford other key defense investments—and thus would leave the Nation vulnerable on other fronts. It would also leave us with a force structure not well suited to smaller operations—meaning that ongoing no-fly-zone missions and peace operations will continue to overwork our personnel.

The United States should change its war-fighting strategy from the two war concept to what can be called a Desert-Storm-plus-Desert-Shield approach. A force of 200,000 troops was sent to protect Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield in 1990. By contrast Desert Storm employed 500,000 American troops to oust Iraq from Kuwait. Actually, it would be more accurate, if more unwieldy, to term this approach a Desert-Storm-plus-Desert-Shield-plus-Bosnia (IFOR) strategy. The latter two need not be seen as simultaneous all-out conflicts because, at some point, worst case analysis must be plausible. But the requirement to maintain deterrence and presence, while waging a Desert Storm-like operation along with something akin to Desert Shield, seems compelling. This type of construct would still be somewhat artificial, but it would encompass a fuller and broader range of likely U.S. military missions than the current planning framework.

The alternative would still require 90 to 95 percent as many active duty personnel as current plans. The Desert Storm package would have to err on the side of caution, including a cushion of extra forces in the event the United States and its allies encountered unexpected difficulties such as widespread enemy use of weapons of mass destruction. For example, it might require a total of six Army divisions and twelve Air Force fighter wings as well as currently anticipated levels of Navy and Marine Corps assets. Backup exists in the Army National Guard, which retains almost as much of the combat force structure as the active Army but would have been expected to deploy less than 20 percent of its units into combat under the 1997 version of the two-Desert-Storm plan. Adding a division for a major peace operation would leave an active duty Army perhaps 90 percent as big as current levels, with slightly smaller cuts in other services.

Something Has To Give

But in a period of fiscal surplus, why not keep the two war capability while simply adding more forces as needed? The budget situation is admittedly less stark than it appeared at the time the last QDR—even though readiness costs have also grown, laying claim to part of the DOD share



9833 Signal Company (Brandon Stephens)

U.S. airborne troops patrolling in Kosovo.

of the budget surplus. Overall, rosy forecasts notwithstanding, it is doubtful that the military will be able to retain current force structure and modernization programs. Large cuts will not be needed, but trimming probably will be.

Budget plans substantially increase procurement for two reasons. First, the spending spree of the 1990s must end because systems purchased during the Reagan era are wearing out quickly.

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Second, the Pentagon intends to replace existing weapons with more expensive ones like F-22s, not to mention joint strike fighters and F/A-18E/Fs, improved attack helicopters, and submarines. The belief appears to be that increasing procurement to \$70 billion per year from the 2001 level of \$60 billion will pay anticipated bills. But neutral watchdogs like the Congressional Budget Office tend to estimate steady-state price tags of \$80–90 billion for the future force in constant 2000 dollars.¹

Meanwhile, other budgetary demands are likely to hold steady or rise under existing plans. Personnel spending will no longer decline because real pay raises will more than counter savings in personnel still to be made in the final stages of the post-Cold War drawdown. Though some hope to realize large savings through privatizing and outsourcing as well as base closings, particularly in operations and maintenance, savings will be modest. Health care, maintenance, and base cleanup continue to exert upward pressure on the budget. Meanwhile reductions in research, development,

test, and evaluation are being questioned as unwise—and would not save much.

The bottom line is that real defense spending will likely have to grow by at least \$30 billion in the decade ahead to sustain the current force and planned modernization agenda. In other words, spending must increase from the 2000/2001 levels of around \$290–320 billion or more. With an available surplus nearing \$2 trillion projected for 2001–2010 (not counting surpluses in Social Security and Medicare), that may not seem to be an inordinate defense spending increase because it would probably total only about 20 percent of available funds.

However, expecting the Pentagon to get \$300–500 billion next decade is highly optimistic. Out of a \$1.8 trillion projected surplus, \$600 billion would be needed to preserve existing levels of domestic services and allow spending to grow as fast as population rather than just keeping up with inflation. Because many discretionary spending programs—transportation, education, immigration, prisons, environment—are linked to the size of the population or economy, that is a prudent assumption. Efforts to shore up entitlement programs in the long term, given high priority by both political parties and presidential candidates, are likely to require at least \$500 billion over the next decade, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. That leaves \$700 billion for tax cuts as well as prescription drug benefits for the elderly and education. After all is said and done, it is highly unlikely that anything close to half a trillion dollars in real funding will be added to the DOD budget over the next decade.²

The gap between planned outlays and likely resource levels for defense is likely to amount to \$10–20 billion per year over the next ten years. Part of the gap can be closed by reducing service modernization agendas. Absent competitors and given advances in computers, electronics, and robotics, less emphasis should be put on extremely expensive weapons platforms and more on a system-of-systems approach. But even such a radical change in acquisition may not solve all budgetary problems. That means that a modification of the two war strategy (as well as cutbacks in nuclear forces and a willingness to try new ways to maintain forward presence in the Navy and Marine Corps) is likely to be a budgetary imperative.

Even more importantly, altering the two-Desert-Storm construct is necessary for the well-being of the Armed Forces. Adapting a less demanding two war capability would allow the Army to shift personnel from traditional combat roles to the types of low-density/high demand

Marine helicopters inserting Argentinean platoon, Dynamic Response 2000.



982: Signal Company (Brendan Stephens)



U.S. Navy

Boarding team from USS Lake Champlain inspecting ship.

support activities that are typically overused in today's non-warfighting missions.

A Rapidly Deployable Force

A 200,000-strong Desert Shield force would be extremely effective. If deployed promptly, it could defend allied territory and infrastructure against virtually any threat on the horizon today. U.S. commanders were confident that they could

defend Saudi Arabia with a Desert Shield force in 1990. Today the high caliber of personnel, combat equipment, and support capabilities such as advanced reconnaissance systems would make such a Desert Shield capability significantly superior to the notional regional aggressor force specified in the Bottom-Up Review, even though the latter force might be two to three times larger.

The airpower component of a Desert Shield-like deployment, smaller but about as capable as that of Desert Storm and larger than that deployed against Serbia during Operation Allied Force in 1999, could devastate enemy forces and industrial infrastructure. The ground component could conduct certain offensive land operations. General Norman Schwarzkopf considered evicting Iraq from Kuwait with a force of this size before asking Washington to double the deployment (and that was before improvements made the military better armed than a decade ago).³

The odds that such a force could deploy in time to prevent significant loss of territory are reasonably good. Since the Cold War, the Armed

Forces have positioned more equipment abroad and bought more fast sealift in the form of large medium-speed roll-on/roll-off ships. In addition to forces routinely deployed overseas, including 37,000 in Korea, somewhat more in Japan, and half as many in the Persian Gulf, Army brigade sets of equipment are based in Kuwait and Korea, another is afloat off Diego Garcia, and elements of a fourth are in Qatar. Marine brigade-equivalent sets are at sea at Diego Garcia and Guam and in the Mediterranean. These units could be married to troops from the United States in a week or so. Further improvements in both lift and prepositioning could shorten response time for other units too. Just as importantly, stocks of precision guided munitions are now located overseas. Stopping an enemy quickly and hitting it from the air might make a major ground counteroffensive unnecessary. At a minimum, it should reduce its urgency.

Hollowing Threats

The militaries of Iraq and North Korea remain dangerous but are markedly weaker than several years ago. Moreover, neither power is likely to get much stronger any time soon. This increases the odds that the United States with a Desert Shield force, and its regional partners, could prevent significant loss of allied territory. Iraqi conventional forces remain about half the size and strength of 1990. As opposed to a pre-Desert Storm inventory of 5,500 tanks, Baghdad now has 2,200. Levels of light tanks and armored

personnel carriers are down from 7,500 to 3,000; troop levels have declined from 1,000,000 to 400,000.⁴

The Defense Intelligence Agency reported in 1997 that although North Korean forces are poised near Seoul, their “capability to conduct large-scale combat operations continues to deteriorate as worsening internal economic conditions undermine training, readiness, and sustainment.” And subsequent threat assessments reconfirm that decline, notwithstanding some modest improvements reported in readiness levels over the last year.

To be sure, South Korea remains vulnerable to artillery, missiles, and special forces from the North, and Pyongyang unquestionably possesses what amounts to massive terrorist assets to target against Seoul. Any war on the peninsula would cause untold civilian deaths as well as large numbers of military casualties. But there is a difference between terrorism and an invasion.

Indeed, the Iraqi and North Korean threats have declined enough that 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. troops might even suffice for a counterattack. A single robust Desert Storm-like capability of closer to half a million troops should be retained out of prudence. But there is less and less reason to think such a large force would be needed even for a march on Baghdad or Pyongyang.

Allies Count

Economic troubles notwithstanding, the South Korean military is improving and, together with modest American forces in place on the peninsula, could probably withstand an attack. South Korea, combined with U.S. forces—the 2^d Infantry Division and forward-based airpower—could inflict great damage to North Korean forces and could most likely stop an assault well short of Seoul. At a minimum, they could buy enough time for U.S. reinforcements to arrive.

Most military casualties would be North Korean. Its military is more obsolescent than that of Iraq; and any invasion attempt would have to cross the most militarized swath of ground on the planet. The density of forward-deployed allied forces near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) is greater than was the density of NATO troops along the intra-German border during the Cold War. North Korea would have to rely on roads and bridges that would surely be destroyed in the first minutes of combat. If attacking near Seoul through the Chorwon or Munsan corridors, the invaders would have to cross the Han or Imjin Rivers. Both freeze in the winter, but the ice might not be strong enough to support a large armored force. North Korean chemical weapons, commandos deploying through tunnels, and forward-deployed dug-in artillery would complicate the battle and cause many casualties. But armor would have great difficulty breaking through allied lines and reaching Seoul.

Although the South possesses less armor than the North, its technological edge evens the balance of tanks, artillery, planes, and other heavy equipment according to some assessments. Its armor is nearly equal that of U.S. models; for example, the K-1 tank is based on the M-1 and uses some of its important components.

Given the higher state of military readiness of South Korea, it is reasonable to conclude that its forces are superior to those of the North. Looking at the outcomes of a range of past battles, one analyst estimated that such readiness factors can at least double combat capability. Despite the fact that, as another analyst pointed out, DOD models appear to assume that South Koreans would not fight as well as North Koreans, the former are competent soldiers and extremely well postured to stop an invasion.⁵ An

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USS John C. Stennis
launching C-2 in
Sea of Japan.



U.S. Navy (Doug McLure)

attacker attempting to directly penetrate densely prepared positions usually advances only a couple of kilometers a day even when not outclassed technologically, as the North Koreans certainly are. Given the lethality of modern airpower and U.S. ability to quickly fly in combat jet reinforcements, such a slow pace of advance—itsself generous to the North—would be a recipe for disaster on the part of an invasion force.

Pyongyang could not pull off a left hook or bypass the Korean equivalent of the Maginot Line because the defenses extend across the peninsula. In addition, the allies enjoy overwhelming dominance in all-weather, day/night reconnaissance that watches over all significant movements. But chemical and biological weapons pose a special threat, especially given the limited confines. U.S. forces have increased attention to such threats, with the QDR initiatives raised by Secretary Cohen being especially noteworthy. One could argue that Seoul should do more as well. But it is more difficult to employ chemical weapons than is commonly asserted, especially for an infantry force like North Korea's. For example, it is extremely challenging for a foot soldier, suited up in bulky and probably rather substandard protective gear, to cover many kilometers to take advantage of holes in enemy lines created by chemical attack. Nor should the North blithely assume that such attack would not be countered by U.S. nuclear retaliation. Airbursts in corridors north of the DMZ would cause little harm to friendly

forces while considerably affecting North Korean units. They would also send a powerful message that America will not tolerate the employment of weapons of mass destruction against its troops or those of allies.

There is a final argument against the two war construct. Just as the capabilities of South Korean forces must not be ignored, one should not overlook the likely role that British forces would play in a conflict in the Persian Gulf. The United Kingdom deployed 30,000 troops during Desert Storm, was prepared to send 50,000 troops to fight against Serbia, and tends to be aligned with the United States on issues of war and peace in Southwest Asia.

Without prejudging the prospects for an integrated European military force, or presuming full agreement between Washington and London in matters of defense and foreign policy, one can venture to say that Britain would probably provide a division and several fighter squadrons to any coalition led by the United States in a future conflict in the Persian Gulf. However, pessimistic American war plans do not now assume such contributions.

Some will see the similarity between this proposal and a plan put forth as a trial balloon by Secretary of Defense Les Aspin in 1993. Known as a win-hold-win strategy, it envisioned completing

an all-out war in one theater while simply holding the line in another. Once the first war was won, forces would be redeployed for a counteroffensive to meet the other challenge. But the caricature of that approach understated its capabilities and doomed it to rejection. Derided as win-hold-oops because of its alleged risk to war plans, it never stood a chance bureaucratically or politically.

The important point is that a Desert Shield force, with its overwhelming airpower and other long-range strike systems, can do more than hold a defensive line despite the limited capabilities of such a force.

The next Quadrennial Defense Review should weigh arguments like those outlined found above. The alternative is attempting to prevail in simultaneous worst-case scenarios in the Persian Gulf and Korea (something that the Armed Forces could not have handled even during the Cold War, given U.S. commitments in Europe) at the expense of readiness, research, and preparing for the future. More dangerously, the military could continue to overuse and wear out its most precious asset—its people. That would be a far greater risk than the remote possibility of two nearly simultaneous, all-out conflicts against both Iraq and North Korea. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that DOD may be required to spend \$90 billion annually on procurement, given current plans combined with the need to replace certain systems that the services have not yet incorporated into their formal acquisition programs. See testimony by Lane Pierrot, "Aging Military Equipment," Subcommittee on Military Procurement, House Committee on Armed Services, February 24, 1999.

² Robert D. Reischauer, "The Dawning of a New Era," in Henry J. Aaron and Robert D. Reischauer, editors, *Setting National Priorities* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1999), pp. 1–12.

³ See Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 123–41; Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Washington: Brassey's, 1994), pp. 121–28.

⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1990–1991* (Oxford: Brassey's, 1990), p. 105; *The Military Balance 1997/98* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 127; *The Military Balance 1999/2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 134.

⁵ Trevor N. Dupuy, *Attrition: Forecasting Battle Casualties and Equipment Losses in Modern War* (Fairfax, Va.: Hero Books, 1990), pp. 105–110, 148; Lawrence J. Korb, "Our Overstuffed Armed Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 6 (November/December 1995), p. 25.