



Needed: A Strategically Relevant Military Force

The military strikes launched by the Clinton administration against Iraq in September 1996 seemed to have achieved their objective. Saddam Hussein has once again been placed on notice that the United States continues to closely monitor his activities within Iraq and that when they threaten either our interests and values or the prospects of regional security, we will react.

But beyond the lessons for Saddam, there are lessons for both Washington and the defense planners in this action designed to limit the regional aggression of the repressive and unpredictable Iraqi regime. Based upon nearly seven years of experience, it has now become increasingly clear which elements of the current American military arsenal are relevant for the current and projected strategic environments, and which have yet to find a comfortable role.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the American military establishment, somewhat paradoxically, has found itself busier than ever. To some degree this is the result of there being nearly 40 percent fewer people in the military work force, but to a greater degree it is the function of a still unsettled international environment requiring the few to do more. Many in the armed forces have found themselves longing for the more stable, predictable demands of the Cold War.

Since 1989 the United States has made major armed interventions in two countries — Panama and Haiti; has engaged in two major humanitarian missions — Somalia and Rwanda; has fought a major regional conflict — Desert Storm; and has undertaken a major peacekeeping operation — Bosnia. The United States has acted three

times to maintain stability in the Gulf — by striking Baghdad in 1993 after evidence emerged of Iraqi involvement in a plot to assassinate former President Bush, by deploying Army forces to deter another threatened invasion of Kuwait in late 1994, and in this recent action stimulated by the Kurdish situation in northern Iraq.

In reviewing these actions it is apparent that some military capabilities have been quite useful while others have assumed a much more modest role. In Panama, Haiti and Somalia the principal instrument of American power was its light infantry divisions. Secretary of State Warren Christopher noted that, despite the threat of air and naval attack, it was only when the Army's 82nd Airborne Division was in the air that the Haitian government of General Cedras stepped aside and agreed to the restoration of power to President Aristide. In Desert Storm the key military capabilities that forced the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait were Army and Marine heavy divisions supported by tactical air forces. Desert Storm also established the enormously increased utility of both Air Force and Navy strategic mobility forces as well as theater missile defenses. But when assessed with appropriate objectivity, the decisive capability was provided by the ground components. The bottom line remains that despite 37 days of furious air bombardment, it still took the land campaign to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait and secure the established political objectives. In Bosnia the peacekeeping operation itself ultimately has rested on the shoulders of the Army's 1st Armored Division.

The messiness of the current strategic environment is likely to be the dominant characteristic of the future strategic environment, a condition which could persist

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for the next twenty years. Given the composition of other armed forces around the world — those of nations with whom we have a greater probability of conflict, and those in regions where we have the most definable interests — the need to retain ready, highly capable, strategically mobile, and to some degree forward-deployed ground forces seems clear. Tactical air forces capable of defeating the threat and establishing air superiority over the battlefield will be required, and strategic airlift and sealift will become increasingly indispensable.

But in circumstances analogous to the situation with Iraq, as the preference for longer-range precision munitions grows, the attractiveness of manned aircraft for strategic and deep attack missions — risking the capture of pilots and the inevitable diplomatic blackmail — will continue to decline. This is particularly true for carrier-based air, which is not only increasingly unattractive operationally but also increasingly cost-ineffective compared to sea-based precision weapons. In regard to the manned aircraft technologies currently being pursued, it must be questioned whether the expense of stealth is merited when, as we have seen in Iraq, precision weapons can be used to eliminate anti-aircraft systems. Any aircraft, stealth or not, is invisible to radar that has been destroyed!

We can expect that there will be increasingly demanding missions for specialized service units providing fresh water, medical treatment, light and heavy engineering capability, local security (military police) and local order (civil affairs). And depending on the future success and direction of strategic arms negotiations and compliance, nuclear deterrent forces, particularly those that are sea-based, will continue to play a vital role.

All of this would suggest that the currently projected defense program — heavily weighted toward very expensive manned aircraft and the procurement of carrier-based naval forces more suitable for “blue water” sea control operations than the threats actually posed by emerging strategic circumstances — needs to be reconsidered and, very probably, significantly rebalanced. The Quadrennial Defense Review and the congressionally-directed National Defense Panel study are intended to do just that. But it remains to be seen whether the force we develop for the future will be one relevant to strategic demands, or a somewhat more advanced and significantly more expensive version of the one we grew accustomed to in a strategic and technological era that has passed.

(This *Defense Report* was written by Colonel M. Thomas Davis, USA, who is currently serving as a Federal Executive Fellow at the Brookings Institute. A separate version of this paper appeared in the 20 October 1996 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*.)

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