Army’s Role in Executing the National Security Strategy

As we move through the final years of this century and into the first decade of the next, the United States Army continues to play the central role in executing the National Security Strategy of the United States. Indeed, if the strategic environment continues to develop as many predict, the missions assigned to and expected of the Army will very likely be broadened significantly. This circumstance has emerged because the capabilities of today’s Army, and those to be developed in tomorrow’s Army, are the most relevant for addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

With the end of the Cold War, marked in late 1991 by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact alliance, many predicted that the end of the threat to Central Europe meant that the Army would play a considerably more modest role in any future security structure. Since the nation had always demobilized after a conflict and had a history of maintaining naval forces while choosing to “raise armies” only when required, and since it historically withdrew behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (electing to maintain its military connections through maritime means), the general consensus was that the Army would be reduced furthest and first among the military services.

To some extent this occurred. During the period following the end of the Cold War in 1989, reductions to the Army’s forces structure, end strength and budget exceeded those of its sister services. But throughout this same period, the need for Army forces, and the flexibility and decisiveness they provide when engaged in a wide variety of missions, substantially dampened the enthusiasm for additional Army reductions beyond those effected to meet the force structure directed in the Defense Department’s 1993 Bottom-Up Review. The challenges to American security interests that developed after the fall of the Berlin Wall have required a continuing, heavy reliance on Army forces and unique Army capabilities.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States has been involved in a wide variety of military operations. Operation Just Cause, the December 1989 invasion of Panama to remove a corrupt leader and restore a democratic process, was conducted quickly and efficiently by Army forces whose strategic and tactical agility made them uniquely suited for such an operation. In 1990, after Iraq invaded Kuwait in an effort to redefine the balance of power in the Persian Gulf region and to enormously expand Iraqi influence over international oil and financial markets, American objectives were only met after Operation Desert Storm’s major ground campaign, spearheaded by seven Army divisions, ejected Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Army forces played the major role in the humanitarian mission to Somalia in 1993, the invasion of Haiti (Operation Restore Democracy) in 1994, and Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia in 1995 to enforce the principles of the Dayton Accord and end a complex, bloody civil war among the former Yugoslav states. Since nearly 80 percent of the military forces in Eastern Europe are ground forces, the Army has led the way in conducting NATO’s Partnership for Peace Program by engaging local militaries in a wide array of activities, from small professional conferences to large multinational training exercises. Such personal contacts offer the best means for increasing the prospects for an enlargement of the family of democratic countries in the former Soviet sphere.

Across the spectrum of military activity, from providing domestic assistance to local emergency and legal authorities dealing with natural disasters or civil disturbance, to conducting large-scale conventional operations, today’s Army has been heavily involved in protecting and furthering national interests. When the nation decides to employ military force, the likelihood is that the Army will provide the dominant and decisive component of the joint task force formed for the mission. The experience of the recent past

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strongly suggests that events can be influenced and shaped by
the capabilities provided by naval and air assets, but decisive
results still require a powerful presence on the ground. This
has been a clear trend in the present, and is likely to remain so
in the years just ahead.

Although much has been written about the emergence in
the future of a "peer competitor" — a foreign power with a
well developed economy, widely dispersed economic
interests, and a technologically sophisticated military with
capabilities equal to our own — it seems unlikely that such a
power will exist to influence world events for a few decades.
The challenges to American interests in the interim,
challenges conceivably requiring the use of American
military force, are more likely to exist in a regional and local
class.

As we have seen over the past eight years, well-armed
regional powers exist who may, under certain circum-
stances, find it in their interests to challenge the borders and
sovereignty of their neighbors in an effort to enhance their
position internationally and within their immediate area of
interest. In some cases, such as currently exist in regards to
Iraq in Southwest Asia and North Korea in Northeast Asia,
such efforts may threaten American interests. In these two
specific cases, and others that may evolve, the most effective
means for signifying national resolve and securing
established objectives will be found in the Army. Once an
aggressor’s armies have moved into new areas, as was
recently seen when Saddam Hussein sent his ground forces to
occupy portions of northern Iraq, they can be forced to
withdraw only when confronted by over-whelming ground
power. As President Clinton observed after launching a
cruise missile strike in response to Baghdad’s actions,
sending in troops was “the only way” to fully reverse the
Iraqi action and, since vital American interests were not
involved, there was no need to resort to such action. But what
if vital American interests were involved, as they were in
1990 in Kuwait? Under such circumstances, the United
States must have the capability to respond appropriately,
effectively and decisively.

In other areas of the world, there are likely to be
continuing threats to regional stability as local institutions of
legal order fray or fail. Clearly, the collapse of local
governmental authority in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti and
Rwanda presented the United States with difficult choices.
Although vital American interests were not involved in any
of these cases, with the arguable exception of Bosnia,
Washington eventually felt compelled to act. At some level,
the maintenance of local authority and regional stability are
an American interest, especially in those circumstances
where American citizens and property are at risk. In each of
these cases American ground forces were ultimately the
central capability holding the key to restoration of order and
the distribution of humanitarian aid. The odds are quite high
that the immediate future will see more circumstances such
as these as governments throughout the world attempt to deal
with the pressures created as population growth exceeds
economic growth. The United States will not respond in each
case, but when it does it will require a strategically mobile,
disciplined, sustainable force capable of controlling events on
the ground. Only the Army has such characteristics.

The Army of the future will support the National
Security Strategy by providing national leaders with a force
that is rapidly deployable throughout the globe; that has
minimal requirements for logistical support, allowing it to
operate for long periods with a much smaller support base
than has previously been the case; that is flexible and
adaptable to a wide variety of circumstances but retains the
characteristics that make it the force of decision when its
employment is required. Technology will provide these
improvements, making the Army more lethal and more agile
than ever before. But while technology will be able to make
soldiers more capable in performing their traditional
missions, and it may make the Army somewhat less
manpower-intensive, it will not substitute fully for the soldier
on the ground. For now and well into the next century, the
soldier will remain the nation’s most capable “precision
munition.”

In Summary

♦ The Army has been heavily in demand as the key
component of national strategy since the end of the
Cold War.
♦ The Army has provided the decisive capability in the
major conflicts of the past eight years.
♦ Conflicts or the next 30 years are more likely to
involve regional and local powers than a clear “peer
competitor.”
♦ The Army will continue to provide the “decisive”
response to such threats to our national interests.
♦ Technology can enhance but not replace the soldier
as the nation’s most capable “precision munition.”