

Defense Report

from AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare



The Emerging Strategic Environment and the Relevance of Ground Forces

In establishing a direction for transforming the armed forces of the United to address the national security challenges expected in the first three decades of the next millennium, an indispensable first step is in reaching some consensus on what those future challenges will be. In order to make such a judgment on the nature of future challenges, one must have a reasonably formed vision of the future strategic environment itself. Therefore, defining with some degree of specificity the nature of the future strategic environment is a necessary first step in describing the size, structure, capabilities and composition of our future armed forces. Without such clarity of vision, drawing a road map to a future condition has neither construct nor direction. Or as an old adage suggests, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." But when it comes to allocating the enormous resources of the Department of Defense, and embarking on an effort as serious as designing future instruments of power to protect and further the national interests, we really should know the road we are on and where it is taking us.

According to most assessments, the world of the next two decades will look very much like the world of today. Although there will clearly be the prospect of regional warfare on the upper end of the spectrum of conflict, the odds are much higher that most of the circumstances requiring a military response tomorrow will occur, as they are occurring today, on the lower end of the spectrum.

For the future defined by the normal defense planning ranges, which can rarely be usefully extended past 30 years, the world will likely have a rather familiar look. Its main characteristic, at least as seen by most foreign policy and defense analysts, will be the continuation of the nation-state

system. Certainly there will be changes in this system, some of them quite significant, driven by increasing economic interdependence, the rapid proliferation of global information technologies, and continuing actions taken by various transnational actors, ranging from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deeply immersed in humanitarian and relief operations to terrorist organizations pursuing their own ideological agendas utilizing increasingly destructive and deadly means.

States themselves will likely fall into one of three categories or tiers. Those in the first tier will be economically, technologically and politically advanced. They will be focused on pursuing and protecting economic and commercial interests while maintaining their internal political structures and, usually, supporting efforts to enhance international stability. These states will be the "haves" of the international system, interested in protecting and advancing what they "have" and cautious about taking actions likely to threaten regional stability and international order. Given these powerful interests, it is likely that these states will engage in economic competition, a competition that may on occasion have hostile overtones, but it is unlikely that they will engage in military confrontations of the classical type. The risks would, in most instances, be disproportionate to any useful benefits or gains.

Since these states are the ones with the resources — human, capital and technological — required to produce a military "peer competitor" to the United States, the chances for the emergence of such a peer are unlikely to be immediate, as there are powerful forces working against such aspirations. But conflicts are possible as states in this category seek to consolidate their positions and reduce

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instabilities within their own regions. To some extent this is being seen today with Russian actions in Chechniya, Chinese actions around Taiwan, European actions in the Balkans, and American actions in Haiti, Panama and, in a somewhat different context, Mexico. Such actions identify the states most likely to occupy this category over the next 20 years: those of North America, Western Europe, Russia, China and the Pacific Rim.

States in the second category are the “almost haves.” Many of them will have some technological ability, relatively powerful but short-ranged military forces, and economies rather narrowly focused in certain sectors providing foreign exchange. In their efforts to consolidate their positions, and to position themselves for possible graduation to the first tier, there will be considerable competition among these states to establish regional advantage. This will be particularly pronounced in those circumstances where neighboring states have resources or other assets of commercial value that could enhance the ability to acquire greater capital and technology.

The potential for more classical military confrontations between such states is, and will remain, relatively high. When such conflicts erupt between states that threaten vital interests of the states in the first tier, such as occurred in 1990 when Iraq invaded and captured Kuwait, the possibility of involvement by the developed states will increase. Ideally, the states in the first tier will pursue multilateral approaches to settling such conflicts by joining together to restore borders and reinforce accepted international norms of state behavior, but there is no guarantee they will have identical and parallel interests in every case.

States in this second tier clearly include significant regional powers such as Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, India, Pakistan, Korea, possibly Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa. Over time others are likely to emerge having one or more characteristics placing them in this category.

The final tier are truly the “have nots.” These states have serious economic, population, resource, societal and governmental challenges. Many face seriously deteriorating conditions, internal strife, and the collapse of government and other institutions of legal authority. Such states are the most likely venues for conflict both internal and external. Although such conflict and turmoil may not directly threaten tangible interests of states in the other two tiers,

there will be calls from numerous quarters for interventions based on humanitarian concerns if not others. Such circumstances have already been seen in Somalia and Rwanda, and to a lesser degree in Haiti. Immediate possibilities exist in Zaire and Albania, and many others are likely to follow over the coming decades.

From the national security perspective, such a world has clear implications when it comes to force structure, force modernization and defense resource distribution. Defense planners at the Pentagon and throughout the federal government will have to give careful thought to the types of forces that will be relevant to meeting the challenges in such an environment. Conflict among the developed states, those from whom a peer competitor would emerge, is unlikely. But conflict at the lower end of the spectrum, among states in the remaining tiers, is a certainty. And such conflict is likely to be more frequent, more violent and less susceptible to many of the technological capabilities now being pursued. Certainly the experience of the past eight years offers some significant insights.

If one accepts, in whole or in part, this vision of the emerging strategic environment, the most relevant force for addressing the challenges expected in such a three-tier world are and will remain ground forces. The record since the end of the Cold War in 1989 is most instructive. During that period the United States has mounted major intervention operations in Panama (1989), Iraq (1991), Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995) and numerous others. In each instance it was the American ground force, principally the Army, that provided the key, decisive capability. Air- and sea-based capabilities have played a major part in American military successes during this post-Cold War era, but despite a chorus of claims to the contrary their contributions have generally been in supporting and enabling roles. When reviewing the major operations mounted by the United States during the past eight years, acting either in coalition with other nations, as in Iraq and Bosnia, or unilaterally, as in Panama and Haiti, American ground forces have constituted the majority of the employed force and the decisive, finishing capability.

In summary, the strategic environment of the 21st century will continue the trend of requirements for ground forces. The future force structure and resources will have to reflect this requirement.