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CRISIS RESPONSE: Army or Marines?

by

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The Issue

Which U.S. military service, the Army or Marine Corps, should be designated the lead service for the planning and execution of operations in response to a potentially wide range of national, regional and international crises? In this still-emerging post-Cold War era of rapidly developing crises on a worldwide scale and reduced U.S. defense budgets, the issue of which land service should have the lead for rapid — albeit joint — responses to crises is being closely examined.

The Marines hold that they have traditionally had this mission. It is true that in the days of sailing ships and steamships the Marines did lead most of our nation's small expeditions. However, since World War II and the development of the capability to airlift forces to distant theaters of operation, the Army has been the lead service in most rapid-reaction deployments and in *all* major expeditions.

The issue of service lead for primary crisis response responsibility must be studied and discussed on the basis of the *military capabilities* which will best serve the nation's security interests and goals. Study of the issue must not be influenced by less relevant emotional and political considerations.

Preselecting the right military capabilities would be simple if the nature of future crises was more predictable. However, the only safe prediction is that each crisis scenario will be different and will entail one or more of a full spectrum of required responses. The United States, therefore, must be prepared

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to respond to crises that range from primarily humanitarian assistance to those that are primarily combat in nature — as well as all types of crises between these two extremes. Future crises will undoubtedly arise quickly and a wide range of capabilities must be in place to address them.

The Role of the Army in Crisis Response

The Army is the *only landpower service* which has the full range of capabilities needed to respond to the wide range of potential crises. Army capabilities feature speed of response, breadth and depth of a wide range of supporting capabilities, rapidly deployable light forces and major heavy combat forces. Army strong suits include coalition experience, flexible command and control systems, special operations, civil affairs and psychological operations expertise, and a wide range of Army-to-army programs in countries throughout the world.

Airborne and special operations forces have proven their rapid response abilities many times; responses to crises involving the need for deployments within hours from initial notification are not unusual. Airborne capabilities are not restricted to light infantry. They include light but lethal armor vehicles, antiarmor weapons, long-range rocket artillery, engineer units, attack helicopters and troop assault aviation. These capabilities can be organized to meet the needs of a particular situation, to include forces being airdropped or air-landed on improved, unimproved or rapidly constructed dirt airstrips.

Engineer units can construct roads, bridges and airfields, dig wells, build structures, and lay pipelines in support of joint U.S. forces and friendly forces, as well as in support of humanitarian relief. Army medical units can provide a complete range of services, including combat emergency surgery, medical assistance to local populations, and sophisticated hospital care.

Logistical units provide over-the-beach support, operate ports, distribute supplies, and operate transportation and maintenance support networks. They provide support to other services and to coalition forces. Military police have taken the security and stability roles in many contingencies and can operate in small units or up to brigade size.

Signal and communications units provide the backbone of land communications to joint forces, from rapidly-deployable, airdropped satellite radios to full communications for a theater of operations. Civil affairs and psychological operations units restore order, rebuild government facilities and return governmental functions to allied or occupied nations.

Army forces can operate as small units, task forces and unified command land component forces. They regularly train, exercise and operate with joint and coalition forces. Army doctrine is focused on land combat of all forms, from light infantry to fully armored forces for heavy sustained combat. Army long-range rocket units (MLRS-ATACMS) provide all-weather firepower to attack targets with either precision or high-volume fires. Patriot missile air defense units provide theater missile defense to U.S. forces or host nations.

Marine Corps Capabilities

The Marine Corps is primarily an amphibious combat force. Marine doctrine necessarily limits the capabilities of Marine units to operations near coastal areas. Army forces, by virtue of their broader landpower mission, must be capable of operating on any type of terrain and far inland from coasts.

Marine units afloat, MAGTFs, are limited in size, usually to a battalion task force reinforced with aviation and attack aircraft. They lack the capabilities needed to *rapidly* execute an operation in response to a crisis. This is in part due to the time units afloat require to accomplish the complex task of executing an amphibious operation, as well as loading and positioning their forces. Deployment of follow-on Marine forces is slower because ships must be positioned and dispatched to the operational area.

Once Marine units arrive in the vicinity of a troublespot, they can initiate military operations. However, they cannot accomplish the manifold tasks of continued operations without extensive Army support. Lacking the full range of capabilities of a modern land force, Marine units must be reinforced by Army units almost immediately in all but small, littoral evacuation or raid-type operations.

Because Marine units are primarily oriented on limited amphibious combat operations, they lack the extensive capabilities needed for the *noncombat support activities* which are increasingly a part of a crisis situation. This noncombat support, which includes such activities as water treatment, medical care, construction and civil government support, must be provided by Army units.

Conclusions

Increasingly, crises will require an almost immediate response to preclude rapid escalation. A quick-response capability can also increase the chances of resolving the crisis early, possibly through negotiation rather than military action. Assigning crisis response responsibility only to the Marine Corps means it would not be possible to resolve a crisis early due to lack of quick-reaction capability.

Crisis situations requiring a buildup of forces to reach a decisive level of force argue for the complementary capabilities of the Army and Marines. Their combined capabilities will allow the joint commander to more flexibly and rapidly build his joint force to the level of capability to reach a decision quickly. Time, in conflicts, equates to casualties and draws out the final decision.

If one service must be designated as the nation's primary crisis response force, it must be the Army. To *not* select the Army for that role would slow our nation's responsiveness, limit the capabilities which can be brought to bear, place combat forces in a situation which calls primarily for noncombat forces, and complicate future adaptive force planning.

Today's world is one of instant communications and real-time, live television broadcasts. Live television drives public and governmental opinion towards action. Once the decision for action has

been made, Americans and the whole world expect operations to start immediately, as they saw in Panama and Saudi Arabia where Army paratroopers, special operations units and the Air Force led the initial U.S. forces into the theater of operations.

Even in Somalia, where a more deliberate approach appeared to be appropriate, it took too many days to get a Marine force in place, and then several more days to get the Marines ashore. The result was widespread criticism from the world press and world health organizations that the operation was too slow. The full capabilities of the U.S. armed forces were not utilized in this situation and cannot be a model for the future.

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