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The Role of the Army in the Common Defense: A 21st Century Perspective

by

Lieutenant Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr., USA

The function of an army is to fight – T.R. Fehrenbach

Introduction

Not since the early days of the Second World War has the U.S. Army experienced such massive, comprehensive, all-encompassing change. The scope and scale of these transitional pressures require a course fixed firmly on a shared vision of what the Army is about and where it is going. What is the Army's role in the common defense? How should it fulfill that role? The right answers to these fundamental questions will position the Army for success in the next century. The wrong answers may call into question the very existence of the Army as we know it today.

Core Business

Throughout our history, the Army has served the nation in many ways. It has built roads, surveyed the frontier, maintained the peace, fed the hungry and sheltered the homeless. Its participation in civil disturbances, disaster relief and many other kinds of peaceful assistance is not a recent phenomenon. The Army has always been there when the nation called.

Nevertheless, the pressure now being placed on the Army to increase its participation in non-combat roles is unprecedented in the modern era. Today, the Army finds itself increasingly in demand for missions ranging from international peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance to counterdrug operations and nation-building far from our shores. In a way, the Army has become a victim of its own success. Although public confidence in national institutions such as government,

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religion, education, law, medicine and the media have declined steadily for more than three decades, faith in the military's ability to overcome obstacles and achieve results remains high. In a society where few things seem to work well, the Army stands out as an organization that gets the job done.

The intensity of these pressures, coupled with a steep drop in funding in this decade (which has affected the Army more strongly than any other service) makes it imperative that civilian policymakers and the American people understand just what the Army is and what it does. The primary mission of the Army is and must remain *to fight and win the nation's wars on land*. The law defines the Army's primary role as "the conduct of prompt and sustained land combat . . . to defeat enemy land forces and to seize, occupy and defend land areas." Decisive land combat is the Army's core competency; the Army represents the only military service capable of conducting large-scale land campaigns. Whether at home or abroad, this core mission defines the Army's reason for being and shapes its training, organization, force structure and doctrine. The Army will always be there to assist in natural disasters, civil disturbances, and humanitarian and other relief operations. To perform its essential national security function, however, the Army must fight to remain focused on its core business—warfighting.

This issue affects the Army in profound ways because its conception of its place in the defense establishment, indeed its view of its place in American society as a whole, is founded on deeply held traditions and beliefs formed over two centuries of existence. For most of this century, the Army has been indoctrinated to believe that its core business and unique competency is to fight and win the nation's wars on land. In the current climate, many civilian decisionmakers believe that the Army should devote more emphasis and greater resources to other missions not directly related to warfighting. This debate reaches to the heart of the Army's view of itself and its role in the life of the nation.

Contrary to some views, an Army focused on warfighting is actually well prepared to transition quickly to a nonwarfighting environment. Competent and decisive leaders, well-trained and disciplined soldiers, and flexible, well-equipped organizations are the building blocks for success in any military operation. While some premission training and indoctrination is essential for demanding noncombat or nontraditional missions, dedicating major formations to these missions or refocusing the Army on operations other than war will cut sharply and perhaps fatally into combat readiness. No peacetime, noncombat operation to date has been mounted to preserve the core, vital interests of the United States. But warfighting by definition engages those things that matter most. To confuse the two would be worse than bad strategy; it would be the negation of strategy altogether.

Given a declared strategy which commits the armed forces to fighting and winning two major theater wars (each roughly the equivalent to the Gulf War) nearly simultaneously, signs of declining readiness are an abiding concern. Many military professionals are troubled at the growing mismatch between defense resources on the one hand and strategic requirements on the other. Recruiting, retention, operational readiness rates and skyrocketing operating tempo raise alarming questions about our ability to execute the strategy with acceptable risk, even under optimal conditions. An increasingly tenuous link between ends and means underscores the importance of focusing principally on warfighting and only secondarily on other missions. This is not to say that the Army should abandon any role in operations other than war. Yet when the war tocsin sounds, the American people and their elected leaders will accept no excuses from an Army that is not ready to answer.

If warfighting must remain the Army's principal concern, what is the nature of the threat it exists to face? The United States no longer faces a hostile superpower which threatens the nation's survival. But the passing of the Soviet Union has brought in its wake a return to severe regional

conflicts, grounded in age-old religious, cultural and ethnic enmities. In the former Soviet Union, in the Balkans, in sub-Saharan Africa and in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, the collapse of bipolarity has revived and encouraged inter- and intrastate conflict. In other places, such as the Korean Peninsula, die-hard totalitarian regimes continue to threaten our allies and our interests. Unquestionably, the end of the Cold War has increased the likelihood of conflict even as it has reduced the possibility of nuclear war.

In the next decade the Army must contend with major regional powers fielding large, well-equipped armies and theater ballistic missiles which can deliver a variety of different weapons of mass destruction. Traditional methods of deterrence, which emphasized forward presence and strategic nuclear forces, no longer apply to regional powers who face no large U.S. presence on the ground and do not fear a nuclear exchange as the possible price of breaking the peace.

In some cases we may be able to identify these threats well in advance and structure our response accordingly. But in other cases we may have little or no warning, as we saw in Korea in 1950 and in Saudi Arabia in 1990. While taking into account the most likely regional threats, our Army must be a capabilities-based Army which can respond quickly and decisively in all parts of the world, anywhere along the threat continuum. This does not mean we need an Army larger and more powerful than any other. It does mean that Army forces, fighting in concert with other services and allies, must be capable of meeting and overcoming those threats to our national interests that we cannot define precisely, as well as those we can.

In many ways, the Army's task is harder, not easier, now that the Cold War has been won. While all the services are smaller, the Army absorbed a disproportionate share of the force reductions which followed the end of the Cold War. The Army has lost approximately 40 percent of its active force structure and is manned today at its lowest level since before the Second World War. This loss of mass and supporting infrastructure was accompanied by severe reductions in the Army's budget and dramatic increases in nonwarfighting missions. Deep cuts in training resources and a perceptible drop in the quality of recruits are warning signs that the Army is struggling to keep the warfighting edge it took to the desert in 1990.

Like those of its sister services, the Army's strategic posture has evolved in the post-Cold War era. Today's Army is a comparatively small, high-technology, force projection Army with limited forward presence. To defeat potential opponents, the Army is structured to deploy rapidly over strategic distances to conduct joint and combined operations with other services and allies. The ability to project decisive landpower over strategic distances requires adequate strategic mobility in the form of airlift and sealift, and secure air and sea lines of communication. To bring its landpower to bear, therefore, the United States requires a defense establishment with balanced air and naval forces that can transport and protect Army forces en route to threatened areas, in addition to their principal combat missions. Weighting our defense establishment too far in any one direction—to include landpower—would violate our greatest military strength: the ability to take on powerful challengers in the air, on land, at sea and over the beach, anywhere in the world. More than better joint doctrine or procedures, that is the essence of joint warfare, American-style.

The United States has often fought as part of an allied or multinational coalition in support of shared interests, and whenever possible with the sanction of the United Nations. Combined operations offer political, economic and strategic as well as military advantages which make operations as part of a larger coalition inherently desirable. Still, while the Army will often fight in concert with coalition partners, the use of American landpower must not become solely dependent on outside help. Dependence on other nations runs the risk of losing that strategic independence and self-reliance

which gives us the ability to control our own foreign and security policy. No nation can defend alone against *every* threat. But no nation can long endure if it cannot defend alone against *any* threat.

In the next century even more than in this one, joint operations will be the standard by which we measure successful military action. U.S. national strategy demands joint doctrine and training, service interoperability, and flexible joint organizations to achieve credible deterrence and a decisive capability for victory in war and for success in military operations other than war. However, there is a danger in taking jointness too far.

Historically and conceptually, joint operations dominate the strategic level of war, permeate the operational level, and influence the tactical level—but there is enduring value in service core competencies. Military power is not generic, freely substitutable or fungible. Airpower and seapower cannot replace landpower. Though modern military operations are multidimensional, encompassing land, sea, air and space dimensions, each of the military departments has special expertise and competence in a primary dimension. No single service can win wars independently and no service can dominate more than one warfighting dimension.

In the give and take of budget wars inside the beltway, one service or another will often press extreme claims to “strategic primacy” or exaggerate its contribution to success in past or future wars. Ultimately, however, all forms of military power are relevant only to the extent that they influence conditions and outcomes on the land. History has shown that air or naval power alone, while very often a necessary precondition for success on land, have never been decisive by themselves in land campaigns. To control or protect the land and the populations who live there, strong, capable Army land forces are an indispensable part of America’s national military power, providing the decisive force in major joint operations conducted on the land. A clear, compelling, convincing case for the enduring importance of landpower will be crucial to maintaining the strategic balance America must have to maintain its position of world leadership.

Preparing the Force for War

To provide a flexible capability to conduct land warfare in all types of terrain and across the threat spectrum, the Army maintains a balanced mix of light, heavy and special operations forces. Army forces also include important combat support and combat service support elements which give the nation land forces with long-term staying power and an ability to acquire and strike enemy formations at great distances. The ability to logistically and operationally support sustained land campaigns is a capability unique to the Army. Alone among America’s military forces, the Army can seize and control the land.

As a landpower, the United States relies on a Total Army which consists of the active Army, the Army National Guard, the Army Reserve and Department of the Army civilians. Each component of the total force has an essential role to play in the common defense. The active force provides forward deployed and contingency forces ready for immediate use in combat and operations short of war. The reserve components provide support forces ready for short-notice deployment and powerful reinforcing combat forces. Most of the nation’s reserve combat forces belong to the Army National Guard, while the Army Reserve provides a large percentage of the support forces needed to sustain Army operations in the field. Army civilians perform essential technical and support functions. Together they constitute one team, a Total Army which represents the land component of America’s national security. For major threats to national security, America’s Army will almost always fight as a landpower team, with each component playing vital roles.

That, at least, is the ideal. But the long-standing estrangement between the active Army and the Army National Guard continues to threaten the warfighting effectiveness of the force. More and stronger exhortations for the regulars to “get together” with the Guard are not particularly helpful, given the profound cultural and organizational issues which divide them. In a “come as you are” war, the nation cannot wait months to put its reserve divisions into the field. Hence the challenge is to maintain reserve combat formations which can ramp up quickly and meet deployment timelines that are meaningful to the warfighting commanders in chief.

There are many things the Army can do to help improve the Guard, but without the active support of Congress and the governors, most initiatives will be stillborn. The active component already funds 90 percent of the costs associated with training and equipping Guard units, and at great cost to the readiness of active formations, provides extensive assistance in the form of training support teams manned by active duty officers and noncommissioned officers. Many of the active Army’s premier units devote weeks each year to assisting Guard units with their annual training. Throughout this century, the active component has been deeply involved in supporting the Army Guard.

Since the Gulf War there has been substantial progress. Recent legislative changes which require Guard leaders to complete advanced professional schooling commensurate with their grade are a strong positive step. Other initiatives, such as putting Guard officers on extended tours of duty with active units, and integrating active leaders into Guard formations (possibly as deputy commanders and assistant staff officers), could help as well. Nevertheless, the root of the problem is *achieving baseline combined arms proficiency in ground maneuver units at battalion level and above*. Despite intense political pressures, active Army leaders have rightly resisted declaring Guard units ready for combat when they know they are not. Assuming away potential threats on the one hand, or artificially moving up Guard deployment timelines on the other, cannot withstand real scrutiny. The right answer is active forces strong enough to stand the initial shock of combat, and reinforcing reserve forces that can mobilize, train up and deploy in time frames that will make a difference in major theater war.

The long-term solution is very likely restructuring our reserve components to place the bulk of our reserve combat formations in the Army Reserve, and our reserve combat support and service support units in the Guard. Prestige considerations aside, state governors have a greater need for transportation, military police, medical, engineer and helicopter units than they do tank and infantry battalions. The transfer of skills from the civilian community to the military is very high for support functions, but virtually nonexistent for maneuver combat units. Without the peacetime phenomenon of dual chains of command, the active Army can influence training and readiness in the Army Reserve to a much greater degree than in the Guard. Mastering the skills of combined arms warfare on an unforgiving battlefield is the work of a professional lifetime, the price of failure unacceptably high by any measure.

These realities argue for Guard units which offer hard skill training to Guardsmen, direct return to the states and direct utility to the nation when called upon. The simple fact is that we cannot fight major theater wars without our reserve components—but our current system is driven more by local and domestic political considerations than by the logic of the common defense.

Policy vs. Politics

On this issue and on others, what role should Army leaders play in influencing policy outcomes relating to landpower? Some schools of thought hold that the Army should have no role in deriving its missions, on the theory that service involvement in such matters constitutes an illegitimate and

even unconstitutional infringement on civilian control of the military. These voices contend that soldiers should go where they are sent and do what they are told. If carried to its logical conclusion, however, such an arrangement deprives the government and the people of the special knowledge and expertise which resides in the collective experience of the armed forces and nowhere else. The Army's vigorous participation in the policy process, be it national military strategy or defense budgeting or social policies applied to defense matters, is essential to informed decisionmaking and sound, effective policy.

What cannot be condoned is any institutional role in partisan politics—that is, involvement of any kind to promote the political fortunes of one party or candidate. The distinction between policy and politics can become blurred, but disaster lurks behind indifference or insensitivity to the difference. The Army has earned the respect of the American people for many decades by its steadfast rejection of any role in partisan politics. It must continue to hold fast to these values or risk losing the reservoir of respect and good will it has earned through long decades of proper subordination to its civilian masters. In recent years, openly partisan positions taken by some retired senior military officers have called this ethic into question. The margin between partisan advocacy soon after retirement and partisan dealmaking just before—perhaps in expectation of political reward—is a thin one. Serving Army leaders have been scrupulous in this regard. Their successors must heed their example.

Coping with Change

While the Army, like all large organizations, changes continuously, the rate of change and the influences causing change can vary greatly depending on the kinds of internal and external pressures operating at a given point in time. Whether externally directed or internally derived, the sheer scope of the changes being visited upon the Army of the mid-1990s poses a major organizational challenge in and of itself.

In practical terms, the biggest change issue facing the Army today is how to cope with resource deprivation. Severe cuts in funding leave the Army's senior leaders with little choice; virtually everything the Army does must be done differently in the current budget environment. In this context, a first order challenge is to rationalize a persuasive strategic requirement for land forces in order to size and equip the Army, as well as a level of funding adequate to sustain that force. This process is largely the responsibility of senior Army elites and defense policymakers.

Having arrived at a level of funding which defines the size of the Army and the role it will play, the defense establishment will cede to the Army leadership much (though not all) of the responsibility for adjusting the force to these new levels. Major reductions in budget authority mean significant changes in how the force is manned, organized, trained, equipped and sustained. The Department of the Army, not the unified commanders, Joint Staff or other actors in the defense arena, has primary statutory responsibility for these missions, and it is in these vital areas that Army leaders are chiefly concerned with change.

For many reasons, Army leaders are looking principally to technology to offset the Army's loss of mass and combat power. Advanced technology affects the force in every area, but most significantly in equipping, organizing and training the force. Currently, the Army's focus appears to be on applying the information potential of the microprocessor to the battlefield to achieve leap-ahead advances in intelligence gathering, analysis and dissemination. Faster and more precise targeting and enhanced battle tracking on a digitized battlefield are expected to give the Army a

built-in technological "overmatch" against major regional opponents, particularly when facing larger enemy forces.

Even in a constrained budget environment, the Army is pressing ahead to develop and field a variety of systems designed to interface with one another on a digitized battlefield. Digital systems will be mounted in each combat system (tanks, helicopters, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, howitzers, command vehicles) and will link commanders at all levels to information nodes providing real-time information on enemy and friendly locations. These nodes will in turn be linked to airborne intelligence platforms such as the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, or JSTARS, aircraft, which can see enemy formations hundreds of kilometers away.

The building blocks of the digital force—the AH-64 Apache Longbow attack helicopter, the RAH-66 Comanche armed reconnaissance helicopter, the Crusader howitzer, and the M1A2 tank—are being developed as part of an Army Modernization Master Plan. Together they will form an ensemble of complementary weapon systems, each fully integrated into the digitized battlefield. In committing the Army to this acquisition strategy, senior leaders have recognized the potential of advanced technology and taken those steps needed to put the Army on a path which will take land warfare to a new level.

Less clear, however, are the prospects for continued funding for these acquisitions. Other concerns may also affect the execution of the Army's modernization program and its commitment to "Information Age" technology. For example, the value of greater range and sharing of real-time information is clear in open terrain where U.S. forces enjoy uncontested air superiority, an absence of populated areas, and an opposing force organized along our own lines. These conditions were, of course, present during the Gulf War.

● On other battlefields, such as the Korean Peninsula, an Army so equipped might not realize the same results. There, the combination of bad weather; an extremely dense air defense system, hardened artillery positions and troop shelters, poor road networks and steep, mountainous terrain will take away many of the strengths described above. Airpower and long-range missiles will be much less effective, as will massed armored formations and attack aviation. The advent of cheap systems that can defeat precision guided munitions—some are commercially available now—also pose a threat to expensive, high-technology systems. While advanced technology will still provide a battlefield edge, it must take into account the full range of threats. Overemphasis on information systems and leap-ahead technologies always carries an inherent vulnerability—the threat of lower-tech, asymmetric responses that can unhinge our system of systems. As always, balance remains the coin of the realm in land warfare.

A great strength in the past has been the Army's conscious decision to maintain flexibility by fielding both heavy and light formations able to fight effectively in many different kinds of terrain against many different kinds of opponents. To date, acquisition decisions and concept development suggest a focus on high intensity, mechanized warfare in open terrain which may not support the full range of missions the Army will be called upon to execute. An equal emphasis on the Army's light community, now sorely undergunned and largely foot-mobile, will pay rich dividends on tomorrow's uncertain battlefields.

Training an "information-based" Army is a major change issue facing the Army as it approaches the end of the century. Predictably, more resource-intensive forms of training, such as major combined arms field exercises and live-fire training exercises, are being de-emphasized as training funds dry up. Instead, computer simulations at every level are touted as cost-effective substitutes for

more expensive forms of training. Almost certainly this is due to the natural impulse to downplay any potential loss in training realism and efficiency, but growing faith in simulations also suggests a confidence in replicating actual training results without deploying to the field.

While computer simulations are unquestionably effective when used to *complement* actual field training, their effectiveness as *substitutes* for field training is doubtful. Simulators can provide useful training for rote mechanical tasks, such as some forms of gunnery, and on technical aspects of warfare such as positioning and massing fire systems. They are invaluable for drilling battlestuffs in the complex processes of synchronizing combat power. But they do little to replicate the human dimension of warfare, which is almost certainly more important. Fatigue, bad weather, faulty navigation, communications failures, fear, uncertainty—in a word, friction—are largely absent from computer simulations. Many trends, such as loss of training areas, less money for training, and more frequent deployments, push the Army away from field training. Still, on future battlefields, hard, realistic training will matter even more than digital interfaces and hours spent in the simulator.

Organizing the Force

Fielding this kind of Army may well mean a departure from traditional forms of organization. At the macro level, this means determining the mix of heavy and light formations the Army should field, together with the corps and army headquarters which support them and the nonoperational or “TDA” (Table of Distribution and Allowances) organizations that support the field Army. Familiar tactical organizations may also face major changes. For example, the traditional division may evolve into a much leaner organization as information flows faster and more smoothly. Logistics organizations may be restructured to exploit improved methods of managing supplies, and other support units, such as signal, intelligence and administrative formations, may merge, become smaller or even be replaced entirely.

The Army has moved more slowly in addressing the organizational impact of revolutionary technology. While most communities within the Army will embrace new technology, any significant restructuring will be sure to challenge the position or even survival of important subordinate organizations. Change issues related to recruitment, retention, compensation, education, promotion and assignment policies are not perceived as having the same importance. Yet the challenges associated with attracting, training and retaining soldiers capable of operating such advanced technology may be among the most daunting of all. This, in turn, suggests the need for a truly rationalized, multidisciplinary survey of all the issues surrounding the decision to press forward with a fully digitized, “Information Age” Army.

All this is not to say that the Army is facing and addressing change in an intentionally flawed or haphazard manner. Many of the changes absorbing the Army are imposed from outside the organization, while others are the result of ongoing research and development with its own powerful momentum and impetus. To a very great degree, the Army manages change by taking measured steps which enable changes to take place within the framework of existing organizational values, norms and operating routines whose influence on the Army’s internal behavior cannot, after all, be ignored. In so doing, the Army may sacrifice the possibility of revolutionary advances for the less turbulent waters of evolutionary change. In a business where the price of failure is measured in lives, treasure and even national extinction, revolutionary but unproven innovations carry inherent risks. Some will succeed, some will fail. But the Army cannot fail, and Army leaders know that advocates of revolutionary change will not step forward and assume responsibility for failure on the battlefield.

By combining new methods and technology with time-tested approaches to its fundamental missions, the Army can best achieve rapid progress with acceptable risk.

Conclusion

Today, only eight years after Desert Storm, academics and policy analysts increasingly argue that the era of interstate warfare may be ending. A sense of historical perspective, however, suggests that in any prolonged spell of peace the urge to assume war away gathers force. As far into the future as we can clearly see, the threat of major conflict between states will continue to shape the nature of global politics. Because it does, the Army will be busy—and the Army must be ready.

To be faithful to its trust, the Army of the next century must be a technologically advanced land force, manned by intelligent, high-quality soldiers, imbued with a sense of jointness but intuitively understanding the importance of land warfare. In form and function, its communities will evolve. By 2025, there may no longer be armor, infantry or field artillery branches as we know them today. Still, the Army's core business must remain unchanged: *to seize and control the land*. That is what armies do. That, in the end, is what armies are. In the next century, as so often in this one, the call to arms will surely come. When it does, few things will matter more than an Army that still lives up to its proud boast: "*This We'll Defend!*"

(LTC Richard D. Hooker, Jr., USA, formerly Special Assistant to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, will assume command of the 2d Battalion, 505th Infantry, 82d Airborne Division, in May 1999.)