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Policy Brief

summary

U.S. military superiority in the air, at sea, and in open terrain is at present so overwhelming and so obvious that there is little need for the expensive new high-technology weapons systems being demanded by all three services. Recognizing America's enormous advantages, potential enemies will be very cautious about engaging the United States in open battle.

Instead, as Kosovo is demonstrating (and as Lebanon and Somalia demonstrated even more brutally), the most dangerous threats come from the need to occupy areas containing hostile populations; and these dangers are even greater when the areas concerned are cities. This is the kind of future warfare on which the U.S. Army should be concentrating its new weapons development, its tactical thinking, and its moral preparation. ■

Soldiers before Missiles: Meeting the Challenge from the World's Streets

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The new U.S. administration's determination to do some serious initial thinking before raising the Pentagon budget is highly commendable. However, the outcome of this and other reviews seems likely to fail to address adequately the most dangerous challenges that the U.S. military will face over the next generation.

U.S. Military Transformation— Not Nearly Radical Enough

When it comes to fighting on the ground outside the United States, the greatest challenges to come do not chiefly stem from the need to defeat organized state forces fighting at sea, in the air, and in open terrain. Rather, they stem from the need to occupy and control territory in the face of a hostile local population. In these circumstances, what is usually needed—as both Vietnam and Chechnya so blisteringly illustrated—is not more firepower, but less, because linked obsessions with firepower and force protection are likely to lead to a

politically disastrous level of civilian casualties. The most dangerous battlefield of the future is not the deserts of Kuwait or even the wooded hills of Kosovo, but the sprawling modern city, with its endless possibilities of ambush and car bombs, and its unlimited capacity to produce large-scale and deeply embarrassing civilian casualties.

U.S. Technology: No Contest

There are two reasons for the relative lack of a conventional threat to the United States today. First, in the Gulf War, the subsequent aerial brushes over Iraq, and the air offensive against Yugoslavia, the United States was simply too successful. The Iraqi and Yugoslav air forces were so hopelessly outclassed that they did not even attempt to fight.

The second reason is that unlike in the period before World War I, the ruling elites in most countries are not drawn from traditional warrior nobilities, and unlike in the period before World War II and during the Cold War, they are not possessed by revolu-



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Carnegie's Russian and Eurasian Program is a premier policy research center on the former Soviet Union. The program operates the Carnegie Moscow Center, the first research center of its size and kind in the former Soviet Union.

tionary and aggressive ideologies. They may be nationalist, but they are also deeply pragmatic, and in many cases they and their families have acquired great wealth as a direct or indirect consequence of integration into the Western-dominated global commercial economy.

Both the elites and much of the populations of China, Russia, and other U.S. rivals have been influenced by the same demilitarizing influences that swept Western societies during the middle and late twentieth century: economic modernization, urbanization, higher education, the impact of modern consumer and youth culture, and in some cases at least partial democratization. This does not mean that these states will not fight if they see their vital interests threatened (in the case of China, by a Taiwanese declaration of independence). It does mean, however, that they are much less likely to launch wars against the United States beyond their own borders.

Threat from Below

The greatest military threat to the United States then comes from discontented subjects, who unlike their rulers, have benefited only partially or not at all from the development of the modern world economy. The greatest threat to NATO forces in Kosovo today is not Serbian reconquest: it is the violent behavior of the people of Kosovo. Likewise, the greatest threat from Iraq is not Saddam Hussein—unless he can strike at the United States through terrorism using weapons of mass destruction—but rather is some combination of events that might compel the United States to get rid of Saddam Hussein and occupy Iraq itself.

This would immediately lay U.S. forces open to attack from enemies hidden amid a hostile civilian population. If U.S. troops reverted to previous patterns and used massive firepower to defeat those attacks, they would destroy the United States' whole political position in the Arab world. The U.S. experience in Somalia in 1994 demonstrated that the sheer killing power of even small

modern weapons platforms can easily create an unintended massacre of civilians in a crowded city.

Writing about the Korean War, the British war correspondent and historian David Rees summed up the Western tradition in this regard: "At the heart of the West's military thought lies the belief that machines must be used to save its men's lives; Korea would become a horrific illustration of the effects of a limited war where one side possessed the firepower and the other the manpower." The results of this approach are clearly illustrated by the battle for Manila in 1945. After U.S. troops began to take serious casualties, restraints on the use of firepower were abandoned, even though the Filipinos were both allied civilians and citizens of a U.S. protectorate. In the battle that followed, approximately 100 Filipino civilians died for every U.S. soldier killed. Vietnam saw repeated smaller-scale incidents of this kind.

In Somalia, these heavy civilian casualties had no wider implications, because most countries sympathized with U.S. objectives there and certainly did not sympathize with the followers of General Farah Aideed. Besides, Somalia was never a focus of serious world interest. This would certainly not be the case with future U.S. operations in the Middle East.

The Middle East, and to a lesser extent the Balkans and parts of Latin America, provides the best answer to those critics who say that the United States will be able to avoid involvement in ugly partisan or urban wars by simply walking away from them. Across most of the world, this is obviously true. Especially under the new U.S. administration, there seems little chance that U.S. troops would be deployed in Africa or Southeast Asia, whatever horrors may occur there.

But in other areas of the world, U.S. national interests are simply too great for the United States to walk away so easily. U.S. troops are already deployed in Kosovo and are

engaged in operations to stop Kosovo Albanian extremists from attacking Serbia and Macedonia. If ethnic violence in Macedonia escalates into civil war and threatens the existence of the Macedonian state, then the United States and its allies will inevitably become involved in another armed policing operation amid heavily armed populations, large parts of which would be bitterly hostile to their presence and their mission.

Even more important and worrying from this point of view is the U.S. military presence

guerrilla and terrorist attacks from a largely hostile population.

Furthermore, we must work on the assumption that such wars will have to be fought at least partly in cities. In 1950, there were only fifty cities in the world with more than one million people, whereas today there are more than 300, with twenty-five cities claiming a population that exceeds ten million. Urbanization is progressing much faster than overall population growth. By 2025, a staggering 60 percent of the world's popula-

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around the Persian Gulf. For the sake of U.S. strategic and energy interests, U.S. troops will have to stay there—even if their presence were to become increasingly unwelcome to much of the local population. Given the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the nature of the new Israeli government, and the increasing unpopularity in the region of U.S. actions against Iraq, hostility to the United States and its troops in the region seems likely to grow.

This means that the United States will also continue to be the target of terrorist attacks—and if such attacks employ weapons of mass destruction, the pressure to destroy the regimes held responsible and to occupy their countries will be overwhelming. Given all this, sooner or later, U.S. forces seem likely to find themselves in the kind of situation they faced in Lebanon in 1982: fending off

tion will live in large cities, according to recent projections.

As guerrilla fighters well know, and as the Israelis found to their cost in Beirut and the Russians found in Grozny, the city provides ideal cover for an adversary disadvantaged in terms of firepower but strong in courage, determination, and local knowledge. In the urban environment, and in anything less than a total war like that of 1941–1945, the Abrams tank, the Crusader artillery system, and supersonic aircraft are worse than useless—they are actively damaging to the side that uses them.

Old-New Military Thinking

In this context, even radical U.S. military thinking seems a good deal less radical. After all, a considerable part of the present debate

should have taken place almost ten years ago, with the end of the Cold War. When it comes to specific deployments in Europe to meet the past Soviet threat, the changes in U.S. strategy and force structures over the past decade have been immense; but the general configuration of the U.S. armed forces, and still more their tactics and weaponry, have changed a great deal less than the Army's public commitment to the "transformation" program might have suggested.

In a sense, U.S. armed forces of the Cold War era were saved by Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, occurring just as the Cold War was drawing to a close, gave the Unit-

In the more immediate past, the war over Kosovo, while it has undermined certain existing assumptions, has reinforced others. On the one hand, faith in the utility of heavy armored forces in many circumstances has been considerably undermined. If NATO had tried to launch a ground attack on Yugoslav forces in Kosovo using Albania as a base, it would have found that some of its most important weapons platforms, like the Abrams tank, could not even have reached the battlefield because local roads and bridges could not have supported their weight. At 67 tons, the Abrams would simply demolish most bridges in the Balkans or for that matter most of the world.

U.S. technological superiority in aerial, naval, and armored warfare is by now so great that there is no need for major new systems of this kind at present.

ed States the chance to use its Cold War strengths of high-technology airpower and powerful heavy armored forces and artillery in optimal circumstances against a Soviet-type enemy.

So instead of making a truly radical change in approach, after 1991, U.S. forces, which had been designed to meet the Soviet threat in Europe, were reduced in size but otherwise essentially unchanged. Instead of the Soviet super-enemy, their configuration was now justified in terms of the need to meet the threat of the simultaneous outbreak of two "Major Theater Wars" (MTWs). A new Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (or Saudi Arabia) and a North Korean invasion of South Korea were the generally posited scenarios—both of which bear a close resemblance (albeit on a vastly smaller scale) to the old threat of Soviet tanks pouring through the Fulda Gap. To meet these threats, all that was necessary was a serious increase in long-range transport capability.

The same would be true of the new 40-ton Crusader gun (80 tons with its backup system) that the Army is currently demanding.

Furthermore, the time it would have taken to assemble heavily armed U.S. forces might well have led to a collapse in the NATO consensus allowing the Milosevic regime to achieve at least a semi-victory. These perceptions have strengthened calls for lighter, more mobile U.S. ground forces on an "expeditionary" model.

On the other hand, however, NATO's victory in Kosovo further strengthened those powerful groups in the U.S. military, and the defense world in general, who believe in the supremacy of airpower and that bombardment without the large-scale involvement of ground troops is in itself enough to win most wars. This belief has an immense appeal, for two obvious reasons.

First, it appears to offer the prospect of victorious war with no U.S. casualties. This is

especially true given the new technological possibilities of “smart weapons,” as used in Kosovo, and unmanned weapons, which are being developed. Second, the further development of such high-technology weapons platforms meets the needs and desires of the U.S. military-industrial complex and its various military and political clients.

When it comes to winning a new air campaign like the one over Kosovo, some of the new weapons being considered by the U.S. armed services would indeed be of great value: notably the proposed “arsenal ship,” essentially a huge semi-submerged barge armed with different missiles. And, of course, lighter, more easily transportable and deployable armored forces would be a gain for future expeditionary warfare.

But these proposed weapons systems are irrelevant for the U.S. and NATO forces in Kosovo, as they would have been if NATO had had to fight in Bosnia in the early and mid-1990s and for its present police mission there. The earlier technological antecedents of these weapons were irrelevant in Somalia, and in Lebanon, they were worse than irrelevant—the use of heavy bombardment infuriated parts of the local population and encouraged devastating terrorist attacks on U.S. forces.

Furthermore, as already pointed out, U.S. technological superiority in aerial, naval, and armored warfare is by now so great that there is no need for major new systems of this kind at present. This applies above all to the Air Force. Planned new aircraft—if these programs are pursued—will be by far the biggest swallower of new U.S. military spending over the next generation, to no real purpose. Good maintenance and resupply of existing planes will give the United States an unbeatable edge for years to come.

In these circumstances, existing plans by the different services to spend \$340 billion over the next twenty-five years on three different new fighter planes (more than the rest of the world spends on their militaries in a

given year) can only be seen in terms of service, industrial, and political interests, not real military need.

The same applies to the U.S. Navy, which still takes the biggest share of the U.S. military budget: 31 percent in 2000 compared to 29 percent for the Air Force and 25 percent for the Army, which is almost precisely the proportions of the late Cold War, despite the immense changes of the past decade. Of course, Cold War-era platforms like the attack submarine continue to play a very important role in the protection of expeditionary forces in coastal waters; but it is very hard to see why the Navy needs to exceed the present cap of fifty such submarines. Nor is there adequate justification for the new, massively expensive vessels such as the DD-21 destroyer or more giant aircraft carriers that the Navy is demanding.

New Solutions for Real Problems

Rather than pushing forward these high-technology weapons, military planners should pay more sustained and better-funded attention under the aegis of the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) to new technology for urban, antipartisan, or “policing” missions. These new technologies would clearly give the best chance for such missions to be carried out without the horrendous civilian casualties that have characterized them in the past. Above all, new weapons systems should allow soldiers to operate in urban environments without having to rely so much on destructive firepower.

Such technology, however, is far from the big, glamorous, high profile—and extremely expensive—aircraft, missiles, and ships beloved of most of the U.S. services, military-industrialists, and politicians. The infantry weapons under consideration for urban warfare are small scale and designed to help the individual infantryman. Nonetheless, attention to the needs of urban warfare has made considerable strides (see box at right).

Some New Systems for Urban Warfare Set Out by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps’ Joint Advanced Concept Technology Demonstration

- Ability to identify and discriminate between combatants and noncombatants at greater ranges and under all conditions;
- Vision equipment allowing all soldiers to see at all times (day or night; in basements/tunnels; through smoke; and so on);
- Ability to produce detailed local maps and distribute them down to at least squad level within six to twelve hours of notification;
- Soldier-portable intelligence collection and dissemination tool to conduct remote route/area/building reconnaissance, ideally incorporating through-wall and countersniper sensors;
- Recoilless hand-held projectiles capable of piercing walls and armor (so-called “bunker-busters”);
- Thermal, electronic, and visual “badges” to mark all friendly soldiers, immunizing them from attack both by each other and by future unmanned fighting vehicles;
- Nonlethal weapons for use in peacekeeping and police operations, and for storming buildings that may contain civilians (for example, quick-drying and immobilizing plastic foam).

An Integrated Helmet Assembly Subsystem (IHAS) is already in existence, allowing the individual soldier to see computer-generated data, maps, and imagery, including pictures from a camera. This will enable the soldier to “see” and fire around corners. Much thinking is also going into the creation of small robots for both intelligence and fighting in urban terrain. The acquisition of light wheeled armored vehicles should be of help in future operations like Kosovo.

However, practice lags a long way behind theory. Most of these developments are still embryonic. They should be given top priority and pushed forward with all reasonable speed. They need more funding (although this amount would be small compared to the cost of new warships and fighters), but above all, thinking about and planning for armed policing operations and urban and antipartisan warfare have to be given the same importance within the U.S. armed forces that is now accorded to maneuver warfare. Officers who succeed in war games and training exercises for these kinds of warfare (and of course achieve successes in real operations) need to be assured that this will bring them promotion to at least the same degree as success in hitherto more “prestigious” fields.

The Marine Corps has devoted systematic and high-level attention to urban warfare. The Army still treats it as secondary to the main task of fighting wars of maneuver in open country, although, encouraged in part by rivalry with the Marines, it has recently been doing some serious thinking about urban operations. Nonetheless, its urban warfare training facilities are still a highly inadequate preparation for the realities of urban conflict; the training programs available do not match up to the care with which the Marines or the British—trained in the hard school of Ulster—approach this subject.

Suggestions have been made that the Army should designate a particular division to specialize in this form of warfare. Howev-

er, this may be both too much commitment and too little: too much, because with only ten Army divisions it is not clear that the United States can afford to hive off one of them in this way; too little, because given the size of modern cities and the demands of antipartisan warfare, any serious operation of this kind would probably require a considerably larger U.S. commitment. This kind of training and equipment therefore needs to be spread throughout the Army, as it is in Great Britain.

Courage and Restraint

Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that in urban and antipartisan warfare, the quality of technology, however important, will always come second to the quality of the individual soldier. And that means not only the ability to use efficient force and to endure hardship and casualties, but also the ability to show restraint: that is, when necessary, to accept limited casualties without resorting to inappropriately massive force in response. This has never been an easy lesson for U.S. forces to accept, and the growing expectation in the United States that wars can be fought without American casualties is making it even more difficult.

Ability to show restraint is essential. In Kosovo, NATO allies are beginning to complain that the U.S. obsession with “force protection” is undermining the entire NATO mission and the stability of the Balkans. This obsession is also greatly increasing the already poor balance between “teeth” and “tail” in the U.S. armed forces. This kind of thing is damaging to an army’s morale in the long run and to its reputation; it will also encourage potential enemies to risk partisan wars in the belief that the United States will not have the stomach for them.

In Kosovo, NATO allies appear to have reached a de facto agreement that Americans will provide most of the surveillance technology and long-range firepower and leave most of the patrolling to the British and others. But

this arrangement will not be popular among NATO allies if their troops begin to take casualties. Indeed, if this distinction of roles and sacrifices were to become too glaring, it could seriously undermine NATO from within. Most notably, trying to pass more and more of this kind of burden onto the shoulders of the Europeans would have the inevitable result of strengthening European Union moves toward the creation of an effective “Euroforce”—something that (rightly or wrongly) is generally seen in Washington as contradicting U.S. interests.

nya, and Kashmir) what “winning” actually means. In such wars, there can be no possibility of a rapid and crushing military “victory.” Success, if it comes at all, will be political and will be the result not of spectacular “victories” but of tenacity, endurance, and sacrifice on the part of the occupying troops.

Second, “decisive force” can all too often mean “overwhelming force.” This is almost always disastrous in urban and antipartisan warfare, as the United States found in Vietnam and the Russians have found in Chechnya. One could in fact turn this doctrine on

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Nor, in the great majority of cases, will NATO allies be available to help the United States outside the continent of Europe.

These problems point to a deeper flaw in the contemporary U.S. philosophy of war, summed up in the so-called “Powell” or “Weinberger” doctrines. Insofar as these doctrines point to the need for clear aims and full commitment and to the dangers of “mission creep,” their approach has been extremely valuable. However, the belief that if the United States is to intervene at all, it must do so with “decisive force” and “with the sole object of winning” raises at least as many questions as it answers.

In the first place, it is not at all clear in Kosovo today (or Northern Ireland, Chech-

its head: if a cause is worth U.S. troops fighting for, then it is also worth some of them dying for—if the alternative is to adopt tactics that will ensure America’s political defeat. And as General Giap once pointed out, purely military considerations are often of secondary importance. In the end the side that wins politically is the one that wins the war.

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Related Resources

Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, Anatol Lieven (Yale University Press, 1999), contains Lieven's eyewitness account of the first Chechen War, which he covered as a journalist for the *Times* of London, as well as reflections on contemporary urban and partisan warfare.

Nasty Little Wars, Anatol Lieven (*National Interest*, no. 62, Winter 2000/2001).

Hubris and Nemesis: Historical Patterns of Western Military Ascendancy and Decline, an essay by Anatol Lieven, forthcoming in *War over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, edited by Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen (Columbia University Press, Fall 2001).

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