



A Period of Transitions: The U.S. Army and its Future

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The topic is a complex one. I know each of you understands that. On one hand, I could respond to the question “what’s in the future for the U.S. Army?” With a series of one-word answers.

“Work;” the U.S. Army’s still at war, as well as recovering from over a decade of continuous rotations to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another word, “trouble.” The army is facing significant budget cuts, ones that have already reduced readiness and promises cuts to size and structure.

A third word might be “shifts,” from an army at war to an army of preparation, from continuous rotations to war to primarily a garrison army, from a focus on the Middle East to the pre-9/11 more balanced focus that included much more engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

But each of these one word answers would be wrong because it’s the combination of factors that the army faces. It’s that leaders have to figure out a way forward in the face of all of the challenges that I mentioned and many more.

Before I go much farther, let me lay out some parameters for my talk.

I am a retired general, with emphasis on the “retired.” My assessment of the army is mine alone, and you should not infer more from what I say here today than this is the perspective of one person.

I love the army to which I dedicated most of my adult life. Make no mistake about that. I miss many aspects of my active duty service. But I’ve been retired now for about 5 years, so what I will present today will be a mix of my experiences of over 37 years with a little more perspective from 5 years of retirement.

I could have taken a more technical approach to this subject. In doing so, I could have described the size and the composition of the army that is now expected. But I didn’t think this technical approach fit this forum. This is a national institute for defense studies. As such, I took a more strategic approach, one that looks at a broader sweep.

So, I’ve chosen for my title, “A Period of Transitions: the U.S. Army and its Future.” The

emphasis is on the plural, transitions.

Most of the transitions the army is facing are not new. They've been faced before. But that doesn't make them any easier or any less complex or any less dangerous.

I don't expect that everyone will agree with my characterization or assessment of the transitions the U.S. Army is facing—here or in the U.S. That's fine. It'll make for a better discussion. My crystal ball is no clearer than anyone else's.

And you should take my remarks as in-complete. I intend them to be “teasers” of a sort: just enough to let you know what I'm thinking and trigger a question for the follow-on session.

The final parameter I should set concerns the current army leadership, military and civilian. We are lucky to have the leaders we have. They're smart, dedicated, and experienced. They know what has to be done, and they understand the risks they face. They also understand the context within which they must decide and act. No leader has a completely free decision space in which to act, the current set of army leaders are no different.

So with that said, here goes. I will focus on five transitions. Let me take each in turn.

From a Robust Budget to Not-So-Robust

This is the third downsizing that I've witnessed in my life: post-Vietnam, post-Gulf War, and now. Others preceded—after our Civil War and both World Wars, for example.

One significant difference in this one is the war is not over. Another is depth and speed of the cuts. And a third concerns methodology: the inflexibility of the sequestration cuts as well as forced equipment purchases.

The cuts have already affected readiness: the U.S. Army has a fairly large maintenance backlog—for example in helicopters and ground vehicles, wheeled and track. It has already forced an approach to readiness that puts more money to those units in combat, preparing to deploy, and in Korea. The rest is funded at reduced levels. “Tiered readiness” of a sort.

Cuts previous to the sequester have significantly reduced many modernization accounts. Improvements to current systems and some new systems have survived. But major new programs are mostly on hold. When they shall return, no one knows.

Because of the speed of the cuts, the size and composition of the army become targets. People cost money. To avoid a hollow army, forces will be cut as size shrinks. That way, whatever is left can be kept as ready as possible. Finally, the current cuts seem less strategic than previous downsizing decisions.

No one doubts that given the state of the us budget and deficit, as well as the reduced pace of combat operations, cuts are necessary. This is a fact of life that all leaders, military and civilian, accept.

But the cuts do beg at least two important questions:

How to retain the motivation of the force? Those now in the army—from about major and below—only know the war years, and the associated money that flowed during those years. Retaining experienced leaders is, and must remain, an important priority. Thus keeping them motivated becomes a vital issue.

Will the role of the United States in the world change from guarantor of global stability to something else? What is the U.S. strategy? What is the vision of global security and the U.S. role in it?

Many nations have approached their own defense budgets and associated armed forces capacities under the assumption of a U.S. guarantee, however that guarantee might be articulated. That is, other nations have cut their military spending and capacity based upon American spending and strength. This arrangement is—or may be, at the very least—in doubt.

Let me be clear, the U.S. will retain significant military capability. But, we are in a period of transition, and during such periods it's better to lay out the ambiguities, in my opinion, and deal with them than to leave them unattended and suffer the consequences.

From Continuous Rotations in Combat to Less Frequent

The rotations to Iraq have stopped, those to Afghanistan will change in size and frequency. I'm not suggesting that this should be otherwise. I want only to point out the fact and its impact.

Training and fighting is being replaced by training and exercising. This is a significant psychological shift, especially for the first several years.

Of course it's not a shift for new soldiers and leaders, but it is for veterans.

And in some ways the shift is welcome: more time with families, more time for a life not laser focused on war, time to recover equipment, opportunity to work on the backlog of professional military education.

But in other ways, this transition brings leadership challenges the army has not faced for over a decade: the realities and pace of garrison life. Let's be honest, returning to garrison life is hard after a decade of the adrenaline of war.

From Being At War to Preparing For War

This is a somewhat misleading transition, for the army is still at war, and will be for some time.

The war in Afghanistan will continue, even after 2014. Some portion of the army will keep rotating into that theater. And the war against al-Qaeda and affiliates has not ended.

The current desire is to fight this war with special operations forces and drone technology. But war often takes unexpected turns because the enemy has a different view.

There is good reason, therefore, that this transition may be premature, like a soldier anticipating a command before it is given, or a runner starting out of the blocks before the sound of the starting gun. Wars don't end by simple declaration of one side.

Talking about being an army of preparation instead of an army at war, during a war, is at best, a psychologically dangerous affair.

Hyper-Focused on the Middle East to a Broader Focus

For over a decade, army training has been focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, with at least some of the special operations forces also focused on al-Qaeda and affiliates.

That focus drove everything: assignment and equipping policies, training cycles, attendance at professional military education, predeployment training, discussion in professional development schools, equipment fielding and development, budgets, and doctrine.

The army adjusted the OPFOR and conditions at each of the "dirt" combat training centers. And it created a series of "Road to War" seminars designed to get everyone's "head in the game" prior to deployment. These seminars allowed deploying units to gain familiarity with the social, religious, cultural, and sectarian aspects of their upcoming deployment as well as the combat and security aspects.

All this is as natural and understandable as it was necessary.

It came at a cost, however. Part of the cost was a de facto disengagement of army forces from other areas of the world, especially here in the Pacific.

A broader focus will bring "re-engagement" to the Pacific. That's good. Whether it's a "pivot" or "rebalance" is less important, in my view, than is the fact that the U.S. and its army can give this critical part of the world its due attention.

But the broader focus has also created a debate within the army as to what the non-deploying unit training focus should be. Some have thought we should return to regaining conventional combat skills, others say that such a focus would be myopia and inappropriate for the kind of variety of potential missions and conditions the army faces.

So far, the latter is prevailing. But the debate is not over.

From Ground Forces Seen as Essential to Being Considered Periphery

I wish that I could say this is a new phenomenon for America, but it is not.

At the beginning of the Atomic Age, we went through a period when the conventional wisdom was that ground forces have lost their utility. The Korean War taught us other-

wise.

After Vietnam, we experienced a variation of this transition theme, the “never again” variant.

Part of the post-Vietnam period included a denial that the nation would ever again become engaged in large scale counter insurgencies, especially ones that required a good bit of nation building.

We focused the army’s attention on the potential conventional war in Europe against the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

In doing so, we created a kind of institutional amnesia. The first Gulf War fed into this amnesia. You would think that U.S. post-Cold War operations in Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo would have awoken us from that amnesia. It did not—at least not entirely.

Some military and civilian leaders were pointing out that the amnesia was obscuring a rapidly changing strategic environment. These leaders suggested that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the Information Age was creating new strategic conditions.

These leaders directed changes in education and training. They conducted experiments in new concepts and organizations using tools the “digital age” was only beginning to make available.

But in the larger strategic context U.S. conventional wisdom remained the same: the immediate post-Cold War operations were “anomalies,” not a new norm emerging. The conventional wisdom was that we should focus on rapid, decisive conventional operations.

In some ways, this amnesia remains in parts of the us national security community. Even in the face of 12 years of evidence, some still believe that war can be “fast, lethal, and remote,” what the utility of ground forces can be diminished, and that the us will “never again” become involved in large scale ground force operations.

Of course this is wishful thinking at its worst, reflecting how strong denial is embedded in the human condition. We seem able to view the world as we want, regardless of how the world really is.

So, let me conclude by saying that the set of transitions I have described, taken together, produce the follow challenges to the U.S. Army:

This is a hefty set of challenges. But they do reflect the reality the U.S. Army is facing now. How these challenges are met will affect the kind of future that will unfold.

On one hand, I have no doubt that the leaders of our army will do their best in each of the transitions and in meeting each of the resulting challenges.

They are already taking steps relative to each of the transitions and challenges. And they will take even more action as the future unfolds.

This speaks to the quality of leadership, military and civilian, that the army has at its helm.

On the other hand, I have equally no doubt that the actual future that will unfold will be different from the future we envision. As such, my personal belief is that the U.S. and its army may become less prepared than it should be.

Content has been edited for formatting purposes.

