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The US Military and the ‘War on Terror’

Professor Paul Rogers

Overstretch

One of the issues that has been in the background for the past two years has been the extent to which the United States armed forces are capable of maintaining their current level of military activity as the core actors in President Bush’s global ‘war on terror’. There have been numerous reports of problems with recruitment as well as resentment by National Guard and reserve units having to spend far more time on deployment than had been expected. Furthermore, the 2006 defence budget has had to be adjusted to put more emphasis on the Army and less on new high-tech weapons.

At first sight it may be difficult to see why there is this problem of ‘overstretch’ – at the present time, the United States is maintaining around 200,000 members of its armed forces in Iraq, Kuwait and surrounding countries, but this is small compared with close to 400,000 troops that were used in the 1991 war to evict the Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Why, then, is there a problem? Essentially it stems from a combination of circumstances, some operational, some historical and some relating to a contradiction between the kinds of wars the United States is fighting and those that its political and military planners were expecting to fight.

On the operational side, the key issue is that Iraq and Afghanistan are turning out to be long wars that are mainly involving just two of the four branches of the US armed forces, the Army and the Marine Corps. Neither the Navy nor the Air Force is greatly involved in either country, except for the air transport units of the Air Force which are certainly under some strain. The US could field twice as many troops in the 1991 war against Iraq, but that did not involve long-term deployments, with the need to rotate units at 6 to 12-month intervals for year after year. If the 1991 war had evolved into a much longer occupation in the face of insurgent forces, than similar problems would have emerged, even though the US armed forces were substantially larger then.

Cold War Legacies

This brings us to the second issue – the historical context. During the latter years of the Cold War, the United States maintained powerful military forces based on a volunteer system. The draft (conscription) was very much a thing of the past, but the requirements of the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union meant that the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps were all well-funded, with defence budgets exceeding \$400 billion a year (at current prices). One major component of the armed forces was a heavy presence in Western Europe, including tens of thousands of Army personnel in West Germany, complete with thousands of main battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers and self-propelled artillery.

After the end of the Cold War and throughout much of the 1990s there were subtle changes in the armed forces that collectively amounted to a major re-orientation of their capabilities. On the nuclear side, most of the tactical nuclear weapons were withdrawn from deployment, and the size of the strategic nuclear forces was scaled down. In parallel with this change, two other aspects of the Cold War forces were substantially altered. One was the massive US Navy emphasis on anti-submarine warfare and the other was the Army's concentration of troops and heavy armour in Western Europe. Both of these were cut back drastically, with the US Navy losing any possibility of getting near the "600-ship Navy" that had been the aim of navy planners in the 1980s. In practice, though, it was the Army that took the heaviest cuts, especially in terms of personnel, whereas the Navy got off relatively lightly and the US Marine Corps was hardly affected by the changing climate.

The thinking behind this was that very large land forces were no longer appropriate for the post-Cold War era. We were now moving into what some naval analysts were calling the era of the "violent peace". There was no longer a massive enemy in the form of the Soviet Union, but there would be many diverse threats to US interests around the world. President Clinton's first Director of the CIA, James Woolsey, had put it succinctly at Congressional hearings in 1994 when he said that the United States had slain the dragon but now lived in a jungle full of poisonous snakes. George W. Bush was to put it in his inimitable style during the 2000 election campaign when commenting on the changes since the Cold War era: "...it was a dangerous world and we knew exactly who the 'they' were. It was us versus them and we knew exactly who they were. Today we're not so sure who the 'they' are, but we know they're there."

During the 1990s, the Army took the brunt of the cuts in terms of personnel, although its rapid deployment units such as the 82nd Airborne Division were maintained and there was an increased emphasis on Special Forces. Some key components of the Navy were also maintained, especially the carrier battle groups. These were seen as massive mobile air bases that could be deployed to regions of crisis and potential threat. Six carrier battle groups had been used in the 1991 war against Iraq, and this demonstrated powerfully to the military planners that the US Navy had a major role to play in keeping the violent peace.

The US Air Force lost many of its European and East Asian deployment centres because of the collapse of the Soviet threat. Many bases in Germany and the UK were closed down, and even the important Clark Field base in the Philippines was evacuated. At the same time, though, the Air Force argued strongly for its capability to reach any part of the world in a matter of hours, contrasting this with the weeks that it could take to deploy a carrier battle group. It did not win the day, with the Navy keeping almost all of its carriers, and this aspect of inter-service rivalry continues to the present time. Even so, the Air Force did well enough to enable it to maintain powerful forces, especially with an emphasis on the 'air expeditionary wings', essentially self-contained air groups that could be deployed to pre-prepared bases overseas, especially in the Middle East, when required.

The most interesting case was the US Marine Corps. During the Cold War, US Marines numbered close to 200,000, substantially larger than the entire British Army, with numerous large amphibious warfare ships, logistics support ships and their own

air force centred on the AV8B, a version of the British Harrier jump-jet. After the Cold War, the Corps was maintained at close to its peak levels of the 1980s, primarily because this was exactly the kind of force that could play a role in responding to regional crises.

Military Forces for a New World Disorder

What this all meant was that the US armed forces as a whole had been progressively reconfigured to fit the perceived demands of an unstable world. The US Air Force now placed much more emphasis on global reach, the Navy relied more heavily on its aircraft carrier battle groups and the Marine Corps was ready and willing to make substantial if short-term deployments in time of crisis. The US Army had taken the biggest cuts, but could at least field some sizeable forces for rapid deployment and also had a back-up system of reserves and National Guard units in an emergency. What it had lost, though, was its Cold War capability to maintain large forces in overseas deployments for long periods of time.

These moves towards to short term interventionism as the key to US military posture got a further boost in 2001 when the George W. Bush administration came into office, and Donald Rumsfeld took up the post of Secretary of Defence. While Rumsfeld recognised the need to have the Marine Corps and the Army's rapid deployment units, he believed even more forcefully in rapid intervention, primarily using air power. He did not see any real likelihood of large ground forces being necessary in the foreseeable future and envisaged an even leaner high-tech US military as the key force in ensuring the security of the New American Century.

The combination of the new thinking and the facts of military dispositions goes a long way to explaining why there was an implicit belief that the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime could be achieved primarily through intensive air strikes and the rapid movement of Army and Marine Corps units into Iraq. It is worth recalling that there were analysts at the US Army War College who were suggesting, in the run-up to the war, that such forces might not be sufficient, and it was the Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, who said, in February 2003, that it would take several hundred thousand troops to secure Iraq after regime termination. Shinseki was sharply criticised by Rumsfeld's then deputy, Paul Wolfowitz.

A Dose of Reality

The apparently easy termination of the Taliban regime in the last three months of 2001 seemed to support the ideas of Rumsfeld and others. Heavy air bombardment, the careful use of Special Forces and the boosting of local surrogates in the form of the Northern Alliance all seemed to demonstrate that the 'new thinking' about American military power was along the right lines. Four years later it looks very different, and there is a certain irony in that it is the issue of Afghanistan that has recently demonstrated the problems now being faced by the US military, especially the Army.

Although the Taliban regime was terminated with ease, many of the militia simply melted away back to their towns and villages, or to neighbouring Pakistan. From both sides of the border they have re-emerged to fight a bitter guerrilla offensive that has

proved to be an unexpected and unwelcome development for the Pentagon. The Bush administration had originally expected to be able to scale down its forces in Afghanistan to the point where it was maintaining two large air bases, at Bagram near Kabul and at Kandahar, together with a number of smaller units elsewhere in the country. Most of the personnel would be from the Air Force, there would be little need for frontline troops and Afghanistan could be secured with a sympathetic regime in power in Kabul.

Instead, the Taliban's guerrilla campaign continues in the south and east of the country, currently tying down around 20,000 troops, with 17,000 of them from the United States and others from Britain, Australia and handful of other coalition partners. The bitter war continues with no respite – 81 Americans and as many as 1,000 Afghans have been killed so far this year, most of the latter being civilians – and there is no end in sight. With the United States committed to maintaining much larger forces in Iraq, there is now an urgent need to try and scale down the Afghan commitment.

Assistance from NATO?

To try and achieve this, Donald Rumsfeld went to Germany during September to try and convince NATO defence ministers to increase NATO's contribution. At present, NATO leads the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, around 12,000 troops stationed mainly in Kabul and some other cities away from the key areas of the insurgency. As the name suggests, ISAF is a peace-enforcing operation and has been fairly successful in this role. Rumsfeld was hoping to see this force amalgamated with the larger combat forces operating elsewhere in Afghanistan under US leadership, the effect being to bring in some of the most experienced of the combat troops available within NATO's European partners, and thereby easing the pressure on the US forces.

Rumsfeld's efforts to achieve this came to nothing, with at least five NATO countries – Germany, France, Spain, Turkey and the Netherlands – all against the proposal. It is possible that Britain may offer more in the way of combat troops if it can extricate itself from its heavy commitments in Iraq, but that is currently the most that the United States can expect. For the time being, at least, the Pentagon will have to keep its forces in Afghanistan while it tries to control the insurgency in Iraq, all the while trying to maintain the required levels of recruitment into the Army at a time when this has proved very difficult. Even with greater monetary bonuses and a lowering of entry standards, the US Army failed this year to meet its recruitment targets.

An Unexpected World

Four years into George Bush's global 'war on terror' and two and a half years into the occupation of Iraq, it is all turning out very differently to the notion of versatile high-tech forces maintaining US security interests across the world. The continuing conflict in Afghanistan may not be large scale, and there may be no more than a few thousand Taliban and other militia active at any one time, yet they are tying down 20,000 troops. In Iraq, most estimates of the size of the active insurgency speak of around 30,000 people involved. They are requiring over 160,000 US and other troops in the country itself, with tens of thousands in Kuwait, Qatar and other western Gulf states.

Moreover, this is clearly long-term, yet it would be hugely controversial if the Bush administration were to seek to re-introduce the draft. Some tentative steps have been taken to make it possible to call up some groups of specialists, but even this is likely to incite opposition if they are implemented.

What the United States is facing in Iraq and Afghanistan is an entrenched form of asymmetric warfare in which determined paramilitaries have sufficient support from their own communities and are fighting on their own territory. With all its reconnaissance and surveillance systems and with all its firepower and communications assets the Pentagon is simply not able to gain the advantage and therefore faces major long-term commitments that are as unexpected as they are difficult to maintain.

One of the main effects of this predicament is a pronounced tendency to use those military capabilities in which the United States has an overwhelming advantage, and these frequently come down to firepower. Moreover, with US casualty figures in Iraq now approaching 2,000 dead and over 10,000 seriously injured, there is a very strong tendency to use firepower on a massive scale, whether it be artillery, helicopter gunships or strike aircraft.

This has been seen repeatedly over the past two years, most notably in Fallujah last November, but is continuing on a near-daily basis. For much of the latter part of September, for example, US forces were engaged in a large-scale programme of assaults against towns and villages in north-western Iraq towards the Syrian border. Scores of people were killed, many of them civilians, and thousands of buildings were damaged or destroyed. The aim was to prevent insurgents using the region for links with Syria and for mounting attacks elsewhere in Iraq, but almost all the experience of similar operations in the past shows that the insurgents themselves, unlike many of the civilians, manage to get advanced warning of the US military operations and simply melt away until the US forces have moved on to other places.

The net effect of all of this is that substantial military operations are having, as their major effect, an increase in the hostility of many Sunni Iraqis to the US occupation. What this means is that the United States is not just finding itself with very large forces pinned down in a long-term military occupation in a manner that was wholly unexpected barely four years ago, but its chosen response – the frequent use of its firepower advantage – is proving persistently counterproductive. That is a measure of the predicament that the United States now finds itself in as it persists with its chosen means of fighting President Bush's global 'war on terror'.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His monthly international security briefings are available from the ORG website at <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm> and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 will be published shortly by I.B. Tauris in *Iraq and the War on Terror: Twelve Months of Insurgency, 2004-2005*.
