

A Military for the 21st Century: Lessons from the Recent Past

by Anthony C. Zinni

Key Points

The post-Cold War world environment has complicated rather than simplified the missions, strategy, and organization of the Armed Forces. Rapid downsizing after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Allied victory in the Persian Gulf War left a military lacking strategic direction, a thoughtful force structure, and a logical threat upon which to base future force structure.

This environment will not permit the luxury of a strategic pause. Allowing the new world order to arrange itself could present the Nation with an unforeseen threat that it cannot handle. To prevent such an eventuality, the military must address several challenges: the number of nontraditional threats, financing a military capable of meeting all the potential challenges it may face, the need to reform itself to handle rapid developments in technology, and interagency reform in coordination with military reform so that the full weight of national power can be brought to bear against adversaries.

A deliberate process of military transformation must account for the need for public support, which is essential for such a process to succeed. Transformation would encompass several areas: developing a realistic strategic direction; reviewing personnel recruitment and retention; understanding the implications of joint and combined warfare for organization, structure, core competencies, and operational concepts; revamping national security advisory and decisionmaking processes; and assessing the effects of technological and social changes on the military.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, more than any other event, marked the collapse of the Soviet Union. I remember crossing through a vacant Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. No one on either side knew quite what we could or could not do, since it all happened so fast. The confusion and stark contrast between East and West Berlin made it hard to believe that we had once feared this collapsed Warsaw Pact or seen it as a serious global competitor. The West always contended that communism was a fundamentally flawed system that would eventually fail. Despite that belief, we were caught by surprise by the sudden and total end of the Soviet empire and the system that governed half the world. At the time, our President proudly drew what appeared to be the logical conclusion from these events: that there was to be a new world order. Others talked of reaping a peace dividend, since defense spending surely could be reduced.

Our Nation made a half-hearted attempt to reprise the Marshall Plan by trying to help the former Soviet Union, as it was then known, through the looming political and economic crisis that it faced. The effort was called Operation *Provide Hope*. It was conceived by the Secretary of State to encourage international contribution of resources and advisors to help the former Soviet Union enter the world of democracy and free market economy. Also established was a military-to-military program designed to build relations with the Russian military and help it through the transition. Those of us involved were disappointed as interest in these efforts by nations, including our own, seemed to fizzle. The lessons of two

world wars seemed forgotten as our attention turned inward to domestic concerns and as the world breathed a collective sigh of relief after a half-century under the threat of global destruction. *Provide Hope* seemed to be an uneasy recognition that the world just might not reorder itself in positive ways.

Cold War Finale

As if to punctuate the end of this historic era and mark the last days of the most powerful forces ever fielded, we were given one final chance to demonstrate the might of our Cold War-era military machine against the forces of Saddam Hussein. The superiority of our technology, soldier skills, and military leadership completely dominated the Soviet surrogate force fielded by the Iraqis. I recall being in Eastern Europe shortly afterward visiting military schools and commands where the officers seemed awed and amazed at the total dominance by the U.S. military in the Gulf War. It seemed a fitting last act for our powerful Cold War military as it exited the world stage after decades of standing tall and preventing a devastating global conflict.

The American military came down rapidly—too rapidly—after these events. Suddenly, careers were terminated, units were disbanded, and bases were closed. I remember the personal trauma I witnessed while stationed in Europe as massive reductions in force were announced, good soldiers were eliminated from the ranks, and proud units furled their colors. There did not seem to be any logic to the draw-downs. It appeared that we would just have a smaller version of our Cold War force. Despite a bottom-up review and other bureaucratic quick studies, no sense could be made of the residual

force. We lacked strategic direction, a forward-looking force design, and a logical future threat base on which to build our new military for the upcoming century. We settled on a two major theater war or major regional contingency concept as a basis for our military structure. Originally designed to be a rough force-sizing construct, this concept became our strategy in the absence of serious strategic thinking and analysis. Basically, it described the military requirement as a force sufficient to fight a *Desert Storm* and a Korean conflict nearly simultaneously, whatever that meant. The force remained fundamentally structured, equipped, organized, and trained as it had been for the Cold War period, with some evolutionary modernization for certain capabilities.

New World Order

Something strange began to happen, however, as Congressional neo-isolationists proudly declared their lack of possession of passports and disinterest in foreign policy. The new world order was turning into the new world disorder. The world suddenly seemed to be exploding in conflicts based on ethnic, religious, and historic hatreds that had been simmering under the superpower bipolar lid. Some nation-states collapsed into anarchy and chaos; others showed alarming signs of becoming incapable or failed states. Some of these collapsed states provided sanctuaries to extremist groups, which used these bases to plan, train, and organize for strikes against U.S. forces and other targets. Natural and manmade humanitarian catastrophes were on the rise, along with civil strife that seemed out of control in some parts of the world. Regional hegemons and rogue states that had learned the lessons of the Gulf War began to develop what has become known as asymmetric capabilities, or threats that were designed to go against our evident military vulnerabilities or gaps. These asymmetric threats ranged from weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles to low-tech sea mines and terrorist tactics. All were designed to challenge a perceived weak-

ness in our military, political, or psychological ability to use force.

The new world order also was changing in other ways. Globalization and the explosion of information technology were making the world more interdependent and interconnected. Geographic obstacles, such as oceans and mountain ranges, no longer provided impenetrable boundaries. Economic, political, or security-related instability in remote parts of the world was having a greater effect on our security interests and well-being on this shrinking planet. In addition, the rise of nonstate entities, such as nongovernmental organiza-

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tions, transnational criminal groups, extremist organizations, global corporations, and warlord groups, brought a new and confusing dimension to a world previously dominated by nation-state interaction.

Remote places such as Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and East Timor became flashpoints that required our intervention at some level. At the same time, the need to contain regional threats such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea remained a major military requirement. These states also were becoming more threatening as they developed greater military capabilities that were aimed at denying us access to regions and our allies within those regions. More and more, our security interests seemed to be drawn into remote, unstable parts of the world.

Changing Missions

As a result of these sorts of events throughout the last decade of the 20th century, our shrinking and adjusting Armed Forces were hit by an onslaught of strange, nontraditional

missions that pressured their dwindling ranks and resources with an unsustainable operational and personnel tempo. They were called upon to keep the peace, provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, fight the drug war, patrol our borders, counter terrorists, contain regional hegemons, rebuild nations, and meet domestic emergencies. These were consuming tasks that were unpopular in a military readjusting from the Cold War and meeting the challenges of an increasing number of imposed social changes and other internal difficulties.

With some exceptions, the U.S. military resisted these missions and the adjustments that it should have made in doctrine, organization, training, and equipment needed to meet this new mix of growing commitments. These missions had significant political, economic, humanitarian, cultural, and social dimensions that brought into question the appropriate role of the military in problems that seemed better suited to other agencies. Traditional military leaders insisted on holding the line to fighting the Nation's wars and hoped to go back to "real soldiering" as they were mending a transitioning force suffering from all the pressures on it. One senior officer was quoted as saying, "Real men don't do MOOTW," or military operations other than war, a term that became the title for all these messy little low-end commitments.

The stress of the changes, confusion over missions, poor readiness conditions, constant deployments, lack of direction, and atrophying benefits, compensation, and quality of life impacted the critical areas of recruitment and retention. With a booming economy, even the most dedicated service members were finding it difficult to remain in the services under these conditions. It became evident as the 20th century closed that the military was in dire need of direction and reform. It was difficult for our political leaders to commit the resources necessary for change, since there were pressing domestic needs, and the American military still looked like the most powerful force in the world.

A New Century

We have now entered the 21st century, and our military must address several serious questions and challenges. The first deals with the growing number of these nontraditional threats. Will these continue to increase, with new types added to the confusing mix, and will

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we rely on the military as our principal instrument to deal with them? Second, can we afford the kind of military that can meet all the potential challenges ahead, which could span the spectrum from dealing with an emerging global power, to confronting strong regional powers with significant capabilities such as weapons of mass destruction, to responding to the growing list of transnational threats? The third question relates to the much-needed military reform. Can the military change, reform, or transform to meet the challenges of the new century and adapt to the rapid development of new technologies that could radically alter the military as we know it today? The fourth issue deals with interagency reform, which must move in parallel with military reform. Can we meet the demand for better decisionmaking and the integration of all instruments of power (political, economic, and informational) to solve the multidimensional challenges ahead?

No one can predict the future, but we can make some judgments on the growing number of threats at the beginning of this century. Some of these will not be the ones that we prepared for in the last century. All of them will challenge a positive new world order and the realization of a peace dividend.

Our security interests will require that we have a military prepared to respond to:

- a global power with sophisticated military capabilities
- regional hegemony with asymmetric capabilities, such as weapons of mass destruction and missiles, designed to deny us access to vital areas and regional allies
- transnational threats that include terrorist groups, international criminal and drug organizations, warlords, environmental security issues, health and disease problems, and illegal migrations
- problems of failed or incapable states that require peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, or national reconstruction
- overseas crises that threaten U.S. citizens and property
- domestic emergencies that exceed the capacity of other Federal and local government agencies to handle
- threats to our key repositories of information and our systems for moving information

This is a demanding list of requirements to place on the military, and it does not include

many of the clean, clear warfighting missions that our military would prefer. But military leaders are sworn to defend “against all enemies foreign and domestic,” and the enemies that threaten our well-being may include some strange, nontraditional ones.

The destabilizing environment in which we may commit forces to confront many of these threats may be further degraded by the effects of urbanization, economic depression, overpopulation, and the depletion of basic resources. The world has become reliant on natural resources and raw materials that come

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from increasingly unstable regions with the compounding problems of a poor infrastructure and environment. Access to energy, water, timber, rare gems, metals, and other resources is becoming a growing rationale for intervention and conflict in many parts of the world.

We also will require that our forces continue to meet the peacetime demands of engagement and shaping. Maintaining stability by building viable, interoperable coalitions with the forces of regional allies will remain a necessity to ensure a positive security environment in key areas of the world. Military engagement

efforts produce dividends in deterrence, confidence-building, and burdensharing. They also demonstrate our commitment and resolve. However, these tasks will continue to tax our thinly stretched forces.

Transformation

Some proposals have been made to cut force structure drastically, remove forward-based and deployed forces from overseas, and stop modernization to afford transformation. Advocates of a strategic pause who think we can withdraw from the world or opt out of interventions that threaten our interests are not facing the reality of the current world situation. We cannot gamble on a self-ordering world, since the risk to us could be great if we are not militarily capable of dealing with an unforeseen threat that emerges from this disordered global environment.

These considerations point out the critical need to transform our military in a deliberate and significant way. Americans must acknowledge this need and support investment in this transformation to achieve success. The transformation must be major in scope to meet the challenges of this new century; however, it will not be given adequate resources if the American people do not understand the need. This will require a stronger and closer relationship between Americans and their military. The relationship has cooled, and even been strained

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at times, since the end of the Vietnam War and the inception of the all-volunteer force.

Strategy The transformation should begin with the development of a realistic strategic direction. Never in our history has the need been greater for a national strategy that clearly spells out interests, goals, priorities, and resource allocations. From this a national military strategy can be drawn that provides the necessary guidance and direction to our defense leadership. They, in turn, must take a hard look at every aspect of our military and the agencies that support it. Their decisions should be made honestly and without the influences of service bias or sentimentality. Decisions to eliminate capabilities are never easy, but they must be made. Some assets will have to be phased out over time as new, innovative systems come on line through the process of transformation. Other capabilities based on sound concepts and technology that have future viability should be retained and programmed for modernization.

Personnel This process of change has to be extensive and should include a review of our personnel system. Leader development must produce leaders with broader and more sophisticated educational and service experience. It may be time to age the force by retaining more troops with longer service, more time in grade, and greater experience. The policies that foster careerism should be removed or overhauled. Quality-of-life areas, compensation, benefits, personal development, challenging experiences, and personnel stability have to be key considerations in getting and keeping the best and brightest our society has to offer. The future military will be an even more complex institution and will require truly competent and dedicated members.

Joint Warfare We must seriously address joint and combined warfare and recognize it as synonymous with the operational level of war; it requires a true capability to integrate forces, not just deconflict and coordinate their efforts. True coherence will come in these operations when we can think past service component integration to think about integrating forces within the domains of maneuver, fire, information, and sustainment. Services must eliminate interservice bickering and corrosive competition that result in dysfunctional force applications or the absence of needed warfighting doctrine and procedures.

Acquisition, readiness measurements, requirement definition, doctrine development, and other processes are all in need of reform. The military's organization, structure, core competencies, and operational concepts need review.

Decisionmaking Our organization and methods for providing military advice and recommendations for national security policy have to be examined. History has not been kind to the structure created by the 1947 National Security Act, as criticism after each conflict since has been severe. The interagency

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mechanism for dealing with crisis and providing crucial decisions must be revamped to remove the ad hoc nature of the process and the organization.

Military Culture We have to come to grips with the issue of an appropriate ethos for our service members. Are they still warriors requiring values much like those of their uniformed forefathers, or have technology and changing social attitudes made that outdated? It is hard to imagine that the coming age of cyberwarriors and remote control battle has removed the need for a warrior culture. The kinds of conflicts that we still face require a long look at what the forces of political correctness and social change have done to morale, good order and discipline, and combat effectiveness. Related to this are the attitudes and atmosphere that generate a zero-defects mentality and a casualty- and risk-aversion approach to

tasks that jeopardize our ability to accomplish vital missions.

Change would be difficult in any military that has not suffered a disastrous defeat or faced an immediate threat to the existence of the nation. Fortunately, the U.S. military does not face those conditions, but their absence can serve to mask the need for change. In the past, legislation has been required to impose significant change without these conditions. The military bureaucracy and politicians with vested interests in preserving status quo infrastructure, systems, organizational structures, and programs will resist change or will support only change on the margin. This will further complicate needed reform.

It is evident that there will be some change in defense structure. Certainly the projected global challenges to American interests seem to require a different kind of military to deal with them. Both sides in the last presidential election took positions advocating transformation and change, and the American public seems generally supportive. The question is whether there will be significant change or whether politics, bureaucracy, traditional thinking, and other demands on resources will limit our ability to realize the full benefits of a true transformation.

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