

THE ROLE OF LAND FORCES IN FUTURE CONFLICT

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The coming year promises to be decisive in national defense policy. The Defense Department is gearing up for another round of cuts, new leadership (both civilian and military) will be settling in, and preparations for the 2012 elections will begin in earnest. These circumstances do not bode well for U.S. ground forces.

Still engaged in an Afghan war that is far from the public mind and growing more so, and apparently on the way out of an Iraq war that is not yet fully resolved, U.S. ground forces remain focused but justifiably tired. Whether ground force leaders can shift gears and clearly articulate a new direction and purpose that aligns with projected future challenges and can win public support remains a critical unanswered question.



For the Army and Marine Corps in particular, the last decade has come at significant human, emotional, and fiscal cost. The country is increasingly weary of war and concerned about the national debt. Indications are that the public and its political representatives are unenthusiastic about devoting dwindling national treasure to large ground forces designed to prevail in military engagements that resemble those of the last decade.

Beyond our borders, America's enemies have learned from our struggles. They are well aware that our moral code, democratic principles, and bureaucratic structures are vulnerable to exploitation. Our future opponents are thus likely to recreate the most nettlesome problems encountered by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ground force leaders, therefore, are caught in a paradox: the missions that are most likely to arise are also politically and fiscally least palatable. Building and training ground forces for large-scale stabilization and reconstruction, counterinsurgency, and training and advisory missions, for example, could make those forces ripe for cuts.

Some senior civilian leaders, nevertheless, seem to support this approach. Outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued in February that future high-end engagements would principally be the purview of naval and air forces, implying that the Army and Marine Corps would be bit players at best in tomorrow's wars. The secretary's argument is that ground forces should focus on building international partnerships while simultaneously preparing for large-scale advisory missions in case we need to build yet another security force from scratch.

But there are at least three problems with this view. First, history shows that even presidents

who come into office vowing to avoid foreign interventions tend to have their hand forced by unforeseen events. Second, despite the political rhetoric in support of building partnerships, the track record for partners acting as we would hope is mixed at best.

Finally and most important, there are multiple plausible scenarios that would require a large ground force. Many would be instances in which the United States would have little latitude to opt out. If the past two decades are any indication, there are likely to be numerous instances over the next two in which the United States would be hard pressed to abstain from deploying large numbers of ground troops yet again.

The Arab Spring serves as a clear illustration of how disorder can ignite suddenly and in ways that directly overwhelm one or more core U.S. strategic interests. These include the physical security of the United States and its people, access to key strategic regions and critical lines of communication, or survival of certain partner governments. These cases will not always rise to the level of military necessity, but sometimes they will. Neither freshly minted concepts of combined air and sea operations nor an army of counterinsurgency advisers will suffice as a response.

Had Egypt's relatively peaceful uprising turned Libya-esque and threatened to disrupt the Suez Canal and key oil networks, only U.S. land forces

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would have been capable of seizing 300-plus miles of critical infrastructure and securing it against further damage. Similarly, piracy of the type around the Horn of Africa or criminal violence like that in Mexico could possibly mushroom into more direct threats against the United States and its interests. Here too, only American land forces could intervene with sufficient speed and scale to systematically destroy adversary infrastructure and address rampant lawlessness.

A crisis in Pakistan, a Syrian civil war, a Saudi failure, a North Korean collapse, or a Mexican gang war that spills over our border are wholly plausible cases that may be more representative of future U.S. land operations than recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And going forward, despite wishful rhetoric to the contrary, budget reductions here and abroad mean that future operations are even less likely to involve effective partners than they have in the past. This holds true for other U.S. government agencies and traditional allies alike.

Despite continuing ground force sacrifices, Army and Marine Corps leaders must provide a compelling vision for the future. These leaders should be wary of placing too much primacy on “partnership” and “advisory” missions, both because they may not be persuasive on Capitol Hill and, more important, because they pose significant and unwarranted risks to our security.

Of course, those leaders must also be cautious of making veiled arguments for either bigger or heavier forces, which are unrealistic in the current context. Instead, they must paint a more complete and tangible picture of future land-based challenges and of the force that can best manage them. Past or present operational reality is not as comprehensively instructive as many appear to believe. Whether we like it or not, those who threaten U.S. interests still have a vote, and it may well be for a war that cannot be won decisively without combat-ready ground forces. ■