



The Development of America's post-Cold War Military Posture: A Critical Appraisal

Carl Conetta
Project on Defense Alternatives
November 7, 1996

World events since 1989 constitute a change in America's strategic environment as profound as any in the nation's history. Viewed in this light, recent revisions in US military policy are remarkably modest – far less significant than the bold steps that inaugurated the Cold War era. On examination, America's new conventional force posture seems a version of its Cold War posture writ small.[1] Several features of the presently evolving posture stand out:

- Central to the posture is the capability to fight two near-simultaneous Major Regional Conflicts or Contingencies (MRCs) involving regular armed forces. [2] Other than their size, these contingencies are seen as similar in important respects to the conventional conflict that the West had once prepared to fight along the European "central front."
- Commensurate with the continuity in how Pentagon planners view the principal conventional military threat is a continuing emphasis on the types of conventional forces that dominated the cold war period: heavy mechanized land forces, a large marine corps of increasing weight and firepower, a Navy built around large aircraft carrier battle groups, and an air force geared toward offensive action and centered on expensive, multi-mission piloted aircraft.
- The new posture puts greater emphasis on "power projection" from the United States, although this is a more modest change than at first appears. During the Cold War, 75 percent of active-duty US troops were based in the United States; under the new posture 79 percent of US troops will be home-based. The peacetime forward presence in the Persian Gulf will be greater than during the Cold War period, and the plans for rapidly reinforcing these units in case of war will be far less ambitious than the plans to reinforce European troops during the Cold War.
- Despite the three-year debate on roles and missions, continuity characterizes the new era posture with regard both to armed forces roles and missions and the division of labor between the active and reserve components. [3]

- The new posture puts increased emphasis on air power -- at least insofar as the allocation of procurement dollars is concerned. The extent and practical significance of the putative "air power revolution," however, remains unclear. Similarly, recent posture statements and initiatives note the advent of "information warfare" and a "military technical revolution," but fall short of charting commensurate changes in defense organization or investment. [4]
- A key element of the new posture is a planned reduction in military personnel of approximately 33 percent to be completed by 1997. The proper context for assessing this goal is the demise of the Soviet/Warsaw Pact threat, which could have mobilized eight million soldiers, and today's increased emphasis on "technology intensive" warfare. In light of these changes, the planned personnel reduction is modest.
- US defense spending will fall about 22 percent from the average annual level for the recent Cold War period 1975-1990 before beginning to arise again circa FY 2000.

The post-Cold War Policy Debate: a Premature "Consensus"?

An odd admixture of consensus and discord has characterized the post-Cold War defense policy debate. Many analysts and commentators share a strong perception that present policy suffers from a means-ends mismatch.[5] Substantial fluctuations since 1992 in defense budget goals and in the allocation of budgeted dollars among defense accounts offer some evidence *primaefacie* of mismatch. However, critics have little agreement on the nature of this purported mismatch.

The main current of thought actually unites the Defense Department and many of its critics in upholding the central element of current conventional force policy: the goal of being able to fight and quickly win two near-simultaneous Major Regional Conflicts (MRCs). However, conservative critics break with administration officials in asserting that the administration's force structure, modernization, readiness, and budget goals cannot support its military strategy. In brief, they argue that the administration's policy is inconsistent; in their view, larger armed forces and more defense spending are needed to make feasible the Administration's stated strategy. [6]

Secondary currents of criticism (issuing from both within the administration and outside) contend either that the central goal of present defense policy – the "two MRC standard" – misconstrues America's real military security needs, or that the planned size of the armed forces and military budget are larger than needed, or both. In this group are proposals,

- To adopt a "one MRC" or a "one MRC plus one lesser contingency" strategy;
- To center post-Cold War US military development on the promise of a military technical revolution, sacrificing some force structure if need be;

- To focus on "operations other than war," including peacekeeping; and
- To reorient security investment toward "conflict resolution" and "preventive diplomacy" initiatives.

Other proposals focus explicitly on the goal of a smaller defense budget and armed forces in order to free resources for domestic use. These see the possibility for force and budget cuts in the adoption of less ambitious means of military security, in greater reliance on multinational operations, or in the achievement of greater efficiency through improved inter-service cooperation.[7]

This range of opinion on what constitutes an appropriate US force posture for the new era is not itself remarkable. Historically, the US process of defense policy development has been an open and contentious one. Of greater concern is the fact that the "main current of thought" – which centers on traditional military structures and the "two MRC standard" – has come so quickly to dominate policy discourse and decision-making. There are three reasons for some concern: first, the main current of thought emphasizes continuity during a period of rapid and profound geostrategic change. Second, the main current has failed so far to produce a stable policy – that is, one in which policy goals do not appear to be at war with themselves. Third, the present period does not give policymakers as much freedom as in the past to hedge against bad choices by over-investing in defense. Indeed, a key element of today's strategic dilemma is the fact of relatively severe resource constraints.

Among some critics of current Pentagon policy a commonplace conceit is that the pressure generated by the federal deficit will compel an eventual revision of America's military posture.[8] However, budget realities provide weak ground for the development of good, stable military policy. If the nation is to avoid the type of disruptive policy swings that occurred in the period 1975-1981, it must adopt a posture that meets the criteria of not only affordability, but adequacy, balance, and cohesiveness as well. This may be possible at lower levels of spending, but finding out requires a reappraisal of our present posture in its own right.

Setting the Limits of Debate

The main current of thinking on America's "new era" defense posture rests on a body of official and semi-official studies and guidance documents – largely unchallenged – that together set out a narrow range of force structure and capability options for the United States. These are the product of a concerted and continuing process of policy re-evaluation begun by the Pentagon and its service schools, analytical departments, and contracted think tanks in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe.[9] The common perspective of these studies and documents has come to dominate the defense policy debate in the United States, effectively setting the criteria by which force posture options are judged "realistic" or not.

Individually these studies are subject to standard sources of institutional bias. And the fragmented nature of the policy analysis process often precludes thorough "checks and balances." [10] While these studies are meant to provide a factual basis for policymaking, institutional bias poses the risk of their artificially limiting the choices considered by the nation's political leadership. (For a fuller discussion of these problems see the appendix to this report, *Force Posture Development: Selected Effects of Institutional Bias and Interservice Rivalry*, which is below)

Although institutional reform is worthwhile, there is little prospect of achieving through this means in the near term any comprehensive integration of the official analytical process or any thorough filtering of this process for bias. A more realistic corrective is the maintenance of an open and vibrant policy debate – one that includes in its critical purview the assumptions underlying official policy, one that is ready to consider and generate alternative policy options. This is essential because the recent policy debate has not managed to adequately engage the assessments and assumptions that are currently driving (and limiting) the development of force posture.

Appendix: Force Posture Development: Selected Effects of Institutional Bias and Interservice Rivalry

Ideally the choice of a force posture would derive from a consideration of the following factors: (i) national interests and goals, (ii) the threats and impediments to securing those interests and goals, (iii) national strategy (which sets priorities among alternative policy tools – economic, military, and diplomatic), (iv) the general "military-technical" environment (which encompasses the state of technology and combat/battlefield dynamics), (v) resource and demographic constraints, and (vi) a calculation of acceptable risk. Of course, these variables admit no simple objective determination.

Assessment of seemingly "objective" factors – such as resource constraints or the capabilities of threat states – are at best partial and probabilistic, especially when looking years into the future. The "net assessment" of security threats and challenges – which helps set force structure, modernization, and readiness requirements – relies heavily on war simulation techniques that purport to capture the dynamics of conflict. The simulations themselves are based partly on empirical generalizations, partly on the predicted performance characteristics of key weapon systems, and partly on assumptions about things like "warning time" and the behavior of adversaries in war. It is not surprising that even disinterested observers might settle on very different levels and types of need, regardless of how well informed. More than that, though, these generalizations, predictions, and assumptions all provide "windows" through which bias can enter the calculation of requirements. [11]

Chief among the sources of bias are the institutional interests and worldviews of the military and military-industrial establishments, the parochial interests of decision-makers, limits set by domestic politics, and the phenomena of "conceptual lag"

(whereby the appreciation of geostrategic and technological changes generally trails their occurrence). These factors act to further distort a process of policy development that is already inexact and disjointed.

In one sense we expect and require our armed forces to be "biased": their role is to attend to the specifically military aspects of security problems and develop specifically military responses. However, their analysis of security problems can subtly overstate the military aspects and, thus, prejudice national decision-making. It is commonplace, for instance, for military planners to choose worst case assumptions in order to hedge against uncertainty and error. When done overtly as part of a process of providing political leaders with a variety of options ranging from low to high risk, this practice can illuminate the tradeoffs between cost and risk. But the practice of choosing conservative assumptions also infiltrates the "micro" level of analysis, and this level is seldom visible to political decision makers.

The "micro level" involves, for instance, estimates and assumptions about troop mobilization time, the quantity of available strategic lift, and the performance characteristics of an adversary's key weapon systems. Planners can also build ambitious new operational goals into their assessment of basic requirements. Much of current official analysis, for instance, incorporates the goal of completing future regional conflicts in half the time required for Operation Desert Storm. Although this goal dramatically increases requirements, it is virtually invisible as an independent variable at the level of political and public debate.

Planning Thresholds and the Cumulative Effect of Bias

In some cases, even small differences in basic assumptions can make a substantial difference in reported requirements. This is due to the presence of "threshold values" in defense planning, such as the time it takes for sealift ships to make a complete circuit from home ports to a theater of conflict and back again. To appreciate the import of threshold values consider the question: How large a force would the United States have to deliver to the Persian Gulf to stop an Iraqi drive to the south, and how fast? The answer depends *inter alia* on assumptions and assessments of how fast an Iraqi invading army can move, how much power the Gulf states can muster in their own defense, and how much US support already exists pre-positioned in the theater. If it is determined that the need for US home-based assistance is not so urgent as to preclude two circuits of sealift ships, the need for sealift assets is much less than if urgency allows only one circuit. A week or even a few days can make the difference, and this amount of time can easily disappear in the adjustment of initial planning assessments and assumptions mentioned above.[12]

Another significant threshold value is the amount of post-mobilization training time Army Reserve combat maneuver units need to become fully ready and deploy. Current official estimates range from 75-120 days – much longer than during the Cold War. Because the Pentagon has embraced the goal of being able to successfully conclude a

major regional conflict in 100 days or less, the potential contribution of combat Reserves is greatly reduced, resulting in a substantially higher national defense bill.[13]

The aforementioned examples also illustrate how repeatedly incorporating worst case assumptions and ambitious goals at various points in the analytical process can have a profound cumulative or "compound" effect. This process can lock political decision-makers into an artificially narrow range of choices – all of which skew toward meeting highly improbable threats and toward maintaining very ambitious and costly military structures and capabilities. The planning process leading up to the recent *Bottom Up Review*, which set America's current force posture, built upon a variety of contentious assessments and assumptions, including:

- A composite regional threat that is significantly larger and more capable than any of the actual or likely adversaries from which it derives,
- Very conservative estimates about allied contributions to regional defense efforts,
- Very conservative estimates of available warning time, of strategic lift assets available to US, and of US Reserves mobilization time requirements,
- Ambitious goals for the deployment of an "offense capable" force and for the onset and successful conclusion of counteroffensive operations, and
- The goal of being able to fight simultaneously two major regional conflicts that begin about a month apart.

Due to the effect of "threshold values" and "compounding" even minor adjustments in these assessments and assumptions could substantially alter the current understanding of US armed forces requirements.

The Effects of Fragmentation in the Planning Process

The fragmented nature of the assessment and planning process also can contribute to the distortion of military requirements. Although the Office of the Secretary of Defense strives for an integrated process, the many offices, projects, task forces, and contracted think tanks that participate in planning may share only a few working assumptions in common. The individual armed services, branches within each armed service, and military industries all add to the process their own relatively independent and fragmentary estimates of what the nation needs – estimates often based on idiosyncratic assumptions and problem definitions. Unfortunately the final fusion of views is more likely to reflect bureaucratic and political expediency or "power politics" than well-reasoned, hard choices among competing views and options. The result may be a "something-for-everyone" force posture that is not only inflated, but also unbalanced – in the sense of placing too much emphasis on structures and capabilities that the nation does not need, and too little on those that it does. The following examples suggest the general contours of this problem:

Force Structure and Modernization Goals at Odds with Each Other: While force structure planning purports to rely on a form of realistic threat assessment, modernization planning orients increasingly toward the limits of what is technically feasible – this, on the assumption that adversaries will do the same. Of course, this assumption was less contentious during the Cold War when a peer superpower filled the role of adversary. Today, the formal "availability" of a new weapon technology does not translate easily into operationally significant capabilities in the hands of potential Western adversaries.[14] The tension between spending on force size, technological advances, force readiness, and sustainability is unending. Given resource scarcity, it is inescapable. Over spending on one input, implies under spending on some other.

The initial "fusion" of force structure and modernization goals remains, in most cases, linear and additive: the services seek to maintain structure, replacing old systems with new on a one-for-one basis. Thus, while force structure planning seeks to adequately overmatch predicted threats, the combination of force structure and modernization goals would, given the new geostrategic environment, actually ensure a steady increase in America's already considerable competitive edge.[15] Although fiscal constraints have been forcing some choices between structure and modernization goals, this has lent to an impression of defense budget shortfalls, rather than one of poorly integrated and overly ambitious force posture goals.

Idiosyncratic Planning and Interservice Rivalry: One recent and controversial Air Force study purports to show how intercontinental bombers can substitute for the Navy's aircraft carriers – a comparison that says more about which key systems these services consider vulnerable to budget cutters than it says about sensible choices before the nation. Choosing *among* USAF systems – bombers vs fighters – or among tactical fighters might make more sense. For its part, the Navy regularly produces rationales explaining why it must maintain a fleet of 14 large carriers if it is to be able to deploy three at all times. However, these statements serve better as windows on the Navy's preferred methods of operation than on the real limits of carrier operation.[16] Much less common are studies illustrating how increased land-based prepositioning of war stocks in theaters of likely conflict could significantly reduce the apparent requirement for all sorts of Air Force and Navy systems. The reason for this hole in assessments is simple: Unlike aircraft carriers and bombers, land-based prepositioning lacks much of an institutional base of support.[17]

Notes

1. The principal statement of the new posture appears in Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom Up Review* (Washington DC: DOD, October 1993), and *DOD Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington DC: 1994).

For the purposes of this report, "force posture" comprises the following factors: (i) force structure, (ii) the principal roles and missions of the individual services, (iii) the relative emphasis placed on each service, (iv) personnel policy, (v) modernization or technical level, (vi) readiness level, (vii) force positioning and deployment patterns - at home and overseas, and (viii) guideline strategies and concepts of utilization. The first of these variables – force structure – in turn resolves into (i) force size – numbers of units and personnel, (ii) the principal types of field units within each service and the balance among them, and (iii) the relative emphasis placed on active-duty versus reserve or cadre/reconstitution units.

2. The 1992 *National Military Strategy* (NMS) of the United States identified "warfighting" as the central function of America's armed forces. Although the 1994 version of the *NMS* added "conflict prevention" and "peacetime engagement" as basic functions, subsequent policy has made clear that traditional warfighting retains pride of place. Indeed, this is explicitly stated in the 1994 White House document, "The Clinton Administration's *Policy on Reforming Multilateral Operations*."

3. Neither former General Powell's 1993 Roles and Missions report nor drafts of the forthcoming report of the Commission on Roles and Missions suggest substantial changes in the definition or allocation of warfighting roles and missions. See "Roles Panel Skirts Issue of Service Missions," *Defense News*, 24 April 1995; and, Colin Powell, *Report on the Roles, Missions, and Functions of the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington DC: JCS, 1993)

4. See "Futuristic DOD Plan Falts Over Focus," *Defense News*, 23-29 January 1995; "Revolution in Military Affairs Could be Stunted by Bureaucracy," *Defense News*, 28 November 1994; and, Dan Goure, "Is There a Military-Technical Revolution in America's Future," *Washington Quarterly* (Autumn 1993).

5. The March 1994 House Armed Services Committee hearings on the *Bottom Up Review* heard concerns about a means-end mismatch from virtually every non-Administration witness, regardless of political orientation. Similarly, the Senate Armed Services Committee's recent hearings on military readiness focused on this problem. Also see "Services Openly Resist Administration's Mandated Force Levels and Budgets," *Inside the Pentagon*, 6 April 1995; and, David C Morrison, "Bottoming Out?", *National Journal*, 17 Sept 1994. Also noteworthy are: *Planning for Defense: Affordability and Capability of the Administration's Program* (Washington DC: CBO, 1994); and, Dov Zakheim and Jeffrey Ranney, "Matching Defense Strategies to Resources," *International Security* (Summer 1993).

6. For a sampling of "hollow force" concerns and analysis see David C Morrison, "Modernization Morass," *National Journal*, 26 March 1994; Senator John McCain, *Going Hollow: The Warnings of Our Chiefs of Staff*, (Washington DC: Office of Senator John McCain, July 1993); and, "Averting a Return to Hollow Forces: Readiness and the Operations and Maintenance Budget," *Defense Budget Project*, 7 June 1993.

7. For a representative range of critical opinion and proposed alternatives see David Isenberg, "The Pentagon's Fraudulent Bottom Up Review," *Policy Analysis*, CATO Institute, April 1994;

Carl Conetta, "Mismatch: the BUR and America's Security Requirements in the New Era," testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, 10 March 1994; Paul Taibl and Steven Kosiak, *An Affordable Long-term Defense* (Washington DC: Defense Budget Project, 1993); William Kaufmann, *Assessing the Base Force* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1992); and, Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, *Reasonable Force* (Cambridge: Commonwealth Institute, 1992)

8. This may happen, although recent political developments suggest that a radical revision of federal entitlement programs is just as likely and could serve to reduce the pressure on the defense budget.

9. The touchstone documents are the Joint Chiefs' of Staff 1992-1994 *National Military Strategy*, *Joint Military Net Assessment*, and especially *Defense Planning Guidance*. Also key are the JCS's 1992 *Mobility Requirements Study* and the 1994 *Mobility Requirements Study – Bottom Up Review Update*. Partly based on the guidance set forth in these documents, the RAND Corporation and other defense establishment think tanks have produced a variety of studies on future defense options, including *The New Calculus: Analyzing Airpower's Changing Role in Joint Theater Campaigns* (Rand, 1993) and *Assessing the Structure and Mix of Future Active and Reserve Forces* (Rand, 1992). Summaries of recent, relevant RAND studies can be found in Paul K. Davis, ed., *New Challenges for Defense Planning* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1994)

10. A review of some of these problems can be found in Carl H. Builder, *Military Planning Today: Calculus or Charade?* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1993).

11. For a systematic analysis of bias in one pivotal requirements study see Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, "Rand's New Calculus and the Impasse of US Defense Restructuring," *PDA Briefing Report 4*, Commonwealth Institute, 1993.

12. For an analysis of the assumptions underlying official studies of strategic mobility requirements see Conetta and Knight, "Adapting US Armed Forces to the New Era -- Selected Force Size and Modernization Issues," *PDA Briefing Memo 6*, Commonwealth Institute, March 1993.

13. For analysis of the assumptions underlying official studies of Reserve forces utility see Conetta and Knight, "Adapting US Armed Forces to the New Era."

14. For a critical analysis of this approach to determining modernization needs see Conetta and Knight, "Rand's New Calculus and the Impasse of US Defense Restructuring," pp 31-33.

15. For an analysis of major US modernization programs and how they articulate with planned force structure reductions see Conetta and Knight, "Build-down: US Armed Forces Retrenchment in the Context of Modernization," *PDA Briefing Memo 8*, 1 May 1994.

16. See, "Adapting US Armed Forces to the New Era," section 2.4.

17. Similarly, reserve component armed forces lack the freedom and the research base to contend with the active component in producing self-supporting studies -- so the nation lacks a full and nuanced view of the potential tradeoff between active and reserve armed forces.