
Transforming for What?

Challenges Facing Western Militaries Today

John Gordon

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Resolving today's security problems requires an integrated approach. Analysis must be cross-cutting and consider the regional and global dimensions of problems, their technological and military aspects, as well as their media linkages and broader human consequences. It must also strive to understand the far reaching and complex dynamics of both international terrorism and post-conflict stabilization. Through the collection « **Focus stratégique** », Ifri's Security Studies Center aims to do so, offering new perspectives on the major international security issues in the world today.

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Introduction

The term “transformation” is often heard in Western – especially U.S. – military circles. “Transformation” is generally intended to convey the notion of major, productive change for the future that will result in improved military capabilities. A major issue that faces the militaries of most democratic nations is, however, *what missions are they transforming for?* This article will examine that important question, with a particular focus on the types of operations that are likely to predominate in the coming years, and the implications that they will have for the armed forces of the Western nations as they plan for the future.

The concept of transformation is often associated with so-called Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMAs). A RMA is an important change in military art and science that results in a very significant new technology and/or method of operations. Some of the better known examples of RMA's include the German's employment of *Blitzkrieg* techniques in the early part of the Second World War, the introduction of nuclear weapons at the end of that conflict, and the concept of “revolutionary warfare” as espoused by Mao Tse Tung and others. In each case, the RMA posed major challenges to other, usually earlier, methods of warfare, at times seriously undermining an earlier technique or technology. For example, revolutionary (guerrilla) warfare essentially completely circumvented the development of nuclear weapons since the latter have virtually no use in low intensity conflict. As RMAs appear and mature, they are often cited as the need to transform since the nature of the RMA might require significant changes in the way military forces are organized, armed, and operate.¹

¹ David Tucker, *Confronting the Unconventional: Innovation and Transformation in Military Affairs*, U.S. Army War College, 2006.
Williamson Murray, “Thinking about Revolutions in Military Affairs”, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 1997.

What is “Transformation”?

First, it is an overused, poorly understood concept. More than just “modernization”, the current interpretation of the term transformation generally includes changes to the operational methods, force structure, training, modernization priorities, and – possibly – culture and orientation of a country’s military forces. From the late 1980s until the early 2000s the term transformation became most strongly associated with the idea that warfare was undergoing a fundamental change due to the rise of modern command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems, plus a growing number and variety of precision munitions. Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 seemed to provide support to those who argued that what the Soviets called the “reconnaissance-strike complex” had become the dominant, new form of combat.² According to this view of transformation, great emphasis would be placed on surveillance and reconnaissance systems that could find enemy forces and transmit their locations to various friendly headquarters who would then – quickly – assign the mission of destroying the target to a unit (air, land, or sea) armed with precision weapons. The logical extension of this concept was the idea that in the future much of the “fog of war” would be eliminated as the ever-improving C4ISR systems provided greater situational awareness regarding the strength and location of both friendly and enemy forces. In general, air power advocates became the greatest proponents of this view of transformation, arguing that this supposed revolution in military affairs would significantly reduce the number of ground and naval forces that would be required in future war.³

Problems with the Concept

Certainly there is much validity to this view of future warfare, as evidenced by the savaging of Iraq’s ground forces deployed in the Kuwaiti desert in the winter of 1991 and other operations since then. When the Bush administration took power in 2001 many of the key civilian appointees in the Department of Defense were adherents to this view of transformation. Indeed, the initial U.S. assault to topple the Taliban in 2001 (which involved small numbers of U.S. special operations forces assisting local ground forces, coupled with precision munitions delivered by Navy

² See, for example, Martin Libicki, *Information Warfare: Toward First Principles*, RAND, 2000 and Huba Wass de Czege, “Revolutionizing firepower: the enabling destructive and suppressive Element of Combat Power”, *Field Artillery Journal*, July-August 2003.

³ Donald Rumsfeld, “Transforming the Military,” *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2002.

and Air Force aircraft) appeared to vindicate this concept of transformation.⁴

There were, however, problems with the “reconnaissance-strike”-centric view of transformation. Even in the interval between *Desert Storm* in 1991 and Afghanistan a decade later there were warning signs that at least some of the important underpinnings of transformation were based on overly optimistic assumptions. Operation *Allied Force* in Kosovo in 1999 showed, for example, that when terrain is changed from open desert to forested hills and villages the ability to find enemy forces with remote (mostly aerial) sensors dropped off dramatically. The post-conflict revelations of the actual damage done to the Yugoslavian forces in Kosovo showed that minimal harm had been done to a military that was at least a full generation behind the NATO forces that had been striving to find and destroy them.⁵ However, the reality of Kosovo did not seem to impress the advocates of “transformation” who pressed ahead, armed with their cherished ideas of “near perfect situational awareness” and “one-shot-one-kill” weapons.

Additionally, in the years prior to 2001 most of Western militaries had paid very little attention to irregular warfare operations such as counterinsurgency, counter terrorism, and stability missions – illustrated by the pre-9/11 decision to close the U.S. Army Peacekeeping Institute. This was especially the case with their ground forces, the component that should have been most involved in the preparation for such operations.

It took the realities of the post-9/11 world to show that much of warfare remains the realm of the uncertain and imprecise. Even during the American drive to Baghdad in March-April of 2003 the level of information on enemy forces remained amazingly low. Indeed, from the point of view of a tank commander advancing north toward Baghdad, combat was far more similar to World War II (sudden, unexpected encounters with hidden enemy forces under conditions of considerable confusion) than to the concepts of “near-perfect situational awareness” as held forth by many of the advocates of transformation.

In fact, it was astonishing just how little had changed from the point of view of the lower level tactical commanders. The Blue Force Tracker (BFT) system installed on many combat vehicles was probably the biggest improvement in terms of situational awareness, providing commanders with a much better ability to know the whereabouts of their own forces in near-real time, although various technical problems were found in the BFT

⁴ Stephen D. Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq”, *International Security*, vol. 30, n°3, Winter 2005-2006, pp. 161-176. Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills and Thomas E. Griffith, “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model”, *International Security*, vol. 30, n°3, Winter 2005-2006, pp. 124-160.

⁵ See Bruce Nardulli *et al*, *Disjointed War, Military Operations in Kosovo, 1999*, RAND, 2002.

system.⁶ However, regarding knowledge of enemy forces, the situation was little improved from World War II, much less than the 1991 Gulf War. At the company-battalion-brigade levels units were moving to contact with very little knowledge of the enemy's location and strength. Sudden, unexpected meeting engagements were the norm in these conditions. That was the case whether the enemy was regular formations (Iraqi army or Republican Guard) or irregular militia. In these circumstances, the main battle tank, often maligned as a relic of the past by transformation advocates, with its heavy armor protection and ability to engage the enemy in seconds after coming under fire was, without question, the most important ground combat system.⁷

Facing Guerrillas

Once major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq ended, a new reality began that had also gone unaddressed in the prior concepts of transformation – irregular warfare. The insurgencies that confronted U.S. and other coalition forces demonstrated the clear need for expertise, systems, and force structures that were in many cases very different from those required for major combat operations. Other issues were also exposed that took Western military leaders largely by surprise.

At the end of the Cold War there was a rapid – and justified – reduction in the size of most NATO militaries. With the demise of the Soviet Union there clearly was no need to maintain the same level of forces that were required to deter a predatory super power. Major cuts were made in the numbers of personnel and organizations. For example, the U.S. Army of 1990 numbered some 770,000 personnel on active duty (not including reserves). By 1996 that number was down to roughly 495,000 in the active force.⁸ As late as the summer of 2001, many advocates of transformation in the U.S. wanted to continue cutting the number of ground forces, in large part due to their faith in the ability of the reconnaissance-strike complex to shatter any foe. The post-Cold War reduction in the number of military units and personnel, particularly in ground forces, became an important issue when the unit rotation and manpower requirements of irregular warfare became apparent after 9/11. Moreover, since the U.S. military (with the exception of the Special Operations Forces) had turned its back on the study of and preparation for irregular warfare in the aftermath of the painful Vietnam experience, there was little expertise in this type of conflict. That lack of understanding of the nature of low intensity conflict clearly showed in the initial experience in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

⁶ Blue Force Tracker was first used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Individual vehicles have transmitters aboard that periodically signal their GPS-based location. Various headquarters have the ability to receive and access Blue Force Tracker data, thus providing a very good near-real-time update on the location of vehicles and units equipped with the device.

⁷ John Gordon and Bruce Pirnie, "Everybody Wanted Tanks, Heavy Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom", *Joint Force Quarterly*, September 2005.

⁸ *The Military Balance*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1990-1991 Edition, p. 18. *The Military Balance*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996-1997 Edition, p. 23.

The U.S. military was not alone in its lack of preparation for irregular warfare. Most NATO militaries had spent decades preparing for possible conflict with the Soviet Union, so most European armed forces also lacked significant recent experience in low intensity conflict. Militaries are, for the most part, conservative organizations where major changes to their internal cultures and orientations are very difficult to achieve. Certainly that tendency was one of the reasons the necessary reorientation toward irregular warfare in the post-9/11 strategic environment was such a difficult, wrenching experience for so many Western militaries that were faced with that mission.

An interesting exception to this norm was the Israeli Army of the 1980s to early 2000s. During that period the Israeli military, particularly the Army, found itself increasingly engaged in counter insurgency and internal security missions. As the years went by, the Israeli Army focused more and more on those operations. While this certainly improved Israel's ability to combat insurgents, it probably eroded the Army's capabilities for major combat operations, as evidenced by the experience in southern Lebanon in 2006.⁹ This example illustrates the difficulty of trying to simultaneously maintain high levels of proficiency at both ends of the spectrum of conflict.

All this is not to say that the reconnaissance-strike orientation of so many of the transformationists was completely wrong. The trend toward precision weapons has been underway since the end of World War II – indeed, the first precision munitions actually appeared in 1943 with the German use of radio-guided bombs. Certainly the emergence of increasingly capable sensors – and, critically, the command and control networks which are needed to rapidly process and share data generated by the sensors – has helped lift some of the fog of war. Yet experience has shown that the ability of sensors to ferret out the enemy is very situationally dependent – terrain really matters, for example. Precision munitions, although individually expensive, do reduce the total amount of weapons that are required and make a major contribution in limiting collateral damage, which can be a very important consideration in irregular warfare. What is certain, however, is the fact that many of the claims of the advocates of transformation were overly optimistic, some dramatically so, regarding situational awareness. Additionally, and of critical importance, the pre-9/11 visions of transformation were overly biased toward the higher end of the spectrum of conflict – specifically, most transformational concepts were almost exclusively focused on major combat operations against the conventional armed forces of another nation state. The requirement to prepare for so-called low intensity operations, a fundamentally different form of warfare, went totally unrecognized by the ardent advocates of the reconnaissance-strike complex.

What happened? Why were the transformationists so convinced that their view of future warfare had trumped so much past experience? More importantly, why are many still convinced that the reconnaissance-strike

⁹ Matt Matthews, *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, 2008.

mode of warfare remains the wave of the future? An unbridled faith in the power of technology helps explain the unflinching adherence to concepts that are increasingly disproved by the reality on the ground in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As soon-to-be-promoted U.S. Army Colonel H.R. McMaster has pointed out, many of the transformationists' ideas were based on a fundamentally flawed concept of future warfare. Once set on their course, recognition that there were major problems with many of their ideas was not easy.¹⁰

¹⁰ H.R. McMaster, *Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2008.

Future Demands on Western Militaries

If the events of the past ten years have shown us anything, it is that Western militaries must be prepared for a very wide range of possible missions. Operations could conceivably take place anywhere in the world, in any terrain type, and could range from rather benign low intensity missions with minimal levels of violence to major combat operations against a well-armed opponent. For the foreseeable future, however, certain realities seem both obvious and enduring.

No Major Competitor in Sight

There will be no truly major global competitor to the U.S. and NATO for at least fifteen years, possibly much longer. There are only two possible major competitors to U.S or NATO power: the People's Republic of China (PRC) and a resurgent Russia. The worst case for the U.S. and most other democratic nations would be a Russian-PRC alliance, including their support for radical regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. The PRC has the economic means to become a major military competitor, and is in fact taking some steps to modernize selected portions of its military. Thus far, however, China is showing no predatory tendencies on anything like the level of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Obviously making money with capitalist democracies is simply too appealing for China to risk a major confrontation with the West.¹¹ In the case of Russia, despite President Vladimir Putin's efforts, the Russian military is still many years from achieving anything remotely like the level of prowess of the Soviet era. The recent fighting in Georgia does not negate the basic fact that the Russian armed forces are in no way capable of taking on NATO in a direct confrontation. The one area where the Russians remain a formidable threat is nuclear weapons, which are of course low-probable-use systems. Should the PRC and/or the Russians start on a path of major military confrontation with the U.S., NATO, or some other collection of democratic nations, there will be years of warning time.

No Quick Exit from the Middle East

A major military commitment in the Greater Middle East (GME) will be required for years. One of the cardinal errors of many of the transformationists was their assumption that modern military technology

¹¹ Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy, Past, Present, and Future*, RAND, 2000 and Wei Pan, *The Chinese Model of Development*, Foreign Policy Center, 2007.

would make a move into the Muslim world “easy”. Unfortunately, the initial operation in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban seemed to validate that point of view.¹² The events of the past seven years have absolutely shown the fallacy of that viewpoint. Now several of the militaries of Western nations find themselves mired in seemingly open-ended commitments in the GME. While the next U.S. President will certainly try to reduce the overall level of American presence in Iraq, it will be years – possibly decades - before the U.S. can completely remove its forces. To the extent that the so-called “Global War on Terrorism” remains at the forefront of U.S. policy, there will remain the possibility of additional, new, commitments in the Greater Middle East. Events in Iraq have clearly shown that most operations in this region will be irregular warfare-type missions.

The Future of Irregular Conflicts

The likelihood of low-intensity missions extends beyond the GME. This reality confronts many of European militaries due to Europe’s previous involvement in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the recent U.S. creation of Africa Command, the fact is that the Americans are, in general, quite happy for the Europeans to assume a leading role in much of Africa. Events of the past several decades have shown that there is no foreseeable end to poverty and violence in this troubled continent. The rise of the AIDS epidemic may, if anything, make the situation in sub-Saharan Africa worse. Depending on the interests of European nations, and the severity of any particular African crisis, there could be protracted and fairly large scale military operations intended to minimize instability.

More Money, Smaller Forces

The cost of modern militaries is growing. The advances in military technology that have permitted, to some extent, the vision of the transformationists to become reality has come at a stiff price. Even the U.S. military, supported as it is by nearly half of all the military spending on the planet, is straining to afford the types of systems it wants, in the quantities that it feels necessary. Today the U.S. spends roughly four percent of its GDP on defense; most European nations spend far less. Indeed, few NATO nations meet the Alliance goal of two percent of GDP for defense needs. As the populations of Europe have grown older, and minus a clear threat like the Soviet Union, the political imperative has been to reallocate national resources to social welfare and other civilian needs. Already the U.S. is starting to confront similar demographic forces as its population ages and the need for social spending increases. When combined with the very high – and growing - cost of modern military technology (for example, the U.S. F-35 Joint Strike Fighter will likely cost \$100 million per aircraft compared to the mid-1990s estimates of roughly \$35 and the much higher personnel costs of volunteer militaries compared to conscript forces, the pressures on the defense budgets of the armed forces of democracies will

¹² Stephen D. Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare : Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Strategic Studies Institute of the United States Army War College, November 2002.

only increase in the future.¹³ Even in the near term, given the ongoing financial crisis that all Western governments face, the pressure on defense budgets will increase. It is likely, for example, that the next U.S. administration will be forced to make significant cuts in several major defense procurement programs by either eliminating some entirely or cutting the quantities that will be procured. In the case of the U.S. military (particularly the Army and Marine Corps), the need to replace and rebuild equipment worn from years of use in Iraq and Afghanistan will add a considerable burden and make the “fix the old or buy the new” decisions even harder.

So, the general picture that emerges is that there is a relatively low probability of the emergence of a major conventional military threat to challenge the West anytime in the next 15-20 years. Meanwhile, it is virtually certain that there will be a continuing, multi-year commitment to the GME, which will be mostly stability and irregular warfare-type missions. There is also a strong possibility of additional missions beyond the Greater Middle East in Africa or possibly Southeast Asia (the Philippines or Indonesia, for example). Finally, these requirements on Western militaries will take place in a fiscal and political environment of increased pressure on defense spending.

¹³ Estimates for the cost of U.S. weapons systems are constantly being revised. While the final unit cost of JFS is not known at this time, most recent estimates are of at least \$100 million per aircraft.

Issues for the Future

Given the strategic realities listed above, what are the major challenges and issues that the militaries of democratic states must come to grips with and prepare for in the coming years? The list below is not intended to be all-inclusive, but it does highlight the major issues that will face Western militaries.

The Possibility of Confronting Nuclear-Armed Regional Opponents

Unfortunately, this issue probably represents the future of major combat operations against powerful regional opponents, and is a strategic-operational reality that most Western militaries do not want to face up to in their planning. Nevertheless, the fact is that as the years go by the still-small club of nuclear-armed nations is almost certain to grow. The risks involved in confronting an opponent who has even a small number of nuclear weapons are, needless to say, much greater than the types of opponents that the U.S. has defeated in the post-Cold War period. Western militaries cannot afford to ignore the possibility that at some point in the future they might have to take on one or more regional opponents with an operationally significant number of nuclear weapons. There would be many challenges present when taking on a nuclear-armed regional opponent, including the reduced likelihood that nearby nations (and potential allies) would take the risk of allowing Western forces to be based on their territory. Take, for example, the case of Japan in the event of a war on the Korean peninsula. In earlier decades, before the North Koreans developed nuclear weapons, the risk to Japan in the event of war in Korea was relatively low. Some Japanese merchant ships would probably have been sunk by North Korean submarines before the latter could be hunted down, some inaccurate conventional or chemically-armed missiles might have struck Japanese cities, but overall the North's ability to inflict significant harm on Japan was very limited. Therefore, the potential cost to Japan of allowing the U.S. to use its bases in the event of war was low. Today that has changed profoundly. A nuclear-armed North means that the risk to Japan is far greater. Therefore, the decision to allow the Americans use of their bases will be harder to make and of potentially much greater cost to the Japan. A similar situation will exist in the Middle East as various nations acquire nuclear capabilities. This is the type of reality that Western military planners cannot ignore.

What is the True Viability of the Reconnaissance-Strike Complex?

This is a fundamental issue. Depending on how much credence is placed in the combination of modern Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems and precision munitions, the investment patterns, force structure, and operational concepts of a military force will be affected in a major way. The U.S. military was marching rapidly down this path prior to 9/11 and to a major extent still is today. As mentioned above, this questioning of the ISR-precision strike combination is a matter of degree, since there is real, demonstrated, potential. To regard this military technique as a panacea is, however, dangerous as has been shown in operations since Kosovo. The exact usefulness of reconnaissance-strike techniques in counterinsurgency is also open to debate. Certainly precision weapons and the associated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems have been useful, helping in particular to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties. What is far less clear is the extent to which these systems actually substitute for manpower, given the clear need to provide close and continuous protection for the population threatened by an insurgency.

“Protection versus Information”

Related to this issue is the further question of whether Western militaries can, to a large extent, substitute “information” (read: situational awareness) for more traditional means of protection at the tactical levels. This is the question of whether Western armies can make a wholesale change from heavy armored fighting vehicles (most modern main battle tanks are 60-70 tons) to much lighter tracked and wheeled vehicles which are less logistically challenging and are, in theory, easier to deploy over long distances. The evidence from recent operations is mixed, but tends to favor a more traditional approach to force protection. Indeed, the U.S. Army has been forced to increase the weight of its Future Combat System series of vehicles from less than 20 tons to nearly 30 due in large part to the emerging lessons from Iraq where units were regularly surprised by ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) at the tactical level.¹⁴ Conversely, it is far less likely that an enemy can move large forces (multiple brigades or divisions) undetected by today’s ISR systems. This is, of course, a great benefit to Western commanders, since it means that operational-level surprise is now much less likely. At the tactical level (brigade-level down to individual vehicles and soldiers), however, the fog of war is still very apparent. High quality situational awareness at the lower tactical levels will remain for the foreseeable future an episodic, occasional event that is highly dependent on the terrain and the nature of the opponent (there is a huge difference in identifying insurgents clad in civilian cloths compared to enemy conventional military force, for example).¹⁵

¹⁴ John Gordon and Bruce Pirnie, “Everybody Wanted Tanks, Heavy Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom”, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ John Gordon, David Johnson, and Peter Wilson, “Air Mechanization, an Expensive and Fragile Concept”, *Military Review*, 2007.

The Relationship of Air and Naval Power Compared to Ground Forces

This is one of the areas that the demonstrated potential of the reconnaissance-strike complex has already changed to some extent, especially in conventional combat operations against the armed forces of another nation state. Operations *Desert Storm*, *Allied Force*, and to some extent *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom* showed that political leaders and senior commanders are increasingly inclined to try to substitute precision, “stand off” attack in an attempt to either achieve the desired objective (*Allied Force*), or as a minimum seriously damage the opponent before ground forces are committed (*Desert Storm*). Even when ground forces must be employed early in a crisis, precision strike systems have been used to significantly reduce the total number of required land units (Afghanistan and Iraq). What appears certain is that most air forces and navies will remain relatively biased toward the high end of the operational spectrum (i.e. conventional combat operations) and as the capabilities of the ISR-precision strike system continue to improve the tendency to try to rely on this technique in conventional combat operations will increase. Meanwhile, air forces and navies will be in a fundamentally supporting role in the far more frequent and much longer-lasting irregular warfare operations where ground forces clearly predominate. There is, and will continue to be, cultural resistance to those roles by armies, air forces, and navies, but the trend appears clear and undeniable.

The Need to Balance Preparation for the High and Low Ends of the Spectrum of Conflict

Related to all the points listed above is the fundamental issue of how best to prepare Western forces for the challenge of having to “do it all” – missions that range from benign stability operations to high intensity combat against a major opponent armed with nuclear weapons, and everything in between. In a very real sense, this is THE challenge for the Western militaries in the first quarter of the 21st Century. The internal cultures within most Western armed forces are still, generally, biased toward preparation for high intensity warfighting. Certainly the vast majority of the spending of the Western militaries is still strongly oriented in the direction of buying systems for high intensity combat (i.e. new fighter planes, most armored vehicles, and warships). In the case of the Americans, one only has to look at the U.S. Air Force’s F-22A and F-35 programs, the Navy’s continued emphasis on aircraft carriers, and the Army’s Future Combat System to see that the trend is still clearly toward spending for systems designed primarily for major combat. In Europe, the United Kingdom is spending heavily on the Future Rapid Effects System (FRES) for the British Army and the Royal Navy (like the French Navy) is building aircraft carriers and the associated fighter aircraft (F-35B in the case of the British). Striking the right balance between preparation for the high and low ends of the spectrum of conflict is not an easy problem, since it is very hard for military units to be good at everything; training time is finite and the cultures of the organizations are hard to change. Thus, striking the right balance between preparation for major combat operations as well as irregular warfare is, and will remain, a major challenge. A fundamental issue is whether the preparation for irregular warfare is a

“lesser included case” (the rationale being that a unit that is well prepared for major combat is also ready for other missions) or something that requires a major, protracted, reorientation of at least part of the force. One approach could be that of the German *Bundeswehr*. The Germans have elected to focus part of their military on preparing for major combat operations while another is oriented on stability missions. It should be noted that the German approach is at least in part due to the fact that the *Bundeswehr* still relies on conscripts who serve less than a year, which in turn limits the number of personnel who can be deployed outside Europe.¹⁶ That model is counter to the traditions of most NATO militaries, in particular the U.S. and the UK who feel that their forces should be multi-purpose. The U.S. Army’s view has long been that units primarily designed for conventional combat operations can, with some retraining and special equipment, perform well at the lower end of the spectrum. The term that has commonly been used is that low intensity missions such as peace operations and counterinsurgency are a “lesser included case” of major combat. The experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has, however, shown that there is a significant difference in the skills a military organization needs to successfully combat an insurgency compared to major combat operations. Indeed, the “lesser included case” mentality contributed heavily to the U.S. Army’s lack of understanding of the situation it found itself in Vietnam in the mid-1960s and more recently in Iraq of 2003-2006.¹⁷

The Need to Have Adequate Numbers of Units and Personnel for Protracted Stability Missions

It took the U.S. military roughly 23 days to reach Baghdad and topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. It looked easy at the time. As of this writing, coalition forces have been engaged for roughly 2,000 days in counterinsurgency, including a major effort to rebuild Iraq’s security forces. Insurgencies tend to last a long time – roughly 12 years is the post-World War II norm.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, at the end of the Cold War, all the Western militaries cut their force structure and manpower levels significantly. With the fall of the Soviet Union that was a logical move. What then took the Americans and Europeans by surprise was the need (starting in the Balkans in the mid-1990s and then growing in the aftermath of 9/11) for significant numbers of troops, especially ground forces, to conduct protracted (multi-year) stability-type missions. With a reduced pool of units to draw on, and lower manpower levels, this has placed considerable strain on many European armies, and the Americans in particular (including the U.S. Marine Corps). With the move toward all-volunteer forces in most European nations, manpower costs have shot upward compared to cheap conscripts of the Cold War. Therefore, the cost of maintaining sufficient numbers of units and personnel has become difficult. This has forced an increased reliance on both reserve units and personnel as well as a much increased use of contractors. The use of contractors has become

¹⁶ *White Paper 2006 on German Security and the Future of the Bundeswehr*, German Ministry of Defense, 2006.

¹⁷ For information on the American experience in Vietnam, see Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, Johns Hopkins University, 1986.

¹⁸ David Gompert and John Gordon, *War By Other Means, Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, RAND, 2008.



increasingly controversial given some of the events that have taken place in Iraq, and it remains unclear whether repeatedly mobilizing reservists (who have their civilian jobs – for most their primary source of income - to consider) will be a viable option should the need for increased numbers of ground force personnel continue well into the future.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the complex challenges that face Western militaries as they prepare for the future. The key issue is *what missions are they transforming for?* Clearly, the earlier reconnaissance-strike focused notions of transformation have been shown to be too narrowly focused. Additionally, many of the assumptions and predictions of the transformationists have been shown to be overly optimistic by the events of the past ten years. Does this criticism mean that the predictions and concepts of the advocates of the reconnaissance-strike version of transformation should be cast aside completely? Of course not. The move toward more precision weapons, better sensors, and improved networking of command and control systems has paid large dividends and will continue to do so. What must be done, however, is for a more realistic view to be taken of what these technologies and concepts can and cannot accomplish. Given these realities, what should Western militaries be prepared to do in an era of uncertainty, with limited budgets and manpower levels?

The armed forces of the Western nations must be prepared for a wide variety of missions that range from major war to irregular conflicts. The reality is that for the foreseeable future most of the capital investment of the Western militaries will be directed toward systems that are most appropriate for major conventional combat operations. Meanwhile, Western forces will continue to be engaged in irregular warfare missions that will last for years. These manpower-intensive, protracted, operations will place pressures on political will, force structures, budgets, and personnel, but they are probably unavoidable barring a major reduction in radicalism around the world.

How to properly balance the need to retain expertise at the higher end of the spectrum of conflict, while simultaneously preparing for and conducting missions at the low end is the most serious challenge facing the Western militaries today and for the foreseeable future. The choices that are made will have a major impact on the size, structure, training, equipment, and culture of the Western militaries. Despite the guidance provided by the NATO alliance structure, it is likely that these will be mostly national-level decisions, thus raising the prospect that noticeably different national approaches will be taken, as is the case with the *Bundeswehr's* very different model compared to the U.S.-UK.

As Western militaries continue to refine their ideas for transformation they must continue to think about what they are transforming for. The events of the past decade have clearly shown that flexibility and



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the ability to accomplish missions that vary greatly in nature, size, and duration has been the most stressing requirement. It is likely that this will remain the primary challenge for years to come.

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