

Keeping the Sword Sharp

by Major Harold M. Knudsen

The conclusion of the Cold War ended the balance of power once insured by a world made up of two armed camps. The subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union left the United States as the world's only preeminent superpower. With no monolithic rival, the United States undertook a military drawdown in the 1990s and reduced military spending to provide money to expand domestic programs that lawmakers thought were more important.

By the late 1990s, the Army went from a force of 18 divisions, which had three brigades each, down to 10 divisions, some of which now only have two brigades. While decreasing in size, the Army saw its commitments and deployments rise dramatically. The remaining force structure gained few upgrades, as the Clinton administration relied on the Reagan legacy equipment throughout its tenure. Thinly stretched resources and manpower still tied to the traditional two-theater war requirement, were now coupled with a multitude of peacekeeping missions, post-Gulf-War theater presence requirements, and a gaping need to begin another transformation. Various peacekeeping missions and the current war in Afghanistan have many proponents of further drawdown fostering the view that future wars will be laser-guided affairs, primarily using airpower and small ground units. Some of this intellectual incontinence declares that large land wars, M1 tanks, and Crusader howitzers have no future, and keeping heavy divisions equates to maintaining an obsolete Cold War army. This is complete and utter nonsense.

The world is a complex and unpredictable place, and no one knows what the landscape may be in 10 years. While many aspects of Cold War thinking can and should be abandoned, the notion that our current force structure of 10 divisions is a Cold War force is erroneous. For the moment, the Army is engaged in a small land war in Afghanistan, but is now somewhat under-resourced for a high-intensity conflict. What are needed, along with components of transformation composing

lighter, quickly deployable elements, are plenty of heavy equipment sets and enough robust divisions capable of fighting high-intensity wars — an Army that has the right mix of varied capabilities.

1940 – 'Poor France' Defeated by a Cult of Complacency

Marc Bloch, French army officer and scholar, wrote in 1940 concerning the defeat of France that year, "We have just suffered such a defeat as no one would have believed possible."¹ In his book, Bloch outlines what happened to a seemingly prepared and robust French army that fell victim to a smaller German army that, although not better equipped, proved superior in organization and doctrine.

The French army's was a defeat fostered by a cult of thinking in the French military that France was militarily superior to Germany and that their insurance policy in choice of organization and doctrine was correct. Save that of De Gaulle, military planners believed the correct use of the tank was as an infantry support vehicle, and subsequently organized their army such that the tank was relegated to a support role. They also built a massive barrier along the Franco-German border called the Maginot Line, and believed it to be impenetrable. In the years following World War I, France believed Germany could no longer successfully invade its soil.

Events proved France wrong. Within a few short years, Germany built an army capable of offensive operations. German military thinkers favored tank concentrations and organized the first tank divisions, pioneering a style of offensive armored warfare known as Blitzkrieg. During 1940, they skillfully maneuvered their powerful tank formations through and around the Maginot line and crushed France in 6 weeks.

The United States has no parallel to France's 1940 defeat. America has, however, suffered painful beginnings in most of the wars in which it has engaged. Historically, the United States

has not maintained an adequate force structure during peacetime. Kasserine Pass, Bataan, and Task Force Smith, still loom as somewhat recent examples of this.

The lessons learned from France's 1940 defeat exist because France's perceived superiority was an illusion. A current parallel to this thought is that some contemporary defense observers perceive the future devoid of large conflicts, requiring no large standing army. Another danger is following the popular belief based on the Gulf War experience, that we would now overcome opponents' size advantages with technology. During the coalition's war with Iraq, Soviet General Nikolai Kutsenko stated, "Iraq's armament, including that which is Soviet made, was primarily developed in the 1960s-1970s and lags at least one-to-two generations behind the armament of the multinational forces."²

Based on experiences during 1990, the idea that smaller is somehow more effective and better across the spectrum of operations is a myth.

Becoming the Wehrmacht of 1943-1945?

It is important to excel at operational maneuver, but it should not be the only play in the book. Ensuring we have enough heavy divisional force structure is just as important as the transformation toward technological advantage and improved deployability. While it made sense to take down excessive force structure in Germany following the decline of the Soviet Union, a minimum number of divisions should be recognized as the benchmark below which the Army will not fall. The reason for justifying a minimum level need not be tied to a formula decided on by think tanks' en vogue far out vision of future war. One guideline we should first and foremost recognize and understand is the timeless reality that at some point quantity has a quality all its own.

World War II Germany, for example, tried to make up the difference against



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the allies' superiority in resources with quality and advanced technology. An excellent illustration of this can be seen in the types of tanks they produced during the last 3 years of the war. The Panther, Tiger, and King Tiger series tanks and assault gun variants were extremely powerful vehicles in their time, and possessed many advantages over the two main allied battle tanks: the American Sherman, and Russian T-34. All three German tanks were able to stand off the allied tanks easily, as their high velocity 75- and 88-mm main guns were of greater size and velocity, granting them range and hitting advantage. If the engagement was within allied tank range, their thicker armor gave the Germans another advantage, as they could withstand frontal hits without fear of penetration from the allied tanks' low velocity 76-mm main gun. Admittedly, there were numerous occasions where German tank design advantages allowed veteran crews to enjoy successes in many tactical engagements, against several times their number. However, the larger, thicker armored, harder hitting Panthers and Tigers still could not provide the decisive advantage in the war.

In the end, attrition wore down the German armored formations. The best King Tiger tank battalions still suffered losses and were pushed back in face of the overwhelming number of American or Russian units they were required to engage. Without time to rest, make repairs, and fill losses, constant allied pressure took its toll on German front-line formations. Eventually, German units became combat ineffective, any advantage of superior equipment was negated. In contrast, the allies could afford heavy losses, pull mauled units out of the line to rest, refit, and replace them with fresh ones. The same is still true today. An army composed of small

divisions and independent brigades cannot be expected to be effective across the entire warfare spectrum. To avoid attrition warfare is to set ourselves up for future defeat where an opponent who has overwhelming numbers will someday force fewer U.S. formations into a pitched battle.

The United States Army is not now in a position like the Wehrmacht of 1943-1945. However, we must realize as politically incorrect as attrition warfare currently may be, attrition is a facet of war that is eternal. More is to come, and we cannot avoid it any more than could Rommel at El Alamein, Robert E. Lee at Petersburg, or any other army that relied solely on maneuver warfare.

Maintaining Robust Force Structure in an Uncertain World

Over the past 50 years, the size of the U.S. Army was mostly based on countering the Soviet Union. This tendency has led some to think if there is no major threat, we can have a smaller Army and rely on advanced technology as America's ace. Therein lies one major challenge: move away from specific threat assessment as the only justification for maintaining a robust standing Army, and adopt the mindset that we need an Army based on varied capabilities.

Now we are at war again. Although Afghanistan's Taliban army and al-Qaeda terrorist reinforcements have proven no match for a small American land force, this war does not prove correct any assumption that a large rival will not emerge. In actuality, the chance of threats emerging today is greater than during the Cold War. Any instigator of a conflict during the Cold War was very likely a subordinate of either the East or West block. To make war in this world was, in many instances, less

likely as the superpowers and their allies made such action by a single state difficult, if not impossible. The two armed camps did, in a somewhat positive way, manage to keep subordinates in line, very often with little effort.

Today the landscape is different. There exist regional powers that, by virtue of population, resources, and geographical size, are peers or even eclipse the United States. India, Pakistan, China, and several states in the Middle East are also far from peaceful, and regularly engage in arms races and confrontation with their neighbors. Any one of these nations could change defensively postured militaries into offensive capabilities. Even worse, a coalition of such nations, well organized and well led, in a few short years could field a coalition army so large that it would make that of the United States and NATO pale in comparison.

Do Recent Advancements Rate as an RMA?

Some defense observers suggest a revolution in military affairs (RMA) is currently taking place, of which the United States must take advantage.³ Whether or not there truly is an ongoing RMA is debatable. If the theory holds true, any current RMA would be in the realm of long-distance, precision-guided missiles, battlefield situational awareness, stealth, and information technology. The United States must continue to use these resources to its advantage.

The Gulf War did provide (on television) an almost entertaining stage for precise stand-off strikes, leading many to believe they were the decisive weapons of the war. In truth, despite the losses, these weapons inflicted, they did not drive the Iraqi army from Kuwait. The tanks, infantry, and artillery took all the actual ground in Iraq and

Kuwait. As stated in a 1996 General Accounting Office report of Gulf War assessment, "In truth, the results of the air campaign were mixed. The claim by the U.S. Air Force that airpower alone defeated the Iraqi Army, has not withstood even brief examination. Airpower failed to destroy 50 percent of Iraqi's armor as advertised."⁴

Like many other wars in the past century, this type of bombardment and preparation is limited in effect. The artillery preparation by the armada of allied ships and the air preparation that pounded the German positions along the Normandy coast the morning of the D-Day invasion in 1944, were also limited in their effects. German soldiers still had to be cleared from their defensive positions by waves of attacking infantry. The situation in Iraq during 1991 was the same.

Thus, it is more accurate to say these advancements are actually expected improvements in the ongoing evolution of military capability, and do not necessarily mean an RMA. The new laser-guided bombs, for example, are still fire support assets that comprise only part of the larger equation of conducting a battle or campaign. These weapons do not win battles and wars single-handedly. They are not such an advantage like the Maxim gun was to the British, who defeated the comparatively primitive Sudanese at Omdurman in 1898, giving rise to an imperialistic doggerel of the period, "whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they do not."⁵

American air-delivered weapons are believed to be decisive because during the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign they were given an unusual spotlight in unusual circumstances.

Blitzkrieg Was the Last True Land Warfare RMA

A true military revolution that might change the complexion of land warfare has yet to arrive in a definitive character. The last true military revolution that changed ground warfare was the German Blitzkrieg doctrine. Although Blitzkrieg has undergone some name changes and modifications over the decades, such as adding the helicopter in the 1960s, and the American combined arms warfare in the 1970s and 1980s, it is largely intact. Indeed, the multiple heavy armored divisions offensive into Iraq in 1991 (while executed from the left) had an uncanny simi-

larity to Field Marshal Manstein's Blitzkrieg application for invading France in 1940 (executed from the right of center) and is a clear reminder that heavy offensive armored warfare is relevant. The tank organized into divisions, synchronously supported by infantry, artillery, and the other branches will continue to dominate warfare in the type of terrain that supports such massed forces.

Transformation Focus: Deployability & Medium Capability

During the Gulf War, the coalition had precisely the right instruments at precisely the right time to deal with Saddam Hussein — many heavy armored and mechanized divisions in Europe and the United States, robust and highly trained. These divisions were perfect for ejecting the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. However, the most powerful divisions were garrisoned and logistically bound to Germany, as their Cold War mission was to move out of their garrisons, and roll a few hundred kilometers to general defense positions in the Fulda Gap. Moving these organizations to the Middle East was an unforeseen contingency that was simply going to take time.

Despite victory in the Gulf War, the lessons of force projection difficulties came home to roost as a significant concern. The Army had one division it could quickly deploy — the 82d Airborne Division because it lacked armor. Fighting heavy armored forces in a desert environment is the airborne organization's worst nightmare. Fortunately for the 82d Airborne Division, the Iraqis stopped with Kuwait and left them alone. Lacking heavy equipment, airborne troops are easy targets for tank and mechanized forces in terrain that affords no cover, other than the foxholes that paratroopers can dig. Conversely, while heavy forces dominate the battlefield once in place, moving them in a timely manner was a problem. Airlift was very limited, and mostly not an option beyond moving a few select heavy pieces of equipment per lift sortie. The roll-on roll-off ships remedied the situation to a degree, but were still too few in number.

Contingency operations, such as those in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Haiti, also challenged the military's ability to project force quickly, and further illustrated the unsuitability of heavy armored forces in peacekeeping environments.

Changes are needed to transform at least part of the Army into a force that can be quickly deployed to a troubled spot or an ongoing commitment. The current transformation goal is to outfit units with lighter, more transportable vehicles to meet the Army's goal to deploy a combat ready brigade within 96 hours, followed by a division within 120 hours, and five divisions within 30 days.⁶ The fact that we have been engaging in these kinds of theaters establishes that some of our forces will have to be redesigned as an adaptation to the variation of current commitments.⁷

This change is more akin to the extensive use of horse cavalry in the American West following the Civil War, and using the correct type of force and equipment to the corresponding terrain.

At the end of the Civil War, large, slow-moving regiments and divisions of infantry and artillery were the dominant forces, but were unsuited for campaigning against highly mobile Indians over vast spaces. Certainly no Indian force would have been able to survive against a regiment of Confederate or Union infantry deployed on line, delivering volleys of musket fire. However, these large infantry organizations would have never closed with the Indians. Only smaller horse units could cover the ground and pursue bands of Indians in the vast Plains environment. Similarly, this is true for the heavy tank division and its relative unsuitability in the Bosnia environment. The heavy M1 tank, for example, is a lumbering behemoth when forced to maneuver in tight old world Balkan villages, or when traveling along muddy mountain roads barely as wide as its width. Large, heavy M1 tanks are without equal in the former Yugoslavia; their crews need fear no encounter with an armored vehicle of the former warring factions. However, in heavily wooded and hilly terrain, the M1 is restricted in its movement, and susceptible to infantry and mines. Just as the cavalry troop was the formation of choice in the expanses of the 19th-century American West, medium tanks, such as the Danish version of the Leopard I, armored HMMWVs, and other similar vehicles organized into smaller units, are better suited for operations in the Balkans.

Thus, the current concept of transformation is to create lighter, more mobile, rapid deploying units by outfitting them with lighter vehicles for quicker transport. Something that bridges the gap between heavy and light, and that

covers the realm of medium operations. The light armored vehicle (LAV) series wheeled vehicles of the new interim brigade combat team (IBCT) would stand no chance in an engagement against a main battle tank, nor should it. It is a vehicle for an interim ground unit stronger than a parachute brigade, almost as quickly deployable, but probably not heavy enough for high-intensity conflict.

We Must Keep Enough Heavy Divisions

Transforming at least part of the Army into highly mobile units better suited for complex terrain and quicker movement is a move in the right direction. However, redesigning forces should not be an effort to change the entire Army into a force of smaller units comprised of lighter, smaller vehicles that can supposedly defeat heavy armor. Force structure choices should not be guided by a cult belief of an unclear role for heavy forces in the future. The role of heavy force structure is clear: to fight high-intensity campaigns and wars. As we focus on striking the correct mix of heavy, medium, and light force capabilities, the heavy forces we retain should not be reconfigured outside of their operational purview. They should be improved and modernized within their level and type of warfare, and not deployed to, or left in places, such as Bosnia, after the implementation force is complete.

Warfighters Fight Wars

Heavy divisions should stay out of the peacekeeping business and focus solely on warfighting. Extensively using troops from heavy divisions for peacekeeping operations during the 1990s should be viewed as something we have successfully gotten away with, done only when no other type of soldier is available.

The primary reason to avoid sending heavy division combat troops on peacekeeping missions is a hidden danger of eroding high-intensity combat effectiveness that might be a side effect of repeated peacekeeping. Perhaps the most overlooked and detrimental aspect of peacekeeping is how training for and conducting peacekeeping will distance the soldier's psychological focus away from the battlefield — his most basic purpose as a soldier. The purpose of engaging in combat with enemy soldiers is to kill them, take them prisoner, destroy their units and their will to fight, and seize victory on the battle-

field. Too much exposure to the constant practice of peacekeeping might diminish our Army's warrior spirit that is so very vital to successful warfare.

At the individual level, a soldier's career should include different and varied experiences — there is more to soldiering than fighting. Combat units earmarked for combat should not be used for peacekeeping. A soldier's tour in such a unit should remain focused while he is there, and not venture too far from the techniques that have been developed by armies over the centuries to condition soldiers to overcome their fear of violence and resistance to killing.⁸

Considerations to commit mainstream combat troops in military operations other than a war should only be done when deemed vital to the United States, and in such cases, combat units should function more like an army of occupation.⁹ When combat troops are sent in to conduct a military occupation, they must make it clear to the soldiers that they are occupiers: enforcers of rules set by military authorities, rules that will be obeyed by the local population. Soldiers as occupiers are constantly vigilant, and ready to engage in combat when any opposition may arise.

The benefits of keeping combat units free from peacekeeping would be many. The regular Army could narrow its focus toward the proper force structure and create units that will make up the combat-capable Army. Equally important, the training focus could go back to what it should be — honing warfighting skills and preparing for the next war.

Keeping the Sword Sharp – Focus on Doctrinally Based Capabilities

Eighteen active component divisions was the force deemed adequate to deal with an assault on West Germany by the Warsaw Pact, and also manage a simultaneous conflict in Asia — most notably on the Korean peninsula. Today, however, the Army is performing more missions than during the Cold War. The 10-division force of today is in no way, shape, or form a Cold War army, and should not be considered one. There does not need to be a direct correlation between the now obsolete two major theater wars (MTW) concept and how much force structure we need. In a more uncertain world, the two MTWs concept overinsures the country against the risk of specific regional conflicts, and detracts from global flexi-

bility.¹⁰ While threat analysis is always paramount in planning, in this period of no clear rival, we can place less emphasis on past monolithic threats, and establish doctrine as the most logical determinant for how much force structure is needed.

According to doctrine, we should retain at least two corps of heavy forces, comprised of one armored and one mechanized division each (a total of four), for high-intensity conflict in regions that support maneuver and attrition warfare. Two corps would allow the Army to start a conflict with a theater level effort, affording the Army a decisive force at the beginning of a major conflict, while reinforcements are being marshaled within the United States.

Two corps of light forces would also be maintained, containing two divisions each, for conflicts and missions in terrain best suited for these types of units. These two corps would be the doctrinally correct strength level to deal with a threat decisively. The two heavy and two light corps comprise the first eight divisions, and the two remaining are the 101st Air Assault Division, and the 82d Airborne Division; both specialty divisions that are generally used for quick deployment, and later augmentation of corps in a theater.

Subordinate to the corps and divisions, and initially separate, are the 15 enhanced National Guard brigades and the IBCT, all used for quicker deployment to hot spots that do not initially require heavy forces.

Divisions are the Best Self-Supporting Combat Organizations

While creating some independent brigades called for in the new transformation concept will allow the Army to project limited force to a hot spot, the division as an organization will more than likely keep its place in modern warfare. It is still the best self-sustaining formation for high-intensity warfare in a large theater of operations.

Doctrinally, divisions are basically comprised of three maneuver brigades: an artillery brigade-sized element, an aviation brigade, and a brigade-sized equivalent of logistics direct support to the fighting elements. It is the best fighting organization that bridges the gap between the tactical and operational levels of war. It has two headquarters: one that focuses on the near fight and is designed to fight brigades;

and one that coordinates logistics, and does most of its planning beyond the current fight. These are capabilities a brigade does not have, and it would make little sense to duplicate in a brigade-sized area of operations.

The fact that a division can fight brigades means that it can add to its three organic brigades, and easily manage four or five brigades smoothly, if a situation arises where the corps commander deems it necessary to reinforce the division that he assigns the mission of main effort. This type of command and control in a high-intensity conflict would be difficult for a brigade operating independently, and depending on the type of headquarters and staff it has, to effectively control follow-on brigades. Who is in charge of coordinating a concentration at the right time is an issue when there are several peers who have different perspectives on the situation. Frankly, when there are two or more of the same size unit, there must be a boss such as a higher level headquarters with a commander of the proper rank and experience.

Divisions also add enduring survivability to the Army. For example, during the 1950s, the Army undertook another transformation — the Pentomic Division. This organization was based on five platoons per company, five companies per battalion or battle group, and five combat brigades.¹¹ This was done so that the division had enough brigades to survive strikes by Soviet tactical nuclear weapons that might render one or more brigades combat ineffective. In this atomic age, the Army decided to disperse its brigades over a larger division area of operations, presenting less of a lucrative target and regaining a margin of safety against a strike by a tactical nuclear weapon.¹² Even if one brigade was sufficiently damaged by a strike, the division commander still had enough units to concentrate on an operation. A division such as the old Pentomic design was most definitely in need of a robust staff and headquarters element to control a widely dispersed group of brigades. The brigades, on their own, would be hard pressed to continuously and accurately know the whereabouts of the other brigades.

However, the division is shaped by transformation, it will be decades before the basic design of the division

that has served armies over the past 100 years will go away. As far as the next few decades, at least 10 full-strength divisions of either heavy, light, and specialty need to remain in the inventory to train and remain ready.

When we look at the world, we see an indescribably complex and infinite array of objects and events, which cannot easily be forecast.¹³ Therefore, the right road is to abandon overly specific theater war scenarios, or overly specific threat scenarios. But those who believe that high-intensity wars and wars of attrition are historical are wrong. Even if we view the absence of the Soviet Union as a safer period, we should still maintain a minimum of 10 full-strength divisions in the Army. Even unlikely threat scenarios and the absence of a major rival do not justify further cutting of army divisions.

Accordingly, innovation and technology that allows us to enjoy superiority over many real or potential foes must not be counted on as decisive by itself. Those who believe that M1 tanks, Crusader howitzers, and other heavy equipment are obsolete are also wrong. There is still no substitute for having enough muscle in the form of heavy units organized into brigades, divisions, and corps that can ultimately compose a theater-level war effort when needed.

Many military events in the 1990s resulted favorably for the United States, despite multiple missions requiring our Army to do things and go places that was not particularly easy. The soldiers and leaders still took on the tasks, adapted, and accomplished the missions with great success. Difficulties, and minor failures were few, and resulted in no real harm to the force or the nation.

Still, we must avoid using the lopsided victory against Iraq during 1991 to measure technology's effectiveness. We should heed the lessons we experienced with the slow force projection during the Gulf War and other contingencies, while we undergo transformation. Transformation should enhance deployability, but should retain and continue to improve heavy forces that can be called on to fight high-intensity conflicts. These forces should not be reduced, they should not be used for missions out of their very difficult specialty, and they should not train in ways

that detract from their readiness to engage in the most vicious, high-intensity scenarios that we can anticipate.

Notes

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²Douglas A. Macgregor, *Breaking the Phalanx: a Design for Landpower in the 21st Century*, Praeger Press, Westport, CT, 1997, pp. 44-45.

³Philip Meilinger, "U.S. Defense Review: Forward to the Past?" *Defense News*, Vol. 16, No. 22, 6/4-10/01, p. 17.

⁴John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed*, Arms and Armour, London, 1992, p. 272. Also see the U.S. General Accounting Office Report, titled "Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air War," Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, July 1996, pp. 4-5.

⁵Hubert P. Van Tuyl, *America's Strategic Future A Blueprint for National Survival in the Millennium*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1998, p. 20.

⁶Department of the Army Memorandum, "Stationing Objectives," 26 June 2001, p. 13.

⁷Van Tuyl, p. 20.

⁸Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1995, p. xxix.

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¹⁰Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Defense Policy Choices for the Bush Administration 2001-05*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 74.

¹¹A.J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era — The U.S. Army Between Korea and Vietnam*, National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, 1986, p. 5.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 82.

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