



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## Arming the U.S. Military for the Future

by Daniel R. DePetrìs

There is a huge debate brewing in Washington today about the current health and state of the U.S. Military. And with good reason; virtually every branch of the military has been stretched to the brink over the past decade. 100,000 American soldiers are expected to be in Afghanistan by the end of this summer; 50,000 American troops will remain in Iraq for at least another year; and nearly 30,000 are deployed in South Korea as a deterrent against North Korean aggression. All of this is not to be outdone by the tens of thousands more who are stationed in bases all across the European continent.

Unfortunately, these numbers only scratch the surface. Troop strength and deployment schedules fail to take on the more controversial issues of the force, like the billions upon billions of dollars that are being poured into the military from American taxpayers, and the billions it costs just to maintain America's current equipment.

Sensing that the U.S. Military is in trouble, perhaps it's not surprising that hardline Republicans in the U.S. Congress- and some hawkish members of President Obama's administration- are desperately lobbying for even more funding and resources into the Department of Defense (DoD).

Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, is just the latest advocate for increased military spending. But he's hardly the only one pushing for a more modern force. Some of the most influential defense specialists in the United States- from both the Democratic and Republican Parties- just sat down and cranked out a report arguing for more high-tech laser guided missiles, a revamped missile defense system, and a beefed up maritime force in the Pacific to counter China's own military upgrades.

But given America's growing national deficit, and the fact that national defense expenditures have risen in every year since 1998, it's misguided policy- even in a time of war- to continue the age old Washington adage of simply throwing money at the problem. Rather, what President Obama should do- as well as the entire defense/intelligence/security establishment- is listen to the intellectual words of America's very own Defense Secretary, Robert Gates. In a word, "adapt."

Fortunately, Defense Secretary Gates has already started this process by announcing the closure of Joint Forces Command, a move that slash the overweight bureaucracy and free up millions for other areas of the defense budget. The goal of cutting private contractors by ten percent is also a signal that the Pentagon may be easing closer to a policy of fiscal restraint.

But even with these changes, it is only the first step in adaptation. The closure of JFCOM and the capping of private contractors are not necessarily designed to set a precedent of savings in the DoD. In fact, some military analysts have suggested that the only reason that Gates' is pursuing reforms now is to preempt a future cut in defense expenditures from Congress

in the next fiscal year. What is more, shutting down JFCOM will only salvage \$240 million in expenses, which is a drop in the bucket for a bureaucracy that currently boasts an operational budget of \$700 billion.

If the Pentagon truly wants to save \$100 billion over the next five years- as Gates has indicated- it may be time for the DoD to take a good hard look at how the U.S. Military fights wars in general. Reviewing and changing long-held ideas in the national defense establishment will certainly be controversial to some in the Department, and may not sit well with some of its more hawkish members. But performing this reassessment could “kill two birds with one stone.” It would prove to be enormous in terms of how the Pentagon saves money, and it would be extremely beneficial for how the U.S. Military prepares for a future conflict.

Thankfully, the U.S. Military already has a reason to change its tactics in war; the nature of international conflict itself has changed markedly from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the exception of the weeks-long campaign to unseat Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the world has not seen a major conventional conflict since Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

Rather, what we have witnessed over the past decade is a transformation in small wars and the spread of intra-state conflict in virtually every corner of the globe. Sunni insurgents remain active in Iraq, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia continue to fight the Columbian Government, non-state actors in Pakistan grow stronger by the day, and terrorist operatives hide in the shadows in Europe. Great power politics- while still alive- is kept in check by the interconnectivity of globalization in all of its forms.

In short, insurgencies and other types of asymmetric warfare have replaced the more conventional form that most states have grown so accustomed to fighting. Non-state actors, including terrorists, criminal syndicates, and sectarian militias, are now major players in the game.

As a consequence of non-state involvement in global conflict, the United States has had no choice but to confront and contain a host of adversaries that are far more diverse than any nation-state. Most are small, highly spread out, and decentralized in structure. And unfortunately, it is this decentralized command that is making it extremely difficult for U.S. and allied forces to track them and disrupt their plans. The adversary is now dispersed in multiple countries, allowing the organization as a whole to survive despite persistent bombing campaigns from western forces. Unfortunately, this fact is compounded by America’s dependency on conventional weapons.

Military scholars may find it helpful to use the U.S. war with Al’Qaeda (AQ) as an appropriate case study.

Despite the thousands of bombs that U.S. authorities have unleashed on extremist strongholds in Pakistan, AQ still retains the capability to plan, coordinate, and execute attacks globally. AQ as an organization has evolved the way it conducts its business over the past decade from a highly cohesive conglomerate into a more scattered and transatlantic network of fighters organized within semi-autonomous cells. AQ’s global reach on multiple fronts has allowed it to withstand big setbacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. But perhaps most of all, members of AQ have been smart enough to partner with local allies, giving them support, sanctuary, and a steady supply of fighters willing to export jihad on western targets. To put it bluntly, Osama bin-

Laden can go to bed knowing that his jihadist movement (to say nothing of his jihadi narrative) would be kept alive by proxies in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

With this in mind, it's increasingly hard to see the U.S. or any other state curtailing these kinds of enemies through the use of fighter planes, battle tanks, and "D-Day" landings. The limits of conventional weaponry- coupled with the Pentagon's budget crisis- should prompt the U.S. Military to look at new methods of conducting the fight.

A reliance on human intelligence, weapons sales to strategic allies, and intelligence coordination between the U.S. and indigenous forces would be a more reliable and effective tool for fighting an evolving enemy such as AQ. Embedding covert teams in "hot spot" areas is far cheaper than building another generation of bomber aircraft, even if these aircraft can exert more damage on enemy positions in the short-term. Intelligence sharing between Washington and Riyadh, or Washington and Ramallah, or Washington and Jakarta, pressures the enemy in almost every direction. Building trust with locals, whether in the remote villages of southern Afghanistan or in the sprawling metropolis of Baghdad, would provide U.S. forces with tips on the way terrorists think and the types of tactics that other "unfriendly's" use. Through a long lasting and sustained campaign of trust with local actors, the United States could thwart attacks before they are operationalized. But perhaps most importantly, a dependence on human intelligence could capture fighters who may possess useful information on potential attacks. Drone aircraft, Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) and Tomahawk cruise missiles cannot perform this role (according to the Federation of American Scientists, the average cost for a single Tomahawk missile is approximately \$1.4 million).

Finally, transferring weapons to strategic allies enables the U.S. defense establishment to make some much-needed profit from weapons sales, which could be diverted into offices and initiatives that are struggling to be kept afloat.

Different threats require different strategies and tactics, as Secretary Gates has repeatedly argued. It just so happens that these same strategies can serve U.S. security interests while ushering in a brand new era of fiscal restraint at the Pentagon. The alternative as proposed by former Defense Secretary William Perry and former Central Intelligence Director Stephen Hadley- pumping more money into conventional forces- would guide the Pentagon in the exact opposite direction.

The global strategic and economic environment is drastically shifting. The U.S. Military can make the most of the shift by considering it as an opportunity to improve itself.

*Daniel R. DePetrìs is a graduate candidate in the political science department at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. He is also a contributor and student analyst at the Institute of National Security and Counterterrorism (INSCT). The views expressed above are entirely his own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Syracuse University or the INSCT.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).

