American’s National Guard: A Force for Irregular War and Homeland Security

John Maier

The recent debate surrounding the size and structure of National Guard attack helicopter forces calls into question the legitimacy of a historical and outdated archetype. That is the practice of modeling reserve component forces to reflect the composition of active duty forces. In the modern era, a new construct is called for. In order to create greater response options, our National Guard forces should be retooled for asymmetrical warfare and domestic utilization, while our active duty forces should maintain their kinetic combat supremacy. Since the end of WW II, reserve forces have been constructed to mirror the active duty force structure in capabilities, (i.e., armor, artillery, aviation, etc.) as well as in organization. (i.e., unit types, force structure, specializations, etc.) This paradigm is outdated, irrelevant, and limits national security response options. Historically, the purpose of the reserve force was to “fill the gap” between the consumption of active duty forces by a peer competitor engaging in general to total war and the mobilization of society necessary to outfit new forces through reindustrialization and conscription. This scenario has never emerged and is not expected. The U.S. enjoys unparalleled technological superiority in mechanized warfare, while maintaining generally amiable relations with those nations that could be considered peer competitors. The main security threat facing the United States today is from irregular actors engaging in increasingly lethal attacks launched from illicit safe havens. The current mirroring of reserve forces with active forces maintains duplication for the least likely scenario, long-term industrial warfare, while leaving almost no capacity for the most likely scenario, asymmetrical warfare. Maintaining this replication is a mistake. The defense establishment must start building for what is actually happening instead of investing in what is unlikely to happen. In doing so, we must accept that the most likely threats to the nation and its people exist along non-state fault lines, such as terrorism, regional unrest, small wars, and emergency relief operations at home and abroad. These missions do not require industrial warfare militaries and in many ways are the antitheses of industrialized warfare. They do require increased civilian engagement, extensive coalition cooperation, information operations, and SOF capabilities, all applied against limited objectives. These capabilities embody a different type of military then the fire and maneuver force that currently comprises both the active and reserve components.

If they reveal anything, the U.S. military engagements of the past twenty years (Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and GWOT) demonstrate a permanent shift in the conduct of modern warfare. An affirmation of British General Rupert Smith’s claim that industrial warfare is a historical remnant, while modern warfare has evolved among the people, requiring that actions be fought on a limited scope where the controlling variable is the behaviors and attitudes of the effected population. Warfare for the foreseeable future, say thirty years or alternatively, the careers of today’s privates and lieutenants, is going to consist of
repetitive, limited engagements conducted under complicated political arrangements between unstructured parties, for limited ends, in unfamiliar, often urban, environments. Realizing the permanency of irregular warfare, the corresponding need for limited operations, and the current domestic financial crises confronting our military, we see that in many ways today’s operating conditions will remain for the foreseeable future. As an additional factor, military organizations are becoming burdened with greater participation in domestic missions such as disaster relief and security operations each with its own political concerns. Regrettably, current defense planning reflects a strategy of returning to peer-competitor industrial warfare fought in support of defined objectives. These plans are driving procurement cycles deigned to pursue increased technological acquisitions set against the cost savings of reduced manpower. This paradigm is the opposite of that needed for resourcing the requirements for irregular, population centric warfare. In application we are facing a future of warfare we are not preparing for.

That is not to say that America’s military does not face peer competitor threats or that we should sacrifice our hard won edge in industrial warfare. The maintenance of peer to peer industrialized capability holds merit as the application of Phase II & III (seize/dominance) direct force will still be necessary, though applied for ends short of the complete destruction of the enemy. What is needed in addition to a kinetic capability is a permanent capability for the multitude of Phase IV (stabilize) operations falling outside of peer to peer maneuver warfare. Such a capability must be efficient, economic, and enduring. This problem is not without solution, a nation as talented, educated, and well resourced as the United States should not want for the means to secure itself or its interests. Today’s variables present an opportunity to reconfigure a key component of our armed forces in order to create the necessary capability for future war while preserving our industrial warfare might. In the face of current international crises the procurement driven, industrial warfare model can no longer be exclusively maintained. Peer competitors may emerge and must be planned for; however, our military cannot be structured solely for state on state warfare, especially in light of the plain fact that such engagements are the least likely form of conflict to take place. Now that a temporary lull in operational missions is upon us there is a brief opportunity to create greater operational flexibility and greater options for decision makers by restructuring the National Guard for precisely the types of missions that organization has repeatedly successfully executed.

Arguments for revamping the entire military based solely on asymmetrical threats will not be successful. Currently, resources drive strategy which drives procurements, procurements which have cyclic backing among the numerous parties. Maintaining the current construct will not allow for the type of radical transformation some advocate. Due to the current conflict, the nation would be under threat during any period of transformation with the services conducting combat operations. Institutional degradation caused by reconfiguring an army at war would hinder transformation resulting in reduced capabilities. These conditions create an inability to currently retool our active component forces so long as GWOT remains. This does not mean, however, that we cannot create the necessary irregular warfare response capability while supporting the citizenry at home. There is great efficiency to be gained within the structure of the National Guard. Based on its dual state-federal nature, the National Guard must always be prepared for its wartime role while also conducting defense support to civil authorities. The capabilities for both are remarkably similar. Asymmetrical warfare calls for flexible, mobile forces, such as light infantry, military police, rotary wing aviation, psychological operations, public affairs, civil affairs, horizontal engineers, field surgical hospitals, tactical-level military intelligence, and cultural awareness/language. Much of this capability already exists within the National Guard. The National Guard has built a homeland based response force over ten essential capabilities: Aviation/Airlift, Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear Response, Engineering, Medical, Communications, Transportation, Security, Logistics, Maintenance and Command and Control. These capabilities correspond with the identified capabilities for irregular warfare. Through precise, limited transformation existing National Guard capabilities could be
adapted to provide a dedicated dual use Asymmetrical Warfare-Defense Support to Civil Authorities response option.

The Army’s current Operations Manual describes full spectrum operations as offense, defense, stability, and civil support operations, assigning these across Joint (Overseas) Campaigns and Homeland Security missions. Offensive and defensive operations are dedicated to the traditional war-fighting tasks of the past century such as movement to contact, attack, and mobile defense. The other two operations, stability and civil support, present different operating tasks, such as providing civil security, restoring essential services, support to governance, and support to disaster response or terrorist attack. These tasks fall across the spectrum of operations occurring in Phases IV-stabilization, counterinsurgency, peace operations, and defense support to civil authorities. They do not require armored fighting vehicles, artillery, or attack helicopters; nor do they require multilayered computer interconnected command and control modules permeating every decision cycle. What they do require is cultural awareness, social understanding, diverse transportation assets, human based intelligence, expeditionary medicine, community policing, information operations, civil support, mission command orders, and above all good, quality human capital. These capabilities are well established in the National Guard and are exercised everyday by Guardsmen across the war fight and the homeland defense missions. Many of the deeper irregular warfare skills, such as language, cultural studies, and counterinsurgency techniques can be institutionalized in National Guard units who traditionally retain unit members for longer tours than their active duty counterparts and therefore, can retain long-term skill sets within their personnel. Building and retaining geographic and cultural specialization within National Guard personnel will lead to cost savings and deeper operational capabilities. This gains additional relevance as many of these skill sets run across the spectrum of operations, including civil-military relations, security operations, information operations, restoration of essential services, and support to governance, all within the joint interagency environment.

National Guard capabilities and personnel are prepackaged in a modular structure across the Guard, providing an independent task organization from Company to Division level. This becomes an attractive attribute when applied against the long duration of a fluid counterinsurgency effort which can ebb and flow as the campaign is progressively waged. National Guard resources can be tailored depending on force size and capabilities needed. National Guard resourcing could also be institutionalized through modeling similar to the current Army AFORGEN model which anticipates uniform National Guard rotations occurring one year within every five years. Such a policy of rotations should be implemented and accepted as an operational reality. Modification to one year within four or even three years could reduce needed force structure, while producing operational experience in the Guard. Deployment cost could be offset by permanently converting National Guard heavy force structure into irregular warfare and DSCA capabilities. Operational flexibility would be maintained by keeping active component heavy combat based capabilities at the highest ratios feasible. Current force mixtures would be altered, but not abandoned. Active Duty and Reserve Component forces would continue to integrate in training and operations as they do now. The future difference would be that such integration would be complementary not duplicative. Though Guard structures currently lend themselves to assignment of hybrid operations, these alone are not enough. Certain retooling of National Guard units, equipment, and personnel will have to be methodically implemented across several years. Additionally, certain DOTMLPF changes for the Guard should be implemented when necessary. This is not to say that we abandon current doctrine, so much as to acknowledge that different mission sets for different components will require unique doctrine, facilities, funding, and improved statutory authorities.

Operational utilization for these forces will not be limited to the overseas war fight. In order to capitalize on the cost-saving benefit of the domestic National Guard, future homeland security and civil support needs should be achieved by direct Department of Homeland Security utilization of the Guard. Previously,
major domestic National Guard responses have wisely utilized the provision of federal enablers while employing the Guard’s unique domestic operational depth and ability under state control. This has repeatedly and successfully been achieved by utilizing the provisions of US Code Title 32 to provide federal funds to the state controlled National Guard. Such missions as Hurricane Katrina, Operation Jump-Start, and the National Guard’s Counter Drug program operated this way to good effect. Currently Title 32 limits the provision of operating funds and authorities to the Department of Defense. This encumbers interagency National Guard support options with lengthy reimbursement mechanisms and complex interagency agreements. Neither of which is necessary, minor modifications to Title 32 would enable direct utilization of the Guard by the Department of Homeland Security subject to the provisions of operating funds and Secretary of Defense acquiescence. This would lead to significantly increased operation depth for the Department of Homeland Security, while recouping the enormous multi-decade commitment the taxpayer has already invested in the National Guard. It would also save lives, prevent suffering, aid business continuity, and enhance community based efforts.

Transformation of National Guard force structure for asymmetrical warfare will lead to greater deterrent and response options with significant cost savings. The new operational paradigm confronting the U.S. requires a permanent force structure for those operations occurring outside of the scope of industrial warfare. Concerns about retaining industrial warfare capability could be alleviated by instituting a methodical rebuilding of the necessary combined arms capability back into the Army and Air Force Reserves. This could be done by the transfer of surplus personnel and equipment that will occur as a byproduct of the planned active duty force structure drawdown. Creating multiple sourcing options across the full operational spectrum will provide dedicated industrial war fighter capabilities while providing for asymmetrical warfare activities such as counterinsurgency, peace operations, and Phase IV stabilization. Current budget deficits and reported cuts in manpower are demonstrative of a future of reduced resourcing. Moving forward into the era of modern warfare, the National Guard should no longer emulate the Active Duty unit organizational model which focuses on major kinetic combat operations, but should instead be organized, trained and equipped as an asymmetrical warfare force primarily for irregular warfare, peace operations, and limited interventions. Not only will this realignment provide the United States with greater response options globally, it would provide for increased civil support capabilities at home. This capability will be built by the Department of Defense for operational themes short of major kinetic combat operations while exercised by the Department of Homeland Security as an operational enterprise across appropriate domestic mission sets. Secretary of Homeland Security execution will be enabled by modifying the current language in U.S. Code Title 32 to include missions performed at the request of the Secretary of Homeland Security, pursuant to Secretary of Defense concurrence. Now and in the future, our nation will face asymmetrical threats ranging the spectrum from limited war to global criminality. Reconfiguring one of our reserve components to deal with these threats is a prudent measured action that will provide greater options for policymakers while leading to effective solutions abroad and at home.

About the Author
John Maier

John Maier is currently an AGR Lieutenant Colonel serving as an Operational Law Judge Advocate at the National Guard Bureau. He is a former 18 Series NCO, MI Officer, and Operations Officer and has served on several Special Ops TF Deployments as a Support Officer. He is a graduate of The Citadel, The University of Akron School of Law, and The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School.


Links:
{1} http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/john-maier

Copyright © 2015, Small Wars Foundation.

Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our Terms of Use.
Please help us support the Small Wars Community.