One War or Two Wars?

MICHAEL O'HANLON

Research Associate,
The Brookings Institution

Refusing the recommendations of a Congressionally mandated commission known as the National Defense Panel, Secretary of Defense William Cohen sent a letter to Capitol Hill late in 1997 insisting that the United States must maintain a military capable of winning two overlapping wars that each resemble Desert Storm in scale and character. In his view, retaining that capability is part and parcel of playing the role of global superpower, and must not be surrendered.

Secretary Cohen's decision to stand by the two-Desert-Storm paradigm came as no surprise. His own Pentagon plan, the Quadrennial Defense Review, had formally reaffirmed that approach to sizing U.S. military forces just seven months earlier. And the Congressionally mandated commission suggested no specific alternative to the two-Desert-Storm requirement. Its vague musings on the subject hardly form the basis for a new national military strategy.

Specifically, the National Defense Panel stated that "the two-theater war construct has been a useful mechanism for determining what forces to retain as the Cold War came to a close...But, it is fast becoming an inhibitor to reaching the capabilities we will need in the 2010–2020 time frame."[1] The National Defense Panel appears to view the two-Desert-Storm concept as little more than a bureaucratic device with more relevance to the Department of Defense's internal politics and organizational requirements than to real-world threats. The fact of the matter, however, is that the Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-Il regimes still

hold power in their respective countries and pose acute threats to important U.S. interests. We cannot drop the current two-war construct until we are convinced that its successor would provide adequate deterrent and defense capabilities vis-à-vis these and other threats.

Still, in a broader sense, the Defense Panel is right and Cohen is wrong. Being able to handle overlapping crises or conflicts in two different places is indeed a sound strategic pillar on which to base U.S. military forces. But positing simultaneous replays of Desert Storm, most likely in Korea and the Persian Gulf, smacks of preparing to fight the last war. Moreover, it presupposes that we would use virtually identical types and numbers of forces in both places—roughly six to seven ground-combat divisions including Army and Marine Corps units, ten wings of Air Force aircraft, four to five Navy aircraft carrier battle groups, and various other assets—in both cases. Whether the war was on the open desert of the Arabian peninsula or the Bosnia-like terrain of Korea, and whether we were joined in combat only by our relatively weak allies in the Gulf or South Korea's fine military, the same cookie-cutter U.S. force package would be deployed to the fight.[2]

In addition, the two-Desert-Storm construct keeps the Pentagon's planned forces and weapons too expensive in light of the constraints imposed by the recent balanced-budget deal. Total defense spending of $265 billion in 1998, already down roughly $100 billion in inflation-adjusted terms from the 1980s average and $50 billion from the overall Cold War norm, is to drop to $250 billion by 2002. At that point, the active-duty military will consist of 1.36 million uniformed individuals, down roughly one-third from Cold War levels. According to the Congressional Budget Office, that annual defense spending level will probably be at least $20 billion shy of what will be needed to properly and sustainably fund the force.[3]

The basic problem is simple. Defense personnel and operating costs are still declining, but only modestly. Even if the Pentagon succeeds in getting Congress to authorize more base closures and in privatizing more non-combat support activities, savings from defense efficiencies will come in slowly and relatively modestly at first. Meanwhile, the 1990s "procurement holiday" is nearing its end, and weapons spending will soon have to go up. Because of the Reagan buildup and the selective retirement of older weapons after the Cold War, the Pentagon has not needed to buy very much equipment this decade. Procurement has represented only about 15 percent of total Pentagon spending. However, the historical

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norm is closer to 25 percent, and tomorrow's advanced weapons may lay claim to an even larger share of defense funds than that.[4]

Some believe that future federal surpluses might relieve the looming defense budget crunch. For example, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who once described himself as a "cheap hawk," wrote in the February 9, 1998 *National Review* that last year's balanced-budget deal should be modified to permit some fiscal relief for the Pentagon. But most politicians appear more inclined to use the surplus for tax cuts, paydowns on the $5 trillion federal debt, entitlement reform, or domestic initiatives than a peacetime defense buildup.[5] I believe that the Pentagon should lobby for at least a small share of any surplus, if not right away then around the time of its next quadrennial defense review (presumably in 2001). But it is unlikely to obtain the full $20 billion in additional annual spending that will soon be required.

Thankfully, there is a way out of the budgetary dilemma that should not harm U.S. military readiness, forward presence, global deterrence, or U.S. military research and development (thus also avoiding damage to America's future military). With a well-conceived approach, the United States can protect the elements of its armed forces and security posture that are most critical to its central role in the world.

One part of the solution is to take advantage of our overwhelming technological advantages over potential foes, together with our ability to modernize existing forces by relatively inexpensive upgrades to their communications, sensors, and munitions, and scale back purchases of next-generation weapons platforms like F-22 fighters, V-22 tilt-rotor helicopters, F/A-18 E/F multipurpose aircraft, and DDG-51 destroyers.[6] The procurement budget would still have to go up substantially next decade, but not as much as under current plans.

In addition, Secretary Cohen should revise current warfighting strategy from the two-Desert-Storm construct to something that might be loosely called a "Desert Storm plus Desert Shield" approach. Desert Shield was the 200,000-strong U.S. deployment intended to protect Saudi Arabia from any Iraqi attack in 1990. Desert Storm, by contrast, employed half a million American troops to force Saddam's troops out of Kuwait. This alternative approach would still require 90 percent as many active-duty forces as current plans, since it would need to include a cushion for peacekeeping missions and for warfighting insurance. (Added backup would exist in the Army National Guard, which retains almost as much combat force structure as the active Army, but would send less than 20 percent of its combat units to war under the two-Desert Storm plan.)[7] But the 10 percent troop cut—which could be made partly by reducing numbers of combat units and partly by reducing the sizes of certain units that were retained—would be enough to get the Pentagon out of its budgetary fix. There are three reasons why such a plan makes sense.

The Potency of Smaller Forces

First, a 200,000-strong Desert Shield force would be extremely effective. Once deployed, it could defend allied territory and key military infrastructure like bases and airfields against virtually any armored threat the United States might face in the world today. U.S. commanders felt confident that they could have defended Saudi Arabia with such a force once it was deployed in October of 1990. Its airpower component, nearly as large and capable as that of a Desert Storm force, could wreak havoc on an enemy's military and industrial infrastructure. It could carry out certain types of offensives on land too. Indeed, Schwarzkopf and company considered developing plans to evict Saddam from Kuwait with just this force before deciding to ask the president to double the deployment.[8]

Odds are continually improving that such a Desert Shield-like force could be deployed in time to prevent significant loss of allied territory in a future conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has stored more equipment in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asian regions and purchased more fast sealift. In addition to forces routinely deployed overseas, including about 37,000 in South Korea and roughly half that many in the Persian Gulf region, there are Army brigade sets of equipment in Korea and Kuwait, another afloat at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, and lead elements of a fourth in Qatar. Marine brigade-equivalent sets are prepositioned at sea at Diego Garcia, Guam, and the Mediterranean. All of these units could be "married up" with troops airlifted from the States within a week or so. Just as importantly, significant stocks of Air Force precision-guided munitions are now predeployed overseas as well.[9] Stopping an enemy quickly and then continuing to pound it from the air might make a major ground counteroffensive unnecessary—or at least reduce the urgency with which it would have to be conducted, should the unlikely scenario of two overlapping major wars come to pass.

The Decline of Key Threats

Second, the Iraqi and North Korean military machines are notably weaker than they were several years ago—with few prospects for getting much stronger anytime soon. This fact increases the odds that a Desert Shield force, together with regional friends of the United States, could prevent any significant loss of allied territory in a future conflict. It also means that 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. troops might prove sufficient for many types of counterattack, including some ground-force counteroffensives, in subsequent phases of battle.

Whatever problems Saddam may be causing for the United States and international community at present, his conventional military forces remain only about half the size and strength they were in 1990. As opposed to his pre–Desert

Storm inventory of 5,500 tanks, for example, he now has 2,700; the total number of light tanks and armored personnel carriers is down from 7,500 to 3,000; troop levels have declined from 1,000,000 to 400,000.[10]

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported in 1997 that, while North Korea's military remains dangerously poised near Seoul, its "capability to conduct large-scale combat operations continues to deteriorate as worsening internal economic conditions undermine training, readiness, and sustainment." The DIA's 1998 threat assessment has since confirmed, unsurprisingly, that the decline continues.[11] In addition, though the allies are powerless to prevent North Korean artillery, missiles, and special forces from inflicting enormous damage on Seoul, North Korean armored forces are even more obsolescent than Iraq's. In any invasion attempt, those weak armored forces would have to cross the most militarized swath of land on the planet, and do so off roads and bridges that would surely be destroyed in the early minutes of any attempted invasion. If attacking near Seoul through the Chorwon or Munsan corridors, they would need to cross the Han or Imjin rivers, and though those rivers routinely freeze in the winter, their ice might not prove strong enough to support a large armored force (especially when being bombed by allied aircraft and pounded by artillery). North Korean chemical weapons, commandos deploying through tunnels, and forward-deployed dug-in artillery could admittedly complicate the battle. But the bottom line is that North Korean armored forces would have great difficulty exploiting any weaknesses that they might somehow manage to develop in allied lines.[12]

The Strength of the South Koreans

Third, its recent economic troubles notwithstanding, South Korea's armed forces are much improved and still getting better. A "hold strategy" would be likely to work on the peninsula even if no U.S. reinforcements arrived before or during the first days of battle. South Korea, together with the U.S. Army's 2nd Infantry Division and forward-based American airpower, could wreak great damage on the North Koreans and stop the assault well north of Seoul with high confidence of success.

Although it possesses less armor than North Korea, the Republic of Korea's technological edge evens out the overall military balance of tanks, artillery, airplanes, and other heavy equipment between the two countries. For example, on a per-weapon basis, South Korea's tanks are nearly the equal of the U.S. inventory; the Korean K1 is based on our M1 and in fact shares a number of important components with it. Factoring in South Korea's superior readiness as well, it undoubtedly possesses net superiority over the North. By examining a wide body of historical battle outcomes, Colonel Trevor Dupuy estimated that such readiness factors can at least double combat capability. Yet as Lawrence Korb revealed three

years ago, the Pentagon's models somehow assume that South Korean soldiers would in fact fight *less well* than North Koreans.[13] No wonder the models predict that Seoul would be lost in a future war!

The Republic of Korea also fields a force that is extremely well postured to stop any invasion attempt. Historically, attackers attempting to penetrate directly through such densely prepared positions have usually advanced at most a couple kilometers a day—even when they were not technologically outclassed by their opponent, as the North Koreans certainly are in this case. Given the lethality of modern airpower, and the ability of the United States to quickly fly combat jet reinforcements to the region, such a slow pace of advance—even if it proved possible—would be a recipe for disaster for Pyongyang. (The United States and Republic of Korea have potent airpower in the region at all times, but if North Korea chose a heavily overcast day to attack, that airpower might not be very effective at first.) Nor could North Korea pull off a "left hook" or bypass the allies' "Korean Maginot Line." Defenses extend across the peninsula, and the allies enjoy overwhelming dominance in all-weather day-night reconnaissance systems that keep a careful eye on all significant troop movements.[14]

Conclusion

These arguments should not be pushed too far. If we ever decided to overthrow Saddam or Kim Jong-Il, large U.S. forces would probably be needed in order to mount a major ground counteroffensive. If an enemy pulled off a massive coordinated surprise attack or used nuclear weapons, Desert Shield forces could also prove insufficient. Also, war could occur in a place where we have important interests yet are less well prepared to respond quickly. For these and other reasons, keeping the capability for a single Desert-Storm-like war, as well as smaller deployments elsewhere, is critical. But planning for two overlapping Desert Storms is too much.

These ideas are in fact nothing new. A similar approach was considered by then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin in 1993. Known as a "win-hold-win" strategy, it envisioned completing an all-out war in one theater while holding the line in a second. Once the first war was completed, troops could be redeployed to reinforce the U.S. position in the second theater and permit a major counteroffensive operation there too. But this caricature of the strategy understated its actual military capabilities and doomed it to rejection. Subsequently derided as "win-hold-oops" for the excessive risk it allegedly introduced into war plans, it never stood a chance bureaucratically or politically.[15]

A Desert Shield capability, with its awesome airpower and other long-range strike systems, can do far more than hold a defensive line while waging attrition warfare. In addition, South Korea is among our very best and most ca-

pable military allies in the world, and Pentagon war plans should stop underrating its strength. In fact, then chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Aspin had emphasized the differences between the Korean and Persian Gulf theaters in a well-known defense white paper—regrettably that analysis never seemed to make it across the river to the Pentagon with him, or anyone else since.[16]

These are the kinds of arguments the National Defense Panel should have emphasized. Mr. Cohen might have had a harder time refuting them.

Notes

1. See National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century* (December 1997), 23.

2. See Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review,* Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, October 1993, 13-22; and Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 1997, 12-13, 24-26, 30.

3. For a concurrent view, see Steven Kosiak, "Cost of Defense Plan Could Exceed Available Funding by $26 Billion a Year Over Long Run," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments,* Washington, DC, 2 April 1998.

4. For more detail, see Michael O'Hanlon, *How to Be a Cheap Hawk: The 1999 and 2000 Defense Budgets* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998), Chapters 1 and 2; for a related earlier view, see Dov Zakheim, "Tough Choices: Toward a True Strategic Review," *National Interest,* no. 47 (Spring 1997): 32-43.

5. See Robert D. Reischauer, "Those Surpluses: Proceed with Caution," *Washington Post,* 21 September 1997; Philip Finnegan, "U.S. Defense Spending Hike Support Wanes," *Defense News,* January 26-February 1, 1998: 3.

6. See Eliot A. Cohen, "A Revolution in Warfare," *Foreign Affairs,* 75, no. 2 (March/April 1996): 37-54.

7. See Frances Lussier, *Structuring the Active and Reserve Army for the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Budget Office, December 1997, 11.

8. See Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 123-141; Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* Washington: Brassey's, 1994, 121-128.

9. See Rachel Schmidt, *Moving U.S. Forces: Options for Strategic Mobility,* Washington, D.C.: Congressional Budget Office, 1997, 36, 40.

10. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 1990-1991* (Oxford, U.K.: Brassey's, 1990),105; and IISS, *The Military Balance 1997/98* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127. For measures of capability that factor in equipment quality as well as quantity, see Michael O'Hanlon, *Defense Planning for the Late 1990s: Beyond the Desert Storm Framework* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995), 43.

11. Statement of Lieutenant General Patrick Hughes, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Global Threats and Challenges to the United States and its Interests Abroad," 5 February 1997, 6; Tim Weiner, "U.S. Spy Agencies Find Scant Peril on Horizon," *New York Times,* 29 January 1998: A3.

12. For what little is publicly available about the Pentagon's expectations for a future Korean war and its operations plan 5027, see Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 313-325; for a more detailed assessment of the Korean military balance, see Michael O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea is Easier than the

Pentagon Thinks," *International Security*, 22, no. 2 (Spring 1998).

13. Trevor N. Dupuy, *Attrition: Forecasting Battle Casualties and Equipment Losses in Modern War* (Fairfax, Va.: HERO Books, 1990), 105-110, 148; Lawrence J. Korb, "Our Overstuffed Armed Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, 74, no. 6 (November/December 1995): 25.

14. Barry R. Posen, "Measuring the European Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment," *International Security*, 9, no. 3 (Winter 1984/85), in Steven E. Miller, ed., *Conventional Forces and American Defense Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 114.

15. Barton Gellman and John Lancaster, "U.S. May Drop Two-War Capability; Aspin Envisions Smaller, High-Tech Military to 'Win-Hold-Win,'" *Washington Post*, 17 June 1993: A1.

16. Les Aspin, "Aspin Shows Defense Alternatives," News Release, U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, 25 February 1992, 23-24.