

7-1-2008

Expand the U.S. Military? Not So Fast

Steven Metz Dr.
SSI

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials

Recommended Citation

Metz, Steven Dr., "Expand the U.S. Military? Not So Fast" (2008). *Articles & Editorials*. 239.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/239

This Op Ed is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Editorials by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.



July 2008

EXPAND THE U.S. MILITARY? NOT SO FAST

Dr. Steven Metz
Strategic Studies Institute

Today there is bipartisan support for increasing the size of the U.S. military, particularly the land forces. While conservatives like Frederick Kagan and Thomas Donnelly have provided the most detailed rationale, even liberals like Barack Obama agree. At first glance, this seems like a common sense step to alleviate the stress on the military and prepare for future security challenges. But is it? When the rationale for expansion is carefully dissected, its desirability is not so clear.

Expanding American ground forces is necessary if one or both of two things are true. The first is whether the United States will need to sustain a major military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan for an extended period of time. If so, we need a larger Army and Marine Corps to increase the interval between deployments, thus protecting the quality of life for service members and providing time for training and professional development. Certainly Iraq and Afghanistan badly stress the Army and the Marine Corps. This must be addressed before American land forces sustain irreparable damage. But enlarging the ground forces may not be the best way to do this. It will be years before an expanded force produces more noncommissioned, company, and field grade officers—the groups most affected by the current pace of deployment. New units will need leaders, thus increasing the demand for noncommissioned, company, and field grade officers even more.

In the broader sense, if Iraq and Afghanistan still need a large scale American troop presence after the 5 years or so expansion would take, then the United States should reconsider its commitment to those nations, perhaps removing them from the life support provided by the U.S. military. If they cannot stand with only modest help by then, they may never. Had the expansion begun several years ago, the military might not be as stressed as it is today. But beginning it now is simply addressing last year's problem with next year's money.

Expanding the military also makes sense if its mission is to undertake future

operations like Iraq and Afghanistan—large scale, protracted counterinsurgency support and stabilization activities. This is the main rationale for expansion. But should it be? A powerful case can be made that outside the Western Hemisphere, the strategic and economic costs of U.S. involvement in large scale, protracted counterinsurgency or stabilization outweigh the benefits. Supporters of expansion often contend that the United States must undertake counterinsurgency or stabilization because “ungoverned spaces” provide a breeding ground or haven for transnational terrorists. This is an unsubstantiated assumption. Al-Qaeda did not operate in Afghanistan because that nation was ungoverned. Al-Qaeda has training facilities in Pakistan because the Islamabad government elects to leave them alone. Even if the U.S. Army and Marine Corps were double their current size, this would not change. We certainly face a strategic problem in Pakistan, but expanding the U.S. military is not the cure.

Even if an insurgent movement won, it would be more effective to prevent it from providing a haven to al-Qaeda *after* it seized power than to try and prevent it from seizing power in the first place. We can coerce or remove regimes which support terrorism. We are good at it. We are not so good at the much more complex, dangerous, and expensive task of re-engineering beleaguered partners, particularly if we must do it in several places at once. Yet if we have a larger ground force, we will feel compelled to use it, undertaking costly commitments. Better to resist in the first place than to stumble into massive burdens for limited strategic gains.

For what we might spend on more ground forces, we could create a deployable law enforcement support organization, enlarge key components of the intelligence community, and improve our foreign assistance programs, thus seeking to prevent conflicts rather than put a lid on them once they explode. Or, we could strike at the heart of our security dilemmas and invest more in ending our petroleum addiction, reviving our national scientific and technological prowess, or other steps to bolster our economic competitiveness. Expanding the military makes sense if we intend to remain the world’s policeman. Doing so may not best promote the national interest.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This opinion piece is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI opinion pieces should contact the Publications Department via e-mail at SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, U.S. Army War College.”