

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 29
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 1999*

Article 6

11-18-1999

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Recommended Citation

Record, Jeffrey. "Operation Allied Force: Yet Another Wake-Up Call for the Army?." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 29, 4 (1999). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol29/iss4/6>

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Operation Allied Force: Yet Another Wake-Up Call for the Army?

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From *Parameters*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 15-23.

The recent war against Serbia underscores a post-Cold War fact of life that is bad news for the Army: the growing relative attractiveness of air power alone as a vehicle for the very kind of value-driven US military interventions that have dominated the Pentagon's operational agenda since the Soviet Union's disappearance.

America's political leadership has become hyper-averse to incurring American casualties, even among all-volunteer professionals. This is especially true in circumstances not involving clear and present dangers to vital strategic interests. That leadership has accordingly embraced air power more and more, not as a "joint" complement to surface forces, but rather as a substitute for ground power. Thus the emerging predilection for cruise missiles over manned aircraft, and manned aircraft over anything on the ground. Thus President Bill Clinton's reassurances to the American people (and to Slobodan Milosevic) during Operation Allied Force that no US ground combat option to stop Serbia's ethnic cleansing of Kosovo was in the cards.[1]

To be sure, future Presidents might not repeat this great mistake of Operation Allied Force. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that factors other than air power--most notably Russia's diplomatic defection from Serbia and NATO's backtracking on war settlement terms--played major roles in encouraging Milosevic to call it quits. Allied Force will nonetheless stand as a powerful and alluring use-of-force precedent.

Even when Iraq challenged concrete US strategic interests in the Persian Gulf a decade ago, Operation Desert Storm was crafted and conducted with American casualty minimization as the first order of business. Massive air power was employed for almost six weeks before US ground forces were exposed to combat against what by then was an already beaten Iraqi army in Kuwait. The result: only 146 American military dead out of over 500,000 committed.

Preparatory bombardment is of course hardly a new concept, and the very presence of massive US ground forces compelled Saddam Hussein to deploy his ground forces in a manner that made them good targets from the air. It is also true that Desert Storm left Saddam Hussein in power and much of his Republican Guard intact, that Allied Force actually encouraged Belgrade to accelerate its ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, and that NATO air power barely touched Serbia's fielded forces.

These facts should matter, but to some politicians and air power devotees they do not. Those contemplating the future of the Army need to understand that air power, decisive or not, is an ever more politically appealing instrument of diplomatic coercion and even of war itself than ground forces, which are regarded as especially casualty-prone. Minimizing risk--force protection--has become more important than military effectiveness. The Vietnam syndrome thrives, and Allied Force's spectacular 78-day run without a single American or allied airman killed in action will stand as a beacon to future Presidents who wish to use force without apparent risk.

The fact that all the services have sustained casualties in every other US war in this century and the fact that politicians believe the public to be more casualty-averse than it actually is should provide little comfort to Army planners; casualty aversion by the White House and Congress appears to be here to stay until the United States is confronted by a direct and convincing threat to its security.

Allied Force should trouble the Army not just because it advertised air power as an apparently safe and relatively bloodless alternative to labor-intensive ground forces. Why *AirLand* Battle if pilots and missileers can do the job

without ground pounders? The ideal of low- or no-casualty war now seems achievable through the combination of accurate stand-off munitions and the absence of any qualified strategic enemies. Nowhere in the world are there credible national defenses against American air power, and in only a few places, such as the Korean Peninsula, can one point to credibly threatened US commitments on the ground. Yet even in the case of Korea the primary burden of defeating a North Korean attack would be borne by American air power and *South Korean* ground forces. Indeed, the military balance on the peninsula has shifted so decisively and irrevocably against North Korea during the past two decades that war would be tantamount to regime suicide for Pyongyang (which admittedly the North Korean leadership may end up choosing rather than accept reunification on others' terms).

Allied Force, though it deliberately eschewed a ground combat option, also shed a harsh spotlight on the Army's intellectual and structural inadequacy in the post-Cold War international security environment. The depressing saga of the 24 Apache helicopters testified in part to a continuing professional apprehensiveness sired by the Army's soul-wrenching experience in Vietnam and reinforced by the Army's embrace of the now scarcely relevant Weinberger and Powell use-of-force doctrines. The Army leadership wanted to have nothing to do with what it wrongly--but predictably--perceived as a potential Vietnam in the Balkans. (I say wrongly because the impossibility of repetition should have been obvious in both tiny Serbia's small, poorly equipped, and professionally inexperienced army and Belgrade's complete political and military isolation; in contrast was the superb fighting power of the Vietnamese communists, who had uninterrupted political and material support from the Soviet Union and China. Serbia chose to cease hostilities after less than three months of initially desultory NATO bombing, whereas communist forces in Vietnam ultimately prevailed in an eight-year war against over 500,000 US troops and under the weight of three times the total bomb tonnage dropped by all Allied forces in World War II.)

The Army dragged its feet in response to SACEUR's request for an Apache deployment; the helicopters were deployed at a glacial pace and with a ponderous 5,000-man contingent of support troops, including ground defense forces and MLRS batteries designed to suppress possible Serbian artillery attacks on the Apaches. Additionally, the Apaches' potential effectiveness against fielded Serbian forces, certainly when compared with the US Air Force's A-10s and the Royal Air Force's Tornados and Harriers, was problematical, and the Army was in any event unwilling to place its Apaches under the control of those running the air campaign.[2] Nor could the Apaches pass the no-air-crew-risk test of conducting attack operations from a minimum altitude of 15,000 feet. It also seems that the Apache crews were not sufficiently trained for night operations.

In fact, it was never clear why the Apaches were deployed at all or whether they would have been employed absent US infantry on the ground. Ironically, the Army suffered the only American air crew losses associated with the war when two Apaches crashed on training flights in Albania.

The Army's marginal relevance to the war against Serbia was not ascribable solely to the White House's political unwillingness--strongly supported by the Army--to commit ground forces to combat. The Army remains intellectually and structurally mired in the Cold War planning environment of preparation for large-scale, high-intensity conventional war against like adversaries, even though the United States has all but run out of such enemies at least for the time being. The Army certainly has served neither itself nor the country well by hugging the Weinberger and Powell doctrines, which are prescriptions for strategic paralysis. Decisions to use force are made by Presidents, not generals, and post-Cold War Presidents have displayed an even greater propensity to use force than did their Cold War predecessors. Moreover, even if one could resolve the definitional challenges posed by the two doctrines' insistence on such use-of-force conditions as "vital interests," "public and congressional support," "last resort," and "overwhelming force," the Weinberger-Powell approach to using force would be relevant mainly in cases where the United States faced the prospect of a major and potentially protracted war with another state. Weinberger-Powell is not germane to the post-Cold War norm of small wars along the periphery of core US security interests or to diplomatic coercion via threatened and actual uses of force.

To no small extent, the Army still remains jailed by its experience in Vietnam even though that experience could never be repeated. The very memory of the war is the greatest obstacle to its repetition, and even if it were not, there do not appear to be any more Vietnams lying in wait for the United States elsewhere in the world. What potential Third World adversary could muster the fighting power that the Vietnamese communists displayed in the 1960s?

Indeed, the disappearance of the Soviet Union not only removed the chief military patron of leading Third World adversaries of the United States, it also eliminated the traditional rationale for a big US Army--i.e., the prospect of American involvement in a great-power war on the European continent. Historically this is the only scenario that has justified retention of an army much larger than that necessary for continental expansion and homeland defense in North America. The United States avoided military entanglement in Europe's politics until 1917, and after its brief participation in World War I it embarked upon two more decades of isolationism. And then, only when Nazi Germany and later the Soviet Union threatened to upset Europe's balance of power did the United States respond by placing large ground forces on the European continent in harm's way.

Yet great-power conflict has vanished in Europe. All but one of that region's former principal military contenders are now in indefinite alliance with each other, and Russia's land power and strategic military position are broken for the foreseeable future. Militarily, the United States dominates NATO, which in turn dominates Europe. There is no opposing power left to balance on the continent.

These judgments do not rule out all war. The Balkans are, well, the Balkans, and Russia at some point might attempt to reclaim some of its lost republics. But it is difficult to envisage a US defense of former Soviet republics unless they had in the meantime become members of NATO, which seems most improbable for the foreseeable future.

The Asian balance of military power was and remains sustainable without the commitment of significant US ground forces ashore on the mainland. American air and amphibious power defeated imperial Japan, and as long as postwar Japan and the other key components of insular and peninsular East Asia remain within the US security orbit, no mainland hegemon can hope to dominate the region. The decision to defend South Korea in 1950 was in fact a decision to defend Japan, and the decision to intervene in the Vietnam War 15 years later was simply a horrendous strategic mistake.

Nor can significant, if indeed any, US Army force requirements be squeezed out of the postulation of China's emergence as America's next global strategic rival over the next 20 to 50 years. The postulation itself presumes *all* of the following: the presence of historically unfounded extra-regional Chinese imperial ambitions; renewed Chinese double-digit annual GDP growth rates that vanished three years ago; continued autocracy in Beijing notwithstanding the information revolution, the emergence of a large middle class, and the growing material corruption of the communist elite; and the ability of any national government in China to accommodate explosive economic and social change. China-as-the-new-Soviet-Union also ignores China's critical dependence on the global capitalist economy. Unlike the Soviet Union, post-Mao China has sought not economic autarky but rather integration in the international economic order. It is far more dependent on foreign markets than the Soviet Union ever was and has amassed huge trade surpluses with the United States. China's stake in world trade would be threatened by any military confrontation with the United States and its East Asian allies. Moreover, to the extent that Chinese and American strategic interests clash, they do so much more across water than on land--i.e., the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and Sea of Japan--thus making it impossible for the Chinese to overthrow US interests in East Asia absent mastery of modern air and naval power, the two elements in which the Chinese military is most deficient. In sum, there is no foreseeable reason for the United States to pit its own Army against the Peoples Liberation Army.

What of the prospect of another Korean or Gulf war requiring a major Army commitment? To be sure, another war in Korea can never be dismissed as long as the current regime survives in Pyongyang. Yet deterrence has prevailed on the peninsula for a remarkable 46 years, and, as noted, the military balance has shifted decisively against the North while the South Korean army has assumed almost the entire burden of the Republic of Korea's ground defense.

In the Persian Gulf, US adversaries are not militarily impressive. Iraqi ground forces remain crippled by Operation Desert Storm and almost a decade's worth of arms embargoes and economic sanctions. Iran's once impressive conventional military forces were gutted by the revolution and eight years of war with Iraq, and Iran's geographic position in any event denies it direct overland access to the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, the common postulation of Iran as the next regional aggressor in the Gulf ignores not only the slow but steady cooling of revolutionary ardor in Iran and the budding of democratic institutions there, it also ignores the presence of such shared strategic interests between the United States and Iran as containment of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, and protection of former Yugoslavia's Muslim populations from Serbian ethnic cleansing. (To be sure,

Iranian theocracy is hardly a spent force, nor is Iran any time soon likely to resume its pre-revolutionary strategic partnership with the United States.)

An assessment performed in 1998 by the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies concluded that rogue states "face the near certainty of eventual defeat" in the event of war with the United States. "By a wide margin, their best strategy would be to avoid war with the United States. For this reason," the study continued, "even though the Persian Gulf and Korea remain dangerous places, wars [with the United States] in these locales seem unlikely." [3]

The post-Cold War world is a world predominantly of *low-technology* wars *within* states, not high-tech combat between states. The scope and incidence of large-scale interstate warfare have been declining for half a century, giving way to lesser intrastate violence spawned by the disintegration of European colonial authority and then of communist Eastern Europe. (It is important to remember that in the long pull of history the state itself is a relatively recent European invention, and that societies around the world are turning increasingly to supra- and sub-national political institutions as means of satisfying social and economic needs.) Clausewitzian great-power clashes have been superseded by smaller, politically messy wars, many of them fought by irregular forces within failed states. Policing such states has become more time- and force-consuming than preparing to refight the Korean and Gulf wars.

Demonstrated US conventional military supremacy moreover has driven our adversaries into the search for effective supra- and sub-conventional alternative weapons and strategies. The American lead in the technologies of the so-called "Revolution in Military Affairs" is incontestable because no other state can afford to compete. Not even the Soviet Union, spending on defense as it did somewhere on the order of 30-35 percent of its gross domestic product, could keep up. This means that mastery of the RMA is mastery of a war that likely will never be fought (though to the extent that it facilitates situational awareness it will be a plus at any level of combat); certainly, the Gulf War proved the futility of Third World attempts to best the West at its chosen style of warfare.

At the same time, politically assured peacetime US military access ashore in the Third World has become episodic, placing a premium on expeditionary forces. Overseas US bases and stationed forces have been reduced dramatically at the same time that the Pentagon increasingly has been called upon to fight or conduct military operations other than war in or from logistically primitive places (e.g., Somalia, Rwanda, Albania).

I do not mean to suggest that the United States has fought the last of its big conventional wars. History bulges with surprises where aggression and war are concerned, and force planners of necessity must be cautious and conservative. Both the Korean and Gulf wars, if not the Second World War and the Vietnam War, were surprises. What I am saying is that full note must be taken of the fact that we are in the midst of fundamental structural change in the international political system which is producing less and less interstate war and more and more conflicts within states.

Yet, notwithstanding the past decade's dramatically altered international security environment, the Army remains structured primarily to fight a big conventional war in Europe. Though it has shed almost 300,000 people since 1989, the active-duty Army remains organized around ten logistically and bureaucratically ponderous divisions, six of them heavy divisions trained and equipped for combat against like armies employing modern tanks and armored fighting vehicles. There is no substitute for heavy forces in wars against heavy enemies, but heavy forces cannot be deployed quickly from the United States, are terrain-constrained, have limited utility in small wars against irregular adversaries, and are ill-suited for either peacekeeping or peace-enforcement operations. Moreover, there is no potentially hostile national army in the world that comes anywhere close to matching both the human and technological quality of the US Army. The Iraqi army was gutted by US air power; the Iranian army's tank park belongs in the Smithsonian; the Russian army remains a joke after Chechnya; the North Korean army is technologically primitive and lacks staying power; and nobody in the Pentagon is planning to fight the Chinese on the ground.

To be sure, the Army is fiddling around with its heavy divisions, making them modestly lighter by shedding a dozen or so tanks and infantry fighting vehicles per battalion. It is also talking the talk of creating a new rapidly deployable strike force. But the Army plans no fundamental reorganization, such as discarding divisions in favor of smaller, more strategically mobile combat groups. Nor does the Army plan any fundamental restructuring, such as perhaps reversing the present ratio of heavy to light forces and creating units specifically trained and equipped for peace operations. (The

same case that was made for dedicated special operations forces can be made for dedicated peace operations forces.) Indeed, the Army's stated main priorities for the future are to achieve "information dominance" via digitization and to maintain its present level of "combat overmatch" vis-à-vis potential enemies by acquiring such new systems as the Comanche reconnaissance and light attack helicopter, the Crusader howitzer, and the Theater High Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile system. Its vision of the future is a digitized battlefield for the "Army After Next," complete with each soldier having computer-displayed information of the battlefield in real time.

Preserving US qualitative conventional supremacy on the ground, in the air, and at sea is imperative if for no other reason than its deterrent power. But precisely because that supremacy encourages adversaries to pursue asymmetric or unconventional strategies and weapons, the armed services must also pay sufficient attention--intellectual, budgetary, and force structural--to challenges posed by small-scale contingencies. This the Army has not done.

But this the Army must do. The issue is not whether the United States needs an army in the post-Cold War world: it does. Or whether it needs heavy forces: it does. Rather, the issue is whether the United States needs an army both lighter and more specialized for small-scale contingencies than it now has: I believe it does.

Both the outgoing Army Chief of Staff, Dennis Reimer, and the new Chief, Eric Shinseki, have recently acknowledged that the Army was ill-prepared to move forces into Kosovo in a timely manner. General Shinseki has set in motion a plan to make the Army's heavy divisions more mobile and its light divisions more deadly, and General Reimer has affirmed that a conservative, Gulf War-mesmerized Army leadership recently rejected calls by younger officers for radical post-Cold War reforms of the kind proposed by Colonel Douglas Macgregor in his 1997 book, *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century*.^[4] Those reforms, which included breaking the Army's ten divisions down into dozens of much smaller and more mobile combat groups, envisaged an army that elevated maneuver over firepower.

Tinkering around the Army's doctrinal, organizational, and structural edges will not satisfy the military demands of the post-Cold War world. Profound international political change, more than technological innovation, is determining the nature of future American uses of force. And even were the Revolution in Military Affairs the primary driver, it would be dangerously naïve, as Barry Watts has brilliantly argued, to believe that technological revolution will eliminate Clausewitzian friction in future war.^[5]

To be sure, debates over heavy versus light forces and general purpose versus contingency-specific forces are hardly new to the Army, and they have almost always been influenced by budgetary realities. Organizational and structural choices within the Army's existing budget are going to be tougher than choices would be if the Army were given greater resources. Some observers have concluded--correctly in my view--that post-Cold War force cuts in at least the Army and Air Force have been excessive in relation to the largely unanticipated post-Cold War operational demands on these services. Obviously, were the active Army given the resources to expand to, say, 12 divisions (or their sub-divisional equivalents), it could, if it so chose, retain its present investment in heavy forces, which are not only essential to conventional deterrence but also the only hedge against its failure, while expanding its investment in lighter and more specialized forces, the demand for which has soared since the Soviet Union's dissolution.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that nearly all the NATO allies opposed the use of ground troops.
2. See Bryan Bender, "Flight Delay," *The New Republic*, 10 May 1999, pp. 14-17; Michael R. Gordon with Eric Schmitt, "Attack Copters Idle as Pentagon Blocks Their Use in Kosovo," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1999; and A. Craig Copetas, "Apache Copters Inspire Awe in Balkans But They May Be the Wrong Birds for Job," *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 1999.
3. *Strategic Assessment 1998, Engaging Power for Peace* (Washington: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 1998), p. 150.
4. See Thomas E. Ricks, "Why the U.S. Army Is Ill-Equipped to Move Into Kosovo Quickly," *The Wall Street*

Journal, 16 April 1999; also, Eric Schmitt, "New Army Chief Seeks Both Agility and Power," *The New York Times*, 24 June 1989.

5. Barry D. Watts, "Clausewitzian Friction and Future War," McNair Paper 52 (Washington: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 1996).

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Reviewed 18 November 1999. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil