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Nora Bensahel

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Transforming the US Army for the Twenty-First Century

Nora Bensahel

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ABSTRACT: In an era of great power competition centered on warfighting domains other than land, the US Army faces difficult and likely painful choices. This reality, coupled with looming budget cuts, means the Army must reconsider its approach to capabilities and total force structure, its role in homeland security, and the relationship between its active and reserve components.

When the editors of *Parameters* gather a new generation of authors to celebrate the 75th or even the 100th anniversary of the journal, how will they view the articles that compose this special 50th anniversary issue? Only time will tell, of course, but certain themes already seem clear. Those authors of the future will very likely look back upon the current era as a major strategic inflection point, much like those following the end of the Second World War, the end of the Cold War, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

This strategic inflection point involves major changes in the types of wars the United States plans to fight, as the irregular wars that dominated the first two decades of the twenty-first century give way to a renewed era of great power competition and, potentially, conflict. The world is experiencing deep changes in the character of war, as the exponential growth of advanced technologies transforms how people fight as well as how they live. And Americans are asking fundamental questions about the definition of national security as the coronavirus pandemic raging through the country has already claimed more US lives than the Second World War did. In February 2021 projections estimated that COVID-19 would kill more than 610,000 Americans by June 2021.¹

These changes in the strategic environment will pose serious challenges for each of the US military services, but they will challenge the Army most of all. As the Department of Defense increasingly focuses on China and as defense budgets decline, the Army will be at a disadvantage in the strategic and budgetary fights to come.

Yet the Army has a long history of reshaping itself to address the changing needs of the nation. The service was posted on the frontiers of the growing nation in the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth

Dr. Nora Bensahel, Visiting Professor of Strategic Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, is a contributing editor and columnist for *War on the Rocks*.

1. David A. Blum and Nese F. DeBruyne, *American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) RL32492 (Washington, DC: CRS, July 29, 2020), 2; Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, “COVID-19 Projections,” accessed February 12, 2021, <https://covid19.healthdata.org/united-states-of-america>; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID Data Tracker,” accessed February 18, 2021, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

century, it fought guerillas in the Philippines and guarded the Mexican border against marauding bandits. The Army quickly expanded to 4 million soldiers during the First World War, demobilized the vast majority of them afterwards, and then suddenly grew to more than 11.2 million soldiers during the Second World War.² Following another comprehensive demobilization, the Army expanded again for the wars in Korea and Vietnam and remained a large standing force during the Cold War. In the 1990s the Army focused primarily on peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations, and following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, it slowly reinvented itself as a counterinsurgency force for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Now the Army must transform itself once again, this time to adapt to an environment where the nation's greatest strategic competitor poses greater potential threats in the maritime and air domains (and the new domains of space and cyberspace) than in the land domain. And the Army will have to do so during a time of declining resources and as the COVID-19 pandemic is making many Americans revisit their basic assumptions about what constitutes a national security threat. This transformation will not be easy and will likely be painful. Yet the sooner the Army embraces these challenges, the better prepared it will be to continue protecting the nation in this new and evolving era.

Changing Strategic Environment

The United States is currently at a strategic inflection point: the irregular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are drawing to a close and a new era of great power competition is beginning. Yet many of the dynamics of this new era are still emerging, creating tremendous uncertainty about the path ahead. While the US strategic environment is transforming in at least four different ways, none of them are on a clear and predictable trajectory and may interact and affect each other in ways impossible to foresee.³

Strategic uncertainty has been increasing during the past several years and shows no sign of abating. Russia's annexation of Crimea and China's increasingly aggressive behavior in the South China Sea have ushered in a new era of great power competition, which became the cornerstone of the *2018 National Defense Strategy*.⁴ Yet at the same time, unpredictable regional actors with both conventional and nuclear capabilities, including North Korea and Iran, pose persistent threats to the United States and its allies. Violent extremist groups continue to spread around the globe, aided by state sponsors in some cases but also including small cells inspired by al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their ever-proliferating progeny. And several global trends are interacting in ways that increase global instability, including

2. Blum and DeBruyne, *American War*, 2.

3. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, *Adaptation Under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chap. 9.

4. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense (DoD), January 19, 2018).

climate change, urbanization, refugee flows, demographic shifts, and growing income inequality.⁵

The number of warfighting domains has increased from three to five, as space and cyberspace join the traditional domains of land, sea, and air. Although the US military has utilized space and cyber capabilities in recent decades, the United States has not fought a war in either domain. But this fact will almost certainly change in a future war against any reasonably tech-savvy adversary, which will introduce enormous complexity and unexpected challenges.

While outer space somewhat resembles the traditional warfare domains in being defined by physical boundaries, the cyber domain is markedly different from all the others. Cyber may quickly become the most important warfighting domain because it critically enables warfighting in the geographic domains and could therefore pose a massive vulnerability for the US military. Moreover, hostile cyber actions raise fundamental questions about the very definition of warfare, as a growing number of state and nonstate actors can directly target the US homeland without ever having to encounter the formidable warfighting capabilities of the US military.⁶

The current scale and speed of technological change is already unrivaled in human history and will continue to grow exponentially. Klaus Schwab argues we are at the brink of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a massive global transformation where the boundaries between the “physical, digital, and biological” realms interact and overlap.⁷ This revolution will profoundly reshape every aspect of society, business, government, and, of course, the military. A new generation of high-tech weapons such as hypersonics and directed-energy weapons will transform the range, speed, and destructive power of conventional arms.⁸

But artificial intelligence, big data, and robotics will also accelerate the development of autonomous weapons systems, which make decisions at the speed of light instead of the much slower speed of human cognition. (Unfortunately this development will reward adversaries who delegate lethal decision-making authority to these weapons with the fewest constraints, making it even harder for the United States and other democracies to impose any ethical or moral restrictions on their use.) Mass will become increasingly important as smaller and cheaper technologies proliferate around the world, enabling

5. National Intelligence Council (NIC), *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, NIC 2017-001, (Washington, DC: NIC, January 2017).

6. See David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “The Irrelevance of Traditional Warfare?” *War on the Rocks*, January 27, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/01/the-irrelevance-of-traditional-warfare/>; and Barno and Bensahel, “A New Generation of Unrestricted Warfare,” *War on the Rocks*, April 19, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/a-new-generation-of-unrestricted-warfare>.

7. Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (New York: Crown Business, 2016), 8.

8. Paul Scharre, *Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018); and T. X. Hammes, “Technological Change and the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” in *Beyond Disruption: Technology’s Challenge to Governance*, ed. George P. Shultz, Jim Hoagland, and James Timbie (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2018), 37–73.

even nonstate actors to employ drone swarms that can effectively counter US offensive advantages.⁹

*The ways in which most Americans define national security may be shifting as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.*¹⁰ For decades the United States has invested hundreds of billions of dollars each year in the Department of Defense in order to defend itself against threats from overseas. Yet as of this writing, over 28 million Americans have contracted the virus, and 506,834 of them have died from it.¹¹ With so many individuals and families directly affected by the pandemic—and millions more suffering from unemployment, social isolation, and other indirect effects—many Americans will conclude US national security needs to focus far more on myriad threats from within the homeland than on threats from abroad.

Moreover, Americans will recognize the Department of Defense, whose over \$700 billion annual budget constitutes approximately 15 percent of the entire federal budget, did very little to protect them from the pandemic and played only a minor role in responding to it.¹² A poll conducted in February 2020, several weeks before lockdowns across the nation began, found 31 percent of those surveyed thought the United States spent too much on defense.¹³ That number is likely to rise in the coming months and years as Americans increasingly prioritize internal threats over external ones.

And even if public support for the defense budget remains strong, the massive economic crisis caused by COVID-19 means the United States may not be able to afford continued high levels of defense spending. In January 2020 the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected the federal budget deficit for fiscal year (FY) 2020 would be about \$1 trillion and would average \$1.3 trillion a year for the next decade.¹⁴ By June, however, CBO projected the combination of pandemic relief and declining government revenue meant the FY 2020 deficit would be \$3.7 trillion and an additional \$2.1 trillion in FY 2021.¹⁵

Even after adjusting for inflation these figures constitute the largest deficit in US history—even greater than the deficit during all the years

9. See Scharre, *Army of None*; Hammes, “Technological Change,”; and David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “War in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *War on the Rocks*, June 19, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/war-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>.

10. See David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “After the Pandemic: America and National Security in a Changed World,” *War on the Rocks*, March 31, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/after-the-pandemic-america-and-national-security-in-a-changed-world/>.

11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID Data Tracker,” accessed February 27, 2021.

12. “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Federal Budget,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (website), updated April 2, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-federal-budget-process>.

13. “Military and National Defense,” Gallup (website), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/Military-National-Defense.aspx>.

14. Congressional Budget Office (CBO), *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2020 to 2030* (Washington, DC: CBO, January 28, 2020).

15. Phillip L. Swagel, “Budgetary Effects of the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic,” letter to Senator Rick Scott, June 5, 2020, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2020-06/56388-CBO-Scott-Letter.pdf>.

of the Second World War combined.¹⁶ And the actual deficit in FY 2021 is likely to be higher than the CBO projection because the pandemic continued unabated in late 2020 and early 2021, with infection rates that dwarfed those of spring 2020. Current and future pandemic relief measures will place upward pressure on an already debilitating deficit.

Deficit spending adds to the national debt of course. In late April 2020, economist Brian Riedl estimated the total costs of the pandemic would add more than \$8 trillion to the national debt over the next decade. The debt was already projected to almost double during that period, but this added load led Riedl to estimate it would grow from \$17.9 trillion in 2019 to \$41 trillion by 2030.¹⁷ And that is almost certainly a low estimate since Riedl assumed most of the economy would reopen by the summer of 2020—which did not happen in large parts of the country—and the number of infections would continue to decrease, when they rapidly escalated instead. This rising debt will significantly increase the amount of interest the United States must pay—already \$375 billion in 2019—further consuming government revenue and pressuring discretionary spending downward.¹⁸

Furthermore the political dynamics surrounding the new Biden administration also suggest the defense budget is about to shrink, and the cuts could be as large, if not larger, than those of the sequestration era. Though President Biden and his advisers are committed internationalists who believe in a strong leadership role for the United States, his highest priority will remain dealing with the pandemic and its aftermath. He has already proposed an additional \$1.9 trillion in pandemic relief, and though Congress may not adopt this proposal in full, the legislation will substantially increase the deficit and the debt.¹⁹ He will also need to adopt some policies that satisfy the more progressive wing of the Democratic party, which will continue to urge cuts to the defense budget. In July 2020, for example, 93 members of the House and 23 members of the Senate voted for a proposal by the Congressional Progressive Caucus to cut defense spending by 10 percent and redirect those funds to coronavirus relief and other domestic priorities.²⁰

With the Democrats now controlling the Senate, members of that party who support cutting the defense budget for any reason may find

16. Todd Harrison and Seamus P. Daniels, *Analysis of the FY 2021 Defense Budget and Its Implications for FY 2021 and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2020), 57.

17. Brian Riedl, "Coronavirus Budget Projections: Escalating Deficits and Debt," Manhattan Institute, April 29, 2020, <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/coronavirus-cbo-budget-deficit-projection>.

18. Christine Bogusz et al., "The Federal Budget in 2019: An Infographic," CBO (Washington, DC: CBO, April 2020), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56324>.

19. Jim Tankersley and Michael Crowley, "Biden Outlines \$1.9 Trillion Spending Package to Combat Virus and Downturn," *New York Times*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/business/economy/biden-economy.html>.

20. Alex Emmons, "Progressives Plan to Push Big Cuts to Defense Spending, Citing Coronavirus Crisis," *Intercept*, June 24, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/24/defense-spending-coronavirus-bernie-sanders/>; and John Nichols, "We Can No Longer Afford the Military-Industrial Complex," *Nation*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/house-senate-defense-spending/>.

more support for such a move. Moreover, as Biden begins his presidency, congressional Republicans may find their best opposition strategy involves embracing fiscal conservatism once again. That strategy worked fairly effectively after 2008 when a new Democratic president took office during the economic crisis now known as the Great Recession. The Budget Control Act of 2011, which contained the much-hated sequestration mechanism, was originally passed under pressure from Republicans who opposed President Barack Obama and the escalating national debt.

Now after the 2020 election, a new Democratic president has once again taken office during an enormous economic crisis rivaling the early years of the Great Depression.²¹ Republicans may well determine the best way to oppose Biden—and improve their election prospects over the next four years—involves sounding the alarm on the escalating national debt. Taken together, these dynamics mean defense spending is about to decline; the only question is by how much. And this reality will make it even more challenging for the US military to prepare effectively for seismic changes in the strategic environment.

Challenges Facing the Army

All the services will find it difficult to adapt to this new environment amidst declining budgets, which will force them to make hard choices about force structure, end strength, and acquisition programs. Yet the Army faces more challenges than the other services as the growing threat from China means the Indo-Pacific is now the US military's most important theater of operations. Unfortunately for the Army that shift suggests land will no longer be the most critical or most decisive domain of warfare for the United States.

A future war with China will be defined by the air and sea domains together with the new domains of space and cyber. As a result the Army has a tremendous disadvantage in the strategic arguments and in upcoming budget fights. In order to adapt successfully to this enormous shift, the Army will have to address the following four challenges: focusing on the nation's secondary theater; the increasing relevance of fires over maneuver; the new demands of homeland defense; and the growing importance of the reserve component.²²

A Supporting Service

Although the *2018 National Defense Strategy* prioritized great power competition with China and Russia, the Department of Defense has now explicitly prioritized competition with China.²³ Toward the end of

21. David C. Wheelock, "Comparing the COVID-19 Recession with the Great Depression," *Economic Synopses* 39 (2020), <https://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/economic-synopses/2020/08/12/comparing-the-covid-19-recession-with-the-great-depression>.

22. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "The Headwinds Looming for the U.S. Army," *War on the Rocks*, October 27, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-headwinds-looming-for-the-u-s-army/>; and Barno and Bensahel, *The Future of the Army: Today, Tomorrow, and the Day after Tomorrow* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, September 2016).

23. Mattis, *2018 National Defense Strategy*.

his term Secretary of Defense Mark Esper clearly stated his goal was “to focus the Department on China,” because China was “the pacing threat” for which the US military must prepare.²⁴ To do so he directed the development of a new “joint warfighting concept,” and instructed the National War College to focus half of its coursework on China.²⁵

The Biden administration has signaled it will provide stronger support for Europe and NATO Allies and partners and has affirmed the prioritization of China as our “most serious competitor.”²⁶ In 2018, for example, two of the most senior China experts in the Obama administration conceded many US assumptions about China had been wrong and called for a new strategic approach.²⁷ Biden’s team will face the simple and sobering fact that only a rising China has the enormous economic power, the cutting-edge technologies, and the advanced military capabilities that could match or exceed those of the US armed forces—and potentially defeat them.

This shift has significant implications for the Army. For decades it has effectively been the first among equals of the US military services. During the Cold War the Army provided most of the NATO forces postured to deter or defeat a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. It also provided most of the forces that fought in Korea, Vietnam, the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In all of these conflicts the Army was the supported service. Yet the explicit focus on China over Russia means this traditional relationship is about to flip. The Army will primarily be a supporting service in any potential conflict with China, enabling the other services to operate in the vast air and maritime domains of the western Pacific.

This seismic shift means the Army will no longer conduct the primary type of military operations against the nation’s biggest strategic threat, fundamentally upending the key warfighting roles and missions it has focused on for the past 75 years. Its ground combat forces will remain essential for deterrence and, if necessary, warfighting on the Korean peninsula, but otherwise the Army’s role in the vast Indo-Pacific theater will remain limited.

The Army does not seem to have fully absorbed the implications of this shift, however, as it continues to push for a combat role in the Pacific. It is still planning, for example, to conduct littoral operations throughout

24. Mark T. Esper, “Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper Message to the Force on Accomplishments in the Implementation of the National Defense Strategy,” July 7, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2266872/secretary-of-defense-mark-t-esper-message-to-the-force-on-accomplishments-in-im/>; and Jim Garamone, “Esper Discusses Moves Needed to Counter China’s Malign Strategy,” DoD News, August 27, 2020, https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article_2326863/esper-discusses-moves-needed-to-counter-chinas-malign-strategy/.

25. Garamone, “Esper Discusses Moves.”

26. Joseph Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” (speech, US Department of State, February 4, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

27. Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 60–70, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>.

the region even as the Commandant of the Marine Corps General David Berger reshapes his service to focus on this specific mission.²⁸

As defense budgets, end strength, and force structure all decline, the Army needs to focus instead on its unique and essential mission of providing critical enablers to the rest of the Joint Force in the Pacific. These include vital capabilities like expanded land-based air and missile defense, theaterwide logistics and engineering, electronic warfare, and possibly long-range precision fires.²⁹ Sustainment and protection will be critical vulnerabilities for US forces in the Pacific, and it is far from clear whether the Army can provide them effectively against a high-capability adversary. As resources decline, the Army needs to shift its time, energy, and thinking away from conducting combat operations in the Pacific and into these less glamorous but absolutely crucial responsibilities.

The Army's traditional ground combat forces will still be required in Europe. Russia remains the most capable and dangerous threat to the United States in the land domain, and Army forces will still need to deter Russian aggression and bolster NATO's defenses. But those missions, which were the highest US strategic priority for many decades, are now lower national defense priorities than deterring, and possibly defending against, Chinese aggression in the Pacific. The fact the land domain—the Army's primary warfighting domain—is now of limited importance against the nation's preeminent threat will pose enormous cultural and practical challenges for the service in the years ahead. The Army will almost certainly see cuts to its force structure and end strength and will likely accept a higher degree of risk in the European theater.

Fires Over Maneuver

The Army is also facing challenges from the changing relationship between fires and maneuver as weapons technology advances and long-range fires become an increasingly vital component of warfighting. Traditionally the Army has devoted a significant part of its force structure to maneuver units—the infantry, armor, and cavalry units that assault the enemy and seize and hold terrain—and has used fires from rockets and artillery to support them. Yet the advent of precision long-range fires is inverting this relationship, especially in the Pacific. Traditional artillery generally could hit targets within a range of 15 to 25 miles. Today, land-based precision rockets and missiles are being developed

28. David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, United States Marine Corps (USMC), 2019); and Berger, *Force Design 2030* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, USMC, March 2020).

29. Sean Kimmons, "Army to Build Three Multi-Domain Task Forces Using Lessons from Pilot," Army News Service, October 15, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/228393/army_to_build_three_multi_domain_task_forces_using_lessons_from_pilot; and Sean Kimmons, "Army Aims to Further Refine MDO with Indo-Pacific Partners," Army News Service, June 1, 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/236120/army_aims_to_further_refine_mdo_with_indo_pacific_partners.

that will strike beyond 1,000 miles, and hypersonic weapons are being developed that will have vastly greater ranges.³⁰

This unprecedented technological advance is inverting the traditional relationship between maneuver and fires, which poses a significant cultural problem for the Army. For the first time, land forces will be able to strike adversaries at strategic ranges without having to resort to nuclear weapons, which means they may be able to deliver strategic effects. The Army may soon be able to use such long-range fires to destroy adversary units, command and control networks, and vulnerable logistics supplies. The best way for the Army to contribute to a future war in the Pacific could involve using these powerful new capabilities to strike a wide range of targets on land and at sea, utilizing few, if any, maneuver forces.

This reality suggests the Army is now overinvested in brigade combat teams. Such maneuver forces will probably not play a significant role in any conflict against the nation's primary strategic threat, and their large footprints and substantial electronic signatures make them increasingly vulnerable to an adversary's long-range strikes. As a result, the Army may need to cut sharply the number of brigade combat teams in its force structure, especially as defense budgets decline and the services are required to use their more limited resources wisely. The Army should prioritize cuts to infantry brigade combat teams, which lack the mobile firepower and robust protection needed to ensure survivability during any high-intensity conflict. The service should then reinvest some of the resources freed by these cuts into more long-range fires and other enabling capabilities for the Pacific (especially in missile defense and logistics units).

Homeland Defense

As noted above, the pandemic has demonstrated the United States is more prepared to address overseas threats than to protect its citizens from threats within the homeland. Yet for all the human suffering the pandemic has caused, the origins of COVID-19 were benign—a natural, if lethal, variant of a coronavirus. A malevolent attack on the US homeland, however, could be far more disastrous. During the pandemic, basic necessities like food, water, and power have remained widely available (if increasingly unaffordable for too many Americans). Yet a concerted cyberattack on the United States could far too easily disrupt supply chains that provide these and other essential goods. And a deliberate attack against US space assets could disrupt or destroy vital military and civilian communications capabilities that enable GPS and other critical infrastructures.

30. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Army Tests New A2/AD Tools: Howitzers, Missiles & 1,000-mile Supergun," *Breaking Defense*, May 1, 2020, <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/05/army-tests-new-a2-ad-tools-howitzers-missiles-1000-mile-supergun/>; and Kris Osborn, "The U.S. Army Wants a 1,000 Mile Range Cannon," *National Interest* blog, September 15, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-army-wants-1000-mile-range-cannon-168967>.

Any future conflicts with a major foreign adversary will almost certainly spill over into the homeland, with potentially disastrous consequences. But such attacks could also occur outside the bounds of traditional warfare, launched by a state adversary trying to stay below the threshold of armed conflict or even by a disaffected group of hackers operating from their basements around the world.³¹ In either case the consequences could be devastating.

As direct threats to the homeland continue to grow, the Army will play a key role in helping prevent such attacks and an even greater role in helping to mitigate the consequences. Throughout the nation's history, the Army has always been the principal military service responsible for defending Americans at home. In recent decades its most important domestic mission has been responding to natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and wildfires—a role that will become even more important as climate change makes these events more frequent and intense. The Army remains a critical part of the nation's toolkit in responding to many domestic emergencies, since it has extraordinarily capable organizations standing ready to provide a wide range of logistics, communications, and engineering support to civil authorities when needed.

Yet active duty Army forces will likely play only a limited role in this increasingly vital mission. In a conflict that occurs mainly at home, the Army Reserve and especially the Army National Guard will be far more important. The National Guard operates day-to-day under the command of state governors and is the first military responder to civil disruptions that exceed the capacity of local authorities. During the pandemic, the Army Reserve joined the National Guard in helping beleaguered city and state officials provide food, medical care, and specialized services like mortuary affairs to hard-hit areas, while the active Army contributed comparatively little.³² In a larger homeland emergency, the Guard and Reserve could lead even broader missions such as providing humanitarian assistance, restoring power and water, and preventing civil disorder. The rising vulnerability of the US homeland will increasingly require the Army to prioritize domestic emergency response capabilities in its reserve forces, requiring tough trade-offs with active capabilities in future constrained budget environments.

The Reserve Component

The Army has always viewed its active forces as the first among equals within the three elements of the total force. Active Army units have traditionally been accorded the first priority for scarce resources and new equipment. Yet growing threats to the homeland combined with the coming era of fiscal austerity may require reversing this

31. Barno and Bensahel, "Traditional Warfare?"; and Barno and Bensahel, "Restricted Warfare."

32. Arnold L. Punaro, *Improving the Total Force Using the National Guard and Reserves*, Appendix B (Falls Church, VA: Reserve Forces Policy Board, 2020), [https://rfpb.defense.gov/Portals/67/Improving the Total Force using the National Guard and Reserves_1 November 2016.pdf?ver=2016-11-17-142718-243](https://rfpb.defense.gov/Portals/67/Improving%20the%20Total%20Force%20using%20the%20National%20Guard%20and%20Reserves_1%20November%202016.pdf?ver=2016-11-17-142718-243).

traditional relationship. Reserve forces are a wise strategic investment. They preserve more combat and support force structure at less cost than active forces, which require much higher investments in readiness to be able to deploy rapidly around the world. And unlike active forces, reserve forces provide readily accessible capabilities for both homeland and overseas operations. Future wartime demands may find these forces pulled in both directions, but they nevertheless remain a cost-effective investment across all Army missions.

As the move to a supporting role and declining defense budgets force the Army to make some painful choices, it must avoid the temptation to make equal cuts to active, Reserve, and Guard end strength and force structure simply to share the bureaucratic pain more equally. Instead, the Army may need to preserve some reserve capabilities at the expense of some active capabilities. This move would strengthen the total force's ability to defend the homeland while simultaneously husbanding critical warfighting capabilities in the most economical way possible. Some of these choices would undoubtedly require the Army to accept more risk in any future European conflict than it would like. But such decisions would be entirely consistent with the decision US political leaders have already made, which identifies China as the nation's top strategic priority.

Shrinking the Army's active component more than its reserve component will pose an immense cultural challenge, however. When defense budgets contracted during the sequestration era, the Army's active and reserve components engaged in an all-out bureaucratic war that can only be characterized as fratricide, leading Congress to charter an independent commission to referee the fight.³³ The Army, and the country more broadly, cannot afford to repeat that experience.

Current Chief of Staff of the Army General James McConville faces the daunting task of managing this countercultural change. He must do so by ensuring active, Reserve, and Guard forces all have an equal seat at the table when cuts are considered. And after tough decisions have been made behind closed doors, all Army senior leaders must emerge in solidarity, emphasizing the needs of the entire Army rather than any of its individual components. Former Chief of Staff of the Army General Mark Milley used this approach to heal the Army's divisions after the debacle described above (as did former Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Mark Welsh III after a similar crisis in his service a few years earlier).³⁴ McConville should learn from their approach as he faces the even greater challenge of preventing the Army from disintegrating into factionalism once again.

33. National Commission on the Future of the Army (NCFEA), *Report to the President and the Congress of the United States, January 28, 2016* (Washington, DC: NCFEA, 2016).

34. National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force (NCSAF), *Report to the President and the Congress of the United States, January 30, 2014* (Arlington, VA: NCSAF, 2014).

Conclusion

The Army is facing extremely difficult challenges as it transforms itself for a new era of great power competition. It will have to manage considerable strategic uncertainty, two new domains of warfare, exponential leaps in technology, and the increasing importance of homeland defense—all while defense resources decline and the service transitions from a supported to supporting role against the nation's greatest strategic threat. The Army has successfully redefined itself many times throughout its history, but this endeavor, like those of the past, will entail hard, painful choices about many things, including its capabilities and force structure, the growing mission of homeland security, and the relationship between Army active and reserve components. Wise decisions on these matters will help ensure the Army remains a relevant and vital element of the nation's military power in the years and decades to come.