

To Defend a Nation: An Overview of Downsizing and the U.S. Military

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Few institutions have had as much experience with organizational downsizing as the United States military. The historic pattern has been one of a small professional military in peacetime, rapidly supplemented by a mobilization of civilians during war, followed by a rapid demobilization with the war's end. Decisions about military force sizing are critical political and strategic decisions. This article discusses the downsizing of the United State's Cold War military force. Each of the three major reviews of the military structure—Base Force, Bottom-Up-Review, Quadrennial Review—are briefly discussed. Some of the claimed consequences of downsizing of the military are considered in the concluding section.

INTRODUCTION

Private firms and public organizations have sought and achieved enhanced efficiency by reducing or downsizing their workforces and limiting other inputs as much as possible. In both sectors maintaining or increasing productivity at lower costs is typically a strategic goal. Managers who create "lean and mean" productive structures are rewarded, those who do not fail.

Few, if any, organizational structures have had as much experience with downsizing as the United States military. With that experience, military leaders have developed practices of force reduction, survived dramatically reduced budgets, and coped with subsequent demands of very rapid organizational growth. Downsizing—or demobilization—has been a familiar aspect of national security policy over nearly the past century and a half.

For the greater part of the nation's history, geographic isolation, cultural aversion to militarism, and competition among governmental functions for shares of the federal budget have resulted in relatively small scale active military forces. As enemies became more evident the limited professional military force would take action, often losing initial battles (Heller and Stofft, 1986), until a full scale mobilization of forces was completed. Once the threat was met, there was a return to the small force status quo ante. Notes Bacevich (1993, p. 37):

«expansion was always undertaken with the clear understanding that it was a temporary expedient. Once the enlarged force had accomplished the task for which it had been raised, it would dissolve. And so it occurred—sometimes with astonishing abruptness—time and again.»

A BRIEF MACRO-OVERVIEW

Consideration of the downsizing of military forces must be done within the broader context of a nation's security concerns. Security is the paramount responsibility of a national government. Assurance of the nation's survival and protection of its interests is the purpose of security policy. Along with economic and political elements, military force is an element of a national power triad. If sufficient, that triad assures security.

The actual use of military power is guided by a structure of policies and strategies. This structure provides answers to the public sector equivalent of the private sector strategic planning questions—"What business are we in?" and "What values do we wish to maximize?"

At the broadest and most comprehensive level, a grand strategy defines national values and interests (Gaston, 1992) and is implemented through a national security policy. The national security policy provides a framework for the formulation of military, economic, and political-diplomatic strategies. The national military strategy guides the strategic planning of the several services, joint operations of the services, and the strategies of regional and functional military commands (Lykke, 1993).

DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGIC CONCERNS

Articulation of military strategies which, in turn, demarcate the size of force needed, requires some level of consensus on the priority status of values and interests to be protected and promoted during a given period. The military strategies and resulting force size must also consider the likelihood and severity of the nature and scope of threats during the period. Since resources are always limited and potential points of trouble are global, military forces must be tasked to deal only with significant problems. Judgments here are important.

Most assessments of these values and interests which constitute the base of policy and strategy consider both substance and intensity or relative importance. The Clinton administration's National Security Strategy (The White House, 1997, p. 3) delineates three categories or levels of interests and values:

- Vital interests: «those of broad, overriding importance to the survival, safety and vitality of our nation. (...) We will do whatever it takes to defend these interests including—when necessary—using our military might unilaterally and decisively.»
- Important interests: «these interests do not affect our national survival, but they do affect our national well-being and the character of the world in which we live. (...) We will use our resources to advance these interests insofar as the costs and risks are commensurate with the interests at stake.»
- Humanitarian interests: «In the event of natural or manmade disasters or gross violations of human rights, our nation may act because our values demand it. (...) Whenever possible, we seek to avert such

humanitarian disasters through diplomacy and cooperation with a wide range of partners, including other governments, international institutions and non-governmental organizations.»

A second dimension of concern for those deciding force sizing addresses the likelihood of different kinds of conflict. Analysts posit a spectrum which ranks conflict types from high destructiveness but low probability of occurrence to low destructiveness but high probability of occurrence. Examples of a spectrum would include nuclear war, conventional war, low intensity conflict, and operations other than war. Even a cursory examination of a spectrum of conflict suggests the difficulty of decision-making on any military force. Given the likely destructiveness of nuclear war, even if a low probability, there is an obvious need to be prepared for hostile initiatives by an enemy and to promote measures limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. There is an equally obvious need to be prepared for those other types of conflict of lesser destructiveness but greater likelihood of occurrence.

Which of the conflict types is emphasized will be determined by the foreign and security policy goals of the administration in power and the nature of threats facing the nation. Since required force levels and readiness requirements can not be met for all possible conflict combinations simultaneously, there is a need for policy and strategic choices as to which types of conflict to prepare for within the constraints imposed by resource and structural factors. An administration's choices will determine the likelihood of its policy successes or failures. Resources already allocated to long term mobilization readiness are, by definition, resources that can not be downsized to deal with issues of immediate operational readiness, and vice versa.

The choices will also condition the future of individual services. Betts (1997, p. 19) shows that «[d]ifferent types of combat operations imply different degrees of importance for the various armed services.» An emphasis on low intensity conflicts or peace operations would likely favor combat units from the Army and Marines Corps. Operations designed to maximize damage and minimize losses by way of sophisticated weapons systems would rely more on air power than on ground combat troops. The choices made have budgetary and service status implications for all involved.

DOWNSIZING AND THE UNITED STATES MILITARY

Expansion and contraction has been defining characteristics of military policy. An historic case in point followed World War II. Within a two-year period, 1945 to 1947, personnel were reduced from 12 million to just over 1.5 million. The basic combat division structure was effectively eliminated rather than maintained at lower levels of staffing and diminished readiness (which would have allowed for reactivation at some later point). At the war's end there were 91 Army and 6 Marine

divisions; by 1947 there were 10 Army and 2 Marine divisions, all of reduced strength. Similarly, there were sharp reductions in the other services—for the Navy from 8,165 to 1,003 ships, for the Air Force from 218 groups to 38 groups (Condit, 1979).

The consequences of rapid downsizing and diminished preparedness were realized with the invasion of South Korea by the communist forces of North Korea in June, 1950. President Harry Truman and the United States, with United Nations' approval, were committed to a "police action" to deter aggression. Whatever the commitment, the needed forces were not at hand since «in June 1950 the armed forces of the United States were in lamentable, or laughable condition.» (Stokesbury, 1988, p. 40). As to forces available to the commanding officer in the area, General Douglas MacArthur, «[e]verything was understrength (...) there were plenty of drivers, clerks, and cooks, but there were not many riflemen. It was, in numbers and attitudes, a peacetime army. (...) The U.S. Air Force in 1950 was not in as poor shape as the Army, but it was not equipped up to its authorized strength» (Stokesbury, 1988, p. 41).

Mobilization for the Korean police action proceeded as attention was also directed to an emergent reality. Political, diplomatic, and military leadership recognized that, with the end of World War II, the United States had become involved in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, an «[u]nderlying [c]onflict in the [r]ealm of [i]deas and [v]alues between the U.S. [p]urpose and the Kremlin [d]esign» (May, 1993, p. 27). Given the expansive aspirations of the Soviet Union and the destructive reality of atomic weapons, withdrawal from international relations was not a viable option.

Debate focused on the form of a new grand strategy (Gaston, 1992) and the levels of funding necessary for its implementation. The grand strategy, spelled out in a paper referred to as NSC 68, called for containment of Soviet expansion. This was necessary because:

«The fundamental design of those who control the Soviet Union and the international communist movement is to retain and solidify their absolute power, first in the Soviet Union and second in the area now under their control. In the minds of the Soviet leaders, however, achievement of this design requires the dynamic extension of their authority and the ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority» (May, 1993, p. 26).

A successful grand strategy of containment involved action on several fronts—diplomatic, economic, ideological. But it also mandated that, «[i]n the broadest terms, the ability to perform [a set of] tasks requires a build-up of military strength by the United States and its allies to a point at which the combined strength will be superior for at least these tasks, both initially and throughout a war, to the forces that can be brought to bear by the Soviet Union and its satellites» (May, 1993, p. 72).

The combined effects of Korea and NSC68 on the size of military forces and the military share of national spending were substantial. According to May (1993, p. 15), «U.S. defense spending tripled. For

the next four decades, it would remain two to three times higher, as a percentage of gross national product, than in any previous period of peace.»

FORCE STRUCTURE AND THE COLD WAR

Allowing for major variations in security policy emphases, mid-course periods of downsizing, and greater and lesser roles for the individual services, from administration to administration, some sense of the effects of the Cold War and the containment grand strategy can be gained by considering military personnel and defense spending levels over time. Between 1951 and 1990 total active duty military personnel annually exceeded two million, and exceeded three million from 1951 to 1954 (Korea) and from 1966 to 1970 (Vietnam).

Like the figures for personnel, those for defense spending reflect developments in foreign policy and security challenges. With the Cold War well underway in the early 1960s, defense spending accounted for 9.3 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1962, 7.4 percent in 1965, and 9.4 percent for 1968 (the greatest percentage for the 1962-1990 period). Through the 1970s and 1980s most defense spending fell in the 5 to 7 percent of GDP range with a high of 8.1 percent in 1970 and a low of 4.7 percent in 1978 and 1979.

The personnel and spending figures do not account for all resources allocated to the national military strategy. Nonetheless, given the successful outcome for the United States, the figures do suggest that political authorities and the society had provided sufficiently to protect national interests and to meet global threats. Their decisions had met three key tasks of force sizing (Troxell, 1997, p. 2):

- «– determination of force levels needed to achieve objectives with some knowledge of the likelihood of success or risk of failure;
- «– assessment of how the force is to be postured within the proposed military strategy;
- «– demonstrating the validity of the determinations of force levels and their planned use to key congressional committees and the public.»

These tasks are always important in budget-making and in policy reviews. They are particularly important during periods of rapid and fundamental change.

The late 1980s and the 1990s comprised a period of unprecedented rapid and fundamental change. The end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Soviet Union contributed to the emergence of policy and strategic environments involving «new players, new capabilities, and new alignments—but (...) no new rules» (Haass, 1995, p. 43).

After a half-century of strategic thinking dominated by concerns for global bipolarity and containment, the paradigm shifted. National office holders and defense intellectuals found themselves considering new means—such as unilateralism, isolationism, and neo-internationalism—to achieve policy and strategic objectives (Haas, 1995). The changing environments mean that formulation of future military strategy and force structure will be based on the employment of «military power in

a fluid setting of multipolarity, ambiguity, many different kinds of conflict, and a highly complex U.S. international agenda» (Kugler, 1995, p. 210).

RENEWED CONCERN FOR DOWNSIZING OF THE MILITARY

The formulation of policy and strategy in all domains involves an interplay of the rational and the political, a combination of careful analysis and particularistic interests. This holds for defense and security issues as for others. On this point Huntington (1961, p. 1) has observed:

«military policy (...) exists in two worlds. One is international politics, the world of the balance of power, wars and alliances, the subtle and the brutal uses of force and diplomacy to influence the behavior of other states. The principal currency of this world is actual or potential military strength: battalions, weapons, and warships. The other world is domestic politics, the world of interest groups, political parties, social classes, with their conflicting interests and goals. The currency here is the resources of society: men, money, material. Any major decision in military policy influences and is influenced by both worlds. A decision made in terms of one currency is always payable in the other.»

Not surprisingly, the end of the Cold War led to calls for action from both Huntington worlds. Absent a competitive global super power to be contained, there was widespread recognition of the need for a new paradigm or framework to frame security decisions generally and to guide force structure decisions specifically. A reduced international threat was assumed to translate to reduced military expenditures and savings—a peace dividend—to be transferred to dramatically increasing domestic entitlement spending and, at the time, major budget deficits. There is a military bureaucratic politics which relates to both Huntington worlds. Any discussion of military structure and size must recognize the fact that each of the services—Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps—has a distinct role, specific missions, traditions, and approach to national defense (Builder, 1989). There is important joint activity in the regional commands and Washington staffing. Since the 1940s efforts have been made to enhance joint cooperation and to strengthen the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by way, most recently, of such legislation as the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. Nonetheless, the specific services constitute opportunity structures for individuals. Inherent in the arrangements, and of fundamental importance in decisions about downsizing, is ongoing inter-service rivalry. Competition is vigorous for resources, missions, stature, and positions. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to the late 1990s three major initiatives were undertaken to review military strategy, personnel requirements, force structure, and budgetary needs. From 1989 to 1992, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell developed the concept of a Base Force (Jaffe, 1993). In 1993, Les Aspin, newly appointed Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration, undertook an assessment of «all of our defense concepts, plans, and pro-

grams from the ground up» (Aspin, 1993, p. iii). A congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) reported its analysis and recommendations in May, 1997 (Cohen, 1997).

THE SIZE OF THE FORCE

While there are fundamental differences among the reviews, they do share common themes. All three recognize the importance of the end of the bipolar superpower world. The new structure is generally recognized to be some form of a unipolar-multipolar world (Huntington, 1999). In such a world the United States is clearly dominant but its interests are affected by the decisions and behaviors of major regional powers. Especially important are Western Europe, Middle East, and North East Asia. But developments in other regions may cause problems for United State's interests broadly defined. Further, in each of the reviews, force structuring is most fundamentally based upon the force requirements for dealing with two near simultaneous major regional conflicts. The Bottom-Up Review (Aspin, 1993, p. 19) explained: «In this context, we decided early in the Bottom-Up Review that the United States must field forces sufficient to fight and win two major regional conflicts that occur nearly simultaneously. This is prudent for two reasons.

«First, we need to avoid a situation in which the United States in effect makes simultaneous wars more likely by leaving an opening for potential aggressors to attack their neighbors, should our engagement in a war in one region leave little or no force available to respond effectively to defend our interest in another.

«Second, fielding forces sufficient to win two wars nearly simultaneously provides a hedge against the possibility that a future adversary—or coalition of adversaries—might one day confront us with a larger-than-expected threat.»

Another theme common to the three reviews is that of the importance of factors which would complement the active force proposed. Most fundamental is the greater role envisioned for reserve forces. As stated in the Quadrennial Defense Review (Cohen, 1997, p. 32):

«In the post-Cold War era, the Reserve components have become an ever-larger percentage of the Total Force and are essential participants in the full spectrum of operations, from the smallest of smaller-scale contingency operations to major theater war. Guard and Reserve forces provide trained units and individuals to fight in wartime and to support the wide range of [Department of Defense] operations in peacetime. Reserve forces are part of all war plans. No major operation can be successful without them.»

Also intended to complement the personnel component of the active force is the emphasis on modernization and the taking full advantage of the technologies and information dominance resulting from the revolution in military affairs. With modernized infrastructure, state of the art weapons systems, and digitized-based combat strategies, a downsized force could well be more efficient and effective than its predecessors.

There is a clear theme across reviews that a reduction in the size of the military force both in number of personnel and the number of organizational units was a given. Powell's Base Force called for a reduction in the total active force from 2.1 million to 1.6 million and in the reserve force from 1.56 million to 898,000. In terms of organization, the Army would be structured at 12 active and 8 reserve divisions, the Air Force at 16 active and 12 reserve tactical fighter wings, the Navy at 450 ships including 12 carriers, and the Marines at 3 active and 1 reserve division (Jaffe, 1993).

Further downsizing in the active and reserve military forces were called for in the Aspin (1993) Bottom Up Review (BUR). A total active force structure was recommended at 1.4 million by 1999 from 1.8 million in 1992. Reserve forces were generally lowered by BUR. Air Force reserve fighter wings and support elements were to be restructured and reduced in number; Naval Reserve was to be «smaller, more specialized, and more immediately effective» (Aspin, 1993, p. 92); Army Reserve components were to decline from 700,000 to 575,000; and the Marine Corps Reserve was to increase somewhat over the proposed Base Force levels. After considering four optional organizational structures for likely challenges in post-Cold War years, the BUR decided upon an option of an Army of 10 active divisions and 15 reserve brigades, an Air Force of 13 active and 10 reserve fighter wings, a Navy of 11 carrier battle groups and 1 reserve carrier, and a Marine Corps of 5 active brigades and 1 reserve division (Aspin, 1993).

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), completed early in the second term of the Clinton administration, modified some of the reductions proposed in the Bottom Up Review. For the 1997-2005 period active forces were to decline from 1.45 million to 1.36 million and reserve forces from 900,000 to 835,000. The Army was to have 10 active divisions and some reduction in reserve elements. For the Navy there were to be 12 carrier battle groups, 10 active and 1 reserve carrier wings, and a reduced number of surface combat ships, from 128 to 116, and attack submarine, from 73 to 50. The Air Force was to be comprised of one fewer active, 12 versus 13, and one greater reserve, 8 versus 7, fighter wings as well as 187 rather than 202 bombers. The Marine Corps structure was recommended to remain constant at 3 active and 1 reserve expeditionary forces.

The overall trend in the reviews is clear. Changes in the environments of international and domestic politics have made continued downsizing the essential reality of contemporary military policy. In the decade of the 1990s alone, defense spending decreased from 5.3 percent of GDP in 1990, to 3.4 percent in 1997, and is projected to be under 3.0 percent by 2003. Over the past three decades national defense spending as a percent of gross domestic product has more than halved.

In the decade, active military personnel fell from just over 2 million in 1990 to 1.4 million projected for 2000. The decline in aggregate personnel has been accompanied by a reduction in the number of military units. Since 1990 the number of active Army divisions has been reduced from 18 in 1990 to 10, Navy aircraft carriers from, 15 to 11, Air Force fighter wings from 24 to 13.

CHANGING THE STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Decisions on military downsizing relate to, or can be related to, a broader strategic planning process. That process is based in starting point assumptions that structure approaches to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data on environments scanned. To facilitate the adjustment to new global realities, military strategic planners have been counseled to adopt new assumptions and approaches in their work.

Two fundamentally different approaches have been available to military strategic planners. (Troxell, 1997). The first is threat based planning which prevailed for most of the Cold War when real threats, such as Soviet military capability and expansion initiatives, were clearly identifiable. Planners developed scenarios, as in the Bottom-Up-Review, to determine possible alternative threat developments. On the basis of the scenarios the force sizes needed to deal with threats were calculated. National command authorities decided how the forces were to be apportioned among regional and functional commands and under what circumstances they would engage the enemy. This approach has the advantage of being precise and explainable to Congress and other key policy makers.

The second approach, objective or capabilities based strategic planning, is more general and intricate and of greater use when threats are more ambiguous. Since a lack of clarity and multiple aspects of the threats make scenarios less useful, planners rely more on judgment and calculate force sizes on the basis of resources available or consider general missions and objectives. Instead of constructing scenarios for a particular threat, a portfolio of approaches is to be established and drawn on for dealing with problems under uncertain conditions (Davis, 1994).

These somewhat abstract points take on real meaning in the current policy debates. The turbulent strategic planning environments of the post-Cold War years led strategists within the military and at institutions like RAND to argue on behalf of objective based planning to allow the national command authority deal with several goals with differing time frames.

Strategic planning results from aspects of objective based planning which may have profound consequences for force structure, and therefore downsizing, can be seen in the National Military Strategy. It includes elements—shaping, responding, preparing—«which synchronize all elements of national power to achieve our security objectives» (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997, p. 12).

The elements are directed to three major goals and several objectives. The first goal is to Shaping the International Environment; the second is to Responding to the Full Spectrum of Crises; and the third is to Preparing Now For an Uncertain Future. Associated with each goal are a number of more specific charges—promoting regional stability, conducting smaller scale contingency operations, exploiting the revolution in military affairs. Faced with uncertain strategic environments

and recognizing the need to plan creatively for an array of possible futures, defense planners, by their approach to planning, have set in play strategies which may make heavy claims on personnel and other resources during downsizing years.

CONCLUSIONS

Downsizing of military forces takes place within a context of threats. In a world free of threats there would be no need for forces. Short of the ideal, forces need to be of sufficient size to insure an appropriate level of military effectiveness, «[m]ilitary effectiveness is the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. A fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically available. Effectiveness thus incorporates some notion of efficiency. Combat power is the ability to destroy the enemy while limiting the damage that he can inflict in turn» (Millett, Murray, Watman, 1988, p. 2).

Judgments as to a needed force structure are political judgments about conditions in a given period. The political judgments include some explicit or implicit grand strategy which commits public resources, summarizes expectations about vital interests, and delineates problems likely to be encountered.

During a transition in global conditions there may be competing grand strategies or a lack of consensus on the particular vital interests to include in the prevailing grand strategy and to be protected and promoted with military forces. Lacking a consensus, there is a risk that short term factors such as media coverage of emotion laden events or distant ethnic and cultural clashes will lead political leaders to champion the constant deployment of forces from one crisis to the next. From a military effectiveness and organizational capacity perspective, a worst case situation during a period of change would be one in which a grand strategy is absent, expectations are so high as to be unrealistic, resources are decreasing, and problems are increasing.

Some critics of national security and military policy during the 1990s have argued that the downsizing of the military force has produced the worst case situation. For example, Representative Floyd Spence, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee of the House of Representatives, has judged the results of downsizing to date to be generally negative. According to Spence (1997, p. 2), the services «are working harder and longer to execute their peacetime missions due to an inherent tension between personnel and resource shortages and an increased pace of operations.» As a result of «[r]epeatedly being asked to “do more with less,” (...) force readiness has suffered –quantity and quality of combat training is being compromised, (...) the quality of military life continues to erode, (...) [and] military equipment is aging prematurely due to extended use and reduced maintenance» (Spence, 1997, p. 2). Additionally, the demands of deployments have led many in key highly skilled positions, such as Air Force pilots, to

leave the service so that «[i]nsufficient available manpower to meet requirements as well as actual skill and grade shortages—was resulting in a situation where no matter how hard or how long they worked, they could not satisfy requirements» (Spence, 1997, p. 4). By the end of the 1990s some were claiming that the services lacked the resources to meet the most basic of strategic goals:

«In public at least, no one has questioned the Pentagon's ability to go to war, if needed. But another senior Army officer said recently it was not clear that the Pentagon could carry out its stated mission to win two major regional wars at once. While winning the first war would not be a problem, the officer said, fighting the second would pose a "big risk"» (Myers, 1998, p. A20).

Along with the immediate personnel problems of doing more with less, there are longer-term impacts of downsizing military organizations. When cuts are made in the number of Army divisions, Air Force fighter wings, and Navy carrier battle groups there are fewer units available to be assigned for shaping the environment or for responding to conflict situations. As for the internal dynamics of military careers, fewer units mean there are fewer opportunities for command positions, from top to bottom, throughout the military, this result of downsizing many have long term consequences for an institution which has viewed command experience as a prerequisite for promotion to higher rank (McCormick, 1998).

The experience with downsizing confirms the wisdom of Samuel Huntington's observation about military policy development. A rationale for reducing the size of the force was the advantage to be gained from a reliance on new technologies. Sophisticated communications, computer, and weapons systems were to substitute for fewer personnel. Military planners have sought to gain new resources for financing the expensive new weapons systems from savings gained through the closing of inefficient or obsolete military bases.

However logical the arguments for closing obsolete bases, and initial successes were achieved in the closing of facilities recommended by a base realignment and closure commission, political resistance, particularly in Congress, has hardened to further base closings (Twight, 1989; Koven, 1992). So the savings and therefore the additional resources have not been gained even though planning goes on for new systems. Given this interplay of short-term political factors and longer-term military strategic concerns, domestic politics and constituency interests complicate downsizing. Once again policy is shown to be the product of the rationale and the political, of long term strategic concerns and a desire for immediate political advantage.

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