

Army Transformation: Built on Feet of Clay?

by Carl Osgood

From April 23 to 27, the Army War College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, played host to the second annual Army Transformation War Game. Its purpose was to test concepts of a future fighting force, that are being developed under a process begun by Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki, when he came into his current post in 1999. As explained by Col. Neal Anderson of the Strategic Plans, Concepts, and Doctrine Division, at the Pentagon on April 25, Army transformation considers what the Army should look like at some point in the future, and how to get to that future force, which the Army calls the objective force. The Army's goal is to field the first objective force units around 2010, with the Army being completely transformed into the objective force by about 2032.

As explained by Colonel Anderson, transformation takes into account operating experience of the past ten years, and ideas as to where the world itself is heading, such as what Anderson referred to as "points of stress," such as in the Taiwan Strait or North Korea. This second point was amplified by Lt. Gen. Mike Steele, the commanding general of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, when describing the Red Force concept employed in the war game. That concept is described as "how adversaries might oppose us" in the future. The Army expects that future adversaries will be unpredictable and have access to technology. They will use urban and complex terrain and be able to blend in with the local population, in order to confuse our targeting. They will have mobile, mounted reserves that will be able to come together from dispersed locations. Weapons that generate mass effects will be part of their strategy, as will the denial of ports of debarkation for U.S. and coalition forces.

The concept for the objective force starts with the idea of combining the rapid deployability of a light unit such as the 82nd Airborne Division with the lethality and survivability of a heavy division that includes a large proportion of tanks. This requires the development of a combat platform that can be used as the basis for many different vehicles. However, since it's not possible to change the current force structure all at once, the transformation is planned to proceed on three legs, the objective force being the final leg. The first leg is the "legacy force," that is, the forces that are ready to deploy and fight today. These forces still have to be maintained and modernized for at least two decades to come. The second leg is the "interim force," to be made up of interim brigade combat teams or IBCTs, the first two of an expected six to eight,

which are being organized at Fort Lewis, Washington. These teams will provide a rapidly deployable medium-weight combat capability, and will also be "testing the doctrine and tactics to provide a capability and bridge to the objective force," as Colonel Anderson put it.

In the "blue" concept that General Steele described, objective force units will be as lethal and survivable as current heavy forces, but with the deployability and mobility of today's light forces. The objective force will still be dependent on the Navy and the Air Force for sealift, airlift, and combat support. The combat platforms will depend on breakthroughs in engine, fuel, and propellant technologies. There will be a "common, shared understanding throughout the battle space," down to the individual soldier. The objective force will also deploy differently, on modernized sea and airlift platforms to multiple ports of entry and over the shore, if necessary.

Fallacies

Certainly, a nation has the right to maintain its armed forces in a state necessary to defend its legitimate interests. But, besides the pitfalls in making linear extrapolations from the present into the future, the physical economic assumptions that underlie the Army transformation concept, conflict with the economic assumptions of the current administration. And this problem isn't limited to the Army. An example serves to illustrate the point.

Last Dec. 14, a commission led by Virginia Gov. James Gilmore (R) released a report on developing a strategy to respond to domestic terrorism attacks involving mass effects weapons. One central point of the strategy was having the physical ability to deal with mass casualties. However, the necessity of maintaining the public health infrastructure of the nation was not addressed. During the press conference, this reporter noted that hundreds of hospitals have been closed as a result of managed-care and budget-cutting policies, and asked Gilmore what effect this has on the capability to respond to a terrorist attack. Gilmore replied that the report says that "a strong national health policy for the United States will give us the assets necessary to be able to respond." Gen. James Clapper (USAF, ret.), vice chairman of the panel, added that one of the assistant directors in the proposed national office would "coordinate, organize, and plan for the surge demands that would occur in the event of a cataclysmic event." But Clapper wouldn't address the question of where this surge capability is to come from.

For Army transformation, the underlying problem is the same. As General Steele himself noted, the Army will depend on American industry to provide the technological breakthroughs that the objective force concepts require. But, can a destroyed industrial base such as ours, provide the technological breakthroughs that the Army is depending on? And what happens when the Army's vision collides with the desperation of a Bush Administration which is trying desperately to keep the bubble of speculation and hyperinflation from collapsing?