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The Evolution of U.S. Military Doctrine and Security Policy: From the Cold War to Current Perspectives

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THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. MILITARY DOCTRINE AND SECURITY POLICY: FROM THE COLD WAR TO CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

By David Pendery

Introduction

The United States military is currently viewed not only as the most formidable and well-equipped armed force in the world, but one with a complex political role as well. The union of political and military responsibilities in light of U.S. security might seem obvious given recent events such as the Persian Gulf War, the Somalia operation and the restoration to power of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti. However, the embodiment of a highly skilled military within a carefully designed, politically flexible security framework is a comparatively new development in the U.S. The road to this accomplishment was long and difficult, and included thoroughgoing reform of U.S. military doctrine and security policy in the 1970s and 80s. By the time change had been fully instituted in the early 1990s, the international environment was changing rapidly, and evaluation of the framework was again necessary.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the evolution, current composition and relationship of U.S. military doctrine and security policy. Cold War strategy is presented as background, but special attention is paid to post-Vietnam reform, policy and doctrinal development from the mid-1980s to the early 90s and current perspectives.
After Vietnam: The Necessity for Change

Soon after WWII, the U.S. military became much more than just a large force with large economic resources—its chief role during the war. In the late 1940s and early 50s, the U.S. military was assigned a political role of international scope based on greatly enlarged responsibilities. In response to the USSR’s daunting military buildup (itself supported by huge economic resources), the U.S. military became more than just the guardian of U.S. national interests, but also the protector of Western interests in its role as the primary bulwark against communism.

These political requirements were to condition U.S. security policy for decades. The Vietnam War, however, revealed deficiencies in the framework. During the war, American military and security policies foundered when the country’s “political objectives were not clearly linked with [its] military operations,” which became “counterproductive” to American strategic aims. The reliance on carefully calibrated military actions to obtain micromanaged political results—without the support of large segments of the public—was a disaster for America. Security planners recognized the need for reform, and soon after the war, changes were developed and implemented.

In the 1970s, an all-volunteer army, a renewed emphasis on realistic training and new cooperative strategies between the different armed forces marked striking departures for the U.S. military. Given the lethality of modern weapons and the desire to avoid nuclear war, military leaders recognized that “it was critical to win the first battles and then be capable of winning the second, third, and final battles” of a conflict. Military leaders wanted to cease a pattern that had plagued the armed forces for most of American history: losing the first battles during war.

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2 Dunnigan, 119.
Rigorous training became the key to the U.S. military’s new approach. In 1973, Army General William E. DePuy inaugurated the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), which would develop many new ideas and training methods during the 1970s, 80s and into the 90s. Among the changes were:

1. Training that rewarded excellence and mastery of subject matter, rather than merely fulfilling a designated time requirement in a particular area.
2. More realistic training, including live ammunition and battlefield conditions against opponents trained in enemy doctrine.
3. Improved cohesiveness of the armed forces—from small formations to operational battle groups to coordination of the services themselves.
4. Receptivity to new ideas, including innovative simulation games and procedures.

During the 1970s, in response to this new openness, a host of new ideas and buzzwords blossomed in U.S. military doctrine—”Active Defense,” “The Integrated Battlefield,” “AirLand Battle,” and “C^3I” (Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence). All of these ideas had a common aim—the coordination and integration of American armed forces to enable them to decisively win first battles.

In the late 1970s another crucial component was fit into the developing U.S. security framework. The USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 “was physical proof that the Soviets were ready and able to move into neighboring areas,” and jolted U.S. security planners into the recognition that Southwest Asia with its access to the Persian Gulf was vital to American security.\(^3\) In response to this development, President Carter outlined what became known as the Carter Doctrine, which stated that the U.S. would forcefully respond to any attempt to control the petroleum resources and transportation lanes of the Persian Gulf. One year later the Army began realistic training in desert warfare in the newly created National Training Center in Southern California.

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\(^3\) Dunnigan, 65.
The 1980s and the Persian Gulf War: Fitting the Pieces Together

By the mid-1980s the U.S. military was improving, but doctrine still lacked a critical element. Leaders of the armed forces had not come to grips with the now-infamous political failures in Vietnam. Ten years after the end of the war, the U.S. military had not enunciated a lucid political doctrine to complement its improving battlefield readiness. The suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and the ensuing revelations of inadequate security preparations, as well as “widespread demands in the U.S. that the Marines be brought home,” highlighted the enduring disjunction between the country’s military and political aims and institutions.4

In a 1984 speech and then officially in his 1986 Report to the President and Congress, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger attempted to rectify the disjunction with additions to U.S. security policy and military doctrine that have had far-reaching impact. Weinberger listed six preconditions to be met before committing U.S. military forces to combat. These tests, which became known as the Weinberger Doctrine were:

1. The United States should not commit forces to combat unless its national interests are at stake.
2. The commitment must be made with “sufficient numbers and sufficient support to win.”
3. It must be carried out with “clearly defined political and military objectives.”
4. “The relationship between our objectives and the forces…must be continually reassessed and adjusted as necessary.”
5. It should have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.
6. It should be a “last resort.”5

Secretary Weinberger had at last harmonized United States political/security and military doctrine. His developments were crucial to U.S. credibility. Weinberger’s approach was picked up by his successors, Frank Carlucci and Richard Cheney, as well as General Colin Powell, who became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989. The Weinberger Doctrine, now also associated with Cheney and Powell, remains an underpinning of American security and military strategy.

One final important advance in the U.S. security framework occurred in the late 1980s and early 90s. On 2 August 1990, the day after Iraq invaded Kuwait, President Bush gave the first intimations of what has since become a pillar of U.S. policy. In a speech in Colorado, Bush noted that with the reduction of the Soviet threat, the U.S. military would be “increasingly shaped by the needs of regional contingencies.” The regional policy, which would develop into the current “two regional wars” doctrine, was born.

The currents of new thinking in American military doctrine and security policy converged in 1991 during the Persian Gulf War: The Carter Doctrine proved prescient and applicable; the heightened training and cohesiveness of American armed forces was decisive in the war’s outcome; the coordination of the armed forces, while still difficult and subject to problems, was vastly improved compared to previous conflicts; President Bush’s regional strategy received a trial by fire; and the Weinberger Doctrine was strictly adhered to by the U.S. administration. The result was decisive Coalition victory.

**After the Persian Gulf War: Reappraisal**

In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, despite what appeared to be a vindication of American doctrine and policy, security planners were caught on the horns of a dilemma. Their success tempted them to leave the principles unchanged, but the

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danger of “Victory Disease” forced them to remain alert in a changing world. “Victory Disease,” writes military analyst James Dunnigan, is an attitude in the military that “it worked so well last time, let’s do it again next time.” This attitude can stifle reform and lead to atrophy. While Powell and Cheney were experienced enough not to make this mistake, the transformation of eastern Europe and the USSR soon after the Persian Gulf War clearly pointed to the need for reevaluation of the security framework.

Largely in response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, President Bush announced a military draw-down in his 1992 State of the Union Address. Military planners understood that force reductions would be implemented well into the 1990s. In response to this development, General Powell created the Base Force. The Base Force was the floor below which U.S. military strength reductions could not go. As well, this military structure enabled rapid reconstitution of forces if an emergency called for it. Powell’s Base Force reduced the forces that had fought in the Persian Gulf War to the following levels: The Army was cut from 16 to 12 active divisions; the Navy from 530 ships and 15 Carrier Battle Groups to 450 and 12 respectively; and the Air Force was reduced from 22 to 15 active fighter wing equivalents.

Once the Base Force had been created, the security policy that would guide it had to be outlined. New policy would have to abandon the threat that had shaped U.S. strategy for decades—the possibility of a large central front war in Europe. Although this was a major change in outlook for the U.S. military, the shift to a new strategy was smooth because the way had been paved not only by the reforms of the 1970s and 80s, but also by President Bush’s anticipation of the importance of regional warfare.

Secretary Cheney reported in his 1993 Report to the President and Congress that with the demise of the Soviet Union, “the focus of the new [security] strategy is on meeting…regional threats and challenges…and on shaping the international security...

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7 Dunnigan, 30.
environment in ways that help to preclude the rise of hostile, nondemocratic powers aspiring to regional hegemony." The regional strategy of responding militarily to key nodes around the world—replacing a central front fixation—was here to stay. It would require only one modification, first hinted at by General Powell when he wrote in 1993 that, “our [military] strategy…recognizes that when the United States is responding to one substantial regional crisis, potential aggressors in other areas may be tempted to take advantage of our preoccupation.” Note that Powell here anticipated the possibility of two regional wars. He continued:

Once a decision for military action has been made, half-measures and confused objectives...can cause...a divided nation...and defeat. Therefore, one of the essential elements of our national military strategy is...the concept of applying decisive force to overwhelm our adversaries and thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with a minimum loss of life.

Powell further wrote that “our force is a Base Force—a Total Force—a Joint Force—a carefully tailored combination of our active and reserve components,” requiring “realistic, demanding, and objectively measured training and exercises.

Secretary Cheney and General Powell had recognized the utility of the best doctrinal developments—the new integrated character of the armed forces, the military’s application of “decisive force” in the Persian Gulf War, the importance of rigorous training, and the necessity of clear political objectives and public support of military action—while responding to the new security challenges by establishing and enlarging the regional defense strategy. All of these developments remain central to American military and security doctrine. The Weinberger/Cheney/Powell era has proven to be pivotal.

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10 Powell, 7.
11 Powell, 10.
12 Powell, Introduction.
13 Powell, 8.
Current Perspectives

“Nothing is permanent but change,” wrote Heraclitus 2500 years ago, and after the election of President Clinton in 1992, a changing of the guard took place in the U.S. security establishment. Clinton’s team—Secretary of Defense Les Aspin (since resigned, and replaced by William Perry), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs John Shalikashvili, and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake—at once adhered to existing policy and doctrine while adding significant new elements.

Current U.S. military doctrine and security policy include most of the elements we have examined. There is consistency with the recent past when the Statement on the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year 1995 describes the U.S. Army as “a power projection Army—a strategically and operationally flexible force”14 that relies upon “the…ability to fight two nearly simultaneous regional conflicts.”15 Today’s Army “is a modernized, technology-enhanced”16 force that “conduct[s] strenuous, realistic training.”17 Among the “Four Dangers” to national security outlined by Secretary Aspin in his 1994 Report to the President and Congress, and more recently in the Statement on the Posture, is “the threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”18

We can see that the current administration has borrowed heavily from its predecessors. The Weinberger/Cheney/Powell preconditions for conflict also remain embedded in American military and security policy. The necessity of arousing strong public support before any military action and the application of decisive force in conflict is now axiomatic. But these central concepts have recently come under criticism.

Edward Luttwak, Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International

14 Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995, p. 15.
15 Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995, p. 78.
16 Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995, p. 22.
18 Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995, p. 16.
Studies, wrote in the May/June 1995 *Foreign Affairs* that the Weinberger/Cheney/Powell approach is broadly harmful to U.S. interests because it prescribes military response to threats to U.S. security *only* if the preconditions are met, and thereafter the response is required to be *overwhelming*. Relying solely on this approach ignores the value of a “calculated, purposeful patience” in response to threats to U.S. security.\(^{19}\) He argues in favor of a siege-like mentality, using trade embargoes and blockades as principle tools to accomplish national aims. The emphasis on tempo and momentum that has guided U.S. military doctrine (called a “Napoleonic” or “Clausewitzian” approach by Luttwak), “induces an almost compulsive sense of urgency, even when there are no truly imperative reasons to act quickly.”\(^{20}\) This approach can lead to loss of life on the battlefield—if force is employed—or to the failure to respond to an enemy’s belligerence if the threat is not deemed vital to national interests. American security planners should scrutinize Luttwak’s criticism of the sacred cows of U.S. military doctrine and security policy. Reliance on an approach because “it worked so well last time” is dangerous and invites apathy.

Michael T. Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College, Massachusetts, has also leveled criticism at current U.S. security policy. In the 25 April 1995 *Christian Science Monitor*, Klare blasted the regional strategy as “adopted in haste” and which ill-advisedly prepares “for an unending series of conflicts with ‘rogue states’ in the Middle East and Asia.”\(^{21}\) Klare believes that “in looking at [rogue states]…we should be realistic about their true capabilities, not blinded by inherited feelings and stereotypes,” such as the United States’ view of Saddam Hussein and Iraq.\(^{22}\)

Klare lists as regional threats Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and North Korea (commonly included on lists of rogue states). Yet, strangely, he doesn’t include the former Soviet

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20 Luttwak, 118.
22 Klare, 19.
satellites in his analysis, though they are certainly embodied in U.S. security policy as potential threats. We can link Iran, Iraq, Libya and Syria in that if conflict with one erupted, it would take place in conditions roughly similar to the Persian Gulf War, and thus the outcome might very well be similar to 1991. But nobody wants another Persian Gulf War, and if preparing for the threat before it emerges better enables the U.S. either to defuse it or face it should it arise, then that is sound policy. North Korea on the other hand, with armed forces approaching one million strong, clearly presents a credible regional threat. In short, the regional wars policy, while subject to review as any policy should be, is acceptable in today’s security environment.

In spite of the continuity linking President Clinton’s security framework with his predecessors’, there have been some comparatively new developments that warrant examination. In October 1993, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake announced in a Washington D.C. speech the Clinton administration’s first major addition to U.S. security doctrine. Lake announced a strategy of “enlargement” of democracy throughout the world. Lake defines this as:

A strategy of American efforts to enlarge the community of market democracies….based on a belief that our most fundamental security interest lies in the expansion and consolidation of democratic and market reform.23

As catchy as the term is, enlargement of democracy is not an especially new idea. In 1950, the famous national security document NSC-68, posited that “by practically demonstrating the integrity and vitality of our system the free world widens….”24

The security aim of encouraging democracy is built upon the axiom that democracies rarely go to war with one another. But Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder,

both professors of political science at Columbia University, reported in the May/June 1995 *Foreign Affairs* that states making the transition from autocratic to democratic regimes are actually more likely to go to war than states that remain autocratic. They write that “democratization typically creates a syndrome of weak central authority, unstable domestic coalitions, and high-energy mass politics,” which often lead to volatility and war (Mansfield 88). The result, according to the authors, is that “democratization is like spinning a roulette wheel.”

National security policy, they continue, “need[s] to think not so much about encouraging or discouraging democratization as about helping to smooth the transition…to minimize its risks.” In all fairness, U.S. security planners appear to have recognized this danger. The *Statement on the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year 1995* notes that “the collapse of…totalitarian regimes left a political vacuum in many countries. That vacuum may be filled by…movements which pose a danger to the world.”

The Clinton administration has added another element to the national security strategy that, like enlargement, can be viewed either as novel and new, or simply an extension of time-honored U.S. interests. Les Aspin referred to “economic dangers to national security, which could result if the United States fails to restore a strong, competitive and growing economy.” The *Statement on the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year 1995* is even more specific:

The final danger is the failure to see our national security interests…in a way that adequately incorporates economic concerns…As the world grows smaller economically, economic concerns are no longer simply a domestic issue, but a national security issue as well.

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26 Mansfield, 80.
27 *Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995*, p. 17.
29 *Statement of the Posture of the United States Army, Fiscal Year, 1995*, p. 17.
Capitalism has long been considered an essential complement to democracy in American foreign policy, but the above passages may be the first references to competitiveness and the global economy in national security documents. The importance of economics is further manifested in the Clinton administration’s Big Emerging Markets strategy, which focuses U.S. energies on promising economies such as Poland, India and Brazil’s.

We shall examine one more key development that is shaping military doctrine and security policy as the 21st century approaches. As in the 1970s, the latest changes are based on new ideas and technology and have given rise to a swarm of buzzwords, including “Battle Labs,” “The Digitized Battlefield,” “Total Army Quality” (TAQ), “Operations Other Than War” (such as the Somalia and Haiti interventions), and, most important, “Force XXI.” Force XXI, to use its rather unwieldy official designation, is “A Concept for the Evolution of Full-Dimensional Operations for the Strategic Army of the Early Twenty-First Century.” The concept was developed by TRADOC, and is included in recent doctrinal manuals.

The latest threats and opportunities to U.S. security that Force XXI addresses are those of “information warfare,” recently called “the hottest concept in the halls of the Pentagon” by Douglas Waller of Time magazine. “Info War” recognizes that rapidly evolving computer and information technologies will be used in the conflicts of the future. Recent developments and possibilities include electromagnetic pulse (EMP) devices and computer viruses that could disrupt an enemy’s defense, transportation, communications and financial systems; unmanned surveillance and attack aircraft; radar, radio and television jamming technology; and even the possibility of inserting “morphed” images of television programs, leaders and personalities into an enemy’s communications.

The skilled use of technology as well as vulnerability to information warfare are “the major security challenge[s] of this decade and possibly the next century,” said the U.S. Joint Security Commission in 1994. New technologies are already changing the U.S. military. Traditional hierarchy is being decentralized, and, according to Force XXI, “the rapidly advancing technologies of the information age can provide the military with a new methodology for interaction at a personnel and an organizational level.” Advanced surveillance and communication gear could improve cohesion and integration down to the smallest military units enabling small unit commanders in conflict “to make a decision and react…without reference to a traditional higher command element.” This type of “top to bottom” cohesion is something the military has been developing for the last 20 years, since the major reform movements began. It undergirds the entire structure of U.S. military doctrine.

Conclusion

Beginning in the 1970s, U.S. military and security planners identified serious rifts and problems in their approaches that hampered the implementation, effectiveness and integrity of the nation’s security framework. Also beginning in that era and continuing into the 1980s and 90s, previously unforeseen and even unimaginable events such as the U.S. failure in Vietnam, the rise (and fall) of regional powers such as Iraq, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a global economy have reflected international conditions more fluid and varied than ever before. To respond to these and other new challenges facing the nation and its allies, American leadership has developed military

32 Waller, 40.
doctrine and security policy that are clear, integrated, flexible and modern.

Accordingly, the U.S. military has discarded its Cold War role as simply a large force with large economic resources at its disposal. Instead, a multi-faceted approach including openness to new ideas, rigorous training, unified command structure and mastery of new technologies has become essential to U.S. military doctrine. American security planners have also rejected one-dimensional assessments of the threats and opportunities that confront the nation. Security institutions have adapted to the changed national and international environment by designing policy that incorporates improved understanding of the interrelated social, political and military aspects of national security.

The recent evolution and improvement of U.S. military doctrine and security policy has become a model of professionalism. After the Persian Gulf War, nations around the world studied the United States’ military and political conduct and structure during the war. General Colin Powell, functioning as the most important link between the nation’s military and political institutions during the conflict, received global recognition for his poise and performance. Such international influence notwithstanding, the most important role of the new American security framework is its ability to respond to change, and defend the nation’s interests now and into the immediate future.
Bibliography


