



Conference Brief Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College,
The Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University, and
The Eisenhower Conference Series*



Security Transformation

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Key Insights:

- The current defense transformation is driven by the quest for new technologies and systems. Most past transformations began when existing technology was married to new systems or concepts. This approach might bring greater results than the one being used.
- Funding transformation still may require additional force structure cuts, a shift to a high/low force mix, or the abandonment of some roles and missions.
- “Back office” issues—more effective practices for planning, programming and budgeting—are as important to transformation as is change in methods of warfighting.
- The Combatant Commanders should be more involved in transformation, perhaps serving as equal partners with the Services.

On November 22-23, 2002, the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, and the Eisenhower Conference Series cosponsored a conference on security transformation which brought together a number of the top thinkers on this topic. The objective was to assess the status of defense transformation and identify major issues which warrant additional analysis and discussion.

Background.

The concept of transformation entered the debate on American strategy in the late 1990s. In 1997 Congress commissioned a senior-level National Defense Panel (NDP) to provide an independent perspective on long-term defense and national security issues.¹ The NDP concluded that the United States should undertake “a broad transformation of its military and national security structures, operational concepts and equipment.” From that beginning, the notion of defense transformation became an integral element of American strategy widely accepted by civilian policymakers, military leaders, and Congress. It includes both fundamental change in methods of warfighting, specifically the shift to network centric warfare and rapid decisive operations, and equally profound change in the way that military forces are trained, equipped, organized, supported, and managed.

Defense transformation grows from a mix of new technology, creative concepts, and often-difficult reorganizations. Like all deep change, it is simple in theory but extraordinarily complex in reality. For this reason, it requires a powerful locomotive. Most historical defense transformations were driven by battlefield failure or an impending threat or weakness. Or they were the cumulation of reforms only recognized as transformative after the fact. The current American transformation, though, is taking place in a setting of military preponderance rather than defeat or weakness. It is

deliberate and engineered, rather than ad hoc. This makes it historically unique and amplifies the importance of assessing and analyzing it. That was the purpose of the Harvard-SSI conference.

Approaches and Concepts.

Five years after its creation, the idea of defense transformation has been integrated into official policy and strategy, but the imperative for it remains subject to question. While the most common rationale for transformation is the need to align U.S. military capabilities with the 21st century strategic environment, one conference participant pointed out that there is no indication that the existing U.S. military is unable to deal with threats to American security. There is no historical instance of successful defense transformation in the absence of perceived decline or escalating threat. “Capabilities based” transformation remains an unproven idea. It could be argued that terrorism provides such a threat and therefore justifies defense transformation. If that is true, American policymakers and military leaders must ask whether the current transformation is designed to improve American capabilities at defeating terrorism, or at the primary strategy of the last decade—power projection against rogue states.

Many of the conference participants noted that the transformation of the “back office”—administrative and support functions—is “less glamorous” than changes in warfighting, but equally important. Certainly the constraints and complexities in this realm are as great as those in warfighting. After all, a new threat or a recent defeat can motivate a shift in warfighting methods and capabilities, but an equal disaster in “back office” functions is unlikely. The locomotive of change must

be forceful leadership willing to bypass or overcome inertia and resistance.

Compatibility and Efficiency.

Operating with allies and partners remains a bedrock of American strategy. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz recently said, “We are not a go-it-alone country. This is not a go-it-alone president. We value the help we receive from others and depend on it crucially.” But defense transformation may complicate this or erode the effectiveness of coalitions as the U.S. military develops new capabilities and operational methods. This problem is particularly astute with America’s closest and most important allies—the other NATO nations. A conference participant suggested that recent operations in Afghanistan may serve as a “wake-up call” to the Europeans, but another pointed out that similar claims were made about Operation DESERT STORM and Kosovo. Another participant suggested that the NATO reaction force proposed by President Bush may serve as a catalyst to European transformation and thus facilitate compatibility among NATO militaries. The commitment of the Europeans to this, though, remains in question. Ultimately the conference participants agreed on the need for significant change among the European allies but did not agree on the likelihood of that happening or on the extent to which the United States should encourage or even force it.

The conference participants also discussed the issue of greater compatibility and efficiency within the U.S. military. Defense transformation emerged from a combination of the NDP, some nodes of future-oriented thinking with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, particularly the

Office of Net Assessment, and the future-oriented programs of the Services such as the Army After Next Project. For a few years, the Services approached transformation with significantly different perspectives on the future security environment and the role of American military power in it. Recently, though, the creation of Joint Forces Command and the Office of Force Transformation within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, along with the inclusion of specific transformation goals in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, helped reconcile differences in the Service approaches. Much remains to be done, though, in terms of pushing “jointness” to ever lower levels. In fact, one conference participant suggested that a “bottom up” approach to jointness modeled after the experience of Special Forces might bear more fruit than the current “top down” approach.

The conference participants did not explore the relationship and potential incompatibility between greater efficiency and greater effectiveness in the U.S. military as transformation moves forward. That problem warrants further analysis at future conferences.

Processes.

The conference participants spent extensive time discussing the transformation of the Department of Defense (DoD) planning and budgeting procedures. Most agreed that the reforms of the past 5 years were extremely important, but there was not a sense that these have reached a transformative critical mass. Great obstacles remain. One participant, in fact, suggested that a total overhaul or even abandonment of the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System was necessary.

Another participant took a different tack and suggested that most “leap ahead”

changes come from large scale exercises or actual operations rather than wargames. Given this, he suggested that the energy for transformation should be both top-down and bottom-up. And, he contended, the regional Combatant Commanders should be much more involved in the transformation process, particularly in terms of identifying needed capabilities and helping separate useful innovations from unsuccessful ones. Rather than simply being given new capabilities developed by the Services, this participant held, the Combatant Commanders should play an active role in concept and capability development. To do this, Congress might have to revise Title 10, U.S. Code which gives the military Services primary responsibility for force development.

Affordability.

All of the conference participants agreed that affording transformation, particularly while retaining the high operational tempo required by the war on terrorism and attempting to recapitalize the existing force, remains extremely difficult. Because operations involving American landpower tend to last longer than those which do not, and because the shift from a Cold War mode of landpower to a 21st century mode is more complicated than for other forms of American military power, this conundrum is particularly pressing for the Army. If anything, the affordability problem will escalate for all Services in coming decades as talent becomes more expensive and some “leap ahead” technologies enter the development and production process.

There are several possible solutions to the affordability problem, but all have shortcomings and costs. A sustained increase in the defense budget is unlikely. One participant noted that the norm is a

5-year cycle of increasing defense budgets following by 5 years of decline. The war on terrorism has temporarily thrown this off, but in lieu of another major attack on the American homeland, the cycle is likely to reemerge. Other solutions such as cutting force structure, abandoning or de-emphasizing some missions, or shifting to a mix of high technology and low technology forces all pose serious risk given the requirements of U.S. national security strategy. The conference participants did not discuss which missions might be de-emphasized, or the strategic risks that would ensue from force structure cuts.

Conclusions.

The Harvard-SSI conference suggested that defense reform continues and is attaining significant successes. The need for and the methods of true transformation, though, remain uncertain. Because senior DoD leaders are committed to transformation, the word has become almost a mantra, used to justify new programs and budget increases, many of which are not truly transformative. Given this, a more strategic approach to transformation—one based on actual trends in the strategic environment rather than on technological possibilities or abstract “capabilities”—may be more sustainable and more effective.

Conference Participants.

COL Eli Alford
COL David Anderson
Dr. Stephen Biddle
Dr. Hans Binnendijk
ADM (Ret) Dennis Blair
LTG Bruce Carlson
LTC Rod Culkin
Dr. John Deutch
Dr. Martin Feldstein

MAJ Russ Hart
Robert Herman
LTC Hersel Holiday
MAJ Chris Hornbarger
MG David Huntoon
Ken Krieg
William Lynn
COL Douglas Macgregor
Dr. Steven Metz
Robert Murray
Blake Myers
LTG Tad Oelstrom
CAPT George Pivik
COL Rick Rankin
BG (Ret) John Reppert
LTG John M. Riggs
GEN (Ret) Gordon Sullivan
BG(P) Michael Vane
RADM Miles B. Wachendorf
Dr. John White
COL Bernard Zipp

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1. The NDP was chaired by Philip A. Odeen and included Richard L. Armitage, General Richard D. Hearney (USMC ret), Admiral David E. Jeremiah (USN, ret), Robert M. Kimmitt, Andrew F. Krepinevich, General James P. McCarthy (USAF, ret), Janne E. Nolan, and General Robert W. RisCassi (USA, ret). Their findings appeared in *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century*, Report of the National Defense Panel, December 1997.