
Two Armies: Balancing America's Landpower for Competition and National Security

Mike Anderson

U.S. Army, michael.g.anderson15.mil@mail.mil

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Two Armies: Balancing America's Landpower for Competition and National Security

Abstract

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The United States ground forces face divergent array of threats from a return of great power competitors and from a continuance of irregular non-state opponents and stability operations, leading the Army and Marine Corps to struggle with capability focuses. American ground forces historically swing from preparing their forces for one spectrum of conflict to the other based on immediate and perceived threats. The pendulum swing creates uncertainty and capability gaps, requiring sharp shifts when unanticipated, immediate threat emerge. A hybrid force model creates two distinct army groups within the larger Army force - allowing one to focus on conventional threats, the other on irregular war and stability operations. A compartmentalized force model divides the Army's focus by component, with the active component focusing on the major combat operations and the reserve component focusing on irregular and stability conflict. A service-centric force solution gives the Marine Corps the sole expeditionary responsibility across the spectrum of conflict, and the Army the sustained land-based operational responsibility. The United States land forces benefit with preparedness with a specialized two army system or service divided responsibilities, positioning the United States ground forces to best protect the national interests with the best prepared forces.

Introduction

In the era of global engagement, the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps face more demanding, diverse, and complex threats across the spectrum of conflict than any other time in its history as an all-volunteer force. The current world environment raises serious national security concerns ranging from the re-emergence of significant great power competitors in the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China, rogue nation states such as Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Iranian Republic, while still facing the perpetual, immediate threat of transnational terrorist groups and the specter of irregular warfare. The U.S. Army specifically follows a pendulum swing between organizing, training, and educating its force structure towards one end of the spectrum or the other – conventional threat or irregular conflict – based on its current conflict, or preparation for the next expected war. The result is a U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps forced to adapt under strain during many transitional periods when the other in an emergent conflict replaces one spectrum of the conflict. The Army felt this as it struggled to reorient itself from a Cold War, post-Desert Storm army to a counterinsurgency force in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Marine Corps returned to supporting rotational, prolonged land-based operations.

The pendulum swing is commencing again as the return of near-peer threats has the Army redirecting its efforts towards rebuilding a force capable of massive, combined arms fire and maneuver against a like foe. The Army needs to obtain a fine balance, eliminate the pivoting back and forth, designing and supporting an overall ground force specialized, trained, and focused to address the full spectrum of conflict without requiring significant retraining or refocusing in the midst of a fight or trying to catch up to a threat after specific capability atrophy. While doing this, the balanced requirements placed on the Marine Corps must keep in mind the Corps' original, expeditionary, short-term land-based operational intent.

The U.S. ground forces must build, sustain, and maintain distinct organizational capabilities across the spectrum of conflict. A two-army system corrects the historical imbalance. The two-army framework offers three models: The hybrid force, the compartmentalized force, and the service-centric force. Hybrid force model combines elements across all the U.S. Army's component – active, National Guard, and Reserve, while the compartmentalized force model divides the spectrum of conflict responsibilities among the components. The service-centric force model divides the responsibilities between the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps. Any model better prepares the United States to counter great power competition while retaining irregular warfare and stability operations capabilities.

The Imbalance

During the first decade after 9/11, the U.S. ground forces focused their energies on combating the threat of terrorism and insurgency; however, during this time the nation's near-peer threats advanced their military and regional influences, emerging over the course of the decade as competitor states in Europe and Asia. In an article relying on "nearly two years of extensive war gaming [*sic*] and analysis," RAND Corporation research analysts in 2017 used the Russian threat to illustrate the concerning growth of near-peer threats faced by the U.S. Army, specifically in Europe.¹ With a focus on artillery and ground forces advancements, they identified a significant Russian threat to Baltic and European allies. Between the advancements in technology and growing experience in their own contingency operations, the Russian competition is significant.

In comparison of U.S. artillery and Russian artillery there is a significant range gap, with Russian artillery outranging American, providing the Russians a maneuver and fire support advantage. Current U.S. cannon artillery ranges are between nine to fifteen miles, while Russia's most common howitzer range is up to nineteen miles. United States rocket fire reaches 25 to 44 miles depending on type of munition, while Russia fields two rocket systems that reach ranges up to 56 miles. Russian ground forces are armed with anti-tank munitions that penetrate even the M1 Abram main battle tank's current armor. Facing a great power competitor's air force, without close supporting and coordinated air defense and in a contested airspace, U.S. ground forces could face serious enemy attack and losses from enemy air forces for the first time since the Second World War.² These disadvantages come from "a situation 20 years in the making" from the focus on counterinsurgency and stability operations and "will not be solved overnight," emphasizing the initiation of the current pendulum swing back to preparing for major conflict against a great power competitor, a 180 degree turn from the focus on irregular war.³

In April 2010, a frustrated U.S. Army armor officer, then-Colonel Gian Gentile, identified aspects of the "situation 20 years in the making" and wrote a provocative piece on "The Death of the Armor Corps." His article highlighted many of the issues identified with the atrophy of conventional core competencies lost in the midst of a re-birthed counterinsurgency focused army. His article raised pertinent questions, such as "when was the last time a heavy Brigade Combat Team has done a combined arms, live fire exercise integrating all arms at Brigade level?" Gentile goes on to say, "Do the Armor, Artillery, and Infantry Branches even have the collective knowledge to know how to do one anymore?" also highlighting how his own cavalry squadron did not even know how to run a Bradley Fighting Vehicle range.⁴

Gentile made a bold claim in his 2010 article that “over the last 9 years of doing irregular warfare we have eviscerated the Armor Corps to the point of its extinction,” ending his article poignantly questioning if the U.S. Army armor units could “pick up and head east and do a movement to contact,” saying “Could we do it? ...It will be hard to get it back. Competent field armies, skilled in all-arms warfare, are not made overnight.⁵” Likewise, a counterweight to that argument would be “if the Army does not develop units with a COIN mindset, it will rarely find one when it’s needed,” as demonstrated in the rough experiences and heavy costs relearning the lessons of the Philippines, Malaya, and Vietnam during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan insurgencies.⁶ Culture and mentality are fundamentally different if the Army decides it wants two specialized armies rather than one jack-of-all-trades master of none, or continue the current historical trend of accepting the painful, costly, pendulum swing.

The Struggle to Maintain Balance

The problem remains though, contrary to even the most devoted commitment to avoid more insurgencies and stability type conflicts, that the U.S. land forces are destined to be involved in irregular wars. Historically, insurgencies are more common than any other type of conflict. According to the database research of Max Boot in his work *Invisible Armies*, since 1775 there have been 443 insurgencies across the world, with nearly half of those- 202- being post-Second World War. This gives credence to the oft-claimed irregular warfare is historically, numerically the more common type of war, while war between states is often more destructive but the less reoccurring. It is easy to see then how major military organization in history have had to deal with some sort of irregular or stability type conflict.⁷ What the U.S. ground forces cannot do is what occurred post-Vietnam purging the institutional knowledge through its reforming training, education, and doctrine after the frustrations inherent in that war, an irregular war fought within the confines of a Cold War peer threat focused environment.

The sentiments of officers such as Colonel Gentile echo those of the 1970s Army post-major Vietnam drawdown. Commanders in 1971 admitted their soldiers being combat experienced in Vietnam but ignorant of conventional war tactics and competencies as a result. The Army embraced the general political and public turn against counterinsurgency and stability conflicts after Vietnam, responding with not only a refocus on conventional warfare but also a virtually expunging of counterinsurgency lessons and knowledge from its forces.

Both training and education emphasized this shift. The Army removed stability operations from its basic courses, replaced all jungle and counterguerilla training with mechanized maneuver drills, and reformed the instruction in the U.S. Army Ranger School towards conventional

maneuvers rather than an unconventional opponent. By 1980, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Infantry School, Command and General Staff College, and the Army War College all had eliminated required counterinsurgency and low-intensity conflict in their curriculum and only a few of these institutions even offered courses on the subject at all.

Doctrine likewise followed the trend with the publication of the Army's primary document Field Manual 100-5 *Operations*, pivoting towards fighting the next war not the last war, and redirecting focus on the defense of Western Europe against a Warsaw Pact opponent. The 1968 edition removed all references to counterinsurgency and nation building, lowering the importance of it in doctrine that retained some discussion on those topics. It definitively influenced any subsequent doctrine published after 1976 until Generals David H. Petraeus' and James N. Mattis' lead in 2005 to reintroduce counterinsurgency doctrine to the mainstream doctrine.⁸ The U.S. Army must retain the hard lessons relearned over the last wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world in stability operations, and not purge them from the training, education, and research and development focused on this type of conflict. The struggle for the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps together comes from the need to prepare for the threat exemplified by the Russian example, while still preserving the ability to fight a sustained irregular war.

The Two Armies

A concept to maintain competency in both the large scale, peer-competitor fights and keep a force prepared for the more common, low-intensity irregular war and stability conflicts is to have a two army force. In an Army-centric solution, allowing the Marine Corps to retain its current structure and design, the Army would create two sub-armies, or army groups, one a decisive action – conventional opponent - army and the other an expeditionary – irregular and stability conflict – army. The delineation allows each to remain specialized in training, education, and doctrine, while also remaining optimally structured organizationally. As part of the core, broader total Army, the soldiers share a base training and education covering the full spectrum of conflict, but additionally have more specialized focuses in training and education depending on which army group they belonged, this giving them a common foundation but allowing for a specialized skill set for their occupational roles.

The decisive action army would have its own force structure, with emphasis on mechanized heavy infantry and armor formations with concentrated fires capability. These units' training environment would be different from that received by the lighter expeditionary force for irregular warfare. This decisive action force would remain largely oriented towards major conventional threats, training in rotations focused on that enemy

and in that operating environment. Conversely, the expeditionary oriented force structure would consist of light and mobile forces, quickly deployable with flexible force structure focused on counterinsurgency and stability operations, training rotations geared towards that environment to build those associated skills. However, a critical factor in making the distinction would be creating the right organizational culture and fostering the correct mentality needed for the appropriate type of conflict, whether it is the aggressive violence in conventional conflict or that of the long steady weight of irregular warfare. Currently the Army pivots from one culture and mentality fostered and encouraged across the entire force to the other depending on the environment, rather than delineating two forces to maintain appropriate organizational orientation allowing the Army to have two concurrently prepared focused forces.

Building, Sustaining, Maintaining Distinct Organizational Cultures

The idea of building and sustaining distinct organizational cultures for both national security threats contributes to the case for specialized irregular warfare force structure, because the hardest adjustments made is not for the leaders so much as it is for the organizational culture. Having a COIN or a stability focused organization would be no different than how the Army already specializes units such as reconnaissance, air assault, airborne, or mountain, making them only slightly different in structure but significantly different in culture, specialized training focus, education, and experience along with expectation and predictability among its members for what they do.⁹ Due to their inherently full spectrum specialization, special operation forces would remain unchanged in their orientation and structure as they are already designed and built to fulfill their specific requirements along the full spectrum of conflict and plug and play in whichever type of conflict their special skill sets are required.

The new initiative of the Security Forces Assistance Brigade (SFAB) is conceptually similar to the idea of a specialized force designed and structured for irregular and stability operations. However, it alone is not enough to maintain the required specialization across the force to handle the irregular and stability threats faced by the nation. These advise and assist type units, such as the Army's SFAB, are a critical component in any force structure focused on irregular and stability type conflicts. However, these units cannot cover the whole scope of irregular warfare and require additional various types of units to support the sort of complex environment inherent in those conflicts. The concept of a Counterinsurgency Brigade Combat Team – one structured, trained, designed for contested irregular environments – is an additional force structure change optional to the expeditionary army.¹⁰ A conceptual employment of the expeditionary army has a light, mobile, quickly deployable force with three elements – a strong initial entry force, followed by a COIN Brigade for a possible insurgency and bridging the gap

for the final advisory and assist formations to stabilize and support the new local forces.

In contrast, the decisive action army would have its own rapidly deployable force used to create breathing space in a conventional confrontation with a near-peer force to give time for the larger mobilization of the heavy forces. Upon the successful conclusion of conventional combat operations, this force then could transition command and control of the theater to the COIN Brigade force and then ultimately to the advisory and assist organizations for the conclusion of the conflict. The key in the delineation of forces is to allow the two formations to maintain their specialized focused on their spectrum of conflict, allowing for predictability, proficiency, and critical skill sets specifically for their threats, avoiding difficulty and hard lessons learned by the organizations repeatedly crossing back and forth along the spectrum.

With the delineation of two distinct armies, the capability to support each other remains in extremis. This is a result of a common core as disciplined, professional soldiers shared across both formations. These forces may be specialists—conventional or irregular—for efficiency and effectiveness purposes in their primary roles for the national defense, but they are also capable of filling the void in each other's wars as needed. Historically there are examples of this sort of two-army concept and its ability to complement each other in emergency circumstances. One example is the massive casualties the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) as their regular professional army experienced during the first months of the war. From August to November 1914, the BEF lost eighty percent of their original force, the main line regular units from Britain.¹¹ This initiated Britain's late 1914 to early 1915 calling up its colonial forces to fill the void left by so many lost regulars, along with support from Britain's traditional reserve force of volunteers and Territorials. By 1915, the largest contingent of these came from the Indian Army, called to France to reinforce the broken BEF. The colonial Indian Army was over 16,000 British soldiers and 28,500 Indian soldiers who now fought on the Western Front in conventional warfare, suffering heavily in a type of war they were not particularly suited for but in the national emergency filled the void. Britain was not the only one either; France tapped heavily into its African colonial armies to balance its heavy losses across the early months of the First World War as well, bringing in colonial troops from across Africa.¹²

The opposite is common as well, in certain colonial emergencies, in Africa, Middle East, and Southwest Asia, the colonial armies were overwhelmed, resulting in defeats that stunned the imperial power. After the colonial armies suffered major defeats, the imperial powers would rush main line units from the continental home country to reassert the colonial army's power and authority.

The Hybrid Force Model

Two possible models to restructure the Army into specialized ground forces are the self-contained, distinct army formations with their own slice of the three components – active, National Guard, and Army Reserve – and the division of responsibility among components for the different conflicts. With the first one, the French army can serve as a conceptual model in its delineation; however, the American model would have even more refined skill sets. The French army in 1996 began to reinforce its already historical division of its army with the end of the Cold War and the identified issues with the French army in the Gulf War. Rooted in its imperial past, the French army has had two distinct ground forces, one designed for expeditionary use with its past as the French colonial army, and the other against peer land threats with its past being the continental army. They both grew and evolved in doctrine, structure, and organizational culture in diverse paths as necessitated by the different missions, threats, and possibilities they each faced.

The colonial army remained light, responsive, more attuned to working with other militaries and cultures, while the larger, continental army based in France naturally became heavier, used to responses that are more prescriptive, and arrayed towards long-standing identified threats. The former colonial forces now compose lighter units, such as airborne, marines, the Foreign Legion, and designated rapid deployment forces from France itself, with an organizational culture of more decentralized autonomous operations at lower echelons, higher degree of accepted risk, and more skills in cultural knowledge. The former colonial army is now the expeditionary army and the first to deploy to conflicts areas, but are also permanently forward deployed across French interests, mainly throughout West, Central, and East Africa. The metropolitan continental forces make-up the heavier armor type units and their larger infantry and support structure, remaining in France to support the defense of Europe. The 2013 French intervention in Mali is the most recent example of the French expeditionary army acting in relatively large numbers.¹³

The French army's expeditionary force regularly deploys to forward stations or contingency-type operations in Africa for two to three years at a time, while the regular French army does short-term rotations of four months at a time.¹⁴ This model is not far off from what is currently done when it comes to assigning deployments, with the U.S. Army's forward presence rotations for heavy, armor units going to Europe. These units train to face near peer threats such as those in Europe and Middle East deterrence, while leaving the irregular and stability type warfare rotations to the lighter forces in Africa, Pacific, and Afghanistan. However, a difference would be the organizational focus and structure would be changed, so that the lighter expeditionary forces would be trained and focused and built specifically to support those irregular and stability

rotations and not formed and trained to fight a conventional threat but then be more often than not deployed to the stability or counterinsurgency environment.

Following this concept, the decisive army group structure mirrors the lines of the current U.S. III Corps structured as the Army's heavy corps. Instead, this would be an army group of majority of heavy formations across all components, active, Guard, and Army Reserve. While the expeditionary army structure would be more along the lines of the current U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps and the global response force. Similar to the decisive army group, this force structure would be larger than just the one corps, and would have a concentration of the lighter infantry brigades, the COIN brigades, advisory and assist formations and psychological and civil affairs across the active, Guard, and Army Reserve formation.

The Compartmentalized Force Model

The second possible model has the two-army groups divided along component lines, one dominated mostly by active component forces and the other by reserve component forces. The active component forms the decisive army, with concentration of the full force structure critical for major combat operations against a great power competitor threat. This force relies heavily on mechanized infantry, armor, concentrated fires capability, and air defense with the requisite support requirements inherent in high intensity combat. This force would be supported by elements of the Army Reserve for required support forces to augment the active support units. This model allows the active component forces to focus on intensity of training and combined arms within a pure component hierarchy to prepare for the demands of peer-competitor combat, without the intricacies and demands of integrating part of the combat force coming from the reserve component.

The irregular war and stability force bulk would comprise the entirety of the Army National Guard force, with Army Reserve support augmenting the support structure in the Guard. There is a common refrain that reserve component soldiers are excellent choices for counterinsurgency and stability operations inherent to their dual role for domestic support and overseas combat operations. Between their training and experience in both military service and their natural experiences in a civilian workforce and a disciplined military force, they bring vastly different experiences, knowledge, and skills to the complex environment of irregular and stability conflicts. These dual civil and military experiences are largely lacking in fulltime active component soldiers, or at least are rare among them.

Another relevant factor for reserve component soldiers for shouldering the bulk of the irregular and stability conflict load for the national defense is

their typically longer timelines for mobilization and deployment. By the time the reserve component ramps up support, the major conventional-type conflict would be over, and the stability operations begun, possibly with an insurgency depending on the specific conflict.¹⁵ The delineation allows the active component to focus on the demanding peer-competitor threat without its training and predictability being broken up by long and reoccurring stability and insurgency-type conflicts, while at the same time emphasizes in the irregular and stability force some traits inherent in the reserve component that make it ideal for that fight.

In addition, irregular and stability conflicts are typically longer in developing allowing for the slower reserve component mobilization process whereas the dynamic near-peer competitor threats would rely more on a fast active component focused response. Elements of the Guard force, however, would still require being on a quick response spin, similar to how some of the select units currently in the reserve component are on a faster readiness build cycle, as these units would be required as the initial entry forces into an irregular warfare environment. This force is only needed if the counterinsurgency and stability force is not picking up from a conflict transition from the decisive army but rather is leveraged in a standalone conflict that did not develop from the conventional fight. The predictability of long-term stability and counterinsurgency fights also plays into the strengths of the reserve component in offering that broad force long-term predictability in deployments and use to support reserve component personnel and civilian life management.

As mentioned before, this would not remove the availability of the two forces to cross support each other. In some cases, the decisive force may be entangled in such a struggle it must call on the lighter forces in the stability force to assist. Likewise, some insurgencies may reach critical mass and begin to transition phases involving traditional major combat operations and the decisive army may need to augment elements of the stability force to address that heavier threat.

The Service Centric Force Model

A joint force solution involves the Marine Corps in an expanded capacity, allowing it to serve as the main force for any expeditionary phases of future conflict, without Army forces in assistance. This includes Marine Corps taking responsibility for training, equipping, and capabilities for decisive action, peer competition, forcible entry operations allowing for a slower deployment of an Army heavy force structure-centric response. In addition to this role in decisive conflict, the Marine Corps' expeditionary focused forces would be responsible for initial actions in an irregular or stability type conflict until the lighter force structure-centric Army forces deployed for follow on handoff for sustained land-based operations. This divergent between the Marine Corps fully assuming the expeditionary and

initial entry operational roles, allows the Army to focus its capability and force structure to remain on sustained conventional conflict and long-term stability and irregular conflict, rather than both forces dividing their force structure in duplicated efforts.

Conclusion

The status quo is an option to address the dynamic, complex environment in the era of global engagement, how the Army and Marine Corps swing back and forth from one end of the spectrum to the other in drastic response to the current or next perceived threat. This does force a refocus on training, education, and doctrine across the entire force to increase proficiency and preparedness towards one type of conflict. Unfortunately, this is historically done at the expense of lessons, experience, and proficiency of the sidelined or secondary conflict, only to switch again when the immediacy of the contemporary threat changes. The U.S. ground forces' pivot addressing the emergent and present danger of irregular warfare and stability operations post-9/11, created a historical imbalance in the U.S. ground forces between the capabilities required for major wars and those for irregular conflict. Meanwhile, the resurgent great power competitors as well as rogue states increased their conventional capabilities with modernization and growing experience, capitalizing on the United States' focus on irregular warfare, resulting in the growing struggle within the U.S. ground forces over training, education, and doctrinal focus. For the successful balance of land power in great power competition and national security, the building, sustaining, and maintaining of distinct organizational capabilities is imperative within the U.S. ground forces for both types of conflict. A two-army framework provides the requisite balance.

The two-army system has three models, two centered on reorganizing the U.S. Army and a third joint service approach of U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps. The first models create two distinct army groups within the larger Army force – allowing one to focus on large-scale conflict, the other on irregular war and stability operations. The hybrid force model includes army groups distinct with their own internal support across all three components: Active, National Guard, and Reserve. The compartmentalized force model divides the Army by component, the active component focusing on major combat operations against a great power competitor and the reserve component focusing on irregular and stability conflict. Each capable of supporting the other in crises, but otherwise specialized in their priority conflict focus. The final service-centric force model gives the Marine Corps the sole expeditionary responsibility across the spectrum of conflict, and the Army the long-term land-based operational responsibility in both decisive conflict and irregular conflict and stability operations. In all but the status quo option, the U.S. land forces benefit with preparedness across the full spectrum of

conflict with a specialized two-army system or service-divided responsibilities, with their own training, education, and doctrine specific to their conflict focus. This balance achieved while sharing the common core training that bonds them as disciplined, professional soldiers. With a change to the status quo, the two Army-centric models, or service-divided responsibilities, U.S. ground forces are positioned to protect the national interests with the best-prepared forces.

The two army theoretical framework addresses the organizational balancing of the U.S. ground forces in support of countering great power competition while maintaining irregular warfare capability. The broad, two-army framework does not address several topics beyond this work's scope. Further discussion should address the optimal size of U.S. land forces for this framework, the balance of fiscal appropriation and research efforts on modernization between the two armies, and the impact and role of allies in this structure. Although there remains additional analysis by strategists and decisions by policy-makers to address the imbalance of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps for great power competition and enduring irregular warfare threats to national security, a two army system framework is a strong first step.

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