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Pacific Garrison or Contingency Force? Implications of the New National Security Strategy for the Marine Corps

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PRESIDENT BUSH'S ANNOUNCEMENT of his vision for a new national security strategy for the post-Cold War world, on 2 August 1990 at the Aspen Institute, was initially overshadowed by an event on the other side of the world—Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. However, with the ensuing Gulf war victory and the diminution in the Soviet threat, the administration's plans to reduce the overall size of the Department of Defense by almost one-third started to receive deserved attention in Congress and in the press. Today, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, it is clearly time for strategists, defense analysts, and military officers to analyze and discuss the implications of the new planning for our force posture. Since American defense reorganization—particularly reorganization characterized by sharp fiscal reductions—has historically entailed a reassessment of the role and mission of our smallest but most elite service, the United States Marine Corps, it is appropriate for all members of the navy-marine corps team to direct their attention to the inevitable and enduring public policy question: where does the marine corps go from here?¹

Objectives of the New National Security Strategy

The Bush administration's future defense plan, outlined in a series of speeches and congressional budget testimony by defense officials, is not yet solidly fixed—it is still evolving.² This is evidenced by the fact that until very recently the plan lacked a permanent name. The titles Aspen Strategy, New National Strategy, New Military Strategy, and Reconstitution Strategy have been used alternately to describe the proposed program. (For the purposes of this article, the abbreviation NNSS will be used to designate the administration's New

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National Security Strategy plan.) Even before the NNSS crystallizes, however, it is obvious that a significant reorganization in the Department of Defense will occur.

The objective of the strategy is to adjust American military posture to the apparent disappearance of the Soviet threat as such and to reduce defense expenditures to the anticipated requirements of the post-Cold War world. Expenditures in the current budget are expected to be cut by at least twenty-five percent. The focus of the reductions are those forces committed to Nato, which will be reduced by fifty percent. Pivotal to this decision is the new intelligence estimate that the West would have a period of up to two years' strategic warning prior to a conflict with the former Soviet Union, or any other global conflict threat.

Rather than maintain a high proportion of forces in forward-deployed status, the Bush administration plans to rely on fewer deployable, active-duty forces backed by an infrastructure facilitating "reconstitution" to previous levels. The reduction in active forces is intended to create a base force sufficient to handle the most probable future contingencies. These reductions will cut 245,000 personnel from the U.S. Army (six active and at least two reserve divisions), 170,000 personnel from the air force (ten tactical air wings), 77,000 sailors and ninety-four ships from the navy, and 36,000 marines (a reduction from 196,000 to approximately 160,000). An additional aspect of the base force plan is to reorganize the Department of Defense into four force components: Atlantic Forces, Pacific Forces, Strategic Forces, and Contingency Forces. Whether the intent is to consolidate the current unified command structure into these four "components" is currently under fierce debate. Whereas the Pacific Force component appears quite similar to the current Pacific Command, the Atlantic Force would include those units assigned to the U.S. European and Central Commands.

Impact on the Marine Corps

Until now, common wisdom has suggested that the pending defense cuts will have a lesser impact on the Department of the Navy (which includes both the navy and the marine corps) than on any other military department. Fewer cuts in personnel are planned, and, more importantly, a significant reduction in overseas-based land and air forces would presumably increase the relative importance of naval forces, giving greater meaning to the long-standing navy-marine corps claim to represent America's "first line of defense." The obvious reason is geography. Defense planners, even if they so desire, cannot wish away the oceanic environment that separates the United States from both potential allies and potential enemies and compels therefore the continuing maintenance of maritime forces, nor can they reduce American economic dependence on

foreign trade, the vast percentage of which travels by sea. For many reasons however, maritime forces, and in particular the marine corps, may face severe challenges to their policy and composition in the wake of severe overall defense budget reductions and varying interpretations of the “lessons” of the Gulf war.

First, there seems to be a nascent but possibly growing view among certain defense analysts that amphibious assault capabilities—in light of the absence of an actual assault—were unnecessary for success in the Gulf war and, by implication, future wars. Two versions of this view are circulating: air power advocates vigorously maintain that *all* ground action was unnecessary in light of the “inevitable” collapse of Iraqi will; others emphasize that army airborne troops were the first on the scene to prevent Saddam Hussein’s probable continuation into Saudi Arabia and to secure the area *prior* to the arrival of the navy and marine corps. Besides being decidedly partisan, both claims disparage the unique contribution of the marine corps by portraying marine operations as patently similar in scope and detail to those of the U.S. Army. Their grudging admission that the marine corps is the “finest light infantry in the world” harbors the implication that marines are nothing more than light infantry, of the sort that should properly be in the army inventory. Another question (of the “who won the war” variety) sidestepped is whether airborne troops (without sea-lifted weapons) represent the same sustainable combat power as is inherent in amphibious-lift forces.

Second, there are growing pressures for the army and air force to adopt an “expeditionary perspective” with the restructuring of their forces. With the elimination of the Soviet threat as such to the European continent and the assumption that Saddam Hussein is an aberration in a Mideast region evolving towards peace, the scenarios for which the army and air force have tailored their capabilities are effectively dissolved. The army had previously begun a readjustment by emphasizing the development of light forces, such as the 7th Infantry Division. The air force is now describing the future organization of “expeditionary air force air wings” that will function in a fashion, albeit land-based, similar to navy and marine carrier air wings. If these services take on a primarily expeditionary role, another uniquely marine corps focus will be duplicated.

Third, the continuing proliferation of special operations units in all the services, controlled by a Special Operations Command with apparently independent responsibilities, has created an impression that there is much duplication among American contingency forces. The traditional role of the marine corps as America’s contingency force, capable of functioning—through swift seaborne deployment to crisis regions—as a prime element of crisis diplomacy during a transition to possible conflict, is obscured by a panoply of units posed to jump from the sky, shoot terrorists, rescue hostages, and perform other covert but spectacular operations.³ The fact that most crises are defused or resolved by overt

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assets, such as deployed naval air, surface, and amphibious forces, rather than covert means, is sometimes forgotten.

Fourth, cutbacks in the fleet will have an obvious impact on the procurement of future amphibious ships. Since the concept of sea lift as a transportation function has been divorced from what is in reality combat sea lift (i.e., amphibious ships), policy makers tend to view sea lift as an exclusively army-oriented function. Pressure will mount to build or otherwise acquire sea-lift ships to transport army material while correspondingly reducing amphibious lift. This makes sense only if one assumes that friendly, developed port facilities, such as were available in the Persian Gulf, will be available in any future overseas conflict. Since this is unlikely, it would seem to be just a matter of time until the army insists on putting some degree of combat capability on our future sea-lift ships to make them able to land supplies under less than commercial conditions. While this would not make them amphibious ships *per se*, it is a small step for the army then to acquire their own amphibious capabilities in order to deal with those situations in which ports must be seized. Historical precedent, such as General Douglas MacArthur's Southwest Pacific campaign, can be cited to demonstrate that the army "always had an amphibious capability."⁴ Of course, the fact that MacArthur's primary amphibious assets and expertise were provided by his *naval* component command, the Seventh Fleet, is treated a bit hazily by this claim.

These four perceptions, combined with perceived fiscal realities, are sufficient to create an intellectual challenge to the role and mission, independence, organization, and perhaps very existence of the marine corps. In any case, the interplay between these perceptions and the NNSS inflicts tough choices among options of how the marine corps should adjust to the assumptions of post-Cold War planning.

Should the Marine Corps Become Geographically or Contingency Oriented?

The New National Security Strategy assumes that the United States will be involved, and only when it so chooses, primarily in Third World contingencies and crises no longer instigated by communist ideology and superpower rivalry. It also assumes that the United States will be able to build political-military coalitions that will support American involvement. Yet, it is obvious that there is always the potential requirement for U.S. unilateral intervention in situations where there is no base support for land or air forces. The NNSS appears to downplay this likely scenario, which is clearly not in keeping with our most wishful hopes for a new world order. However, there may be areas of the world where the marine corps, with its unique capabilities to mount independently sustained expeditions, might logically focus its efforts. Amphibious warfare is

ultimately maneuver warfare, and there are certainly regions where such maneuver capabilities are more important than logistics-dependent heavy armor or land-based air forces. These regions will presumably be the responsibility of the Pacific and Contingency Force components. In order to escape the inevitably bloody political fight over roles and missions, it may be logical for the marines to become more geographically oriented, to concentrate on being the primary service in commands and regions where amphibious, littoral, and ground maneuver are the prime elements of deterrence, crisis resolution, and victory.

On the other hand, and given the marine corps' two-hundred-year history of independent, small-scale operations in support of American interests, it may be more logical to assign the contingency role exclusively to the Corps. While this appears to be radical departure from the current policy of having a joint Special Operations Command siphon individual units from each service to retain a national (vice theater) special operations capability, it would greatly simplify training and tactical interoperability (and would probably be cheaper). In return, the marine corps might have to give up some of the sustained land-combat capability (such as armor and armor-trained units) that it demonstrated in the drive to Kuwait City and that is required under the geographic primary-service concept.

The Argument for a Pacific Orientation. The current emphasis on maneuver warfare, which is made evident in such doctrine as Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 1, *Warfighting*, would appear to position the Corps to assume a major responsibility for both the Pacific and Contingency components of the proposed new military organization.⁵ However, it is particularly the Pacific region, in which the administration plans to use "chiefly maritime" forces in a reduced level of forward operations, that is most suitable for the use of a seaborne marine presence for crisis response; most of the nations here that are of interest to the United States, whether as potential allies or potential enemies, are coastal states. The Pacific Rim is characterized by oceanic trade. Likewise, many of the potential conflicts take on an oceanic character. A number of the major powers or possible future powers—Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Indonesia—are separated by expanses of ocean. With no Soviet threat, most of the potential conflicts on the Asian landmass itself will probably remain of peripheral interest to the United States except where they affect coastal regions. In view of the imminent loss of bases in the Philippines, and the probable reduction of forces in South Korea and Japan, and also of the great distances required for air transport, amphibious forces will be even more critical if the United States is to maintain its formal and informal defense guarantees with Asian allies.

This poses a bit of a dilemma in that *Warfighting* and other recent writings on marine doctrine seem to de-emphasize classic amphibious operations. The marine corps campaign in the Kuwait Theater of Operations consisted of

effective ground maneuver combined with sea and land-based air support but did not include a major combat amphibious assault. Marine corps commandant General Alfred Gray's warfighting philosophy was put to good effect. As noted, however, critics are swift to point out that marine actions differed from that of the army only by the degree of armor involved, thereby challenging the marine corps claim to exclusivity of mission. Critics could ask: If army units can be rapidly deployed and backed by sea lift, why is a separate marine corps required? If the marine corps is de-emphasizing its amphibious assault mission, what makes the marine corps unique? Possible answers are that marine corps expeditionary forces are designed to remain afloat for extended periods and land and mount an initial defense without the need for an extensive logistics train; that amphibious assault is not really being de-emphasized, but other aspects of expeditionary combat are being reemphasized; and that in contrast, airborne and air-transportable units simply do not have the combat sustainability of amphibious forces bringing their weapons by sea.⁶

Rather than fight such intellectual battles, the administration, operating under the tenets of the NNSS, may conceivably choose to designate the Pacific theater as "Marineland," under the logic that so much of the region consists of water or territory not conducive to operations by heavily armored forces. Conversely, the ground forces of the Atlantic component, with its responsibility for Mideast operations, may become the sole province of the army under the logic that army heavy armor is the major requirement in most regional scenarios. This approach is suggested by the Bush administration's deliberate intent to continue assigning two of the three Marine Expeditionary Forces to the Pacific region. For the navy, this would require designating the bulk of its amphibious ships for the Pacific and assigning the bulk of its fast logistics sea-lift assets to the Atlantic.

The Argument for a Contingency Force Orientation. The land component of the Contingency Force may consist of a combination of amphibious-based marines, light army infantry (air transportable), airborne assault, various special operations forces, and even a brown-water navy.⁷ On the other hand, the land component of the Contingency Force might just as well be composed primarily of marines with support as required by special operations forces. Only after a "limited contingency" (for which the contingency force is presumably designed) appears to be large enough to require major intervention would forces assigned to the Atlantic and Pacific components, including armor and extensive logistic capabilities, be introduced. Such a solution would preserve the marine corps without debilitating battles over roles and missions. In exchange, the army would be free to concentrate on mechanized warfare and building a reserve structure that could adequately reconstitute Nato.

Under such a plan, the marine corps would revert to its "can-opener" function in a major conflict (that is, conflict beyond the contingency level),

followed up as necessary by active-component armor and all-mechanized army units, and finally the reconstituted reserve “people’s army.”⁸ This would require shifting some of the less glamorous functions now detailed to reserve units (particularly in logistics) back to the active component in order to ensure success of the rapid initial marine and army armor response. This might also lessen the land maneuver focus of the most recent marine doctrine. The obvious strategic implication is the gamble that heavy armor and highly mechanized forces would not be needed initially in a crisis (probably in the Americas or Africa).

Another feature that the marine corps might need to adopt in order to fulfill the contingency forces mission is a foreign-force training orientation similar to that of army’s Special Forces (Green Berets). This capability is provided to some extent by the special operations capable Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU(SOC)), but only on a limited, as-required basis. Considering the high regard in which the marines are held by foreign forces and also the esprit natural to the Corps, creating a more intense, dedicated foreign-force training capability would not seem overwhelmingly difficult.

The prospects described above would seem to argue for retiring the mechanized maneuver emphasis of marine corps *Warfighting*. This does not mean that marine armor would go away—only that its funding would become secondary in priority. It is important, however, to reflect on the ultimate prerequisite for this sort of approach—benign behavior on the part of Russia. The strategic vision it assumes is that of a worldwide conventional deterrent (forward presence) consisting of combatant ships and afloat marines, a ready response to small military crises by such sea-borne forces, relatively placid contingency regions whose conflicts (if they are of interest to the United States) can be addressed by the navy-marine corps team, and a fast sea-lift capacity to move army units rapidly across the Atlantic and Mediterranean with minimum opportunity for opposition at sea.

There are inherent assumptions in the Bush administration’s New National Security Strategy that will put pressure on the marine corps to redefine its function in the post-Cold War world. The reason is *not* that the marine corps’ previous orientation is outdated; in fact, it is quite the contrary. The primary reason is that the post-Cold War army and air force will be attempting to redefine *their* functions as being expeditionary forces. In the inevitable roles and missions battle, fueled by pressures to reduce duplication and various claims as to what constitutes the lessons of the Gulf war, the marine corps will once again be forced to argue for its independence and uniqueness.

A possible way to avoid this conflict is for the marine corps to focus on a geographic or force component orientation in those areas and components

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(Pacific and Contingency) most suitable for expeditionary and amphibious warfare. Another method would be to devote the Corps exclusively to the Contingency Force role, although this option is more likely to cause bureaucratic backlash from existing units. These are only two options, but they are ones that need to be considered under the tenets and tensions of the new strategy. Is the marine corps suited to be the Pacific garrison or to be the American contingency force? Or both? Or neither? Should it simply remain as presently constituted, albeit smaller by 36,000 marines? The time for the marine corps to make this decision is when it still has the power to decide—before its expeditionary function appears to be redundant.

Notes

1. A debate most similar to the post-Vietnam dialogue prompted by such studies as Martin Binkin and Jeffrey Record, *Where Does the Marine Corps Go from Here?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1976).

2. The best assessment of the strategy thus far can be found in the technical report, *America Promises to Come Back: A New National Strategy*, by Dr. James J. Tritton of the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS-NS-91-003, 26 December 1990, updated 1 May 1991). Implications for naval forces can be found in Sam J. Tangredi, *The Means to Deliver: Implications of the New National Strategy for Maritime Forces*, Working Paper in International Studies 1-91-8, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, (Stanford Univ.: May 1991). (Available from author.)

3. This traditional role has been reinforced by development of the Marine Expeditionary Unit—Special Operations Capable (MEU(SOC)) concept in which all deploying MEUs are trained in a specifically tailored package of “special operations” skills. While not considered a national special operations asset, forward-deployed MEU(SOC) units may be the most readily available forces to handle particular low-intensity war and non-combatant evacuation operations.

4. It should be pointed out that the post-World War II army leadership tended to disparage the need for amphibious capabilities—obviously challenging the need to maintain an independent marine corps. The illustrative quote of the period is from General of the Army Omar Bradley’s testimony to Congress: “I am wondering if we shall ever again have another large-scale amphibious operation. Frankly, the atomic bomb, properly delivered, about precludes such a possibility.” Less than a year later, U.S. forces landed at Inchon, Korea.

5. U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, FMFM-1 (Washington: 6 March 1989).

6. In the absence of sufficient naval amphibious lift, the marine corps has spearheaded the development of the fast-reaction Maritime Prepositioning Ship (MPS) force capable of delivering the combat equipment for air-transported marine units. Obviously, this is a concept suited to the U.S. Army and one in which, given the Desert Storm experience, interest is likely to continue to increase. Again, it must be pointed out that the concept requires a relatively benign environment where commercial shipping can be off-loaded.

7. Inferred from General Powell’s brief depiction. General Colin L. Powell, USA, *Statement of General Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives*, 7 February 1991, p. 10.

8. This is similar to the scenario described by General Powell (on 7 February) as constituting the initial American response to Operation Desert Shield and Storm. *Statement of General Colin L. Powell*, pp. 12-13.