

Zeitschrift: ASMZ : Sicherheit Schweiz : Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Offiziersgesellschaft

Band: 167 (2001)

Heft: 5

Artikel: Consequences of a New US Defense Strategy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-67308>

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Consequences of a New U.S. Defense Strategy

In Washington, an internal Pentagon review of American defense strategy is likely to call for a dramatic reduction in U.S. troops deployed overseas while increasing the use of technologies that can monitor and strike adversaries from long distances. Such a historic shift would reduce the vulnerability of U.S. forces to attack and lower the profile of a seemingly imperial military presence. Over the long term, however, such a strategy may force allies and adversaries alike to build new regional alliances or adopt independent, antagonistic defense strategies.

Analysis

Under the direction of Andrew Marshall, director of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, an internal think tank, a «quick reaction» review to be completed next month is set to offer a fresh look at how to structure U.S. forces in the post Cold War period.

Marshall's findings – anxiously awaited by those who feel Washington has been too slow to restructure its military forces, but feared by the parochial interests in the military services and defense industry – are expected to steer the more detailed Quadrennial Defense Review that is to be complete by the end of the year.

The Bush Administration will seek to put in place a new military strategy that over the long term enables the United States to pull back its overseas military presence and replace it with new capabilities such as the vastly expanded use of standoff and stealth capabilities. But this strategy could have the unintended consequence of further fragmenting the world, causing certain major powers to build new regional alliances while prompting others to aggressively defend their interests.

America has stationed troops abroad for more than half a century as a legacy of World War II. The United States still maintain an estimated 100,000 troops in Europe, primarily Germany, and a similar number in Asia, primarily Japan and South Korea. In the Middle East, a force of roughly 25,000 keeps watch on Persian Gulf oil. The Marshall study, however, is likely to assert that in the next 20 years emerging threats and unstable politics will endanger this long-standing U.S. presence.

One of the «principal future challenges» to U.S. national security will be the difficulty in projecting military power in the face of enemies armed with advanced «anti-access» and «area denial» capabilities, according to some of the review's initial findings. For example, air strips in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that are critical to keeping the Iraqi military in check may become off-limits because conventional and unconventional weapons can strike them – or simply because the United States has worn out its welcome. Naval forces, for their part, will be sitting ducks for missile and terrorist attack.

Such a pullback of U.S. forces would dictate a comparatively smaller military. Marshall and his staff are preparing to recommend cutting the number of aircraft carriers from 12 to 10; similarly reducing Marine Corps amphibious ready groups; and scrapping two of 10 Army divisions. They are likely to recommend clipping three of 20 Air Force combat wings. A variety of Cold War weapons – such as the Crusader artillery system and the Joint Strike Fighter – could be terminated.

Instead, Marshall is likely to call for developing and deploying new technologies. At sea, stealth technology will cloak submarines and ships; ship decks could have hypersonic, directed energy and electromagnetic guns; and undersea vehicles would gather intelligence and deliver amphibious forces. In the air, long-range precision munitions fired from submarines, ships and bombers would strike targets from extended ranges. In space, new satellite imaging capabilities would penetrate foliage and other obscurants such as walls, allowing military planners to better see their targets. The Army, meanwhile, would probably field robots on the battlefield.

In practical terms, such a strategy would vastly reduce the need for forward-based American forces. In South Korea, for example, local troops would take a leading role in thwarting an invasion from North Korea. A European rapid reaction force would become more important for a wide array of regional crises. The United States, in turn, would orient its military strategy toward the Persian Gulf as well as South and East Asia and further away from Europe.

The unintended consequence of such a strategy, however, could be to further fuel regional military alliances or independent military buildups in key regions that, in turn, hinder rather than help global security. STRAT-

FOR.com, in its 10-year forecast in January, predicted an increase in regional alliances and rivalries, which ebbed considerably in the decade following the Cold War. Echoing this, Marshall review documents contend that the «sharp decline in competition among the great powers has begun to reverse,» predicting the rise of «great regional powers» in South and East Asia in particular.

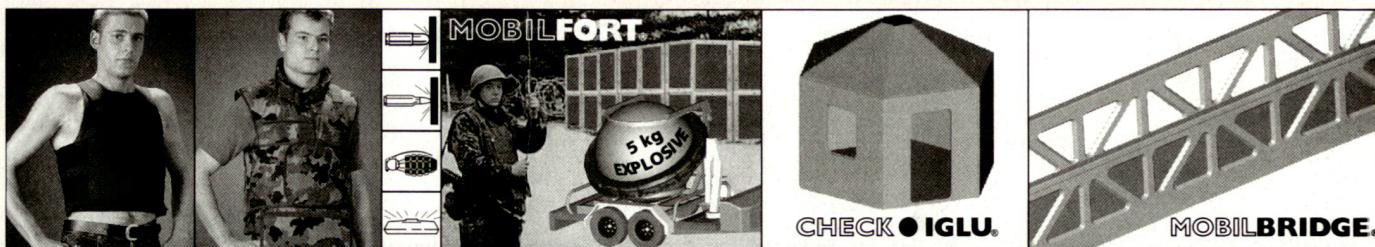
The physical void created by a dramatically reduced U.S. military presence abroad would probably speed up this trend as historic rivals, such as China and Japan or Israel and its Arab neighbors, either seek closer military ties with friendly nations or decide to enhance their security by beefing up their military capabilities.

In East Asia, Japan has already taken steps to improve its offensive military capabilities with the recent decision to acquire air-refueling planes. Tokyo may determine that it can no longer rely on the United States for protection and therefore strike new alliances with its like-minded neighbors, re-orient toward the offensive what for a half century has been primarily a defensive force, or a combination of both.

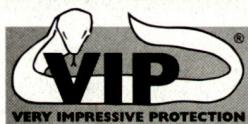
In the Middle East, Israel would probably take a similar approach, crafting an even closer relationship with Turkey, much to the chagrin of other Islamic countries, while increasing the reach and firepower of its military. Faced with what it perceives as a growing external threat, Israel earlier this year deployed three Dolphin-class submarines – acquired from Germany – to the Persian Gulf. These submarines are possibly carrying nuclear tipped cruise missiles.

The Marshall prescription for how to project U.S. military power in the coming decades is aimed at preparing the armed forces to confront new threats and deal effectively with a dramatically different strategic environment. In so doing, however, Washington may stimulate unwanted regional competition by leading its allies and adversaries alike to align themselves militarily with major regional powers or embark on a more active defense of their territory and interests. A U.S. military seeking to limit its forward presence and use of overseas bases may inadvertently find itself involved in a greater rather than fewer number of foreign forays.

Stratfor, 01 March 2001



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