

Briefing Memo

U.S. Army Reform Following the Gulf War

Yuichi Shinpuku

International Conflict Division, Center for Military History

Introduction

The U.S. Forces are shifting away from the counterinsurgency operations of the 2000s and heading into the next phase. During the U.S. Army's engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia studied the assets and vulnerabilities of the United States, set out to modernize its ambitious forces, and succeeded for the most part, which have drawn the fears of the Army. In response, the Army has embarked on equipment development and established a multi-dimensional doctrine called "Multi-Domain Battle." The Army is exploring its role and evolving the style of warfare not only on land but also in new domains, such as cyberspace and outer space.

The current international situation marked by the fight against terrorism and the rising military threats of China and Russia traces back to the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union in early 1990. This was a time when there was interest in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) theory following the Gulf War. It was also a time when the United States began to explore the role of the Army's capabilities in the coming uncertain period. This article examines the U.S. Army's prospects and preparations for future wars before and after 1990 and discusses the difficulties of transforming a military organization.

1. Commencement of Review

Between 1987 and 1989, the U.S. Forces conducted reviews of how its military capabilities should be utilized and developed, looking ahead to the post-Cold War world. In 1988, the Joint Chiefs of Staff unveiled the *Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan*, which covered not only the most high-risk scenarios, namely, clashes with then Soviet Union in Europe, but also the most likely scenarios of regional instability that do not involve Soviet forces. The Plan anticipated that responding to the latter scenarios will require units that have light equipment and can be strategically deployed quickly. In 1989, troop strength reductions began to be discussed, and coupled with pressure from Congress, the post-Soviet defense strategy began to take on more reality. When Army General Colin Powell became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he pressed forward with these reviews and shaped the "Base Force" concept, which determined the military strength that was necessary for U.S. military engagement all around the world after the absence of the Soviet threat.

In parallel with these reviews, the U.S. Army undertook reviews in line with the Base Force concept. Under Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Carl Vuono, senior officers considered the role of the Army in view of the decline of the Soviet threat and budgetary cuts. Vuono has stated that in order to "maintain the ability to conduct an opposed entry into combat in defense of vital U.S. interests anywhere," the Army must emphasize "a great premium on the

capability to project power rapidly.” Accordingly, the Army sought to transition from an asset design based on threats, in which the Soviet Union serves as the benchmark, to a concept based on capabilities, which takes into account the surrounding environment of the United States in the future. The Army thus conducted reviews on transformations to secure force projection capabilities, in particular, devising a new operational doctrine that shifts from heavy forces to units that can be strategically deployed easily.

2. Measures Ahead of Future Warfare: Adaptation to RMA and Introduction of OOTW

The U.S. victory in the 1991 Gulf War dispelled the bitter memory of the Vietnam War within the Army. Meanwhile, there was no longer a military power like Iraq that was hostile towards the United States. As a result, doubts began to be cast in the United States as to whether the vast spending was needed to maintain Cold War military capabilities. Though the victory in the Gulf War led to a surge in President George W. Bush’s approval rating, he was criticized for his economic measures and lost in the next presidential election one year later. At this timing, General Gordon Sullivan succeeded Vuono as Chief of Staff of the Army. Sullivan entered military service not from West Point but from the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), setting him apart from past chiefs of staff. While he did not directly take part in the Gulf War, he had served as Vuono’s right-hand man as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army.

Sullivan appears to have a relatively low profile in Japan compared to the Army generals who contributed to the victory in the Gulf War. It would be premature to dismiss him as merely a figure who followed in the footsteps of Vuono. During the period that Sullivan was Chief of Staff from 1991 to 1994, the Army gave shape to Force XXI, an experimental unit based on advanced information technology. In addition, the Army revised the AirLand Battle operational doctrine that was the driving force behind the U.S. victory in the Gulf War, and also established a new concept known as “Operations Other Than War (OOTW)” ahead of other military services. It was Sullivan’s leadership that materialized the Army’s vision for future warfare, which had been under review since the latter period of the Cold War.

Sullivan worked hard to realize the ideal Army of the future. To this end, he began by raising awareness within the Army. He actively contributed articles to *Military Review*, a magazine of the U.S. Army for its officers, and *Parameters*, a quarterly magazine of the Army War College. During his term from 1991 to 1994, he contributed 20 articles, including articles he co-authored, to military magazines, ranking him among the chiefs of staff who contributed the most articles. Through these articles and instructions, Sullivan emphasized that adapting the Army to the new era requires abandoning Cold War thinking and executing “full-dimensional operations,” as well as forming compact units that maintain high combat capabilities through increased precision, information sharing, and high-speed information processing made possible by information technology.

Sullivan then carried out systematic and intensive reviews of future warfare. General Frederick Franks, Jr., Commanding General of the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), who was the Commander of the VII

Corps in the Gulf War, established six study groups to realize Sullivan's intentions. The study groups conducted reviews that have contributed to the Force XXI concept.

Reviews regarding the doctrine were also undertaken under the responsibility of Colonel James McDonough, Director of the School of Advanced Military Studies. The reviews illuminated the relationship between wars and OOTW that had been given little attention, making it clear that the post-Cold War duties of the Army include not only large-scale wars but also domestic disaster relief, international peacekeeping and peace enforcement, as well as small-scale contingency operations.

Sullivan gave particular consideration to integrating the views of commanders, heads of units, and officers of each organization. The prime example is the Louisiana Maneuvers, a series of unit experiments and task force meetings to study future warfare, which began in the end of 1991. This process had the same name as the operational experiments of units organized by General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army, before World War II. Sullivan states that he named the process after Marshall's exercises in order to foster "innovation and growth in extraordinary ways," believing that "business as usual was not good enough" for creating the Army of the future. Alongside the Louisiana Maneuvers, TRADOC made rounds to units to explain about future warfare and the operation doctrine and made efforts to form a consensus.

In this way, Sullivan evolved a concept that had previously been considered, and during the post-Cold War period following the Cold War U.S.-Soviet confrontations, succeeded in preparing the Army in concrete ways for future warfare.

3. Background of Sullivan's Measures

Let us now examine the background against which Sullivan considered the role and ideal form of the Army in a new era and was able to translate his ideas into action, with a particular focus on his convictions. Two key phrases in articles he has written shed light on what Sullivan considered were problems and how he construed the changes in the environment in and outside of the military.

The first is "No more Task Force Smiths." Task Force Smith is a battalion-level combat team that was hastily deployed from Japan, where it was stationed, in order to rescue South Korean forces initially after the outbreak of the Korean War. Although the Task force was expected to endure until the arrival of the main units, it was overwhelmed by North Korean units whose number exceeded expectations. Sullivan contends that Task Force Smith was "not trained and ready to fight" and should not have been, under inadequate conditions, sent to a battlefield that required different from comfortable occupation duty in Japan. Sullivan believed that the responsibility for the crushing defeat of Task Force Smith lies not with the blunder of the dispatched commander but with the failure caused by a lack of "leadership in the Army." In other words, he attributed the cause to the Army taking "its eyes off the ball [what was happening in the world]...and the soldiers paid the price." Bearing in mind that, during peacetime, following the end of World War II, the Army did not conduct sufficient reviews of the changes in the next era and neglected to carry out the necessary preparations, Sullivan believed it was the responsibility of the Army's leadership to make preparations to enable units to engage in combat by foreseeing the changes in the times.

Second, Sullivan believed it was necessary to understand the changes of the times in order to achieve “change, continuity and growth” of the Army. The Gulf War drew media attention to precision-guided weapons, and RMA became a buzzword. In light of Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Wave*, Sullivan perceived that these developments were not merely confined to weapons and military phenomena but also represented a historic turning point that led to the post-industrial society.

Toffler’s proposition that an agricultural society is followed by an industrial society and then by an information society gave two hints to Sullivan. The first was related to the changes in modes of combat due to RMA. Sullivan believed that importance would be attached to the superiority or inferiority of information capabilities rather than to numerical superiority or inferiority as in an industrial society. The key point of the Force XXI concept was that even a small unit compared to the adversary’s could achieve decisive victory if the former has information superiority. For this reason, it was deemed that it was possible to achieve both the military strength and budget reductions requested by Congress as well as swift acquisition of troop projection capabilities. In particular, Sullivan obtained hints from private companies’ adaptation to the information society and viewed that measures should be taken to ensure that the Army does not fall behind.

The other hint was related to the changes in the character of war based on the changes in society. Even as the information age would come to dominate, the vestiges of the industrial and agricultural ages would remain. Sullivan believed that as the only superpower, the United States would face regional conflicts and limited wars inflicted by nations that do not yet have an information society, or by forces that resist U.S. hegemony. Sullivan’s future predictions based on speculation were in the backdrop of his measures which covered not only traditional, interstate war but also OOTW that contributes to resolving conflicts.

In examining these two hints, it is important to consider what war was envisioned by Sullivan. It can easily be understood that the former Force XXI concept had the Gulf War in mind. Then what war was in mind for OOTW? While Sullivan has not commented on it directly, he likely had in mind the success of the invasion of Panama in 1989.

Sullivan praises the Operation Just Cause and believes it was truly a more formidable operation than the Gulf War. Regarding the reason, he explains that a “decisive victory” was achieved due to the success of many OOTW duties, like noncombatant evacuation of U.S. nationals, that were carried out simultaneously, as well as conventional warfare against Panamanian forces. The Operation Just Cause achieved Panama’s strategic collapse by “overwhelming the enemy simultaneously at the operational and tactical levels,” and for Sullivan, this represented a success case that the Army of the future should aspire towards. He perceived that “Simultaneity, the simultaneous employment of overwhelming combat power throughout the breadth and depth of the operational area to paralyze the enemy, is the defining characteristic of war and Military Operations Other Than War in the Information Age.”

Conclusion

Force XXI and OOTW that Sullivan and other senior officials of the Army aimed to achieve were breakthroughs compared to the Army of the Cold War period. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the Army succeeded in the

subsequent war against terrorism and in stabilizing security during the Iraq War. Later, those who led the counterinsurgency operations criticized that the Army's leadership at the time were still in rapture over their victory in the Gulf War and were focused only on conventional warfare.

There are indeed grounds for the criticism that the Army had understood OOTW, including counterinsurgency operations, as being low intensity conflicts compared to conventional warfare. It is incorrect, however, to regard that Sullivan and other Army leaders in and around 1990 only considered general wars. Based on Toffler's social restructuring, Sullivan had understood that future enemies would be asymmetric to the United States, and therefore, OOTW was necessary. The Army was able to step out of its Cold War role as a result of the Army leaders at the time engaging in trials and errors in preparing for future warfare, and this ought to merit some praise.

In the 1990s, in order to avoid stagnation following its victory, the Army explored its new role by analyzing the future circumstances based on the existing situation. Meanwhile, looking back on these reforms, the author thinks it is understandable that there are difficulties in preparing for the future, with the present as the starting point. The U.S. Army today is still in the midst of this challenge. In order to understand the true significance, it is important to be aware of the background of the reforms without dwelling on the buzzwords of the times—in particular, how the Army perceives continuity and non-continuity between the past and the present circumstances. There lies some significance in taking another look at the Gulf War and the invasion of Panama from such perspectives.

Referenced Sources

- Takeshi Fukuda, *American Defense Policy: Realignment after the Cold War and Strategic Culture* [Amerika no Kokubo Seisaku: Reisengo no Saihen to Senryaku Bunka] (Kyoto: Showado, 2011).
- *East Asian Strategic Review 2017* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2017). Especially Chapter 7.
- U.S. Army TRADOC, "Multi-Domain Operations."
<https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Multi-Domain-Operations/>
- Benjamin M. Jensen, *Forging The Sword – Doctorial Change In The U.S. Army* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- General Gordon R. Sullivan, *The Collected Works of the Thirty-Second Chief of Staff, United States Army: June 1991-June 1995* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, U.S. Department of Defense, 1996).
- COL John R. Dabrowski, eds., *An Oral History of General Gordon R. Sullivan* (Carlisle: U.S. Army Military History Institute, 2009).
<http://cdm16635.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16635coll26/id/62>
- Walter E. Kretchik, *U.S. Army Doctrine: From the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

The views expressed in this column are solely those of authors and do not represent the official views of NIDS.

We do not permit any unauthorized reproduction or unauthorized copying of the article.

Please contact us at the following regarding any questions, comments or requests you may have.

Planning and Management Division, Planning and Administration Department, NIDS

Telephone: 03-3260-3011 ext.: 8-6-29171

FAX: 03-3260-3034 *NIDS Website: <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>