



# The U.S. Army Has a Vision for the Future. Is It the Right One?

Steven Metz | Friday, Dec. 14, 2018

Last week the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command released a new report

([https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1\\_30Nov2018.pdf](https://www.tradoc.army.mil/Portals/14/Documents/MDO/TP525-3-1_30Nov2018.pdf)) entitled, "The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028." The title might seem to suggest that the document would only interest die-hard military geeks. But despite its complex and arcane phrasing, the report is actually a fascinating window into how the Army sees future armed conflict and how it intends to prepare for it.

The report expands on the National Defense Strategy (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>), which the Pentagon unveiled in early 2018. That document identified America's primary security threat as "revisionist powers," particularly Russia and China. The Army's new report expands on this idea, labeling Russia the "pacing threat" that will shape capability development over the next few years, while flagging China as the more pressing long-term adversary. While very different in national objectives and capabilities, the report notes, Russia and China "operate in a sufficiently similar manner to orient on their capabilities collectively." What works to deter or defeat one of them, the Army believes, will also work against the other.

According to the report, China and Russia "believe they can achieve objectives below the threshold of armed conflict ... fracturing the U.S.'s alliances, partnerships, and resolve" using diplomatic and economic actions; unconventional operations; information warfare such as weaponized social media, false narratives and cyber attacks; and conventional military forces. This is what security experts call "gray zone" (<http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1303>) aggression.

While the Army sees a role for itself in the gray zone, most of the new report focuses on how it would respond if China and Russia resorted to war "by employing layers of anti-access and area denial systems designed to rapidly inflict unacceptable losses on U.S. and partner military forces," forcing Washington to either accept aggression or pay a high price to reverse it.



*Georgia National Guard troops with the 108th Cavalry Regiment at a send-off ceremony before deploying to Afghanistan, Dalton, Ga., Nov. 26, 2018 (Photo by Curtis Compton for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP Images).*

If this sounds like what Saddam Hussein tried to do when he invaded Kuwait in 1990, it is. The difference is that the U.S. military of 1990 was so superior to the Iraqi armed forces that it could reverse Saddam's aggression at a politically acceptable cost. The Army and the other services believe that without augmented capabilities, they might not be able to do that in the future against the technologically advanced Russian and Chinese militaries. The way to regain clear superiority over potential opponents is by developing "multi-domain operations" that tightly integrate military formations and operations across all of the domains of warfighting: land, air, sea, space and cyber. Once this integrated approach is in place, the Army will be able to "overmatch the enemy through cross-domain synergy and multiple forms of attack all enabled by mission command and disciplined initiative."

***The Army's vision is based on strategic and political assumptions that may or may not hold.***

In a sense this, too, is similar to what the U.S. military did to Iraqi forces in 1991, except faster, more complex, more tightly integrated and generally better. But this makes sense only if Russia and China actually plan to attack nearby nations, and if American policymakers would be willing to go to war to throw them out. Therein lies the rub: The new Army report and, more broadly, the U.S. military's vision of the future are based on strategic and political assumptions that may or may not hold. As is always the case, assumptions are the foundation of any vision of the future but also its greatest potential weakness.

The Army's vision, for instance, assumes that Russia and China would gobble up weaker nations unless the United States prevents them from doing so, and that Americans are willing to pay any price for a military to deter or reverse their gains. But it is equally plausible that Russia and China are self-deterred by the political and economic costs of invading and ruling nearby nations. If that is true, the United States might spend trillions of dollars on unnecessary military capabilities to prevent something that wasn't going to happen anyway. Al-Qaida tried to goad the United States into spending itself into weakness and failed. Russia and China might pull it off.

The vision also assumes that Americans will continue to consider armed aggression by adversaries intolerable, and that they will be willing to bear the cascading economic costs of war to prevent or reverse it. This might have been true in 1991, when the United States stood atop a global economy not as interconnected as it is today. Whether it will still enjoy this paramount position in the future is an open question. Would a U.S. president and Congress truly risk a catastrophic global economic crisis to save a nation invaded by Russia or China?

Throughout history, militaries often have prepared to fight the previous war rather than the one they were eventually confronted with. Could this be happening again? The U.S. military's vision of the future as described in the new Army report is astute from an operational perspective, but its underlying strategic and political assumptions are straight out of 1991. But this is not a slam on the Army. As it should, America's land force is thinking about how it might fight in the future. It cannot decide why it might fight.

To make the Army's future vision even more effective, America's political leaders and security intellectuals need to reach a working agreement on the purpose of U.S. military power. The Army and the other services need to be told by the civilian leadership what they should prepare to do rather than having to invent their own predictions of the future strategic environment. In lieu of that, the best the Army can do is prepare for a replay of Operation Desert Storm and hope that this is what America asks it to do.

*Steven Metz is the author of "Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy." His WPR column*

*(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/authors/790/steven-metz>) appears every Friday. You can follow him on Twitter*

*@steven\_metz ([https://twitter.com/steven\\_metz](https://twitter.com/steven_metz)).*

---

© 2018, World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.