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U.S. MILITARY TRANSFORMATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ASIAN SECURITY

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THE United States military has been the chief protagonist in the military transformation agenda – sometimes referred to as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The 1991 Gulf War hinted at the shape of this military transformation, which remains a work-in-progress. Nevertheless, the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002 and 2003 respectively have provided a more concrete sense of the transformation agenda – what a fully transformed U.S. military will look like, and how it will operate in battle.

However, another question, namely what the implications are for the stability and security of the Asia Pacific region, remains largely unanswered. Nevertheless, hints of a skein of an answer to this question are emerging.

Principles of Military Transformation

Military transformation refers to the idea that every once in a while, military organisations undergo a process of radical change. This transformation is driven by combinations of several factors – technological, societal, economic and political.

The current transformation is driven largely by rapid changes in two key technologies – IT and communications. The most obvious manifestation of transformation can be found in the increasing use of precision weaponry. Whereas entire squadrons of heavy bombers could not guarantee destruction of their targets in World War Two, a single aircraft launching a single weapon now offers almost guaranteed destruction of even the most heavily defended target. This points to a second feature of this military transformation – the increasing use of stealth technologies to enhance penetration through the toughest defences and battlefield survivability.

Improvements in IT are also enhancing sensor capabilities, which gives commanders ever-increasing battlespace awareness. Military commanders today can see and hear more, and potentially, understand more about the battlespace than their predecessors. While this probably does not eradicate the so-called fog of war, it nevertheless promises to minimise the possibility of misperception or lack of information. Finally, technologies are now able to link widely separated battlegroups into networks with virtually real-time and simultaneous communications. Combined with improved sensor technologies, this means that every individual in this network can receive the same information, and potentially generate the same understanding of the battlespace. This facilitates smoother command and control, and allows military commanders to react to exigencies with unprecedented awareness and

efficiency.

Implications of Transformation – the face of U.S. Military Forces in Asia

Consequently the determinants of military power are also being transformed. Traditionally, military power was determined by quality and quantity. The element of quantity is reflected in the military truism that an offence required a three-to-one numerical advantage over the defence. The current transformation threatens to make quantity redundant. Military power will increasingly be determined by quality – in military training, as well as in the technological superiority of the weapons systems. The transformed U.S. military will likely be numerically smaller than its current incarnation. A second, and related, issue is that of physical presence, which will no longer be as important as in the past, primarily because commanders today are better able to react to contingencies than before. Along with revolutions in logistics – from pre-positioning to just-in-time – it means that the U.S. military footprint will likely shrink.

A third key issue is the decreasing importance on weapons platforms – combat aircraft, naval vessels – in favour of the technologies earlier discussed. A modern Aegis cruiser can deliver firepower with greater precision and effectiveness against the targets that really matter than a Vietnam-era aircraft carrier. In other words, it is the modern Aegis-capable cruiser that packs the greater punch.

What this will mean is a smaller U.S. military presence in the Asia Pacific. In the past, much strategic capital was invested in the magic number of 100,000. This means that 100,000 U.S. military personnel in the Asia Pacific region not only demonstrated genuine U.S. commitment to the region, but also the ability of U.S. military forces to ensure security and stability by deterring potential aggression within the region. Post-transformation, the exact numbers of U.S. military personnel in the Asia Pacific will almost certainly be significantly less than 100,000. Furthermore, the numbers of weapons platforms will also likely be significantly less, translating into fewer land-based combat aircraft, naval vessels and U.S. Marine Expeditionary Units.

Implications for Asian Security

At face value, this transformed U.S. military presence ought to signify no change in either the U.S. commitment to the region or its ability to deter aggression. A key implication of military transformation is that there are potentially very few places an adversary to the U.S. can hide; and that which can be seen will almost certainly be destroyed.

For these reasons, the deterrence posture ought to hold. If adversaries to the U.S. have few places to hide, if being exposed means almost certain destruction, then it would make sense for states to ensure that they are ‘on-side’ with the U.S. However, as one Indian general was alleged to have said, the signal lesson of Operation Iraqi Freedom is that if one wishes to challenge the U.S., it would be wise to first have a nuclear capability. In other words, it is still possible to challenge the U.S. and get away with it. No other state better demonstrates this than North Korea. Fortunately, most states of the Asia Pacific do not have nuclear ambitions. For these states, particularly for their policy-makers and strategic planners, awareness of the full power of the transformed U.S. military means that deterrence is likely to hold, at least for these actors.

However, a transformed U.S. military might still not have the necessary skills with which to engage in the security challenges it faces. The current quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq are illustrative. The world might possibly be on the cusp of so-called fourth-generation warfare – net wars, where information attacks will be one of the main offensive instruments states have. However, precisely because the transformed U.S. military will be unmatched in conventional conflicts, potential adversaries might adopt what Martin Van Creveld called third-generation warfare – where one side adopts either guerrilla or terrorist tactics against a conventionally superior enemy. A transformed U.S. military will almost certainly be significantly smaller in numbers. Dealing with third-generation warfare, however, is typically a manpower-intensive and long-drawn out affair, which a transformed U.S. military might not be optimised to deal with.

Furthermore, wars are not caused purely by hardheaded deliberations by strategic planners and policy-makers. Some wars are caused by this deliberate process. One good example is that of Japanese policy-makers' calculations about the need to initiate war against the U.S. and European colonial powers in 1941. However, there is another category of wars that emerge without this deliberate process of calculations over national interests and the use of military force. These are accidental or inadvertent wars - wars that emerge when policy-makers lose control of domestic political processes and forces and find themselves propelled into decisions for war that they neither want nor anticipate.

Here, the clarity of the deterrent message is fundamentally important. Policy-makers and strategic planners may understand that U.S. military capabilities remain as powerful as before, even if a transformed military does not have the numbers its predecessors had. It is possibly less likely for electorates to be able to fully grasp the nuances of military power that this transformational agenda engages in. After all, which appears more daunting – a comprehensive nation-wide network of early-warning sensors and real-time simultaneous command and control, or a Vietnam-era aircraft carrier? Strategic planners ought to choose the former, but an uninformed electorate might be more easily swayed by the latter.

In other words, a transformed U.S. military might be a truly awesome military instrument, but its ability to deter – both electorates and policy-makers – may be more questionable. Perhaps it is time for policy-makers and strategic planners to re-think their approaches to transformation. Transformation is desirable and necessary, but it is necessary to remember that military power comes from “quality and quantity”.

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