

Future of the Army  
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## **The Rise of China and the Decline of the US Army**

It is a great pleasure and an honor to be here today at the Army War College as the keynote speaker for the 24<sup>th</sup> Strategy Conference. I would like to thank General Cucolo for his kind introduction and for inviting me to speak. I would also like to thank Trey Braun for handling the logistics of my visit and all of you for coming to listen to me.

The subject of my talk is the topic of the conference: the future of US landpower, which is another way of saying, the future of the US Army.

The Army has been the most important of the three major military services over the past decade mainly because of the prominence of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The Air Force and especially the Navy have played secondary roles in those conflicts. I have spoken with more than a few officers from those two services over the past decade who have complained about how all the attention focused on Afghanistan and Iraq was detrimental to the interests of the Air Force and the Navy.

This situation is likely to change significantly in the next two decades, and the Army is likely to be treated as the least important of the three services, which means it will be allocated less of the Pentagon's resources than either the Air Force or the Navy. Indeed, the Army will probably have to work extremely hard to secure large numbers of defense dollars.

The fact is that we are at what I would call a plastic moment in the history of America's relations with the wider world. Fundamental changes are taking place in our strategic environment that will have a profound effect on US grand strategy, and on the Army in particular.

To be more specific, three changes are occurring in America's strategic calculus that will have a marked effect on the Army's fortunes. Those changes will interact in ways that make the Army a less important instrument to policymakers in Washington than it has been in recent memory.

First, the United States is pivoting to Asia to deal with a rising China. The threat environment in the Asia-Pacific region,

however, does not require large numbers of American ground forces. If anything, it is a region in which the geography appears to favor the Air Force and Navy over the Army.

Second, the Iraq war is over and hopefully America's combat role in Afghanistan will end soon. All of the Army's combat troops are scheduled to be out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Both of these wars are widely – and correctly – regarded as disasters and the United States is not likely to fight another war like them anytime soon. Occupation, counter-insurgency, and nation building are likely to remain dirty words for years to come. Indeed, American presidents and their lieutenants are sure to go to great lengths to avoid fighting another protracted land war in the developing world. That means the mission that has been the Army's main force driver over the past decade will probably be of secondary if not tertiary importance.

Third, given the troubles afflicting the American economy, especially its huge budget deficits, the military's budget is likely to be exposed to the knife in the decade ahead, forcing the Pentagon to make lots of hard choices about the kinds of military forces it should buy. To justify large expenditures,

each service is going to need a compelling story about how it is essential for protecting the national interest. The Army is going to have a particularly hard job doing that, because counter-insurgency and nation building will be a hard sell, and because the Army is of limited utility for dealing with a rising China.

There is one additional factor that is unrelated to the strategic environment that will make life difficult for the Army in the years ahead. That factor is the Marine Corps. As you all know well, the United States has two separate land armies – the Marine Corps and the Army – and the Marines are going to want to play a key role in Asia. The Marines are brilliant at public relations, which means they will be very effective at securing scarce defense dollars. Furthermore, the Marines are joined at the hip with the Navy, which will have a big role to play in the Asia-Pacific region, and will be inclined to privilege the Marines over the Army more often than not. All of this is to say that the Army will have to work overtime to be an important player as the United States becomes increasingly concerned with checking a rising China.

Before laying out my thinking on these matters in detail, I want

to emphasize that I am not hostile to the Army in any way. Indeed, I have a special place in my heart for that institution. Besides being a former enlisted man in the Army as well as a West Point graduate, I have long argued that landpower is the principal ingredient of military power, and that most wars are ultimately won or lost on the ground. These are central themes in my book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, where I also emphasize the limits of independent airpower and independent sea power for winning wars.

Furthermore, when the Vietnam war finally came to an end in the mid-1970s and the United States refocused its attention on Europe, I argued that the Army was of central importance for deterring a Warsaw Pact attack, and that extra defense dollars should be spent on buying additional armored and mechanized divisions and tactical aircraft to support them, *not* on procuring more aircraft carriers or more nuclear weapons.

But the Asia-Pacific region is not Europe and when you look at the possible conflicts that might involve the United States in that region of the world, it is hard to see circumstances in which we will need a large and powerful army.

Let me now examine my thinking about the future of the Army in more detail.

How a country thinks about building its military forces should be largely a function of its grand strategy. Because people define grand strategy in different ways, it is important for me to spell out exactly what I mean by that concept. For me, fashioning a grand strategy involves answering three questions. First, what areas of the world are strategically important? In other words, what areas of the world are worth expending substantial blood and iron? Second, what are the main threats in those regions of the world that might require a military response? Third, what kinds of military forces are necessary to counter those threats? To be a bit more specific, what are the optimum mix of forces for deterring adversaries and defeating them if deterrence fails and war breaks out?

It seems to me that when today's Army leaders talk about why we need a large and powerful army, they rarely make the case by framing it in terms of American grand strategy. Instead, they talk in broad generalities about the fact that we live in a large and complicated world where change is happening rapidly and where it is therefore hard to anticipate where

trouble might come from in the future. They maintain that we have to be prepared for a wide variety of threats, none of which are defined with much specificity. One has the sense from listening to the Army leadership that there is no mission too difficult for the Army to do expeditiously. It is an all-purpose army.

This is not a smart way to strategize, and is not going to help the Army make its case in a world where the defense budget is shrinking. Army leaders need to say where their service is likely to fight, whom it is likely to fight against, and why the Army is especially well-suited for dealing with that adversary or those adversaries.

Let me spell out my views on American grand strategy and explain how I think the Army fits into the big picture.

I believe that we are in the early stages of a fundamental shift in America's grand strategy. There are three areas of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere that have been of great strategic importance to the United States since the early part of the twentieth century. They are 1) Europe, 2) Northeast Asia, and 3) the Persian Gulf. The first two are vital strategic

interests because they are where the world's other great powers are located and we care greatly about those countries, because they are potential rivals that could cause us lots of trouble. The third area – the Persian Gulf – matters because oil is located there, and it is an enormously important natural resource for countries all around the world.

For all of America's history, Europe has been by far the most important of those three areas. Remember that the United States had a "Europe first" policy before it entered World War II and even though Japan, not Germany, attacked us at Pearl Harbor, we maintained a "Europe first" policy throughout the war. And during the Cold War, Europe was strategically more important to the United States than Asia, which is why – when we ran war games involving a major conflict between the superpowers – we would "swing" American forces out of Asia to Europe.

Some of my Asian friends maintained that we swung forces out of Asia to Europe because most Americans had European roots and were more concerned about the fate of their fellow Westerners. But this was not true. We privileged Europe over Asia during the Cold War because the heart of the Soviet threat



was sitting in the center of Europe, not in Asia.

This pecking order is now beginning to change. Mainly because of China's rise, Asia is becoming the most important area of the world for the United States, and Europe is likely to become not the second, but the third most important region. We talk today about pivoting to Asia, which obviously means shifting American forces to Asia from other locations. This pivot, which is rather low key at the moment, is likely to accelerate if China grows more and more powerful. But if a country pivots to a particular area that must mean it is pivoting away from some other region. That other region in this case is almost certain to be Europe, not the Persian Gulf, which is likely to be the second most important region for the United States.

There are two reasons the Gulf will remain very important to the United States. First, it is longstanding American policy to make sure that no single power in that region establishes hegemony and gains control over the energy resources there. Second, China and India will both be increasingly dependent on oil and gas from the Gulf in the years ahead, which means both of those Asian countries will pay serious attention to that

region. In a very important way, Asia and the Gulf will be tied together. In other words, I believe that the security competition, which is likely to develop in Asia between the United States and China, will extend into the Persian Gulf. At the same time, that security competition will not extend into Europe. Simply put, Asia and Europe will remain worlds apart militarily. Indeed, it is not clear Europe will help the United States in any meaningful way to contain China. Instead, it is likely to sit on the sidelines.

There is another reason Europe will not be a source of major worry for the United States in the next few decades. There is no threat on the horizon in Europe that is likely to command our attention. Both Germany and Russia – our two principal competitors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – are depopulating. Moreover, there is not going to be a united Europe that might challenge the United States in some meaningful way. If anything, Europe looks to be fragmenting, not integrating – largely because of the Euro crisis, which is like acid eating away at the foundation of the European Union. Simply put, Europe is not likely to matter that much in the decades ahead. Asia and the Gulf are likely to be the focus of our attention. Again, this represents a historic shift in America’s strategic priorities.

This shift in how we think about the key regions of the world will have profound ramifications for the Army. Europe is a region where landpower has always mattered greatly. Large armies have settled all the major wars in European history. Thus, when the United States entered World War I, it built a huge army – the AEF – to fight against Imperial Germany. It did the same in World War II with Nazi Germany, although that conflict was largely settled by massive battles between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht. During the Cold War, we maintained a large army on the Central Front to deter the Warsaw Pact ground forces on the other side of the inter-German border. Thus, when the Vietnam War ended in 1975 and the United States began to focus laser-like on Europe, it was easy to make the case for maintaining a formidable American army.

The geography of Asia, however, looks very different from Europe. Most importantly, there is no equivalent of the Central Front in the Asia-Pacific region. When you look at the possible conflict scenarios involving the United States and China, it is hard to see where a large American army would be needed. This is not to say that no US ground forces will be needed in the

region, but it is hard to imagine a major conventional war on land between America and China.

Probably the most Army-friendly contingency in Asia is a possible war on the Korean Peninsula. Remember that more than 200,000 U.S. army troops fought the Chinese army between 1950 and 1953. While it is certainly possible to imagine a future war between South and North Korea, this time the South Korean military will be able to handle the North Korean army. In fact, the ROK forces are likely to clobber the North's army.

None of this is to deny that the United States could get dragged into a future Korean conflict. After all, we have about 19,000 troops stationed in South Korea and it is imperative that they remain there for purposes of trying to convince South Koreans that our nuclear umbrella is firmly in place over their heads. Regardless, any American involvement in another Korean war would most likely involve small numbers of US ground forces. It is difficult to imagine a repeat of the conflict that took place in Korea during the early 1950s.

The other potential conflict scenarios in the Asia-Pacific region

that might involve American military forces include 1) Taiwan, 2) the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and 3) the South China Sea. None of them, however, are likely to involve large-scale American ground forces. Indeed, it is not even clear that US troops would be involved in any of those fights. And if they were needed, it might very well be the Marines and not the Army that joined the fight.

The United States and a powerful China will not only compete in the Asia-Pacific region; they are also sure to do so in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, because those large bodies of water link China with the Persian Gulf. China will want to control those waters because gas and oil destined for China will move across them. However, the US Navy and countries like India will bear the burden of countering Chinese efforts to control those critically important SLOCs. The Army will play a minor role at best.

The Persian Gulf itself is the one area where the Army is likely to have an important role in the decades ahead. The United States, as noted, has a deep-seated interest in making sure that no single country dominates that strategically important region. The main threat to do so is Iran, which of course is why

the Reagan administration supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War that ran from 1980 to 1988.

American policymakers can deal with threats in the Gulf in basically two ways: 1) they can rely on other countries in the region to check an aggressor, as happened in the Iran-Iraq War; or 2) they can build and deploy US military units to handle the job. Those American forces can either be stationed outside of the region – “over the horizon” as they say – or they can be stationed on the territory of an ally in the region.

Regardless, those forces would be comprised of a substantial number of Army units, whether they were stationed in the region or outside of it. Some of you I am sure remember that the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), which the Carter and Reagan administrations established in the last decade of the Cold War to intervene in the Gulf if need be. It was comprised of four Army divisions (9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division) and a cavalry brigade (6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade). It also contained a substantial number of Marines.

Given America’s dismal experience in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is likely to rely on

countries in the Gulf to check dangerous aggressors rather than assuming that burden itself. Nevertheless, there will always be the possibility that the local powers cannot do the job, in which case the United States – and here we are talking mainly about the Army – will have to move in and remedy the problem. This is essentially what happened in the 1991 Gulf War. The United States and its allies intervened and threw the Iraqi army out of Kuwait, because no local power had both the will and the capability to reverse Saddam's aggression. All of this is to say that the Army is likely to matter in important ways for protecting America's interests in the Persian Gulf.

Let me conclude this discussion of grand strategy with a few words about Europe. As noted, Europe will remain an area of strategic importance to the United States, but it will not command the attention from Washington that it has in the past. My sense is that how much attention future American policymakers pay to Europe will depend on how powerful China becomes in the decades ahead. If China's rapid rise continues, the United States will have its hands full containing China and will sharply reduce its presence in Europe, maybe even pull all of its troops out so it can focus its attention on Asia and the Persian Gulf. If that were to happen, it would have

serious consequences for the Army, because the “American pacifier” in Europe is built around US ground forces. The more likely scenario, however, is that the United States will gradually and inexorably decrease its presence in Europe, which will leave the Army with a diminishing role in that region.

My bottom line regarding grand strategy is that Asia is rapidly becoming the most important area of the world for the United States and the Army will only have a small role to play there. The region where the Army is most likely to play an important role is the Persian Gulf, where a substantial body of US land forces will still be needed to prevent a regional hegemon and counter Chinese influence. Europe, which has always been an Army-friendly theater, is not likely to be a major concern for the United States in the years ahead.

I would now like to switch gears and talk about conquest and occupation in the developing world.

As part of the so-called Global War on Terror, the United States has fought two major wars of conquest since 2001, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq. The American military went to war in Afghanistan in mid-October 2001, and by early



December, it had toppled the Taliban from power and appeared to have won a quick and decisive victory. That led many people in the American national security community, and especially in the Bush administration, to think that the United States had found the magic formula for conquering countries in the developing world, affecting rapid regime change, and then getting out of town quickly so as to avoid a costly and difficult occupation.

This belief that the Afghan model was a harbinger of more easy victories to come is what underpinned the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the Bush Doctrine more generally. President Bush and his key advisors were convinced that the US military could win a quick and easy victory in Iraq, avoid occupation, and then put its gun sights on the next rogue state in the region. The choice was obviously between Iran and Syria. In fact, it might not even have been necessary to attack either of those countries, because they might have been so fearful of being defeated by the mighty American military that they would have surrendered without a fight.

As we all know now, the victory in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 was a mirage; the United States had not found the magic

formula for winning quick and decisive victories in the developing world. Instead it ended up in protracted and costly occupations in Afghanistan as well as Iraq, engaged in both cases in counter-insurgency operations and nation building.

The Army, of course, has been the key service in both of these conflicts, which explains in good part why the Army has grown significantly over the past decade. The central problem, however, is that there is almost no way the Army can win a meaningful victory in these kind of wars; the mission is simply too difficult. And even in those rare cases where the United States succeeds, it will take many years and a huge amount of resources. And on top of that, the Army will pay a significant price in the process, and the war will have a corrosive effect on our politics at home as well as on our foreign policy.

Not surprisingly, there is remarkably little enthusiasm in the American national security community for invading any more countries and trying to do social engineering at the end of a rifle barrel. Just look at how the United States has dealt with Libya, Iran and Syria. In the Libyan case, the Americans put no regular Army troops on the ground and instead relied largely on airpower to help topple Colonel Kaddafi. Furthermore, one

White House advisor said that the United States was “leading from behind” in Libya. In the Iranian case, there is no serious threat of sending American ground forces into Iran. If the United States takes military action against Iran’s nuclear facilities, it will be done with airstrikes and cruise missiles. But even so, it is evident that there is hardly any appetite for a war with Iran in the United States. And the same is true regarding Syria, where the Obama administration has gone out of its way to avoid intervening in that civil war, even with just airpower.

Perhaps former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates best summed up what will surely be the conventional thinking about future wars of conquest when he told a West Point audience in February 2011 that: “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.”

The present situation actually reminds me of the post-Vietnam period. After that devastating defeat, American policy makers went to enormous lengths not to get involved in another costly occupation in which we had to fight a major counter-

insurgency while simultaneously doing nation building, a task of enormous difficulty. I am confident that it will be a very long time before the United States opts to conquer another country in the developing world and transform its political system.

None of this is to say that we are going to get out of the business of fighting terrorists that are targeting the United States. But we will rely on special operations forces, allies, and especially drones, to get the job done. The lead article in Monday's *New York Times* nicely captures where the war on terror is headed. It reads: "Targeted Killing Comes to Define War on Terror."

If I am right, this means that one of the chief reasons for maintaining a large and powerful army will be effectively taken off the table. When this happened after the Vietnam War – the last time we ran away from doing counter-insurgency – we turned to Europe with a vengeance, and, of course, Europe during the Cold War was Army-friendly in the extreme. But this time we are turning to the Asia-Pacific region where the Army will only have a minor role to play. It is hardly surprising that today we speak about Air-Sea Battle, whereas in the Cold War we spoke about Air-Land Battle.

Finally, there is the shrinking defense budget. The Pentagon is already reeling from sequestration, which mandates that the Pentagon cut its budget by 41 billion dollars this year and about \$500 billion over the next decade. And that comes on top of another \$487 billion dollar in cuts that are already being implemented. There is no reason to think these troubles are going away anytime soon given America's huge budget deficits coupled with the difficulty of curtailing spending on entitlements.

Indeed, the situation is likely to get worse. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said last Wednesday in a speech at the National Defense University that the military must make fundamental changes in how it operates to deal with new fiscal realities. He made it clear that he was not talking about "tweaking or chipping away at existing structures and practices but, where necessary, fashioning entirely new ones that are better suited to 21st century realities and challenges." Hagel went on to say that, "Much more hard work, difficult decisions and strategic prioritizing remains to be done."

In a world where there is an abundance of defense dollars –

such as the first decade after September 11 – there is usually not much pressure to prioritize and it is relatively easy for each service to get a large chunk of the pie. However, when the pie is shrinking and there are serious threats on the horizon, which will surely be the case if China continues its impressive rise, policymakers are forced to pay more attention and be more ruthless about their spending decisions. This situation can only be bad news for the Army, because it is simply not as important relative to the other services as it was during the Cold War, when containing the Soviet Union was the Pentagon’s overarching mission, or as it has been over the past decade, when the Pentagon was consumed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I want to be clear. I am not saying the Army will have no role in defending the country’s interests in the years ahead. Nor I am hinting that the Army should be drastically downsized. But I am saying that when you look at America’s likely grand strategy in the next few decades, the Army is probably going to be the least important of the three services. Its role will certainly be limited in the Asia-Pacific region, which is likely to be the most important strategic area because China is located there. And this could have especially grim consequences for

the Army if the Pentagon budget is severely constrained and China's economy grows at a rapid clip, necessitating an accelerated pivot to Asia.

Of course, the Army can help its case by fashioning a clear and concise story that describes the threats to critical American interests that the Army is best suited to counter. But even then, there are significant limits to what can be done, because the future security environment is unlikely to involve the United States in major land wars. That is surely good news for the country as a whole, but not for the Army's budget.