

Armed Forces and the Comprehensive Approach: SSRTOs

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Abstract:

Military forces of the United States (US) and other countries will require near simultaneous preparations for both traditional missions and Security/Stability/Reconstruction/Transition Operations (SSRTO). This essay discusses efforts by the US to address SSRTOs, which will likely be one of several future demands for militaries around the world. It outlines the history of US participation in Operations Other Than War history since the 19th century and the expansion of nontraditional operations in the Balkans and Liberia during the post-Cold War era. Also addressed are the issues of Responsibility to Protect and the implications for armed forces in the future.

Keywords: Operations Other Than War; Responsibility to Protect; Security/Stability/Reconstruction/Transition Operations

INTRODUCTION

This essay discusses efforts by the United States (US) to address what are known today as Security/Stability/Reconstruction/Transition Operations, or SSRTOs, which have an elevated position within Department of Defense (DoD) priorities since 2005. These efforts require a nontraditional focus for the armed forces, yet they must coexist as a priority in an environment in which capabilities must be appropriate to both traditional conventional arms requirements and the more subtle SSRTOs. I will conclude with how this will challenge militaries in the years ahead.

HISTORY OF US INVOLVEMENT IN OOTW

The US military has spent much of its history engaging in Operations Other Than War (OOTW), especially in the first century of the nation's history. During the 19th century, the military was engaged in massive stability and transition operations in the western portion of the US, as



SAF working together with TNI in tsunami relief efforts, January 2005

the country expanded west to the Pacific Ocean. One of the primary causes for establishment of the Military Academy at West Point was to build a cadre of engineers to provide the skills necessary to build the new nation. In the early 20th century, the US addressed concerns about the types of regimes it saw in the Caribbean Basin by sending in the marines to help civilian experts with stabilizing poor economies and to provide security if problems arose for US citizens.

The more contemporary view, dating to Second World War (WWII) or the Vietnam experience, is an expeditionary military that responds to a foreign problem. A rapid victory is expected, following a campaign of sustained battles that end with an unconditional surrender by the adversary. This view of conventional force employment dates to the Normandy invasion of June 1944 and Japan's surrender in Tokyo Bay aboard *USS Missouri* fifteen months later. Many people believe that war is only war when it looks as decisive as WWII did.

Reality, however, is that the armed forces that George Washington and his successors have developed in the US have been long involved in a series of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (and actions under associated names) operations that are limited and not total warfare. The contemporary US military now has the DoD's imprimatur to treat these types of missions as on par with traditional warfighting.

One of the most important US general officers in the 20th Century was Douglas A. MacArthur, who engaged in what would today be labeled as SSRTOs in the Philippines during the 1930s and in Japan during the five years following WWII. As the Military Advisor to the Commonwealth Government in the Philippines after 1937, when he resigned his commission from the Army, MacArthur worked to strengthen the evolving Philippine military in preparation for independence which would occur—in a somewhat different environment than anticipated prior to WWII—in 1946. MacArthur's work was seen by most in the United States as anomalous, a function of the general's abiding commitment to Asia from another time.

He instead preferred to allow the armed forces to pursue the more traditional "violence" associated with war, since less traditional aspects of military operations might dull the nation's force when responding to a significant threat somewhere in the world.

In Japan, MacArthur's work was even more wide-ranging: as the Supreme Allied Commander for the allied powers, a *de facto* viceroy with responsibility for crafting and strengthening post-war institutions and society into a democratic

ones that would theoretically not repeat the errors which led to WWII. These activities were nontraditional ones for a US military that had fought its way from the South Pacific into the Japanese home islands, but once there, the military became the arbiters

of justice, providers of the basic needs of society until reconstruction ended in the 1950s, and the overall administrators for Japanese society. These acts were all fundamental to stabilizing a Japan left in ruins by September 1945 and needing assistance to reconstruct and transform as the victors—the allied powers—deemed necessary after the war. These steps were crucial to providing security against the possibility of communist expansion into the void left by the 1945 fall of the imperial system.

While MacArthur and his contemporaries in Europe were engaged in post-war reconstruction, the armed forces viewed these as secondary activities aimed at precluding having to engage in the military's primary mission—fighting wars on the ground.

SSRTOs, hence, were a means to another objective, rather than an independent, viable mission on their own. The primary concern remained fighting wars to defeat enemies rather than building institutions or strengthening societies, since those tasks were seen as civilian responsibilities.

EXPANSION OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

Many people appeared startled during the 1990s when the Bill Clinton administration began to send the US military into places like Somalia, the Balkans, Liberia and Haiti to address issues that were not traditional combat operations. Clinton's many personal peccadilloes had created a chasm between the Commander-in-Chief and the forces under his command. Rather than shy away from their use, Clinton, and particularly his first United Nations emissary and second Secretary of State, Dr. Madeleine K. Albright, viewed the armed forces as a tool of statecraft to intervene in the affairs of states where the local government activities needed curbing. This type of utilization meant placing the military in nontraditional areas of conflict.

Clinton's decision to pursue the Somali warlord Mohammed Aideed in 1993 led to disastrous events in Mogadishu which humiliated the nation and the Army, followed days later by a US ship declining to enter the bay at Port-au-Prince, Haiti when a large number of angry protesters showed their frustration with the Clinton administration.

Neither of these involved traditional warfare but illustrated the possible frustration of SSRTOs, especially in stabilization efforts. Possibly as a result, Clinton chose not to send US forces to confront the Rwandan genocide six months later, being complicit in the death of a million there.² President Clinton later expressed his deep regret at this decision in remarks to the people of Rwanda.³

By the end of his administration, US efforts under what are now called SSRTOs had grown dramatically to include the former Yugoslavia, Colombia, Liberia and other instances. It was

against this backdrop that Vice President Al Gore debated Texas Governor George W. Bush in 2000—the latter appeared far from willing to continue this path of greater security, stability, reconstruction efforts, or transition activities.

The Texas governor clearly enunciated a policy which did not include a focus on SSRTOs as a core mission of the US military. He declared that he instead preferred to allow the armed forces to pursue the more traditional “violence” associated with war, since less traditional aspects of military operations might dull the nation's force when responding to a significant threat somewhere in the world.

In a widely-touted article in the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*, Stanford professor and campaign advisor Dr. Condoleezza Rice similarly indicated that a Bush presidency would harness the power of the military to pursue traditional combat responsibilities for the military.⁴ The military's job was not to engage in missions which would dull its ability to meet dramatic challenges across the world. When Bush finally won the presidency after a six week controversy in late 2000, few in the military or the political sphere in general would have ever anticipated the increased importance of SSRTOs that he would embark upon within twelve months.

SSRTOS

Thoughts and arguments about military intervention in Iraq, and to a lesser extent Afghanistan, have been repeated many times because they illustrate concentration on the decision-making that lead to the invasions.⁵ The crucial aspect, within the scope of this paper, is that the concentration of thought was on traditional military activities, rather than on how those activities would form only a portion of the overall national security goal of transforming both Afghanistan, then Iraq, into democratic states with values and institutions shared with the western world. It would be wrong to



Ground Zero after the 11 September 2001 Attacks

assume that only the military leadership sought to diminish the institution-building required to achieve this goal but there is strong evidence that many military and DoD leaders sought not to ask whether this responsibility was theirs' to address.

What became clear, however, was that the difficulties were so severe that civilian agencies did not have the brute force capacity to accomplish these tasks and thus the military was needed to meet the objectives.

The Bush administration decision to go after the Taliban in the wake of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks, which led to the concomitant decision to reconstruct Afghanistan to prevent a safe haven, was a move to increase

nontraditional operations. The administration saw its military operations, traditionally defined, being simultaneously under development to oust Saddam Hussein from Iraq. This latter mission was anticipated to be mostly conventional combat operations, while Afghanistan had a much more nontraditional flavor.

By April 2002 the President had noted that transformation of Afghanistan was essential to prevent its return to being an al-Qaeda safe haven under Osama bin Laden. Addressing students at the Virginia Military Academy, Bush acknowledged that an effort comparable to the Marshall Plan after WWII in Europe would be required, with "roads, [the] health care system, schools, and businesses" which could not be done by the military alone.⁶ What became clear, however, was that the difficulties were so severe that civilian agencies did not have the brute force capacity to

accomplish these tasks and thus the military was needed to meet the objectives.

A difficulty that arose was that this was a somewhat ill-defined objective. It spoke of what it did not want but did not spell out precisely what it sought to achieve in concrete terms. Even the concept, widely-banded about, of a “democratic” or “pro-western” Afghanistan did not offer a clear objective for the military.

As efforts progressed in Afghanistan, the military provided the basic security that was a prerequisite for stabilization, reconstruction or transition operations. Civilian workers could not accomplish those steps, but the armed forces could focus on preventing conflict, not on establishing peaceful conditions because it viewed itself, particularly in the early years of

2001-2005, as a combat force. This sounds like a semantic difference, but illustrated a completely different mindset.

Discussions with US officers who served in Afghanistan in the early months of the conflict reveal that they fairly uniformly viewed their role as pursuing bin Laden and the Taliban, rather than looking towards the transformation steps which would accomplish the president’s goals.⁷

Also at this time, the US was still involved with Colombia, where efforts to eradicate drug trafficking melded into activities to reconstruct that country into a fully functioning democracy.⁸ Clearly labeled something other than counterinsurgency because Congress had prevented assistance to the Republic for that specific purpose,⁹ for domestic political requirements, the Colombia work by the military fell under the aegis of efforts now known as SSRTOs.



US Soldiers passing through a village in Afghanistan

More importantly, the post-combat challenges of Iraq after the summer of 2003 made obvious the need for security to help stabilize and reconstruct the country while it transitioned from a long-standing dictatorship to a hoped-for western-style, competitive democracy. Unfortunately, this proved expensive in both blood and treasure. It also competed with the military's traditional missions of fighting wars, as future conflict scenarios appeared possible in Iran and perhaps even East Asia.

As the military leadership, particularly in the Army and the Marine Corps—the two services most engaged on the ground in Iraq—wrestled with how to balance their force structure and procurement for the future in the face of immediate needs which were less traditional combat but more SSRT0-based, tensions in the system became harder to reconcile.

These tensions became especially pronounced as the Bush administration fought to keep costs of Iraq under control in the face of escalation.

The administration had been reluctant to introduce terminology or doctrine that was not clear in its mission, fearing that insurgency could drag the US into the type of morass that characterized the Vietnam War. In mid-2005, Vice President Richard Cheney described the insurgency in Iraq as being in “its final throes,” but the Combatant Commander for Central Command, General John Abizaid, rejected that position. The military confronted a changing environment, forcing reconsideration of mission priorities. With the violence in Iraq spiraling into 2005, reconciliation of doctrine and force missions became crucial.

DOD DIRECTIVE/INSTRUCTION 3000.05

In early December 2005, the DoD formally announced what had seemed impossible only eight years earlier. Then, the Presidential debate argued about the efficacy of non-combat operations for

the highly trained US military. The DoD issued Directive 3000.05, specifically elevating SSRT0s to a mission equal in status to full scale combat. This change imposed more comprehensive US operations across the entire military spectrum. It elaborated the mission for the troops, the chains of command and various other operational aspects in elevating SSRT0s to a primary mission for the armed services.

Prior to this event, US military operations had always prioritized killing the enemy or bringing about unconditional surrender as primary goals to defeat the enemy. Anything beyond that was a secondary concern, almost something done when everything else had been accomplished. The shift with 3000.05 dictated that nontraditional activities were also crucial to accomplishing national security objectives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FORCE

In the past, the US military has prided itself on being a force to “break things and kill people.”¹⁰ Today's military regularly sees rotations to Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan, as it did during the last years of the Iraq effort before the US military finally withdrew in 2011. PRTs and the SSRT0 based assignments that aim to rebuild a new Afghanistan without the fissures that allowed the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to take hold are joint and “whole of government,” mixing civilian and military personnel in teams to address societal reconstruction needs. The certainty of meeting these goals is far from clear, but it is clearly a different type of approach than the mid-2000's DoD-heavy mission perpetrated by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

It will take military culture perhaps a generation to accept these missions as career-enhancing. While the military salutes smartly



US Air Force Officer of Provincial Reconstruction Team Zabul spends time with Afghan girls

when a fundamental transformation of this sort occurs, subtle resistance is likely to remain. The US military has operated “jointly” for a full quarter century since the Goldwater-Nichols Military Reform Act of 1986, yet subtle differences in service priorities still creep into things like military education or promotion rates for various specialties. A DoD directive reissued as an instruction by the current administration, however, does carry substantial weight that will be more difficult to ignore over time.

SSRTOs were codified under DoD Directive 3000.05 during the Bush administration as on a par with combat operations and the Obama administration reinforced this status when it issued DoD Instruction 3000.05 on 16 September 2009. A DoD Instruction has greater weight than does a Directive, thus stressing its importance to the force.

RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT?

An enduring question that has arisen regarding our efforts in Afghanistan relates to US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) efforts in Libya. That is, ousting the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was justified as fulfilling the “responsibility to protect” (often called R2P) those unable to protect themselves from a brutal government. This concept, far from universally accepted within the US or in the international community, transcends traditional rules of international law and engagement in the sovereign affairs of a state.

Military funding has become a zero sum exercise: gains for some are a loss for others.

R2P was championed by Policy Planning Staff Director Dr Anne-Marie Slaughter and Dr Samantha Powers of the National Security



Council among many others—it would have the US armed forces focus their efforts on the protection of the weak and persecuted wherever the phenomenon appeared around the world, regardless of other priorities.

While R2P may not appear related to SSRTOs, there are profound implications for the military, especially an all-volunteer force. The ramifications are also financial in a time when the US is facing severe budget cuts: the funding for those SSRTO capabilities will require technologies, training, and weapons that may not be synonymous with combat capabilities. This requires spending for systems and training which support stability or security operations that may detract from the needs of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines fighting in traditional efforts. In some ways, during the current era of severe federal debt, military funding has become a zero sum exercise: gains for some are a loss for others.

Similarly, as has been a concern for more than a decade, training for SSRTOs may detract from training for combat operations since there is a finite amount of time and resources for training.

Other questions also arise: what does this mean for the force? Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publicly argued that the State Department (and by extension organizations such as the Agency for International Development) required a dramatic increase in its funding to pay for the type of staffing necessary to carry out the SSRTO mission. At the same time, it was not clear whether Gates intended DoD funding to decrease to accommodate this reconfiguration of leadership in the field. It also leads to questions about how the US military will interact in the event of international activities in the SSRTO realm, such as occurred in the middle of 2011 with the NATO

goal of protecting citizens against Muammar Gaddafi. The US military has traditionally not been under foreign leadership, but many other countries have considerable knowledge and expertise in SSRTOs that would be useful for the US, depending on the circumstances. Would the US better serve its officers and enlisted personnel to defer command to someone from Brazil, for example, with considerable experience in SSRTOs as opposed to insisting that US forces always be led by a US commander?

The Libya mission ended with Gaddafi's death in 2011 but another question that arises is whether engaging in R2P or SSRTO activities then requires a state to continue its engagement after the target government is gone. In other words, how long does the international community maintain its commitment to security, stability, reconstruction or transition operations? Until an oppressive regime leaves power? Through one new regime? Five, ten? This is not at all clear in the current environment yet it has important effects for the military. As the world looks at the possibility of a mission for Syria to deal with the brutality of the Assad regime or an ouster of the Islamic Republic in Iran to prevent its further development of nuclear capabilities, these questions remain unanswered yet important for the militaries that may be involved. An end to either the Assad dynasty's forty years in power or the Islamic Republic of Iran's thirty years would leave major stabilization challenges for the global community, or at least their neighbors. In today's period of fiscal retrenchment, the commitments to SSRTO would loom important in many ways.

For the US, much of the SSRTO work is actually done by civilians who are officers in the reserves or the National Guard. The Guard achieved important status with the elevation of the senior

guard officer, General Craig McKinley, US Air Force, to the ranks of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But many serving in the Guard or the Reserves still face doubts from their active duty peers and their civilian employers about the implications of being called up for these SSRTOs. Are they equal to the task? How long will they be involved? How will they coordinate their arrival on station and their return home?

Additionally, how does this elevation of SSRTOs work for smaller militaries? If a smaller force has to choose between traditional operations and SSRTOs, how would its missions be accommodated?

A number of states, such as the Pacific islands, have moved towards non combat operations, specifically peacekeeping, in the past thirty years, but that choice eliminates certain opportunities for any military that might require traditional combat skills. Other nontraditional concerns, such as Gulf of Aden piracy, illustrate the different skills and missions that are at work in the international community today.

CONCLUSION

The departmental and service decisions towards stability, security, reconstruction, and transition operations for the US is still underway. The full implications are not yet clear, but represent a significant change in orientation for the missions of the US military. These implications will be similar for some militaries and different for others, but represent a change from the mission of combat against major military forces in a sustained, long term approach that characterized the way states prepared during the Cold War. SSRTOs may be the future for militaries around the world but more likely will be one of several. Hence, the US and other military forces

face a more demanding and complex future, requiring near simultaneous preparations for both traditional and SSRTO missions. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. The views of the author are personal and do not in any case represent policy of the US Government, the National Defense University, or any other agency. Cynthia Watson is Professor of Strategy at the National War College where she has taught since 1992. ABC Clio of Santa Barbara will publish her third book on SSRTOs in April 2012. She also researches China's national security goals and topics relating to professional military education around the world.
2. To see Clinton's speech to the people of Rwanda years later, see Cynthia A. Watson, *Stability, Security, Reconstruction & Transition Operations* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC Clio, 2012).
3. Clinton issued an apology in Kigali on 7 May 1998 but many critics found it insincere and callous in light of other decisions during his presidency. See John Ryle, "A Sorry Apology from Clinton," *guardian.co.uk*, 13 April 1998, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,6573,234216,00.html>.
4. Condoleezza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000.
5. Dozens of volumes on electronic lists and bookshelves cover the lead up to the Iraq war in March 2003. Several which I find most relevant to this discussion include Bob Woodward's series on Iraq; Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Tom Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); and George Packard, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005). I also find L. Paul Bremer and Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq* (Threshold Editions, 2006) illuminating.
6. James Dao, "A Nation Challenged: The President; Bush Sets Role for U.S. in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 18 April 2002.
7. Countless seminar discussions at the National War College during this period centered around the frustration many veterans of the Afghan campaign felt about their

- inability to “get” bin Laden during Operation Anaconda (March 2002) and during the early months of the Iraq campaign when those assigned to an Afghan mission appeared to believe they were missing out of the “real war.” That view shifted as the Taliban began to creep back into the picture around late 2005 but the crux of these discussions rarely focused on the SSRT0 missions. These officers clearly viewed themselves as warfighters.
8. The Clinton and George W. Bush administrations provided assistance under Plan Colombia for several years. The bulk of the assistance was for military training, enhancement of human rights protection, and other aspects of strengthening the notoriously weak institutions in a country fighting insurgents while also exporting vast amounts of cocaine into the United States. The plan had a major military component but also provided some other types of assistance such as legal reform, crop substitution, and other needed transformative steps to put Colombia on a sustainable path rather than one of violence and polarization.
 9. Senator Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, was adamant about not providing assistance to the Colombian military which appeared, in the late 1990s, to have a serious disregard for human rights standards. A goal of Plan Colombia was to reverse that problem. While Colombia still has its critics, those voices are considerably lower than they were before the US efforts at SSRT0 there.
 10. This phrase was a commonly heard in the 1990s as people grumbled about Clinton’s use of the armed forces for peace operations and what are now SSRT0s, while it was similarly used to highlight the initial success of activities in Iraq until it became obvious that reconstruction and stabilization components were both equally important in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. Anecdotally, the phrase is used far less often today at the National Defense University.



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