



INSS Insight No. 567, July 1, 2014

The United States: Prepared and Fit for Military Intervention in Iraq?

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Following the seizure of Iraq's main cities by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), there has been much discussion about possible US military intervention in Iraq. Since the ISIS campaign began, a small American force of 275 soldiers has been sent to Iraq with the declared goal of protecting US citizens and property. In addition, President Obama stated that the United States "will be prepared to take targeted and precise military action if and when we determine that the situation on the ground requires it." While the President also approved the dispatch of 300 military advisors to assist the Iraqi government, he declared that US troops will not be fighting again in Iraq. Several days later, Secretary of State John Kerry went to Iraq on an emergency visit.

The official White House statement highlights the clear reluctance of the President to send the American troops to another round of fighting in the bloody Middle East because he seeks to leave a legacy of bringing the troops home. Nevertheless, the situation raises the question of US military preparedness for intervention of this kind if the administration decides in the future that the interests of the US or its allies warrant it. The US military is the strongest and best-equipped in the world, yet when it comes to counterinsurgency, it has paid heavily in both blood and treasure. Has the United States learned how to improve its military preparedness for a possible future conflict?

The question invites an examination of the concepts that shaped both US assessments on asymmetric warfare as well as the actual military confrontations, beginning with the post-September 11 operation in Afghanistan. In an article published in 2002, "Transforming the Military," then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld presented a new doctrine, "transformation," and described the change that the United States must undergo in force buildup and force operations because of a change in the nature of conflicts and enemies. More than a decade after its publication, Rumsfeld's approach appears more relevant than ever – perhaps a surprising observation, given the strategic failures in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Rumsfeld saw Afghanistan as an important example for preparing the US military for the future so that it can adapt quickly to unforeseen challenges and circumstances. This is

prominently reflected in force buildup programs. The flagship program that presented the administration's approach is known as Future Combat System (FCS). Indeed, this program was envisioned two years before the start of Rumsfeld's term, but implementation began after he was in office. The FCS included changes in combat doctrine, weapons and equipment, the form and method of training, suitable command and leadership development, recruitment and training, and construction of new facilities. The goal of the program was to transform the army entirely so as to allow it to cope better with the challenges of the future. One of the program's major emphases was on the development and acquisition of new weapons intended not only to replace the old systems, but also to fill new roles. The force was planned to be relatively small, light, and mobile so that it could reach any point on the globe in less than 100 hours and carry out any task required, independently and without assistance from other parties, using a variety of components connected to an integrated network (for network-centric warfare). A large number of unmanned systems and robots were included in the program. The first division was intended to be ready in 2015, and the entire program was to be complete by 2030.

The program was groundbreaking in a number of ways: first, technologically, because until then, the United States had only several dozen drones and a very small number of ground robots; second, in terms of the attention to various military aspects and the understanding that to create an effective force, it is not only these systems that need to be changed, but also the concepts of combat, exercises, recruitment, training, command, and more; and third, in the way in which the program perceives the future nature of military conflicts. Military officials are sometimes caught "preparing for the last war"; this program demonstrates forward thinking and preparation for conflicts that are lying in wait for the United States.

The ambitious FCS program was canceled in 2009 by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who claimed it was one of the most difficult decisions he made. FCS was replaced by the more modest Bridge Combat Team Modernization (BCTM) program. The reasons for the change were several, but there were three main factors, first among them budget. The program was quite costly and by 2009 was already over the planned budget; the timing of the cancellation, following the global economic crisis of 2008, is not coincidental. Another important reason was the failure to meet deadlines and the fact that military systems already in use, such as tanks, would soon become obsolete and unusable, while new systems were still not ready for use. The change in administration, which was accompanied by a change of approach, was likewise a decisive factor. A combination of circumstances led to a government decision to replace the older program with a new one. The new program made an effort to assimilate technologies and weapons developed as part of the FCS, but it differed from the FCS in scope and nature, primarily in the significantly reduced number of unmanned systems. Regarding the cancellation of this

program, skeptics in the media saw this as a symbol to the end of the vision of robotic army. Whoever thought this, was wrong.

US forces are the best equipped and the most technologically advanced today, with a fleet of thousands of drones that are operated continuously around the world. Other countries, however, seek to challenge this supremacy. China, for example, has already declared its intention to develop the largest fleet of drones in the world and overtake the United States. In addition to its aerial systems, the United States (as of 2010) has over 12,000 ground robots, which were also used in the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, this equipment does not ensure preparedness for a conflict that requires the use of troops on the ground against insurgents who constitute a challenging enemy. An enemy of this type challenges not only the United States, but modern Western militaries in general, and especially those of democratic states, which unlike the enemy, place many restrictions on themselves in the fighting.

From a tactical perspective, a qualified force according to the original FCS model could presumably provide better ability to operate on the ground than what exists today. While such a force would still include many manned systems, it would also have more unmanned ground systems than today, as well as a higher level of information sharing between the systems and soldiers, and this capability would have begun to approach US unmanned aerial capabilities. At the same time, these systems clearly do not lack disadvantages. In particular, they do not solve international political problems or challenges in warfare, such as the difficulty in distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants, which is common in this type of warfare, and the fact that their level of technological development still does not allow them to replace soldiers and manned systems in all military tasks.

And yet, the ability to use force while minimizing the risk to soldiers is very useful for any Western democracy that is forced to defend itself against terrorist and guerrilla organizations in various arenas. It lessens the impact of the Achilles' heel of democracies, exposed long ago by insurgents: sensitivity to military casualties, especially during a war against a threat that is not existential. However, it appears that the United States and other countries still lack the ability to intervene on the ground without risking an ongoing conflict that would endanger the lives of many soldiers, and that this will be one of the weighty considerations against military intervention in Iraq if the United States decides that defending American interests requires the use of military force.

