Conference Brief Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,
The Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University, and
The Eisenhower Conference Series

Security Transformation

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Key Insights:

- The Global War on Terrorism and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are diverting resources and energy from security transformation. The ultimate effect of this is unclear.
- Experts do not agree on the amount of budgetary support that will be available for security transformation over the long term.
- The human capital to sustain security transformation exists, but may become more expensive and harder to maintain.
- While the United States has been successful at transforming to attain battlefield success against conventional enemies and for defense management, there is a great need for a second generation of transformation focused on stabilization operations, intelligence, and homeland security.
- Making America's security transformation compatible with key allies remains an unresolved problem.
- The "strategic pause" that gave birth to security transformation is over; now the United States must find a way to transform while "under fire."

For the past 5 years, the United States has sought to transform its defense capabilities to reflect ongoing changes in technology, management techniques, the American political and economic landscapes, and the global security environment. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing Global War on Terrorism provided stark and tragic reminders of the need for the such an adjustment. With American military forces engaged around the world in both combat and stabilization operations, the need for rigorous and critical analysis of security transformation has never been greater. Toward this end, The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), and the Eisenhower National Security Series co-sponsored a conference on security transformation on November 14-15, 2003, which brought together top thinkers to assess this topic.

The Major Themes. The wide range of discussions at the conference reflected the breadth of transformation which, by definition, encompasses a fundamental change in nearly every dimension of American security. To fully assess something that complex would require weeks of discussion. In a very broad sense, though, two themes did appear on a regular basis throughout the conference: the difficulty of sustaining transformation and the need for adjusting the trajectory of transformation. These encapsulate the state of the security transformation debate today.

Sustaining Transformation. Much energy and money has been devoted to security transformation since the congressionally-commissioned National Defense Panel concluded in 1997 that the United States should undertake "a broad transformation of its military and national security structures, operational concepts and equipment." In many ways, though, the world of 2003 is not the world of 1997. Ironically, the global war on terrorism, particularly the ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, divert money and, more importantly, people and energy from transformation even while they demonstrate the need for it. The question is whether these distractions will derail transformation.

One area of intense discussion at the conference was the money for sustaining transformation. One participant suggested that recent increases in defense budgets have allowed a clearing up of a backlog in readiness and maintenance which could, in turn, allow an increase in transformation spending in coming years, but only if there is no significant decline in the defense budget and no unforeseen increase in major system or personnel costs. Many other participants considered a major increase in transformation-related spending over current levels unlikely, particularly with no end in sight to the war on terrorism and many major systems approaching the point of total failure or obsolescence. Few participants expected a windfall in transformation spending, thus forcing its architects to be selective in the programs they pursue.

A second dimension of sustaining transformation that the conference participants discussed in detail concerned people. There was a general sense of satisfaction with the quality of the people leading security transformation, both civilian and military. The human "raw material," as one participant phrased it, is there. The discussion did not, though, push beyond the idea of sustaining this existing level of quality. In other words, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the military compete for quality people with corporations and other organizations which are themselves transforming and thus need people with similar skills sets—creativity, comfort with emerging technology, an ability to think in nonlinear ways, the ability to work across cultural boundaries, whether national or organizational ones, and so forth. The question is how to draw transformative people to the defense establishment, empower them, educate them, network them, and keep them—a pressing one that needs additional exploration.

A third dimension of sustaining transformation is "harvesting" research and turning it into new technology. General agreement existed that the present system based on defense laboratories is not adequate for transformation. While no one advocated abolishing the defense labs, all agreed that significant changes are needed.

At least one dimension of sustaining transformation was *not* discussed at the conference: the energy and impetus driving the process. The assumption among the participants seemed to be that transformation has taken root or reached critical mass, at least within the defense establishment. Only a few years ago, though, the general wisdom was that organizational and psychological impediments to transformation were so great that only a committed and powerful Secretary of Defense with the full support of the President could burst through them. We sometimes forget that rumors before the terrorist attacks of September 2001 were that Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was on his way out, and the changes he was attempting would go with him. The question of whether the impetus for transformation has been institutionalized or is specific to the current leadership probably merits further consideration.

Adjusting Transformation. The participants at the conference agreed that great strides have been made during 5 years of transformation. This is most obvious in the battlefield skill of the U.S. military, particularly when facing a conventional opponent. Jointness, speed, precision, and knowledge have combined to give the American armed forces a significant advantage that shows no sign of diminishing. While perhaps not as stark, the transformation of defense management has led to equally profound change in the way that defense resources are used. But these may represent the "low hanging fruit" of security transformation. The conference participants identified several "second generation" arenas for transformation while noting the difficulty it will face in these venues.

One—and perhaps the most pressing—involves stabilization and support operations. The major idea is that in an era when states may ally with terrorists and terrorists may use weapons of mass destruction (WMD), simply restoring the status

quo when attacked, then relying on international and multinational forces to address the conditions that generate conflict and aggression is no longer adequate. This suggests that the United States requires a comprehensive strategy which allows it to both defeat an identified threat on the battlefield and then transform that threat, whether it is a state, a nonstate actor, or a region, so that it no longer poses a danger. Decisiveness in the new security environment thus means permanently transforming a threat rather than simply reversing overt aggression. Part of the "second generation" of transformation is building the capabilities to implement such a strategy.

The conference participants agreed that such a transformation is more complex, wide-ranging, and holistic than simply changing the military for battlefield success. Stabilization and the amelioration of the root causes of conflict and aggression are not solely military missions. In some cases they may not be predominantly military tasks. Instead, they involve all elements of national power and many agencies of the U.S. Government—to transform an aggressor or state in conflict often entails changing its political, economic, legal, social, and cultural structures.

Stabilization operations and the ensuing transformation or reconstruction often involves partner nations. None of America's have the same extensive defense resources that the United States does. Thus those which attempt transformation at all must take a very different path. This is an enduring problem leading to growing issues of incompatibility between the United States and its partners. Several solutions have been attempted, but all have flaws. For instance, the "division of labor" in which the United States undertakes large-scale combat and allies undertake stabilization and reconstruction, as one participant pointed out, is not sustainable. America's allies need security transformation as much as does the United States. At the same time, that participant argued, a strategy built on "coalitions of the willing" is equally weak. These should be seen as the exception rather than the norm, with alliances based on a shared threat perception serving as the bedrock of common defense.

The conference participants also identified two new but difficult venues for transformation: intelligence and homeland security. On intelligence, one participant suggested significant change has been undertaken in terms of the ability to collect, assess, and disseminate information for conventional, force-on-force warfighting. This is the key to the emerging dominant battle-space awareness of American forces. A similar transformation is needed for WMD and stabilization operations. In the latter, this participant did not follow the common argument that only more human intelligence could solve the problem, but suggested that technology did offer at least some solutions if it was tailored "close in" technology rather than the long-range sort used for conventional warfighting.

The conference participants noted that intelligence and homeland security still need additional reorganization. In the intelligence community, for instance, the Director of Central Intelligence has overall responsibility but not overall control, particularly budgetary control. Homeland security is still more in the process of coordinating capabilities than building new ones, so it is probably too soon to talk of transformation.

The Way Ahead. From the time transformation first entered the American strategic vocabulary, it was not clear whether it was a finite process which would be finished at some point in time, or a process of "permanent revolution" through which constant change would be institutionalized. If the November 2003 conference is an accurate barometer, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. On one hand, the participants at the conference—like the U.S. military and DoD—have ingrained the need for transformation. What was once open to debate now passes without question. That is unlikely to change. It will remain a fundamental source of American strength for decades. On the other hand, the fact that so much of the discussion at the conference dealt with Iraq, Afghanistan, the defense budget and other near-term issues showed that some of the attention on long-term transformation that was possible a few years ago has been diverted. In all likelihood, this situation will continue—transformation will remain important but often be pushed aside by immediate challenges. The "strategic pause" that gave birth to security transformation is over. Now the United States must find a way to transform while "under fire."

Conference Participants.

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