



Institutionalizing the Operational Reserve

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United States Army Reserve

THE Armed Forces of the United States have demonstrated the strategic benefits of preparing reserve forces for operational employment.

For more than seven years, formations manned by citizen-warriors have been used to meet the demand for military capabilities in support of both domestic and expeditionary operations.

In doing so, they have helped to reduce national risk associated with execution of the National Defense Strategy and Combatant Command Operation Plans; they have helped to reduce the stress on our Active Component forces; they have contributed to operational successes in Iraq and Afghanistan; and finally, they have built up a level of combat experience in their formations not seen since World War II.



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Despite these benefits, the Department of Defense has yet to fully institutionalize the Operational Reserve concept across the Services in a consistent and coherent manner.

The Department should review Service implementation of the operational reserve concept during the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) to influence policy and resourcing decisions that will follow that review.

This article will provide one opinion on how to use the QDR to institutionalize the Operational Reserve concept across the Services.

DOD Directive (DODD) 1200.17, "Managing the Reserve Components as an Operational Force," describes two key attributes of an operational Reserve Component – participation in activities across the range of military operations and a cyclical employment paradigm.

Specifically, the directive says:

"In their operational roles, RCs participate in a full range of missions according to their Services' force generation plans. Units and individuals participate in missions in an established cyclic or periodic manner that provides predictability for the combatant commands, the Services, Service members, their families, and employers."

To meet these requirements, our operational reserve formations must be more ready – in a higher state of personnel, training, and equipment readiness – than they were in previous decades. To do this we must institutionalize the operational reserve concept.

We must adapt authorities, policies, and resourcing to establish and sustain pre-mobilization readiness to provide the access that the Services will require from

their operational reserve formations.

The operational reserve is our hedge against the potential for high-intensity state-on-state conflict and provides the strategic depth required in protracted irregular conflicts.

The Services have taken steps to operationalize their Reserve Components, but more can be done. The Department, in close coordination with the Services, has begun to implement selected recommendations from the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves (CNGR) Final Report.

The Services have developed and matured force generation models that facilitate cyclical employment described in DODD 1200.17.

We have not, however, fully integrated operational reserve requirements into Service Program and Base Budget submissions. Base Budget resourcing is an absolutely essential element in institutionalizing the Operational Reserve concept.

Recently, the Administration laid out a plan to reduce US Military commitments to ongoing efforts in Iraq by August 2010 and to remove all US Forces from Iraq by December 2011 while simultaneously increasing military support to our efforts in Afghanistan.

This will very likely result in a net reduction in the demand for military forces in support of these operations. That said, we have had a tendency, in our history, to drawdown forces after conflicts – implementing a so-called “peace dividend.”

The pressure to take another “peace dividend” after our withdrawal from Iraq and our eventual departure from Afghanistan may be heightened by the current economic crisis. Evidenced by recent discussions on the Defense Department’s FY10 Budget, fiscal pressures will shape future budget authorizations.

As demand for military capabilities begin to decline for operations in Iraq, the Department and the Services might be tempted to put the Reserve Components back in the “Strategic Reserve” box – into cold storage for the next major conflict.

Analysis of the security environment suggests that this is an unwise approach. U.S. Joint Forces Command, in their Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 2008, describes the challenges of the future security environment by saying, “The next quarter century will challenge U.S. joint forces with threats and opportuni-

ties ranging from regular and irregular wars in remote lands, to relief and reconstruction in crisis zones, to sustained engagement in the global commons.”

It goes on to say that “One cannot rule out the possibility that U.S. military forces will be engaged in persistent conflict over the next quarter century.” The Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff’s Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO) 2009 adds that “The future operating environment will be characterized by uncertainty, complexity, rapid change, and persistent conflict.”


The volatility of the future security environment, described by these critical documents, demands that we retain the strategic flexibility that the operational reserve affords us.

The recently begun QDR, directed by Title 10, Section 118, is a “comprehensive examination of the national defense strategy, force structure, force modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plan, and other elements of the defense program and policies of the United States with a view toward determining and expressing the defense strategy of the United States and establishing a defense program for the next 20 years.”

The QDR is a critical driver for Departmental strategy, policy and resourcing. The implementation of the Operational Reserve concept is worthy of scrutiny under this review given the operational environment described by the JOE and CCJO and the demand for military forces that those conditions could require.

The Department should follow up on the good efforts of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves to shape the Reserve Components to meet the demands of 21st Century conflict.

The Department should take the opportunity that QDR offers us to review Service implementation of the Operational Reserve concept and to direct the funding of essential requirements associated with improving pre-mobilization readiness of reserve formations for employment across the range of military operations.

Ensuring the Reserve Components remain a viable element of a defense strategy that seeks to deter other nations from challenging the United States militarily and a viable source of operational forces should deterrence fail are crucial in an era of uncertainty and persistent conflict. 

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