

By a staff reporter

A recent unattributable briefing in London by a strategist on the Obama/Biden team highlighted the problems facing the US military to replenish and replace stocks trashed by years of operations in hot and sandy places.

In the two-front conflict, there are 16-18,000 US troops committed, with a surge in prospect as stability decreases. Iraq is stable after a fashion, but a draw-down of the 160-180,000 troops there may decrease this. Pakistan is a joker in the pack, with some expecting a coup there sooner rather than later.

Strategically, the principal threat to US national security appears to be radical terrorism. There are concerns over rising powers, in particular China. US short term defence policy, like that of the UK, has been focussed primarily on asymmetric situations. But much US procurement is focussed on high-tech platforms, giving rise to real tensions between the conflicts of today and those potentially of tomorrow. This may be illustrated by talk of "what is the point of JSF". There is tension within the US military, and a push back from senior levels on transformation, and the "loss of toys". Was Rumsfeld right?

The Democrats have dialled down the rhetoric on an Iraq draw-down, making some room for manoeuvre if the strategic situation changes. If troop reductions result in an increase in violence, civil war or even genocide, there would be a major threat to regional stability and access to resources.

There is a need for a new plan for Afghanistan. The 10,000 troop, 2/3 brigade will be hard to man up. Conflict seems to be slowly spreading into Pakistan, a major capability worry.

What kind of wars will the US be called upon to fight in the future? Great wars in the classic mould? China is building a blue water navy. It has large numbers of missiles pointing at Taiwan. (A recent RAND study wargamed conflict across the Strait, had the US quality losing out to Chinese quantity in some scenarios). What about the Baltic states like Estonia? NATO is becoming very aware of a re-arising Russia post Georgia even though their current deficiencies were highlighted.

To what extent will counter-insurgency wars continue, with what tempo? How serious is talk of cyber wars?

On current operations, operational tempo is high and conditions harsh. Sand is an issue – but it's different, that in Afghanistan being more like moon dust. And there are manpower shortages – there aren't the people to drive the equipment half the time, and recruitment rates aren't high enough to fill the gaps.

The average peacetime track miles of the Abrams M1A2 tank is 800 miles, in Iraq it's six times that, 5000 miles a year. Bradley tracked vehicles and Humvees are being used at similar rates. Medium and heavy trucks are running 10 times their peacetime miles. Helicopters, depending on type, are doing 2 1/2 times their peacetime flying hours.

Much of the current equipment was designed for set-piece conflict with clearly defined zones of war and peace. There has been a lot of spending on supplements (equivalent of UK UORs). In 2005 the US Army sought over half a billion dollars for 800 major pieces of equipment including 350 wheeled vehicles. In 2006 they needed \$1.2 billion to replace damaged or destroyed helicopters. The numbers keep rising. The wash-out rate – irreparable equipment as a result of climate and operating conditions means much cannot be repaired – is running at 12% for wheeled vehicles, 2% for tracked vehicles and 3% for helicopters.

In addition to regular forces, reserve forces have been on constant call. The Army National Guard and the Army Reserve both started with less quality equipment, but much has been transferred to the front line. A move to Theatre-Provided Equipment means much of it is left in theatre and not returned to the US for refurbishment. Around 100,000 pieces of major equipment have been transferred from the non-deploying National Guard, and about two-thirds of it remains in Iraq. There is a critical shortage of night vision and chemical detection kits.

The US is constantly reminded that the army you have is not necessarily the army you want. With more manpower-based operations, there's a toll on the people as well as the equipment, with some units rotated more than is desirable. It's clear that the reserves may have to be equipped better.

Amongst the lessons learned so far is the need for force protection and its implications. Fast moving infantry hasn't traditionally used heavy equipment. Situational awareness remains vital. How can forces monitor where problems are, like key routes? HUMINT makes a comeback. More UAVs could mean that first-hand situational awareness could be devolved downwards. Training in Arabic culture and languages is underway – but what about other potential theatres? Bluetracker is invaluable. In tactical communications, the ability to intercept the communications of others and jam them has thrown up deficiencies in software. There's a lot of old equipment out there which will give a further push to satellite communications but concerns about redundancy remain.

Heavy armour has been invaluable. A Humvee replacement is needed by 2012. MRAP is king, the joint tactical light vehicle programmes may need to be scrapped.

The "reset" budget – what it takes to get back to a reasonable starting point – has risen inexorably from \$1.26 billion in 2003, \$9 billion in 2006 and \$17 billion this year. Defence is the second largest public expenditure item in the US after social services, but Obama and a Democrat Congress may differ spending priorities. Democrat gains of 4-6 Senate seats and 20-30 House seats might be reasonably expected, entrenching current narrow majorities.

The long term requirements are military transformation and modernisation of armour, trucks and helicopters. All the principal prepositioned stocks – Guam, Diego Garcia, the Gulf – have

been drawn down. Only Korea is at planned levels. So principal, reserve and prepositioned stocks are all depleted of current inventory types. There is a proposed increase in manpower of 65,000. This implies over half a million significant pieces of equipment will be required for them alone.

For advanced items like Stryker, there are worries about access to raw materials like steel and rubber. This could result in a focus on smaller, mid-range vehicles with greater protection levels.

A lot boils down to what sort of conflict should the US be planning for? Iran started out as a conventional blitzkrieg 2.0, Afghanistan was taken mainly by proxies.