

Military — in need of a reality check



By Rajan Menon

The pre-eminent problem of the current world will be not wars among the major powers but rather upheavals within weaker states

AT a congressional hearing July 7, the Army's new vice chief of staff, Gen Richard A Cody, answered the rhetorical question of whether US military forces were stretched too thin with a resounding "absolutely".

It doesn't take the genius of Clausewitz to figure out what's obvious: With 135,000 troops assigned to the war in Iraq, 17,000 in Afghanistan, 37,500 in South Korea, 47,000 in Japan and 100,000 in Europe, saying that we are overstretched is putting it mildly. In all, there are 368,900 US troops in 120 countries.

Some drastic steps have been taken or are being contemplated to cope with the pressure.

Nearly 40% of the available National Guard and Reserve forces have been tapped for missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. So-called stop-loss policies have been implemented to prevent soldiers from leaving units that have received orders to deploy. The Pentagon has called up 5,600 soldiers from post-active duty "retirement". And policy wonks have brought up re-instituting the draft, though, for political reasons, this effort is unlikely to gain footing.

All of our problems in Iraq cannot be blamed on insufficient forces — the reliance on 135,000 troops to wage a counterinsurgency in a country of 25 million people and an area

larger than California. It doesn't help that as yet no Iraqi troops with the numerical strength and training to serve as true partners have emerged. As American casualties in Iraq mount, it will be harder to get people to enlist or reenlist. And for those already engaged in combat, insufficient numbers make the inherent risks of war greater still.

Nor are we likely to see a diminished need for our military's involvement, although the pre-eminent problem of the current world will be not wars among the major powers but rather upheavals within weaker states — ethnic

threat are 47,000 US troops defending that country, which, with a \$3.5-trillion economy, spends barely 1% of its GNP on defence, compared with our 3.7%. The idea that a self-sufficient Japan would return to the imperialism of the 1930s simply won't wash anymore. South Korea too can wean itself from its current reliance on the United States. True, it faces a real danger from a militarised, dictatorial and mercurial North Korea. But it is also one of the world's foremost economic powers, a technological leader and an industrial giant. It has the wealth to purchase or to manufacture all

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conflicts, failed governments, humanitarian crises and terrorism.

So what is to be done? One obvious step is to avoid military engagement under the rubric of "regime change" absent a clear and present danger. The toppling of the Taliban, which occurred after that odious regime refused to turn over the mastermind behind the 9/11 massacres, met the standard. But the Iraq war, it is evident by now, did not.

Another approach is to reassess the military commitments inherited from the Cold War. What precisely are 100,000 US troops doing in Europe? Against whom is Europe being defended? And why is the European Union, whose economy and population exceed that of the US, incapable of meeting its own defence needs now that the days of a war-torn, weak Europe and the spectre of German revanchism and Soviet aggression are long gone? A similar question must be asked in Japan. Against what

of the weaponry needed for its defence.

The point of such rethinking should not be to revert to isolationism or even to shuffle military units around. Rather, it should be part of an effort to cut ourselves loose from Cold War conceptions, to take stock of the world we live in now and to make clearheaded choices about where the new dangers lie and how we can best face them.

It's also time that we review what we can afford to do for others, and what they should rightly be encouraged to do for themselves. If we avoid such a recalculation, we will perpetuate outdated strategies, continue to overextend our military and persist in the strategic infantilisation of our allies. COURTESY LA TIMES

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violating rights at home, turning a blind eye to violations abroad and using pre-emptive military force where and when it chooses.

The recklessness that seems to typify the policies of this White House can also be seen in its fiscal policies. Republicans take pride in their party as one

Surely you must miss your ranch in Crawford, Texas; it's time to ride into the sunset cowboy.

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