

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

## Backing Up on Strategy

**A** PROPOSAL gathering steam in Washington calls for the United States to abandon the "two-MRC" defense strategy and its standard that the armed forces be prepared to fight and win two major regional conflicts, nearly simultaneously.

That strategy had been opposed all along by hard-core defense cutters. They say US military power is excessive, that two conflicts occurring at the same time is wildly improbable, and that the services should be geared for limited actions like those in Haiti and Bosnia-Herzegovina rather than theater conflicts on the scale of the Persian Gulf War.

Now, conservatives who reached their positions by a practical route also are inclined to change the strategy. They believe it is foolish to cling to a plan the nation seems unwilling to support. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) says a force to implement the present strategy "exceeds available funding by hundreds of billions of dollars" over the next few years and there is "little realistic prospect of significant, sustained increases." He would therefore peg the strategy to "a single MRC, possibly together with one or more lesser threats" instead of counting on forces and capabilities "that will never materialize."

The two-MRC strategy grew out of the notorious "Bottom-Up Review" in 1993. Recollections of what happened during that strange interlude, however, are receding into myth. In making its case against the current strategy, the Progressive Policy Institute, the research arm of the Democratic Leadership Council, says the Bottom-Up Review "was a useful initial device for trimming the Cold War force structure in a planned and consensual manner."

What actually took place was this. Two months after coming to office, the Clinton Administration—on the basis of faulty assumptions—made whopping cuts to the defense budget without any real analysis to determine feasibility or impact. The Bottom-Up Review was an exercise to devise a strategy and a force structure to fit a budget level that had been set already.

Partway through the process, the Administration floated a concept called "Win-Hold-Win," based on a capability to fight one regional conflict and conduct a holding action elsewhere. After several weeks of withering criticism and ridicule, Win-Hold-Win was withdrawn and the two-MRC strategy was put forward in June 1993.

The manipulation of numbers continued. Bottom-Up Review calcula-

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tions, for example, prescribed twenty-four Air Force fighter wings for a two-MRC strategy and twenty wings for Win-Hold-Win. When the two-MRC force was announced in October 1993, though, it had twenty fighter wings. Within the year, the projected total of 184 heavy bombers was marked down to 100. That was a Win-Hold-Win force, no matter what label was pasted on it.

To make matters even worse, the emaciated defense budget would not cover such a force. It still won't. (An interesting sidelight is that John Hillen of the Heritage Foundation says that his proposal for a 1.5-MRC strategy would take substantially *more* forces and funding than are found in the present posture.)

There is no requirement that strategy be expressed in some specific number of conflicts. From 1961 to 1968, conventional force planning used a 2.5-war standard—simultaneous response to a Soviet/Warsaw Pact invasion in Europe, an attack by the Chinese in Asia, and a "lesser

contingency" elsewhere. The lesser contingency, or "half war," was Vietnam. From 1982 to 1993, national defense strategy was not based on any explicit number of conflicts.

The two-MRC concept works reasonably well as a means for sizing the force and estimating resources required. Response to regional crisis is central to the strategy, but there are other missions, ranging from strategic deterrence to peacekeeping and counterproliferation. The two-MRC force must cover these missions, too, and also provide a margin against the unexpected. For that matter, it should not take a great deal of imagination for anyone who reads the newspapers to think of two places—or more—where significant trouble could erupt.

Retreat from the two-MRC standard would inevitably be taken to mean that the armed forces can be reduced even further. The reality is that current forces and budgets are not sufficient to carry out the present strategy. We might be obliged to cut more if the nation could not afford anything better, but in 1995 defense outlays were just 3.7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. They will account for 2.7 percent of the GDP in 2002. The two-MRC strategy is unaffordable only if we want it to be unaffordable.

In Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War, US estimates of forces required were consistently low. Operation Desert Storm took a third more fighter forces than anticipated by Pentagon war plans. Any way you slice it, the right standard for sizing the force is appreciably more than one MRC. If it's not two, it's very close.

The arguments for changing the strategy are essentially economic, not military. The two-MRC standard was the least that the Administration could get by with in 1993. For the past three years, it has struggled to make a strategy based on that standard line up with insufficient funds. It won't work. It's time to recognize the budgeting for what it is—a mistake—and correct the problem in the only way that makes sense. ■