

Interview

GEN. RAY ODIERNO

US Army Chief of Staff

At last week's Association of the United States Army annual meeting and exposition in Washington, thousands gathered to hear senior leaders explain where the service is headed in this era of austerity. And the message from Gen. Ray Odierno, Army chief of staff, was one of frustration with uncertain budgets and automatic and inflexible defense cuts that are gutting readiness, with only two of his brigades ready for combat. The Army has been cutting personnel at a breakneck pace to save as much money as possible, given additional budget cuts are likely.

The Army is headed from a force of 570,000 soldiers, just a few years ago, down to 490,000. That number could get smaller, given sequestration is likely to continue and deeper reductions are expected over the coming months as part of a broader debt and spending deal.

Q. What is the real impact of past and future budget cuts on the force? Why are you so alarmed? And what is the way out of it?

A. Well, it is a bunch of cumulative things that have occurred: continuing resolutions [CRs], which we submit budgets, the House Armed Service Committee passed these budgets, but since we have not gotten a total governmental budget, we do not execute them, so we go to a CR. So it is not in line with how we think we should spend money in order to keep our force up. Then you have a shutdown. Then on top of that, you have sequestration, where we have a bunch of very heavy cuts that we have to take.

So let's forget about the number on sequestration. It is about the up-front cuts in sequestration that does not allow you to properly manage sequestration where you can sustain readiness, you can sustain modernization, as you reduce end strength. So what we are being forced to do is cut readiness, cut modernization, because we cannot cut end strength fast enough. Because it becomes too expensive to cut it, and you do not get any savings if you cut it very fast because you have to pay benefits.

Q. So what is the net impact from a readiness standpoint?

A. So let me put it in very simple terms. A brigade [of soldiers is] not going to the National Training Center. They do not have dollars to train at their home station. So we still have brigades, but if we ask them to go, they are not going to be trained properly. So what does that mean? That means when they go, it is going to take them longer to do it. They might

have more casualties. So to me, that is unacceptable. And so the problem with us is, we are realistic about the future. What I am telling you is we have to deploy people in the future. They are not going to be ready right now. That is a problem for me.

Q. What is it going to take to drive this point home? Is this a credibility issue for the service chiefs and the defense leadership?

A. The bottom line is everybody has got to realize between now and 2019, we have significant risk because we will not get rebalanced until then. And so that is a six-year period where we are going to be unbalanced. And what I worry about is this world we live in is incredibly uncertain. I do not know what is going to happen. There are lots of possibilities out there.

I certainly hope we do not have to deploy soldiers, but my job is to make sure we are ready to deploy them. And if we have to do it in the next six years, we have significant problems, because I think they will not be trained or equipped the way we think they should be as American soldiers to do their job.

Q. There has been a sense that the Pentagon has been waiting for Congress to come and ride to the rescue with more money, sort of forestalling the hard decisions. Was it a mistake to wait as long as you did?

A. So, you know, if we get a budget, we can plan towards that budget and we have planned towards these budgets. So we have a sequestration budget. We have planned for that. We know what it means. We know what a '15 to '19 budget would look like.

So we are prepared to execute that. Again, the bottom line is sequestration was a tool that was supposed to force compromise in Congress. It was not a tool developed to properly manage the downsizing of the Department of Defense or the Army. And that is the problem. The tool was not right.

Q. One of the challenges is almost everything you have now is more expensive than it was in the last downturn.

A. They like to compare it, "Well, you know, in 2001, your budget was here, and now it's going to be here. It is about the same. Why do you not have the same capabilities?" Well, the cost of soldiers has gone up. The other pieces we thought were for 12 years. And then we have wounded warriors. We have to take care of our families. We have to take care of our soldiers. That all costs a lot of dollars and we have to invest in that. There are other things, like the ability to sustain equipment is more expensive today than it was then because costs go up over time. So for us, if it is the same budget, it is a reduction in the budget.

Q. Do the military service chiefs need to map the drawdown themselves, rather than leave it to the political process?

A. I think the quadrennial defense review gives us an opportunity to do this. I think [Defense] Secretary [Chuck] Hagel and the chairman are having discussions about how we want to move forward. And this might be one of the solutions. We will probably include the combatant commanders in that as well, as we think our way through this process. I think that is one thing that is on the table, and I think that is a good way to go after this. We will see if that is where we head or not.

Q. There is a fierce debate among Army intellectuals, which you are fueling with your long-range study panels that you are putting together. What is it you want to achieve?

A. Strategic landpower is a kind of comment that we are using. There are a lot of people that dismiss the fact we really do not need ground forces any more. There is not going to be a necessity to use ground forces. And my view is that that is a bit naïve. Because I believe it is about the human domain, human dimension. It is about humans, and you



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US ARMY

FY 2014 budget request: \$129.7 billion

Troops: 535,000 active-duty, 199,000 Army Reserve

Deployed in Afghanistan: About 50,000

Units: 10 active divisions, 2 integrated divisions, 3 Army National Guard divisions

Worldwide installations: 158

Source: Defense News research

have to be able to compel humans to do things. And the way you compel humans is by having soldiers and Marines and others

on the ground. And it can be an engagement. It could be, if necessary, deploying and conducting operations across a broad array of missions that we might have to do. And I think that is key, especially in this complex world we live in, that we have to have that capability. The president and the national security team want to have a variety of capabilities available, and you certainly do not want to dismiss this. And I am afraid there are too many people that are dismissing that as an alternative for the future.

Q. In the future's team, there is a sense that some have that it is going to support the status quo. Is that going to be the case this time or do you expect totally different fresh views?

A. Well, I think we are getting different kinds of views. We are looking at new alternatives of what we think we are going to have to do in the future. We have to learn from the last 10 or 12 years because our adversaries look at what has happened over the last 10 or 12 years, and so we have to be prepared to operate in that environment. I think it is going to make the environment more complex. And so we have to prepare our leaders. We have to prepare our units. We have to prepare our training and our development in order to meet these complex challenges that we have. And that is what we are focused on.

Q. Are there any particular challenges that you think are going to be a more important focus area?

A. Well, what I would say is, it is a combination of things. So we still are going to have to probably deal with some sort of an insurgency

wherever we are. We still might have to deal with stability operations, all simultaneously while we might have to deal with a military action of either state or non-state actors. So it's a combination of all of those things that we are going to have to do, which is incredibly complex. We know it is going to be a civil-military solution. We know it is going to have to be a multinational solution. But all of that requires lots of preparation, training and capability in order to accomplish that.

Q. What is the right balance between massive, combined-arms evolutions and counterinsurgency? And how do you retain highly perishable skills?

A. If you went out to our training centers today, you would not recognize what we are doing because what we are building out there is a very complex environment that when a brigade goes out, they have to do counterinsurgency. They have to do some level of combined-arms maneuver. They have to do some stability operations. All at one time. And the scenarios are very complex. It also weaves in conventional special operations force integration. So these are the lessons we have learned. But now we are moving them forward into an even more complex environment — what we think we are going to have to fight in the future. And we will constantly update that environment out there as we learn more and think more about where we have to go.

Q. But you guys were doing brigade-level operations as part of a counterinsurgency.

A. Right, but it is a different kind of operations. I mean, it takes different synchronization and different capabilities. □

By **Vago Muradian** in Washington.