

# An Empty Battlefield?

*Will precision weapons proliferation limit land force engagement in future conflicts?*



Written by: Eric Tegler on June 8, 2012  
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Afghan National Army from the 2/207th Kandak, Italian Army Operational Mentoring Liaison Team, and Marines from the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command conduct a combat reconnaissance patrol around the mountains of Bagwa, Farah province, Afghanistan, Feb. 26, 2010. The constant engagement in two wars has prevented the in-depth study of the role precision munitions will play on the battlefield of the future. Technology will give the infantry of the future focus on a wider area. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Nicholas Pilch

The demands of two wars have driven American doctrine, training, and acquisition to such an extent that the question, "How will we fight the next conflict?" has been largely neglected for years. The oversight is particularly obvious when it comes to our military's land forces, honed for a decade by America's occupation and counterinsurgency campaigns.

The defense establishment has begun to seriously grapple with the possibilities of the next war. The threat scenarios of the future and the recent past have common elements, but none may be more strategically and tactically important than the availability of precision munitions (PMs).

*“Once the technological “silver bullets” of a handful of nation states, precision munitions are now within reach of most countries and a variety of non-state actors. While the U.S. military has employed them in greater numbers and with greater efficacy than any other force, it has never faced a peer enemy with high-end precision munitions.*

But what if that happens? What would the implications for the land battlefield be? What demands would such a scenario make on ground forces? Would units need to be dispersed and downsized, maintaining contact and command via networks? Would they rely on portable air defense systems? How would they maneuver, gather intelligence, and maintain situational awareness? In the face of weapons several orders of magnitude more lethal than conventional weapons of the past, would the modern land battlefield have radically fewer boots on the ground?



We posed these questions, strategic and tactical, to Col. William G. Braun (Ret.) and Col. Jay Peterson. Braun is a research professor of national security studies and

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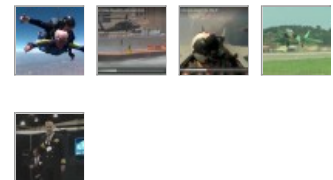
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A U.S. Army soldier demonstrates the Joint Tactical Radio System as part of the Army's Network Integration Evaluation 12.1. As the battlefield becomes more and more dominated by precision munitions, the information acquired from advanced networks will be more important to link smaller units separated by distance. U.S. Army photo

analysis, [Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College](#). Peterson is deputy commandant of the [U.S. Army Infantry School](#) at Fort Benning, Ga.

The challenge of a sophisticated opponent with precision munitions is one U.S. land forces are less than optimally prepared for, Braun said.

"I think that there's a genuine concern with our state of readiness and what part of land force capabilities and skill sets have atrophied."

He quickly added that our assumptions of future peer-to-peer warfare need to be tempered by strategic probability.

*"In the near term, I think it's going to be what the [recent] literature suggests, more of the kinds of things we see now. There are always a couple likely peer competitor candidates in the world. They have as much at stake in [employing] a strategy that avoids peer-to-peer conflict as we do. So the more likely concern in terms of precision weapons on the battlefield is the 'hybrid threat,' where there is some conventional force capability mixed with an insurgent/criminal network – call it the 'Hezbollah model.'"*

Such conventional forces can punch above their weight using precision munitions, particularly when partnered with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and other technological assets that may be covertly provided by an ally. And as demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan, they will likely use effective but less "sexy" precision munitions.

"As we're thinking about this, I wouldn't strictly think about high-technology stuff," Braun said. He contends that with their affordability and easier accessibility, low-end PMs – from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to less sophisticated [unmanned aerial vehicles](#) (UAVs) – will play a role on a hybrid battlefield.

Ironically, a peer opponent might not use high-end precision munitions as we expect against land forces, Braun said.

"If you did confront a peer that had high-end precision capability in great depth, it would seem to me that they would use such expensive and effective weapons against more valuable soft targets than land forces. I'd be more concerned with air defenses and naval or missile defense systems that could protect critical infrastructure, economic hubs, or soft targets. You'd expect we'd make our land forces more difficult to engage with those weapons so the likelihood of their employment would be against something other than a land force."

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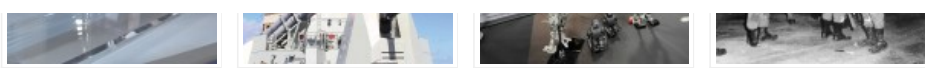
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