DoD Strategy, Army Reset Should Bolster Helo, Drone Budgets

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One lesson the Army has taken to heart from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the value -- and often the necessity -- of aviation to soldiers fighting on the ground. This is one reason that, even as the Army shrinks by a reported 80,000 or more troops under President Obama's new military strategy, and even as defense spending is cut at least $487 billion over the next decade, Army aviation won't get cut much.

"If you have fewer troops, you need to move them quicker and more safely, given the IED (Improvised Explosive Device) threat," reasons retired Maj. Gen. Andy Anderson, who ran the Army's UH-60 Black Hawk utility helicopter program in the early 1980s and then the RAH-66 Comanche attack helicopter project, which was canceled well after he retired.

The Obama administration's new strategic guidance makes it pretty clear that the Army and Marines will need substantial helicopter and drone fleets. "Our ground forces will be responsive and capitalize on balanced lift, presence, and prepositioning to maintain the agility needed to remain prepared for the several areas in which such conflicts could occur," the guidance says. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta made the case more eloquently, noting that U.S. forces would be "smaller and leaner, but will be agile, flexible, ready and technologically advanced." Agile, flexible and ready would seem a pretty powerful argument in favor of a robust Army aviation capability.

A vivid illustration of why Army aviation is so valued, and stretched painfully thin at times, aired Sept. 20 on the CBS Evening News. Pentagon correspondent David Martin's powerful report shows the last moments of a soldier who died in Afghanistan last September after being wounded by an IED. His death was blamed on the lack of an armed helicopter to escort the unarmed medevac chopper needed to get him to treatment within the so-called Golden Hour. As Martin noted, however, "Today in Afghanistan, a wounded soldier stands a 92 percent chance of surviving -- the highest rate of any war."

A primary reason for that survival rate is helicopters, which have saved countless lives in other ways as well, from providing air cover for troops in contact with the enemy and convoys in danger of being ambushed to transporting soldiers and supplies without the risk of hitting a roadside bomb.

While Army aviation primarily means helicopters, ground commanders also have come to rely during the wars of the past 10 years on the growing fleet of unmanned aerial systems (UAS). Army UAS provide ground commanders real time video of what lies around the next corner, detect and track down insurgents or terrorists planting IEDs, and, with the advent of the Hellfire missile-armed General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc. MQ-1C Gray Eagle, the Army's version of the Predator, carry out air strikes.

The Army owns about 5,500 helicopters, but since 2001 has lost several hundred, chiefly to accidents. "Even if you draw down the size of the Army and your brigade combat teams are fewer but more robust, you're still going to need all that aviation," argues retired Lt. Gen. Mark Curran, who commanded the Army Aviation Center and its base, Fort Rucker, Ala., from 2001-2003.

As evidence that he's right, Curran cites an unfolding Army plan to create a 13th Combat Aviation Brigade, to be based at Fort Carson, Colo., which is to have 113 helicopters. The defense bill President Obama signed into law New Year's Day authorizes $238.6 million for the first phase of construction of facilities to house the new aviation brigade. Retired Lt. Gen. Ted Stroup, a former deputy chief of staff of the Army, agreed with Curran on what creating the new 2,600-soldier unit means.

"That's almost a signal that this is important enough, knowing that there will be downsizing coming, that we've got to have that force structure," Stroup says. He also notes, however, that aviation "has always been the most expensive portion of the Army in terms of equipping and training. So then you come into an affordability dilemma."

Aviation accounts for only about 7 percent of the Army's personnel but in recent years has consumed 22 percent of the service's research, development and acquisition budget. Even so, helicopter industry and other experts say the Army has invested far too little in developing new and better rotorcraft. Instead, it has used its roughly $8 billion annual aviation acquisition budget mostly to refurbish its existing helicopter fleet and buy more of the same types of aircraft, though in more modern versions.

"The designs are old and many airframes are old, too," Michael Hirschberg, executive director of the American Helicopter Society International, told a January aviation symposium held by the Association of the United States Army (AUSA).

Hirschberg cited as the "archetypical example" a Boeing Co. CH-47 Chinook transport helicopter that he said first flew in 1960 as the eighth prototype of what was then a new design. Still in service today with the 101st Airborne Division after more than 3,600 hours of flight time since its last upgrade, the same Chinook may keep flying "another two decades or more -- 75 years of service," Hirschberg said.

The Army is upgrading all of its more than 500 Chinooks from CH-47Ds to CH-47Fs or special operations model MH-47Gs by installing more powerful engines and transmissions, a new cockpit with digital avionics and other modern features. The service is upgrading its other helicopters in similar fashion. Its UH-60 Black Hawks, made by Sikorsky Aircraft Co., are getting improvements of the same sort. The Army plans to keep buying these new UH-60Ms through at least 2025, when it expects to have 2,135 in all. In the same way, its Boeing AH-64D Apache attack helicopters are being remanufacturered into Block III models, with more effective weapons systems, with the goal a fleet of 690.

Against that backdrop, budget cutters might find it hard to squeeze money out of Army aviation, its advocates say. Other than the Gray Eagle and smaller UAS, which in general are far cheaper than manned aircraft, the Army has no firm plans to acquire any new aircraft for the next decade at least. The only possible new start in that period might be an Armed Aerial Scout helicopter to replace the service's OH-58D Kiowa Warrior, which has logged more flight hours than any other Army aircraft type over the past decade. Even that possibility, though, has become dubious in the current budget climate.

Helicopter makers have been invited to fly demonstrations this spring and summer of existing aircraft they might propose to replace the Kiowa Warrior, but with no firm promise the Army will buy one.

"Who thinks that's affordable?" Maj. Gen. Tim Crosby, the Army's chief aircraft buyer, said of the Armed Aerial Scout at the AUSA aviation symposium. "We're going to have to accept some risks in this area."
The Army's UAS office is participating in a Navy program to acquire a new unmanned helicopter, the MRMUAS, which stands for Medium-Range, Multi-Role Unmanned Aerial System. The only other new aviation programs the Army is working on, though, are the Joint Multi-Role Rotorcraft (JMR), which would be fielded in 2030 at earliest, and the Air Force-run Joint Future Theater Lift (JFTL) project.

The JMR concept resembles what Bell Helicopter did with its UH-1 Huey during the Vietnam War, when the company used its UH-1 as the basis for its AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, but seeks to take helicopter capabilities to new levels of speed, range and hovering power. The JFTL, meanwhile, aims to create a new transport to carry armored vehicles and other heavy cargo into austere landing zones.

Other services have envisioned the JFTL being a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft, perhaps a tiltrotor far larger than the Bell-Boeing V-22 Osprey, but experts who follow the program question whether the Air Force cares enough about VTOL aircraft to pursue that capability.

In any event, while a smaller Army that's more spread out on the battlefield makes aviation "astronomically more important," Crosby told the AUSA symposium, "We all know our country is in kind of a jam right now, financially." So at the very least, he said, "We're not going to be able to do all we want to do."