
SUMMARY

The division, the U.S. Army's preeminent fighting organization throughout the twentieth century, has proven to be a very robust, flexible, and adaptable formation, successfully absorbing and exploiting new technologies and doctrinal concepts. Fundamental changes to the division reflect the character of the national military strategy, national resources, force structure, and contemporary battlefield conditions. A few specific factors, derived from organizational goals and capabilities, have been prime determinants of division design: operational flexibility, firepower, agility (timeliness, mobility, and deployability), sustainability, and economy (manpower, money, and other resources). Technological advances—in weaponry, information systems, transportation, and protection—have greatly affected these factors, while human capabilities have also concerned force designers.

Today, some practitioners and scholars are calling for the retirement of the division from the Army organizational hierarchy. Most prominently, noted military theorist Colonel Douglas Macgregor argues that the division is too large and cumbersome to undertake missions that require quick overseas deployments. He argues that only new brigade-size organizations can take full advantage of the latest technologies and advancements, yielding a quantum leap in combat effectiveness, thus permitting the division's demise. In this context, it is helpful to determine why the division has endured and changed. Through examination of the major division designs, some principal historical factors can be illuminated.

The division was first established as a peacetime Army organization in 1911, while the first permanent division was formed in 1917. The Maneuver Division of 1911 aided the training of men and the testing of new equipment, convincing Army leaders to reorganize the Army into four divisions whose triangular design favored mobility and maneuver. During World War I, the experience of French and British forces convinced U.S. Army leaders to design the square division for purposes of greater control and sustainable combat power, intended to break through the stalemated trench warfare in Europe.

During the interwar period, although careful studies suggested flexible and mobile triangular designs, internal disagreements delayed the reorganization of divisions until war was again imminent. Although first officially proposed in 1929, it would not be until 1939 that Army infantry would adopt triangular divisions, with each based on three regimental combat teams and a field artillery regiment. At that time, Army leaders also sought to improve the division's command and control, incorporate new technologies, and streamline support. The infantry division's triangular design remained throughout World War II, postwar occupation, and the Korean War with only minor modifications. Perhaps the most significant organizational development of the twentieth century, the armored division of 1942—a direct forerunner of today's heavy divisions—had flexibility incorporated into its design. Its combat commands task organized fighting groups for specific missions.

The Pentomic division emerged in the late 1950s as the Army's response to the nuclear age. The Army expected nuclear weapons to be an important part of future battle and thus imposed the Pentomic design on its infantry divisions with the hope that they could undertake both conventional and nuclear missions, employing tactical nuclear weapons while also surviving the enemy's own nuclear strikes. As a result of technological and other materiel limitations, the Pentomic division proved to be neither capable of conventional offensive action nor survivable on the nuclear battlefield.

Acknowledging the inadequacies of the Pentomic design and the new national strategy of "flexible response," the Army introduced the triangular ROAD (Reorganization Objectives, Army Divisions) divisions in 1961. With them, Army leaders sought to regain a true conventional warfighting capacity and improve flexibility. These tri-

angular divisions benefited from the innovation of making battalions nearly identical and thus interchangeable. Flexible brigade headquarters would task organize these battalions as armored division combat commands had done in the past. The airmobile variant ROAD division introduced in 1965 differed basically only in tactics and equipment and lacked organic armor and artillery. As the Army was leaving Vietnam in the early 1970s, it experimented with the TRICAP design, which incorporated armor, infantry, and air cavalry assets. Although TRICAP was deemed inadequate for fighting heavy armor forces, its air cavalry combat brigade became a model for future corps-level attack aviation.

Contemporary division designs have not strayed far from the ROAD model and are modifications of it for a variety of purposes, including specialization, integration of new technologies, deployability objectives, and economy. The Army of Excellence (AOE) division that exists today grew out of the Division 86 study, putting primary organizational design emphasis on the probable enemy (the Warsaw Pact countries) and the new AirLand Battle doctrine and incorporating significant new weapons. Introduced in the early 1980s, the light infantry division (LID) was intended to be a highly deployable, highly trained force that could handle low- to mid-intensity contingencies and still be useful against heavy forces in Europe. To meet deployability guidelines, the LID was stripped of much support, limiting sustainability. In 1998, the Army unveiled Division XXI, a “digitized” version of the AOE design that greatly enhances each unit’s knowledge of the battlefield through real-time intelligence sharing that increases each combat unit’s area of coverage and improves its combat effectiveness. Reserve component integration and improved logistics are notable changes.

Over the span of the twentieth century, the firepower, mobility, and flexibility of Army divisions improved steadily to the benefit of ever increasing combat effectiveness and coverage area. Nevertheless, some claim that the time has come when the division’s size and basic organization no longer maximize—and perhaps hinder—the Army’s overall combat effectiveness and efficiency in the Army’s most likely contemporary missions. Such expressions of doubt raise many important policy questions that should be examined. Has the division, in its current form, outlived its usefulness? Does the division’s size hinder quick deployment and optimal combat effectiveness?

Has the strategic environment changed so much that alternative organizational designs would be more appropriate than divisions? Serious and intense experimentation should be undertaken to determine the size and organization of those units that will best serve the Army and the nation.