

DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES: An Introduction

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In Brief

- The defense planning system needs to be redesigned and not developed solely in reaction to crisis.
- Instead of being a rational top-down process, the current capabilities-contingencies-risk-strategy nexus is ad hoc and largely opaque.
- We need to create a credible and reasoned understanding of the function of the United States military in the future.

Introduction

United States defense policy is in disarray. The United States is overcommitted in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the military is stretched to its breaking point. The defense budget is undisciplined and unfocused. The entire defense planning system needs to be redesigned. For nearly two decades, the United States has allowed defense planning to occur by inertia leavened by ad hoc responses to crises. There is no coherent force planning construct. Instead of planning for clear contingencies, we developed disconnected capabilities.

The path forward is clear. The United States must enunciate a detailed and sustainable national military strategy that seeks to implement defense-related elements of the country's grand strategic framework. The process must be top-down, and must begin with a clearheaded assessment of America's role in the world, the utility of military force, and the capabilities – extant or desired – of America's armed forces. This document introduces a set of contrasting defense policies that meet these requirements.

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Flaws of the Existing Approach

In order to plan better for the future, we need to understand the problems with our current defense policy.

The Distorting Impact of the Iraq War

Almost the entirety of American ground forces are currently committed to the war in Iraq. With the exception of a relatively small – though growing -- force in Afghanistan, virtually the rest of the United States Army and Marine Corps are either in Iraq, coming back from Iraq, or preparing to deploy to Iraq. The toll on readiness has been staggering. Masses of equipment have been destroyed or worn out, and have yet to be replaced.

In many ways, the personnel system is even in worse shape. American troops are exhausted and run-down by long tours and low dwell times back at home. Though the military has trumpeted its positive retention figures, the fact is that much of that is motivated by unsustainably high retention bonuses as well as the threat of extended deployments under the “stop-loss” program and recall under the “individual ready reserve” provisions of military enlistments. A retention crisis is looming unless we reduce our deployments. The challenges with recruitment – the lowering of intellectual, physical, and behavioral standards as well as the problems of recruitment for the Guards and Reserves have also been amply documented.

The United States currently lacks the capacity to respond to any significant additional contingency that would require any commitment of ground forces. Our defense obligations and alliance commitments are currently being sustained largely by a bluff. The risk of our current allocation of resources is staggering. America’s commitment to Iraq represents an abdication of our role as the leading nation of the international security system.

Many defense planners have implicitly accepted the assumption that Iraq is the shape of things to come, and that we need to reorient our forces around counter-insurgency and nation building. At the beginning of his first term, President Bush had explicitly rejected this role for the United States. The events of 9/11, though shocking and significant, ought not have settled this debate without additional consideration. Indeed, the deep unpopularity of the Iraq War should be convincing evidence that the American public does not support the notion of a grand strategy based on fighting similar conflicts frequently in the future.

In short, Iraq distorted American defense policy in an extreme manner. It continues to weaken our military capacity. It puts at risk existing American commitments. And it is promoting a concept of defense transformation that has not been fully vetted or defended.

The Legacy of the “Base Force”

As the Cold War began to wind down with the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, there was broad consensus in the United States on the desirability of reducing defense spending. The administration of George H.W. Bush was concerned about drawing down American forces too rapidly, and in particular was concerned about diminishing American capacity to the point where it could not easily be rebuilt if the geopolitical situation rapidly worsened.

The result was the “Base Force,” an intermediate step towards a transition to a post-Cold War military that essentially represented an across-the-board reduction in military capabilities without any significant efforts to rebalance the force for a “new world order.” Amazingly enough, the “Base Force” is still the force we have today. For the past 18 years we have lived with a military whose structure was determined not by strategic assessment, but simply as a hedge against a revival of the Cold War Soviet threat.

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Force Planning Confusion: From 2 “MTWs” to the “Michelin Man”

The Clinton Administration largely abdicated its responsibility to reshape the military during the 1990s. A 1993 “Bottom Up Review” did little to change the characteristics of the “Base Force.” Faced with bureaucratic inertia and pathological civilian-military relations, the Clinton Administration only exercised limited control over the military during the first term, and then left the Department of Defense in the hands of a caretaker Secretary of Defense during the second term.

During the 1990s, strategic assessment went from being a driver of defense planning to being a tool to rationalize the existing allocation of resources. The Clinton Administration ultimately settled on justifying the defense budget under the rubric of preparing for two simultaneous or near-simultaneous “Major Theater Wars” (later “Major Regional Contingencies”). The problem with the two MTW/MRC approach was that it actually over-inflated defense requirements and failed to mesh with the Clinton Administration’s national security strategy.

As a practical matter, the United States never really had the capacity to fight and win conflicts in Iraq and Korea simultaneously as envisaged by the two MTW/MRC concept. Even the basic public presentations required heroic assumptions about the speed of deployments and combat operations. The underlying war plans were even more in disarray. As a result, the Clinton Administration faced recurrent accusations of underfunding the military and failing to support its own strategy. For the

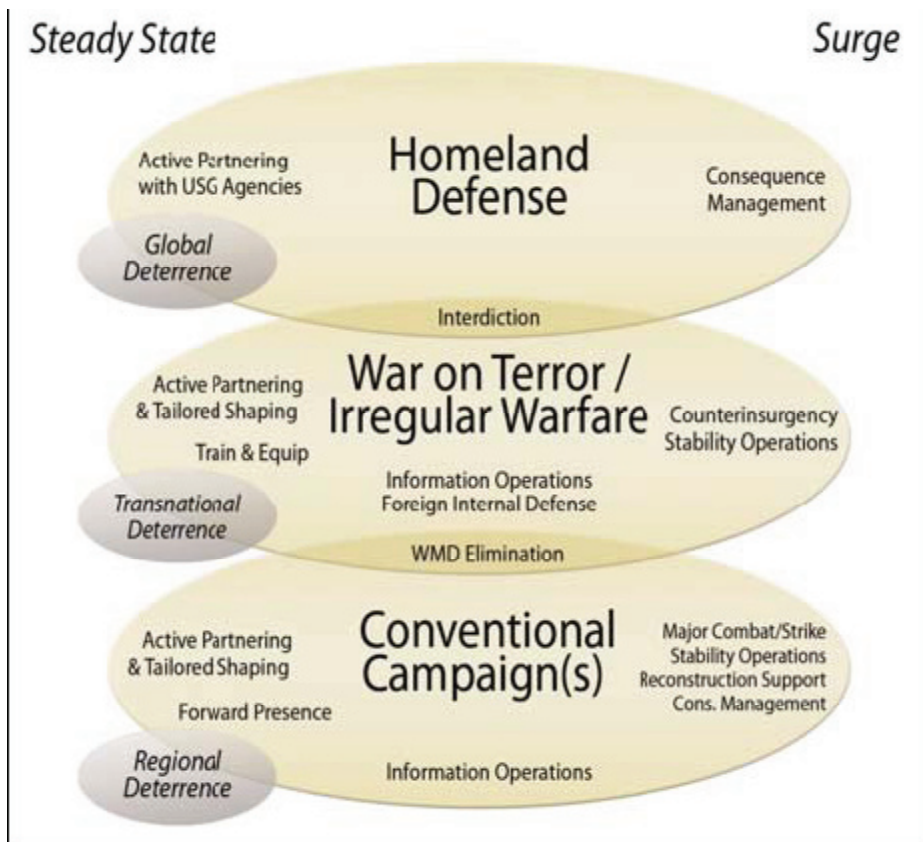
uniformed military, however, this debate was a boon. Though defense expenditures were largely flat in the 1990s, the two MTW/MRC concept helped stave off further reductions in total defense spending, while also justifying the existing allocation of resources and continued investment in pet projects.

More significantly, using the two MTW/MRC concept to justify defense spending, failed to match the priorities of the Clinton years. Following the genocide in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration became much more willing to intervene in humanitarian disasters. This “liberal interventionism” in “complex emergencies” required different assets from traditional conventional operations. They required in particular a greater emphasis on ground forces, with a particular focus on certain specializations such as intelligence, civil affairs, and special operations. Yet, instead of confronting this emerging gap between the need to support a doctrine of liberal interventionism and existing force structure, the Clinton Administration signed off the flawed concept that these interventions could be classes as “lesser included contingencies” beneath the two MTW/MRC framework. The result was a predictable stress in “low-density, high demand” (LDHD) capabilities such as civil affairs and military police.

In retrospect, the Clinton Administration’s force planning construct was well conceived in comparison to what has happened under the Bush Administration. During Bush’s first term, the 2 MRC model was replaced by the concept of “1-4-2-1,” which was described in the 2004 National Defense Strategy as follows:

The 2004 NDS directs a force sized to defend the homeland, deter forward in and from four regions, and conduct two, overlapping “swift defeat” campaigns. Even when committed to a limited number of lesser contingencies, the force must be able to “win decisively” in one of the two campaigns.

The 1-4-2-1 strategy further envisaged accomplishing the swift defeat of regional threats within a 70-day window under the 10-30-30 concept: “The 10-30-30 construct said that the U.S. military should plan military actions to seize the initiative within 10 days of the start of an offensive, achieve limited military objectives within 30 days, and be prepared within another 30 days to shift military resources to another area of the world.” With 1-4-2-1 and 10-30-30 the Bush Administration replaced Clintonian inertia with outright fantasy as a basis for strategic planning.



Nonetheless, the 2 MRC and 1-4-2-1 concepts at least provide a framework for rational assessment. They were set at largely unachievable levels, but one could engage in a rational process for linking strategic and procurement decisions to the achievement of these goals. In the most recent National Military Strategy issued in 2006, by contrast, there are no clear targets or goals. Instead of a force planning construct, we have a vague definition of a set of possible missions, which may or may not be implemented simultaneously. Worse, the new strategy conceives of each mission being either in a “steady state” or “surge” mode, although these terms are also unclear. Is Iraq a surge mission or a steady state mission? Is defending the homeland during the “War on Terror” steady state or surge? This “Michelin Man” force planning construct is wholly incoherent and provides no basis for rational defense planning. We can, and must, do better.

Defense Transformation and Modernization

To the extent that there was a movement to reshape the force, it came from the pressures to pursue a “revolution in military affairs” which was seen as building on the successes of high-tech elements of the force during the First Iraq War. The attempt to replace mass with information, and in particular rely upon full-spectrum sensor integration, precision weapons, and dispersal, was a good theoretic counter to traditional adversaries such as Saddam Hussein’s World War II-style forces, but raised concerns about their utility in complex emergencies and urban operations. Much of the defense policy debate in the late 1990s centered on the attempt to square the circle and justify a high-tech force even

as strategic assessments continually raised the specter of irregular combat.

Ultimately, the “revolution in military affairs” debate fizzled out, and defense planners began talking about the tradeoffs between modernization and transformation. The former referring to generational replacement of existing capability, while the latter referred to the development of new capabilities oriented around preparing for a potential conflict with a peer or near-peer competitor in 2020 or beyond. The military services hoped to prioritize modernization as a way to deflect questions about the utility of their favored pet projects. But in 2000, then-Governor Bush argued for prioritizing

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transformation, and after the election he appointed Donald Rumsfeld to oversee this effort to remake the U.S. military. It was this effort, more than Rumsfeld’s legendarily abrasive personality that first created tensions between the Secretary and the uniformed services. Regardless, the attacks of 9/11 rendered the debate moot, as a significant infusion of resources temporarily pushed the necessity for choice down the road.

The Travesty of Capabilities-Based Planning

Another profound problem with current U.S. defense policy is the adoption of “capabilities-based” planning as the foundation for resource allocations. The argument for this approach is deceptively appealing. The world is increasingly complex and the future hard to predict. As a result, proponents of “capabilities-

based” planning argue that it is inappropriate to plan for specific contingencies and instead it is better to develop a range of capabilities that balance our ability to respond regardless of the nature of emergent threats.

In practice, however, budgetary allocation decisions are about prioritization. And you cannot prioritize capabilities without a sense of scenarios. Worse, capabilities are meaningless without concrete contingencies to test them. Airlift is constrained by flight paths, refueling options, and runways. Air strike options are limited by access to forward bases, the state of enemy air forces and air defenses, and the nature of the target set. Counter-insurgency capabilities require culturally-specific training as well as units adapted to particular terrain and weather. Capabilities simply do not exist absent contingencies, and attempts to define them in the abstract lead to waste and improperly designed forces and systems.

Indeed, ultimately, capabilities are refined through the requirements process which takes into account the needs of individual combatant commanders as well as other key actors. But instead of being a rational top-down process, the capabilities-contingencies-risk-strategy nexus is ad hoc and largely opaque.

The Path Forward

In order to repair American defense policy, we need to first specify a plausible and coherent concept of how the American military will be utilized over the coming decades. A good first step is specifying some clearly defined alternatives in order to bound the debate. As we struggle with defining American national security strategy in the post-Bush era, we will gradually be able to refine scenarios, clarify tradeoffs, and develop a workable strategic framework that can ultimately guide decisions on force sizing, weapons systems, and the training of American forces.

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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