

DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES: Empowering American Alliances

Dr. Bernard I. Finel

December 17, 2008

In Brief

- The world remains a large and taxing battlespace, in which the United States cannot be expected to be the dominant military power everywhere and at all times.
- The advancement of strong bilateral relationships with vital regional players built around consensus and concessions is the only credible defense policy given the United States' global interests.
- Implementation of the "anchor state" policy, will mean a need to move beyond "capabilities-based" planning and involves major alterations in active duty, emergency response, reserve and draft forces.

The United States spends more than the rest of the world combined on the military. Yet one of the few issues on which serious analysts from across the political spectrum agree is that the U.S. military is underfunded to accomplish its missions. This suggests either that the U.S. military is tremendously inefficient with its use of resources or that it has been assigned missions that are inherently unachievable.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld believed that the U.S. military was essentially inefficient. His approach to defense transformation suggested that by reallocating resources and re-engineering internal processes the United States could have a more lethal and agile military at the same cost. Even before the war in Iraq, there was reason to doubt Rumsfeld's vision. It is now clear that there is no free lunch in defense transformation. You cannot get more with less.

The U.S. military is currently expected to be able to project power nearly instantaneously virtually everywhere around the globe. This is a uniquely challenging requirement. No other country in the history of the world has expected its armed forces to be able to project power, even in opposition to other great powers, at every spot on the globe. The United States military is expected to simultaneously be able to

Dr. Bernard I. Finel is a Senior Fellow at the American Security Project (ASP) where he directs research on counter-terrorism and defense policy. He is the lead author of ASP's annual report, "Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the Struggle against Violent Jihadism."

act with impunity in Chinese coast waters, intercept Iranian or North Korean ballistic missiles, safeguard oil traffic out of the Persian Gulf, defend America's borders, respond quickly to humanitarian crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, topple rogue regimes anywhere in the world, all while maintaining a sufficiently large residual force to reassure allies and dissuade potential adversaries from building up their own power-project capabilities.

This definition of necessary American capabilities ignores a basic law of power-projection, namely that distance exercises an exponentially increasing tax on capacity. The cost for the United States to develop and maintain the capacity to operate in Chinese coastal waters is orders of magnitude larger than the cost to the Chinese to develop and maintain the ability to deny American military forces access. The world may be getting smaller, but it remains a large and taxing battlespace. The United States simply cannot shoulder the burden of being the dominant military power everywhere and at all times. We lack the will and ultimately the resources to do so. Establishing this goal as a key aspiration for defense planners is a guarantee that a mismatch between ends and means will be the end result.

Given the limits of American power and the constraints of distance, the only credible defense policy for the United States to safeguard its global interests is to work closely with selected regional allies. Coalitions should not just be seen as a matter of convenience and cobbled together "of the willing," but rather virtually all American uses of military power beyond its borders should be conceived of and planned as part of a coalition of necessary actors.

This is not a revolutionary concept. During the Cold War, the United States did not plan to defend Europe unilaterally or with whichever allies it could happen to coerce or bribe to participate. The defense of Europe was conceived of as a collective enterprise with set allies, each allocated pre-war responsibilities in terms of force structure and preparations, with joint planning, and with extensive joint exercises to ensure that all the allies were prepared. This was not a matter of convenience or even of international legitimacy. It was a matter of pragmatism. Affordable power projection requires a logistical infrastructure, secure operating bases, and some pre-positioning of forces in order to mitigate the "distance tax" on power.

There are costs to this sort of approach to power projection. First, it means that the United States cannot have a unilateral foreign and defense policy. We must rely upon others and they must be able to rely on us. Our foreign and defense policy goals will have to be built on consensus and will require bargaining and concessions. We must banish, once and for all, the concept that others are either "with us or against us." Second, it means that due to a lack of potential allies, there are some military missions that we will have to abandon. Third, we will have to accept the possibility that in some cases we will be forced to fight conflicts that stress our military capacity and that will require large scale mobilizations of resources.

Abandoning Unilateralism

An effective and sustainable defense strategy will require a careful reassessment of American alliance commitment, both with an eye to liquidating some current relationships that lack strategic utility and

developing new relationship with states that can help with the accomplishment of American military goals over the coming decades.

The goal of this reassessment should be the development of strong bilateral relationship with regional “anchor” states lodged within a broader framework of shared norms. This broader framework, a loose coalition of peace-loving democracies, must form the core of the world order we hope to establish and sustain. Within this framework of shared norms, there will unquestionably be a set of core values and principles that will need to be defended, by military force if necessary. These values and principles will need to emerge through discussions and negotiations, but will likely include most of the following:

- A commitment to the norm of non-aggression and to punish those who would seek to profit by waging unlawful wars.
- The prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons to states lacking internal restraints upon their use.
- The obligation to respond to acts of genocide and other severe humanitarian crisis.
- The necessity of seeking out and destroying transnational terrorist groups capable of launching mass-casualty attacks.

These principles will have different applications in different regions of the world. Unfortunately, because of regional political dynamics, there will be some norms and principles and that can only be recognized rather than acted upon. Nonetheless, American foreign policy must seek to identify those actors around the world with both the capacity and willingness to work with the United States in the promotion of these norms and principles. Importantly, we must identify not just those that might like to help, but those without whose help nothing meaningful can be accomplished.

Those states, members of a coalition of peace-loving democracies, with the capacity and willingness to act must be acknowledged as peers not as conveniences. We must defer to their wishes as much as we ask them to defer to ours. Only on this basis can we develop solid, long-term relationships that will genuinely add to our ability to maintain global order.

Though the list of peer-allies will develop as a function of diplomatic interactions, it seems likely that the following states will form the core of this category of actors:

- The European Union and Turkey
- Japan

American foreign policy must seek to identify those actors around the world with both the capacity and willingness to work with the United States... not just those that might like to help, but those without whose help nothing meaningful can be accomplished.

- India
- Brazil and/or Argentina
- South Africa
- Indonesia

For each of these countries, the United States ought to develop solid, bi-lateral contingency plans for operations within their areas of interest. These plans ought to be developed with the same level of detail as those with NATO during the Cold War. They ought to define commitments and responsibilities, basing rights, and support obligations.

As a practical matter, the United States will need to abandon the concept of “capabilities-based” planning in order to enter into serious discussions about likely regional contingencies with potential peer-allies. But the result will be to gain for the United States reliable access to the significant military capacity of regional allies much closer to the likely conflict zones.

Foregoing Some Military Missions

The most difficult part of this sort of approach to defense policy is that we will have to accept significant limitations of American commitments if we cannot find regional allies to support our initiatives. In the end, though, this acceptance is simply a forward-looking acceptance of limits that will exist regardless of whether we choose to acknowledge them publicly.

Taiwan is a prime example. Over the next twenty years, it will become increasingly impossible for the United States to defend Taiwan unilaterally. Chinese submarines and anti-shipping missiles already make any effort to interpose a force into the Taiwan Strait a tremendously dangerous endeavor. Increasingly, the growth of Chinese military capacity will make it difficult to establish a defense umbrella even from out to sea over Taiwan. Though one can argue that it is valuable to maintain strategic ambiguity in order to deter Chinese aggression, the value of ambiguity declines as it is exposed as a naked bluff. If we truly wish to provide a military commitment to Taiwan in the future, we can only reasonably accomplish this goal in conjunction with active cooperation and support from Japan and South Korea. If we cannot gain this support, we will have to acknowledge that our ability to deter China will need to rest more on diplomatic and economic pressure and less on ambiguous military threats. This may or may not be more effective, but what it will do unquestionably is ease the demand on American forces. The necessity of keeping a sufficient force in the western Pacific to respond instantaneously and unilaterally to potential Chinese moves against Taiwan places tremendous demand on American force structure, particularly for the Navy.

Planning for Mobilization

It is not cost-effective for the United States to maintain all the forces necessary for any contingency around the world. Instead, the United States must pare down its active duty forces to an emergency

response force; put in place mechanisms for a smooth and orderly mobilization of reserves; and further develop the draft system for additional servicemen and women to meet contingencies. This will require three major initiatives.

First, the United States must determine what a minimal, base-force looks like. This is a force that will be expected to shoulder all military requirements that will need to be addressed within 90 days. Realistically, this force will be perhaps half the size of the current U.S. military.

Second, the United States will need to outline a mobilizable reserve capable of meeting any requirements within one-year. This will include the remainder of today's military, augmented with special capacities to deal with various special situations – such as, civil-affairs components for nation-building, constabulary forces for peacekeeping operations, specially-trained troops for counter-WMD operations, and so on.

Third, the United States must establish a credible scheme for mobilizing a large military capable of taking on multi-year missions or conflicts. This will include plans for building-out needed weapons platforms, recruiting additional servicemen and women, and funding operations over multi-year time frames.

Conclusion

Clearly this sort of reform of the U.S. military will be a lengthy process, requiring adjustments in force structure, training, equipment, and basing in support of a systematic reassessment of American foreign relations and diplomatic initiatives. But in the end, this proposal is a step toward rebalancing military means and political ends in American national security policy.

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.



American Security Project

www.americansecurityproject.org