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Chapter 8: The U.S. Military: Balancing Old and New Challenges

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The physical security of the United States is a prerequisite for the achievement of all other national goals, and maintaining it is the primary national interest. This does not make it the sole objective of national policy, but it is the most important one around which all others revolve. Achieving physical security will continue to require a high level of national resources of all types. The most critical task is intellectual: understanding the nature of the threats and developing strategies to deal with them efficiently and with the least cost to other national priorities. Implementation will continue to be difficult, but the loss of lives and treasure will be less if the problems are better understood at the outset. A primary consideration must be the need to uphold the fundamental values of the United States – which need not clash with the requirements of national security.

The Changing Threat Environment

Two threats exist to the physical U.S. national security: state threats and non-state actor threats. Traditional state challenges remain as a major concern to U.S. security. While there is not yet a peer competitor for the U.S. military, it is only a matter of time before one emerges. The likeliest candidate is China, given its resources and willingness to develop its military capabilities. It is easy to imagine scenarios that would put the U.S. and China at odds militarily, but it is important not to assume the inevitability of hostility and become victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Apart from major powers, smaller regional powers such as Iran and relatively minor states such as North Korea and Venezuela can also cause enormous problems for U.S. security through various asymmetric means. Even our putative allies, such as Pakistan, can cause problems, especially when nuclear issues are involved. In addition to the more traditional state centric military challenges, this new era will continue to see threats from subnational groups that define themselves politically and/or are bound by religious, tribal, or ethnic identities and use terrorist

attacks as their weapon of choice. Such groups attacked the U.S. abroad many times prior to September 11. Given the evolution of weapons technology, they will become a more deadly problem as time goes on – especially if they have the support of a state. States no longer have a monopoly on the means of mass violence, and the merging of criminal enterprises with asymmetric adversaries is a growing problem for the United States.

A number of situations could cause the military to operate at home because of a serious civil emergency, with adjustments made to *posse comitatus* restrictions on the use of military forces domestically. One possibility is restoring order after a serious natural or man-made catastrophe. Another is the use of the military to enforce a quarantine in the wake of a biological attack on a U.S. city or a natural epidemic. These scenarios have serious implications for civil liberties and the links between civil society and its military.

Military Priorities

Because resources and the ability to imagine future threats are both limited, the military cannot be well prepared for every possibility. Choices must be based on the seriousness and likelihood of a particular threat and the level of risk leaders are willing to assume. The end of the Cold War saw a transition from a low probability of a catastrophic (perhaps society-ending) nuclear attack by the Soviet Union to a high probability of more limited attacks by non-state actors, groups, and even individuals. Given the evolution of weapons technology and the diffusion of information on how to construct explosive devices, even a “limited” attack could be catastrophic for anyone nearby and would have untold political and psychological consequences.

Unfortunately, the state-on-state threat did not evaporate with the onset of the new challenges mentioned above. New threats are layered atop the old, rather than replacing them, affecting both strategy and resource allocations. Even if the previous threats seem unlikely at a particular time, the military must remain prepared to deal with them. As many have pointed out, our current emphasis on population-centric counter insurgency may be appropriate for Iraq and Afghanistan. Reasonable and knowledgeable people continue to differ on the priority that should be given to this capability and the extent to which it should shape the military as a whole. But the ability to strike quickly and decisively in fast moving “kinetic” conventional operations must remain a core competency of all branches of the military, and can be a crucial supplement to counter insurgency operations..

Ideally, military priorities and policies should flow seamlessly from the objective threats to U.S. security. Practically, there are other considerations that affect military related actions. These include a lack of complete knowledge, differing perspectives on the threat, economic considerations, political pressures, service cultures, the attachment of individuals to certain weapons platforms, and the difficulty of dealing with controversial issues relating to the nature of the threats and the means to deal with them. Still, it is wise to approximate the ideal as much as possible.

Overall Defense Challenges

The U.S. military faces a future of ambiguous and deadly threats at a time of severe economic crisis. Even if resources were less constrained, the military could not develop every capability it might wish to, so choices need to be made. They need to be made wisely, with as much awareness as possible of the objective threats to U.S. security.

Sun Tzu wisely said that tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. Strategy is the means by which resources are related to national security goals, leaving a cushion in case the assumptions or analyses prove to be incorrect. This requires that there be more specific objectives than “enhance national security.” With an understanding of desired end states, strategic planning can replace personal preferences and other nonstrategic bases for resource allocation and prioritization.

Sound analysis will be required to make decisions about procurement (types and amounts of weapons and equipment), personnel issues (such as the role of women in close combat and the service of open gays and lesbians in the military), training vs. education, organizational forms and structures, and force employment.

Service specific challenges

In addition to the overall issues, the separate services confront their own unique challenges.

The Army is seriously stretched by simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not large enough to handle the tasks required of it and had to resort for a time to the temporary expedients such as lowering recruiting standards and implementing “stop loss” programs to force soldiers to remain on active duty beyond their expected discharge date. There still are extended and multiple deployments, and the Army uses its reserve components – including the National Guard – at a rate and in ways it never envisioned previously. The Army is not yet broken, which is a credit to soldiers and leaders alike, but it is seriously overtaxed. The Army is also divided on the importance of counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorist operations, and the more conventional kinetic operations. Optimizing the force for counterinsurgency, for example, could pose a problem if it became necessary to perform other types of operations.

The Air Force faces a major change in its pilot-dominated service culture as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) grow in importance. This is compounded by the capping of the Air Force’s F-22 fighter program at 187 by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who felt the plane was too expensive and not sufficiently relevant to near term threats. While useful in war with an advanced state, the utility of the F-22 in the sort of unconventional wars the U.S. is waging in Iraq and Afghanistan is limited – especially compared to the UAVs. The F-35, formerly known as the “joint strike fighter,” is now in development and will perform many of the missions of the F-22, but at a lower cost and capability. Even so, the F-35 will be extraordinarily expensive and cannot be procured in desired numbers. This poses a particular problem if one were to be shot

down. The Air Force sees space as their special area of future operations, and needs to balance technological investments as it makes the migration from an air force to an air and space force. The Air Force maintains a special operations capability clearly relevant to current conflicts; in addition, the Air Force has increasing responsibility for offensive and defensive cyber warfare. It may be that the most important day-to-day contribution of the Air Force in current operations is its unglamorous but essential transport mission.

The Navy can no longer focus on its open ocean “blue water” operations, as it did to counter the Soviet Navy. This capability must remain, but there is an increasing need to project power from littoral “green water” areas. Shipbuilding is a very expensive long-term operation, requiring educated estimates of future requirements. A related issue is the need to sustain the civilian shipbuilding capability, a resource that will atrophy if not used. The increasing role of Aegis guided missile ships in ballistic missile defense carries with it the likelihood that many very capable ships will be tethered to a geographic region to provide missile defense and thus be unavailable for mobile battle force operations. Although modern naval vessels are very capable, their numbers are shrinking while the size of the globe is not. The Navy will eventually receive an aircraft carrier variant of the F-35 to replace its F/A-18 series of fighter/attack aircraft, which are still very capable but growing long in the tooth.

The Marine Corps is also stretched by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, although not nearly so much as the Army, and just as in Vietnam, Marines often find themselves performing land missions indistinguishable from those of the Army. It is vital that the Marine Corps retain its amphibious capability and mindset. Central to this capability is the right mix of ships, landing craft, aircraft, and command and control to enable them to project power ashore quickly and effectively. The controversial tilt rotor V-22 “Osprey” aircraft, now being delivered in large numbers, will enable Marine forces to transition rapidly ashore at locations an enemy cannot predict. The Marine Corps short takeoff/vertical landing variant of the F-35 fighter faces daunting technological challenges and possible cost overruns and delays. The need for greater sealift capability remains a perennial Marine Corps concern. A longer term problem will be repositioning major forces to Guam as they are drawn down in Okinawa in response to political pressure in Japan.

The Coast Guard is miniscule in comparison with the other services, but it has a vital role in close-in defense of the homeland and migration control. Coast Guard members can also be permitted to act in a law enforcement role prohibited to the other services by *posse comitatus* restrictions. Its location in the Department of Homeland Security is appropriate in view of its military importance. It may also be the most appropriate service for navy-to-navy contacts with smaller allies, such as those in South America, whose missions are much closer to those of the Coast Guard than to those of the U.S. Navy.

Implications for Civil-Military Relations

Policy choices will impact both civil-military relations and national security directly. With the demise of compulsory service in 1973 (although a male-only standby system remains), fewer Americans have personal experience with the military. Even an increase in the Army's size would not have a significant impact on this, compared to the large draft call-ups of the 1950s and 1960s. This is reflected in the lower percentage of veterans in all walks of life.

If compulsory service was needed for a greatly expanded military or to fill needs unmet by volunteers, it would likely be in the context of a program of national service for both men and women, and with an option for civilian service instead of military service. Some of the separation between the military and society is reduced by the use of reserve forces for front-line operations. This is a benefit of having the forces called up, although it was done for reasons of military necessity.

Decisions made about women in close combat and the service of openly homosexual members will affect civil-military relations in ways that cannot yet be determined. Surveys show growing acceptance of change in these areas, especially among civilian respondents, but there exists significant opposition in the services – especially among more senior members.

Military personnel decisions should continue to support the goal of making the military more reflective of American society. Perhaps the greatest difference, and one most difficult to overcome, is the relative lack of personal participation in the military by the most privileged members of U.S. society. Racial diversity has long been a priority, and much progress has been made, especially in the enlisted ranks.

A critical issue that arises periodically is the public role of high ranking serving military officers in public discussions of military policies. Officers need to be able to give their best professional judgment when testifying before Congress, but public advocacy is more problematic.

The possibility that military forces may have to operate within the U.S. presents many problems. Among them are when restrictions of *posse comitatus* can be waived, the lack of training of most military forces for police work, the great difficulty in performing some tasks (like enforcing a quarantine), the possibility that the military may injure citizens in the course of their work, and a diminution of the respect and affection of the American people for their military.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's dictum that "war is the continuation of policy by other means" reminds us of the primacy of policy in military planning and operations. The political dimension in such matters is both unavoidable and necessary. It provides a perspective of the international strategic landscape, outlines the specific goals of our national security strategy, and judges the amount of sacrifice we are prepared to make in their pursuit.

The second Bush administration posited a preemptive strike doctrine based on the extreme danger of weapons of mass destruction and the difficulty of determining their existence and the intentions of adversaries who may have access to them. This doctrine led directly to the invasion of Iraq. The invasion of Afghanistan was based on the support of the government there for the activities of al Qaeda, or at least its tolerance of them. Unfortunately, Iraq proved to be both a strategic distraction and a years-long military quagmire, permitting a reemergence of the threat in Afghanistan while U.S. attention was directed elsewhere. President Obama's decision to augment U.S. forces in Afghanistan, request more forces from NATO allies, and focus more on protection of the Afghani population may turn that conflict around, but how much light there may be at the end of both tunnels is yet to be determined.

Nation-building may be an important objective of U.S. policy in some areas, but it is a very long term commitment that must not tie down our already overstretched military forces indefinitely. Future plans will need to include non-military components of the U.S. government whose expertise in relief and reconstruction can relieve an overstretched military of some of that burden.

No one can predict precisely what the future holds in the way of security threats, but the direction is clear. State-on-state conflict is unlikely for the time being, although we need to be prepared to deal with it if necessary. The subnational, often terrorist, threats are much more likely and we need to be ready to meet them. This will require imagination to anticipate them and good judgment to react appropriately. The force must operate as effectively as possible in the current counterinsurgency environment, but without serious degradation of basic war fighting skills. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has argued, we need to strive for a “balanced force” capable of operating against current and future threats. Given the possibility of strategic surprise or the emergence of unanticipated threats, severe force reductions and too much specialization in the name of efficiency are shortsighted.