

# *The* NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

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## **U.S. National Security Challenges**

By John Allen Williams

Short of a global war with a peer competitor, it is hard to imagine a more challenging and complex national security environment than the one now faced by the United States. The war in Iraq is hardly finished, yet our major combat forces are currently scheduled to leave there by the end of this year in accordance with our status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government. Many security problems will remain for that government to handle, and they will need to do so without the safety net of U.S. forces in the country. It is not certain that they are up to the task. At the same time the war in Afghanistan winds on with no end in sight. It is not even clear what the endgame might be or what the constellation of political forces will be when the combat phase is eventually over.

To make matters worse, compounding the strategic problems posed by the “away games” in Iraq and Afghanistan is the very real possibility of catastrophes at home. Like Britain in particular, the United States confronts a problem at home of radicalized residents, some illegal but many others legal residents or even citizens. Some of them have links with groups abroad that make them easier to discover and track, but there is an increasing problem of homegrown radicals acting on their own. This was seen in several cases, perhaps the most alarming of which was the car bomb in downtown New York City that fizzled but did not explode. Eventually one will, and there are even more serious threats on the horizon with respect to “dirty bombs” that would spread radioactivity along with the blast.

Three aspects of U.S. security problems deserve close attention. They are conceptual, geopolitical, and fiscal.

### **Conceptual Issues**

It may not be too harsh to suggest that the United States is better at tactics than strategy. Reports from the field in Afghanistan suggest that U.S. and allied forces are making headway against heavily entrenched Taliban fighters. Statements of progress from the highest military leaders there are echoed by highly credible reports from the field, many of them from soldiers and Marines we know personally and trust. The United States military is extraordinarily good at what it does, and has perhaps never had more capable or dedicated service members.

At the same time, it is less clear what the overall strategy is or whether it is likely to be successful. Sun Tzu supposedly said, "Strategy without tactics is the slowest road to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." Debates about the role of counterinsurgency ("COIN") as opposed to counterterrorist operations are common, but generally off the mark. There needs to be some combination of the two that at the same time tries to win the hearts and minds of the population and ruthlessly goes after enemy combat elements. This is well understood, but one would have more confidence of eventual success if the members of the Afghan government were as committed to the fight as they seem to be to personal enrichment. The issue is further complicated by the ambiguous role of Pakistan, which is hedging its bets for a post-U.S. Afghanistan that will likely have some element of Taliban participation in the government.

At a more fundamental level, the U.S. needs to balance the forces needed to fight the wars with which we are now confronted with those needed for other highly plausible scenarios, such as the rise of a peer competitor. Counterinsurgency forces will not be helpful if we are trying to deter a resurgent China from military adventures. Traditional "conventional" forces involve very expensive equipment and highly trained personnel. Should that capability erode, it will be very difficult to reconstitute it. Meanwhile, the U.S. armed forces have become split functionally, with the Army and Marine Corps focusing on the present wars and the Air Force and Navy focusing on deterring and, if necessary, fighting a large-scale war with a near-peer competitor. Future intra-service disputes over a division of resources in a drastically constrained fiscal environment should be expected.

There are also many other challenges confronting the United States that are not military, but most definitely affect national security broadly defined. These include the integration of a large and diverse population and arriving at an immigration policy that is fair to individuals, consistent with the national interest, and enforceable. Much is made about the importance of military personnel policies that would, for example, put women into ground combat units under the same conditions as men and permit the service of openly homosexual service members. These policies, important as they are to the individuals involved, pale in importance compared to the considerations noted above.

### **Geopolitical Issues**

Arguably the greatest geopolitical challenge faced by the United States is in the Middle East, now in the throes of apparently popular revolutions which may or may not be hijacked by undemocratic elements – as has happened so often in the past (1789 France, 1917 Russia, and 1979 Iran). It is not possible to predict how these revolutions will evolve or how far the revolutionary spirit may carry, but that something fundamentally important has happened in Tunisia and Egypt – with furthers sparks flickering in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Iran – is beyond doubt.

At the same time, United States faces a growing challenge from China, the only country that could pose a serious threat to the U.S. in the mid term. Chinese leaders are increasingly assertive, and Chinese investments in military hardware appear to be bearing fruit. Whether these factors would make the Chinese more likely to, for example, decide to settle the Taiwan

question once and for all is not clear, but it is a real possibility. It is possible that increased Chinese pressure in that region will backfire, however. Japan in particular may be motivated to resume its role as the traditional balancer of China, a position more recently played by the United States. The greatest threat in that region relates to a miscalculation on the part of China or Taiwan that would result in a conflict across the Straits. Were the United States to become directly involved, no one can predict how great the escalation would be.

The possibility that the regime in North Korea would attack South Korea is very real, as is the possibility of an international consortium deciding to press as hard as necessary to get the North Koreans to denuclearize. Given the importance of the nuclear capability to the regime in North Korea, and perhaps to its survival, it is hard to imagine North Korean denuclearization without threats moving to the brink of war or beyond. There are recent reports of U.S.-South Korean military exercises dealing not with a North Korean attack on the South but with managing the results of a collapse of the North Korean regime, so there is no lack of plausible scenarios that would involve a greatly enhanced U.S. military posture on the Korean Peninsula.

One could make the case that the greatest geopolitical danger to the United States is closer to home. Certain trends in Central and South America are very worrisome, including the danger Venezuela poses to its neighbors and to the United States, the rise of narco terrorism, the spread of criminal gangs into the United States, and the possible destabilization of Mexico itself – with unforeseeable negative consequences for both the United States and Mexico.

### **Fiscal Issues**

Conceptual clarity is less critical – even in the face of significant geopolitical problems – if the resources to be devoted to defense are unlimited. In the real world, however, it is necessary to make choices, and decision makers need to understand clearly the opportunity costs for any particular decision. That is, what capabilities are not acquired because one has devoted scarce resources to something else? The criticism is sometimes made of the Reagan Administration that defense improvements were more the result of a massive increase in defense spending rather than a more targeted notion of what should be acquired and for what purpose. Without associating oneself completely with this position, there is at least a grain of truth in it. Quantity can at some point make up for a want of quality.

Unfortunately, the American economy is not sufficiently robust to generate sufficient resources to apply to defense that one can be unconcerned with priorities. Coupled to this is the fact that our traditional allies are even more strained economically than we are. As a result, defense is going to be "underfunded" for the foreseeable future. In this stringent fiscal environment, it is vitally important that we understand the priority that should be placed on particular defense expenditures. To do this, we will need a clearer notion of what we are trying to accomplish and how we are going to do it.

It is a commonplace that if you do not know where you're going, any road will take you there. This highlights the importance of strategy: the analysis of means and ends and the most effective and efficient ways in which national goals can be attained. In the security sector, the very survival of the state is at stake.

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