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A Balanced Strategy

Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age

By Robert M. Gates

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Summary: The Pentagon has to do more than modernize its conventional forces; it must also focus on today's unconventional conflicts -- and tomorrow's.

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The defining principle of the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy is balance. The United States cannot expect to eliminate national security risks through higher defense budgets, to do everything and buy everything. The Department of Defense must set priorities and consider inescapable tradeoffs and opportunity costs.

The strategy strives for balance in three areas: between trying to prevail in current conflicts and preparing for other contingencies, between institutionalizing capabilities such as counterinsurgency and foreign military assistance and maintaining the United States' existing conventional and strategic technological edge against other military forces, and between retaining those cultural traits that have made the U.S. armed forces successful and shedding those that hamper their ability to do what needs to be done.

UNCONVENTIONAL THINKING

The United States' ability to deal with future threats will depend on its performance in current conflicts. To be blunt, to fail -- or to be seen to fail -- in either Iraq or Afghanistan would be a disastrous blow to U.S. credibility, both among friends and allies and among potential adversaries.

In Iraq, the number of U.S. combat units there will decline over time -- as it was going to do no matter who was elected president in November. Still, there will continue to be some kind of U.S. advisory and counterterrorism effort in Iraq for years to come.

In Afghanistan, as President George W. Bush announced last September, U.S. troop levels are rising, with the likelihood of more increases in the year ahead. Given its terrain, poverty, neighborhood, and tragic history, Afghanistan in many ways poses an even more complex and difficult long-term challenge than Iraq -- one that, despite a large international effort, will require a significant U.S. military and economic commitment for some time.

It would be irresponsible not to think about and prepare for the future, and the overwhelming majority of people in the Pentagon, the services, and the defense industry do just that. But we must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future conventional and strategic conflicts that we neglect to provide all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as those the United States is in today.

Support for conventional modernization programs is deeply embedded in the Defense Department's budget, in its bureaucracy, in the defense industry, and in Congress. My fundamental concern is that there is not commensurate institutional support -- including in the Pentagon -- for the capabilities needed to win today's wars and some of their likely successors.

What is dubbed the war on terror is, in grim reality, a prolonged, worldwide irregular campaign -- a struggle between the forces of violent extremism and those of moderation. Direct military force will continue to play a role in the long-term effort against terrorists and other extremists. But over the long term, the United States cannot kill or capture its way to victory. Where possible, what the military calls kinetic operations should be subordinated to measures aimed at promoting better governance, economic programs that spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented, from whom the terrorists recruit. It will take the patient accumulation of quiet successes over a long

time to discredit and defeat extremist movements and their ideologies.

The United States is unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan -- that is, forced regime change followed by nation building under fire -- anytime soon. But that does not mean it may not face similar challenges in a variety of locales. Where possible, U.S. strategy is to employ indirect approaches -- primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces -- to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention. In this kind of effort, the capabilities of the United States' allies and partners may be as important as its own, and building their capacity is arguably as important as, if not more so than, the fighting the United States does itself.

The recent past vividly demonstrated the consequences of failing to address adequately the dangers posed by insurgencies and failing states. Terrorist networks can find sanctuary within the borders of a weak nation and strength within the chaos of social breakdown. A nuclear-armed state could collapse into chaos and criminality. The most likely catastrophic threats to the U.S. homeland -- for example, that of a U.S. city being poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack -- are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states.

The kinds of capabilities needed to deal with these scenarios cannot be considered exotic distractions or temporary diversions. The United States does not have the luxury of opting out because these scenarios do not conform to preferred notions of the American way of war.

Furthermore, even the biggest of wars will require "small wars" capabilities. Ever since General Winfield Scott led his army into Mexico in the 1840s, nearly every major deployment of U.S. forces has led to a longer subsequent military presence to maintain stability. Whether in the midst of or in the aftermath of any major conflict, the requirement for the U.S. military to maintain security, provide aid and comfort, begin reconstruction, and prop up local governments and public services will not go away.

The military and civilian elements of the United States' national security apparatus have responded unevenly and have grown increasingly out of balance. The problem is not will; it is capacity. In many ways, the country's national security capabilities are still coping with the consequences of the 1990s, when, with the complicity of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, key instruments of U.S. power abroad were reduced or allowed to wither on the bureaucratic vine. The State Department froze the hiring of new Foreign Service officers. The U.S. Agency for International Development dropped from a high of having 15,000 permanent staff members during the Vietnam War to having less than 3,000 today. And then there was the U.S. Information Agency, whose directors once included the likes of Edward R. Murrow. It was split into pieces and folded into a corner of the State Department. Since 9/11, and through the efforts first of Secretary of State Colin Powell and now of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the State Department has made a comeback. Foreign Service officers are being hired again, and foreign affairs spending has about doubled since President Bush took office.

Yet even with a better-funded State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, future military commanders will not be able to rid themselves of the tasks of maintaining security and stability. To truly achieve victory as Clausewitz defined it -- to attain a political objective -- the United States needs a military whose ability to kick down the door is matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterward.

Given these realities, the military has made some impressive strides in recent years. Special operations have received steep increases in funding and personnel. The air force has created a new air advisory program and a new career track for unmanned aerial operations. The navy has set up a new expeditionary combat command and brought back its riverine units. New counterinsurgency and army operations manuals, plus a new maritime strategy, have incorporated the lessons of recent years in service doctrine. "Train and equip" programs allow for quicker improvements in the security capacity of partner nations. And various initiatives are under way that will better integrate and coordinate U.S. military efforts with civilian agencies as well as engage the expertise of the private sector, including nongovernmental organizations and academia.

CONVENTIONAL THREATS IN PERSPECTIVE

Even as its military hones and institutionalizes new and unconventional skills, the United States still has to contend with the security challenges posed by the military forces of other countries. The images of Russian tanks rolling into Georgia last August were a reminder that nation-states and their militaries do still matter. Both Russia and China have increased their defense spending and modernization programs to include air defense and fighter capabilities that in some cases approach the United States' own. In addition, there is the potentially toxic mix of rogue nations, terrorist groups, and nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. North Korea has built several bombs, and Iran seeks to join the nuclear club.

What all these potential adversaries -- from terrorist cells to rogue nations to rising powers -- have in common is that they have learned that it is unwise to confront the United States directly on conventional military terms. The United

States cannot take its current dominance for granted and needs to invest in the programs, platforms, and personnel that will ensure that dominance's persistence.

But it is also important to keep some perspective. As much as the U.S. Navy has shrunk since the end of the Cold War, for example, in terms of tonnage, its battle fleet is still larger than the next 13 navies combined -- and 11 of those 13 navies are U.S. allies or partners. Russian tanks and artillery may have crushed Georgia's tiny military. But before the United States begins rearming for another Cold War, it must remember that what is driving Russia is a desire to exorcise past humiliation and dominate its "near abroad" -- not an ideologically driven campaign to dominate the globe. As someone who used to prepare estimates of Soviet military strength for several presidents, I can say that Russia's conventional military, although vastly improved since its nadir in the late 1990s, remains a shadow of its Soviet predecessor. And adverse demographic trends in Russia will likely keep those conventional forces in check.

All told, the 2008 National Defense Strategy concludes that although U.S. predominance in conventional warfare is not unchallenged, it is sustainable for the medium term given current trends. It is true that the United States would be hard-pressed to fight a major conventional ground war elsewhere on short notice, but as I have asked before, where on earth would we do that? U.S. air and sea forces have ample untapped striking power should the need arise to deter or punish aggression -- whether on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, or across the Taiwan Strait. So although current strategy knowingly assumes some additional risk in this area, that risk is a prudent and manageable one.

Other nations may be unwilling to challenge the United States fighter to fighter, ship to ship, tank to tank. But they are developing the disruptive means to blunt the impact of U.S. power, narrow the United States' military options, and deny the U.S. military freedom of movement and action.

In the case of China, Beijing's investments in cyberwarfare, antisatellite warfare, anti-aircraft and antiship weaponry, submarines, and ballistic missiles could threaten the United States' primary means to project its power and help its allies in the Pacific: bases, air and sea assets, and the networks that support them. This will put a premium on the United States' ability to strike from over the horizon and employ missile defenses and will require shifts from short-range to longer-range systems, such as the next-generation bomber.

And even though the days of hair-trigger superpower confrontation are over, as long as other nations possess the bomb and the means to deliver it, the United States must maintain a credible strategic deterrent. Toward this end, the Department of Defense and the air force have taken firm steps to return excellence and accountability to nuclear stewardship. Congress needs to do its part by funding the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program -- for safety, for security, and for a more reliable deterrent.

When thinking about the range of threats, it is common to divide the "high end" from the "low end," the conventional from the irregular, armored divisions on one side, guerrillas toting AK-47s on the other. In reality, as the political scientist Colin Gray has noted, the categories of warfare are blurring and no longer fit into neat, tidy boxes. One can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction -- from the sophisticated to the simple -- being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare.

Russia's relatively crude -- although brutally effective -- conventional offensive in Georgia was augmented with a sophisticated cyberattack and a well-coordinated propaganda campaign. The United States saw a different combination of tools during the invasion of Iraq, when Saddam Hussein dispatched his swarming Fedayeen paramilitary fighters along with the T-72 tanks of the Republican Guard.

Conversely, militias, insurgent groups, other nonstate actors, and developing-world militaries are increasingly acquiring more technology, lethality, and sophistication -- as illustrated by the losses and propaganda victory that Hezbollah was able to inflict on Israel in 2006. Hezbollah's restocked arsenal of rockets and missiles now dwarfs the inventory of many nation-states. Furthermore, Chinese and Russian arms sales are putting advanced capabilities, both offensive and defensive, in the hands of more countries and groups. As the defense scholar Frank Hoffman has noted, these hybrid scenarios combine "the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare," what another defense scholar, Michael Evans, has described as "wars . . . in which Microsoft coexists with machetes and stealth technology is met by suicide bombers."

Just as one can expect a blended high-low mix of adversaries and types of conflict, so, too, should the United States seek a better balance in the portfolio of capabilities it has -- the types of units fielded, the weapons bought, the training done.

When it comes to procurement, for the better part of five decades, the trend has gone toward lower numbers as technology gains have made each system more capable. In recent years, these platforms have grown ever more baroque, have become ever more costly, are taking longer to build, and are being fielded in ever-dwindling quantities. Given that resources are not unlimited, the dynamic of exchanging numbers for capability is perhaps reaching a point of

diminishing returns. A given ship or aircraft, no matter how capable or well equipped, can be in only one place at one time.

For decades, meanwhile, the prevailing view has been that weapons and units designed for the so-called high end could also be used for the low end. And to some extent that has been true: Strategic bombers designed to obliterate cities have been used as close air support for riflemen on horseback. M-1 tanks originally designed to plug the Fulda Gap during a Soviet attack on Western Europe routed Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah and Najaf. Billion-dollar ships are employed to track pirates and deliver humanitarian aid. And the U.S. Army is spinning out parts of the Future Combat Systems program, as they move from the drawing board to reality, so that they can be available and usable for troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nevertheless, given the types of situations the United States is likely to face -- and given, for example, the struggles to field up-armored Humvees, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) programs in Iraq -- the time has come to consider whether the specialized, often relatively low-tech equipment well suited for stability and counterinsurgency missions is also needed. It is time to think hard about how to institutionalize the procurement of such capabilities and get them fielded quickly. Why was it necessary to go outside the normal bureaucratic process to develop technologies to counter improvised explosive devices, to build MRAPs, and to quickly expand the United States' ISR capability? In short, why was it necessary to bypass existing institutions and procedures to get the capabilities needed to protect U.S. troops and fight ongoing wars?

The Department of Defense's conventional modernization programs seek a 99 percent solution over a period of years. Stability and counterinsurgency missions require 75 percent solutions over a period of months. The challenge is whether these two different paradigms can be made to coexist in the U.S. military's mindset and bureaucracy.

The Defense Department has to consider whether in situations in which the United States has total air dominance, it makes sense to employ lower-cost, lower-tech aircraft that can be employed in large quantities and used by U.S. partners. This is already happening now in the field with Task Force ODIN in Iraq, which has mated advanced sensors with turboprop aircraft to produce a massive increase in the amount of surveillance and reconnaissance coverage. The issue then becomes how to build this kind of innovative thinking and flexibility into the rigid procurement processes at home. The key is to make sure that the strategy and risk assessment drive the procurement, rather than the other way around.

SUSTAINING THE INSTITUTION

The ability to fight and adapt to a diverse range of conflicts, sometimes simultaneously, fits squarely within the long history and the finest traditions of the American practice of arms. In the Revolutionary War, tight formations drilled by Baron Friedrich von Steuben fought redcoats in the North while guerrillas led by Francis Marion harassed them in the South. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Marine Corps conducted what would now be called stability operations in the Caribbean, wrote the Small Wars Manual, and at the same time developed the amphibious landing techniques that would help liberate Europe and the Pacific in the following decade. And consider General John "Black Jack" Pershing: before commanding the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe in World War I, Pershing led a platoon of Sioux scouts, rode with buffalo soldiers up San Juan Hill, won the respect of the Moro in the Philippines, and chased Pancho Villa in Mexico.

In Iraq, an army that was basically a smaller version of the United States' Cold War force over time became an effective instrument of counterinsurgency. But that transition came at a frightful human, financial, and political cost. For every heroic and resourceful innovation by troops and commanders on the battlefield, there was some institutional shortcoming at the Pentagon they had to overcome. There have to be institutional changes so that the next set of colonels, captains, and sergeants will not have to be quite so heroic or quite so resourceful.

One of the enduring issues the military struggles with is whether personnel and promotions systems designed to reward the command of American troops will be able to reflect the importance of advising, training, and equipping foreign troops -- something still not considered a career-enhancing path for the best and brightest officers. Another is whether formations and units organized, trained, and equipped to destroy enemies can be adapted well enough and fast enough to dissuade or co-opt them -- or, more significant, to build the capacity of local security forces to do the dissuading and destroying.

As secretary of defense, I have repeatedly made the argument in favor of institutionalizing counterinsurgency skills and the ability to conduct stability and support operations. I have done so not because I fail to appreciate the importance of maintaining the United States' current advantage in conventional war fighting but rather because conventional and strategic force modernization programs are already strongly supported in the services, in Congress, and by the defense industry. The base budget for fiscal year 2009, for example, contains more than \$180 billion for procurement, research, and development, the overwhelming preponderance of which is for conventional systems.

Apart from the Special Forces community and some dissident colonels, however, for decades there has been no strong, deeply rooted constituency inside the Pentagon or elsewhere for institutionalizing the capabilities necessary to wage asymmetric or irregular conflict -- and to quickly meet the ever-changing needs of forces engaged in these conflicts.

Think of where U.S. forces have been sent and have been engaged over the last 40-plus years: Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and more. In fact, the first Gulf War stands alone in over two generations of constant military engagement as a more or less traditional conventional conflict from beginning to end. As General Charles Krulak, then the Marine Corps commandant, predicted a decade ago, instead of the beloved "Son of Desert Storm," Western militaries are confronted with the unwanted "Stepchild of Chechnya."

There is no doubt in my mind that conventional modernization programs will continue to have, and deserve, strong institutional and congressional support. I just want to make sure that the capabilities needed for the complex conflicts the United States is actually in and most likely to face in the foreseeable future also have strong and sustained institutional support over the long term. And I want to see a defense establishment that can make and implement decisions quickly in support of those on the battlefield.

In the end, the military capabilities needed cannot be separated from the cultural traits and the reward structure of the institutions the United States has: the signals sent by what gets funded, who gets promoted, what is taught in the academies and staff colleges, and how personnel are trained.

Thirty-six years ago, my old CIA colleague Robert Komer, who led the pacification campaign in Vietnam, published his classic study of organizational behavior, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. Looking at the performance of the U.S. national security apparatus during the conflict in Vietnam, both military and civilian, he identified a number of tendencies that prevented institutions from adapting long after problems had been identified and solutions proposed: a reluctance to change preferred ways of functioning, the attempt to run a war with a peacetime management structure and peacetime practices, a belief that the current set of problems either was an aberration or would soon be over, and the tendency for problems that did not fit organizations' inherited structures and preferences to fall through the cracks.

I mention this study not to relitigate that war or slight the enormous strides the institutional military has made in recent years but simply as a reminder that these tendencies are always present in any large, hierarchical organization and that everyone must consistently strive to overcome them.

I have learned many things in my 42 years of service in the national security arena. Two of the most important are an appreciation of limits and a sense of humility. The United States is the strongest and greatest nation on earth, but there are still limits on what it can do. The power and global reach of its military have been an indispensable contributor to world peace and must remain so. But not every outrage, every act of aggression, or every crisis can or should elicit a U.S. military response.

We should be modest about what military force can accomplish and what technology can accomplish. The advances in precision, sensor, information, and satellite technologies have led to extraordinary gains in what the U.S. military can do. The Taliban were dispatched within three months; Saddam's regime was toppled in three weeks. A button can be pushed in Nevada, and seconds later a pickup truck will explode in Mosul. A bomb dropped from the sky can destroy a targeted house while leaving the one next to it intact.

But no one should ever neglect the psychological, cultural, political, and human dimensions of warfare. War is inevitably tragic, inefficient, and uncertain, and it is important to be skeptical of systems analyses, computer models, game theories, or doctrines that suggest otherwise. We should look askance at idealistic, triumphalist, or ethnocentric notions of future conflict that aspire to transcend the immutable principles and ugly realities of war, that imagine it is possible to cow, shock, or awe an enemy into submission, instead of tracking enemies down hilltop by hilltop, house by house, block by bloody block. As General William Tecumseh Sherman said, "Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster."

Repeatedly over the last century, Americans averted their eyes in the belief that events in remote places around the world need not engage the United States. How could the assassination of an Austrian archduke in the unknown Bosnia and Herzegovina affect Americans, or the annexation of a little patch of ground called Sudetenland, or a French defeat in a place called Dien Bien Phu, or the return of an obscure cleric to Tehran, or the radicalization of a Saudi construction tycoon's son?

In world affairs, "what seems to work best," the historian Donald Kagan wrote in his book *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, ". . . is the possession by those states who wish to preserve the peace of the preponderant power and of the will to accept the burdens and responsibilities required to achieve that purpose." I believe the United States'

National Defense Strategy provides a balanced approach to meeting those responsibilities and preserving the United States' freedom, prosperity, and security in the years ahead.

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