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**Four Wars and Counting:  
Rethinking the Strategic Meaning of  
the Iraq War**

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Almost without sensing it, America has drifted into involvement in four separate and simultaneous conflicts. The most obvious war is Iraq. Former regime loyalists and violent Islamic extremists are fighting a low intensity conflict. American and other coalition soldiers die there every day, a US-led occupation force governs it, and it has the highest media and political profile. No matter how this conflict develops, there is little prospect of a stable Iraq over the next 5-10 years, or that Iraq will serve as an example that will transform the Middle East.

In the process, the second conflict – Afghanistan – has become the "not quite forgotten" war. Americans and America's allies die there too, but not as regularly. Nation building is having its own crisis in Afghanistan, but at less cost and no longer under high profile American direction. "Victory," however, has proved as relative as in Iraq. The Taliban has mutated and is fighting again, Al Qaeda has lost many of its leaders but has mutated and relocated some of its operations in Pakistan, the internal tensions in Afghanistan threaten to make its central government the government of "Kabulstan," and the spillover of Islamic extremism into Central and South Asia continues.

The third war, the broader global "war on terrorism," continues, but in an increasingly confused form. The Bush Administration has sometimes sought to make Iraq its focus, knowing that Americans (and presumably the world) will react better to the "war after the war" in Iraq if it is blamed on terrorism and Al Qaeda, than perceived as a product of the Bush Administration's failure to prepare for conflict termination and nation building.

Top officials like President Bush and Vice President Cheney still take in these terms although the US military in Iraq talks about a threat that is "95% former regime loyalists," and Secretary Rumsfeld has made it clear that Saddam's regime prepared to fight the conflict we now face before the US invasion began. This, however, is only part of the problem. Rather than making war on specific terrorist movements hostile to the US and its allies, many in the US Congress and media have used rhetoric that has made the "war" seem like a war on Islam and the Arab world. Others continue to try to make Saudi Arabia its focus in spite of the fact that the Saudis are fighting their own battle against Al Qaida.

The war on terrorism involves hostile Islamic extremist movements and cells all over the world, and its focus is global and not simply Iraq or Saudi Arabia. It is a war being fought primarily within Islamic states between secular leaders and religious extremists – Shi'ite, Salafi, Sufi, and neo-Wahhabi. However, it is a “clash within a civilization” that continues to spill over into other regions and which often uses the US as a proxy target for local regimes.

The fourth war does not involve direct American use of troops, but rather the Arab and Islamic perception that the US is a cobelligerent with Israel. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves the US strategically in almost as much depth as if it were a belligerent. The US is Israel's ally, and its main source of aid and military equipment. It is seen throughout most of the Arab and Islamic world as partially responsible for Israel's actions. A struggle that the US and Israel perceive as a struggle against terrorism and extremism is perceived by Arabs and Iran as a struggle against Palestinians using the only means they have to struggle for liberation and independence, and far too often, Arab media are anything but objective. Worse, the US “occupation” in Iraq is increasingly seen in the Arab world as the mirror image of the Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank. There is a flood of conspiracy theories charging that the US is copying Israeli tactics or that its actions in Iraq are somehow dictated by Israel.

Other potential struggles are waiting in the wings, although it is far from clear that war will actually occur. These flashpoints include Iran and Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, North Korea's efforts to proliferate and constant stream of threats, and the much lower level of tension across the Taiwan Straits. At a less intense level, the US is also involved in Colombia in a war on drugs that inevitably means involvement in Colombia's civil war, and faces an uncertain situation.

### **Strategy and Strategic Overreach**

In fairness to the Bush Administration, only one of these struggles – Iraq – can be called optional. Afghanistan came as the result of a major attack on the US, the problem of terrorism had arisen long before “9/11,” and US involvement in Arab-Israeli conflicts is inevitable unless a true and lasting peace can be achieved or the US abandons an ally. Even Iraq seems optional more in retrospect than it did before the conflict began. The

Bush and Blair governments may have politicized some aspects of the assessment of Iraqi proliferation, but virtually all experts felt the threat was more serious than it has proved to be. Moreover, it seems doubtful that Saddam's Hussein's Iraq would not have triggered another regional conflict at some point, just as it is doubtful that most of Iraq's present internal problems would not have surfaced at some point in the future even if the US, Britain, and Australia had never invaded.

The end result, however, is the US does not face the *possibility* of fighting two major regional contingencies – the strategic focus of both the first Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration. It faces the reality of *actually* fighting three low intensity conflicts and deep strategic involvement in a fourth. Moreover, the US still faces the risk of involvement in major regional conflicts. These risks include Iran, North Korea, Taiwan, and Columbia.

American military planning and strategy must be reevaluated in terms of this situation and ten major changes are needed:

- **First, neither a capabilities-based strategy nor one based on theoretical sizing contingencies is meaningful when real-world conflicts and well-defined contingencies require a strategy and force plan that can deal with reality, rather than theory.** The US does not face a world where all problems were solved by the end of the Cold War. It does not face a world it can control or predict in the future. It must constantly adapt to the tasks at hand and those it can immediately foresee, not base its plans on hopes and strategic slogans.

The US must pursue strategies and tactics that reflect the fact that many of the conflicts we are now involved in cannot be resolved by defeating a well defined enemy and involve political, social, and economic forces that will take years, if not decades to run their course. Iraq, at best, will be an unstable and evolving state for a decade after we leave and at worst could be the subject of strong Anti-American feelings in the Gulf and Arab world. The war in Afghanistan is mutating in ways that are beyond our control and nation building so far is failing. The war on terrorism is not a war against Al Qaeda but against violent Islamic extremism driven by mass demographic, economic, and social forces in a region

with limited political legitimacy. It may take a quarter of a century to deal with. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems years away from peace, and the last peace process has shown how tenuous and uncertain even a seemingly successful peace process can be.

- **Second, “superpower” has always been a dangerous term. The resulting exaggeration of US capabilities and strategic focus on bipolar threats and “peer rivals” misses the point. The real problem is being a global power with limited resources – a problem that Great Britain encountered throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The world already is multipolar.** There are severe limits to what the US can do, and how many places it can do it. Coalitions and alliances are just as – or perhaps more -- important than ever.

There is no alternative to “internationalism.” There may be times we disagree with the UN or our some of our allies, but our strategy must be based on seeking consensus wherever possible, on compromise when necessary, and on coalitions that underpin virtually every action we take. Our rhetoric can no longer be simply American or be driven by domestic politics; it must take full account of the values and sensitivities of others.

Our military strategy must give interoperability and military advisory efforts the same priority as jointness. In order to lead, we must also learn to follow. We must never subordinate our vital national interests to others, but this will rarely be the issue. In practice, our challenge is to subordinate our arrogance to the end of achieving true partnerships, and to shape our diplomacy to creating lasting coalitions of the truly willing rather than coalitions of the pressured and intimidated.

- **Third, for all the criticism of dual containment at the time of the Clinton Administration, the US cannot afford to fight more than one major regional conflict without stretching its present force levels to the limit. Deterrence and containment are far more complex than at the time of the Cold War, but they still are critical tools and they too are dependent on formal and informal alliances.** The need to create reliable structures of deterrence must also respond to

the reality of proliferation. The problem no longer is how to prevent proliferation, but rather how to live with it.

The US needs to develop more mobile forces that are better tailored to rapid reaction, power projection in areas where the US has limited basing and facilities, and capable of dealing better with the kind of low intensity combat dominated by terrorists or hostile movements that require an emphasis on light forces and HUMINT, rather than heavy forces and high technology.

Military intervention cannot, however, be the dominant means of exercising US military power. The problem is to find better ways to use the threat of US military power to deter and contain asymmetric conflicts, and new kinds of political and economic threats. War avoidance is just as important in the post-Cold War era as it was during it.

- **Fourth, war must be an extension of diplomacy by other means, but diplomacy must be an extension of war by other means as well.** US security strategy must be based on the understanding that diplomacy, peace negotiations, and arms control are also an extension of – and substitute for – war by other means. It is easy for a “superpower” to threaten force, but far harder to use it, and bluffs get called. Fighting should be a last resort, and other means must be used to limit the number of fights as much as possible.
- **Fifth, the Quadrennial Defense Review was right in stressing the risk asymmetric warfare posed to the US in spite of its conventional strength. It failed, however, to look beyond the narrow definition of the problems of direct combat to the problems of containment and deterrence, conflict termination, and armed nation building.** Much of today’s problems in Iraq stem from the fact that the Defense Department and the Bush Administration were as badly prepared for conflict termination, nation building, and low intensity threats after the defeat of Saddam’s regular military forces, as they were well prepared to carry out that defeat. The price tag also involves more than dollars. It is some share of responsibility for every US body bag being flown out of Iraq. To a lesser degree, the same is true of the situation in Afghanistan, and the problem is

scarcely new. The US failed in both nation building and Vietnamization in Vietnam. It failed in Lebanon in the early 1980s. It failed in Haiti, and it failed in Somalia. The stakes, level of involvement, and the costs to the US may have been far lower in some of these cases, but the fact remains that the US failed.

- **Sixth, simply adding troops or more weapons will not solve America's problems, any more than trying to use technology to make US forces smaller and more cost-effective will.** The Afghan War led to an emphasis on a method of using airpower that now has clearly failed because it could not secure the country or deal with Taliban and Al Qaida forces that quickly mutated and dispersed. The Iraq War began with heavy conventional land forces and soon became a heavy air-land battle. It was all airpower, armored, IS&R and precision through late April. As such, it showed that high technology forces could decisively defeat lower technology conventional forces almost regardless of force numbers and the kinds of force ratios that were critical in past conflicts.

The problem of both force numbers and force cost cannot, however, be dealt with through force transformation to one kind of war fighting. As has been discussed earlier, the US has virtually been forced to reinvent the way in which it uses its forces since the fall of Saddam's regime. Technology and an emphasis on destroying enemy hard targets and major weapons systems failed when the problem became conflict termination, armed nation building, and low intensity warfare.

The missions that are emerging require extremely skilled troops with excellent area skills, far more linguists, and training in civic action and nation building as well as guerilla warfare. Many of these forces, however, would have little value in a Korean or Taiwan contingency. The US needs to pause and think out the issue of quality before it does anything about force quantity. The fact is that 200,000 under-trained troops in Iraq would not be better than 150,000, and having F-22s instead of F-15s would be pointless.

- **Seventh, the US should learn from Afghanistan and Iraq that technology-based force transformation and the revolution in military affairs are tools**

**with severe and sometimes crippling limits.** The ability to provide IS&R coverage of the world is of immense value, but it does not mean the ability to understand the world, deal with complex political issues, and fight effectively in the face of terrorism, many forms of low intensity conflict and asymmetric warfare, and the need to deal with conflict termination and peace making or protect nation building.

The ability to use precision weapons, helicopter mobility, and armor to destroy enemy conventional forces and blow fixed targets up “24/7” is also of great tactical value, but it does not mean that defeating enemy conventional forces really wins wars, and the US is as bad at knowing what to blow up in terms of strategic targeting and many aspects of interdiction bombing as it was in World War II.

There also are good reasons to question whether many aspects of “Netcentric” warfare are little more than a conceptual myth, concealing the military equivalent of the “Emperor’s new clothes” in a dense forest of incomprehensible PowerPoint slides than cannot be translated into procurable systems, workable human interfaces, and affordable Future Year Defense Plans.

In practice, there may be a need to make far more effective use of legacy systems, and evolutionary improvements in weapons and technology, to support “humancentric” forms of military action requiring extensive human intelligence and area skills, high levels of training and experience, and effective leadership in not only defeating the enemy in battle but winning the peace.

This, in turn, means creating US military forces with extensive experience in civil-military action and which can use aid as effectively as weapons – dollars as well as bullets. It also means redefining interoperability to recognize that low technology allied forces can often be as, or more effective, as high technology US forces in such missions.

- **Seventh, the US has some agonizing decisions to make about resources.** In spite of major recent increases in defense spending, even the present force plan is totally unsustainable. Real defense spending in FY2004 will be at the 1990s level



in constant dollars, but procurement and RDT&E will be a 10-15% lower share of spending and the constant dollar cost of major platforms is rising steadily.

The fact that the US cannot come close to funding both its planned force levels and force improvement plans is so obvious that it does not fit in the “worst kept secret” level. Everyone with any experience stopped believing in estimated procurement costs long ago. What is equally clear now, however, is that the US faces years of unanticipated conflicts, many involving armed peacemaking and nation building, and must rethink deterrence in terms of proliferation. This is not a matter of billions of dollars; it is a matter of several percent of the US GNP.

- **Ninth, the US cannot tolerate an executive branch that allows major divisions to grow between key departments like the Department of State and Department of Defense, and a National Security Council that does not enforce coordination between them.** “Jointness” cannot simply be an issue for restructuring the US military. It must occur within the entire executive branch, and on a civil-military level as well. The Iraq War has shown that the end result of allowing small cadres in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Vice President, and National Security Council was to allow incompetent ideological cadres to bypass the US national security process in ways that led to critical failures in key strategic tasks like conflict termination and nation building. More broadly, however, similar failures have occurred in virtually every aspect of US strategic engagements and diplomacy, including critical areas like counterproliferation and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

To date, this lack of “jointness” in the Bush Administration national security team makes it the worst such team in operational terms since the Johnson Administration and Vietnam. The President’s National Security Advisor has failed to show effective leadership and to force coordination on the US national security process. Unresolved conflicts between leaders like Secretary Powell, and Secretary Rumsfeld, the exclusion of other cabinet members from key tasks, insufficient review of military planning, and giving too much power to small elements within given departments, have both weakened US efforts and

needlessly alienated our allies. The US can no longer tolerate an advisory National Security Advisor. “Jointness” must go far beyond the military; it must apply to all national security operations.

- **Tenth, the US faces enduring threats from terrorism and violent Islamic extremism, as well as from serious threats in Asia. It cannot afford to deal with any of these issues in terms of ideological prejudice.** The US does not need either neo-conservatism or neo-liberalism. It needs pragmatism, neo-realism, and a return to the “internationalism” that has shaped its most successful national security policy efforts ever since World War II.

The US is involved in four very complex wars, each of which requires the most objective intelligence and analysis that is possible. There is no room for ideological sound bites or overly simplistic solutions, and force transformation cannot cut some mystical Gordian knot. The US cannot afford to rush into – or stay in – any conflict on ideological grounds. It cannot afford to avoid any necessary commitment because of idealism. What it needs is informed pragmatism.

One simple rule of thumb is to stop over-simplifying and slogan zing. The US needs to deal with security threats quietly and objective on a country-by-country and movement-by-movement basis. It cannot afford to carelessly abuse words like “Islam” and “Arab,” or ignore the sensitivities of key allies like South Korea in dealing with the threat from the North. It cannot afford to alienate its European allies or lose support in the UN by throwing nations like “Iran” into an imaginary “axis of evil.” It needs Saudi Arabia as an ally in the struggle against movements like Al Qaeda, and it cannot afford to confuse terrorist movements driven by different and largely neo-Salafi beliefs with terms like Wahhabi, any more than it can afford to act as if Al Qaeda somehow dominated a far more complex mix of different threats.

The US needs a nuanced pragmatism that deals with each threat individually and in proportion to the threat it really presents. It must give regional and other allies a proper role and influence in decision-making rather than seek to bully them

through ideology and rhetoric. It needs to engage the checks and balances of the fully interagency process, of area and intelligence professionals, and seek a bipartisan approach with proper consultation with the Congress.

This same pragmatism is needed in seeking reform in the Middle East and developing world. The US has threatened to turn “democracy” into a four-letter word; a synonym for half-reasoned US efforts to force its own political system on other countries or simply serve its own interests through regime change. President Bush did support a more nuanced approach in his speech on democracy in the Middle East in early November 2003, but both American neo-conservatives and neo-liberals often still seem to dwell in slogans and often in a world where the net result of what they recommend would be “one man, one vote, one time.”

Elections are only one element in what should be a carefully tailored country-by-country effort to achieve evolutionary change and reform. The first step may often be to improve human rights and the quality of the rule of law. At the same time, helping nations achieve economic reform and deal honestly with their demographic problems should have equal priority. Creating consultative institutions, moving through a process where countries learn what voting means, develop a basis for political parties, create media capable of supporting an honest elective process, and creating transparency in the way states use their resources and manage the state, can all be preconditions to effective pluralism in given cases.

The US must look beyond words like “democracy,” and remember that it is not a democracy, but rather a republic that protects the individual over the majority, and preserves the rights of all through limitations on the power of the federal government and checks and balances within it. It must always remember what revolution, rather than evolution, can bring by way of violence and hostility to the US, and act accordingly.

## **Looking at the Strategic Implications of a Four War (And Counting) Posture**

More immediately, the US needs to seriously consider the implications of trying to deal with four wars at once that may well continue into the indefinite future. Each war presents its own separate problems, but some issues become far clearer when they are considered together.

- **Avoid new strategic adventures if at all possible:** The US needs to avoid additional military commitments and conflicts unless they truly serve vital strategic interests. Regardless of the outcome of the reevaluation of force transformation recommended earlier, it will be two to three years at a minimum before the US can create major new force elements and military capabilities, and some change will take at least five to ten years. The US already faces serious strategic overstretch, and nothing could be more dangerous than assuming that existing problems can be solved by adding new ones – such as Syria or Iran. This means an emphasis on deterrence, containment, and diplomacy to avoid additional military commitments. It means a new emphasis on international action and allies to find substitutes for US forces.
- **Accept the cost of winning the peace in Iraq:** It may not take more troops in Iraq, but it may well take most of the US assets in terms of low intensity warfare capabilities and at least a year more of casualties and armed nation building. It certainly means tens, if not hundreds of billions of dollars of international aid, over a period far longer than the next fiscal year, and which cannot be paid for by mortgaging Iraq's oil – and several years of armed nation building.

The price tag will be high, and high in more than dollars. It is time to start thinking of price tags such as at least 1,000 American dead. It is also clear that the US may have to accept the political cost of reaching out to its allies and the UN, even if this means admitting mistakes. Most important, the solution lies in doing as much as possible, as soon as possible, and flooding resources forward even at the cost of waste. Every delay and exercise in cost-effectiveness means

higher costs and higher risks in the future – and the risks include seeing the Shi'ite part of the country and ordinary Sunnis turn against the US.

- **Accept the cost of winning the peace in Afghanistan:** Afghanistan remains a real war. The US cannot seek to win in Iraq at the cost of leaving Afghanistan without the military capabilities needed to pursue the Taliban and Al Qaida. In some ways, the task may be easier than in Iraq, but only if the US is willing to pay for Afghan and Allied nation building and military forces that can secure the country. NATO is already in Afghanistan. Germany has already played a critical role. One answer to reducing US global strategic overstretch is to pursue an “allied strategy” in Afghanistan to free as many US resources as possible in Iraq. This will, however, almost certainly mean spending some \$5-10 billion more over the next five years than the US currently programs.
- **Stop dealing with the war on terrorism in terms of ideology, slogans and oversimplifications, and work seriously with regional allies:** The US cannot afford to back away in any form from the effort to defeat terrorist and extremist movements that attack the US or Americans. It must continue to concentrate all the needed resources to destroy Al Qaida and its affiliates, and additional movements that target the US.

At the same time, the US cannot afford to fight this war in terms of neo-conservative ideology or broad slogans. It needs to stop talking noisily about democracy and regime change, and quietly work for economic, human rights, and legal reform. It needs to work with moderate regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere and not against them.

The US needs to try to create local partnerships with key nations like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, and it needs to focus systematically on just how different the various Sufi, Salafi, neo-Wahhabi, and Shi'ite movements are, and deal with each separately. A far more visible effort is needed to make it clear that the war is being fought against a small minority of extremists, and not the Arab world and Islam, and to make it clear that the US will seek to persuade other countries that its values are correct and not seek to impose them.

- **Stay the course in the Arab-Israel peace process:** The US will be at a major disadvantage in Iraq and in the war on terrorism as long as the Israeli-Palestinian War continues. Nothing it can do will prevent Arab and Islamic media from portraying one-sided images of the conflict and blaming the US in part for Israel's actions. At the same time, the US cannot abandon Israel and may well confront the fact its deteriorating economy will require some form of additional aid.

There is no way out of the resulting dilemma, other than a continuing and high visibility US effort to create a peace, regardless of how many times new initiatives fail. The US will not win Arab hearts and minds by doing this, but it can increase Arab tolerance. Moreover, Israel's strategic interests ultimately lie in a successful peace, even more than those of the US. Israel's social structure and economy cannot be sustained through constant low-level war. America will never be at existential risk because of Middle Eastern proliferation; Israel could be in a matter of years.

The broad course of action the US has laid out in the "road map" is the right one, but several factors must be kept in mind. The timing may well be a matter of a decade. Israel is not the present Israeli government, and intolerance of terrorism should be accompanied by equal intolerance of settlements.

The security situation is also going to be extremely difficult. The US must support Israel in fighting terrorism, and it should support Israel in pushing the Palestinians into a real effort to suppress terrorist movements. But this does not mean supporting the present Israeli government in setting impossible standards for Palestinian action. The US must also resist every Israeli and pro-Israeli effort to drag it into a confrontation with Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ unless they clearly attack US targets. Israel's problems and priorities are Israel's, not America's. The US cannot afford to wander off in search of enemies.

At the same time, the US must be extremely careful about any plans to put US forces on the ground to separate Israelis and Palestinians. The end result is to create a natural target for every Islamic extremist movement that would like to broaden the scope of the war on terrorism, and potentially put the US in the

position of new media images of involvement against Palestinians. This is an area where the US needs to think hard about what an international presence really means, and work with Israel to try to find allied capabilities that both Israel and Palestinians can accept.

One final reality – the moment one turns from a focus on the war that has the most current visibility to a broader consideration of all four wars and the other risks at hand, the clearer it is that the US will face major domestic political problems. The image of a quick and decisive victory was always a false one, but it is still the image many Americans want. One thousand or more dead in Iraq is hardly Vietnam, but it must be justified and explained, and explained honestly – not in terms of the ephemeral slogans President Bush has used to date. America may well have to spend another one percent of its GNP on sustained combat and international intervention overseas than any American politician is willing to admit.

America faces some very hard political choices, and they are going to take exceptional leadership and courage as the US enters an election year. They require bipartisanship of a kind that has faded since the Cold War, and neither neo-conservative nor neo-liberal ideology can help. Moreover, America's think tanks and media are going to have to move beyond sound bites and simple solutions, just as much as America's politicians and military planners. Put differently, it is going to be a very tough year. In fact, it is going to be a very tough decade.