

The Folly of ‘Asymmetric War’

The rapidly emerging conventional wisdom in U.S. defense policy suggests that the dominant threats we face today and will face over the coming decades are nontraditional, asymmetrical, and insurgent-terrorist in character, rather than the large-scale, interstate wars about which U.S. defense planners obsessed from the 1930s until about 1989. According to this line of thinking, U.S. force structure, doctrine, planning, and procurement programs ought to shift to meet this new series of threats, toward combating terrorism, insurgencies, “fourth generation wars,” and the like. This conventional wisdom builds on thoughtful concepts of the future of warfare and has the best interests of the United States very much at heart but, if taken seriously, would distort U.S. defense priorities for years to come and trap the U.S. armed forces in endless conflicts that military power cannot win.

The idea that the U.S. military ought to throw itself into the business of such asymmetric wars would have been anathema to the post-Vietnam War U.S. defense establishment, especially the U.S. Army, which took profound force structure and doctrinal decisions precisely to prevent such an outcome. The intellectual movement away from the former conventional wisdom to the present one perhaps began with the ideas of writers such as Martin Van Creveld, who wrote as early as the late 1980s that interstate war was a thing of the past, that insurgencies and similar sorts of conflicts would constitute the future of warfare, and that militaries that ignored these facts were doomed to obsolescence.¹ If Van Creveld started the trend toward asymmetry, Robert

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The military instrument of statecraft is the wrong tool to deal with asymmetric threats.

Kaplan, writing in the early to mid-1990s, gave it a tremendous boost, arguing that state failure and criminal instability rather than interstate war posed the principal security risks of the future.² The implications for U.S. defense policy were obvious enough: dump the dinosaur systems, doctrines, and force structures optimized for big wars and develop new ones to cope with the asym-

metric conflicts that the United States would be fighting in the future.

Soon another influential voice was added to the chorus. Thomas P. M. Barnett contended that areas of the world disconnected from globalization were the most likely to harbor threats to U.S. national interests, areas he christened the “nonintegrating gap,” as opposed to the “functioning core” of developed, globalizing states.³ As a result, the mission of the U.S. military was now to bring stability,

governance, and development to the “gap.” “Making this effort,” he concluded, “means reshaping our military to mirror-image the challenge that we face.”⁴

More recent works typical of this line of thinking are essays and books by such authors as Max Boot and T. X. Hammes. “When it comes to old-fashioned nation-building and counterinsurgency operations,” Boot argues, the modern U.S. Army “lags behind both the Victorian British army and its modern successor.”⁵ He would remedy this situation by having the military “focus on training and equipping infantry for irregular warfare.” Hammes’ fourth-generation-warfare concept, although broader, has some similar implications.⁶

If the recent words of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates are evidence, the same concepts now lie at the very core of U.S. defense thinking. In a November 2007 speech, Gates argued:

The real challenges we have seen emerge since the end of the Cold War—from Somalia to the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—make clear we in Defense need to change our priorities to be better able to deal with the prevalence of what is called “asymmetric warfare” ... [I]t is hard to conceive of any country challenging the United States directly in conventional military terms—at least for some years to come. Indeed, history shows us that smaller, irregular forces—insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists—have for centuries found ways to harass and frustrate larger, regular armies and sow chaos. We can expect that asymmetric warfare will be the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time.⁷

An official Department of Defense directive now states that “stability operations are a core U.S. military mission” of the department, on par with major

combat operations.⁸ As a result, this burgeoning emphasis has found its way into doctrine. A new U.S. Army draft operations manual, the first in seven years, places stabilization operations and nation building on the same plane with fighting and winning major conventional wars.⁹ The conventional wisdom is now so firmly established that a recent RAND study refers offhandedly to "the certainty of the need for a sustained level of effort against terrorist and insurgent groups," as if a future bursting with stability operations can no longer be questioned.¹⁰

Some sort of paradigm shift in the nature of conflict may in fact be underway. Interstate war has indeed become less likely. What is open to serious question, however, is the implication that major components of U.S. military forces ought to be specialized for asymmetric, nontraditional forms of warfare, particularly their most elaborate and demanding versions: counterinsurgency and nation building. The U.S. defense community may have jumped to a conclusion that, on closer examination, is neither obvious nor warranted.

Redirecting U.S. military forces substantially to an asymmetric threat is misguided for three reasons. First, it allows U.S. national security officials and military planners to ignore the real degree of the revolution in conflict that is underway. Second, it promises to get and keep the United States involved in conflicts in which it is often counterproductive to become militarily embroiled. Finally, it risks forfeiting the much more important global role for U.S. military power: deterring and responding to major conventional aggression.

The argument here is not that the United States should ignore asymmetric conflicts around the globe or that they pose no threat to U.S. interests. Rather, such conflicts represent less of a threat to the United States than has become fashionable to assume, and the military instrument of statecraft is the wrong tool to deal with them. The United States should powerfully enhance its efforts to reduce instability, conflict, and radicalism in key areas of the world and to shore up institutionalization and governance in critical states. It should do so, however, by relying on an expanded and deepened set of nonmilitary tools and do so largely in an anticipatory and collaborative manner rather than an *ex post facto* and interventionist one.

Avoiding the Significance of the Paradigm Shift

Although it is always dangerous to generalize, much of the instability described by theories of asymmetric and nontraditional warfare stems first and foremost from causes other than military aggression. Many rebellions, insurgencies, and civil wars are the symptoms of political, economic, and psychosocial factors that undermine social stability and popular commitment to public order. Once order has collapsed, leaders and groups arise determined to seize power, and

the contest can become a clash of power-seekers. Yet, the essential problem in many so-called failed states and other contexts that give rise to civil wars, insurgencies, and the radicalism at large in the Muslim world is a society or a large group of individuals beset with some combination of economic stagnation, ethnic division, cultural resentment, historical grievance, political or national repression, and other factors. These afflictions—injustices, in the eyes of the aggrieved—are not amenable to military solutions.

Today's global instability principally stems from causes other than military aggression.

The United States also ought to be clear about the range of conflicts that it has in mind when thinking about asymmetric warfare, a term that obscures more than it clarifies. U.S. forces engaged in such missions have done everything from delivering humanitarian relief to conducting special forces operations against terrorists to peacekeeping and peacemaking to counterinsurgency, postconflict reconstruction, and nation building. It is admittedly difficult to generalize about such

a wide-ranging list of potential conflicts or missions. Counterinsurgency is a very different animal from Kosovo-style, airpower-based peacemaking. Both are highly varied, and neither has much in common with highly secret counterterrorism operations or classic UN peacekeeping observer missions.

Meanwhile, attached to the background of the current war on terrorism is a very different sort of challenge: countering the rise of radical Islamism writ large. This radicalism is a product of popular reactions to incomplete and partially successful modernization and Westernization, the inability of local governments to provide social goods, the perceived humiliation of Muslim peoples and interests globally, the socioeconomic decline of parts of the Muslim world relative to the West, and much else. Such environments produce mind-sets filled with real and invented grievances, overwhelmed with the existential demands of modernity, and anxious to revalidate a humiliated national or ethnic group by resuscitating ancient values.¹¹ By conceiving of this broad range of complex phenomena in military terms amenable even in part to kinetic violence, however, a defense policy obsessed with asymmetric war risks distracting attention from the true degree of change required in how the United States conceives of national security.

Such conflicts require the use of social, economic, political, informational, and psychological tools of statecraft. Fighting radical Islamism in Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco, or Pakistan does not invite military force; making war on one's enemy will not be effective in the way that it is in interstate war. Political scientist Richard Rubenstein argued that "retaliation based on the

principle of collective responsibility for terrorist actions follows precisely the adversary's script."¹² Hechmi Dhaoui, writing from a psychiatrist's perspective, pointed out that "the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a godsend for the Wahhabists"¹³ because it furnished them with the world-embracing struggle that they needed to validate their doctrine. Mark Juergensmeyer, a leading authority on extremist thought, explained that a "war-against-terrorism strategy can be dangerous, in that it can play into a scenario that religious terrorists themselves have fostered: the image of a world at war between secular and religious forces. A belligerent secular enemy has often been just what religious activists have hoped for."¹⁴

Counterinsurgency and nation building are different situations from the task of countering Islamic radicalism, but the utility of military force is often only marginally greater. Modern counterinsurgency doctrine rests on the truism that achieving lasting stability even in the face of an armed insurgent enemy depends primarily on nonmilitary actions and tools: building viable political institutions, resuscitating the national infrastructure, spurring the local economy, creating effective police forces, and much more. The security provided by large military forces may be an ongoing, sustaining precondition for such results, but it cannot guarantee them. Meanwhile, the actions of those military forces, especially when they are foreign, run the risk of empowering the rebels, terrorists, or insurgents by alienating the local population. Following his return from Iraq, Major General Peter Chiarelli listed as one of his primary lessons that "those who viewed the attainment of security solely as a function of military action alone were mistaken." He concluded:

Erosion of enemy influence through direct action and training of Iraqi security forces only led to one confirmable conclusion—you ultimately pushed those on the fence into the insurgent category rather than the supporter category.... Kinetic operations would provide the definable short-term wins we are comfortable with as an Army but, ultimately, would be our undoing. In the best case, we would cause the insurgency to grow. In the worst case, although we would never lose a tactical or operational engagement, the migration of fence-sitters to the insurgent cause would be so pronounced the coalition loss in soldiers and support would reach unacceptable levels.¹⁵

Chiarelli was not arguing that military forces had no role in counterinsurgency, but he was stressing their extreme limitations. Yet, many military officers and defense planners, citing recently changed tactics and presumed progress on the ground in Iraq, continue to believe that, with enough adaptation and skill, counterinsurgency campaigns can be won by military forces operating unmisstakably in the lead, integrating political and economic elements in a combined campaign. The doctrinal term of art these days is "full-spectrum operations."

Yet, the larger truth lurking behind that clever phrase and behind counterinsurgency doctrine as a whole is that, where progress has been achieved, it has been attributable largely to political and economic factors rather than military ones.

Undoubtedly, U.S. forces on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan have done heroic work adapting to the demands of these sorts of conflicts. Yet, there is a strong case to be made, informed by the experiences of those same troops over the last six years, that U.S. efforts represented a fundamental mismatch from the start. Deploying aggressive military units trained to kill, destroy, and seize territory into environments in which their primary goals quickly become performing missions such as convening local governments, building schools, or functioning as the local police force creates a natural tension. This tension can be eased, but it is inevitable and will continue to manifest itself as long as military units are employed in roles for which they were neither created nor trained and are not suitable, to some irreducible and crucial degree.¹⁶ Fired on by secretive enemies, armies tend to fire back overwhelmingly and destructively. Patrolling streets in search of hidden insurgents, armies tend to “demonstrate resolve,” to show strength, and to maintain a constant search for elusive enemies. This often involves kicking in doors, rifling through homes, and conducting hurried and angry interrogations—humiliations visited on a populace by a roving counterinsurgent army, no matter how respectful and restrained it attempts to be. Success in counterinsurgency operations emerges almost in spite of their military components.

It is thus dangerous to view the military as the lead agency to deal with very diffuse, broad-based asymmetric challenges such as radical Islamism, nation building, stability operations, and even counterinsurgency. Talk of redirecting U.S. military emphasis to asymmetric threats amounts to a form of avoidance, allowing U.S. national security planners to ignore the truly dramatic change underway in the character of conflict. As smart, adaptable, and courageous as U.S. military officers and men and women clearly are and will be, asymmetric challenges demand asymmetric responses—political, economic, cultural, informational, and psychological tools, tactics, and techniques allowed to work organically over time, not retrained military forces whose true purpose is to fight and win wars, which are different enterprises. The strategic trap is obvious: Furnished with a vast, expensive, skillful military tool, policymakers will use it again and again, as they have been doing, without confronting the tougher challenge of shifting resources into nonmilitary tools of statecraft.

To be fair, analysts such as the tremendously insightful Hammes and policymakers such as the thoughtful and dedicated Gates have fully recognized the importance of nonmilitary instruments of power in dealing with these new threats and have called for improvements in those instruments. In practice, however, actual U.S. operations in these contingencies have retained an over-

whelmingly military flavor. As long as large proportions of the U.S. military are being retooled for asymmetric war, the perceived need for and role of other instruments will continue to lag. This result will be warned against, feared, and bemoaned, but it will also be inevitable.

Some defenders of the asymmetric emphasis for the U.S. military will respond that this argument ignores the history of military forces in counterinsurgency and nation-building contexts. That role might not be sufficient, but it is certainly necessary for success when combined with other elements of power. Forces trained in counterinsurgency techniques are required to hold the line until other instruments of power can catch up. This recipe can work successfully, some contend, as it has

arguably done a number of times in the past and is doing in Iraq today. Indeed, there is no question about the roles that military forces have played in various asymmetric contingencies, but it is important to clarify what those roles have been. In pure humanitarian or simple peacekeeping operations, requisite logistical and policing functions were easily performed by militaries optimized for high-intensity warfare or, better yet in peacekeeping contexts, civilianized police forces specially trained for the purpose. In some instances of coercive peacemaking such as the Kosovo campaign, a combination of tools originally procured for interstate warfare proved largely appropriate to the military requirements of the situation.

Even in counterinsurgency, one lesson of prior experiences would seem to be that the outcomes of counterinsurgency and nation-building campaigns will likely be governed by the same factors that have always decided such wars, factors that better preparation of counterinsurgent forces can at best indirectly influence. Does the government trying to establish order have legitimacy? Does it possess a cause with which to rally the people? Can it draw to itself a critical mass of the political, social, and economic interest groups of the nation? On the other side of the conflict, does the insurgency tap into deep-rooted national, ideological, ethnic, tribal, or religious grievances, or is it a more ephemeral or alien phenomenon? Do the insurgents have bold, charismatic leaders? Do they enjoy strong external support? In a civil or ethnic conflict, has the violence passed some critical tipping point at which all the leading parties to the conflict have exhausted their desire for mutual punishment or revenge and share a desire to move toward peace?

History suggests that these questions ultimately will determine whether or not an insurgency succeeds or a conflict ends. Incremental improvements in

Retooling the U.S. military will delay the perceived need for and role of other instruments.

counterinsurgency practice by an outside ally of the local government may make some difference but will rarely be decisive. If stability emerges in Iraq, for example, it will likely be because these questions have been answered in ways that point toward order.

Can well-trained military forces make a difference in such contexts? Can they contribute toward a successful outcome? Of course they can, and they

are arguably doing so in parts of Iraq today. Yet, the U.S. defense establishment cannot afford to master every mission, and the question for U.S. defense planners is one of priority and opportunity costs. The United States can only afford to do so much. It only has so many military forces to devote to various potential contingencies, and those troops only have a finite number of training hours to be allocated.

Focus on asymmetric wars will inevitably devalue systems appropriate for interstate war.

If counterinsurgency and nation building are mostly political, social, economic, and psychological tasks and are only military in character to a small degree, it does not make much sense to spend billions developing skills, units, doctrines, and equipment that ultimately will not be decisive in most asymmetric challenges, all the while continuing largely to ignore, in relative budgetary and bureaucratic terms, the nonmilitary tools (economic aid, foreign service efforts, public diplomacy, and cultural outreach) that will be decisive in such conflicts. Meanwhile, there are opportunity costs to be borne. Gradually but inevitably, a focus on and continual engagement in asymmetric wars will force the United States to devalue systems and force structures appropriate for interstate war.

The risk of such trade-offs—the danger of underfunding the research, development, and procurement of systems for major war because the United States is building and deploying forces for asymmetric war—is already evident in the 2009 fiscal year defense budget request. The Defense Department added almost \$9 billion to pay for additional numbers of ground troops for the new missions. Given the high tempo imposed by Iraq and Afghanistan, operations and readiness categories of the budget will grow 42 percent, an increase of almost \$15 billion, while strategic modernization accounts rise only 23 percent, just more than an \$8 billion increase.¹⁷

Yet, specific program lines in particular fiscal year defense budgets measure these trade-offs in only the narrowest of terms. After all, many defense budget experts would quickly object that the numbers just cited mislead, that long-term U.S. defense commitments remain heavily weighted toward big-ticket weapons systems. Yet, the wider, long-term costs of the larger strategy of embroiling the United States in such conflicts are immense. In fiscal year 2008,

for example, supplemental costs of \$189 billion for the “global war on terror,” largely Iraq and Afghanistan funding, were stacked on top of a straightforward defense budget of \$479.5 billion. That amount does not begin to count the accumulating health, pension, operations, maintenance, and other related costs built into the defense budget itself. Repeated deployments into stability operations create enormous ongoing costs in these areas as well as in lost equipment that must be replaced, bonuses to boost recruitment for unpopular wars, and other associated obligations.

Over the long term, these costs tend to drive out new investments, and an asymmetric war strategy that has U.S. forces hopping from one stability operation to another will substantially magnify this problem. Beyond that, there are skills and training trade-offs; every month an Army captain spends in Arabic language training is a month not spent mastering large-scale warfare tactics.

The strategic opportunity costs may be even more profound. While the U.S. national security apparatus obsesses about asymmetric conflict, the nonmilitary tools necessary to deal successfully with such challenges languish. Meanwhile, other potentially more important security threats, such as the challenge of rising powers, such as Russia and China, receive less attention than they should. In an era in which the potential for war between major powers, although unlikely, remains alive, this kind of a trade-off seems strategically unwise, especially because of the undeniable fact that such large-scale wars, were they to occur, would engage U.S. interests that dwarfed anything at stake in contingencies such as Somalia or even Afghanistan. Russia is headed increasingly for a sort of autocratic, anti-Western nationalism, and China’s determination to transform its economic strength into geopolitical and military might has long been obvious. Although neither of these states will inevitably become a threat to peace, either one could.

Along with continuing risks such as North Korea and Iran, these realities render naive the assumption that the world has been rendered immune from the requirement for deterrence of major conventional war. Unlike in the case of asymmetric challenges, where a broad range of national and international states and organizations can play important roles in dealing with the economic, social, and political challenges involved, only the Defense Department offers the sorts of tools—long-range strike, global logistics, space-based capabilities, missile defense, and the like—required to engage in major conventional operations. If the United States allows these capabilities and skills to depreciate, no one else is capable of picking up the slack.

The risk of such trade-offs is already evident.

Fighting the Wrong Kind of War

If the military is the wrong answer to most asymmetric conflicts, an equally powerful reason to reject such a focus for U.S. defense planning is that the very effort to fight and win such conflicts is often misguided. This is true because of the kind of warfare they represent, because most such conflicts cannot be settled from the outside, and because of the degree of U.S. national interests at stake.

Carl von Clausewitz was one of the first to distinguish between limited and unlimited, or absolute, wars. Clausewitz's absolute war was a theoretical abstraction, a concept of complete and total conflict that did not actually exist. He used the notion in part as a device to examine the nature of war's limitations. For Clausewitz, war could be limited in several ways: by the level of political demands of the combatants, the situation or condition of the belligerents, the strength of will on both or all sides, the degree of force employed, and much more.¹⁸ From Clausewitz's discussion of war's limits flows his famous dictum that war is a continuation of politics: it is the political and policy environment that sets the limitations to conflict, for example by dictating what resources belligerents will be able to employ.

The problem with asymmetric wars around the world as well as the most essential reason why the United States has trouble prosecuting them effectively is that such conflicts will inevitably be strictly limited for the United States, whereas for its enemies, they will often approach absolute warfare. This mismatch is inherent to the character of asymmetric war, in which fanatically devoted terrorists, insurgents, or rebels are attempting to win a conflict they may see in absolute, even apocalyptic terms, whereas the United States is trying to manage a war far from home that engages secondary national interests.¹⁹ Control of power in places such as Baghdad, Kabul, Mogadishu, and, from a more distant vantage point, Saigon is far more important to the revolutionaries, insurgents, gangs, and militia leaders on the scene than it would ever be to the United States, at least over the long term. This crucial asymmetry of commitment cannot be bridged unless the United States confronted an asymmetric challenge that engaged truly vital national interests, and it makes asymmetric warfare a poor candidate for long-term U.S. military focus. As it has done a number of times already, it threatens repeatedly to embroil the United States in losing endeavors.²⁰ The problem is exacerbated in a globalized information age in which the psychological impact of violence in distant conflicts on U.S. and global populaces is far greater than in earlier eras.

Some years ago, two insightful military analysts, Richard Betts and Edward Luttwak, offered a second powerful reason to avoid asymmetric wars, making the case that attempting to "cure" many such conflicts by imposing external

military force was exhausting for the intervening power and in fact counter-productive. Although the external powers have the best intentions and the temporary result of their actions might indeed be to quell violence and save lives, such interventions can often merely translate civil strife into slow-motion conflicts that simmer for decades, surging up whenever external controls are loosened.

Both writers began from the basic assumption that a certain subset of civil conflicts do not arise because of accident or misunderstanding, but as a result of clashing political goals on the part of warring parties. As a result, as Betts argued, limited intervention in such situations “may end a war if the intervenor takes sides, tilts the local balance of power,” and helps one side to win. Intervention can also end a war “if the outsiders take complete command of the situation, overawe all the local competitors, and impose a peace settlement.” The first sort of intervention is not impartial, however, and the second is not limited; and it is precisely an impartial, limited intervention that the United States and the world community has been trying to accomplish in recent years. “Trying to have it both ways usually blocks peace,” Betts concludes, “by doing enough to keep either belligerent from defeating the other, but not enough to make them stop trying.”²¹

Conflicts interrupted by external intervention tend to continue to break out in violence.

Luttwak agrees that “an unpleasant truth often overlooked is that although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace. This can happen when all belligerents become exhausted or when one wins decisively. Either way the key is that fighting must continue until a resolution is reached.” The problem in recent decades has been that “wars among lesser powers have rarely been allowed to run their course” but instead have often been interrupted “before they could burn themselves out and establish the preconditions for lasting settlement.”²²

The implication of both arguments is clear enough. If an asymmetric war is brewing in a developing nation, intervention to stop it could well demand an excruciating commitment on the part of outside powers, forcibly ending the possibly centuries-old aggressive ambitions of one or all sides, keeping those ambitions submerged for years or perhaps decades, and then sponsoring alternative social, economic, and psychological trends to ensure that the aspirations, hatreds, stereotypes, and power dynamics that gave rise to the conflict do not reappear. “Peace takes hold,” Luttwak concludes, “only when war is truly over,” and interventions suspend that process indefinitely. “Policy elites should actively resist the emotional impulse to intervene in other peoples’

wars—not because they are indifferent to human suffering but precisely because they care about it and want to facilitate the advent of peace.”²³

To some, the resulting policy will appear morally noxious; to allow civil wars to “burn themselves out” is to conspire in immense violence. The urge to act is very real and can sometimes be indulged with little cost. In some cases, wars are ready to end with just a bit of help, and simple UN observer missions with modest peacekeeping muscle can do yeoman’s work. In 2007–2008, some

104,000 personnel from 119 countries were serving in 20 UN peacekeeping operations at a cost of \$7 billion.²⁴ The United States can support this ongoing, globally shared effort without nearly the sorts of risks embodied by an across-the-board asymmetric-warfare doctrine. Outright genocide may represent a different and unique category. When a people is being systematically erased, the question at issue has moved beyond “conflict” to extermination, and

the world community may properly feel unable to apply the sorts of balancing considerations being discussed here. Then, too, each case is unique. In some, such as Darfur, ending genocide may not require a lengthy intervention at all but merely strenuous pressure, with enough global consensus, on the state apparatus that is engineering the slaughter, followed by a modest UN monitoring presence.

Yet, if Betts and Luttwak are correct—if wars that run to a logical conclusion pave the way for a truer peace, whereas conflicts that are interrupted tend to break out in continuing violence—then the moral calculus of intervention is not as straightforward as it might seem. An excellent example may be the Balkans, where the intervention, justified as it was at the time, seems only to have pushed a lid down onto a simmering conflict, rather than ending it.²⁵ The ultimate questions are where the moral obligation for ending a conflict lies and just how high a price the United States and the leading world powers are expected to pay, and for how long, to discharge the obligations some claim for them. The last six years have suggested that between the idealistic goals of the intervention-minded and the hard realities of nation building and stability operations lies a far greater gulf than many had assumed.

Finally, U.S. national security policy must be tied to U.S. national interests as well as to a calculation of serving global values and norms. When reconsidered with a cold eye, the claim that vital U.S. interests are at stake in numerous asymmetric wars does not hold up. By their very nature, being usually distant from the United States, involving small-scale adversaries and limited conflict, asymmetric wars generally do not hold essential stakes for the United

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States. Over and over again, when the United States has withdrawn from the scene of such conflicts, as in Lebanon, Somalia, and Vietnam, it has suffered injured prestige but no grave insults to national security. Where it has chosen not to intervene at all, no substantial national interests have compelled U.S. involvement. From a pre-September 11 perspective, asymmetric war resides at the margins of U.S. interests.

In the post-9/11 world, some argue that key U.S. interests are at stake because of international terrorism. Yet, the view that we will "inevitably" be drawn into such wars in an era of failed states, primarily to forestall the emergence of safe havens for terrorism, is one of the most egregious unchallenged assumptions of post-Cold War defense planning. Terrorists do not need full-blown failed states in which to operate. The frontier areas of Pakistan are al Qaeda's best refuge today, and some of its most aggressive recruiting is taking place in places such as Algeria, Morocco, and western Europe.

Wiping the world political map clean of failed states would not end these threats, nor, on the opposite end of the ledger, is every failed state a terrorist haven. Haiti, Somalia, and a number of other countries today can be described as failed or failing, and yet none has become host to large-scale terrorist training camps. Even if there were a generalized connection between state failure and terrorism, such a correlation would still not solve the asymmetry of commitment problem. Although instability in general may be a vital concern around the globe, no one country's civil strife will ever be crucial enough to the United States to place U.S. interests on an even par with those of the local belligerents.

There are other problems. Deploying large military forces in at-risk countries is hardly the right answer for state failure; many tools exist to deal with terrorist power centers short of invasion, occupation, and nation building. Even from a narrowly military standpoint, a better approach is available: find out where the terrorists are and strike them without trying to repair every unstable context that offers a temporary safe haven. Meanwhile, use nonmilitary tools to improve governance, institutionalization, and economic performance in states of concern. The answer is not a new isolationism but a clear-eyed recognition of the tasks the U.S. military is best suited to perform and of the parallel, politically challenging effort to substantially increase the nonmilitary tools in the U.S. arsenal that will, in the medium and long term, accomplish much more in avoiding the failed-states problem.

Taken at the level of strategy, the focus on asymmetric war in defense policy assumes a foreign policy that would have the United States leaping into one stability operation after another in service of a guiding ideology that assumes that Washington and its allies can and must create order in failed states. Such an ideology is highly questionable on empirical grounds, and as a foreign pol-

icy, it almost certainly will not sustain public support. The American people, especially in the wake of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, have no appetite for endless nation-building schemes.²⁶ Yet, a defense strategy committed to preparing for asymmetric war presumes that the United States will commit itself to precisely such a campaign.

The case for an asymmetric-war focus in U.S. defense policy seems to suggest that the United States will not be able to help itself. In a world of non-state threats, it will plunge from one civil conflict or insurgency to another, trying to quash the world's instability to keep itself safe. If objective tests are applied, however, vital U.S. national interests are simply not at stake in such wars. It turns out that U.S. defense policy already has been playing a global role that serves U.S. and global interests, interests that are in fact more important than placing the United States in service of asymmetric and nontraditional missions.

Forgetting What We Do Best

The call to focus on irregular warfare undervalues what the United States militarily does best and what its most important global role has been and should continue to be. The U.S. military since World War II has been a force specializing in high-intensity conventional war and has developed forces, technologies, and doctrines so advanced that few states can contemplate challenging it in that domain. This is the sort of mission that attracts many recruits to the U.S. military, and it is the form of warfare with which U.S. commanders and troops are most comfortable. Many analyses of the "American way of war" have documented U.S. discomfort with limited, persistent, grey wars, precisely the sort that advocates of asymmetric conflict demand as a central focus.²⁷

One of the most important guarantees of the absence of major war is U.S. conventional dominance. Having a nonbelligerent, widely accepted enforcer state that enjoys overwhelming conventional capability is of enormous value to much of the international community, especially states that themselves desire to keep defense preparedness at very low levels. This precisely describes the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least until recent doubts and resentments have accelerated over U.S. bellicosity. Quite obviously, not all states welcome U.S. conventional military dominance—fewer now, surely, than did 10 years ago. Apart from states with potentially aggressive foreign policies whose ambitions are checked by U.S. power, such as Iran and North Korea, other potential peer competitors, such as China and Russia, will be less than enthusiastic about such a leading U.S. military role.

Yet, this proposal does not demand unipolarity as propounded by the hawks and neoconservatives of the 1990s to the exclusion of other centers of power.

The argument here is for a strong, conventional war-centered U.S. defense policy working in tandem with other states in a highly multilateral affirmation of the nonaggression norm and other emerging norms of world politics. It would be a defense and military posture that would forsake its more provocative recent policies, take new steps to ease the nationalist ire of states such as Russia, and affirm a U.S. commitment to working through the United Nations to gain support for military action.

To be sure, there will be substantial tensions to resolve as the power dynamics of U.S. relationships with China, Russia, and other major powers take their natural course and because the conventional-war focus relies for part of its justification on the potential for new problems and tensions with these very states. A United States willing to work in a restrained, prudent, multilateral fashion, however, ought to be able to manage these tensions without turning the strategy into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This then ought to remain the cardinal role for U.S. military forces in the years ahead: to serve as the backbone of global deterrence of interstate war and thus to lend continuing momentum to the emerging norm against territorial aggression. This norm and trend are enormously positive for the United States, leading as they do to a world with fewer large-scale, state-based military threats to U.S. interests. Underwriting these trends is the most important thing the United States could do for its long-term security, more important even than the campaign against al Qaeda, provided that movement remains more or less as it is today. Placing the U.S. military in the service of these trends is an act of profound strategic logic.

This proposed model could and should reflect a strong coalition and alliance flavor. Wherever possible, the United States should continue to integrate local allies into this global conventional military presence, as it has since 1945, for the same obvious reasons that it has always made sense to do so: it lightens the U.S. load by sharing deterrence as well as containment responsibilities and eases the perception of a domineering U.S. footprint. A conventionally oriented, multilateralist defense policy would also acknowledge radical Islamism, the threat of global terrorism, and the problem of failed states and incomplete governance as issues that require substantial investments in the nonmilitary instruments of power, for which deploying military power would prove largely counterproductive. It would avoid rather than embrace military involvement in most other counterinsurgency wars, nation-building enterprises, and stability operations.

The call to focus on irregular warfare undervalues what the U.S. does best militarily.

Possibly the most persuasive response to such an agenda would simply reject the need for any fundamental choice. Why not a defense policy that buys capabilities to do everything, that aims for competence in the full range of possible conflict? The United States should have the capability to tackle any potential contingency it might face, some suggest.

The need for a broad range of national security capabilities to deploy against asymmetric threats and contingencies is unquestioned. The United States must dramatically expand and carefully rethink its program of socioeconomic assistance and cultural engagement in key parts of the Muslim world. Arguably, Washington could also benefit from an operational capability to deploy experts in political and legal institutionalization, economic development, public relations, education, and related fields into conflict-prone areas to assist in long-term stabilization and nation-building efforts. As suggested above, offering encouragement to selected UN peacekeeping missions with funds, logistical support, or very small numbers of troops can also make sense if the operations promise to be truly limited in scope and duration. Whether U.S. defense policy should specifically embrace large-scale stability operations, nation building, counterinsurgency warfare, and intervention to separate the combatants of civil wars and to promote stability as leading missions for U.S. military forces is another question entirely—a course based on unquestioned assumptions and holding substantial unexamined risks.

At the same time, this argument does not endorse the current approach to military “transformation” of conventional warfare. Whether to focus on conventional war and how to do so are two different questions, and in fact, there are powerful and persuasive critiques of plans for “information dominance,” “network-centric warfare,” and other centerpieces of the existing transformation program.²⁸ Not only do such plans reflect a utopian vision of technology’s ability to master the chance and chaos of war, but by making U.S. military forces so dependent on computer- and satellite-based networked connectivity, they create dangerous new vulnerabilities to be exploited by new forms of asymmetric warfare. Current U.S. plans for defense transformation must be radically rethought.

Defense Policy for a Globalizing Era and a Restrained America

If the United States adopted the approach recommended here, what would it mean for U.S. defense and foreign policy? It would mean a decision to avoid, almost without exception, the deployment of U.S. combat units into asymmetric and counterinsurgency situations and to focus on continued mastery of mid- and high-intensity conventional war. One cannot rule out the possibility of an emerging large-scale asymmetric conflict that would engage vital U.S.

national interests, demanding substantial and continuing U.S. participation. As one example, the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan would have met such a test because of the clear nexus between al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. The great irony, indeed, is that the situation there remains so unstable, continuing to demand so many U.S. and NATO forces, in substantial measure because of the Bush administration's refusal to view Afghanistan as a true nation-building job in 2001–2002 and the subsequent meager funding of the nonmilitary tools of power that might have helped to stabilize the country. The common assumption that many such conflicts engage vital interests is exaggerated, but this does not mean that no such conflict ever could. The presumption, however, would be strongly against becoming militarily involved in such wars.

These recommendations look beyond the current Afghan and Iraqi wars. What does this analysis say about the two asymmetric wars in which the United States has already become embroiled? It suggests, in brief, getting out of them from a military standpoint, but that end state is obvious and desired by everybody. The key questions are getting out on what schedule, in what way, and at what cost, and a full treatment of that debate is well beyond the scope of this essay. A precipitous withdrawal for withdrawal's sake would be as irresponsible a way to leave either Afghanistan or Iraq as the clumsy manner in which the United States entered. Nonetheless, to those who urge staying until the job is done in Iraq no matter how long it takes, much of this essay's argument amounts to a pointed reply. If the United States were to nearly wreck and massively reorient its ground forces while undermining its long-term defense posture in the endless pursuit of stability and institutionalization in a single failing state, it would have made a strategic error of historic proportions.

The obvious implication of this proposed strategy would be that the United States would dedicate only very small forces to regular training and preparation for or participation in counterinsurgency and other asymmetric-warfare missions. Obviously, pressure on al Qaeda and associated terrorist groups should not be eased; the counterterrorist war requires a continuing level of special forces participation. For occasional, larger missions in a peacekeeping or related category, it may also make sense to dedicate two or three infantry brigades as specialist units toward such operations. Preserving a permanent lessons-learned and training facility to keep alive a germ of the knowledge traditionally lost between large-scale counterinsurgency wars would also constitute a prudent hedge against the now unlikely eventuality that such a conflict were ever judged unavoidable.

The U.S. military should serve as the backbone of global deterrence of interstate war.

The proposed shift would then allow the Defense Department to reverse planned increases in the end strengths of the Army and Marines. As the Iraq deployment winds down and with other large-scale irregular operations removed from the planning calculus, larger standing ground forces become unnecessary. In fact, this proposal would call for overall U.S. active duty forces in all services to shrink, by perhaps 10 percent, as a cost-saving measure. The core notion is to have an extremely powerful, high-technology military capable of dominating conventional warfare. Overall numbers are not as essential as technology, skill, doctrine, joint interoperability, and the strength of supporting alliances. The United States would then focus this smaller active-duty force on conventional war and, as argued above, place it in service of the mission the United States has served so well: underpinning world stability in the name of international institutions and norms.

The United States then should enhance its overall national security by reducing the size of the defense budget and using the savings, as well as other budget funds added specially for this purpose, to enhance investments in other instruments of national power. By dramatically expanding the budgets for foreign aid, public diplomacy, exchange programs, and related nonmilitary forms of power, the United States can do much more to address the sources of instability, stagnation, and grievance that underlie the state failure, radicalists, insurgents, and terrorist groups at large in a globalizing world. Military power is not the way to defeat such threats. Although economic, informational, diplomatic, social, psychological, and other tools offer no guaranteed solution, they are the essential core of any true long-term answer. It is instructive, for example, that even as the U.S. defense community discussed the merits of asymmetric warfare as a mission for military forces, the Department of State in December 2007 issued a cable directing a 10 percent, across-the-board cut in staffing positions abroad.²⁹

The suggested strategy is far from isolationist. The United States would remain firmly involved in defense alliances around the world. On the non-military side of the ledger, it would substantially increase its profile abroad in foreign aid, expanded diplomatic missions, cultural engagement, and much more. It would seek to address the underlying causes of asymmetric conflict rather than ward off its symptoms. Without this shift, U.S. defense policy will continue to hallucinate that it can fight these different forms of conflicts as wars when in fact they are not wars at all, as traditionally understood.

This has been and continues to be the United States' greatest strategic error since the September 11 attacks. It has been compounded by a catchall defense policy that wants to have it not just both ways but all ways and a messianic foreign policy convinced of the U.S. ability to bring stability, order, and functioning democracy to places of its choosing. U.S. military forces, in the

view of current policy, are the grandest strategic Swiss Army tool in history, capable of tackling anything from simple policing to insurgency to civil war to humanitarian crises to full-blown conventional war.³⁰ Yet, asymmetric threats are not amenable to the application of military force, and the lead agencies responding to them should not be military ones. When one department in the U.S. national security portfolio dwarfs all others in resources and capabilities, however, the U.S. answer to any problem will remain as routine as it has become: find a military angle, and send in the troops. The result is all too often as counterproductive to the local conflict as it is to the U.S. global image.

The United States needs a defense policy that comes back into service of the global values and norms that generated world support for a robust U.S. role for so long. It needs a policy that respects the true nature of the asymmetric conflicts that the United States confronts and the character of radicalism permeating parts of the Islamic world today. It needs a policy that takes seriously the strengths and weaknesses of the American way of fighting and that builds a military profile around them rather than fighting uphill against them. It needs a policy prudently aware of the Herculean task that a state assumes when it attempts to transplant institutionalized modernity into the boundaries of another, ill-prepared country and aware as well of the ever-present potential for major power rivalries to reignite. In other words, it needs something other than an obsession with asymmetric warfare.

In fact, though, the abandonment of that obsession may be inevitable. Despite the scholarly pedigree and doctrinal and policy changes that have given it momentum for the moment, it runs so firmly against the grain of American strategic culture and military preference that it may be unsustainable over the long term. The Iraq experience alone may end up generating its own "syndrome," responsible for years of strict avoidance of similar adventures. If the argument of this essay is valid, however, the United States should come to this realization quickly rather than gradually and as a matter of strategic choice and logic rather than a sort of involuntary response to events. We have had quite enough of those over the last eight years.

Notes

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