

DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES: Defending the Globalizing Commons

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In Brief

- Redirecting U.S. military forces to an asymmetric-nontraditional threat is misguided.
- The U.S. military is a force that specializes in high-intensity conventional warfare--a form that the United States serves the international community best by dominating.
- The United States should increase its overall national security profile by reducing the size of the “defense” budget and making enhanced investments in other instruments of national power.

The reigning conventional wisdom in U.S. defense policy now has two major components. First, 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 wars about which U.S. defense planners obsessed from the 1930s until about 1989. And second, U.S. force structure, doctrine, planning, and procurement programs ought to focus on this new series of threats—shift away from readying for major warfare and instead prepare to combat terrorism, insurgencies, “fourth generation wars” and the like. Every recent doctrinal change, and virtually every defense reform proposal in circulation, urges the U.S. defense establishment in this direction, and the recent DoD directive has established asymmetric war as being on par with major conventional war in all aspects of defense planning, training and budgeting.

This memo argues that redirecting U.S. military forces substantially to an asymmetric-nontraditional threat is misguided for three reasons. It allows us to ignore the real degree of the revolution in conflict that is underway. It promises to keep us involved in conflicts in which it is often counterproductive to become militarily embroiled. And it risks forfeiting the much more important global role for U.S. military power, a

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role we have played well since 1945 and could continue playing—to both our and the world’s great advantage—for years to come.

Avoiding the Significance of the Paradigm Shift

The sorts of conflicts described by theories of asymmetric and nontraditional warfare in the current, globalizing era do not generally stem from military aggression. Instead, when we are talking about the many rebellions, insurgencies, civil wars—and most especially “the global war on terror” and its focus, Islamic radicalism—it is a cocktail of psycho-social factors that is to blame, conspiring to undermine social stability and undermine popular commitment to public order. At its base, the essential problem in many contexts is a society, or a large group of individuals, beset with economic stagnation, cultural resentment, historical grievance, a situation of political or national repression, or other related factors.

Yet the full implications of this widely drawn insight have not touched U.S. national security strategy and policy. By conceiving of these asymmetric threats as “military” ones, amenable to the application of kinetic force, we understate the true degree of change that is necessary.

Talking of redirecting U.S. military emphasis to asymmetric and nontraditional threats allows U.S. defense planners to ignore the degree of change underway in the character of conflict. Infantry platoons and tactical air are not required to win these new conflicts; the nations in question need development programs, police organizations, governance support, business investment, massive infrastructure repair efforts. But we have our hammer—our powerful, shiny, kinetic hammer—and it seems a rather interesting coincidence that the conventional wisdom of our defense planning has found that this radically different category of conflicts happens to be, after all, just a different kind of nail.

The answer, of course, is that the nail will be retooled—that conventional forces will be reorganized, redesigned, retrained, that we will generate “unconventional warfare brigades” skilled in the application of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare techniques. And there is no doubt that, in some contexts and to some degree, effective COIN can work. But the larger lessons of COIN appear to be that such conflicts end, are truly “won,” when underlying political or socioeconomic issues are resolved—through political compromise, changed social situations, or some other dramatic shifts in underlying causal situations.

Military forces can *contribute* to such outcomes (by establishing basic security, for example); but they cannot, on their own, *cause* them. Military forces represent a sometimes necessary but never sufficient tool in asymmetric conflicts. As such, even re-tooled ground forces will win brilliant tactical victories but not bring the conflicts to a conclusion because they do not address the dominant elements of the issue. What will we have then bought, with our new defense policy?

Fighting the Wrong Kind of War

Yet it is far from clear that we should be involved in asymmetric conflicts to begin with. The conventional wisdom asserts that failed states, insurgencies, and related forms of asymmetric conflict represent the leading threat to U.S. national security. There is little good evidence to support this proposition, and its practical implications are daunting.

Global instability has been with us for decades, centuries—yet suddenly, at the outset of the 21st century, the new conventional wisdom views it as an urgent national security threat, in such immediate need of redress that the United States ought to consider deploying military forces to remote corners of the global to stabilize failing states. There seems no obvious reason why this should be so, except for dangers lurking within instability. The leading one of these is terrorism, said to breed in the “ungoverned spaces” of failing states. But again, the evidence here is poor—terrorists are emerging from many places, some less governed corners of states otherwise governed well (Pakistan), in other cases within some of the most intensively governed nations on earth (Western Europe), in still others from perfectly stable if imperfectly-governed states (Morocco, Indonesia). The causal connection between state failure and terrorism is weak.

Then, too, what are we to do with this conclusion, even if we accept it? What comes after Iraq and Afghanistan? Does the American public have the stomach for more nation-building adventures? In the midst of a half-century-worst economic crisis, do we have the means? Are we going to intervene in places like Yemen? Nigeria? Pakistan? And if not, why are we play-acting with a doctrine we know very well we have no intention of ever putting into practice when the hard cases emerge?

In the end, 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. It turns out, however, that U.S. defense policy already has been playing a role that serves the interests of the world community. And those interests are, in fact, more important than placing the United States in service of asymmetric and nontraditional missions.

Forgetting What We Do Best

Because, perhaps most powerfully, the call to focus on irregular warfare disregards what the United States does best from a military standpoint—and what its most important global role has been, and should continue to be. The U.S. military since World War Two has been a force that specialized in high-

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intensity conventional war, and which has developed forces, technologies, and doctrines so advanced that few powers consider challenging U.S. power in that domain. This is the sort of war that attracts many recruits to the U.S. military—it is the sort of war they expect to train and prepare to fight.

It is more to the point, the form of warfare *that the United States serves the international community best by dominating*. In the global system today, the abandonment by all major powers of major warfare is an increasingly accepted trend, a norm that many states and theorists hope to cement into world politics in the decades ahead. In such an environment, having a non-belligerent, widely-accepted enforcer state that enjoys a veto-strength conventional war capability against possible rogue aggressors continues to be of enormous value to the international community—and this precisely describes the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Saddam Hussein learned in 1990-1991, and as any rogue aggressor state considering large-scale conventional military aggression against a neighbor knows today, if the United States military leads a UN-sanctioned coalition against them, they will lose.

This, then, ought to be the cardinal role for U.S. military forces in the years ahead: To continue to specialize in traditional, conventional warfare, serving as the backbone of global deterrence of major war and continuing to sustain the emerging norm against territorial aggression. This norm and trend, after all, serves the United States in powerful ways, creating a world with far fewer large-scale state-based military threats to U.S. interests.

This proposal could and should reflect a strongly coalition and alliance flavor; we would remain an engaged global partner in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. It would, on the other hand, avoid involvement in other counterinsurgency, nation building, and asymmetric conflicts to the greatest degree possible. This is not to suggest that the U.S. military should have no forces capable of operating in a counterinsurgency, peace operations, or nation-building environment -- in fact it should, as a hedge against cases in which a specific such conflict were to engage true vital U.S. national interests. But these irregular warfare-dedicated forces should be small -- prized, well-tended, but at the margins rather than the core of U.S. military emphasis.

The most likely general trends in world politics in the years ahead, in fact, involve rising nationalism and identity-seeking in a world of reactions to globalization, exacerbated now by severe economic decline. The situation in some parts of the world today mirrors to some degree the context in Germany and Japan in the 1930s—nations looking for a place on the world stage, unhappy with their present roll, economically distraught, psychologically traumatized. America's task will be challenging and paradoxical: to remain capable of deterring major threats to peace that emerge out of this era without exacerbating the psychological stresses that give rise to its security threats or allowing itself to become embroiled in the psychodramas that will characterize it.

Defense Policy for a Globalizing Era—and a Restrained America

Pursuing such goals would have a few major implications for U.S. defense policy. It would mean, first of all, *dedicating only very small forces to regular training and preparation for, or participation in, counterinsurgency and irregular warfare missions*. This decision would reflect the defense policy

assumption, and the larger assumption of U.S. strategy, that the U.S. military will not, for the most part, be involved in major nation-building, civil war, or counterinsurgency situations.

The proposed shift would then allow the U.S. defense department to *reverse planned increases in the end-strengths of the Army and Marine Corps*. Absent the Iraq deployment, and without other large-scale irregular operations as part of the planning calculus, large standing ground forces become less urgent. In fact, this proposal would *call for overall U.S. active duty forces to shrink, by perhaps 20 percent, as a cost-saving measure*: The core notion is to have an extremely powerful high-technology military capable of dominating conventional warfare.

And then the United States ought to enhance its overall national security profile by *reducing the size of the “defense” budget and making enhanced investments in other instruments of national power more appropriate to the national security challenges of the current moment*. Bolstering our funds for foreign aid, public diplomacy, human exchange programs, and related non-military forms of power would do much more to address the sources of grievance that underlie the radical movements, insurgencies and terrorist groups we face in a globalizing world today. Military power is not the way to defeat such threats; and while economic, informational, diplomatic, social, psychological and other tools offer no guaranteed solution, they are the only long-term route to an answer.

The case for a conventionally-focused U.S. defense strategy thus boils down to three simple truths. Dominating the realm of large-scale conventional warfare is what the United States does best. Doing so is what the current global moment most demands of the United States—underwriting, as it does, the emerging global norm of nonaggression. And finally, the appropriate responses to nontraditional threats are best offered by nonmilitary instruments of power. These three facts point to the defense policy construct I am advocating here: Smaller U.S. military forces optimized for traditional, conventional warfare; and a reduced defense budget freeing up resources to invest slightly more in non-military instruments of power. In the bargain, we can help reverse the perception of the United States as an imperialistic, adventuristic power—without substituting isolationism, which this strategy does not begin to propose.

The dominant truth about world politics in the years to come is likely to be an intense, often frustrated search for national, cultural, and economic identity on the part of many states and peoples, a struggle with especially destabilizing potential in key regions (primarily the Middle East, to a limited degree Latin America) and countries (Russia, to some degree China) where a nationalistic anti-Western, anti-American, anti-globalization trend is well underway. Preparing to undertake risky, extended nation-building tasks around the world risks thrusting our head precisely into this emerging cauldron of national anger, pride, fear, and reaction. There is a better alternative.

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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