

DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES: Policing the New Global Commons

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In Brief

- The “new global commons” refers to the seas, the air above the seas, space, cyberspace, and, arguably, the emerging global market.
- The new global commons was a key concept in the maritime strategy announced by the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard in October 2007 with the thrust of the document being on military cooperation.
- The New Maritime Strategy using the new global commons concept, uses collaboration with other maritime forces to balance the traditional role of force to deter aggression with the new role of global integrative systems manager.

“Unconditional surrender”, “Cold War”, “Vietnamization”, and more recently, the “Global War on Terrorism” (with the somehow descriptively sounding acronym of “GWOT”) point to an American tendency to attach shorthand names to national security strategies. It’s not necessarily bad. The results usually capture key conceptual aspects of our grand strategies and help avoid getting lost among the complexities, nuances, and elasticity inherent to them. In any case, every new administration attempts to come up with a shorthand description of how it intends to use the US military and other governmental institutions to provide national security. So, it’s worth speculating about the version the Obama administration ought to formulate. One of the contenders is emerging from the Navy and Air Force as they, among other things, grapple with the prospect of a near perfect storm of a declining defense budget coinciding with a shift in budget shares to the Army and Marine Corps. They have not yet formulated the shorthand expression, but the concept involves “policing the new global commons.”

The notion is not new; it has been floating through US military journals for years. A decade and a half ago, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the euphoria of Desert Storm, there was growing speculation about a “new world order”

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and what it might mean for U.S. security strategy and capabilities. It never went very far; it was too grand an idea for the George H.W. Bush administration, which in its waning months still admonished the Defense Department to plan for a “reconstituted” Soviet military threat. Nor did the Clinton administration follow up on the idea, although it spoke of a new U.S. opportunity and the need to shape the international security environment. Near the end of the last century and into the first decade of this one, however, the notion that we were already in a fundamentally new international system took hold. We were no longer in a transition from the Cold War, or the Post-Post Cold War period, moving toward something new. The fundamental assumption changed with the realization that we are now actually *there*, with no chance of returning or of delaying the accelerating rate of change inherent in the new era. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the American occupation of Iraq were the catalysts for rhetorical acknowledgements -- but it was the search for an explanation for both events that cemented the conceptual shift, and the new allusions to olive trees and Lexuses, globalization, cyberspace, and global warming became underlying dynamics of the new era.

The conceptual foundation of the new world disorder (the term “order” doesn’t seem to fit today’s rapidly changing world) is that international security now flows from the interaction of two broad groupings. One, variously referred to as the “integrating or functioning core,” consists of nations and peoples who seek modernizing benefits from globalization and want greater economic, political, and cultural interdependence to get them. It includes nations once pitted against each other (Russia and the United States), other “advanced Industrial Age” nations (Japan, South Korea, and Canada, for example), and emerging powers (India, China, and others). The second group, a “non-integrating gap” of nations or non-governmental organizations, some of which control state power, opposes the trend toward greater global interdependency.¹ Direct threats of terrorism against members of the integrating core and against the ideas and mechanisms that drive the integration (to include political systems such as democracy and the philosophies of human rights), emanate from the gap. And because the gap often coincides with demographics of high poverty, low education, and disease, it is the source from which these spread into the core. It is the clash and interaction of these two broad groupings – the “core” and the “gap” – that increasingly drive and shape national security concerns of world affairs.

We have not yet agreed on what to call the era in which we find ourselves. “Clash of civilizations,” the “Information Age,” “fourth-generation warfare,” and even “the end of history” all capture aspects of it. But so, too, does the notion of a “new global commons.”

The New Global Commons

A “commons” is any resource shared by a group of people. It carries the notion that there is value to all who share the resource in expanding to others, so long as none who have or gain access abuse it to the detriment of the others. Freedom of the seas is one example. Access to the seas can expand trade; the wider the access to use of the seas, the greater the expansion of trade, the greater the selection of goods, the greater the wealth, the greater the value of maintaining expanding trade, and the higher the interest of all who have access to the seas in maintaining and expanding access to others. What some call the tragedy of the commons accompanies expanding access to a commons. This is the tendency of those who have access to the commons to use them at the expense of others. If the commons are

finite, efforts to monopolize them by competitors -- hoping to get as much value out of them while they last -- is an historical source of conflict and destitution of whatever value was generated when access to the commons expanded. Over-fishing, toxic chemical dumping, spam and phishing, and atmospheric pollution are all modern manifestations of the "tragedy." The historical lesson is that collaboration and cooperation in use of the commons tend to be beneficial to all, while competition for control of the commons tends to be detrimental to all.

The "new global commons" refers to the seas, the air above the seas, space, cyberspace, and, arguably, the emerging global market. The Air Force's interest in the concept flows from the service's long term interest in space. (A decade ago the Air Force was seriously considering changing its name to "The United States Aerospace Force" or "The United States Air and Space Force." More recently, cyberspace has become a much more intense Air Force focus of thought and organizational adjustment.) But the most recent systematic national security discussion of the new global commons comes in the maritime strategy announced by the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard in October 2007.

The Navy's New Maritime Strategy is fresh in the following respects:

- It is a significant, perhaps profound, recognition of the effects of the collapse of the former bifurcated international security system and globalization. It links U.S. national security and welfare to the maintenance of the global commons both directly (we get trade, money, resources, and peace from it) and indirectly (as other nations expand their wealth and power through the global commons, they develop interests in maintaining the commons and allowing others access to it. They may, however, seek to expand control over, exploit, and deny the use of the commons by the United States and others). Maintaining access to and proper use of the commons is therefore a means of preventing conflict and wars. And because of the proliferation of the means of mass destruction and disruption, preventing conflict is at least as important as winning wars -- and probably more.
- It recognizes the Navy alone cannot meet its traditional national security missions (win wars, defend the homeland), build confidence and trust among nations, and maintain the global commons. It faces a strategy-resources disparity.
- But it offers various means of addressing the disparity: combining the resources of all the sea services (Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard), closer joint collaboration with the Army and Air Force, and *expanded international partnerships*. In effect, the New Maritime Strategy balances the traditional role of presence to deter aggression by potential antagonists with the new, or at least hugely expanded, role of global integrative systems manager in collaboration with other national

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maritime forces.

The new maritime strategy argues the flash points for international conflict are now in competition in the new commons. In part, it is an effort to reorient and update thinking about military conflict with China, Russia, and other potential national opponents, and to build a framework to prevent non-state entities from using the new global commons to attack the United States. In some respects, it carries familiar collective security aspects, implicitly arguing that abuse of the seas, air above them, space, and cyberspace hurts all nations, and that the use of these commons to attack the United States or other nations jeopardizes the security and welfare of all.

The Navy is explicit about the need to maintain traditional war-fighting capabilities, to include abilities to impose local sea control, overcome challenges to access, force entry, and project power ashore in joint operations against significant military opposition. But it has relegated these capabilities to hedge status. The dominant thrust of the Navy's strategy and force planning is toward military collaboration, not competition. And while it describes a strategy ostensibly only for the use of the nation's maritime forces, it is proposing a new national strategy encompassing all U.S. military forces.

A Grand Coalition?

To be sure, U.S. policy pronouncements from the mid-1990s onward have studiously avoided identifying China or any other major power, or combination of major powers, as the threat against which the United States must plan its strategy and military capabilities. Former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld sought to purge the phrase "threat planning" from the Pentagon's planning lexicon, seeking to replace it with the notion of "capabilities planning" in part to avoid the implication that we were planning forces capable of defeating Russia or China in an all-out conventional war. But his effort was representative of the administration's Orwellian penchant for new speak. Threat planning has remained the basis of deciding what kind of forces the United States should have, and the multi-theater scenarios the Pentagon uses to push into how much is enough have always been devised to generate the kind and level of military capabilities needed to deal with a global war against a formidable conventional military threat. Estimates of the kind of threat we may face in the future flow from projections of major combat weapons systems, not from a global spread of improvised explosive devices by insurgents. (Pentagon planners do not ignore low-tech threats, but they address them in terms of how our military, built to deal with high-tech threats, may have to adjust to deal with such nuisances.)

Now, here's the Navy in effect arguing that the United States should not plan for its military forces to deal with a future "near competitor." Instead, it should focus on developing capabilities to form a new grand coalition, built on a common interest in maintaining the benefits of globalization and expanding them to the rest of the world. It starts from the presumption that Russia, China, India, and many other nations have already decided to become part of the integrating core, that they are already benefiting greatly from their access to the new commons, and that they will therefore recognize the benefit of cooperating with the United States in managing the commons and will help expand access to other nations. Although the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard present the new strategy as a guide to

the development and use of maritime forces, it is also a model for a more general national security strategy. It is quite a bold argument.

It is not strictly an endorsement of the visions of Huntington (“Clash of Civilizations”) or Barnett’s popularizations of some implications of Huntington’s thesis. It is more subtle and conscious of other intellectual threads. It is different from Wilsonian idealism or its Neocon update. It does not start from the presumption of dividing the world by the agreement of the elites of major powers, as the Wilsonians believed was possible at the beginning of the 20th century. Nor does it argue, as the Neocons did at the beginning of this century, that democracy can be imposed by armed force and will then automatically spread because of the obvious advantages and the threat that if non-democratic nations don’t reform themselves, the United States will do it for them. Nor does it jump directly to deducing force requirements solely from the implications of the “integrating core and non-integrating gap.” But it posits a new framework for doing so.

The immediate implications of the new maritime strategy are to force use rather than force design. The emphasis on collaboration represents a step back from the unilateral preemptive thrust of the early George W. Bush foreign policy, and it implies a willingness to follow existing procedures in establishing the collaboration. These could involve existing United Nations processes and bi- and multilateral negotiations. There are precedents for multilateral policing of seas and the air above them regarding piracy and air hijacking, and it is not farfetched to see expanded agreements on information sharing and collaborative maritime operations to deal with these and the transport of weapons of mass destruction components or terrorists in these two domains. These could encompass terms of transit within the two commons and at the ports and airfields of entry and exit to them. Policing space and cyberspace are less precedent-rich. But here the approach could involve similar agreements on screening out agreement-defined dangerous entities and denying access to these two commons. For example, dealing collaboratively with space and cyberspace could involve anti-satellite systems and ballistic missile defenses for policing space and virus screening technology for cyberspace.

Theoretically, there could also be a pre-emptive twist to the collaboration focused on the launch sites for either the space or cyberspace that a hostile “outsider” might contemplate using. That kind of major power—integrating core collaboration seems today to be a significant stretch, even though it is possible to point to some harbingers. If that collaboration is combined with an agreed transparency and no first-use agreements on cyber attacks among members of the integrating core, however, it is a logical extension of the general thrust of the strategy.

Force Implications

While the United States could implement a collaborative policing of the new commons strategy with today’s force, it’s worth speculating on what a force optimized for such a strategy would look like. Here, again, the Navy’s October 2007 pronouncement provides some pointers that would apply generally to the character of the total U.S. force.

- **Numbers:** Part of the Navy’s rationale for moving toward greater collaboration with other nations is the constraints that its limited numbers of ships impose on what it can do unilaterally. Combining efforts with others provides all the obvious advantages of wider, more frequent global coverage and force mass where and when it is needed. The same rationale applies across the other U.S. military services. To the extent they have more units through effective collaboration (that is dedicated to the same purposes), the strategy would be easier to implement.

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But numbers beget numbers. It is logical that the U.S. would have to (and probably want to) contribute to the collaboration directly. That contribution could involve less force than would be required should the United States undertake a policing mission unilaterally. But to the extent that the country has more forces, it theoretically would have more capability to generate and participate in collaborative efforts throughout the world. Collaboration is therefore not a means of reducing the size of U.S. military forces; it is an argument favoring more numerous participants in collaborative efforts. U.S. forces could meet this in three ways: add units, change the units, and change the force structures within which the units function. The Navy plans to use all three approaches. Its ship-building plan calls for an overall increase in the numbers of ships, largely through the introduction of smaller vessels (littoral combat ships), which will operate in a more distributed fashion. Each of the military services could adopt a similar approach or could aim to get around the costs of increased numbers of battalions (Army and Marine Corps), ships (Navy), and aircraft (Air Force) through structural and operational changes.

- **Greater Collaborative Capabilities.** One logical development would be enhanced collaborative capabilities at the tactical level, to include C4ISR technologies, protocols, and procedures. If U.S. forces are to operate effectively with Chinese, Russian, and other forces in a coalition, they would have to be better able to communicate, coordinate, and share information. But there is a broader reason also: to help overcome suspicions and a reluctance to operate too closely with U.S. military forces. This is a function of the disparity between U.S. and other military forces, generally. Given the considerable lead in military capabilities the United States currently has, other nations do not usually welcome exposing their relative deficiencies by being too open. Nor would it be easy for the United States to be too open about ours. We enjoy the lead we have and do not wish to make it easy for any other nation to catch up to or surpass us. This makes openness a clear signal that we are serious not only about tactical effectiveness, but also about moving toward a new grand strategy dedicated to collaboration rather than military competition with other members of the integrating core.
- **Interdependence?** This last point raises the issue of how much military interdependence we would want. The cost of collaboration can come at the expense of independence, and it is

doubtful if the United States would agree to or want to go too far in shifting to a new world order that increasingly curtails its freedom of action in the use of military force. On the other hand, the cost of independence and the unilateral actions it facilitates can come at the expense of missing the opportunities created by closer collaboration with China, Russia, India, and others. The potential opportunities of a new era of collaboration include greater security against the attacks of terrorists, who must slip through the seams of global surveillance, movement control, and legality to attack us and others who ride the crest of globalization. They include more effective global efforts to reverse the widening gap between the haves and have-nots -- between the beneficiaries of globalization and those who are being left behind by it -- that feed the hatred and willingness of the suicide attackers. And they may increase the chances of obtaining that great goal of the last century -- peace in our time and for future generations.

Military interdependence may now just be another word for reality. And it may be an integral part of the new global commons.

The notion of policing the new global commons has not, of course, been elevated to the status of a national security strategy. It is, however, worth considering. And with the right shorthand moniker it just might get there.

Endnotes

1 Thomas Barnett coined the two terms in his 2004 book, *The Pentagon's New Map*. But the division between "haves" and "have nots", "modern and non-modern", "developed and developing" (or the older "undeveloped"), and other global bifurcations has a long list of references in economic, sociological, UN, and other literature. Barnett has popularized the notion and, in particular, put it into a US national security context. His style reflects contemporary shock broadcast programs and blogs, but his argument is straight forward: (1) globalization is inevitable, but that the spread of globalization is guaranteed to create political and military conflict; (2) We need to firewall the core from the Gap's worst exports: pandemics, narcotics, and terror. And we need to shrink the gap by exporting security into it. This requires two forces - the Leviathan (the warfighting force) and the SysAdmin (the peacemaking, rebuilding, stabilization force.).

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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