PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

Avoiding Hubris in a World of Asymmetric Warfare

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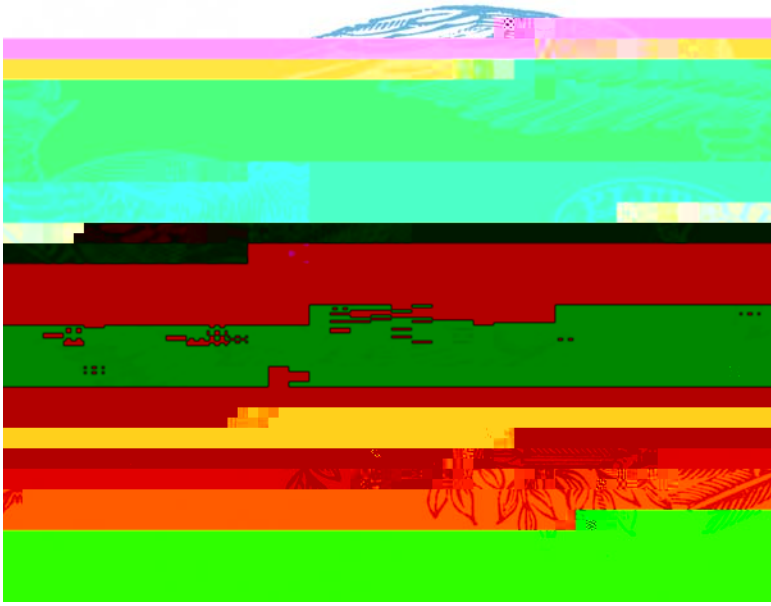

duced reconsideration. The widespread use of improvised explosive devices against American troops in Iraq, the parallel successes that Iraqi insurgents enjoyed, and then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's strong emphasis on transforming the U.S. military's conventional fighting capabilities into untouchably modern technological ones at the same time that a bloody ground war caused increasing American combat casualties prepared the way for the Defense Department's (DoD) current interest in the broad category of asymmetric warfare whose specific current threat to the U.S. and its allies the military refers to as irregular warfare.

In its most recent self-assessment for example, the 2006 Quadrennial Review, DoD listed its three major mission areas as homeland defense first; irregular warfare second; and conventional campaigns last. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates strongly supports increasing the U.S.'s ability to conduct asymmetrical warfare. "History," he told the Association of the U.S. Army in the fall of 2007, "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," Gates continued, "that asymmetric warfare will remain the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time." More recently, Gates wrote in the first *Foreign Affairs* issue of 2009 that the U.S. "needs a military whose ability to kick down the door is matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterwards." This coincided with the Pentagon's declaration that "it is DoD policy to recognize that irregular warfare is as strategically important as traditional warfare."

The Bureaucracy Reacts

DoD's bureaucracy is responding. The Army opened a new Army Asymmetric Warfare Office (AAWO). More important, the service rewarded its successful Iraqi commander, General David Petraeus, by appointing him as head of a promotion board for newly-minted (brigadier) generals, thus increasing the likelihood that Petraeus' skills at counter-insurgency will increasingly characterize future Army leaders.

In December, the Defense Department issued a new directive on humanitarian and civic assistance (HCA) that demonstrates its seriousness of purpose by requiring increased inter-agency coordination with the State Department; by requiring the combatant commanders to include humanitarian and civic assistance in their planning; and by specifying the importance of doctors, dentists, pharmacists, health administrators as well as masons, electricians, carpenters, and heavy construction equipment operators to HCA activities.

The U.S. Special Operations Command budget, although reduced from its level

at the height of the Iraq war, continues to register impressive geometric increases over the command's beginnings in 1987.

The Navy published a "new maritime strategy" a year ago that links futurist assumptions about global resource scarcity to an increase in failed states and promotes deterring conflict in these regions over winning it in more conventional areas of potential great power dispute such as the western Pacific. The list goes on.

The new administration should look carefully at the shift in U.S. military emphasis that is underway, and satisfy itself that we do not exchange an excess of conventional forces for an excess of irregular warfare capability. Changing the course of an institutional behemoth such as DoD is extremely difficult, but once accomplished is more likely to result in oversteer than the slight adjustment that was originally intended.

For example, the Navy's wise decision to build nuclear-powered submarines toward the beginning of the Cold War produced a naval shipbuilding bureaucracy today that—despite the extraordinarily quiet characteristics of diesel-electric and air-independent boats that Chinese and Russian yard are now turning out—will not consider non-nuclear propulsion. With more demonstrably harmful consequences, the post-World War I French military institutional attachment to a static defense famously discouraged the design of equipment and development of tactics that might have halted the Nazi air and armored assault in the spring of 1940.

What is Asymmetry?

A thorough review of strategic planning is required. Secretary Gates has spoken publicly of the need for balanced forces. He's right. The new administration should satisfy itself that the shape of the military that DoD now envisions fits reasonable predictions of future threats to vital American interests. A very intellectually rigorous definition of asymmetric warfare ought to be part of this assessment. Asymmetry is to success in war as diagnosis is to success in treating the sick

Asymmetry should be a part of any plan that expects opposition. How many intelligent strategies or commanders ever planned to match an enemy man for man, weapon for weapon, and tactic for tactic? Lord Nelson's crossing of the "T" was an asymmetry in tactics that destroyed the combined French and Spanish fleet at Trafalgar. The size and equipment of the Union army was an asymmetry in force—and a similar ability to overwhelm the enemy with the tools of war was just as important to Allied success in World War II. The U.S.'s effort to develop effective anti-ballistic missile defenses is an effort to provide security through asymmetric

technology. Irregular warfare (IW) in the form of terrorism is one current example of the asymmetry that a very small force can use to produce a disproportionate effect on large states. A handful of terrorists in a large Indian city bring two nuclear powers to heightened alert status.

The Pentagon published a new directive in December 2008 that defines irregular warfare to "include…counter-terrorism; unconventional warfare; foreign internal defense; counter-insurgency; and stability operations that, in the context of IW, involve establishing or re-establishing order in a fragile state." The skills needed for these activities are the same as those required to sustain civilized human existence in the contemporary world: governance, commerce, education, communications, medicine, law, police, and construction, to name a few large ones. Direct military action, as Gates notes in his *Foreign Affairs* article, remains important in fighting violent extremists, but for the most part "it will take the patient accumulation of quiet successes over a long time to discredit and defeat extremist movements and their ideologies."

At the same time, other insistent and serious conventional threats continue to multiply, ones that do not demand quiet successes to counter, but rather convincing and skillful demonstration that traditional force can be brought to bear with decisive results. China is gradually transforming its military from its previous config-

a minimum increase of 15 percent in the number of combatant ships which today has slipped well below half the level achieved during the Reagan administration.

Hubris

Overconfidence, or what the ancients called "hubris" is as troublesome for individuals as for states. Almost two decades ago, a substantial and vocal part of the defense community—from significant numbers of intellectuals, officers, and contractors—convinced themselves that technological advances in the accuracy of weapons, the capabilities of satellites, miniaturization, sensors, and computing speed heralded seamless tactical communications, precision, and standoff capability of such magnitude that the advancing technologies together formed what experts called "the revolution in military affairs." Network-centric warfare would weave together these technological accomplishments and dominate battle spaces as they had never been dominated.

Impressive as these technologies are, and as useful as they might prove in operations against a large armored or mechanized force, they were far less effective in reducing the deaths of U.S. troops from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) than what actually worked: exploiting Al Qaeda's mistakes in Iraq. This required understanding the enemy and taking the fullest advantage of *his* weakness. Our excessive confidence in military technology was hubristic. It contributed to the difficulty the U.S. military experienced in defeating asymmetric challenges, and may yet prove a vulnerability as other states attempt to take advantage of its vulnerabilities, for example growing dependence on satellite systems that—as China demonstrated in January 2007—can be destroyed.

At roughly the same time that the limitations of highly complex battlefield technology became more apparent, a similar realization about the limits of technology to supply useful intelligence dawned. Ancient Middle East tribal loyalties appeared to possess a power that matched, or perhaps surpassed, the U.S.'s extraordinary system of spy satellites and remarkable ability to listen to, decode, and interpret electronic signals around the world. Superior technology offered no royal road to the secrets of radical extremists who trust only long-familiar members of the same or friendly tribes. Advanced algorithms and computers that perform more than one quadrillion floating point operations per second seem to have no place in penetrating such clans or the intelligence communicated among them.

The problem that faces both the new administration and the U.S. defense establishment is how to build and field forces that can succeed at traditional warfare, irregular warfare, and conflict in the fuzzy interstices between these two as is represented by the potential for harm from a nation such as Iran that would use

even a small nuclear arsenal as a shield for supporting terror in the region and around the world.

The U.S. needs forces that can deter or if required, fight against and defeat conventional militaries. The nation also needs forces that can operate effectively in the face of unconventional threats. The languages, skill sets, tactics, weapons, communications, logistics, strategies, and cultural understanding required to succeed at these two contrasting forms of warfare are very different. Naval forces equipped to provide humanitarian and disaster relief services need languages, medical services tailored to the regions in which they will operate, construction and perhaps administrative expertise similarly appropriate to their target area. These skills are different from those required to destroy enemy submarines, launch carrier strikes against land targets, or defend against ballistic missiles. Similarly with land and air forces: constabulary services, intelligence, counter-insurgent operations, and the rebuilding of infrastructure demand different skills than an amphibious landing, or taking and holding an airstrip, then rolling back an opposing force.

A large problem is, as Secretary Gates put it in his *Foreign Affairs* article, that "military capabilities cannot be separated from the cultural traits and the reward structure of the institutions the United States has: the signals sent by what gets funded, who gets promoted, what is taught in the (military service) academies and staff colleges, and how personnel are trained." Directing a large organization to accomplish one large task successfully is difficult enough; changing its objective to include, at the same level of proficiency, other large and important missions is extremely hard. The course Gates has set is not an easy one.

The distinguished twentieth-century accompanist, Gerald Moore, told a story about how as a young man he had accompanied for the first time a distinguished diva of the day. Just before beginning to sing, she leaned over the piano and whispered to Moore, "Not too loud." He nodded and prepared again to begin playing. But she hesitated once more turning herself away from the audience to face him and whispered, "but not too soft."

understanding this weakness, will pose a conventional or perhaps nuclear threat. If the Navy decides that deterring war is more important than preparing to win one, it will be forced to do the latter.

The new administration should satisfy itself that the balanced course Secretary Gates has set matches its objectives for providing national security. It should examine thoroughly the strategic choices the U.S. faces as new powers—some friendly and others less so—emerge; radical religious extremists continue their ideological and armed assault on civilization; weapons of mass destruction proliferate; and challenges to America's position as the world's great power increase. These are not all military problems, but to the extent that they are, the new administration should begin by identifying how to address them, and balance is critical to success. Achieving it is important to the future effectiveness of the U.S. military, and requires the administration's full support. ■

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