Military Strategy Under Review

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Key Points

- The new military strategy retains a focus on major regional wars. It complements this with increased attention to possible new major competitors arising after 2010-2015.
- The Pentagon sees an increased role for the armed forces in "shaping" the peacetime strategic environment in ways favorable to U.S. interests.
- Cold war strategy sought parity with the Soviet Union as key to deterrence; the new strategy sees permanent global military superiority as necessary to maintaining U.S. world leadership.

In May 1997, Defense Secretary William Cohen submitted to Congress the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)—the Pentagon's third attempt to outline a post-cold war military strategy. Ordered by Congress as part of the 1997 Defense Authorization Act, it surveys America's defense needs through the year 2015 and provides a strategic justification for the administration's defense program. The QDR also is the template for the annual National Military Strategy (NMS) document and sets out guidance for regional military policy.

While carrying forward key elements of the 1993 Bottom Up Review (BUR), the QDR reconfigures them as part of a more proactive strategy. Outstanding among its prescriptions is an expanded role for the military in U.S. foreign policy and a distinct elevation of national military objectives.

The QDR proposes that the U.S. develop and use its armed forces to do three things: respond to crises, shape the strategic environment in ways favorable to U.S. interests, and prepare now for possible future threats. Secretary Cohen notes that the "shape" and "prepare" functions have gained greater prominence since the BUR. Partly, this means less emphasis on existing threats and more on future, hypothetical ones. Specifically, the QDR warns of unnamed future "peer" competitors and the proliferation of revolutionary new weapons and military techniques.

During the cold war, strategists planned for possible future wars primarily by extrapolating from the "real and present" potential of the Soviet Union. By comparison, the QDR's futurism is speculative, tilting at uncertainty itself. Implicit in this is a qualitatively higher standard of security and an increased sensitivity to risk. In practical terms, the injunction to "prepare now" helps set the quantity and pace of next-generation weapon purchases. Even the size of today's standing military is partly rationalized as a hedge against the early emergence of a larger than expected future foe.

“Environment shaping,” the other ascendant element in the new strategy, prescribes a more active peacetime use of military power to influence the course of strategic affairs. It encompasses not only traditional deterrence, but also the goals of discouraging other nations from even trying to compete militarily with the U.S. and of “preventing the emergence of a hostile regional coalition or hegemon.” Key to achieving this novel “preemptory” deterrence is the maintenance of a robust U.S. regional presence, a daunting degree of U.S. military superiority, and a technological edge that no prospective competitor could hope to diminish.

Crisis response is the strategy’s third element, and it covers preparations for today’s conflicts, both large and small. The QDR recognizes that the demand for smaller operations has grown. Nonetheless, it retains the BUR’s emphasis on major regional wars. Although the threat of such wars and the power of regional rivals has receded, the QDR makes clear that U.S. strategic and operational objectives have grown more ambitious.

The BUR had stated a need for the ability to fight and win two major regional wars at once. The new strategy leaves no doubt that this requirement is a generic one, not tied to the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. The 1997 National Military Strategy asserted that even should the threats in the Gulf and Northeast Asia diminish, a two-war capability would remain “critical to maintaining our global leadership.”

The 1998 National Security Strategy avoids references to the Persian Gulf or Northeast Asia altogether in its section on “Major Theater Warfare.” Thus, what may motivate American involvement in a broader, more demanding set of regional conflicts is not specific interests, but a general one. As the QDR puts it, a generalized two-war capability is “the sine qua non of a superpower.”

Rising ambitions are also evident in the proposed method for fighting regional wars. The Bush administration’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance had put forward the goal of winning these wars within 100 days—half the time it took for the Gulf War. The QDR sets an even higher standard by requiring a capability “to rapidly defeat initial enemy advances short of their objectives.” Finally, U.S. military strategy adopts the most ambitious and expensive way of fighting two such wars at once. It rejects the option of pursuing victory in one theater at a time. Instead, major counter-offensives must commence in both almost simultaneously.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Key Problems

- The new strategy weakens the link between US military power and immediate or compelling threats—making it more difficult to set limits and priorities.

- The QDR puts too much emphasis on large-scale wars that are increasingly unlikely or speculative.
- The strategy prescribes using military superiority to deter or contain potential competitors before they even arise. This may prompt the competition that the strategy aims to avert.

The QDR strategy loosens the link between military power and specific interests and threats. "Global leadership" takes their place as a central force rationale. Leadership, in turn, hinges on permanent global military superiority, which becomes an important goal in itself—a historical first for the United States. In Secretary Cohen's view, "Without such superiority, our ability to exert global leadership and to create conditions conducive to the achievement of our national goals would be in doubt."

Military primacy is supposed to be the antidote for what most concerns Pentagon strategists today: uncertainty. However, the strategy's embrace of goals that are both ambitious and poorly defined creates several dilemmas. The plans for fighting major regional wars illustrate how these play out. The Pentagon feels compelled to accelerate such wars and win two at once not because America's stake in distant conflicts is growing, but because it has diminished. For this reason, public support for large-scale intervention is thought to hinge on winning very quickly and easily. This creates tremendous demand for "war fighting" and power projection assets—even though today's foes are third-rate—and it intensifies the drive for cutting-edge weapons (as does the call to "prepare now" against a future possible peer).

The result is a "new era" military very much like the old and almost as large. Short-changed, however, are the actual operations that the military is undertaking today—primarily peace operations, as in Bosnia. A greater focus on these would produce a military different than the one the QDR envisions. It would have more light units and military police in its active component, for instance. Failing to give peace operations their due results in the paradox of a 1.4 million person military that has trouble keeping 40,000 troops deployed in such operations.

A different sort of problem concerns the reliance on military power to stem the emergence of new threats—a goal that impinges on one of the State Department's principal functions. The 1998 National Defense Panel (NDP), which Congress had commissioned to offer an alternative view on strategy, took exception to some of the environment-shaping roles that the Pentagon covets. The NDP report strongly argues that the foremost tools for enhancing regional stability should be diplomacy and development assistance, not forward-deployed military units.

The problem is two-fold. First, some of the Pentagon's aspirations threaten to drain resources away from nonmilitary policy initiatives. Second, an over-reliance on military power to shape international affairs would likely have negative inadvertent effects. Because

the strategy relies on a type of military containment to deal with nations who are not yet foes, it may push them into opposition, provoking what it is supposed to prevent.

For this reason, the National Defense University's Strategic Assessment 1997 warns that this type of dissuasion is a "two-edged sword" that "may lead others to believe that their interests are at risk, in which case they may decide they have no choice other than the use of force." China, for one, views with suspicion American efforts to extend and deepen military links with the nations surrounding China—a problem explicitly recognized in the recent U.S. strategy document on Asia.

In treating leadership as synonymous with military superiority, the new strategy will bolster the legitimacy of military power as a routine policy instrument. This stance is likely to inspire imitation among friends and foes alike.

At worst the new strategy will contribute to a process of gradual global re-militarization and re-polarization. Already this prospect has been rekindled in Europe by NATO expansion. In no other region was there a greater opportunity to bridge old divisions and demilitarize them.

But current national strategy favors multinational arrangements in which American military primacy easily translates into American institutional predominance. This means a preference for exclusive military clubs, such as NATO, rather than inclusive institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE not only emphasizes nonmilitary solutions but also includes Russia as a full member—and as a potential counterweight to U.S. influence.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

Key Recommendations

- US security policy should put greater emphasis on non-military security instruments and invest more in building inclusive multilateral security institutions.
- An appropriate military strategy would focus less on large, low probability wars and hypothetical future threats, and focus more on stability and peace operations.
- Preparations for fighting major regional wars should focus on the Korean peninsula and Persian Gulf, but plans to conduct two major counter-offensives in an overlapping time-frame should be abandoned.

Adapting U.S. strategy to today's world begins with grasping the new matrix of challenges and opportunities. As noted by CIA Director George Tenet in testimony in 1998 before the Senate intelligence committee, military threats to vital U.S. interests are declining in

magnitude, while other types of challenges have grown. Among these challenges are global economic instability, communal violence, and the dislocations associated with weakened and collapsing state structures.

Addressing these requires a re-allocation of resources and responsibility among the different agencies and instruments of U.S. security policy. Traditional military power and the Pentagon should play a smaller role than during the cold war.

Today, the U.S. international affairs budget—which covers all forms of diplomatic activity, foreign assistance, arms control, and participation in international organization—is less than seven percent as large as the Pentagon budget. This ratio has not changed significantly since the cold war, but it should. As the National Defense Panel report asserted, development assistance is often the most effective tool for enhancing long-term regional stability. Despite its great expense, the 1949 Marshall Plan paid high dividends as a security and stability-building measure. Compared to 40 years of post-World War II defense spending, it came cheaply.

The cold war's end has offered a singular opportunity to extend security cooperation across lines of political division and to make progress in demilitarizing international relations. U.S. policy should fully exploit this opening in three ways: first, by investing in inclusive security organizations, such as the UN and OSCE; second, by encouraging the reduction of national arsenals and tightening the limits on arms transfers; and third, by progressively restricting the role of armed forces in foreign policy.

The experience of the past six years suggests that progress in building effective security cooperation will not come easily. Nonetheless, America's stance should be one of progressive multilateralism: rely on multilateral instruments where they exist and are effective; where they do not exist, build them. This is the type of investment that will pay dividends in time.

"Stability assistance" together with support for regional security cooperation and demilitarization form the heart of an appropriate "environment-shaping" strategy for the new era. Unlike the current approach, this one would attempt to move the world toward an order in which armed forces could play a smaller part in keeping the peace. In the meantime, the U.S. military should focus principally on dealing with existing and likely threats—but in ways that differ from the QDR's "respond" strategy.

The threat of major regional war will continue to command our attention, but it should not transfix us. We must provide adequately for peace and stability operations, which are smaller scale but much more frequent. Regarding major theater wars, there are only two places outside Europe where U.S. interests, the needs of allies, and the magnitude of threats might coincide to compel very large-scale intervention: the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. We should not prepare to add cavalierly to these commitments. Defense

preparations for these areas should take full account of the capabilities of local allies, and we should consistently urge them to do more in their own defense—even if this means a reduction in U.S. influence.

In the eventuality of having to go to war in the Persian Gulf or Northeast Asia, the U.S. should plan to fight in distinct phases: defensive and then counter-offensive. There is no need to rush into large-scale offensive operations. Attempting to accelerate regional wars narrows the scope for diplomacy. Moreover, the cost of maintaining a “hyper war” capability on this scale draws resources away from other aspects of security policy.

Similarly, the plans to conduct major offensives in two theaters simultaneously is too costly given the very low probability of facing a double war. Should we find ourselves fighting in one theater, we should seek to deter an opportunistic attack in the other by raising readiness levels there and modestly reinforcing forward-deployed units. Should deterrence fail, the U.S. would conduct a defensive “holding” operation in the second theater until victory is won in the first.

Finally, the way to guard against the possibility of future peer antagonists is to maintain a capacity for force reconstitution. Its key elements are a strong training base, a powerful Reserve military, and an unsurpassed research and development establishment. By contrast, the current policy of keeping an overly-large active military as a hedge and proceeding with big buys of next-generation weapons draws attention and resources away from today’s challenges. Furthermore, it treats the emergence of a future military peer as a foregone conclusion and pretends to know now what would be needed to thwart it.

No strategy can dispel uncertainty completely. Absolute military security is impossible. Pursing it only creates other forms of insecurity. The country’s best hope lies in a diversified security and military strategy—one that works hard to change the rules of the game and that appreciates the real source of America’s long-term strategic flexibility: its economy, its political culture, and its people.