The Strategic Challenge of the Decade

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The necessity to regain U.S. economic strength is a pressing issue of national security, but actions taken to regain our strength cannot occur in a vacuum. Rather, economic recovery is one of three important elements of a larger strategic problem. Individually, each of the three elements is an enormous intellectual, political and organizational challenge, but they are a related set, making the problem a colossus.

The first element involves winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while continuing the larger, global war against al Qaeda and its associates in ways that achieve U.S. strategic objectives, increase stability and create a better peace. The second concerns American economic recovery, which will include a reduced defense budget. The third involves retaining real strategic and operational capability to protect America’s citizens, global interests and borders—including cyberspace—as well as to respond to natural disasters within our borders. The entire U.S. security apparatus faces these issues, as does the U.S. Congress. Recognizing the magnitude of the challenge, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates has said that “while America is at war and confronts a range of future security threats, it is important not to repeat the mistakes of the past by making drastic and ill-conceived cuts to the overall defense budget.”

The Army has important roles to play in each element of the larger strategic problem. The following perspectives may be helpful as the Army prepares its contributions to whatever solutions may emerge.

First, stimulate debate on all three elements of the strategic problem; do not let the debate focus only on one. Already the issue of defense savings...
has come to the fore. This is natural and necessary, but this issue must be understood in its context. Wartime spending cannot be sustained forever without damaging the nation’s economy. If a nation is serious about success in war, however, spending must match requirements associated with fighting and ending the war consistent with national interests and strategic goals. Most of the public discussion is about the costs of fighting. These are significant, but the costs of ending a war need equal attention.

The costs of ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fall into several categories. We are now facing the first category in Iraq—costs associated with the redeployment of forces and enacting the sets of transitional activities necessary to end an insurgency. Insurgencies do not end with a surrender ceremony. They peter out when the political, economic, and security conditions dry up support for insurgents and they are seen as criminals. Creating these conditions continues even after the hard fighting ends. As the February attack in Kirkuk, Iraq, demonstrates, the insurgents are still trying to rekindle the embers of sectarian violence. Even after our military presence ends in Iraq and combat operations wind down in Afghanistan, al Qaeda and its associates will continue to fight.

The second category of war-ending costs are associated with recovery from combat operations. In fighting the current wars, the United States chose to use the equipment it had on hand and to field new equipment only in the amounts necessary for fighting. This was a prudent decision, but it has consequences. As the wars wind down, America’s Army has a pool of war-worn equipment. Part of the recovery costs, therefore, will be allocated to refurbishment. Other recovery costs will be aimed at war-worn soldiers, leaders and families. America’s general approach to “use something up and throw it away” will not work with respect to its Army.

The final war-ending cost concerns readiness—preparing the Army for what the nation may need it to do in the future. Threats to American strategic interests will not end in 2014. Could any American administration turn its back—saying it is “too busy” or “too overwhelmed,” or “not in our interest”—on the implosion of North Korea or a war on the Korean Peninsula and the associated post-conflict activities such a war would create? Or on Pakistan, should the state fail and disintegrate, risking the security of nuclear weapons or materials? Or on attacks on American soil? Preparing for these possibilities—as well as a number of other realistic contingencies that could result from the confluence of demographic shifts, competition for natural resources, disruptions to energy flow and civil unrest in areas important to U.S. strategic interests—are just some examples of war-ending readiness costs.

Second, give voice to balancing requirements, affordability and risk. A full analysis and discussion of the three elements of the strategic problem we face will result in identifying a set of reasonable requirements that are unaffordable to our nation. Identifying the requirements nevertheless remains an important intellectual task. Without a clear-eyed understanding of what is actually required, the nation and the Army cannot have a proper discussion of “prudent strategic risk.” Given the state of our economy, the United States cannot afford “too much” defense. Given its global interests and the acknowledged threats to those interests described in both the National Security Strategy and the Quadrennial Defense Review, however, the nation can neither afford “too little.”

Third, study and learn from the past. No two historical periods are exactly alike, but as Sir Michael Howard reminds us in *The Lessons of History*, “Our awareness of the world and our capacity to deal intelligently with its problems are shaped not only by the history we know but by what we do not know. Ignorance, especially the ignorance of educated men, can be a more powerful force than knowledge” (emphasis in the original). Our nation and our Army have faced strategic problems like this before: after the war in Vietnam and after the first Gulf War.

After the Vietnam War, the nation’s strategic debate resulted in two requirements: Central Europe including the northern and southern flanks and the air/sea-lanes between the United States and Europe, and the Korean Peninsula. Any unforeseen contingencies would be handled by the forces derived from
these requirements. As the Army downsized, it also refocused. In doing so, and with help from Congress and the Department of Defense, the Army created the volunteer Army, structured a “total Army” with its reserve components, retained its ability to expand via mobilization, and focused its training and equipment on conventional warfare. In the process, the Army created the light infantry division and a Ranger regiment, modernized its equipment, reformed its training methodology, and changed its education and promotion selection processes. This postwar downsizing period was unique. Many of the historical conditions present then do not exist now. How the nation and the Army thought through this period and then translated that thought into action, however, will shed some light on the strategic debate that should occur in our current situation.

After the first Gulf War, the strategic debate resulted in requiring the U.S. military to be prepared to succeed in two simultaneous major regional contingencies—one on the Korean Peninsula and another in Southwest Asia. Again, any unforeseen contingencies would be handled by the forces derived from this requirement. The Army downsized again, and as it did so it began to shift its reserve components’ focus from a strategic reserve to an operational reserve. The “two major regional contingencies” strategy would rely less on full mobilization. Reliance on contractor support rose sharply as much of the Army’s logistics capability was “outsourced.”

Recognizing the power of emerging information technologies, the Army began a long and successful investment in “digitizing” its forces, which ultimately concluded with the creation of Stryker brigade combat teams and a suite of other equipment and capabilities now in use.

The conditions the nation and the Army face today are different, but the post-Gulf War period will also be illustrative of the kind of strategic debate that should be happening now.

“A persistent and repeated error through the ages,” writes Donald Kagan in On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace, “has been the failure to understand that the preservation of peace requires active effort, planning, the expenditure of resources and sacrifice, just as war does.” As a nation, we are tired from more than nine years of war, none more so than those who have been fighting and the families who have waited anxiously for the return of their loved ones.

For the sake of our citizens and our future, America must succeed in its economic recovery. Yet we face a colossus of a strategic problem. The challenge is to think and act our way through all three elements of that problem. Solving one without adequate solutions to the others could result in a decade marked by further economic decline and an even more unstable security environment.

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