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Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare

by

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Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

President John F. Kennedy[1]

In the past few decades the United States has witnessed two contrasting global security environments. In one, the world was deadlocked in a struggle between East and West, marked by heated maneuvering among capitalist, communist and unaligned nations. In this environment, the driving focus for the United States was the containment of communism as outlined in George Kennan's *Long Telegram* of 1946.[2] Notice in President Kennedy's statement above that the proliferation of democracy is not a part of the U.S. focus. During the Cold War the United States was more willing to expend effort to contain communism than it was to encourage democracy. In fact, the United States supported or feigned ignorance toward many regimes more heavy-handed than the Soviet Union's. This single-minded crusade, more or less a mantra of the United States for 40 years, was carried on in various forms by every administration.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the global security environment endured a radical, unforeseen change followed by almost a decade of uncertainty and distress. Downsizing the armed forces while increasing deployments for military operations other than war (MOOTW) overstretched the military to obscene proportions. Furthermore, the United States' armed forces suddenly existed in a world that lacked the threat they had been molded for a half-century to defeat, and they operated under new management that could not—or would not—wield them effectively. The potential existed for civil-military relations at the highest echelons to come completely unraveled, and at times it appeared they would. After serious political debacles in the Balkans and Africa and numerous unanswered terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens and servicemembers at home and abroad, culminating with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, a new global security environment was forged.

Transformations in Response to Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare

This new security environment was in stark contrast to the previous one. Absent were the bipolar struggle and the mutually-assured-destruction doctrine that required preparation for conventional war. Instead, the United States did not know its enemy at all and did not have a half-century of time

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to tailor a force for that enemy. In fact, U.S. national security policies and forces considered ideal in the face-off with the Soviet Union could be rendered near-ineffective against this new enemy—terrorists using asymmetric warfare, staging from an area in which the United States has little strategic interest. A force that had known its primary threat as an identified tank division crossing Germany's Fulda Gap during a conventional war suddenly didn't know who, what, when, where or why it would be fighting next, but did know it would have to dispatch entire brigade combat teams to the scene in a matter of hours. This challenge was unexpected and daunting.

The policies of the United States overall were focused and consistent during the Cold War:

- the containment of communism,
- the proliferation of democracy or, at least, U.S.-friendly regimes, and
- heavy engagement in brinksmanship which could, technically, be included in containment of communism but grew to such lengths and shaped the security environment so greatly it quickly became a system of actions and reactions all its own.

The last is evidenced by John J. Weltman's statement in *World Politics and the Evolution of War*:

> The American nuclear arms buildup at the end of the Eisenhower years and at the beginning of the Kennedy presidency may thus have been a response not so much to what the Soviets were then actually doing but to what they had done in the 1940s and the early 1950s, to the menacing sound of Soviet rhetoric and to the domestic political situation in the United States, which made fear of the Soviets paramount and American politicians vulnerable to the charge that they were allowing the United States to "fall behind" in the arms race. . . . Similarly, the Soviets undertook a great nuclear weapons buildup in the 1970s.[3]

The new global security environment emerging during the decade after the Cold War and cemented by 2001's terrorism attacks required a nearly complete overhaul of U.S. policies. We could no longer assume that our enemies would approach through central Europe. We no longer knew the caliber of conventional or nuclear forces we would face.

The new factors forming U.S. national security policies were not as comfortable, predictable and easy to counter as those of the previous global security environment. U.S. policies of the new global security environment were marked by:

- the transition to the information age;
- the disposition of the Cold War that left the United States as the world's only superpower, greatly increasing the chance our next enemy would employ asymmetric warfare against us; and
- the absence of a looming threat like the Cold War battle against communism, which meant the United States would use the armed forces in situations described by Donald M. Snow's "interest-threat mismatch" as employments of choice and not necessity.[4]

In this new global security environment—an information-centric age in which the United States is the hegemon that will no doubt be faced with asymmetric warfare in current and future years—the military needed to transform itself across the board. Personnel, equipment, units and organizational structure all had to respond differently, work differently and fulfill completely different expectations than previously envisioned. The existing system did not possess the organizational capacity or capabilities to accommodate requirements placed on it by the new environment. Initiatives such as the Homeland Security Department—established in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States to coordinate information-sharing and reduce the duplication of effort—

have been almost wholly *reactive* approaches rather than *proactive*. The United States took almost a decade after the end of the Cold War to realize the need to change, and it will probably take another decade for this change to fully materialize. However, the United States will definitely be in a better position to adjust to any future changes in the environment than it has been in the past.

Snow's interest-threat mismatch is nothing new to the United States and its armed forces. Fully a decade before the end of the Cold War the United States began seeing the potential of being drawn into employments of choice in places where it would not have to battle communism in any form. By the end of the Cold War, the interest-threat mismatch was in full swing, even as the United States continued in its long-established role of global constabulary with forces engaged in low-intensity conflict in every region of the world.

The greatest implications for U.S. forces would be the unintended transformation that occurred during the early 1990s as a result of military downsizing and then the deliberate transformation begun in the late 1990s when planners realized the need for change. The United States now had to be able to respond to a wide variety of circumstances, including civil unrest, humanitarian relief, halting genocide, peacekeeping, stabilization and state-building. The country needed a force as flexible and deployable as those missions were wide-ranging. Where U.S. armed forces were once a hammer—a tool with only one function, to destroy the Soviet Union—they now needed to be a Swiss Army knife, versatile enough to complete any task and not so specialized as to be able to complete only one.

Employments of necessity, while less prevalent in the modern security environment, are still real possibilities requiring U.S. forces' preparation. "The U.S. homeland remains physically at almost as much risk now from Russian nuclear weapons as it was during the old war from Soviet nuclear weapons . . . and strategic surprises can still occur and necessitate action."[5] Although no conventional force will rival the United States for a long time (even if China or the European Union were to face us man-for-man, our technology is vastly superior), "[t]he American military is now the strongest the world has ever known, both in absolute terms and relative to other nations; stronger than the Wehrmacht in 1940, stronger than the legions at the height of Roman power. For years to come, no other nation is likely even to try to rival American might."[6]

Employments of choice most likely will dictate U.S. engagements for the next several decades. As the global hegemon, the United States is endowed with the luxury of choosing the times and places to employ its forces. Also, as we do not have to face head-on a heavily armored conventional force, our lighter and more deployable forces, tasked with the variety of missions listed above, will be able to move more quickly and will be imbued with new tactics. Increasing numbers of soldiers are being instructed in military operations-urban terrain (MOUT) techniques, stability operations and support operations (SOSO), hostage rescue, force protection, counterterror, civil affairs, peacekeeping and civil disturbance techniques. While these skills would have been useless in a total war fought across Europe by U.S. forces of the Cold War era, they were useful in the conflicts in Latin America in the 1980s and are even more so in today's engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. As these activities become typical of daily military operations and units are shaped to focus on such missions, the forces that are at the core of today's combat arms—the armor, field artillery and infantry that won World War II—may find themselves relegated to the sidelines as the bulk of our future operations are fought by military police and civil affairs soldiers.

"State-building" is well under way in both Afghanistan and Iraq, despite the inherent reluctance of the United States (itself a product of a previous era's "state-building") to play the role of sponsor. Still, Snow presents three solid arguments the United States will have to answer before it can be successful with state-building:

- We have had limited success with state-building in places such as Cuba, Japan and Germany, although those examples of state-building differ from what would be required today in non-industrialized, non-democratic states.
- State-building is a costly and uncertain investment—these nations have little in the way of infrastructure or an educated base of citizens.
- The citizenry will not always accept change. The deeply divided populations of Iraq and Afghanistan stand in stark contrast to the more homogenous populations of Germany or Japan as we attempt to impose Western-style, Christianity-rooted democracy and values on them. A governmental system simply *backed* by a Western-style, Christianity-rooted democracy could be enough to incite suspicion and resistance from indigenous populations in Afghanistan and Iraq.[7]

The abrupt and unanticipated change in the global security environment that came with the fall of the Soviet Union caught the United States unprepared. While the United States willingly accepted the title of lone global superpower, it also had to accept the frightening challenge of being prepared for any eventuality the new global security environment could throw at it. The U.S. military has had to shift from using Cold War-era forces to engage in brinksmanship with potential challengers (China, North Korea or even the European Union) to deploying in just a few weeks, and with little or no forewarning, division- to corps-sized elements in response to regional conflicts. Its intelligence, investigative and protective services now must serve counterterror functions as well. Meanwhile, the next great challenge to U.S. security may not even be military but economic or political as ties with some European countries have become strained and the European Union and China gain increasing economic power worldwide.

The United States, once its forces and agencies realize the transformations being envisioned today, will be more versatile and alert than before and therefore better able to handle a wider range of contingencies, from conventional total war to humanitarian support and relief. U.S. unpreparedness for what came after the end of the Cold War led, more than a decade later, to a valuable lesson that the Department of Homeland Security, the civilian and military leadership in the Department of Defense, and others who witnessed the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, will not soon forget—to be prepared for any contingency at any time.

The Bush Doctrine and Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare

Several Presidents have committed the nation to courses of action that have revolutionized U.S. national security strategies and policies as well as the global security environment of the time. James Monroe prohibited colonialist intervention in the Western Hemisphere, Harry Truman committed the United States to containment of communism, and George W. Bush made a bold stand against terrorism with his National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2002.

> The Bush NSS . . . sets three tasks: "We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent." It's worth comparing these goals with the three the Clinton administration put forth in its final NSS, released in December 1999: "To enhance America's security. To bolster America's economic prosperity. To promote democracy and human rights abroad." The differences are revealing. The Bush objectives speak of defending, preserving, and extending peace. Bush calls for cooperation among great powers; Clinton never uses that term. . . . Bush comes across as more forceful, more carefully crafted, and—unexpectedly—more multilateral than [his] immediate predecessor.[8]

The strategy, on one hand, is revolutionary: we are proactive and take great liberties as the global hegemon, committing ourselves to a near-managerial role for the rest of the world. In fact, the President goes so far as to assume "other great powers *prefer* [emphasis in the original] management of the international system by a single hegemon as long as it's a relatively benign one." Bush says this is a far better option when offered as an alternative to the heavy-handed and oppressive regimes of previous years.[9]

In addition to his proactive stance on the proliferation of freedom and democracy, Bush committed the United States for the first time ever to a security posture—preemption—that will keep the world on edge for many years as it anxiously evaluates the degree of success achieved during that posture's pilot run in the Republic of Iraq.

After a decade of terrorist attacks against the United States that went largely unanswered, terrorism could no longer be considered a passing craze. Indeed, it has been a tactic employed with notable success since the dawn of warfare and remains a threat to industrialized democracies across the world. With the strategy of preemption, the United States will take great liberties anywhere in the world where it can build a qualified argument against terrorists or terror-friendly regimes. While preemption is definitely a fear-provoking notion and may not be the wisest path for a global hegemon to adopt due to the danger of becoming tyrannical or perceived as such, the Bush administration considers it almost a requirement for survival in the aftermath of 11 September 2001.

The two most global elements of national power—diplomacy and military might—play significant roles in President Bush's National Security Strategy. He outlines an approach wherein much of the responsibility lies on nations to take an active role in their own or their region's affairs, in stark contrast to the often all-encompassing tactics of collective defense and containment of Communism that defined the Cold War era. The strategy describes the two routes the United States would take with regard to defusing regional conflicts:

> The United States should invest time and resources into building international relationships and institutions that can help manage local crises when they emerge.
>
> The United States should be realistic about its ability to help those who are unwilling or unready to help themselves. Where and when people are ready to do their part, we will be willing to move decisively.[10]

The strategy acknowledges at the outset that the United States cannot expend all its resources and energies to relieve regional instabilities, and that no doctrine can foresee all possible eventualities. As described by the strategy, this aspect leans heavily on "an interconnected world" and working "with friends and partners to alleviate suffering and restore stability."[11]

The military aspect of national power began assuming its future role years before President Bush took office. In the confusion following the Cold War, the military knew it was time for a transformation and set about accomplishing it despite much adversity, dissension and uncertainty. The recent increase in terrorism and subsequent increase in support to the military facilitated by the Bush administration accelerated this transformation and, in the process, enabled the forces to improve their current quality and capabilities (i.e., maintaining a larger Current Force than was anticipated prior to the Global War on Terrorism while building the Future Force).

Although almost all of the attention focuses on the brigade combat teams and the "lighter, more deployable force" that General Eric K. Shinseki envisioned during his term as Army Chief of Staff, the largest change is in organization and the manner in which intelligence is collected:

> Intelligence—and how we use it—is our first line of defense against terrorists and the threat posed by hostile states. Designed around the priority of gathering enormous information about a massive, fixed object—the Soviet bloc—the intelligence community is coping with the challenge of following a far more complex and elusive set of targets.[12]

This is in keeping with the information-centric battlefield the Army envisions and is preparing for in the 21st century. In fact, the greater and more valuable our intelligence-gathering capabilities become, the less we will have to rely on bulky units of action requiring massive logistics tails. Instead, we can place the emphasis of battle on smaller units, such as today's special operations forces and Marine Expeditionary Units, in association with high-technology command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and air power.

The differences between the Cold War global security environment and the modern one, and the flexibility and versatility now required by the armed forces, are clearly described in the NSS:

> While maintaining near-term readiness and the ability to fight the war on terrorism, the goal must be to provide the President with a wider range of military options to discourage aggression or any form of coercion against the United States, our allies, and our friends.[13]

This posture anticipates the simultaneous use of a Current Force for conventional war and Future Force units for regional security, humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism operations.

This will involve addressing the interest-threat mismatch and asymmetric warfare outlined by Snow. Asymmetric warfare, although defined as "leveraging inferior tactical or operational strength against the vulnerabilities of a superior opponent to achieve disproportionate effect with the aim of undermining the opponent's will,"[14] can be likened to cheating in a mismatched brawl. If a party knows it has no chance of winning, it ultimately will do anything to achieve success, even if the tactic is considered "fighting dirty," not accepted by the Geneva Convention or within the confines of conventional warfare.

While Kenneth J. McKenzie, Jr., contends in "The Rise of Asymmetric Threats: Priorities for Defense Planning" that asymmetric options are actively sought by the weaker party when there is a disparity of interest,[15] such is not always the case. The United States' amassing one-third of a million soldiers to defeat an army that had all the firepower of a single American armored division *circa* 1970 can be seen as asymmetric in the opposite regard. Nevertheless, terrorism, scare tactics and non-state actors with illegal means of funding who attempt to defeat the psyche of a nation rather than its army are the pillars of traditional asymmetric warfare.

Nations or organizations—openly or subversively—will engage in asymmetric warfare or terrorism no matter the opposition. It is not a sound military tactic but an effective way to make social and political statements. America has not fallen into shambles since the 11 September 2001 attacks, but significant developments have transpired in their wake: the country's airlines have been teetering on the verge of collapse, the destruction of the Twin Towers—the nation's economic heart—plunged us deeper into recession, our military has become doubly overtasked and our nation has taken retributive actions and liberties in other countries, causing precarious diplomatic situations with even our most trusted allies. Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty was invoked *for the first time since its inception!*[16] Considering that such hysteria came about at the cost to our enemies of a few hours of flight training, a few airline tickets and the lives of 19 terrorists, asymmetric warfare and terror cemented for the 21st century the least expensive and most direct way to garner support and make a statement for one's cause. Whether the United States will be able to deter attacks and defeat other organizations in the future remains to be seen as our security services undergo their own

arduous transformations. If intelligence capabilities are successfully transformed, the United States most assuredly will be able to prevent similar attacks in the future. Still, groups will always make desperate attempts to shake a nation's psyche when they cannot or wish not to attack using conventional means.

There are definitely limits to what can be achieved through military power. There is not much that cannot be accomplished, but, as von Clausewitz would say, it depends upon the context.[17] If an entity concentrates its airpower, it will control the skies. If it concentrates land forces, it will control the land. If one concentrates sea forces, it will control the waters. That said, no piece of real property is out of the reach of U.S. armed forces. However, despite trillions of dollars of research and development of weapon systems, no amount of bullets will ever be able to control the will of a nation's people.

In that regard U.S. armed forces, no matter the technology they bring with them, will likely have a hit-or-miss performance record for several decades. To occupy a land and be able to effectively lead its people (i.e., persuade them to do what we want), U.S. military forces will need face-to-face contacts between soldiers and local citizens who understand the history of the region, the factions involved, the languages, dialects, customs and needs, and the people whose hearts and minds we seek to win. It is imperative our military forces bear in mind the best interests of the local people as well as those of the United States and make positive progress while at the same time being wary of factions that seek to remove the U.S. presence from or manipulate its presence within the region. For these reasons wars will never be won without forces on the ground. Real properties and sectors on a map can be conquered—and resistance suppressed—with superior air power, unmanned vehicles and naval assaults. However, o*nly* when forces on the ground arrive, meet the people, treat their wounds, solicit their input, neutralize their insurgents and incorporate their will into the mission will true victory be achieved.

Endnotes

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