

Double or Nothing

Andrew A. Michta

THE UNITED States cannot afford to maintain its current strategy, planning for both traditional war and the entire spectrum of stability operations, without making it a top priority to double the current size of its armed forces. Since such an expansion of our military is unlikely, the incoming administration and Congress must seek to reduce the scope of our global commitments, redefine the War on Terror, and give the country a strategy that it can pay for and that its armed forces can implement at sustainable force levels.

Until the creeping democracy agenda of the Clinton years and the outright universalism of the neoconservative program, generations of American leaders implicitly recognized that the key to national security is regional stability, and that it rests not so much on shared democratic values but on legitimate regimes, regardless of whether they are based on democratic franchise, historical accident or simply sufficient strength to impose order.

The crucial step on the road to redefining the core requirements for the U.S. military must be rethinking the assumptions that have informed U.S. post-Cold War strategy under both Democratic and Republican administrations. We should not view American values as the immediate driver of policy. The promotion of

democratic universalism in the past two decades—especially the upsurge in the regime-change strategy of the “neoconservative moment”—has put an unsustainable strain on the U.S. military.

Now, somewhere between this democratic idealism and our strained military capabilities lies a realist alternative to almost two decades of strategic meandering. This requires that we rethink the scope of our existing security commitments so that current military resources are credibly matched to strategy. Prioritizing regime legitimacy instead of democratic universalism would allow the United States to ease the burden on its military by encouraging enduring regional stability. A security policy focused on regime legitimacy would return the military back to its traditional deterrent and defensive roles, and allow it to train for a clearly defined mission.

A Mismatched Strategy

THE UNITED States is now confronted by a rise in asymmetric threats. Needing to provide post-conflict security and reconstruction, the military finds itself in urban environments where its technological advantage is quickly forfeited. Operations often require saturating the area with the maximum number of “boots on the ground.” The argument that the highly trained and superbly equipped modern Western professional warrior will compensate for the paucity of numbers is being challenged daily in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons of Operation Enduring Freedom and the 2003 Iraq campaign have confirmed that the U.S. military has the ability to quickly destroy any conventional military force in its path. The problem is

Andrew A. Michta is a professor of National Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.



The truth is in the boots.

that in full-spectrum stability operations, traditional combat is but the initial phase in a process that goes all the way from warfighting to peacekeeping to community policing.

For the initial critical security phase of stability operations, there is simply no substitute for an infantry soldier with a rifle on patrol coming into contact with the local population. An army that has been trained and equipped for traditional combat will continue to struggle in this new urban war, fought among populations that look for security and order while demanding respect for their customs and social relationships. The new battlefield environment in which the U.S. military finds itself combines many tasks: combat against insurgents, support for civilian populations, police functions, restoration and maintenance of damaged infrastructure, cooperation with private companies and NGOs, support of nascent political institutions, and—as U.S. government officials like to put it—“winning the hearts and minds” of the population. Very few American soldiers today, except perhaps for seasoned members of the special forces, have the skill set to perform the range of duties required. It may be tempting for a country with an unmatched military to regard the armed forces as the principal tool of policy, but no amount of resources is going to transform even the best-trained soldier into a modern-day Prometheus, ca-

pable of destroying and building at the same time, killing and capturing the insurgents while building schools and waterworks, organizing elections and restoring power grids. The U.S. armed forces are simply being asked to fulfill missions that are beyond the capabilities of any modern professional military force, especially given the insufficient numbers of our deployable infantry.

Most urban stability and counterinsurgency operations, in addition to being wars of attrition, are essentially “wars of protracted presence” aimed at securing and winning over local populations. These missions require large numbers of troops, constant presence on the street to build a sense of security among the population and the ability to fight in a complex environment; a mistake by a single soldier can change the attitudes of the population in an instant. Here, the United States and its NATO allies have the wrong troops for the task—forces too small and trained for a very different job.

The Military We Have...

OUR NATION is at war against global terrorist networks and if, as the Bush Administration has maintained, our military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of that struggle, then why have our armed forces not grown and adapted in response to the needs of this new type of warfare? As in past conflicts, both in Iraq and Afghanistan the military tool should be sufficient in size to match the task. In World War I, the United States raised and trained an expeditionary force able to fight alongside the French and the British on the western front. In World War II, the nation went from a very low level of peacetime readiness to a military that dwarfed its adversaries. During that war, mobilized national resources more than matched the

task at hand. In the Cold War, U.S. forces deployed in Europe and Asia, buttressed by NATO and our security agreements with Japan and South Korea, were sufficient in size and had their tasks clearly defined. In the 1990 Gulf War, the United States led a coalition that included over 500,000 U.S. troops—a force more than adequate for routing Saddam Hussein’s army. When the Powell Doctrine called for “overwhelming force” to defeat any potential adversary, the numbers were there to support the strategy. In all these cases, the strategy and the force structure were congruent, yielding successful outcomes.

In contrast, the shortage of troops has been palpable since the beginning of the 2003 Iraq War. The result has been a high operations tempo of repeated rotations and an ensuing strain on soldiers and their families. The overstretch of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan is a structural problem that goes much deeper than past and current policy misjudgments and changing battlefield conditions. The personnel shortage, especially in the infantry ranks, has been the main reason why the surge in Iraq has had to rely on increased unit rotations. The price has been prohibitive. There is neither enough time for soldiers to retrain, refit and get the family time so critical to our volunteer force environment, nor to get new personnel trained and integrated. Worse still, another regional war caused by an escalation in the Middle East or an implosion in Pakistan would put into question the military’s ability to respond. The best that senior military leadership can do is hope that such scenarios will not come to pass. But as the saying goes: Hope is a poor substitute for planning.

Present estimates of U.S. military personnel shortfalls vary depending on the circumstances, but all scenarios must deal with the shortage of troops available for additional short-notice deployments. The personnel crunch is, in part, a post-Cold War legacy. Between 1989 and 1996 the army shed over a quarter-million active duty per-

sonnel, ending up with fewer than 500,000 troops. The urgency of the current troop deficit has been recognized by Congress. Senators Joseph Lieberman (ID-CT), Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Jack Reed (D-RI) and Ken Salazar (D-CO) recently called for increasing the size of the army by 100,000. In spring 2007, President Bush also proposed an expansion of permanent active army end strength. Based on the so-called Gates Plan there would be a growth in troop size to 547,000 for the army and 202,000 for the Marine Corps, respectively, by 2012. This would amount to a total increase of 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 marines.¹ Although the planned increase will relieve some of the immediate pressure on the military, it is simply not enough, especially considering the scope of our current missions and potential contingencies.

Where to go from here?

ONE OPTION is to augment our professional military with a form of conscription targeted specifically at stability operations, similar to what the French are considering for their own professional army—an admittedly controversial idea. With the current level of U.S. defense spending fast approaching \$2 billion per day, doubling the armed forces would mean both increases in taxes and reductions in spending.

On the other hand, the reintroduction of national military service would require a sense of urgency among the public—the very opposite of the attitudes fostered by this administration as part of the War on Terror. After all, it is counterintuitive to ask young American men and women to

¹The projected 2012 troop numbers are based in part on those given by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates while speaking at a joint press conference with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and General Peter Pace at the White House Conference Center Briefing Room on January 11, 2007.

accept the draft if they have been told for several years that the correct response to terrorism is to continue focusing on travel, shopping and living their lives as if little has changed. Since the government asked little of the nation beyond the inconvenience of added airport security measures in 2001, it is unlikely that, short of another national trauma, it will reverse course in 2008.

Either of these solutions is political poison, as the president would have to muster sufficient support on Capitol Hill to roll back decades of established thinking about how much we spend on defense and the acceptability of a draft for an unpopular war.

If a dramatic increase in the size of the U.S. military to match the current expansive strategy is not in the cards, an alternative is to reduce the scope of the country's global security commitments and to jettison post-Cold War assumptions about the imperative of accelerated democratic transitions in critical regions of the world. Instead, American resources should be re-focused on a lower-cost, pragmatic security strategy based on supporting regime legitimacy as the path to regional stability.

The United States needs a strategy that is sustainable long-term. This requires that we rethink the scope of our existing security commitments, so that current military resources are credibly matched to strategy. This approach would allow the United States to fund the core high-tech "hedge programs" against the rapidly shifting power balance in Asia, while maintaining an option to intervene in crisis areas. It would require that we rapidly disengage from Iraq, reduce and redefine our stake in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and return to offshore balancing in the Middle East. It would also require that we plan for an Afghanistan without NATO troops, with an eye toward stability rather than democracy-building, and that we return NATO to its role as the premier defensive alliance. In that way, NATO would regain the credibility of its commitments by limiting itself to a strictly defined area,

rather than the current amorphous *à la carte* expeditionary coalition it has become. This four-pronged redefinition would offer the United States a realist strategy that could be managed by the military at only slightly increased force levels.

With respect to the War on Terror, we should re-evaluate the post-9/11 paradigm and reduce the rhetorical excesses of the Bush Administration, which has framed the terrorist challenge as an existential global struggle. This is not about warfighting in the traditional sense—military pitted against military. Successful counter-terrorism efforts that disrupt and suppress terrorist networks rely more on effective intelligence and police measures than on conventional forces. Subverting substate actors requires a great deal of cooperation on the international and domestic levels. Such multilateral cooperative approaches to dealing with international terrorism should be our first priority, with the military reserved for those cases where force is clearly and unequivocally warranted.

Since the 1990s, the United States has committed itself to an expansive national security strategy that has relied ever more heavily on the military instrument, while at the same time contracting the size of the armed forces called upon to implement it. Like in the 2004 election, today the executive and Congress continue to argue over tactics in Iraq, while the overall reassessment of U.S. global strategy is being deferred yet again to the next presidency.

The limits imposed by the current structuring of the U.S. armed forces, rather than ideological debates in Washington, may finally force a redefinition of the U.S. security strategy for the coming decade. Absent an exponential increase in defense spending or a return to the draft, the next president will have to reassess the scope of our current deployments with the goal of eliminating those in which the structure of the U.S. military and the nature of the conflict constitute a fundamental mismatch. □