A Prisoner to Primacy

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Does the 2008 election portend a fundamental shift in US security policy? Don't bet on it. The US policy debate remains paralyzed by 9/11 and mesmerized by military primacy. As a result, we can't even get Iraq right. Real progress depends on reassessing the role of force and the armed forces in US policy.

As foreign policy disasters go, the American adventure in Iraq is a splendid one - "splendid" in the sense of being both grand and manifest. We might call it "exceptional" as well, except that the troubles which beset US policy do not end at Iraq's borders. The policy wreck is a more general one.[1]

The US mission in Afghanistan has run aground, too. [2] Rather than spreading democracy, recent US military activism has helped spread chaos in several regions. It has tattered both our reputation and our armed forces. It has helped push Muslim populations toward Islamist politics, unsettled America's alliances, and prompted "balancing behavior" on the part of potential big power competitors: China and Russia. As for its impact on terrorism: terrorist activity and violence has grown worse, not better since 11 September 2001. [3] Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since. And there is no sign that this trend is abating.

The present course is not only counter-productive, but also fabulously expensive.[4] Indeed, it seems to be delivering less and less security at ever increasing cost. Annual defense expenditures have risen by 62 percent in real terms since 2001 (and 70 percent since 1998). By the end of FY 2008, defense authorization will probably exceed $700 billion - significantly more than was authorized in any year since 1946. Expenditures of this magnitude are not easily reconciled with bringing national debt under control, while also meeting pending demands on Social Security and Medicare. These circumstances may soon force an economic reckoning for which the nation is ill-prepared.

With American security policy listing on the shoals, we might reasonably expect congressional leaders and presidential candidates to be vowing incisive action - a fundamental reassessment,

perhaps, or a bold new direction. But no such awakening is evident. Perhaps Democrats are not eager to interrupt the self-immolation of the Bush administration. It is easy enough to ascribe the lapse to the vaudeville of American electoral politics. But, again, the problem is a more general one.

Lehigh University professor Chaim Kaufmann had it right when he wrote in the Summer 2004 issue of *International Security* that America's slide into the Iraq war evinced a broad failure in our vaunted "marketplace of ideas" - and not simply the perfidy of the current administration.[5] Today, the market failure continues. Again and again, the nation is tempted to rash action by hyperbole or outright falsehood. [6] Our policy discourse - in the media, academe, the halls of government, and the think tank world - seems perpetually locked and loaded. And the "military option" is always on the table, darkening the agenda.

And the future? What presently passes for new thinking is a search for an imagined "middle ground" - a political safe harbor -- located somewhere between the errors of the present administration and those of the previous one. Emblematic of this is the view that sees America's troubles in Afghanistan and Iraq as largely a matter of execution and insufficient troop strength, that foresees our military occupation of those nations continuing for decades, and that pins its hopes for success on the enlargement of US ground forces and the renovation of counter-insurgency doctrine.

Most prescriptions for policy change still operate within the framework of a "war on terrorism" - a piece of strategic nonsense if ever there was one. Even worse is the slippery, indistinct notion of a "long war" against Islamic radicalism (or "jihadism" or "Islamo-fascism"), which seems tailor-made to tempt war with the Muslim world. [7] Neither framework accurately models the current security environment and neither illuminates a productive, sustainable path to greater security.

Finally, and worst, are the ruminations about setting America on the path of "liberal empire" with US ground troops serving as the constabulary of troubled regions.[8] The fact that the imperial option - which has advocates left, right, and center - should gain a respectful hearing, despite the experience of Iraq, indicates that the American policy community has worked itself into a dead end. We seem to have lost the capacity to think outside the military option, the "big stick."

The problematic turn in US policy did not begin on 11 Sept 2001, or even on 7 November 2000. Recognizing this is the minimum requirement for exiting our current predicament. By the late-1990s, US security policy was already on a path that was counter-productive and unsustainable - not a wreck, but one waiting to happen. Defense budgets were already rising after a nine-year respite, but with little relationship to actual threats. [9] And America's world reputation was already eroding.[10] Key precursors to current policy - unilateralism, offensive counter-proliferation, the "rogue state doctrine", and regime change - were already evident in US policy toward Iraq and elsewhere.

Certainly, the 9/11 attacks stunted the US policy debate, rendering it narrow, reactive, and timid - but there is a more fundamental and longer-standing problem. Since the end of the Cold War, much of the US policy community has been mesmerized by the advent of US military primacy and the advantages it supposedly conveys. To many, this circumstance seemed to provide the leverage with which the United States might further enhance its security, extend its position of world leadership, and advance an American vision of world order - a "new rule set". The 1997 *Quadrennial Defense Review* and 1997 *National Security Strategy* went a step further, construing military primacy as essential to US global leadership and security - not just a fortuitous thing, but a necessary one. Thus, primacy became a security end in its own right and the cornerstone of our global policy.

Trouble is: primacy is not sustainable. Indeed, the more it is exercised, the more it invites balancing behavior on the part of others. Also, experience suggests that we have dangerously overestimated both the extent and utility of our military primacy. Nonetheless, our policy discourse remains entranced by it.

Militarizing policy

Since the Cold War's end, three successive US administrations have retreated from the idea that force should be an instrument of last and infrequent resort – reserved mostly for defense against aggression, narrowly defined. President George H.W. Bush first enunciated the shift in a 1993 West Point valedictory address.[11] Therein, he set aside the common "last resort" principle for a more permissive formulation. Rather than last, force might be the preferred option when other approaches were not thought to be as likely to work or work as well. This relaxed the presumption against war: the simple idea that war is a unique type of policy instrument, not subject to short-term utilitarian calculations of the type that the President proposed.

Of course, the "last resort" principle often has seemed to be honored more in the breach than in the observance. Nonetheless, it has had a restraining effect, which is evident when comparing the extent and frequency of US activism during the periods 1976-1989 and 1990-2003.[12] The principle embodies an implicit recognition that war constitutes a zone of chaotic effects, both profound and unpredictable. Thus, it holds, we should undertake war only when it is forced upon us.

At the same time that official thinking about the use of force was changing, defense planners in the Pentagon's employ (especially at Rand Corporation) began exploring new ways of calibrating threats and associated military requirements.[13] Emphasizing uncertainty, they lowered the bar on the plausibility of threat scenarios, brought "worst case" eventualities to the fore, and boosted their estimates of what these scenarios might require of our armed forces. Quickly they pushed aside the verdict of former JCS Chief General Colin Powell, who had the temerity to testify in 1991 that he was "running out of demons."[14]

The planners' efforts to break free of the "tyranny of scenario plausibility" was supposed to reduce risks and help immunize the United States against unpleasant surprises.[15] Instead,

it diffused our resources and attention. Thus, when Osama bin-Laden's gang plunged airliners into the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the US defense establishment was thinking about and preparing against other eventualities. Bioterrorism, missile defense, cyber attacks, and Chinese military power dominated security concerns in the months before 11 September, effectively distracting from various warnings that a terrorist attack on the US homeland might be imminent.

Although the new thinking on threats and requirements is conceptually independent of the new principles governing the use of force, the two developments are broadly consistent – both serving to expand the scope for the use of force and the armed forces. Thus, surveying US policy in the post-Cold War period:

- The threshold for using force has steadily come down,
- The ways we imagine using force and our armed forces have multiplied,
- And our military objectives have grown steadily more ambitious - now including the aim of fighting multiple, overlapping wars to fast decisive conclusions, including regime change.

Beyond the traditional objectives of deterring and defending against aggression, there has been an increasing emphasis on trying to use force and forceful pressure to actually "prevent the emergence" of threats and, more generally, to "shape the strategic environment" (as the 1997 US *Defense Review* put it.)

In the past, threat prevention and "environment shaping" were largely in the purview of the State Department. But a feature of our post-Cold War practice has been the increasing intrusion of the Pentagon on the provinces of State. Parallel to this, diplomatic functions have been increasingly militarized. Thus, today coercive diplomacy plays a bigger role relative to traditional "quid pro quo" diplomacy. Similarly, "offensive counter-proliferation" has grown in importance relative to non-proliferation efforts.

Even US programs in support of democratization and development have gained a khaki tinge – and it is deepening. The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* strongly advocated for greater Pentagon authority in managing US security partnerships and conducting development assistance programs. Already the Pentagon oversees 22 percent of US official development funds – up from 3.5 percent in 1998. [16] There is a discernable tendency in Congress to "go with the flow" and attach underfunded non-military priorities to the Pentagon's task list. The fiscal logic is seductive. The US national defense budget is 15 times as large as the nation's budget for international affairs. And the Pentagon's personnel roster is 200 times as long as that of State. But choosing to trend further in this direction only makes a principle out of a problem. As surely as war is an extension of politics, State should lead Defense in developing our relations abroad – not the other way around.

The mutation of US foreign aid efforts mirrors the imbalance evident in the conduct of the Iraq occupation. And it suggests an institutional complement to the role of military primacy in recent US policy. Policymakers can be mesmerized by the promise of primacy for pragmatic reasons,

whether they ascribe to a Realist or a Liberal Internationalist worldview. But reinforcing this fixation is the hard fact of the Pentagon's institutional heft.

Prevention or provocation?

Using military power to prevent the emergence of threats often implies treating actors who are not mounting or conducting an act of aggression as though they were. Preventive military operations target not aggression but, instead, *the capability to aggress* - be it existing, emergent, or suspected. Prevention can also target actors who we believe are disposed, due to the nature of their governments or belief systems, to do us some type of harm at some point in the future - that is, adversary regimes or movements, rogues and radicals.

Of course, treating potential threats as though they are impending ones can exacerbate tensions and precipitate the outcome that "prevention" is meant to preclude. Thus, in addressing the nuclear programs of both North Korea and Iran, our coercive efforts spurred, rather than retarded, the behavior we had hoped to stop.

Similarly provocative are some types of militarized "environment shaping" - what the Bush administration prefers to call "dissuasion." Armed dissuasion involves using military assets to "stake out" US interests in a specific situation or outcome. We might think of it as "preemptive deterrence" or "preemptive containment." Our worldwide military deployments, bases, exercises, assistance programs, and partnerships all serve a dissuasive function (among others). They are supposed to communicate implicitly that an undesirable competition or confrontation may ensue if another nation or actor undertakes a proscribed course of action.

Beginning with the 1997 *Quadrennial Defense Review,* US strategy has seen the success of dissuasion as dependent on American military primacy. In accord with this, a key objective of dissuasion has been to discourage other countries from initiating arms competitions with the United States. How? By creating and maintaining "substantial margins of advantage across key functional areas of military competition" – as Secretary Cheney put it in his 2002 report to Congress. The conceit is to preempt arms races by winning them in advance – and, thus, make competition seem hopeless. And so US military modernization efforts proceed full-bore, despite the absence of anything resembling peer competition.

Linking military modernization to the dissuasion of military competition also alters the status of arms control in US policy. The only negotiated agreements that are congruent with the drive for dissuasive power are those that codify or otherwise preserve a distinct US superiority.

Is dissuasion provocative or not? This depends on what behaviors it targets and what rules it seeks to set. Generally speaking: if dissuasive acts impinge on the internal affairs, sovereignty, core interests, or normal prerogatives of a target country, they are more likely to prompt resistance than compliance. The United States might effectively dissuade Chinese naval activism in the Caribbean, for instance - but not in the South China Sea. Likewise, if the United States seems to be claiming extraordinary rights or privileges through dissuasive acts, the targeted nations will either resist complying or strive to alter the power balance between

themselves and America. This is precisely what China and Russia are attempting to do as the US network of bases and partnerships gradually surrounds them.

Enabling primacy: the "new warfare"

A key enabler for the broader and more frequent use of force is the notion that the United States has developed ways to fight fast, low-risk, low-impact wars. This is the "new warfare" hypothesis and, in one form or another, it has helped shape US thinking about the utility of force since the 1990-1991 Gulf War. What we have seen in Iraq and elsewhere, however, is that the application of US military power is less discrete, manageable, and predictable in its effects than recent policy assumes. [17] And its negative repercussions are more far-reaching and complex than imagined. Indeed, in Iraq, we have been treated to an exceptional lesson in how "precision warfare" can spawn chaos, bringing with it a protracted surge in human suffering.[18]

During the initial six weeks of the war, the US coalition pummeled Iraq with 12 kilotons of explosives – in gross terms, the near-equivalent of the 1945 Hiroshima blast. Tens of thousands of targets were destroyed, shattering the Iraqi government and its security structures. Although fewer than 15,000 Iraqi combatants and non-combatants were killed in those six weeks, the social and institutional fabric of the nation were shredded. Neither they, nor the rules governing social behavior have yet recovered. And, of course, the deleterious effects were not merely national, but regional and global.

Putting "boots on the ground" in Iraq was supposed to rectify the shortcomings of wars fought at a distance with stand-off weapons - wars like the 1999 Kosovo conflict. But instead of giving US forces greater control, military occupation has prompted nationalistic responses and inflamed ethnic tensions. It has enabled extremists to tap Iraqi patriotic sentiments. And it has set Iraqi communities against each other and against the central government as "collaborationist".

More recently, American commanders have sought to turn the tide in Iraq by forming tactical alliances with select Sunni tribal groups, paid and armed by the United States. This stratagem, which seeks to leverage localism and communal tensions, has often proved an effective force multiplier – for the short-term. But its longer-term risks and consequences are also evident wherever it's been attempted – for instance, with Mohammad Farrah Aideed in Somali during the early 1990s, with the Afghan warlords and mujahideen in both the anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban campaigns, and with the Shiite and Kurdish militias who now comprise the Iraqi security forces. Whatever its battlefield benefits, this maneuver does not offer a path to stable, beneficial outcomes.

Clearly, we have not fully understood the dynamics of either "identity politics" or tribalism. This failure points to a more fundamental one: Seized by a sense of military primacy, US leaders have failed to appreciate the difference between achieving military effects and achieving political-strategic ones. The institutional concomitant of this failure is the primacy of the Pentagon *vis à vis* State.

The Limits of Primacy

Any true reassessment of the utility of force and its limits must lead to a re-evaluation of our present condition of "military primacy". What does it mean and what is it worth?

Our distinct military superiority exists only in the conventional realm. Facing an unconventional foe in a complex contingency is another matter. And even in the conventional realm: potential adversaries do not have to match our levels of investment in order to boost the price of victory to unacceptable heights and, thus, effectively sap our superiority. It is worth remembering that the present global disparities in military power and investment do not reflect the global distribution of human and material resources. Many nations have considerable latent capacity to narrow the military gap between themselves and the United States -- if they are so motivated.

At any rate, when evaluating primacy, the most important comparison is not between us and other international actors, but between means and ends - that is, between our power and what we propose to do with it. The options range from simple defense and deterrence at one end to schemes of coercive national transformation on the other. If our Iraq experience teaches anything, it is that humility is in order. But this lesson is not likely to register in our policy discourse - not so long as it remains a prisoner to primacy.

Notes

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9. There was a nine-year respite in defense spending – a "peace dividend" – which saw outlays average 11 percent lower than in 1989. All told, about $500 billion was saved. In the subsequent 9 years, nearly $1 trillion were added. (All amounts in FY 2008 USD).

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11. Michael Wines, "Bush, in West Point Valedictory, Offers Principles on Use of Force", *New York Times,* 6 January 1993; and, George Bush, *Remarks at the United States Military Academy in West Point,* New York January 5th, 1993: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=20414&st=&st1=

12. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the number of US troops stationed or deployed abroad declined from an average of approximately 505,000 to approximately 225,000 – with most of the difference due to withdrawals from Europe.

Although the total numbers of troops deployed overseas declined, the number of troops (and the percentage of the force) deployed for shorter-term contingency operations rose from a yearly average of less 6,000 personnel/years during the 1980s to more than 35,000 in the following decade. And these figures do not take the Operation Desert Storm years (1990-1991) into account. Incorporating them would significantly increase the post-1990 average. Of course, since 2003, the number of US troops involved in contingency operations has been much higher – on average, approximately 200,000 active-component troops and 30,000-60,000 reservists. Today, 15 percent of active-component troops are routinely deployed in contingency operations abroad; during the 1980s, the average annual percentage was less than 0.5 percent. Also, the number and variety of individual contingency operations rose dramatically beginning in the early 1990s.

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