
THE PENTAGON'S NEW MISSION SET: A SUSTAINABLE CHOICE?

Carl Conetta, Project on Defense Alternatives

Revised 23 October 2011

Today, the United States enjoys an abundance of military power, but it is a uniquely expensive asset. During the past 20 years we have sought new ways to put this asset to work. Reviewing the change in the Pentagon's mission set, several broad trends are discernible:

- Mission objectives have grown much more ambitious, generally.
- The geographic scope for intensive US military efforts has widened significantly.
- Across the globe, the focus of US military action and investment has become less discriminate and more sweeping or comprehensive.
- Missions that put US "boots on the ground" in foreign nations in either a direct action, advisory, or capacity-building role have grown much more prominent.

- US policy continues to emphasize multinational approaches to addressing security issues, however the trend has been for the United States to play an ever more prominent role as the convener, governor, and quartermaster of joint action.

The post-Cold War evolution of the Pentagon's mission set is problematic in terms of cost, effects, and effectiveness. Taken together these indicate that the present balance among security instruments is not a cost-effective one. This argues for returning to an emphasis on more traditional and reliable crisis response, defense, deterrence, and conflict resolution tasks. This would allow a significant reduction in both the size and activity level of our armed forces. Their activity would become more focused and their goals more discrete, determinate, and realistic.

Since the mid-1990s, and especially since the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the mission set of America's armed forces has grown dramatically in scope and ambition. What we hope to accomplish today principally by means of military power would have been dismissed by many as unwise, if not infeasible just 15 years ago.

Reviewing the change in the Pentagon's mission set, several broad trends are discernible:

- **Mission objectives have grown much more ambitious, generally.**

Mission goals have trended from an early emphasis on standard deterrence and various forms of crisis response – including defense, conflict resolution, and conflict contain-

ment – to more proactive and transformative goals. These latter include efforts to preclude the emergence of threats, remove or weaken adversarial regimes, and shape the global strategic environment in ways that accord with perceived US interests and a new "rule set" for nation-state behavior.

- **The geographic scope for intensive US military efforts has widened significantly.**

America's armed forces have been consistent global players since the Second World War. However, while global in scope, US military presence, activity, and initiative has concentrated over the years on a changing subset of the world's regions. The Cold War ended with our armed forces concentrated in Europe and Northeast Asia. During the 1990s, US presence and activity increased in the Persian Gulf and spread into eastern Europe. Since the 9/11 attacks, it has spread further into central and south Asia, southeast Asia, and Africa. And, throughout this period, there has been increasing attention to China's periphery.

This article is an updated and expanded excerpt from the Report of the Task Force on a Unified Security Budget (USB) for the United States (Washington DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 2010). The author is a member of the USB Task Force.

-
- **Across the globe, the focus of US military action and investment has become less discriminate and more sweeping or comprehensive.**

The US military entered the post-Cold War period focusing its efforts on a discrete set of acute problems and outstanding adversaries. More recently, policy has directed the Pentagon toward achieving (in partnership with others) a more consistent and “positive” control over the global security environment. This includes “securing the global commons” and stabilizing the ungoverned and weakly governed areas of the earth. Like putting a cop on every corner to foreclose criminal activity, these are “area control” tasks that aim to lock threats out from broad zones of the world. The goal is well beyond the capacity of any single state or group of states. However, to approximate it, the US military is investing substantially in constructing and provisioning a global web of security “partnerships.”

- **Missions that put US “boots on the ground” in foreign nations in either a direct action, advisory, or capacity-building role have grown much more prominent.**

During the past decade there has been a shift in emphasis from standard “peace operations” to much larger counter-insurgency and nation-building tasks. Now, military assistance missions are slated to grow significantly. These changes are largely the consequence of the war on terrorism and regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan. Slow progress in Iraq and Afghanistan prompted the revival of counter-insurgency methods. Subsequently, the larger war on terrorism evolved not as a standard counter-terrorism campaign targeting Al Qaeda, but as a global counter-insurgency effort, aiming to stymie militant anti-Western movements worldwide.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, counter-insurgency operations have accompanied US efforts to reform the political, economic, and social structure of these nations – against significant indigenous opposition. This is a far more ambitious

goal than conflict resolution or threat containment, and one that involves the United States as a direct disputant. Looking more broadly, future plans for security and stability operations foresee US forces mostly playing a less direct and intensive role. These may nonetheless make the United States party to a wide range of foreign civil conflicts.

- **US policy continues to emphasize multinational approaches to addressing security issues, however the trend has been for the United States to play an ever more prominent role as the convener, governor, and quartermaster of joint action.**

Throughout the post-Cold War period US defense policy has cited the importance of international cooperation both as a force multiplier, source of legitimacy, and means of burden-sharing. In the course of the past 20 years, however, US efforts at military cooperation have trended consistently away from an emphasis on inclusive multilateral institutions and toward more exclusive, *ad hoc*, and bilateral arrangements. Although these latter grant the United States more sway and freedom of action, they convey less legitimacy, can be polarizing, and leave the United States carrying more of the costs.

A QUESTION OF BALANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

There is nothing new in the United States pursuing an ambitious vision of global transformation. Since the Second World War, America has set out to defend and advance the sphere of market democracy and to build a community of nations at peace. The pressing question today is, How best to achieve these ends? Given the nature of the challenges facing America and competing demands on the nation’s resources, what constitutes an effective and sustainable balance among available instruments of power?

A first principle of recent US policy is that the nation’s security depends on investment and initiative in the areas of defense, diplomacy, and development. But what is the proper mix? Despite rhetorical support for a balanced approach, current policy and expenditure is overwhelmingly weighted toward military, rather than non-military instruments. And it has become more so as the Pentagon has placed greater emphasis on functions that have been traditionally the pre-dominant province of the State Department.

The gradual migration of functional leadership from State to Defense is evident in many ways:

- Threat prevention, “environment shaping,” and the reassurance of allies have long been part of the Pentagon’s mission set – but a subordinate part. For most of the 65 years

Project on Defense Alternatives

Commonwealth Institute
186 Hampshire Street, Cambridge MA 02139
617-547-4474 • pda@comw.org
PDA Homepage: www.comw.org/pda
The Defense Strategy Review Page:
www.comw.org/wordpress/dsr/

since the end of the Second World War, these functions sat primarily with the State Department. In recent years, as they have grown more central to the Pentagon's force and budget rationales, they have taken on a more military complexion.

- Military-to-military engagement activities presently rival or surpass regular diplomatic practice in many nations, and the Pentagon's regional Commanders serve routinely in a front-and-center diplomatic role. No State Department mission can rival their resources.
- Today, the Department of Defense is directly responsible for the delivery of about 20 percent of all development aid. More than this, the revival and spread of political-military operations – that is, counterinsurgency – has reframed development assistance overall. Security rationales are playing a bigger role in the distribution of aid among nations and in the use of aid within them.
- Country missions, embassies, and diplomatic staff are distinctly overshadowed in many places by the array of ongoing counter-terrorism, intelligence, military assistance, and military-to-military engagement activities of the armed services. Increasingly, America's armed forces are the most prominent face of the nation, worldwide.

The post-Cold War evolution of the Pentagon's mission set is problematic in terms of cost, effects, and effectiveness. Taken together these indicate that the present balance among security instruments is not a cost-effective one. This is especially troubling given America's current economic travails and the effort to reduce federal deficits and debt. And these economic concerns have a strong national security component pertaining not only to America's long-term military capacity, but also to the preservation of other forms of national strength.

ISSUES OF COST

Since the late-1990s, the US defense budget has grown by nearly 100 percent in real terms. About half of this growth is due to recent wars, which themselves have proved much more expensive in real terms than previous ones (when measured in terms of cost per deployed person per month). Parallel to this, defense expenditures have claimed a growing proportion of discretionary spending overall. As for spending on international affairs, it was in decline relative to defense spending for twenty years, beginning in the 1980s. Only in the mid-2000s, with the onset of the war on terrorism, did it begin to recover relative to defense. However, recent deficit reduction efforts are casting it back – while defense continues on a growth path.

The increased scope and ambitions of the Pentagon's mission set have been a key factor in driving up both the war and peace-time portions of Pentagon budget. Current defense budgeting reflects a variety of mission-related demands, among these:

- The personnel and operations requirements for the routine rotation and stationing of troops and units abroad which, apart from war, involves 150,000 troops plus their rotation base;
- The requirements associated with constructing new bases abroad, upgrading the old, and sustaining and protecting the entire base infrastructure;
- The personnel and operations requirements associated with the expanded "military assistance mission" and ongoing engagement activities, ranging from hundreds of annual overseas exercises to thousands of military-to-military contact events;
- The requirement to equip the units tied down by "reassurance" and environment shaping tasks. As recent Quadrennial Defense Reviews make clear, today's armed forces are sized not solely for purposes of war, deterrence, and crisis response requirements.
- Counter-insurgency and nation-building activities have proved to be exceptionally expensive, especially in terms of personnel and operations costs, largely as a consequence of their complex and protracted nature. (The non-conventional phases of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts have cost in total five times as much as the conventional phases of these wars plus the 1990-1991 Gulf War). The costs imposed by counter-insurgency, nation-building, and military assistance activities include employment of a much larger cohort of private contractors, which registers as an operations and maintenance cost.
- Increasing the types of critical missions for which the armed forces must prepare as a first order of business also increases training costs and exerts upward pressure on force size (as the military must accommodate more types of units). The Defense Department can choose to partially forego training requirements, but only at the expense of readiness.

ISSUES OF EFFECTIVENESS

The increased dependence on military power for purposes other than simple defense and deterrence raises issues of effect and effectiveness. These must be taken into account when trying to figure an optimal balance among security instruments.

How reliably and at what cost does a particular type of military activity produce an intended effect? And what is the corresponding risk of negative collateral effects? These questions bear heavily on America's dependence on military power for shaping the strategic environment and preventing the emergence of threats. They also shadow the practice of counter-insurgency and armed nation-building.

Assessment: Threat prevention

A central objective of US military policy, especially since 1997, has been to prevent the emergence or maturation of threats. Of course, this has long been a central objective of diplomacy, too, although its means differ. Diplomacy depends on simple deterrence to hold threats in check, while efforts at arms control, conflict resolution, and consensus building work to defuse them.

Preventative military action aims to do what diplomatic measures and simple deterrence cannot: quickly and decisively extinguish risk. Preventative military operations can range from sanctions and blockades to shows of force, counter-proliferation strikes, and even regime change. Such actions do not target an adversary's aggression, per se, nor even the imminent danger of it. Instead, they target an adversary's *capacity to aggress* - be it existing, emergent, or suspected. Prevention also can target actors believed to be disposed, due to the nature of their governments or belief systems, to do America or its allies significant harm at some point in the future, even though these actors may presently lack the opportunity or capability.

The risks inherent to preventative military action are also clear: Treating potential threats as though they are imminent ones can exacerbate tensions and precipitate the outcome that "prevention" is meant to preclude. Thus, in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war, coercive efforts and threats fed the Hussein regime's "bunker-mentality", making war more likely, not less. Generally, the declaration of "regime change" objectives undermines diplomacy and helps to harden non-cooperative behavior. The Iraq case also suggests that preventive uses of military force rest on unrealistic assumptions about our capacity to control outcomes and a serious underestimation of the potential costs and consequences of toppling regimes.

Assessment: "Environment shaping"

Perhaps the most costly peacetime function of the US military during the post-Cold War period has been what the first Quadrennial Defense Review called "environment shaping." This involves the use of military deployments and activity to influence the longer-term strategic calculus of other nations. Envi-

ronment-shaping goals are more important than ever before in rationalizing America's worldwide military presence and exercises, its alliances and military-to-military contacts, and its arms transfers and military assistance programs.

The reassurance of allies and the dissuasion of potential adversaries are among the functional goals that define "environment shaping." Reassurance involves demonstrating in tangible ways that the United States remains committed to addressing the security concerns of allies and friends. This is supposed to bolster US influence and mitigate any allied tendencies to pursue more independent policies. There is no reason to believe, however, that "reassurance" requires current levels of foreign military presence and engagement, especially given current levels of threat and US rapid deployment capabilities. And, of course, there are various, less costly ways by which we can and do affirm our vital links with our friends.

On the negative side of the balance sheet, a too energetic practice of reassurance via military means can discourage burden sharing, while also suggesting that we need partnership more than our allies do. Also, any substantial level of foreign military presence can cause friction with local populations. And it can provoke counter-balancing behavior by other powers - an outcome that would lessen security, rather than enhance it.

A similar set of issues concern the practice of military "dissuasion." Dissuasion involves using military deployments and activity to forcefully assert America's interest in certain regions, situations, or outcomes. The aim is to convince potential future adversaries that an undesirable competition or contest might ensue if their policies evolve down some proscribed path.

Unlike deterrence, dissuasive acts are not supposed to embody explicit threats of war or retaliation because these might actually precipitate a confrontational relationship. We might think of dissuasion as constituting "pre-emptive deterrence" or "pre-emptive containment." Thus, the spread of US military bases and partnerships toward the borders of Russia and increased US naval presence in Asia are supposed to temper Russian and Chinese military activism.

The actual effect of armed dissuasion depends partly on what behaviors it aims to discourage. The United States might effectively dissuade Chinese naval activism in the Caribbean, for instance - but not in the South China Sea. Generally speaking, if dissuasive acts impinge on the core interests or normal prerogatives of the targeted country, they are more likely to prompt military competition than compliance. Recent relations with Russia and China offer a good test because both these countries have been prime objects of dissuasive efforts

for nearly twenty years. Unfortunately, both seem less willing today, not more, to fold themselves agreeably into a global order led by the United States. This raises the question, Are our dissuasive efforts encouraging or discouraging competition? Spending as much as we do on dissuasion, the answer to this question ought to be indisputably affirmative – but it is not.

Assessment: Dissuading military competition

A key objective of dissuasion is to discourage other countries from initiating military competition (not just conflict) with the United States. The QDR consensus sees accomplishing this end through an energetic program of military modernization that aims to ensure “substantial margins of advantage across key functional areas of military competition,” as the 2001 QDR put it. This is supposed to “compel future competitors into an unenviable choice”:¹

They can seek to develop responses to most or all of the U.S. capabilities and options and consequently stretch their limited resources thin, or they can choose the high-risk option of focusing their efforts on offsetting only one or a few of the new warfighting options, leaving themselves vulnerable to the others. When confronted with this dilemma, potential adversaries may find themselves dissuaded from entering into a military competition in the first place.

Here the aim is to preempt competition by winning it in advance. This significantly transforms the perennial budgeting question, *How much is enough?* It is not enough to match, overmatch, or even substantially overmatch potential adversaries. Only when they quit the race has the dissuasive goal been satisfied.

Having been practiced for 14 years, this approach seems not to have discouraged competition as much as encouraged it. Attesting to this are trends in world military expenditure as well as successive DoD reports on Chinese military power. A critical fault in the strategy is that it hinges on maintaining multiples of other nations’ power in a world where many nations have considerable latent capacity to narrow the military gap, if they are so motivated. And their achieving parity is not necessary to drive the United States deeper and deeper into economic difficulty.

Relevant to the prospects for arms race dissuasion is the fact that present global disparities in military power and investment do not reflect the global distribution of economic potential. The United States accounts for approximately 48 percent of all military spending today, but only 24.8 percent

of the global economic product. While the United States presently spends about 4.8 percent of its GNP on defense, the rest of the world allocates only 1.6 percent of its available product to this end. By comparison, in 1985 the United States spent 6.5 percent of its economic product on defense while the rest of the world spent 4.8 percent. Thus, the disparity in effort is significantly greater today than it was 26 years ago. Energetic efforts at preventative containment and arms racing seem unlikely to keep it that way -- quite the opposite.

Assessment: Counter-insurgency, nation-building, and military assistance

The slow progress and great cost of counter-insurgency and armed nation-building efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that these methods are suboptimal for fighting terrorism and managing other types of transnational danger. Of course the grander hope is that America’s military involvement in these and other troubled states will eventually produce self-sustaining stability and enable them to secure their own territories. However, for all the blood and treasure invested so far in Iraq and Afghanistan, stable outcomes are hardly assured.

A necessary prerequisite of stability is genuine national accord and balanced economic development. There is a serious disconnect between these prerequisites and a US policy that emphasizes large-scale foreign military intervention and action, while relegating development to a distinctly subordinate role. America’s drive for regional stability may require much more time and a different mix of assistance efforts than current policy envisions.

The 2010 QDR implicitly recognized the need for change by proposing the seemingly modest alternative of building indigenous security capacity in numerous troubled states. Presently the United States provides security assistance of some sort to over 150 nations of which more than two dozen can be considered “weak states” suffering significant security problems. Does an expanded practice of “security assistance” offer a more reliable and sustainable method of enhancing regional stability and curbing terrorism?

The Iraq and Afghanistan experiences show that producing professional, effective, and reliable local security forces in troubled states is neither easy nor inexpensive. And local security forces often fail to rise above the sectarian loyalties that divide their societies, despite Western mentoring.

An emphasis on security force development in otherwise weak states can serve to militarize these societies and impede the development of democratic institutions. And there can be little confidence in the long-term effectiveness and loyalties

of these forces as long as the broader problems of democracy, development, and civil discord persist.

There also is the danger, already apparent in Africa, that selective bilateral security arrangements with the United States will arouse concerns about regional military balances – an outcome detrimental to stability. A final concern is that close association with numerous local security forces may implicate the United States in undemocratic practices and foreign civil conflicts. And it may prove hard to walk away from these investments, even when they go bad.

What would prove more manageable, reliable, and sustainable would be greater discretion in dispensing military assistance and a more refined focus in conducting counter-terrorism operations. As for the broader pursuit of regional stability, it requires a more patient and longer-term approach – one that emphasizes the de-militarization of regional relations, the emergence of stronger regional institutions, equitable economic development, and progress toward democratic governance. These latter imperatives fall principally within the province of the State Department, not Defense.

CONCLUSION

The nation's current economic troubles require us, as a matter of husbanding national strength for the long term, to re-examine our policy choices in every area and ensure that they are wise, necessary, and cost-effective ones. Today, the United States enjoys an abundance of military power, but it is a fabulously expensive asset -- indeed, uniquely expensive to build, maintain, modernize, and employ. During the past 20 years we have sought new ways to put this asset to work. Some of the new and expanded missions of our armed forces have not proven their effectiveness – much less their cost-effectiveness.

Assessing our current defense strategy and posture in terms of costs and benefits argues for returning to an emphasis on more traditional and reliable crisis response, defense, deterrence, and conflict resolution tasks. This would allow a significant reduction in both the size and activity level of our armed forces. Their activity would become more focused and their goals more discrete, determinate, and realistic.

Although it is beyond the scope of this report to assess how much might be saved as a result of a comprehensive re-set of our defense posture, several recent reports indicate the potential scale of savings to be achieved by significant reductions in military structure and activity:²

- Rolling back the size of US ground forces by 20 percent could yield a steady-state savings of \$20 billion per year;
- Reducing the Navy's surface fleet by 20 percent, including two carriers and carrier combat air wings, could save \$10 billion per year over the next 10 years;
- Reducing the US Air Force by two combat air wings could save as much as \$3 billion per year;
- Reducing routine peacetime overseas deployments by 50,000 troops and demobilizing these troops could save \$12 billion annually;

The recent cost of protracted US counter-insurgency campaigns approximates \$1 million per year for every deployed person.

In April 2011, President Obama directed the Defense Department to conduct a strategy-driven review of its current budget in order to identify new savings options. The review could be the first step in a process of serious reassessment. However, to guide DoD toward a more effective and sustainable posture, it will need to do several things, minimally:

1. First, focus on the need to revise the current mix of military missions;
2. Second, clarify the costs in dollars and “operational tempo” associated with today's major missions; and
3. Third, demonstrate a willingness to set hard and fast priorities among the missions that DoD today considers “essential.”

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: DoD, 20 September 2001), p. 36.
2. *Budget of the Congressional Progressive Caucus Fiscal Year 2012* (Washington DC: Congressional Progressive Caucus, 11 April 2011); Gordon Adams and Matthew Leatherman, “A Leaner and Meaner Defense: How to Cut the Pentagon's Budget While Improving Its Performance,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2011); Erskine Bowles and Sen. Alan Simpson, *The Moment of Truth: Report of the National Commission On Fiscal Responsibility And Reform* (Washington DC: White House, December 2010), Appendix: Illustrative Savings; *Debt, Deficits, and Defense: a Way Forward* (Washington DC: Sustainable Defense Task Force, 11 June 2010); Defense Savings Datasheet; Carl Conetta, “The Dynamics of Defense Budget Growth, 1998-2011,” in Richmond Lloyd, ed., *Economics and Security: Resourcing National Priorities* (Newport RI: Naval War College Press, 2010).