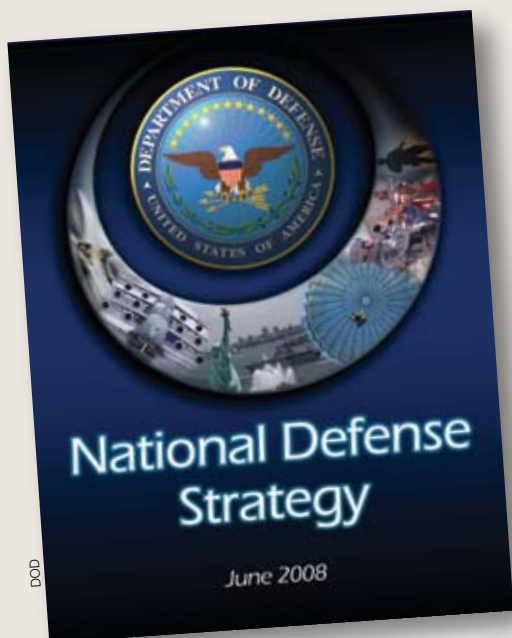


# The National Defense Strategy Striking the Right Balance

By ROBERT M. GATES



**T**he defining principle driving our strategy is balance. Balance is not the same as treating all challenges as having equal priority. We cannot expect to eliminate risk through higher defense budgets—in effect, “to do everything, buy everything.” Resources are scarce, yet we still must set priorities and consider inescapable tradeoffs and opportunity costs.

We currently strive for balance between:

- doing everything we can to prevail in the conflicts we are in, and being prepared for other contingencies that might arise elsewhere, or in the future
- institutionalizing capabilities such as counterinsurgency and stability operations,

as well as helping partners build capacity, and maintaining our traditional edge—above all, the technological edge—against the military forces of other nation-states

■ retaining those cultural traits that have made the U.S. Armed Forces successful by inspiring and motivating the people within them, and shedding those cultural elements that are barriers to doing what needs to be done.

As we have seen in recent years, in so many ways, the basic nature of humanity and the iron realities of nations have not changed, despite the fondest hopes of so many for so long, especially after the end of the Cold War. What has changed is that the international environment today is



Top: New *National Defense Strategy*, published June 2008  
Bottom: USS *Ronald Reagan* pulls into Agana Harbor, Guam

more complex and unpredictable than it has perhaps ever been.

### The Wars We Are In

As we think about the security challenges on the horizon, we must establish up front that America's ability to deal with threats for years to come will depend importantly on our performance in today's conflicts. To be blunt, to fail—or to be *seen* to fail—in either Iraq or Afghanistan would be a disastrous blow to our credibility, both among our friends and allies and among our potential adversaries.

In Iraq, the number of U.S. combat units in-country will decline over time. The debate now is about the pacing of the drawdown as there will continue to be some kind of American advisory and counterterrorism effort in Iraq for years to come.

In Afghanistan, as President Bush announced in September 2008, U.S. troop levels are rising, with the likelihood of more increases in 2009. Given its terrain, poverty, neighborhood, and tragic history, the country in many ways poses an even more complex and difficult long-term challenge than Iraq—one that, despite a large international effort, will require a significant American military and economic commitment for some time.

In the past, I have expressed frustration over the defense bureaucracy's priorities and lack of urgency when it comes to current conflicts—that for too many in the Pentagon it has been business as usual, as opposed to a wartime footing and a wartime mentality. When referring to “Next-War-itis,” I was not expressing opposition to thinking about and preparing for the future. It would be irresponsible not to do so—and the overwhelming majority of people in the Pentagon, Services, and defense industry do just that. My point is simply that we must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future conventional and strategic conflicts that we neglect to provide, both short and long term, all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as those we face today.

Support for conventional modernization programs is deeply embedded in our budget, our bureaucracy, the defense industry, and Congress. My fundamental concern is that there is not commensurate institutional support—including in the Pentagon—for the capabilities needed to win the wars we are in,

and of the kinds of missions we are most likely to undertake in the future.

What is dubbed the “war on terror” is, in grim reality, a prolonged, worldwide irregular campaign—a struggle between the forces of violent extremism and of moderation. In the long-term effort against terrorist networks and other extremists, we know that direct military force will continue to have a role. But we also understand that over the long term, we cannot kill or capture our way to victory. Where possible, kinetic operations should be subordinate to measures that promote better governance, economic programs to spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented from which the terrorists recruit. It will take the patient accumulation of quiet successes over a long time to discredit and defeat extremist movements and their ideologies. As the National Defense Strategy puts it, success will require us to “tap the full strength of America and its people”—civilian and military, public sector and private.

We are unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan any time soon—that is, forced regime change followed by nationbuilding under fire. But that does not mean that we may not face similar challenges in a variety of locales. Where possible, our strategy is to employ indirect approaches—primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces—to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial American military intervention. In this kind of effort, the capabilities of our allies and partners may be as important as our own, and building their capacity is arguably as important if not more so than the fighting we do ourselves.

That these kinds of missions are more frequent does not necessarily mean, for risk assessment purposes, that they automatically should have a higher priority for the purposes of military readiness. And it is true that many past interventions have had significant humanitarian considerations. However, the recent past vividly demonstrated the consequences of failing to address adequately the dangers posed by insurgencies and failing states. Terrorist networks can find a sanctuary within the borders of a weak nation and strength within the chaos of social breakdown. A nuclear-armed state could collapse into chaos and criminality. Let's be honest with

ourselves. The most likely catastrophic threats to our homeland—for example, an American city poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack—are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states.

The kind of capabilities needed to deal with these scenarios cannot be considered exotic distractions or temporary diversions. We do not have the luxury of opting out because they do not conform to preferred notions of the American way of war.

Furthermore, even the largest wars will require so-called small wars capabilities. Ever since General Winfield Scott led the Army into Mexico in the 1840s, nearly every major deployment of American forces has led to subsequently longer military presence to maintain stability. General Dwight Eisenhower, when tasked with administering North Africa in 1942, wrote, “The sooner I can get rid of these questions that are outside the military in scope, the happier I will be! Sometimes, I think I live 10 years each week, of which at least nine are absorbed in political and economic matters.” And yet, in Eisenhower, General George Marshall knew he had the “almost perfect model of a modern commander: part soldier, part diplomat, part administrator.” This model is as important and real today as it was 70 years ago.

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Whether in the midst or aftermath of any major conflict, the requirement for the U.S. military to maintain security, provide aid and comfort, begin reconstruction, and stand up local government and public services will not go away. Even with a better funded State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, future military commanders will no more be able to rid themselves of these tasks than Eisenhower was. To paraphrase what a former United Nations Secretary-General said about peacekeeping, it is not a soldier's job, but sometimes only a soldier can do it. To truly achieve victory as Clausewitz defined it—attaining a political objective—the U.S. military's ability to kick down the door must be matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterward.

**Signs of Progress**

Given these realities, the military has made some impressive strides in recent years:

- Special operations have received steep increases in funding and personnel.
- The Air Force has created a new air advisory program, and recently, General Norton Schwartz announced a new career track for unmanned aerial operations.
- The Navy stood up a new expeditionary combat command and brought back its riverine units.
- New counterinsurgency and Army operations manuals, plus a new maritime strategy, have incorporated the lessons of recent years into Service doctrine. To the traditional principles of war have been added perseverance, restraint, and legitimacy.
- Train and equip authorities and programs allow us to move more quickly to build the security capacity of partner nations.
- A variety of initiatives are under way that better integrate and coordinate U.S. military efforts with civilian agencies as well as engage the expertise of the private sector, including nongovernmental organizations and academia.

Retired Marine colonel T.X. Hammes has noted that whereas past insurgencies consisted of military campaigns supported by information operations, they now often consist of strategic communications campaigns supported by military operations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, extremists have made deft use of the Internet and propaganda to misinform and intimidate local populations—the swing voters, if you will, in these struggles. Many defense leaders—including myself—have bemoaned the U.S. Government’s

for shortcomings in policy or execution. As Admiral Mullen has noted, in the broader battle for hearts and minds abroad, we have to be as good at listening to others as we are at telling them our story. And when it comes to perceptions at home, when all is said and done, the best way to convince the American people that we are winning a war is through credible and demonstrable results, as we have done in Iraq.

**Don’t Forget the Nation-state**

Even as we hone and institutionalize new and unconventional skills, the United States still has to contend with the security challenges posed by the military forces of other countries—from those actively hostile to those at strategic crossroads.

The images of Russian tanks rolling into the Republic of Georgia last August were a reminder that nation-states and their militaries do still matter. Both Russia and China have increased their defense spending and modernization programs, to include air defense and fighter capabilities that in some cases approach our own.

In addition, there is the potentially toxic mix of rogue nations, terrorist groups, and nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. North Korea has built several bombs, and Iran seeks to join the nuclear club. North Korea is impoverished and literally starving, while Iran sits on a sea of oil. Both have primitive ground offensive capabilities and ballistic missile programs of increasing range. Both have a record of proliferation and ties to criminal groups or terrorist networks.

What all these potential adversaries have in common—from terrorist cells to rogue nations to rising powers—is that they

in the Army, and amphibious operations in the Marine Corps. We must remedy this situation as soon as we can through growing the ground forces, and increasing dwell time and opportunities for full-spectrum training.

But in making the risk assessment associated with near-peer competitors, in judging where we can make tradeoffs, it is important to keep some perspective. It is generally agreed, for example, that the Navy has shrunk too much since the end of the Cold War—a view I share. But it is also true that in terms of tonnage, the battle fleet of the Navy, by one estimate, is larger than the next 13 navies combined—and 11 of those 13 navies are allies or partners. No other navy has anything comparable to the reach or combat power of a single American carrier strike group.

Russian tanks and artillery may have crushed Georgia’s tiny military. But before we begin rearming for another Cold War, remember that what is driving Russia is a desire to exorcise past humiliation and dominate their near abroad—not an ideologically driven campaign to dominate the globe. As someone who used to prepare estimates of Soviet military strength for several Presidents, I can say that the Russian conventional military, though vastly improved since its nadir in the late 1990s, remains a shadow of its Soviet predecessor. And Russian demographics will likely impede its numbers getting much larger. Though Russia’s recent air and naval forays into this hemisphere have grabbed headlines, it is worth noting that in the last 15 years the Russian navy has launched just two new major warships. Russia does present serious challenges, but ones very different from the past.

All told, this year’s [2008] National Defense Strategy concluded that although U.S. predominance in conventional warfare is not unchallenged, it is sustainable for the medium term, given current trends. It is true that the United States would be hard pressed to fight a major conventional ground war elsewhere on short notice, but where on Earth would we do that? We have ample, untapped striking power in our air and sea forces should the need arise to deter or punish aggression—whether on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, or across the Taiwan Strait. So while we are knowingly assuming some additional risk in this area, that risk is, I believe, a prudent and manageable one.

Other nations may be unwilling to challenge the United States fighter to fighter, ship to ship, or tank to tank. But they are develop-

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*a variety of initiatives are under way that better integrate and coordinate military efforts with civilian agencies as well as engage the private sector*

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limitations in this area. Our troops have made some ingenious adaptations, such as in Iraq, for example, where they set up the “Voice of Ramadi” broadcast to counter what was spewing forth from extremist mosques.

The Quadrennial Defense Review highlighted the importance of strategic communications as a vital capability, and good work has been done since. However, we cannot lapse into using communications as a crutch

have learned over time that it is not wise to confront the United States directly or on conventional military terms.

Nonetheless, we cannot take this traditional dominance for granted. Many of America’s refueling tankers and some fighters are now older than the pilots who fly them. As a result of the demands of Afghanistan and Iraq, ground forces have not been able to stay proficient in specialties such as field artillery

ing the disruptive means to blunt the impact of American power, narrow our military options, and deny us freedom of movement and action.

In the case of China, investments in cyber and antisatellite warfare, anti-air and anti-ship weaponry, submarines, and ballistic missiles could threaten America's primary means to project power and help allies in the Pacific: our bases, air and sea assets, and the networks that support them. This will put a premium on America's ability to strike from over the horizon and employ missile defenses; and it will require shifts from short-range to longer range systems such as the next generation bomber.

And even though the days of hair-trigger superpower confrontation are over, as long as other nations possess the bomb and the means to deliver it, the United States must maintain a credible strategic deterrent. Toward this end, the Department of Defense and Air Force have taken firm steps to return excellence and accountability to our nuclear stewardship. We also need Congress to fund the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program—for safety, for security, and for a more reliable deterrent.

### Blurring Boxes and Hybrid War

As we think about this range of threats, it is common to define and divide the so-called high end from the low end, the conventional from the irregular—armored divisions on one side and guerrillas toting AK-47s on the other. In reality, as Colin Gray has noted, the categories of warfare are blurring and do not fit into tidy boxes. We can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction—from the sophisticated to the simple—being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare.

Russia's relatively crude—though brutally effective—conventional offensive in Georgia was augmented with a sophisticated cyber attack and well-coordinated propaganda campaign. We saw a different version during the invasion of Iraq, where Saddam Hussein dispatched his swarming paramilitary Fedayeen along with the T-72s of the Republican Guard.

Conversely, militias, insurgent groups, other nonstate actors, and Third World militaries are increasingly acquiring more technology, lethality, and sophistication—as illustrated by the losses and propaganda victory that Hizballah was able to inflict on Israel 2 years ago. Hizballah's restocked arsenal of

rockets and missiles now dwarfs the inventory of many nation-states. Furthermore, Russian and Chinese arms sales are putting advanced capabilities—both offensive and defensive—in the hands of more countries and groups.

As defense scholars have noted, these hybrid scenarios combine the “lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare.”<sup>1</sup> Here, “Microsoft coexists with machetes, and stealth is met by suicide bombers.”<sup>2</sup>

As we can expect a blended, high-low mix of adversaries and types of conflict, so too should America seek a better balance in the portfolio of capabilities we have—the types

of units we field, the weapons we buy, and the training we do.

### Sensible and Responsive Procurement

When it comes to procurement, for the better part of 5 decades, the trend has gone toward lower numbers as technology gains made each system more capable. In recent years, these platforms have grown ever more baroque and costly, are taking longer to build, and are being fielded in ever dwindling quantities.

Given that resources are not unlimited, the dynamic of exchanging numbers for capability is perhaps reaching a point

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*other nations are developing the disruptive means to blunt the impact of American power, narrow our military options, and deny us freedom of movement and action*

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U.S. Marine convoy of up-armored Humvees in Helmand Province, Afghanistan



U.S. Marine Corps (Randall A. Clinton)

of diminishing returns. A given ship or aircraft—no matter how capable or well-equipped—can only be in one place at one time—and, to state the obvious, when one is sunk or shot down, there is one fewer of them.

In addition, the prevailing view for decades was that weapons and units designed for the so-called high end could also be used for the low. And it has worked to some extent: strategic bombers designed to obliterate cities have been used as close air support for riflemen on horseback. M-1 tanks designed to plug the Fulda Gap routed insurgents in Fallujah and Najaf. Billion-dollar ships are employed to track pirates and deliver humanitarian aid. And the Army is spinning out parts of the Future Combat Systems—as they move from drawing board to reality—so they can be available and usable for our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The need for the state-of-the-art systems—particularly longer range capabilities—will never go away, as we strive to offset the countermeasures being developed by other nations. But at a certain point, given the types of situations that we are likely to face—and given, for example, the struggles to field up-armored Humvees, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in Iraq—it begs the question of whether specialized, often relatively low-tech equipment for stability and counterinsurgency missions is also needed.

And how do we institutionalize procurement of such capabilities—and the ability to get them fielded quickly? Why did we have to go outside the normal bureaucratic process to develop counter-improvised explosive device technologies, to build MRAPs, and to quickly expand our ISR capability? In short, why did we have to bypass existing institutions and procedures to get the capabilities we need to protect our troops and pursue the wars we are in?

Our conventional modernization programs seek a 99-percent solution in years. Stability and counterinsurgency missions—the wars we are in—require 75-percent solutions in months. The challenge is whether in our bureaucracy and in our minds these two different paradigms can be made to coexist.

At the Air War College earlier this year, I asked whether it made sense in situations where we have total air dominance to employ lower cost, lower tech aircraft that can be employed in large quantities and used by our

partners. This is already happening in the field with Task Force ODIN in Iraq, where advanced sensors were mated with turboprop aircraft to produce a massive increase in the amount of surveillance and reconnaissance coverage. The issue then becomes how we build this kind of innovative thinking and

future colonels, captains, and sergeants will not have to be quite so heroic or resourceful.

One of the enduring issues our military struggles with is whether personnel and promotions systems designed to reward command of American troops will be able to reflect the importance of advising, training,

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flexibility into our rigid procurement processes here at home. The key is to make sure that the strategy and risk assessment drive the procurement, rather than the other way around.

### **A Full-spectrum Force**

I believe we must do this. The two models can—and do—coexist. Being able to fight and adapt to a diverse range of conflicts—sometimes all at once—lands squarely in the long history and finest traditions of the American practice of arms. In the Revolutionary War, tight formations drilled by Baron von Steuben fought Redcoats in the north, while guerrillas led by Francis Marion harassed them in the south. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Marine Corps conducted what we would now call stability operations in the Caribbean, wrote the *Small Wars Manual*, and at the same time developed the amphibious landing techniques that would help liberate Europe and the Pacific in the following decade.

And then consider General “Black Jack” Pershing, behind whose desk I sit. Before commanding the American Expeditionary Force in Europe, Pershing led a platoon of Sioux Indian scouts, rode with Buffalo Soldiers up San Juan Hill, won the respect of the Moros in the Philippines, and chased Pancho Villa in Mexico.

In Iraq, we have seen how an army that was basically a smaller version of the Cold War force can become an effective instrument of counterinsurgency over time. But that came at a frightful human, financial, and political cost. For every heroic and resourceful innovation by troops and commanders on the battlefield, there was some institutional shortcoming at the Pentagon they had to overcome. The task facing military officers today is to support the institutional changes necessary so

and equipping foreign troops—which is still not considered a career-enhancing path for our best and brightest officers. Or whether formations and units organized, trained, and equipped to destroy enemies can be adapted well enough, and fast enough, to dissuade or coopt them—or, more significantly, to build the capacity of local security forces to do the dissuading and destroying.

### **Institutional Culture and Incentives**

I have spent much of the last year making the argument in favor of institutionalizing counterinsurgency skills and our ability to conduct stability and support operations. This begs a fair question: If balance between high- and low-end capabilities is so important, and we cannot lose our conventional edge, why spend so much time talking about irregular or asymmetric warfare? The reality is that conventional and strategic force modernization programs are strongly supported in the Services, in Congress, and by the defense industry. For reasons laid out today, I also support them. For example, this year’s base budget for fiscal year 2009 contains more than \$180 billion in procurement, research, and development, the overwhelming preponderance of which is for conventional systems.

However, apart from the Special Forces community and some dissident colonels, for decades there has been no strong, deeply rooted constituency inside the Pentagon or elsewhere for institutionalizing our capabilities to wage asymmetric or irregular conflict—and to quickly meet the ever-changing needs of our forces engaged in these conflicts.

Think of where our forces have been sent and have been engaged over the last 40-plus years: Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and more. In fact, the first Gulf War stands alone

in over two generations of constant military engagement as a more or less traditional conventional conflict from beginning to end. As then-Marine Commandant Charles Krulak predicted just over 10 years ago, instead of the beloved “son of *Desert Storm*,” Western militaries are confronted with the unwanted “stepchild of Chechnya.”

There is no doubt in my mind that conventional modernization programs will continue to have—and deserve—strong institutional and congressional support. I just want to make sure the capabilities we need for the complex conflicts we are actually in and are most likely to face in the foreseeable future also have strong institutional support and are sustained in the long term. And I want to see an institution that can make and implement decisions quickly in support of those on the battlefield.

In the end, the military capabilities we need cannot be separated from the cultural traits and reward structure of the institutions we have: the signals sent by what gets funded, who gets promoted, what is taught in the academies and staff colleges, and how we train.

Thirty-six years ago, my old Central Intelligence Agency colleague Bob Komer, who led the pacification campaign in Vietnam, published his classic study of organizational behavior entitled *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. Looking at the performance of the U.S. national security apparatus during that conflict—military and civilian—he identified a number of tendencies that prevented institutions from adapting long after problems had been identified and solutions were proposed:

- the reluctance to change preferred ways of functioning, and when faced with lack of results, to do more of the same
- trying to run a war with a peacetime management structure and practices
- belief that the current set of problems was either an aberration or would soon be over
- where because a certain problem—in that case counterinsurgency—did not fit the inherited structure and preferences of organizations, it simultaneously became everybody’s business and no one’s business.

I cite that study not to relitigate that war, or to suggest that the institutional military has not made enormous strides in recent years. It is instead a cautionary reminder that these tendencies are always present in any large,

hierarchical organization, and we must consistently strive to overcome them.

### Humility and Limits

From these personal lessons that I have learned from 42 years of service in this arena, I hope that national security professionals take away two things: a sense of humility and an appreciation of limits.

First, limits about what the United States—still the strongest and greatest nation on Earth—can do. The power of our military’s global reach has been an indispensable contributor to world peace and must remain so. But not every outrage, every act of aggression, or every crisis can or should elicit an American military response, and we should acknowledge such.

Be modest about what military force can accomplish, and what technology can accomplish. The advances in precision, sensor, information, and satellite technology have led to extraordinary gains in what the U.S. military can do:

- the Taliban is dispatched within 3 months
- Saddam’s regime is toppled in 3 weeks
- a button is pushed in Nevada, and seconds later a pickup truck explodes in Mosul
- a bomb destroys the targeted house on the right, but leaves intact the one on the left.

But also never neglect the psychological, cultural, political, and human dimen-

sions of warfare, which is inevitably tragic, inefficient, and uncertain. Be skeptical of systems analysis, computer models, game theories, or doctrines that suggest otherwise. Look askance at idealized, triumphalist, or ethnocentric notions of future conflict that aspire to upend the immutable principles of war, scenarios where the enemy is killed but our troops and innocent civilians are spared, where adversaries can be cowed, shocked, or awed into submission instead of being tracked down, hilltop by hilltop, house by house, and block by bloody block. As General William Sherman said, “Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster.” Or, as General Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell said, “No matter how a war starts, it ends in mud. It has to be slugged out—there are no trick solutions or cheap shortcuts.”

In conclusion, for the reasons outlined in this presentation, I believe our National Defense Strategy provides a balanced and realistic approach to protecting America’s freedom, prosperity, and security in the years ahead. **JFQ**

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Evans, “From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War,” *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2003), 132–150.

### Soldiers fire mortar at Taliban insurgents near Firebase Martello, Afghanistan



U.S. Army (Michael Zuk)