

# A New Grand Bargain

## Implementing the Comprehensive Approach in Defense Planning

By THOMAS G. MAHNKEN

**T**he United States faces a security environment in which comprehensive approaches are supplanting joint operations. The military's heavy involvement in complex operations poses a conundrum for U.S. force planners and ultimately challenges the identity of the Armed Forces. Closing the gap between our commitments and national security capacity requires a new formulation of risk and a new grand bargain on national security roles and missions.

### The Spectrum of Challenges

The United States today faces the most complex and challenging security environment in recent memory. Dealing with these challenges requires a versatile military force. Military power has played an important role in the struggle to defeat violent extremist organizations such as al Qaeda and its affiliates. The United States has used, and will continue to need, military power to disrupt the ability of terrorist groups to strike globally, bolstering the ability of local regimes to

deal with insurgents on their own territory. To achieve success, the U.S. military will need to develop and sustain a proficiency in irregular operations equal to that which it possesses in high-end conventional warfare. Although the United States has made considerable progress in this area in recent years, more

---

**Dr. Thomas G. Mahnken is a Visiting Scholar in the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University.**

**Marine sniper engages enemy during firefight in Helmand Province, Afghanistan**



U.S. Marine Corps (William Greeson)

must be done, for example, to institutionalize the mission of training and advising foreign military forces as a core mission of the Army and Marine Corps.

Military power will also play a crucial role in dealing with regional rogues, particularly those who possess or are seeking nuclear weapons. The threat of military force has played a central role in deterring these states and their surrogates from aggression. However, thinking about deterrence—a central mission of the U.S. military throughout the Cold War—went out of fashion with the collapse of the Soviet Union and has only recently begun to stage a comeback. We need to revive our understanding of deterrence and develop new approaches for competing with North Korea and Iran over the long term. The United States also needs to improve its ability to defend against the missile arsenals that regional rogues use to coerce their neighbors. Finally, the U.S. military needs the ability to preempt or retaliate against aggressive behavior, ranging from rogue states' use of terrorist surrogates, through the use of conventional force, to the use of nuclear weapons.

Finally, military power has a role to play in dealing with the rise of China. Specifically, the United States must, through its words and actions, maintain a preponderance of power in the Pacific in order to reassure allies and friends in the region and ensure access to the global commons. The Armed Forces also need to develop asymmetric responses to those Chinese capabilities that put U.S. forces at risk.

Beyond these long-term challenges, the United States must be prepared to confront any number of disruptive events that could destabilize the international system, ranging from the outbreak of a virulent pandemic, to the collapse of a strategic state, to the use of nuclear weapons. Recent experience, in the form of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, shows that such shocks can shape what the President and the American people expect of the military.

### Complex Operations

The U.S. military must not only prepare for a broad spectrum of contingencies but also plan to conduct a wide range of missions in those contingencies. Although policymakers frequently espouse a comprehensive approach to meeting current and future contingencies, the military in fact has become the instrument of choice for handling complex contingencies in recent years. In Iraq and Afghanistan, it is

not only combating insurgents and providing security to the local populace, but also building infrastructure and supporting economic development. Across the globe, combatant commanders plan to respond to future contingencies and play a major role in security cooperation with a broad range of allies and partners. At home, the military is being asked to deal with the spillover of crime and drug trafficking from Mexico into the United States. For example, Governors of states in the Southwest have asked the Department of Defense (DOD) to dispatch 1,500 troops to the U.S.-Mexican border to analyze intelligence and provide air support and technical assistance to local law enforcement agencies.

---

*beyond long-term challenges, the United States must be prepared to confront any number of disruptive events that could destabilize the international system*

---

The Armed Forces have become the preferred means for dealing with national security challenges for several reasons. They are highly professional and increasingly expeditionary. They are also responsive: the Nation's leadership can order troops into action, and they will heed the call of duty. And when these troops reach their destination, they have demonstrated the ability to perform admirably, including in roles they did not anticipate when they joined the military. For example, Navy and Air Force officers have been asked to lead Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, members of the Reserve Component and National Guard have frequently been called upon to use their civilian skills rather than their military training in areas such as law enforcement and public administration. Above all, however, because of its size, the military has the capacity to undertake a range of tasks, a capacity that the remainder of the national security community lacks.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated the limits of U.S. national security capacity. If counterinsurgency is "20 percent military and 80 percent nonmilitary," the military all too often finds itself performing not only its 20 percent, but also a substantial part of the nonmilitary 80 percent. If there is a gap between our military commitments

and capacity, then there is a growing chasm between our national security commitments and capacity.

DOD is currently in the midst of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the congressionally mandated report that helps set the future course of the military. According to the fact sheet on the QDR's terms of reference, the study will "re-balance DoD's strategies, capabilities and forces to address today's conflicts and tomorrow's threats."<sup>1</sup> One of the central issues that defense planners must grapple with in this context is the role of the military in complex interagency operations.

The fact that the Armed Forces are heavily engaged in complex operations, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, poses a conundrum for defense planners. Should the Services prepare for the best case or the worst? In other words, should DOD plan on being able to concentrate on its main role, which is the use of force to achieve the aims of policy, with other departments and agencies playing their roles? Or should it, based on recent experience, plan on conducting missions beyond its core competency, including reconstruction and stabilization, law enforcement, and development assistance? How we answer that question will have a major impact on the size and shape of our forces.

This is truly a conundrum because DOD leadership cannot know a priori what the correct choice is; the answer depends not only on what DOD chooses to invest in, but also on the capability and capacity of other parts of the national security community. Even more broadly, it depends on what activities Congress chooses to fund.

There are real costs associated with these choices. Taking the narrow approach of focusing on combat tasks runs the risk of leaving the Nation unprepared to carry out the full range of postconflict missions in a future war, as it was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, electing to focus on one portion of the conflict spectrum, whether countering insurgencies or the threat posed by capable states, risks leaving the United States unprepared for future contingencies where our adversaries fail to adhere to our preferred approach to war.

Taking the broad approach of embracing the new, expanded set of missions carries its own costs. It risks diluting the military's expertise in its core mission of warfare. It also risks allowing other parts of the national

security community to dodge their responsibilities in complex contingencies. Although the military has in recent years become the favored instrument for carrying out a range of tasks, it is doubtful whether it is, or can become, an adequate substitute for experts in political reconciliation, development, law enforcement, or governance.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has spoken eloquently of the need for a dramatic increase in funding of the civilian instruments of national security, including diplomacy, foreign assistance, and economic reconstruction and development. As he put it in his Landon Lecture at Kansas State University in November 2007:

*We must focus our energies beyond the guns and steel of the military, beyond just our brave Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen. We must also focus our energies on the other elements of national power that will be so crucial in the coming years. . . . Civilian participation is both necessary to making military operations successful and to relieving stress on the men and women of our armed services who have endured so much these last few years, and done so with such unflinching bravery and devotion.<sup>2</sup>*

Gates' well-publicized call for greater civilian capacity was not, however, the first. The 2006 QDR examined the need for greater national security capacity, noting that:

*Although many U.S. Government organizations possess knowledge and skills needed to perform tasks critical to complex operations, they are often not chartered or resourced to maintain deployable capabilities. Thus, the Department has tended to become the default responder during many contingencies. This is a short-term necessity, but the Defense Department supports legislation to enable other agencies to strengthen their capabilities so that balanced interagency operations become more feasible—recognizing that other agencies' capabilities and performance often play a critical role in allowing the Department of Defense to achieve its mission.<sup>3</sup>*

Drafters of the 2006 QDR based their analysis of future defense requirements on the assumption that other parts of the national security community, such as the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, would become larger and more

adept at complex operations, thus relieving the military of much of this burden. The recent track record belies that optimistic assumption. The question that DOD must now face is the degree to which the military will play an active role beyond its core competency in complex operations.

### Redefining the Military Domain?

The military's heavy involvement in complex operations raises the question of how the military domain of national security should be defined. Today, one frequently sees two pathologies at work within the officer corps. One is to define the military domain in excessively narrow terms. In this view, the role of the military was to fight

also indeed eagerness, to take on all manner of tasks, whether the force was well suited to them or not.

Now, more than ever, what is needed is a frank debate over the scope and contours of the military profession. Officers and the civilians they serve need to answer some difficult questions, namely: what *must* the military be able to do, and what *should* the military be able to do? In what skills must Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen be proficient? And what skills should they be aware of?

The Armed Forces must above all be able to fulfill their core mission of fighting and winning our nation's wars. It would be a mistake to understate the difficulty of this task, or the cost of failing to perform it

*although the military has become the favored instrument for carrying out a range of tasks, it is doubtful whether it is, or can become, an adequate substitute for experts*

certain types of wars—generally the wars we want to fight. To take just one example, Air Force Major General Charles Dunlap has argued that the military cannot succeed at counterinsurgency and should not even try. Rather, in his view, “we need the bulk of the Army prepared to go toe-to-toe with the heaviest combat formations our adversaries can field.”<sup>4</sup>

The opposite tendency is to define the military domain in excessively broad terms. Think of it as the embodiment of the military's “can do” attitude on steroids. This manifests itself in not only willingness, but

successfully. It is the core reason the United States has a military, and no other organization can carry out this mission. The core tasking of the U.S. military is to fight and win *all* of the Nation's wars. These range from counterinsurgency campaigns to the need to combat states with advanced capabilities. Moreover, the Armed Forces must be able to fight and to win. They must thus be proficient in tactics and operational art—and strategy.

The military also exists to prevent or deter wars. This includes maintaining forces in readiness to deter attacks of all sorts and training and advising foreign security forces,



Chairman speaks to Soldiers in Afghanistan

DOD (Chad J. McNealey)

as well as a range of other security cooperation activities.

Finally, the military exists to keep the peace. That includes a range of military operations short of war, including ensuring the freedom of navigation, enforcing sanctions, and combating piracy.

If these are the missions the military *must* be able to carry out, what *should* it be able to do? In order to carry out these missions, the men and women of the Armed Forces should be aware of all the other instruments of national power and how they

future. Given limited resources, minimizing risk against one type of threat only creates additional risk in other areas. For example, specializing in irregular warfare would raise our risk to attack through other means. Rather, now and for the foreseeable future, we will need to balance risks.

Fortunately, the flexibility of the military as a joint force can help balance risks. Although each Service has a significant role to play in meeting each challenge we face, the struggle against violent extremist organizations will involve the Army and Marine Corps

due to bureaucratic foot-dragging or lack of congressional buy-in. Even successful innovations, such as the Section 1206 authorities that allow DOD to fund some programs to train and equip foreign forces, enjoy only tepid congressional support. To overcome such obstacles, such an effort must be led personally by the President and must involve both his Cabinet and key leaders in Congress. Only through such direct action can the United States achieve the type of integrated approach required.

To implement a new grand bargain, the Obama administration should act on the recommendation of the 2006 QDR and draft *National Security Planning Guidance*. Such a document would set priorities and clarify national security roles and responsibilities to reduce capability gaps and eliminate redundancies. It would help departments and agencies better align their strategy, as well as budget and planning functions, with national objectives. Such an effort would help ensure that operations better reflect the President's National Security Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

To meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, we need a military characterized by flexibility, agility, and versatility. We buy that versatility through the technology we procure. More than that, we purchase flexibility through the people we recruit, train, and educate. By rebalancing national security roles, missions, and resources, the United States can ensure that it is actually able to implement the comprehensive approach. **JFQ**



U.S. Army (Bobby L. Allen, Jr.)

Soldiers await instructions after patrolling village in Diyala, Iraq

relate to the military mission. They should have an understanding of foreign culture and language and be able to work closely with allies and friends. They should also be able to contribute to nonmilitary tasks, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

### A New Risk Calculus

The prevalence of complex contingencies and the military's heavy involvement in them call for a new approach to judging risk and ultimately a new grand bargain to align our capabilities and requirements.

In the past, the U.S. military displayed a strong preference to minimize risk. One manifestation was the Weinberger Doctrine, which set overwhelming force as the precondition for launching military operations. Another was a traditional emphasis on material superiority as the recipe for success.

Such an approach was of questionable utility in the past but is clearly inapplicable to the situation we face today and will face in the

more heavily than the Navy and Air Force, whereas shaping the rise of China will involve naval and air forces more than ground forces. By continuing to invest in a balanced joint force, we will mitigate risks.

We also need to conceive of risk more broadly—not only in terms of the military, but also in terms of national security overall. Increasing the capacity of the national security community would relieve stress on the force and help reduce the possibility of conflict. As Secretary Gates has noted, “Having robust civilian capabilities available could make it less likely that military force will have to be used in the first place, as local problems might be dealt with before they become crises.”<sup>5</sup>

Achieving this greater balance will, in turn, require a new grand bargain on national security—a reaffirmation and redefinition of national security roles and missions. Too often in the recent past, efforts to build greater civilian capacity were truncated or aborted

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense, “2010 QDR Terms of Reference Fact Sheet,” April 27, 2009, available at <[www.defenselink.mil/news/d20090429qdr.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/d20090429qdr.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Manhattan, Kansas, November 26, 2007, available at <[www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199](http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199)>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006), 86.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Julian E. Barnes and Peter Spiegel, “A Pentagon Battle over ‘The Next War,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2008. See also Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “America’s Asymmetric Advantage,” *Armed Forces Journal*, September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Gates.

<sup>6</sup> *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 85.