



The Top Ten Questions for the Post-9/11 World

By Thomas Donnelly

As the great bureaucratic gears that will stamp out the 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review—without question, the most important appraisal of U.S. military requirements in a generation—begin to turn, the Pentagon's decisions in the months ahead will shape the post-9/11 world. As a barometer of things to come, here follow the ten most important questions today confronting U.S. military strategists and force planners.

What Is the “Post-9/11” Environment?

Properly understood, the current state of international politics is a continuation of the previous, “post-Cold War” environment; the fundamental correlation of power in the world remains the same. The new century is still a moment of unprecedented great-power peace. The former great powers of Europe, in addition to being far less great, are peaceful almost to the point of pacifism, as is Japan. One rising great power, India, is already a thriving democracy, and its pressing security problems of terrorism and the nuclear balance with Pakistan are not immediately the stuff of world wars. China's rise is potentially the most destabilizing change in the future, and its immediate threat to Taiwan carries within it the danger of disrupting the current international order. Yet by any historical standard, the danger of open wars among wealthy nations is at an all-time low.

Moreover, this very stable global order is amazingly liberal. If the world is enjoying a moment of remarkable peace, it is also experiencing an even more amazing moment of human liberty. Many of the “captive nations” of the Cold War are free. Genuinely liberal democracies, with protections

for minorities, the rule of law, property rights, and transparent governance, are flourishing in regions once assumed to be inhospitable to such “Western” values. And, though under daily attack, the flag of freedom is rising in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With headlines and newscasts dominated by violence, it is easy to lose sight of these larger facts. And it is even more difficult to remind ourselves what links these two historically unprecedented moments of peace and freedom. They are the product of an equally unique fact: the global preeminence of a single state, a sole superpower, the United States of America. The “post-9/11 security environment” is still, unmistakably, the era of Pax Americana.

Is This Really What We Want?

If the current era is defined by American hegemony, is this a preferable arrangement? If, in some sense, the collapse of the Soviet Union placed the United States in a quasi-imperial role, that was hardly the explicit purpose of waging the Cold War. Indeed, for several decades, American strategists imagined a peaceful, ordered coexistence with the Soviets as the most optimistic denouement for that struggle. Does America have the will and the wherewithal to maintain its preeminence?

It is almost impossible to explain the international behavior of the United States over the past fifteen years without coming to the conclusion

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that Americans have grown comfortable in their super power. It was, after all, the policies of the Clinton administration that provoked the French to complain about “hyperpower.” Despite much national lip-biting and soul-searching and a number of false starts, the 1990s were a time of expanding commitments, particularly in the Balkans, as well as traditional commitments kept in the Middle East and East Asia. An expanding security perimeter is a consistent element in American strategic culture, a combination of principles and interests that has defined the historical exercise of power by the United States.

Internationalism not only describes U.S. behavior, but also reflects the moral framework through which Americans view the world. Yes, it suited U.S. interests to prevent a pipsqueak dictator like Slobodan Milosevic from shredding the hard-won peace of Europe, but America’s moral abhorrence of Serbia’s ethnic cleansing was ultimately just as important in provoking Washington to action. And likewise, just as it is our strategic interest to support democracy in the greater Middle East, the moral argument for liberty is equally compelling.

How Can We Preserve the Pax Americana?

If the United States wishes to preserve its preeminence on the international stage, it must learn the logic of global power in the twenty-first century. The United States needs to maintain both its leadership within the international state structure, as well as the legitimacy—moral and practical—of the structure itself. In short, there is a “systemic” or “institutional” dimension to the job of being the sole superpower.

Preserving U.S. leadership among states is the timeless task of traditional geopolitics. Statesmen have long grasped that the developed states of Europe and East Asia are the key to great-power politics and that the energy resources of the Middle East are crucial to industrial economies. Maintaining a favorable disposition of power in these three regions is essential to preserving the global security order.

Yet today the state system of international politics is under increasing pressure. This is most apparent and most immediately threatening in the greater Middle East, where the old order—imposed by the great powers after World War I—is breaking down. Terrorist groups have exploited this opening in a variety of ways, but the

greatest source of their strength is the illegitimacy of local autocratic regimes.

The United States has an interest in maintaining the health and legitimacy of this system, the framework for American power and principles. One task is to prevent terrorists from gaining control of or further destabilizing the weak and failing states of the greater Middle East. The second is to foster a new, more durable order in the region by bolstering democratic governance, individual political rights, and the protection of minorities.

What Are the Leading Challenges to the Pax Americana?

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union and the strength of the United States have created a global great power peace, life under the Pax Americana is hardly without danger. Indeed, some of the most worrisome trends in international politics flow largely from the success of past American policies.

Europe is free and at peace, a blessing of historic proportions. Yet even as it slowly aggregates its economic and diplomatic strength through the European Union, the politics of its great powers remain focused inward. Of the 2.5 million personnel under arms in Europe, only approximately 3 percent can be deployed, even for a short period. And France and Germany, under the intense fiscal pressure caused by poor economic growth, aging populations, and huge welfare burdens, are actually cutting their defense spending. At the same time, they have yet to enact any serious reforms in their force structure or defense industry.

If traditional U.S. great-power allies are growing weaker, the People’s Republic of China increasingly acts like a great power determined to make its mark on international politics. Beijing has studied the recent operations of the U.S. military intensely, noting what it regards as American strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, China is using its expanding economy to slowly transform its own armed services into a power-projection force. Where this process will lead or end is unknowable, but two facts are clear. First, in local scenarios and most crucially across the Taiwan Strait, Chinese capabilities already make it difficult for the United States to keep control of any crisis. And second, in the longer term, China is discovering that its regional ambitions are, in a globalized world, inseparable from the larger international security situation.

If a rising China poses a longer-term challenge, the collapse of the old order in the greater Middle East is the most immediate danger. This collapse has been underway for some time, since the multiple crises of 1979.¹ The rise of political Islam, in the form of al Qaeda and its ideological affiliates, has accelerated this decline and carried it from the Arab heartlands to the periphery of the Islamic world. This has become the central challenge to global security, one that the United States can no longer ignore. Attacking terrorist groups directly is a necessary but insufficient response to the larger problem—a treatment of the symptoms, not the disease.

A fourth concern is that posed by nuclear or near-nuclear rogue states, such as Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran. The possession of nuclear weapons severely limits options for dealing militarily with these states, leaving some combination of diplomatic engagement and containment as the only attractive option—at least in the short term.

A final danger, and one given too little thought by U.S. strategists, is the possibility that various anti-American actors might forge an alliance of convenience. These might be more traditional, state-to-state agreements—China’s flirtations with Iran occasionally take on this quality. But these coalitions of the unwilling might easily include “non-state” actors such as al Qaeda; indeed, Osama bin Laden’s offer of truce to European nations after the March 11 bombings in Madrid reveals how state-like al Qaeda’s agenda is. Such agreements would be true axes of evil, even if their strategic cooperation were limited.

What Defines Victory?

The task for the United States is nothing less than the preservation and expansion of today’s Pax Americana, the extension of the “unipolar moment” for as long as possible. “Victory” means the integration of China within the liberal political order—and there is reason to aspire to this goal, even though it all but implies some sort of regime change in Beijing. As important and more immediate is the need to foster the process of political liberalization in the Islamic world, on the periphery as well as in the Arab heartland. Finally, we must preserve the political legitimacy of state structure as discussed above, by bolstering weak and failing states (including in Europe) and constraining the power of non-state actors.

What Are U.S. Strategic Priorities?

The first priority of our strategy making is ideological: elaborating what President Bush describes as a “forward strategy of freedom” is essential to ground the exercise of American power in the American political tradition. This matters internally, to maintain political will to endure the “long, hard slog” in the greater Middle East and to simultaneously engage China diplomatically, economically, and culturally while containing its growing military power. But it matters externally as well. American political principles are the most powerful aspect of what lately has come to be called “soft power,” the power to attract others around the world: both to retain allies and win over potential enemies. The retreat to realpolitik, a theme sounded by candidate John Kerry, would be to forgo our most effective strategic tool.

A second priority of American strategy should aim at preventing a true “axis of evil” or tyranny, that is, the kind of direct or indirect strategic cooperation among enemies and potential enemies outlined above. One of the factors that has thus far preserved the Pax Americana has been our ability to deal with our enemies individually—to divide and conquer, so to speak. While this is important to our purposes in the Middle East, it is essential in regard to China.

While the modernizing People’s Liberation Army poses a clear and growing threat to Taiwan and to the outdated American strategy of bilateral alliances in East Asia, China, like other industrialized nations, is increasingly dependent on imported energy from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. In the material sense, this is of far greater strategic importance to China’s great-power aspirations than asserting its claims to Taiwan.

A final priority for American strategists is to roll back anti-Americanism from traditional allies. The crush of events after 9/11 may have made a larger effort at public diplomacy impossible—and a large element of European public opinion is beyond the reach of either material or moral appeal—but it is clear that the “solidarity of the West” must be bolstered.

What Are the Military Implications of American Strategy?

One of the most tenacious pieces of conventional thinking by strategists in the post–Cold War era is “force sizing is not strategy.” Yet the difficulties the U.S. military has encountered in trying to occupy, pacify, and reconstruct

Iraq suggest a far closer connection between the two. The most obvious strategic implication of the American experience since September 11 is that the reductions in forces over the past fifteen years were excessive.

The need to fight on multiple fronts has been a basic tenet of American military strategy since the United States became a world power at the beginning of the twentieth century, and this remains a core premise today. Fortunately, recent experience has clarified the nature of potential conflict in the greater Middle East and in East Asia. The upcoming 2005 *Quadrennial Defense Review* can now be crafted to solve a more specific geopolitical puzzle, rather than having to base its assessments on generic “capabilities.”

It is also reasonably clear that U.S. strategies in the Middle East and East Asia are distinct, and thus require distinct forces. The military containment of China is fundamentally a job for firepower, naval, and air forces. The transformation of the political order in the Middle East is principally a task of manpower, specifically land forces. While this is a radical simplification—of course, the superior accuracy, firepower, and mobility of U.S. forces are themselves transforming traditional calculations of military balances, and essential elements of American military power, like space forces, are applicable globally—it does lend a necessary clarity to force planning.

The most immediate question about the U.S. ability to sustain its position of global preeminence turns on the obvious gap between the strategic ends and material means. In the roughest terms, U.S. forces possess overwhelming strength at delivering firepower but insufficient ground troops, particularly infantry troops. The needs of firepower can largely be addressed by maintaining and managing current research and procurement accounts, while the need for manpower cannot be addressed without significantly increasing the defense budget.

Is This a Politically Sustainable and Fiscally Affordable Strategy?

The price of a Pax Americana remains an open-ended question, and it is the central proposition dominating this fall’s presidential election. In a fiscal sense, the burdens of global leadership in the post–Cold War, post-9/11 era are a fraction of the burdens of the Cold War or the other wars of the twentieth century. Defense spending—even allowing for all the supplemental appropriations for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—remains at about two-thirds the Cold War average, measured as a percentage of the U.S.

economy. Even with no militarily significant contributions from allies other than Great Britain, the United States commands all the necessary resources to preserve the current liberal international order for the foreseeable future. And during the Cold War, Americans found a way to operate globally while both avoiding the perils of “imperial overstretch” or the loss of liberties at home.

The far greater question is that of political willpower. President Bush has described a vigorous, ambitious set of geopolitical goals: “transforming” the brutal and repressive political order in the greater Middle East, liberalizing autocratic governments while stemming the surge of radical Islamism. It is too early to tell if this commitment will be sustained by an opposition party and thus whether the Bush Doctrine is really consistent with American strategic culture; how much of John Kerry’s political strength is derived upon personal animus toward the president and how much a matter of genuine policy disagreements is impossible to gauge. Thus far, at least, the race pits a liberal visionary—George Bush—against a realist, even reactionary, John Kerry.

What is remarkable, however, is how little serious opposition the Pax Americana generates abroad. For all the hyperventilating about U.S. hyperpower and the “adventure” in Iraq, and for all the theorizing about balancing by means of “soft power,” no single power or coalition has done anything material to offset American strength. The French and the Germans, who complain most about Iraq, are, as noted above, investing ever less in military power. China’s military modernization is proceeding according to some inscrutable, internal clock, more or less at the same pace as it was prior to September 11. And, although Iran is clearly determined to acquire nuclear forces, most other regimes in the Middle East act more like deer caught in the American headlights, giving lip service to the new U.S. demands for reform while hoping they go away.

What Alliances and International Organizations Can Help Defray the Costs and Burdens of This Strategy?

Another bitter lesson of the past fifteen years, and especially the period since September 11, is how the alliances and international organizations that served American purposes so well during the Cold War are so poorly suited to the needs of the twenty-first century. The United Nations and NATO, at least as they are now structured, are at worst constraints on the

expansion of a liberal world security system and at best marginally relevant, although NATO remains a useful framework through which European military establishments can be modernized and synchronized.

At the same time, ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” are flimsy structures upon which to make long-term commitments. The skeletal alliance for Iraq is falling apart, either because of policy differences, as in the case of Spain, or, as in the case of Poland, simply because limited military capabilities have been exhausted. And, as noted above, the bilateral security partnerships that have long characterized U.S. policy in East Asia are unsuited to the military containment of China; such an approach makes it easier for Beijing to contemplate a divide-and-conquer strategy.

The United States must make time to make new alliances. Even the traditional “special partnerships,” not only with Great Britain but with Australia, need to be refurbished and renewed to meet new challenges. Britain’s 2002 defense review, “A New Chapter,” provides a model—it is explicit in recognizing the United States as its closest ally and emphasizes the need to field forces capable of operating to U.S. standards—that a new administration would do well to promote. But equally important is whether we will undertake the spadework necessary to build new strategic partnerships, such as with India. While it is clear that old allies have not yet been persuaded to participate in the task of securing a new political order in the Middle East, the tasks of defending the Pax Americana can and should be shared with those who most stand to benefit from it.

What Are the Alternative Strategies?

American strategists, even as they try to preserve the Pax Americana, would do well to contemplate alternative systems of international security; maintaining the U.S. position as global hegemon, however benignly, could ultimately prove beyond our capacity or our will. If that proves the case, then American policy must be trimmed either by limiting our strategic ends, hoping that means other than military power can achieve the same strategic ends, or crafting alternative strategies.

One scenario already unfolding would push the United States to choose between addressing the problems of the Islamic world and the military containment of China. It may be that multiple, open-ended, and expansive missions in the greater Middle East gradually diffuse U.S. military power, unbalancing the mix of forces to the point where a response to Chinese provocations would be increasingly

difficult. As Vietnam diverted and warped American military power into the 1970s, so might long-term commitments to Afghanistan, Iraq, or other trouble spots distort the global posture of U.S. forces in the future. Conversely, concentrating too much on China or other firepower-intensive scenarios—the preferred choice of many military and civilian leaders in the Defense Department, who still resist the sort of constabulary, counterinsurgency missions that have become the steady diet of U.S. forces over the past decade—has already left today’s force structure unbalanced. In either case, sharing power with Beijing or adopting a more “realist” approach to the greater Middle East would place the liberal and democratic political foundations of the Pax Americana at risk.

Any alternative strategies would still have to deal with the fact that the collapse of the traditional order in the Middle East is a pressing problem. U.S. strategists might consider some form of limited strategic partnership with China for the purposes of addressing the problems of the region; Beijing has as great an interest in keeping the oil flowing as the rest of the industrial world. While China’s alleged contributions to the global war on terrorism are more rhetoric than reality, and its repressive approach to its own Muslim population may limit the scope of a genuine partnership, there is perhaps a logic there. More promising might be a different, “peripheral” approach to reform in the Islamic world, working to support liberalism in Southeast Asia and Northwest Africa, where radical Islam is a weaker force and the local culture more tolerant. By invading Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has attacked the problem with typical American directness, eliminating al Qaeda’s haven and training base and then going to the Arab heartland of Islamic discontent. An indirect approach would be less costly, if perhaps a longer and less certain strategy.

In contemplating such alternatives, however, it is important not to confuse tactics with strategy. How the presidential candidates and the next administration answer these ten fundamental questions will determine the shape, the extent, and the durability of the Pax Americana that has been the framework for general peace and prosperity since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Note

1. For a fuller discussion, see Thomas Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: A Strategic Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2004), 1–2.