



Force Size and Strategy

By Thomas Donnelly

One of the emerging ironies of the presidential campaign is that both parties seem to want to regard the events of the past three years—the post–September 11 era—as an anomaly. The Democratic convention was an exercise in nostalgia for the good old days of the 1990s. Even the Bush campaign has lately succumbed to a kind of Iraq fatigue, seeking in particular to divert attention from the president’s rhetoric of a year ago calling for the democratization and liberalization of the Middle East. Alas, the United States cannot simply resign as the “sole superpower” and guarantor of the current global order. No matter the outcome of the election, the United States still will face two inescapable strategic tasks: changing the Middle East and containing the rise of China. At the same time, the new president must rebuild and restructure the U.S. armed forces to respond to the needs of these very different theaters.

The preservation of the largely peaceful and prosperous Pax Americana demands that the United States secure the continuing political transformation of the greater Middle East while offsetting the growing strength of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Each of these tasks is a tall order, at once distinct and increasingly interwoven. To fail at one is to fail globally. Achieving these strategic goals demands an explicit “two-theater” strategy—an approach that has been at the core of the American strategic tradition, but one that has fallen out of favor in recent years.

Since before the founding, Americans have looked outward, in many directions; paradoxically, we share a similar strategic perspective to the Chinese: we regard the United States as a kind of “middle kingdom,” a center with security concerns all along its perimeter. Today, of course, these concerns extend well beyond the colonial frontier and the Americas, past Europe, past the islands of the western Pacific to the Asian heartland—the farthest side of the world.

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At the same time, the United States has never fully embraced or provided the resources for a two-front military capability; there has most often been an element of “swing force” intended to be shifted to the point of decision. Thus, the Panama Canal was essential to permitting a true two-ocean Navy, allowing ships to move between the Atlantic and Pacific fleets in a timely fashion. In World War II, Roosevelt agreed to a “Germany First” approach and, although both successes and setbacks against Japan complicated this seeming clarity, forces that had fought in Germany were en route for a possible invasion of Japan’s home islands when the war ended. Likewise, during the Cold War, forces stationed in the United States might be sent east or west as the situation demanded. Units constituted to fight the Soviets on the central German plain were similarly counted on to rebuff a North Korean invasion.

The central value of a two-front military strategy is to permit active engagement and “patrolling” of the American security perimeter while retaining an operational reserve capable of providing decisive force, should a crisis exceed the capacity of forward operating units. This operational reserve also allows for the rotation of personnel in these

patrolling missions, ensuring the viability of the forward line of defense over time. Reestablishing this essentially American military strategy is the key to achieving U.S. security goals in the twenty-first century.

Yet it has been the conventional wisdom of recent defense reviews that force sizing is not strategy. Pentagon leaders remain reluctant to adapt this view, even as the unanticipated commitment of forces to Iraq constrains U.S. strategy globally, to the point of disrupting efforts to transform the force or train it. In long-running struggles like the Cold War or in this effort to reorder the greater Middle East, the size of the force is an essential element in strategy-making. It is necessary to maintain a balance of forward operating forces, operational reserves capable of deploying rapidly to points of crisis or relieving forward units, and a genuine strategic reserve available in a timely fashion in the event of multiple, large-scale conflicts—in other words, a genuine two-war capability.

Military Strategy to Transform the Greater Middle East

The “greater Middle East,” extending from West Africa to Southeast Asia, is a theater of operations of immense size as well as political and military complexity, itself sure to produce multiple U.S. military operations on disparate “fronts.” Yet the region’s problems demand an integrated grand strategy and a coherent military approach. Realizing a military strategy for the Islamic world will certainly take years, if not decades, and will often as not be driven by exogenous events rather than conscious American design. Nevertheless, the need for some initial blueprint is desperate—we should at least try to imagine how we would prefer to prosecute this war.

The primary directive for U.S. military strategy in the greater Middle East should be to retain the initiative won since September 11 through the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the task of transforming the political culture of the Islamic world will inevitably be a long-term effort, we must strive to keep our adversaries on the strategic defensive; individually, the autocratic states and terrorist groups of the region are weak and susceptible to a divide-and-conquer strategy. Neither do they benefit from broad great-power support. Europeans generally may prefer to appease rather than confront these adversaries, and China’s interests are uncertain, but for the moment no outside power is willing to do more than scold the United States for its ambitions in the region.

The very weakness of terrorists and the increasingly “distributed” nature of their operations give them an elusive, mercurial quality, allowing them to reconstitute rapidly even when defeated tactically. The object of U.S. strategy must be to deny sanctuary to terrorist groups, for as they grow, they assume many of the traditional qualities of a military force, even of a nation-state. As the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States observes in its recent report, “a complex international terrorist operation aimed at launching a catastrophic attack cannot be mounted by just anyone in anyplace.” Such operations require:

- time, space, and the ability to perform competent planning and staff work;
- a command structure able to make necessary decisions and possessing the authority and contacts to assemble needed people, money, and materials;
- opportunity and space to recruit, train, and select operatives with the needed skills and dedication, providing the time and structure required to socialize them into the terrorist cause, judge their trustworthiness, and hone their skills;
- a logistics network able to securely manage the travel of operatives, move money, and transport resources (like explosives) where they need to go;
- access, in the case of certain weapons, to the special materials needed for a nuclear, chemical, biological, or radiological attack;
- reliable communications between coordinators and operatives; and
- the opportunity to test the workability of the plan.¹

The need for such sanctuaries suggests that combating al Qaeda-style terrorist groups requires addressing the problems of the larger, state-centered political order in the greater Middle East; they are inseparably interwoven. But for the political peculiarities of the region—both its strengths, such as the wealth its oil reserves have brought, and weaknesses, such as the corruption and illegitimacy of its governments—the terrorist phenomenon would not be possible, or would take a different and less dangerous form.

The greater Middle East abounds with potential sanctuaries for terrorist groups. After the fall of the Taliban

from power in Afghanistan, remnants of al Qaeda and al Qaeda-like groups have availed themselves of the traditional trade routes and lines of communication throughout the Islamic world, westward from Central and South Asia and Arabia into Africa, and eastward to Southeast Asia. These are also the paths followed by itinerant Wahabi-style clerics, who proselytize their extreme religious beliefs and their accompanying violent politics. These many potential sanctuaries “combine rugged terrain, weak governance, room to hide or receive supplies, and low population density with a town or city near enough to allow necessary interaction with the outside world.”² These are spread throughout the greater Middle East, and include:

- western Pakistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region;
- southern or western Afghanistan;
- the Arabian peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and the nearby Horn of Africa, extending into Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya;
- Southeast Asia, from Thailand to the southern Philippines to Indonesia;
- West Africa, including Nigeria and Mali;
- North Africa, including the southern Sahara; and
- European cities with expatriate Muslim communities, especially cities in central and eastern Europe where governments are fighting to modernize and reform, and security forces and border controls are less effective.³

Even this brief summary reveals the immense scope of military operations in the global war on terror. Denying the use of any one sanctuary may require relatively little force, yet patrolling and operating across such a vast space will necessarily diffuse and absorb U.S. military strength. As the 9/11 commission concluded, “in the twentieth century, strategists focused on the world’s great industrial heartlands. In the twenty-first, the focus is in the opposite direction, toward remote regions and failing states. The United States has had to find ways to extend its reach, straining the limits of its influence.”⁴

The simple size of this theater of potential operations demands that the United States set some strategic priorities. Across the region there are a number—a fairly large number—of states whose combination of weakness and

strength makes them vitally important to any coherent U.S. policy: Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, *inter alia*. There is no doubt that assembling these many pieces in a strategic puzzle will be a challenge. Indeed, at any one moment and for many moments to come, it may be that several of these states seem on the verge of crisis.

At the same time, these uncertainties represent strategic opportunities, either to improve the legitimacy and governance of states whose weakness is the danger or to attack terrorist groups directly. In many cases—Pakistan, for example—both may be possible. The long-term struggle for the future of the greater Middle East is at an extraordinarily fluid stage; hence, the high value on retaining the strategic initiative.

Thus the United States must engage strategically across the region. This will of course involve other elements of American power, particularly intelligence gathering, but must also include some level of military engagement. In some instances, such as in Pakistan or Nigeria, the goal will be to bolster the local government and specifically the institution of the military, thus allowing it to extend its reach into the ungoverned corners of its own territory where terrorists otherwise find sanctuary, while simultaneously encouraging the political, economic, and educational reforms that would make it more accountable and legitimate to its own people. These are very much the traditional tools to “shape” the security environment, but applied in places that have largely been ignored by American strategists in the past.

To the degree possible, U.S. strategy for the greater Middle East should strive to balance concerns with the “Arab heartland,” Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—where the region’s problems are most pronounced and most deeply rooted—with the “periphery” of the Islamic world. In places like Indonesia and Nigeria, for example, the costs of engagement and the risks of large-scale warfare are low, yet the potential strategic rewards are great. Not only is it crucial to deny sanctuary to terrorists in such places, but it may also be possible to build these governments into relatively reliable partners in the struggle.

At the same time, it must be recognized that a peripheral or “indirect” strategy alone will not suffice. The problems at the core of the Islamic world are simply too pressing, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—not to mention the Iranians’ acceleration of their nuclear program—have created a new dynamic in the region. The

danger is that, despite what is actually a remarkably rapid and successful counterinsurgency campaign, the United States will suffer from “Iraq fatigue,” seeking a new stability. This would be to sacrifice the strategic initiative won since September 11. Such stability would be illusory and, at best, temporary; the enemy, which has been under constant pressure, will use any respite to rearm, reorganize, and plot new attacks. The status quo regimes, meanwhile, will conclude that the United States has lost interest in the region and thus feel less pressure to implement domestic reforms.

The United States cannot afford an “exit strategy,” either from Iraq and Afghanistan or from the region as a whole. Neither can it afford a status-quo strategy; the entrenched political order is a large part of the problem. Thus, the trend since 1979—of larger, longer, and more decisive U.S. military operations in the region—is unlikely to end. The costs and dangers of military engagement at the core of the Islamic world will be high, exceeded only by the costs of withdrawal. We must build the capacity to continue to secure the footholds won in Afghanistan and Iraq, while retaining the capacity to respond, and respond decisively, elsewhere within the region.

In sum, the conflict within the greater Middle East is itself a multifront war. American strategy for the region must proceed from the determination to retain the strategic initiative and with the capacity to operate in remote and widely separate locations. While these operations may rarely take the form of direct invasion and regime change as in Iraq, the United States must retain the ability to undertake such operations if necessary, quite apart from its new and expanding baseline engagement missions across the region.

Military Strategy to Shape China’s Rise to Power

The growing wealth and power of the People’s Republic of China has been an increasingly apparent element in international politics throughout the post-Cold War period; it is an integral part of the Pax Americana. China’s rise could not have been possible but for the collapse of the Soviet empire; Beijing’s break with Moscow provided the strategic framework for its embrace of economic modernization, and the great-power peace of the past fifteen years has helped sustain and accelerate that trend while allowing China to wield

more political clout. At the same time, the PRC stands as a potential strategic competitor to the United States.

It is neither inevitable that China will be hostile to the United States or the American-led international order nor certain that China will achieve genuine great-power status. At the same time, U.S. strategists must concede that the balancing act between accommodating China’s economic growth—indeed, contributing to and benefiting from it—and resolving Chinese political and strategic aspirations will be a precarious one. The United States wants to see a prosperous China but should also work to make China free. The Chinese people deserve no less, and American principles and interests insist upon it.

Thus it is essential that American military strategy strive to restrain China’s military ambitions; that is, to discourage any attempt by Beijing to gain by force or threat of force what it cannot otherwise obtain through peaceful, economic means. This most certainly includes military territorial conquests, beginning with Taiwan. But U.S. strategy must also, in the longer run, concern itself with China’s capability to confound American interests elsewhere. We must begin to regard Beijing not simply as a regional actor but increasingly as a factor in global geopolitics. China’s growing power is, in tremendous measure, a function of a globalized economic system secured by American global military power. The distinction between global power and “regional” strength is vanishing.

That China has great-power pretensions has been recognized by the Department of Defense since the late 1990s. The first sentences of the Pentagon’s 1999 *Report on the Military Power of the People’s Republic of China* declared that “China’s primary goal is to become a strong, modernized, unified and wealthy nation. It views its national standing in relation to the position of other ‘great powers.’ Beijing clearly wants to be recognized as a full-fledged great power.”⁵ The Clinton administration, which wanted to view China as a “strategic partner,” was forced to conclude that Beijing’s strategic views were based on a “calculus” that U.S. policy intended to “restrict” Chinese power and “complicate China’s effort to become the preeminent power in Asia.”⁶ And Chinese military strategy was primarily intended to “prepar[e] for capabilities the United States might bring to bear in any conflict.”⁷ In other words, China regarded the United States as its long-term adversary; Beijing was not satisfied with its role under the Pax Americana.

These facts did much to shape the initial military strategy and defense planning of the Bush administration; preparing for conflict with China underlay a good

deal of the rationale behind the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the program of “transformation.” And indeed, the 2004 edition of the Chinese military power report represents a development of these basic themes—China sees itself “emerg[ing] as a great power and the preeminent power in Asia”⁸—and at the same time a more sophisticated understanding of Chinese strategy. The new report recognizes that “China has had a longstanding geopolitical challenge in maintaining control over the heartland of China and major elements of ‘inner Asia.’” Yet China “has also sought to secure the vast periphery of coastal and land boundaries, as well as maritime territory in a region populated by traditional rivals and enemies.” Beijing’s goal is to preserve a favorable “strategic configuration of power”—in other words, a balance of power rather than the dominance of a single power, the United States.⁹ Thus Chinese leaders have long spoken about the desirability of returning to a multipolar world order.

Many in East Asia, and even globally, have begun to accord great-power status to China. According to the Pentagon, “Beijing views itself as operating from an increasingly competitive position relative to other established world powers, including the United States.” This is a reflection of both China’s own rise and the new realities of the post–September 11 world; China regards the “global war on terrorism as creating a ‘strategic window of opportunity’ for China.” The new American “focus on counterterrorism has reduced perceived U.S. ‘pressure’ on and ‘containment’ of China, opening opportunities to strengthen internal security and create a more favorable situation along the periphery.”¹⁰ At the same time, American actions, particularly those resulting from the invasion of Afghanistan, have created new problems:

China’s leaders appear to have concluded that the net effect of the U.S.-led campaign has been further encirclement of China, specifically by placing U.S. military forces in Central Asia, strengthening U.S. defense relations with Pakistan, India, and Japan, and returning the U.S. military to Southeast Asia. . . . Because of these perceptions of Washington’s strategy and presence Beijing believes U.S. intervention in conflict scenarios involving China . . . is increasingly likely.¹¹

Thus China’s strategic horizons have been expanded by the events of the last several years. Beijing now thinks in terms of its “greater periphery,” encompassing Central

Asia and the Middle East. Its goals include “maintaining access to natural resources and markets, and pursuing a ‘counter-containment’ strategy by establishing a regional presence and influence to balance and compete with the United States.”¹²

The most notable feature of this new turn in Chinese strategy is Beijing’s increasing interest and presence in the greater Middle East. Energy security is becoming a central concern as China’s economy continues to grow and industrialize. China is now the world’s second largest energy consumer and third largest net oil importer, more and more dependent on outside sources of supply. As the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission reported to Congress in June, “this dependency influences China’s energy and national security policies. China has a growing sense of insecurity because of increased dependence on tanker-delivered Middle East oil via sea lanes, including the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz, controlled by the U.S. Navy.”¹³

Energy shortages are a paramount concern for Beijing, which is already having to ration its electric power supply, slowing the manufacturing economy and threatening overall economic growth, which the ruling Chinese Communist Party regards as key to retaining power and ensuring domestic peace. Thus Beijing takes a strategic view to securing its energy supplies, the exact inverse of U.S. energy policy. Moreover, the problem will be exacerbated with time; China’s share of world oil consumption is projected to grow significantly, with consumption doubling and perhaps tripling by 2010.¹⁴ Thus, China is planning to create a strategic petroleum reserve, is pursuing a variety of pipeline deals with Central Asian states—investments that are difficult to justify economically absent very high per-barrel oil prices—and, most ominously, pursue “non-market reciprocity deals with Iran, Sudan, and other states of concern, including arms sales and WMD-related technology transfers that pose security challenges to the United States.”¹⁵

In keeping with its political and strategic view, Beijing has an autarkic energy policy, “focused on owning the import oil at the production source.” This has the effect of creating strategic partnerships between China and those states that supply it with oil. The United States, by contrast, takes a market-driven approach to energy, and its security policies, particularly toward the oil states of the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East, have sought to maintain influence from a distance. Thus, as Energy Department official James Caverly bluntly puts it: “geopolitically, this could soon bring the United States

and Chinese energy interests into conflict. Both countries will be in the Persian Gulf for oil.”¹⁶

In sum, it is uncertain whether China’s increasingly global economic interests will be a factor in greater cooperation or greater competition with the United States. At the very least, the disparity between Beijing’s worldwide interests and its lagging ability to project and sustain military power create a sense of vulnerability for China, and will continue to create tension between China and the United States.

Force Size Is Also Strategy

The kind of forces needed to secure U.S. interests in the Middle East and in East Asia may be very different. Land power is likely to be most valuable in the Middle East; sea power, in East Asia; and space and air power, important globally. But just as important as maintaining a balance of capabilities is the need to expand U.S. armed forces so that they can better sustain two-theater commitments.

In the simplest terms, this requires the expansion of the active-duty component of the U.S. Army. The active army has been formally reduced to about 480,000, although emergency temporary measures have raised that number to about 512,000. However, the conduct of campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq has required the activation of an average of about 130,000 National Guardsmen and Army Reservists for nearly two years, and there is very little prospect of a significant reduction in that number. In essence, the true strength of the army has been more than 600,000 soldiers for an extended period of time.

While hopes remain that gradual success in Iraq might reduce this burden, the prospect of new missions in this region, over an extended period of time, is almost certain. The fact is that the employment of the Army Guard and Army Reserve at current levels is depriving the United States of a genuine strategic reserve; these soldiers have become the de facto operational reserve, necessary to sustain current missions in the Middle East. This is a constraining factor—the most important constraining factor—in U.S. military strategy.

This is a choice made by the two Bush and Clinton administrations; it is a way in which the United States has chosen to limit itself. The late-Cold War army—the superb, all-volunteer force that won the 1991 Gulf War—had an active component of 780,000. There is no immediate need to build a force of that size, but there is a need to expand the force to meet the need for continued

engagement and preserve the option of decisive, “regime-change” operations when necessary.

The U.S. Navy and Air Force comprise the “swing” element of a two-theater strategy, providing mobile, sustainable firepower capable of balancing Chinese military power and providing fire support to land operations. These are the kinds of capabilities in which U.S. armed forces excel, and the challenge is to sustain and increase their operational reach. For the moment, this may allow for certain reductions in force; the quality of these systems is such that each ship and aircraft is exponentially more capable than its predecessors. At the same time, some planned Pentagon cuts—in the size of the submarine force, for example—have more to do with managing the defense industry than responding to the changing security situation.

Far more important than the specifics of the size of the active army or the fleet is the recognition that size still matters. Kingdoms are not lost because of excess nails.

Notes

1. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (July 2004), 365–66.
2. *Ibid.*, 366.
3. *Ibid.*, 366–67.
4. *Ibid.*, 367.
5. U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People’s Republic of China*, 1; available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jun2000/china06222000.htm>.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 6.
8. U.S. Department of Defense, *FY04 Report to Congress on PRC Military Power*, 10.
9. *Ibid.*, 9.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. *Ibid.*, 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 14.
13. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2004 Report to Congress*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 151.
14. See, for example, “China and Long-Range Asia Energy Security: An Analysis of the Political, Economic and Technological Factors Shaping Asian Energy Markets,” The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy (April 1999), 4.
15. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2004 Report to Congress*, 151.
16. *Ibid.*, 158.