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A Dangerous Opportunity: American Defense Policy at a Crossroads

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America's military policy is in disarray, but not for the reason most people think. For the first time since around 1950, there is no coherent theoretical framework for thinking about how to shape our armed forces for current and future threats. This fact presents both a danger and an opportunity. The danger is that we will either fail to develop one and therefore drift aimlessly at a troubled time, or that we will reach back to some of the tattered remnants of the theories that guided military policy until 2007. But we now have the opportunity for a serious discussion about the shape of the world today and its likely shape tomorrow.

From 1950 to 1991, American military policy was fundamentally shaped by the nature of a specific enemy—the Soviet Union. As Soviet thought and action—both of which we watched closely, if never completely accurately—changed, our military policy changed. When Nikita Khrushchev made it clear that he was going to encourage revolutionary movements around the Third World, John F. Kennedy created the Special Forces to train indigenous armies to resist them. As the Soviets moved toward nuclear parity, the Air Force and the RAND Corporation developed a sophisticated (which is not the same as reasonable) nuclear strategy in response. In some cases, the action/reaction was remarkably swift. Army doctrine was revolutionized completely in 1976 based on a careful reading of Soviet doctrine of the time. But the Soviets changed their doctrine (or, at least, our understanding of their doctrine changed), and by 1982, the Army had revolutionized its doctrine once again. A lot of other things went into shaping American military policy and the armed forces, of course, but military leaders during the Cold War were never at a loss for how to start thinking about the problem: look at the enemy, figure out what he can or might do, and figure out how to respond to it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to confusion and frustration among American military theorists. There was much hand-wringing about the challenges of designing a military policy, national security strategy, and force structure without having any clear enemy. A solid effort to do so was conducted by then–secretary of defense Dick Cheney and his under secretary of defense for policy, Paul Wolfowitz. They produced the Regional Defense Strategy, which attempted to continue to develop military policy on the basis of concrete geopolitical realities, but this effort died with the waning of the first Bush administration.[1]

The Information Revolution

The strategy was replaced with a theoretical frame-work antithetical to the Cold War paradigm. Instead of focusing on concrete geostrategic realities, the paradigms that shaped the American military between 1991 and 2007 were based on theories. The Army's leadership rapidly seized on the information revolution as the basis of its thinking about future war, quoting abstract works like Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* and Alvin and

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Heidi Toffler's *War and Anti-War*. The result was an initiative first called "digitization," then "Force XXI," and finally, by the end of the decade, the "objective force," which was part of a three-phased transformation program (moving from the "legacy force" through the "interim force" to the "objective force").[2]

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The current manifestation of this concept is the Army's principal modernization program called the Future Combat System (FCS). FCS incorporates and relies upon the principles of the information revolution with an additional emphasis on reducing the weight of Army vehicles in order to make them more rapidly deployable. That requirement resulted from Army analyses of some of the challenges the institution faced in the conflicts of the 1990s. Military planners could not expect to produce tanks light enough to deploy rapidly with armor protection anything like what the M1 Abrams has. The dilemma was resolved through the information revolution: superior information would allow the Army (and the other services) to use precision munitions to destroy any potential threat to our vehicles before they came in range, thereby rendering heavy armor unnecessary. With the geostrategic realities of the Soviet Union gone, the logic of the information revolution reliably produced answers to difficult questions that arose in the process of designing forces and weapons.

The air power services were even more enthusiastic about the information revolution, which had enabled them, according to air power devotees, to defeat the Iraqi military in 1991 and the Serbian military in 1995 and 1999 almost entirely from the air, using precision munitions. They argued that air power could do even more if it received the necessary share of a shrinking defense budget, and they had some success.

Air power theory also generated a number of intellectual frameworks, ranging from the "five rings" or "centers of gravity" theory developed and used during the air campaign of the first gulf war (and again, in a variant form, in Bosnia), through the "halt phase" strategy that emphasized air power's ability to stop enemy aggression without the presence of American ground forces, and finally to "network-centric warfare" (NCW) from around 1999 to 2007.

NCW was a variant of the information revolution theory that underlay the Army's various paradigms. Where the Army writings quoted the Tofflers, NCW advocates quoted Wal-Mart and the writings of computer scientists about network theory. The principles were at once simple and complex. Businesses like Wal-Mart had used information technology to generate incredible efficiencies in their operations, and similar approaches would generate similar results in war, it was argued. Much more sophisticated arguments pointed to phenomena in the development of computer technology itself—that the power of a network is proportional to the square of the number of nodes, that the speed of moving information is the critical pacing factor in the responsiveness of organizations, that the flatter the hierarchy of an organization—made possible through information technology—the more agile it would be, and so on.[3]

The concrete manifestation of these theories was investment in precision munitions, the communications and analytical tools needed to provide them with targets, and the platforms (such as the F-22) needed to launch them. NCW theory also provided all the answers to key questions about how to design and build military forces: build everything around the network.

Although the Army never really formally embraced NCW, its own "transformation" programs were based on almost identical principles and merged easily with the NCW paradigm when it became policy in 2001. Shortly before September 11, 2001, then–secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld had accepted and ordered the implementation of NCW theory as the basis of American military policy, and established the Office of Force Transformation, headed by an initial author of the NCW concept, to coordinate the transformation efforts of all the services. For months, it seemed that the air power enthusiasts had even carried the day enough to persuade Rumsfeld to cut the ground forces to pay for additional air power resources, but September 11 ended that effort.

Rumsfeld's departure at the end of 2006 effectively laid NCW to rest as the theoretical basis of American military policy. By then it had become common wisdom that the emphasis on precision air power and a small ground footprint that is the hallmark of NCW theory had led America to disaster in Iraq. The nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after initial operations seemed to discredit the validity of NCW concepts,

including such critical concepts as "information supremacy" and precision strikes against centers of gravity as the keys to success. Whatever else is true, there can be no simple return to the information revolution theories that had defined American military policy since the end of the Cold War. As originally conceived and partially implemented, those paradigms are dead, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has made no effort to revive them.

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But Gates has made no serious effort to replace these force transformation theories. The defense budget is still shaped by the programs that defined and were defined by information revolution theories—ranging from the Army's FCS to the Air Force's F-22 and the host of ancillary weapons and systems designed to support and work together with them. It is by no means inherently bad that these systems are continuing to tick along even after the collapse of the theories that spawned and supported most of them. (The F-22 actually began development in 1986.) The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have repeatedly demonstrated the value of many of these systems, although often in uses other than the ones for which they were designed. And it would, of course, be disastrous to shut down current programs before we have developed new ones.

Current Enemies and Likely Threats

Before we start the inevitable squabbling about defense programs as defined by the budget, we must first develop a new intellectual paradigm for thinking about war today. The services need to undertake this effort in pure self-interest. Defense budgets pass today without much fuss because Congress desperately wants to be seen as supporting our troops at war. But the time will soon come when congressmen will begin to push hard with questions: Why should we pay for program X or weapons system Y? How is the military going to use it? What need does it actually meet? If the services have no coherent answer to those questions, or if they simply start to repeat the NCW mantras about the information revolution that many Americans—including many members of Congress—now have serious doubts about, then the budgetary consequences may be serious.

The practical consequences for the nation are already serious. It has become apparent that the military designed in the 1990s under the expectation of a protracted "strategic pause" followed by an information revolution is not well-suited for the real challenges America faces in the world today. Our weapons systems, particularly the most important weapons systems—soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines—are flexible enough to perform superbly even in conditions for which they were not designed or trained. But the requirements for large numbers of ground forces, the protracted nature of the struggle, and the need to blend high-intensity conventional combat seamlessly with counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and reconstruction activities have imposed great strain on forces designed for none of those challenges. Simplistic efforts to dismiss the problem by insisting on an immediate withdrawal from Iraq and abjuring any such future wars do not help. Even if they were valid—and they are not—they do not offer any coherent intellectual vision to replace the paradigms that underlie the current military.[4]

The most basic problem with the information revolution theories is that they were astrategic. With few exceptions, they were not designed with any particular scenario or threat in mind. Instead, their authors developed a coherent logical framework from a series of general assumptions about how war works and how war would change. The geostrategic basis of Cold War military policy did not ensure that it was good—some of it, like elements of the nuclear strategy and the Army doctrine of 1976, was profoundly wrong. But it did have one advantage: it focused military theorists, planners, and budgeteers on figuring out who and where the United States was likely to fight, learning as much as possible about those potential threats, and determining how to defeat them. It would be good to return to such an approach today.

Military theorists love to say that you always end up fighting the war you did not expect to fight, with the implied corollary that it is unwise to build military forces to fit a particular set of scenarios. Perhaps. But from around 1890 to 1945, the French, Germans, British, and Russians pretty much assumed that if their states fought major wars again in the future, they would pit the French and the Russians, and possibly the British,

against the Germans. They were right. American military planners in the interwar years assumed that the likeliest naval conflict would pit America and Britain against Japan. They were right.

Few in the 1990s thought that American ground forces would be fighting in Afghanistan within the decade, of course. But no one should have been surprised that we fought another war with Iraq. And the mistake about Afghanistan reflected a failure of imagination rather than any inherent imponderability in the scenario, particularly after President Bill Clinton's air strike against al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan following the African embassy bombings in 1998. Some wars emerge unexpectedly and with little or no meaningful warning; others are more obvious. Failing to develop plans and force structure appropriate to obvious threats on the grounds that you can never predict the next war is poor strategy.

American military thinking is also clouded by another pervasive myth: that preparing to fight a particular war makes it more likely to occur. The Cold War offers the most obvious refutation of this notion. Military preparations on the Korean peninsula after 1953 would appear to offer another. Rising tensions and military escalations between the United States and Libya in the 1990s ended suddenly and almost completely after an extremely limited American air strike. India and Pakistan, China and the Soviet Union, even the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, have all engaged in more or less intense arms races and even military skirmishes without falling into major wars. There are sound arguments, on the contrary, that the weakness of states that support the status quo is more likely to lead to wars with predatory states that seek to change it.

So military theorists, planners, and budgeteers would do well today to look first at current enemies and likely threats as the basis for designing American military forces. Virtually no one is excited about the prospect of war with Iran, but failing to plan and prepare for it is irresponsible. No one is enthusiastic about the prospect of deploying forces to Pakistan—either in the event of a governmental collapse scenario or to support counterterrorism operations—but that does not mean we might not have to do it. Will China ever attack Taiwan? Americans (and Taiwanese) emphatically hope not, but failing to be ready for such an eventuality would be strategic incompetence.

It is admittedly harder to design a geostrategic military policy to handle multiple contingencies than it was to design one to defend against the almost monolithic Soviet enemy of the Cold War. And it is harder still than assuming an information revolution and building a logical framework as a thought experiment without having to refer to geopolitical realities at all. But it is the only way to create a military policy that is at all likely to prepare America to meet the security challenges it is likely to face over the coming years.

The collapse of the information warfare paradigm is an opportunity to change the way we think about national security. That paradigm lasted longer than it should have by about five years. It was conceived as a transformation program suitable for a strategic pause and designed for warfare very different from the conflicts of the past six years. The strategic pause, if there ever was one, is over. The world is becoming a much more dangerous place. The time for abstract theorizing about war is also past. Let us seize this moment to begin a serious discussion about the realities of the strategic environment we face, and what we will need to survive in it.

AEI research assistant Colin Monaghan and editorial assistant Evan Sparks worked with Mr. Kagan to edit and produce this National Security Outlook.

Notes

1. Richard Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington: Department of Defense, January 1993), available at www.informationclearinghouse.info/pdf/naarpr_Defense.pdf (accessed October 26, 2007).

2. For a discussion (with references) of the development of American military theory and doctrine in the 1990s, see Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter, 2006), available through www.aei.org/book865/.

3. For a detailed discussion of NCW and its intellectual bases, as well as references to key works, see Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*.

4. See William S. Lind, "Understanding Fourth Generation War," AntiWar.com, January 15, 2004, available at www.antiwar.com/lind/index.php?articleid=1702 (accessed October 26, 2007); and William S. Lind, "Why We Got It Wrong," LewRockwell.com, April 22, 2004, available at www.lewrockwell.com/lind/lind19.html (accessed October 26, 2007).