Arms for the World

How the U.S. Military Shapes American Foreign Policy

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This past April, the U.S. Department of Defense released an inauspicious two-page "Fact Sheet" outlining the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a comprehensive examination of the U.S. military's strategic posture. Such a document rarely raises eyebrows outside the cloistered world of military analysts and wonks. But this unremarkable two-pager speaks volumes about the roles and responsibilities of the U.S. military in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It begins by laying out an exhaustive list of "threats and challenges the nation faces." Key security challenges include "violent extremist movements, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, rising powers with sophisticated weapons, failed or failing states, and increasing encroachment across the global commons (air, sea, space, cyber-space)." Confronting these challenges suggests a broad national mandate for the U.S. military.

But there is more. U.S. national security strategy, we are told, must also take into account other "powerful trends that are reshaping the international landscape." These range from the global economic downturn and climate change to the "spread of destabilizing technologies" and the growing "scarcity of resources." What is needed is the "further institutionalizing" of irregular warfare capabilities, which will include "building partnership capacity" as well as strengthening Pentagon support for civilian-led operations.

While a "whole of government" approach is suggested in dealing with these challenges, the document curiously omits any mention of the State Department or even the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Perhaps the lack of reference to America's chief diplomatic and development agencies is an accidental oversight. But then the shortchanging of these civilian agencies should not come as a surprise, because the defining characteristic of U.S. foreign policy and national security policy in the post–cold-war era is the extent to which America's foreign policy agenda is being crafted and implemented by the military. Almost fifty years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the "total influence—economic, political, even spiritual" of an "immense military establishment and large arms industry being "felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the Federal government." Today, these concerns seem quaint. Whether it's waging the war on terror or the war on drugs; nation-building in post-conflict environments; development, democracy promotion, or diplomacy; fighting cyber-criminals or training foreign armies, the global face of the United States today is generally that of a soldier.

Today, the Pentagon has approximately 1.4 million uniformed active duty personnel and nearly 700,000 civilian employees (not to mention the 848,000 reserves and National Guard). By comparison, the Department of State has a mere 6,500 Foreign Service officers and just under 20,000 total employees. At USAID there are fewer than two thousand employees, and the agency has become little more than a contracting and grant-making agency, with neither the capabilities nor the resources to do much more. It's small wonder that the Pentagon's responsibility for overseas development assistance has gone from 4 percent to more than 21 percent—and USAID's share

has dropped nearly in half. When it comes to security assistance, the transformation is even starker. These programs, while generally implemented by the Pentagon, were authorized and monitored by the State Department. But today a majority of such monies flows through the Pentagon with little guidance from State or even Congress.

Retired military officers now hold top national security positions (National Security Advisor, the head of the National Intelligence Council, the Veterans Administration, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) as well as key diplomatic posts (Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and special envoy to Sudan), and debates about the future of the armed forces—and whether it should adopt a counterinsurgency-centric approach or a more conventional war-fighting posture—are conducted largely by the military.

The traditional elements of statecraft can hardly compete with the juggernaut that is the modern U.S. armed forces. And the growing predisposition to view all security challenges through the prism of the military portends even more reliance on America's fighting men and women. For progressives, the ever-expanding military-industrial complex presents grave dangers to the hopes of a renewed period of activist government. The United States can maintain a huge army with the most up-to-date weapons system or it can better provide for the needs of its citizens. It can't do both.

Although it is essential that the country begin to rebuild its civilian agencies and rein in the defense budget, it can't do so without larger structural changes. What is needed is a fundamental reconceptualization of U.S. security interests—a recognition that discussions about military tactics and the structure of forces should be closely aligned with strategic considerations as well as a dispassionate view of the country's national interests. The growing U.S. military footprint around the world risks undermining not only America's foreign policy agenda but its democratic ethos.

How We Got Here

The expanded role of the armed forces in key aspects of American foreign policy may seem like a temporary overreaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001. But the military's dominant role in fighting the "war on terror" is the outgrowth of developments that were underway well before the fall of 2001. First and foremost was the maintenance of a large standing military force in peacetime.

Through most of U.S. history, when a war ended, demobilization of the military began soon after. The Founders believed a standing army would stand in stark contrast to the ideals of the republic—and for the first 150 years of the country's history, the nation did not have one.

But things changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The move toward a volunteer army along with the crushing defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War combined to transform the image of the armed forces—and place them in a rarefied air above the back and forth of traditional politics. No politician wanted to be seen as "anti-military," and little benefit would come to those who opposed the Pentagon's spending priorities, which are spread across nearly every congressional district. Moreover, what policymakers would want to dismantle a military force that gave the United States almost limitless global sway?

At the dawn of the cold war, presidents Harry Truman and then Eisenhower adopted the remainder method for determining defense outlays: once funding was fully allocated for domestic priorities, whatever remained was spent on defense. Today the reverse occurs; an eager Congress ensures that the Pentagon gets its priorities met, and whatever is leftover goes to domestic spending. In FY 2008, 55 cents out of every dollar of discretionary spending went to the military.

As the only public institution consistently venerated by both Democrats and Republicans, the military has little reason to fear interruption of its prodigious flow of taxpayer dollars. In 2009, the White House Office of Management and Budget directed federal agencies to prepare fiscal year 2011 budgets that freeze spending levels at FY-2010 levels or impose a 5 percent cut. The Pentagon was of course exempted from the directive.

As Andrew Bacevich described the situation in *American Empire*, even with the defense cuts of the 1990s, by the end of the decade, the United States had more than 1.3 million soldiers, thirteen active Army and Marine divi-

sions, eleven aircraft carrier groups, and twenty active and reserve wings. Never before had America maintained such a large military in peacetime—all this without a clear competitor on the world stage. Yet still Secretary of Defense Robert Gates says of this period that "America's national power" was "allowed to wither" and be "abandoned."

MOOTW–Military Operations Other Than Wars

A big military without a major global rival must find other ways to keep itself busy. The search for relevance in the post–cold-war world, combined with the belief that the armed forces were uniquely equipped to handle the country's growing number of "security challenges," helped ensure that the military would become involved in tasks once seen as the exclusive province of civilians or—MOOTW (military operations other than wars).

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan declared drug trafficking to be "a threat to national security," and three years later, President George H.W. Bush made the Pentagon the nation's lead agency in combating the drug trade (using it to invade Panama and enforce a drug warrant against Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega). Placing the military at the forefront of the war on drugs was a portentous decision. A challenge that would have been more effectively handled by law enforcement or even the public health community was being transformed into a "security threat."

During the Clinton years, large-scale foreign intervention was seemingly at a minimum. But beyond the headlines, the military was taking on a wider range of responsibilities and intervening at a clip three times greater than during the cold war. For example, the nation's regional combatant commanders began cultivating enormous global influence. With virtually limitless resources and manpower at their disposal, they engaged in their own form of U.S. diplomacy: supporting and training foreign militaries and also taking on tasks usually handled by civilians. In her book *The Missions*, *Washington Post* reporter Dana Priest recounts a telling anecdote about these "proconsuls":

> Soldiers routinely swapped stories about dining with the country's top general or scrambling for a coat and tie for the ambassador's reception. Capt. James Spivey, one of the U.S. company commanders in Nigeria, met with the king of Swaziland. He felt honored, he said, but also a little out of his depth. The king told him, "I'd really like to meet your ambassador," Spivey recalled.

The Army's growing footprint occurred at the same moment that the nation's civilian agencies were atrophying. At USAID, consolidation decimated the organization and removed its independent mandate. At State, morale suffered in the face of hiring freezes and the closing of foreign embassies. As civilian leaders failed to make tough decisions on strategy and spending, the military simply filled the void. So the aftermath of the September 11 attacks didn't put the military in the foreign policy driver's seat. When al Qaeda attacked, the military was already driving the car.

With minimal public debate the military's brief quickly expanded to areas of responsibility that the generals had once resisted. In the late 1990s, the military fought being given the responsibility for nation-building in Kosovo. But today the leading thinkers in the armed forces and the advocates of counter-insurgency are pushing for the military to be the lead agency in future nation-building exercises.

Indeed, if there is one consensus in both the civilian and military leadership it is that the military should be more, not less, engaged in non-war-fighting activities—a decision spurred by Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 in 2005, which asserts that "stability operations" are a core mission of the armed forces and should be given the same priority as combat operations.

At the same time, budgets for international affairs and development work—both of which lack obvious constituents in Congress—have suffered. Indeed, while the number of Foreign Service officers (FSOs) rose in the three years following September 11, in subsequent years, Congress consistently rejected administration requests for new hires. The situation was so dire that, by the end of 2007, the State Department was forced to enact a 10 percent cut at embassies worldwide in order to fill slots at American embassies in Kabul and Baghdad. The budgetary constraints even led to cutbacks in

the number of FSOs who were receiving language training. As Stimson Center Distinguished Fellow Gordon Adams pointed out in congressional testimony in March 2009, those remaining FSOs often lack the skills in program development and strategic planning that are necessary to carry out America's foreign policy agenda. This created a perverse situation whereby the Pentagon was taking on added foreign policy responsibilities simply because State and USAID didn't have the funding or capacity to do it on their own.

For example, the Pentagon directive on cooperation between the Department of Defense and USAID acknowledges that "many of the tasks and responsibilities associated with reconstruction and stabilization operations are not ones for which the military is necessarily best suited." But the document soberly notes, "However, in the absence of civilian capacity to carry out these tasks, the capabilities will be developed within the military."

Secretary of Defense Gates caused a buzz in 2007 when he declared the need for a "dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security." But nowhere did he call for the Pentagon to shed any responsibilities. Indeed, in his next breath, Gates made clear "I'll be asking for yet more money for Defense this year." At the same time, he noted the incongruous sight of "field artillerymen and tankers building schools and mentoring city councils." Gates remarked that these skills will need to be "institutionalized and retained" in the military. Once the Pentagon takes ownership of these functions, it's hard to see how civilian agencies will get them back.

Where Is the Danger?

Herein lies the greatest danger of a foreign policy led by the military and defined by security threats and challenges. As the old saying goes, when all you have is a hammer, every problem tends to look like a nail. While an initial armed response to the attacks of September 11 was appropriate, the security challenge posed by nineteen hijackers and their cave-dwelling leaders quickly evolved into an existential conflict of good versus evil that necessitated a sprawling military response.

The construct of the "global war on terror" became the organizing principle for American foreign policy, other global challenges (even those more potentially dangerous than terrorism) be damned. What's worse, it spawned a new—and often unquestioned—set of assumptions about America's security challenges.

Because al Qaeda had found safe haven in a failed state, fixing other failed states suddenly rose to the forefront of the U.S. security agenda. The supposed "success" of counter-insurgency operations in bringing relative stability to Iraq—though the reality suggested a variety of reasons for the decrease in civilian casualties—led military leaders to push for a similar approach in Afghanistan. No longer was the goal of the U.S. military to fight the enemy, but the metric for success had become "protecting civilians" and establishing the legitimacy of the Kabul government. Yet concerns as to whether such goals are achievable, further the national interest, or are commensurate to any threat posed by a nation where no al Qaeda cells currently exist have been brushed aside.

The dubious assumptions about al Qaeda and the conclusion that America faced a Long War with jihadist terror groups—as opposed to a near-term conflict with al Qaeda—led to policies and programs that further enshrined the role of the military. U.S. foreign aid, and in particular development assistance, flowed largely to countries with a robust or even marginal connection to the war on terror.

Not surprisingly, the military became a key assistance conduit for these evolving bilateral relationships. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) has spent close to five billion dollars since 2003 for local development projects that can be undertaken at the discretion of commanders in the field. As William Hartung notes, "The militarization process is even expressed in the language of the CERP program. Its manual is entitled 'Money as a Weapon System.' And an officer . . . referred to CERP's road-building efforts with the phrase 'asphalt is ammunition.'" In addition to the CERP program, new security assistance programs have cropped up, such as Coalition Support Funds (CSF), which reimburse nations that have provided assistance to the U.S. missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Afghanistan and Iraq Security Force Funds, which focus on training

for domestic security forces in these two countries. The latter has doled out approximately $35 billion since 2001.

This phenomenon was also being repeated in peaceful environments. In Nigeria, a country desperately in need of police instruction, an increasing percentage of U.S. assistance instead has gone to military training. In the wake of September 11, development and democracy assistance in Pakistan took a back seat to security assistance packages totaling more than nine billion dollars. And when President Barack Obama in 2009 announced his intention to foster a "civilian surge" in Afghanistan, the lack of capacity at State and USAID meant most of the jobs were taken by the military.

Yet the tasks being asked of the armed forces are simply not part of their skillset. The military has little capacity or training for development, governance, or humanitarian assistance. And do Americans really want their fighting men and women to focus on such tasks? There is great irony in using what is possibly the least democratic institution in American society to promote democracy and good government. What is the message being sent to the rest of the world when the U.S. military becomes the country's lead nation-building institution? If one of the U.S. goals of foreign policy is to promote democracy overseas and de-emphasize the role of militaries, relying on the armed forces to advance these goals is self-defeating.

Impact on Civil-Military Relations

The increased prominence, public veneration, and virtually limitless resources of the military have led to a crisis in U.S. civil-military relations. Retired military and active military are now regularly found on the campaign trail. On the eve of the 2004 presidential election, General David Petraeus wrote a controversial op-ed praising military progress in Iraq. In 2008, Democrats regularly trotted out a coterie of former military officers to promote the security bonafides of Barack Obama, who of course had never served in the military. The old era of generals simply saluting elected leaders and carrying out their orders is giving way.

But it is no longer just a question of the military flexing its political muscle. Civilian leaders are showing a disquieting complicity, particularly in ceding decision-making on the war in Iraq. In June 2008, GOP candidate John McCain declared, "General Petraeus will tell us in July when we are [able to withdraw]" from Iraq. This came on the heels of George W. Bush's earlier declaration that a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq would depend not on a strategic decision by the president but almost exclusively on the recommendations of Petraeus. "My attitude is," said Bush "if he [Petraeus] didn't want to continue the drawdown, that's fine with me. . . .I said to the general: 'If you want to slow her down, fine; it's up to you.' " Actually, it's supposed to be up to the president.

Unfortunately, Obama's election has not yet brought a shift in the civil-military balance. In his March 2009 speech outlining the administration's policy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Obama laid out a policy that suggested the United States would be embarking primarily on a counter-terrorism approach in Afghanistan. But by June, the new military commander, Lt. Gen Stanley McCrystal, was telling Congress that the mission in Afghanistan would be defined by population-centric counter-insurgency or COIN, representing a troubling evolution in emphasis for the mission.

Ultimately, if civilians abdicate their responsibility over strategic decision-making, then military commanders end up with far more power than appropriate: and they run the risk of driving national security strategy in ways not necessarily intended.

For all the dangers that the militarization of U.S. foreign policy represents, perhaps the most crucial threat is to the home front. Today, the military receives more than half of domestic discretionary spending. Even this year's Pentagon budget, heralded for bravely cutting several high-priced and unneeded programs, actually increases defense spending (a fact loudly trumpeted by the Obama administration and many of its liberal supporters).

Indeed, in the midst of ongoing budget debates, Americans are consistently told that all sorts of tradeoffs must be made when it comes to health care, protecting the environment, and even spurring the economy out of the deep recession. But none of these cost-benefit analyses are made in regard to the armed forces.

There can be no compromise, Americans are told, when it comes to protecting the country from foreign threats. One cannot put a price tag on "security."

The military has a "responsibility" to protect all of America's vital overseas interests, deal with emerging security threats, and thus keep America safe. But of course the more the military extends its reach overseas, the bigger a force it needs. And the bigger the military gets, the more it expands the reach of U.S. global interests. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that is constantly renewed by its own underlying and unquestioned assumptions of limitless American power and interests.

In recent years there have been calls for doubling the number of Foreign Service offices and development officials at the State Department and USAID. Others have called for a joint State/DoD budget to ensure a more strategic approach to national security spending. In other words, policymakers will be forced to think about what foreign policy challenges the country is facing and thus how they want to configure the national security bureaucracy before they open the checkbook. Both measures represent an important start, but in a vacuum it is the policy equivalent of shifting deck chairs on the Titanic.*

What is needed is a shift of attitude that de-emphasizes the notion of the U.S. military as the end of the spear in dealing with global challenges. It's a shift that must be led by civilian leaders, in the Pentagon, at the White House, and at the State Department. In fact, the true national interests of the United States may depend on it.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the continuing militarization of foreign policy is that it actually leaves America ill-prepared for the future. The challenges facing the United States are transnational in nature and come from non-state actors as much as they do from states. From health pandemics and global economic instability to vast criminal networks, failing states, and the rise of semi-authoritarian governments, these are security threats that aren't confronted with aircraft carriers and F-22s, but with development workers, public health professionals, diplomats, and law enforcement.

But so long as the military is dominating all elements of the national security agenda, the United States will continue to perceive its challenges in military terms and respond in kind. What's worse, the country will fail to train the professionals essential for dealing with problems that are, at their core, not military in nature.

Only when Americans stop believing—and are no longer told—that a big military is essential to the country's security and that there are no limits to U.S. power can they begin to make much-needed tradeoffs in how the country spends defense dollars. A national conversation is the only antecedent to change.

This is not to suggest that the United States should adopt a policy of demobilization or arbitrarily cut the defense budget. What it does suggest is that policymakers must do a better job of assessing the real challenges and threats facing the nation as well as the country's most vital national interests. That should be the starting point for determining the structure and character not just of the military but of the entire national security and foreign policy bureaucracy. Beginning the discussion by suggesting that the country must have a big military for its security or that a certain percentage of GNP should be devoted to defense spending ensures that a ruthless assessment of America's strategic posture will not occur—and that American foreign policy will continue down the same dangerous path on which it currently finds itself.

During his historic presidential campaign, Barack Obama said the key to changing U.S. foreign policy for the better was moving away from the "mindset" that led to the invasion of Iraq and its subsequent occupation. If he is serious about changing the current shape of U.S. foreign policy, de-emphasizing the role of the military is not only the logical place to start: it's the only place.

* See: "A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness," Stimson Center & The American Academy for Diplomacy, October 2008. Also: Derek Chollet, David Shorr, and Vikram Singh, "Policy Memo: A Unified International Affairs and National Security Budget to Increase American Effectiveness Worldwide," Center for New American Security and the Stanley Foundation, October 2008.

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