Prisoner to Primacy

by Carl Conetta

Does the 2008 election portend a fundamental shift in US security policy? Don't bet on it. The American policy debate remains paralyzed by 9/11 and mesmerized by military primacy. As a result, we can't even get Iraq right.

As foreign policy disasters go, the American adventure in Iraq is a splendid one - "splendid" in the sense of being both grand and manifest. We might call it "exceptional" as well, except that the troubles which beset US policy do not end at Iraq's borders. The policy wreck is a more general one.

The US mission in Afghanistan has run aground, too. Rather than spreading democracy, recent US military activism has helped spread chaos in several regions. It has tattered both our reputation and our armed forces. It has helped push Muslim populations toward Islamist politics, unsettled America's alliances, and prompted "balancing behavior" on the part of potential big power competitors: China and Russia. As for its impact on terrorism: terrorist activity and violence has grown worse, not better since September 11, 2001. Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since. And there is no sign that this trend is abating.

The present course is not only counter-productive, but also fabulously expensive. Indeed, it seems to be delivering less and less security at ever increasing cost. Annual defense expenditures have risen by 50 percent in real terms since 2001 (and 78 percent since 1998). By the end of FY 2008, defense authorization will exceed $700 billion - significantly more than was authorized in any year since 1946. Expenditures of this magnitude are not easily reconciled with bringing national debt under control, while also meeting pending demands on Social Security and Medicare. These circumstances may soon force an economic reckoning for which the nation is ill-prepared.

With American security policy listing on the shoals, we might reasonably expect congressional leaders and presidential candidates to be vowing incisive action - a fundamental re-think, a new direction, something! But no such awakening is evident. Perhaps Democrats are not eager to interrupt the self-immolation of the Bush administration. It is easy enough to ascribe the lapse in thought to the vaudeville of American electoral politics. But, again, the problem is a more general one.

Lehigh University professor Chaim Kaufmann had it right when he wrote in the Summer 2004 issue of International Security that America's slide into the Iraq war evinced a broad failure in our vaunted "marketplace of ideas" - and not simply the perfidy of the current administration. Today, the market failure continues. Again and again, we are tempted to rash action by falsehood. Our policy discourse - in the media, academe, the halls of government, and the think tank world - seems perpetually locked and loaded. And the "military option" is always on the table, darkening the agenda.

And the future? What presently passes for the "cutting edge" in new thinking is a search for an imagined "middle ground" - a political safe harbor - located somewhere between the errors of the present administration and those of the previous one. Emblematic of this is the view that sees America's troubles in Afghanistan and Iraq as largely a matter of execution and insufficient troop strength, that foresees our military occupation of those nations continuing for decades, and that pins its hopes for success on the enlargement of US ground forces and the renovation of counter-insurgency doctrine.

Most prescriptions for policy change still operate within the framework of a "war on terrorism" - a piece of strategic nonsense if ever there was one. Even worse is the slippery, indistinct notion of a "long war" against Islamic radicalism (or "jihadism" or "Islamo-fascism"), which seems tailor-made to tempt war with the Muslim world. Neither framework accurately models the current security environment, and neither illuminates a productive, sustainable path to greater security.

Finally, and worst, are the ruminations about setting America on the path of "liberal empire" with US ground troops serving as the constabulary of troubled regions. The fact that the imperial option - which has advocates left, right, and center - should gain a respectful hearing despite the experience of Iraq indicates that the American policy community has worked itself into a dead end, a cul de sac. We cannot think outside the military option, the "big stick."
The problematic turn in US policy did not begin on September 11, 2001, or even on November 7, 2000. Recognizing this is the minimum requirement for exiting our current predicament. By the late 1990s, US security policy was already on a path that was counterproductive and unsustainable - not a wreck, but one waiting to happen. Defense budgets were already rising, but with little relation to actual threats. And America’s world reputation was already eroding. Key precursors to current policy - unilateralism, offensive counter-proliferation, the "rogue state doctrine," and regime change - were already evident in US policy toward Iraq and elsewhere.

The 9/11 attacks may have stupefied the US policy debate, rendering it narrow, reactive, and timid, but there is a more fundamental and longer-standing problem. Since the end of the Cold War, much of the US policy community has been mesmerized by the advent of US military primacy and the advantages it supposedly conveys. This circumstance seemed to provide the leverage with which the United States might further enhance its security, extend its position of world leadership, and advance an American vision of world order - a "new rule set." The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review and US National Security Strategy went a step further, construing military primacy as essential to US global leadership and security - not just a fortuitous thing, but a necessary one. Thus, primacy became a security end in its own right and the cornerstone of our global policy. Trouble is: primacy is not sustainable. Indeed, the more it is exercised, the more it invites balancing behavior on the part of others. Moreover, experience suggests that we have dangerously overestimated both the extent and utility of our military primacy. Nonetheless, our policy discourse remains entranced by it.

**Militarizing policy**

Hoping to realize the promise of military primacy, three successive US administrations have retreated from the idea that force should be an instrument of last and infrequent resort. Thus:

- the threshold for using force has steadily come down;
- the ways we imagine using force and our armed forces have multiplied;
- our military objectives have grown steadily more ambitious - now including the aim of fighting multiple, overlapping wars to fast decisive conclusions, including regime change.

Beyond the traditional objectives of deterring and defending against aggression, there has been an increasing emphasis on trying to use force and forcible pressure to actually "prevent the emergence" of threats and, more generally, to "shape the strategic environment" (as the 1997 US Defense Review put it).

In the past, threat prevention and "environment shaping" were largely in the purview of the State Department. But a feature of our post-Cold War practice has been the increasing intrusion of the Pentagon on the provinces of State. Parallel to this, diplomatic functions have been increasingly militarized. Thus, today coercive diplomacy plays a bigger role relative to traditional "quid pro quo" diplomacy. Similarly, "offensive counter-proliferation" has grown in importance relative to non-proliferation efforts. And even our programs in support of democratization and development have gained a khaki tinge.

**Prevention or provocation?**

Using military power to prevent the emergence of threats often implies treating actors who are not preparing or conducting an act of aggression as though they were. Preventative military operations target not aggression but, instead, the capability to aggress - be it existing, emergent, or suspected. Prevention can also target actors who we believe are disposed, due to the nature of their governments or belief systems, to do us some type of harm at some point in the future - that is, adversary regimes or movements, rogues and radicals.

Of course, treating potential threats as though they are impending ones can exacerbate tensions and precipitate the outcome that "prevention" is meant to preclude. Thus, in addressing the nuclear programs of both North Korea and Iran, our coercive efforts spurred, rather than retarded, the behavior we had hoped to stop.
Similarly provocative are some types of militarized "environment shaping" - what the Bush administration prefers to call "dissuasion." Armed dissuasion involves using military assets to "stake out" US interests in a specific situation or outcome. We might think of it as "preemptive deterrence" or "preemptive containment." Our worldwide military deployments, bases, exercises, assistance programs, and partnerships all serve a dissuasive function (among others). They are supposed to communicate implicitly that an undesirable competition or confrontation may ensue if another nation or actor undertakes a proscribed course of action.

Beginning in 1997, US strategy has seen the success of dissuasion as depending in large part on maintaining America's considerable margin of global military superiority. In accord with this, a key objective of dissuasion has been to discourage other countries from initiating arms competitions with the United States. How? By continuously widening America's lead with the aim of making competition seem hopeless.

Is dissuasion provocative or not? This depends in part on what behaviors it targets and what rules it seeks to set. Generally speaking: if dissuasive acts impinge on the internal affairs, sovereignty, core interests, or normal prerogatives of a target country, they are more likely to prompt resistance than compliance. The United States might effectively dissuade Chinese naval activism in the Caribbean, for instance, but not in the South China Sea. Likewise, if the United States seems to be claiming extraordinary rights or privileges through dissuasive acts, the targeted nations will either resist complying or strive to alter the power balance between themselves and America. This is precisely what China and Russia are attempting to do as the US network of bases and partnerships gradually surrounds them.

Enabling primacy

A key enabler for the broader and more frequent use of force is the notion that the United States has developed ways to fight fast, low-risk, low-impact wars. This is the "new warfare" hypothesis and it did not originate with the Bush administration. In one form or another, it has helped shape US thinking about the utility of force since the 1990-1991 Gulf War. However, what we have seen in Iraq and elsewhere is that military power is less discrete, manageable, and predictable in its effects than recent policy assumes. And its negative repercussions are more far-reaching and complex than imagined. Indeed, we have been treated to an exceptional lesson in how "precision warfare" can spawn chaos.

Putting "boots on the ground" in Iraq was supposed to rectify the shortcomings of wars fought at a distance with stand-off weapons - wars like the 1999 Kosovo conflict. But instead of giving us greater control, military occupation has prompted nationalistic responses and inflamed ethnic tensions. Clearly, we have not understood the power and dynamics of "identity politics." This failure points to a more fundamental one: Seized by a sense of military primacy, we have failed to appreciate the difference between achieving military effects and achieving political-strategic ones.

Any true reassessment of the utility of force and its limits must lead to a re-evaluation of our present condition of "military primacy." What does it mean and what is it worth?

Our distinct military superiority exists only in the conventional realm. Facing an unconventional foe in a complex contingency is another matter. And even in the conventional realm: potential adversaries do not have to match our levels of investment in order to boost the price of victory to unacceptable heights and, thus, effectively sap our superiority. It is worth remembering that the present global disparities in military power and investment do not reflect the global distribution of human and material resources. Many nations have considerable latent capacity to narrow the military gap between themselves and the United States -- if they are so motivated.

At any rate, when evaluating primacy, the most important comparison is not between us and other international actors, but between means and ends - that is, between our power and what we propose to do with it. The options range from simple defense and deterrence at one end to schemes of coercive national transformation on the other. If our Iraq experience teaches anything, it is that humility is in order. But this lesson is not likely to register in our policy discourse - not so long as it remains a prisoner to primacy.

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