THE POLITICS OF DEFENSE PLANNING

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The Iraq war has been the most protracted, prolonged controversy in American security policy since Vietnam and remains so as the presidential election year of 2008 begins. In this context, what is most striking about what might be called normal or non-war security policy and defense planning is how much consensus exists.

The consensus is not uniform, to be sure. There are progressives who believe that a regular defense budget approaching $500 billion a year is excessive and strongly oppose many missile defense programs as well as certain other military initiatives. There are conservatives who would favor a return to a military of Cold-War size and consider building and testing new nuclear warheads and putting weapons in space. If one wants to create an interesting panel discussion in Washington, or in the halls of the country’s universities, it is still possible to find a range of interesting and different viewpoints.

But defense planning is not, at its core, a subject of strong partisan disagreement at present. Critical masses of both Democrats and Republicans support something akin to America’s current defense posture of 1.5 million active-duty troops, overall defense budgets roughly at current levels, and generous pay and health and retirement benefits for the soldiers and Marines and others doing so much for the country from Iraq to Afghanistan to other places. Looking ahead to the future, they also generally support planned purchases of large numbers of next-generation fighter aircraft and more modest but still significant numbers of warships, a rebuilt Army designed to be more
deployable and efficient, and steady progress towards improved missile-defense capabilities for the nation and its allies. Robust forward military deployments abroad remain broadly popular with the notable exception of the Iraq mission.

This American national consensus may not be permanent, but it has already proven that it is durable. Despite the partisan rhetoric that has surrounded military deployments in recent years—most notably Iraq, but also peacekeeping missions and Balkans operations during the Clinton administration—and despite occasional disagreements over specific nuclear-related matters like deploying a limited national missile defense—the basics of American military policy have been largely continuous through the three past presidents. Post-Cold War defense policy has been notable not for its fundamental debates about America’s role in the world, but rather for the unanimity with which Democrats and Republicans agree that the United States must remain the world’s global superpower, even as it seeks reasonable economies in how to translate that imperative into a force posture and a defense budget. The core characteristics of American defense policy today—strong presence abroad in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East; a two-war capability for possible regional conflict; a vigorous defense modernization effort to ensure dominance against not only “rogue” threats but possible future great powers such as China; attention to growing vulnerabilities such as missiles and weapons of mass destruction, as well as advanced anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles; an active-duty force of roughly 1.5 million troops or about two-thirds the latter Cold War level—have endured through two changes of administration and political party since 1989 when the Cold War ended. In those few instances where radical ideas have been considered, as with Donald Rumsfeld’s emphasis on defense transformation at the expense of robust and capable ground forces, experience has brought the debate back to a more central position. Talk of defense revolutions has largely ended as a result of the Iraq war and all it does to remind us about how much of warfare is NOT changing fundamentally even in these modern, high-tech, globalizing times.

While it is a welcome respite from partisan bickering to witness one major area of American public policy in which there is agreement, it is important that debate continue about future U.S. defense policy. We need some disagreement to spur creative new approaches to defense, on issues ranging from the nature of coalition warfare and alliance burdensharing, to the need for expensive weapons platforms of the traditional types, to the use of robotics in future war, to the future of nuclear weapons. After reviewing the recent past in American defense policy, this essay concludes with suggestions about some of the issues that the defense debate will need to address in coming years.

THE CONTINUITY OF THE AMERICAN POST-COLD WAR DEFENSE DEBATE

In 1991 and 1992, in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm and the dissolution of the not only the Warsaw Pact but the Soviet Union itself, the first
Bush administration realized it needed a new post-Cold War defense plan. After then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney first tried to minimize any reductions, objecting to those who advocated a peace dividend to help balance the federal budget and restore American economic momentum with the well-known line that “peace is the dividend,” the administration changed course. Whether out of concern over Americans’ desires to focus inward a bit more (and thereby try to fend off Democratic political pressure as well as the presidential candidacy of Bill Clinton), or out of genuine conviction among other administration officials that a smaller force posture and smaller budget were indeed now feasible, the administration developed a “base force” plan. Among other features it planned cutbacks of about 25 percent in military force structure (and nearly comparable reductions in defense spending)—envisioning an active force of about 1.6 million sized largely by the contingency of simultaneous hypothetical wars in Korea and the Persian Gulf.

The subsequent Clinton administration, aided largely by work done by Les Aspin when he had been Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee during the Bush administration years, built on the base force concept but with an eye towards greater defense economies. It sought to retain a two-war capability, with the possibility of reversing enemy aggression, overthrowing an enemy regime and occupying its country, with a smaller and less expensive force. Its concept for doing so required about 1.4 million active-duty troops, a further reduction of 200,000 on top of the cuts of half a million planned by the Bush administration. Its budgetary cutbacks wound up not being particularly dramatic vis-à-vis the Bush plans. Money had to be added to the defense budget in an unplanned way almost yearly to fund larger than expected operating costs, ensure adequate compensation for troops, and in general respond to political pressures from the Republican-led Congress. But compared with what would have been spent for a larger force, there were undoubtedly significant additional savings just the same. This push for further economy was perhaps the central thrust of the Clinton strategic concept, relative to that of its predecessor.

There were some other changes too, such as emphasizing theater missile defense somewhat more than long-range missile defense, and formalizing the end of nuclear testing through pursuit of an international comprehensive test ban treaty. But the first Bush administration had been responsible for the U.S. nuclear testing moratorium in the first place, and Clinton’s reorientation of missile defense priorities did not preclude development of the very Alaska/California national defense system that the second Bush administration later deployed.

The Quadrennial Defense Review of 1997 added several more changes, but few of them had to do with the central elements of force structure or the size of the military. It preserved the ambitious weapons modernization plans of the Reagan years that neither Bush 41 nor the Clinton bottom-up review of 1993 had substantially modified (except by buying fewer of most types of weapons than Reagan had planned, in light of the scaled-back force structure). Talk of a revolution in military affairs gained currency in Clinton’s second term, and led
among other things to creation of a National Defense Panel that favored more
dramatic changes in American defense budget priorities (away from ground
forces, peacekeeping, and forward presence abroad, to free up more funds for
technological and doctrinal innovation). But the National Defense Panel did
not produce major changes in actual policy during the latter 1990s. The
changes made then were significant but secondary in magnitude and
importance, such as greater funding for naval minesweepers and for chemical
protective gear.

So when George W. Bush won the White House in 2000, the question of
whether any Clinton changes would be reversed was vivid in many minds.
Having promised during his campaign that “help is on the way,” and having
chosen the very Dick Cheney who had said that “peace is the dividend” (and
opposed large force structure cuts) a decade before, George Bush seemed
poised to reverse some Clinton defense cutbacks. Also, after his emphasis on
military transformation on the campaign trail, it seemed quite possible he would
favor much bolder changes in the structure and nature of the military. Would
that prove the case?

The answer was clearly revealed to be no. In the end, Secretary of
Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the rest of the administration settled on a
defense strategy that departed from the previous Bush and Clinton policies only
modestly in terms of broad concepts, forces, and requirements.

That said, in the aftermath of September 11, it proposed a major defense
budget increase that had more in common with Ronald Reagan’s presidency
than the administration’s immediate predecessors.1 And of course, the Iraq war
led to huge further increases in funding. But the 2001 QDR is instructive about
how this new administration saw the fundamentals of American national security
policy.

Donald Rumsfeld’s Quadrennial Defense Review was originally expected
to emphasize ideas that had their antecedents in a speech given by then-
Governor George Bush in September 1999 at the Citadel in South Carolina. In
that message, Bush promised a radically transformed U.S. military if elected
president. He promised to “skip a generation” of weapons purchases in order to
create a military featuring advanced systems. Major increases in research and
development spending would help usher in such new capabilities. Cutbacks in
overseas military presence, especially peacekeeping operations, would help
provide some of the financial and human resources needed to make such a
revolution feasible within affordable defense budgets (which, according to
candidate Bush, would grow by only about $5 billion relative to the annual levels
planned by the outgoing Clinton administration).2

Once in office, Mr. Bush continued to promise a radical overhaul, as did
his new secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Word from the Pentagon
suggested a new emphasis on long-range strike systems and more focus on
possible future competition with a rising China. European commitments were
reportedly seen as less important; Iraq and North Korea were seen as nagging
problems from yesterday, not major concerns for the future; unconventional or
"asymmetric" military tactics were expected from enemies (though there was at least as much emphasis on asymmetric attacks by countries as by terrorists). In addition, Rumsfeld brought with him a great concern with the ballistic-missile threat and a conviction that warfare would soon move into space.3

Ultimately, however, the Bush administration chose not to cut existing weapons programs, streamline the combat force structure, or reduce overseas deployments of the American armed forces.4 In fact, the absence of virtually any change in any of these areas was striking. The 2001 QDR contained the fewest programmatic and force structure initiatives of any of the four major U.S. defense reviews since the Cold War ended (since it contained virtually none). Before September 11, Secretary Rumsfeld had essentially settled on a conservative quadrennial defense review document.

There were changes and initiatives, to be sure. At the rhetorical and conceptual level, Rumsfeld placed homeland security at the top of the Pentagon’s agenda.5 He also emphasized the need to accelerate the process of defense innovation, or “transformation” as it is increasingly known by those who sense the opportunity for a major change in U.S. combat forces in the years ahead and wish to accelerate that change.6

But at the practical level, Rumsfeld essentially reaffirmed the core elements of Clinton administration defense policy—in terms of forces, weapons modernization plans, overseas troop commitments, and most other concrete matters. Given that this was the fourth major defense review of the post-Cold War era, including the first Bush administration’s base force concept as well as the Clinton administration’s 1993 bottom-up review and 1997 quadrennial defense review, there was perhaps less pressing need for a radical rethinking. But given the administration’s early rhetoric, the continuity with Clinton policy was nonetheless surprising.

Secretary Rumsfeld’s QDR retained the planned Clinton administration force structure with only the smallest of modifications. He stated an intention to retain, at least for the foreseeable future, 10 active-duty Army divisions, roughly 20 Air Force fighter wings (specifically, 46 active squadrons and 38 reserve squadrons, with 4 squadrons being in the typical wing), 3 Marine Corps divisions and associated air wings, 12 Navy aircraft carriers and 11 associated air wings, 116 additional surface combatants, 55 attack submarines, and over 100 bombers.7 These numbers were all virtually identical to those in the Clinton administration’s 1997 QDR. In fact, they differed only slightly from the numbers in the 1993 Bottom-Up Review, though they are often 10 to 25 percent less than what was proposed by the first Bush administration in its “base force” concept. Similarly, while the base force envisioned active-duty troop levels of more than 1.6 million, the 2001 QDR reaffirmed Clinton administration levels of just under 1.4 million.

Implicitly, Rumsfeld retained the Clinton weapons modernization agenda as well, since he indicated no new plans. He repeated the Clinton administration’s intention to ask Congress for the authority to close more military bases, ultimately convincing Congress to approve another round in 2005 (two
years later than he would have liked, but better than nothing). He also added other efficiency initiatives, such as a desire to further privatize defense support functions and to streamline headquarters staffs by 15 percent.8

Perhaps the most notable nuts-and-bolts decision of Rumsfeld in these early months, as codified in the QDR, was to increase funding for the military simply to improve immediate combat readiness. Arguing, just as candidate Bush had done, that the Clinton administration had neglected the basic needs of the military, he continued a trend begun in the late 1990s of adding money to readiness accounts. Specifically, he added nearly $6 billion to the 2001 defense budget through a supplemental appropriation request, and then nearly another $20 billion above what the Clinton administration had envisioned for the 2002 budget, all before September 11. Previous initiatives of the Republican Congress and Clinton administration had focused on military pay, equipment spare parts, and resources for training. Rumsfeld added yet more money to these accounts, while also increasing funding for improving military health care and the Department of Defense’s infrastructure—that is, facilities such as housing and bases.9 But these were not large changes in the scheme of things.

Backing away from the campaign rhetoric about reducing U.S. deployments abroad, Rumsfeld decided that U.S. forces should essentially remain in their current configurations overseas. Indeed, his desire that forward forces should, in conjunction with regional allies, be able to quickly defeat attacks without requiring large reinforcements pointed if anything in the direction of increasing capabilities based abroad (though the QDR indicates a hope that improved technologies, rather than increased numbers of troops, would provide these enhanced capabilities).10 Rumsfeld also conceded that smaller operations, including but not limited to peacekeeping missions, might sometimes be necessary and made explicit allowance for that possibility in sizing the force structure.11

At the more strategic level, Rumsfeld argued for a shift in thinking about the scenarios that should guide U.S. force planning. Claiming that a fixation on replays of Desert Storm against Iraq and North Korea was harming the armed forces’ abilities to prepare for other threats, he shifted force planning from a requirement that two all-out regional wars could be won in nearly simultaneous fashion. Instead, he held out a slightly less demanding standard: a requirement that one such war be won in absolute terms—including an overthrow of the enemy government and occupation of its territory—while a second war was prosecuted vigorously enough to stop an enemy and begin some offensive operations against it. In other words, Rumsfeld retained the requirement for a two-front warfighting capability, but adjusted Pentagon expectations about the likely nature of that two-front worst-case scenario. Undoubtedly thinking that one future adversary might be a country like China instead of Iraq or North Korea, he also avoided specifying who the likely foes would be. His QDR described such generic defense planning as a "capabilities-based" approach, in contrast with the Clinton administration’s scenario-oriented or "threat-based" framework that more explicitly designated likely future foes.12 But this change
seemed more semantic than real, since capabilities must ultimately be sized to specific scenarios and to potential foes if they are to be adequate for the potential tasks at hand. At most, the resulting change was one of nuance.

Continuing a desire to foster military innovation—even if no longer using the radical rhetoric and compressed time horizons of many enthusiastic proponents of a revolution in military affairs—Rumsfeld and the Bush administration made several key decisions. They advocated significant increases in research and development funding; a greater emphasis on joint-service experiments (most innovation takes place within, not between, the individual military services today); and support for new ideas such as the Army’s desire to create lighter, more deployable units (ironically, Rumsfeld’s main legacy here was to bless and continue support for the ongoing Army plan for Stryker brigades and a Future Combat System initiated during the Clinton administration by Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki).

The push for transformation arose because, coming into office, the Bush administration’s shared the view of much of the U.S. defense community that a revolution in military affairs was under way. The “revolution” thesis holds that further advances in precision munitions, real-time data dissemination, and other modern technologies, if combined with appropriate war-fighting doctrines and organization, can transform warfare. The unprecedented pace of technological change, many observers hold, will sharply alter the size and composition of our military forces—perhaps even saving money in the long run. The optimism needs tempering. Change in military technology is fast, but may not outpace that of the past half-century. True believers in the “revolution” thesis invoke “Moore’s law”—the trend of the number of transistors on a semiconductor chip to double every eighteen to twenty-four months. They are right about the computer revolution, but they often extrapolate from this trend in computer chips to predict equally rapid progress in entirely different realms of technology. Such technological optimism is unwarranted. Advances in electronics and computers do not necessarily imply comparably rapid changes in the basic functioning of tanks, ships, aircraft, rockets, explosives, and energy sources.

In regard to the record of recent years, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that certain preparations for operations like those still ongoing in Iraq were not made because defense planners placed primary emphasis on high-technology transformational concepts. For example, inadequate investment was made in body armor, armor for vehicles, and flare countermeasures for helicopters. Similarly, technologies such as nonlethal weapons, though advocated by some proponents of defense revolution, tended to receive limited funds even though there is a strong case for spending several times the recent average of $25 million per year devoted to such technologies. When advocates of transformation place principal emphasis on expensive high technology weapons platforms, they are particularly prone to skew military investment priorities. This perspective should be kept in mind as individual weapons systems are evaluated. Moreover, excessive emphasis on
transformation may have been one of the reasons Rumsfeld dramatically scaled back the invasion plan for Iraq, in a belief that large ground armies were no longer as important as they once had been—and with dramatic and terrible consequences for the nation.

Indeed, while he did dramatically change the Iraq war plan by comparison with what he inherited, Rumsfeld did not make major changes in the underlying defense posture—that is, the force structure or the weapons modernization plan. After reportedly contemplating big cuts in the ground forces, in the end he did not dramatically cut back the size of the Army or Marine Corps in the years just before Iraq, which would clearly have made the recent strains of deployment and re-deployment even worse. In terms of existing modernization plans, few “legacy” systems were cast aside. Relative to the Clinton plan, only the Army’s Crusader howitzer and Comanche helicopter, as well as the Navy’s lower-tier missile defense system, were canceled (this continued a post-Cold War tradition begun under Clinton, who actually restored the V-22 program after Dick Cheney had canceled it, and did little to eliminate any modernization programs). That said, missile defense received a major increase in funding and allocations for some so-called transformational programs increased substantially as well. Because of these latter programs, among others, the Pentagon’s Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation budget has actually increased faster than the procurement account in recent years.

One might think that the Bush administration’s most famous doctrinal innovation—its so-called preemption doctrine—would itself constitute a radical change in defense policy. After all, whatever continuity there might be in the structure of the armed forces, a greater propensity to use them assertively and early in the course of worsening crises would be extremely significant for obvious reasons.

However, this seems dubious. For one thing, even political defenders of the Bush administration are not anxious to defend preemption doctrine; it is unlikely to be seen as a political selling point by any candidate for president in 2008. Mr. Bush is himself nearly out of office. And he himself seems, with the notable possible exception of Iran, disinclined to use force preemptively again. Enough is already on the American military plate.

Preemption doctrine, enshrined in the fall, 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States, is more accurately described as a policy of preventive war rather than of emergency preemption. Whatever the label, it was intended by the Bush administration to emphasize that in a world containing extremist states with weapons of mass destruction as well as extremist terrorist organizations, the United States could not wait for dangers to “gather” before taking action to confront them. Preemption doctrine was a highly controversial cornerstone on which to base American security policy. In this author’s view, it was counterproductive for U.S. interests since it fostered the widespread (if exaggerated) image of an America unbound by international constraints or the need to seek legitimacy for its uses of force. Most notably, much of the
opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq came from a worry that it might not be the last major "war of choice" undertaken by the Bush administration. From the strategist's and military planner's point of view, however, preemption is an option that must be retained. No U.S. president could stand by while an enemy visibly prepared an attack on this country. Indeed, many American leaders have given consideration to preemptive options in the past, including President Clinton in regard to North Korea in 1994 (when options for destroying North Korea's nuclear infrastructure were examined).

So preemption will not be ruled out by future presidents or secretaries of defense. But it will almost surely not be employed frequently either. Appropriate cases for preventive or preemptive attack are likely to remain relatively few. There is little prospect that "silver bullet" technologies could make it easy to conduct surgical strikes against incipient enemy capabilities effectively in the future, mostly because countries can hide most weapons of mass destruction assets from existing and planned sensors. Such scenarios may depend on certain innovative and exceptional capabilities, such as unmanned aerial vehicles or long-range stealthy aircraft, not to mention outstanding personnel to carry them out. But they are unlikely to require large numbers of such assets and hence are unlikely to be fundamental determinants of proper force size for the U.S. armed forces. (As witnessed in recent years from Yemen to the Philippines to Afghanistan, however, they do place a premium on a flexible and diverse global military base structure as well as the political relationships to allow those bases to be employed when necessary.) And all-out war involving regime change is a very difficult option to employ. So with or without this doctrine, the basic logic of a two-war capability seems appropriate for the United States in the future.

CONCLUSION

American defense policy is never static. Far too many resources are devoted to it, far too much about the world and therefore American security commitments abroad is always changing, and far too many smart people in America's weapons laboratories and war colleges and universities and think tanks—not to mention the Pentagon and the Congress—are working on issues for things to stay the same for long. Indeed, even in a period of general consensus in American defense policy, a great deal changed—American defense forces were downsized by a third, missile defense systems were deployed, smart munitions came of age, military reconnaissance and communications systems became far more capable of real-time targeting; unmanned aerial vehicles become a standard part of the nation's air forces; medium-weight Army vehicles were procured, and now mine-resistant vehicles for theaters like Iraq's are being purchased in large numbers as well. American force structure in Europe was cut by two-thirds right after the Cold War and is being reduced by another third this decade; troop strength in Korea was cut back by a third; Navy ships are now making their overseas deployments on less predictable schedules than before, with less fixation on maintaining continuous
presence in key theaters; an Africa Command has been created to increase attention on that continent’s security problems, even as the nation has devoted far larger sums than before to train and equip African militaries for the challenges they face.

But the commitment to remaining a global superpower, with strong commitments to allies abroad and to the defense of key American interests in regions like the Persian Gulf and East Asia, has been unshakeable. The notion that American troops deserve not only our appreciation but our financial support, and a better average compensation package than typical peer groups in the private sector, has only become more widespread. The realization that we cannot choose one type of military, or one type of warfighting, and ignore others has been reinforced—the nation must be able to do peacekeeping, stabilization, counterinsurgency, and nation building even as it ensures a clear continued technological dominance over would-be competitors.

Even with all this consensus, sharp elbows have sometimes been thrown in the defense debate (not even counting what is happening now over Iraq). For example, in the early 1990s, Democrats helped force Dick Cheney and George Bush to downsize the military and then won a presidential election based in part on the argument that Republicans were too slow to redirect the nation’s resources away from foreign affairs and towards domestic needs and national economic vitality. With Bill Clinton in the White House, Republicans were often extremely critical of the nation’s peacekeeping policies and were very vigilant to detect any signs of reduced readiness among the nation’s armed forces. George W. Bush then campaigned successfully for president, aided by the slogan that “help is on the way” for the nation’s beleaguered armed forces.

In short, without defending all its aspects or occasional excesses, the American defense policy debate has been a successful example of democracy at work. The two-party competitive system has maintained vigilant oversight of the nation’s armed forces while introducing and vetting a number of creative new ideas and defense options. This is how American democracy is supposed to work.

And we will need more of this same dynamic in the challenging years ahead. Again, leave aside specific matters of war and peace, and of Iraq—almost a separate subject from the question of defense resource planning (though clearly related). The United States will need to figure out how many nuclear weapons to keep and whether to retain the option to test warheads again; it will need to determine whether to deploy missile defenses in Europe (and someday, perhaps, in space); it will need to determine the optimal force posture for remaining vigilant in key theaters like East Asia without appearing militaristic or provocative; it will need to decide which special forces capabilities require improvement for missions ranging from training allies’ forces to pursuing terrorists to searching for lost nuclear materials. It will need to wrestle with questions such as whether heavy 70 ton tanks can really be replaced by 20 ton vehicles, or whether robotic aircraft can replace most manned fighters, or
whether new types of vehicles such as tilt-rotor aircraft and catamaran ships offer meaningful new capabilities that are worth the extra money and risk involved.

To have vigorous debate, and constructive debate, on these questions, the nation will need a balance of power—not so much abroad, where Americans rightly favor preponderance (at least when U.S. capabilities are combined with those of allies and friendly neutrals), but in the debate at home. Both parties need to master the politics as well as the substance of national security. The uniformed military needs to be given a strong voice without being accorded a veto. The Congress needs to find a few more Sam Nunns and Warren Rudmans out of its next generation of representatives and senators. The death of some of these balances of power caused huge problems in the Iraq debate and subsequent operation there; we must strive to avoid such problems in the future, and build on the strengths of the defense policy debate of the last two decades.

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1 This section draws in part on an article in the summer, 2002 issue of the journal *Survival*.
5 Rumsfeld, pp. 17-20.
6 Rumsfeld, pp. 29-32.
7 Rumsfeld, pp. 22-23.
8 Rumsfeld, pp. 49-53.
9 Rumsfeld, pp. 7-10.
10 Rumsfeld, p. 20.
11 Rumsfeld, p. 21.
12 Rumsfeld, p. 21.

