

Striking Balance on National Defense

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We have been raised in this country to believe that the defense of our vital national interests is largely the province of the Pentagon. National security, the theory goes, is for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force to figure out. And in the wake of World War II and throughout much of the Cold War, that was a pretty safe assumption.

Not anymore.

National defense today must be considered by every American citizen a truly national concern. Indeed it should be considered an international concern for we are surely more tied to our neighbors in the need for greater security than we even dare to imagine. As the Secretary of Defense recently said to an audience in Oxford, England, “Today we face a set of global security challenges unprecedented in complexity and scope.”

They are challenges that call for a truly balanced way of looking at national defense. There must be balance in terms of our approach, balance in terms of our capabilities, and balance in the way we support our troops and their families.

Consider recent events in the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ethnically disparate groups of extremists and militants there are now cooperating with each other in an almost syndicate-like manner, killing innocent people and coalition troops in the process. Why should we care? Because should the United States fall victim to another major terrorist attack, I am convinced we will find that it was planned and perhaps resourced by groups operating in this region.

We are acting to defend our troops from threats across that border. The Pakistani military is also acting to eliminate the safe havens there, but, like us, they recognize that real progress can only come through concerted efforts across the whole of government to make life inhospitable to extremism.*

A threat like that—one based on a violent ideology—will not be defeated solely through military might. That’s why we have invested so much in our Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it’s why we are working hard to develop a new strategy to get at the larger issues of political and economic stability in the

* *Editor’s Note: The New York Times of October 1, 2008, reported that General David H. Petraeus “said in an interview...that he welcomed the [Pakistani] government’s recent public recognition that extremism was now the most severe threat facing the country, because that recognition meant it would be adopted through all government institutions.... ‘The heartening aspect is there appears to be a willingness on the part of the Pakistani government and military to undertake the kind of operations necessary,’ he said.”*

border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a strategy that incorporates a more holistic approach to the problem.

We cannot kill our way to victory in this war. There is a diplomatic piece to it as well as an economic, social and cultural piece, all of which we haven't fully explored. It's time we did, for as good as our troops are at mastering the complexities of counter-insurgency warfare—and without question, they are the best, most combat-hardened force in our history—they cannot carry this burden alone. Indeed, they should not. We need the assistance and the expertise of other federal and nongovernmental agencies.

Fewer than one in 20 Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan are currently staffed by civilian personnel. We need the willing cooperation of partner governments like those in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and, yes, Iraq, where elected leaders are indeed exerting themselves more and more. We need to think about engaging people and places we have, perhaps, ignored.

I was struck by something George Schultz once recalled about Ronald Reagan. He said Reagan understood that difficulties most arise when countries talk *about* each other rather than *with* each other. And I couldn't help but think how much more the national defense might be bolstered—even in places like Iran—by the simple weapon of good conversation. Again, it comes back to relationships.

It should have been lost on none of us that Afghanistan President Karzai attended the swearing-in of Pakistan's new president Asif Ali Zardari, and the two pledged to support one another.

This sort of burgeoning cooperation and dialogue will prove critical. But we also need to understand there is more to the Middle East than Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. And there is more to the world than the Middle East. From terrorists in the Philippines to pirates in Indonesia and the Horn of Africa, extremists have demonstrated the desire to disrupt our interests around the world.

Global economic centers of gravity have been steadily shifting towards the Pacific, another region of vital concern. Half the world's economy and nearly 60 percent of its population calls the Asia-Pacific region home. The region accounts for a third of US imports, more than \$600 billion annually. Users of the Port of Los Angeles alone generate some \$12 billion in import/export revenue. And more than half of Asia's oil is imported from the Middle East and must pass through the narrow Strait of Malacca before reaching its destination.

Lingering concerns about North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the likelihood of future disaster relief missions and the growing need for stronger military relationships throughout the region all point to a heightened sense of urgency for us in the Pacific Rim.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will come to an end, as all wars do, but America's responsibilities to lead throughout the world will not. To prepare for this future,

the American military must remain a total, joint, expeditionary force suited to irregular warfare against asymmetric threats. We must be capable of operating with our international partners in activities ranging from civic and humanitarian assistance, to theater security cooperation but also capable of full combat operations.

It isn't enough for us to fight the fight we're in. We have to be ready for the fight that could be coming.

We must stay mindful of the core warfighting capabilities, resources and skills we need to successfully deter conflict and, failing that, conduct operations across the spectrum of military missions and responsibilities. We must constantly assess the strategic environment, use that assessment to inform our decisions about military requirements and develop the appropriate programs and budgets to deliver the right combat capabilities.

With an eye beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, we must re-balance our strategic risk. Our Air Force is in desperate need of modernization. The Navy's fleet, currently at 281 ships, is still too small for the sorts of demands we believe it will face in coming years. There are young Marines who have never deployed aboard a Navy ship and Army officers who have not been able to focus on their mission of providing artillery fire support. These gaps in professional expertise cannot persist, particularly at a time when we are being called upon to stay better engaged around the globe, improving international and inter-agency cooperation and fostering security and stability.

I have in the past questioned the amount of resources we devote as a percentage of gross domestic product to national defense. Currently it is just under four percent. I have questioned it not because I think four percent is or is not the right number, or even because I think GDP is necessarily the best way to measure it, but rather because I believe we need to have an informed debate in this country about what national defense really means.

What exactly are our vital national interests in this new era? How do we secure them, and with what allocation of precious resources do we advance them? We don't typically predict the future very well. And while none of us can ever get it perfectly right, those of us charged with leading the discussion and those of us held accountable for it must try. We would be derelict in our duty if we didn't.

And that brings me to my last point: since a balanced national defense is not purely a military burden, Americans everywhere must ensure we are doing all we can to either assist in that defense, or, at the very least, care for those who bear the burden.

Compulsory military service is certainly not the answer, but we can all find ways to contribute to the national good within our own areas of influence and interest. This can be accomplished through volunteer work, through donations of time, money and effort. It can be done through federal service of a non-military sort, or even by supporting non-governmental relief and charity organizations.

I am convinced there is a sea of goodwill out there—people and organizations ready and willing to help our returning warriors and their families as they reintegrate back into society—and I would only ask you to join it and help us all connect to it. There are three major entities best equipped to deal with issues relating to our troops: one is the Department of Defense, another is the Veterans Administration, but the biggest and most capable one is the rest of the country. It is the community of our country that truly heals.

And we need that community now more than ever.

As I said, we have been raised in this country to believe that the defense of our vital national interests is largely the province of the Pentagon. Not anymore.¹

¹ This article was adapted from a speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council on September 22, 2008.