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Strategic Insights: 2016 Campaign: National Security Debate, Army Implications, and Oversight

April 13, 2016 | Prof. William G. Braun, III

The United States finds itself in a presidential election year that will certainly result in new priorities and policies. By the time this article is published, the world will know the results of the March madness primary elections and caucuses. Currently, the nation is choosing between two Democrat and three Republican candidates, with a real possibility of having contested conventions in both parties come July.

National security policy and the employment of the nation's Joint Force are perhaps the most sacred responsibilities of the commander in chief, and a central theme in the run-up to the July conventions. Army leaders are interested in the variance among the candidates' national security policy positions and their potential implications on land forces.

It is incumbent on professional soldiers to consider the range of policy options represented by the field of candidates, and their potential implications for the Army's future. Soldiers must first consider how the candidates, if elected president, intend to use the Army. Senior Army leaders must also consider what the candidates are not debating. Senior Army professionals must educate and advise candidates and policymakers on overlooked challenges, and they must prepare the Army to meet those challenges in the absence of guidance.

The candidates all consider the U.S. economy and U.S. commercial trade to be the foundation of the nation's strength and influence. Candidates put different spins on how they would advance the U.S. economy and engage international trading partners.

However, the democratic front-runner's assertion that "Our economy provides the foundation for our leadership, our diplomatic influence, and our military might"¹ would not sound out of place in any candidate's campaign speech.

With two notable exceptions, the candidates' foreign policy philosophies embrace international engagement and the expansion of Western values as critical U.S. interests. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are the two outliers to this observation. Trump's philosophy seems less concerned with expanding Western values than competing successfully in international markets for economic competitive advantage. He believes he can do this without intervention (or war). Bernie Sanders is the most isolationist candidate, setting a very high bar for any U.S. intervention beyond diplomacy. Governor John Kasich's quote would resonate in the other campaigns and align with the general trajectory of U.S. national security strategy since the Cold War.

. . . the U.S. can play a critical role in making the world more stable. We must rededicate ourselves to the values that underpin and unite the Western world: democracy, a respect for individual and civil liberties, a respect for human rights, a belief in the equality of men and women, and a tolerance of different worldviews and religious beliefs.²

Despite this general philosophic alignment, as with each post-Cold War administration, implementation strategies and the tools used to advance these philosophies have varied. Examining the language used by the candidates regarding the military and its role could offer a window into implementation policy and strategy variance among the candidates.

There is a difference between how the parties address military issues. Both parties talk about supporting the military and veterans. The Democrats quickly turn this conversation toward U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reform and caring for wounded warriors. The conspicuous absence of a defense budget versus entitlement discussion suggests the Budget Control Act (sequestration) restrictions will continue in a Democratic administration. Among the Republican candidates defense budgets will likely increase. Those with specific plans, particularly Senator Ted Cruz, support increased strategic strike and high-end systems, including missile defense, satellite, and cyber capabilities. No candidate is talking about adjusting Army end strength.

There are marginal differences between candidates regarding the military's role in foreign policy. The candidates all rattle off the same half-dozen threats likely to precipitate a military action. Candidates in both parties indicate they will explore other options first, holding direct military action as a last resort. Other consensus themes include increased burden sharing by U.S. partners in all theaters, a regional Sunni force to confront Daesh (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, and commitment of U.S. "unique capabilities" to support those partners. The euphemism for "unique capabilities" universally means Naval and Air strategic strike support. Republican candidates include Special Operations

advisors and Army Security Force Assistance trainers among the unique U.S. capabilities, although a Democratic administration would likely continue President Obama's policy of including these supporting role ground forces as well.

There is a clear policy difference between Democrat and Republican candidates regarding the employment of U.S. ground forces to defeat Daesh (ISIS) and to confront challengers in other theaters. The Democratic candidates resist the notion of additional "boots-on-the-ground," thereby promoting stability through proxies without "mirroring our troops in another misguided ground war."³ Republican candidates call for U.S. ground troops, especially to defeat Daesh and to block Russia from her aspirations in Eastern Europe. Donald Trump indicated he would employ U.S. ground forces to secure oil fields that Daesh can exploit – presumably as a first option.

The alignment of candidate positions on foreign policy and military missions offers predictability to Army leaders on two fronts. First, a Republican candidate will likely try to increase defense budgets, and a Democratic candidate will likely support continued sequestration limits. However, Army end strength is unlikely to increase regardless of the election outcome.

Second, consensus limits the number of challenges that candidates can expect military planners to prepare for and narrows their preferred "ways" to confront those challenges. Everybody wants to defeat ISIS and the prevailing means in both parties is reliant on a regional Sunni force bearing the ground fight burden. All candidates are concerned with nuclear proliferation and possible rogue behavior by North Korea and Iran. Beyond traditional deterrence, candidates differ on approaches to confront these challenges; but no candidate is advocating a direct military response. Finally, the candidates would like to build U.S. and partner nation military capabilities to respond to Russian designs for Eastern Europe and Chinese assertiveness in Asia. The general alignment of these policy positions significantly narrows the military planning aperture and narrows the focus of Army senior leaders toward that of combat readiness.

Political candidates have not addressed four key issues that should concern military leaders. They all stem from the idea that challengers and partners get a say in setting conditions that will motivate and limit the range of U.S. options. The first issue involves "soft power" produced outcomes achieved by strengthening alliances, nurturing relationships, and building military capacity among partners. The candidates have not provided insight into the military's role in supporting diplomacy, partner engagement, and relationship networking to achieve these "soft power" goals. Second, no candidate has laid out a plan for dealing with China in the "Gray Zone," – that coercive competitive space short of sustained conflict. Russia and China have both threatened U.S. national interests without exceeding a threshold for direct military action. Short of precipitating a fight, China is currently advancing its interests at the expense of the United States in this

competitive space. Third, no political or military leader is anxious to engage in a regime change operation any time soon. Yet, from a military perspective, the leadership vacuum in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and a host of other states around the globe present the same challenges. As conditions in those states directly or indirectly affect the American people or their interests, the military must be prepared to act. Finally, partners might not be willing or able to accommodate the burden the candidates expect of them without significant U.S. ground force involvement. Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster cautions that the primary reliance by the United States "on proxies is often problematic due to variations in capability and the impact of incongruous interests on each party's willingness to act."⁴ Limited warfighting capabilities, misaligned interests, and differing degrees of commitment may confound each candidate's vision of dealing with future challenges without U.S. ground forces. In addition, some new partners lack the training or inclination to employ their forces (to fight or manage the peace) in ways that conform to U.S. sensibilities and ethical norms.

History and the vagaries of campaign rhetoric caution against making predictions as to how a candidate, once president, will employ U.S. military forces around the world – regardless of what they proffer during the campaign. Yet two insights seem clear. First, the near single-minded focus of the Army's leadership to maintain current force combat readiness despite declining budgets seems well placed. Second, as an institution, the Army must put some time and energy into examining how to win in contested security environments that do not resemble historic, state-centric, warfare – for it is likely that the Army will find itself engaged in those contested environments in the near future. Developing relationship networks, assuring partners through engagement, and finding ways to compete in the "Gray Zone" between peace and war are as important to advancing U.S. interests as sustaining the Army's capacity to fight and win the nation's wars.

ENDNOTES

1. Clinton Campaign web page, National Security tab, available from <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/national-security/>.

2. John Kasich, "Making America Safer and Defeating ISIS," National Security Speech, Washington, DC, November 17, 2015, available from <https://johnkasich.com/NationalSecurity/>.

3. Clinton Campaign web page, National Security Tab, Defeat ISIS paragraph, available from <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/national-security/>.

4. H.R. McMaster, "Thinking Clearly about War and the Future of Warfare – The U.S. Army Operating Concept," Military Balance Blog, October 23, 2014, available from <https://www.iiss.org/en/militarybalanceblog/blogsections/2014-3bea/october-831b/thinking-clearly-about-war-and-the-future-of-warfare-6183>.

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