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Adjusting to Post-Cold War Strategic Realities

GEORGE L. BUTLER

Classic national military strategy formulation begins with analysis of broad security objectives and potential threats to those objectives arising from the unfolding international environment. For present purposes, however, let us begin simply with the proposition that while fundamental US security objectives remain largely constant, the global arena in which these aims find their context is undergoing such a profound transformation that virtually all of the givens that have shaped our national military strategy for four decades have been called into question. As President Bush recently reminded the nation, "Our task today is to shape our defense capabilities to these changing strategic circumstances. . . . We know that our forces can be smaller," he acknowledges, but we "would be ill-served by forces that represent nothing more than a scaled-back or a shrunken-down version of the ones we possess. . . . What we need are not merely reductions—but restructuring."¹

I am keenly aware that a number of serious-minded critics have questioned whether any in the defense establishment really believe in the desirability of significant force reductions and are prepared to deal constructively on the issue. They can rest easy on that score. Obviously, the war in Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia has put a hold on many aspects of our military draw-down and strategic reorientation, but sooner or later the Gulf situation will be resolved and the nation will resume its long-term response to the end of the Cold War. Energized from the topmost rung of government, the defense establishment has been laboring mightily to produce the framework for a new national military strategy and its supporting policy tenets.

My purpose in this essay is to sketch my own appreciation of this brave new world which has so challenged the nation's military planners, strategists, and policymakers. What follows is the distillation of more than two years of reflection, study, and conceptual borrowing from professional

colleagues during my tenure as the nation's chief uniformed strategic planner. Let's begin with a glance at the factors that make global security an entirely new ball game.

The New Global Security Context

The historic shift in the tectonic plates of the Cold War, to use Joseph Nye's wonderful metaphor, has unleashed at least six forces that are reshaping the strategic landscape. Each of these forces has enormous implications for US national security policy and military strategy. First, we are witnessing the astounding advent of a Second Russian Revolution in this century, one which may well terminate the bizarre and tragic Marxist-Leninist experiment set in motion some 70 years ago. Second has been the astonishing advancement of the German question to the forefront of the European security agenda, with its attendant implications for the future of alliances both East and West. Third, we now see the prospects for a 21st-century Concert of Europe, a promising reprise of an earlier, less-structured collective which foundered on the rocks of rising nationalism. Fourth is the intensification on the world's stage of intractable conflicts between mortal enemies, in some cases centuries-old quarrels now fueled by arms of enormous destructiveness. Fifth, we are seeing the consequences of catastrophic failures in the human condition in the Third World, with the creation of vast reaches of misery and ecological ruin which blight the global village and benumb the global soul. And, finally, we must note the rise of new centers of power, with agendas which, unless carefully nurtured or in some cases checked, may abort the nascent era of cooperation stirring in the ashes of the Cold War. These six fundamental forces will condition every security initiative undertaken in the foreseeable future.

Within this tumultuous sea of new and historic forces emerge two bedrock strategic postulates. First, the character of the US-Soviet relationship is undergoing a remarkable and long-sought metamorphosis. We are reaping the

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fruits of a historic strategic success—containment of the most virulent strains of communism, thus validating George Kennan's brilliant perception that this false ideology would eventually collapse under the weight of its inherently flawed vision of man and society. Let there be no doubt that those of us responsible for the nation's strategic planning not only applaud this success, we are bending every effort to accommodate to its sweeping consequences.

Second, and conversely, this is not a transition we can nor should make overnight. While there is much to hope for in the new US-Soviet relationship, there is also much that remains unseen. As a strategic planner, I would emphasize that whatever the degree of impending revision in our long-standing security calculus vis-à-vis Soviet military capabilities, some crucial constants remain. The most enduring concern is that despite its evolving ideology and the apparently benign intentions of its current leadership, the Soviet Union remains the one country in the world with the means to destroy the United States with a single, cataclysmic attack. Consequently, until and unless the Soviet strategic nuclear arsenal is vastly modified, whether through arms control agreements or unilateral action, the cornerstone of US military strategy must continue to be a modern, credible, and survivable nuclear deterrent force which can render a devastating reply to any nuclear aggression, even while retaining a stable, non-threatening peacetime posture.

Regional Strategic Survey

With the broad parameters of the world's security climate in mind, we can now reexplore the familiar terrain of regional tensions from a post-Cold War perspective. With respect to Europe, it is crystal clear that we are dealing with an extraordinary realignment of the strategic context. Soviet retrenchment, the demise of the Warsaw Pact, German unification, and the prospect of economic integration embody both the fruits of collective defense and the imperatives for undertaking new approaches toward it. In the future, NATO will doubtless field restructured active forces—smaller, more mobile, more versatile. The alliance will also rely increasingly on multinational corps. Readiness of active units can and will be scaled back. We have struck, in my estimation, the right balance between enduring strategic principles and the self-evident need for far-reaching changes in NATO's operational practices and postures.

On the opposite side of the globe, the Cold War clouds on Korea's horizon stand in stark contrast to the emerging sunshine in Europe. The one ray of optimism is sparked by the upward surge of democracy, economic growth, and military capability in the South. This burgeoning self-sufficiency has prompted a considered review of the US-South Korean security relationship. It is evident that the United States is in a position to undertake a prudent, phased series of steps to reduce modestly its force presence in Korea, as well as in Japan and the surrounding region. The United States can transition

gradually toward a partnership in which the South Korean armed forces assume the leading role.

Looking at still another point on our well-worn strategic compass, the Middle East, we find new realities again emerging to force change. By the fall of 1989, we had been engaged for over two years in tanker escort operations in the Persian Gulf, thus clearly establishing the principle of US military intervention to protect the free flow of oil. However, as the twin specters of Soviet hegemony and Iranian adventurism dissipated, and as the specter of Iraqi aggression rose to replace them, new approaches to preserving regional stability and access became mandatory.

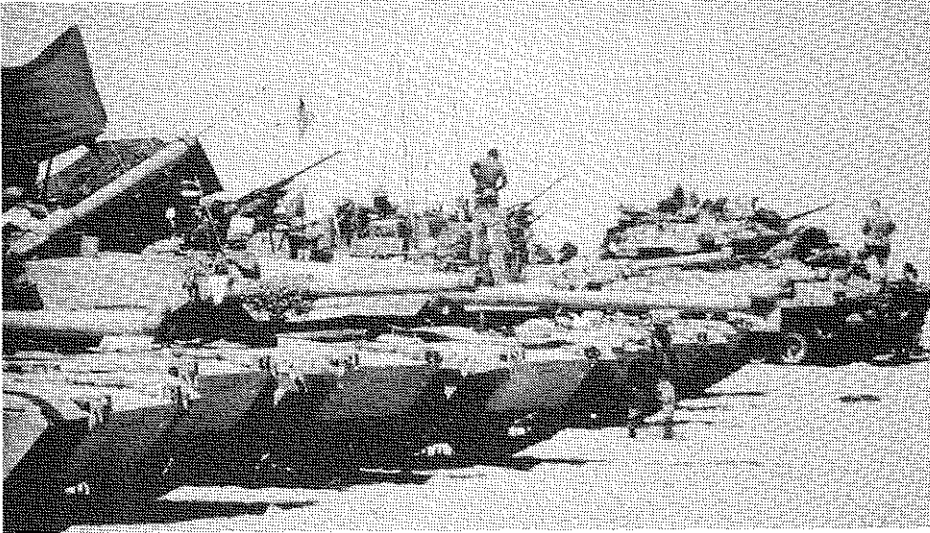
Iraq emerged from its eight years of war with a messianic zeal, an appetite for weapons of mass destruction, and a shattered economy. Consequently, in late 1989, USCENTCOM was directed to develop a new regional defense plan for thwarting potential Iraqi aggression aimed at dominating the Arabian Peninsula. Of course, we did not begin with a blank page, but rather built on years of planning for this type of regional threat. Obviously, the assessments, assumptions, and concepts of operation in the CENTCOM plan have been put to a severe test by recent events in the Gulf. We will return to this subject later, but suffice it to say here that, on balance, the thrust of our strategic judgments was largely on the mark, thus providing sound conceptual footing for the remarkable success to date of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Finally, we need to glance at "the rest of the world." That term is not intended to diminish nor denigrate the importance of US interests, friends, and allies in regions beyond Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Rather, from a planner's perspective, the nature and urgency of threats outside of those I have earlier specified are simply less compelling and can be dealt with by a modest and judicious mix of forces, including units with specialized capabilities for operations at the lower end of the conflict spectrum.

Getting Down to Brass Tacks

Let us turn now from the realm of strategic assessment within a broad regional survey to the more concrete aspects of national military strategy: force structure, force posture, operational planning, and force potential.

The linchpin of our new military strategy has already been articulated by our Joint Chiefs Chairman General Colin L. Powell. His base force concept, now widely reported,² is founded upon a clear and realistic vision of the post-Cold War world. It refers to that basic, minimal level of forces below which we cannot prudently go without reducing our commitments or defining our national interests more modestly. The concept of a base force serves two essential purposes for strategic planners, programmers, and field commanders. First and foremost, it puts a mark on the strategist's wall identifying the cross-over point between enduring tasks and the shrinking resources to perform those tasks. It



“The thrust of our strategic judgments on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was largely on the mark.” Shown above, Abrams tanks from the 24th Infantry Division (Mech) in the Saudi Arabian desert.

represents a capability below which forces may no longer be adequate to underwrite vital strategic objectives. The base force is a floor, not a goal. Indeed, at any given point in strategic time, the base force may entail considerable risk, much like a whole life policy that needs to be supplemented by term insurance to cover a period of unique personal vulnerability or commitment.

The second key purpose served by the base force is to provide the flexibility for meeting both new and enduring strategic realities. General Powell envisions an Atlantic force that is equipped, postured, trained, and exercised for the threats characteristic of Europe and Southwest Asia. With respect to Europe, the base force concept exploits the prospect of longer response time, in the unlikely event of post-CFE Soviet aggression, by building into the Atlantic force structure an appropriate active-reserve mix, supported by the ability to reconstitute larger forces should the need arise.

The base force also includes a Pacific dimension, structured and postured according to the dictates of what is essentially a maritime theater. The Pacific force places a premium on naval capabilities, backed by the minimum essential air and ground forces required for continuing deterrence and immediate crisis response. Notwithstanding the dramatic growth in US trade in the Pacific Basin, with a corresponding increase in our stake in regional stability, the US military profile can be cautiously reduced as our most important security partners become more self-reliant.

Additionally, the base force concept makes allowance for what I earlier referred to as “the rest of the world.” Through the lenses of a military

strategist, this is the world of lesser regional contingencies, low-intensity conflict, insurgencies, anti-drug wars, anti-terrorism, and noncombatant evacuations. It is the come-as-you-are world of 48-hour response times to spontaneous, often unpredictable crises calling for a contingency element of highly trained and ready forces, air deliverable and largely self-sufficient.

The contingency element of the base force would be composed of Army light and airborne divisions, Marine expeditionary brigades, special operations forces, and selected Air Force assets, buttressed as necessary by carrier and amphibious forces. The contingency element is the tip of the spear, first into action, followed as required by heavier forces and longer-term sustainment.

The base force is underpinned by strategic nuclear forces of appropriate size and posture, as shaped by estimates of opposing arsenals, arms control outcomes and prospects, and the dictates of fiscal reality. Equally important are America's mobility forces, the long pole in the tent of power projection, now under rigorous scrutiny as we draw early lessons from Operation Desert Shield.

We need not be concerned here with the exact shape, size, or cost of the base force. What is important for the sake of this discussion is the *concept*—a force tailored to the perceived realities of a world undergoing a sea change in political power and power politics. It anticipates the prospects for a smaller force, with an appropriate mix of active and reserve elements, highly mobile, well equipped and trained, competent to underwrite America's unique, enduring global obligations. The base force is not sized for today's world—it is rather the “don't go below force” for a future world largely relieved of the vestiges of superpower competition. This is why a measured approach to reductions in defense expenditures is so essential. Should the bright promise of a new, more cooperative era in East-West relations be dimmed by unwanted outcomes or the rise of significant new threats to our security objectives, we would sorely regret imprudent earlier cuts in American military strength.

New Directions in Strategic Planning

During the tortuous process of developing a new concept of operations for combined defense of the Arabian Peninsula, it became apparent that our traditional planning construct was increasingly ill-suited to such a complex contingency environment. Face to face with the reality of powerful new adversaries, shrinking forward presence, and reduced resources, planners could no longer make reliable assumptions about the numerous variables in the equation relating military responses to military outcomes. Foremost among these variables are warning time, reserve call-up, resort to commercial lift assets, and the precise nature of the military response chosen by political authorities. With respect to

warning time, the most critical and elusive factor in operational planning, there are only two legitimate answers to the question of how much warning will be available in a given crisis. The short answer is, "I don't know;" the second and slightly longer is, "It depends on how the crisis arises and unfolds."

But there are some things with respect to warning that we can be sure about. First, to guess wrong when dealing with a powerful adversary is to lose. Second, warning time isn't warning time unless you exploit it; otherwise it is wasted time. And, third, the propensity to avail oneself of warning time is inversely proportional to the amount of time perceived to be available. In other words, we move out with alacrity when we think the enemy can strike out of the blue, but we tend to dawdle when we think we'll learn of his intentions well in advance. This tendency arises because crisis response always entails a high degree of risk, encompassing far-reaching political and economic as well as purely military considerations. It follows, therefore, that warning time is far more likely to be exploited by key decisionmakers if they have a large menu of discriminate response options from which to choose. Faced with the single choice of one large contingency response option, involving tens of thousands of troops and perhaps a requirement to mobilize reserve forces, any senior decision authority would wisely pause for thought.

Such considerations have led to a new contingency planning strategy which puts a premium on what I call "graduated deterrence response." Its premise is that a crisis can arise under a variety of circumstances that will in turn condition a variety of likely or possible responses. Its most operative feature is that regional planners, where appropriate, will be tasked to develop not one but several response options—or "concepts of operation," as planners call them—with each keyed to specified conditions of crisis onset: warning time, response timing, reserve call-up, and lift availability.

This new planning construct underscores the importance of early response to a crisis. It also facilitates early decision by laying out a wide range of interrelated response paths which begin with bite-sized, deterrence-oriented options carefully tailored to avoid the classic response dilemma of "too much too soon or too little too late." I would emphasize that this approach is *graduated*, not gradual. In a fast-developing crisis, which leaves little or no time for elaborate deterrence choreography, plans will certainly encompass appropriate response options, but based on precise tailoring.

The final piece of the new strategic game plan can be labeled "graduated mobilization response." In my judgment, the issue of mobilization represents the toughest problem we have as a nation in transitioning to a new strategic posture as the Cold War fades from center stage. If warning time or, as I would prefer to call it, "available response time," is truly increasing with respect to any future conflict in Europe, that fact may well prove to be a curse as well as a blessing. Clearly it is a blessing in that NATO has been enabled

to begin reducing its force posture, readiness levels, and other Cold War defense burdens. Increased warning time will be a curse, however, if it lulls us and our alliance partners into failing to sustain the potential for reconstituting large, competent forces as a hedge against a fundamental threat reversal in Europe or elsewhere. This means that in planning for graduated mobilization responses we must pay careful attention to the management of the vital elements of military potential, to wit, our scientific, technological, and industrial base, manpower pool; and strategic materials. In other words, we are going to have to think and act strategically, with the intellectual and political courage to invest in hedges that may not always be precisely measurable in terms of explicit future dividends. For me, this is our greatest challenge, and in the long run it may also prove to be the most important.

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Such, then, is how I visualize the new directions in American military strategy. This revised strategic blueprint contains approximately equal measures of change and continuity. Even as we applaud the historic success of containment, we must recognize that its success is not yet complete. Despite the bright promise of a Europe free from the specter of war, the shadow of residual Soviet power will continue to loom large, and ages-old enmities may well emerge from the receding tides of the Cold War.

More acute reminders of the enduring demands for strategic continuity emerge daily from the Gulf war, and episodically from the DMZ in Korea where long-standing regional strife could at any moment directly engage our military forces. Thus, even as we adapt the size, posture, and deployment planning for America's armed forces to the dramatic changes of our strategic center of gravity, the broad thrust of long-familiar policy tenets will still obtain. Nuclear deterrence, collective security, forward presence, power projection, security assistance, counter-terrorism, anti-drug support, and arms control will continue to describe the central thrusts and concerns of national security strategy.

In many respects, the recasting of military strategy has been very much like painting the proverbial moving train—the cars are familiar, but they refuse to stand still as powerful new forces fuel the boiler of the strategic locomotive. But we know where this train is headed, and that the passengers are in competent hands.

NOTES

1. Speech by President George Bush at the Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colo., 2 August 1990.

2. See remarks by General Powell to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 22 June 1990 (*Defense Issues*, Vol. 5, No. 30); and his remarks at the National Convention of the American Legion, Indianapolis, Ind., 30 August 1990 (*Defense Issues*, Vol. 5, No. 41).