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MIA in QDR: A Unifying Vision for Land Forces

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Introduction

The post-9/11 period has witnessed a marked improvement in corporate defense perceptions about the utility of U.S. land forces. Although they have sacrificed a great deal in the field, the Iraq and Afghan wars have been good to the Army, Marine Corps (USMC), and Special Operations Forces (SOF) from a defense policy perspective. With counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT), stability operations (SO), and security force assistance (SFA) currently dominating the defense agenda, even passive observers recognize the near-term value of land power. Today, land forces are central to solving the United States' most pressing near-term national security challenges. Consequently, the land combat function has benefited from steadily rising stock prices within the Department of Defense (DoD).

The current era of land force ascendancy has witnessed significant changes in mission. For example, land force competency in irregular warfighting has risen substantially while service competency for high-intensity traditional conflict has atrophied. The Army, USMC, and, to some extent, SOF, have radically adjusted their operational worldview to account for previously under-valued "irregular" missions like CT, COIN, SO, etc. The army now openly acknowledges in its capstone doctrine that stability and civil support are core army missions, alongside more conventional offensive and defensive operations. For its part, the USMC — while often decrying the loss of some of its expeditionary capability — has become increasingly comfortable operating in force ashore for extended periods. Both the Army and USMC have also accepted new responsibilities in SFA.

SOF, too, has witnessed significant change in focus and operating principles. "Direct action" (DA) SOF forces — long accustomed to operating autonomously — have learned to operate in close proximity to and in close coordination with large conventional ground forces sharing the same battlespace. Army SOF specifically — an organization whose pre-9/11 *sine qua non* was largely foreign internal defense (FID) and SFA — now, by necessity, is more accustomed to serial employment in DA. And, in recent years, the scale of DA and SFA requirements necessitated that Army SOF cede many of its traditional FID and SFA responsibilities to general purpose ground forces (GPF). This has resulted in a number of "in stride" GPF innovations like

the Army's new Advisory and Assistance Brigades (AAB) and the Marine Corps' Security Cooperation Marine Air Ground Task Forces (SCMAGTF).¹

Whether or not any of this amounts to a bellwether for the future of land operations remains a hotly debated issue across defense-interested communities. Some traditionalists see unacceptably high-risk in these trends; whereas less traditional military thinkers argue that contemporary strategic conditions necessitate a new, more unconventional focus for land forces, leaving many aspects of the next generation traditional warfight to the Air Force and Navy. Some influential thought leaders see recent irregular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as concrete demonstrations of the utility of robust (if not less traditionally-oriented) land forces. Still others see the uneven history and raw cost of Iraq and Afghanistan as data points militating against future large-scale U.S. interventions. The author argues that future land interventions are unavoidable. But, the circumstances under which they occur, the operating concepts employed in their execution, and the objectives pursued throughout their course may be substantially different than those that shape current warfights.

In brief, U.S. land forces are now more the principal instruments for defeating foreign disorder than tools employed to counter unfavorable military balances or tip the scales in favor of a counterinsurgent partner government. Limited "opposed stabilization" will be their defining future mission. As a result, the operating concepts employed by land forces will often require near equal weighting and simultaneous execution of the doctrinal conceptions of offense, defense, and stability operations in campaigns designed to pursue modest objectives.

Back to the Future?

Today, the wide-ranging costs associated with large-scale armed interventions are more obvious than they were a decade ago. Indeed, the post-9/11 surge in interest in SFA may be one attempt by the defense establishment to lower the future demand signal for large-scale, U.S.-led, land-based interventions. If the United States raises the fighting capacity of others, in theory, it will have to shoulder less of the warfighting burden itself.

Recent policymaking history indicates that the current era of land force ascendancy is vulnerable to reversal. A quick survey of the recent past indicates, for example, that land force utility was under intense scrutiny at the beginning of the last decade. The first Bush defense review (QDR 01), for example, adopted threat narratives that devalued land-based operations and large standing land forces. Recall this occurred at the same time that clear evidence indicated land-based threats were becoming more "unconventional."

Though the 1990's opened with a large conventional warfight in the Middle East, the decade was dominated by extended U.S. engagements in lower intensity land operations in the Horn of Africa and the Balkans. Through the 1990's, it became increasingly clear that land-centric

¹ For an outline concept of the AAB and SCMAGTF, see Brigadier General Ronald Johnson, USMC Strategy for the Long War, 12 November 2008, Available from: http://www.novanavyleague.org/USMC-12Nov08_files/frame.htm#slide4947.htm, Accessed June 2, 2010 and Gordon Lubold, Pentagon deploys new troops to Iraq, with a twist, Christian Science Monitor, July 14th, 2009, Available from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2009/0714/p02s25-usmi.html>, Accessed June 2, 2010.

challenges like civil conflict, intrastate war, and terrorism would be more prominent in land force planning than would large-scale conventional conflict. Until 9/11, however, these irregular conflicts were not deemed consequential enough by defense officials to warrant their elevation to the position of prominence they enjoy today. Nor, were land forces adjusted in any meaningful way to account for these new demands.

Given the human, material, and fiscal costs of the first decade of “persistent conflict,” corporate-level defense perceptions about land force utility are vulnerable to sudden change. In the end, DoD’s views on the value of land forces (or any other warfighting function for that matter) relies on prevailing threat assessments and high-level national security cost-benefit calculations. These cost-benefit concerns may increasingly dominate the strategic conversation. And, as discretionary defense resources ultimately plateau or decline, the efficacy of large standing land forces will become an important topic of discussion.

Large land services are costly to maintain. And, once employed, they are difficult to cleanly disengage from active conflicts. In addition, the more irregular the conflict, the likelier it is that favorable outcomes will be messy, open-ended, and difficult to achieve and sustain over time. Underscoring all of these points is the fact that the Iraq and Afghan wars have proven longer, costlier, and more resource-intensive than many anticipated; a fact not lost on the current defense team. As a consequence, new debates about land force missioning and employment are certain to resurface inside the Pentagon.

In the end, the future of U.S. land forces relies on highly subjective senior leader judgments on projected demands. These judgments will be made by officials whose worldview has been substantially impacted by the military’s operational experience over the last ten years. Protracted irregular conflicts occurring after forcible regime change are at the center of this experience. And, now, classical COIN has emerged as the dominant warfighting theme for the land components.

The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR 10) advanced important ideas on the joint force. The most explicit among these pertained to the navy and air force and their role in future asymmetric conflicts with “high-end” state competitors. QDR 10 avoided making similar futures judgments about land forces. It certainly did not satisfy two urgent needs. The first is a compelling long-term threat narrative around which DoD might shape the future land force demand signal. The second is an associated land force vision about structure, operating concepts, and missions that conform to or adequately address this narrative. Both should be more sophisticated than simply “more of the same.”

A New Division of Labor?

QDR 10 inadvertently ushered in a new post-Goldwater-Nichols era in defense strategy and planning. How so? In the author’s view, QDR’s major, unrecognized headline is its implicit acknowledgement of a new (and sensible) “division of labor” between DoD’s land components on the one hand and its air and naval forces on the other.²

² The most recent proposal on a “division of labor” among the service components is found in Andrew Hoehn, et al, A New Division of Labor: Meeting America’s Security Challenges Beyond Iraq, Project Air Force, The RAND

Naturally, each service (or service group) still complements the others in foreign contingency operations. The sacred concept of “jointness” remains intact but, out of necessity, it may at times look different in execution than most conceived of it prior to 9/11. Why? The primary reason is that the key security challenges today (and into the future) are fundamentally different than those around which the original concept of “jointness” was designed. Indeed, before 9/11, the archetypical joint warfight was a resource intensive, all-arms struggle between the U.S. military and that of an enemy nation. Now, however, the Army, USMC, and SOF will collectively form the core joint response to a unique set of largely irregular, land-centric challenges, while the Navy and Air Force optimize for a second set of more traditional threats emerging from (or operating in) the air, sea, space, and cyber space domains.³

Significant overlap is still inevitable. For example, defense planners cannot wholly discount the prospect of a large all-arms campaign against an offending nation-state. Further still, this new “jointness” does not suggest service or service group exclusivity in foreign contingency operations, only that one core group of service components will dominate outcomes in one set of contingencies while a second core group dominates others. Each service still possesses unique enabling capabilities that are essential to the effective employment of the others — e.g., airlift, fire support, forcible entry, missile defense, communications, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR), logistics, etc. And, further, by design, no service component will ever take on major contingency responsibilities alone.

However, the character of the likeliest future joint “warfights” has fundamentally changed since the advent of “jointness.” And, now with the benefit of nine years of persistent conflict, future conflicts will most certainly be fought to achieve more circumspect ends as well. Finite resources and a new appreciation by defense strategists for the real — not theoretical — costs of regime change indicate that joint warfighting is entering a new era. There will be more constraints on the military’s human and material resources. By implication, there are also likely to be significant limitations on the military courses of action available to U.S. decisionmakers.

Ultimately, Secretary Gates’ full spectrum “balance” will be created between service components and not within each of them. In this regard, it is quite likely that the U.S. is nearing a revolution in force sizing, shaping, and missioning. Quasi-specialization is inevitable. Over time, two new distinct service component groups — land forces and SOF in one and air and naval forces in the other — will optimize for different “high-intensity” contingency demands and

Corporation, Available from http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG499.pdf, Accessed May 26th, 2010.

³ See Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2010, Available from http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf, Accessed May 12, 2010, p. 39 and p. 45. QDR 10, for example, says the following about U.S. ground forces, “U.S. ground forces will remain capable of full-spectrum operations, with continued *focus* (emphasis added by the author) on capabilities to conduct effective and sustained counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorist operations alone and in concert with partners.” Whereas later it observes, “Operations over the past eight years have stressed the ground forces disproportionately, but the future operational landscape could also portend *significant long duration air and maritime campaigns* (emphasis added by the author) for which the U.S. military must be prepared.”

not quixotically tilt at the windmill of complete “full-spectrum” capability as the Army now portrays itself in its own doctrine.⁴

Here DoD, as a corporate entity, will attack its diverse demand set by ensuring that each service focuses at the right point on the spectrum of conflict. This newly refined and somewhat individualized focus will drive service training and readiness, capabilities and budget choices, and, to a great extent, future service culture. Each institution still contributes to wider joint solutions to a variety of circumstances and a range of threats. However, they will not all be equally prepared or well-suited for all circumstances and threats. In the end, all will be “warfighting” institutions at their core. However, the “kind of war” each prepares more for will differ fundamentally by service group.

DoD’s Two New MCO(s)

Though not explicit, QDR 10 seems to imply that the likeliest and most dangerous major foreign contingencies are trending toward two distinct archetypes.⁵ And, by implication, it presents clear focus points for the new service component groups as a consequence. The first archetype is large-scale irregular or unconventional operations; the second more traditional military conflicts with high-tech asymmetric powers. Combined, these replace past generic surge demands like Major Regional Contingency (MRC), Major Theater War (MTW), and, most recently, Major Combat Operation (MCO).

The unwritten division of labor between the two contingency archetypes sees the Army, USMC, and SOF focused at max intensity on the first, while the Navy and Air Force orient on the second. By their nature, large-scale irregular operations will involve extended commitment of ground forces against unconventional military and non-military opponents. It is not, however, likely to involve years-long, revolutionary reconstruction like that attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶ Similarly, air, sea, space, and cyberspace wars with capable high-end competitors are likely to trend more in the direction of short coercive campaigns to redress unacceptable breaches of international norms or threats to key U.S. interests. For lack of a better term, these campaigns will focus on behavior modification and not necessarily fundamental changes to an unfavorable status quo. In fact, neither new archetype suggests the kind of all-arms regime removal and replacement witnessed in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

One key indicator of DoD’s shift in focus toward these two new major foreign contingency archetypes is found in QDR 10’s six key mission areas. The mission areas are those DoD tasks

⁴ See Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, Operations, February 2008, pp. 3-1 – 3-23, Available from <http://www.army.mil/fm3-0/fm3-0.pdf>, Accessed May 20, 2010.

⁵ By “major foreign contingency” the author means those foreign military commitments that are equal to or exceed the human, material, and political commitment of the United States to Operations Iraqi or Enduring Freedom. This does not count smaller scale commitment of forces for presence, security force assistance, etc.

⁶ See Robert M. Gates, A Balanced Strategy, Foreign Affairs, January 2009, Available from: <http://www.dam.army.pentagon.mil/offices/dami-zxg/documents/Foreign-Affairs-SECDEF-Balance-Dec08.pdf>, Accessed May 26th, 2010. A year ago, Secretary Gates said as much when, in Foreign Affairs, he observed, “The United States is unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan -- that is, forced regime change followed by nation building under fire -- anytime soon.”

or functions requiring the greatest near-term thought and resource focus.⁷ Two of the six in particular demonstrate DoD's new bias toward the basic warfighting models outlined above — *Succeed in Counterinsurgency, Stability, and Counterterrorism Operations* (from this point forward "COIN/SO/CT") and *Deter and Defeat Aggression in Anti-Access Environments* (referred to as "deter and defeat" from now on).⁸

Obviously, there are clear operational differences between the two mission areas. Again, as the author implies in the section above, the first of these represents a collection of less conventional military missions — often undertaken in the face of non-military or disorganized military threats and challenges — i.e., terrorists, criminals, insurrectionists, insurgents, rogue military units, etc. And, the second, is new-age "war" (as DoD generally prefers to think of it) where state militaries enter into direct confrontation with one another, albeit employing more advanced technical capabilities and fighting for control of or freedom of action in the "global commons" — sea, air, space, and cyber space.⁹

Consistent with the discussion above, the former is a land force challenge; the latter an air and naval problem. Thus, as a general rule, the Army, USMC, and SOF will be decisive in combating *disorder* — or the failure of once functioning authority that suddenly presents fundamental hazards to U.S. interests. And, the Navy and Air Force will increasingly focus on redressing *unfavorable order* — i.e., organized attempts by aggressive states to undermine core U.S. interests through military force and associated "grey area" capabilities like cyber.

The likeliest route to this latter conflict might be accident, miscalculation, or U.S. preemption.¹⁰ The "greyer" the principal enemy warfighting mechanisms — e.g., cyber, international economics, etc., the more debatable the casus belli. The author's interpretation of the two new archetypes and their relationship to other contemporary defense missions is depicted in Figure 1 below.

⁷ See Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 17. On this, DoD observed, "Analysis focused on identifying gaps in capabilities and shortfalls in capacity that programmed forces might encounter in executing these missions over the near-term, midterm-, and longer term."

⁸ See Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2010, Available from http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf, Accessed May 12, 2010, pp. 20-26 and pp. 31-34.

⁹ See Michele Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, The Contested Commons, Proceedings Magazine, Vol. 135/7/1, 277, July 2009, Available from http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY_ID=1950, Accessed May 25, 2010. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and one of her key advisors Shawn Brimley observe, "Ensuring relative stability throughout the global commons remains central to the maintenance of U.S. power and influence in the 21st century... We are likely entering an era in which a series of strategic trends will make it more difficult for the United States to sustain stability within the global commons."

¹⁰ See Nathan Freier, Strategic Competition and resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Traditional, Catastrophic, and Hybrid Challenges in Context, Available from <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=782>, Accessed May 25th, 2010, pp. 24-26.

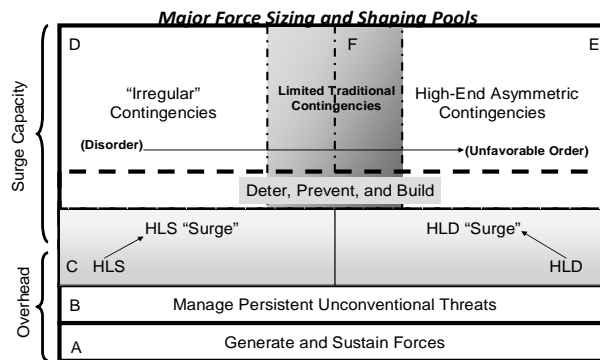


Figure 1. A Notional Depiction of the Contemporary Defense Mission Set.¹¹

Boxes A, B, and C above — *Generate and Sustain the Force, Manage Persistent Unconventional Threats, and Defend the Homeland and Support Civil Authorities* — all constitute new or previously un- or under-recognized “overhead” costs that DoD incurs even before it considers undertaking large-scale foreign contingency operations. Boxes D and E represent the two new large-scale contingency archetypes described above. As indicated by the chart, forward presence, foreign military engagement, and building partner capacity are drawn from blocks D and E, as is the capacity to plus-up defense or security of the homeland should domestic contingencies surpass the capabilities of civil authorities and military forces committed in advance to the Homeland Security/Homeland Defense (HLS/HLD) mission.

Clear recognition of these standing limitations gives defense leaders greater clarity when making strategic decisions about the commitment of forces abroad. For example, forces allocated to foreign presence missions or SFA may need to be marshaled back into large joint responses in other theaters. Further, a catastrophe at home requiring forces above and beyond those already committed to HLS/HLD will naturally place some resource and capability limitations on foreign contingency responses. Finite resources require the secretary and his principal civilian and military advisors to make difficult trades. Finally, as depicted in Figure 1, the ability to conduct a limited traditional, all-arms campaign (now the “lesser included case”) lies within the capacity to conduct large-scale irregular contingencies and resource intensive campaigns against high-end asymmetric challengers.

Regardless of their specific origin or precise form, the two new large-scale contingency bins (Blocks D and E) will call for unique joint groupings. According to both operational requirements and hypothetical design, each grouping may result in limited or supporting participation by one or more of the four service components and/or SOF. Again, new in this construct is the idea that Block D (Irregular Contingencies) is now largely Army, USMC, and SOF operating space, whereas Block E (High-End Asymmetric Contingencies) requires more air,

¹¹ This chart was adapted from an unpublished presentation given by the author at the United States Army War College’s 2010 Strategy Conference entitled “What is War? Why Does it Matter? I’m Not Sure it Does”, Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6Y_N8-h-Lw&feature=channel, Accessed June 10th, 2010.

sea, space, and cyberspace capabilities — the majority of which reside in the Navy and Air Force.

By implication, the inviolable theology of “four-way” jointness that has held sway over military affairs for twenty-four years may have a new book among its many gospels.¹² At a minimum, jointness will have new corollaries to remedy future security challenges. The different services will optimize for different large-scale contingencies. Again, land forces will address disorder through armed stabilization, CT, response to natural and human disasters, COIN, etc. And, air and naval forces will both enable land forces in the performance of all of these missions while optimizing to redress unfavorable order in a handful of key regions by securing and/or penetrating the contested commons. In the author’s view, QDR 10 was very clear on the latter and less so on the former. Except for “more of the same,” there is really no future QDR vision for land forces.

The Past and the Present for Some; the Future for Other

The land force vision problem stems from QDR 10’s perceptions about the character of the two new contingency archetypes and the defense responses to them. The “disorder” anticipated in QDR 10 looks very much like that experienced between 2001 and 2010. In short, it looks from today back to model land force futures. On the other hand, the “unfavorable order” embedded in QDR’s assumptions looks forward to the emergence of a state rival who is capable of employing niche military capabilities — among many other tools — to prevent U.S. interference in its presumed sphere of influence; this anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threat is becoming increasingly real and centers around a handful of usual suspects — China, Iran, North Korea, perhaps Russia, etc. Thus, in the aggregate, QDR 10 is overly reactive and, in fact, late to what is and what has already been (terrorism, insurgency, etc), while prudently hedging only against one aspect of what might be (now, just future state-based asymmetric competition). In the author’s view, innovation and prudent hedging are required across the board.

Consistent with the most popular and common contemporary warfighting themes, both new major contingency archetypes — “COIN/SO/CT” and “deter and defeat” — are unconventional, asymmetric, and hybrid to one extent or another. Thus, the two joint service groups discussed above now have new and distinct “*high-intensity*” contingency demands to adjust to. In addition, both “COIN/SO/CT” and “deter and defeat” supplant more traditional warfights as gold standards for joint force readiness. Again, the most recent gold standard — MCO — is now an unspoken “lesser included” case in defense contingency planning. As the author observed above, from a defense futures perspective, QDR 10’s discussion of the “deter and defeat” mission area is far better developed and much more forward leaning than is any QDR discussion covering “COIN/SO/CT.”¹³ This leaves land forces locked in a planning worldview mirror imaging that of today; a perilous point of departure for reasoned defense strategy development.

¹² See 99th Congress, Public Law 99-433—1 October 1986, Goldwater-Nichols department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Available from: <https://acquisition.navy.mil%2Fcontent%2Fdownload%2F5326%2F24165%2Ffile%2Fpubl%252099-433%2520goldwater-nichols01oct1986.pdf> , Accessed June 2, 2010.

¹³ See Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2010, Available from: http://www.defense.gov/QDR/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf, Accessed: May 3, 2010, pp. 31-34.

As the QDR process opened in the spring of 2009, the A2/AD challenge set was effectively and accurately labeled — High End Asymmetric Threats (HEAT).¹⁴ QDR’s articulation of defense responses to the A2/AD challenge, of course, came via the “deter and defeat” mission area. QDR’s HEAT discussion begins by arguing:

U.S. forces must be able to deter, defend against, and defeat aggression by potentially hostile nation-states. This capability is fundamental to the nation’s ability to protect its interests and to provide security in key regions. Anti-Access strategies seek to deny outside countries the ability to project power...thereby allowing aggression or other destabilizing actions to be conducted by the anti-access power.¹⁵

The “deter and defeat” mission area focuses on a future high-intensity conflict against a state opponent who leverages innovative A2/AD capabilities and methods against the U.S.¹⁶ On this point, QDR observes:

In the future, U.S. forces conducting power projection operations abroad will face myriad challenges. States with the means to do so are acquiring a wide range of sophisticated weapons and supporting capabilities that, in combination, can support anti-access strategies aimed at impeding the deployment of U.S. forces to the theater and blunting the operations of those forces that do deploy forward.¹⁷

Indeed in the end, the most conspicuous and explicit piece of “futures” guidance in QDR 10 falls out of the “deter and defeat” discussion and its tasking the Navy and Air Force to “(d)velop a joint air-sea battle concept” to contend with the anti-access environments.¹⁸ According to QDR 10, “(t)he [joint air-sea] concept will address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains — air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace — to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action.”¹⁹

The A2/AD mantra is hardly new. Rather, it is a remarkably consistent theme across the last three defense reviews. In reality, QDR 10’s “deter and defeat” mission area is largely a re-

¹⁴ See Greg Grant, QDR Team: Big Threats Matter, DoD Buzz: Online Defense and Acquisition Journal, August 9th, 2009, Available from <http://www.dodbuzz.com/2009/08/07/qdr-team-big-threats-matter/>, Accessed May 6th, 2010. Early in the QDR process the acronym “HEAT” emerged to describe the “high-end asymmetric threats” falling into this category. These were “threat(s) posed by a “near peer” competitor armed with an inventory of advanced “anti-access” weapons: anti-satellite systems, increasingly accurate ballistic missiles, anti-air weapons, anti-ship systems, undersea warfare systems and cyber attacks.”

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jan Van Tol, et al, A Point of Departure Operational Concept, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010, Available from http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/R.20100518.Air_Sea_Battle__A_/R.20100518.Air_Sea_Battle__A_.pdf, Accessed may 25th, 2010; Richard Halloran, China Turns Up the Heat, Air Force magazine, Available from: <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2010/April%202010/0410china.pdf>, Accessed may 25, 2010, pp. 34-37; and Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, On the Verge of a Game Changer, Proceedings Magazine, Vol. 135/5/1,27,5, Available from: http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY_ID=1856, Accessed May 25th, 2010.

¹⁷ See Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 31.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2010, p. 32 and 33.

¹⁹ bid.

articulation of Secretary Rumsfeld's early transformation agenda, fueled from the outside by acolytes of the revolution in military affairs (RMA).²⁰ For example, one of QDR 01's "six operational goals" was "(p)rojecting and sustaining U.S. forces in distant anti-access or area-denial environments and defeating anti-access and area denial threats."²¹ Five years later, on the subject of China — then and now considered by many to be the most consequential A2/AD challenge, QDR 06 observed, "China's continental depth, and the challenge of en route and in-theater U.S. basing place a premium on forces capable of sustained operations at great distances into denied areas."²²

To the extent there is any substantive discussion of land force futures in QDR 10, it hinges almost exclusively on linear projections of the current demands associated with Iraq, Afghanistan, and the wider WoT. In fact, the nearest QDR 10 comes to "futures" guidance for land forces comes in the defense review's summation of "(c)hanges directed under the QDR." Here the document states:

U.S. ground forces will remain capable of full-spectrum operations, with continued focus on capabilities to conduct effective and sustained counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorist operations alone and in concert with partners.²³

For the land forces, this sets up a fragile "straw man", vulnerable to repudiation. Detailed, policy-level consideration of the absolute human, material, and political costs incurred over the last decade, as well as the fiscal cost-benefit trades associated with maintaining large standing land forces might result in strategic decisions (principally, significant land force "reductions") that are fundamentally out of synch with the likeliest defense futures. Regardless of how many times commentators invoke past failures to heed and institutionalize the hard lessons of irregular warfighting, the Pentagon seems increasingly willing to sublet much of its responsibility in this regard to others.

QDR 10's important and quite reasonable emphasis on "build(ing) the security capacity of partner states" (BPC) is one example in this regard. BPC and SFA can easily be interpreted as first strikes against the maintenance of large, standing U.S. capacity for direct irregular warfighting, replacing that responsibility instead with foreign partner capacity.²⁴ The author

²⁰ Department of Defense, The Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR 01), September 30, 2001, Available from <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/QDR2001.pdf>, Accessed May 25th, 2010, p. 30. One of QDR 01's six "operational goals – "Projecting and sustaining U.S. forces in distant anti-access or area-denial environments and defeating anti-access and area denial Threats—is nearly identical to QDR 10's "deter and defeat" key mission area. The anti-access/area denial concept is mentioned in eight separate instances inside QDR 01. For an outside view. See Andrew F. Krepinevich, The Pentagon's Wasting Assets, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 88, Iss 4, July/August 2009, Available from ProQuest, Accessed May 27, 2010.

²¹ Department of Defense, Quadrennial Review Report, September 2001, Available from <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/QDR2001.pdf>, Accessed May 3, 2010, p. 30.

²² Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, February 2006, Available from: <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>, Accessed May 3, 2010, p. 30. Italics and underline added by the author.

²³ Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 39.

²⁴ See Department of Defense, February 2010, pp. 26-30 and Krepinevich, 2009. On this subject Andrew Krepinevich observes specifically: "For one thing, the United States should adopt an indirect approach to addressing instability in the developing world, conserving the bulk of its resources for meeting other strategic priorities. This

would argue that there are a number of untested assumptions and risks involved in excessive reliance on this approach.²⁵

In general, QDR 10's description of the "COIN/SO/CT" mission area either directly refers to or looks a great deal like the COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a gross oversimplification of the nation's unconventional threat future, relying too much on contemporary conditions and the geography of current conflicts for the land power futures narrative.²⁶ From a functional and geographic perspective, QDR 10 and defense policy in general focus too much on the Middle East and South Asia as the only possible future "irregular" games in town. Further still, QDR relies too heavily on a perpetually militarized WoT in and around these regions as proof of the enduring value of the "COIN/SO/CT" mission area and the land forces that predominantly support it.

Many experts recognize the WoT now as an intelligence and law enforcement endeavor, where DoD supports a much broader whole of government effort.²⁷ However, QDR does not share this idea. Nonetheless, most would argue that Faisal Shazad (the would-be Times Square bomber) and Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab (the would-be Christmas Day bomber) are hardly military threats useful in making DoD force sizing and shaping decisions. Yet, most if not all of QDR's land force discussion is dominated by a perpetual, resource-intensive war on extremists. In short, QDR 10's assumed land force future has an uncomfortable air of "presentism" in it. Colin Gray aptly described "presentism" in a critique of the last QDR, observing:

We may prefer to be less generous and instead suggest that the vision in the QDR amounts to a gross overreaction to the problems most characteristic of the present day. This is the sin of "presentism." The Defense Department has peered out through the fog of the future to 2025 and has seen—guess what?—a future that is very much like today.²⁸

Gray's critique holds true today for QDR's treatment of future land-based contingencies. It is "back to the future" and "more of the same" with very little energy devoted to either the evolution or proliferation of the various irregular challenges U.S. land forces may be called on to

means exploiting the U.S. military's advantage in highly trained manpower by emphasizing the training, equipping, and advising of indigenous forces of countries threatened by subversion...rather than direct combat operations.

²⁵ See Nathan Freier, *The New Theology — Building Partner Capacity*, Smallwarsjournal.com, May 27th, 2010, Available from: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/445-freier.pdf>, Accessed May 27th, 2010.

²⁶ For the author's perspective on this, see Nathan Freier, *The New Balance: Limited Armed Stabilization and the Future of U.S. Landpower*, April 2009, Available from <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=915>, Accessed May 25, 2010 and Nathan Freier, *Hybrid Threats and Challenges: Describe...Don't Define*, Available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/01/hybrid-threats-and-challenges/>, Accessed May 25th, 2010.

²⁷ On the latter point, see Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 20. The QDR report states, "(W)e must expect that for the indefinite future, violent extremist groups, with or without state sponsorship, will continue to foment instability and challenge U.S. and allied interests." In this case, extremist is code for Islamic extremist. See also the author's view on this topic in Nathan Freier, *Gates Next Task: Planning for the Future*, Defense News, Available from <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4489197>, Accessed May 25th, 2010.

²⁸ Colin S. Gray, *Stability Operations in Strategic Perspective*, Parameters, Summer 2006, Available from <http://www.usamhi.army.mil/USAWC/Parameters/06summer/gray.htm>; Accessed May 25th, 2010, p. 4.

address. Instead, QDR focuses land force priorities on a threat narrative that holds (only barely) now, so long as the U.S. remains engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan. And given current timelines for reduction of forces in both theaters, one can argue that this line of argument is much less plausible over time. When, for example, do we anticipate another direct large-scale U.S. intervention against a regime threatening *classical* insurgency? Never or not for quite some time are the likeliest responses to that question along the corridors of the Pentagon.

Indeed, Iraq and Afghanistan fail to qualify as classical COIN operations anyway (or perhaps neither qualified until very recently). Instead, Iraq was more akin to response to sudden state failure — where the U.S. armed forces and not civil or sectarian conflict, coup, popular insurrection, natural catastrophe, or economic failure were the instruments of collapse. Whereas, Afghanistan was a failed state well before the U.S. intervention, governed by a mob and long in the throes of civil war.

Classical COIN implies the existence of an indigenous government that is “capable enough” to function as a real partner. At a minimum, it assumes that the insurgents are fighting back against some established local order.²⁹ In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States did not have the benefit of either a capable partner or the semblance of order until recently. Thus, in both cases, American ground forces were responding to failed political authority and abject “disorder” first and foremost — creating a reinvented order from the bottom up. That is a useful data point for the design and missioning of future land forces.

In the end, neither chasing would-be suicide bombers nor intervention in large-scale classical COIN appear to be valid focus points for land force optimization. However, neither is the abstract and quite wide concept of “full spectrum” dominance. Recent news reporting on risk and cost calculations inside the Pentagon today suggest that the same policymakers that produced QDR 10 are coming to similar conclusions.³⁰ Yet, QDR 10 still argues:

The wars we are fighting today and assessments of the future security environment together demand that the United States retain and enhance a whole-of-government capability to succeed in large-scale counterinsurgency (COIN), stability [SO], and counterterrorism (CT) operations.³¹

The New Focus Point — Opposed Stabilization

In large measure, designing and fielding military capabilities and missioning military forces is an exercise in “worst case” planning. For the time being, QDR appears to imply that the “worst case” land force challenge is fighting another protracted irregular conflict mirror imaging Iraq

²⁹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency, December 2006, Available from http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/coin/repository/FM_3-24.pdf, Accessed May 26th, 2010, p. 1-1. The now famous Army field manual on the subject calls COIN “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”

³⁰ See, for example, Nancy A. Yousef, Pentagon rethinking value of major counterinsurgencies, McClatchy Newspapers, Available from: http://www.mercurynews.com/news/ci_15095406?source=rss, Accessed May 25, 2010.

³¹ Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 20.

and/or Afghanistan. While both the Iraq and Afghan experiences are important pieces in the puzzle, the author suggests DoD might consider using a very different and more complex measuring stick. So if not COIN by some description, then what?

While classical COIN and CT do not provide the most compelling case for large standing land forces, the author would argue that a more violent and unstable variant of stability operations (SO) does. Stability operations here are defined in the spirit of James T. Quinlivan's view circa 1995. He argued persuasively then that stability operations were combined military, paramilitary, and police missions undertaken to create "an environment orderly enough that most routine civil functions [can] be carried out."³² In the author's view, "orderly enough" implies a more limited form of "armed stabilization" than that attempted in either Iraq or Afghanistan.³³ Indeed, using a medical metaphor, it argues first for treating the most dangerous symptoms (i.e., managing the critically ill patient), while not always or even routinely treating the whole disease or anticipating the patient's full recovery.

In reality, three things are likely true about future land-centric security demands. First, some form of terrorism and/or consequential foreign criminal activity will be the most frequent, manageable, but also the least resource-intensive land-based demand — response to it calling for serial employment of specialized SOF in modest numbers and low-visibility SFA. In nine years of irregular warfighting after all, the United States has recognized the value of putting terrorists and criminal actors under constant unrelenting physical pressure. Therefore, in force planning, accounting for persistent low-intensity war against an atomized community of malign non-state actors is important but not central to solving the land force "futures" problem.

Second, most acknowledge that large-scale, classical COIN is probably the unlikeliest future demand for American land forces. Even if it were inevitable, current COIN theology is overly focused on the Middle East and too wedded to the current WoT. Thus, it is likely less transferable to insurgent dangers rising from beyond the Muslim world. In the author's view, COIN, in fact, should increasingly be seen as one among a family of opposed stabilization efforts ultimately captured under a new conception of stability operations.³⁴

Finally, restoring minimum essential order to a collapsed, failed, or profoundly unstable "strategic state" would be the most dangerous, complex, and risk-laden unconventional contingency for U.S. land forces. However, if U.S. forces, in coalition with allies and partners, can restore a modicum of limited stability to all or part of a once functioning and capable state in crisis, then it likely can handle the gamut of possible warfighting challenges, including classical COIN and more traditional campaigns.

³² From James T. Quinlivan, Force Requirements in Stability Operations, Parameters, Winter 1995, Available from: <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/USAWC/Parameters/1995/quinliv.htm>; Accessed: October 15th, 2009. Quinlivan was quoted in Nathan Freier, Commentary: Mainstreaming Stability Operations — A Problem of Classification, PKSOI Bulletin, Volume 2, Issue 1, Fall 2009, Available from <http://pksoi.army.mil/PKM/publications/bulletin/volume2issue1/commentary.cfm>, Accessed June 9th, 2010.

³³ For and expanded discussion of "limited armed stabilization" see Nathan Freier, April 2009.

³⁴ See Nathan Freier, Fall 2009.

For a variety of reasons, response to strategic state collapse, failure, or disorder is the ultimate “worst case” land force contingency. Disorder or collapse of a strategic state assumes threats to U.S. interests so grave that they compel land intervention in the absence of capable local partners. The mechanism of collapse might range from natural disaster to insurgency, wide-spread insurrection, or civil war. The strategic state failure scenario is unique in defense planning in that it would demand that land forces weight offensive, defensive, and stability operations (in their doctrinal context) near equally while simultaneously acting as the principal enabling hub for what is likely to be a co-equal civilian response — aid, reconstruction, disaster relief, etc.³⁵

Among the worst of these scenarios are those where elements of the fallen regime’s security forces remain under some coherent command and control and resist intervention. Other former regime actors, hesitant to dispense with the old order, attempt to defend or restore the now collapsed and discredited prior status quo against all threats — internal or external. Free-riding on the chaos, self-interested criminals and sub-state militias too may carve out defensible spheres of influence, rapidly filling the naturally expanding security vacuum as central authority fails. Adjacent state powers and foreign agents with significant interest in the post-collapse order are also likely to intervene directly or indirectly to sew wider instability and extend their influence — often by proxy. In addition, those populations, previously mistreated by the old regime might seek to exercise newfound freedom through vengeance against their former oppressors.³⁶

Local nationalists too may resist what they perceive to be foreign-imposed political solutions; whereas significant segments of the general population may physically oppose intervention and any political rebalancing that does not appear to favor the narrow interests of their constituent groups. Overlay on this ethnically heterogeneous and mutually hostile populations; the presence of employable nuclear weapons; substantial strategic resources (e.g., petroleum); vulnerable populations susceptible to mass migration; trans-regional ethnic, religious, political or criminal associations; and a host of other potential complications and there exists a recipe for future complex interventions rivaling almost anything previously experienced. Should one or more of these collapse or failure scenarios come to pass, responses to them would largely fall on the collective capabilities of U.S. land forces first.³⁷

By implication then, land forces should focus their attention on succeeding in conflict environments exhibiting three basic characteristics:³⁸

- First, increased attention should be placed on discriminating forcible entry and conduct of large-scale expeditionary operations in areas of the world where vital interests are or

³⁵ See Headquarters, Department of the Army, February 2008, pp. 3-1 to 3-2.

³⁶ This paragraph was adapted from Nathan Freier, Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: The Traditional, Irregular, Catastrophic, and Hybrid Challenges in Context, The United States Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute, Available from <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub782.pdf>, Accessed June 8th, 2010, pp. 58-59.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Freier, April 2009, pp. 54-55.

could be challenged by violent and somewhat disorganized unconventional threats. As a general rule of thumb, the geographical focus of these opposed stabilization missions might include states or regions:

- Whose stable functioning underwrites critical U.S. interests and/or order across a key strategic region;
- Where nuclear weapons, internal instability and conflict, and fragile governance combine;
- Where combustible ethno-sectarian relationships are liable to trigger contagious pan-regional instability in the absence of intervention;
- That possess substantial strategic resources, enormous economic leverage, or dominant geographic position; and/or finally,
- That are in close proximity to the U.S. or a key international partner and have a large dependent population vulnerable to widespread displacement under duress.

None of these criteria are mutually exclusive. And, to the extent a contingency area of operations exhibits two or more of these, the required response is likely to be bigger and more complex.

➤ Second, land forces should optimize for circumstances where:

- The degree of violence or capacity for violence is quite high;
- The environment, in the main, is non-permissive;
- The physical threats demonstrate some organization and relative sophistication at various levels — neighborhood, tribe, province, etc (but not that associated with MCO's against other medium to great powers); and, finally,
- Resistance to intervention or hostile action emanates or should be anticipated from a variety of sources ranging from rogue military units and organized insurgents to common rioters.

In this regard, it may be far more important today for the land components to master “wars of all against all” before resetting for extended COIN, traditional conflicts, or a “full spectrum” combination of the two. Imagine, for example, opposed entry into a theater where multiple armed groups are competing for local, regional, and national primacy both with each other and with an intervening American military. The warfight would occur in the round; partners — to the extent they existed — would be informal and local; making friends — or heading off the emergence of opponents — would be of equal importance to killing the enemy, and, finally, securing or restoring some semblance of *minimum essential order* in important pieces of the fallen state might be the best possible outcome given resources and risk tolerance.

➤ Finally, third, as a rule land forces should predicate their future capabilities, organization, and missioning on circumstances where indigenous government authorities (i.e., our potential partners) suffer from substantial loss or complete failure of sovereign control over political and security outcomes. Though clearly not preferred, success in unilateral intervention must be the gold standard for measuring land force capabilities and risk in

the hypothetical. By definition then, if the U.S. had to go it alone, the objectives pursued would have to be more limited.

This final point — the capacity to fight alone — is both the most important and the most counter-cultural given the current trajectory of key initiatives inside DoD — especially initiatives associated with combating future irregular challenges. Accepting less than unilateral capability is a risk choice that would leave an American President with very limited options. SFA should remain an important component of U.S. defense strategy. However, as conceived of now, it assumes the presence of willing and able partners who will act consistent to U.S. interests and values on the business end of every contingency operation. If prudence indicates building forces for the worst case, then a useful assumption would be that local partners are an exception and not a rule at the front end of a large-scale contingency.

Adopting some form of limited, opposed stabilization as the focal point for land force development does not imply the need for larger land components. It certainly does not foresee making them significantly smaller either. Instead it pushes for pursuit of more circumspect objectives. In past strategic planning, unilateral intervention assumed away the enormous cost of regime change — and by implication — wholesale nation-building and reconstruction.

Limited opposed stabilization argues for an inherent, built-in conservatism with respect to outcomes pursued and resources invested. This conservatism is perhaps its most important characteristic. It implies sharply curbing strategy and policy appetites in the execution of future land-based interventions — in short, pursuing limited or minimum essential objectives first and then deciding whether or not pursuit of more ambitious objectives is possible.

The concept of “limited objectives” rejects the tempting resort to deliberate regime change in conventional warplanning and the pursuit of wholesale regime restoration in the event of strategic state collapse, failure, or disorder. It argues for the kind of strategic discipline in future interventions that constrains senior policymakers and sees them ordering U.S. forces and their civilian counterparts to pursue more modest, definable, and achievable objectives in complex interventions.³⁹ In this regard, strategic and operational aims associated with limited opposed stabilization might focus on minimum essential conditions like the following:⁴⁰

- Quick restoration of *minimally functioning* indigenous authority and accountability;
- Limitation of horizontal regional escalation of conflict and instability;
- Isolation of the victim state (or region) from hostile spoilers;
- Short-term protection of vulnerable populations and critical institutions and infrastructure;
- Defeat of violent threats to internal security — including abuses by surviving indigenous security forces;
- Establishment of responsible control over strategic resources and military capabilities;
- Temporary delivery of essential public goods; and, finally,

³⁹ This paragraph and the list of “minimum essential conditions” were adapted from Nathan Freier, April 2009, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 67.

- Establishment of basic foundations for indigenously-led national/regional recovery or a much bigger international intervention.

The overall intent of the U.S. campaign design would be the latter — laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive international response. This wider international response may or may not involve a significant U.S. presence but should, at a minimum, be consistent with American interests.

Conclusion: Opposed Stabilization and the Future

In recent remarks, the commanding general of the United States Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) General Martin E. Dempsey, outlined two broad future mission sets for the United States Army —“wide area security” and “combined arms maneuver.”⁴¹ According to Dempsey, the “wide area security mission set establishes conditions necessary for humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, counterinsurgency, mass atrocity response and homeland security;” whereas, “the combined arms maneuver mission set establishes the conditions necessary for mounted maneuver, attack and defense, over extended distances.”⁴² Opposed stabilization sits at the nexus of “wide area security” and “combined arms maneuver,” seeing future land force demands requiring simultaneous and widely distributed execution of both.

Though opposed stabilization will most likely occur in the developing world, the proliferation of dangerous military capabilities and know how increases the likelihood that U.S. forces will operate in highly lethal environments regardless of where or when they are employed. In addition, the higher the strategic state sits on the development ladder before its failure, the likelier it is that the operating environment will boast even greater lethality. In any case, opposed stabilization sees both formal and improvised capabilities and associated know-how on the “loose” under decentralized and irresponsible control.

Adopting opposed stabilization as the land force optimization point would help ground forces prepare better to “play down” as the norm, but also “play up” effectively with sufficient strategic warning. If U.S. forces were called on to minimally stabilize a once functioning strategic state, where the remnants of a relatively sophisticated military and security architecture operate as free agents among a sea of more unconventional competitors, one might anticipate a broad spectrum of violent challenges. These would range from intense, high-end small unit actions to decentralized (and often unconnected) irregular resistance occurring across a wide area of operations.

Each discrete opposed stabilization mission would occur under circumstances of disintegrating friendly or hostile political authority. In the end, this concept argues that the high-end contingency focus point for U.S. land forces must now be some new and more violent form of stability operation than that previously considered in most strategic planning. Given contemporary strategic conditions, the capacity to intervene in and stabilize important pieces of a failing nuclear state, a friendly or hostile nation plagued by state-killing civil war, or a key state threatening to export contagious regional instability is their most logical area of concentration.

⁴¹ Martin E. Dempsey, The Failure of Imagination, Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, London, May 25th, 2010.

⁴² Ibid.

Doing so arms land forces with the capacity for more sophisticated high-end maneuver in the unlikely event of a traditional all-arms conflict. However, more importantly, it places responsibility for redress of strategically consequential disorder squarely on the shoulders of land component leaders well prior to their inevitably having to respond coherently to it.

Continued land force adaptation to classical COIN may only provide false comfort for the time being. Reset toward traditional warfighting is not practical either. A more thorough-going appraisal of the strategic environment and its likeliest contingency demands is in order. QDR 10 missed an opportunity with respect to land forces. Just as QDR argued that the navy and air force needed to develop a combined air-sea concept for operating in and defeating threats in A2/AD environments, the Secretary of Defense would be well-advised to ask the Army, USMC, and SOF to undertake a similar effort with respect to the future of less conventional land conflicts. Limited, opposed stabilization of a fallen state would be an interesting and important starting point in this regard.

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