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Defense Strategy in the Obama Administration

By Leo Michel¹

In April 2009, when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced his recommendations for President Barack Obama's first defense budget—a total of nearly \$670 billion for fiscal year 2010—his message was clear: the Pentagon must “rebalance (its) programs in order to institutionalize and enhance our capabilities to fight the wars we are in today and the scenarios we are most likely to face in the years ahead, while at the same time providing a hedge against other risks and contingencies.” If Washington's defense *cognoscenti* did not doubt the Secretary's determination to “rise above the politics and parochialism that have too often plagued...our nation's defense,” many were skeptical that, when all is said and done, U.S. defense strategy would fundamentally change direction.

Today, as the Obama Administration enters its second year, the skeptics' ranks have thinned a bit. The pragmatic and plain-speaking Mr. Gates, who served from November 2006 to January 2009 as President George W. Bush's defense chief, reportedly enjoys excellent relations with the President and other top members of the national security team. Moreover, Mr. Gates is widely respected by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress, where he will soon deliver a cascade of assessments and recommendations. These include the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)—the Pentagon's comprehensive examination of defense strategy and priorities intended to support long-term budget plans—as well as separate reviews covering the U.S. nuclear posture, ballistic missile defenses, and space policy. Tough decisions on specific issues lay ahead—on Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and arms control, to name a few—and President Obama might not side squarely with his defense chief in every instance. But based on his performance so far, Mr. Gates seems reasonably well-positioned to achieve many of his “rebalancing” goals.

Security challenges

Understanding the threats and opportunities posed by the current and projected strategic environment is a critical piece of the defense strategy puzzle, and senior Administration officials

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and military officers involved in the forthcoming reviews already have shed considerable light on their thinking.

One top civilian official, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy, has listed five key challenges shaping the strategic environment: the rise of violent extremism; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; fundamental shifts in the balance of power (e.g., the rise of China and India); failed and failing states; and increasing tensions in the “global commons” due, in part, to competition for natural resources and the effects of climate change. These long-term challenges are aggravated, to varying degrees, by developments such as the global economic crisis, the increasing importance (and vulnerabilities) of “cyberspace,” and the spread of potentially destabilizing technologies. Moreover, this daunting set of problems must be addressed while the United States remains engaged in “hot” conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, without mentioning other simmering crises—involving Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapons issues—that might explode with little or no warning.

Thus, according to Ms. Flournoy, the defense establishment must think in new ways about the nature of future warfare, the size and structure of its military forces, and how to balance “strategic risk” among competing priorities. Like other top Administration officials, she no longer uses the “global war on terror”—a Bush Administration formulation consciously discarded by President Obama—as a primary organizing principle of national security policy. At the same time, she has acknowledged the rise of militarily potent non-state actors and the blurring of lines between conventional “force on force” warfare and counterinsurgency. In an environment characterized by prolonged “hybrid” conflicts that combine aspects of conventional and counterinsurgency campaigns, military forces alone cannot produce strategic success. Hence, as Ms. Flournoy has argued, the overall defense effort must be integrated into a “whole of government” approach—involving diplomatic, intelligence, economic, development assistance, and other civilian tools—to meet U.S. national security objectives.

Leading American military officers seem to be reaching similar conclusions. Army Chief of Staff George Casey, echoing his civilian leadership, has argued that the Army’s first responsibility is to “win the wars we are in.” He, too, has assessed that future conflicts likely will involve U.S. forces pitted against non-state actors armed with increasingly sophisticated weapons and information warfare skills. (Such conflicts, he has advised, “will look more like Israel’s war with Hezbollah in 2006 than the conventional 1991 war with Iraq.”) Marine General James Mattis, head of the Joint Forces Command that plays a key role in transforming U.S. forces to meet future missions, has further warned that American technological superiority is sometimes overrated; in any event, it cannot substitute fully for ground forces when the objective is to defeat a determined insurgency. And even traditional concepts of deterrence are now under scrutiny. For example, Marine General James Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has cautioned that the proliferation of dangerous technologies—such as ballistic missiles or weapons of mass destruction in the hands of reckless governments or fanatical terrorists—obliges the United States to reconsider how best to deter a conflict “that could be over in minutes” without necessarily crossing the nuclear threshold.

Priorities and trade-offs

How the Pentagon will propose specifically to prioritize threats, military missions and capabilities is not yet clear, but the overall thrust of its expected recommendations is already taking shape.

Broadly speaking, the QDR is expected to advocate much greater emphasis on the kinds of equipment, programs, and capabilities needed to protect American troops and prosecute the “hybrid” conflicts underway in Iraq and Afghanistan. This likely will translate into efforts to augment helicopter support, air transport, mine-resistant armored vehicles, personnel protection equipment, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets (notably unmanned aerial vehicles), as well as to improve military education and training. A further expansion of the active duty Army and Marine forces (beyond the levels authorized by Congress near the end of the Bush Administration) might be proposed, since existing forces have been seriously stressed by repeated combat deployments; this could include additional capabilities for the Special Operations Command due, in part, to its important role in training foreign military forces.

This shift in emphasis will come with a price tag, and Mr. Gates has acknowledged that the Pentagon budget has entered “a zero-sum game.” In his first budget skirmishes with Congress (including with influential Democrats anxious to protect jobs in their constituencies), the defense secretary has fared well. Despite intense lobbying by a number of defense contractors, he won support for terminating expensive but (in his judgment) unnecessary programs to build additional ultra-sophisticated fighter aircraft (the F-22), futuristic army vehicles, a new constellation of communications satellites and an extravagant fleet of presidential helicopters. As he told an audience of defense industry leaders last July: “We cannot expect to eliminate risk and danger simply by spending more—especially if we’re spending on the wrong things.”

The likely results of the nuclear posture review are less clear. The President clearly wants to achieve substantial reductions in strategic nuclear arms as a result of a new arms treaty with Russia. It is far from certain, however, that this will be accompanied by a fundamental change in the decades-old American reliance on its “triad” of intercontinental land- and submarine-based missiles plus strategic bombers. And while President Obama declared last April in Prague that his Administration “will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons,” he quickly added that “(a)s long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.” Indeed, while debate has continued inside the Administration and Congress over the need to design new warheads that could make the aging nuclear arsenal more safe, secure and reliable without resuming explosive testing, Mr. Gates won the President’s approval to begin work on a new generation of ballistic missile submarines and an additional \$700 million to modernize the nuclear weapons infrastructure.

Similarly, while the Obama Administration has cut some of the more esoteric missile defense programs (such as the air-borne laser) pursued by the Bush administration, it has certainly not abandoned missile defense entirely. Under plans announced by the President last September, the United States will discard the previous project of placing ten ground-based interceptors in Poland by 2017, supported by an X-band radar in the Czech Republic, in favor of a two-phase program: by 2011, to deploy sea-based SM-3 interceptor missiles to protect the areas of Europe most threatened by the near-term Iranian short and medium-range missile threat; and, between 2015 and 2020, to deploy upgraded, ground-based SM-3s in southern and northern Europe capable of protecting all of the European Allies. In addition, the United States will deploy, by the end of 2010, some 30 ground-based interceptors in Alaska and California to boost its territorial defenses against a potential long-range Iranian missile threat. Meantime, the military will continue research and development on a two-stage interceptor of the type previously planned for Poland—just in case.

Washington no doubt will pursue parallel efforts, also attempted by previous administrations, to develop some form of cooperation with Russia on missile defenses. This could include, for example, linking U.S. (and possible future NATO) warning radars with Russian-controlled radar sites. Still, it remains highly unlikely that the United States would put itself in a position to depend on Russian data for mission success.

Implications for Europe

By and large, the “rebalancing” of U.S. defense strategy holds the potential for strengthening transatlantic defense and security relations. The QDR likely will underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO and the growing convergence between the North American and European Allies on the critical importance of integrating a wide spectrum of civilian and military tools in a “comprehensive approach” to challenging stabilization operations. The fact that Ms. Flournoy’s office has included European representatives inside the planning staff preparing the QDR testifies to the Pentagon’s willingness to take Allied views into account in framing issues for U.S. decision makers.

In this context, a number of senior Administration officials, including Mr. Gates, have sought to promote more effective cooperation between NATO and the European Union in delivering a “comprehensive approach” in Afghanistan and the Balkans. Indeed, one of the important U.S. objectives in welcoming France’s decision to “take its full place” in NATO military structures and advocating that a European officer (French Air Force General Stéphane Abrial) assume leadership of Allied Command Transformation was to encourage a much closer, pragmatic and effective NATO-EU relationship.²

Much will depend, of course, on U.S. policy decisions that are NATO-related but take place outside strictly NATO channels. Some experts have suggested, for example, that the Administration reconsider previous plans (approved under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld) to reduce the U.S. military permanently stationed in Europe (principally in Germany, Italy and the UK) from the current approximately 80,000 personnel to a total closer to 35,000. Their arguments against such cuts: deep reductions would be counterproductive to U.S. efforts to increase Allied capabilities and interoperability through day-to-day interaction and periodic exercises; and, particularly in light of a more assertive Russia, they might increase concerns, already brewing among some of the Allies, about U.S. capability to meet NATO’s Article 5 (collective defense) commitment. And while European Allies so far have not expressed serious concern about the near-term prospects for further U.S.-Russian strategic arms reductions, they likely will want reassurance that the U.S. “extended deterrence” will remain credible for the indefinite future.

Defense industry issues are another important facet of the transatlantic relationship, and here the jury is still out. Mr. Gates’ decision to halt the F-22 procurement was accompanied by his recommitment to a robust Joint Strike Fighter program—a decision welcomed by the seven Allied development partners. He has promised a “fair, open and transparent” competition between the Northrop-EADS consortium and Boeing Corporation over the pending contract, valued at over \$35 billion, to provide the U.S. Air Force with a new fleet of tanker aircraft. Still, some influential Members of Congress will want him to favor the Boeing product. In another contentious area, Mr. Gates reportedly was a key force behind

² On September 9, General Abrial became the first European to hold one of the two “supreme commander” positions in the 60 year history of NATO.

President Obama's decision last August to order an interagency review of U.S. export controls. Many—in government and the private sector—increasingly view those controls a relic of the Cold War and harmful to developing a real “two-way street” in high-technology cooperation with Europe. Here again, the Administration will have to convince some skeptical but influential Members of Congress to change the restrictive legislation.

For many Americans, however, the biggest test facing transatlantic solidarity and effectiveness will be decided in the caldron of Afghanistan, which the President, in mid-2009, called “a war of necessity.” NATO's difficulty in meeting its force requirements there extends beyond troop levels. Some Allies continue to invoke “caveats” that restrict how and where their nation's forces can be employed by the NATO commander. In addition, the costs associated with the difficult mission are taking a heavy toll on several European troop contributor nations. U.S. frustrations with the European Allies have been growing for some time now, but despite these, Washington has strong incentives to try to maintain the Alliance's commitment. After all, ability of the Allies to sustain their Afghan commitments over several years testifies to the value of Alliance structures for consultations, planning, decision-making, capabilities development, and mutual support in difficult operations.

Yet the questions are legion. Will the U.S. decision to increase its forces in Afghanistan during 2009-2010 succeed in stabilizing the security situation? Will the troop increase reinforce perceptions in Europe that this is an “American war,” thereby strengthening pressures within some Allied countries to draw down their military participation? And if the Europeans' military commitments in Afghanistan begin to erode, will they really follow through on promises to contribute more to non-military aspects of the “comprehensive approach”—for example, in police training and mentoring, funding for an expanded Afghan National Army, finding sustainable development alternatives to the opium poppy culture, and capacity-building for struggling civilian ministries and regional governments?

Speaking in Prague last April, President Obama noted that none of the fast-changing global challenges can be solved quickly, “but all of them demand that we listen to one another and work together; that we focus on our common interests, not on occasional differences; and that we reaffirm our shared values, which are stronger than any force that could drive us apart.” One thing is clear: if Europe wants to preserve a strong transatlantic defense and security link with a U.S. partner that is more inclined to multilateral solutions, it should seize this opportunity. A grave setback for the Euro-Atlantic community's effort in Afghanistan might not mean the end of NATO, but it would seriously damage its credibility both inside and outside the Alliance.

In that event, stay tuned for another, less transatlantic and more U.S.-centric “rebalancing” of its defense strategy.

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