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***Long Range Strategy Development: Methodology  
and Tools***

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## **Long Range Strategy Development: Methodology and Tools**

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*Strategy is a game plan to accomplish something in the future that is unlikely to happen on its own and that someone or something does not want to happen.*

In January 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave a speech highlighting the concept of massive retaliation. The Eisenhower defense budget of the following year gave reality to this strategic view by allocating almost half to the Air Force, which in turn heavily funded Strategic Air Command. The Navy was second in budget allocation and in turn emphasized submarine launched missiles. The strong link between strategy, the budget, and force structure remained intact until the Kennedy switch to flexible response. Whether massive retaliation was a good or bad strategy is not relevant; relevant is the fact that it was accompanied by sufficient funding and force structure to make its execution entirely feasible. In the years since the end of the Eisenhower administration, however, there has been little connection between professed strategy and actual capability.

The strategy-force mismatch became obvious with the advent of Kennedy's flexible response strategy that called for sufficient forces to stop a Soviet ground attack in Europe and adequate to fight two and one half wars. In the following decade, the Joint Chiefs regularly identified force requirements to execute this strategy far in excess of anything that ever became reality. As the country moved into the Seventies, it addressed the strategy-force mismatch by reducing the requirement from 2 ½ to 1 ½ wars but never came close to fielding the forces necessary for even this scaled down strategy. The one thing that was constant during the period until 1992 was a generally accepted view that the United States needed to stay technologically ahead of the Soviet Union in aircraft, missiles, ships, tanks, and artillery. Thanks in part to the ponderous Soviet bureaucracy, the US was largely successful in this quest although it never procured the quantity of weapon systems needed to match official positions on numbers of wars and general readiness. Since the collapse of the Soviets in 1992, the country has not agreed on any strategy other than "not being too weak." In a sense, however, this approach has actually solved the strategy-force mismatch!

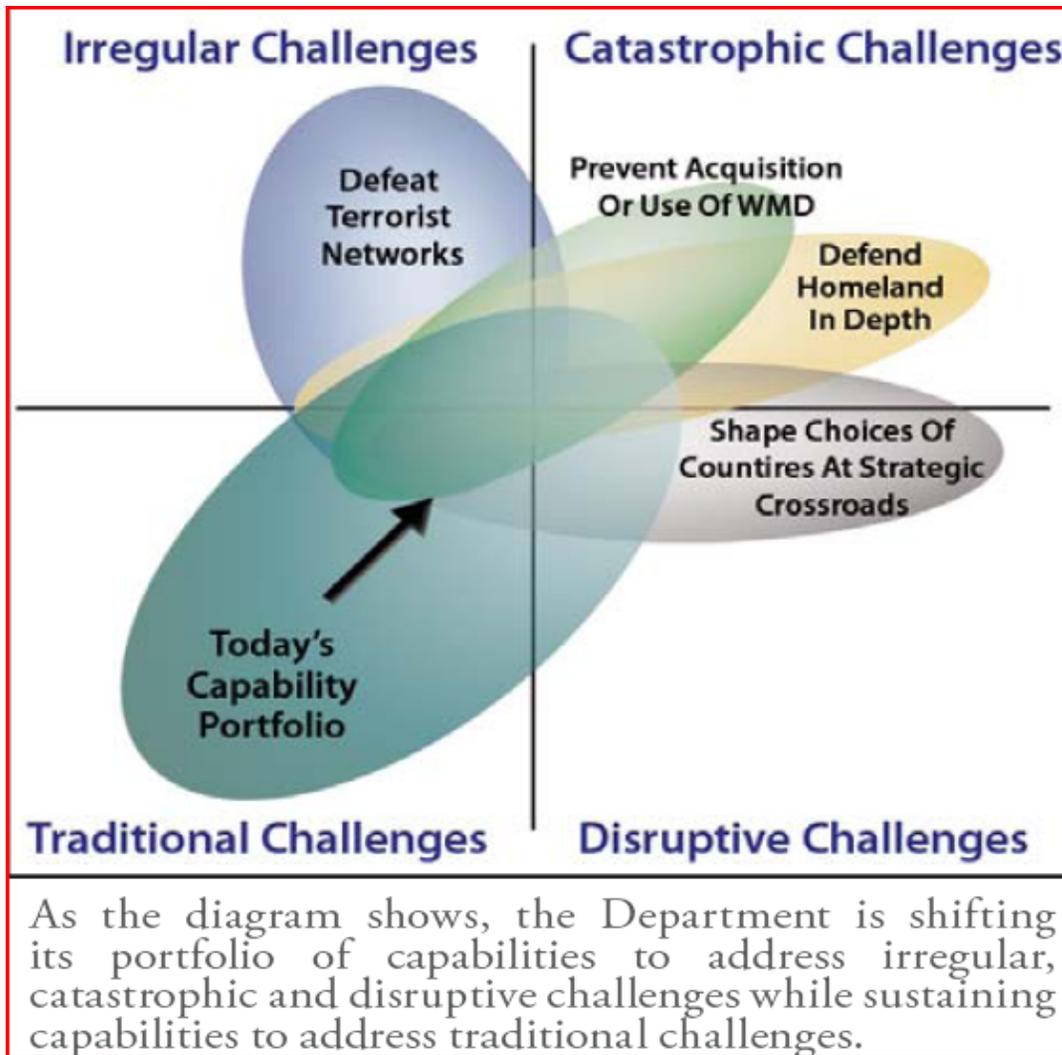
Our hypothesis is that the process of thinking about the future and devising appropriate force structure and policy has not functioned very well for many years. With luck, we can probably continue to muddle through for another three decades or so. There are, however, methods which could mitigate the problem in the next administration.

As of the late spring of 2008, there is little consensus in the United States on grand strategy, foreign policy, domestic policy, or the size and role of military forces. At the same time, we have a large national security bureaucracy and an elaborate set of procedures for deciding what we should and should not buy for tomorrow's military. Unfortunately, this bureaucracy and its

procedures developed in the three decades from the end of the Eisenhower Administration to the collapse of the Soviet Union when there was a workable (if not very precise) consensus on national security issues. In general, procedures developed for times and circumstances of yesterday do not transition well to new situations. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to sketch at a very high level an alternate methodology for addressing the force structure questions that need to be answered even in the absence of consensus.

Developing and executing good strategy is not an easy process but is made significantly more difficult because it unfolds for good or for ill in the future. Unfortunately, our knowledge about the future is nearly nil and our attempts at prediction normally fail spectacularly—especially as we move out in time. Thus, any approach to strategy that starts with or depends on predictions (or scenarios) is probably doomed to failure. This includes predictions about physical events (“In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death... . Paul Ehrlich, 1971), predictions about how people or states will react (“I believe it is peace in our time.” Chamberlain, 1938), and even predictions about most trends (“The horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty - a fad.” President of the Michigan Savings Bank, 1903). Predictions based on trends are especially beguiling—and dangerous—because they start with the observable present; given our human inability to think very well beyond the short term, they seem grounded in reality and sure to survive. The 2006 QDR offers an excellent example-to which we will return later.

In the 2006 QDR, then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld presented a diagram on which components of his Department were to base their force planning. It is a neat combination of prediction (future wars will be above the line and be a continuation of the post 2001 world), scenarios (terror, WMD, homeland defense, nation shaping, and tradition—note that “tradition” is in the always bad lower left quadrant), and trends (clear movement from tradition to the 2006 situation which becomes the new now and tomorrow). It implied a certainty of knowledge about the future sufficient to justify major changes in the force structure of the nation with which we will live for many years. Whether this particular prediction is correct or not obviously remains to be seen; the fact that most predictions proved themselves wrong rather quickly might at least give pause.



The current Secretary of Defense has taken this approach to an even higher level in a talk he made 13 May 2008 in Colorado Springs: “I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called ‘Next-War-it is’ – the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict” and “Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today.” If this is true, our problems are solved—but it certainly implies a stasis of history that has been notably absent for many centuries, if indeed it ever existed. **Although we must prepare for the future, the dismal record of predictions of all kinds, means that we should not base our strategy on them.**

Strategy always should start with a high resolution picture of what you intend the future to be in a given area or domain. It should not start with where you are today. Likewise, it should not start with the tools you might use to execute a strategy, just as design of a new house does not start with grabbing a hammer and some nails. We will obviously need tools of some sort, but selecting them should flow directly from the strategy. If we really want a grand strategy for the

United States, we ought to go forward some decades and describe the high resolution future we intend to have for ourselves (first priority!) and then for the rest of the world. Note that this is not a prediction of the future—it is a statement about what we intend to make it. Knowing what we wanted the future to be, we could work backwards to figure out how to make it happen to include the requisite military capability. Unfortunately, the prospects for creating and agreeing on a long term future picture are very poor given the huge gulf between the two camps of opinion in the nation.

On the one hand are those who believe that the Founding Fathers had it about right and would agree with Secretary of State John Quincy Adams who said on 4 July 1821, “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher of the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.”

The opposite position is well-illustrated by Woodrow Wilson’s request to the Congress for a declaration of war against Germany in 1917:

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

And more recently The New American Project in its 1997 Statement of Principles (signed *inter alia* by Messrs Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz) said, “we need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values; [and] we need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad.”

Until we can arrive at a new consensus, the most important part of strategy, the future picture will be difficult to impossible to construct and without it, we will drift aimlessly. Despite this potentially fatal flaw, as strategists we must devise something politically acceptable that will give us the best chance of coping with tomorrow until such time as a consensus emerges. In the absence of our ability to predict the future and in the absence of a long-term, consistent set of future objectives, we can focus on defining the way we intend to wage future wars which in turn will help us determine the military forces (at least in type) we need in the arsenal regardless of the avenue a future president and congress may take. **Our arsenal should allow us to serve a broad range of grand strategies.**

The best approach to war when it arises is to have a strategy and capability that allows us to seize the initiative, impose our will on an opponent, and prevent reaction. The worst strategy is one that is reactive and deliberately cedes the initiative to an opponent. The latter is strangely the most common and is well illustrated by our experience in Vietnam. It is important to note that the first option can be used in response to a provocation or preemptively. **Our intent should be**

**to have the capability and will to operate in such a way as to preclude reaction once we make a decision to use force.**

The next element to consider is time—the length of a war. Time has a huge impact on probability of success, cost, and domestic support. Fast response and execution have always been desirable, but the concept of “fast” has changed dramatically with the advent of rapid delivery systems, powerful weapons, and near-instant communication. Whereas months or even years might have been acceptable in the past, we must now think in terms of minutes or hours if we wish to act either responsively or preemptively to preclude future damage to our interests. In addition, and of greatest importance, the time it takes to prosecute a war is inversely proportional to the probability of winning while the cost goes up dramatically as the time extends. **In order to raise probabilities of success and to reduce costs, we should plan to make wars short.**

Time is a crucial determinant of the outcome and cost of a war but is also of great concern from a home front standpoint. Wars require some degree of domestic support regardless of the form of government. American experience over the last 100 years has taught us that we are unlikely to support long wars with complex objectives. Given the military and political desirability for short wars, **our strategy and accompanying force structure should always be oriented toward brevity.**

Since we cannot predict the future, we do not know who we are going to fight. There is, however, a reasonable probability that some large scale military operation will take place far from our borders. There may well be small, terrorist events domestically, but the domestic response is likely to be a police responsibility. (Responses such as our attack on Afghanistan may require large scale military operations). There is also a possibility that the United States could come under some kind of air or space attack, ranging from missiles to hijacked airliners, for which a defense is indicated. Outside of an air and space defense at home, wars may take place many thousands of miles away from the United States and some uncomfortable distance from established bases. **Our strategy and military forces structure must allow us to go a long distance to execute and conclude wars quickly without dependence on prepared bases.**

Until fairly recently, for technical and philosophical reasons, our wars have been based on attrition. Although there is nothing to preclude attrition wars in the future, they are uneconomical in execution and rate low in public perception. Just as technology is driving inexorably to focus on the very small we now have the capability to do the same in war which translates into “precision.” We normally think of precision as being able to place something (like a bomb) exactly where we want it to go but there is a second component—precision of effect. Precision of effect means that the device being used (a missile, a piece of code) has just the effect needed and desired. If the objective is to eliminate a bomb maker in a house, a device with precision of effect would do so with no unwanted damage to the house or other occupants. Precision of effect and impact allow us to move beyond attrition with all the accompanying advantages in efficiency (little energy wasted), perception, proportionality, and public opinion

foreign and domestic. **Our future strategy and force structure should permit wars characterized by precision.**

Specificity is not a characteristic much discussed in war. It means determining what things within an enemy organization need to be attacked most directly (positive or negative) in order to attain the objectives for a particular war. In any given war, there are individuals and capabilities whose dramatic alteration would reasonably lead to achievement of war objectives. As an illustration, the death of Hitler at any time up to April 1945 would have had a huge impact on Germany whereas the death of thousands of *Grenadier* Schmidt's had little. Likewise, stopping German synthetic oil production would deal a fatal blow to Germany whereas the attrition of millions of dwellings was manageable. **Our strategy and force structure should incorporate specificity as a required capability.**

Wars cost money. Our attitude for many decades has been that they cost whatever it takes; the only question becomes whether to pay for them now or later. When we really think about this approach, it doesn't make any more sense than a company deciding to develop a new product without any regard for the development cost or the return if successful. Wars are investments of money and blood neither of which is in unlimited supply. Rather than take the attitude that wars cost whatever, we should make the cost of war a major (perhaps the major) factor in our strategy and force structure. With respect to the former, **there should be a relation between cost and return and with respect to the latter our force structure should be designed to allow us to prosecute a war successfully at an objectively low cost and one proportional to the return if we are successful.**

The last force structure issue to sketch is size. During the Cold War, the US theoretically sized its forces against the Soviets, but in reality sized them according to the money available. In some ways, this is not a bad approach: simply decide what proportion of the GDP you want to spend on defense (think of it as an insurance premium) and then distribute the total among services and agencies as a function of political influence. A second method is to use a historical average of forces deployed for operations such as Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War I. In this case, we can leave out the World Wars on the assumption that it would take some time for everyone to get geared up and fully engaged so mobilization plays a major role. To be safe, you might decide to have a sufficient force to fight two average contingencies at the same time. The third approach makes some assumptions about what future enemies are likely to be in terms of targets and then develops a force structure capable of hitting those targets within the short timeframes we previously discussed.

If we think about potential enemies as systems, we can envision their centers of gravity (leverage points) with fair accuracy and discover that even a large state like a China has a relatively low number of centers of gravity necessary for its functioning in peace and war. The actual numbers at a strategic level may be as low as a thousand and may be just in the tens of thousands at operational and high tactical level. Although tens of thousands sounds like a lot, it is a very

finite number in a day where precise weapons have a high probability of hitting something and where individual delivery vehicles can employ hundreds of precision weapons on a single mission. Accompanying this kind of analysis must be some kind of estimate on delivery vehicle survival. This last approach can actually provide a good estimate of what is needed, but in the final analysis will probably revert to the “insurance premium” concept. **Figure out what you need by working backwards and either buy it or know where the gaps are.**

Our last point has to do with the methodology of developing strategy at the grand level and of planning and executing war operations. Our tendency has been to do both from the bottom up with small isolated groups working on details. As the small groups complete their work, they send their results to higher authority until they finally reach a policy decision level. At this point, however, the policy makers are so far removed from the initial workers that it becomes nearly impossible to understand or validate the original assumptions and facts. The result is likely to be a collection of ideas that lack real integration or cohesion with a significant probability that important areas are overlooked in part because there is an assumption that the area is someone else’s responsibility. Unfortunately, the expertise and the time to note the absence of something rarely exist at a policy decision level. Finally, for significant operations such as a war, a “finished” product is handed to the chief executive whose ability to understand and dissect the proposal is quite limited and who may have little practical ability to do much more than choose among three options carefully crafted to ensure that “B” is the only reasonable choice. Alternatively, the chief executive may find elements of the plan that he chooses to change but does so without sufficient detailed knowledge to understand the impact of his changes on other elements. It is little wonder that we see so many instances of wars where good execution of the details fails to lead to the envisioned strategic ends.

The alternate to the bottom up planning is Open Planning that starts out with the chief executive and many echelons of command and management across the government. This group works out the big picture aspects of the plan which is subsequently given to lower echelons *in toto* to work out the details. Under this approach, many people with varied expertise see the big picture so they know that the details for which they have responsibility make overall sense. In addition, because so many people see the plan, the chances of serious errors of omission are much lower. Lastly, with so many people intimately involved, the commitment, understanding, and ability to make the plan work in the face of the unexpected becomes quite high. Of course, the open planning should not stop with the planning—it should continue through execution with the chief executive meeting regularly with many echelons in an environment open for discussion and debate.

Some will object to Open Planning on security grounds. The answer to this is simple: it is far more dangerous for an organization not to know what it is doing than for an enemy to know something about it. **Plan and operate in the open.**

In summary, until such time as we are able to agree on the foreign and domestic future we want to create, we can at least prepare ourselves for future conflict. We should

- Not base our strategy on predictions
- Have an arsenal that allows us to accommodate a broad range of grand strategies
- Be able to operate in such a way as to preclude reaction
- Plan to make wars short in order to raise probabilities of success, to reduce costs, and to sustain domestic (and foreign) support
- Ensure that our strategy and military forces structure allows us to execute and conclude wars quickly far from the United States and prepared bases
- Wage wars with precision of effect and precision of impact
- Plan and execute against specific elements of an opponent
- We should plan and execute operations at objectively low costs in consonance with expected returns
- Size forces by working backwards based on knowledge of future enemies provided by system analysis
- Plan and operate in the open

In the final analysis, however, as useful as the above would be, what we desperately need is a new consensus on a Grand Strategy that will allow us to develop a high resolution future picture for ourselves and for our opponents. With it, we can resolve most issues; without it, we run the real risk of fighting the wrong wars in the wrong places for the wrong reasons and at costs that bear no relation to the return.