



CENTER FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies  
Johns Hopkins University

*AN OCCASIONAL PAPER*

**The New National Defense Strategy:  
A Constructive “Legacy” Vision**

**Jeffrey P. Bialos**

**August 2008**



CENTER FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

## *AN OCCASIONAL PAPER*

### **The New National Defense Strategy: A Constructive “Legacy” Vision<sup>1</sup>**

**Jeffrey P. Bialos<sup>2</sup>**

The new National Defense Strategy<sup>3</sup> (“Strategy”) recently released by the Pentagon is a constructive step forward in the evolutionary process of realigning our missions to the range of international threats and challenges we face.

Unfortunately, it is too late in this Administration for Secretary Gates’ forward looking vision to be implemented – it really serves as a legacy of his thinking and a potential blueprint for the next team. To effectuate the type of change the Strategy envisages requires sustained leadership, a fair amount of time (years not months), significant institutional reform and a substantial reallocation of resources. The Pentagon is like a massive carrier – it is difficult to shift its course quickly. Secretary Gates has set a sensible course and it will be up to the next Administration to meaningfully steer the defense “carrier” in that general direction.

The following are some initial thoughts on the new Strategy:

**1. Does the Pentagon have it right?** On a macro level, it is difficult to argue with the Strategy’s main thrusts:

- First, the range of threats we will face are more likely to be low intensity and asymmetric in nature – from terrorism and insurgency, to cyber war and

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, Jeffrey P. Bialos, August 2008. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Bialos is a partner in Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. A number of the ideas set forth herein are developed further in Mr. Bialos’ recent book entitled “Ideas for America’s Future: Core Elements of a New National Security Strategy.”

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (June 2008). Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/2008NationalDefenseStrategy.pdf>. While the Strategy is dated June 2008 and was apparently signed by the Secretary of Defense at that time, it was not publicly released until late July 2008.

weapons of mass destruction, to unforeseen “niche capabilities” developed by potential adversaries to exploit perceived U.S. weaknesses (military, political, economic and social).

- Second, addressing these threats, which are more transnational in character, will require the holistic use of all elements of national power, including the capabilities of civilian agencies (such as public diplomacy and assistance), as well as closer cooperation with, and enhancement of the capabilities of, our Allies.

The new Strategy also appropriately recognizes the need to “balance strategic risk.” Like diversified financial portfolio managers, national security managers cannot put all their eggs in only several military baskets, so to speak, and must shape defenses against the spectrum of risks. Hence, the United States obviously needs to maintain its present military dominance in conventional warfare military capabilities against conventional threats as both a deterrent against military adventurism and a “hedge” against the emergence of future “peer competitors (not to mention the need for these forces for ongoing daily operations around the globe). The current Russian intervention in Georgia serves as an important reminder that conventional warfare has not become extinct and that the United States and its allies may face these types of threats in the future as well.

But the question, in both financial and national security planning, is how to draw priorities among the relevant risks. Taken at face value, the Strategy makes the case that we essentially need to shift the course of our defense “carrier” and put more emphasis on the range of low intensity and asymmetric threats. As the Strategy declares, “we must display a mastery of irregular warfare comparable to that which we possess in conventional combat.”<sup>4</sup> As Secretary Gates has recognized, we have improved in this arena – witness our better performance in Iraq – but have not yet institutionalized this as a core capability with appropriate structure, doctrine, and the like.

In short, the bottom line is that Secretary Gates largely has it right, and it is doubtful that a Democratic Secretary of Defense’s Strategy would look radically different. Indeed, some of the main facets of the Strategy have evolved over the last decade and now have bipartisan support.

**2. What’s New? Toward a Forward Line of Defense.** Inherent in the Strategy is the idea of a more “forward” line of defense against terrorism and other threats that identifies problems earlier (before they mature) and seeks to address them principally through non-military means such as development assistance and public diplomacy. The idea is to address incipient situations before they become full-fledged crises and before we have to engage in costly, challenging and politically divisive military operations.

In other words, a few more ounces of prevention, whether through deterrence, dissuasion, or other means, can potentially help to avoid a resort to military “pre-emption” (although in fact

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. at 4.

the new strategy is explicitly “pre-emptive” in requiring early and active intervention in potential crisis areas albeit through the use of “softer” power). By focusing on better governance in Muslim states and de-legitimizing al Qaeda in the eyes of the local populations, we can reduce the potential pool of terrorists and potentially avoid the types of wars we are fighting in Afghanistan. By identifying states in crisis before they fail, we can hopefully provide support and assistance earlier – and possibly avoid the need for expensive stabilization and reconstruction missions.

Could a more pro-active, clear-headed and engaged diplomacy have helped to avert the current crisis in Georgia or the recent crisis in Lebanon? While the answers to these questions are unknowable, it’s what we need to strive for.

**The Questionable Use of the Long War Construct.** Ironically, while the new Strategy has much the right emphasis on combating terrorism (more of a patient “root cause” approach), its continued use of the “Long War” construct is counter-productive to the very shift in policy the document reflects. The characterization plays into the hands of radical Jihadists and helps to create the unintended impression that there is a conflict between the United States and the Muslim world. This will help their recruitment and hurt our counter-insurgency efforts. While it is a struggle for “hearts and minds,” we would be wise to recharacterize it in a more constructive fashion.

**Military Power As Only One Element of National Defense.** The clear thrust of the Strategy, and a key lesson from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, is that we cannot defend American with our military alone. Without the better civilian capabilities and civil-military coordination that Secretary Gates calls for, we cannot achieve an effective defense. The Defense Department certainly should not take the lead in building “internal capacities of countries at risk,” for example, or shrinking “ungoverned areas” – two areas of need highlighted by the Strategy.

Thus, the new Strategy appropriately makes clear that while the Pentagon has taken on the burden of some of these stabilization and reconstruction activities due to our relative lack of civil capabilities, “[g]reater civilian participation is necessary both to make military operations successful and to relieve stress on the men and women of the armed services.”<sup>5</sup>

**Other Key Shifts.** A careful read of the new Strategy reflects several other shifts in emphasis versus earlier U.S. policy pronouncements:

- **Constructive on China.** The tone and substance on China is more constructive than in prior DoD policy statements. While the Strategy recognizes the need to “hedge against China’s growing military modernization and the impact of its strategic choices upon international security,”<sup>6</sup> there is more focus on affording China greater stakes in the stability of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. at 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. at 3.

international system and enhancing peacetime engagement between U.S. and Chinese defense establishments.

- **Dour on Russia.** Not surprisingly, the discussion of Russia is rightly more dour in its assessment in light of Russia's "retreat from openness and democracy," its efforts at muscular petro-diplomacy and its more active and troubling military activities. The recent Russian intervention in Georgia confirms this trend and Russia's effort to reassert itself – especially in its near abroad. Yet, what is missing from the Strategy is some sense of context. In truth, the long-term U.S. policy challenge vis-à-vis Russia is probably more along the lines of facilitating its descent to a benign second tier power with nuclear weapons. Fundamental structural challenges – an economy the size of New Jersey, a limited ability to conduct expeditionary warfare, enormous corruption, and a declining population – constrain Russia's ability to re-emerge as a superpower. Thus, over time, Russia's international influence is likely to wane, not grow, despite its efforts to the contrary and its current Georgian campaign.
- **More on Energy Security and Global Challenges.** There is rightfully more focus on global challenges such as climate change and demographic trends. In particular, there is a sensible emphasis on energy security, a likely future defense priority – the need to secure our own sources of supply, the growing risk of conflict over scarce resources, and the impact of the rising cost of energy on our defense operations.
- **Less on Transformation.** Finally, and mercifully, there is virtually no mention of "transformation." It seems that this Rumsfeldian vocabulary, which came to mean all things to all people, has now been happily excised from our defense strategy lexicon. Frankly, the idea of a process with no end point – how senior DoD officials to this day describe transformation – is of little planning or operational value. When the Army calls its Comanche program transformational and then cuts it, we know the concept is of little use. Indeed, the Pentagon's just issued "Strategic Management Plan" – which has been little noticed – sets forth 25 diverse "Transformational Priorities" that cover the water front of reform initiatives designed to achieve "strategic change."<sup>7</sup> Obviously we need to "transform" the defense enterprise to better address core missions – so if transformation means forward change, fine. And, certainly this will include a healthy focus on net-centric operations and jointness (both of which are called out in the Strategy). However, we can now at least put the broader, etherial concept of transformation out to pasture and create a more specific focus and set of objectives – as Secretary Gates has done.

### 3. What's Missing from the Strategy?

**The Rule of Law.** The Strategy begins by noting that the United States is a "beacon of light for those in dark places" with its commitment to liberty, equality, and opportunity. As John Winthrop said, "We shall be as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us."

---

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, 2008 Strategic Management Plan, Appendix, p. 26 (July 25 2008). Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/dbt/products/SMP/FY08%20Strategic%20Management%20Plan.pdf>.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the eyes of the world have been upon us but not always in a good way. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are not beacons of light. Yet, the new Strategy does not address this overriding concern – that the United States must restore its image in the world and renew its commitment to the rule of law to better effectuate change and protect our security. While one might argue that rule of law considerations should not be a part of our defense strategy, in this new era and with our recent track record, I would respectfully beg to differ. The Strategy does not, but should, discuss the need for the development of a clear and new set of rules, at home and abroad, with respect to the detention, treatment and interrogation of prisoners in non-traditional wars. Put another way, the next President and Secretary of Defense need to make clear that torture has no role in advancing American security.

**Matching Vision to Institutions, Budgets and Policies.** Another fundamental question not directly addressed in this vision statement is how to achieve this realignment of our defense establishment to meet these challenges – what institutional changes, resource allocations and changes in policy are necessary. That is where the rubber hits the road. As is often the case with vision statements like this, it is somewhat long on rhetoric and short on granularity – leaving the specifics to a series of other Pentagon documents focused on plans, resources and force structure. Will we reallocate resources to achieve these goals, and if so how? What new structures are needed? How should alliances be reshaped?

More specifically, the following questions need to be answered to put meat on the bones of this strategy:

- Building up our civilian national security capabilities, as the Strategy contemplates, makes good sense but will cost money. Today, of the roughly \$750 billion spent on national security, in the range of \$600 billion is spent on defense with only \$150 billion spent on civilian agencies' operations and foreign assistance. A reallocation of \$40-\$50 billion to the civilian side of the house would produce significant results. Yet, where will the increased civilian funding come from? Which part of the DoD budget?
- How will we allocate resources between our conventional forces needed for deterrence (high intensity missions) and the range of more likely low intensity missions? What mix of force structures do we need? Implicit in the new strategy is the notion that we would shift resources to these new missions – but how and where?
- What are the implications of this shift toward low intensity programs for defense acquisition programs? Should we spend less on manned tactical fighter aircraft and land combat systems and more on unmanned vehicles, soldier systems and small inshore patrol craft? The answer is probably yes but the proof is in the pudding. Let's keep in mind, however, that whereas high intensity warfare is capital intensive (we fight with expensive platforms), low intensity warfare requires less expensive and complex tools (it is more manpower intensive). Hence, even modest shifts in our investment accounts can acquire quite a bit more low intensity capability. Ordering ten less tactical aircraft can acquire considerably more Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and transports, for example.

- How do we institutionalize our capabilities for counter-insurgency, stabilization and reconstruction and make them core parts of our defense establishment? What structures do we put in place in the Army to develop operational missions, equipment requirements, and the like on a long-term basis? While our military has relearned the lost lessons of Vietnam, we are in danger of forgetting them again if our mission focus is not changed – especially for our ground forces.
- How do we eliminate the clear strain on our forces as they seek to achieve this dynamic range of missions? While the Strategy clearly notes the needs to broaden our talent pool and tap more into skills of veterans and others, it offers little specifics for how to achieve improved capability. The challenge here is a difficult one and requires a reconsideration to the role of the current force and the reserve – something not contemplated by the Strategy.

In short, one does have the sense that Secretary Gates means business. Yet, without knowing the answers to these questions, it's hard to know if the new Strategy reflects a vision of bold and significant change – a real shift in the direction – or modest changes that largely maintain the status quo. While one might argue, for example, that the new Strategy is too focused on terrorism and other nouveau threats based on a word count of the document, it is hard to know where the real balance is struck until these questions are addressed. Secretary Gates could perform a helpful public service for the next Administration by issuing a follow-up document that gives guidance at a top level (in effect, a mini-Quadrennial Defense Review) on the implications of the new Strategy for budgets, force structures, programs and plans.

**The Lack of Focus on Defense Economics.** Surprisingly, there is little real focus in the Strategy on the economics of defense – how to grapple with the rising cost of weapon systems and to affordably develop the capabilities needed to meet our national security needs. It is well known, from study after study, that our defense procurement system is seriously challenged – there are questions about its ability to respond to the threats posed by an agile enemy in real time and produce systems that meet technical performance goals on time and on budget. Yet, the Strategy barely addresses this challenge or the related need to create a set of policies that will facilitate the development of robust and competitive defense industrial capabilities needed to supply our 21<sup>st</sup> century national security requirements. While the Strategy document may not be the place for a full treatment of these demand and supply aspects of the defense marketplace, it does warrant some top level attention.

**The Disconnect Between Our Rhetoric and Reality on Allies, Coalitions and Harnessing the Benefits of Globalization.** Finally, building on the 2006 QDR, the Strategy places considerable emphasis on allies, partners, coalitions and alliances – the need to work closer with allies and build their capability for the range of challenges we face. This emphasis is certainly laudatory and hard to disagree with in principle. Underlying this focus is the premise that the strategic environment is becoming more multi-polar in nature, the problems more transnational and, therefore, the solutions require greater multilateral cooperation. U.S. action alone cannot get the job done in many instances.

However, there are several disconnects between this rhetoric and reality. First, with respect particularly to our European allies, we have spent years urging them to spend more on defense and acquire more capabilities – across Administrations – with little to show for it. Fundamentally, this strategy hasn't been terribly effective. We therefore need to reconsider Europe's role in collective security in light of its own culture, capabilities and sense of threat. We need to recognize and accept the emerging defense identity of the European Union, and its focus on homeland security and low intensity military capabilities, and thus modify our approach in this arena accordingly.

Second, in general, there is in practice a serious disconnect between our rhetoric of building cooperation and coalition warfare, on the one hand, and the reality of our unwillingness to share technology or technical information with Allies necessary to either enable better interoperability or enhance their capability. The fact is that the United States has a series of regulatory regimes and practices, each well intended and with their own internal logic, that undermine rather than enhance our ability to fight together and cooperate more with Allies in defense and homeland security.

Hence, while the rhetoric of the new Strategy is good, there is little acknowledgement of the difficult cultural and institutional challenges to turning that rhetoric into reality. Underlying this gap is a larger concern – not directly reflected in the Strategy – about how to best manage globalization and its implications for our defense posture. There are serious questions whether our rules and policies – export controls, foreign investment, immigration – are cutting us off from foreign ideas, innovation, people and capital that are important to both our future competitiveness and our national security. While we need to be mindful of the downsides of globalization and its risks to our security, we at the same time need to develop better mechanisms for embracing the benefits of globalization for our security. In the end, we need to remember that it is our openness to foreign people, ideas and capital that is one of the sources of America's greatness. In short, we need to recognize the dangers of defense protectionism for our own interests.

**The Bottom Line: The Prospect for a Bipartisan Consensus Around a New Paradigm.** On balance, the new Strategy is a constructive step forward – despite a few missing pieces and questions over its implementation. Indeed, one might say that the new Strategy has Kennanesque qualities to it – shades of the Long Telegram.

We may very well be entering a period not unlike the late 1940s, when a long-term framework emerged for containment of the Soviet Union that garnered broad bi-partisan support. Now, as reflected in the Strategy, a new framework may be emerging that has a primary but not exclusive focus on the challenges of international terrorism and rogue states. After years of trial and error, we have learned that military means alone, whether pre-emption or reactive, do not provide a complete solution to the problem. Rather, we are moving toward a new forward defense to address this threat in a sustained manner through a series of short term measures (both military, civil and economic) to contain and limit its effects (e.g., counter-insurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq), until a series of longer-term policies can take hold that will address its root causes (poverty, poor or no governance, as well as alienation and despair).

What is also striking about the new Strategy articulated by the Pentagon is that, like containment before it, its main thrusts are largely acceptable across the political spectrum; whichever party wins the election will adopt core elements of it. Hence, the table is now set for the next act. There is a prospect that the next President can build a national consensus in favor of realigning our defense strategy to asymmetric and low intensity threats; improving our civilian capabilities and ability to more holistically assert national power; and shifting toward a more forward line of defense that seeks to identify problems early and address them with non-military means where possible. To the extent the Strategy becomes a blueprint for a future, post-Bush bipartisan and balanced policy, Secretary Gates could not ask for a better legacy.