Stating the Obvious and Pretending It's Not

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Sometimes, stating the obvious is exactly what is needed. Osama bin Laden is dead, but al Qaeda and its affiliates are not. The United States left Iraq, but the war, never over, has taken on a regional dimension. A similar result is pending in Afghanistan. Russian aggressiveness threatens European security, and America is a NATO country. The Middle East— Iran, Syria, Iraq and their environs—is on the edge. Central Asia is unsettled, as is much of Africa, and al Qaeda is involved in both. America's foreign policy and resolve are in question. These are all interrelated; they form a complex, multivariable set with out- comes no one can predict. So what is the United States doing in the face of this list of the obvious?

First, we reset to our default defense position. The default position holds— even in the face of considerable historical counter-evidence—that technology can offset the size of a military force and that air and naval forces are more useful than ground forces.

Better technology does offset size in many areas of military force application. For example, one current fighter / bomber, tank or ship does the work of a larger number of its World War II counterparts. An Infantry platoon of- ten has access to information and com- bat power that far exceeds what its predecessors had just 20 years ago. There is a limit, however, to what technology can offset.

The technology offset approach applies more to conventional wars than irregular ones. It applies more to the destructive aspects of war than to the security, stability, support and constructive aspects. Afghanistan and Iraq are cases in point. Technology offset also applies less where the desired effect is engagement, encouragement, capacity building or partnership. Giving the best technology to military forces is not at issue; rather, the point is over-reliance on technology— believing one can find technological solutions to all problems in all forms of war.

No American should go to war without air superiority, and every expeditionary operation needs secure sea lines of communication for sustainment. Nevertheless, air and naval forces are not sufficient; equally strong ground forces are also necessary. America has lived through the false belief that ground power was no longer as necessary as air and naval power. The Korean War was a hard lesson that proved otherwise. At that time, our default position was that the destructive power of nuclear weapons made ground forces irrelevant. The dead of Task Force Smith, among the first to deploy to Korea, would tell a different story.

Now, the default position suggests that fast, lethal and remote capabilities, in combination with cyber and special operations forces, are a sufficient deter- rent. No one questions the utility of long-range attack capacity—whether manned or unmanned, fixed wing or missile—or the significant and wide- ranging capabilities of U.S. cyber and special operations forces. Rather, the question is whether these capabilities are sufficient. They are not. The nation is coming to a point at which we are re- lying too much on such capabilities, believing they can do more than they actually can. When we get to that point, U.S. strategic options will be restricted.

Next, we lie to ourselves. They may not be actual lies, but we are telling ourselves at least three seductive stories. The first is this: We have the ability to anticipate the kind of war the future will hold, and we believe we can shape the strategic environment to create our preferred future and optimize American military forces against that future.

Perhaps this seduction evolved from the Cold War, when we sized and structured America's forces against those of the Soviets. Even then, however, the size and balanced composition of our land, air and sea forces masked the fact that the U.S. was more surprised than not. In fact, former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates commented, "When it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right, from the Mayaguez to Grenada, Panama, Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Kuwait, Iraq and more—we had no idea a year before any of these missions that we would be so engaged." The U.S. was able to provide the President options in each of these cases—not be- cause we anticipated correctly and had just the right force structure but because our forces were large enough and balanced enough to cover the fact that our predictions were wrong.

Hence, the second seduction: If we are wrong about our prediction, we ave time to develop the capability we need. Time is never in abundance. Everyone understands that it takes years to build sophisticated hardware, equipment and weapons platforms. Few understand, however, that it also takes years to build human networks like those needed for intelligence or the networks of leaders who form the real command-and-control architecture inherent in every military organization. Nor do many understand the time necessary to train soldiers, sailors, airmen or marines into units that perform at the level Americans expect, or the time it takes to activate and train forces in the National Guard or Reserve. Those who succumb to the second seduction give time the brush of a hand wave.

The hand wave erases, in the minds of those who wave it, the fact that it was primarily the forces in being that provided previous administrations with the options they needed. Furthermore, the hand wave obscures the fact that the U.S. could not really fight both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars simultaneously. Rather, the size of our active force—and the desire not to fully activate our reserve forces or expand the ground force to the size necessary—dictated these wars would be more sequential than simultaneous and that they would go on longer than necessary. The hand wave also erases the challenges— political, fiscal and technical—to activating reserve component forces.

The third seduction is related to the first: We don't shape reality; reality imposes itself on us. What we call shaping is actually preparing for a future that will surprise us. Preparation includes having sufficiently large and balanced operational, deployment and generative military forces; having access to airports and seaports; keeping our cyber lines of communication se- cure and our intelligence networks functioning; being postured with for- ward-deployed elements that can react quickly, then having reinforcement forces and supplies available in a reasonable amount of time; maintaining capable and practiced alliances; and establishing diplomatic and military relationships as well as building the capacities and willingness of potential coalition partners. These activities have an effect on America's ability to react to whatever future unfolds. Nevertheless, those ignorant of history—recent and more distant—are seduced to believe that we'll never do that again, where "that" is a counterinsurgency, a conventional war, armed humanitarian assistance or any other kind of action that was either a failure or a too- painful success. Those who are historically challenged also believe that we'll do only the kinds of operations we want. The

echoes of past administrations suggest otherwise. History does repeat itself, especially for those who ignore it.

In addition to these three seductions, we are ignorant of our own his- tory, a history in which reality forces its way upon an administration. The Truman administration did not want to fight in Korea. The Johnson administration did not want to get bogged down in Vietnam. The George H.W. Bush administration did not anticipate Panama, the first Gulf War or Somalia. The Clinton administration did not want to "do" Bosnia. The George W. Bush administration did not want to fight al Qaeda or end up in nation- building in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some are also ignorant even of recent history, not wanting to remember that in the last 10 years, the U.S. transformed its reserve forces into 200,000 more operational assets and hired about 200,000 contractors for two "stability operations." And the "jury of reality" has yet to speak of current "hot spots."

Finally, we tell ourselves we don't have enough money. The U.S. is in a challenging economic period. Ten years of war are not responsible for many of the causes of our financial situation, but our national strategic choice to wage war by borrowing did contribute to America's weakened fiscal position. Rather than face reality and adopt "pay as we fight" as our nation's wartime fiscal strategy, the decision was for deficit spending. Many of the political leaders now decrying the size of our current deficit were those who voted for a national strategy of waging war by deficit spending.

DoD has not been, nor should it be, excluded from doing its part in economic recovery. Previous Secretaries of Defense have leaned forward by enact-

ing huge defense spending cuts. Defense must continue to shrink, but rather than make wise cuts based upon strategic realities, Congress has placed America in the frivolous and dangerous straitjacket of sequestration.

Sequestration replaces thinking. The straitjacket has been forced upon a nation that is part of a rapidly changing world where predicting the future is not possible and American leader- ship is necessary. Sequestration man- dates that federal spending cuts come equally from defense and non-defense sectors even though the U.S. defense budget represents only about 17 percent of annual federal spending. Rather than allowing DoD's uniformed and civilian leaders to cut where cuts make

sense, the straitjacket locks the nation into directed, stove-piped, across-the-board cuts that are resulting in irresponsible reductions to American military capacity. Sequestration is also devastating the defense industrial base. Sequestration cuts have already affected our ability to deploy, equip and supply a mobilized force—not only in DoD's industrial facilities but also in commercial industry. The issue is not whether to reduce defense spending; the issue is doing so wisely.

In the face of Russian aggression, the savings that our European allies have taken in their defense sectors over the past are looking less like the good in- vestment that many believed they were. America, if sequestration has its way, will put some future administration in a position of being without the strategic options its predecessor had.

America has reacted to the realities of the strategic environment by going to our national default position; seducing ourselves to believe fictions rather than fact; and placing ourselves in the sequestration straitjacket. All are dangerous patterns of behavior for a nation with global interests and responsibilities, especially given the obvious instability and uncertainty of the strategic environment. Falling to these patterns and seductions represents an unwillingness to make difficult decisions wisely and unnecessarily places national security at risk.

Thus, the last statement of the obvious: America needs—because the strategic environment, U.S. global interests and responsibilities demand—a reality check.

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