The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

- Purchase this document
- Browse Books & Publications
- Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org
Explore RAND Project AIR FORCE
View document details

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND PDFs to a non-RAND Web site is prohibited. RAND PDFs are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see RAND Permissions.
This product is part of the RAND Corporation conference proceedings series. RAND conference proceedings present a collection of papers delivered at a conference. The papers herein have been commented on by the conference attendees and both the introduction and collection itself have been reviewed and approved by RAND Science and Technology.
Summary

On December 4, 2007, RAND Project AIR FORCE and the Center for Naval Analyses hosted a conference, “Meeting America’s Security Challenges Beyond Iraq.” From the outset, it was clear that the phrase “beyond Iraq” does not mean that supporting the emergence of a stable Iraq will soon disappear as a major security issue for the United States. On the contrary, all participants recognized that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to persist well into the future. The security obligations associated with these conflicts would join the list of ongoing security obligations the United States must already address, such as countering terrorists, deterring Iran and keeping open the Straits of Hormuz, promoting peace on the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait, and strengthening alliances more generally.

There was broad consensus throughout the discussion that the following are among the issues and challenges to U.S. foreign and security policy that any new administration will have to face:

1. The United States needs to restore its credibility as a world leader in the face of widespread anti-American sentiments. Regaining an influential voice in regional security matters was also considered necessary for protecting and advancing U.S. and allied interests. (See pp. 3–5.)

2. The executive branch needs to greatly improve the integration of interagency approaches to complex security problems. This is particularly urgent because the problems that arise when combining traditional and irregular warfare, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, have historically persisted for many years and will likely continue in the indefinite future. (See pp. 4–6.)

3. Dealing with the emergence of China in all its many manifestations is going to be a multigenerational issue for the United States. In the security field, it will be important that, as China improves its military capabilities, the United States maintain key advantages or risk losing its credibility as a guarantor of stability in East Asia. (See pp. 3–4.)

4. U.S. defense planners need to prepare to counter nuclear-armed regional adversaries in case nonmilitary activities fail to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Aside from the longstanding concern about the possibility of proliferation to terrorists, the reality of nuclear-armed “rogue regimes,” such as North Korea and, potentially, Iran, could profoundly alter regional security environments in ways that would be extraordinarily harmful to U.S. interests. (See p. 4.)

5. The nexus of rapid population growth in the Islamic world, stalled economic growth, and vehement anti-Americanism suggests that the “long war” will indeed be long. The
so-called youth bulge creates huge potential recruitment pools for jihadist extremists. (See pp. 3–4.)

While these concerns reflect a broad consensus among the conferees, there was less agreement about how to respond. If the United States is to meet these challenges, along with existing security obligations, its armed forces will be called upon to undertake a range of “nontraditional” missions at a scale and level of intensity well beyond what today’s forces can sustain.

In turn, conferees discussed whether the notion of complex or “hybrid” wars helps planners prepare for future conflicts. Some conferees linked the idea of hybrid wars with “regime change” operations and were convinced the Iraq experience has made it very unlikely that there will be any appetite in Washington for such endeavors in the future. Others argued that, given a long history of U.S. military action against regimes (going back to the Mexican War), it would be wrong to discount the possibility of future similar operations.

In addition, there was considerable discussion among conferees about whether U.S. ground forces need to be restructured or realigned to better conduct counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, and constabulary missions. The debate revolved around competing visions of the future. On one hand, if Iraq and Afghanistan are going to be the final U.S. experience with counterinsurgency, restructuring forces might be unnecessary. On the other hand, if the United States is destined to be engaged in conflicts that include both traditional combat and counterinsurgency operations, some form of restructuring is merited. Several participants observed that the currently planned expansion of ground forces makes it easier to contemplate realignment.

Most conferees agreed that the Navy and Air Force should focus on major combat operations against regional powers to maintain the ability to employ overwhelming airpower with precision weapons from land bases and from the sea in more than one region of the world. Some saw this capability as an important “strategic hedge.” By the same token, the contributions both services are providing to ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are ample illustration that the capabilities they bring to the fight are applicable across a wide array of circumstances today and will be into the future.

In short, there was widespread agreement that the set of the challenges the United States faces, coupled with the varied demands on the military forces, will require significant changes in how the Department of Defense trains, equips, and postures its forces and, more broadly, how the U.S. government is organized for the advancement of U.S. interests abroad. Prominent examples of such changes include the following:

- U.S. forces will need to be able to conduct, on a sustained basis, a large number of “train-equip-advise-assist” missions in countries striving to counter Islamist-based terrorist and insurgent movements. Substantial numbers of U.S. ground forces will be associated with this mission. (See pp. 15–16, 20–21.)
- Nonmilitary agencies, including the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Justice, and the Intelligence Community, must play more visible and, ultimately, predominant roles in efforts to counter terrorist and insurgent groups abroad. (See pp. 9–10, 21, 23–24.)
- U.S. and allied forces will need to prepare for the possibility that regional adversaries, such as North Korea and Iran, may soon field nuclear weapons. This will raise a host of large, crosscutting policy issues (such as whether the goal of regime change through invasion
and occupation is still appropriate and feasible in the presence of a nuclear threat). It will also call attention to important capability shortfalls (such as the inability to locate and destroy nuclear weapons and their delivery means, as well as the ability to deploy effective, multilayered defenses against a missile attack with nuclear weapons). (See pp. 8–9, 13–14.)

- As China continues to modernize its conventional forces, U.S. planners will be compelled to rethink key aspects of the U.S. approach to power projection, as the U.S. posture in the Western Pacific is becoming increasingly vulnerable to Chinese antiaccess weapons. (See pp. 7–8, 16.)

Furthermore, while there was agreement that the interagency process sometimes borders on dysfunctional, there was little agreement on how to correct the problem. The next administration will have to determine, systematically and thoughtfully, how to address the budgetary, cultural, and planning differences among the departments of Defense, State, Treasury, and Agriculture and other parts of the government. It will also need to focus on timely implementation of policy. Today, it is almost impossible to reach agreement on how to define problems and identify solutions. And few agencies other than the Department of Defense have the capabilities necessary to conduct large-scale operations in austere environments—a growing need in many places.

Finally, pressures on defense spending within the overall U.S. budget cast a long shadow. The combination of existing requirements, including Iraq and Afghanistan, with future challenges suggests that the demand for defense resources will increase rather than decrease even as these conflicts subside. The ground forces need to recapitalize, as do the Air Force and Navy, as the inventories of frontline aircraft and ships reach and often exceed their expected service lives. No one expected defense budgets to remain at current levels, much less increase. All, however, acknowledged that difficult choices loom in the not too distant future.