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TESTIMONY

Does America Need A New Grand Strategy?

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-311

July 2008

Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on July 15, 2008

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Does America Need A New Grand Strategy?[2]

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
United States House of Representatives

July 15, 2008

Mr. Chairman: It is highly flattering to be offered this opportunity to offer thoughts on a new grand strategy for the United States. I must admit, however, to certain reservations about the utility of such exercises. Having entered public service at the beginning of the Vietnam war and continued through the rest of the Cold War, the short lived New World Order, and the opening campaign of the War on Terror, I have become persuaded that the United States has enduring interests, friends, and values, all of which militate for a high degree of consistency in our behavior and continuity in our policies. Observation of the war in Iraq has only reinforced this view.

The contemporary schools of foreign policy – realism, Wilsonianism and neo-conservatism – provide pundits and political scientists with useful instruments for analysis but afford poor guides for future conduct. Wise presidents and legislators will pick and choose among these alternative efforts to describe and prescribe for a world that defies easy categorization, worrying less about ideological coherence and more about incremental progress toward long-term national goals which do not and should not, in the main, change from one Administration to the next.

Of course we need a national strategy, and of course it must evolve with changing circumstances, but I doubt we need a new strategy every year, or even every four or eight years. Rather than use my brief time here to lay out an entirely new and fully developed strategic construct, therefore, I feel I can better serve the Committee by explaining how our existing national security strategy should be modified in light of recent experience and changing circumstances.

Reordering the War on Terror

The unanticipated costs and uncertain prospects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the continued resilience of our adversaries in the war on terror certainly call for some adjustments

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in policy. The current Administration has already made some important course corrections. Others, which I will attempt to prescribe, should be introduced by its successor.

The Bush administration's rhetoric since 9/11 has accentuated the martial character of the terrorist threat and the warlike nature of the required response. Treating terrorists as combatants, and labeling their activities as jihad, or holy war, dignifies their endeavors, bolsters their self esteem and enhances their standing throughout the Muslim world. Most of the tangible successes in the "war on terror" have come as a result of police, intelligence, and diplomatic activity. Certainly efforts to counter violent extremism and protect the American homeland must continue to occupy a high priority in our national strategy, but we need to find a vocabulary that secures us broader international support, which denigrates rather than dignifies the terrorists, and which supports a greater allocation of our own resources to the diplomatic, intelligence, and law enforcement instruments upon which we must rely to battle violent extremism in those places where it is most threatening, that is to say in the homelands of our friends, allies and partners around the world.

In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 the Bush Administration elaborated and began implementing a national strategy that emphasized preemption, democracy promotion, and nation building. These policies have become increasingly controversial by reason of their association with an unexpectedly costly and arguably unnecessary war in Iraq. All deserve reexamination, but none should be jettisoned entirely.

Preemption

Over more than two centuries, the United States has conducted dozens of military campaigns, only two of which were in response to attacks upon the American homeland. This record should leave few in doubt that the United States will employ force to protect itself, its friends, and its interests without necessarily waiting to be struck first. To enshrine this principle in publicly proclaimed national doctrine, however, only makes any subsequent resort to force more controversial and hinders the process of attracting allies and securing international sanction for such actions. Other nations will never be prepared to exempt the United States from the internationally recognized restraints on the unprovoked use of force. This international resistance to declared U.S. policy was clearly on display when the decision was made to attack Iraq soon after the Bush administration formally adopted preemption as the cornerstone of its new national security strategy. Washington therefore needs to drop "preemption" from the lexicon of its declared national security policy while leaving an appropriate degree of uncertainty in the minds of any potential foes about how the United States might respond to a mounting threat.

A good place to start to deemphasize explicit threats of preemption is with Iran. Insanity, it is said, consists of doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. Yet we have in this country today a serious debate about the desirability of launching a preemptive attack upon yet another large hostile Middle Eastern state on the basis of intelligence suggesting that that country may, at some time in the future, become a serious threat.

At least we are debating the proposition, one might say. And this debate does represent some advance, given the lack of serious examination accorded to the Iraq enterprise five years ago.

The debate in the United States is not between one camp that thinks a preemptive attack on Iran may prove necessary, and another opposed, however. Rather, the disagreement is between those who think the U.S. should talk to the Iranian regime first, and bomb them only after they fail to agree to dismantle their nuclear program, and those who believe this preliminary step unnecessary. The debate, in other words, is not about the morality, or even the expediency of preemptive attack, but rather the utility of preventative diplomacy.

Consideration of how best to deal with the challenge posed by Iran logically depends on where one places that country on the spectrum of potential adversaries. Is Iran a country like Grenada or Panama, one that can do America no serious harm, and that the United States can therefore safely afford to ignore, or overrun, at its discretion? Or is Iran more akin to the former Soviet Union or China, an adversary that can do American great harm, and that Washington cannot afford to ignore, or overrun?

If one concludes that Iran is closer to the Soviet Union than Grenada on this spectrum, then the military option is probably not an expedient response to anything the Iranians might do short of overt aggression. After all, the United States never threatened to use force to take out Soviet or Chinese nuclear facilities. It did not bomb China when that country sent a million men to battle American troops in Korea. It did not even attack Soviet or Chinese ships supplying North Vietnam during the war in Indo-China. Washington found a myriad of ways to discipline, punish, contain, contend with and, in the case of the Soviet Union, eventually defeat its Cold War adversaries, but preemptive attack was never one of them.

There are instances of diplomacy backed by force succeeding. There are far more frequent examples of it failing. Saddam, after all, could not even be coerced into demonstrating persuasively that he had no WMD. Taking the military option off the table might come at some cost if there were good reason to believe that Iran could be coerced into giving up its nuclear program. There is, however, better reason to believe that the threat of attack is a prime motivation for the Iranian program.

As long as the United States maintains a military establishment, the military option remains available. Taking this threat off the table, and putting it in a readily available drawer would improve the prospects for negotiation while avoiding the most likely result of the current approach, which is that in the end America either has its bluff called or finds itself launching a war the costs and consequences of which it cannot confidently predict. This does not require abandoning the possibility of preemption, but it does mean retiring the doctrine.

Democratization

Like preemption, democracy promotion has been a component of U.S. foreign policy almost since the country's birth. Beginning in the eighteenth century, most other nations in the Western Hemisphere adopted political systems modeled, however imperfectly, on the United States. After World War II, the United States established strong democracies in Japan and Germany and supported democratization throughout Western Europe, employing a combination of military power, economic assistance, strategic communications (that is, propaganda), and direct, if surreptitious, support to democratic parties. In more recent decades, all of central and most of eastern Europe, nearly all of Latin America, much of East Asia, and some of Africa have become democratic with active U.S. encouragement.

But democratization is no panacea for terrorism and no shortcut to a more pro-U.S. (or pro-Israel) Middle East. Established democracies may not make war on one another, but studies have shown that democratizing nations are highly prone to both internal and external conflicts. Furthermore, democratic governments in Egypt, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia would be more hostile to Israel and less aligned with the United States than the authoritarian regimes they replaced, since public opinion in those countries is more opposed to Israeli and U.S. policy than are their current leaders.

It may well have been a mistake, as Condoleezza Rice has suggested, to exempt the Middle East from over 60 years of largely successful U.S. efforts to promote democracy elsewhere, but it is unrealistic to expect this deficiency to be remedied within a few years. Recent efforts to accelerate political reform in the region have already backfired. Elections, after all, are polarizing events, particularly in societies already marked by sectarian conflict, as has been demonstrated recently in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Rather than seeking dramatic electoral breakthroughs, let alone imposing reforms, U.S. efforts to advance democracy in the Middle East should focus on building its foundations, including the rule of law, civil society, larger middle classes, and more effective, less corrupt governments.

Nation Building

Nation building also deserves to survive the setbacks encountered in Iraq. The Bush administration, like the U.S. public, now recognizes that the occupation of that country was mismanaged and has put in places many new structures, doctrines and capabilities designed to improve American performance in the area. While the Administration's reaction to its early missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan has been a determination to do better next time, however, Americans may more inclined to avoid any such future enterprises.

In fact, both conclusions are valid. The United States should certainly avoid invading any further large hostile countries on the basis of faulty intelligence with the support of narrow, unrepresentative coalitions. But not all conflicts are avoidable. Iraq may have been a war of choice, and the choice a poor one, but Afghanistan was neither. Both interventions left the United States with a heavy burden of nation building.

Through the 1990s, the Clinton administration slowly learned how costly and time-consuming such missions could be. In Somalia, the United States turned tail at the first sign of opposition. In Haiti, it set an early departure deadline, thereby ensuring that any improvements it introduced would be short-lived. In Bosnia, Clinton set an even shorter timeline, promising to have all American troops out of the country within 12 months. But if Clinton had not learned by then to avoid setting deadlines, he had at least learned to avoid keeping them. Only late in his second term did he finally acknowledged the open-ended nature of U.S. commitments in both Bosnia and Kosovo.

It has taken the Bush administration a similar amount of time to learn that nation building cannot be done on the cheap. The "surge" of troops into Baghdad is a belated acknowledgment that rebuilding a failed state takes an enormous commitment of manpower, money, and time.

Nation building is tough, slow work. Yet, contrary to the popular impression, successes do outnumber failures. Tens of millions of people are living at peace today in places like El Salvador, Mozambique, Namibia, Cambodia, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, East Timor, Haiti, Sierra Leone and Liberia because American, European, NATO or UN troops came in, separated the combatants, disarmed the contending factions, helped rebuild the economy, organized elections and stayed around long enough to ensure that the resultant government could take hold. Despite the continued fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur, the number of conflicts around the world has steadily decreased over the past twenty years, and the number of casualties and refugees resulting from such conflicts has also decreased.

Resizing and Rebalancing Our National Security Establishment

The United States thus needs to decide whether nation building is going to be an enduring part of its repertoire. If so, it will need to rebalance the political and the military elements of national power. For example, the Army and Marine Corps are projected to add about 90,000 in end strength over the next several years. Despite recent and projected future expansion, the total number of personnel in civilian agencies associated with nation building, including USAID, the CIA, and the State Department, is dwarfed by this number. Budgets are similarly weighted toward the military. Absent some effort to redress this imbalance and to create an operational civilian cadre for nation building, the implementation of American policy in this field is likely to remain stunted no matter how sound its strategic vision.

Should increases in the numbers of our diplomats and aid workers be matched by further increases in the size of our armed forces? Certainly there seems considerable support for this proposition. Indeed, even many of those calling for a rapidly reduced U.S. military presence in Iraq are simultaneously urging an increase in the size of the army. Underlying this apparent anomaly is widespread confusion regarding the appropriate role of military force in combating violent extremism.

Where the United States puts the bulk of its national security effort will be heavily influenced by how Americans conceptualize the struggle against violent extremist movements in the Muslim world. If al Qaeda and its ilk are regarded primarily as criminal conspirators, then the United States needs a counterterrorism strategy that emphasizes police, intelligence, and diplomatic efforts. If the threat is deemed to have metastasized to the point where it is regarded as a global insurgency, then a greater reliance on military force may be justified.

Many experts do indeed believe that the threat of Islamist terrorism has grown to the point where its purveyors have the capacity to overturn existing governments and seize control of substantial territory. Others continue to regard al Qaeda and its imitators more as opportunistic parasites that seek to attach themselves to what are essentially nationalist conflicts (much as al Qaeda attached itself to a Sunni resistance movement in Iraq).

In the case of parasitic relationships supporting rather than opposing the insurgency can sometimes be the best way to marginalize the extremists. After all, there are few insurgent movements that would not rather have American support than al Qaeda's if it were available. This is the approach the United States followed in Afghanistan in the 1980s and in the Balkans in the 1990s, where America supported Muslim insurgencies against Soviet and Serbian domination,

respectively. This is the strategy the U.S. has followed in Iraq over the past eighteen months, co-opting the Sunni insurgency and separating it from al Qaeda.

Staying entirely aloof, as the United States did with respect to the Algerian insurgency in the 1990s, is another option where the local state is strong enough to handle the challenge on its own. In those cases where U.S. national interests dictate some level of involvement against the insurgents, limiting the U.S. role to training, equipping, and advising the counterinsurgents is normally preferable to direct military intervention. In rare circumstances, such as in Afghanistan, that option may not be immediately available, and the burden may necessarily fall to U.S. soldiers. U.S. strategy should seek to minimize such requirements, however.

Iraq is a comparatively small country, yet countering the insurgency there has engaged most of the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps. If future terrorist-linked insurgencies are to be similarly confronted directly by U.S. forces, then very large numbers will be needed. Alternately, if the United States chooses in the future to combat insurgencies via local forces, as it did throughout the Cold War (Vietnam being the sole exception), then a renewed emphasis on training, equipping, and advising friendly foreign forces is in order. In that case, the need is less for a larger army than for one reorganized to better handle these new tasks.

It would thus be a mistake to employ Iraq as the yardstick by which to gauge the future necessary size and shape of the U.S. military, given that the war was probably unnecessary and the occupation mishandled from the outset. Afghanistan offers a better and somewhat less demanding guide for future requirements. The U.S. effort there has broad (if diminishing) local support, full international legitimacy, and substantial multinational participation. Yet Afghanistan, for all these advantages, is a test the United States is not currently passing. Improvements in the United States' capacity for nation building and counterinsurgency are thus in order.

The Middle East

It is in the Middle East where our national security strategy has undergone the greatest innovation since 9/11, encountered the least success and is consequently in need of the greatest renovation. Today we have some two hundred thousand troops in the region, and yet our influence has never been more absent. At present the European Union is leading negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, Turkey is brokering peace talks between Israel and Syria. Qatar has just mediated an end to the political crisis in Lebanon. This Administration initially resisted all three of these efforts. American leadership is currently manifested only in what appears to be dead end negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, a process that can, at best, produce no more than a non-

binding declaration of principals before the next American Administration takes office. There will thus be little to show for eight years effort.

There is no controversy in our country about American objectives in this region. We all want a secure Israel at peace with its neighbors, a denuclearized Iran, a unified and democratic Iraq, and the modernization and democratization of all societies in the region. At issue are not ends but the sequencing among these various goals and the methods best suited to reaching them.

The threat from al Qaeda is centered primarily in South and Central Asia and secondarily in disaffected Muslim populations resident in Western societies, not in the Middle East. The attacks of 9/11 therefore do not justify or require an enduring American military presence in the Gulf region. The overall American goal in this region should be to promote the emergence of an equilibrium among the local powers that does not require most of our available ground forces to sustain. This is not an impossible goal. Such a balance existed from when Great Britain left the Persian Gulf in the early fifties until Saddam invaded Kuwait in the early nineties. During this forty-year period America interests were preserved with little more than occasional naval visits. A return to this condition may take a while, but it would be worth enunciating such a goal and thereby making clear America's long term intentions.

On the other hand, a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq could easily move us further from that objective. We owe it to the Iraqis, we owe it to the region, and we owe to ourselves to leave behind a unified country capable of contributing to regional stability. This will not happen overnight, nor even, in all likelihood, within the next year or two, although some significant troop drawdown over this period may well prove feasible if the security situation continues to improve.

Stabilizing Iraq will be the next President's most urgent problem, while denuclearizing Iran is likely to prove his most difficult challenge. In both cases, the decisive variable is Washington's ability to influence Teheran. Non-communication and the threat of preemptive attack are not the best means to do so. Diplomacy can not always produce agreement, but it does always yield information, and more information will result in better informed choices, more options and wiser policy. We talked to Moscow under Stalin and Beijing under Mao, and we are talking today to Havana under Castro. The Iranian regime is no worse, and in some respects rather better than any of these. Talking is no concession, and self imposed silence no virtue in this situation.

Areas of Continuity

There are a number of elements of our national strategy I have not addressed, as I do not advocate substantial changes. The current Administration has largely abandoned the unilateralism of its early

years, and sought to foster better relations with Europe, Russia, China and India, the world's other major power centers. I would expect its successor, of either party, to continue those efforts. Latin America has been somewhat neglected since 9/11, and I would hope to see a return to the closer and more positive ties of the 1990s. Both candidates have promised a renewed emphasis upon arms control and a reduction in nuclear stockpiles looking toward the long-term goal of a nuclear weapons free world. This is to be applauded, as we can not expect to reverse expansion in the number of nuclear powers as long at those who possess these weapons do nothing to reduce their own reliance upon them.

America's long term interests are to integrate emerging and reemerging powers, like China, India and Russia into the broader, rule based international system our country has done so much to shape over the past sixty years. Close transatlantic collaboration will be needed to ensure that an adequate mix of incentives and conditions are established so that this entry happens, and happens in ways that strengthen the various organizations and arrangements that underpin the existing system.

Talk about American decline, the emergence of new peer competitors, and the end of American hegemony has been somewhat overstated in my view. China will not be a peer competitor of the United States in the area of hard security for several decades, if ever. Nor will India, over this same time span, be able to compete with, or counterbalance, China. Neither will a united Europe emerge, in the security sphere, to compete for influence with the United States. Today America still produces about a quarter of the entire world's goods and services and has a defense budget as large as most of the rest of the world combined. The resultant budget deficits have gotten wildly out of control, and this imbalance is weakening our currency, our economy and our international influence. But we corrected this problem in the 90s and we can do so again. If we do not, it is no one's fault but our own.

America's standing in the world has certainly fallen as a result of some of the tactics the present Administration introduced in its war on terror and some of the unintended abuses that flowed from them. Those abuses have already been curtailed and the most controversial practices largely abandoned. One can expect with some confidence that the next Administration will move America back to full conformity with national and international law. This will be very important, as there is no doubt that America's ability to shape the international environment, influence foreign governments and lead international opinion has been very negatively effected by this loss of prestige and respect.

Conclusion

Having served under eight presidents through seven changes of administration, I have come to view these transitions as periods of considerable danger, as new and generally less experienced people assume positions of power with mandates for change and a predisposition to denigrate the experience and ignore the advice of their predecessors. America needs a grand strategy that helps it bridge these troubled waters, one that enjoys bipartisan support and is likely to endure. One key criteria for judging any newly announced grand strategy, therefore, is whether it is likely to be embraced by successor Administrations. In this respect, Napoleon's advice with respect to constitutions may prove apt: that they be short and vague.