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Defense Planning for the Long Haul: Scenarios, Operational Concepts, and the Future Security Environment

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Resources: Forces & Capabilities

Senior defense officials face a host of critical issues when assessing the nation's military posture. Most importantly, they are responsible for determining which threats the United States must be prepared to address, what capabilities will be required to do so, and how the US military should be organized, trained, equipped, and employed to counter these threats successfully if and when they materialize.

Answering these questions is difficult enough when preparing for existing challenges or threats that appear to be on the immediate horizon. For instance, the United States is currently fighting irregular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which are likely to persist for some time. Yet there is still no consensus in the Pentagon or the wider defense policy community on whether these conflicts represent the types of challenges the United States should expect to confront in the years ahead, whether the armed forces should be reoriented away from conventional warfare and toward counterinsurgency and stability operations, and how this might be done. When preparing for a distant and uncertain future, however, resolving issues such as these becomes far more difficult.

Although it is impossible to predict how the future will unfold, it appears increasingly clear that the United States will confront a very diverse and demanding array of strategic challenges over the coming decades: transnational terrorist groups, weak and failed states, and the intersection between them; the rise of a near-peer competitor that is not yet overtly hostile toward the United States but has nonetheless implemented a comprehensive military modernization program devoted to countering the US military's ability to project power; and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to aggressive regimes and perhaps eventually non-state actors.

Both individually and collectively, these challenges represent a significant departure from those the US military has focused its attention on in the past, particularly the large-scale, ground-centric conventional conflicts that dominated military planning during the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War period. Nor do today's counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq or the counterterrorism operations taking place across the globe provide a complete blueprint for the challenges that the US military should expect to confront in the years ahead. Preparing for these challenges is therefore almost certain to require significant changes in both the capabilities that the US military develops and how they are employed.

At the same time, military organizations often have trouble adapting and innovating absent specific operational problems and clear contingencies. The purpose of this report, therefore, is to translate the principal strategic challenges the United States is likely to confront into a set of illustrative planning scenarios, and to discusses the critical importance of devising new operational concepts and developing new capabilities to address each one. Specifically, this report presents three scenarios:

- An irregular war in Nigeria between the government and an insurgent movement in the country's southern region;

- An attempt by the People's Republic of China to reincorporate Taiwan through a policy of economic and military coercion; and

- An Iranian regime that is emboldened by its acquisition of a small nuclear arsenal and becomes increasingly hostile toward both the United States and its neighbors in the Persian Gulf region.

Of course, there is no guarantee that any of these scenarios will occur in the future, or that the United States would choose to intervene militarily if they did. Nevertheless, all three are plausible, would clearly impact American national security interests, and would present a number of very difficult operational challenges for US military forces.

Intervention in a Nigerian civil conflict, for example, might require the United States—either alone if necessary or in support of indigenous forces whenever possible—to conduct direct-action missions against terrorist or insurgent targets, defend critical government or economic facilities from attack or sabotage, and, in some areas, provide basic healthcare or civil infrastructure improvements to gain local support and generate intelligence. Moreover, because a protracted military operation could fatally undermine the legitimacy of the central government and fuel instability throughout the country, a critical goal would be to expand the government's ability to provide both security and essential services to the population. This would require a systematic effort to organize, train, and equip competent local police and military forces, and to reduce the level of corruption in major government institutions. In addition, to avoid eroding the tenuous legitimacy of the central government while US military forces are present in significant numbers, it would be necessary to (1) engage in a major strategic communications campaign emphasizing that the United States is acting in support of the host nation government and will leave as soon as a degree of stability has been restored, and (2) implement an operational and logistical support system that minimizes the "footprint" of US forces to the greatest extent possible.

A conflict with China would also be a daunting contingency; the People's Liberation Army has spent more than a decade building capabilities that could enable it to hold at risk a set of key targets—including regional bases, aircraft carriers, and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) systems—that collectively underpin the US military's ability to project power and defend its allies in East Asia. Of course, whether China would actually use these capabilities at the outset of a crisis is uncertain. Nevertheless, the ability to credibly threaten attacks that could severely hamper the American military's ability to project power into a region of vital national interest would have a major impact on the balance of power. As a result, the US Navy and Air Force will have to devise new operational concepts, including the ability to conduct operations from much greater ranges, from a more diversified basing posture, and without secure and reliable communications.

Finally, a confrontation with a nuclear-armed Iran has the potential to be a truly "hybrid" war, one that might require the United States military to counter Iran's conventional anti-access capabilities, defeat its irregular forces both at sea and on land, prepare for attacks by terrorist groups against American targets or US allies globally, and most importantly conduct operations under the shadow of a possible nuclear attack. Moreover, any effort to neutralize a rogue nation's small nuclear arsenal is unlikely to resemble the first or second Gulf War, for a host of reasons. Rather than launching a ground invasion or occupation, an operation would rely principally on air, sea, and undersea assets to strike critical targets; special operations forces with an expanded capability to secure or destroy nuclear weapons and material; and most importantly intelligence regarding the locations of those weapons as well as delivery systems.

Preparing for these challenges is therefore almost certain to require significant changes in both the capabilities that the US military develops and how they are employed. Yet implementing major changes in the face of geopolitical uncertainty and entrenched institutional interests has historically proven difficult. Nevertheless, using scenarios to identify potential threats and, perhaps more importantly, to generate new operational concepts to meet existing and emerging challenges is an important first step toward overcoming these constraints and fielding a more effective military.