

Reflections on U.S. Military Policy

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An Interview with Jonah Shrock and Oliver Hermann

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: Various analysts have said that we are at an inflection point for U.S. strategy, involving declining U.S. primacy or growing multipolarity. Do you think that analysis is correct? If so, what would be your key parameters for U.S. strategy going forward?

Douglas Feith: I'm not keen on buzzwords like "inflection point," which have no clear definition. You raise a significant point, though: the United States previously had a particular position in the world, which you refer to as "primacy." Especially after the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States had a position of unique importance in the world. We were the predominant military power, and our enormous economic strength gave us influence. But in the Obama years U.S. influence diminished: in Europe, with the Russian action in Ukraine; in the Middle East, with U.S. inactivity in Syria; and in East Asia, with the assertiveness of the Chinese in the South China Sea and the lack of a strong U.S. response. People in the United States and around the world question whether the United States still is the kind of predominant power that we were in the 20 years or so after the USSR's collapse. One of the things that President Trump wants to do is to rebuild and reassert U.S. power. It's not yet clear whether he and his team will do this wisely.

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Journal: And if you were trying to think of a few parameters for strategy going forward—some notions to inform U.S. policy—what might those parameters be?

Feith: I think that the weakness exhibited by the United States in the last eight years or so damaged U.S. interests and created enormous problems. The most obvious examples are the ones that I mentioned: the Russians in Ukraine and the catastrophe in Syria. Consider the millions of Syrian refugees: many have tried to get into Europe, which has radically changed European politics. Chinese aggressiveness in the South and East China Seas has changed politics and the strategic situation in Asia. All of those things have damaged our interests. So has the Iran nuclear deal, which I think is going to encourage various countries to pursue nuclear weapons. There was also the weak U.S. response to North Korea's nuclear program, which was likewise a failure of the Bush administration. The combination of the North Koreans getting away with their nuclear activity without an effective response, and then the Iranians defying the whole world and at the end of the day being rewarded for their nuclear program, did severe damage to the global architecture of nonproliferation. The world is going to be a more dangerous place as a result, and U.S. interests are going to suffer.

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When the United States signals a lack of interest in getting involved in major world problems, or a lack of capability or will to engage in defense of our own interests or those of our friends and partners, there are consequences. The ill effects can take many forms: erosion of security; economic harm; humanitarian disasters, such as the Syrian and Afghanistan refugee problems; threats to democracy and human rights abroad and at home; and increased risk of the spread of weapons of mass destruction. My key point is that we can't avoid the effects of world affairs by adopting isolationist attitudes. Some Americans want to run away from the violence, corruption, and extremism of the world, but the problem is that, if we try to run away, those problems will chase after us. Isolating the United States from North Korean or Iranian missiles, from Islamist terrorists, or from Russian or Chinese cyberwarriors is not possible. We need strategies to shape world affairs in ways that protect and serve our interests in security, freedom, and prosperity, or we'll be at the mercy of problems being exploited by others.

Journal: We have recently seen a trend toward "limited warfare," whether that's Chinese militarization efforts in various island chains in the South China Sea, or even the "little green men" in Ukraine. How can the U.S. adapt its capabilities to be able to respond to these more limited threats, when higher-intensity

deterrence by punishment might not be feasible?

Feith: The people who want to challenge U.S. interests are learning lessons all the time. When groups are hostile to each other, they go to school on each other. They are learning and adapting, and—as your question wisely highlights—enemies of powerful players are experimenting with asymmetric warfare techniques so that they can attack the interests of the powerful players without hitting where the powerful players are strongest.

America's enemies nowadays tend not to launch conventional attacks against us because nobody can compete with our conventional military power. They instead use asymmetric techniques. That means, for example, that a country or group that wants to challenge us does not try to defeat our air force, but instead seeks ways to wear out the patience of the U.S. Congress. So if we get into a protracted fight and our enemies succeed in killing some number of Americans every week for years, then at some point Congress may insist that the president stop the war. Recall what happened in Iraq: the Democratic leaders in Congress said they wanted to cut off money for the war. That was just when the surge was getting underway in 2006. Had Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid managed to stop the money, the surge would have been aborted and we would not have seen the gains. Our opponents in Iraq understood that the real battle they had to win was not against the U.S. military, but against Capitol Hill.

The Russians used asymmetric techniques when putting their soldiers into Ukraine without insignia on their uniforms. They want the fruits of aggression without having to fight us. We shouldn't want to fight them either but need ways to penalize aggression

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so that we can defeat it and, even better, deter it. In other words, one of the main vulnerabilities of democratic countries relates to popular and parliamentary support

for military action. If enemies can design aggressive military action to make it hard for anyone to confront them or sustain a confrontation over time, they can make the real battle not on the battlefield, where they'll lose, but in a political forum, such as Congress or the United Nations, where they have a better chance of winning. That's how asymmetric strategies work. International affairs students should strive to understand this. It's not enough for the United States

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to have military strength. We need ways to defeat the asymmetric strategies of those who want to harm us.

Journal: Looking toward the future, do you think the trend toward drones and cyber warfare will continue to the point where there will be increasingly limited human involvement in the military, or do you think a certain amount of human involvement will always be necessary?

Feith: Some degree of human involvement is likely to remain in the picture. If you're going to control territory, for example, it's hard to do it from a drone. Even though war will get increasingly automated, I don't think that wars will be fought without a substantial human combat role in the foreseeable future. But there's a trend toward greater and greater automation partly because drone technology has proved to be highly successful, not simply in killing targets and sparing members of our own forces. Drones can be precise and can reduce the collateral damage on the enemy side.

Journal: On the issue of drones, the Obama administration carried out drone strikes in places like Yemen, which were arguably outside of the congressional authorization for the war on terror, and now the Trump administration is doing the same and taking military action in these areas. What do you think are the implications of having a system that increases executive power—or specifically White House power in the case of the Obama administration—over military decisions?

Feith: Lawyers in the Obama administration would probably not agree with the premise of your question. They would, I assume, say that what the administration did in Yemen was legal. But let's talk about the essence of your question: when the United States takes military action, as the Obama administration did in Yemen, is it *more* desirable for the administration to go to Congress to get authorization, or is it better to rely on the president's commander-in-chief powers? Sometimes a president can rely on an old authorization to use force and interpret it—stretch it—to cover their current intentions.

In my view, it's much more desirable for the president to get clear authorization from Congress. This view relates to the point that I made earlier: one of the most important national security lessons in recent decades is that the United States can be reasonably successful on the battlefield but lose a war because of lack of congressional support. I think a truly strategic president would

understand that sending the right forces forward to fight the action with the right equipment and the right operational concept is as important as shoring up support in Congress and among the broader public for what is being done, making it possible to maintain popular and congressional backing over time.

Again, you can win on the battlefield and lose strategically if you do not have popular and congressional support. Presidents that ignore or downplay the importance of Congress and then wind up getting into trouble and lacking the support they need from within their own political system are doing something that makes them highly strategically vulnerable; it's a big strategic error. So it's important for the president to go to Congress and get authorization for any major military action, but it's also important to continue to work with Congress to sustain support.

Journal: The Obama administration faced some criticism for micromanaging and making too many decisions within the White House. As someone who was under secretary of defense for policy, what do you see as the ideal balance in decision-making authority between the president and the Pentagon?

Feith: That's a hard question to answer in a sentence or two. There are some terrific books on this subject. My former colleague, the late Peter Rodman, wrote an excellent book called *Presidential Command*.¹ Eliot Cohen from Johns Hopkins University wrote one called *Supreme Command*—it deals with your question.² For that matter, H. R. McMaster, President Trump's national security advisor, also wrote a book on this subject—*Dereliction of Duty*.³ There's no mathematical formula that tells you when White House involvement in strategy and in overseeing military operations crosses the line into too much or too detailed. There is a role for the president. He is the commander-in-chief. It doesn't make sense to say the Pentagon should be left on its own to do whatever it wants—that's not our system. Our system is civilian control of the military and the two civilians in the chain of command are the secretary of defense and the president. I think there is always, inevitably and inescapably, a role for the president, and that is a good thing.

The president should have a proper understanding of what strategy is and should set the strategy, but the military should make its own judgments on how to implement the strategy militarily. In general, you don't want the president telling the military which specific targets they should attack or which munitions to use against a target. The president should define the mission, and then the military should use its best professional judgment to accomplish it.

But what the military does can have enormous political and diplomatic implications. That's why the military should brief the president on its proposed war plan, so the president can say, "Now wait a second." Imagine if the president ordered the destruction of a country's nuclear reactor—as the Israelis did with Syria a few years ago or with Iraq back in 1981. Imagine also if the military, in briefing its plan, said, "We're going to send a B-52 over and drop a nuclear bomb on them." The president should have an opportunity to say, "Hold on! I don't want you using nuclear weapons! The point of this operation is to shore up our nonproliferation policy, and you don't need nuclear weapons to destroy that facility." It would be right for the president to contradict war planners that were foolishly proposing to use nuclear weapons when they weren't needed.

There should be a civilian-military dialogue when the president sets his strategic goals and when the military comes up with its operational plans. The question of how the president relates to the military requires judgment. There's no mathematical formula you can apply to determine how much involvement by the White House in military planning is the right amount.

Journal: Pivoting toward the Trump administration, the defense budget—or potential defense budget—that was submitted received a lot of press. The president proposed a 355-ship fleet. Leaving aside that specific number, are you in favor of some sort of naval or general military buildup? And if so, what capabilities need to be focused on?

Feith: I think the defense budget was cut in recent years to the point where dangerous vulnerabilities exist. Our allies and friends around the world doubt our capabilities, and it would be beneficial to correct that. We should start by identifying U.S. strategic interests. What are our principal goals? What are the major challenges we face? What are the kinds of capabilities we need? It's clear that East Asia is a major concern. We have important relationships—treaty relationships and security partnerships with countries from northeast Asia, such as South Korea and Japan, down to Australia. To provide friends and allies there with confidence in our ability to fulfill our obligations and maintain security in the area, we need long-range capabilities—naval and air—that are greater than what we now have. There are other important requirements. But those relating to East Asia are especially pressing.

Journal: Can you talk about some differences in defense strategy when you are fighting a nation state and its military, compared to when the military goal is

to combat a terrorist organization or multiple terrorist organizations? How does the philosophy or the strategy change?

Feith: Well, it does change. It's an intellectual challenge for strategists to devise a military campaign against non-state actors, such as terrorist groups. The way we have dealt with enemies that are states or coalitions of states in World War I and in World War II was to conquer them and overthrow their governments. With the war on terrorism, we had a different challenge: the people trying to harm us were not organized as a state, but as an ideological movement. This wasn't completely new because the West's enemy in the Cold War was also an ideological movement—totalitarian communism. But there was a state-to-state component in the Cold War, of course. That ideological movement was a great danger to the West precisely because it had taken over a powerful state, Russia, which was renamed the USSR. The Truman Doctrine after World War II was a call to support countries in Europe that were fighting communist parties. It was an interesting example of how to deal with a strategic challenge that comes not just from a state but also from an ideologically driven movement.

There are Cold War lessons that are useful for the war on terrorism. The radical Islamists who consider themselves at war with us are not from one country or one specific organization. The enemy is so hard to define because it is an amorphous movement of groups and individuals that are united to some extent by ideology, even though elements of the movement oppose one another. These people may not be linked by anything *but* ideology, which is why there is the so-called lone wolf terrorist phenomenon. I think “lone wolf” is a misleading term because it suggests that the person really is alone. They are not alone. They're actually part of a worldwide movement, and that is what makes “lone wolves” significant.

Your question is essentially how to organize a strategy against a movement motivated by a hostile ideology. One element of any such strategy should be an effort to counter the ideology. But U.S. strategy has lacked a serious ideological component since 9/11. This was a failure not only of the Obama administration, but also of the Bush administration. There were Bush administration officials attuned to the problem—for example, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, General Myers, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. They said that the jihadist ideology was important and that we needed to do something about it. But the administration never actually developed a proper strategy to counter ideological support for terrorism. The Obama administration also failed, for different reasons.

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The Bush strategy for fighting the war on terrorism was stunningly successful in preventing large-scale follow-up attacks after 9/11. It was carried forward, with modifications, in the Obama administration. I don't think many people in 2001 predicted that 16 years would elapse after 9/11 without another major terrorist catastrophe in the United States. But here we are. The success is worthy of note. Nonetheless, we would have a better chance of solving the problem if our strategy included a campaign to undermine ideological support for jihadist violence and hostility against the West. 

NOTES

1. Peter W. Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

2. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

3. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997).