



**From kinetic to comprehensive: new thinking in the U.S. military** by Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman

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A quiet transformation is underway in the United States military that has significant implications for U.S. foreign policy, and relations with Asia in particular. Strategists increasingly recognize that military options must go beyond combat operations. Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained the new approach in a July speech: “The overall posture and thinking of the United States armed forces has shifted – away from solely focusing on direct American military action, and towards new capabilities to shape the security environment in ways that obviate the need for military intervention in the future.” He is even ready to put the Pentagon’s money where his mouth is: He advocates shifting resources to other agencies to ensure a more balanced approach to so-called stability operations.

The painful experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has prompted a serious rethinking of how the U.S. military must operate. The single most important lesson is the reminder that it is impossible to kill or capture your way to security. The new doctrine focuses on pre-conflict actions, emphasizing the need to create mechanisms and processes to help reconstruct and stabilize societies in the process of transitioning from, or at risk of lapsing into violent conflict. Two policy documents articulate this shift: DOD Directive 3000.05, “Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations” and the October 2008 Army field manual (FM 3-07 “Stability Operations”).

The DoD Directive establishes stability operations as a “core military mission” that must be given “priority comparable to combat operations.” The Army field manual goes further and offers doctrine on how capabilities associated with reconstruction and stabilization can be leveraged in the context of “peacetime military engagement” and as part of the “combatant commander’s theater security cooperation plans.” This more comprehensive approach to stability operations “provid[es] the foundation for multinational cooperation” as “military forces establish conditions that enable the efforts of other instruments of national and international power.”

In some ways, this latest transformation in military thinking is a repudiation of the “revolution in military affairs” that began in the early 1990s and culminated in the “shock and awe” campaign in 2003. Lost was the illusion that technology offered a silver bullet. Even with precision weapons, the use of deadly force remains a blunt instrument: there is still a need for “boots on the ground” to pick up the pieces and reestablish social order. But the new thinking goes further still and

recognizes that it is better to invest in building local institutional capacity to mitigate and reconcile political differences without resorting to deadly force. In short, the Army field manual concludes that the best way to eliminate enemies is to prevent them from being born. That means improving material conditions in regions that are most vulnerable to the recruitment of adversaries.

“Kinetic” operations are a poor substitute for measures to promote participation in government, develop programs to spur economic development, and build local capacity to address grievances. Maintaining a stable society requires good governance, provision of basic services, institutions to promote internal reconciliation, economic development, and competent indigenous military and police forces. Implementation of this strategy is difficult. It requires real collaboration among relevant agencies. In the language of the policy guidance on stability operations, it is a “whole of government” approach. The challenge is integrating the tools offered by these agencies into a coherent strategy that takes advantage of the vast resources of the military while avoiding the “militarization” of U.S. foreign policy. Success demands careful coordination and a conscious effort by all involved to avoid the interagency squabbles that surfaced in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The immediate challenge to implementing a “whole of government approach” to stability operations is forging an effective organizational framework. This is difficult for two reasons. First, different agencies and institutions see “security” differently, and this creates disagreements about which threats are most important and which solutions are most appropriate. The second is a byproduct of the military’s institutional culture, its penchant for detailed planning, and its sheer size when compared to other agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development. The military will typically overwhelm and subordinate other agencies with which it must work.

A second set of challenges involves resistance within the military itself. One camp argues these operations detract from the core competency of the military establishment, which is to deter aggression by other military powers. They advocate the procurement of new warships, ballistic missile defense, and sophisticated aircraft to retain full spectrum dominance. Dedicating resources to operations that do not deal directly with training and preparation for large-scale war should be limited. For them, stability operations are a fad. The other camp insists that a real commitment to stability operations requires more resources. This group will be convinced of the military’s seriousness when the Army has a stability operations division counterpart to an infantry division and there are disaster relief brigades alongside tank brigades.

The shift in thinking acknowledges the complexity of security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The whole-of-government approach is an organizational acknowledgement that security must be approached comprehensively. The shift needs to be endorsed, accelerated, and implemented by the next U.S. administration.

Thus, as a first step, the U.S. should develop a comprehensive security strategy that goes beyond countering terrorism and traditional military threats and postures but also recognizes that the notion of “traditional” and “nontraditional” security issues is a false dichotomy. This should be done by the National Security Council to ensure a fully coordinated whole-of-government approach. This document would detail organizational responsibilities to allay concerns both internally and externally about the militarization of U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, there should be a concerted effort to reduce the emphasis in previous national security strategies on military aspects and a more visible role for other agencies such as USAID, the State Department, and the Department of Homeland Security.

This shift is especially important for U.S. engagement with East Asia. Most regional governments have different priorities from the U.S. regarding security policy: the shift in DoD thinking brings the U.S. closer to their approach. The Army field manual’s focus on multilateral cooperation also provides a platform for the confidence-building and capacity-building exercises that those governments also favor.

A whole-of-government approach also encourages cooperation among more and different government bureaucracies. By focusing on a broader definition of security, a wide range of issues – from environmental preservation to disaster relief – can be addressed multilaterally while avoiding fears that such cooperation represents a military threat to any single country. An obvious starting point here is the development of a multilateral security strategy focused on the eight UN millennium development goals.

The ultimate destination of the quiet transformation underway in the Pentagon is uncertain. Much depends on the success or failure of the current efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, the willingness of the top leadership to acknowledge the need for a broader perspective on security is significant. A stable and sustainable security environment requires a collective effort that cannot be limited to the threat and use of force – especially in circumstances where they can be avoided. The next U.S. administration must continue this rethinking and begin the process of implementation.

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