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Gates' Strategic Determinism: Will the future Mirror the Present?

Eric Sayers

29 December 2009

Irregular warfare missions will continue to consume the bulk of the American military's attention. But this is only in so long as its conventional power and its strategic arsenal remains a sound and thorough deterrent.

A MISGUIDED notion has crept into the minds of American policymakers, and in particular Secretary of Defence Robert Gates: As the United States has only rarely engaged in conventional combat in recent history and continues to find itself caught up in irregular warfare missions, the prevailing wisdom now holds that the battlefield of the future is likely to reflect the battlefield of the present. As the probability for conventional combat missions has declined, the argument goes, so too has the utility of expensive conventional platforms like 5th generation fighter aircraft, next-generation cruisers, nuclear attack submarines, and long-range bombers.

While on a tour of military bases to help sell his defence vision earlier this year Secretary Gates made clear his belief that “we have to be prepared for the wars we are most likely to fight”. President Barack Obama has also echoed this view, arguing that we must reform the defence budget “so that we’re not paying for Cold War-era weapons systems we don’t use”.

But to recognise irregular warfare operations as the way of the future solely because they dominate the modern battlefield would be to misinterpret the root causes for both why conventional inter-state war remains rare and why low-end asymmetric combat has become so prevalent.

The Future is Now?

The regularity of post-conflict reconstruction, state-building, and counterinsurgency, combined with the Hobbesian breeding grounds that exist for Islamists in the Horn of Africa and parts of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, has come to convince Secretary Gates and others that irregular warfare missions will be the defining characteristic of the 21st century battlefield. The Secretary has even gone as far as to predict that “war in the future will often be a hybrid blend,” as was witnessed in the Second Lebanon War during the summer of 2006.

With good cause, training for these missions, along with winning the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has become the central mission of the US military under the leadership of Secretary Gates. But while adopting the lessons from the last eight years is a necessary task, misinterpreting them as a glimpse of what the future will hold risks the danger of strategic determinism. This is an approach that history has shown will only invite painful lessons in the future.

The advent and proliferation of new technologies, the rapid expansion of markets and accumulation of wealth, unanticipated economic turmoil, energy demands, and sharp demographic shifts are all variables that can redefine the global balance of power, and redistribute conflict across the map in unexpected ways.

The great irony of the modern strategic landscape is that the very existence of America's military predominance and strategic nuclear arsenal have acted to dissuade and deter the aggressive intentions of would-be adversaries. In many instances, they force America's enemies to engage with the asymmetric means we see on display today – terrorism, cyber attacks, investment in counter-space programs – in an effort to level the odds against the American goliath. This is true on the low-end of the asymmetric spectrum for non-state networks like al-Qaeda and Hizbullah, as well as for state powers like China that are developing tools and strategies to challenge US power at the high-end of the spectrum.

America's military has ensured that relative stability continues to prevail on the Korean peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, and in the Taiwan Strait. Wars the likes of which occurred in Georgia in the summer of 2008 remain exceptions to the rule. In short, America's investment in a strong conventional force only increases the likelihood it will not have to use it.

A Cautious Gamble

The future will no doubt remain rife with unconventional military engagement. However, irregular warfare will continue to consume the bulk of the American military's attention. But this is only in so long as its conventional power and its strategic arsenal remains a sound and thorough deterrent. Just as building peace within states requires the tiring exercise of building the capacity of states to govern and sustain themselves through ingenuitive, population-centric political and security efforts, sustaining peace between states necessitates the deployment of an adequate strategic arsenal and the means to project power throughout the global commons.

The real consequence of the debate between irregular and conventional missions is that the pendulum could be pushed so far in the direction of the former that America's ability to maintain military primacy in the medium and long term would be irrevocably harmed. Secretary Gates has confidently determined that US primacy in the conventional sphere is sustainable for the medium term, but he is referring only out to about the 2020 time-frame. Because it can take years, if not decades, to design and build a complex military platform like the F-22 *Raptor*, the systems that the US invests in now are what it will rely upon for the next 30-40 years.

The ripples of this trend will be no stronger felt than in the Asia-Pacific, where China's economic and military power have begun to dictate the strategic thinking of the region's other state actors and America's ability to maintain its traditional hegemonic position is being increasingly challenged. Concerns regarding trends of this nature are already afoot: Australia's new defence white paper released in May 2009 openly questioned if the US will "continue to play over the very long term the strategic role that it has undertaken since the end of World War II?"

It is true that maintaining sufficient conventional platforms is a capital intensive effort that commands a disproportionate level of defence resources. But to dismiss these platforms as "Cold War" relics, and

let America's conventional arsenal wither in the misguided pursuit of an irregular future of conflict, would be to invite the traditionally American-dominated commons of the air, space, and sea to become arenas of competition. Secretary Gates' narrow vision of a "realistic" future where the military is prepared for "the wars we are most likely to fight" promises to do just that.

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