

## Threats or Capabilities?

**I**N MARCH 1989, Dick Cheney, recently nominated to be Defense Secretary, went through his Senate confirmation hearing. He and the Senators mulled over threat scenarios, but no one mentioned Iraq. Mere months later, Iraq invaded Kuwait and Cheney faced war.

It was a classic case of poor threat forecasting. Still, Cheney was not without means. He had access to new weapons—most notably the F-117 stealth fighter—which would bring swift victory in the Gulf War. Cheney later publicly thanked Harold Brown, the late 1970s Pentagon chief, was the man who actually started the weapons programs Cheney used to such great effect.

When war comes, US leaders must fight with the forces in hand. Their predecessors cannot foresee all possible foes and construct forces to defeat them. They can only bequeath broad capabilities useful in unknown scenarios.

Today's Pentagon, under Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, appears to be de-emphasizing that goal; it now chooses to plan US forces mostly in response to specific, current dangers—those Gates calls the “real threats, posed by real-world adversaries, with real limitations.”

Unless someone can match a weapon to a clear and present (or near-present) danger, the Pentagon likely won't spend money on it.

It is a notable shift, and it marks a more or less explicit abandonment of one of the Bush Administration's signature defense policies. In 2001, Donald H. Rumsfeld, Bush's Pentagon chief, established that, when planning future forces, we should move away from a “threat-based” posture, which was traditional, to a “capabilities-based” one.

Planners began focusing on how a potential adversary might fight, rather than on the identity of a foe or a specific scenario. In turn, DOD concentrated on the capabilities adversaries might have or acquire—anti-satellite arms, ballistic missiles, cyber-war systems—in order to determine needed US capabilities.

In short, said the Pentagon, the US would not “over-optimize the joint force for a limited set of threat scenarios,” as it had for years, and leave itself open to potentially lethal surprises.

It was a hard sell. Over eight years, the concept drew numerous critics,

zealous in their condemnation of its alleged defects.

The most consequential critique grew out of the two long and painful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ground-force partisans said Rumsfeld's approach shortchanged soldiers and marines fighting unglamorous irregular wars and placed excessive emphasis on high-tech systems deemed critical for future conflicts, the most obvious being the F-22 fighter.

The case was put this way by Ralph Peters, columnist and retired Army of-

### **Without “prudent worrying,” we run a greater risk of a nasty military surprise.**

ficer: “If you found your hilltop house on fire, would you (A) put out the flames or (B) buy flood insurance? If your answer is ‘B,’ you are suited for a job in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.”

Others argued that Rumsfeld's way undermined political support for defense. The public, the argument ran, won't pay for nebulous “capabilities.” “As we divorced ourselves from a threat-based approach, we also divorced ourselves from [public] support, perhaps,” said Marine Corps Gen. James N. Mattis, commander of US Joint Forces Command.

In truth, capabilities-based planning was not at all new. One would be hard-pressed to find a more “capabilities-based” concept than USAF's air mobility planning. Nuclear force planning since the 1960s has spurned specific scenarios in favor of broad capabilities.

Even so, it is now clear that US war-fighting needs are being defined and funded in a different way. In the current Quadrennial Defense Review, which will shape future forces, DOD has moved to heavy use of specific country-oriented scenarios to define missions.

Critics charge this has unavoidably focused most attention on here-and-now challenges, which can be quantified, and shifted it away from more-distant dangers, which cannot be.

The QDR, for example, has identified shortfalls in US capabilities to deal with irregular-type threats as well as major “asymmetric” challenges from

large nations such as China. These are not speculative dangers; they exist today.

In response, Gates plans to add some 20,000 soldiers to the Army's ranks, while the Air Force, for its part, is flattening its fighter force structure and moving more toward UAVs, propeller-driven aircraft, and other weapons suited to lower-end conflict.

Pentagon officials would do well to recall why Rumsfeld pushed for capabilities-based force planning in the first place.

For 40 years—from Robert S. McNamara's arrival at the Pentagon in 1961 until Rumsfeld took charge in 2001, US defense planning was “threat-based.” More importantly, it was based on a “bounding” threat—first the Soviet Union, and then regional powers. These were “point-scenario” concepts, fixated on specific enemies, specific wars, specific places, and specific assumptions.

This produced two weaknesses. First, flexible and adaptive planning became a near impossibility.

Second, military planners became so blinkered that they missed potential dangers. The Gulf War was a surprise. Kosovo was a surprise. The Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attack was a surprise. The Iraqi insurgency was a surprise. The Taliban revival was a surprise. Given this poor record, say some officers, it's safer to pursue military capabilities with broad usefulness.

Given the pluses and minuses, it seems to us that neither a pure threat-based or pure capabilities-based planning concept is good enough. The correct course would feature some mixture of the two.

Certainly, it is dangerous to discard the capabilities approach. Paul K. Davis, a RAND expert on force planning, once observed that, whatever its faults, “capabilities-based planning has the virtue of encouraging prudent worrying about potential needs that go well beyond currently obvious threats.”

Lacking a sufficient amount of prudent worrying, we probably run a greater risk of suffering a nasty military surprise in the future. By then, though, today's officials will be gone from the Pentagon, and someone else will have to deal with the problem. ■