

Missing in Action: Strategic Clarity and Focus in U.S. National Security

Strategic Triage

The purpose of a national security strategy is to set clear priorities; unambiguously identifying the objectives that must be accomplished to promote and defend the national interest. These objectives must be attained through careful orchestration of diplomatic, military, economic, and informational ways and means. Strategic focus and clarity ensure: unity of purpose; concentration of effort; timely, decisive actions aimed at a clearly defined center of gravity; and cross-domain synergies – all time-tested keys to success. The inescapable corollary is that hazy vision and uncertainty result in: diffused efforts; crossing purposes; unnecessarily delayed, haphazard or futile actions; wasted resources; and, all too often, undesired, random, chaotic outcomes and unintended, dire consequences.

The old adage that if everything is deemed important, nothing really is – or in military parlance, that “he who seeks to defend everywhere, defends nowhere” – fully applies to strategic choices. Focus requires that certain interests be identified as vital; to be protected at all hazards. Other issues, while perhaps intrinsically important, will inevitably be relegated, pushed to the back burner, consigned to other actors as a primary responsibility, or dispensed with altogether. Such strategic triage is never easy or perfect, analogous to clearing under-brush and trees to regain a clear perspective of the forest. It is, however, vitally necessary in times of austerity.

Fiscal Context

Any effective strategy must account for the real-world context in which it is designed to operate. Absence such congruence, the ends become dangerously disconnected from the means. This, in turn, creates a credibility gap, questioning the validity of the entire enterprise.

As the drama of the Fiscal Cliff recedes from public memory, it is worth recalling that the December cliff-hanger generated more heat than light. Simply put, none of the systemic problems was solved. The last minute deal by the lame duck Congress merely kicked the can down the road, prolonging the uncertainty and making coherent planning virtually impossible.

Three critical actions are necessary starting March 1st – a very narrow window indeed, especially given that the House was scheduled to be in session for only 11 days in February.

The question I would ask this committee: What do you want your military to do? If you want it to be doing what it's doing today, then we can't give you another dollar. If you want us to do something less than that, we're all there with you and we'll figure it out.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey's response at the February 12th House Armed Services Committee hearing on whether the military can absorb further budget cuts

- 1. The Debt Limit:** The maximum amount of federal borrowing is set by law. The current ceiling of \$16.4 trillion was breached on December 31, 2012. On February 4, 2013, the President signed into law an Act that suspends the debt limit until May 18 (and provides for withholding Members' salaries as an incentive to pass a FY'14 budget resolution). This is a short-term fix. It merely delays the risk of default and another down-grade in the U.S. credit rating; outcomes that would harm the already sluggish economy and America's waning image abroad. The inexorable reality is that the national debt (mostly owed to China) is, as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Admiral Mike Mullen said, “the most serious threat to US national security.” The inescapable consequence is that the U.S. looks and behaves strapped. Hagglng with NATO allies over who pays for aircraft fuel and other incidentals (as was recently the case with France, whose troops the U.S. airlifted into Mali, to combat a common Islamist threat) is unseemly for a global power, whether we actually claim to lead or, as in Libya, choose to “lead from behind.”
- 2. Sequestration:** The Budget Control Act of 2011 makes Sequestration the law of the land. Originally designed to kick in on January 3rd, implementation was delayed to March 1st. Unless a new deal is reached regarding how to cut \$1.2 trillion in spending over the next ten years, automatic across-the-board cuts totaling nearly \$110 billion, equally divided between defense and non-defense spending, will occur on March 1st. Many are rightfully skeptical that an agreement the Executive and Legislature failed to reach in 18 months will be reached by then.

3. Appropriations: The 112th Congress did not complete a single Appropriations Bill. Since October 2012, the entire Federal Government is funded through a Continuing Resolution (CR). The CR resources all federal operations only through March 27, 2013 at an annual level of \$1.047 trillion, the amount set in the Budget Control Act of 2011. Effectively, a CR freezes activities at a previous budget year's levels, forbids new program starts, and severely limits fiscal flexibility by constraining all Departments' ability to shift funds between the various accounts under their purview. That, by itself, creates significant shortfalls and uncertainties. Unless Congress extends the CR, the U.S. government would have no choice but to shut down.

As for the Department of Defense (DoD), it is facing the prolonged specter of sequestration, while under a Continuing Resolution, while just beginning to absorb \$487 billion worth of cuts from 2011, and while still fighting and resourcing a war in Afghanistan. That is unprecedented.

Tippling Point

With civilian federal agencies under a semi-official gag-order, DoD became the de facto spokesman on the dire consequences of these fiscal realities. Repeated warnings from Secretary of Defense Panetta that sequestration will be nothing short of a "devastating disaster," were crystallized on January 10th when Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter issued an astoundingly detailed Action Memorandum. The Memo ordered the entire DoD to reduce base operations, "curtail" travel, conferences and "non-mission-critical training," and scale down facilities maintenance. It also imposed a hiring freeze, authorized the termination of temporary employees, and the suspension of term employees. Voluntary separation incentives and early retirements were encouraged, and the possibility of furloughs of those who chose to stay was highlighted. The Memo also directed agencies to "review" all contracts with an eye to reducing their "administrative expenses," and cancel all 3rd and 4th quarter ship and aircraft maintenance and other depot activities. Any research and development, production contract, or contract modifications that obligate more than \$500 million must be personally approved by the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics. Importantly, Secretary Carter prioritized the austerity measures such that ongoing combat operations and programs most closely associated with the new Defense Strategy, specifically the Asia-Pacific pivot, are to be "protected to the extent feasible."

On January 14th, the CJCS, Vice Chairman, and all the Service Chiefs exercised their Title X legal responsibility to warn Congress of threats to readiness and ability to execute the national strategy. In a rare "we are on the brink" message (leaked, like the Carter Memo), the top uniformed officers alerted the Chairmen of the Senate and Armed Services Committees in the starkest of terms that "the readiness of our armed forces is at a tipping point." It warned the cuts would result in grounded aircraft, ships stuck in

port and scaled-down training. "We are on the brink of creating a hollow force due to an unprecedented convergence of budget conditions and legislation that could require the department to retain more forces than requested while underfunding that force's readiness." The problem, they explained, is twofold. For one, sequestration would reduce military spending by nearly \$500 billion over the next decade. On top of that, the CR has made it difficult for the Services to meet current requirements. A year-long CR, if enacted in March, would result in major shortfalls. The result could be a one-two punch that reduces operating budgets by more than 20%. "Under the current budgetary uncertainty, we are at grave risk of an imposed mismatch between the size of our nation's military force and the funding required to maintain its readiness."

Following the Joint Chiefs' letter was an even more specific Memoranda issued by the Services to their subordinate commands. All warned of a dangerous decline in readiness and a "hollow force," unable to carry out the array of missions required of it by the President's Defense Guidance, by enduring Alliance commitments and by the ever present danger of military surprise. For example: The Navy estimates a funding shortfall of over \$4.6 billion for operations and maintenance – money needed to sustain training, maintain bases, and operate ships and aircraft. According to Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, the fleet will be forced to stop "nearly all non-deployed operations," a move "which will ultimately prevent Carrier Strike Groups and Amphibious Ready Groups from deploying." Operations in the turbulent Middle East and Pacific regions will be further reduced. "Once we shut down sustainment training, it will take our ships and squadrons about 9 months to conduct the maintenance and training needed to be certified to deploy again." The warning became reality on February 6th, when the Navy announced that its presence in the Persian Gulf would shrink to a single carrier, cancelling the scheduled deployment of a second carrier, the USS *Harry S. Truman*. The mightiest Navy the world has ever seen now forward-deploys only two Carrier Strike Groups: one in the Persian Gulf, the other in Japan. This sorry state of affairs, equally impacting the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, can only undermine America's global stature, deterrence posture, influence, and credibility in the eyes of both friends and foes.

The Perils of Ends-Means Mismatch

The situation is all the more disturbing since the 2012 Defense Guidance was expressly designed to focus U.S. strategy through a painful but necessary triage, stipulating what the military will no longer do, given its shrinking budget and leaned-out force. Stated differently, the purpose was to achieve strategic clarity by prioritizing national interests and closely aligning the desired ends with the available means. Thus, the Guidance should have been about doing less with less, specifying which missions America's overstretched military would no longer do.

However, there was no scaling down of the strategic ends in the President's letter which accompanied the Guidance. To

the contrary, the stated objectives were more expansive than ever, seeking “the security of our Nation, allies and partners,” “the prosperity that flows from an open and free international economic system,” and “a just and sustainable international order where the rights and responsibilities of nations are upheld, especially the fundamental rights of every human being.” While not addressing a pivot to Asia at the expense of other regions, the President promised a “focus on a broader range of challenges and opportunities, including security and prosperity of Asia Pacific.” He also vowed to “support political and economic reforms across the Middle East and North Africa and build allies’ and partners’ capacity to ensure regional security.” The President concluded with a vow to ensure that “our military is agile, flexible, and ready for the full range of contingencies” by investing in “capabilities critical to future success, including C4ISR, CT, countering WMD, operating in anti-access environments, and prevailing in all domains, including cyber.” If these are the strategic ends, a fair question is how will a battered military accomplish them?

America’s strategy is balanced on a knife’s edge. Sequestration has no strategic underpinnings. The yawning gap between lofty ends and meager means renders strategic clarity and focus moot. Worse, the fissure undermines America’s credibility as the indispensable global leader. Internally, the uncertainties and flux are debilitating, draining energy and diverting attention from real-world exigencies. In normal times, the Services and Combatant Commanders should have already submitted their 2014 Budget Request. Additionally this year, work on the Quadrennial Defense Review should have been well underway. Instead, the Chiefs’ worry about a hollowing force, while running countless (and largely useless) budget drills.

Troop and families’ morale are inevitably impacted, as is the much-maligned federal workforce. All this makes for to a “perfect storm,” fuelled by the most toxic political atmosphere in recent memory.

Deepening the sense of foreboding is the fact that the threat environment is more complex and dangerous than ever. Worse, the U.S. has a painful history of identifying areas to de-emphasize, only to find itself in ferocious combat in those very theaters. For example, six months after Secretary of State Dean Acheson placed the Korean Peninsula outside America’s defense parameter, North Korea invaded the South and the woefully unprepared U.S. forces came perilously close to defeat. This experience, along with the clear and singular national security focus of the Cold War, goes a long way to explain why the U.S. has been wary of explicitly prioritizing its interests and areas of concern. After slaying the Communist dragon, the U.S. faces vipers’ nests of unpredictable, asymmetric threats. If there is a strategic compass guiding America in these dangerous times, its needle is fluctuating wildly.

There are only three ways to close the yawning gap between ends and means: scale down the objectives, thus restoring strategic clarity and focus; increase the means, which is highly unlikely, given fiscal realities; or, most dangerously, bluff. Doing nothing and allowing the gap to deepen is the last resort. Its consequences are neatly captured by Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. When Alice asks the Cat which way she ought to go, he points out that it depended on where she wanted to get to. When Alice states, “I don’t much care where,” the Cat replies, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.” Alas, U.S. national security may already be headed down the rabbit hole.