UH-1Y Venom crew chief with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 164 (Reinforced), 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, fires Gun Aircraft Unit-17 machine gun during live-fire close-air support training event for Operation *Octave Quartz*, in Somalia, December 22, 2020 (U.S. Marine Corps/Kassie McDole)

Competing Regionally
Developing Theater Strategy

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The past two decades have been tough for strategists. Large-scale efforts in Central Asia and the Middle East did not bring the successes policymakers demanded, despite con-

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siderable blood and treasure expended, and though free of U.S. combat casualties, the record in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific is not much better. U.S. attempts to reset relations with Russia did not prevent invasions of its neighbors or stop significant Russian intelligence operations in cyberspace. The U.S. military buildup in the Indo-Pacific and clear redlines did not deter the People's Republic of China (PRC) from militarizing the South China Sea, undermining U.S. alliances in the region, or from using the power

of trade to reinforce China's national security positions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, both Russia and the PRC made inroads with their traditional partners, muting efforts to unify the region's commitment to democracy, cooperation, and transparency. And in Africa, U.S. and European efforts to squelch terrorism, aid developing economies, and become the partner of choice ran up against alternative proposals from Moscow and Beijing, as they continue to strengthen their positions beyond their regions. The limits

of the United States' ability to preserve its hegemony and restrain competitors have compelled the national security community to refocus on Great Power competition to inform strategy development at the regional level.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and China's military modernization convinced U.S. allies to spend more on defense. While budget deficits have yet to condition U.S. strategic decisions, it has never been clearer that the United States requires renewed efforts to improve strategic thinking, particularly at the regional level. As such documents as the National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy attest, the United States attempts to shape the international security environment by balancing threats in key regions of the world, assisting partners in addressing security deficits, and supporting allies to solve their own security dilemmas against regional challengers. Although overarching security strategies are driven by the national security advisor and key Federal departments, combatant commands must translate national objectives into theater strategy.

The last 20 years of incomplete counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and postconflict reconstruction efforts underscore Hal Brands's argument that strategy "should flow not from mere reactions to day-to-day events, but from a judgment of those enduring interests that transcend any single crisis."[1] In general, the United States consistently attempts to defuse situations before they become crises through a strategy of prevention and improving partner capacity and capabilities to control security challenges.[2]

As the numerous defense and national documents suggest, strategies are relatively easy to develop, but Carl von Clausewitz is instructive here: "Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy."[3] The challenge for the strategist is to coordinate the various levers of national power in a coherent way and implement at the country and regional levels. Taken from a budgetary and policy perspective, the Department of Defense (DOD) tends to dominate

U.S. national security. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argues that "the American government had become too reliant on the use of military power to defend and extend our interests internationally, that the use of force had become a first choice rather than a last resort."[4] To avoid this pitfall, some advocate "rebalancing" the U.S. approach to national security through greater investment in nonmilitary tools, and the chorus continues to call for interagency efforts, whole-of-government solutions, and primacy of public-private partnerships.[5]

To be effective in a differentiated world—through holistic approaches—strategists must answer three basic questions: What do we wish to achieve, or what are the desired *ends*? How do we get there, or what are the *ways*? And what resources are available, or what *means* will be used? Though the first question is largely the domain of civilian policymakers, military officers are expected to advise and ultimately implement strategy. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey notes, "Strategic coherence . . . does not just happen. Rather, it results from dialogue and debate."[6] With regular interactions with their counterparts throughout the world, combatant commanders are key national security actors in the strategy development and implementation process.

Defining Strategy

At a minimum, strategy should link ends, ways, and means. For DOD, *strategy* is "a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives."[7] Strategy is also about *how* leadership can use the *power* available to the state to influence people, places, things, and events to achieve *objectives* in accordance with national interests and policies. In fact, Brands describes *grand strategy* as a "discipline of trade-offs: it requires using the full extent of national power when essential matters are at stake, but it also involves conserving and protecting the sources of that power."[8] Nina Silove further states that grand strategy "includes consideration of the use of all the state's resources, not just military force."[9]

Henry Bartlett visualizes strategy as an *interaction* among key variables: the security environment, ends, ways, means, resource constraints, and risk.[10] As figure 1 shows, strategy is shaped simultaneously by the very same security environment that it is attempting to mold. Just as no plan remains intact after first contact with the enemy, no strategy can exist outside the real world. Allies, partners, and adversaries can impede successful strategy implementation by

Figure 1. The Shaping of Strategy

Marines with 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment; British Royal Marines with 40 Commando; Australian Army with 3rd Royal Australian Regiment; and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers conduct amphibious landing during exercise Talisman Sabre 21 in Ingham, Queensland, Australia, July 30, 2021 (U.S. Army/ Matthew Mackintosh)

balking at U.S. demands, imposing caveats on forces in coalition operations, and engaging in efforts that outright undermine U.S. objectives. These examples simply constitute friction, and it should come as no surprise that sovereign countries will make strategic decisions that are not always congruent with U.S. interests.

At the same time the international security environment affects strategy, so do resource constraints. As Colin Dueck argues, the U.S. approach to strategy is flawed: "Sweeping and ambitious goals are announced, but then pursued by disproportionately limited means, thus creating an outright invitation to failure."[11] Since the 1990s, the limits of (and frustration with) U.S. grand strategy tend to be explained by an expansive view of security challenges that includes subnational and transnational challenges. Because burden-sharing through coalition operations is a norm, combatant commands are key to train and equip partners to address their security deficits, sponsor regional exercises, and employ military forces.

The strategist can look to national interests as a starting point—to set priorities and to determine ends, because they help identify the reasons countries employ military forces. National interests can be universal and enduring, such as ensuring the security of the state and its people. National interests can also be the product of national policies, such as advancing democratic institutions or protecting the environment. Ranking national interests is important to setting priorities. Hans Morgenthau distinguishes between vital national interests and secondary interests; the latter are more difficult to define.[12] Presidential policy, which can be spelled out in the National Security Strategy, is one source for discerning vital from secondary interests, but when Presidents involve the United States in the international system, strategy is also driven by policy considerations that examine risk to the U.S. reputation and treasury and to the lives of U.S. national security practitioners. Along these lines, Peter Liotta observes that national interests should assist leaders in answering a fundamental question: "What are we willing to *die*

for?"[13] That is, where is the United States willing to put lives at risk? To this we add, "What are we willing to kill for?" and "What are we willing to fund?" One relatively simple approach to these rather complex and somewhat ambiguous questions is to stratify national interests:

- Vital interests: What are we willing to die for (for example, invade Afghanistan with ground forces to destroy al Qaeda, or deploy forces to Syria to disrupt the Islamic State)?
- Important interests: What are we willing to kill for (for example, participate in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization air campaign to prevent genocide in Libya, or engage in unilateral airstrikes against terrorists in East Africa)?
- Peripheral interests: What are we willing to fund (for example, support the Afghan National Security Forces through the U.S. defense budget, or support a global vaccination campaign by a nongovernmental organization)?

The United States has many ways to advance its national interests through friendly surrogates. For example, the Joseph R. Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* states that "we will reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world."[14] In other words, the Nation is willing to fund others to provide humanitarian assistance, conduct peacekeeping operations, and support international military coalitions. For example, the Global Peace Operations Initiative was designed to train and equip foreign peacekeepers for global deployment. Such a program seeks to limit the impact of regional crises, while providing the international community a ready pool of international peacekeepers. Along these lines, Washington was willing to fund African militaries to operate in Somalia, but it was not willing to deploy ground forces or establish a no-fly zone. This kind of tactic is likely to increase in an era of burden-sharing, where "building partner capacity is an essential military mission and an important component of the U.S. Government's approach to preventing and responding to crisis, conflict, and

instability."[15] Moreover, collaboration and cooperation are especially important during periods of fiscal austerity. By developing new partnerships that advance U.S. interests and maintain favorable regional balances of power, combatant commands are critical to this effort.[16]

After ends are defined, policymakers and national security professionals devise the ways to achieve national interests. Ways can be thought of as concepts, which are activities that define how elements, systems, organizations, and tactics combine to accomplish national objectives or tasks.[17] By specifying ways or concepts, the military departments can then develop required capabilities and attempt to limit redundancies. Concepts also propose necessary changes for the joint force to improve its ability to fight and win across all warfighting domains in future conflicts.[18] For example, the 2012 Capstone Concept for Joint Operations drove the development of joint operating concepts designed to achieve operational access as well as fight and win against advanced peer competitors in contested environments and across multiple domains. These concepts also identified several required capabilities, including the ability to conduct forcible entry operations, defeat enemy targeting systems, conduct and support operational maneuver over strategic distances, and conduct electronic attack and computer network strikes, while being able to detect and respond to such attacks by an adversary.[19] The means to provide these capabilities range from cyber units to submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers, but the concept gives specific guidance on what the joint force actually needs.

As Presidential administrations evaluate ways to advance and defend national interests, criteria emerge suggesting conditions for military force employment. Gates argues that "as essential as it is to build and maintain a strong military, it's just as—or more—important to know when and how to use it."[20] Not all crises around the world warrant the commitment of U.S. forces, so leaders must also be willing to answer the following question: What are we willing to live with? The

Soldier stands watch next to M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicle in Syria, October 30, 2020, in support of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation *Inherent Resolve* (U.S. Army/Jensen Guillory)

2020 Chicago Council Survey found that, despite fatigue from fighting the "forever wars" and enduring a global pandemic, 68 percent of the public maintains that the United States should take an active part in world affairs, and 54 percent say that the Nation should be more involved, not less, in addressing global problems.[21] The military, however, favors a conservative approach to force employment that traces its roots to the Vietnam experience, is embodied in the Weinberger Doctrine, and was reinforced by operations in the Middle East and Central Asia.[22]

Strategists should analyze suitability, acceptability, and feasibility: Is the action suitable or likely to achieve the desired ends? Also, is it an acceptable choice given ethical, legal, political, and organizational constraints? At tactical levels, planners must ensure their ideas are feasible or can be carried out with the resources granted; at the strategic level, feasibility is more complicated, as strategists have the dual task of identifying resource gaps to guide future investments while not relying on concepts whose resource demands will never plausibly be met. This is one reason the Bartlett model of figure 1 shows never-ending iteration.

If *ways* provide the framework or concepts identifying how elements of national power will be used to promote ends, then *means* are the specific tools or capabilities available for carrying out those concepts. Raw resources such as money and people are not means until they are considered and prioritized within the context of strategy. Overall, the United States has a complex system for prioritizing and developing defense capabilities. Details and processes change over time, but essentially DOD first aims to identify gaps between the capabilities it already has and those needed to carry out desired strategies. Next, DOD prioritizes those gaps given likely resource constraints and develops programs to create needed capabilities. Finally, DOD works within the executive branch and with Congress to fund the programs.[23]

As the eventual consumers of DOD capabilities, combatant commands give important support to concept and capability development, at times serving as executive agents. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 formalized this process to "utilize the significant experience and knowledge of [combatant commands] in the validation of critical capabilities and the development of future forces in U.S. defense planning."[24] One of the ways combatant commanders accomplish this objective is by producing an Integrated Priority List (IPL) that sends a formal "demand signal" to the Pentagon by identifying capability gaps and providing the commander's "highest priority requirements, prioritized across Service and functional lines. IPLs define shortfalls in key programs that may adversely affect the combatant commander's mission."[25] Additionally, combatant commands offer input into the Joint Requirements Oversight Council, which is critical to determining and validating DOD capability requirements.[26]

Although intuitive and rational in theory, effective combatant command

F-15C Eagles assigned to 48th Fighter Wing conduct aerial operations in support of Bomber Task Force Europe 20-2, over North Sea, March 16, 2020 (U.S. Air Force/Matthew Plew)

participation in practice has proved challenging given competing perspectives and interests. For example, tension exists between the capability requirements of combatant commands that are focused on the immediate challenges within their areas of operation and the Services that take a more global and long-term view. The differing perspectives between the "warfighters" and "force providers" are understandable but introduce a level of friction in a resource-constrained environment. The Joint Requirements Oversight Council serves as a collaborative forum in which these issues are considered as part of the decisionmaking process. Annual combatant command testimony also provides Congress with a voice from the field—one it may not hear inside the Beltway.

Overall strategic success is based on how well ends, ways, and means are balanced. Julian Corbett observes that one must constantly keep in view the politico-diplomatic position of the country (on which depends the effective action

of the military instrument) and its commercial and financial position (by which the energy for working the military instrument is maintained).[27] Although Corbett's advice is clearly not ideal, commanders are well advised to heed it. In its simplest form, defense budgeting is a key variable that impacts strategy implementation. For example, Kathleen Hicks argues that the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) requires the military to "navigate the painful trade-offs among readiness, investment, and structure, since all three types of spending are needed to keep pace with China and Russia."[28] Because decisions about these tradeoffs directly impact the ability of the joint force to successfully carry out the strategy, they should be made according to clearly defined priorities.

A strategy is not considered complete until a risk analysis determines the ability of the organization to carry out the tasks and missions specified and implied by that strategy. Risk results from a mismatch among ends, ways, and means. With

military strategy, the strategist considers four dimensions of risk.[29] *Operational risks* are associated with the current force's ability to execute the strategy within acceptable costs. *Future challenges risks* involve the military's capacity to execute future missions against an array of prospective challengers. *Force management risks* are those that pertain to recruiting, training, equipping, and retaining personnel. Finally, *institutional risks* relate to organizational efficiency, financial management, and technology development.[30] To identify and measure risk, DOD uses exercises, scenarios, and experimentation.[31]

As the preceding discussion suggests, strategy is developed in the context of the international security environment, and tactics must be reviewed as they are used in the real world. Again, strategy is an iterative process. Reevaluation and interpreting surprise recalls Sun Tzu's famous exaltation, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."[32] Ideally, perfect knowledge ensures success, but history

is replete with evidence to the contrary. Because "[w]ar is . . . an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will," the enemy has a vote too.[33] War is characterized by fog and friction. Winston Churchill understood this, noting, "The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events."[34] The preceding discussion applies to the development and evaluation of strategy in general, but national security professionals are primarily concerned with three specific levels of strategy: national or "grand" strategy, military strategy, and theater strategy.

Levels of Strategy

Grand strategy is the highest level of strategy and encompasses all elements of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.[35] Basil Liddell Hart correctly notes that "whereas strategy is only concerned with the problem of winning military victory, grand strategy must take the longer view—for its problem is winning the peace. Such an order of thought is not a matter of putting the horse before the cart, but of being clear where the horse and cart are going."[36] Walter Russell Mead reminds, "Tactics . . . was about winning battles; strategy was about winning campaigns and wars. Grand strategy was about deciding what wars to fight."[37] Although the Nation has always followed a grand strategy (for example, containment during the Cold War), Congress requires the President to publish a National Security Strategy. As required by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, this strategy describes:

the worldwide interests, goals, and objectives . . . the foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression . . . the proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests . . . the adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy.[38]

Since the statutory requirement, more than a dozen national security strategies have been released by U.S. Presidents responding to particular security challenges during their tenures, with many persisting today: the ending of the Cold War for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, the rise of nationalist conflicts and global terrorism for Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, a focus on the Indo-Pacific region for Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and the global pandemic and climate change for President Joseph Biden. There have been continuous policies related to trade, America's leadership in global affairs, and the promotion of international organizations to unify action. For example, Paul D. Miller argues that "contrary to widespread belief, the United States has been pursuing at least one pillar of an implicit grand strategy since the end of the Cold War: building the democratic peace."[39]
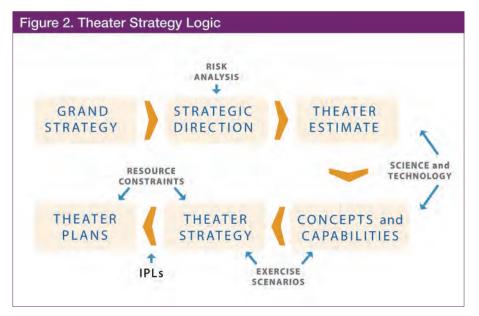
Deriving strategic guidance from the country's grand strategy, DOD has regularly produced a National Military Strategy (NMS) since the 1990s. In 2003, Congress required the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to submit a biennial review of the NMS in even-numbered years. The NMS outlines the strategic direction for the Armed Forces by providing guidance for force planning, force employment, posture, and future force development; it also acts a strategic framework to prioritize planning, resource allocation, and risk management, by looking beyond the near term to identify long-range operational requirements for the joint force.[40]

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act replaced the Quadrennial Defense Review with a mandated NDS that articulates the highest priority missions for DOD and major investments in defense capabilities to address the most critical and enduring threats to U.S. national security interests. The NDS is required to be produced every 4 years and include a strategic framework to guide DOD prioritization regarding the "force size and shape, force posture . . . organization and other elements of the defense program necessary to support the

strategy."[41] Though their number can be overwhelming, strategic documents in the United States are intended to work together to provide "nested strategic direction" supporting the tasks, missions, and intent of the next higher strategy. As an example, the 2017 National Security Strategy marked a departure from the almost-two-decade-long war on terror and emphasized the growing challenge of "revisionist powers" such as Russia and China that "want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests."[42] This change in strategic priorities was acknowledged and echoed in the 2018 NDS that proclaimed, "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[43] This priority carried through the Biden administration. With this "nesting of strategy" in mind and an understanding of how to develop strategy, the following section focuses on how to develop theater strategy.

Theater Strategy

Using national strategy as a guide, combatant commands develop theater strategies that are "an overarching construct outlining a combatant commander's vision for integrating and synchronizing military activities and operations with the other instruments of national power in order to achieve national strategic objectives."[44] Theater strategy is the bridge between national strategic guidance and joint operational planning, as it guides the development of the Combatant Command Campaign Plan (CCP). Although discrete documents with unique purposes, theater strategy and the CCPs are simultaneously mutually dependent. The CCP operationalizes the theater strategy and offers a more detailed and integrated approach to achieving security objectives including engagement, security assistance, and presence activities that support contingency plans (for example, securing access to bases or improving partner capabilities). More broadly, theater strategies should seek to make conflicts less likely, by achieving U.S. ends through security cooperation and other tools of national power.[45]

Figure 2. Theater Strategy Logic

A major challenge in developing theater strategy is the requirement to coordinate theater security cooperation activities with other U.S. Government agencies and activities. These activities can cover the entire spectrum of conflict—from peace operations to major combat operations—and often occur simultaneously, adding another level of complexity for the commander's staff to consider. The strategy must therefore be broad and flexible enough to encompass a wide variety of political-military activities across a combatant command's area of responsibility (AOR).[46] As a result, combatant commands are encouraged to involve their interagency counterparts in the crafting of these strategies to secure buy-in from these stakeholders, as these individuals bring different perspectives that enrich the planning process.

Theater strategy must also consider other countries' activities. General Rick Hillier, former chief of the Canadian Defence Staff, remarked, "International cohesion is usually the first casualty of having tactics without a strategy to guide you."[47] Consequently, military diplomacy is essential for combatant commands; they must coordinate their activities with regional partners and allies to approach unity of effort. Such collaboration also happens at the country team level, where defense attachés and ambassadors interact with their counterparts.

Despite the complexity and criticality of theater strategy, there exists relatively little doctrine or other guidance on developing it. Perhaps this dearth is a contributing factor in Charles Bouchat's observation that "no two combatant commands follow the same process, format, or procedures for developing theater strategy. Each combatant command has adapted its method to the peculiarities of its region and the personalities of its commanders."[48] As part of the unifying effort, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has directed professional military education institutions to teach officers to "discern the military dimensions of a challenge affecting National interest; frame the issue at the policy level; and recommend viable military options within the overarching frameworks of globally integrated operations."[49] Additionally, to bring rigor to theater campaign plan development, Joint Publication 5-0 includes a detailed chapter on the subject of campaigning and the differences between CCPs and contingency plans.[50]

While acknowledging the complexity of developing and aligning the various strategies and operational planning efforts, we offer a logic model designed to translate grand strategy and associated strategic direction into theater strategy and associated plans.[51]

The model begins with national (grand) strategy, which defines U.S.

security interests, objectives, and priorities and offers guidance to all who are charged with its execution, including combatant commands. Using the National Security Strategy for direction, DOD and the Joint Staff produce strategic guidance that, through several critical documents, focuses on the military instrument of national power and provides direction for combatant commanders. In addition to the NDS and NMS, the Unified Command Plan (UCP) "sets forth basic guidance to all unified combatant commanders; establishes their missions, responsibilities, and force structure; delineates the general geographical AOR for [combatant commanders with physical areas of responsibility]; and specifies functional responsibilities for [the other] combatant commanders."[52]

DOD reviews the UCP every 2 years, and the plan is changed as conditions and circumstances require. Though many changes are relatively mundane, some are more strategically significant. For example, the 2020 UCP shifted Israel from its longstanding position in U.S. European Command to U.S. Central Command. This change was an acknowledgment of the "easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors after the Abraham Accords" and offers an opportunity for the United States "to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East."[53] It also allows U.S. European Command to focus on Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization problem set.

In addition to the NMS, strategic direction is furthered in the Joint Strategic Campaign Plan. Operationalizing the NMS, this plan with a 5-year outlook is "the Chairman's primary document to guide and direct the preparation and integration of Joint Force campaign and contingency plans."[54] It aims to integrate joint force global operations, activities, and investments from the day-to-day campaign up to and including contingencies. In addition to directing global and functional campaign plans, the Joint Strategic Campaign Plan also directs regional campaign plans (with global implications) and CCPs.

Armed with national strategy and strategic direction as well as the

Guardsmen from Puerto Rico Army National Guard Aviation assist USAID personnel with loading provisions to UH-60 helicopter, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, August 24, 2021 (U.S. Army National Guard/Agustin Montanez)

commander's guidance, the staff is prepared to begin formulating theater strategy. One of the most critical steps is to conduct a thorough theater estimate, which is "the process by which a theater commander assesses the broad strategic factors that influence the theater strategic environment, thus further determining the missions, objectives, and courses of action throughout their theaters."[55] The estimate includes a mission analysis that derives specified, implied, and essential tasks as well as theater-strategic objectives (ends) and desired effects. It is important to note there is a reconciliation between what *can be* identified as a threat and what *is* identified as an object for U.S. national security—and the theater estimate requires continuous refinement. In addition to a detailed analysis of the combatant command's mission, capabilities, and limitations, the estimate should:

- Identify in the security environment any states, groups, or organizations that might challenge the combatant command's ability to advance and defend U.S. interests in the region. Examined through a national interest lens, this analysis should include an appreciation for relevant geopolitical, geo-economic, and cultural considerations within the region.
- Broadly assess the risks inherent in major uncertainties in the depiction of the security environment. Identify the major strategic and operational challenges facing the combatant command to inform plans.
- Identify known or anticipated opportunities the combatant command could leverage, including those states, groups, or organizations that could assist the command in advancing and defending U.S. interests in the region.
- Identify opportunities to partner with other U.S. Government entities or international partners in support of larger U.S. Government objectives in the region.

The theater estimate is crucial to set the context for the combatant command's mission analysis. Commanders articulate their intent through a vision that describes how the theater strategy supports U.S. goals and objectives. The vision should discuss the general methods to achieve those objectives, including international assistance and diplomacy as well as military means. Additionally, it may describe where the combatant commander is willing to accept risk. Finally, it should introduce and describe the appropriate strategic and operational concepts for the military instrument of power.

A good vision must be compelling to a broad audience. A coherent and credible vision serves as a communication tool that provides essential continuity and integrity to the everyday challenges and decisions within the combatant command's theater. For instance, if

the combatant commander's vision is embraced by coalition partners, regional leaders, the U.S. country teams in the region, the associated Department of State regional bureaus, and Congress, then there is a good chance that the strategy will be successful.

Once the theater estimate is complete, the strategist must write concepts that articulate the ways to achieve the theater strategy objectives or ends. First, the strategist must develop and consider strategic alternatives that can be expressed either as broad statements of what is to be accomplished or as lines of operations. The concepts often draw from preexisting examples guided by the Joint Staff and influenced by the capabilities developed by the military Services.

These concepts also form the basis for subsequent planning efforts that include combat operations, security cooperation, and other types of support.[56] Additionally, they identify the means necessary for the command to attain its identified theater-strategic and national objectives. The means normally include interagency and multinational capabilities as well as the full spectrum of U.S. military resources. In many cases, combatant commanders identify capability gaps that can be filled with resources that already exist within DOD but are not assigned to that theater or do not exist in sufficient capacity. In other cases, the command may identify capabilities—from across the spectrum of doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy, not just hardware—that must be created, modified, or accelerated. Such capability requirements are submitted from the combatant command to DOD through an IPL. In either case, sound and clear strategic concepts are invaluable in articulating those capability needs to senior leaders.

Theater Strategy and the U.S. Country Team

Of the many lessons from the past decades of military operations, Gates's argument of overreliance on the use of military power deserves special attention. The Goldwater-Nichols Act's establishment of combatant command-

ers' direct reporting and accountability to the Secretary of Defense, and Congress's predilection to support the defense budget, might have signaled an irreversible militarization of U.S. national security policy. Moreover, by 1986, DOD developed and procured preeminent hard power capability through the so-called Reagan buildup[57] that has only grown since the end of the Cold War and enabled the United States to be a global power with worldwide interests, rather than a regional hegemon focused on territorial defense.

What does this mean for the development of theater strategy today? As previously discussed, theater strategy should not be viewed as a separate element of foreign policy; rather, it should be considered an important element of it. And one way to realize this ambition is by understanding Department of State strategic planning and development of foreign policy objectives down to the country level.

The Department of State uses a parallel strategic planning structure to create and resource foreign policy objectives.[58] Developed in Washington, the Joint Strategic Plan outlines agency-level goals and objectives shared by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Of increasing interest to theater strategists, the six regional bureaus establish priorities and coordinate U.S. foreign relations within their respective geographic areas.[59] Each of the chiefs of mission accredited to countries and international organizations maintaining diplomatic relationships with the United States develops an Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) that sets forth U.S. priorities, a mission strategic framework, the mission's objectives, and management aims.

An examination of foreign policy at the country level as stated in these publicly available documents reveals considerable interest in the military instrument of power. Many countries around the world face challenges from neighboring states and subnational and transnational groups; thus, a recurrent thread in these strategies includes building capacity for partners to provide for

their own security, establishing a resilient security environment, and developing strong institutions. Country-level foreign policy often places a high demand on military capabilities, and theater strategists should plan to provide security cooperation and other military support as communicated in the ICS.

The fact that security is a common thread in many ICSs rebuts the criticism that foreign policy has become increasingly militarized; rather, it reflects an environment where the goals of combatant commanders and U.S. ambassadors interconnect. Security cooperation activities are important U.S. deliverables to a partner country. While combatant commanders might not know all the details in these strategies, they are mindful of the goals these documents identify and the foreign policies they represent. Shoon Murray and Anthony Quainton explored this by interviewing dozens of ambassadors, concluding that combatant commanders are "savvy team players who respected their civilian ambassadorial authority . . . [and] a discordant relationship between a commander and ambassador is the exception."[60]

To coordinate these activities, combatant commanders might spend two-thirds of their time outside of their headquarters equally split between their regional AOR and Washington meeting with prominent actors responsible for devising the national strategies described earlier in this article. When visiting another country, the combatant commander often first calls on the U.S. chief of mission to affirm defense support for diplomatic efforts and to promote unity of effort. Moreover, combatant commanders and chiefs of missions often jointly engage not only host-country military and defense leadership but often its civilian political leadership as well. This use of time speaks to the value combatant commanders place on foreign policy integration.

The differing alignment of the six DOD combatant commands with territorial areas of responsibility and the six Department of State regional bureaus induces friction into comprehensive approaches to foreign policy challenges.[61] For example, both

U.S. Northern Command and U.S. Southern Command share equities with the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; U.S. Africa Command has equities with two regional bureaus; and there is a separate South and Central Asian Affairs regional bureau straddling U.S. Central Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). Depending on the viewpoint, there are either military or diplomatic rationales for the divergence, but the fact remains that the working relationship of combatant commanders and chiefs of mission requires thoughtful coordination to overcome these long-standing territorial challenges.

Within the embassy, the senior defense official (SDO) plays an important role in overcoming this bureaucratic obstacle. SDOs range widely in rank; most are also accredited as the defense attaché, and others serve as the commander of the military group, chief of the office of defense cooperation, or the chief of the military liaison office. Although these officers are also responsive to Washington, they are the bridge between the chief of mission and the combatant commander.[62] Theater strategists should therefore engage the SDOs and solicit the views of the U.S. country teams to better understand the foreign policy objectives in the AOR and to infuse interagency unity of effort into theater strategy from the start.

DOD fulfills an important component of U.S. foreign policy and one that is highly valued by its interagency counterparts. The resources available to combatant commands provide options for U.S. diplomats who often have a broader view of how those resources are best applied in countries within the AOR. In addition to reflecting national strategies and strategic direction, effective theater strategy must therefore recognize the importance of these different foreign policy perspectives. Theater strategy should also convey how the military instrument of power supports diplomacy and where the military capabilities of the combatant command advance U.S. foreign policy goals.

Implementation

Once the theater strategy is complete and approved, the next step is implementation, or executing the strategy. Without the means, competencies, and informed thinking to carry out the commander's intent, the strategy is just an idea.[63] For example, designating USINDOPACOM as the DOD priority theater[64] without the commensurate resources negatively affects deterrence operations, undercuts the meaning of

Soldiers of 3rd Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regiment, and mortarmen from 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, conduct familiarization class with their counterparts from 6th Field Artillery Regiment, 23rd Battalion, Royal Thai Army, during Hanuman Guardian 20, February 26, 2020, in Korat, Thailand (U.S. Army/Angelo Mejia)

Marine with Marine Rotational Force–Europe 19.2, Marine Forces Europe and Africa, fires MK 19 automatic grenade launcher during exercise Platinum Eagle, in Babadag Training Area, Romania, September 18, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Larisa Chavez)

defense reassurances, increases uncertainty in contested areas, and risks defeat in a major military conflict.

The theater strategy should also outline the structures, policies, technology, and people necessary to carry it out. As previously discussed, in today's complex security environment, theater strategy implementation requires the cooperation of multiple governmental and nongovernmental organizations as well as international allies and partners. One of the most challenging tasks for the combatant command is ensuring that there is a credible commitment among all participants to accomplish the common goals.

With theater strategy playing a key role in U.S. foreign policy, it is important to know how to evaluate the strategy. In pure combat terms, it is easy to measure whether the military disrupts, degrades, or destroys enemy forces, and it is easy to see when combat operations fail to achieve national security objectives. In

permissive environments, the objectives are less clear and broader than military objectives. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen noted that the effects may never be clearly calculable and that cultural sensitivities might preclude measurement.[65]

At a minimum, a strategy is designed to change the security environment by promoting a favorable balance of power and preventing the emergence of a peer competitor, increasing the number of democracies in the world, and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. In a broader sense, as this article makes clear, strategy develops and employs all tools of national power to advance and defend national interests. Consequently, when evaluating strategy, one must examine the strategy's concept of national interests, view of the security environment, strategic priorities, role of power, impact on resources, required means, risk, feasibility, suitability, and acceptability.

A theater strategy should contain measurements to calibrate its progress toward achieving goals and objectives. There are three broad categories of measures: input, output, and outcome. Resources (funds, personnel, and equipment) are typical examples of input. Interagency or coalition support might be another resource prerequisite. Outputs are performance measures that directly track progress toward goals and objectives. Outputs depend on adequate resources, such as securing an area or building infrastructure, and are accomplishments over which the combatant command has considerable direct control. These measures are usually quantifiable and have associated time frames. In contrast, outcomes are often qualitative and are therefore more difficult to measure; they are usually only influenced and not directly controlled by the combatant command. Examples may include participation in coalition operations or the

relative receptivity to U.S. forces within the partner country. Outcomes are often referred to as strategic *effects*, the ultimate goals of the theater strategy and combatant commander's intent.[66]

The practical value of performance measurement systems is that they enable the combatant command to evaluate the strategy's progress in achieving desired and clearly identified goals and objectives. Most theater strategies have a hierarchy of performance metrics starting with high-level outcome metrics that are supported by more detailed and granular performance (output) metrics. Recognizing that measurability might be challenged, high-level outcome metrics should nevertheless also consider the goals of the aforementioned parallel diplomatic strategies. The essential point is that performance measurement systems must be consistent and aligned with strategic goals.

Conclusion: Evaluating Strategy

In practice, strategic decisions must always compete with the demands of domestic politics, or what Samuel Huntington has called "structural decisions" or choices "made in the currency of domestic politics."[67] But we cannot overlook that strategic decisions and funding strategy represent choices for both Congress and the President within a larger context. Modern strategists are not locked away in bunkers developing the ideal; they are working for institutions that compete with other institutions for space on the national agenda and for resources. The most important structural decision concerns the size and distribution of funds made available to the Armed Forces. The strategic planner can never ignore the fiscal constraints that link domestic politics and national security. Indeed, political reality sometimes dictates that budgetary caps will constitute the primary influence on strategy and force structure, which requires new ways to think about advancing and defending national interests. Michèle Flournoy argues that "the imperative is clear: the U.S. military must reimagine how it fights," which will require a wholesale

shift in mindset. While acknowledging that changing organizational cultures is "far harder than revising a defense strategy," we attest that inertia presents the greater risk—that "ultimately, the strategy will fail unless these operational changes succeed."[68]

Further, Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski point out that "bureaucratic and organizational impediments—and the occasionally tendentious relationship between civilian and military leaders—complicate the Nation's ability to respond to the plethora of threats, differing actors, and various forms of conflict. The cumulative effect obstructs the Nation's ability to implement any single grand strategy, no matter how sound its overarching principles or how carefully it prioritizes particular threats and allocates resources."[69] We are less sanguine about the importance of strategy but are mindful of the importance of organizational, domestic, and international influences on national security.[70] Potential mismatches create risks. If the risks resulting from an ends-ways-means mismatch cannot be managed, then ends must be reevaluated and scaled back, means must be increased, or the strategy must be adjusted. That said, when done correctly, theater strategy enables the combatant command to synchronize available resources and achieve theater objectives. **JFQ**

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Notes

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