

CONFRONTING AN IRREGULAR AND CATASTROPHIC FUTURE

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Next year's *Quadrennial Defense Review* (or QDR) will be the most important since the end of the Cold War. A frank appraisal of the nation's strategic future in light of September 11, 2001 (9/11), experience in the war on terrorism, and on-going conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan indicates a need for substantial adjustment to the strategy reflected in QDR '01. Such adjustments in defense strategy and policy, however, require that the future trajectory of the nation's primary challenges be thoroughly reassessed.

The most likely, virulent, and persistent challenges for the foreseeable future will be irregular and increasingly catastrophic in character. Further, although nonstate sources pose the most pressing irregular and catastrophic threats today, we cannot discount the prospect that all hostile competition—to include that with states—will trend in this direction over time. Taken to their logical ends, strategic adjustments founded on such an outlook would mark a very distinct philosophical shift in the strategic calculus of some American strategy and policy elites. Further, it would balance strategic priorities and address what has been an over-emphasis on the prospect of future peer competition.

The past 3 years have been instructive. We have learned through very real and often difficult strategic experience that our most significant hostile competition for the foreseeable future will arrive via decidedly unconventional routes—terrorism, insurgency, and emerging concepts such as “unrestricted warfare.” The inherent grand strategic danger of these challenges often lies not in their immediate impact but rather in their very persistence. Their corrosive effects accumulate over time, undermining our position of primary influence. Thus, purposeful irregular resistance—whether global or local in origin—seeks to offset recognized U.S. advantages in traditional forms of warfare, erode political will, and drive real and perceived costs to prohibitive levels.

The most capable irregular adversaries recognize America's advantages, reduce their own vulnerability to them, and target our minds instead of our might. Tactical military victories are less important than the persistent imposition and accumulation of physical, psychological, and material costs. This steady compounding of adverse effects is intended to tip the cost benefit calculations against pursuit of particular strategic courses of action and force strategic retreat. We see this approach at work today in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the wider war with Islamic extremism.

There is near certainty that the most active and capable irregular adversaries will seek more immediate and far reaching impact through weapons of mass destruction (WMD). While 9/11 proved that catastrophic effects can come from other means, preventing irregular enemies from acquiring WMD, especially employable nuclear and biological capabilities, is vital. Successful employment of catastrophic WMD capabilities and methods against us would, in an instant, transform a persistent, corrosive, but more

manageable threat into one whose effects are more comprehensive, immediate, and paralyzing.

Until 9/11 and the messy irregular conflicts that ensued, many Americans and elite opinionmakers expected a sustainable “long peace” founded on our predominance in a number of competitive domains. The prevailing wisdom held that, given adequate investment in transformational but still largely traditional capabilities, American military preponderance would harden us against all competitors *that mattered*. Many were certain that simply maintaining recognized advantages through technological innovation was enough to offset meaningful strategic competition.

Recent experience reveals this logic to be flawed. The strategic environment is more complex and perilous than expected, and we are apparently more vulnerable to purposeful irregular challengers than previously anticipated. The proven virulence and adaptability of these challengers, combined with the prospect of additional catastrophic attacks, call for fundamental adjustments to the grand strategic design adopted in 2001. Particularly critical is recognition that two fundamental assumptions supporting that design have been discredited. First, American predominance in traditional military power has not, as was widely believed, deterred active resistance to our influence worldwide. It has simply foreclosed adversary options in traditional realms. Second, hostile rogue states and budding great powers are not the only prospective challenges of strategic relevance. Our preeminent position draws active resistance from many directions—most immediately by less traditional, often nonstate, challengers. Thus, we must prepare to contend with a period of persistent irregular and potentially catastrophic conflict for the foreseeable future.

Proceeding into the next QDR, alternative assumptions underpinning grand strategy are in order. Three come to mind. First, the extension and maintenance of American influence will remain the best way of securing core interests. Second, our power and leadership will inspire active, purposeful, and growing irregular resistance. Finally, this resistance will be unbounded geographically and will trend increasingly catastrophic in its effects.