



The Best-Laid Plans Upended

August 27, 2021 | Dr. John R. Deni

The American national security establishment is shifting from nation building to addressing the challenge of rising great powers, from a near obsession with the United States Central Command geographic area of responsibility to an emphasis on the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Sound familiar? This shift both reflects the trajectory of US policy today and echoes where the United States wanted to go 20 years ago, before the September 11 attacks derailed Washington’s intentions. As the United States embarks on a new national security approach, the nation would do well to remember events have a way of undermining the best-laid plans and strategies.

The September 11 attacks compelled the national security establishment to shift from what it wanted to focus on to what it had to focus on—at least temporarily. Following George W. Bush’s controversial election in November 2000, the new administration entered office in January 2001 determined to end DoD nation-building efforts.¹ By this time, the US military had already been heavily engaged on the ground in Bosnia for five years and had recently taken on a similar mission in Kosovo.

Simultaneously, the new administration assessed China was the principal challenge to long-term national security.² As a result, the Bush administration hoped to shift emphasis in defense strategy, planning, and deployments to the Pacific.³ Senior Bush administration officials believed the priority global military objective should be to retain qualitative superiority over China. Furthermore, many of the elements of President Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia just a few years later were based on efforts planned or initiated during the Bush administration.⁴

But the attacks of 9/11 forced a fundamental reconceptualization of US national security. Although this reconceptualization unfolded over a period of months and years, early evidence for it emerged almost immediately after September 11. The 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* that was already under development was hastily updated to account for the shift in focus. Released just weeks after the terrorist attacks, the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* struck a note of understatement in positing, “The war the nation fights today is not a war of America’s choosing.”⁵

The irony is at least some of George W. Bush's most senior advisers, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, viewed surprise in national security matters as inevitable.⁶ But acknowledging the inevitability of a surprise does not necessarily prevent the surprise from subsequently seizing control of the strategy and policy agenda.

Following 9/11, instead of shifting away from nation building and decisively turning the vast national security enterprise toward China, the United States was forced to double down on rebuilding war-torn societies; training and equipping ragtag foreign forces for internal defense and stability; and, when civilian counterparts proved unable to fulfill the mission, nation building.⁷ Of course, counterterrorism consumed a great deal of energy and effort as well in Afghanistan and, later, in Iraq.

The September 11 attacks are therefore a reminder an adversary can sometimes upend plans. In today's context, recalibrating the national security enterprise toward great-power competition and moving nation-building missions in places like Afghanistan into the rearview mirror will only succeed if potential adversaries do not draw Washington off target.

Crafting a strategy that calls for no more nation building, stability operations, or peace enforcement missions and instead directs effort into competing against China and Russia is a relatively simple and uncontroversial task. The challenge resides in initiating and maintaining a commitment to wide-scale implementation across government.

After analysts called for a strategy of competition against Russia and China, and the Trump administration embraced a new, strategic direction based on competition, implementation got off to a slow, rocky start.⁸ Nonetheless, progress is evident today. Shunning allied collaboration has given way to increased cooperation.⁹ Plans to withdraw US forces from overseas have been replaced with plans to increase US forward presence vis-à-vis challenges from Russia and China.¹⁰ And US forces are becoming increasingly engaged in competition below the threshold of armed conflict against both Russia and China.¹¹

Whether implementation of America's great-power competition strategy continues moving in the right direction depends on numerous factors, such as congressional support and funding, public opinion, and the contributions of allies and partners. Just as important though is the absence of strategic alternatives—like a \$2.26-trillion, 20-year odyssey through South Asia.¹²

The problem of course is, as the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* argued, “[W]e cannot and will not know precisely where and when America's interests will be threatened, when America will come under attack, or when Americans might die as the result of aggression.” Despite Washington's effort to maintain focus on great-power competition, a strategic alternative—or what some might call a “black-swan event”—might unexpectedly occur or emerge, compelling a response.¹³

How then can the national security establishment prepare for such an environment in which great-power competition is the lodestar, yet other, unrelated missions remain a possibility? One

solution may be to craft an insurance policy that helps the United States manage a temporary, unexpected security crisis or armed conflict while maintaining the capacity and capability to return easily to great-power competition.

Overcoming predominant organizational culture within the defense establishment—one that avoids addressing anything that cannot be prepared for—is no easy feat.¹⁴ Building and fostering critical thinkers within the military who can challenge assumptions and offer alternative perspectives takes time and relentless effort. Nonetheless, the insurance policy should emphasize adaptability and agility in personnel, training, and equipment and acquisition.

For example, the insurance policy might include regular updates to doctrine and training on peacekeeping and stability operations to ensure collective knowledge and lessons learned are not lost over time. The insurance policy could also include greater emphasis in acquisition programs on multimission capabilities and allied interoperability to better enable equipment intended for one context or mission set to be used across many. Finally, the insurance policy should emphasize the necessity of maintaining unit readiness across a wide variety of mission-essential tasks, not merely those focused on the bright, shiny object of the day. Adaptability and agility will help to ensure if events compel Washington to focus on something other than Russia and China, the United States can more easily retool and return to great-power competition.

Twenty years on, the lessons of 9/11 are numerous. One of the most obvious of these is the realization world events can throw off the most carefully crafted strategy. The United States can mitigate this risk today by thinking about and planning for how it would maintain or return to its focus on Russia and China, even while engaged in some unrelated mission.

ENDNOTES

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