How to Read the New National Military Strategy

BY PETER FEAVER | JULY 6, 2015 - 11:51 AM

This week Gen. Martin Dempsey, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, released a new National Military Strategy (NMS). The NMS is prescribed in law (Title 10.153) as one of the top-level documents that outline how an administration sees the global challenges and opportunities it faces, and what it intends to do about them.

In theory, the documents all fit together in a logical way. At the highest level is the National Security Strategy (NSS), signed by the president; it outlines the broadest level goals and discusses how to integrate all elements of national power in pursuit of those goals. One step down is the National Defense Strategy (NDS), signed by the secretary of defense; it focuses on the defense role in implementing the strategy outlined in the NSS. The NDS is sometimes published as a stand-alone document, but it is prescribed as part of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which I'll talk about more below. One further step down is the NMS, which Dempsey just released; it focuses on the role of the uniformed military in support of the NDS and NSS. And below that would be the individual service strategies that focus on the roles of airpower, sea power, or land-power.

The NSS is also supposed to guide threat- or other domain-specific sub-strategies, e.g., the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the National Security Space Strategy, the Department of Defense's (DoD) Cyber Strategy, and so on.

And the NSS is supposed to guide the department level program-development efforts — the Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review and State's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review — that more directly shape budgeting and force-structure decisions.

All of these efforts are supposed to drive budget: let strategy determine what you are trying to do and how you are trying to do it, and then translate that strategy into programs funded in your budget.

I keep repeating, "supposed to," because in practice the preparation of these strategic documents does not follow the neat flow-chart implied by theory. They are usually prepared concurrently or even out of phase — a new QDR releasing before the new NSS, for instance — so, which is driving which seems up for grabs. In a well-functioning interagency system, there is ample staff coordination to prevent disconnects from such out-of-phase sequencing. In less well-functioning systems, sometimes departments and agencies that lose a battle on another document try to win back some ground on another.

And, most problematically of all, too often the budget is developed independently of the strategy (and vice-versa). In some Procrustean bed cases, a politically driven budget exercise will determine a dollar amount available for national security, and then everything else is chopped and tweaked to produce a strategy that comes in under that budget.

If one thinks of this as an exercise in simple home economics, then perhaps that process sounds reasonable — akin to deciding I can afford $25,000 for a new car and then going out and looking for the best car available for that number.

But providing for national security is not like a buying car for your family. National security involves enemies who are actively trying to thwart your interests. If you have the best strategy and forces available for an arbitrary dollar figure, you are still failing if that strategy and force structure is inadequate to the threats you face. The riskiness of any strategy is directly proportional to the gap between what you need and what you have.

Which brings us to the new National Military Strategy. For while in theory this NMS is derived from the NSS President Barack Obama released to mixed reception in 2015, in reality the NMS is more derivative of several other budget-driven exercises.

The first was President Obama's decision toward the end of 2011 to cut the defense budget and then directing his national security team to come up with the best strategy they could under that new arbitrary limit. The administration did not admit that that was a budget-driven exercise, but it was. The result, the Defense Strategic Guidance of 2012, was a strategy that Obama's national security team defended as adequate, provided that no further budget cuts would be imposed. While many, including myself, criticized that effort, compared to what came later it probably is the guidance Obama's national security team would most like to defend in a formal debate.

For what came next was another round of budget cuts, deeper and even more arbitrary, known as sequester. If by the Obama administration's own measure their 2012 strategy was only barely viable before the sequester, it is hard to see how they can claim it is viable after the sequester. The obvious truth is that there is vastly more risk — the gap between ends and means — now than there was before.

The strategy effort that was supposed to square this circle was the 2014 QDR, which superseded the 2012 Defense Strategy Guidance, and constitutes the prevailing National Defense Strategy. It did not, however, resolve the ends-means gap and inherent riskiness of the posture, as the bipartisan National Defense Panel review of the QDR makes clear.

And all of this was before the geopolitical situation turned sharply negative. While the decline in America's geopolitical situation was evident to many three or four years ago, it has now become obvious to all but the most blinkered of partisans.

Since all of these strategy documents were released, and before the release this week of the NMS, there was one more critical administration document of particular relevance to defense strategy: the parts of the president's FY 2016 Budget submission relevant to the DoD. It tries to walk a bit back from the sequester cuts although perhaps not all the way back to the levels imagined in the 2012 Defense Strategy Guidance.

So that is the context of the NMS, and it constitutes a daunting set of constraints within which Gen. Dempsey had to operate. Defense spending is too low and misallocated — but Dempsey is not able to change that. America's global situation is worsening and most of the geopolitical bets Obama took did not pay out — but Dempsey is not able to change that. At the national strategic level, Obama still outlines ambitious goals and refuses to acknowledge that his previous approaches failed — but Dempsey is not able to change that.

Under those constraints, Dempsey deserves credit for producing an NMS as candid as it is, so candid, in fact, that I am surprised the White House did not balk at its release. The NMS acknowledges:

- "Today's global security environment is the most unpredictable [Dempsey has] seen in 40 years."
- "Since ... 2011, global disorder has significantly increased while some of our comparative military advantage has begun to erode."
- "That some states, however, are attempting to revise key aspects of the international order and are acting in a manner that threatens our national security interest." Then it names them: Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China. This is not quite an "axis of evil" moment, but that grouping is striking and noteworthy, especially for a public document.
- "Today, the probability of U.S. involvement in interstate war with a major power is assessed to be low but growing." The "but growing" caveat is a remarkable admission from the top military officer.

All of these are important strategic truths that amount to a very sober cautionary. However, when it comes to identifying responses to these truths, the NMS is less satisfying.

- It mentions that the erosion in America's geopolitical position will require that we "adjust our global posture" but it does not specify how.
- It seems to distinguish between "deter, deny, and defeat" and "disrupt, degrade, and defeat," the former being the appropriate strategy for states and the latter for violent extremist organizations — but it doesn't explain the distinction.
- It acknowledges the importance of allies, but not the fact that our relations with our allies are frayed and in need of repair and it does not specify how we can restore our alliances without assuming a greater burden than President Obama has been willing to bear.
- Most importantly, it ducks the opportunity to force the ends-means gap issue. In the crucial section on "resourcing the strategy," it merely "assumes a commitment to projecting global influence" and stipulates that resources are needed. It does not state clearly that the resources are lacking.

One could argue that the parts of NMS 2015 that were more satisfying were the ones driven by the statutory requirements and the ones that were less satisfying were not formally required. Perhaps, but the NMS seems to be stating that the military believe we are in a much more parlous geopolitical position than the White House typically acknowledges. If so, then the times may demand a more satisfying NMS than the law requires.

But if it does not answer the questions as thoroughly as one would like, it opens the door to asking vital questions that need addressing, including ones that might cause some discomfort within the administration. That is a contribution worth recognizing.

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