

Improving the Pentagon's Development of Policy, Strategy and Plans

Testimony by Michael G. Vickers
Former Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence

Senate Armed Services Committee

December 8, 2015

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, it is a privilege and pleasure to be with the Senate Armed Services Committee this morning to discuss how the Pentagon might improve its development of policy, strategy and plans. It is an additional pleasure to be joined by my former colleagues, Michele Flournoy and Jeff Eggers.

It has been seven months since I've left my position as USD(I). I miss the great privilege of defending my country, and as astonishing as this may sound, I miss you all as well.

I have followed with great interest the Committee's hearings on U.S. National Security Strategy and Defense Organization. I commend you for taking on the critical task of Defense Reform.

Thirty years ago, a lack of joint interoperability and interdependence within the armed services and insufficient attention given to our Special Operations Forces provided the impetus for major defense reform. Today, the need for defense reform is no less urgent.

A major problem that must be addressed today is that rising personnel and weapons costs, and excessive bases and headquarters staffs are generating decreasing strategic and operational returns on our defense investment, resulting in less and less combat power available for the defense of our national security interests. Second, and even more urgent, we are not winning our nation's wars. We are winning battles and campaigns, but not our wars.

As I will discuss momentarily, we are engaged in three long-term conflicts or competitions for which we have yet to devise effective strategies. I have focused my statement this morning on our difficulties with developing good strategy, since policy and plans, and, indeed, effective military operations flow from good strategy.

As Dr. Kissinger and other witnesses have testified, we face major challenges to our national security interests in the Middle East, in Europe and in Asia.

- In the Middle East, the old order is collapsing. There is an assault on the international system by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Qa'ida, and associated global jihadi groups; expanding sectarian conflict; and a widening proxy war between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and its allies, and Iran and its allies.
- In Europe, a revanchist Russia has successfully waged hybrid warfare against Georgia and Ukraine, and seeks to reorient the continent away from the United States.
- In Asia, a rising China is asserting its growing power across the region, and anticipates that within a few decades that it will surpass the United States as the leading power in the international system.

These three strategic challenges are highly asymmetric, and two are largely unconventional. Each of our adversaries and competitors are able to impose significant costs on us. Each challenge will likely last for decades. We are not postured as a Department, intellectually or organizationally, for these highly asymmetric and largely unconventional long-term challenges. We are also in the midst of an ongoing revolution in technology that will have profound consequences for strategic balances. We must account for this ongoing revolution in our defense strategy and investment.

We will need to develop an array of strategies to deal with these challenges. Much as some might prefer, we cannot simply opt out. As my former boss and mentor, Bob Gates, told this Committee seven weeks ago, “while we may not be interested in aggressors, terrorists, revanchists and expansionists half a world away, they ultimately are always interested in us – or in our interests, allies and friends.” And, unfortunately, our strategic effectiveness across administrations from both parties has not been at the level that will be needed going forward.

We were as much as a decade and a half late in responding to China’s anti-access/area denial challenge to our power projection capabilities, though, now, I believe, we are generally heading in the right direction. We seem flummoxed by and self-deterred in our response to Russian indirect and direct aggression. And, although it’s certainly not from a lack of trying, we are far from having a strategy that can bring stability to the Middle East.

We have had considerable success at the tactical and operational levels, particularly in the counterterrorism arena and in turning around the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but much less at the strategic level. It is not enough to win battles or even campaigns. We must win our wars, and victory in war must lead to the establishment of the regional and international orders that we seek. We must develop and field capabilities and demonstrate the will to use them, moreover, to restore the deterrence component of our strategy.

Good Strategy/Bad Strategy

As Richard Rumelt observes in his excellent book, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, good strategy is unfortunately the exception and not the rule. Good strategy almost always looks simple and obvious, but it is not.

Good strategy is made by good strategists. A talented leader identifies the critical issues in the situation, pivot points that can multiply the effectiveness of his effort, and then concentrates action and resources on them. Good strategy doesn't just apply one's strengths against an opponent's weaknesses or against the most promising opportunity; it creates strength, both short and long-term, often from unexpected or non-obvious sources. Good strategy aims to force an opponent to play our game, sometimes by changing the rules of the game, or to beat him at his own game when he overreaches and makes himself vulnerable. And, important aspects of strategy, particularly in the national security realm, must be developed in secret to be effective.

I was privileged during my career to be part of two efforts that represent what I believe good strategy is.

During President Reagan's second term, the administration leveraged American economic and technological superiority to force a competition the Soviets knew they could not win without major reform, and we beat the Soviets at the own unconventional warfare and covert action game by driving the Red Army out of Afghanistan and supporting Solidarity in Poland. Importantly, the Regan administration and its George H.W. Bush successor sustained both efforts until they were victorious, despite a warming in U.S.-Soviet relations.

Late during President George W. Bush's second term and through President Obama's first term, the administrations adopted and sustained an effective strategy against core al-Qa'ida in the Pakistan border region that has brought core al-Qa'ida, though not its franchises, closer to operational defeat than the group has ever been.

There are of course numerous other examples, large and small, of good strategy since the end of the Second World War: the strategies of containment, rollback, and economic and technological superiority that we pursued in varying ways through the Cold War; the opening to China, which we leveraged to great effect in our covert war with the Soviets in Afghanistan; the shift to a deep/follow-on forces attack strategy against Soviet forces in Europe during the late 1970s; the strategy to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait; the air strategy that led to the Dayton Peace Accords; and the air-irregular ground campaign that toppled the Taliban after the 9/11 attacks.

There are others, and an even greater number of examples of bad strategies that, in the interest of time, I won't go into. Bad strategies result from a poor understanding of the strategic and operational environment, unrealistic aims, inappropriate ways, insufficient means, and inadequate follow through. But more than anything, they stem from an inability to identify a decisive element that confers enduring advantage, and then

to focus actions and resources on it. As Clausewitz noted, strategy gets more difficult the farther one moves from tactics to operations to strategy and to grand strategy. With respect to the Department of Defense, examples of good and bad strategy are evident in both the conduct of war and in the preparation for war, in operational plans and in force development. The latter results in a Department that all too frequently prepares for the wrong war and prioritizes capabilities for imaginary wars over real ones.

Improving Strategy within the Department of Defense

I have spent my career developing and implementing strategy and conducting and overseeing operations. I've spent far less time thinking about how to make the making of strategy better. With that in mind, I'll offer a few thoughts on reforms you might consider that could improve the making of strategy (and policy and plans along with it) within the Department of Defense and the U.S. National Security Establishment more broadly.

Let me return briefly to my core themes: good strategy is made by good strategists; you can mandate strategy, as we have done with a series of national security strategies and quadrennial defense reviews, but you can't mandate good strategy; good strategy is the exception rather than the rule; the problem is getting worse and more consequential as challenges to our national security significantly increase; the problem affects not only strategic and operational planning but also force development; and Goldwater-Nichols has done very little to address our growing strategy deficit; it has, in fact, contributed to it.

I have described the sources of bad strategy. The structural and systemic causes that often result in bad strategy in the Department are insufficient strategic education, lack of relevant operational expertise and strategy-related experience among practitioners, insufficient competition and rigor in the marketplace of strategic ideas, and failure to bring the Congress along as a partner in the development and implementation of strategy.

There are a number of ideas, several of which I had a hand in developing in an earlier stage of my career, that have been proposed by previous witnesses that could address some of the structural and systemic causes that frequently result in bad strategy. As such, they are at least worth exploring as you continue your review of potential defense reforms.

These include: remaking our system for selecting and promoting general officers to increase the odds that strategic leaders will rise to the top; making a much larger investment in the strategic education of select members of the officer corps; transforming the Joint Staff into a Joint General Staff with an exclusive focus on the conduct of war and the preparation for war; transferring responsibility for certain warfare areas (counterterrorism, special operations and cyber) to functional combatant commands – CIA, for example, has a functional organization in charge of its global CT operations; elevating Cyber Command to a Unified Command; establishing additional standing

warfighting joint task forces and reorienting regional CoComs on military diplomacy; strengthening the role of the Services in operational planning and encouraging a greater degree of inter-service and intra-service competition in the development of operational concepts; establishing much closer linkages among strategic and operational planning, intelligence assessments and force planning; establishing additional Services (Special Operations, cyber and space); and consolidating staffs (OSD and the JS and those within the Military Departments). Most of these ideas have as their animating principle the development of deeper strategic expertise within the Department – through rigorous strategic education and career development, through specialization, and through healthy competition.

Several of these proposed reforms may have merit, and there may be important synergies that can be realized by adopting several of them as part of a coherent strategy. Some may be alternative courses of action, e.g., establishing additional Services versus transferring operational responsibility to Service-like organizations (SOCOM and CYBERCOM) to gain greater operational expertise in certain areas of military strategy. (In this vein, Space Command could also be reestablished.) But each of these ideas has drawbacks that must be carefully assessed.

While I'm admittedly generally skeptical of organizational change as a driver for strategy improvement, something must be done. Accordingly, I think the biggest direct strategic bang for the buck could come from revamping selection and promotion of general and flag officers, and from rigorously selecting and educating a corps of joint operational strategists and transforming the Joint Staff into a real Joint General Staff. Good strategy requires good strategists.

During the past three and a half decades, our armed forces have become far more proficient at the tactical level of war. They have also become more jointly interoperable and interdependent. These are good things. That increased tactical proficiency and joint effectiveness has come at a strategic cost, however. With our "one size fits all" line officer personnel management system, we have sacrificed the strategic education of our senior officer corps for these tactical and joint gains. It is far less likely going forward that we will produce four-star combat arms officers who have attained a Ph.D. or who are proficient in foreign languages and knowledgeable about foreign areas of strategic interest to the United States. That means no more Dave Petraeus's, no more Jim Stavridis's and no more John Abizaid's. If continued, this practice over time will reduce our strategic effectiveness. We are paradoxically plagued by both too much and too little joint experience and tactical expertise in our officer corps.

Good military strategists can be military or civilian, and on the military side, they can be produced in several ways. Indeed, to increase our overall strategic effectiveness, we should pursue several diverse paths. For some promising officers, we should consider relaxing the joint duty requirement until they reach general officer/flag officer rank. This would allow them to pursue strategic education, gain important foreign experience or become masters in their domain of warfare. Within our Services, we should seek to produce a mix of highly tactically proficient and somewhat less tactically proficient but

strategically educated officers on the command track. To keep pace with the ongoing technological revolution, we will also need command track general and flag officers with doctorates in the STEM disciplines.

A Joint General Staff would differ from the current Joint Staff in several important ways. First, its members, after demonstrating operational proficiency, would have to pass a rigorous selection process that would seek to identify those with potential to serve as strategists, and then would have to complete several years of graduate level strategic education. Second, as opposed to a single two-to-three year tour in a joint assignment, Joint General Staff officers would spend the remaining two-thirds to three-quarters of their careers in the Joint General Staff, rotating back to their Services of origin periodically to maintain operational currency. Third, to ensure their strategic independence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, dual-hatted as the Chief of the Joint General Staff, and not their parent Services, would control the promotions of JGS officers. Fourth, a Joint General Staff would be focused exclusively on the conduct and preparation for war at the strategic and operational levels as opposed to the wide and duplicative range of broad policy and staff functions the current Joint Staff engages in.

Improving Strategy across the U.S. National Security Establishment

Although it is beyond the remit of this hearing, I would like to close with a few thoughts about improving strategy across the broader U.S. National Security Establishment.

The National Security Council system works well when it focuses on big questions of strategy and crisis management. Problems in strategy at the national level usually stem from not presenting clear strategic alternatives with their likely consequences to the President, and/or from not having deep and relevant operational expertise directly available to the President when needed. Accordingly, I do not think a “Goldwater-Nichols for the Interagency” would be wise. In fact, I believe it would likely make our strategy problem worse, as it would replicate the sources of bad strategy within DoD across the interagency. To repeat for a final time what has by now become my mantra, good strategy comes from having good strategists in the right positions.

I’d like to close by noting that good strategy and effective operations are greatly enabled by good intelligence, and that the operational integration of CIA and DoD capabilities has significantly improved our strategic effectiveness in several areas in recent years. I’m sure I will sound parochial in saying this, but at the margin, we will see a larger return in strategic effectiveness by providing additional resources to national intelligence than we will by providing equivalent amounts to defense.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.

Michael Vickers, a former Special Forces Officer and CIA Operations Officer, was Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, 2011-2015, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities, 2007-2011.