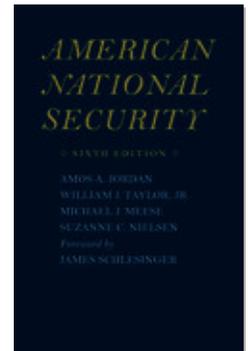




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Conventional War

As the Cold War ended and the “unipolar moment” of U.S. preeminence began, it was reasonable to ask what kind of conventional, state-on-state conflicts Americans might find themselves fighting.¹ With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and U.S. dominance over any conventional army that it has faced, including the Iraqi Army in 1991 and 2003, some questioned whether the United States would ever fight a conventional opponent and argued that the military should instead shift significant resources toward confronting unconventional and asymmetric threats.²

As serious as the threat of terrorism is to the United States today, it is difficult to argue that terrorism is a threat comparable to that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Even if terrorists used weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to present a catastrophic challenge to national security, it is unlikely that terrorists would have enough warheads to seriously threaten the continuation of the United States as a nation. States will continue to be the primary actors in the international arena, and any that ignore the potential of military conflict, including conventional war, do so at their own peril.³

A discussion of conventional war includes traditional challenges and disruptive challenges—the lower two boxes in the challenges to U.S. national security chart (Figure 13.1 in Chapter 13) considered by defense planners. *Traditional threats* are the force-on-force military operations that occur in a conventional war. To accomplish their political aims, adversaries seek to defeat one another’s military forces. *Disruptive threats* include technological or operational advances that enable a potential adversary to challenge or threaten U.S. interests in the future. Both categories of threats have serious implications for U.S. national security policy.

Traditional Threats

Military planning and resource allocation around the world are still heavily focused on the development of armed forces to combat other military forces. How traditional military forces are employed is likely to differ based on the state's degree of commitment to the military operation and the scale of the political purposes at stake.

General War. *General conventional war* occurs when the resources of a state are mobilized on a massive scale in a war fought for total victory over a clear and defined enemy: either a single state or a coalition. The two world wars in the last century are commonly regarded as general conventional wars in which the resources of opposing coalitions of belligerent states were mobilized on a massive scale in a war fought for victory, requiring unconditional surrender by the vanquished enemy.⁴ In both wars, progress toward victory was measured by the geographical movement of battle lines established by mass military formations and by the destruction or capture of enemy units. Victory was achieved by destroying the enemy's economic or military capacity to continue or simply defeating its political will to fight. Such victories are sealed by a formal exchange of signatures on a document of surrender or a treaty that ends the war.

For decades, many theorists have believed that the advent of the nuclear balance of terror has likely precluded another general conventional war along the lines of World War II.⁵ Of course, general conventional war is still possible among non-nuclear states fighting for objectives not centrally involving important interests of the nuclear powers; the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988 is one example. Theoretically, limited wars could occur even among nuclear states, as long as the states restricted the conflict to the use of conventional forces, with the threat of nuclear retaliation deterring both states from escalating the conflict. The concept of *mutually assured destruction* implies that no rational head of state would invite nuclear self-destruction by the first use of nuclear weapons, and therefore traditional conventional military strategy and tactics remain applicable and possible even among nuclear opponents. Though the logic of these propositions seems sound, they have never been tested in the nuclear era. Indeed, there has not been a general conventional conflict between nuclear powers.⁶

Limited War. *Limited conventional war* is one in which at least one side fights with only limited resources, in a limited geographic area, or for limited objectives. Limited war “reflects an attempt to *affect* the opponent's will, not *crush* it, to make the conditions to be imposed seem more attractive than continued resistance, to strive for limited specific goals and not for complete annihilation.”⁷

Limited war is hardly novel. Historically, few wars have resulted in the utter physical or political demise of a contending state. Rome's total destruction of Carthage occupies a special place in history in large part because it was so unusual an event; the term *Carthaginian Peace* is frequently used to describe the conse-

quences of total war. In contrast, throughout much of Western history, the means, scope, objectives, and consequences of war were sharply curtailed by the limited military power of states and by their limited ability to project that power beyond their own borders. Together, such constraints tended to restrict the objectives for which states went to war and their expectations about what might be achieved thereby.

While familiar to historians and military theorists, the concept of limited war does not fit with traditional American perspectives toward war. As discussed in Chapter 2, Americans historically have approached war in moralistic terms; the United States should only fight “just” wars and not wage war simply for narrow self-interest. Although the Korean conflict (1950–1953) was fought as a limited war, it was not the wellspring of limited war doctrines.⁸ The most common reaction to it among Americans was “never again.” In fact, Secretary of State John Dulles’s formulation of “massive retaliation” with nuclear weapons was designed to deter future limited wars similar to Korea and was still widely viewed as a viable policy into the late 1950s.⁹

Contemporary limited war doctrine is primarily the product of western fears of nuclear war growing out of Cold War hostilities, Soviet development of a thermonuclear capability in the 1950s, Russian sputniks, bomber and missile “gaps,” and the balance of terror. Obviously, limited alternatives to massive retaliation had to be found when the impact of nuclear retaliation in response to non-nuclear threats raised the risk of nuclear devastation in one’s own country. Moreover, massive retaliation seemed particularly inappropriate to containing the threat of communist subversion in the form of so-called wars of national liberation in the Third World, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s.

American military involvement in Vietnam was influenced in its early years largely by various doctrines of counterinsurgency warfare. After the U.S. troop buildup in 1965, these doctrines were supplemented by limited war and controlled escalation strategies that guided the application of conventional military force. Although they were difficult to achieve, important U.S. objectives—principally, the security of an independent, noncommunist government in South Vietnam—were rather clear and limited at the conflict’s outset, in contrast to North Vietnam’s unlimited war against South Vietnam. Few could have estimated the effect of the restraints limiting American strategy, tactics, and resources. As limits on U.S. means and actions grew—motivated by mounting casualties, escalating monetary costs, concern about direct Chinese involvement, and international and domestic public sentiment against the war—U.S. objectives became still more limited, settling for the acceptability of any kind of government in South Vietnam as long as it was freely elected and secure from North Vietnamese military aggression. By 1975, the United States was unwilling to dedicate resources even to this limited objective.¹⁰

The outcome of the American experience with limited war in Southeast Asia has been stated succinctly: “The war is over, the cost enormous, and the side which the United States backed lost.”¹¹ Perhaps few conclusive lessons concerning the general utility of limited war can be drawn from Vietnam, but it was clear

that for Americans the utility of the limited approach to warfare was very low indeed throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the strategy, tactics, and force superiority that the United States brought to the Gulf War battlefield in 1990 for a quick, decisive victory were in large part a consequence of lessons learned from limitations in Vietnam. Nevertheless, limited war remains an alternative in U.S. national security policy, albeit an approach fraught with various problems.¹²

The Nature of Competitors in Conventional War. Whether the United States finds itself facing the threat of general conventional war or limited conventional war hinges on the type of potential enemy. Only a viable peer could cause the United States to mobilize its resources on a massive scale for a general conventional war. In the early twenty-first century, no state meets this threshold. However, a peer competitor could arise by attaining strength in one of two ways—internally or externally.¹³ *Internal balancing*—a state using its own resources to increase its power—is unlikely to allow any state to achieve peer status vis-à-vis the United States for the foreseeable future in the absence of a technological breakthrough that would close the military capabilities gap with the United States. A major opponent’s breakthrough capability to nullify American superiority in command, control, communications and intelligence (C³I) would be a conceivable example. To the extent that the United States is perceived as a status quo power, it is also unlikely to prompt alliances or coalitions forming against it—that is, by states resorting to *external balancing* that would lead to conventional war.¹⁴ In the absence of a peer competitor, any conventional war that the United States engages in will likely be a limited rather than a general one. However, over the longer term, the possible development of a disruptive threat from future potential peer competitors, such as China, Russia, or India, is something that defense planners must consider and is discussed below.

A more likely scenario, particularly in the near term, is the development of a hostile regional hegemonic power or the escalation of a regional conflict that leads to U.S. intervention. A hostile regional hegemon may decide to use force to advance its own interests because it perceives the United States as being either unwilling or unable to respond. Whether and how the United States would respond would depend on its current level of military commitments, its political will, and the national interest at stake. The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) of March 2006 provides some indication of the potential willingness of the U.S. to intervene in limited regional conflicts, even when American national interests do not seem to be directly challenged:

Regional conflicts do not stay isolated for long and often spread or devolve into humanitarian tragedy or anarchy. Outside parties can exploit them to further other ends, much as al-Qa’ida exploited the civil war in Afghanistan. This means that even if the United States does not have a direct stake in a particular conflict, our interests are likely to be affected over time.¹⁵

Thus, there are potential regional interests that could warrant U.S. military intervention. Though the statement above is sufficiently ambiguous to invite differing

interpretations, a would-be hostile regional hegemon would be ill advised to easily assume U.S. inaction.

Disruptive Threats: Rise of a Peer Competitor

Although the rise of a peer competitor is unlikely in the foreseeable future, its development would present a dangerous strategic situation for the United States, and thus it merits analysis. Although some worry about China, despite its phenomenal economic growth over the last twenty-five years, it is not likely to be able to rival the United States militarily in the near term. Although exact budgetary comparisons are difficult, most estimates of military spending reflect that the United States spends far more than does China on defense. And in *qualitative* terms, the differences are even more profound (see Chapters 18 and 26).

To become a peer competitor and thereby compete militarily, head to head, with the United States, a country would need to achieve a major advance in technology, operational art, or some combination of the two with which it could counter decades of U.S. investment in high-technology weapons. Although technology and the ability to effectively use military systems are important—and often the former is of little usefulness without the latter—the prospect of “leap ahead” technologies preoccupies many defense analysts. Because of the length of time required to procure a new weapons system and the high cost of doing so, after a nation commits to developing a particular system, it is difficult to halt that production cycle in favor of a newer, more potent one. While one country develops the most technologically advanced weapons system (at the time of its decision), another country could “leap ahead” with even more advanced technology. Thus, disruptive threats could emerge.

Research and Development. Modes of conventional war fighting and war prevention have become inextricably linked to the sophistication and scientific currency of weapons systems. As just noted, it is possible that a seemingly invulnerable superpower could find its interests threatened virtually overnight because of breakthrough technology. It is no longer sufficient to be a World War II–style “arsenal of democracy” and outproduce a potential opponent with average weapons. In the twenty-first century, arms competition has become as much qualitative as it is quantitative.

The establishment and maintenance of a strong technology base and leadership in scientific investigation is a principal determinant of the future technological capability of a state. Military research and development (R&D) capability is an important indicator of the future military power of the state. If the base for future advancement and continuing progress in technological fields is inadequate, the military component of national power will erode as technological advances enable competitors to pass it by. Alternatively, the state will become dependent on imported sophisticated defense systems, which could constrain its policy options. States today appropriately view the technological potential and capabilities of opponents as major factors in capability assessments.¹⁶

Rapid advances in technology can significantly affect national security in at least three distinct ways. First, a successful technological breakthrough can have a considerable impact on the quality and capability of conventional forces. To highlight one example that worked in favor of the United States, the global positioning system (GPS), which is now commonly used in daily life for such purposes as automobile navigation, was first used in combat in Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Prior to the relatively specific technological breakthrough of GPS, maneuvering several divisions of thousands of vehicles over a desert with few terrain features for orientation and battle space management would have been extraordinarily difficult. But the deployment of and training with GPS only months before the war provided a technology that “revolutionized combat operations on the ground and in the air during Operation Desert Storm and was—as one Allied commander noted—one of two particular pieces of equipment that were potential war winners.”¹⁷ If the Chinese military or another conceivable peer competitor could develop a technological breakthrough of similar significance, they would have the potential to disrupt American military predominance in at least one major dimension of combat operations.

A second significant aspect of technology’s contribution stems from the uncertainty inherent in newness and change. A sizable R&D program, even if it is unsuccessful in gaining major breakthroughs, contributes the possibility of associated successes or surprise advances. This introduces a degree of uncertainty into a potential adversary’s calculations, intensifying its sense of risk over particular policy alternatives. A further fear generated by the unknowable arising out of possible technological breakthroughs is that a breakthrough could make much of a nation’s standing military force obsolete. Even if such a breakthrough did not result immediately in military defeat, the cost of rebuilding a security force from the ground up could be prohibitive. At a minimum, a breakthrough could affect the quality of a state’s existing military and, subsequently, its calculations of relative power. Quickly changing relative-power and balance-of-power calculations could lead to conventional conflict. Conceivably, the losing state in the R&D competition might, in the absence of other options, feel compelled to initiate conflict with the winner to avoid certain future defeat because of its newfound technological inferiority.¹⁸

The implications of a true breakthrough pose a dilemma. Given the often lengthy lead time from concept to application and the high rate of technological change in the world, planners of the first state to discover a concept will be reluctant to concede the initiative to the second discoverer, yet they could err by “locking themselves in” to the development, procurement, and deployment of the earliest operational prototype, a *first-generation* system. An opponent, in response, could concentrate instead on the development of more advanced *second-generation* applications and, by skillfully collapsing technological states into each other, could balance the capability with a more advanced system in almost the same time frame. Historically, this case is illustrated by the “missile gap” of 1958–1962. The Soviet Union, by launching Sputnik, demonstrated the technological capability to build an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Immediately thereafter, Soviet

spokesmen began implying that the Soviets were deploying first-generation ICBMs; in fact, they were not.¹⁹ The United States, uncertain about the truth of Soviet statements, rushed missile programs to completion and deployed first-generation ICBMs to counter the supposed threat. The problem of uncertainty and the fear of technological breakthrough contributed to the U.S. reactions. In retrospect, the outcome of this situation was counterproductive for both sides. The Soviet Union suddenly found itself on the inferior side of the strategic balance, faced with a larger U.S. missile force than anticipated. The United States, as a result of its rush to redress, found itself with a costly and obsolete first-generation missile force that had to be phased out and replaced.

Today, to balance the need to adopt advanced technology while attempting to avoid the deleterious impact of locking in a first-generation technology, many military acquisition programs use spiral development. *Spiral development* is a form of evolutionary acquisition in which the end-state technology is not specified when a program starts, but the military requirements are refined incrementally as the technology is developed, depending on feedback from users and technological breakthroughs.²⁰ As the rate of technological advances increases in the information age, it is critically important for the research, development, and acquisition systems to be able to adapt as well.²¹

The third way that rapid technological change can affect national security is, ironically, the possibility of disproportionate reliance on technological breakthroughs, which appear to provide a significantly advanced capability but, in fact, are less effective or otherwise easily countered when used against a thinking enemy in combat. For example, in conducting the air war against ground units in Kosovo, many military leaders believed that the technological advances and sophistication of the intelligence, aircraft, and precision munitions would and did have a significant effect on the Serbian military in Kosovo. After the war, however, detailed bomb damage assessments indicated that the bombings had at best a “modest effect” on targets, in spite of the advances in technology.²² In the worst case, fascination with technology can distract national security decision makers from the nature and ultimate purpose of warfare. As Fred Kagan observes:

The U.S. strategic community in the 1990s was in general so caught up with the minutia of technology that it lost sight of the larger purpose of war, and therefore missed the emergence of a challenge even more important than that of technology—the challenge of designing military operations to achieve particular political objectives.²³

Although technological breakthroughs can have a significant, even decisive, effect on military competition, overestimating technology’s ability to ameliorate the inherent fog and friction of warfare can also lead to failures in national security policy.

The Revolution in Military Affairs and Defense Transformation. Incorporation of the latest technological changes into the military has always been a significant concern for the Department of Defense, and indeed for all military establishments. Changes in equipment, organization, and tactics that the services developed after the Vietnam conflict were so transformative and decisive in the

1990–1991 Gulf War that they were labeled as a “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA).²⁴ With the advent of the George W. Bush administration in 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld vigorously pursued the RMA, using the term *defense transformation*, created an Office of Force Transformation, and published a Transformation Planning Guidance document to better manage the changes.²⁵ Regardless of the name given to the adaptation of military capabilities, understanding the characteristics and implications of such changes is an essential component of national security policy.

Information technology and precision weapons played a critical role in shaping the approach to warfare taken by many senior military and civilian leaders in the Pentagon in the 1990s.²⁶ Many believed that increasingly lethal yet precise weapons, coupled with information dominance, would facilitate decisive military operations without the need for large, mobilized land forces. Thus, defense transformation focused on increasing reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities, standoff munitions, and computers to effectively integrate all components of an increasingly complex and fast-paced battlefield. The defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq seemed initially to validate this approach. As demonstrated by continued operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, such dominating conventional capabilities do not necessarily translate to victory when fighting an adversary who purposely avoids such strengths.

Whether described as an RMA or as defense transformation, most analysts agree that there are at least four elements of a potentially significant military adaptation: technological change, systems development, operational innovation, and organizational adaptation.²⁷ Technological innovation without a concomitant change in the concepts and organization for employing such technology, however, is of limited utility. One such example is the significant time it has taken the U.S. military to adapt organizationally to fully maximize the advantages gained through the use of battlefield-tracking technology.²⁸ Only with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did the Army shift away from its traditional division-centric organization and capitalize on the advances made in precision air power and precision navigation systems.

Changing organizational concepts can lead to the effective exploitation of existing technology. For example, special forces soldiers in Afghanistan integrated centuries-old transportation technology (horses) with sophisticated targeting technology (laser targeting, satellite communications, and precision munitions) to create a capability that Rumsfeld praised as being transformational. As he described it, this integration of sophisticated technology with cavalry skills “shows that a revolution in military affairs is about more than building new high-tech weapons—though that is certainly part of it. It is also about new ways of thinking and new ways of fighting.”²⁹ Organizational and conceptual change may be as important as technological change in creating a new military capability that is effective on the battlefield.

The response by potential peer competitors to the current U.S. defense transformation is particularly interesting.³⁰ As mentioned above, technology can affect

national security planning either because of the technological breakthrough itself or because of the uncertainty associated with newness and change. Traditionally, great powers or those aspiring to be great powers have attempted to keep up technologically by committing themselves to an R&D program within the constraints of the competition for national resources. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, states appear to be conceding defeat to U.S. technological superiority. Rather than attempting to match the technological advances of the United States in most or even many areas, such countries as China are focusing more on developing capabilities to exploit potential U.S. weaknesses. During the 1980s, when China focused on responses to possible conflict with the Soviet Union, it concluded that its best defense strategy would be to have the capacity to attack “soft targets,” such as command posts; electronic weapons control systems; and command, control, communications, and intelligence (C³I) systems.³¹ China appears to have decided to take a similar approach to potential confrontations with the United States.

As the United States develops systems of increasing complexity, it will become more vulnerable to attacks against those sophisticated information-based systems. Rather than modifying their strategies to reflect technology, as often happens in the evolution of U.S. strategy, such countries as China may simply employ new technology to fit their existing strategies after the technology has been developed by other, more advanced industrial countries, such as the United States. For example, the idea of the “people’s war” remains embedded in Chinese strategic culture. The technological advances of the past twenty years have not fundamentally altered this concept but rather have simply added new meanings.³²

Other potential responses by those conceding U.S. technological superiority include the acquisition or development of WMDs or the exploitation of asymmetric warfare.³³ Some countries may calculate that their possession of WMDs can deter the United States from using conventional force against them. Based on the U.S. military’s record in Iraq and Afghanistan, many countries will likely conclude that asymmetric warfare is the best means of countering U.S. strength in a limited war, because it allows technologically inferior forces to exploit the vulnerabilities of a technology-centric opponent. The most dangerous scenario would be a combination of asymmetric techniques and nuclear capability, as discussed in Chapter 14.³⁴

Disruptive Threats and the Escalation of Regional Conflicts

Another possible response to U.S. conventional military superiority is for regional powers to develop a niche military capability that threatens U.S. interests.³⁵ China’s development of the ability to shoot down satellites is an example of this response. Although the rise of a peer competitor to the United States is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, it is quite possible that states hostile to U.S. strategic interests will develop into regional hegemonic powers and subsequently threaten American national security interests.

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review describes potentially disruptive threats as “countries at strategic crossroads” and declares that the United States will use all of its power to “shape these [nations’] choices in ways that foster cooperation and mutual security interests. At the same time, the United States, its allies and partners must also hedge against the possibility that a major or emerging power could choose a hostile path in the future.”³⁶ In other words, the United States seeks the integration of states that represent potential disruptive threats into an international system characterized by peaceful political and economic competition. In the end, that outcome is far more productive for all involved than one of military competition. The United States is most likely to be successful in this aim if it effectively leverages all instruments of national power.

A short list of potential hostile regional hegemonic powers includes China in East Asia, Russia in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, India in South Asia, Iran in the Middle East, and perhaps Venezuela in South America. Whether these rising regional powers are or will become hostile to U.S. strategic interests depends largely on two factors: first, the historical relationship that the country has had with the United States; and second, the extent to which specific foreign policy goals of the two sides diverge or conflict. In the short term, the United States can do little regarding the former, but it has significant control over the latter. Through its positive interaction with potentially hostile regional powers, it is possible that the United States can overcome challenges emanating from a problematic history of relationships.

Although it was not explicitly articulated in this way at the time, the U.S. approach to Japan and Germany since World War II is an example of the productive integration of potentially disruptive powers. Both countries have sophisticated military forces and R&D capacities, and both could develop technologies that could be channeled in ways that would threaten U.S. interests. This has not happened. Instead, American engagement with these states over more than sixty years has helped to make these countries U.S. allies. Though they may compete economically, and sometimes differ diplomatically, it is inconceivable that these countries and the United States would threaten one another militarily.

At first glance, a promising solution to discouraging regional powers from becoming hostile to U.S. interests, or perhaps even reducing existing hostility, appears straightforward. The United States could simply act multilaterally whenever possible and otherwise act in a matter to reduce suspicion about American intentions (see Chapter 26 for a more in-depth discussion of the role of *multilateralism*). Thus, the strategic challenge for the United States is to pursue its fundamental security interests, including its interest in combating terrorism worldwide, without inducing either great power competition or the rise of hostile regional hegemons.³⁷ But, aggressively combating terror could require the United States to act unilaterally, potentially employing the doctrine of preemption with the unintended effect of provoking hostility or even efforts by other states to strengthen themselves militarily or form alliances to be better postured to oppose—or defend themselves against—the United States.³⁸

Whether an aggressive strategy, such as preemption, is likely to do more good than harm is a contentious debate. This topic is further discussed in Chapter 14. One problem with such strategies is that they have adverse, unintended consequences. As Stephen Biddle notes:

If the chief determinant of balancing is perception of others' intent, then continued erosion of world perception of American intentions can be an important stimulus to great power competition, and energetic American use of force against terror has proven to be an important catalyst for negative perceptions of American intentions.³⁹

Though most countries realize that they cannot compete with the United States militarily any time soon, balancing through the formation of hostile regional coalitions remains possible. However, the most probable response by a hostile regional power or coalition is to threaten U.S. national security by attacking U.S. economic or political interests rather than attempting military confrontation. The alignment of France, Germany, and Russia to oppose U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, for example, provides a vivid case of an ad hoc coalition undermining U.S. national interests diplomatically. Hugo Chavez and his anti-American efforts in South America demonstrate a hostile regional power attempting to undermine U.S. economic interests. Despite such examples of soft balancing, which can be frustrating diplomatically, the United States is not likely to find itself in a limited or general conventional war against these adversarial regional powers or coalitions over political or economic interests.

Escalation of Regional Conflicts. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the prospect of regional conflicts has not diminished, and in some cases has perhaps increased. According to the 2006 NSS, "the U.S. strategy for addressing regional conflicts includes three levels of engagement: conflict prevention and resolution; conflict intervention; and post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction."⁴⁰ Subsequent chapters provide a more detailed analysis of regional issues confronting the United States and potential state-on-state conflicts and crises that might occur. However, a quick overview of some of the potential contingencies in the international security environment today makes it clear that there are several possibilities for new, limited conventional wars.

The Korean Peninsula will certainly be a major source of friction for the foreseeable future. A great gulf exists between North and South Korea, and, political rhetoric notwithstanding, no major actor in the region supports near-term unification of the peninsula. After its successful testing of a nuclear weapon in 2006, North Korea's nuclear weapons program status is no longer in doubt. Additionally, it maintains a military with more than 1 million service members, potentially armed with chemical, nuclear, and even biological weapons. These forces, most of which are positioned in relatively close proximity to the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas, pose a constant danger of surprise attack or even unintended military incidents. Those forces would eventually lose a conventional war against the U.S.–South Korean Combined Forces Command of approximately twenty thousand U.S. and six hundred fifty thousand South Korean uniformed

personnel. Nevertheless, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons has dramatically increased the risks. Even absent the use of nuclear weapons, North Korea has the capability to wreak destruction in the greater Seoul metropolitan area, where almost a third of South Koreans and most of the eighty thousand Americans living in South Korea reside.

China continues to undergo a transition from a centrally planned, state-led economy to a more open, market economy. It has experienced tremendous economic expansion over the last twenty-five years.⁴¹ However, the growth has been very uneven—coastal areas have gained disproportionately, while its inland provinces remain comparatively impoverished. Increasing inequality could produce domestic instability within China. Should the leaders of China attempt to shore up domestic support by resorting to hypernationalism and by attempting, by force or dire threat, to regain control of Taiwan, as some feared was the case in 1996 when China tested missiles in the Taiwan Straits, reverberations would be severe. Japan and other Asian powers would be gravely concerned by such Chinese bellicosity, and regional economic relations would be seriously affected. The U.S. relationship with Taiwan, as well as regionally, could result in involvement in any armed conflict between China and Taiwan.

Further, the dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan will be a strategic concern for the United States for the foreseeable future. The tense situation in Kashmir has repeatedly led to conventional conflict, and the United States can ill afford to have the tensions result in a full-scale conventional conflict that might escalate into nuclear war. Because both countries are integral players in the U.S. effort to combat terrorism worldwide, it is conceivable—though unlikely—that the United States would directly intervene with conventional forces as part of an international effort to bring any conflict over Kashmir to an early resolution.⁴²

The Middle East will likely be the most pressing source of regional instability to preoccupy American strategists for years to come, as described in more detail in Chapter 20. The question of Palestine continues to smolder, while Iraq and Afghanistan continue to struggle, against great odds, in their development of governmental capacity. Iran's regional ambitions could also touch off further conflicts. The United States, dependent on the oil of the region and committed to Israel's security, could become a participant in additional conventional conflicts in the Middle East.

Issues in Conventional War

Responding to these and other various regional instabilities and conflicts will pose challenges that are similar to the limited war concerns that prevailed during the Cold War. At issue will be U.S. interests, objectives, means, and constraints. Each of these four factors will affect the American approach to future conventional wars.

The extent to which future conflicts will be limited will largely be determined by the U.S. interests at stake. The more significant the interests, logically, the more general the war might be. World War II, in which two global powers threat-

ened the United States directly, required a much more complete U.S. response than the localized challenge posed by North Korea. The nature of the U.S. interests involved will also affect limitations in the actual waging of any war. In the 1991 Gulf War, for example, U.S. interests in Saudi Arabian security and the preservation of international access to Gulf oil were deemed by the George H. W. Bush administration to be vital and worth a major, if still limited, effort.

Problems of defining and pursuing interests are more challenging since the end of the Cold War. International politics is not so much a zero-sum game as it was during that era, where every gain for Moscow was perceived as a loss for Washington. In the twenty-first century, it is sometimes difficult to determine what U.S. interests are at risk in the developing world and what level of military action is justified to protect them. The George W. Bush administration decided that the putative possession of WMDs by the Hussein regime posed an unacceptable risk to the United States and that military conflict was necessary to remove the risk. Clearly there was disagreement within the United States and in the international community over this decision.

In terms of objectives, architects of U.S. conventional war strategies face problematic confusion between the concepts of limited and total war. Generally, regional conflicts will threaten only limited U.S. interests and will likely demand only a limited U.S. military effort, but the damage done to a target country could approach that characteristic of a more general or total war. The focus on regional conflicts also lends itself to confusion, if not clashes, between political and military objectives, arising from the tension between a limited war's aims and the highly intense fighting likely to be required.

There is also the possibility that, when decision makers consider responses to a regional "contingency," national security policies—including the military strategy designed to address such events—might encourage them to rely too much on the short-term use of military power to solve what are at heart political, economic, or social problems. This possibility is enhanced by intense media coverage and domestic attitudes that pressure policy makers toward rapid, decisive action. Once a war has begun, however, the opposite presumption—of limited rather than total ends—might emerge in the minds of leaders and the public. In the case of the 1990–1991 war with Iraq, the George H. W. Bush administration from the outset denied that it sought the removal of Hussein from power; at the time, these statements seemed appropriate to a war of limited ends. As it turned out, however, U.S. and coalition interests might have been better served at that time by a more ambitious set of military and political goals *if* allied and public consensus had been possible. Ruling out total victory also complicated war termination. When the key postwar U.S. goal was "getting out quickly," other goals—such as encouraging a transition to a democratic Iraq under different rule or protecting the Kurds and Shiites from Hussein's vengeance—fell by the wayside.

The Iraq War in 2003 presented somewhat different issues in the connection between interests and objectives. In that war, unlike in the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the explicitly stated objective was to remove Hussein from power and to effect a regime change. Not unlike the first Gulf War, however, insufficient attention

was given to the problem of transitioning from war to peace after the stated objective had been attained.

It is important to note that military objectives should serve political objectives that are established by political leaders who take into consideration the whole array of U.S. military, political, and economic interests. War is an extension of politics, and political leaders should never begin a war without having a vision for its political end in mind. The 1990–1991 Gulf War and the Iraq War in 2003 demonstrate the difficulty of “winning the peace” when war commences without a clear vision for its political end.

The means used to pursue conventional war also must adjust in an era that includes a persistent conflict with global terrorism. The notion that all international conflicts have important social, economic, and political foundations and cannot be treated merely as military phenomena has gained nearly unanimous acceptance. In the Gulf War, for example, waging a limited regional war involved far more than the purely military tasks of fighting air and ground battles; it entailed the diplomacy needed to assemble an international coalition with the backing of the United Nations, the embargo levied against Iraq, economic incentives offered to certain Arab states (such as Egypt), and response to the environmental hazards posed by Hussein’s forces burning Kuwaiti oil fields.

Waging conventional war also required diplomatic negotiation to secure basing rights for ground forces and flyover rights for air forces, assistance from neighboring countries to control cross-border traffic, and the enlistment of non-governmental organizations to help with countless postconflict reconstruction tasks. In both the Gulf War and the Iraq War, observations that U.S. and coalition military actions were incomplete were frequently based on the fact that important national objectives—even though they may not have been fully articulated at the outset of the campaign—were not achieved.

In the realm of constraints on U.S. action, one of the most powerful will continue to be public opinion. One of the biggest challenges confronting President George H. W. Bush in August 1990, when Iraq attacked its neighbor, was an apparent lack of public support for military action—a lingering “Vietnam syndrome.” Polls showed little public enthusiasm for a war to oust Hussein from Kuwait, and Congress balked at the idea of actually declaring war or in some other way authorizing the president to initiate major conflict. President George W. Bush faced a similar challenge as his administration began to make the case for war against Iraq in 2002.

In both cases, of course, public and congressional doubts were overcome, and authorization was given to both presidents. In the Gulf War, this was partly a result of a robust international consensus: Americans were apparently much more willing to accept the use of force in that conflict if it was clear that the world community also accepted it and agreed to stand side-by-side with U.S. forces in the war. Involving friends and allies in any conventional limited war undoubtedly contributes to, and even may be a precondition for, gaining domestic public support.

In the Iraq War, the still-lingering effects of the 9/11 attacks were enough to provide American support for the conflict, despite significant international opposition. The paucity of international support for military action in 2003, which was critical in Gulf War, did not appear to be a binding constraint as the president made the case that removing Hussein from power was a vital national interest that justified military intervention.

One of the clear lessons from both wars therefore relates to the means by which national leaders can create support for a U.S. military intervention. Such support will result from a shared sense of purpose and a perception of a common goal. A significant event, such as a major terrorist attack, would seem to generate a sufficient sense of common purpose and to preclude the need for the support of a significant part of the world community. However, the mostly lone struggle to stabilize Iraq after the removal of Hussein in 2003 will certainly make Americans far more leery of “going it alone” in the future.

The extent of support for conventional operations will depend, of course, on the conduct of the war and how quickly it ends. If it is defined by a specific, powerful moment—the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait, or the attacks of 9/11—the onset of a war will often serve to galvanize public opinion behind the U.S. military effort. This is consistent with the “rally around the flag” effect discussed in Chapter 2. Often, however, when the war is extended and the casualty lists grow, the citizenry is confronted with the brutal consequences of war and begins to rethink its support. That is certainly what happened in Vietnam. George H. W. Bush never faced this problem in the 1990–1991 Gulf War because of the war’s short duration, relatively few casualties, and negligible costs.⁴³ Many thought that, collectively, Americans had moved beyond the “Vietnam syndrome.” The costs in casualties, time, and spending, as well as the outcome in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, will significantly affect the constraints on future presidents engaging in conventional wars.

The issues of public opinion and public diplomacy are complicated by the pervasiveness of information technology in today’s world, as discussed in Chapter 11. Beginning with the Gulf War, and continuing in the Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, and Iraq interventions, reporters often broadcast stories in the United States before they are reported through military channels. The requirements of information operations are more demanding than ever as defense leaders may face a media that is occasionally better informed about some aspects of the battlefield situation than they are. If public support is to be maintained, U.S. interventions must be swiftly decisive, and during such operations the government’s ability to report accurately must be equal to that of the world’s media.

The implementation of the “embedded reporters” plan during operations in Iraq in 2003 was useful as a means of meeting the need for information dissemination, even if some editors and news organizations believed that their reporters had “gone native” and had lost their ability to objectively report on the war. Whether it is through embedded reporters or another program, the media will certainly be a continuous, important element of all future conventional wars.

Looking Ahead

The United States will encounter formidable challenges in the concepts and the conduct of conventional conflicts in the coming decades. Despite the current strategic focus on terrorism and the increasing concern about China's military buildup, limited conventional war will continue to be a distinct possibility for the United States. Policy makers and citizens must understand how to best think about the interests, objectives, means, and constraints involved with conventional war. Perhaps the most useful, succinct guidance—although not necessarily applicable in every case—was furnished by General Colin Powell when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A further distillation of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's tests for employing military force, the so-called "Powell Doctrine" (discussed in Chapter 13) required that any commitment of U.S. military forces must: establish clear objectives, use overwhelming force, ensure public support, and plan an exit strategy for U.S. military forces before entering any direct military conflict.⁴⁴

Discussion Questions

1. How does one define *limited conventional war* versus *general conventional war*?
2. To what extent is the concept of general war relevant to the United States as a policy option? Is it more relevant to other states? Why?
3. During any international crisis, what domestic considerations (if any) might constrain the United States in regard to limited, regional conflicts?
4. Were the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 or the Gulf War of 1990–1991 limited wars? Was the Iran-Iraq War limited or general? The 2003 Gulf War? By what standard? From whose perspective?
5. What effect can a nation's R&D programs have on a potential enemy's perception of its military capability?
6. If the United States had sufficient national interests in a specific region in the world, could a regional conflict escalate into a total conventional war? From whose perspective? Explain.
7. Is there a threat to the United States of a rise of a peer competitor? If so, who might it be, and how should the United States respond?
8. To what extent have technological changes since the end of the Cold War been revolutionary? How have these changes altered the nature of conventional war, if at all?
9. Do the current rapid advances in technology make the prospect of a peer competitor to present a disruptive threat to the United States more likely? How should the United States best respond to such a competitor?
10. How should U.S. interests drive the objectives and affect the means that the United States employs in a conventional war?
11. To what extent should U.S. objectives and means in a conventional war be constrained by U.S. public opinion? By international public opinion? By diplomatic pressure? By other factors?
12. What are the most likely conventional wars that the United States will face in the next ten years? Who will they most likely be with? Why?

Recommended Reading

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Internet Resources

- The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, March 2006, www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006
- The Project on Defense Alternatives (full-text online sources on the Revolution in Military Affairs, information war, and asymmetric warfare), www.comw.org/rma