

# Future Conflict, Open Borders, and the *Need for Reform*

**by Robert P. Kozloski**

*Editor's Note: The following article was originally published in one of the Simons Center's earliest editions of the InterAgency Journal in 2012. From the Obama administration in 2012 to the Trump administration in 2019, border security remains a chief concern for U.S. leaders. With the current administration's call for a border wall, media frenzy over an "invading horde" of migrants, and the mix of myth, fact, and misinformation surrounding actual and perceived threats at the southwest border, the editors of the Journal invite our readers to ask themselves what has changed – for better or worse – since this article was originally published.*

As tensions rise in the global political environment and the use of military force remains a realistic possibility in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions, national security policymakers, interagency practitioners, and American citizens must carefully consider threats to the U.S. homeland in deciding whether U.S. military intervention is a prudent option in the future.

Despite having been at war for over a decade, the American public appears ready and willing to commit the U.S. military to future conflicts where vital interests are involved. As the Foreign Policy Initiative recently found, “A majority of Americans (62 percent) favor preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons—even if this option means the use of military force—over the alternative of avoiding armed conflict and accepting the likelihood that Iran gets nuclear weapons.”<sup>1</sup> It is unclear if the respondents are fully aware of the complex problems future military operations will pose, or if America has simply been lulled into a false sense of security during international conflict by the seemingly invincible U.S. military.

For the better part of the past century, American citizens have enjoyed the relative security of the American homeland during episodes of military conflict overseas. This is due to the so-called “American way of war” that delivers overwhelming U.S. military power to our enemy’s doorstep. Unfortunately, the U.S. will not be afforded the luxury of a secure homeland during any significant military operation in the future.

While examining future national security crises, the nation’s top military officer General Martin Dempsey recently noted, “In the future, our homeland will not be the sanctuary it has been.”<sup>2</sup> Potential adversaries currently possess a variety of conventional and unconventional capabilities that could be used against U.S. interests overseas and even in the U.S. homeland.

Dempsey’s concerns were affirmed during recent testimony before the Senate Homeland

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Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Senior officials from the federal law enforcement and intelligence communities expressed their concerns over the expanding threat posed by Iran. Kevin Perkins, Associate Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testified that, “Quds Force, Hezbollah, and others have shown they both have the capability and the willingness to extend beyond that [Middle East] region of the world and likely here into the homeland itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Considering the comparatively large defense budget and the unrivaled conventional U.S. military power, the notion of foreign military forces operating on U.S. soil may seem unfathomable and simply another scare tactic to buttress defense spending. However, it is this military superiority and the willingness to use it that could actually put the security of homeland at risk.

In reviewing the recent strategic guidance for the Department of Defense, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans Dr. Janine Davidson explained that the last decade of military conflict has identified that adversaries will “go asymmetric and irregular against the U.S. military, because taking it on head to head conventionally would be just plain stupid.”<sup>4</sup> This new reality implies the U.S. homeland would certainly be in play in the future.

Several nation states currently possess a variety of military capabilities that could be used to target the U.S. homeland. These capabilities include conventional attacks enabled by advanced technology, cyber attacks, or even attacks using financial or economic instruments to disrupt the U.S. economy. However, of particular concern are military operations executed by small units that may conduct Mumbai-type attacks using weapons and communications devices readily available in any small-town sporting goods store or groups who incorporate improvised explosive devices and/or weapons of mass destruction.

While these isolated or even coordinated attacks would not lead to a U.S. military defeat,

they certainly could create fear, a sense of vulnerability, economic turmoil, and challenge support for the war effort among U.S. citizens. Attacks to the homeland would target America’s center of gravity—the will of the American people.

Changes in the global security environment further exacerbate this U.S. security dilemma. Globalization has enabled black markets trafficking in illicit goods to flourish to an estimated \$10 trillion per year. The transnational criminal organizations that facilitate these markets are becoming more efficient, adaptive, and lethal. Illegal arms and legitimate dual-use technology once only available to super powers to develop sophisticated weapons are readily available for sale to the highest bidder. This diffusion of dangerous goods makes small groups increasingly more dangerous. As Dr. Roy Godson of Georgetown University concludes, “Globalization has enabled micro groups the capability to cause macro damage.”<sup>5</sup>

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Of particular concern is the nexus between violent Middle Eastern extremist groups and drug traffickers in South America. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) noted this worrisome issue in the *Miami Herald*, stating that because of Iran’s increasing international isolation as a result of its outlaw nuclear program, the regime has aggressively pursued closer diplomatic ties with anti-American despots in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>6</sup> These new partnerships are mutually beneficial; new markets are opened up to the drug traffickers, while the extremists gain access to a new realm for their operations. U.S. intelligence officials have testified that Iran also uses its embassies as cover for nefarious activities, including harboring operatives from

the Quds Force.

Expeditionary logistics and the capability to move enormous quantities of personnel and material anywhere around the globe was once a strategic advantage of the U.S. military. However, small military units may now leverage transnational criminal networks, motivated purely by profit, to move personnel and material into the U.S. and provide sustained logistical support once inside the porous U.S. borders.

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Since the Vietnam War, U.S. Special Operations Forces have had great success in conducting small-unit operations deep behind enemy lines. The allure of special forces has permeated American culture from video games to fitness programs. However, interagency planners must be aware that other nations possess similar capabilities as well, and capabilities must never be “assumed away” simply because they have not been used in recent history.

It is certainly conceivable that in the future small military units could operate inside the U.S. homeland and effectively employ sabotage techniques using improvised explosive devices, a modern tactic developed by Iran and perfected by al Qaeda, or conduct coordinated Mumbai-style attacks on soft targets within the U.S. A company-sized unit of approximately 200 well-trained and equipped members operating in disbursed small units throughout the U.S. could inflict significant physical and psychological damage.

The reaction to such attacks would be difficult to predict. The security of American citizens and national interests would certainly be paramount, but would the public demand an immediate overwhelming retaliatory response to

such attacks or would they demand that the U.S. military operations precipitating the homeland attacks to cease? This issue would be a major consideration if the conflict were intended to defend a traditional U.S. ally, say Israel, Taiwan or even Japan.

The scenario of foreign military forces operating within the U.S. is one that the interagency is not well prepared for. To ensure preparedness, a host of national policy and organizational issues must be resolved, particularly those issues that relate to protecting the civil liberties of U.S. citizens, particularly those affiliated with the nation or religion involved in the larger conflict. An effective response would require an unprecedented level of cross-agency and cross-government (federal, state, local) integration.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the 2002 “U.S. National Security Strategy” identified the need to transform U.S. national security institutions to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. After a decade, the U.S. has made some progress in achieving this goal, but bureaucratic inertia has been difficult to overcome. The issues noted in this 2002 clarion call were clearly evident in the operational shortcomings in Afghanistan, Iraq, and during the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, all of which demanded significantly more coordination and integration than previous interagency operations. However, it is likely that future threat scenarios will demand an even greater degree of capability integration to ensure an effective response.

Recently, Barry Watts, Senior Fellow at the influential Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, remarked that while the goal of transforming the national security institutions was laudable, it was no more of a constituted and executable strategy than a business firm’s declaration to double its market share in the next three years.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past decade, efforts for institutional reform have been largely overshadowed by

ongoing military conflicts, partisan gridlock, and the fiscal issues facing all elements of the national security enterprise. The recent political discourse has failed to identify and articulate a clear strategy of how to best cope with emerging national security concerns—many of which could potentially disrupt the livelihood of American citizens to a degree not experienced in a generation. Instead of meaningful debate on evolving the current system, the discourse has been mired in the traditional (and simplistic) issue of the size of future defense budgets.

Unfortunately, previous efforts to reform the national security institutions have been reactive and intended to resolve yesterday's crises. Reform efforts heretofore have largely resulted in a significant increase in bureaucratic overhead. For example, the three most recent efforts to significantly reform the U.S. national security institutions, the Goldwater Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 that created the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Security Intelligence Reform Act of 2004, all increased the size of headquarters' staffs. These efforts have been questionably effective but unquestionably expensive.

Given the realities of U.S. fiscal problems, additional layers of expensive bureaucracy is not the optimal solution to these emerging threats, and the U.S. needs a new strategic approach for "reform without growth." This approach will take innovative, strategic thinking and cooperation among all three branches of government. It will also require that governmental and nongovernmental organizations learn to operate more efficiently and effectively as interagency teams, both vertically and horizontally.

Recently, U.S. Army Major Jonathan P. Graebener, writing for the Arthur D. Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation, proposed the concept of "domestic security cooperation" between the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security that may serve as a useful starting point to prepare for this complex interagency challenge.<sup>8</sup> However, if the U.S. maintains the status quo, future enemies will exploit national policy gaps and ineffective organization.

An entire generation of U.S. military officers, policymakers, and citizens has waged war without regard to disrupting the American way of life at home. Given the emerging capabilities of nation states or affiliate groups, transnational criminal organizations, and the diffusion of technology available to anyone with a moderate level of financial resources, the U.S. will not have that luxury in the future. Our national leaders, particularly our newly elected officials, must consider how to defend the homeland should military action be realistically considered in the future. **IAJ**

## NOTES

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