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The Cheney-Powell-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz Strategy: An Evaluation

By Michael S. Rozeff

October 30, 2014

The U.S. never demobilized after the Cold War ended. It constructed new missions for its military. It adopted a new post-Cold War strategy but kept its military forces intact.

Americans received no peace dividend. To the contrary, as the years have passed and America's wars have proliferated, Americans have expended enormous wealth.

The war policies of Barack Obama and George W. Bush grew out of defense plans of the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations. These plans maintained the Cold War mentality. This involved the U.S. constantly being heavily armed against foes and enemies. The Defense Department planners transmuted "Global threats" of the Cold War into "regional challenges and opportunities." These plans retained a U.S. military force structure suitable for a wartime situation, rather than the actual peacetime situation.

In order to keep the U.S. on a military footing despite being at peace, these plans replaced the Soviet Union with an array of other justifications. They appealed to such goals as maintaining regional stability, being able to fight two wars, defending American overseas interests in natural resources, warding off foreign threats, fighting terrorism and preventing the emergence of rivals. The planners multiplied missions and magnified their importance.

In the past, no such goals had ever prevented the U.S. from demobilizing and returning to a peacetime posture. None of these goals was ever serious enough or regarded as so serious as to require that the U.S. be on a continuous war footing. The U.S. had not before regarded itself as a sole superpower. It had not conceived itself as having these missions to fulfill, with the attendant military superiority and applications of force that they implied.

It is argued below that the defense policy plans were constructed so as to justify the military. The justifications and arguments they contained failed to reflect all sorts of realities. Consequently, when put into practice, they have failed miserably. They have not lived up to the aspirations of the planners.

In its planning, the U.S. established missions for itself that relied on war and force. The missions were broad, open-ended, vague, and subject to interpretation. They opened up into new proactive vistas. The language of the plans often sounded innocuous or even sensible and reasonable, but they were disturbing in many ways. Carrying over the Cold War mentality, they blithely referred to democracy as if it were a criterion of goodness and as if peace required its extension everywhere. American interests everywhere were taken for granted. The plans were global in scope. The seeds of pre-emptive warfare were planted.

In the January, 1993 document containing “Defense Strategy for the 1990s”, Dick Cheney would write

“Together with our allies, we must preclude hostile nondemocratic powers from dominating regions critical to our interests and otherwise work to build an international environment conducive to our values.”

Plans to extend NATO were in place:

“The second goal is to strengthen and extend the system of defense arrangements that binds democratic and like-minded nations together in common defense against aggression...”

The U.S. planned full spectrum dominance everywhere. Any country that the U.S. regarded as nondemocratic became an automatic threat, especially if its region contained resources that the U.S. regarded as critical:

“The third goal is to preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests, and also thereby to strengthen the barriers against the reemergence of a global threat to the interests of the United States and our allies. These regions include Europe, East Asia, the Middle East/Persian Gulf, and Latin America. Consolidated, nondemocratic control of the resources of such a critical region could generate a significant threat to our security.”

Defense was redefined to include activities that involved social and political changes in foreign regions under the theory that doing this produced a good known as reduced regional instability.

The U.S. would spread democracy in its own defense. Under the umbrella of national security policy, the U.S. would see fit to meddle in all sorts of way and in all sorts of regions and countries:

“The fourth goal is to help preclude conflict by reducing sources of regional instability and to limit violence should conflict occur. Within the broader national security policy of encouraging the spread and consolidation of democratic government and open economic systems, the Defense Department furthers these ends through efforts to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, and other threats to internal democratic order, assistance to peacekeeping efforts; the provision of humanitarian and security assistance; limits on the spread of militarily significant technology, particularly the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction along with the means to deliver them; and the use of defense-to-defense contacts to assist in strengthening civil-military institutions and encourage reductions in the economic burden of military spending.”

Pre-emption and spreading democracy became part of U.S. doctrine:

“Our strategy is designed to preclude threats and to encourage trends that advance U.S. security objectives in the future. This is not simply within our means; it is critical to our future security...If we and other leading democracies continue to build a democratic security community, a much safer world is likely to emerge.”

In 2002, David Armstrong identified some of the U.S. defense planning and strategy documents that have guided major elements of U.S. foreign policy for about the past 25 years. He identified the men directly responsible for drawing up these plans and strategies as Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld. Some of these documents are available [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). As time went on, the plans and strategies evolved. In May of 1997, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen issued a new Quadrennial Defense Review.

In a journal article published in 2011, Alexandra Homolar writes that between 1989 and 1995, these formal defense reviews

“provided a medium for political bargaining between key actors in the defence policymaking community which enabled the maintenance of core elements of the status quo. This bargaining process lead to a rearticulation of actors’ interests that in turn enabled a new strategic consensus to emerge that preserved many of the principal pillars of US Cold War defence policy, the linchpin of which was a shared belief in the need to maintain an absolute superiority in US military power.”

She also identifies Powell, Cheney and Wolfowitz as key players. Les Aspin resisted the direction being taken, but Bill Clinton acceded. She concludes

“...all major defence reviews in the post-Cold War era have underlined the US status as the sole military superpower and the will to persist as the world’s preeminent military power as well as

the willingness to resort to the use of military force, despite a strategic environment where manifest military threats to US interests appeared to have declined substantially. In short, the maintenance of ‘unipolarity’ quickly became defined as a central objective of US defence policy in the post-Cold War era...At the same time, this reconfiguration of US strategic objectives served to avert radical changes within the US defence establishment.”

These defense plans that embody the Cheney-Powell-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz (CPRW) strategy would lead to the U.S. war policies of the twenty-first century. They would lead to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya among others. They would lead to the effort to oust Syria’s government, to sanctions on Iran and Russia, and to drone warfare in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. They would lead to the blowback of 9/11 and to the Islamic State. They would lead to the Department of Homeland Security, to the growth of the national security state, and to the TSA. They would lead to confrontation with Russia over Ukraine and to a Pacific “pivot” that confronts China. They would lead to AFRICOM.

The planners saw their plans as relevant for the next 100 years, and they have not yet been proven incorrect in their assessment. Even though these plans in practice have produced enormous failures that can be traced back to the false assumptions and mistaken ideas of the planners, the U.S. government has yet to acknowledge its failures much less alter its basic presumptions.

Under the Cheney-Powell-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz (CPRW) strategy, a huge military is kept alive and U.S. policy is reshaped around that military force. The CPRW strategy creates a military force structure that’s not needed for maintaining peace or for security. This has major negative effects. For one thing, the U.S. government then has options to apply military force throughout the world. The missions are so broad that the government has the option of making continuous war, but more importantly it has the option of making war at junctures that favor swaying domestic political outcomes. War at chosen junctures brings certain benefits to government officials, including a way to re-align domestic political opposition and a way to win elections. The result is wars being made for political purposes. Second, politicians who have their own personal reasons for making war have a ready-made tool to do so. Third, any group with the skill to work the levers of government power or convince officials can instigate wars for its own reasons. Project for a New American Century (PNAC) did just that. Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were also associated with PNAC. These groups can mobilize important segments of the public in support of their aims. Fourth, even if war is avoided, the U.S. government stands ready to intervene in almost any country for almost any reason. This meddling has very high costs. Beside being difficult to reverse, it ties the U.S. into local and regional predicaments that the U.S. cannot resolve. Where a regional hegemon might be able to keep order, the U.S. cannot. Regional instability rises.

The CPRW strategy created a standing war-making machine, and a standing war-making machine is an invitation to the making of war. Consequently, the wrong wars in the wrong places and for the wrong reasons become more probable. Wars for non-rational reasons or without

rational calculation of the war's costs and benefits become more likely. Because it provides the military means, the CPRW strategy encourages government and those who influence government to push other nations around and dominate them in the name of doing good. At the same time, the CPRW strategy reflects this aim to begin with.

A tremendous gulf divides the lofty CPRW strategy of the elite defense establishment from the results that have actually occurred on the ground when these plans were put into practice.

“But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men
Gang aft agley,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,
For promis’d joy!”

Instead of a safer world, the world is less safe. Cheney’s defense document contains one erroneous statement after another, which explains why his best-laid schemes went astray. For example, he wrote

“One of the primary tasks we face today in shaping the future is carrying long standing alliances into the new era, and turning old enmities into new cooperative relationships. If we and other leading democracies continue to build a democratic security community, a much safer world is likely to emerge.”

Extending NATO’s life and range to Russia’s borders didn’t make Russia more cooperative. How could it possibly do so? Withdrawing from the ABM treaty didn’t achieve that end either. How could it do anything but interfere with cooperation? The U.S. built and extended its “democratic security community”, but that hasn’t made the world safer.

Cheney opined that

“Our fundamental belief in democracy and human rights gives other nations confidence that our significant military power threatens no one’s aspirations for peaceful democratic progress.”

How believable is it that the U.S. could grow in strength but others would not feel threatened? That might well be a first in human history, but Cheney thought that American exceptionalism (its “fundamental belief in democracy and human rights”) assured this result. How could other nations not feel threatened when the U.S. in practice used its military power to violate human rights and to violate international law?

Cheney’s thinking in this 1993 document, which was U.S. official doctrine, made this assertion:

“Similarly, NATO’s new strategy not only reflects an adjustment to the reduced threat environment in Europe but equally it reassures our former adversaries of the truly defensive nature of the NATO alliance.”

The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 showed how wrong his thinking was. The role of NATO in the Libyan campaign provided a further instance. NATO’s response to the Ukrainian conflict makes total hash out of this statement.

One last example of many that could be cited shows again that the U.S. plans were shaped without sufficient regard to realities. The documents live in a rarified world of their own in which the writers seem to think that what they express about the world actually makes it so. It doesn’t. Their ignorance of everything involved is so vast that they could not help but go wrong. Cheney wrote

“Our ability to reduce sources of regional instability and to limit violence should conflict occur also is critical to shaping the environment This includes, for example, updating our strategy to counter the proliferation of militarily significant technology, particularly the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction along with the means to deliver them. Our traditional export control efforts must not only be updated and strengthened in this new era, but supplemented by political dissuasion, bilateral and multilateral negotiations, and inspection and destruction missions, as illustrated in the case of Iraq.”

There was a fixation on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction revealed here and elsewhere in the thought of American defense planners. They seem to have lost all sense of proportion. Accompanying this was the sense that it was up to the U.S. to “reduce sources of regional instability”. Why? And could it be done? Cheney was intent on “shaping the environment”, another fixation. Why attempt this? Was this really necessary for security of Americans? Is it even feasible? Were Cheney and his planners even cognizant of the difficulties in doing so? He thought this was “critical”. Why? How much difference does it really make to Americans if various regions have changes or instability? Isn’t this as old as the hills?

Here we have Cheney piling up one erroneous, distorted or wild idea atop another. Eventually these ideas would lead him and Bush to an attack on Iraq. These ideas could be made to sound sensible and logical by practitioners of the art of persuasion on talk shows, interviews and speeches; but they are all flawed and they led to disaster, it being widely thought, as is easy to document, that the decision to invade Iraq was a huge policy blunder.

The CPRW plans and strategy are official U.S. policy to this date. They are a loser.