
New National Defense Strategy Emphasizes More Iraq-Like Missions

By

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates is set to approve a new strategy that calls for greater emphasis on irregular operations, solidifying in a key Pentagon planning document his recent public admonitions that the military services must shift their focus away from preparing for conventional fights against superpowers in favor of plans for more Iraq-like missions.

As soon as this week, Gates is expected to approve the 2008 National Defense Strategy, which will be made public along with an updated National Military Strategy issued by Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to Defense Department officials.

The two volumes—which sources say will be unclassified once approved—are two of six so-called “gold standard” planning documents, most of which are designed in close coordination with each other, that provide strategic direction for the Defense Department.

Last week, Gates approved two others—the Guidance for the Development of the Force and Guidance for the Employment of the Force. The Unified Command Plan and the Quadrennial Defense Review complete the Pentagon’s strategic planning library.

With less than six months before a transition team for a new administration prepares to take the Pentagon’s reins, some defense analysts say it is not clear what impact the new strategy will have on near-term decisions, particularly the FY2010 to 2015 investment blueprint being developed.

Sources who have read the document say it outlines a set of global security challenges that Gates believes are long-term problems likely to confront multiple administrations and congresses.

Still, the 2008 National Defense Strategy may be a harbinger of near-term changes the defense secretary seeks to impose in the coming months on both the portfolio of weapons the military acquires as well as the structure of the U.S. military.

On May 13, one day after approving the Guidance for the Development of the Force—the measure against which the military services’ FY10/15 weapon system investment proposals will be judged—Gates told an audience in Colorado that the viability of any major weapon system program will be its ability to “show some utility and relevance to the kind of irregular campaigns that . . . are most likely to engage America’s military in the coming decades.”

The National Defense Strategy, according to sources familiar with it, reiterates a view set forth in the 2005 version of the document that the U.S. military should prepare to deal with an increasingly complex, and dangerous, security environment in which full-scale war against China or Russia or Iran is considered unlikely.

“One of the things I’ve tried to do in my limited tenure as secretary is focus attention on areas where our military—and the U.S. Government as a whole—need to change to deal with the kind of security challenges we are going to face for the next several decades,” Gates told a May 5 audience at the Brookings Institution.

In addition to dealing with violent jihadist networks in Iraq and Afghanistan, Gates said the military must keep an eye on “rising powers of new wealth and uncertain intentions” who are “showing assertiveness on the world stage.”

“Rogue regimes continue to pursue dangerous weapons and the means to deliver them,” he said. “All these challenges will co-exist alongside the destabilizing scourges of poverty, hunger, disease, economic dislocation, and environmental degradation.”

Speaking in Colorado on May 13, Gates said “for much of the past year I’ve been trying to concentrate the minds and energies of the defense establishment on the current needs and current conflicts . . . to ensure that all parts of the Defense Department are, in fact, at war.”

In the same speech, Gates said that in his relatively brief tenure as Pentagon boss he has “noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called ‘next-war-itis’”—the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict.

“But in a world of finite knowledge and limited resources, where we have to make choices and set priorities, it makes sense to lean toward the most likely and lethal scenarios for our military. And it is hard to conceive of any country confronting the United States directly in conventional terms—ship to ship, fighter to fighter, tank to tank—for some time to come,” the secretary said.

In addition to current U.S.-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Gates pointed to other recent military conflicts that he believes foreshadow the types of military operations that Pentagon leaders are more likely to confront than major combat operations with a near-peer adversary like China or Russia. Operations in which smaller, irregular forces frustrated larger, wealthier regular militaries—as the Soviets were hindered in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the Israelis in Lebanon in 2006, Gates said.

“Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today,” stated the defense secretary.

New capabilities include not only the types of new military hardware that Gates has urged the Pentagon to field faster—like new armored trucks and additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities—but a wider array of skills to assist foreign nations as they enhance the capacity of their defense and security forces, a responsibility that is extending beyond Special Forces to the general purpose force.

Speaking to future Army officers at West Point on April 21, Gates said, “From the standpoint of America’s national security, the most important assignment in your military career may not necessarily be commanding U.S. soldiers but advising or mentoring the troops of other nationals as they battle the forces of terror and the instability within their own borders.”