Commentaries & Replies

On "Predicting Future War"

Jeff Becker

This commentary is in response to Robert A. Johnson's article "Predicting Future War" published in the Spring 2014 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 1).

The Joint Force Must Get Better at Understanding Combinations, Employing Asymmetry, Evaluating Risk

The article "Predicting Future War" by Robert Johnson provides a compelling vision for the types of challenges future forces will face and the military implications of those challenges. Although "tours of the future" like those found in the article are important, I believe it is critical the military step back and understand the cultural reflexes and biases we must cultivate order to address those emerging challenges. Straight-line analysis of trends and their implications may drive us to solutions that are wrong or incomplete. Instead, I would advocate a broader view so the force as a whole can come to terms with these challenges in a coherent way.

Strategic competition is always a back-and-forth affair. The US approach to warfare over the last several decades has deeply impressed potential adversaries and is encouraging speedy military innovation around the world. This innovation is confronting the Joint Force with an array of emerging military challenges and threatening to obsolesce, or make irrelevant, parts of the US defense establishment. From anti-access challenges in the Pacific, to "masked warfare" in Eastern Europe, to evolving irregular and insurgent challenges throughout the Middle East, adversaries are adapting to the "US way of war" and testing new approaches to limiting American influence and reach.

Although always difficult in a bureaucracy as large and complex as the Department of Defense, we have to think hard about building a Joint Force (through conscious design) with keen appreciation for evolving strategic challenges and threats. The Chairman notes 80 percent of the Joint Force of 2020 is essentially decided. Thus, what we do about the remaining 20 percent can potentially have disproportional impact on the success or failure of our future military. Perhaps even more critical is what we do in doctrine, education, organization, training, and leadership – in essence, the mental and social "software" that orients and orchestrates our military capabilities. To get this software right, the military should be thinking more deeply about the nature of these key mental investments to ensure military change is positive, opportunistic, and occurs on our terms, not an adversary's. Coding this mental software also suggests now is the time to step back from individual weapons or programs and think more broadly about the context within which future conflict will take place. I see this contextual discussion taking three distinct, yet related paths.

Mr. Becker is a Defense Analyst in Virginia, and has worked on military futures for over 15 years. He is currently working and writing on a number of Joint Futures and Future Joint Concept projects for the Joint Staff. Mr. Becker graduated from Old Dominion University with a M.A. in International Studies and has a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Iowa.

First, we must work to understand better the complex threats and challenges driving military change. Calling it complex is not good enough; we must clarify this complexity if we do not want to miss the mark. For me, this complexity is about combinations. Today, we face novel combinations of threats from an array of adversaries. These threats frequently transcend neat or tidy categories, cutting across land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum, while being distributed or reaching across broader geographic ranges. Each military service tends to have a well-defined range of responsibilities in which its competence and professionalism are unrivalled. Adversaries, unable to confront superior capabilities within service domains, are experimenting with combinations of overlapping capabilities capable of cutting across seams or boundaries between services, or avoid them altogether.

Second, these novel combinations of challenges, threats, and adversaries require novel combinations of power in response. To encourage a future military capable of such combinations, we have to think about the assembly and employment of complementary mixes of government, civilian, and military power, which are at once confounding, irresistible, surprising, and unexpected, to our adversaries. If we do this well, it will set the stage for affordable and numerous new capabilities, such as small, swarming robotics capable of taking advantage of the emerging intersection of twenty-first century engineering, manufacturing, and information technologies. Furthermore, this mental approach will assist in mitigating the vulnerabilities of our own expensive or hard-to-replace capital assets and overcome the potential limitations of a force too exquisite to risk using. Before a war, a convincingly flexible force will serve to deter more effectively. During war, it will be central to victory.

Third, we must better understand how to evaluate and mitigate risk by integrating vulnerability assessments more comprehensively into all aspects of our thinking. Risk is inherent every time military power is employed. However, we often forget the true measure of power in the international system is the ability to change the behavior of another *at reasonable cost*. Critically, we need to get better at uncovering flaws in our initial assumptions about military problems, and at articulating the consequences of specific military actions or approaches. Not all problems are dangerous, not all dangers are pressing, not all emergencies are soluble, and not all solutions are affordable. The defense intellectual must understand how the US military is able, under modern warfighting conditions, to provide political leaders flexible military options capable of uniting strategy and tactics in a world of limitations. In a world characterized by powerful adversaries and perhaps less ample US military capabilities, it is critical we cultivate a sense of risk management across the future force.

Our institutional inability to think thorough contextual issues, such as those I have described above, tends to discount future costs. We default to easy decisions, such as protecting legacy structure, end strength, or top-line budget, and put off difficult choices until they are beyond the point at which they can be optimally solved. The great strategic thinker Colin Gray is well known for articulating the idea that war is about context. Putting contextual discussions at the beginning of our future force development activities will help to position the Department

of Defense and the nation as a whole to seize opportunities rather than – as is so often the case – be driven by institutional inertia or by reacting to a more visionary, forward-looking adversary's plans.

Dr. Johnson's article surfaces a number of challenges the future force will face, some will be right, some will be wrong.   Critically, however, I suggest we must understand how − in a world most agree is (as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is fond of saying) "complex, uncertain, and increasingly dangerous," we cultivate the mental agility to prepare where we can, and adjust to unanticipated conditions when we must.

The Author Replies

Robert A. Johnson

Mr. Jeff Becker advances ideas that are close to my own and I do not detect any fundamental disagreement between us, but rather an injunction to develop our responses to future trends. We share a critical view of the term "complex," which Mr. Becker rightly points out is overused. His observation that it is merely a question of combination, perhaps in unexpected ways, is spot on. He encourages action "across the seams or boundaries between Services"; our own "novel combinations" and the cultivation of "mental agility." In this we are on the same page. Mr. Becker urges the armed services to: "better understand the cultural reflexes and biases we must cultivate," but I would only caution here we also might better understand our usual reflexes in order to militate against our tendency to reach the wrong conclusions. I am also a little uncertain if we always get the formula for assessing risk right. Risk is an inevitable facet of war and cannot be avoided, but he rightly enjoins us to assess cost, which, in fact, is a far better metric. Mr. Becker correctly deduces that to get our mental "software" right, "the military should be thinking more deeply about the nature of these key mental investments to ensure military change is positive, opportunistic, and occurs on our terms, not an adversary's." In this, he is absolutely right.