"WHAT IF?" – A MOST IMPERTINENT QUESTION INDEED

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We are in an era of persistent, purposeful, and increasingly complex resistance to American primacy. Unfortunately, the strategic discourse necessary to guide us through our current predicament has yet to coalesce around an appropriate logic. Despite 5 years of irregular conflict, military purists in and out of uniform continue their search for clean boundaries between war and peace—boundaries that will again allow them to focus on the most traditional conceptions of "warfighting" at the expense of those concepts and capabilities necessary to our success against the likeliest and most strategically consequential future challenges.

Truthfully answering some very impertinent questions might prove the only route to necessary change in the defense community's view of and approach to a dangerous and complex strategic environment. The principal question? Are recent changes in the environment's dynamics additive—new challenges added to old or instead qualitative—new challenges replacing old? Specifically, has there been a real revolution in the character of competition and strategic hazard in the international system? Are endemic insecurity and under-governance, in fact, the most significant threats to American primacy over the long-term?

Our perceived vulnerabilities, evidenced by the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks and our difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggest to even our traditional competitors the value of persistent irregular and potentially catastrophic resistance. Therefore, will serial "small wars" of necessity be the future norm? And, thus, will irregular and increasingly catastrophic resistance and their associated costs stake more of a claim to strategic significance than all possible traditional challenges? Most significantly, perhaps, will our continued fixation on the tools and concepts of traditional conflict result in fatal under-preparedness for the irregular and catastrophic resistance likeliest to stalk American great power?

Getting the right answers to these important questions will require a more thoughtful and nuanced appreciation of the strategic environment than we have corporately demonstrated the capacity to either undertake or consume. Institutional and bureaucratic interests are now conflated with national interests. As a result, it may be impossible to either distinguish or act on what are real but unrecognized strategic imperatives. If our national security institutions continue to value tradition, convention, and bureaucratic self-interest over strategic utility or necessity, we are doomed to understate the importance of nontraditional challenges and certain to under-invest intellectually and materially in the strategic solutions necessary to contend with them. As a result, our traditional instruments of power and the institutions responsible for employing them will remain optimized for the unlikeliest and most manageable of our strategic challenges; thereby, putting our strategic position and interests at substantial

risk.

The questions we must necessarily answer admittedly are disquieting to a national security community with a toolbox full of hammers and a near nail-free set of problems. The traditional worldview that relies on enemy armies, air forces, and missile batteries as the gold standard against which we gauge our military preparedness may no longer be valid. Our traditional advantages will allow for regime removals and coercive campaigns. Prudence indicates we maintain these. However, will the same advantages enable us to prosecute an opposed regime change of decisive and enduring effect? Will they enable us to contain or reverse contagious instability in a key strategic region, prevent or restore a fallen but essential political order in a critical state, or adequately contend with a new global insurgent threat originating from outside the world of extreme Islam? Indeed, failure to adapt could even endanger our ability to counter effectively competitor states, now certainly likelier to surreptitiously employ physical, material, political, or economic "violence" than military force to challenge our interests and influence.

I return to the fundamental question. Has the character of strategically significant resistance changed so fundamentally that traditional conceptions of "warfighting" are less relevant? We cannot allow intellectual narrowness or blind loyalty to convention to perpetuate the most comfortable concepts and tools of traditional "warfighting" if dedication to them is born more of nostalgia and than of necessity. Indeed, America's future strategic success may rely less on traditional battlefield outcomes than we would like to admit. It may, in fact, rely most on skillful management of persistent conflict and resistance and the ability to push both below the threshold of strategic significance.

What if Baghdad and like environs are the future and not just part of it? An impertinent question, indeed. Absent truly transformational thinking, America will not be well served by a national security structure designed to defeat Goliath while most vulnerable to a sea of very capable Davids.

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