Contemporary Issues in U.S. National Security

Interview with Robert D. Kaplan

On October 22, 2007, Robert D. Kaplan, a journalist for the Atlantic Monthly and current visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD, sat down with YJIA Editor Alexander Besant to discuss contemporary issues in American national security.

Your recent travels with the U.S. military has brought you to the frontlines of the management of the issues of tribalism, scarcity, disease, and crime indirectly through the prism of the war on terror. Would you say that the increasing contact the U.S. military has had with these issues recently has begun to alter both the role of the average soldier as well as the strategy of the U.S. military as a whole?

I think that being engaged in those places is profoundly changing the U.S. military. You have young junior officers, lieutenants, and captains who are returning from the war with lessons learned and reinvigorating staff college curriculum, not just at West Point and Annapolis but also at various bases throughout the country. A military is only as good as its learning curve. The war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, [Hurricane] Katrina, and the recent tsunami—all these deployments around the world are showing these young officers that they were not trained for this. So the training has to be somewhat different for new junior officers. You are going to see the curriculum changing to make the U.S. military become much more engaged in the world, by teaching more foreign languages, for example. At Annapolis, where I teach temporarily at the Naval Academy, there is a huge influx of money for exotic language teaching. So one way in which the U.S. military will change will be its increased cosmopolitanism.

You speak of a combination of humanitarian relief and combat. Could you speak a bit about Katrina and what conclusion we could draw from that experience?
I was embedded with a group of Army National Guard Special Forces in Afghanistan in late 2003 who were fighting the Taliban. During this operation there were many combat missions in which people were wounded and killed, and then this same unit was deployed to Katrina. I didn’t go along, but according to them Katrina was every bit as violent, dangerous, and challenging as a war zone. They found that the things that applied in Afghanistan were able to aid them in humanitarian work during Katrina. Both saw a massive territory throughout which order has collapsed. Questions such as where to deploy first, how to protect civilians best, and which methods are working and not working were key questions during both missions. There really is transference of knowledge. We seem to erect too thick of a barrier between one deployment and another.

**Do you think the future AFRICOM, with its interagency mix of intelligence, diplomatic, health, and aid experts represents a shift in U.S. military strategy—one that incorporates development and nation-building functions?**

There is a saying that attrition of the same adds up to big change. We have seen this interagency shift take place elsewhere, but in AFRICOM we are going to see it in a big way, in one whole area of command that is going to be, in a bureaucratic sense, a trend-setting command. In the past, our other areas of geographical command have tended to have one pol ad, a political officer from the State Department, someone of ambassadorial rank who advises the combatant commander. In AFRICOM you will see many pol ads, and even the deputy of AFRICOM may be a deputy from the State Department. So you are going to see a meshing of interagency to a degree you have never seen before. It is going to be a real cutting-edge bureaucratic instrument.

**Do you see a renewed role for the State Department with AFRICOM?**

The biggest promoters of the State Department are the U.S. military. Whenever I meet the military they ask, “Why isn’t the State Department doing this? Why are we stuck doing this?” You hear that from all over, from generals to colonels. Nobody wants the State Department to have a bigger role in all of this than the U.S. military does. Giving the State Department a bigger role is welcomed but the problem is that the State Department has been underfunded and undertrained, and as a result it can’t do things as fast as the military.

**What effect will different branches of the military have on the military future of the United States?**
The 1986 Goldwater Nichols Act reorganized the U.S. military so that there was less competition between the services. We all know these words now such as CENTCOM, AFRICOM, or PACOM. The significance of them is not that they are area-specific; rather it is that they are of joint services. They are composed of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and sometimes even the Coast Guard. It is because the real action is in these joint services command, where they may have a combatant commander who is a Marine and his deputy who is in the Army. This was deliberate in order to lessen tension between the services. There are always inter-service rivalries and there always will be, but there is less now than before the late 1980s. In order to get promoted to the top in all of the services, you now have to have what is called joint or “purple” experience; purple refers to the color created by blending Navy khaki, Army green, and Air Force gray.

Do you see an increasing role for private military companies on the battlefield?

They very much have a place in the future, yet you have to ask why this is occurring. In some sense, this is very much connected with market capitalism. The changing nature of war, mainly due to technology, means that it is much more time-consuming and expensive to train someone to be useful. This means that the quality of each troop matters more. The private sector thus can do this more cheaply, particularly by hiring the best minds of the U.S. military who can provide services like nobody else can.

Private contractors do a lot of work in Iraq from cleaning toilets to training missions, and all of our global positioning ships are manned by merchant seamen, which are a form of private contractors. This phenomenon will stay with us. The recent scandal over Blackwater will be dealt with and rules of engagement will be tweaked. I don’t see this as these companies dying off. They are even now coming up with strategies on how to intervene in failed states such as Sudan when nobody else is willing to do it. Furthermore, Blackwater is already building its own small warships to enforce drug interdiction and anti-piracy off the horn of Africa. What I would say is to keep an open mind about this trend.

Could you discuss the role of the U.S. in upholding sovereignty in unstable states through the training of indigenous forces? Is the training of indigenous forces only linked to the war on terror, or do you see further benefits for U.S. foreign policy?

The war on terror is the bumper sticker for a lot of our involvements around
the world which may have more or less to do with a war on terror. Many of our military deployments around the world deal with propping up democratic governments against undemocratic insurgents or fighting insurgents who are not al-Qaeda, but may be indirectly linked or even not indirectly linked, as in those who we fight in Colombia. The war on terrorism is the rubric the way in which the Cold War was the rubric. It provides a reason for budgeting and for organization. I don’t think the U.S. government takes a stand on sovereignty *per se*. What it promotes, however, is minority rights, the rule of law, and good government. We have debates about how much we should push the spread of democracy. But if we soften that a bit and stop using democracy so legalistically, we wouldn’t care if this government holds an election the next day or every six months, just as long as it brings improvement and good government. Look at the case of Pakistan. We are not holding a gun to anyone’s head to hold elections, but we are asking ourselves how we can massage this situation to get better and more stable government out of the leaders. We look at what we can do to help stable government and that may include pushing elections in one case and it may mean postponing them in another. I think after the Cold War there was this big debate about sovereignty, about how if a government is really cruel to its people it is morally sanctioned to interfere with the domestic affairs of that country in order to stop abject cruelty. It turned out that we did this, albeit late, in Kosovo and we didn’t do it at all in Rwanda, which is now considered a big mistake. One of the undervalued debates in the Iraq war is how the failure to intervene in Rwanda and the successful intervention in Kosovo and Bosnia fuelled the drive to the Iraq war, as this was seen as another humanitarian intervention against a leader who had killed many more than Milosevic had.

**What are the differences between Iraq and Kosovo in terms of what worked and what didn’t work?**

I think the differences were those of scale. Kosovo, we fought as an air and naval war exclusively. We didn’t get involved on the ground. We were very conscious about our limits. In Bosnia, we went in with ground troops but only after the fighting had ceased due to air and naval actions. In Iraq, we were dealing with a country of 26 million people and we had a ground invasion to dislodge the government. Thus, there was a great difference of scale between the cases. It was not a question of culture or proximity to Europe, as Kosovo is a rather oriental country in many respects.

**In the last chapter of your newest book, you mention a number of obstacles that threaten the continuance of U.S. military dominance in the coming century. One factor that stood out in particular was the erosion of**
the psychological will to win, particularly in American society. Could you elaborate on this argument?

I think that has to do with prosperous middle class societies with low birth rates that put a large value on their troops’ lives. I also think there is a basic guilt complex in a volunteer military society amongst those who don’t serve and who may be unwilling to risk the lives of those who do so. Also, we live in a society in which we have had a volunteer military for almost a third of a century; thus, the public approaches the military with a feeling of awe on one hand and a feeling of suspicion on the other, rather than something they are deeply in touch with. We have lost around 3,500 in Iraq compared to 58,000 in Vietnam, yet there seems to be a decreasing tolerance to sacrifice the lives of troops.

Would you say that the media plays a role in this?

I think it does. I think the media is a reflection of the society at large, mainly of liberal society rather than conservative society in the elite branches of the media, but I wouldn’t push that too strongly. The media is comfortable with portraying the troops as victims but not as war heroes. One of the things that perplexes me and that I am going to write more about is why there isn’t much publicity given to winners of the Medal of Honor and other war medals. This is a society in which we watch all these reality TV shows and have all these sports heroes but there is very little coverage of our war heroes.

Do you think that has to do with the types of wars being fought?

It could be. Unpopular war is hard to make heroes out of individual troops. If you had a case of a Medal of Honor winner in the First Gulf War, it would potentially have been easier to lionize him or her than in the current war in Iraq. Remember, when the troops went into Bosnia, the troops were lionized and were portrayed in the liberal media as heroes. Yet real heroes in this war have not been portrayed this way.

I get the impression that you are torn between the idea of having a warrior democracy that maintains this will to fight for what it believes in and the idea of fading into a cosmopolitan post-national country which abhors all war.

Yes, it is healthy that there is a suspicion of the military. You don’t want to become a militaristic nation or anything like that. So suspicion of the military is healthy as is questioning the need for war. But there is a danger
of going to the other extreme where there is a disdain for the military and no acceptance of casualties. Safety is brought by a kind of warrior caste or clique who may not subscribe to the views of the society but defends that society nonetheless.

Are you convinced that the United States and its military are a force of good in the world whose dominance should be maintained?

I don’t like the word dominance. But on the whole the military has been a force of good. If you look at all our deployments—not just Iraq and Afghanistan, but if you look at the Philippines, Colombia—in all the missions we have run in Africa from one end to the other we have been a force for humanitarian good, for training troops of fledgling democracies which evolved on their own and did not have the system imposed upon them. An age of democratization requires an age of military professionalization, because unless you professionalize the militaries of these new democracies, they will not remain democracies for long. So I would say on the whole, though we could argue about Iraq, the U.S. military has been a force for good.

The U.S. military must contend with various types of warfare of which it may be currently ill-suited to fight. What kinds of wars has the U.S. military proven able to fight and which have given us the most trouble?

Democracies handle small wars better, wars which the population doesn’t know much about and the stakes are low. Big wars are those in which we are fighting a mortal enemy which everyone agrees is a direct threat on our soil. You could say that if al-Qaeda acquired nuclear weapons then you might see a big war mentality amongst the leaders and the public. But what we are not good at are middle-sized wars where there is a lot of killing and, in a way, we have our hands tied behind our back because the war is real to those who are fighting but not yet real to the public. The army is at war and the nation is at the mall, so to speak. It is these ambiguous wars, in which we have to deal with human beings on the ground, that we have problems with.

You mention that the United States must plan for many different types of war at once. How can the U.S. military plan for a wide range of differing types of warfare? Where does a war with Iran fit into this planning? The Pentagon does not have the luxury of planning for a specific military
future but therefore must plan for several. So how do you plan for different kinds of wars? You do it through budgeting and appropriations. In other words, you don’t just do away with tanks because we didn’t use them in the last war, but you may gradually reduce them over time. You make slow, overarching transitions. There is nothing done abruptly. You have to maintain an uneasy balance. You can’t do everything, so you make bets. One bet may be that we may not need as many tanks and conventional infantry as we do now. You may want to bet that we won’t need twelve aircraft carrier strike groups in thirty years, as slow, big targets at sea may be easy to hit when we live in an age of ballistic missile weaponry. Alternatively, you may want to tighten the Navy with littoral combat ships, but you may also want to invest in increasing the linguistic ability of the soldiers. With gradual change you are making bets but still allowing for the possibility of different kinds of wars. You are looking at being ready for many different scenarios. Your budget is built on your vision for the military future.

The war with Iran may not be a middle-sized war because as I read it, if there were a war, we wouldn’t have many boots on the ground except maybe as spotters to identify a location and then get out quickly. It would mainly be an air-naval conflict that would be highly technical, which is the kind of thing we tend to do well. So it may not be a middle-sized war. There are, however, many forms which this could take. I don’t think though there is an intention to occupy Iran, which is a large country and far more complex bureaucratically than a place like Iraq.

You mentioned the expansion of the Chinese military power in your recent article, “How We Would Fight China.” Do you think this expansion will undermine our support for Taiwan?

Taiwan is where we maintain the status quo through ambiguity. On one hand, we maintain a One-China Policy, but on the other hand we really have a “Two-China Policy”, so to speak. The United States and China publicly treat this question as a moral issue. Publicly, we say Taiwan is a democracy and thus must be protected. Yet the Chinese claim that Taiwan is their national patrimony and it belongs to them. They see it as an integral part of historic China. But there is another reason why China wants Taiwan back, and that is because it is very strategic from the point of view of the Chinese. Douglas MacArthur said Taiwan is one huge, unsinkable aircraft carrier on the convex coast of China. Taiwan lies at the convex through which China hopes to one day project power into the Pacific. For China, eventually integrating Taiwan into a Hong Kong-like entity with its own modes of self-government would close this circle. There is a naval scholar at a think tank in Washington named Robert Work, and he mentions that incorporating Taiwan in China would be
equivalent to our Battle of Wounded Knee and its effect on the United States. It was the last battle of the so-called Indian Wars and after that we began to look outwards in terms of sea power once the continental United States was fully integrated. I think for the moment the problem with the Taiwan issue is not the Chinese military attacking preemptively but rather the Taiwanese precipitously declaring independence. Most likely, however, will be that in the years and decades to come China will slowly integrate Taiwan economically through trade.

Do you see a changing role for the United States in the rest of Southeast Asia?

People often say that we can see how powerful America’s influence in the world with how Iraq goes. I would say the Philippines may be a more accurate barometer. The Philippines was the American project of the 20th century. If we are imperial in any way it would have been in the Philippines. But what is going on now is that the Philippines is being swallowed up by the Chinese economic imperium. We are the wet nurse doing all the humanitarian relief in the south of the country while, at the same time, the government is coming more under the sway of Beijing due to its power over the Filipino economy. This is the Chinese economic imperium which Samuel Huntington discusses in his article “The Clash of Civilizations”, which seems to be increasingly prescient. China is building an imperium through trade with the surrounding Southeast Asian countries. This leads me to believe that our national security policy in the Far East will have to be very multilateral as our influence vis-à-vis China within that region will wane. This may even be true for our influence in Australia perhaps.

Recent debates about the militarization of space have focused on the role of China and its ability to affect U.S. supremacy both on earth and in space. What do you see as occurring with regards to the militarization of space in light of these debates?

After hearing the news of the Chinese destroying an old weather satellite in space I asked a Naval Admiral John Morgan who said that the debate was over the moment the Chinese shot down that satellite. The U.S. Navy cannot go anywhere without a satellite. They don’t use sextants anymore, which some believe they should. Thus, it was Admiral Morgan’s conclusion that space will militarize. Just as the Age of Discovery led to the militarization of oceans, this new age of discovery in space will have the same effect. If it is there, it will be used by militaries.
What are the pressures to use the new technology that is bought by the government? Does our spending determine the future of global warfare?

If you build a platform, it will be used. The real reason we used the B2 in Kosovo was because we had built a plane during the Cold War which the Soviets would have to spend so much money combating that it would further damage their own economy to do so. Instead of using the B2 against the Soviet Union, however, we used it during the humanitarian war in Kosovo where it dropped bombs from 30,000 feet flying directly from the United States. If you build something, they will find a way to use it. The question is in fact quite profound, because we may be determining the future to some degree by what we choose to fund or not to fund. Are we going to spend $18 billion USD a piece for the Ford class aircraft carriers? Because if we do, they will be used. The same with buying more littoral combat ships. However, they will probably not be used for what they were originally intended for, if history is any guide.

How do you feel about the current instability in Pakistan? What does its future hold?

I reported from Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is not a pretty picture. You must remember that Benazir Bhutto has been Prime Minister twice, as has Nawaz Sharif, and both were badly functioning, nepotistic, corrupt, and highly irresponsible regimes. Remember that Bhutto and Sharif had brought the country so low that when Musharraf staged a military coup, all the civil society intellectual supported him. Think of how bad things have to become when a rather sophisticated society’s intellectuals welcome a military coup. This shows you what a sad spectacle Pakistani democracy was in the 1980s and 1990s. And now we will have a return to some quasi-democracy under the same people. Even if those leaders have improved, their party systems are the same. The best hope for Pakistan is that the economy grows and there is an emergence of a middle class like in India. This is occurring quietly behind the scenes. This trend needs to be nurtured so that its influence affects the politics of Pakistan.

What do you see as the main goal of Russia?

I think Russia’s main goal is to reconstitute its nearer abroad: to reclaim its influence over the former Soviet Union, to have friendly governments come to power in Georgia, the Ukraine, and elsewhere. In many ways that puts Russia at odds with the United States, which is supporting democratic regimes in these countries. I am sure the Russians would help us in Iran if
we were to withdraw our support for Georgia and the Ukraine. This will not happen, however.

Putin is sitting very pretty at the moment. He doesn’t like the idea of having Iran as a nuclear power, but if the United States takes care of it militarily he will denounce us for doing so, and then he will have taken care of a nuclear Iran without costing him any chips on the table. He can support Iran and then support the bombing privately. We are bogged down in Iraq—he likes that; we are moving into a confrontation with Iran—he likes that; if we attack Iran and the oil price jumps—he likes that too. He is in a very strong position. ■