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Nonlethals and the 21st Century Art of War

In recent years the simple, yet profound, writings of the Chinese philosopher-General Sun Tzu have gained increasing popularity among strategic thinkers, military officers, academics and business executives. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is in many respects a warfighting manual. In another more enduring sense, however, it is a primer to guide strategic thinking and planning. As we talk about nonlethal weapons and technologies on the eve of the 21st century, it is instructive to reflect on some ideas articulated by Sun Tzu circa 400 B.C. Allow me to quote from his third chapter, entitled "Offensive Strategy:"

Generally in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. [and]

To capture the enemy's army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them.

I cite these ancient Chinese passages to help frame some of my comments and to provide context for thinking about nonlethal technologies.

My remarks are not intended to reflect the views of the White House or the NSC staff. That said, I hope my comments will help broaden the larger discussion on nonlethal weapons and technologies within our national security strategic framework.

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Policymaking requires options -- diplomatic, economic, military, and informational. Without options, or choices, policymakers are extremely limited in their ability to influence outcomes, to shape policy to best represent or advance American interests.

National security objectives frequently demand that a country simultaneously prepare for a variety of challenging political-military situations, for rarely does a country face a one-dimensional security *threat*. If threats or challenges are similar, or reasonably similar, decisionmaking is simplified. Being ready may mean having a trained military and a transportation network suitably developed to counter invasion from opposite sides of the country -- the dilemma confronting Germany in earlier times. Or, better yet, being ready may mean focusing a country's efforts largely on just one border and one opponent -- the current situation on the Korean peninsula. Though that opponent may pose varied types and levels of threats -- from clandestine intervention to ballistic missiles -- it still permits policymakers to focus primarily on one potential adversary.

In many cases, however, a country preparing to counter different threats may actually have to train, equip and plan for different types of war -- the situation during much of the Cold War. For example, the Containment Doctrine presupposed that U.S. instruments of national power must defeat Communism and its ideological adherents in all "threat" forms -- from strategic nuclear threats, to continental threats, to major naval threats, to uprisings or Third World "Wars of National Liberation."

In the first two examples, the policymaking focus was limited to a singular threat or, in the German case, two very similar threats. In the third instance, the Cold War, policymakers confronted multiform situations requiring the United States to plan for different types of war. All three examples illustrate threat-based strategies.

Our interests, at home and abroad, force U.S. policymakers to confront varied national security challenges. Only a few of these require traditional warfighting options. Most require military forces in combination with other national, governmental and even nongovernmental agencies to rollback not some well-defined enemy, but a host of threats or security challenges that assume new and inherently dangerous dimensions. Some of these directly endanger the U.S. or our immediate interests; others generate instability that ultimately affects close allies; and still others combine to create circumstances of chaos and disintegration that demand U.S. leadership and involvement.

Contemporary conflict is often ambiguous, with unclear distinctions between the various parties to conflict, and between combatants and noncombatants; and it is less ideological and industrially-based than was the case in many past conflicts. In some cases it appears irrational -- in both causes and methods employed -- to traditional western conceptions of warfare (which may also support the validity and relevancy of understanding Sun Tzu). Regardless of its form and substance, conflict has in a great many, but not all, cases evolved from large-scale force-on-force formations between well-defined military enemies into something more nebulous and unpredictable. Conflict increasingly involves non-state actors fighting (in some form or other) states or other non-state actors in pursuit of various interests, and conflict is typically more societally-oriented than state- or military-oriented.

To further muddy the national security picture is the breakdown of borders - geographical and otherwise. Increasing global interdependence has made nations more vulnerable to growing transnational developments and threats. Diseases, refugees, narcotics, international crime syndicates, information, and weapons of mass destruction cross geographical borders unhindered.

Some of these threats are reaching a new critical mass as they go global. We witness increasing links between terrorism, narcotics, counterfeiting, weapons-grade plutonium smuggling, nerve gas attackers, and so on. Groups that previously specialized in only one activity in one region are now intermixing and engaging in many activities on a global scale.

The world is an unsettled place with expansive security concerns -- concerns driven by potential military threats, by the decreasing distinctions between guerrillas and mafiosos, and by the humanitarian tugs generated by pictures from places we seldom hear of and people who do not fit our vision of "vital national interests." Still though, as much as Americans might prefer to ignore these tugs, our humanitarian impulses seldom let us. Consequently, these developments, coupled with traditional security concerns, have led to U.S. military forces deploying to assist in security or humanitarian crises scores of times during this decade.

A strategy to deal with dangers such as these that are unprecedented in their complexity requires not a "threat-based" strategy as I spoke to a few minutes ago, but an "interests-based" strategy. The Clinton Administration's *National Security Strategy for A New Century* is an "interests-based" strategy for this unsettled time of transition and changing security

imperatives. Captured within this strategy is both our need to prepare for fighting different types of war (as during the Cold War), and to confront diverse non-traditional security challenges.

The core imperative of this national security strategy is the need for overseas engagement. Thus, ours is a strategy of engagement that seeks to enlarge the community of democratic and free market nations in order to promote our own domestic prosperity, and to check global threats abroad before they threaten our territory and people. Central to this strategy is having the capability to both "shape" the international environment in ways favorable to U.S. interests and global security, and "respond" to the full spectrum of crises that may arise.

The unsettled, ambiguous nature of the international security environment dictates that our strategy address a diverse range of issues affecting national security. It refers to the blurring of domestic and foreign policies; to spreading democracy and human rights; to supporting peace and opening markets; to enlarging and defending the community of nations; to sharing our aspirations and our values; to keeping America militarily, diplomatically and economically strong; to combating the spread and use of weapons of mass destruction; to countering terrorism and fighting drug trafficking. How then does such a broad, flexible strategy relate to non-lethal weapons and technologies?

Well, as written, our *National Security Strategy For a New Century* is a requirements document. No other single document better captures the clear, undeniable need to provide civilian policymakers and military commanders with greater decision and employment options. And there is a direct and growing relationship here between the civilian decisionmaker and the military commander, for with growing frequency, fallout from what the military commander does or does not do ends up back in the policymaker's lap.

Often our instruments of national power are seen as either too weak, or paradoxically, too strong to achieve a desired political outcome. These ideas of "too weak" and "too strong" are related and in some cases virtually inseparable. Many conventional weapons, for example, are ill-suited for urban environments where civilians and military targets exist in close proximity. This situation will become even more grave in the coming years with growing urbanization as the world population increases by more than 86 million people annually. The World Resource Institute, for example, projects that the world population will grow by 45 percent to about 8.3 billion people in 2025 - in just 27 years.

Faced with this situation the United States will require more precise targeting capabilities (both lethal and nonlethal) than that provided by economic sanctions or traditional military methods. Policymakers and military commanders will require greater flexibility.

Nonlethals may expand policy choices by providing a credible capability to use discriminate, measured force to influence conflict or even pre-conflict situations. Depending on the circumstances, nonlethals can supplement or supplant lethal weaponry. Because nonlethal weapons and technologies (both conceptually and in reality) are suited to many situations where human deaths and infrastructure or environmental damage is contrary to our political purposes, they provide decisionmakers increased capabilities and options for resolving vexing political dilemmas. They can potentially:

- lower the threshold at which certain decisions are made;
- minimize self-deterrence or the choice between benign acceptance of a crisis situation and the use of lethal force;
- limit conflict;
- strengthen deterrence by reinforcing flexible response capabilities;
- "buy time" in crises while other instruments such as diplomatic, military, economic or law enforcement are engaged;
- complement and expand the utility of conventional military weaponry.

Some of these points are potentially problematic and vulnerable to critics who would argue that with nonlethals war is more likely because its destructive consequences are reduced. Or that nonlethals demonstrate a clear lack of resolve and could lead to incremental approaches to situations or issues that might not have been adequately thought through. These are not groundless criticisms. But, it is incumbent on policymakers to work through the hard issues surrounding our engagement abroad. Nonlethals do not, as some might suggest, permit policymakers to avoid difficult decisions when contemplating intervention. And nonlethals are not merely the low end of escalatory options. Objectives and desired end states must still be identified beforehand. Further, nonlethals do not mean that war can be fought without the risks of bloodshed and loss of lives.

Policymakers don't normally speak in the hypothetical, but hypothetical examples can illustrate genuine needs. I recall hearing a retired Service Chief note a few years ago that Desert Storm may never have occurred if we possessed the capability to disable Iraqi tank engines prior to their entry into Kuwait - and they knew we had the capability. Extending this example a bit

further: possession of this kind of technology might also have permitted the U.S. to stop all movement along the "highway of death" leading from Kuwait City to Iraq without the intense bombing that occurred, perhaps permitting the Gulf War's termination on different terms.

Similarly, some surmise that certain nonlethal technologies may have given the U.S. Government the flexibility and credible capability to intervene in Bosnia sooner in a limited, yet effective fashion. Or, the absense of nonlethal options could have limited our ability to react when UN peacekeepers were taken hostage by the Serbs, to stop the assault on UN safehavens in Bosnia, or could have forced the resort to lethal options if desperate Muslims had attempted to block UNPROFOR's withdrawal by positioning themselves in front of UN vehicles and tanks in 1995. And, a 1995 Council on Foreign Relations report also mentions that the use of flight-inducing smells and sounds in Somalia "could have offered significant advantages over deadly fire from helicopter gunships…."

More recently, the absence of significant nonlethals in Bosnia could have endangered U.S. troops or undermined the credibility of U.S. forces who could have been forced to retreat in the face of a civilian mob. (Given the choice between "passively holding their ground" or "firing into a threatening crowd of civilians and causing an international incident," soldiers might err on the side of restraint, thereby exposing themselves to greater danger than if they had acted.) And on yet another note, recent events again suggest there is likely a need to develop nonlethal technologies to separate civilians being used as human shields from the military target they are shielding. These types of situations are bound to grow in number. In this instance, nonlethals would serve as the enabler for precise use of conventional weapons.

In these unsettled times with a less certain international landscape -- one marked by increasing ambiguity and complexity -- nonlethals provide great potential. But discussions must move beyond the conceptual. And they must move beyond the narrow vision of nonlethals weapons and systems primarily employed at the tactical level against people (to the exclusion of anti-material).

Nonlethals can expand higher order policy choices too. But what is required is more serious thinking on the subject as well as serious research efforts to find alternatives, and additions, to our current tools. There needs to be broader educational effort aimed at senior policymakers to inform them of the potential of nonlethals - which can then turnaround and feed into the current

requirements process that drives R&D efforts as well as funding priorities. Furthermore, it should not surprise anyone if the identification of a need for greater nonlethal options to deal with the complexities of the contemporary national security environment originate from outside DoD as policymakers acquire a greater understanding of the potential of nonlethals.

Warfare will never be bloodless and military might can never exist merely on the threat, or promise, of nonlethality. But the ability to target an opponent's key vulnerabilities without excessive death and destruction is an appropriate military requirement. It certainly is a political and even a moral requirement. In *Winning the Next War*, political scientist Stephen Rosen argues that as militaries innovate for the future, they should focus on managing uncertainty, rather than on constructing new capabilities tailored to what future wars might look like. We can think of nonlethals as one way to manage uncertainty.

Within the military it is common to say that nonlethals should not tie the hands of the military commander. This is unassailable. But I would submit an addendum: the absence of nonlethality should not tie the hands of policymakers.

In our *National Security Strategy For A New Century*, we have an interests-based strategy. To support this strategy we need "capabilities-based" approaches. Nonlethals provide vast untapped potential capabilities. Earlier I mentioned that policymaking requires options, for options provide flexibility to respond to challenges and to influence actions. The blurring of domestic and foreign policy concerns, the proliferation of security threats and societally-oriented conflict -- in sum, the current international security environment -- require flexible options. Military commanders are prone to say that nonlethal weapons are yet another tool in the commander's kitbag. Well, viable, mature nonlethal technologies also put tools into the policymakers kitbags.

I come back to Sun Tzu:

For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.

I sincerely doubt that the insightful Sun Tzu ever thought about non-nuclear electro-magnetic pulse, accoustic technologies, directed energy, anti-traction materials, or high-power microwaves. But had Sun Tzu been born 2,500 year later, he likely would have…