CHAPTER FOUR

Scenarios in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas

WHILE THE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS considered in chapter 3 may be the most challenging for American planners, and pose the greatest risks of either nuclear war or other fundamental threat to the integrity of the global order as well, they are probably not the most likely for the United States in the decades to come. This chapter considers those areas of the world where war might be slightly less apocalyptic for American interests if it happened but where, alas, it is also more likely to occur—or even occurring already, in some cases.

To recapitulate, this chapter considers the final seven scenarios on my list from chapter 3:

—A fissioning of Pakistan.
—Indo-Pakistani war.
—Iranian use or threatened use of nuclear weapons against a neighbor.
—A major international stabilization operation in the Middle East—perhaps in Syria after a negotiated peace.
—Civil war accompanied by other challenges in Nigeria.
—Increased brutality against Americans by criminal networks in Central America.
—A major domestic emergency in the United States.
I start by considering Pakistan in the unlikely scenario in which it begins to fall apart. Pakistan is hardly the only state in the region that faces major internal challenges. But it is among the largest. And not only does it have nuclear weapons, it is the staging ground for a number of terrorist groups bent on doing great harm to India in particular, and to U.S. interests from Afghanistan to other parts of the world as well.

On balance, the Pakistani state is likely to survive, and its circumstances may be somewhat better now than just a few years ago. Still, Pakistan could face threats to its cohesion, perhaps arising out of a combination of insurgencies in places such as Balochistan, together with the internal threat of Islamic extremism.

Imagine, for example, if such a political crisis coincided with a major natural disaster striking a megacity such as Karachi or Lahore, laying waste to much of its infrastructure and perhaps threatening nearby nuclear reactors—and also, quite possibly, the physical security of some nuclear weapons storage sites. When looking out two to three decades and considering scenarios that stretch the imagination as well as the likely capacities of U.S. and other international forces, it is important to do more than extrapolate linearly from today’s baseline level of problems and challenges in South Asia.

Under such extreme circumstances, it strikes me as entirely plausible that whatever remnants of a Pakistani government still existed might solicit international aid to help reestablish order, aid in relief efforts, and help secure—or recover—nuclear materials. At present, such a scenario is nearly inconceivable. But if the situation became truly dire, Pakistani leaders might elect to try to hide whatever part of their nuclear arsenal was still intact (so that Americans and other outsiders could not access it) while asking for help with the rest of it, and with other challenges to the nation’s security and integrity. Because of the potential for nuclear weapons to fall into terrorist hands, the stakes here could be very high for the United States and its allies as well.

For all the challenges facing the country, it is important to note that today, Pakistan does not appear on the verge of collapse. It is also important to underscore, especially in this period of fraught U.S.-Pakistan relations, that any international effort to help Pakistan restore order to its own territory could only be carried out with the full acquiescence and
at the invitation of its government. That is because there is probably no realistic scenario in which Pakistan’s army would truly melt away. It is also because the country is so huge that the task of completely stabilizing it with outside forces would be unthinkably demanding, even with today’s military—indeed, even with a force twice as large as that of the current U.S. armed forces.

This subject is a very sensitive one with Pakistanis, who tend to be confident about the cohesion of their country and mistrustful of outside powers that would offer “help” in scenarios like the one I have just sketched out. Many Pakistanis suspect that any such assistance would be a means of gaining control of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and fissile materials, among other concerns. The May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden, done without any American warning to Pakistan, only exacerbated Pakistani sensitivities to any discussion of scenarios that would infringe on the nation’s sovereignty.

But of all the military scenarios that undoubtedly would involve U.S. vital interests, a collapsed Pakistan ranks very high on the list. The combination of Islamic extremists and nuclear weapons in that country is extremely worrisome. Were parts of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal ever to fall into the wrong hands, al Qaeda could conceivably gain access to a nuclear device, with terrifying possible results. The Pakistan collapse scenario does appear unlikely, in light of the country’s traditionally moderate officer corps and other factors. However, some parts of the country’s military as well as its intelligence services, which created the Taliban and other extremist groups, are becoming less moderate and less dependable. The country as a whole is sufficiently infiltrated by fundamentalist groups—as evidenced by the assassination attempts directed against President Pervez Musharraf in earlier days, the killing of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, and other incidents—that this terrifying scenario should not be dismissed.

Were Pakistan to fracture, it is unclear what the United States and like-minded states would or should do. As with North Korea, it is highly unlikely that “surgical strikes” to destroy the nuclear weapons could be conducted successfully. The United States probably would not know their location—at a minimum, scores of sites controlled by special forces or elite army units would be presumed candidates—and no Pakistani government would likely help external forces with targeting information. The chances of learning the locations would probably be greater than in
the North Korean case, owing to the greater openness of Pakistani society and its ties with the outside world. But U.S.-Pakistani military cooperation, cut off for a decade in the 1990s, is still quite modest, and the likelihood that Washington would be provided such information or otherwise obtain it should be considered low.

Rather than expect a great deal from surgical strikes or commando-style raids, therefore, a wiser option would be to try to restore order before nuclear weapons could be taken by extremists and transferred to terrorists. If the international community could act fast enough, it might help defeat an insurrection. Another option would be to protect Pakistan’s borders, thereby making it harder to sneak nuclear weapons out of the country, while providing technical support to the Pakistani armed forces as they tried to quell the insurrection internally.

Given the enormous stakes, the United States would literally have to do anything it could to prevent nuclear weapons from getting into the wrong hands. Even in the event that China aided in the effort too, as it might well, the scale of the plausible undertaking would be daunting. Pakistan is a very large country. Its population of 200 million is more than six times Iraq’s; its land area is roughly twice that of Iraq; its perimeter is about 50 percent longer in total than Iraq’s. Stabilizing an entire country of this size could easily require several times as many troops as the Iraq mission (which topped out at about 170,000 Americans). According to the criteria outlined in the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency manual, 4 million to 5 million total “counterinsurgents” could be required for a population of 200 million—including indigenous police, gendarmes, and soldiers, as well as any outside forces. Even if one assumes the lower ratios from past operations, history suggests that at least 2 million counterinsurgents would be needed.

Beyond the enormous scale of the stabilization operation itself, there is the matter of transportation and timing. Today, the time frame required for a force of even 100,000 foreign troops to be deployed intercontinentally would likely be two to three months. This is evident from past deployments for Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, among others—as well as the simple military realities that even fast roll-on/roll-off ships typically take a month for loading, traversing the oceans, and unloading. Beyond that month is the time needed to get equipment from interior U.S. bases to ports, and from receiving ports in Pakistan to where they might be needed in that country.
But any fissioning of Pakistan would likely be gradual and partial, not immediate and nationwide. One way to guesstimate the scale of a possible operation is through an examination of the ethnic breakdowns of the nation. Pakistan is about 15 percent Sindh, about 15 percent Pashtun, and about 4 percent Baloch. Rather than splintering across ethnic lines, Pakistan could also fray between secularists and jihadists, even within the armed forces themselves. It is difficult to estimate what fraction of the military and intelligence services may be so hard line as to be capable of breaking off from the rest of the state. Either way, however, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that up to roughly one-third of Pakistan or its armed forces could wind up in revolt at some future date. If that occurred, a region of several tens of millions could descend into chaos or civil war—a fraction of the country not unlike Iraq or Afghanistan in the size of the affected population.

One could also imagine a city such as Karachi experiencing a meltdown as a result of a combination of prolonged weak governance and increased criminality, and the city environs then possibly being affected by a terrible natural catastrophe such as a huge earthquake. Perhaps the earthquake would even create a second catastrophe, such as a major accident at a nuclear power plant, with cascading and snowballing repercussions. Such a situation could bring an urban area and surrounding region of 20 to 40 million people to its knees, while knocking out electricity and other infrastructure and bringing economic activity largely to a halt. (Indeed, a separate analysis estimating the possible effects of a single nuclear reactor accident in South Asia independently calculated that the health of some 30 million individuals could be threatened.) In such circumstances, military forces could be needed not only to restore order but also to provide some minimal level of human necessities—food, water, basic medical care—to a huge population. This massive relief operation, the greatest in history, would occur, moreover, in a potentially hostile and violent environment. The magnitude of the possible effort can be guesstimated by observing that a typical division of some 15,000 soldiers, along with support in the form of additional units again as numerous, might have the trucking capacity for moving up to 10,000 tons or 20,000,000 pounds of supplies. Assuming, say, two round trips a day from a central depot area, to allow time for loading and unloading and distribution, such a contingent of 30,000 troops might provide two pounds of supplies per person to a population of 20 million.
the typical requirement were five pounds a day, 75,000 or more troops could be needed just for providing sustenance, to say nothing of security, at least until water purification systems could be made operational and provided with adequate fuel.\textsuperscript{11}

Scaling from the response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti provides another reference point. That operation involved up to 22,000 American military personnel and at least several thousand more from other countries, making for roughly 30,000 at peak. It also involved many thousands of civilian relief workers—quite possibly comparable in number to the military response. In round numbers, the total was perhaps 50,000 individuals.\textsuperscript{12} In a future case like the one considered here, those civilian aid workers might not be able to move about safely, meaning that they would have to be replaced by military or police personnel. As such, a disaster affecting ten times as many people could require, in rough terms, some half million responders (indigenous and foreign) to provide for basic relief, sustenance, and ultimately shelter and recovery. It seems credible that the foreign troop requirements in these types of Pakistan scenarios could exceed 100,000. An estimate of 30,000 to 50,000 U.S. ground troops does not seem unrealistic for a sufficiently bad and demanding scenario.

\textbf{INDO-PAKISTANI WAR}

An Indo-Pakistani war remains a real possibility in today’s world, and quite probably throughout the time frame of this study.\textsuperscript{13} There have already been three or four, depending on whether one counts the Kargil crisis of 1999, and it is remarkable that there have not been more, especially after the 2008 Mumbai attack, when India chose not to respond militarily. If in the next possible war the nuclear weapons threshold were crossed, the plausibility of a foreign military role could increase dramatically. This would not necessarily entail taking sides in the fighting or forcibly imposing a peace, but reinforcing a cease-fire once it was negotiated. To date, Delhi in particular has eschewed any and all foreign role in diplomacy over Kashmir or related matters dividing the two countries. But in the aftermath of the near use or actual use of nuclear weapons, calculations could change dramatically—such a world could be characterized by a far different political psychology than today’s.
The path to war could begin, perhaps, with a more extremist leader coming to power in Pakistan. It is troubling to imagine the dangers associated with a country of 200 million and the world’s fastest-growing nuclear arsenal, antipathy toward both India and America, numerous extremist groups, with some possibly still supported by the nation’s intelligence forces, and claims on land currently controlled by India. It is straightforward to see how such an extremist state could take South Asia to the brink of nuclear war by provoking conflict with India, perhaps through another Mumbai-like attack. Were that to happen, and if perhaps a nuclear weapon or two were detonated above an airbase or other such military facility, the world could be faced with the specter of all-out nuclear war in the most densely populated part of the planet.

It is important to understand why nuclear weapons really could be employed, even after seventy years of nonuse globally. First, even if it was the original provocateur, Pakistan could come to fear very gravely for its own survival in the course of this type of scenario. Having aided and abetted a group like Lashkar-e-Taiba, with its extremist anti-Indian views and ruthless brutality, Pakistan would have given India ample grounds for retaliation. That would be true even if Lashkar-e-Taiba had in effect become by then a Frankenstein’s monster, no longer obeying its initial creator, Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence. Yet even a limited Indian conventional counterattack, perhaps influenced by its Cold Start military thinking, could very quickly put the capital at risk, owing to the narrowness of Pakistan in the northern part of the country. Islamabad and Rawalpindi are a scant 200 kilometers from the Indian border—meaning that in theory, they could be reached within days by a successful Indian maneuver operation. This worry could be the Pakistani perception even if it were not the Indian intent. And, of course, Lahore, with its considerable strategic significance (and its role as occasional sanctuary for the leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba), is just over the border.

In such a situation, Pakistan might well see military logic in the use of several nuclear weapons against Indian troop concentrations, marshaling facilities, choke points, bridges, military airfields, or other tactical targets. Presumably Pakistan would prefer to conduct such attacks over Indian soil, though it is not out of the question that it could conduct some over its own territory, too. If airbursts were employed, meaning that the weapons were detonated say a half-kilometer or so up in the air.
(depending on their precise yield), the effects of the explosions could be
catastrophic to people and military equipment immediately below and
over an area of roughly 3 to 5 kilometers’ radius, without creating much
fallout that would later descend on populated areas downwind. That
is because such fallout is created mostly when dirt and rock are heaved
up into the atmosphere when the fireball of a nuclear detonation makes
contact with the ground—as it will do for low-altitude bursts but not
higher-altitude ones. Because the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were
detonated nearly 2,000 feet above the ground, there were no casualties
from fallout from either.\textsuperscript{17}

Beyond their immediate military effects, such attacks would simulta-
neously signal Islamabad’s willingness to escalate if the advance did not
cease. Despite the huge risks, there would be few better ways of mak-
ing a threat to attack Delhi credible than to cross the nuclear threshold
in attacks against tactical military targets. This approach could, in the
minds of Pakistani planners, hold out the hope of simultaneously slowing
the Indian advance, showing resolve, and yet at the same time displaying
enough restraint that India would not have an incentive to attack Paki-
stani cities with nuclear weapons in the first instance. Presumably, Paki-
stanis would have to assume the possibility of Indian attacks against
Pakistani armed forces. But that might be a risk the country’s leadership
would be willing to accept, if the alternative seemed to be defeat and
forced surrender after a conventional battle.

Whether such a finely graduated nuclear attack would impress Indians
as having been restrained in any meaningful sense can be debated. That
might be especially true if any of the Pakistani attacks went off course and
caused more damage than intended. Thus, the danger of inadvertent esca-
lation in this kind of scenario could be quite real. It might not even take
nuclear attacks by Pakistan to cause nuclear dangers. Even conventional
attacks against warning and command systems could create dangers that
India or Pakistan would believe it was under nuclear attack by the other
when in fact it was not—raising the possibility of a nuclear response.\textsuperscript{18}

It is imaginable in such circumstances that, if such an Indo-Pakistani
war with nuclear implications began, and international negotiators were
trying to figure out how to end it, an international force could be pro-
posed to help stabilize the situation for a number of years. The notion
might be based on the concept of trusteeship. Kashmir, perhaps still the
original casus belli of the conflict, might be administrated under a UN
mandate and protected by a UN-legitimated force for a number of years, prior to the holding of a plebiscite that would determine the region’s future political status, whether independence, association with India, association with Pakistan, or partition. There might be no other compromise that both India and Pakistan would accept. That nuclear conflict might have occurred by this point would have raised the stakes enormously for both sides, making it hard for any leader to accept a simple cease-fire absent a credible political process to go along with it. A time horizon of roughly a decade or more might be appropriate for such a mission, time enough to allow for a calming of tensions as well as political transitions in both countries, and for Pakistan to demonstrate a willingness to clamp down on terrorist groups that it had previously supported. India in particular would be adamantly against this idea today. But things could change fundamentally if such a settlement, and such a force, seemed the only way to reverse the momentum toward all-out nuclear war in South Asia. American forces would quite likely need to play a key role, as others might not have the capacity or the political confidence to handle the mission on their own.

If a peacekeeping mission could be limited to Kashmir itself, with a population of about 15 million, standard doctrine would suggest up to 300,000 personnel for a fairly robust capability. However, because of the importance of securing borders and maintaining a muscular margin of insurance against the unexpected, a somewhat larger force might be considered. In addition to securing Kashmir, that mission might monitor much of the Indo-Pakistani border, with enough capacity for active patrolling and monitoring. That could include the entirety of the nearly 3,000-kilometer border, but it might be more likely that it would seek to monitor the roughly 1,200 kilometers of cease-fire line dating back to 1972 and known as the Line of Control. How much force might be needed to maintain a patrol along, say, 1,200 kilometers? It is difficult to give a figure, but the UN mission in Abyei, on the border between the two Sudans, stretches over roughly 100 kilometers of border and involves some 4,000 troops. (And, of course, the Sudans are much less militarily capable than India and Pakistan.) Applied to this case, that ratio would imply about 50,000 additional troops, based on linear extrapolation. Another possible model, the UN Disengagement Observer Force along the Golan Heights, involves about 1,000 troops for a border between Israel and Syria of some 65 kilometers’ length.
That figure, when extrapolated, would imply a requirement for something like 20,000 troops along the Line of Control, if similar force densities were deemed adequate.\textsuperscript{24}

The U.S. role in such an operation could range from moderate to quite substantial. Recent operations, from Bosnia and Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan, suggest a plausible range of 20 percent to 50 percent or more of the total force. If the foreign force requirement were 350,000 and if most U.S. troops were ground forces, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps contribution could range from perhaps 60,000 to 150,000.

It is worth noting that, even if the above scenario seems rather apocalyptic, it is far from the most challenging for U.S. forces that can be imagined in the aftermath of another Indo-Pakistani war. Should such a conflict go beyond the potential threatened use or actual employment of a nuclear weapon or two and escalate to the exchange of many warheads, perhaps even the targeting of parts of cities (say, those with key military command and control centers), the world could be confronted with a situation in which millions were immediately dead—and worse yet, tens of millions were trying to survive without working infrastructure in areas contaminated by radioactivity. Such a specter could dwarf even the previous contingency of a complex catastrophe afflicting a single city like Karachi.

In short, the scenarios advanced here may or may not be the right ones, and may or may not reach the threshold of plausibility in the eyes of all readers. But they are not being gamed to deliberately overstate the scale of potential danger. Substantially worse cases can easily be imagined.\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{ADDRESSING A NUCLEAR IRAN—AN IN EXTREMIS U.S. INVASION CAPACITY}

A scenario involving Iran’s possible acquisition and possible use of nuclear weapons against a neighboring state is designed less as a high-probability scenario than as a “stress test” for future American force planning. My contention here is that, in such a situation, the United States might wish to retain an implied or latent capability to mount a ground invasion that could overthrow the Iranian government that had carried out such a strike or that seemed willing to do so. This is not a preventive war scenario; I am not proposing that the United States seriously consider a major ground war to stop Iran from getting the bomb
or to overthrow an Iranian government that might be seeking such a capability. Rather, the exercise is designed with an eye toward a crisis or conflict that Iran might generate while seeking, or after having obtained, such a nuclear capability.

The first premise of the scenario, that Iran someday chooses to pursue or acquire the bomb, is hard to dismiss. The second premise, that a U.S. ground invasion capability could be relevant to handling a future threatened use or actual use of Iran’s own nuclear arsenal against a regional ally of the United States, is less obvious and requires explanation.

To be sure, there are scenarios in which the United States would almost surely not respond to an Iranian nuclear threat or attack with a counterattack using conventional ground forces. Most likely in this situation would be a proportionate U.S. nuclear response. Threatening to overthrow the Iranian regime could be exactly what the United States might not wish to do in a given instance, if trying to deter Teheran from any further nuclear use, since Iran would have little reason to hold back as it watched American armies march on its capital city.

Still, there are dimensions to a possible scenario that could make it desirable for the United States to have options. For example, if Iran only had one or two deliverable weapons, and had already employed them, the United States (and any coalition partners) might decide that the dangers of leaving in place a regime that had carried out such a heinous attack would be great over the longer term, and that, in the short term, there would be relatively little danger of marching on Teheran, in terms of associated nuclear risk. Or if Iran was believed to have a number of tactical weapons in a specific location or two, but those locations were not known, it could be sensible to look for them rather than to grant Iran the time to build more delivery vehicles, which could dramatically increase the danger they posed to the region. This might particularly be the case if it was known that Teheran was planning to carry out an attack with such warheads, perhaps through stealthy means such as smuggling them into a major Middle Eastern port on a cargo ship.

This scenario is proposed less as a likely U.S. recourse than as a capability U.S. ground forces should seek to retain for the sake of deterrence. An ability to invade and overthrow the Iranian government, even without a corresponding capacity to stabilize and govern the Iranian state thereafter, could be a useful if unspoken additional deterrent, making it less likely that leaders in Teheran would ever contemplate nuclear aggression,
knowing the full range of retaliatory options that might befall them if they did.

Leaders in Teheran might convince themselves that the United States would not respond to an Iranian nuclear attack in kind because of the American fear of causing casualties to innocent civilians. If Iranian hard-liners could embed themselves within their nation’s cities, they might believe themselves to be relatively impervious to the possibility of U.S. nuclear retaliation against their command and control assets and main headquarters. It would be in the United States’ interest not to allow Iranian leaders the option of subscribing to a theory that seemed to promise them impunity since any such sentiment, even if wrongly grounded, could make them more reckless and aggressive. It would also be in the United States’ interest to reassure its regional allies that it had multiple credible options for responding to any Iranian nuclear coercion or aggression—partly to dissuade those allies from pursuing their own nuclear weapons.26

The force requirements for this scenario would mimic fairly closely the standard estimates of what it takes to win a major regional contingency or major theater war of the classic post–cold war definition. Iran is much larger and more populous than Iraq (or Afghanistan, or North Korea), to be sure, but its armed forces are not unlike those of Saddam’s Iraq in size, resources, technology, and general capability. That is no surprise at one level, since Iran and Iraq fought to a standstill over nearly a decade of war in the 1980s.

According to the TASCFORM methodology employed frequently in the 1990s by the Congressional Budget Office and the House Armed Services Committee, Iran was notably weaker in the early post–cold war years than either Iraq after Desert Storm or North Korea.27 Since then, Iran has attempted to rearm, but its purchases have been constrained by various forms of sanctions, and its net capabilities have probably improved only modestly.

**Iran, 1992**

—530,000 active-duty military personnel, with 305,000 in the army.
—Four armored divisions and seven infantry divisions.
—Key ground weaponry including some 700 tanks (mostly of T-54/T-55 vintage).
—700 armored personnel carriers (largely BTR-50 and BTR-60 models).
—About 1,300 large-bore artillery.
—100 or so AH-1 attack helicopters, and an estimated 262 fixed-wing combat aircraft of variable but mediocre levels of serviceability (a mix of F-4, F-5, F-14, and MiG-29, among other types).
—According to TASCFORM methodology, less than 2.0 U.S. armored divisional equivalents and 2.0 tactical fighter wing equivalents (less than half the capabilities of either post-Desert-Storm Iraq or North Korea).²⁸

Iran, 2015
—523,000 active-duty personnel, of which 350,000 are army.
—About 1,700 tanks (including about 500 T-72 tanks from Russia).
—Nearly 9,000 large-bore artillery tubes.
—Some 640 armored personnel carriers.
—About 50 attack helicopters.
—About 334 fixed-wing combat aircraft (with the increase largely the result of acquiring Su-24 jets from Russia).
—Resulting TASCFORM scores approaching 4.0 American armored divisional equivalents and 3.0 equivalent tactical fighter wings.²⁹

Of course, this mission would be very demanding and risky whatever the simple math might suggest. First of all, reliably unseating the regime implies more than a Persian equivalent of the U.S.-led coalition’s Thunder Run in Baghdad in April 2003. It means staying around long enough to ensure that most top leaders of the government, especially the Revolutionary Guard and QODS force, were tracked down. It took several months to find Saddam in Iraq, and a good deal of great intelligence work and luck as well. Elements of the Iranian regime might attempt to hide in the remote northern mountains of the country, for example.³⁰ Second, Iran’s very size increases the chances that a maneuver operation designed to reach the capital might bog down in one way or another. This difficulty could be amplified if U.S.-led coalition forces felt they needed to come ashore in southern Iran to eliminate the kinds of naval threats that Iran could pose to shipping in the Persian Gulf itself. Third, Iran’s weapons of mass destruction could cause the same kinds of problems that were considered in the discussion of a Korea scenario: they could weaken or slow U.S. invasion forces.
These considerations leave aside the herculean task of actually stabilizing a country of nearly 100 million. Simply invading and overthrowing a regime that planned or had committed abominable nuclear transgressions would almost surely be at least as difficult as past Iraq wars were, and comparably demanding to a prospective North Korean contingency. As in that case, the U.S. ground force requirements could surely reach 175,000 uniformed personnel.

A PEACEKEEPING OR STABILIZATION OPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Despite the understandable aversion of Americans to putting significant numbers of boots on the ground in the Middle East again, there are scenarios that could make it a serious option for the United States, even in the relatively near future. This category of scenarios is probably the single most probable of any considered in this book.

One relatively simpler and smaller operation—though hardly an easy one—could be to undergird an implementation force for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. Such a deal is not in the immediate offing, but could still happen someday. President Obama’s and Secretary Kerry’s effort, in the 2013–14 time period, to help promote an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal involved not only the dedicated efforts of Ambassador Martin Indyk on the political and diplomatic aspects of the challenge but also a parallel effort led by retired General John Allen on the security side. Both tracks were kept generally quiet and private, so available details are limited. But the thrust of the latter effort was clearly to provide Israel in particular with confidence that its security would not be compromised in any deal, which would presumably have required it to pull back its own forces from the occupied West Bank and allow them to be replaced with some kind of international capability. The international force would presumably have had to secure borders against possible arms shipments by regional powers such as Iran to would-be spoilers, carry out targeted counterterrorism operations if and when needed in the Palestinian territories (perhaps in conjunction with Palestinian forces), and help police the population until proper Palestinian security forces could be fully recruited, trained, and vouched for. The international force might also help build those competent and capable Palestinian forces. With a population of around 5 million, the Palestinian regions of the Levant might be policed
with roughly one-fifth the assets devoted to either Iraq or Afghanistan. In rough terms, this means that an international force might number 30,000 to 50,000 uniformed personnel. The U.S. share of that total might be 10,000 to 20,000, in rough numbers, or one to three brigades and associated support capability, for a period of several years to a decade or more.

Another operation could be a deterrent mission to help backstop the security of countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council against possible Iranian threats in the aftermath of a U.S. bombing campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities. U.S. ground forces could participate in such a mission. They could also provide protection for U.S. air and naval assets in the region, depending on the nature and duration of any Iranian response to the postulated bombing campaign. They could provide air defense and missile defense and base security for key naval and air assets the United States deployed in the region, and for U.S. partners and allies as well.

But here I focus primarily on two potentially more difficult and dangerous missions. The central scenario is implementation of a possible peace agreement that could ultimately emerge out of the civil war in Syria. A second possibility might be an effort to help restore stability in Saudi Arabia, and to its oil production, in the event of severe violence or a breakdown of the state there.

It is of course possible to imagine other cases where large-scale counter-insurgency or stabilization missions could be considered too. One might be after a major terrorist strike against the United States emanating from a country such as Yemen, which could raise similar questions to those confronted by the United States in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as to how to respond and how to root out the longer-term threat.

Take the Saudi case first. A civil war in Saudi Arabia is the kind of scenario that, despite the United States’ aversion to large-scale counter-insurgency in the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, could lead to another major U.S. ground force deployment to the Middle East. The stakes for Western security and the global economy could be too high to ignore. Most of Saudi Arabia’s oil production is in the east; that is also where most of the nation’s million-plus Shia reside, in close proximity to Iran (and Shia populations in Bahrain as well). If the widening Sunni-Shia split in the Middle East, perhaps further inflamed by Iranian instigation, led to a major period of violence that also affected oil production and shipment, the implications for the global economy could be quite considerable. Indeed, Iran’s interest in stoking such a conflict could
be reinforced by such economic considerations, since a higher price for oil could help Iran, assuming that it could still find a way to ship its own production to market. Iran might also try to sow mayhem in this area after a U.S.-led aerial attack on its nuclear facilities, rather than contenting itself with a simple one-off retaliation through terrorism. Perhaps the ensuing violence would also extend to attacks in Riyadh and even near Mecca or Medina.

To be sure, even under the kinds of extreme circumstances presumed here, it would be important to design any military mission very carefully. Clearly, Western forces would not be the optimal units to retake Mecca from an al Qaeda offshoot, for example. Even Western boots on the ground further east in the kingdom could be portrayed as apostasy by many, and could lead to various kinds of violence. Riyadh would be highly unlikely to countenance any Western role on Saudi soil, so this scenario is perhaps plausible only if the current regime either had collapsed or had lost control of most of the country and feared acutely for its future survival. In these circumstances, it might be credible to imagine an international coalition, with Muslim states providing units to handle religious sites while a U.S.-led coalition handled the central and eastern parts of the country.

A related and perhaps more plausible mission, particularly over the next five years or so, could be a negotiated peace followed by a stabilization mission in Syria. The deal might be analogous to the Bosnia peace deal, creating one or more autonomous zones for each of the three major ethnic groups, combined in this case with an additional zone for the intermixed cities of the country’s center. This type of hybrid model may offer the only plausible way out of this terrible war, given the strong desire of Turkey and the Gulf states to see President Assad overthrown but the strong resistance to such an outcome by Iran and Russia. A federalist model could help each party to the war attain its core security objectives. It could conceivably grow out of some of the local cease-fires already being attempted in various parts of the country today.

It is too soon to know whether the parties to any peace agreement would want an outside force to help stabilize the situation. But given the likely existence of would-be spoilers to any deal, including perhaps residual elements of ISIL/ISIS, the local parties probably would not be able to secure the peace themselves. And because of the large danger associated with extremist elements involved in the war today, any such
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A peacekeeping force would need to be rather capable. Among the threats one could anticipate would be chemical weapons, jihadist suicide bombers, and the frequent use of roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices.

Scaling from Bosnia, or employing standard force-sizing methods often used to size counterinsurgency operations, this mission could be very large. Syria’s population is approaching 25 million. In theory, it could require 500,000 peacekeepers/counterinsurgents. It is possible that most of them might need to be foreign troops in the early going, as Syrian security forces would probably need to be rebuilt largely from scratch. Alternatively, scaling from the Bosnia precedent would imply more than 300,000 troops, at least in the early going. Either way, the numbers are striking.

Given the extremist presence in Syria, the risk of significant numbers of casualties would be much greater than in the Bosnia mission, making the likely need for high-end U.S. troops even more compelling, if other countries were to be persuaded to send their own soldiers as well. Even the lower of the above figures suggests an American contingent in the range of perhaps 50,000 to 100,000, if one assumes a U.S. contribution of 20 to 35 percent of the total.

**COMPLEX TRAGEDY IN NIGERIA—BOKO HARAM PLUS EBOLA**

As bad as the Middle East has become, Africa is still the continent where the world has witnessed the most frequent—and, in their aggregate effect, also the most deadly—ground wars of the last couple of decades. But for most periods, this violence has involved African states themselves, and international peacekeepers under UN or African Union auspices, to help end the carnage, much more than U.S. troops. This tendency is unlikely to change very much, even in the era of Africa Command (or AFRICOM) and related institutional improvements in how the United States addresses security challenges in Africa. The United States will most likely prefer to employ modest, indirect leverage through special forces, military trainers, and the like.

Yet there are certain scenarios that could change the calculus for Washington. When the issues have been purely humanitarian, the United States has tended to opt for minimal American engagement. But a sufficiently serious conflict could make a larger American role plausible. Indeed, two
of the nation’s most recent presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, have expressed regret about not doing more with American power to address acute security challenges, the former in Rwanda in 1994, the latter in Libya since 2011.

There is a serious case that the prevention of genocide is itself a major national security interest of the United States. However, genocides and civil wars of a character similar to those of the past are not the only possible contingencies. It is also possible to imagine situations that could directly engage other, very important U.S. national security priorities.

The spread of al Qaedaism to Africa creates the potential for a humanitarian crisis juxtaposed with a major security threat to the United States. This dynamic has been seen already to an extent, from Libya to Mali to Somalia. To date, it has generally afflicted smaller states. Salafist extremism has, of course, affected Nigeria too, in the form of the Boko Haram movement, but not yet at a level that has required consideration of major outside help. That could change.

One additional compounding threat is the possibility that a severe epidemic like the 2014 Ebola outbreaks in West Africa could occur in a place already affected by such extremist violence. This could truly make for a horrible situation that would be hard for outside powers to ignore, given the risks of a massive spreading of the disease worldwide. That scenario might include the pandemonium that could result from suicide bombers causing massive casualties in a crowd of people, many of them already affected by an Ebola-like disease. Caring for the kinds of patient caseload seen in such outbreaks, in the context of a security environment in which health care workers and other public servants could be targeted by terrorists, could make for a remarkably difficult situation. It could greatly heighten the risks of an epidemic going out of control, making it harder for the outside world to rely exclusively on local actors to handle the disease, even if it wished to. Indeed, Ebola has already been witnessed in Nigeria, even if the 2014 outbreak there was well controlled.

Boko Haram may now field 10,000 fighters, substantially more than a couple of years ago, and may still be growing. At present, Boko Haram would appear to pose limited direct threat to the West. It is made up largely of disparate cells with only local reach. That said, its extreme ideology and past suspected associations with the broader al Qaeda movement raise the possibility that its capacities, and ambitions, could expand.
The threat of Ebola (or similar contagious diseases, many of which have originated in Africa over the years) could also potentially grow a great deal. The wave of anxiety that its arrival on American shores elicited in 2014 could foreshadow a far more serious situation if the number of cases ever became so great as to escape the immediate control of authorities. Certainly, the prospect of such an epidemic becoming a prevalent worry in much of the world could dramatically change the perceived threat. It is difficult to know how seriously to take such a potential concern. But as one indication, it is worth recalling that in September 2014, the World Health Organization estimated that Ebola could infect up to 20,000, with about half of all victims dying.\(^{42}\) The same month, the Centers for Disease Control offered a separate estimate and increased the number of projected cases—by a factor of 70, to 1.4 million, by the end of January—if practices did not change.\(^{43}\) Thankfully, health measures were improved enough in West Africa that the toll from the outbreak will likely be much closer to the lower bound of this range than the higher bound. But the higher end could very well apply in a hypothetical Nigerian case like the one postulated here, if health care could not be properly provided in the context of an ongoing war.

In such a multidimensional crisis, Nigerian armed forces could survive intact but still find themselves overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis. The military has at times shown hesitancy, and at other times mediocre tactics and competency, in its fight against Boko Haram to date.\(^{44}\) Nigerian armed forces, with 150,000 active duty soldiers, are simply not very large when measured against the scale of the potential problem—they are, for example, substantially smaller than the armed forces of either Iraq or Afghanistan, even though Nigeria has six to seven times the population of either of those countries. Even when the police forces are added in, Nigeria’s total uniformed security personnel number about 500,000, for a population approaching 200 million.

In theory, U.S. military doctrine would suggest a need for perhaps 4 million police and counterinsurgents to stabilize the entire country against a significant internal threat. In practice, as noted earlier, these metrics are crude and imprecise, and may err on the side of conservatism for many operations. That said, a complex mission of the type postulated here could involve a number of forced quarantines, regulation of the perimeters of a certain area to control any movement into and out
of it, and specific tasks associated with medical or humanitarian relief. These tasks could drive the numbers up.

For the scenarios imagined here, it does not seem likely that the entire country of Nigeria would be equally threatened in such a future operation. If the crisis at hand involved a blend of regional politics, insurgency, and al Qaeda-ist extremism, perhaps it would affect large swaths of Nigeria’s Hausa and Fulani populations—ethnic groups that are primarily Muslim and that account for some 30 percent of the population, or more than 50 million individuals. If the violence affected half of this population, the mission could be roughly comparable in scale to those in Iraq or Afghanistan in this century. That in turn could imply a potential need for perhaps 600,000 total counterinsurgents/police in this part of the country. Nigeria has 500,000 of its own security personnel, as noted, but most of these are police, with limited ability to deploy beyond their immediate areas of responsibility—and ongoing obligations in these other areas, too. As such, it seems entirely credible that the international community might need to provide at least 100,000 to 200,000 forces, and to provide them in a fairly remote part of the country, where logistics support could be quite difficult.

The United States would hardly need to provide the majority of the personnel. But its unique capacities in logistics, health care, and planning would be essential ingredients of any successful mission and probably imply a need for 30,000 to 50,000 U.S. Army and Marine Corps uniformed personnel on the ground, in keeping with the typical proportionate American contribution to other demanding stabilization missions in places like the Balkans.

STRENGTHENING THE STATE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Imagine the possibility that several countries in Central America, already among the most violent and corrupt regions in the world, could experience an escalation of violence not unlike that seen by Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. Should criminal cartels take the gloves off, attacking the state and perhaps even attacking Americans in an effort to deter the United States from coming to the aid of governments in the region, a much more threatening situation could emerge. It is plausible that Washington then might, in conjunction with beleaguered governments of the region and allies such as Colombia and Mexico, consider a broad
stabilization mission. Such a mission could be intended first to attack the
criminal syndicates that had escalated the violence and then to build up
the region’s states so they could fend off future such challenges on their
own.45

For example, if prominent Americans began to be assassinated by
criminal groups gone berserk, the threat to U.S. national security could
quickly seem much more acute than today. One would not have to
impugn complete irrationality to a criminal group to worry about this
scenario. Perhaps a group that felt the noose of the state tightening
around its neck, or that had a leader in an American prison that it wished
to free, would use violence in the hope that this would lead Washington
to relent rather than retaliate. Under certain circumstances, it could seem
a credible gamble. After all, some counternarcotics strategies envision
the arrest or killing of top leaders of drug cartels—meaning that they
raise the stakes very high. To make an analogy with nuclear strategy, it is
precisely when one’s “regime” is at risk (in this case, one’s drug empire,
personal wealth, personal freedom, and very survival) that a leader may
be prepared to risk it all. A threatened leader of a country might contem-
plate the use of nuclear weapons if he felt there was no other way to stop
a foreign power bent on overthrowing him. In this case, analogously, a
drug leader might try to kill (or kidnap) prominent Americans in a long-
shot hope to stymie a campaign that clearly had him in its crosshairs.

This problem could be worsened if transnational criminal groups
teamed up with terrorists in an unholy alliance of some sort. Perhaps a
personal vendetta by a drug syndicate against a political or law enforce-
ment figure would lead to a desire for weaponry that a terrorist group
possessed—and perhaps the terrorist group would be willing to exchange
the weaponry if offered help with accessing North America and specifi-
cally the United States through the various means that many criminal
groups have developed over the years. Such a deal would presumably
be avoided by drug cartels in North America under most circumstances,
since they would have to appreciate the risks involved in being com-
plicit in a direct attack on the United States. But a sufficiently risk-prone
and vengeance-seeking group might throw caution to the wind. There
is little reason to think that criminals will be perfectly rational all the
time. We know from examples such as Pablo Escobar in Colombia that
there are groups that choose to escalate their use of violence against the
state out of a desire for vengeance or in an attempt to create a climate
of fear that they can exploit. Some, like Escobar, may also think that they can gain popularity locally through various forms of charity and patronage, providing additional protection and cover should authorities try to close in, and mitigating their worries about being tracked down.\textsuperscript{46} However, Escobar did not undertake major attacks against the United States, and over time, Colombia proved to have most of the capacity to deal with him itself. In a future Central American contingency, it is at least remotely conceivable that a criminal group would not show the same restraint, and that the indigenous government would need outside help to respond.

What type of military mission might the United States and its allies consider in such a scenario? The first instinct would likely be a series of raids directly against the offending group’s leadership. But carrying out such raids effectively could prove a major challenge; limited uses of force in general have a spotty record of achieving their goals.\textsuperscript{47} And in the case of limited strikes on terrorist groups in particular, the effects of decapitation strategies are typically quite mixed.\textsuperscript{48} If the problem became severe enough, therefore, going to its source might seem advisable—meaning trying to help some of the states where the criminals had enjoyed effective sanctuary develop the tools to root them out. Some aspects of the operations could resemble muscular counterinsurgency of the 2000s variety in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Thus, this type of scenario could ultimately lead to a type of stabilization mission in Central America. The goal would not be counterinsurgency per se, as in Iraq or Afghanistan, but short-term law enforcement and longer-term state building. The mission could seek to repeat the kinds of successes achieved in Colombia in recent decades, for example. The goals might be to root out the offending cartels and their networks and leaders and safe houses and weapons caches while strengthening local law enforcement capacities so that the indigenous countries at issue could sustain the progress in the future.

The scale of any such mission would of course be a function of which regions in which countries needed to be handled through such a systematic military, law enforcement, and state-building operation. But a rough sense of the scale can be developed by noting that the combined populations of the three countries in Central America facing the worst of the drug and crime problem today—and suffering from among the very highest rates of homicide in the world as a result—have a combined
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population of about 30 million. Thus, if the operation were to include El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala together, the magnitude of the effort might be comparable to the Iraq or Afghanistan mission, by that population metric at least. The United States might undertake the effort in conjunction with Colombia and other key regional states such as Mexico or Brazil. But it could also expect that it might have to provide a very substantial fraction of the total outside force on its own.

Standard force-sizing algorithms as reflected in the *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, for example, could imply up to 600,000 “counterinsurgents” in such a mission. Assuming that some fraction of indigenous capacity was initially available to help with the effort, foreign troops might have to constitute one-third to one-half of the total. The necessary U.S. ground force contribution might reach the rough range of 50,000 to 150,000. More likely, any such mission would not have to address all three countries at once, and the scale of the operation would decline accordingly, so I estimate ultimately a range more like 30,000 to 100,000. Yet it could still be considerable.

Of course, attention should not be limited to Central America. Certainly, large-scale uprisings or major drug-related violence could threaten countries from Venezuela to Cuba to parts of Mexico in the years ahead, as well.49

A MAJOR DOMESTIC DISASTER AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina reminded Americans of the potential for huge natural disasters at home, beyond the usual threats from hurricanes, forest fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods. Further back in memory, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident conjured up fears of what could have happened had the reactor malfunction been even more severe.

The early period after the 9/11 attacks witnessed a range of discussion and analysis on this general subject. The types of disasters that could cause huge damage and major ensuing disruption to life in America include terrorist attacks on nuclear reactors or major chemical facilities, dirty bomb attacks with nuclear-waste-laced weapons, and the spread of a biological pathogen. Other cases include the possibility that a nuclear weapon might be loose within the country or known to be en route to the United States. One might also add scenarios in which a breakdown in electrical or computer systems, perhaps caused by cyberattacks or a
high-altitude nuclear weapons burst designed to maximize the effects of electromagnetic pulse, plunges much of the country into a period of protracted darkness. Mayhem could result. The resulting large-scale responses needed to ensure safety for the population—not to mention food, water, and health care if infrastructure were incapacitated for an extended time—could go far beyond the capacity of local police or limited numbers of National Guard troops to handle.

What is the plausible scale of the resulting challenges to response and law and order? The challenge intellectually, as always when carrying out scenario analysis, is to stretch the imagination while maintaining credibility. Asteroid strikes and invasions by extraterrestrials or cannibalistic humanoid underground dwellers are not included here. Nor is a sequence of multiple independent disasters, each of them individually conceivable in isolation but collectively improbable in the extreme.

Even without such truly apocalyptic scenarios, many unexpected events could transpire. The 9/11 attacks really did happen, as did a very long U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan thereafter—and neither of these possibilities would have been easy to predict within the bounds of previous experience beforehand. Moreover, attacks involving weapons of mass destruction that could quite credibly cause many hundreds of thousands of fatalities are not difficult to imagine at all.

Another way to sketch out the realm of the plausible is to think of how large a geographic area of the country could be affected at once by a major disaster or challenge. The most natural scale of possible tragedy is probably a single metropolitan area. A region of such size could be affected by a nuclear or chemical plant disaster, an actual detonation of a nuclear weapon, a huge earthquake, or another such event. However, it is also possible to imagine plausible events that could affect larger areas. A major electricity outage brought on by a system failure, or a solar storm, or an enemy attack with a high-altitude nuclear burst designed to create a major electromagnetic pulse could condemn a whole swath of the country to a lack of power for weeks or months. Fear of a nuclear weapon on the loose in a certain part of the country could require intensive monitoring of movement into and out of several cities. Fear that such a weapon was inbound on a ship could lead to huge search operations at several major ports at once.

The requirements for forces to provide security and relief would of course vary enormously from case to case. But policing cities with
a combined population of, say, 20 to 30 million, when blackouts and intense fear and other breakdowns in normal life risk producing pandemonium and thereby necessitating very intense domestic stabilization efforts, could in theory demand more than half a million responders, according to classic counterinsurgency or stabilization algorithms. Inspecting all vehicular traffic into cities, assuming 20 to 100 major entry points per city, could require a mission that would dwarf the call-up of some 20,000 Army reserve component personnel after 9/11. And, heaven forbid, should a nuclear weapon actually go off in a U.S. city, the scale of the needed cleanup effort could be difficult to imagine, certainly exceeding by tenfold or more the scale of the post-9/11 cleanup, with its cost of some $5 billion and the involvement of several tens of thousands of workers, or the response to Katrina, which included 45,000 National Guard personnel and some 20,000 active-duty forces. It would be quite credible that hundreds of thousands could be required for such a task.

**CONCLUSION**

Numerous military scenarios could each require many tens of thousands and even several hundred thousand U.S. soldiers and Marines for periods of months to years. The plausibility of individual scenarios can be debated, but there are enough imaginable cases to make the possibility of such a scale of response seem quite real and credible. The United States would be right to attempt to limit its involvement in many if not most of them. But in a number of cases, the strategic stakes could be high enough, and the difficulty of the mission great enough, that an effective response would require a major U.S. military role.

Calculating requirements for how to handle various scenarios is a very difficult enterprise. Combat modeling is an inherently imprecise science, and planning war is an inherently mistake-prone human endeavor. That is true even when one can focus on a specific and real scenario. Here the task is necessarily more speculative, and more imprecise. But when planning for the long term, there is no alternative.

As the George W. Bush administration learned in the early 2000s, preemptive and preventive wars are difficult to make legitimate in the eyes of international public opinion—and in the eyes of other states. The logical consequence of this situation is that a country with the avowed purpose of upholding international stability will often wind up having to
absorb the first blow in war before it is able to respond decisively, thus conceding some degree of initiative to the enemy.  

For all these reasons, an element of caution and a margin of insurance need to be introduced into planning efforts for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. The next chapter turns to the issue of how many of these scenarios should be prepared for at once, and with what types of forces.