Building the Right Military for a New Era: The Need for an Enduring Analytic Framework

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The Unique Value of American Military Power

Today, the United States is a global power with worldwide interests, investments, relationships, and concerns. It is also the leader of a like-minded community of nations, a set of alliances, security relationships, and even of what passes for a board of directors for the international economic system. America earned its current role by helping to rebuild the war-shattered nations of Europe and Asia, promoting an open international political and economic order, aiding those suffering from humanitarian crises, and providing a bulwark against regional aggression and internal subversions.

Twice in the past 60-plus years, the United States has chosen to fill the vacuum caused by the collapse of old institutions, relationships, and power centers. After World War II, along with key allies, this country created a new international order anchored by democratic institutions and international agreements that have endured to this day. America, again in concert with many allies, also built a security apparatus and military machine of global reach and power, one unlike any seen in peacetime.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States did not simply declare victory and go home. Rather, even while reducing the size of its military, America chose to remain in the world—forward deployed and committed to maintaining and even expanding long-established alliances and security relationships. As a result, the world was able to weather difficult and dangerous transitions while maintaining a viable international system.

Ironically, the end of the Cold War increased the United States military's role in maintaining the global order. From 1945 to the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were between 40 and 50 significant instances of the use of U.S. armed forces abroad. From 1991 to the present, that number nearly tripled to between 100 and 135. These figures do not include several hundred humanitarian operations, support for civil authorities after natural disasters, or the myriad of routine deployments for training purposes or to build partnership capacity. Taking these additional actions into consideration, the activity level for the U.S. military increased by a factor of four after 1991.[1]

At the same time, in the 1990s, the U.S. military was halved. This dramatic force reduction, coupled with the fourfold increase in activity, resulted in an eightfold increase in the military's "use rate" or "stress level." Were it not for two important factors, the U.S. military might have collapsed.

1. The Reagan–Bush era had yielded an overhang of military procurements, an investment off of which the military has lived for years; and

2. The military engaged in selective hollowing, which allowed the services to reduce spending on maintenance and upgrades rather than relying

on a reduction in force. For the Army alone, this amounted to some $50 billion in the years prior to September 11, 2001.

U.S. power and presence are the foundation on which the present international order is built. Whether it is the size of the U.S. economy, America's capacity for innovation, the role of the dollar as the world's reserve currency, or the contribution of U.S. military power to the stability and peace of the global commons, the present world order has "made in the USA" stamped all over it. Furthermore:

> The United States offered resistance to illiberal and autocratic regional powers that have at time[s] challenged the protocols of the postwar order. And that pushback has allowed weaker nations—such as Poland or the Baltic States—to escape the orbit of post-Soviet Russia, while in the Pacific ensuring that an Australia, New Zealand, or the Philippines is not bullied into subservience by China.
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> This strange postwar world ushered in the greatest advancement in prosperity amid the general absence of a cataclysmic world conflagration or continental war since the dawn of civilization. For the first time since the rise of the Greek city-state, most nations have been able both to prosper and to assume that their boundaries were inviolate and their populations mostly free from attack. A system of international communications, travel, commerce, and trade is predicated on the assumption that pirates cannot seize cargo ships, terrorists cannot hijack planes, and rogue nations cannot let off atomic bombs without a U.S. led coalition to stop them from threatening the international order.[2]

For more than four decades, the modern American military has served this nation with distinction. However, the U.S. military today faces a growing number of challenges. Some of these are of our own making, most notably an unwillingness to put forward the relatively modest amount of resources required to maintain a military capable of meeting enduring security requirements. Others come from without, including the proliferation of advanced conventional and even nuclear weapons and delivery systems; significant increases in the defense budgets of potential adversaries; and the rise of new types of warfare based on new technologies, many of them commercial in nature.

The most important challenge facing America is the apparent inclination of its political elite to turn away from this nation's role as the linchpin in the international security order—an inclination that places this nation's vital interests, as well as the freedom and security of friends and allies, at risk.

From Global Containment to the Two Major Theater War Standard

For more than 60 years, the adequacy of U.S. military power was measured with reference to a dominant strategic concept (deterrence); a single adversary (the former Soviet Union and its allies); and largely in terms of one type of conflict (a large-scale, high-end conventional conflict centered in Europe). A full-spectrum conventional military force, reinforced by robust theater and strategic nuclear capabilities, was viewed as sufficient to deter any Soviet leadership from employing force directly against the United States, its allies, or their vital interests. In addition, it was generally accepted that the broad range of capabilities necessary to conduct and sustain such a major war would provide sufficient richness with which to address multiple lesser conflicts and contingencies.

Historically, the U.S. government has used as a sizing standard the number and character of wars in which the U.S. might be engaged. The standards were defined in terms of the prospective opponents, the scale of the conflict, and the ultimate objectives.

At the height of the Cold War, the United States maintained a two-and-a-half-war strategy: major, simultaneous wars against the Soviet Union and China plus another nation. Following the Sino–Soviet split and the U.S. opening to China, the Nixon Administration changed the sizing criteria to a one-and-a-half-war strategy that planned for a major war with the Soviet Union plus a second, possibly related conflict in the Persian Gulf or on the Korean peninsula.

The Cold War period was not free of debate and disagreement over the size and composition of U.S. military forces. The answer to the question of "how much is enough?" was pursued from a variety of perspectives: strategic, political, and budgetary. What is notable about the Cold War effort to define the required size and character of U.S. military forces is

the application of rigorous and consistent analytic methods. By focusing on a consistent and commonly accepted set of scenarios, performance requirements, and measures of effectiveness, analysts were able to track the strength and weaknesses in force structure decisions, particularly in light of a changing threat, and provide clear information, traceable over time, that contributed to the public debate on the adequacy of American military power.[3]

Eventually, the Department of Defense's use of analytics yielded the "net assessment process." Developed by the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) under the leadership of Mr. Andrew Marshall to examine the balance of military power between the West and the Soviet bloc, the process answered questions concerning both the present and the future by anticipating changes in technologies, defense budgets, and even alliances.

A strategic net assessment began with a thorough understanding of America's military capabilities and those other nations, most notably the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. To this quantitative assessment was added an appreciation for how military forces might be employed in various kinds of conflicts—the qualitative dimension. Changes in alliance relationships, advances in technology, and fluctuating defense budgets were also considered as factors influencing the final or net assessment of the military potential of the opposing sides.[4]

Over time, ONA also developed an approach to the long-term competition between the two sides called Competitive Strategies. The central idea of Competitive Strategies was to focus areas of U.S. advantage against areas where America's competitors were weak while simultaneously limiting their ability to do the same. The long-term goal was to move the balance of military power increasingly in America's favor, thereby enhancing deterrence. ONA helped to train several generations of analysts and policymakers in the methodologies and ways of thinking about net assessment and competitive strategies.[5]

Analytics and the End of the Cold War. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the strategic and analytic pillars that supported a coherent and consistent debate on force sizing and composition vanished almost overnight. Since the end of the Cold War, the basic metric for judging the adequacy of the U.S. military has been its ability to fight in two geographically separated regions of the world at approximately the same time. Referred to at different times as "Major Regional Contingencies (MRCs)," "Major Theater Wars," or "multiple, large scale operations," the two-war standard has stood the test of time because it reflects a basic strategic reality that was well expressed by the 2012 Strategic Guidance for the Department of Defense: "As a nation with important interests in multiple regions, our forces must be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere."[6]

Moreover, there have been times when the United States, in order to deter possible aggression, has found it prudent or even necessary to build up its forces in two different parts of the world. For example, in 1994, the Clinton Administration faced a crisis on the Korean peninsula. In response to heightened tensions in Northeast Asia, the United States began to move additional forces to the region. At about the same time, Saddam Hussein began to move portions of his army from central Iraq southward in what could have been preparation for another attack on Kuwait. Again, the U.S. deployed an array of forces to that region. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry later credited the maintenance of a two-MRC military for Washington's ability to deter conflict in both regions simultaneously.[7]

Each Administration has put its own spin on the two-MRC standard, and therein lies the problem: It is impossible to compare the adequacy of the U.S. military to meet national security demands over time because the goalposts keep moving. Initially, the requirement was to fight and win two conflicts similar in size and complexity to Desert Storm, the war that the U.S. and its coalition allies had fought against Iraq. Over time, successive Administrations took liberties with this standard—alterations that reflected a variety of strategic, political, technological, and budgetary priorities.

For instance, the 2001 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs) paid minimal obeisance to the two-MRC standard, instead reflecting the impact of September 11, the Bush Administration's determination to prosecute the global war on terrorism, the requirements of two long-term stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and rising defense budgets.

The 2009 and 2014 QDRs were driven by the Obama Administration's markedly different strategic and policy perspectives. They continued, for

example, the two-MRC standard but significantly modified the definition of the type of conflicts for which the U.S. military should be prepared. Gone was the requirement for a protracted, large-scale stability operation—another Iraq or Afghanistan. The military still had to fight two conflicts, but only one would be a full-out conventional war. In the other conflict, the U.S. military's objective would be limited to "denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—a second aggressor."[8] In theory, because this second conflict would be based on more limited objectives than those pursued in the first, it would require fewer forces and would last for a shorter period of time. As a consequence of these changes, the Obama Administration was able to extract a significant "peace dividend" from ensuing defense budgets.

While post–Cold War defense policy has always advocated being able to fight two wars at the same time, successive Administrations have never provided sufficient resources to ensure a force structure capable of achieving such a goal—except at extremely high risk. It was possible to get away with this charade in the past because the U.S. military was relatively modern as a result of the Reagan buildup and America's potential adversaries were rather weak. Neither of these conditions holds true today.

In fact, even before the Budget Control Act became law, the U.S. military would have had a very hard time fighting two regional conflicts. This difficulty is the reason that the Obama Administration changed the standard for American military adequacy from winning two wars to winning one and attempting to deny an aggressor his objectives or punish him severely in the second. No one really knows what this second objective means or how to assess the adequacy of U.S. military forces to do either denial or punishment. If, as some experts have speculated, the second requirement means using air and sea power to attrite an aggressor's military forces without employing significant land forces, it is by no means clear that our ammunition stocks are sufficient for such an effort.

The 2014 QDR did the Obama Administration, the Pentagon, and the American people a disservice by pretending that the proposed budgets were adequate to maintain a force structure with sufficient readiness. The reality is that if America wants a two-war military, its citizens have to be willing to pay for it. The next Administration will face a difficult choice: increase defense spending or turn one important region of the world over to the tender mercies of authoritarian or even fundamentalist-theocratic states.

Inadequacy of the Current Analytic Paradigm

It is increasingly evident that the current approach to defining a sizing standard is inadequate. In fact, it is not really a sizing standard at all; rather, it is a way to justify reductions in the size of the military in the face of a declining defense budget.

Some have characterized the new formulation as a one-and-a-half-war standard, but the threat of major theater wars in Southwest and Northeast Asia is no less serious today than it was when the two major theater war standard was articulated some 20 years ago. If anything, the possibility of two major conflicts that overlap in time is increasing, and the formulation of the mission for the second conflict as the capability to deny an aggressor's objectives or impose unacceptable costs is so vague as to be meaningless. The lack of a clear, more precise and usable standard for sizing the U.S. military leaves defense planners in a quandary: Is the one major theater war to take place in the desert, jungles, or mountains? Is it against a nuclear-armed adversary or one with only limited long-range strike capabilities? Will America have capable allies in theater? The two regions of the world of most interest to military planners are quite dissimilar and require different force structures.

Similarly, regarding the second part of the standard, how many fighter wings or strategic bombers are needed to deny an aggressor's objectives or impose unacceptable costs? One nuclear weapon should do it, but America is not about to go back to the good old days of the 1950s. Without a sense of against whom or when a buildup might be required, it is impossible for the military to judge as it downsizes today how much equipment or which people and capabilities should be retained in order to have the ability to expand in the face of a larger future threat.

The public debate on the adequacy of America's national defenses waxes and wanes with every crisis. There is a high point every four years with the publication of the Quadrennial Defense Review. Unfortunately, each QDR is *sui generis* and, despite claims by each Administration that it has taken a long-term perspective, deals only with near-term challenges. There is no common standard, no yardstick

by which to measure the adequacy of U.S. military power over time.

Moreover, even though QDRs are required by law to take a long-term perspective on the adequacy of U.S. forces, they have never done so. Rather, they provide a static vision of the adequacy of U.S. military forces and, even then, not against the most formidable threats and adversaries. Hence, the QDR is a backward-looking, out-of-focus Polaroid picture that tells us nothing about how much military power the nation needs relative to both missions and threats.

The static, disconnected nature of this analytic approach does not permit an adequate characterization of the arc of strategic trends involving defense spending, force evolution, or technology proliferation. As a consequence, it is easy for negative conditions such as the long-term decline in the U.S. military to be obscured in policy discussions. But this is only half of the problem. The decline in American power has been exceeded by that of its major allies: Not even a handful of NATO countries spend the agreed minimum of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense.

This is now a military beset by challenges on all sides. It is worn out from overuse and inadequate modernization. There is a clear and growing negative tilt in the strategic military balance between the United States and its allies on one side of the scales and rogue states and prospective adversaries on the other side. A combination of factors—war weariness, financial crises, unfavorable demographics, entitlement spending's growing weight on national finances, the rising costs associated with modern all-volunteer militaries and the global commons, and a failure to make the case publicly for adequate defense spending—has contributed to the pronounced decline in Western military strength.

And now the United States is about to tilt the scales further against its own interests. Sequestration would impose serious and poorly distributed cuts in defense spending across the entire Department of Defense. The military already is reducing end strength, retiring hundreds of airplanes and dozens of ships and slashing training activities. Sequestration will only make the situation worse.

Military Investment by America's Adversaries. While it is important to appreciate the long-term downward trends in U.S. military forces and capabilities, this is only half of the problem. It is equally important to appreciate the trends in military investments by prospective adversaries.

Over the past five years, the overall share of defense spending by the West has shrunk from around three-quarters to one-half of the global total. For more than a decade, however, China has increased its defense spending by double digits, more even than the annual growth in its GDP. It has developed, deployed, and—according to recent reports—demonstrated an operational anti-ship ballistic missile. And China's area denial/anti-access capabilities continue to grow: Beijing is deploying anti-space forces that could deny the United States the use of space in a future conflict.

Furthermore, Russia has announced yet another major defense spending program designed to close the technology gap between Moscow and the U.S. and its NATO allies. Within another decade, the combined defense spending of Russia and China could exceed that of the United States.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies' *2014 Military Balance* makes a particular point of the contrast between the decline in Western military investments and the sharp rise in defense spending and concomitant arms expansion of programs in the Asia–Pacific region:

> Whereas defence spending in North America and Europe has stagnated or declined since the 2008 financial crisis, over the same period real defence outlays in China and Russia rose by more than 40% and 30% respectively.
>
> In real terms, total Asian defence spending in 2013 was 11.6% higher than in 2010. The largest absolute spending increases over the past year occurred in East Asia, with China, Japan and South Korea accounting for more than half. China now spends about three times as much as India on defence, and more than neighbours Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam combined.
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> These outlays are fuelling heightened military procurement in a region replete with conflicting territorial claims as well as long-standing potential flashpoints. Not least because of the Asia–Pacific's central place in the global economy, the rapid pace of capability development and the potential for accidental conflict and escalation will continue to be of concern.

> Overall, the scope for competition—and potential confrontation—is broad. It might develop in different domains, such as space and cyber, through the development of new military technologies, such as directed energy weapons, or even in newly accessible regions, such as the Arctic.
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> For the West, what is clear is that the end of the Iraq War and the impending drawdown from Afghanistan mark neither an end to crises inviting Western military responses, nor a definitive end to Western intervention. Events on Europe's periphery will continue to demand attention, and there remains substantial capacity to deploy force.[9]

Yet because of the limits of the current analytic paradigm, the intersecting implication of these two trends—Western military decline and the growing military capacity of states hostile to Western interests—is never addressed. The current analytic paradigm neither acknowledges these adverse trends nor makes any serious effort to identify the investments in U.S. military forces, platforms, and capabilities that must be made to reverse them.

More with Less. Moreover, as American military power declines, the demands made on the U.S. military are increasing. The then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Amos, recently opined that in view of projected U.S. defense budget cuts on the one hand and the explosion of international crises and threats to U.S. interests on the other, he expected his service and the Joint Force, at a minimum, to be asked "to do the same with less." His real concern, he acknowledged, was that the U.S. military would be asked "to do more with less."[10]

Yet this potentiality—having to do more with less—is another area in which the current analytic paradigm is inadequate. Specifically, it fails to account for unchanging or increasing demands on the military at a time when both the size of the force and its capabilities relative to evolving threats are declining.

How does the military do the same or more with less? One way is by working the force harder. Units, particularly those with high demand/low density capabilities, are deploying overseas for longer periods and, as a consequence, spending less time at home. Platforms and equipment are operated at a higher rate than predicted, thereby increasing maintenance and sustainment costs and bringing forward the date at which aircraft, ships, and vehicles will need to be overhauled or even replaced. Eventually—really, in a few short years—this approach will break the force.

The other way to do more with less is by accepting greater risk. The term "risk," while often used by military officers, Defense Department civilians, and think tank experts, is never clearly or accurately defined in ways that are understandable to Members of Congress or the public. What "risk" really means is that while the mission, the region, or the commitment will not be formally abandoned, there is no way it can be supported or defended with the forces available. Insufficient, inadequately trained, or poorly supported forces will be sent to accomplish the impossible. Remember Task Force Smith in Korea in 1950? Ultimately, this approach means that Marines (and other service personnel) may sacrifice their lives needlessly.

Further defense budget cuts—a consequence of sequestration—will require reductions in force structure and modernization programs that will virtually guarantee the inability of the United States to deploy credible military forces to two regions at the same time. For two years, senior Administration officials and uniformed personnel have been attempting to make clear to Congress and the American people the consequences of sequestration. The lack of a comprehensive, credible, and consistent analytic national methodology for assessing the adequacy of U.S. military capabilities and identifying shortfalls has severely impeded this effort.

Indeed, the closest anyone has come to clarifying what the Pentagon means by "accepting increased risk" was in testimony by the Joint Chiefs of Staff last year before the House Armed Services Committee. If sequestration comes into effect in 2016, the Pentagon will not have sufficient forces, air and sea-lift, or munitions to conduct two major regional conflicts. As the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Larry Spencer, warned, "We won't have the capacity to respond to what we say we can respond to today."[11]

Then-Army Vice Chief of Staff General John Campbell, whose service is facing the possibility of simultaneous land wars in Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia, stated the danger in even starker terms: "We're mortgaging the future. We're really pushing hard for additional money to try to bring up short-term readiness, but then in 2016, if we go to sequestration, we all just fall off the map again."[12]

The Elements of a New Methodology

If the American people are to be engaged in a reasonable debate over future defense spending and the adequacy of the U.S. military, a new yardstick for defining sufficiency is required. Such an index of U.S. military power needs to be designed for the long haul: a methodology capable of tracking changes in military capabilities and critical technologies that can take decades to make an impact.

This yardstick must reflect both the high-impact/low-probability scenarios and those that are more likely to occur but have lesser consequences. It must also reflect changes not only in U.S. forces and capabilities, but also those of friends, allies, and—most important—adversaries. Thus, this methodology must go beyond quantitative measures of military power (the bean counts) and include a clear articulation of enduring and vital U.S. security interests, an accurate assessment of both the current and likely future threats to those interests, and a net assessment of the ability of the U.S. military to achieve desired results in the face of changing threats over time.

A new methodology must start with a vision of U.S. national security, as well as the defense strategy to support it, that recognizes vital American interests. For America, uniquely among the great powers of history, securing its vital interests did not mean diminishing those of other nations. Rather, America's defense of its vital interests has supported the economic, social, and political development of the majority of the world's peoples. There is a strong correlation between American interests and those of a liberal and peaceful world order:

> After more than two centuries of independence, the United States' vital interests, in our evaluation, have largely remained consistent over long periods of time, with transformative technologies serving as the single greatest reason for change in American interests. In many respects, two centuries of growth and change only served to filter and clarify what is and is not in the national interest. By reinforcing the enduring nature of the nation's interest, events such as World War I & II, the Cold War, and the attacks of September 11, 2001 have not fundamentally reshaped what matters most.[13]

In the past, it has been America's tendency to focus both strategic analyses and force planning on the demands of the war-fighting mission. Certainly, at present, the minimum standard for the U.S. military is to be able to fight two MRCs.

It is necessary but insufficient to evaluate the adequacy of the U.S. military against the standard of its ability to fight its nation's wars. Instead, a new methodology must recognize that today and for the foreseeable future, the U.S. military is the linchpin in the global security system.

Indeed, most U.S. vital interests have to do with issues related to maintenance of a stable international order: freedom of the seas and airways, access to trading partners, maintenance of a community of like-minded liberal democracies, and deterrence of would-be regional aggressors. The international system is not a game of Jenga in which the removal of a critical support structure merely results in one's tower collapsing. Helping to maintain a peaceful international order is a vital U.S. national security interest.

Toward a New Strategic Concept

For more than 20 years, it has been an accepted fact of U.S. security policy that the ability to deter regional aggression in two separate regions of the world at the same time—to fight and win two MRCs—also is critical to the maintenance of a peaceful international system. In view of the growing militancy of the regimes in North Korea and Iran, as well as efforts by both Russia and China to assert control over adjacent land, sea, and air spaces, it is difficult to conceive of a time when the two-MRC standard will no longer be applicable.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, recently proposed a variation on the regionally focused MRC standard to include Russia and China. He proposed a strategic concept that he calls "two, two, two, one."

> Here's my elevator speech about strategy. Two, two, two, one: Two heavyweights will influence our future strategy, Russia and China. Two middleweights, North Korea and Iran. Two networks, al-Qaida and transnational organized crime from our southern hemisphere. And one domain—cyber. And those things have influenced, are influencing me today and will influence you in the future. One of them or more.[14]

What is most noteworthy about General Dempsey's formulation is that it includes both Rus-

sia and China as prospective challengers. While previous defense strategies and each QDR have made reference to the challenges posed by Russia and China, this is the first time that these two countries have been clearly identified as countries with whom the United States must consider the prospect of conflict.

Mapping the two-MRC requirement against the "two, two, two, one" strategic concept raises some interesting questions about the adequacy of the U.S. military. Is the Pentagon capable of fighting two nearly simultaneous regional conflicts against both Russia and China? General Dempsey makes it clear that he does not think war with either nation is likely, particularly if the United States and its regional allies maintain the means to deter them. But to deter, U.S. forces must be able to pose a credible threat at least to Russia's and China's presumed or prospective war aims or valuations.

Furthermore, is the U.S. military postured to fight two middleweight powers? Since, as General Dempsey says, these two states are less predictable and more roguish, does America not have to plan to defeat both of them in detail, including changing their regimes? Is a force structure able to defeat in detail one or both middleweight powers essentially adequate to achieve denial/cost imposition against Russia or China?

One approach to force sizing for multiple MRCs that would also match General Dempsey's strategy would be to consider a conflict with a middleweight power as the full-out conventional conflict and a face-off with Russia or China as requiring the abilities to deny their objectives and/or impose unacceptable costs. In other words, a war with Russia or China would be limited in scope, which seems reasonable considering the large nuclear arsenals that both nations possess.

Strategic Surprises. A new methodology must not only address known challenges; it must also make allowances for the possibility of strategic surprises. The recent blitzkrieg that took the extremist group that goes by the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) almost to the gates of Baghdad should be enough to convince any reasonable observer that this is a bad time to be reducing the size of the U.S. military.

As of a few months ago, no one in Washington had even heard of ISIS, and it was just a couple of years ago that President Obama assured the American people that al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups (one of which, it turns out, was ISIS) were decimated and on the run. Now U.S. "advisers" are back in Iraq, unmanned aerial systems are conducting surveillance missions over the newly declared caliphate, a carrier battle group and amphibious assault ship loaded with Marines are positioned in the northern Arabian Gulf, and air strikes are underway.

This sudden turn of events is ironic in part because one of the central operating assumptions of the Administration's defense policy was that this country would not again engage in a large-scale and sustained stability operation. This assumption was the basis for slashing the size of the active U.S. Army from a high of 570,000 troops to some 450,000. While President Obama has promised that there will be no American boots on the ground, can we accept this as an ironclad certainty if ISIS threatens to take Baghdad? What about when ISIS turns its attention to Jordan, a long-standing U.S. ally?

The reality is that America's leaders have generally done a poor job of predicting when, where, and how this nation will fight. Since 1950, three factors have repeatedly saved the U.S. from military disaster: the size of the armed forces, America's technological superiority, and the robustness of the defense industrial base. For example, the Cold War military was of sufficient size and power to make up for a plethora of strategic and operational mistakes. America discovered, for example, that the B-52s originally acquired to deliver nuclear weapons on Soviet targets were more effective as conventional bombers. Moreover, there were so many B-52s that the Air Force could afford to lose nearly two dozen during Operation Linebacker II over North Vietnam.

Today, all three of these historic sources of salvation are at risk. The military is being reduced to a size at which it will be able to fight one war at best. America's technological edge is being challenged by prospective adversaries abroad and by a broken acquisition system at home. The U.S. defense industrial base, while still capable of producing world-class weapons systems, lacks the robustness to support a rapid and sustained defense buildup. On its own, the requirements for a robust and responsive defense industrial base should be considered in any new assessment of U.S. military capabilities.

The rise of ISIS is but one of a host of strategic, operational, and technological surprises that have confronted the United States in recent years. If this

nation is going to protect its vital interests, deter conflicts with would-be regional hegemons, reassure allies, and respond to crises of all sorts, it needs a robust military of sufficient size, sophistication, resources, and readiness to deal not only with the known threats, but also with the inevitable surprises. A key measure of the adequacy of U.S. military might is its ability to withstand surprises of all kinds.

A New Approach. Recognizing the limitations of the existing methodology for assessing the adequacy of the U.S. military, the House Armed Services Committee has proposed a new approach that would replace the QDR with two documents: a Quadrennial National Security Threats and Trends report (QNSTR) and a Defense Strategy Review (DSR). This new approach also would give greater responsibility to the National Defense Panel.

The QNSTR would provide a definition of U.S. national security interests, an assessment of trends that could affect those interests, and the identification of threats to those interests, all for multiple time periods. The new DSR would address the manifest inadequacies of the existing QDR process while also significantly expanding the roles and responsibilities of the National Defense Panel, requiring it to consider alternative strategies, force structures, capabilities, and budgets—thereby ensuring that the U.S. military is capable of prosecuting the full range of assigned missions.[15]

Finally, an informed public debate about the manner in which the adequacy of U.S. military forces is measured, both quantitatively and qualitatively, requires an informed and forward-looking analytic approach. It is therefore time to revitalize the process of net assessment as part of an overall effort to establish an ongoing, publicly accessible index of U.S. military power. In many ways, doing so in the current fluid security environment will be even more challenging than it was during the Cold War.

America's armed forces are at a crossroads. The American people need to understand not only the role this nation and its military play in the world, but the importance of global peace and stability to the security of the homeland and their personal well-being. They also need to be given the facts: how large and capable a military is required in order to meet America's vital national security interests and what it will realistically cost to acquire and maintain such a military.

The American people need to fully appreciate the risks associated with reducing the U.S. military to the point at which it can only "do less with less." Ultimately, however, the American people need to be convinced that their military will be used in ways that support U.S. interests and that decision makers will make wise use of the resources with which they are provided.

Endnotes:

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