The Role of a Strong National Defense

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"[The United States Navy is] an infinitely more potent factor for peace than all the peace societies of every kind and sort."

—President Theodore Roosevelt[1]

Introduction

One of the few core responsibilities of the federal government mandated by the Constitution of the United States is "to provide for the common defence."[2] Upon commissioning, every American military officer swears an oath to "support and defend" this Constitution.[3] Accordingly, the core mission of the American military is to protect and defend our nation. This means deterring potential aggressors and, if deterrence fails, fighting and winning wars. Any consideration of the military's role and American defense policy must start with that foundational principle.

Yet if the need for a strong military begins with the mission to fight and win wars, it does not end there. As the quote from Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of this essay illustrates, American leaders have long appreciated that a formidable military can produce abundant diplomatic and economic dividends, even—especially—when not wielded in wartime. The United States' military capability supported our nation's rise to global greatness over the past century, but this was often because of the increased influence and credibility produced by this capability rather than the overt use of force. Along the way, there developed an American strategic tradition that integrated military strength with diplomatic acumen, economic growth, and international influence.[4] It is an historic tradition with an impressive heritage and continuing salience today.

Drawing on the historical record, there are many ways beyond the kinetic use of force that a strong national defense bolsters our national power and global influence. A robust defense budget and defense policy also strengthens our nation in manifest other ways. A well-equipped defense enhances our capabilities and influence across virtually all other elements of national power: our economy, our diplomacy, our alliances, and our credibility and influence in the world. Conversely, an underresourced national defense threatens to diminish our national power across all of these other dimensions.

A strong national defense is thus indispensable for a peaceful, successful, and free America—even if a shot is never fired. The diplomatic successes in building and maintaining a stable and peaceful international order achieved by the United States over the past century have been enabled by America's military dominance. Conversely, the calamitous defense budget cuts and corresponding rise of potential peer competitors in the present day are already undermining America's diplomatic and economic influence.

A well-appointed military improves diplomacy with adversaries, strengthens our alliances, signals credibility and resolve, deters aggression, and enhances national morale. Yet this is not to

disregard the manifest other dividends that a strong military can pay. There are multiple pathways by which investments in military hard power produce economic benefits. For example, the military's role in protecting a stable international environment also creates predictable and secure conditions in which economic growth can flourish. The American security umbrella facilitated Western Europe's postwar reconstruction and economic revival, and Asia's half-century economic boom has been partly a function of America's treaty alliances in the region maintaining peace and stability, exemplified by the United States Navy's Seventh Fleet protecting an open maritime order, freedom of navigation, and secure sea lanes.

Additionally, while America's world-leading economy has largely been generated by free enterprise and private sector–led growth, innovations in defense technology can sometimes have economically beneficial civilian applications. There are numerous examples from the past 75 years of technological innovations that originated as defense projects but were eventually adapted for private-sector commercial use, including nuclear energy, jet propulsion, the Internet, global positioning systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles.

Peace Through Strength

One of President Ronald Reagan's favored mantras, still often cited today, was "peace through strength."[5] Embedded in this slogan are a complex set of strategic assumptions: for example, that a strong military can be effective without being deployed in hostile action, that the acquisition of arms can be inversely proportionate to their use, that military strength pays diplomatic dividends, and that preparedness for war enables the preservation of peace. As described by United States Military Academy professor Gail Yoshitani, in Reagan's formulation of the "peace through strength" strategy:

> [P]eace was not simply the absence of war. Instead, it was conceived as a world hospitable to American society and its liberal-democratic ideals in which the United States and its allies were free from the threat of nuclear war and had access to vital resources, such as oil, and vital transportation and communications routes. Reagan believed that such a peace was dependent upon US strength, which would come from rebuilding the nation's economic and military might.[6]

It was a strategic concept in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt eight decades earlier. For Roosevelt as for Reagan and many other American leaders, "peace" meant more than just the absence of conflict. It encompassed the full flourishing of American interests and ideals and in turn was predicated on an equally expansive concept of national "strength" that included diplomatic, ideological, and economic as well as military quotients.

In recent years, the Obama Administration has introduced a new strategic concept that, while not in direct contradistinction to "peace through strength," seeks to recalibrate American national security policy by diminishing national defense and elevating international development. This concept is known as the "three Ds" of defense, diplomacy, and development. As described by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her January 22, 2009, inaugural remarks on her first day at the State Department, "There are three legs to the stool of American foreign policy: defense, diplomacy, and development."[7] She elaborated on this the next year in a speech to the Center for Global Development, declaring that "development must become an equal pillar of our foreign policy, alongside defense and diplomacy.... [T]he three Ds must be mutually reinforcing."[8]

While this concept appropriately recognizes that there is a relationship between sustainable development and improved peace and security, it skews the triad by making development co-equal with defense.[9] Ironically, given that the Obama Administration intended the three Ds concept to elevate development policy, as implemented, it has instead had the opposite effect. It has left development still at the margins while diminishing defense policy, as evidenced by the draconian cuts in the defense budget over the past six years.

Moreover, in both constitutional and conceptual terms, a strong national defense needs to take primacy over development. A well-equipped military creates an enabling environment for improved development policy. Many of the most notable economic development successes of the past 75 years took place in the context of either an explicit American security umbrella or a more favorable security environment underwritten by American defense policy. The economic development successes of postwar Western Europe and post–Cold War Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the "Asian tigers" such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, and the unprecedented growth and poverty alleviation in

China since Deng Xiaoping's 1979 economic reforms and India since Manmohan Singh's 1991 economic liberalization all took place in the context of an American troop presence, explicit American security guarantees, or (at least in the cases of China and India) a stable regional environment underwritten by American power projection.

This is not at all to disparage economic development or the work of development professionals, which should be a national priority on moral, humanitarian, and strategic grounds. Rather, it is only to observe that economic development efforts are most successful and most enduring when undertaken in a context of peace and stability, which is most often provided by a guarantor of security underwritten by military power.

The broader sweep of American history and international politics reinforces the perception that military power enables diplomatic and economic progress. This historical insight bears remembering in the present context. Each of the manifest national security policy challenges facing our nation in the current era—including growing Chinese assertiveness in the western Pacific, a revanchist Russia destabilizing the postwar European order, the collapse of the state system in the Middle East, resurgent jihadist groups exemplified by the Islamic State and various al-Qaeda franchises, Iran's nuclear ambitions and aspirations to regional hegemony, and North Korea's metastasizing nuclear capabilities—has its own complex internal and external causes, but all have been taking place in the context of global perceptions of a diminished and weakened American defense capability, which in turn has undermined American diplomatic and economic power and influence.

The setbacks for American foreign policy during the past several years provide a vivid empirical illustration both of the non-kinetic utility of military power and of the costs when it is diminished.

Insights from History: Strengthening Diplomacy and National Morale (Theodore Roosevelt)

If the 19th century was characterized by the United States expanding and consolidating its continental control and resolving its internal conflicts through the Civil War, the dawn of the 20th century marked America's turn outward and debut as an emerging global power. Not coincidentally, Theodore Roosevelt occupied the White House during these early years.

Roosevelt's foreign policy vision combined an assertive military buildup with deft diplomacy and credible displays of force with restraint in the actual use of force. His increased defense budget focused primarily on building up the Navy, based on Roosevelt's long-standing belief in the primacy of naval power for strategic force projection. As one of the premier scholars of his foreign policy has observed, Roosevelt embraced the axiom that "power and diplomacy work best when they work together."[10]

Of the abundant examples that could be drawn from Roosevelt's presidency, none illustrates this more vividly than his decision to sail 16 American battleships on a 14-month voyage around the world in 1908. Not since Chinese Admiral Zheng He sailed a massive fleet in the 15th century had the world seen such a show of naval force.[11] This voyage of the "Great White Fleet" was as unexpected as it was audacious. In the words of University of Texas–Austin historian H. W. Brands, "Nothing like this had ever been attempted. For the United States to be the first to accomplish it would be a cause for national pride.... Never before had so much naval power been gathered in one place, let alone sent on a grand tour around the globe."[12]

Roosevelt intuitively understood that an expanded global role for the United States depended in part on popular support from the American people, and this in turn depended on demonstrating to the nation what its Navy could accomplish. In Roosevelt's own words, "my prime purpose was to impress the American people; and this purpose was fully achieved."[13] Here Roosevelt seemed to draw on the insights of his friend Alfred Thayer Mahan, the eminent naval strategist who believed that "national character" constituted one of the six elements of sea power.[14]

Thus emerges an underappreciated aspect of a strong national defense: its salubrious effect in bolstering national morale and civic unity. In sending the fleet on this circumnavigation of the globe, Roosevelt in one gesture reminded his fellow citizens of their nation's industrial might, technological prowess, audacity, and intrepid frontier spirit. He hoped also to galvanize public support for a sustained international leadership role for the United States.

Domestic public opinion was by no means the only audience that Roosevelt had in mind for this display of naval power. He also intended it to impress a watching world. The leaders of two nations in particular, Japan and Germany, were on Roosevelt's

mind. The former had long captured his attention with a mixture of admiration and concern. Roosevelt's recognition of Japan's growing power and ambitions had led him to mediate the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the Russo–Japanese War in ways that recognized Japan's power and preserved many of its territorial gains. (For this, Roosevelt would become the first American to win the Nobel Peace Prize.) Likewise, his affinity for Japanese culture and industry inspired his support for the immigration of numerous Japanese to California, despite incurring much domestic criticism from Americans with nativist predilections.

At the same time, Roosevelt's wariness of Japan's aspirations to regional hegemony had caused him to include provisions in the Treaty of Portsmouth that circumscribed Japan's acquisitions and preserved Russia's viability as a check on further Japanese expansion. For some time, Roosevelt had been suspicious of Japan's potential expansionism, especially against American territories. In an eerily prescient move, several years earlier, while serving as President William McKinley's Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt had tasked the Naval War College with addressing a scenario in which "Japan makes demands on Hawaiian Islands. This country intervenes. What force will be necessary to uphold the intervention, and how should it be employed?"[15]

Against this backdrop of ambivalence about Japan's growing power and uncertain intentions, Roosevelt targeted a strategic communication toward Tokyo. In Brands' words, the cruise "would also serve as a reminder to the Japanese, who not surprisingly felt rather proud of themselves, that the United States was a Pacific Power to be reckoned with." *Pace* those critics who contended that such visible displays of force would be destabilizing and potentially instigate conflict, "Roosevelt paid no mind to the argument that an audacious American move might provoke a war.... [H]e felt that weakness was far more provocative than strength. Consequently, the worse relations with Japan grew, the more necessary he deemed the voyage." As Roosevelt put it, "My own judgment is that the only thing that will prevent war is the Japanese feeling that we shall not be beaten, and this feeling we can only excite by keeping and making our navy efficient in the highest degree."[16]

Though it would be six more years until Germany's growing power and aggression contributed to the outbreak of World War I, Roosevelt was already casting a wary eye at Kaiser Wilhelm's incipient bellicosity. In the midst of a relatively minor diplomatic dispute between Germany and the United States, Roosevelt wrote to the German leader describing the ongoing voyage: "I trust you have noticed that the American battleship fleet has completed its tour of South America on schedule time, and is now having its target practice off the Mexican coast."[17] As Brands describes, "The president traced the itinerary—Australia, Japan, China, the Philippines, Suez—leaving unsaid that the German navy had never done anything like this. And he couldn't resist a final note: 'Their target practice has been excellent'."[18]

Roosevelt's pointed and pithy insinuation to the German ruler belied a more sophisticated appreciation of the relationship between military power, diplomatic success, and the preservation of peace. For all of his occasionally bellicose rhetoric, Roosevelt's presidency is distinguished by the remarkably peaceful expansion of American power and influence. As noted, he understood that a weakened military could provoke aggression and invite adventurism from hostile powers who would otherwise be deterred. Roosevelt knew that a formidable military and a commander in chief with a deft diplomatic touch would be a potent force in dissuading aggressors and preserving peace. It is such a combination of military power and diplomatic acumen that creates national strength.

Roosevelt frequently warned against what he saw as the misguided hopes of disarmament advocates who believed that munitions themselves were destabilizing. These calls for reduced defense budgets and outright disarmament were deluded, he believed, and would increase the risk of war rather than further the cause of peace. As he proclaimed in his annual message to Congress in 1905:

> At present there could be no greater calamity than for the free peoples, the enlightened, independent, and peace-loving peoples, to disarm while yet leaving it open to any barbarism or despotism to remain armed. So long as the world is as unorganized as now the armies and navies of those peoples who on the whole stand for justice, offer not only the best, but the only possible, security for a just peace. For instance, if the United States alone, or in company only with the other nations that on the whole tend to act justly, disarmed, we might sometimes avoid bloodshed, but we would cease to be of weight in securing

> the peace of justice—the real peace for which the most law-abiding and high-minded men must at times be willing to fight.[19]

Roosevelt's insights of over a century ago have much to offer today. He famously and frequently invoked the African proverb, "speak softly and carry a big stick."[20] During Roosevelt's presidency, this was translated from a trite aphorism into a sophisticated strategic doctrine. A strong military can bolster national power and influence without ever *using* force. It can even reduce the likelihood of violence. Rather, the mere *display* of force can pay significant diplomatic dividends, deter potential aggression, and preserve the peace.

In turn, the effective display of force depends on perceptions of American credibility, and credibility rests on a combination of capability and intention. If other nations (and in some cases, non-state actors) perceive the United States as a credible power—possessing both a potent capability to use lethal force and the willingness to do so if necessary—our nation will have greater power to act on the global stage while facing fewer threats. Developing this capability is predicated on funding and maintaining a military that is without peer.

This strategic doctrine is one of Theodore Roosevelt's enduring legacies in American history, and it is one which bears remembering and recovering today.

Insights from History: Signaling Resolve and Supporting Allies (Harry S. Truman)

At first glance, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Harry Truman have little in common. One was a Republican, the other a Democrat. One was an East Coast Harvard-educated blue blood from one of America's most distinguished familial lineages, the other a Midwestern small-town haberdasher with only a high school education—the last American President without a college diploma. One was the architect of America's debut at the high table of international politics, the other the befuddled inheritor of America's new role as a global superpower and the architect of many institutions of the new international order.

Yet Roosevelt and Truman also shared much in common, including a belief in American exceptionalism, a commitment to the universality of liberty and preserving and extending free societies, and especially an appreciation for the role a strong military plays in projecting power and influence, even without the use of lethal force. As with Roosevelt, most of Truman's enduring national security accomplishments came through the adept employment of military power as a diplomatic and economic instrument of statecraft. Just as our nation still benefits from the international institutions and postwar order he helped to create, there is also much to learn from his integration of a strong defense into the larger structure of national power.

Upon taking the oath of office in April 1945, Truman was bequeathed a situation unprecedented in its complexity and challenges. In short order, he had to navigate:

- The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan;
- The end of World War II and the unconditional surrender settlements that would give the United States near-total control of the reconstruction of Germany and Japan;
- The crafting of a postwar international political and economic order that would preserve stability and promote prosperity and ordered liberty; and
- The emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union and its sundry satellite states that would loom over the next four decades of American national security policy as the United States sought to contain Soviet expansionism while preventing the belligerent exchange of nuclear warheads.

It was a tall order for even the most seasoned statesman, let alone a relatively untested and ill-equipped Senator from Missouri.

To appreciate Truman's strategic innovations, one should recall the fraught and unprecedented international climate of the time. The United States and Soviet Union had fought together as allies in World War II, yet even as the war wound down in 1945, tensions between the two victors emerged over the contours of the postwar order. By the next year, it was becoming clear that Soviet dictator Josef Stalin regarded the United States as an adversary and had aggressive designs to dominate Eastern Europe and points beyond.

This left American leaders struggling to formulate a response amidst what appeared to be the unpalatable choices of either fighting the Soviet Union or acquiescing to the further expansion of

Communist tyranny. Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis aptly described it as "the despair of 1946 when war or appeasement appeared to be the only alternatives open to the United States."[21] Furthermore, with the end of the war, many feared the prospect of slipping back into the economic depression that had plagued the 1930s.

Into this environment of anxiety and policy uncertainty, George Kennan sent his renowned "Long Telegram" from Moscow, diagnosing Soviet intentions and advocating what became the strategy of containment. Instead of fight or flight, containment offered the option of resisting Soviet aggression without triggering a third world war. But while Kennan may have developed containment as a concept, it took Truman's leadership and vision to operationalize and implement it in practice.

The success of containment depended largely, though by no means exclusively, on the non-kinetic use of military power. Kennan himself appreciated this. In a 1946 address at the National War College, the lifelong diplomat told his audience, "You have no idea how much it contributes to the politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet armed force in the background." As Gaddis points out:

> [T]he mere existence of such forces, [Kennan] wrote two years later, "is probably the most important single instrumentality in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy." A Policy Planning Staff study done under Kennan's direction in the summer of 1948 concluded that armed strength was essential as a means of making political positions credible, as a deterrent to attack, as a source of encouragement to allies, and, as a last resort, as a means of waging war successfully should war come.[22]

Truman's Cold War policy incorporated these insights. From the Marshall Plan, to the creation of NATO, to the passage of the National Security Act creating the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council, to the issuance of seminal strategy blueprints such as NSC-68,[23] the Truman Administration created a national and international set of institutions that leveraged military power into diplomatic and economic influence. Two Truman initiatives especially illustrate this concept: the Truman Doctrine providing aid to Greece and Turkey and the Berlin Airlift.

Truman's 1947 address to Congress is best remembered for his declaration that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."[24] Less appreciated is how the actual aid packages he developed for Greece and Turkey leveraged American military power to strengthen beleaguered allies and signal American resolve to Stalin. Unlike the Marshall Plan announced later that year, which provided economic reconstruction aid to Western Europe, the Greece and Turkey assistance packages also included a substantial military component to help the governments of the two Mediterranean nations defeat Communist insurgencies.

This had not been a foregone conclusion. Several of Truman's advisers argued for limiting the packages to economic aid, but Truman sided with then-Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson's arguments for including military hardware and advisers.[25] This reflected Truman's belief in what political scientist Henry Nau calls "armed diplomacy"[26] and had far-reaching implications. For example, the aid to Turkey included establishment of the Joint American Military Mission to Aid Turkey (JAMMAT), an ambitious Defense Department initiative that transformed the Turkish military and established a template for eventual American military assistance programs with other allies.[27]

The robust American military aid to Greece and Turkey would not have been possible without the expertise and military technology that the United States developed during World War II. In finishing the war as the most dominant military power on the planet, even in the midst of rapid demobilization, the U.S. still had considerable defense resources to employ in support of its friends, allies, and interests. Truman fused military hardware, economic aid, and vigorous diplomacy into a new tool to implement his Cold War strategy. In doing so, he also ushered in a new era in American power projection. The incorporation of military assistance into the program of aid to Greece and Turkey sent a strong signal of American resolve to the Soviet Union and its satellites while also shoring up important American allies during their periods of acute vulnerability.

The next year, an even more vexing challenge emerged when the Soviet Union made an audacious power grab and cut off Western access to West Berlin, the portion of the German capital isolated within the Communist-controlled occupation zone that

would eventually become East Germany. Eschewing either a diplomatic capitulation or a violent escalation, Truman instead ordered a massive airlift to provide food, medicine, and other living essentials to the beleaguered citizens of West Berlin. American military cargo planes operated these resupply flights around the clock for the next 11 months until an embarrassed Stalin backed down and lifted the blockade.

Again, this non-kinetic use of military power had the intended effect of signaling American resolve to Stalin while simultaneously reassuring and strengthening the allied city of West Berlin. This was no mere humanitarian gesture. As Henry Nau has observed, Truman's "decision to erect Berlin as the outpost of Western freedom was monumental. It...placed American forces at risk to defend the 'disputed' borders of freedom in Europe" and "was a preeminent example of the preemptive use of force to deter aggression."[28]

While one might not normally consider cargo planes delivering food aid to civilians to be the "preemptive use of force," Nau has it exactly right. Truman deployed American military resources in a formidable display of resolve, at considerable risk, to dissuade the Soviets from their attempted seizure of West Berlin. It was a turning point in the Cold War, as it revealed the Soviet Union's malign intentions as well as the limits of Soviet adventurism. It galvanized American allies and led directly to the demands of several Western European nations to create what soon became the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Without a shot being fired, the American military achieved a significant diplomatic success and made a formidable display of American power.

Concluding Implications and the Contemporary Challenge

Theodore Roosevelt's "big stick" diplomacy, Harry Truman's Cold War projections of power, and Ronald Reagan's "peace through strength" paradigm, while all revealing as historical vignettes, are also much more. They constitute some of the essential building blocks of the American strategic tradition of armed diplomacy—of using military power in non-kinetic ways to improve our negotiating outcomes, reassure allies, dissuade adversaries, and enhance our global credibility and influence.

This strategic tradition has served American interests well and has done much to protect our national security and project our national power over the past century. It has become embedded in our national security institutions and, if properly resourced and utilized, can still be a primary source of national strength. Moreover, while originating in our nation's past, this strategic tradition has also produced policy successes in recent decades. Consider just a few examples:

- The peaceful reunification of Germany and peaceful dissolution of the Iron Curtain as American diplomacy backed by military strength helped to end the Cold War without a shot being fired;

- The 1995 Dayton Accords ending the Bosnian wars, which followed the American-led bombing campaign and were made possible only because of the threat of additional force;

- Libya's decision to relinquish its weapons of mass destruction program voluntarily in 2003 in the aftermath of the American display of power in the Iraq War;

- The United States military's leading role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief after the 2004 Asian tsunami, which also did much to improve America's reputation in Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia;

- The upgrading of America's relationship with India to a strategic partnership during the George W. Bush Administration, based in part on the appeal of America's military power projection in the region and nuclear technology partnership; and

- The Pentagon's relationship with the Egyptian military during the recent Egyptian revolutions, which was made possible by America's decades-long military assistance program and exchanges and which preserved the only viable channel for diplomatic communications in the midst of chaos and changing Egyptian governments.

With such a demonstrable record of success and proven formula for how a well-resourced military strengthens our overall national security policy, the United States now stands at a crossroads. The precipitous defense budget cuts of recent years do not just erode American military strength; they also

undermine our diplomatic capabilities and our global influence and credibility. Conversely, a renewed commitment to adequate resourcing of the American military would not come at the cost of American diplomacy and economic policy, but rather would be to their benefit. In this sense, the defense budget is not a zero-sum allocation, but a "win-win" that enhances diplomatic and economic policy as well.

The United States in the 21st century remains a global superpower thanks to this strategic tradition of a strong and deftly wielded national defense. Rather than being squandered, it is an inheritance that should be embraced.

Endnotes:

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23. "National Security Council Paper NSC-68 (entitled 'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security' and frequently referred to as NSC-68) was a Top-Secret report completed by the U.S. Department of State's Policy Planning Staff on April 7, 1950. The 58-page memorandum is among the most influential documents composed by the U.S. Government during the Cold War, and was not declassified until 1975. Its authors argued that one of the most pressing threats confronting the United States was the 'hostile design' of the Soviet Union. The authors concluded that the Soviet threat would soon be greatly augmented by the addition of more weapons, including nuclear weapons, to the Soviet arsenal. They argued that the best course of action was to respond in kind with a massive build-up of the U.S. military and its weaponry." See "NSC-68, 1950," in "Milestones: 1945–1952," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/NSC68 (accessed June 10, 2015).
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