Global challenges, U.S. national security strategy, and defense organization

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Senator McCain, Senator Reed, thank you for inviting me here today. It is an honor to be asked to speak at these hearings, which have the potential to be at least as consequential as those held by Senator Henry Jackson in 1960 on national security organization, or those which gave birth to previous major legislation such as the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986.

Our task on this panel, as I understand it, is to bring together three things: a view of our international circumstances and American foreign policy; an assessment of the adequacy of our defense organization; and suggestions for directions this committee might pursue in exploring the possibilities of reform. This is a daunting assignment: I will do my best to approach it from the point of view of someone who has studied and worked with the American military in various settings for over thirty five years, drawing on what I know as a military historian and what I have seen during service at senior levels in government.

The roots of our current defense organization and strategic posture

The theory taught at our war colleges – and I have taught at them myself – would say that we should begin by looking at our interests and policies, and then design a military to meet them. I am going to start the other way, with what kind of forces we have, for two reasons. First, as we all know, you do not get to redesign your forces afresh unless you experience utter calamity, and some times not even then. Secondly, because it is important to recognize the ways in which the military experiences and geopolitical assumptions of the past shape even seemingly technical questions today. It will be helpful to begin by appreciating how peculiar, from an historical point of view, many of the features of the armed forces that we take for granted, really are.

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Today's military is the product chiefly of seventy-five years of history. World War II, of course, not only provided a great deal of its physical infrastructure, to include the Pentagon, but has left organizational legacies. No other country in the world, to take the most striking example, has a Marine Corps remotely sized like ours – today, it is larger than the entire British army, navy, and air force put together. That is a result of the Marines' performance in World War II, and the legacy of raising a force six divisions strong for that conflict.

But it is primarily the roughly forty five years of the Cold War, and some fifteen years of unchallenged American preeminence thereafter, that have most left their mark.

The Cold War has left us many, indeed most of the platforms that equip the military today, M-1 tanks, B-2 or B-1 bombers, or AEGIS class cruisers. Even weapon systems coming into service today such as the F-35 reflect Cold War assumptions about which theaters we planned to fight in, what kind of enemies we thought we might encounter, what kind of missions we would be required to conduct. From the Cold War as well emerged our highly professional career military built on the ruins of the draft military of the Vietnam war. Our weaving together of reserve and National Guard units with the active duty military reflects ideas first expressed in the late 1970's.

Even deeper than these things go certain assumptions about what war is, and how it should be waged. The Cold War military was largely a deterrent military, designed to put up a credible defense against Soviet aggression, while taking on lesser included tasks such as peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention.

The conventional tasks were assumed to be extremely intense but short – nothing like the multi-year wars of the mid-twentieth century. The result was an Army, for example, that honed its skills in armored warfare at installations like the National Training Center to a level never seen in a peacetime military, even as it shunted aside the tasks of military governance that had characterized it through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this world, a large nuclear arsenal was designed for deterrence of more than use against the USSR. Naval power was to be used chiefly to protect the sea lanes to Europe and to project power abroad, not to contest command of the seas with a major naval power.

When the Soviet Union fell and the Cold War ended, a period of unchallenged supremacy began: it has lasted barely fifteen years, and although the United States is still the world's strongest power, that supremacy is now contested. I doubt we will ever get it back. But it too has left legacies of thought and action. With great reluctance, a military that had pledged to itself after Vietnam that it would not do counterinsurgency again (as it similarly pledged to itself after Korea that it would not do land war in Asia) embarked on a mission that it found strange and distasteful in Afghanistan and Iraq. It learned, or rather re-learned old lessons, but at a cost.

One organizational legacy of this period has been the rise of special operations forces, particularly after the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing conflicts. Others include the tremendous emphasis placed by combatant commanders on the conduct of

military diplomacy, giving rise to multinational exercises that are less substantive than political in nature. Similarly, today's senior officers often dwell on the importance of what they call Phase 0 operations – acts of military diplomacy to set the conditions where we might fight. I believe that much of this focus has come at the expense of hard thinking about Phase III – war.

From the transitional period between Cold War and the age of supremacy arose strategic doctrines too, characterized by terms such as "end state" and "exit strategy" that previous generations would have found meaningless and that today are downright dangerous. In this period, as in the past, the heart of America's strategic alliance system was to be found in Europe. Thus, it was (absurdly) with a NATO command structure that we have attempted to fight a war in Afghanistan. Thus too, it was that officers dismayed by the unfamiliar challenges of irregular warfare came to blame all other departments of government for failing to be able to understand problems and provide capabilities that, history should have taught them, would have to be found within the military itself.

The new world disorder

The assumptions of both the Cold War, and the brief period of American supremacy must now be cast aside. Instead of one major enemy, the Soviet Union, and its various clients and supporters, we face four major strategic challenges.

1. China, because of the sheer size and dynamism of its economy poses a challenge utterly different than that of the USSR, and, unlike the Soviet Union, that challenge will take place in the Pacific, in an air, sea, and space environment unlike that of Europe.

2. Our jihadist enemies, in the shape of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and like movements, are at war with us, and we with them. This will last at least a generation, and is quite unlike any other war that we have fought.

3. We face as well an array of states that are hostile to our interests and often, in a visceral way, to our political system as well: these include, most notably Russia, Iran, and North Korea, but others may emerge. All of these states are, or will be, armed with nuclear weapons that can reach the United States.

4. Finally, while our policy in the past has been to secure "the great commons," as Alfred Thayer Mahan once put it, for the use of humanity, today ungoverned space – to include outer space, the high North, and cyberspace – poses new and deepening problems for us.

This means that our strategic problems are quite unlike those of the previous two periods. We can imagine, for example, conventional conflict with China that might not end after a few days, or be capped by nuclear threats. We are, right now, engaged in protracted unconventional warfare that is likely to spread rather than be contained. New technologies, from cyber-weapons to long range cruise and ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial and maritime vehicles mean that defending the

homeland against conventional, or semi-conventional attack must again be a mission for the armed forces.

We live in an era when our old strategic partners are weakening. One need only look at the appalling decline of the British military – the Royal Navy, which struggles to man the ships it does have, has a fleet less than half the size of semi-pacifist Japan's just now – to measure the self-inflicted weakness of old allies. At the same time, new partners are emerging, particularly in Asia, with Japan, Australia, and even India coming into closer association with us.

And it is not just the external politics of security that has changed: our domestic politics is more deeply divided by questions of the use of force today than at any time since the worst periods of the Vietnam War. On the one hand, every President from now into the indefinite future has to accept that he or she will be a war President, ordering the pinpoint killing of terrorists in far corners of the earth, and probably sending our armed forces into harm's way every few months. On the other, at no time since the 1970's have the American people been so reluctant to commit large forces abroad, or rather, so uncertain about the purposes that would justify it.

I could extend this analysis indefinitely, but will not. After the Cold War there was a resizing of the military, a reconfiguring of its basing structure, and some realignment, but the sheer busyness of the post 1989 period has in many ways deferred a fundamental rethinking of what kind of military we need, and to what ends. Now is the time for such a rethinking.

New directions for defense policy and organization

The time, then, is ripe for what you are undertaking. Of course, one scholar can only offer so much by way of recommendations, but I would like to suggest four, which flow from this fundamental diagnosis: that our problems will be so complex, so large, and so different from the past that we need to design a system that is much better at redesigning and reinventing itself than what we have got. It will not do, in other words, to conceive a new pattern of organization and impose it upon the Department of Defense. We will assuredly fail to foresee the crises and opportunities to come. We need, rather, to recover the creativity and institutional adaptability that produced in astonishingly short time the riverine flotillas of the Civil War, the massed bomber and amphibious fleets of World War II, the Polaris program and espionage from space of the early Cold War.

Here, then, are four ideas.

First, remake our system for selecting and promoting general officers. Nothing, but nothing is more important than senior leadership – the creative leaders like Arleigh Burke or Bernard Schriever in the early Cold War. Our problem is that our promotion systems, in part because of the natural tendency of bureaucracies to replicate themselves, and in part because of the wickets (including joint service) all have to pass through, is making it hard to reach deep and promote exceptional talent to the very top.

We take it for granted that some of the best leaders of World War II were field grade officers when it began. For some reason, however, it does not occur to us that maybe there was something good about such a system that we should be able to imitate. Other large organizations – businesses and universities, among others – can seek out exceptional young leaders and bring them to the top quickly. We are long past the day when General Curtis LeMay could become head of Strategic Air Command at age 42, after having led one of the most important campaigns of World War II in his late thirties. It was a minor miracle when President Carter passed over scores of Army generals to make General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer Chief of Staff of the Army in 1979 – I am not sure whether we could even do that today. Moreover, we need to find ways to promote and retain general and flag officers who are so unorthodox, so off the usual career path, that the system left to its own devices would crush them. Where would the nuclear Navy be without that unique, exceptionally difficult man, Hyman Rickover, for example? And where will the next one come from?

Second, overhaul the current system for producing strategy documents on a regular basis. The Quadrennial Defense Review system, which consumes vast quantities of labor in the Pentagon and much wasted emotional energy as well, seems to be predicated on the notion that the world will cooperate with our four year review cycle. It does not. The 2000 QDR, to take one example, was invalidated as soon as it hit the streets by 9/11. So too will any document that has a fixed schedule. Moreover, most public documents, to include the National Security Strategy of the United States are the vapid products of committees. A much better system would be something like the White Papers produced by the Australian and French systems, not on a regular basis but in reaction to major international developments, and composed by small, special commissions that include outsiders as well as bureaucrats.

Third, re-discover mobilization. Throughout most of the history of the United States, and into its colonial past, a key assumption was that the forces we would have at the outbreak of war would be insufficient in number and composition for the challenges ahead. Since the 1950's, mobilization thinking and planning has languished. To be sure, under pressure from an active Secretary of Defense the Department can acquire mine-resistant vehicles or speed up the production of some critical guided weapon, but that is hardly the same thing.

Serious military planning not only for expansion of the existing force, but for the creation of new capabilities in event of emergency, would be a worth while effort. For example, had serious thought been given before 2003 to identifying civilians who might contribute to military government in an occupied country, and thinking through the organizations needed, the Iraq war might have looked very different in 2004 and 2005 than it did. Mobilization thinking and preparation would require a willingness to contemplate unorthodox measures (direct commissioning, for example) on a scale that the Department is unwilling to consider in peacetime. Worse yet, it would require some brave thinking about the kinds of crises that might require such measures.

Fourth, renew professional military education at the top. Our war colleges do a capable job at the mission of broadly educating senior officers at the O-5 and O-6 level, even as they help create a network of foreign officers who have been exposed to our system. But they do not create an elite cadre of strategic thinkers and planners from all the services and the civilian world. To do that, measures would have to be taken that would be anathema to personnel systems today: competitive application to attend a school, rather an assignment to do so as a kind of reward; extremely small class sizes; no foreign presence, or only that of our closest allies; work on projects that are directly relevant to existing war planning problems. A two year institution would graduate no more than thirty or forty top notch officers a year who would, in all but name, help constitute a real joint general staff. Of course, to manage the careers of such officers would require further departures from our current personnel system.

Our current professional military education system produces extremely able tacticians and unit leaders; it does not produce, at least not in large numbers, officers who make their names as deep thinkers about the nature of modern war. Yet surely that is the heart of the military profession. You will see very few books or even deeply serious articles on modern war written by serving officers; fewer yet that transcend a service perspective. That is a pity, and a deficiency.

While it is flattering to think that academics or think tanks can fill that void, the truth is that they can only do so much without the current knowledge, exposure to the most sensitive secrets, and sense of professional responsibility of top notch officers. In the long run, a revitalized American armed forces requires that senior leadership, in Congress as well as the executive branch, pay a great deal of attention to military education, whose budget is trivial, but whose impact is, potentially tremendous.

These are, inevitably, but preliminary thoughts which will not be welcome in some quarters. But of this I am quite convinced: our country faces a more turbulent world than it has at any time since the end of World War II. It is, in many ways, a more dangerous world, in which our children or grandchildren may live to see nuclear weapons used in anger, terrorism that paralyzes great societies, war in new guises brought to the continental United States, the shattering of states and seizure of large territories by force. As in the last century, the United States will be called upon to play a unique role in preventing those things from happening, maintaining some general standards of order and decency, and leading a coalition of like minded nations. As ever, we will have a strong hand, thanks to the institutions of government under which we live, and the spirit of the American people. But that does not mean that we should take our military power for granted, or neglect thinking hard and creatively about how to mold it in the interval of peace that we have, such at is. New crises await, and alas, may not be far off.