



Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services
On Reshaping the US Military

Peers, Near-Peers, and Partial Peers

Making Sense of America's Balance-of-Power Interests

THOMAS DONNELLY

Co-Director, Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies
American Enterprise Institute

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The post-Cold War era has been a confounding period for the United States military and for the country as a whole. The collapse of the Soviet empire, an entirely unforeseen event, seemed at first to create a “unipolar moment,” a self-sustaining *Pax Americana*. This “end” to history begat a holiday from history. Now history is having its revenge. The impulse to “make America great again” is a reflection of our anxieties as much as our aspirations.

These varying assessments of our geopolitical power directly reflect attitudes about the strength of the military; “unipolarity” was grounded in the primacy of US military forces demonstrated in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and our current feeling of decline stems from the frustrations of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. As President Trump put it: “We don’t win wars, we just fight, we just fight. It’s like...you’re vomiting: just fight, fight, fight.”

Having struggled with the costs—in blood, in treasure, and in domestic political support and leadership attention—of these long-running irregular contests, we now find ourselves also facing deficits in the conventional realm, which we have so long taken for granted. The Joint Chiefs of Staff fret over China’s ability to target our surface Navy, over the range advantages of the Russian Army’s artillery, and over the difficulty our aircraft face in penetrating modern air defenses everywhere. These are real and growing concerns.

However, my greatest fear stems less from our ability to meet the technological, tactical, or operational challenges of the times but from three more fundamental but repeated failures of the last generation. First, the reluctance of political leaders to define their purposes in traditional geopolitical terms; second, the US defense community’s propensity to define wars as types—“great-power conventional conflict,” for example—rather than in particular—“deterring Russian aggression and influence in Eastern Europe;” and third, the faith in “strategic agility” in place of strategic persistence. To prevail over our most threatening competitors, we must define victory, be attuned to the particular strategic circumstances that define the contest, and ready ourselves for the long haul.

The Purpose of American Power

Defining victory demands clear-eyed self-knowledge, something that is often difficult for Americans trained to look to the future and dismiss the past. But the roots of American strategy-making predate our republic. Since the mid-16th century, English-speaking peoples have sought to defend the “liberties” of the international system against the prospect of a “Universal Monarchy,” that is, the would-be hegemon of Eurasia: the houses of Hapsburg and Bourbon, German “Reichs,” Russian and Soviet tsars, and Japan’s emperors. In the 20th century, the standard in this struggle to preserve a favorable great-power balance passed from Great Britain to the United States. Even as we have imagined ourselves as benevolent, commercial, maritime

“offshore balancers,” our actions have betrayed our rhetoric: the Eurasian great-power balance has been our principal geostrategic concern.

The logic in these deeply ingrained habits of strategy is powerful. As John Donne, as deep a politician as he was a poet, wrote:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;*

This is to say that our “exceptional” experiment in self-government is inseparable from the nature of government elsewhere in the world and in particular in those parts of Eurasia where power, wealth, and great geopolitical ambitions lie. The bell tolls for us in 2017 as it did for Donne in 1624; the Stuart regime’s attempts to absent itself through the 17th century from the continent’s great-power conflicts, the Thirty Years’ War and the wars of Louis XIV, twice cost them their crowns and lost Charles I his head on the chopping block. Any government in Washington that similarly fails to secure Eurasia’s “liberties” against the assaults of 21st-century absolutists will lose not only international respect but also domestic legitimacy.

What does it mean to be “a part of the main” today? It means we must formulate an effective response to the challenge that China, Russia, and Iran pose to the balance of power across Eurasia. Walter Russell Mead has dubbed this trio the “Axis of Weevils,” a phrase as apt as it is clever. The first order of business for China, Russia, and Iran is to undermine the American global order. Each pursues military designs meant to confound US influence in their “near abroad” and then establish regional spheres of influence. Even their principal “strategic” systems—their nuclear weaponry—are intended as a deterrent. None of these three powers is a proximate challenge to or substitute for US primacy on the global commons of the seas, the skies, in space, or in cyberspace. Thus the Weevils’ principal investments have been in “anti-access” and “area-denial” forces and systems, although more recently these have been balanced with a growing capacity for power projection; having had substantial local successes in rolling back the tide of the United States and its allies, the Weevils are increasingly leaning forward.

It will be very difficult to make the military changes necessary until we can be clear and precise about the geopolitical outcome we wish to achieve. “Everything in war is simple,” wrote Clausewitz, “but the simplest things are difficult.” Over the past generation, American military planners have suffered from a great deal of self-induced “friction” stemming not from our inability to understand our enemies but from our inability to understand ourselves.

Wars in Particular versus War in General

One of the distinguishing and consistent features of the many US defense reviews conducted since the end of the Cold War has been a desire to define wars by type rather than in particular. This began with the 1993 Bottom-Up Review (BUR), which measured the requirements of the post-Cold War armed forces by their ability to conduct two “major regional conflicts” at the same time. Although the review rested, at least in part, on detailed analyses of the Gulf War and studies of what a renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula might be like, the purpose of the

effort was to distill various common “phases” of generic military “campaigns” that would be “employed” in a contest against “Country X.” The universal model clearly was derived from the Gulf War experience; the four phases of any campaign would be to “halt the invasion,” then “build up US combat power in the theater while reducing the enemy’s,” culminating in a “decisive defeat [of] the enemy,” and “providing for post-war stability.” With some recent modifications and much debate about “Phase Zero operations,” this basic structure remains more or less intact as the American model of campaigning.

The review also acknowledged that the United States might employ military power in other ways and for other missions—for “smaller-scale conflicts or crises” of short duration, “overseas presence” patrols, and deterrence, both nuclear and for other “weapons of mass destruction.” However, these were assessed as “lesser, included cases” for force-sizing, posturing and defense budgeting purposes in the belief that a military capable of fighting two nearly-simultaneous regional conflicts could handle anything else that might come its way.

Two final distinguishing features of the Bottom-Up Review were that it took the post-Cold War to be a “new era,” defined not by the enduring interests of the United States but by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, relatedly, that it looked warily outward for signs of new threats rather than new opportunities to secure interests.

In these significant ways—seeking a typology of possible conflict, placing faith in the unprecedented novelty of international competition, and measuring the challenge by dangers rather than enduring geopolitical goals—subsequent Quadrennial Defense Reviews and other official studies have been, essentially, footnotes to the BUR.

This method has had a powerful grip on American defense planning. However, it ought to be plain by now that it has been powerfully problematic. That is not because its analyses have failed to predict events accurately or that they were insufficiently detailed; the reams of possible-future studies produced across the US intelligence community and the detailed campaign modeling churned out by the Pentagon and federally-funded think-tanks represent immense effort. But this approach has deprived our adversaries of their particular qualities, strengths, and weaknesses. In a profound way, we’ve been looking through the wrong end of the telescope to define the many things that might lead to defeat rather than to chart a path to victory.

If the United States is to respond successfully to the emerging challenges to its Eurasian interests, it must first define what constitutes success in the three principal arenas of competition. In Europe and East Asia, for all the troubles of recent decades, a favorable overall balance of power persists: our alliances are fundamentally sound, our force presence remains and could be augmented, and our ability to project additional force is considerable. Deterrence—a relatively low-cost strategy—is a practicable posture. Alas, and particularly with the precipitate reduction in presence of recent years, there is no stable “status quo” to preserve in the Middle East; the weevils are on the loose and eating everything in sight. To achieve our traditional strategic aims, it will be necessary to compel change, to reverse the course of current events.

Showing Up Is 80 Percent

One of Woody Allen's most famous quips was that "eighty percent of success is just showing up." The same applies to sustaining the life of the liberal international order. When the United States doesn't show up or goes home, things begin to unravel.

Alas, US military presence in critical regions is, increasingly, American absence. Beginning with the withdrawal from the Philippines in the early 1990s, the global "footprint" of US forces has been steadily shrinking. And perversely, we have come to imagine this as a virtue: the model of "campaigning" enshrined in the Bottom-Up Review was one that emphasized rapid response rather than continuous presence. In contrast to the patrol-the-frontiers-of-freedom approach of the Cold War—even, as in West Berlin, where the tactical situation was all but untenable—US armed forces have increasingly withdrawn from forward garrisons and sought "strategic" deployments from bases in the continental United States. This approach has had mounting consequences: rather than being in position to check rising revisionists, we have ceded them the initiative and, with diminished overall forces, been slow to respond and lacking in the capacity to tend to multiple contingencies.

Belatedly, the Obama Administration appeared to recognize this. The European Reassurance Initiative, one would hope, represents a form of repentance for and reversal of the drawdown that has opened an opportunity to Vladimir Putin to begin to overturn the result of the Cold War. But rotational forces—not only American troops but also those of NATO allies in the Baltic States—cannot supply the day-in, day-out deterrence that the alliance's exposed eastern flank demands. Further, current plans do little to cover alliance commitments in southeastern Europe, where Russian bribery and "political warfare" have helped to bring truculent and nationalist leaders and parties to the fore.

The situation in the South China Sea is similar. In the face of the administration's much-protested "Pacific Pivot," Chinese irregular and, increasingly, regular forces have dredged their way across the sea, island-making rather than island-hopping. Not only have we withdrawn from the business of long-term basing, but an overstretched Navy—whose principal task has been to maintain a robust presence in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea to offset the lack of land-based forces—also lacks the assets to interpose itself between China and the ASEAN states it tries to intimidate. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is a mercurial man, but his periodic pronouncements about American weakness and Chinese strength reflect, at the least, the region's nightmares.

Alongside these mounting worries in Europe and East Asia, the policy of "ending" America's wars in the Middle East has led to a precipitate collapse of what little order there was, although, in retrospect, the situation in 2009 stands as a high-water mark of American influence in the region, the very-hard earned result of efforts made not only since 2001 but since 1979 as well to stabilize an inherently volatile region. From a traditional American strategic perspective, the return of Russia and the ascent of Iran from the Levant to the Hindu Kush is a catastrophe of epochal proportions. Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut, three of the great capitals of the Arab world, are essentially satrapies to Tehran. Iran's rise was aided immeasurably by Russia's willingness to deploy a few thousand troops and a few dozen aircraft; in the vacuum left by US

withdrawal, a little went a long way. The change has unnerved our remaining traditional allies and partners in Riyadh, Cairo, Tel Aviv, and, especially, Istanbul; if there is to be a near-term settlement to the horrific conflict in Syria, America will have little to say about it.

As a post-script on presence, it is worth asking whether we have made the most of the promised partnership with India. This was supposedly a priority of both the second Bush and the Obama presidencies; the expectation that the Indian Ocean and the surrounding littoral might someday become a fourth critical Eurasian “theater” was sound, and it would only be prudent to anticipate such a development—if only because the Chinese are headed in that direction. Although this is more a failure-to-advance opportunity missed than a tangible retreat, the region’s weight in the Eurasian balance of power can only increase.

Recommendations

What, then, is to be done?

To begin with, the new administration ought to bring a greater sense of urgency to restoring a favorable Eurasian balance. It has been a commonplace argument that the post-Cold War period was not only a time of “strategic pause” but also an era of rapid technological change, and that the United States could afford and might even benefit from a time-out, awaiting developments and positioning itself as a “second mover.” Even if that were once true, the contradictions of “leading from behind” and superpower passivity have been increasingly apparent. Dreaming of a “transformation” of military forces or waiting further to “offset” adversaries initiatives is to reinforce geostrategic failure. Therefore we must work with what we have, immediately improve and increase what we can in the near-term, and selectively develop new capabilities that can be fielded within a foreseeable future. Photon torpedoes, warp drives, and cloaking devices would be cool; once they’re invented, we should build them. In the meantime, we must:

- **Forward-position forces.** No other single defense reform would pay a bigger or more rapid return on defense investment than negotiating a return of forces based or homeported closer to the zones of contention. And, though this is an obvious measure of efficiency, it is even a greater measure of effectiveness in reassuring and mobilizing alliance partners. Advancing to patrol the new frontiers in Eastern Europe—the line from the Baltic to the Black Sea—and Southeast Asia is critical to reestablishing a credible deterrent. But the same is true in the Middle East, although the task will be much harder; we cannot expect to much influence, let alone reverse, the terrible trend of events from over the horizon or “offshore.”
- **Fully fund force readiness accounts.** The force we now have could be made significantly more effective if a “sustained readiness” model were implemented to replace the “just-in-time” rotational model of the last 15 years. We have imagined that deployments can be made eternally predictable and created a system whereby units are brought to adequate levels of manning, equipment, and training just before they are sent into harm’s way. Then, immediately on their return to home station—and mostly to save money—the people are dispersed to new assignments or schools, the equipment sent to

the depot for “reset,” and tactical proficiency and teamwork thereby lost. No matter the emergency, within a matter of weeks it makes little sense to attempt to redeploy these forces; they’ve lost their edge.

- **Increase personnel strength.** The most crippling factor in force readiness is personnel instability and shortages. These factors are intertwined. The current personnel system was designed at the height of the Cold War, when deployments and missions were relatively constant, end-strength levels much higher, and service raise-train-and-equip institutions much more robust. Over the course of an extended career, this system produced a force of incredible tactical competence—its ability simply to operate helped immeasurably to make up for the strategic errors of recent decades. Personnel reductions have diminished both unit stability and cohesion as well as the services’ ability to produce the needed raw human and intellectual capital.
- **Increase munitions stocks and spares.** Material readiness and force deployment capacity are most limited by sparse stocks of precision-guided munitions—Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles are the poster children for what is now a widespread dilemma—and spare parts—even the smallest units have taken to cannibalizing some systems to field others; there is hardly a hangar, a dock, or a motor pool in every service that does not have a “cann bird” or two.

I will conclude my testimony here. I cannot convince myself that many other defense investments—with perhaps, the expansion of F-35 purchases or deciding not to mothball modernized Ticonderoga-class cruisers—would have a substantial and timely effect upon the degenerating balance of power in the critical regions of Eurasia. The immediate need is for restored capacity, not innovative capabilities. The Weevils have gotten into the woodwork, and it’s time to call the exterminator, not the architect.