

Global Challenges, U.S. National Security Strategy, and Defense Organization

Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee

by

Thomas G. Mahnken*

Senior Research Professor, Strategic Studies

Director, Advanced Strategy Program

Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

Senator McCain, Senator Reed, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. In the time I have I would like to address the challenges that the United States faces in an increasingly contested global environment. These include not only the threats posed by adversaries and competitors, but also the structural impediments that we must overcome if we are to develop an effective strategy to safeguard U.S. interests in an increasingly threatening world. I would also like to examine some of the United States' enduring strengths and the opportunities that they provide us. I would like to conclude by offering some thoughts on what we might do to improve our strategic position.

I. Challenges

The United States faces a growing and increasingly capable set of adversaries and competitors, including great powers such as China and Russia as well as regional powers such as Iran and North Korea. U.S. defense strategy should take into account the need to compete with these powers over the long term in peacetime, as well as plan for the possibility of conflict with them.

* The views that follow are mine and mine alone and do not reflect those of any organization with which I am affiliated.

Great Powers

The tide of great power competition is rising. China and Russia possess growing ambitions and, increasingly, the means to back them up. They possess sizeable and modernizing nuclear arsenals and are investing in new ways of war that have been tailored, at least in part, to challenge the United States.

Regional Powers

Iran and North Korea. North Korea appears to be developing a sizeable nuclear arsenal and the ability to deliver nuclear weapons against the United States. P'yongyang has also demonstrated a willingness to sell nuclear technology to other states, such as Syria. Iran has growing reach and influence in the Middle East. Its nuclear program is at best frozen; its missile program continues apace.

The War with Al Qaeda and its Affiliates

We also remain engaged in a war, whether we choose to call it that or not, with Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and other jihadist groups that threaten the United States and its allies. That war is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

An Uncertain Future

Finally, we will face threats to our security that we either do not see or cannot recognize today. History is a strong antidote to those who confidently predict the contours of the future.

As if the global challenges we face were not enough, we also face a series of internal, structural barriers that will need to be addressed if we are to have the resources to shape and respond to an increasingly challenging security environment.

- **A sharpening tradeoff between guns and butter:** The tradeoff between national security and social spending is already painfully apparent, and is likely to become even more acute as the U.S. population ages.

- **Cost growth in weapon systems:** Most new weapon systems provide increased capability, but often at increasing cost. As a result, we can afford fewer of them.
- **Cost growth in personnel:** Similarly, as I need not remind the members of this committee, we face long-term cost growth in personnel, which further exacerbates the trends I have outlined above.

II. Enduring Advantages

All is not beyond hope, however. The United States enjoys a series of enduring advantages, including those provided by our strategic geography, economic strength, society, military power, and alliances and partnerships.

Strategic geography

As an insular power, the United States has enjoyed security from attack throughout much of our history. With friendly powers to the north and south, we have not had to worry about the threat of invasion for two centuries. Our alliances compound this advantage, allowing us to work together with our friends to meet threats far from our shores.

Economic strength

We possess the world's largest economy and are also the world leader in innovation. We produce culture that much of the rest of the world finds attractive.

American society

American society is the source of other advantages. For example, we possess demographic strengths that are nearly unique in the world. Our population includes emigrants from literally every country in the world who speak the full breadth of the world's languages. More importantly, ours is one of only a handful of states that has the ability to bring new emigrants to its shores, weave them into the fabric of

the society, and make them full members of that society within an individual's lifetime.

Military Power

We possess the world's largest nuclear force, the world's most capable Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force – a historically unique combination. We have been able to exploit space for intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance; communications; and precision navigation and timing. The US space capability has multiplied the effectiveness of US ground, sea, and air forces. We are also the world leader in exploiting the cyber dimension to support military operations.

Alliances and partnerships

U.S. allies include some of the most prosperous and militarily capable states in the world. These include the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in North America and Europe as well as Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand in the Pacific. Beyond formal allies, the United States also possesses friendly relationships with a number of key states.

All too often, however, we have failed to exploit these strengths to the extent we could or should. We have focused on how others can leverage their strengths against our weaknesses rather than how we can best use our strengths to exploit the weaknesses of our competitors.

III. Implications for Defense Policy and Organization

Three main implications flow from this assessment. First, *we need to think more seriously about risk than we have in recent years*. Strategy is all about how to mitigate and manage risk. However, over the past quarter century, we have grown unused to having to take risks and bear costs. We have become risk averse. All too often, however, the failure to demonstrate a willingness to accept risk in the short term yields even more risk in the long term. As a result, our competitors increasingly view us as weak and feckless.

Among other things, we need to have a serious discussion about risk within the U.S. Government and with the American people. And we are going to have to begin to take actions that are risky and costly to us to demonstrate our resolve to both our allies and our adversaries.

Second, *we face a series of long-term competitions with great powers and regional powers.* China and Russia, Iran and North Korea have been competing with us for some time; we have not been competing with them. As a result, we find our options constrained, and we find ourselves reacting to their initiatives.

To achieve our aims over the long term, we first need to clarify what our aims are and then develop a strategy to achieve them. Such a strategy should seek to expand the menu of options available to us and constrain those that are available to our competitors. It should seek to impose costs upon our competitors and mitigate their ability to impose costs upon us. And it should give us the initiative, forcing them to respond to our actions and not the other way round. That is, of course, easier said than done in 2015 Washington, but it *must* be done if we are to gain maximum leverage from our considerable but limited resources.

We need to do a better job of understanding our competitors. For example, the Chinese military publishes a vast number of books and articles how it thinks about modern war, strategy, and operations. These books are freely available for purchase in Chinese bookstores and on the Chinese version of Amazon.com, but remain beyond the reach of scholars and officers who do not read Mandarin Chinese because the U.S. government has yet to make translations of them broadly available. Similarly, in past decades the U.S. government invested vast sums in building intellectual capital on the Russian military. Today that capital has been drawn down to dangerously low levels, so that we are surprised by or misunderstand Russian actions that should be neither surprising nor mysterious. Additional investments in this area are sorely needed.

Finally, *we need to take seriously the possibility of great power competition and conflict.* This means that we need to think seriously about a host of national security topics that we have ignored or neglected for a generation or more. These include the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, how best to

mobilize the nation's resources for war, and the need to wage political warfare and counter its use by our competitors. We will also need to re-think the educational requirements of an officer corps that has experienced little but counter-insurgency and policy makers who came of age after the Cold War.

In short, we face mounting challenges, but also have great opportunities, if we can only seize them. Part of the answer, no doubt, will consist of acquiring new capabilities, but a substantial part of it will lie in developing intellectual capital, and formulating and implementing an effective strategy, to harness the considerable strengths that we possess in the service of our aims.