

Testimony of Lieutenant General Thomas W. Spoehr, U.S. Army, Retired

Director, Center for National Defense, The Heritage Foundation

Armed Services Committee

U.S. Senate

Recommendations for a Future National Defense Strategy

November 30, 2017, SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building

Lieutenant General Thomas Spoehr, U.S. Army, retired, served for 36 years in the Army until 2016. As the Director for the Center for National Defense at The Heritage Foundation, Spoehr leads a team of defense experts responsible for researching and forming policy recommendations to promote a strong and enduring U.S. national defense. As part of their efforts, they publish the annual authoritative Index of U.S. Military Strength providing a comprehensive assessment of U.S. military power and are currently engaged in the Rebuilding America's Military Project (RAMP), designed to inform decisions regarding the future direction of the U.S. military. While in uniform, Spoehr was responsible for forming recommendations for the Army's annual fiscal program, equipment investments and strategies, and the Army's business strategy. In those roles, he participated in several Quadrennial Defense Reviews, the development of the DOD's Defense Strategic Guidance, and other strategies. In 2011 Spoehr served as Deputy Commanding General-Support for U.S. Forces Iraq with responsibilities for transition and logistics. The following is adapted from an October 3, 2017, article published in War on the Rocks, titled: "Rules for Getting Defense Strategy Right."

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee on this important subject.

So, is the Pentagon on the cusp of generating a real defense strategy? Or will the forthcoming National Defense Strategy (NDS) be like so many strategic documents of the past: attractive, but of little intrinsic value, like coffee-table books?

A real defense strategy would provide clear priorities, identify America's competitive advantages and how to capitalize on them, and deal with the world—and the enemies it offers as it is. Since the August 2014 Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and the Chinese militarization of man-made islands in the South China Sea in 2015-2016, the U.S. has been operating without a relevant defense strategy. Thus, the need for a new NDS could not be more acute, but previous efforts have had decidedly mixed results. Will this one succeed where others have failed? We are about to find out.

Done correctly, the NDS can put the United States on a sound strategic footing. But a couple of challenges loom.

First, the Pentagon is writing the NDS in parallel with the White House's development of the National Security Strategy (NSS). Even though the writing teams are closely collaborating, it would be better for them to be tackled sequentially.

The NSS should provide the framework for the NDS with sufficient intervening time for the NSS to be digested and analyzed. Congress should ensure that future national security and defense strategies are separated by time in their development.

Second, the Pentagon's senior policy leadership team is only just starting to arrive, with the Principal Deputy to the Under Secretary for Policy only arriving in the last couple of weeks and the appointed Under Secretary and relevant Assistant Secretary still not in place. There is a capable team in place developing the strategy, but their leaders missed the opportunity to weigh in on the strategy.

So, what would contribute to the creation of a seminal defense strategy that can guide our defense efforts for years to come?

Above all else, the NDS must lay out clear choices. As Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter puts it: "Strategy is about choices." Strategies articulate that we are going to "do this, *and not this*." American defense strategies often fail by endeavoring to be completely inclusive of all parties and valuing their contributions equally. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) fell in that category. Every "tribe" successfully inserted their organizations as a high priority into the document, which consequently was irrelevant the moment it was signed.

Assuming that Congress succeeds in appropriating additional desperately needed defense funding in 2018 and beyond, the Pentagon still will not be able to afford everything on its vast "wish lists," as the military must also contend with crushing needs for facility repairs and maintenance backlogs. Some capabilities, organizations, and elements of infrastructure are not as important as others, and the NDS should not pull back from identifying those that are less critical for success.

Turning to the contents of the NDS, I am a prisoner of my education at the Army War College which instills that good strategy is comprised of ends, ways, and means, each linked and in balance. Just to be clear, the "Ends" represent the objectives you seek to accomplish, "Ways" the actions you will employ in the pursuit of the objectives, and "Means" the resources you require to execute the strategy. I will therefore organize my comments in that manner.

First, the Ends or Objectives

The NDS should flow from a clear and understandable goal: The U.S. military needs to be ready and able to defend America's interests with decisive and overwhelming military strength.

The only logical and easily understood strategic construct for the United States is to maintain the capability to engage and win decisively in two major regional conflicts near simultaneously. America's force-sizing construct has changed over time. During the peak of the Cold War, the United States sought the ability to fight two and a half wars simultaneously against the Soviet Union, China, and another smaller adversary. Successive Administrations have modified this construct based on their assessments of threats, national interests, priorities, and perceptions of available resources. The real basis for the two-war construct is deterrence. If adversaries know that America can engage in two major fights with confidence, they will be less inclined to take advantage of the United States or an ally committed elsewhere.

Fortunately, the United States need not size its forces to take on an adversary the size of the Soviet Union but instead a smaller, albeit still very dangerous and capable, Russia. The bad news is that the United States also needs to stand ready to deter and defeat China, which is making massive investments in its military forces and has chosen belligerence in Asia.

The NDS must not overlook the need to continue to remain engaged to counter terrorist and violent extremist threats in the Middle East, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, as well as confront rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran.

When Considering the Ways, or the Actions and Methods to Be Employed

First, the NDS should call for more forward presence by U.S. forces. The end of the Cold War led to massive reductions in the U.S. military posture in Europe and elsewhere. These reductions were not based on an empirical or strategic review of U.S. force requirements, but rather on two factors: the opportunity to save money and the politically less contentious choice to close overseas military installations, not ones at home. Then-European Command Commander General Philip Breedlove testified as much in 2015: “[P]ermanently stationed forces are a force multiplier that rotational deployments can never match.” If our goal is to deter war, we must demonstrate both our will and capability. Forward stationed forces demonstrate both to the degree that no other action can match. U.S. forces stationed abroad should be configured, trained, and equipped to provide a real, versus symbolic, warfighting capability.

Secondly, the NDS should not propose approaches that contradict the very nature of war. The Obama Administration attempted this when it wishfully prescribed in the 2014 QDR that “our forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations.” U.S. history, not confined to Iraq and Afghanistan, reflects the way wars have a way of drawing American forces into prolonged stability operations. Critics correctly argue that some of these stability operations were conducted by choice and that America should be more judicious in deciding whether to enter into future conflicts with the potential for stability operations. While appealing, such reasoned arguments ignore the reality that modern conflict usually presents either gradually, like Vietnam, or as crisis, such as Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, and in neither case allowing for extended deliberation of questions like “How does this end?”

To put it simply, it is foolhardy not to prepare or size our forces for a type of operation which history tells us American presidents have repeatedly seen fit to engage the military, even when not specifically prepared for it.

Third, to support the objective to counter terrorist and violent extremist elements in the Middle East and elsewhere, the United States should maintain certain “low-end” capabilities such as non-fifth generation attack aircraft and Advise and Assist capabilities such as the Army’s new Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB) in order to conduct these type operations at lower cost.

Finally, within the strategy, Washington should be able to see the key competitive advantages that the United States intends to employ to win. America’s unmatched ability to fight as a joint team certainly would rank as one. A strong and well-nourished network of alliances and partners would certainly be another. I hope not to see artificial intelligence, swarms of drones, robots, railguns, and directed energy weapons proposed as the keys to our military’s future success—as has become fashionable—because the advantages those and other technologies convey are transitory. They are important, but are not key U.S. advantages for the long haul.

The Means Must Be In Balance to the Ends and Ways

Nothing will doom a strategy faster than an imbalance between the ends, ways, and means. This is the situation we find ourselves in today, with the smallest military we have had in seventy-five years, equipped with rapidly aging weapons, and employed at a very high operational pace endeavoring to satisfy our global defense objectives.

The NDS should chart the path to the development and maintenance of a strong military with the ability to dominate likely opponents in all domains: land, air, sea, space, and cyber. Tragically, due to overuse, underfunding, and inattention, American military capabilities have now markedly deteriorated to a dangerously low level. Fighter pilots now fly less sorties per week than they did during the “hollow” years of the Carter Administration. Recent tragic ship collisions, aircraft mishaps, fighter pilot shortages, and reports on dilapidated shipyards show what happens when a military tries to accomplish global objectives with only a fraction of the necessary resources.

The NDS should acknowledge the growing gap between the military’s needs and what the nation has seen fit to resource. There are no shortcuts to accomplish the rebuilding that is now necessary. The NDS should acknowledge the true state of the military as it relates to the broad requirements of protecting our national interests.

In that regard, it is critical that the NDS should be budget-informed, not budget-constrained. There is a big difference. The strategy should take a realistic view of the national security threats facing the country and propose realistic ways and means to deter and defeat those threats. While acknowledging the United States cannot dedicate an infinite amount of resources to national defense, the strategy should not fall victim to the trap of accepting the Office of Management and Budget's views as the upper limit for what the country should or can spend on its defense.

Already some seek to advance the notion that because of our structural economic problems the United States will be unable to increase defense spending, even though the spending on its armed forces stands at a historically low percentage of both gross domestic product (3.3 percent) and overall federal spending (16 percent). Skeptics employ superficial spending comparisons between nations to argue the United States already spends enough on defense.

How many times, for example, have you heard that the United States spends more on its military than the next seven or eight countries combined? You might take from that observation that Washington is spending too much hard-earned taxpayer money on a bloated military, but you would be wrong. Such arguments fall apart quickly on examination. First, there is no other nation in the world that needs to accomplish as much with its military as the United States. Washington depends on a globally deployed force that upholds the pillars of the international order by defending access to the commons, protecting trade routes (that benefit the American people more than anyone else), and deterring those who seek to disrupt peace and security. Therefore, the U.S. military must be superior everywhere we are challenged. Second, some of the difference in spending among nations can be traced to purchasing power parity. For example, a ship that costs \$1.2 billion to produce in the United States may cost only \$300 million in China. Notwithstanding these factors, national interests and objectives must drive America's military requirements, not cold financial calculations.

The NDS should find the balance between identifying the resources that are required and acknowledging that tough resourcing choices are still inevitable.

Summary

It is a military maxim that nothing happens until someone is told to do something. The NDS should therefore be directive, not just descriptive. Strategic objectives should lend themselves to tracking, and appropriate individuals should be held accountable. For example, if one objective is to increase readiness, the strategy should specify how much of a gain, by when, and who is responsible.

When Congress created the requirement for the NDS, it specified that it should be classified, with an unclassified summary. That direction is liberating, as the NDS can be more narrowly focused than if it were forced to serve as both strategy and public relations tool. Hopefully, the Pentagon embraces that aspect.

There is room for optimism about the opportunity the NDS affords. Authoritatively defining how the U.S. military will protect America's interests and the methods to be employed is something that has not been done in recent memory. Done correctly, it has a great chance of helping put the military back on a path to being a formidable force for the foreseeable future.