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Recasting the Flawed Downsizing Debate

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Everyone has an opinion about the proper size and structure of the US military in the new world order. No one, however, has been able to build a consensus among the key decisionmakers or the public at large. The maneuvering opened after the Berlin Wall came down, with the military proposing a 25-percent force reduction and a new "Base Force" organizational scheme.¹ The plan received generally high marks as both workable and practical. In the wake of the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union itself, Congressman Les Aspin and others have branded the proposed reduction as too timid and out of touch with the changed world.

Representative Aspin bases his vision for the future military on equivalents of Desert Storm, Just Cause, and Provide Comfort. Each of these is an interpretation of the size and structure of forces that led to quick success in, respectively, the Gulf War, the Panama invasion, and the Kurdish relief effort following the Gulf War.² Although a novel concept, Aspin's vision also has received considerable criticism. Other participants in the debate have more radical force reductions in mind. This is particularly true of those who envision the so-called peace dividend as panacea for the multitude of social and economic ills plaguing the nation.

The core issue in the debate is the disappearance of our long-standing principal adversary, the Soviet Union. As a result, the military has felt itself constrained to identify other threats and produce theoretical scenarios that would justify future force structures. This approach is doomed to defeat in the current political environment by those who will brand all potential threats and scenarios either as too pessimistic or as outlandish, self-serving fantasy.

The truth is, the simplistic identification of a principal enemy—the foundation of Cold War military policy—no longer works. It is a systemically flawed procedure based on assumptions that consistently proved wanting even during the Cold War. Further, the vain search for an enemy has so dominated

the defense debate that important issues that should affect the debate have been all but ignored.

What follows is an explication of the flaws in the “traditional” method, a proposal for a more rational approach, and a discussion of some important submerged issues which have not yet been uncovered by the shallow digging of the current debate.

Problems With Threat-Based Force Structure

What is wrong with identifying the enemy as the first step in the traditional defense decision process? The answer is twofold. First, such an approach seeks short-term guidance to solve a long-term problem. International power politics are volatile. Yesterday’s adversary becomes tomorrow’s ally, and vice versa. But building a competent and effective military organization is a long-term process often extending over decades. Modern armies, navies, and air forces are extraordinarily complex organizations which take considerable time to fashion into effective fighting forces.

Consider, for example, that it requires two years to train a pilot to *minimum* combat proficiency in modern, high-tech aircraft. Yet minimum combat proficiency does not easily translate to victory and generally results in very high casualty rates. Consider the lowly infantryman who, unlike his counterpart in earlier wars, now must master and use some of the most sophisticated equipment imaginable—satellite-based positioning systems and night vision systems, for example. The days in which we could just put a carbine in an infantryman’s hands, give him some target practice, and send him off to war have long since passed.

Consider, too, the amount of time it takes to build modern weapon systems. Even discounting research, development, and procurement time (sometimes stretching over a decade), sophisticated aircraft, ships, and tanks take a great deal of time to produce. With the decline in our industrial base, even in an emergency we could not produce these weapon systems with the speed and in the numbers we might have earlier associated with industrial mobilization.

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Finally, consider the time required to educate and season military leaders—both commissioned and noncommissioned officers. War is as much a mental struggle as a physical contest. Educating military officers in the complexities of modern warfare is a time-consuming task. Seasoning those officers to lead forces in battle effectively and confidently or to plan complex military campaigns requires even more time. If this corps of officers does not already exist when the fighting starts, there will be precious little time to produce these leaders.

All of these factors—procurement, training, education, and seasoning—compound the time problem. They explain why it took more than a decade to build from the hollow force of the mid-1970s to the robust force the United States fielded in Desert Storm.

On the other side of the equation is the enemy we identify. Predicting who will be tomorrow's adversary, or where and when the civilian leadership will commit military force, is a risky business. We were not very successful making these predictions even during the Cold War, when we were confident we had accurately identified the enemy.

Consider the following examples. As little as six months before the outbreak of hostilities in 1950, no one in a position of authority, including the Secretary of State, seems to have considered that we might be drawn quickly into a war against North Korea.³ In 1958 few imagined that within a decade over half a million Americans would be fighting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Who could have imagined in the late 1980s that we would shortly be involved in a major shooting war against Iraq—whom we had supported in its war against Iran? Who could dream we would join a coalition with Syria, a long-time US political adversary?

Two of these examples took place during the height of the Cold War when we had a clearly defined enemy (the Soviet Union) and had assumed from the beginning that the critical flash-point was in Europe. We should remember that beyond the two "hot" wars the United States fought during the Cold War (Korea and Vietnam), we also used or threatened to use force in the Straits of Formosa, Lebanon (twice), Grenada, Panama, and Libya, to name but a few examples. None of these situations directly involved the Soviets, and none took place in Europe. So much for the accuracy of our predictions.

The second problem in basing force structure on a definitively identified enemy is that it promotes worst-case planning based on faulty assumptions. Such was the case during the Cold War. With the Soviets identified as the enemy, the United States built a military establishment to deter or defeat the worst possible case—a nuclear confrontation or an invasion of Western Europe. That was a natural and logical policy. However, implicit in the policy was the general assumption that if we were prepared for the worst case, we were automatically prepared for lesser cases.⁴ The war in Vietnam demonstrated that our military must also be prepared for *different* cases, not

just lesser cases. Although possessing far superior technology and firepower, we were woefully unprepared for the kind of war waged in Vietnam.

Predicting the long-term adversaries of the United States is a difficult, if not impossible, proposition. Moreover, it is a dangerous exercise in that it may leave us unprepared for the kind of conflict actually encountered. The United States needs a longer-term strategy that considers both the unpredictability of international politics and the full range of threats we might face. The key to this strategy is *what* the United States will face rather than *whom*.

Defining the Threat

Even in the face of an uncertain future, we can say with great confidence that the US military must be prepared to deal with three fundamentally different kinds of warfare.⁵ Each requires its own strategy, force structure, operational methods, equipment, and training. The generalized (and clearly oversimplified) descriptions of these kinds of warfare that follow illustrate their fundamental differences.

Conventional Warfare

Americans are most familiar with conventional warfare. In this century the Gulf War, the various Arab-Israeli wars, the Korean War, and both World Wars were prominent examples of conventional warfare. What did these very different conflicts have in common? Operationally they emphasized large-unit operations and a heavy reliance on firepower. Maneuver was based on the mechanized mobility of large units. As with all conventional wars, strategies revolved around perceived “centers of gravity” of the antagonists.⁶ Both sides in each struggle deployed and maneuvered their forces to defend their own centers of gravity and to attack those of the enemy. Each of these struggles continued the trend that has been present for at least the past two centuries in the Western World—strategy, operations, tactics, and technology were designed to bring an enemy’s center of gravity under attack faster and more effectively. The military objective in conventional warfare is to bring the struggle to a quick, decisive conclusion.

Insurgent Warfare

Insurgencies are wars of the weak against the strong—of those out of power against those in power. They are revolutionary civil wars generally fought for political control of the state in question. Although there are many insurgent strategies they all have much in common, and they all turn conventional strategies on their collective ear.⁷

Insurgencies use a sophisticated mix of political, economic, psychological, and military operations to drain support away from the government and build support for the insurgents. The military portion of the mix often plays only a supporting role, and therein lies both a dilemma and an advantage.

The insurgent needs to win *either* the non-military or the military struggle to achieve victory. The government must win *both* the military and non-military aspects of the struggle.

Time is a key weapon for the insurgent. Rather than providing quick victory, insurgencies are protracted affairs—every day that the insurgency survives heaps more discredit upon the government. The very survival of an insurgency provides the impression that the government is not in control of its future.

On the military front, guerrilla tactics are the norm for the insurgent because the insurgent generally cannot compete directly with the military forces of the government in power. Guerrilla tactics dictate that insurgent military maneuvers be based on the mobility of the individual soldier rather than the mechanized mobility of large formations.

The most important difference between insurgent and conventional warfare is that the centers of gravity for both sides are the same—the population of the nation under siege. Insurgents cannot survive without significant support from the people, nor can the government. This fact brings into question the basic military strategy of attacking the enemy's center of gravity by putting fire and steel on target.

Nuclear Warfare

Though the threat of superpower nuclear confrontation has significantly subsided, nuclear weapons will not cease to exist and thus their threatening nature will continue. Many commentators have postulated that the spread of nuclear weapons to new potential antagonists will only heighten the threat.

Nuclear warfare is fundamentally different from other types of war on at least two counts. The first is the potential destruction that could result from the detonation of even a single nuclear weapon. As a result, the declared policy of the United States for nearly 50 years has put the deterrence of nuclear warfare as the first national security priority.⁸

Another important difference between nuclear warfare and all other forms of conflict is the ignorance of those who wage it concerning the ultimate consequences. Setting aside the isolated, unilateral strikes against Nagasaki and Hiroshima at the end of World War II, there has never been a nuclear war. We have no empirical evidence as to what might happen once the first nuclear detonation takes place against an enemy who possesses the means to retaliate in kind. Can escalation be controlled? What would constitute victory? What would bring the enemy to his knees? Why would one use such weapons, given the potential risks? For these and a thousand other questions, ranging from the grand strategic to the tactical, we have no evidence and no answers, only opinions.

Even more troubling is the notion that traditional concepts of deterrence may not apply to some new members of the nuclear club. The Soviet Union was a very good enemy in its day! Deterrence concepts seemed to work. Will they also work against nations that have much less to lose, or against

nations motivated by religious, ethnic, or nationalistic fervor only dimly understood in the West?

Using the Defined Threats

Armed with an understanding of the three fundamental types of warfare with which our military forces may be forced to deal, we can begin to estimate the size and kinds of forces we will need. The most rational approach—in view of the volatility of international power politics—is to analyze each of the types of warfare we may face (conventional, nuclear, insurgency) in the light of those forces extant in the world that could realistically wage a particular type of warfare against us—*no matter who possesses those forces*. The key is what—not who—may cause the problem in an uncertain future.

This approach is not new. Before World War I, the British sized their fleet—which they considered crucial to the maintenance and defense of their global empire—using a similar process. The British policy was to maintain a fleet equal in size to the two next largest fleets combined.⁹ One can argue whether this was a prudent decision. But it was an approach that recognized political volatility. The British policy also recognized that military decisions, particularly those involving navies, are decisions for the ultra-long term. Finally, the two-power standard provided a logical rationale for adjusting the size of the Royal Navy, over time, based on something more than temporary budgeting problems or passing political whims.

A similar example can be found in the construction of the Washington Naval Treaties negotiated during the 1920s. In those instances, the great naval powers established size ratios for their respective navies without reference to specific enemies.¹⁰ Again, whether ultimately successful in their purpose or not, these ratios provided a rationale for force size without regard to current enmities.

The point is, of course, that rational decisions for the long term have been and can be made without identifying specific national actors as the “threat.” That process, however, still leaves the question of the decisions themselves. What guidelines should the United States use to develop a modern version of the British two-power standard? Guidance can be found in some issues that have yet to surface in the public debate.

The Hidden Issues

The shallowness of the debate and its misguided focus on threat identification have prevented discussion of several crucial issues that bear on the problem. These hidden issues fall into four broad categories: lead time, force structure, force quality, and consequences of error.

Lead Time

Time, once squandered, cannot be reclaimed. This is particularly significant to defense policy for at least two reasons. The first has to do with

the peculiar nature of the American democracy. Americans have traditionally viewed war as an aberration in human affairs. As a result, there has often been a reluctance to respond to growing threats. A prime example of this phenomenon took place in 1941 when the world was already in flames. The Germans had overrun western and central Europe. The Soviets reeled under the blitzkrieg. Axis troops rummaged around North Africa and threatened to make the Mediterranean Sea their private lake. Passage through the North Atlantic was hotly contested. In the Pacific, Japan continued its endless war in China and made threatening noises toward the entire Pacific region. Even in the face of these obvious threats, the US House of Representatives managed to pass a renewal of the Selective Service Act by only a one-vote margin. Just over two months later, the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor.

With the demise of the Soviet threat, there is the distinct possibility that we might slip back into the kind of myopia that gripped much of the nation before World War II. It would be foolhardy to base our military preparedness on the assumption that future threats will present themselves unambiguously and that they will conveniently provide a reluctant democracy with enough time to build sufficient forces. Strategic warning is more often lost in the background noise of world affairs, ignored for a variety of reasons, or frittered away in the laborious decisionmaking processes of the US government. Response time is a crucial element, and the ability to respond in time can be heavily influenced by the size and structure of standing armed forces.

The difficulty of recognizing a growing threat and mobilizing the political will to meet it is magnified by the time-related problems discussed earlier. Effective military forces cannot be designed, procured, trained, and educated quickly. A standing force made too small, a shrunken defense industrial base, a reluctance to recognize an emerging threat, and a prolonged decision to react could combine to give an aggressive adversary an insurmountable lead in military capability. The results could be catastrophic. Time, in all its ramifications, must remain a central element in the defense decisionmaking process.

Force Structure

The structure of the future US force is at least equal in importance to its size, but there is insufficient informed discussion of structure in the current debate. Any decision must consider the factor of which kinds of warfare will likely confront us in the future. The strategies, tactics, weapons, training, and organization appropriate for one type of warfare are not necessarily appropriate for the others. The sweeping maneuvers of heavy armored forces would be of little use against insurgents using hit-and-run guerrilla tactics in a jungle. Nuclear-tipped ICBMs may have little effect on the conduct of conventional or counterinsurgent operations.

Another factor influencing force structure is geography. The United States is essentially an island nation with few threats to its territorial integrity.

But the United States has far-flung national interests reaching into virtually every corner of the world. No one can predict which of those interests might become so important in the future that, when threatened, their defense would warrant the use of military force.

At the same time, the American body politic shows some signs of wanting to retrench to Fortress America, or something close to it. If that comes to pass, future employment of American arms will be in far-off places, requiring massive and rapid deployment efforts. An expeditionary armed force in that scenario—one not reliant on forward pre-positioning of troops and equipment—must be highly mobile, quickly transportable, and have large amounts of high-speed, long-range air and sea lift. Further, it should be able to put fire and steel on targets quickly and over extreme distances to discourage, slow down, and possibly defeat an adversary, or to prepare the battlefield for other forces being deployed.

Future force structure is crucially important lest the United States be caught with the wrong force at the wrong time, and unable to get to the right place. Close attention to the kinds of warfare we will face and where we will face them is essential to produce an effective force structure regardless of size.

Force Quality

Adversaries on both sides of the questions concerning the future of the American military probably can agree on one point. Whatever the size of the future force, and whatever its structure, it must be the best—the most effective force person-for-person and weapon-for-weapon in existence. Even with all sides in agreement, however, the quality issue (or non-issue, if you prefer) has significant implications for both the size and structure of the future force. For example, a quality force requires extensive infrastructure (including associated manning and funding) for intense and realistic training, and professional education of its commissioned and noncommissioned leaders. A quality force also requires a robust research and development program to produce superior technology for that force. The proper size of the future force is determined by much more than just soldiers in the field, rubber on the ramp, and keels in the water. The infrastructure of a quality force must be a prominent consideration in the defense debate.

The Consequences of Error

The final hidden issue in the defense debate concerns the consequences of error. Only the consequences of building a future military that is too large have been well vetted. Those consequences are important—money and manpower wasted that could have been better spent on other pressing national needs. But erring on the low side also leads to serious consequences.

The first and most obvious consequence of a too-small, ill-equipped, or ill-structured force is that it would tie the hands of policymakers. They

would find it increasingly difficult to deter threats to our national interests. They would be unable to defeat those who transgress. Indeed, such a predicament would likely encourage transgressions.

Another possible consequence is victory at a high price. This scenario would have US leaders committing forces to the battlefield even though they are too small, ill-equipped, or ill-structured. Many Americans would die unnecessarily—paying the price for errors on the low side—even though US forces managed to carry on and muddle through to eventual victory. This has been the story of American arms for much of the history of this nation. Such was the case in the Civil War, the two World Wars, and the Korean conflict. The ghosts of Pearl Harbor, Bataan, Corregidor, Kasserine, and Task Force Smith bear witness to the folly of this traditional US approach to defense policy.

Still another consequence of erring on the low side is a replay of the second, but with an even more tragic outcome. Again Americans would die unnecessarily, but this time in vain—we lose. Some would argue that this is what happened in Vietnam. The United States went to war in Southeast Asia with a military unprepared for the kind of war going on, and then compounded the error with poor decisionmaking at every level. In the future, the consequences for the United States could be much more severe than those stemming from our misadventure in Southeast Asia.

The point is that errors on the low side lead to consequences that are at least as unacceptable as errors made in building and maintaining a military establishment that is too large. This problem needs to be set firmly in the minds of our policymakers and well articulated in the defense debate. A nation that calls itself a superpower must have the armed forces of a superpower.

What Now?

Clearly, the current defense debate must be recast. The new debate framework must take into account the volatility of international politics and juxtapose that reality with the long-term consequences of defense policy decisions. Continuing to focus on the identification of an enemy as the basis for defense policy—i.e., seeking short-term solutions to a long-term problem—will likely result in a future strategy/capability mismatch.

The hidden issues must also come to the fore as primary modifiers to what otherwise might seem a straightforward, almost mathematical calculation. War and peace, victory and defeat, are not engineering problems that can be solved with calculator and computer. Nor can force size and structure decisions be calculated using Desert Storm, Just Cause, Provide Comfort, or any other equivalents. If one could construct such balanced equations, the task of providing for the common defense would indeed be simple. Nor should the reader conclude that the hidden issues discussed here are the only salient variables. This article has discussed only those issues that have been largely

ignored in the current debate. The number of issues that will and should bear on the problem remains imposing.

Of equal importance to recasting the framework of the debate are the participants in the debate. To this point, the informed debate has been among military professionals, politicians, and occasional columnists. We have not brought the public into the process. This is a crucial error. The need for national consensus is paramount when there are so many important competing demands for government resources. Further, the new Administration does not have a clear political mandate and needs broad consensus on issues of such magnitude. If we fail to fashion a national consensus, our plans for the future American military will almost certainly founder under pressure from competing domestic agendas.

NOTES

1. *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington: White House, August 1991), particularly p. 31; *National Military Strategy of the United States* (Washington: GPO, January 1992), pp. 17-25. For a critique of the Base Force concept see Rep. Les Aspin, "National Security in the 1990s: Defining a New Basis for U.S. Military Forces," a presentation to the Atlantic Council of the United States, 6 January 1992. For a brief analysis of the Base Force concept see Kevin Lewis, "U.S. Force Structure: Post-Gulf, Post-Cold War," Defense and Arms Control Studies Program, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Inst. of Technology, 8 October 1991.

2. Rep. Les Aspin, "An Approach to Sizing American Conventional Forces for the Post-Soviet Era," unpublished paper released to the press 24 January 1992. Also see the Aspin reference in note 1.

3. In a speech to the National Press Club on 12 January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson described the forward defensive perimeter of the United States—excluding the Korean peninsula. Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953* (rev. ed.; Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1983), p. 18.

4. This concept approached its zenith in the 1950s. During 1956, Air Force Secretary Donald Quarles publicly stated, "It seems logical if we have the strength required for global war we could handle any threat of lesser magnitude." Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson turned opinion into policy when he told Congress in 1957, "We are depending on atomic weapons for the defense of the nation. Our basic defense policy is based on the use of such atomic weapons as would be militarily feasible and usable in a smaller war, if such a war is forced upon us." Quoted in Robert F. Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: A History of Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force 1907-1967* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 227, 232.

5. The reader should not think that warfare has only three variations. Although there appear to be, at this point in history, three *fundamentally* different kinds of warfare, there are many variations on these three themes. Nor should the reader confuse tactics (e.g. guerrilla operations, terrorist operations) that are used in many different kinds of war with the kinds of wars themselves.

6. Carl von Clausewitz describes center of gravity in *On War* as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed" (pp. 595-96). He goes on: "The first task, then, in planning for a war is to identify the enemy's centers of gravity. . . . The second task is to ensure that the forces to be used against that point are concentrated for a main offensive" (p. 619). Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, tr. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976).

7. Insurgency is, for most Americans, the most misunderstood form of warfare, and thus I have included a slightly expanded description in the text of the article. For further reference, see Douglas Pike, *PAVN: Peoples Army of Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986).

8. The importance of nuclear deterrence in overall US security strategy is unequivocal. "Even in a new era, deterring nuclear attack remains the number one defense priority of the United States." *National Security Strategy of the United States*, p. 25.

9. The British two-power standard originated in the 1889 Naval Defence Act when the principal pretenders to the supremacy of the Royal Navy were the navies of France and Russia. Later, of course, Germany's rising naval power became a concern. Concerning Germany, the First Sea Lord told the cabinet in 1902, "It is an error to suppose that the two-power standard . . . has ever had reference only to France and Russia. It has always referred to the two strongest naval powers at any given moment." Quoted in Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945* (Boston: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), p. 139.

10. For concise discussions of the naval treaties concluded during the interwar period, see E. B. Potter, ed., *Sea Power: A Naval History* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985), pp. 233-34; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 3-13.