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Ready for What and Modernized Against Whom? A Strategic Perspective on Readiness and Modernization

JEFFREY RECORD

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Trade-offs between readiness and modernization come with the territory of any defense budget. Choosing between the two can be particularly painful in periods of declining total expenditure. We are entering a second decade of steadily declining annual real defense spending. Allegations of eroding force readiness are mounting. The Clinton Administration earlier this year agreed to add \$25 billion to the defense budget over the next six years to improve combat readiness and the quality of life for US troops. The Administration subsequently sent to Congress a supplemental request for an additional \$2.6 billion to cover the costs of recent and unexpected peace and humanitarian relief operations. The House of Representatives added \$600 million to that supplemental appropriation.

Doubts nevertheless remain as to whether we can afford to complete costly modernization programs. Among them are the Navy's F/A-18 E/F fighter and *Arleigh Burke* destroyer programs, the Air Force's F-22 fighter and C-17 transport programs, and the Marine Corps' V-22 tilt-rotor aircraft program.

Military readiness has become a hot issue on Capitol Hill, with some of the Administration's more irresponsible critics claiming that we are headed for the hollow forces of the post-Vietnam era. There was much ado about the decline to C-3 readiness status of three US Army heavy divisions, even though they all were late-deploying divisions, and two were slated to be disbanded. The Army deliberately slipped their readiness, however, by temporarily raiding their operations and maintenance accounts to pay for the costs of the unexpected Operation Restore Democracy and other similar enterprises. A better way of doing business would be for Congress to authorize the Pentagon to obligate money to pay for such operations at the time they are conducted, and then send the bills over in the form of supplemental requests. This would relieve the Pentagon from having to rob Peter to pay Paul for the duration of such operations. At any rate, this budgetary intervention did not endanger the Republic.

There is simply no comparison between the state of our military establishment in the 1970s and that of today. Our present armed forces are not defeated, demoralized, despised, drug-ridden, and awash in high-school drop-outs, Category IVs, AWOLs, desertions, and courts-martial. No one wants to go back to the 1970s, and memories of that decade account in part (along with no small measure of political posturing by those who seek to paint the Administration as soft on defense) for the degree to which readiness has become the latest congressional defense fad.

Congress has traditionally focused on the budgetary aspects of readiness and modernization at the line-item level, and in times of budgetary stress has tended to favor modernization even at the expense of readiness. Until recently, readiness has had practically nothing in the way of a political constituency, whereas procurement programs, especially the big-ticket ones, drip with them. Moreover, it is easy to convince yourself that a vote for modernization is a vote for readiness, even at the cost of fewer dollars allocated to training and operations and maintenance. Superbly trained and supported troops equipped with inferior weapons may be considered unready for combat.

In terms of training, sustainability, and weaponry, it is always better to be ready and modern than unready and obsolete. What Congress does not look at, because it is constitutionally incapable of doing so in a coherent fashion, is the broader and far more critical question: Ready for what? What exactly should we expect our military to do? Against whom do we modernize? Have we correctly identified future threats to our security and the proper forces for dealing with those threats? Are we breathlessly and blindly pursuing modernization for its own sake, or are we tying it in with the quality and pace of hostile competition?

These are the questions I would like to address. Informed line-item judgments on readiness and modernization hinge

on informed judgments at the level of strategy, whose formulation is the responsibility of the Executive Branch. Our present strategy portends an excessive readiness for the familiar and comfortable at the expense of preparation for the more likely and less pleasant.

Introducing Realism Into Our Assessments

The basis of present strategy is the Administration's Bottom-Up Review, a 1993 assessment of US force requirements in the post-Soviet-threat world. The assessment concluded, among other things, that the United States should maintain ground, sea, and air forces sufficient to prevail in two nearly simultaneous major regional contingencies. For planning purposes the assessment postulated another Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (and Saudi Arabia's eastern province) and another North Korean invasion of South Korea--two large and thoroughly conventional wars fought on familiar territory against familiar Soviet-model armies.

Congressional and other critics rightly point to disparities between stated requirements for waging two major wars concurrently and the existing and planned forces that would actually be available. Shortfalls are especially pronounced in airlift, sealift, and long-range aerial bombardment. Critics also note that the Bottom-Up Review more or less ignores the impact of Haiti- and Somalia-like operations on our capacity to fight another Korean and another Persian Gulf war at the same time.

Few in Congress or elsewhere, however, have questioned the realism of the scenario. How likely is it that we would be drawn into two major wars at the same time? What are the opportunity costs of preparing for such a prospect?

The prospect of twin wars has been a bugaboo of US force planners since the eve of World War II--the only conflict in which the US military was in fact called upon to wage simultaneously what amounted to two separate wars. Chances for another world war, however, disappeared with the Soviet Union's demise.

Moreover, two points should be kept in mind with respect to World War II. First, the two-front dilemma came about only because of Hitler's utterly gratuitous declaration of war on the United States just after Pearl Harbor--a move that has to go down as one of the most strategically stupid decisions ever undertaken by a head of state. Had Hitler instead declared that Germany had no quarrel with the United States, and therefore would remain at peace with it, President Roosevelt would have been hard put to obtain a congressional declaration of war on Germany, or, with one, to pursue a Germany-first strategy. Second, during World War II the United States was compelled to pursue a win-hold-win strategy against Germany and Japan, respectively, even though we spent 40 percent of the GNP on defense, placed 12 million Americans under arms, and had powerful allies (unlike Germany or Japan). We sought to--and did--defeat Germany first, while initially remaining on the strategic defense in the Pacific.

In the decades since 1945, US planners persisted in postulating scenarios involving at least two concurrent conflicts, even though we have never had the resources to wage two big wars at the same time. Recall that the Vietnam conflict was a "half-war" in contemporary US force planning nomenclature.

More to the point, our enemies have without exception refused to take advantage of our involvement in one war to start another one with us; not during the three years of the Korean War, the ten years of the Vietnam War, or the eight months of the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-91.

States almost always go to war for specific reasons independent of whether an adversary is already at war with another country. This is especially true for states contemplating potentially war-provoking acts against the world's sole remaining superpower. In none of the three major wars we have fought since 1945 did our enemies, when contemplating aggression, believe that their aggressive acts would prompt war with the United States.

If prospects for being drawn into two large-scale conventional conflicts at the same time are remote, prudence dictates maintenance of sufficient military power to deal quickly and effectively with such conflicts one at a time. And for this we are well prepared. Our force structure remains optimized for interstate conventional combat, and it proved devastating in our last conventional war, against Saddam Hussein's large--albeit incompetently led--Soviet-model forces. Though most national military establishments in the Third World, which today includes much of the former Soviet Union, are incapable of waging large-scale conventional warfare, the few that are or have the potential to do so

are all authoritarian states with ambitions hostile to US security interests. Among those states are Iran, Iraq, Syria, a radicalized Egypt, and China.

Russia can be excluded for probably at least the next decade. Russia's conventional military forces have deteriorated to the point where they have great difficulty suppressing even small insurrections inside Russia's own borders. The humiliating performance of the Russian forces in Chechnya reveals the extent to which draft avoidance, demoralization, disobedience, desertion, political tension, professional incompetence, and the virtual collapse of combat support and combat service support capabilities have wrecked what just a decade ago was an army that awed many NATO force planners.

China is included not just as a potential regional threat but as a potential global threat. We need to be wary of today's commonplace notion that the United States is the last superpower, that we will never again face the kind of global and robust threat to our vital security interests once posed by the Soviet Union, and before that, the Axis Powers. The present planning focus on regional conflict should not blind us to the probable emergence over the next decade or two of at least one regional superpower capable of delivering significant numbers of nuclear weapons over intercontinental distances and of projecting conventional forces well beyond their national frontiers. China comes first to mind. China's vast and talented population and spectacular economic performance could provide the foundation for a military challenge in Asia of a magnitude similar to that posed by the growth of Japanese military power in the 1930s.

Our capacity for large-scale interstate conventional combat is indispensable to our security. It served us well in Korea and the Persian Gulf, where we continue to have vital interests threatened by adversaries who have amassed or are seeking to amass significant, and in the case of North Korea, vast amounts of conventional military power.

But is preparation for large-scale interstate conventional combat enough? Some observers argue that the Desert Storm-inspired model of conventional combat at the regional level is largely irrelevant to what they believe to be the more likely security challenges in the post-Soviet world. They say we are entering an era of smaller, mainly unconventional and culturally motivated conflicts, waged for the most part inside rather than across established national boundaries. Others, such as the Defense Budget Project's Andrew Krepinevich, assert that Desert Storm's very success will encourage our adversaries to sidestep head-on collisions with US conventional military power, in favor of strategies and tactics against which that power is poorly suited to respond. Still others, like Johns Hopkins Professor Andrew J. Bacevich, contend that the United States will seek to avoid direct involvement in unconventional conflicts, and if unable to avoid involvement, will inevitably perform poorly. In his view the culprit is a Pentagon still so petrified by the prospect of another Vietnam that it has deliberately blocked attempts to prepare effectively for unconventional conflict--and this, says Bacevich, at a time when the age of conventional military practice is drawing to a close.

I tend to believe that we are entering an era in which the predominant form of conflict will be smaller and less conventional wars waged mostly within recognized national borders. State disintegration in much of Africa, the collapse of the Soviet empire, the potential decomposition of Russia itself, and the likely spread of politically radical Islam--all portend a host of politically and militarily messy conflicts. They also portend a continuation of strong pressures to participate in operations other than war, especially in peace, humanitarian relief, and nation-building operations.

But whether I am right or wrong, most would agree with the proposition that a military establishment dedicated almost exclusively to preparation for conventional combat, and strongly averse to dealing with violent challenges that cannot be effectively dealt with by conventional means, is a military establishment that is not ready for unconventional conflict. Our own military performance in this century reveals a clear correlation between the type of combat we faced and how successful we were. Almost all of our military victories were gained against conventionally armed states that in the end failed to match either the quality or quantity of US (and allied) manpower, materiel, and raw firepower. Wilhemine Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and Baathist Iraq were simply overwhelmed.

In contrast, our military failures and humiliations for the most part have been at the hands of opponents having little or nothing in the way of sea and air power, or even ground forces other than light infantry. Most of them could not hope to prevail over US forces conventionally. But they did prevail because they employed a combination of unconventional strategy and tactics and had a greater willingness to fight and die. The United States was stymied by

Philippine *insurrectos*, stalemated in Korea, defeated in Vietnam, and embarrassed in Lebanon and Somalia by opponents who succeeded in denying to US forces the kinds of targets most vulnerable to overwhelming firepower, while at the same time demonstrating superior political stamina in terms of enduring combat's duration and cost.

To be sure, there were factors on our side other than our military conventionality that contributed to these failures, including excessive micromanagement of military operations from above, an absence of interests worth the price of the fight, and an underestimation of enemy political will and fighting prowess. But the fact remains that military forces designed primarily for one type of warfare are inherently ill-suited for other kinds of warfare. Race horses perform poorly at rodeos and behind plows.

Of the Pentagon's commitment to conventional military orthodoxy and aversion to the unconventional, Andrew Bacevich has written:

Adversaries as different as Mohammed Farah Aideed and Radovan Karadzic have all too readily grasped the opportunities implicit in this fact. No doubt they respect the American military establishment for its formidable strengths. They are also shrewd enough to circumvent those strengths and to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in the rigid American adherence to professional conventions regarding the use of force. As long as US military policies are held hostage to such conventions, those vulnerabilities will persist. The abiding theme of twentieth century military history is that the changing character of modern war long ago turned the flank of conventional military practice, limiting its application to an ever narrowing spectrum of contingencies.[1]

Far more of a challenge than Iraq presented four years ago will be forthcoming from Iran, which in its continuing campaign against American power and influence in Southwest Asia has relied not on direct conventional military challenges, but rather on more successful, indirect, unconventional instruments such as terrorism, hostage-taking, and subversion. Add to these ingredients weapons of mass destruction and a keen attention to surreptitiously exploiting US conventional military weaknesses, such as mining Gulf waters, and you have what Andrew Krepinevich has called a "Streetfighter State." Such a state relies on unconventional acts of violence and is prepared to wage a protracted struggle. Iran, and nations like it, are willing to absorb what the United States would consider a disproportionate amount of punishment to achieve their goals. The Streetfighter State exploits American social weaknesses, such as impatience and aversion to casualties, while at the same time denying US firepower decisive targets or at least easily attackable ones.[2]

It's not that the US military is preparing for the wrong war. It's just that there is more than one war--any single "right" war--to prepare for in the post-Cold War world. Stuffing money into the defense budget readiness accounts prepares us for conventional warfare but not for much else, and that "much else" may come to dominate the international military environment.

Krepinevich has written:

It would seem that, rather than maintaining a force structure for two "last wars," the Defense Department might consider expending some additional resources, especially intellectual capital, examining how the United States military might explore innovative operational concepts that help it cope with the Streetfighter State. Such conceptual innovation need not break the budget . . . [D]uring the 1920s and 1930s the US military successfully engineered a number of conceptual, or "intellectual," breakthroughs in response to dramatic changes in the geopolitical and military technical environment. The military services did it through a mixture of good fortune and far-sighted leaders, both military and civilian, who were sufficiently adaptive and innovative to nurture the "intellectual breakthroughs" that led to the rise of carrier aviation, strategic aerial bombardment, and modern amphibious assault operations. They accomplished this sea change while military budgets were extremely tight. War-gaming and prototyping were emphasized, as opposed to full-scale production of systems. In essence, the services benefitted from a relatively small force structure, which allowed them to move more quickly into the new form of warfare once it was identified and the nation found itself confronted with great power rivals.[3]

Operations Other than War

What of operations other than war, which in recent years have figured far more prominently on the Pentagon's agenda than they do in the Bottom-Up Review's assessment of future US military requirements? The issue here is not just the Pentagon's readiness or lack of readiness for such operations; rather it is the wisdom of participation. Most of these operations have taken place in areas of little or no strategic interest to the United States. At the very minimum, the United States should be more discriminating than it has been up to now.

Some of those who in the past criticized anti-Communist interventions now seem to believe that with the end of the Cold War, American military power should be reoriented away from the defense of traditional interests toward the promotion of American values abroad. They look favorably on military intervention, when and where possible, to transform dictatorships into democracies--as in Haiti; to halt genocide--as in Bosnia; and to provide relief to the sick and starving--as in Somalia and Rwanda. These are all desirable objectives. But value-driven, as opposed to interest-driven, interventions raise two issues: first, the utility of military power as a means of promoting American values overseas, and second, the effects of operations other than war on preparation for war itself. For some things, the Pentagon is inherently unready.

The Defense Department has been predictably and rightly skeptical about value-driven interventions. There is no question about our capacity to project massive infrastructure overseas--to fly into a place like Somalia or Rwanda and immediately begin to feed, shelter, and provide health care for desperate multitudes. Had it not been for the American military, with its unmatched strategic mobility and logistical capabilities, hundreds of thousands--maybe millions--more Kurds, Somalis, and Rwandans would have died.

However, intervention in a humanitarian crisis that is the product of civil war, as opposed to natural disaster, carries with it the risk of being drawn into taking sides in that civil war. When suffering has political rather than natural causes, attempts to lessen that suffering can have adverse political--and ultimately adverse military--consequences. This is the lesson of our ill-advised and ill-fated interventions in Lebanon and Somalia. Feeding and sheltering people is a simple and straightforward proposition. Making peace and building nations are much more complex and demanding undertakings.

Enduring democratic institutions cannot be created by foreigners in poverty-stricken and largely illiterate societies that have known only tyranny, anarchy, or both. It is not for the United States, and certainly not for our armed forces, to assume primary responsibility for building other nations. We could and did so with Germany and Japan after World War II, but only because they were completely defeated militarily, we wielded absolute power over their political destinies, and we were prepared to keep troops in both countries for decades. Furthermore, both countries were economically viable and had highly literate populations.

None of these ingredients is present in Haiti. Haiti is a failed state riven by irreconcilable political and social divisions. The unexpectedly low incidence of violence against US forces in Haiti should not obscure the almost certain futility of our intervention there.

Also an object of justifiable Defense Department skepticism are peace-enforcement operations, especially in areas where we have no compelling strategic interests. Such operations, unlike genuine peace-keeping, presume actual or imminent resistance by at least one of the parties to the nominally "settled" dispute. In Bosnia, the Administration has committed the United States in principle to contribute ground combat forces to enforce a peace agreement that has yet to be reached. That agreement has proven elusive precisely because no one can come up with a formula for Bosnia's territorial division satisfactory to all parties concerned. Moreover, even if an agreement is reached, it probably will be inherently unenforceable simply because it will not be honored the moment one side or another thinks it could "create new facts on the ground" to get a better deal. This has been the history of the seemingly endless cease-fire agreements in the former Yugoslavia. There is no reason to believe a territorial settlement would fare any better. In Bosnia, peace enforcement would be synonymous with war. And that war would be in an area where the United States has never had interests critical to its security.

Participation in peace and humanitarian operations carries with it significant strategic and budgetary opportunity costs as well as domestic political risks. As of the beginning of 1995, the United States had almost 23,000 troops deployed

worldwide performing operations other than war. In February, the Defense Department requested a \$2 billion supplemental appropriation to cover the \$124 million in costs incurred last year in Haiti and for what it estimates it will spend in Haiti and other humanitarian and peace operations for the remainder of fiscal 1995.[4] Such operations traditionally have been financed out of service operations and maintenance accounts. Because these operations are not conducted on behalf of self-evident strategic interests, but often entail risk of and actual combat, they are, in terms of public and congressional support, politically difficult to sustain. Unexpected casualties exacerbate the situation by rendering such operations vulnerable to early termination. The humiliating departure of American forces from Lebanon and from Somalia indicate this reality.

The Place of Modernization

Let me now turn to the subject of modernization. For 40 years we modernized primarily against a Soviet threat which no longer exists and which will not be reconstituted, if ever, in any amount of time meaningful for US force planning purposes. During that 40 years the Pentagon and its allies on Capitol Hill and in the defense industry often exaggerated both the quantity and quality of the Soviet threat, which was real enough without amplification aimed at justifying budgets and satisfying worst-case planning.

There is nothing left to exaggerate, what with the Soviet Union's disappearance and Russia's military decrepitude. Even during the Cold War the United States never had any real peer in the quality of its air and sea power, notwithstanding the enormous investments the Soviet Union made in both. Even in such weapon categories as armor and artillery, the United States for the most part maintained a qualitative lead, though not one sufficient to offset the sheer size of Soviet ground forces.

Today, and for the foreseeable future, there is no foreign power able and willing to compete broadly and effectively with the United States in the quality of modern arms and their associated technologies. This does not mean that we should cease research and development and stop fielding new technologies. We want to maintain a substantial qualitative lead over any potential foe down the line. It does mean, however, that we can dispense with the urgency with which large buys of new and technologically more advanced weapons were rushed into the inventory as fast as they could be procured. It means that we can be much more selective in deciding what to field and when. We don't have to deploy every generation of technologically advanced weaponry. In some cases development and testing of a prototype is sufficient as we wait for the next generational leap in technology to come to fruition.

The post-Soviet world is a world in which we can significantly slow, and in some cases even halt, investment in the technologies of nuclear deterrence, strategic ballistic missile defense, anti-submarine warfare, and land and fleet air defense. We are no longer producing nuclear weapons; we won't need intercontinental ballistic missile defenses for the foreseeable future, assuming such defenses are feasible and affordable; few Third World countries have submarine forces worth the name; and no foreign air force today poses a serious threat to US surface forces because no foreign air force can gain air superiority over US air forces.

It is a world, in short, in which we can and must take a hard, fresh look at our modernization priorities. A good example is the F-22. A stealthy air superiority fighter would certainly be nice to have seven years from now, but the money could be far better spent. We will be able to perform the air superiority mission successfully against our potential adversaries for the foreseeable future with existing aircraft and modifications thereof. Only three or four countries field fighter aircraft and fighter pilots of a quality even approaching that of the United States, and they are all allies. The F-22 program could be limited to prototyping and testing, with some or all of the savings applied to resolve the one genuine crisis in US tactical aviation today, which is the sorry state of the US Navy's air-to-ground strike capabilities.

Another example is the Marine Corps' V-22 Osprey. Once again, this is a nice-to-have but very expensive technology. But, once again, it is a technology that may not be essential to future US Marine Corps' operations and for which an acceptable substitute--in this case helicopters (new and upgraded)--is available. Tilt-rotor aircraft seem well suited for such missions as special operations and anti-submarine warfare. The Marine Corps, however, has justified their acquisition primarily on the basis of enhancing performance of a mission whose utility and feasibility are highly questionable. Not since the 1950 Inchon landing has the Corps been called upon to conduct an amphibious assault.

Amphibious assaults are acts of last resort and are not undertaken when more favorable alternatives are available, as they have been since Inchon. Moreover, an enemy doesn't have to be very sophisticated to turn an assault into a bloody mess or even to deter an assault outright. Four years ago, the presence of Iraqi mines, which damaged two major American warships, contributed significantly to the US military leadership's decision to forego an amphibious assault on Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War. Money for the V-22 could be far better spent in strengthening the US Navy's chronically inadequate counter-mine-warfare capabilities.

Keeping Things in Strategic Perspective

The strategic situation we find ourselves in today in some ways resembles that which we confronted after World War I. During the 1920s and early 1930s we could plan our forces, pace their modernization, and make acquisition decisions on the assumption that US involvement in great power conflict was years if not decades away. The assumption of years of strategic warning did not reduce the imperatives of research and development, prototyping and testing, and doctrinal development; but it did relax the urgency of acquisition. There was no need to go to full-scale production with every new advance in technology. Full-scale production was ordered only when it became apparent, in the latter half of the 1930s, that another world war was in the making.

Back then, of course, it was far easier to move from a peacetime to a wartime economy. Technology in general was much simpler then, and the disparity between the civilian and military applications was considerably more narrow.

An informed strategic perspective on readiness and modernization, which is a component of readiness, broadly defined, is essential to making the right choices on operational and tactical readiness. In 1939 the French army was supremely ready for the kind of war it knew how to fight, wanted to fight, and which it assumed (or hoped) the Germans would fight. The French army also fielded air and ground technologies that were qualitatively competitive with those of the *Wehrmacht*. However, those technologies were present on the battlefield in very limited number because, during the interwar period, the French General Staff felt safe only in repeatedly and indiscriminately carrying new technologies into full-scale production.

I recently re-read David Halberstam's masterpiece on Vietnam, *The Best and the Brightest*,^[5] which ought to be required reading for every commissioned officer in the United States. One of the aspects of our defeat there that really jumps out even 20 years after Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City is the stunning combination of material readiness and intellectual unreadiness with which we entered Vietnam. We had enormous quantities of people, mobility, and firepower dedicated to the war effort. But we were utterly--and happily--ignorant of Vietnamese society and history, and especially of our Vietnamese adversary's character and style of warfare. Worse still, civilian and military leaders alike believed that knowledge of such things really didn't matter; what counted was only that which could be counted, and we had overwhelming numbers of everything. We were going to fight *our* kind of war in Vietnam, and the enemy would simply have to submit. Like the French in 1940, we were superbly ready: they for World War I, and we for another Korean War.

NOTES

1. A. J. Bacevich, "The Limits of Orthodoxy: The Use of Force After the Cold War," paper presented before the Aspen Institute Conference on the Use of Force in the Post-Cold War Era, Aspen, Colorado, 14-19 August 1994, pp. 19-20.
 2. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Bottom-Up Review: An Assessment* (Washington: Defense Budget Project, 1994), pp. 41-44.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 4. Eric Schmitt, "Military and Budget Office Duel Over Surprise Expenses," *The New York Times*, 18 January 1995, p. A19.
 5. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972).
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