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Rebuilding a Consensus on Defense

CHARLES S. ROBB

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Disagreements over defense spending, evident during the Cold War but tempered in the face of a major threat, intensified with the demise of the Soviet Union. Although the Pentagon's last major review of defense strategy--the so-called Bottom-Up Review of 1993--helped restore some consensus, without a new, more credible roadmap, differences over defense spending now threaten to become highly divisive.

Congress recently passed the defense authorization bill for fiscal year 1997. Included in this legislation is a provision (sponsored by Senators Lieberman, Coats, McCain, Nunn, myself, and several others) requiring the Department of Defense to reevaluate thoroughly its defense strategy. In addition to requiring a comprehensive internal review, the legislation calls for an outside panel of defense experts to assess the nation's future military strategy and force structure. The panel will report its final conclusions to the Congress toward the end of 1997.

The Bottom-Up Review (BUR), which established post-Cold War force level targets through 1999, was criticized for sizing the total force structure to fit a prescribed defense budget rather than to meet future threats, for appeasing the military services by maintaining their respective shares of the total force, and for making questionable assumptions about future conflict scenarios and the forces required to achieve victory in them. Despite these and other criticisms, the BUR force structure has held sway and essentially been adhered to by the Congress in terms of funded ground divisions, carrier battle groups, and fighter wings.

Support for the BUR force structure is already beginning to unravel. Due to the extensive modernization efforts required over the next 10 to 20 years to replace aging Cold War weapon systems, most Democrats and many Republicans consider the BUR force unaffordable in a period of fiscal austerity. Funding for the BUR force over the next decade will, by some estimates, fall short by considerably more than \$100 billion. This assumes that the defense budget, as currently envisioned in the budget resolution passed by the Congress in June 1996, will continue to decline gradually in real terms from one to two percent per year through 2002.[1] Recent public opinion polls, which show mixed views on defense spending but lean toward reductions, suggest that spending more than called for in the resolution will be difficult.[2]

Even those in Congress willing to increase defense budgets significantly are nonetheless wary of using the BUR as a guide. Like many other members, they prefer a fresh policy that better addresses a host of difficult issues not fully resolved by the BUR, such as modernization priorities, the active and reserve force mix, peacekeeping commitments, and infrastructure reductions.

A lack of consensus--whether for more or less defense--has many negative consequences. Planning long-term federal budgets intelligently becomes difficult not knowing where the defense slice of the budget is heading. Considerable resources will be wasted starting and stopping or slowing major new acquisition programs in response to the whims of a divided public and Congress. Troop morale can suffer if every year's end strengths, training levels, and pay raises fluctuate unpredictably. We also send mixed signals--confusing friends and emboldening foes.

A lack of consensus ensues not only from the absence of a clear and present danger, but also reflects the complexities of deciding how much is enough, of balancing domestic and international obligations, and of weighing near versus long-term priorities. As a first step toward restoring a national consensus, and as our first step in reevaluating US military strategy and force structure, we need to return to fundamentals. We need to agree on a basic framework for evaluating our defense needs. This article explores alternative frameworks, and examines some of the most critical military policy issues that must be resolved before consensus can be achieved.

Choosing a Framework

Four basic frameworks are evident in congressional deliberations on defense: historical, threat-driven, budget-constrained, and strategy-based. The most common framework is historical--comparing current to past defense budgets in absolute and relative terms. Advocates of increased defense spending observe that the \$265 billion authorized for fiscal year 1997 represents a 2.1 percent decrease in constant dollars from the fiscal year 1996 authorization, a 36-percent decrease from fiscal year 1985, and about \$60 billion less than the average annual spending from 1950 to 1990. Focusing on the procurement component of the defense budget depicts a starker trend, with acquisition of new weapon systems down over 50 percent from 1985.

In terms of the nation's economic might, defense spending now represents 3.6 percent of gross domestic product--the lowest percentage since 1940 and lower than the percentages of over 30 nations (including many potential threats). It could dip below three percent as early as 2001. In terms of the taxpayer's dollar, defense now consumes less than 17 percent of the federal budget, down from percentages in excess of 40 percent during the 1960s.

Defense critics respond that the defense budget, though reduced, still represents in real terms 80 percent of Cold War spending levels. Current spending in fact roughly matches the amounts allocated in the mid-1970s, and the sharp rise in procurement spending during the "Reagan build-up" of the 1980s delivered large inventories of weapons to last us into the next century.[3]

The first framework is good for rhetoric, but too simplistic for real-world planning. "We're not spending enough now because we spent more in the past" is hardly a sound basis for planning. Historical spending, though a convenient benchmark, is but one of many factors that must be considered in formulating current and future defense budgets.

The second defense spending framework compares US defense preparations to those of our plausible enemies. Critics of large defense budgets ask why, when we no longer face 30 Warsaw Pact ground divisions in top readiness for an invasion of Western Europe, should we be spending at levels only 20 percent below Cold War levels? The US defense budget now exceeds those of our eight foremost potential enemies combined, and none of these spends more on defense even on a per capita basis.[4] Why does the United States suddenly need to be prepared for engaging these lesser threats, when during the Cold War threats other than the Soviet Union were essentially afterthoughts?

In response, defense advocates acknowledge reduced spending by our potential enemies, but point to their large standing armies and inventories of weapons. The United States now ranks third in military manpower, second in main battle tanks, and second in surface combatant ships.[5] It would require at least its current force levels to engage decisively and simultaneously only two significant threats--North Korea and Iraq (the BUR force is essentially based on this two simultaneous conflict scenario). China's growing military ambitions, evidenced in part by an expanding nuclear missile force and large-scale military exercises in March 1996 meant to intimidate neighboring Taiwan, suggest that the United States could again face a major military competitor on the world stage. If China sustains its GDP growth rate of over nine percent per annum (almost twice the rate projected for the United States), early in the next century it could afford a major regional fighting force that could decisively challenge US power projection in East Asia. The global threat of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons use by a rogue regime or terrorists is also cited as a growing and all too likely threat that will require significant defense expenditures to negate. Moreover, ongoing threats of regional instability are already pushing our troops in some theaters to record operational tempos in support of peace operations and humanitarian efforts.

Specific threats aside, defense advocates point out that US defense spending relative to potential enemies will remain high due to the vast oceans that the United States must traverse to reach trouble spots (exacerbated by a reduction in forward US bases), the high ratio of offensive to defensive forces required to insert our troops into well-defended areas, and the overwhelming strength needed to ensure victory with minimal losses (a reflection of the US public's limited tolerance for losses when the country's survival is not at stake).

And then there are the unknowns. History has shown repeatedly that the next major threat can be difficult to predict. Preparation for modern conflict involves major new weapon systems that can take more than a decade to develop and produce--but the United States has seldom identified potential adversaries in time to permit orderly planning and

preparation for war. Even a conflict with an enemy expected to be dealt with expeditiously or in a "limited" fashion can, like Vietnam, evolve into a protracted and major confrontation.

This second, threat-oriented framework is more useful than the first, but still problematic if used in isolation. It creates a tail-wagging-the-dog scenario, where levels of US defense spending are dictated by the caprices of potential enemies. It tends to overemphasize immediate and obvious threats while underrating future unknowns. It also underestimates the importance of economic security and the value of security-enhancing actions less directly tied to the threats, such as cooperative and preventive measures.

The third framework is an economic one: spend no more than you can afford. Adherents of this framework see national security as a nebulous business, where defense spending levels correlate only roughly with our level of security--a terrorist would be undaunted by a US Army twice its current size, while Russia would still be substantially deterred by a much smaller US nuclear force. Recognizing this "fog of security," they support spending a fiscally "reasonable" sum on defense, where "reasonable" is generally understood to be an amount politically acceptable to the taxpayer and not an excessive burden on the economy. As is the case in the first framework, one year's spending is often used as a fair gauge of what is appropriate for the next year. During this period of modest economic expansion, growing entitlements, and an enormous public debt, application of this framework portends a steadily shrinking level of "affordable" defense.

Reflecting the lessons learned by past great nations that undermined their economic foundations by overextending their military might, this framework rests on the supposition that large defense budgets are in fact an economic burden. Although studies of the effects of defense spending on the economy have reached mixed conclusions, there is general agreement in the Congress that incremental reductions in federal spending that directly reduce a severe and sustained deficit are economically prudent.[6] Whether those reductions should come mostly from defense, social programs, or other sources is at the heart of this year's visceral budget debates. This framework, while appealing to many deficit-hawks, is overly simplistic and insulates our budgeting decisions from international realities.

The fourth and final framework establishes defense spending at levels adequate to meet basic national security objectives. This is the most obvious and sensible approach. It involves a sequence of steps: establish national objectives, develop a military strategy to achieve the objectives, and then define the force structure required to carry out the strategy. Tying force levels to basic objectives rather than past levels, specific threats, or perceived budget availability is eminently logical. It is the preferred approach of military planners, and has been applied with varying success by past administrations. This textbook approach was promised in the Bottom-Up Review, named as such because it was supposed to begin with a ground-up evaluation of force requirements needed to meet the national objectives and then costed out. Critics charge that in fact the process was reversed, with the BUR force structure designed to fit a budget limit and a national security policy formulated after the fact.

Implemented properly, this framework holds the focus on national objectives, and keeps strategy and force structure issues in proper perspective. Because it is broad in scope, it avoids the second framework's narrow spotlight on specific threats. If it includes economic security as one of its objectives, it answers the third framework's call for affordability. Most important, when forces are cut or added, it makes it easier to identify the consequences for national security. Of the \$11.2 billion added by the Congress to the President's 1997 defense budget, almost half was for programs not part of the Pentagon's acquisition blueprint for the next several years. Much of that spending went instead to satisfy member "interest items" (pork). The absence of a clear framework linking objectives to programs invites this behavior.

The first three frameworks dominate current congressional debates over defense spending. The public is warned, often simplistically, that we have gone too far by cutting defense x or y percent. Or that we should cut defense further because there are no or few threats. Or that the deficit must be reigned in and that defense must share in the sacrifice. It is striking how infrequently the fourth and most meaningful framework--meeting our basic security objectives--is applied in the Congress or other public fora. It is not surprising, then, that a new consensus has proven elusive.

National Objectives

The preferred (fourth) framework begins with an examination of national security objectives. The next review, as well, should define these objectives up front. There are innumerable ways to articulate these objectives. For the purpose of

exploring areas where consensus is lacking, the following articulation should suffice:

- Protect the US homeland, as well as citizens, forces, and assets overseas, from attack by another nation.
- Protect and advance vital US political, economic, and military interests overseas.
- Protect and support key US allies and maintain strong and effective alliances.
- Prevent and deter the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
- Protect US territory, citizens, and assets from terrorist attack.
- Protect and promote democratic regimes and institutions.
- Support peace operations and humanitarian efforts where appropriate.
- Be prepared for a full restoration of US military might should a new (or renewed) superpower threat arise.

A brief review of these objectives and their most contentious aspects follows.

The first objective--protecting the US proper and its citizens, forces, and assets overseas from attack--is served by traditional ground, air, and sea forces, as well as our strategic nuclear forces by virtue of their deterrent role. Its most controversial aspect is whether the United States should deploy an extensive national missile defense for homeland protection, or effective theater systems for force and ally protection overseas. The Congress is divided largely along partisan lines over whether more or less should be allocated for missile defense, and deeply divided over whether the testing and deployment of certain systems could undermine the 1972 ABM Treaty--a cornerstone of modern arms control.

Perhaps the most important action for resolving the dispute is to prove that the technology does or will soon perform as required. Over \$38 billion has been spent on missile defense research since then-President Reagan initiated the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars" program, in 1983. Yet we have little to show for it save numerous, mostly unsuccessful tests and warehouses full of paper studies. It would make more sense to concentrate efforts on one or two key programs with the zeal and focus of the Apollo program, rather than spreading our dollars across at least seven theater programs and several national systems. Once we are convinced that even a basic system can work effectively against an unsophisticated threat, then consensus on expanding our missile defense efforts should soon follow.

The second objective, protecting vital interests, is especially contentious because of the diverse views on what constitutes "vital." There have been laudable efforts to carefully define these interests and equally commendable attempts to establish criteria by which we would deploy troops to defend them.[7] But we cannot expect to establish an *a priori* consensus on what is vital, nor that the President, the Congress, or the public will make decisions based on static, preestablished criteria. Thus a useful step toward consensus in this area is the acknowledgment that the US response to each and every challenge to its interests overseas is highly complicated and will be decided on a case-by-case basis. Also helpful would be the acknowledgment that the United States should not forgo intervention in situations that challenge our interests simply because those interests are not "vital." Where the risks for US troops are relatively limited and the costs within reason, we should protect "important" interests, such as stability in the Balkans.

Burdensharing and NATO enlargement are the most contentious elements of the third objective--protecting and supporting allies and maintaining strong and effective alliances. Whether our allies need to contribute more to common security efforts is a perennial debate in Congress. As was the case during the Cold War, more contributions are in order from our major allies. Nonetheless, we should acknowledge some significant developments. During the Gulf War, our allies contributed roughly one quarter of the troops, and over 88 percent of the war's costs.[8] In 1991, Japan agreed to a substantial increase in the amount of support it provides for military forces based there. By one estimate, that contribution's value has now reached over \$4 billion per year.[9] This support aside, the ability to station troops and base carriers in Japan today saves the US several billion dollars annually that would otherwise be necessary to support additional carrier battle groups to offset the lost forward base, as well as the additional sea and airlift that would be needed to carry troops from the United States or other distant locations to a contingency in the Far East.[10] Similarly, the US presence in Europe, and growing land presence in the Middle East, can save substantial sums in operating and acquisition costs related to ongoing contingencies in those areas.

The Congress passed legislation this year supporting NATO enlargement, but many outstanding issues remain. Pushing NATO's geographic bounds eastward serves to improve NATO's position insofar as NATO may one day again face a

Russian war machine aimed west, but that same push could be the impetus for a renewed Cold War. The cost of miscalculation will be measured in the hundreds of billions of dollars. NATO's lack of solidarity--evidenced repeatedly in NATO and non-NATO missions since the end of the Cold War--is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Adding members will only diminish prospects for a unified consensus. At the same time, however, enlargement will facilitate deliberation, limit misunderstandings, and ease tensions further into central Europe. It will also bring in new military capabilities, but at a price--the US share required to help modernize and integrate the militaries of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia has been estimated at between \$4.8 and \$18.9 billion.[11]

The spread of weapons of mass destruction combined with terrorism has been referred to as "our number one national security threat" by retiring Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia. Meeting these threats constitutes the next two national security objectives. Concerns have been raised over whether enough is being done in light of the bomb attacks against US military personnel in Riyadh and Dhahran. US programs to defeat the spread of weapons of mass destruction have been criticized for involving the expenditure of dwindling US defense dollars on converting Russian defense industrial facilities to non-defense purposes. Nonetheless, consensus--and funding--for both national objectives remain strong. Whether these objectives are fulfilled will depend on, more than any other factor, the success of US intelligence efforts--especially human intelligence. Simply budgeting more dollars for intelligence will not suffice. Shrewd, bold, and innovative operations will be needed to stop these threats at the source.

The next two national security objectives, protecting democratic regimes and institutions, and supporting peace and humanitarian operations, are not in dispute--unless they involve sending US troops into areas where the United States has limited political or economic interests. As in Somalia, this can be a true test of national altruism. Critics argue that we are overextending our military in these types of operations, and that we should not be expending scarce resources and risking American lives in actions that do not involve our vital interests. Early in 1996, over 80,000 military personnel were supporting peace and humanitarian operations. Annual costs for these operations now approach or exceed \$2 billion--quadruple the amount expended in fiscal year 1992.[12]

If we are to view peace operations in terms of potential American lives saved by preventing major regional wars, then a \$2 billion investment seems small. If we are to view this investment in purely financial terms--it is a bargain. The Persian Gulf War cost the United States and its allies well over \$60 billion. The Korean War, in today's dollars, cost over \$300 billion, and Vietnam over \$480 billion.[13] As discussed earlier, trying to define precisely vital interests, or to establish criteria under which we would deploy military personnel, is not very useful. However, some consensus on our total level of commitment to these operations would certainly be worth pursuing.

The final national objective of being prepared for a major buildup has mixed support. The Congress, for example, has kept two major shipyards open for construction of advanced destroyers, as well as two major yards capable of producing nuclear-powered ships. The Navy could get by with one of each, potentially saving billions of dollars, but industrial base concerns--not to mention political realities--have kept the yards open. In contrast, industrial base arguments for building additional B-2 bombers or M-1 tanks have not been as successful (although significant sums are being spent to maintain production capacity and critical skills for these and many other military systems).

As budgets tighten further and if it becomes apparent that the rise of a new superpower is unlikely, industrial base protection should be curtailed significantly. It might be useful in the upcoming strategy review to agree upon when and under what circumstances we should cut back. In any case, more innovative, less costly options should be explored. One such innovation is the Army's Armament Retooling and Manufacturing Support Initiative. It provides incentives for commercial firms to collocate with Army ammunition facilities to share overhead costs. The result is preserved Army production capacity at a greatly reduced cost.

As noted earlier, the upcoming review should begin with a careful examination of national objectives. Maintaining the proper framework, it should then explore the military strategy and force structure needed to fulfill the objectives or the review will run the risk of losing focus and distorting priorities. Specifically, the review should recommend the number of military and peace operations the United States should be capable of executing; reexamine warning, mobilization, and conflict duration assumptions; posit requirements for lift, prepositioning, and forward presence; identify excess infrastructure; redefine the role of the reserves; develop a strategy for information warfare; set forth a roadmap for

exploiting the revolution in military affairs; assess command structure changes; and make specific modernization choices.

The Pentagon and the independent panel need to make hard choices. Where specific decisions cannot be reached, they must steer a course for the Congress and the nation to resolve contentious issues. Following these recommendations, the next review should provide a more widely supported, and hence longer-lasting, defense blueprint as we enter the new century.

NOTES

1. The Clinton Administration's long-term funding profile for defense dips lower initially than that proposed in the Congress's budget resolution, but rises to a higher level in 2002 to fund an anticipated surge in purchases of ships, aircraft, and other major weapon systems.
2. According to an ICR Survey Research poll conducted 28 June - 2 July 1996, 57 percent of those Americans surveyed did not support the additional defense spending authority added by the Congress to the President's defense budget request this year, while 34 percent favored it. A similar poll by The Mellman Group recently showed 70 percent of America's youth (18- to 30-year-olds) opposed the spending increase. A University of Maryland survey conducted at the end of 1995 showed a large majority of Americans favoring a strong defense, but a modest majority favoring significant cuts in defense spending.
3. Defense advocates respond further that the large weapon inventories built up during the Vietnam War, along with reduced public sentiment for defense spending and a brief rapprochement with the Soviets, led to reduced spending levels in the mid-1970s. In retrospect, defense spending was too low and resulted in a "hollow military" with undertrained or poorly equipped units. To avoid a repeat of this, the Congress has fully funded readiness in recent years, but has gone too far, many argue, in relying on the large but aging Cold War weapon inventories to carry us into the next century.
4. US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* (Washington: GPO, 1995), and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1994-1995* (London: IISS, 1994).
5. *The Military Balance 1994-1995*.
6. Regarding the effects of defense spending, see Gordon Adams, *Defense Spending and the Economy: Does the Defense Dollar Make a Difference?* (Washington: Defense Budget Project, 1987).
7. Regarding defining vital interests, see The Commission on America's National Interests, *America's National Interests* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Science and International Affairs, JFK School of Government, Harvard University, 1996). Regarding criteria for troop deployment, see Caspar Weinberger, "Uses of Military Power," Remarks to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 28 November 1984, and Anthony Lake, "Defining Missions, Setting Deadlines: Meeting New Security Challenges in the Post-Cold War World," Address to George Washington University, 7 March 1996.
8. Based on information from the Department of Defense Comptroller and Congressional Research Service.
9. Stephen Daggett, *Defense Burdensharing: Is Japan's Host Nation Support a Model for Other Allies?* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 20 June 1994).
10. For every one forward carrier on station, several others are needed to account for overhaul and maintenance, transit, and training. The loss of the forward base in Japan would increase the number of carriers needed to support Western Pacific operations by two to three carriers, depending on the number of months out of the year the United States wants to have a carrier on station there.
11. Ivan Eland, *The Costs of Expanding the NATO Alliance* (Washington: Congressional Budget Office, March 1996).

12. Personnel and budget estimates from Congressional Research Service.

13. Stephen Daggett, *Costs of Major U.S. Wars and Recent Military Operations* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 13 December 1994).

Senator Charles S. Robb was first elected to the United States Senate in 1988. He serves as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Foreign Relations Committee, and the Intelligence Committee. He is the only member of Congress in history to serve on all three national security committees. Senator Robb retired from the Marine Corps Reserve in 1991 after 34 years of active and reserve service. A Vietnam veteran, he commanded an infantry company in combat and was awarded the Bronze Star with Combat V and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star.

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