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# National Mobilization: An Option in Future Conflicts?

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Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, some commentators drew a parallel between al Qaeda's strike and Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor, and between the ensuing struggle and the Second World War. There was sporadic talk of mobilization, which was easily enough dismissed as out of step with the realities of the War on Terror. Unconventional warfighters like terrorists are by definition immune to the massive concentrations of power that are the traditional object of a mobilization. At the same time, conventional war is generally regarded as oriented toward smaller, more professional, and high-tech forces fighting in "demassified" conflicts.<sup>1</sup> However, despite a great deal of hand-wringing on the part of social critics, the really difficult question was not asked: Would a World War II-scale mobilization even have been possible after 9/11 if it had been deemed an appropriate response?

With a much reduced emphasis on military competition between the great powers and far less talk of American "declinism" today than there was 15 years ago, the ability of major economies to bear drastically enlarged military burdens has been discussed far less of late. Even Paul Kennedy, who popularized the declinist thesis in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* in 1987, recently backed away from it.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, two major developments have set the stage for a new debate on rises in military expenditures.

The first of these developments is a changed economic and fiscal outlook, specifically a return to the massive US budget deficits of the 1980s, and less exuberant economic expectations than was the case just a few years ago. The illusion of perfection at no cost has largely faded. The other development is the demands placed on US forces since 9/11, with talk of their being stretched too thin by commitments in Iraq and elsewhere becoming fairly widespread.

While the possible emergence of a large peer competitor has never disappeared from consideration, other motivations for mobilization have emerged in recent years. One is the drive to “terrorist-proof” the United States, the final bill for which may run into the trillions.<sup>3</sup> Another is a more open embrace of an “imperial” position likely to involve more preventative and unilateral actions, as well as prolonged occupations and nation-building projects, and the extension of America’s sphere of influence to new regions like sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia. These factors already have led to the post-9/11 expansion of the defense budget and the institution of the Department of Homeland Security, hailed as the biggest reshuffling of the executive branch since 1947. They also have brought renewed discussion of conscription and the expansion of the armed forces, with bills pending in Congress to increase the US armed forces by tens of thousands of personnel over the next five years.

American requirements, capacities, and investments aside, the question of military expansion also speaks to the capacities of other nations and the relationship of the United States with them, in terms of both the dangers of great power conflict and the international distribution of security responsibilities. The European Union and Japan, for instance, have been seeking to develop militaries capable of meeting enlarged international responsibilities since well before 9/11, efforts which have been extremely sluggish. Europe set for itself the relatively modest goal of being able to deploy a 60,000-strong force 3,000 miles away for one year by 2003. That target date has come and gone, and it seems unlikely that any such force will be made operational before 2012—if then. The Defense Capabilities Initiative, intended to close the growing technological gap between Europe and the United States, has been similarly disappointing.<sup>4</sup>

Observers looking to explain that sluggishness, like Robert Kagan in his recent book *On Paradise and Power*, have commonly focused on the relatively pacifistic political cultures of the EU’s member states. However, these nations have been grappling with sluggish economies for a much longer time, and in many cases also with fiscal crises which dwarf what the United States now faces. Given the massive cost of a fundamental expansion or restructuring of their armed forces, this factor cannot be lightly dismissed. It also throws a light on what other states (i.e. China) might do if and when they gain the economic wherewithal to pose a challenge to the United States. To

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what degree would they be able to translate their new economic power into military power?

The question is not an easy one to answer. To date none of the “New Economies” has been forced to undertake a large-scale military mobilization. However, if a real need arose to do so, they would no doubt make the attempt. The issue then is just how far they can go in such a mobilization, and how long they might be able to sustain it. While this article cannot be the final word in such an argument, it also is not the first. Accordingly, it is appropriate to review some of the discussion of this issue in recent years.

### ***Mobilizing in the Post-Industrial Era***

It may seem counterintuitive to question the capability of today’s advanced economies to mobilize relative to where they stood a half century or more ago when they were much smaller and less sophisticated. In 2002 the US economy was ten times as large as it was in 1940, and roughly five times as large as it was in 1945.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, that growth has partially been fueled by changes which are trade-offs from the standpoint of mobilization.

The first is that geography offers less advantage today than it did in the 1940s, as the case of the United States makes clear. The fact that the United States was richly endowed with natural resources and physically isolated from the main World War II battlefronts by two oceans allowed its industrial base to mobilize unimpeded by fighting, in contrast with Britain or Japan, each dependent on vulnerable sea lanes, or Germany, subjected to strategic bombing. A greater reliance today on imported natural resources and manufacturing practices dependent on outsourced components makes the United States much more susceptible to such interference. This goes not only for attacks by an adversary, but the precautions involved in tightening up the borders, as demonstrated in the wake of 9/11. “Transportation issues played havoc with order flows and drove up shipping costs,” and the plants practicing just-in-time manufacturing, like those belonging to Ford, Honda, and Toyota, came to a halt.<sup>6</sup> At the macroeconomic level the result was a one-percent drop in American industrial production, largely due to the disruption of industry in the week before a semblance of normality returned.

Changes in military technology also make it more difficult for the United States to insulate itself from a conflict abroad. Long-range aircraft and missiles permit attacks on the US homeland. This includes not only strategic forces like those of Russia and China, but the prospect of crude cruise missiles launched from offshore freighters by smaller opponents, a feat arguably within the reach of terrorist groups. It also includes the widened possibilities for infiltration and attack by saboteurs, terrorists, and special forces units, given easier transport and more effective, compact weapons, even if they do

not possess weapons of mass destruction. A sophisticated adversary could dispatch a large number of such teams to infiltrate the United States and cause havoc in wartime, a threat against which elaborate missile defense schemes would be useless. Computer attacks, similarly, are undeterred by distance, and attacks by single viruses in the past, like the “Love Bug,” are estimated to have caused billions of dollars in damages. Should such attacks be staged by a large, determined force of cyberwarriors rather than a single cracker, the damage to the economy could be substantially greater.

Second, several studies in recent decades have pointed to a neglect of traditional manufacturing and heavy industry as a problem.<sup>7</sup> Manufacturing now provides 14 percent of America’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), rather than the nearly 27 percent it provided in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the problem of the United States in the 1930s was underutilization of its vast industrial capacity, due to a lack of demand. Factories were left at a standstill and a quarter of the labor force out of work in the Great Depression. With the war effort providing new demand, America’s economic output grew 75 percent during the conflict, after adjustment for inflation. By contrast, a recent RAND Corporation report has noted that should it become necessary for the US Army to equip and arm more than the 26 heavy divisions for which equipment is already available, the lack of industrial capacity would represent the biggest problem for further expansion.<sup>9</sup>

The changing nature of economic productivity is also a reason why industrial bases may be less susceptible to mobilization today than they were a half-century ago. Computerization, and the practices enabled by it like just-in-time manufacturing, mean that increases in productivity often have been accompanied by tighter coupling and less slack.<sup>10</sup> Older, less efficient ways of going about an activity are eliminated through standardization of process and procedure, leaving less room for improvisation or adaptation.<sup>11</sup> This suggests a greater level of difficulty in converting civilian production, and, more important, a heightened vulnerability to disruptions, demonstrated by the damage the 9/11 attack’s ripple effects inflicted on the financial markets and the manufacturing and transport sectors.<sup>12</sup> Combined with the “demassified” character of modern industrial production and warfare, this makes it very unlikely that the United States would experience a wartime economic boom comparable to that of the 1940s, helping to bear the burden of such drastically heightened spending. Without the 15-20 percent per year real GDP growth of the early war years, the Herculean effort America made in that conflict would have simply been out of the question. That defense spending in 1945 was roughly equal to the country’s whole income in 1941 in dollar terms is ample proof of this.

Third, critics have frequently pointed to diminished civic militarism as an obstacle to such efforts, noting the formidable political resistance among

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***“Would a World War II-scale mobilization even have been possible after 9/11 if it had been deemed an appropriate response?”***

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citizens to paying higher taxes or serving in the military. The widespread support for military action following the 9/11 attacks did not translate into an equally widespread willingness among Americans to enlist, or make conscription less unthinkable politically.<sup>13</sup> This trend is variously attributed to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence, the “law of the increasing cost of war,”<sup>14</sup> cultural change from the 1960s on,<sup>15</sup> a lack of leadership on the part of elites generally eschewing military service,<sup>16</sup> or some combination of these factors.

Nevertheless, there is considerable room for argument with these claims. The fact remains that the territory of the United States remains relatively secure from conventional and unconventional attack. Western Europe is much more vulnerable to Middle Eastern missiles than the United States, and even the War on Terror is being fought primarily abroad. The relative shrinkage of manufacturing in terms of its share of jobs or contribution to the Gross Domestic Product, or the reduction in the output of traditional heavy industry, is not synonymous with the absolute decline of industry. While total steel production has declined since 1973,<sup>17</sup> output turned back up in the 1990s and the total dollar value of American manufacturing has risen since then. The perils of computer warfare may also have been overhyped, perhaps grossly so if experts like Martin Libicki are to be believed.<sup>18</sup> It also can be pointed out that nostalgia about the World War II era has obscured the actualities of that period, with partisan and domestic politics not simply disappearing after Pearl Harbor. It also may be argued that smaller, volunteer forces are a much more practical tool than larger, draft-based armies for the sorts of constabulary missions which will make up the bulk of the military’s duties in the near future. The soldiers who fought World War II were called on to “fight and win America’s wars” rather than to act as an imperial army, as Eliot Cohen notes.<sup>19</sup> Nor was the patience of the American people infinite even where this task was concerned. By 1945 there was considerable pressure on the Roosevelt/Truman Administration to “bring the boys home.”

The fact also remains that other countries, in less geographically advantageous positions, are subject to the same trends. The shift away from heavy manufacturing, the vulnerabilities attendant on rising economic inter-

connection, and cultural and political trends undermining civic militarism also are evident elsewhere, particularly in Western Europe and Japan. Indeed, particularly with regard to cultural developments, they are even more pronounced in these nations than in the United States, as observers like Kagan would suggest. This is not to say that these points should be lightly dismissed, of course. However, they are only dimensions of the larger issue, and another aspect of the issue is well worth examining, the slack present not in single industries, but rather in whole societies.

### ***Slack and Mobilization***

While commonly discussed in a much more limited sense, the concept of slack carries over to entire societies, which depend on untapped human and material resources for pursuing new endeavors or meeting emergencies. The level of governmental activity as a part of overall societal activity—specifically its patterns of taxation, spending, and debt—offers a guide to how much slack a society has. The reason is simple. Endeavors like mobilization represent an abrupt enlargement of government spending, and have to be paid for by redirecting the nation's resources, typically by raising taxes or borrowing money. Looking at how much a government taxes, spends, or owes in relative terms under normal circumstances gives a clue to what resources are not being exploited at the time, and therefore how much more it might be able to do in the event of an emergency. A higher level of untaxed income, lower spending levels, and a lower debt burden are representative of greater slack, and vice-versa.

Given the popularity of comparisons of the present with World War II, during the last two years of which the United States devoted 37 percent of its national income to the war effort, it would be useful to contrast today's fiscal situation with that era's. Gross debt was equal to 52.4 percent of US Gross Domestic Product in 1940, and that was after a decade of economic contraction in the Great Depression. By contrast it was 60 percent in 2002 at the end of a prolonged economic boom and years of what were by some measures budget surpluses—unusually good times in the view of economists, rather than unusually bad ones. More important, overall tax levels were far lower. Federal revenue levels in 1940 were 6.8 percent of GDP, compared with 18 to 20 percent of GDP in recent decades, or three times as much.

Additionally, while the United States accumulated massive debt in the World War II years (equal to 120 percent of GDP) the postwar drawdown, combined with postwar economic growth, was sufficient to reduce that proportion over the decades that followed, even through years of deficits. Between 1946 and 1980 the debt level fell from 121.6 percent of GDP to 32.5 percent, by almost three-quarters. In the 1950s, during the early part of this



drop, it occurred while defense spending ranged from 9.3 to 14.2 percent, often in years of lighter taxes and budget surpluses.<sup>20</sup> It should be pointed out that fewer social programs were being funded in the 1950s than later. However, even in the 1960s and 1970s, with programs like Medicare largely in place, the United States fighting the Vietnam War, and deficits the norm, America's economic growth still outpaced the expansion of its debt.

By contrast the national debt spiked upward sharply in the 1980s, with defense expenditures at levels of only 5 to 6.5 percent of GDP, these relatively lower expenditures apparently less supportable than the higher spending of a decade or two earlier. It took World War I to turn Britain from a creditor nation into a debtor nation. The 1980s, with their comparatively much lower level of strain, were sufficient to effect that transformation for the United States. The short-lived fiscal optimism of the late 1990s aside, it is clear that any conceivable combination of defense cuts and economic growth would be insufficient to pay down the debt the United States accumulated during the late Cold War. Moreover, today defense spending in the area of only four percent of GDP goes along with budget deficits and increases in the debt comparable to those of the 1980s.

The heightening of security spending since 9/11 is responsible for only a fraction of recent deficits (about a fourth of it, according to one estimate), but that this spending is contributing to the debt is still indicative of the problem of a tighter fiscal situation. Additionally, consistent with this picture, the direction in which the US economy is moving is toward more spending, more debt, and, at least proportionately, less slack, for a number of reasons which have nothing to do with the War on Terror. The most widely discussed of these is the pressure which aging populations are putting on the social safety net, already a major driver of deficit growth.<sup>21</sup> The federal debt is expected to almost double to \$11.8 trillion by 2013, at which time the retirement of the baby boomers could send the debt spiraling still higher. By 2030, spending on the elderly could rise by 80 percent relative to national income, threatening peacetime deficits dwarfing those of the 1980s or today.<sup>22</sup> Such straight-line projections have their limitations, but today it is difficult to conceive of alternative scenarios given the drivers of such change. Social Security payouts aside, essential services like health care are becoming more expensive relative to income.<sup>23</sup> Also consistent with a trend toward older populations, though not entirely due to it, savings rates have declined<sup>24</sup> and private debt has risen,<sup>25</sup> placing other strains on the tax base. No one expects the cost of health care to drop in the foreseeable future, or the trend toward an older population to reverse itself, but the contrary.

Another reason which should not be overlooked is the rate of economic growth, so crucial to absorbing and recovering from shocks, as after



World War II. Despite the hype about a global economy turbo-charged by integration and information technology, epitomized by authors like Thomas Friedman, world economic growth has actually *slowed* in recent decades. The rate of world GDP expansion fell from 5.3 percent a year in the 1960s to 3.9 percent in the 1970s, 3.2 percent in the 1980s, and only 2.3 percent in the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

This pattern has been evident throughout the developed as well as the undeveloped states, so that it cannot be explained away as simply an object lesson in the advantages of backwardness, or the gap between “competitive and noncompetitive” states. Certainly, China’s and India’s comparative underdevelopment is a strong contributor to their high growth rates, and US competitiveness explains its having stronger growth than Europe and Japan. From 1995 to 2000 America’s economy was expanding at almost five percent a year. However, this level of growth was the exception and not the rule for the United States as well as the rest of the world. American performance over the whole decade was only a bit over three percent after adjustment for inflation, not much better than that of the 1970s or 1980s. Reports of six percent GDP growth in the last half of 2003, all the rage among economists at the time of this writing, should therefore be kept in perspective.<sup>27</sup>

Of course an economic picture contrasting so starkly with the conventional wisdom requires some explanation. The propensity of stable societies to develop special interest groups and the acceleration of the rate of change to the point of “future shock”<sup>28</sup> have been identified by some observers as causes. Complexity science suggests a broader theory, Joseph Tainter arguing that beyond a certain point a society’s investments in new institutions or activities tend to produce diminishing returns, consuming their slack.<sup>29</sup> These arguments are all well worth exploring, but doing so would be beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, whatever the precise cause, the implications are obvious. Slowing growth means that public goods once easily afforded and which electorates and governments are loathe to curtail weigh more heavily on the tax base. Debt mounts, the costs of debt service rise, and interest rates go up to the detriment of growth. Citizens pay more for less, making them resistant to the imposition of any further demands in a vicious cycle.

Of course it is frequently claimed that should the need arise, the United States could muster the political will to raise taxes or slash spending in other areas. However, an honest look at the historical record shows that partisan and domestic politics have not simply been swept aside in the name of national interest during mobilizations, even in the 1940s.<sup>30</sup> Where taxes are concerned, the fact remains that today’s tax levels are broadly equivalent to those levied during the Second World War. Federal revenue levels peaked at 20.9 percent of GDP in 1944, compared with the 20 percent raised in peacetime in recent years.<sup>31</sup> The political challenges facing those who would rewrite the

bills authorizing mandatory spending, particularly those affecting the elderly, need no elaboration. Rather than a tax hike or Social Security reform, what has materialized thus far in this decade is a sizable tax cut and the passage of a prescription drug benefit for Medicare recipients, the largest entitlement since the Great Society programs of the 1960s. Moreover, according to the various explanations given by observers concerned with the economic and fiscal picture, this may be the rule and not the exception in the years to come.

In short, the United States of World War II and most of the Cold War was a substantially less-taxed, lower spending, and less indebted society than today's, giving it more fiscal slack on which to draw in the event of an emergency. Along with its higher rate of economic growth, this enabled a rapid fiscal recovery after the spending surge. There was little sign of this happening after the Cold War, and even less than that today with deficits of \$400 to \$600 billion a year projected for the next several years, and which will grow greater still as the baby boomers retire. It would be going much too far to say that this makes a substantially enlarged military or even outright mobilization impossible, but it is safe to say that it makes it harder to come by the necessary resources. Since it would be more difficult to raise taxes today than in the 1940s, more of the money needed to sustain a war effort would have to be borrowed. These additional loans would come on top of a rising structural deficit and higher debt burden, as is happening today.

Nevertheless, the picture should be kept in perspective. No foreseeable threat requires anything remotely close to a World War II or even Korea-level commitment. The War on Terror, at least as it is presently being fought, has relatively little bearing on these actualities, though this could change if the more ambitious schemes some have proposed are adopted. Moreover, the case of the United States is by no means unique, and its problems actually are milder than those of most other developed nations. Among the G-7 (Group of Seven) countries, government outlays rose from 27 to 36.6 percent of GDP between 1965 and 2001.<sup>32</sup> Gross debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 40.8 to 73.6 percent between 1977 and 2001. While Europe has generally had bigger governments, this rise occurred despite cuts in many of the welfare benefits paid out and the privatization and decentralization of many social services, measures widely marketed as improving their efficiency.<sup>33</sup> In the 1990s Japan's debt exploded to a crushing one and a half times the nation's GDP, and it is likely to continue rising for some time to come, without a substantial increase in the size of the Japanese government.<sup>34</sup> Both regions also have seen their growth slow dramatically since the 1980s, when they were widely supposed to be on the verge of driving the United States out of its spot as number one.

In other words, the United States, aside from still enjoying by far the largest economy, remains a faster-growing, less indebted society than the other

technologically advanced nations, and this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. The stresses posed by aging populations and the like are also milder in the case of the United States than in Japan or Europe, with their older populations, earlier retirement, and more generous benefits. Of course this leaves open the question of China, said to be rapidly becoming “the workshop of the world.” The hype surrounding China’s economic expansion, however, tends to minimize its significant problems, such as its own aging population, insolvent banking system, growing reliance on costly energy imports, and mounting debt.<sup>35</sup> The statistics reporting ten percent growth are notoriously spotty, and numerous observers suggest they have been exaggerated for years. Even were they accurate, such growth rates cannot be sustained forever and will likely fall dramatically before China attains a per-capita income remotely comparable to that of the United States or other industrialized nations. This may make it less likely to be a peer competitor to the United States anytime soon than is widely imagined.

### *Conclusions*

The question of just what a developed economy can or cannot do, of course, is by no means a simple one. Nevertheless, a look at the key facts—such as changes in economic structures, technology, and cultural attitudes—raises serious questions about the capacity of the United States to mobilize to meet security needs. The crucial factor may be that the slack required for sustaining a military mobilization is gradually being depleted, at least as measured by slowing economic growth and the worsening fiscal picture for the United States and other major nations. If this is problematic today, it is likely to be far worse by 2020 or 2030, given current trends. It also should be noted that this disappearing slack additionally affects the ability of the United States to respond to other problems or seize other opportunities, like undertaking an ambitious program of space exploration or coping with an environmental disaster.

The long-term solution to the problem clearly will lie in dealing with the problems posed by slowing economic growth and the growing fiscal imbalances. That will mean tough decisions with respect to entitlements, tax codes, and other policies. It also will require the exploitation of new technologies which can keep economic growth a step ahead of debt growth, and perhaps ameliorate certain security burdens like the assurance of resource security. While information technology gets all the attention, these innovations may run the gamut from solar- and wind-generated electricity to carbon nanotubes to desktop manufacturing.<sup>36</sup> Many of these are areas where the lead of the United States over the rest of the world is much less clear than it is in software, and sound policies for acquiring and keeping such a lead may be called for.

In the meantime, this reading of the situation carries with it a number of implications relevant to policy today. Most important, the emergence of a peer competitor to the United States in the 2025 time frame may be less likely as a result of their facing similarly tightened financial and economic constraints. Not surprisingly, the expansion of military capability on the part of the other potential candidates has been much slower than expected. Despite some budget hikes since 9/11, Europe's earlier plans to develop a long-range military capability will not be realized within the decade. Japan's steps forward have been gradual enough that six years after North Korea fired a missile over its territory it still lacks a truly usable strike capability against Pyongyang. China's modernization of its military has essentially consisted of attaching small numbers of modern systems to a downsized but still very large force of obsolescent units.

The United States consequently will retain a position of leadership indefinitely, in large part because of the weakness of other states, including China. Nonetheless, while America's tax, spending, and debt levels remain below those of most other advanced states, and its economic growth rate higher, the overall trends are cause for concern. The United States, less able to count on the means of its allies even when they are willing, needs to acknowledge the limits of its own resources in providing for security at home and abroad.

Again, as was the case in the late 1980s, America's finances must be seen as a security issue as well as an economic one. While defense spending now plays only a partial role in alleviating or increasing the present and future fiscal difficulties, those fiscal problems must be recognized as limiting how much of a burden the United States could take on in the future. The danger of "overstretch," highlighted by the nearly singlehanded conduct of the war in Iraq, should not be lightly dismissed. It is certainly true that the United States can hardly escape involvement abroad. Nevertheless, at a minimum, a conservatism toward acquiring additional commitments is overdue.

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