

A HARD LOOK AT HARD POWER: ASSESSING THE DEFENSE CAPABILITIES OF KEY US ALLIES AND SECURITY PARTNERS

Second Edition

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Editor

In a world where the United States faces two major revisionist powers—Russia and China—and additional security threats from Iran, North Korea, and jihadist terrorists, a critical edge for the United States is its global network of allies and strategic partners. As the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* notes, “Alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match.”

Having allies and partners is not only an advantage but it is also a real need. Taking a step back, it is useful to remember that, in January 2012, at President Obama’s direction, the Pentagon issued a new defense guidance, *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. The guidance admitted the future US Joint Force would be “smaller and leaner.” The headline from the guidance was the Defense Department’s intent to prioritize the Asia-Pacific region, while simultaneously noting that the administration believed Europe was, in security terms, stable and peaceful and a leaner footprint in the Middle East was possible. Underlying the guidance was the Pentagon’s judgment that neither prospective defense budgets nor the size of the active duty force allowed the American military to continue being a dominant warfighting force in multiple key theaters. Flexibility and risk were now bywords for defense planners.

Arguably, the constraints of budget and the size of the force remain, even though Europe is no longer seen as pacific, Iran and jihadists continue to require the Pentagon’s attention, and, if anything,

the difficulties posed by China’s military in Asia have grown. Although the US defense budget was increased over a two-year period (FY2018 and FY2019) by some \$90 billion, the increase only brought the total up to where the defense budget was projected to be in the last budget (FY2012) put forward before the 2011 Budget Control Act caps came into effect. And that may be as good as it gets for the time being. According to the current administration’s proposals for future budgets, the topline will flatten and, in real terms, slightly decrease. It seems unlikely given the current trend fiscally that a new or continuing administration will reverse course. All of which is to say, that this will be less than the 3 to 5 percent annual real increase in spending that senior defense officials have in recent years said was necessary to carry out the current national defense strategy. And while the American military has begun to adapt to this new environment and begun to modernize its forces in select areas, the overall capacity of the American military is largely the same as a decade ago and, indeed, is smaller when considering land forces.

The point is that the strategic requirement for allies and partners is greater now than any time since the end of the Cold War. That need, however, must be filled by allies and partners who can pull their weight militarily if the United States is going to be able to defend the American homeland, protect vital interests abroad, and maintain a favorable balance of power in critical regions of the world.

Although the United States’ economic and military power—its cumulative hard power—is not

as dominant globally as it was in the wake of World War II or in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the country accounts for roughly a quarter of the world economy. Indeed, when one marshals together the economies of the United States and its allies and security partners, the scale of the dominance remains substantial—over half the world’s total GDP. As a matter of sheer potential power, there is no reason the United States and its allies should have to concede “spheres of influence” to the likes of Russia and China.

That said, translating American and allied economic power into military preeminence and maintaining it globally has been difficult. Fatigue from decades of the Cold War, expanding domestic agendas, a significant recession in 2008, and less-than-satisfactory campaigns in the Middle East and Central Asia have made increasing defense spending a heavy lift—a fact compounded no doubt by the pandemic of 2020. Regenerating the capital expenditures necessary to bolster regional security in Europe and Asia, while continuing to deal with instability and terrorism in the Middle East and Africa, is an uphill political battle. To assess where our cumulative military capacity stands in this environment is both timely and necessary.

A Hard Look at Hard Power is a survey of the “hard power” capabilities of key US allies, partner states, and its most significant multilateral alliance, NATO. Individual country chapters examine a state’s defense budget, troop strength, ongoing deployments, procurement programs, research and development efforts, doctrinal updates, strategic guidance documents, and defense “white papers.” Accounting for these elements of hard power shed light on the ability—and, indirectly, the will and intention—of US allies and partners to use force independently or in concert with the United States and other allies to address current threats and sustain global or regional peace and stability. The allied countries covered in Europe include France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom and in Asia include Australia, Japan, and South Korea.

In addition, the volume has chapters on key frontline states, India, Sweden, and Taiwan. Finally, there is a chapter on NATO that analyzes its current

capabilities, policies, and reform efforts. Among the notable scholars contributing to this volume are: Bruce Bennett of RAND, former NATO Assistant Secretary General Lieutenant General (retired) Heinrich Brauss, Olivier Schmitt of the University of Southern Denmark, Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Toshi Yoshihara of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill remarked toward the end of World War II, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.” And, as long as that is true, having an honest assessment of what their real strengths and weaknesses are is a matter of strategic priority.

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