



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## Defense in the Next Decade

By *Joseph J. Collins*

Journal Article | May 20 2015 - 3:37pm

### Defense in the Next Decade[1]

#### Joseph J. Collins

A constellation of stars is falling on Washington. Not only will we soon have a new Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but all of the service Chiefs, except the Air Force, will be replaced by this fall. As each of the new chiefs takes his chair, he will have to grapple with the pressing problems of strategy, programs, and budgets. Before each of them dives into the weeds, it may be helpful for them to review a few facts about the security environment and consider some new ways to do old business.

First, to maintain a balanced perspective on defense, U.S. officials must look at the nation's defense posture as others see it. The United States has the single largest national economy, and leads the world in defense technological innovation, as well as combat experience. Its defense budget is bigger than that of the next ten great powers combined. The United States has 60 friends and allies that account for about 80 percent of the global GDP and a similar percentage of worldwide military expenditures.[2] Russia and China, the near peer competitors, have no powerful allies, not even each other. As the Pentagon moans about billions in future defense cuts and wail about sequestration, others see the United States defense establishment, in the old Italian phrase, as "crying with a loaf of bread under each arm."

Second, in the next decade, despite vast U.S. capabilities, power in the world will be more diffuse and defense challenges will become more complicated. As General Dempsey has reminded us, the new Chiefs will have to contend with a security environment that will include stronger near peer competitors in China and Russia, vigorous regional competitors, and a reinvigorated Long War.

In recent years, both China and Russia have become markedly more aggressive in pursuing their security interests in the face of U.S. objections. While China is the more robust of these two challengers, both have rising defense budgets. In the Pacific, China is expanding its naval activities and territorial claims, often against those of U.S. treaty allies. Russia's aggression in the Ukraine has again spurred talk of a new Cold War. Both nations have showcased impressive new military hardware.

In the next decade, the United States and its partners may also face stronger regional competitors in North Korea (possible) and Iran (probable). Both of these charter members of the axis of evil are developing nuclear capabilities. Iran in the past decade has also improved its standing as a regional power. Nothing happens in Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon that isn't affected by Iranian power. While Iran is the larger of the two threats, the volatility and unpredictability of North Korea make it the most likely war scenario in the next decade.

Were all of this not enough, the United States will still be dealing with the Long War in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and Yemen. ISIS is the latest and most powerful new threat, and after a three year respite, forcing the United States to send forces to Iraq. While al Qaeda has been dealt crushing blows, the outgoing head of DIA, LTG Mike Flynn, left us with this thought: "in 2004, there were 21 total Islamic terrorist groups spread out in 18 countries. Today, there are 41 Islamic terrorist groups spread out in 24 countries. A lot of these groups have the

intention to attack Western interests, to include Western embassies and in some cases Western countries. Some have both the intention and some capability to attack the United States homeland.”[3] The Long War has become a longer war. Despite the desire in the Pentagon --- especially in the Navy and the Air Force --- to put it behind us, the Long War may be diminished in size but it is not going away. The old military axiom --- “the priority of effort goes to troops in contact” --- will continue to exert a strong draw on defense resources. In all, while defense requirements are growing, government spending will be strapped, and defense resources will be at a premium. In the next decade, there could well be a widening gap between requirements and resources.

At the same time, U.S. enemies are thinking beings, always searching for and often finding new ways to frustrate U.S. goals. Among those asymmetric means are: cyber attack, insurgency, lone-wolf terrorism, hybrid warfare and even nuclear proliferation. A relatively new wrinkle here is that some non-state actors, like Hezbollah in Lebanon and ISIS in Syria and Iraq, have also become conventional military powers as well. Across the globe, irregular conflicts will be the most frequent type of conflicts, but the new Chiefs will have to pursue readiness across the spectrum of conflict. Maintaining an agile two-contingency force has never been more essential or more difficult. [4] Inside every future contingency, there may well be wild variations in the intensity of combat operations.

Because of more powerful regional and great power threats, the United States may well be more inhibited in using force in the next decade than it was from 1990 to the present. As in the Cold War, it will have to figure out how to keep both large numbers of CONUS-based and forward deployed forces ready for combat. Right now, the Pentagon strategy, with rare exceptions, has been to bring forces to high readiness and then deploy them. In the next decade, the United States will have to do more for active and reserve contingency forces at home and will have to do it in a resource-constrained environment.

Third, complicating the preparation of the nation for war is the fact that the next war remains unpredictable. Superior national technical means cannot tell us the intentions of adversaries or insulate the nation from their deception. In Washington, D.C., imaginations fail with amazing frequency. The United States failed to predict or was largely surprised by: the attack on Pearl Harbor, the start of the Korean War, the entry of Chinese forces into the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the onset of the first Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks, the status of Saddam Hussein’s WMD before the invasion of Iraq, the strength of the ISIS phenomenon, etc., ad nauseam.

Any defense strategy that favors one service, or limits preparation to one kind of war, or mortgages U.S. security to precise warning puts the U.S. long-term interest at serious risk. Because of the nature of the security environment and the unpredictability of future conflicts, agility and resiliency will be much in demand for planners and fielded forces. The combatant commanders and the Joint Chiefs will have to meet the Clausewitzian standard: to be both generals and statesmen.

The issue of regional priorities will be a tricky one. While the Indo-Asia Pacific meta-region is where the United States would like to put more emphasis, the magnets of combat and aggression are keeping much of U.S. forces focused on the greater Middle East, with multiple, new, but usually smaller contingencies in Africa. U.S. economic power and vast alliance structures, however, can provide some relief. In the end, initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership will far outweigh a few more ships afloat or a battalion of Marines in Australia.

This essay will not end with a call for doing more with less. That’s a fallacy. When you have less, you can do less. Instead, what’s required is to optimize the use of resources. The way to do that is to pare back the defense portfolio by the selective reduction of redundancy, while carefully managing future commitments.

The new chiefs should ask a lot of hard questions: Do we need a modernized strategic nuclear Triad, or would a Diad do? Do we need three versions of the Joint Strike fighter in the quantities postulated? Do we still need MARSOC, Marine special operations forces, the new kid on the block? Does MARSOC duplicate already existing capabilities, or does it have its own niche? Do we need five brigades of Army parachute infantry, as well as another brigade-sized force of airborne Rangers? What’s magic about 10 carrier battle groups? Would 9 do? With the VSTOL F-35, could we build small battle groups around amphibious ships? Can we design a better personnel system with a modernized incentive structure and retirement system? Can we find new ways to reduce base

infrastructure without lengthy congressionally-dominated processes? The answer to all of these questions is that the Armed Forces can do much better in managing its affairs, but only if it gets outside of the box that it has built for itself. In the main, what each of the services lack is the imagination and authority to design and implement rapid change.

The Armed Forces need a new design philosophy. To save money on hardware, the Services need to start designing systems that are not more expensive, advanced versions of their predecessors. Examples today abound: 3 billion dollar destroyers, 180 million dollar fighters, and the one hundred new Air Force bombers, promised to us at the bargain price of 550 million dollars per copy. In all of these cases, the defense establishment has taken (or will take) decades to build handfuls of systems that become ultra-expensive jewels that keep the force small and less agile than it needs to be. Maybe the next bomber should be a C-17 filled with 50 autonomous aerial vehicles. Maybe the “carrier” strike group should be mainly UAVs and autonomous aerial vehicles flown off of big deck vessels. Maybe the infantry sergeant of the future should command soldiers, as well as robots. Improving ISR and sensors could well be another key to empowering the ground force commander in the future.

Overall, these measures can save resources. Another way to save time and money is to choose missions and areas of deployment more carefully. There is a finite limit to the places where the United States can and should lead by putting US combat forces on the ground. In most cases, the host country must be out front. The United States must demand performance for assistance and insist on a government as effective as U.S. military advice is. Since 2011, the nation’s leaders have shown admirable restraint for putting large number of regular boots on the ground. This trend should continue, realizing that as the burden of ground combat shifts from us to indigenous forces, there may be an increased requirement for U.S. trainers and combat advisers.

Amidst all of this cutting, there are areas that require more work. In the next decade, U.S. aid will have to go beyond kinetic support or even military training. From time to time, the United States will need to help its partners to improve governance, spark development, or deliver humanitarian assistance. The anti-model is Libya. With advice and kinetic support, the West and friendly Arab nations helped the rebellion throw off the yoke of Gaddafi’s oppression. The coalition then walked away, leaving Libya to slide into a chaos accelerated by al Qaeda and ISIS. The downsides of post-conflict entanglement are often outweighed by the negatives of abandonment. If the major powers are not going to follow through, they should consider leaving bad situations alone. Doing nothing might be preferable to doing half a job.

Sadly, as this article is being written, US capabilities to conduct post-combat stability operations are shrinking. Many of the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan are evaporating in the face of congressional skepticism and bureaucratic disinterest. Commonsense notions like a civilian response corps are dead. Many of the organizations interested in stability operation have been closed or are shrinking.[5] Readiness across the spectrum of conflict demands serious multi-departmental capabilities for irregular conflict and stability operations. It’s too early to forget the lessons of the last fourteen years.

One final priority requires more resources: education. The services should prioritize both joint military education (JPME) and advanced civil schooling. Whatever the conflict, the United States will benefit greatly from having commanders with wider mental apertures. Sadly, JPME and some education programs have already been cut under the theory that all must suffer with some degree of equity. JPME and advanced civil schooling need better funding, but they also need help from concerned unit commanders. The school houses should be augmented by unit reading programs and seminars, where commanders and their subordinates stay current with trends in relevant disciplines and area studies. Every officer should have a plan for life-long learning. Better education programs today will help create commanders and units better able to adapt and overcome our enemies in the next decade.

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## End Notes

[1] This article is an edited version of the author's presentation at the USAWC Strategy Conference, April 8, 2014.

[2] Michael O'Hanlon, *Budgeting for Hard Power: Defense and Security Spending Under Barack Obama* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2009), p. 24.

[3] James Kitfield, "Flynn's Last Interview: Iconoclast Departs DIA with a Warning," *Breaking Defense*, August 7, 2014.

[4] Richard D. Hooker, Jr., "American Landpower and the Two War Construct," *AUSA Land Warfare Papers*, no. 106, May 2015.

[5] For a listing of selected Joint and Interagency capabilities for COIN and Stability Operations, see Linda Robinson, Paul Miller, John Gordon IV, et al., *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), pp. 116-119.

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## About the Author



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