

Toward a new American military

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Like most European nations, the U.S. is cutting its defense expenditures. With the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, President Obama shifted the American focus from Europe and the Middle East to Asia. This article analyzes the American “pivot” to Asia and the consequences for the U.S. military services: how should they adapt to future fiscal strains and a refocus on nation-state warfare, instead of ‘irregular’ warfare?

New strategic guidance

In releasing the United States Department of Defense’s (DoD) *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense and Defense Budget Priorities and Choices* in January 2012, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta offered a rationale for the administration’s reductions in defense spending. By stating that the shift in strategic direction is an effort to “put our fiscal house in order” and a response to the 2011 Budget Control Act, which requires DoD to reduce spending by \$487 billion between fiscal years 2012 and 2021, the United States’ NATO partners in Europe were given considerable reason for concern. With the United States continuing to serve as the anchor and principal contributor to NATO — promising to cut defense spending while “pivoting” toward the Asia-Pacific — sends a clear signal to European leaders that is unmistakable: the American role in NATO may change. From a European perspective, the new American direction is especially troublesome because of Europe’s inability to integrate individual nation-state forces into a pan-European military force. Continued European dependence on American leadership and Russia’s rapid expansion of military capabilities makes the American pivot even more troubling. And with President Obama promising to reduce and, if possible, elimi-

nate nuclear weapons (i.e., Europe’s nuclear umbrella), some European elites rightly worry about the long-term future of NATO and continental security.

For the majority of Americans, however, NATO mattered most when Europe served as the front line in a global war against communism. With that threat eliminated, many Americans see Europe as a continent where the U.S. military enables European nations to offer their citizens six weeks of annual holiday and generous benefits only possible because of an American military subsidy.¹ This is not to say that Americans are anti-European. However, domestic politics in the United States and a poor economy are forcing American voters to question the wisdom of subsidizing European security.

Secretary Panetta described the United States’ new strategic guidance as defending the nation’s “core national interests.” According to Panetta, those interests are: defeating Al Qaeda and its affiliates and succeeding in current conflicts; deterring and defeating aggression by adversaries, including those seeking to deny our power projection; countering weapons of mass destruction; effectively operating in cyberspace, space, and across all domains; maintaining a safe and effective deterrent; and



protecting the homeland. Interestingly, the security of Europe is not mentioned as a core interest of the United States. However, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership* goes on to lay out an “increasingly complex set of challenges and opportunities to which all elements of U.S. national power must be applied.” These include, among others: terrorism; a need to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific; presence and partnering in the Middle East; and *maintaining Article 5 commitments to NATO*.

In essence, the administration is suggesting that the United States will maintain all of its current commitments while reducing the baseline defense budget by between \$500 billion and \$1 trillion over the next decade. In 2011, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reduced future defense spending by almost \$500 billion through program cancellations, personnel reductions, and cost cutting. An additional \$500 billion over the same period (2013-2021) must be cut if the 2011 Budget Control Act is *not* modified before sequestration begins in January 2013. Should this occur and the Department of Defense face an additional 10 percent cut in its baseline budget — for a total cut of approximately 20 percent from the 2010 defense authorization — all bets are off as to which programs, personnel, and commitments will receive the funding required.

Admittedly, the DoD is not an efficient organization. It is part of a highly bureaucratized system where dollars are often allocated inefficiently. However, cutting defense without reforming bureaucratic processes will only leave the United States with an inefficient bureaucracy and less capability. Absent a dramatic reform of acquisition, personnel, and strategic decision-making processes — which requires political boldness — defense cuts are an inefficient means to solving the federal government’s spending dilemma.

All too many members of Congress think only of the impact defense strategy has on their constituency, rather than on the interests of the nation at large. One example is the M1-Abrams tank production plant in Lima, Ohio. The Army determined that it no longer needed to continue production. Yet the Army was forced to continue purchasing tanks it did not want, because Congress was more concerned about the loss of jobs than the broader impact on national security.² Similar examples are plentiful. Bureaucratic reforms also take time and need a drastic redesign of the organizational structure, which bureaucracies are seldom able to initiate. Other countries have failed to make their organizations more efficient without drastic reductions in funding and added external expertise.

[Airmen load an Abrams tank into a C-5M Super Galaxy. Production of this tank illustrates bureaucratic defense problems: the Army was forced to continue purchasing tanks it did not want, because Congress was more concerned about the loss of jobs \(photo: U.S. Air Force/Roland Balik\)](#)



While offering a comprehensive set of bureaucratic reforms is beyond the scope of this article, the remainder of these pages focuses on offering a reform agenda to the structure and purpose of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. The intent is to design a force that meets the strategic needs of the coming decades.

Factors to consider before reforming the U.S. military

When considering reforms to the structure of the services, three factors should weigh heavily in one's thinking.

Increasing fiscal constraints

First, the Department of Defense can expect to operate under increasing fiscal constraints, with stagnant or declining budgets, for the foreseeable future.³ This challenge will last well beyond any economic recovery because Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security — the three largest entitlement programs — and the national debt will consume an ever-increasing share of the federal budget. At present, Medicare and Medicaid alone account for over \$700 billion per year in federal spending. This is more than \$150 bil-

lion more than the baseline defense budget. If projections are correct, these and related healthcare programs will see dramatic increases in costs and are almost certain to crowd out defense spending.

The trifecta of growing entitlement spending, expanding military personnel costs — which accounts for one-third of defense outlays — and acquisition cost overruns are likely to further strain the fiscal constraints that are already stressing the force and playing a greater role in shaping the United States military than any other single factor.

For America's NATO partners, the floundering U.S. economy and the United States' march down the path toward greater and greater entitlement spending should serve as a wakeup call. While Europe may not appear to face a clear challenge to its territorial sovereignty, the long lead-time required to increase military capabilities would make it difficult to rapidly deploy the capabilities required to defeat a strategic challenger such as Russia or *effectively* engage in out-of-area operations.⁴ It should not be forgotten that Russia can easily turn west if its eastern intentions are frustrated and the Russian Bear seeks to lash out at its weaker western neighbors.⁵ Western-European countries, so reliant on

A B2 and a B52 bomber. According to the author, the entire fleet of B-52s, B-2s, and B-1 Lancers is in need of replacement by a new long-range bomber. When long-range strike is not the single greatest capability the Air Force possesses, the service has lost focus on its core mission (photo: U.S. Air Force)

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American leadership, must address their geopolitical circumstances with the United States' Asia-Pacific pivot in mind.

Nation-states vs. irregular warfare

Second, the focus on Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) is likely to fade as American troops withdraw from the region and Americans grow increasingly tired of waging a democratization and modernization effort where success seems increasingly improbable. Washington has also signaled that it will seek to address major (current or potential) threats to U.S. national security, such as Iran and China. This means the post-9/11 focus on irregular warfare is on the decline and nation-states are back as America's adversaries. Iran and North Korea are two adversaries increasingly capable of threatening the U.S. and its interests. China has also signaled its dissatisfaction with American leadership in the world and is waging a sustained cyber campaign against American companies and government networks.⁶ Beijing's rise is already influencing the direction taken by the U.S. military and is likely to grow in importance as China — in the eyes of many Americans — increasingly looks like a new version of an old enemy, albeit with Chinese characteristics.

The greater the challenge in Asia becomes, the less important European security will be for the American people. There is, however, a silver lining. As the following section will suggest, a military designed to defeat the United States' nation-state adversaries is the same military that is best suited for defeating a likely threat to NATO and its members. The only real question will be: how committed is the United States to NATO? This will prove a particularly relevant question if the United States is actively engaged in Asia when a challenge to Europe arises.

Punitive operations

Third, history shows that Washington will avoid conflicts like Afghanistan and Iraq for a generation or more. Just as the Vietnam conflict shaped the use of military force by Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, so too will the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷ If history is any guide to the future, a military built to invade, occupy, and rebuild nations will prove unsupported by the American people and ill-suited for the punitive operations of the future.

Where "irregular operations" and nation building were all the rage in the post-9/11 decade, they are quickly fading in popularity as American academics, policy makers, and intellectuals are reflecting on the blood and treasure spent to defeat Al Qaeda. Some, at least, are coming to believe

that the United States may have invested too heavily in defeating an enemy who was never capable of threatening American sovereignty.⁸

Reshaping the military services

For the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps, meeting tomorrow's challenges could require painful decisions that will undoubtedly prove unpopular within each service. However, such choices are necessary if the U.S. military is to best position itself to defeat future challenges to U.S. national security.

Land Forces

In a world where the U.S. lacks the national treasure needed to invade, occupy, and rebuild nations, there may be no need for a standing army of more than a half-million soldiers and an amphibious infantry of more than 200,000 marines. Instead, special operations forces will be increasingly in demand as small-scale operations in places like Afghanistan, Colombia, and the Philippines continue over the long term. While the United States will not engage in

The only real question will be: how committed is the United States to NATO?

large-scale counter-insurgency operations for some time, it will seek to enable and empower local governments to defeat such threats. Thus, the need for special operations forces at a time when nation-state adversaries are back as a primary threat.

And with a land war in Asia an unlikely event, Special Forces are likely to prove the most useful and versatile ground force for the United States.

The need for land forces capable of training indigenous troops (a particular specialty of the Army's Green Berets), defending remote airbases (a responsibility of the Army), and supporting airpower, for example, is evident. A small, light, and elite force of special operators is the ground force that the nation will most likely require and use most frequently.

The Army's current "tooth-to-tail" ratio is staggering: fewer than one in five soldiers is actually an infantryman.⁹ This makes the Army well suited to sustaining long-duration

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invasions, but poorly suited to rapidly moving to distant locations where logistical support is a challenge. Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have made the Marine Corps look increasingly like the Army — undermining its unique role as an amphibious force.

Thus, the Army and Marine Corps should expect to see their forces decline to meet future security challenges just as they appropriately expanded to meet the needs of Afghanistan and Iraq. To mitigate these reductions in land forces, the Army, in particular, should look to increase efficiency within its large logistics and support force. To put it bluntly, the Army is bloated.

Both services must also rethink their tactics, techniques, and procedures as they engage in foreign internal defense-type operations and adversarial nation-states simultaneously — a difficult task. The last decade of counter insurgency has created units and leaders that are experts in small-unit tactics and platoon or battalion-level combat, but untrained to fight as an integrated part of a large warfighting machinery. The Army and Marine Corps lack recent experience to act at the division or corps level, which may be required in Europe.

Air Force

For the Air Force, the focus on remotely piloted aircraft suitable for passive air environments like Afghanistan and Iraq may give way to a demand for power projection in the form of a long-range strike aircraft with long legs and the ability to penetrate heavily defended airspace. This is a capability the Air Force has seen decline more than any other capability over the past generation. Currently, the Air Force's 19 B-2 Spirit stealth bombers are the United States' only weapons platform capable of penetrating a peer or near-peer adversary's defended airspace. With current and potential adversaries heavily investing in the development of new air defense systems, the United States clearly lacks the long-range strike capability needed to defeat them.

As a result of the United States' Asia-Pacific pivot, long-range strikes will play an increasingly critical role in both deterring a potential adversary and in military operations that focus on punitive operations. With fewer than 20 modern bombers (designed in the 1980s), the Air Force bomber fleet has not only been in numerical decline for a generation, but the fleet's workhorse — the B-52 Stratofortress — last rolled off the assembly line during the presidency of John F. Kennedy. The entire fleet of B-52s, B-2s, and B-1 Lancers is in need of replacement by a long-range bomber

that gives America's adversaries pause when they consider challenging the international status quo. The lack of an adequate conventional and nuclear-capable long-range bomber force calls into question the service's ability to meet and defeat future adversaries. Given current progress on the next-generation bomber, there is ample reason to question whether the Air Force and senior leaders in the Department of Defense are prioritizing defense acquisitions in the right order.

Some European elites rightly worry about the long-term future of NATO

The simple fact is, the U.S. Air Force exists for one primary purpose: to strike targets from long distances. When long-range strike is not the single greatest capability the Air Force possesses, the service has lost focus on its core mission.

Navy

No other service has more to lose in the coming decades than the U.S. Navy. Advances in ballistic missile technology are threatening the utility of the aircraft carrier. For more than sixty years these expensive and manpower intensive warships have served as the center of gravity in naval strategy. Before long, China, for example, is certain to field anti-ship missiles that will force aircraft carriers so far from China's shores that naval aviation is unable to reach land-based targets. This may make them largely irrelevant against a peer or near-peer adversary.

The carrier may soon face a day, just as the battleship did during World War II, where it is superseded by a submarine or a stealth ship capable of delivering large numbers of cruise and ballistic missiles. Investing in these capabilities should enable the Navy to make an eventual shift from a carrier-based fleet to one that is capable of delivering the firepower required to either deter or defeat a major competitor.

The Marine Corps, the Navy's amphibious infantry, faces many of the same challenges as the Army. Though its amphibious capabilities are duplicated nowhere else, the Marine Corps' nearly 200,000 men and women may be more than the nation requires. With the Navy finding it increasingly difficult to approach an adversary's shores, the op-

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portunity to launch an amphibious assault could decline. However, the Marine Corps has long faced attempts by the Army to incorporate the marines into the Army. This has created a Marine Corps leadership that is perhaps the most adept service at navigating troubled waters. What is not in question is the need for a combat force capable of rapidly responding to a developing crisis. Marines are well-suited for this job since the Fleet Marine Force is regularly deployed around the globe. They will, however, struggle to reach dry land if a conflict breaks out with a competent and capable adversary.

Conclusion

How the military will adapt to the strategic challenges of the future is uncertain. No service is sitting pretty relative to its peers. Americans and Europeans should expect a vigorous debate over the shape of the nation's military in the coming years. If, as we suspect, China continues to grow as a threat to American dominance in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere, American voters will see participation in NATO as a less efficient use of dwindling defense resources and may support candidates and politicians who promise to move resources home or to Asia.

Looking broadly, the coming decades are likely to usher in an era where peer and near-peer competition is back with a vengeance. No longer will the United States focus on terrorism as its principal strategic concern. At a time when entitlement programs are growing, defense spending will face increasing downward pressures and American policy makers will have no choice but to constrain American foreign policy objectives. For NATO and its European members, the challenge will be to ensure that Europe matters. Failing to convince American voters of this may see American support for NATO decline even further.

1. Ted Galen Carpenter and Marian L. Tupy, "U.S. Defense Spending Subsidizes European Free-Riding Welfare States," Cato Institute, July 12, 2010, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/us-defense-spending-subsidizes-european-freeriding-welfare-states>.
2. Brian Bull, "Plant Pleads To Stay Afloat, But Army Says 'No Tanks,'" National Public Radio, September 6, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/25/157256332/plant-pleads-to-stay-afloat-but-army-says-no-tanks>.
3. Alan Goodman, "The Future of Defense Spending," *Commentary Magazine*, April 5, 2012, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2012/04/05/future-of-defense-spending/>.
4. Among American servicemen who have served in Afghanistan, there is a regular complaint that NATO forces from European nations all too often fail to actively engage enemy forces. These troops are often seen as a greater hindrance than a help to American forces.
5. In recent years, Russia has, for example, cut natural gas supplies to the Ukraine when disputes between the two countries arose. Such action may occur again if Russia is frustrated in the East or believes its interests are threatened by Western encroachment. There is also talk of reintegrating Belorussia into Russia.
6. Panayotis A. Yannakogeorgos and Adam B. Lowther, "How to Save Cyberspace," *The Diplomat*, March 21, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/03/21/how-to-save-cyberspace/>.
7. Peter Duignan, *NATO: Its Past, Present and Future* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 19–42.
8. Brendan McQuade, "A Critical View of Counterinsurgency: World Relational State (De)formation," Binghamton University, 2012, http://binghamton.academia.edu/BrendanMcQuade/Papers/1762922/A_Critical_View_of_Counterinsurgency.
9. The U.S. Army currently has eight infantry divisions with a total of approximately 100,000 soldiers.

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