Backgrounder

Adapting to the Threat Dynamics of the 21st Century

The Honorable Donald C. Winter

Abstract: *During the latter half of the 20th century, U.S. defense efforts were driven by the need to respond to the threat posed by the Soviet Union. While the Soviet threat was considerable, the U.S. response was facilitated by the focus on a single adversary. The current situation is quite different. Today, the U.S. faces a disturbingly diverse set of national security challenges ranging from Somali pirates to transnational terrorist organizations to rogue nations with nuclear weapons. In the 21st century, the only viable approach to national security is to maintain an adequately sized, trained, and equipped force that is capable of dissuading, deterring, and—if necessary—defeating a diverse set of future adversaries.*

The national security situation in the 21st century is far different from what existed during the Cold War. Today, the U.S. faces a disturbingly diverse set of national security challenges ranging from pirates threatening U.S. citizens and world commerce off the coast of Somalia to transnational terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, to rogue nations acquiring nuclear capabilities, such as North Korea. Added to these threats are the military buildup in China[1] and continuing unrest in the Middle East. These security challenges encompass a broad spectrum of threats, from improvised explosive devices to nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the location of these threats continues to shift. The U.S. focus has moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan to Libya in a matter of weeks, as the U.S. attempts to respond to ever-changing demands on its military.

Talking Points

- The U.S. faces a disturbingly diverse set of national security challenges ranging from pirates threatening U.S. citizens and world commerce off the coast of Somalia to transnational terrorist organizations to rogue nations acquiring nuclear capabilities, such as North Korea.

- Given the rapid pace at which threats evolve today, the U.S. needs to prepare ahead of time and not wait for a challenge to emerge.

- The U.S. military is far smaller than during the Cold War, and the Administration appears to have subordinated the nation's defense needs to budget goals.

- Protecting U.S. national security will require maintaining an adequately sized, trained, and equipped force that is capable of dissuading, deterring, and–if necessary–defeating a diverse set of future adversaries.

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The significant reductions in U.S. military end strength after the fall of the Soviet Union have exacerbated the difficulty in dealing with this dynamic, widely dispersed, and wide-ranging threat environment. The demands for a "peace dividend" after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 led to U.S. military reductions that cut the number of active duty personnel by one-third and the Army's force structure from 18 divisions to 10 divisions.[2] Furthermore, as Secretary Robert Gates recently noted in a speech to NATO, the burden of dealing with security challenges worldwide is increasingly falling on the U.S. as other nations lack the military capability and political will to support such efforts.[3]

In fact, the only viable approach to national security in the 21st century is to maintain an adequately sized, trained, and equipped force that is capable of dissuading, deterring, and—if necessary—defeating a diverse set of future adversaries.

U.S. Defense Strategy During the Cold War

During the latter half of the 20th century, U.S. defense planning efforts focused on the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Force structure, positioning, and investments in weapon systems were tailored based on the understanding of the Soviet threat. The Soviet Union made huge investments in its armed forces and had access to leading technologies, as evidenced by its early successes in space, such as Sputnik. Fortunately, while some notable espionage efforts, such as the Rosenberg case, enabled the Soviets to acquire U.S. technology, most of their weapon systems were developed internally.

Their development and deployment processes and procedures took a considerable amount of time and afforded the West the opportunity to observe and measure their modernization efforts. The resulting threat assessments were well documented[4] and became the basis for much of U.S. defense planning and budgeting. Joint efforts by industry and government laboratories maintained a qualitative advantage in weaponry, due in part to the Soviets' bureaucratic development and deployment processes. Technological gaps, such as those revealed with the launch of Sputnik, were closed by focused and well-funded efforts.

The U.S. also believed that it had a good understanding of where the threats might appear. The makeup of the Warsaw Pact, the positioning of its forces, and the military history of geographical features, such as the Fulda Gap in Germany,[5] gave a good idea of the most probable points of conflict. Identification of these locations led to U.S. and NATO deployment strategies and the positioning of major U.S. bases in Europe and elsewhere around the Iron Curtain to respond to the projected hostile actions.

The focus on the Soviet Union was recognition of the threat embodied in the massive Soviet military force, equipped with enough nuclear weapons to destroy the free world many times over, under the control of a despotic leadership with an outspoken intent to defeat the West.[6] The U.S. strategy for the Cold War worked. U.S. and NATO forces constituted an adequate deterrent to attack by the Warsaw Pact. Finally, U.S. technology,

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1. Amol Sharma, Jeremy Page, James Hookway, and Rachel Pannett, "Asia's New Arms Race," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2011, at *http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704881304576094173297995198.html* (April 11, 2011).

2. Anthony H. Cordesman, "Trends in US Military Forces and Defense Spending: Peace Dividend or Underfunding?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 26, 1999, at *http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/peacedividendorunderfunding%5B1%5D.pdf* (August 22, 2011).

3. Robert Gates, "Transcript of Defense Secretary Gates's Speech on NATO's Future," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2011, at *http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/06/10/transcript-of-defense-secretary-gatess-speech-on-natos-future/* (August 22, 2011).

4. During the last 10 years of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Department of Defense compiled and published our assessment of the Soviet threat in an unclassified document: U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power: An Assessment of the Threat*, 1988, at *http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA196828* (August 22, 2011).

5. The use of the Fulda Gap as an invasion route goes back hundreds of years. See World Geography, s.v. "Fulda Gap," at *http://world-geography.org/europe/249-fulda-gap.html* (August 22, 2011).

6. Krushchev was quoted several times saying "we will bury you." For example, see "We Will Bury You!" *Time*, November 26, 1956, at *http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,867329,00.html* (August 22, 2011).

coupled with President Ronald Reagan's uncompromising support for the Strategic Defense Initiative, dissuaded Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev from continuing the Cold War. Gorbachev had stated to the Politburo that the Soviet Union risked being "pulled into an arms race that is beyond our capabilities."[7]

Impact of Technology Proliferation

There is no indication that the current complex and highly dynamic security situation will similarly resolve or simplify itself in the foreseeable future. This is a period of great change, fostered in part by a technological revolution evidenced in the explosive growth of the Internet. Social media played a significant role in the rapid evolution of the "Arab Spring," spreading it from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya in a matter of months.[8] At the same time the opposition was using the Internet to rally against President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, al-Qaeda was using it to recruit new terrorists, train them, and coordinate operations. Al-Qaeda's use of the Internet has been a major factor in its ability to persevere in spite of nearly 10 years of pursuit by the U.S. and its allies.[9] The U.S. has long believed that U.S. command and control technology provided a significant advantage that was beyond the technological and financial reach of all but a few near peer competitors. However, the Internet has negated much of this advantage by enabling even nonstate actors, including al-Qaeda, to employ sophisticated digital production and communications technologies at minimal expense.

Regrettably, the Internet is not the only technology that has been widely disseminated. Even in impoverished third-world countries, the development of highly sophisticated weapon systems, particularly missiles and nuclear weapons, has accelerated. North Korea's surprisingly rapid development of missile technology has been noted[10] and caused great concern. In 1998, in the first systematic review of these shortened developmental timelines, the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States noted that "A nation that wants to develop ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction can now obtain extensive technical assistance from outside sources. Foreign assistance is not a wild card. It is a fact."[11]

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The commission expressed concern that the U.S. could expect reduced warning time of new missile developments. While the Soviet Union relied on indigenous development of critical technologies—a time-consuming process—new aspirants to the ballistic missile community can skip many of those developmental steps by acquiring the technology from others. The commission also pointed out that relaxed standards for accuracy, reliability, and safety among these new players has facilitated the accelerated development and that the new players are increasingly able to conceal their efforts.

The End of Predictability

These multifold shifts in technology and societal behavior have the net effect of creating an increasingly unpredictable threat environment. The U.S. cannot know for certain who will constitute the next threat against the U.S., the origin of that

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7. Mikhail Gorbachev, statement in a Politburo meeting, October 1986, quoted in Fred Kaplan, "Ron and Mikhail's Excellent Adventure," *Slate*, June 9, 2004, at *http://www.slate.com/id/2102081/* (April 11, 2011).

8. Washington and Lee University, "W&L Journalism Professor Discusses Social Media and Egypt: A Q&A with Claudette Artwick," February 13, 2011, at *http://www.wlu.edu/x52998.xml* (August 22, 2011).

9. Jarret M. Brachman, "High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda's Use of New Technology," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 2006).

10. Daniel A. Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program*, February 2008, at *http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub842.pdf* (August 22, 2011).

11. *Executive Summary of the Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States*, 104th Cong., July 15, 1998, at *http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/bm-threat.htm* (August 22, 2011).

threat, or the military capabilities that could be brought to bear. This has arguably been the situation for a number of years. Who forecasted U.S. engagements in Somalia or the Balkans, much less in Iraq and Afghanistan? Who anticipated Turkey's refusal to permit U.S. forces to stage for Desert Storm or Spain's reaction to the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid? Who predicted the Arab Spring and NATO's engagement in Libya?

> ***Given the rapid pace at which threats evolve today, the U.S. needs to prepare ahead of time and not wait for a challenge to emerge.***

During the Cold War, the U.S. felt confident in focusing on preparing to counter the Soviet threat. The military capabilities developed during that time and the resulting U.S. force structure effectively deterred Soviets. They also provided what is often termed "lesser included capabilities," which enabled the U.S. to deal with smaller challenges, such as in Grenada (1983), Libya (1986), and Panama (1989). U.S. force planning was fairly straightforward and could be defended before Congress and explained to the American public because it was based on evolving, but relatively predictable Soviet capabilities. Congress and the American people recognized the clear and present danger posed by the Soviet Union and supported funding to build up military end strength and pursue military modernization programs that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Strategies for an Era of Uncertainty

In today's vastly different situation, the U.S. needs to effectively prosecute the war against terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and wherever else al-Qaeda and its associates appear. The U.S. needs to control piracy off Somalia and dissuade and deter Iran, North Korea, and other rogue nations from hostile action, while remaining mindful that Russia still has more than 10,000 nuclear warheads[12] and that China is continuing its military buildup[13] and challenging its neighbors throughout the South China Sea. Yet the U.S. military is far smaller today than during the Cold War, and the Administration appears to have subordinated the nation's defense needs to budget goals.[14]

Given the rapid pace at which threats evolve today, the U.S. needs to prepare ahead of time and not wait for a challenge to emerge. The military needs to be adequately sized, able to respond in a timely manner, and equipped to perform a wide range of missions. The speed at which unanticipated challenges can emerge and new weapons appear in the hands of U.S. adversaries makes any strategy of hopeful waiting untenable. While the American buildup during World War II[15] demonstrated America's exceptional capabilities, those who challenge the U.S. in the future will probably not give many years of warning enabling us to prepare. Nor is the U.S. likely to have allies like Great Britain was 70 years ago, able to hold off the adversary without us.

Modern militaries need extensive training. They cannot be quickly built up by filling the ranks with conscripted recruits who receive only a few weeks of training. Effectively using modern weapons and doctrine requires extensive training and preparation. Similarly, the weapons themselves require years to develop and produce. Furthermore, the U.S. increasingly depends on other nations to provide raw materials and manufacture most products. China and other nations have long surpassed the U.S. in many key manufacturing areas.[16] America's ability to serve as an arsenal of democracy has declined in recent years and could be challenged by others. Even a temporary reduction in defense investment accounts could grievously harm the U.S. industrial base, with profound implications for the future.

12. Arms Control Association, "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," at *http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat* (August 22, 2011).

13. Sharma *et al.*, "Asia's New Arms Race."

14. Baker Spring, "President Obama's Disconnect on the Defense Budget," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3226, April 15, 2011, at *http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/04/President-Obamas-Disconnect-on-the-Defense-Budget*.

15. Donald M. Nelson, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Story of American War Production* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).

In the 21st century, the only viable approach to national security is to maintain an adequately sized, trained, and equipped force that is capable of dissuading, deterring, and—if necessary—defeating a diverse set of future adversaries. The U.S. will likely not be able to predict the location, nature, or timing of the next military challenge. The U.S. cannot afford to assume that the future will look like the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, much less like the confrontation with the Soviet Union or its proxies.

What the U.S. Should Do

To prepare the U.S. military for the 21st century, Congress and the President should:

- **Meet the Pentagon's budget request.** The Pentagon needs $731 billion in fiscal year 2012 and $3.6 trillion over the next five years to maintain military readiness and advance its capabilities.

- **Ensure that U.S. forces can respond to the wide range of evolving threats emanating worldwide.** The U.S. military needs to be organized, trained, and equipped to dissuade, deter, and—if necessary—defeat the broad spectrum of adversaries.

- **Invest in the air and sea mobility assets needed to respond quickly to challenges anywhere in the world.** These assets will take years to develop and produce. The U.S. cannot wait to prepare until future threats to develop.

- **Invest in the technologies needed to continue to respond to the broad range of threats.** Technology proliferation and increasing use of asymmetric capabilities necessitates a sustained investment strategy.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers need to acknowledge the limitations of threat-based force planning in a worldwide security environment that is rapidly changing in increasingly unpredictable ways. Congress needs to find a way to provide the needed financial resources. This is not a matter of nation building at home versus abroad. It is a matter of ensuring the survival of America and the free world.

—*Donald C. Winter has served as U.S. Secretary of the Navy (2006–2009).*

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16. China is now the world's leading shipbuilder, with roughly 40 percent of production. "China's Shipbuilding Industry Leads the World," *People's Daily*, August 13, 2010, at *http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90778/90860/7104229.html* (August 22, 2011). See also Gabriel Collins and Lieutenant Commander Michael C. Grubb, "A Comprehensive Survey of China's Dynamic Shipbuilding Industry: Commercial Development and Strategic Implications," U.S. Naval War College, Center for Naval Warfare Studies *China Maritime Study* No. 1, August 2008, at *http://www.usnwc.edu/Research—-Gaming/ China-Maritime-Studies-Institute/Publications/documents/CMS1_Collins-Grubb.aspx* (August 22, 2011). Over the past 50 years, two-thirds of the major U.S. shipyards have closed. Tim Colton, "Shipbuilding History," at *http://shipbuildinghistory.com* (August 22, 2011).