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How much military force does a global superpower require? Answering this question has challenged U.S. leaders and defense planners for more than 20 years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States found itself the world's sole superpower, but one without a significant adversary against which to measure the adequacy of its military capabilities. In the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War, U.S. leaders decided to use the requirement to conduct two major regional conventional contingencies (MRCs) at the same time as the basis for sizing the U.S. military. Every subsequent review of U.S. defense policy and programs has reaffirmed the two-war standard. In fact, every Administration for the past two decades found that a force sized to fight two wars was essential for meeting the ongoing demands for forward presence,

crisis response, regional deterrence, humanitarian assistance, building partnership capacity, homeland defense, and support to civil authorities.

Based on some 20 years of analyses and studies as well as the experiences of Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom, a two-MRC force should generally consist of 10 Active and eight Reserve Component Army divisions, two to three Marine Expeditionary Forces, 11 aircraft carriers, 120 large surface naval combatants, 38 large amphibious warfare ships, 200 strategic bombers, 20 tactical fighter wings, 400–500 tankers, and 250 airlifters. Such a force would need support from a wide range of enabling capabilities, such as special operations forces; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems; cyber defenses; air and missile defenses; and space systems.

Today's military is too small to meet the two-MRC test credibly. Moreover, the qualitative advantage that the U.S. military has long enjoyed is eroding as advanced military capabilities proliferate around the world. The capabilities of U.S. forces are also deteriorating as platforms and systems age and as critical modernization programs are delayed or even cancelled.

Building a two-MRC force for the 21st century means increasing the size of the U.S. military, modernizing existing platforms and systems, and investing in advanced air, sea, and land capabilities. This will require resources above the levels proposed by the Obama Administration. Over the next decade, building a reasonable two-MRC force for the 21st century will cost roughly \$70 billion more per year than the projected cost of the current defense program, which averages approximately \$550 billion per year.

Section I

What It Takes to Be a Military Superpower

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has measured the fundamental adequacy of its force posture in terms of the ability of U.S. forces, without national mobilization, to defeat two nation-state adversaries in geographically separate theaters nearly simultaneously. From the time it was first articulated in 1991, the two-theater-war standard has undergone repeated reviews and revisions. The fundamental reason that the two-theater-war standard still survives is because no credible alternative has ever been proposed. Senior decision makers across five Administrations, Republican and Democrat, have been unable to avoid the reality that, in a world of continuing globalization and growing political and military uncertainty, the U.S. needs a military that is large enough and has a sufficient range of capabilities to cover multiple major military contingencies in overlapping time frames. Such a military would not only fit the character of the post-Cold War threat environment, but also serve a critical deterrence function in an era in which the scale of potential conventional conflicts was seen as decreasing and the ability to resort to nuclear weapons had become less plausible. The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) provided one of the best formulations of the rationale for the two-theater-war standard:

As a global power with worldwide interests, it is imperative that the United States now and for the foreseeable future be able to deter and defeat large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theaters in overlapping time frames, preferably in concert

with regional allies. Maintaining this core capability is central to credibly deterring opportunism—that is, to avoiding a situation in which an aggressor in one region might be tempted to take advantage when U.S. forces are heavily committed elsewhere—and to ensuring that the United States has sufficient military capabilities to deter or defeat aggression by an adversary that is larger, or under circumstances that are more difficult, than expected. This is particularly important in a highly dynamic and uncertain security environment. We can never know with certainty when or where the next major theater war will occur, who our next adversary will be, how an enemy will fight, who will join us in a coalition, or precisely what demands will be placed on U.S. forces. Indeed, history has repeatedly shown that we are often unable to predict such matters. A force sized and equipped for deterring and defeating aggression in more than one theater ensures the United States will maintain the flexibility to cope with the unpredictable and unexpected. Such a capability is the *sine qua non* of a superpower and is essential to the credibility of our overall national security strategy. It also supports our continued engagement in shaping the international environment to reduce the chances that such threats will develop in the first place.

If the United States were to forego its ability to defeat aggression in more than one theater at a time, our standing as a global

power, as the security partner of choice, and as the leader of the international community would be called into question. Indeed, some allies would undoubtedly read a one-war capability as a signal that the United States, if heavily engaged elsewhere, would no longer be able to help defend their interests. Such a capability could also inhibit the United States from responding to a crisis promptly enough, or even at all, for fear of committing the bulk of our forces and making ourselves vulnerable in other regions. This fact is also unlikely to escape the attention of potential adversaries. A one-theater war capacity would risk undermining both deterrence and the credibility of U.S. security commitments in key regions of the world. This, in turn, could cause allies and friends to adopt more divergent defense policies and postures, thereby weakening the web of alliances and coalitions on which we rely to protect our interests abroad.¹

Some 15 years later, the 2012 new strategic guidance for the Department of Defense acknowledged the same basic reality:

As a nation with important interests in multiple regions, our forces must be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere.... Even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable

of denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—an opportunistic aggressor in a second region.²

Every Administration has put its own spin on the two-war standard, sometimes repeatedly. The initial formulation was based on the concern that the United States might need to deal with aggression at the same time in both Southwest and Northeast Asia. Over time, the requirement evolved from maintaining the capability to defeat two conventionally armed aggressors to a more complex formulation in which the U.S. military was asked to be able to conduct a single campaign against a conventional adversary while waging a long-duration counterinsurgency and stability campaign or protecting the homeland against attack and providing support to civil authorities.

This evolution culminated in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, which explicitly attempted to move away from the two-theater-war standard. However, it failed to provide a clear alternative metric for determining the size and shape of U.S. forces. Rather, the 2010 QDR proposed to determine force sizing and composition by using the requirements of a diverse and complex set of scenarios, including long-duration stability operations and the defense of the homeland on par with a major regional conflict (MRC). The Obama Administration clearly acknowledged the inadequacy of this approach in its 2012 new strategic guidance, which returned to the two-theater-war construct, although U.S. operations in the second conflict would be limited to countering an aggressor's objectives or inflicting unacceptable damage. In his announcement of the new defense strategy in January 2012, Secretary

of Defense Leon Panetta clearly articulated the need to maintain capabilities to deal with two major regional conflicts at one time:

Our strategy review concluded that the United States must have the capability to fight several conflicts at the same time. We are not confronting, obviously, the threats of the past; we are confronting the threats of the 21st century. And that demands greater flexibility to shift and deploy forces to be able to fight and defeat any enemy anywhere. How we defeat the enemy may very well vary across conflicts. But make no mistake, we will have the capability to confront and defeat more than one adversary at a time.³

Secretary Panetta even more explicitly advocated the two-conflict standard in his speech to the 2012 Munich Security Conference in front of America's major allies:

[W]e will ensure that we can quickly confront and defeat aggression from any adversary, any time, any place. It is essential that we have the capability to deal with more than one adversary at a time, and we believe we have shaped a force that will give us that capability.⁴

Experience also suggests the need for the U.S. military to be prepared to conduct two major long-term operations at a time. Three times since the end of the Cold War, the United States has found itself involved in major theater conflicts. For Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990–1991, the U.S. deployed nearly a million soldiers (73 percent were U.S. personnel) from 34 countries.

The United States conducted decisive theater operations in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom or OEF) in 2001 and in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom or OIF) in 2003, overthrowing the regimes in both countries. These two operations morphed into long-term counterinsurgency campaigns involving at their zeniths around 150,000 U.S. troops each as well as significant contingents from allied and partner nations.

An essential premise of U.S. national security since the end of the Cold War has been this nation's role as the guarantor of global security. The Clinton Administration sought to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the demise of the Soviet Union to define a new approach to U.S. security policy—one based on the opportunities created by the end of the East–West divide to expand the community of democratic states and improve global engagement on a host of issues. U.S. military preeminence was essential to this new strategy and the U.S. role in the world:

First and foremost, we must exercise global leadership. We are not the world's policeman, but as the world's premier economic and military power, and with the strength of our democratic values, the U.S. is indispensable to the forging of stable political relations and open trade.⁵

Almost two decades later, as it sought to articulate its vision for U.S. defense and foreign policies, the Obama Administration had to acknowledge the close intertwining of U.S. military power and peace in the world:

Our country possesses the attributes that have supported

our leadership for decades—sturdy alliances, an unmatched military, the world’s largest economy, a strong and evolving democracy, and a dynamic citizenry. Going forward, there should be no doubt: the United States of America will continue to underwrite global security—through our commitments to allies, partners, and institutions; our focus on defeating al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the globe; and our determination to deter aggression and prevent the proliferation of the world’s most dangerous weapons.⁶

The two-MRC standard also provided a useful hedge against both the near-term danger of a resurgent Russia and the longer-term rise of a true peer competitor, either a single “superstate” or a confederation of adversaries. With respect to the latter, discussions in the early 1990s when the standard was first proposed did not foresee such a situation for at least 20 years. Conceptually, a force structure designed to conduct two relatively large and intense theater campaigns could serve as a counterweight to a hostile, militarizing Russia and simultaneously as the base for an expanded military capability to deter a peer adversary.

The two-MRC standard was never considered a perfect guide to force sizing and modernization. In the absence of a clear and driving threat, such as that provided by the Soviet Union, its role was as a placeholder, allowing defense planners and budgeters to define a useful and affordable military capability that could respond to the range of known demands and unknown future contingencies.

In truth, there have always been some doubts about the ability of the post-Cold War U.S. military to conduct two MRCs precisely at the same time and in the absence of national mobilization. The temporal relationship between the two conflicts was recognized as a problem. Overlapping conflicts placed particular stress on so-called high-demand/low-density systems, the critical enablers that were central to the ability of U.S. forces to gather intelligence, deploy forces, and conduct high-intensity precision operations. In addition, there was continuing uncertainty about the capacity and willingness of regional allies to support U.S. operations. Turkey’s refusal to allow U.S. forces to use it as a staging base for a northern offensive against Iraq confirmed the validity of this concern.

Of far greater concern has been the gap between the appetite of successive post-Cold War Administrations for military forces and their willingness to invest the resources necessary to support the required force structure. Over the past 20 years, the size of the U.S. military has declined by 50 percent while its activity level has increased fourfold, excluding recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even as successive force structure and strategy reviews have reconfirmed the centrality of the two-MRC construct to America’s global leadership, defense budgets have been cut; modernization programs have been reduced, delayed, or even canceled; and maintenance and upgrades of older equipment have been deferred. This process led two senior defense experts to conclude about the ritualized process of the Quadrennial Defense Review:

There is an air of unreality about the whole process, particularly

because the last three administrations systematically underfunded America’s armed forces while increasing their deployments and missions abroad. As a result, the military is too small and is forced to use equipment that is too old. Consistent with ongoing obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military cannot fight one regional contingency like Desert Storm, much less two.⁷

Nevertheless, the two constants in U.S. national security policy for the past two decades have been, first, the centrality of U.S. military preeminence to this nation’s position of global leadership and its goal of a stable international environment and, second, the value of the two-MRC force-sizing construct as both a symbol of that preeminence and a measure of overall adequacy of the force to perform the range of its missions.

Nothing in the evolving global security environment suggests that the U.S. military will be unshackled from the basic requirement to deter if possible, but fight and win if necessary, two geographically separated major theater conflicts in overlapping time frames. Rather the opposite appears to be the case. Core U.S. national security interests and objectives have changed very little since the end of the Cold War and the formulation of the two-theater-war sizing construct. These interests include protecting the U.S. homeland and U.S. citizens everywhere, partnering with allies and friends to provide regional security, ensuring access to areas of vital national interest, securing the global commons, and countering efforts by aggressive powers to dominate important regions of the world.

At the same time, challenges to these interests and threats to U.S. forces abroad and U.S. allies are increasing, not declining. The canonical Southwest and Northeast Asia scenarios remain. Iran is pursuing a hegemonic strategy in the Persian Gulf, supporting terrorist organizations and rogue regimes and continuing a sustained military buildup. North Korea shows no signs of easing its hard-line stance or curtailing its efforts to acquire long-range ballistic missiles and a stockpile of nuclear weapons. Over the past two decades, Pyongyang has engaged in a series of provocative military actions that caused the deaths of South Korean military personnel and civilians. In addition, other parts of the Greater Middle East from Libya and Egypt to Syria and even Pakistan are experiencing political instability, social upheavals, and increased conflict.

The possibility of major theater conflicts in other parts of the world can no longer be ignored. Russia's new national security strategy identifies the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as that country's principal security challenge. Moscow maintains a military presence in a number of former Soviet republics and fought a short, inconclusive conflict with Georgia in 2008. Russia's defense minister recently warned that his country might respond to the deployment of theater missile defenses in Europe with a preemptive strike on those sites. China continues to expand and improve its military forces deployed opposite Taiwan. In addition, that country and its southern neighbors have sparred over territorial rights in the South China Sea.

Looking ahead, if the U.S. will be required to conduct a theater campaign along the lines of Desert Storm, OIF, or OEF, it will likely do so under

more challenging circumstances than envisioned when the standard was first articulated. Potential adversaries have studied the strategies, tactics, and technologies that the United States employed to win decisively in prior theater conflicts. These countries are participating in the global proliferation of advanced conventional weapons. A number of these regional actors are investing heavily in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities primarily to counter the ability of the United States and its allies to project power into regions of interest using their traditional advantages in air and naval power to achieve decisive military outcomes as they did in earlier major theater conflicts.

A number of prospective regional adversaries also are investing in a range of unconventional capabilities and operational methods to counter or circumvent traditional U.S. advantages in conventional military forces. Some of these countries have extensive programs to develop, stockpile, and deploy weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). A number of prospective adversaries also have developed extensive ties with non-state actors and terrorist groups seeking to develop what some analysts have termed a "hybrid threat," such as the military relationship between Iran and Hezbollah.

Even as prospective theater adversaries build up their military capabilities and acquire more advanced weapons and systems, the ability of regional allies to contribute to their own defense and the security of their regions is changing. Some U.S. allies are reducing their defense budgets and cutting their military capabilities. Budgetary pressures in Europe have forced a number of NATO allies to reduce the size of their armed forces and scale back modernization

programs. However, many U.S. allies in the Middle East and East Asia are expanding and modernizing their force structures.

Future major theater conflicts will likely be more challenging than those of the past several decades, and they may not be limited to foreign theaters. A theater conflict could easily involve actions against the U.S. homeland or overseas bases outside the primary region of hostilities. Such attacks on the homeland could either be preemptive à la Pearl Harbor, intended to undermine a U.S. response, or in retaliation for U.S. actions against a theater adversary. Possible homeland events could range from terrorism and acts of sabotage to cyber attacks to the use of a WMD.

Not all of the trends are negative. Since the inception of the two-MRC standard, the United States has invested in a range of platforms, systems, and capabilities that have significantly enhanced its ability to conduct large-scale joint and combined operations. In this regard, the contrast between Desert Storm in 1991—the first MRC in Southwest Asia—and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 is telling. The 1991 coalition to liberate Kuwait deployed nearly 1 million combatants, more than half of them U.S. personnel. In 2003, the march to Baghdad employed only 248,000 U.S. personnel along with some 50,000 allied soldiers, primarily from Great Britain.⁸

Improvements in military equipment significantly affected the conduct of the two MRCs. In 1991 only 7.5 percent of the air-delivered ordnance was precision-guided, but the proportion had increased to nearly 65 percent in 2003.⁹ Over this period similar radical changes occurred in unmanned aerial systems, real-time strategic and tactical

communications, stealth aircraft, and theater missile defenses.

Today, the two-MRC standard, the *sine qua non* of superpower status and possibly the most critical measure of a viable U.S. national security strategy, is at risk. The new defense strategy attempts to have it both ways. It professes to adhere to the two-major-theater-war standard while proposing for the second contingency something a great deal less. In the 1990s, this lesser standard was tried and found wanting. Given the number, variety, and war-waging potential of current and emerging threats to U.S. national security, maintaining a U.S. force structure sized against any standard less than fighting and

winning two nearly simultaneous major theater conflicts invites the very instability that U.S. defense strategy is intended to deter. For the foreseeable future even more than in the recent past, the U.S. military's ability to meet a two-MRC standard will be the measure of this nation's status as a superpower and a primary engine driving its role as a global leader.

This paper defines the essential quantitative and qualitative characteristics of a U.S. force structure required to meet the two-MRC standard for the near term and midterm. Section II examines the evolving character of the two-MRC standard in the post-Cold War era with a particular focus on future

theater conflicts and criteria for sufficiency. Section III examines the evolving military threat to regional security and U.S. vital interests and its effect on the two-MRC standard. Section IV defines a 21st-century standard for a two-MRC force structure. Section V develops a top-level assessment of the costs associated with sculpting the planned force structure to meet the two-MRC test. Finally, Section VI recommends the steps that the Administration should take to address the shortfalls of the current U.S. force structure, one based on the new defense strategy, so as to enable that force to meet the goal of fighting and winning two nearly simultaneous MRCs.

Section II

The Evolving Character of the Two-MRC Standard, 1991–2012

The two-major-theater-war standard for sizing the U.S. military is hardly a new idea. It has its roots in the geopolitical situation that developed in the late 19th century. The United States had achieved the status of the world's leading industrial power, acquired a set of overseas territories as a consequence of the Spanish–American War, and finally settled the Western frontier, knitting together a transcontinental dominion from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In this context, the U.S. discovered that it had growing political, commercial, and security interests in geographically distinct regions. America's first tentative steps onto the world stage occurred during the first wave of globalization generated by rapid technological change, coupled with increased competition among the Great Powers to expand their investments in, influence over, and outright control of large parts of the world. The same conditions that called the United States out of its comfortable isolation also ended the sanctuary status the United States had enjoyed for the past century.

Alfred Thayer Mahan first articulated this new reality in his seminal work *The Influence of Seapower on History*. According to Mahan, the combination of expanded international commerce and the growing capability of the world's leading nations to project power globally required the United States to abandon its treasured notions of isolationism and the security afforded by two oceans. The United States needed to consider the possibility of involvement in conflicts in two widely separated regions of the globe as well as sorties by major adversaries against the East and West Coasts.

The U.S. experience in the Spanish–American War, most notably the USS *Oregon's* circumnavigation of the globe and the acquisition of former Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and Western Pacific, appeared to confirm the correctness of the new doctrine. Mahan's thesis also resonated with the belief among political and military leaders in American exceptionalism and the requirement that the United States needed to prepare to address threats from both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.¹⁰

What were the implications of this new perspective on national security for the size and composition of the U.S. military? At the time, in the beginning of the 19th century, Mahan could argue that the United States required a Navy that could meet the greatest of any naval threat regardless of the direction from which it might come—the Pacific or the Atlantic. The construction of the Panama Canal reduced the risk of guessing wrong on which was the greatest threat by enabling the Navy to more easily “swing” ships to the other ocean as the magnitude of the threat changed. As a result, according to the prevailing military doctrine, the United States did not need a two-ocean Navy, although it had to focus on potential strategic threats from both the Atlantic and Pacific.

However, in the 1930s, with the rise of new regional powers such as Japan and the decline of the British Navy as a bulwark against threats to the United States, it became necessary for defense planners to consider the possibility of confronting threats in two theaters simultaneously. The result was the 1940 Vinson–Walsh Act, also known as the Two-Ocean Navy Act, which funded a 70 percent

increase in the U.S. Navy, including construction of 18 aircraft carriers and construction or expansion of air and naval facilities across the Pacific. Proponents of the act argued that its fundamental purpose was to strengthen U.S. naval power to deter aggression by Japan and/or Germany.

World War II was a multi-adversary, multi-theater conflict and seemed to confirm Mahan's basic thesis. For many U.S. decision makers, this conflict also underscored the consequences of failing to acquire a military capable of meeting more than one adversary at a time.¹¹ Notably, the Roosevelt Administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff struggled to manage the flow of men and materials to both the European and Pacific Theaters. They made the strategic decision to give priority to winning the war in Europe, a choice ratified by the Allied powers.¹²

Within a few years of defeating Germany and Japan, growing antagonism between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union and the ensuing Cold War resurrected the strategic requirement that U.S. forces be able to fight multiple, geographically dispersed, and possibly simultaneous conflicts. The early history of the Cold War—which involved a series of small wars beginning with the Korean conflict, insurgencies, and direct confrontations between the Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact and United States/NATO, such as over Berlin—underscored the centrality of a multi-conflict force-sizing standard. Even where Soviet forces were not present, there was growing concern that Moscow was directing the actions of revolutionary movements and fraternal communist regimes,

such as the People's Republic of China and Cuba, to tie down U.S. forces and weaken the West's ability to confront Soviet aggression.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States struggled to define a relevant and affordable force-sizing standard. The fundamental strategic problem of the era was deterring central conflict between the two superpowers and their alliances, while still dealing with regional conflicts against Soviet forces or regional proxies. Faced with the growing Soviet strategic nuclear threat, U.S. defense planners abandoned reliance on nuclear weapons alone for deterrence and planned instead to counter, at least initially, conventional aggression at the regional level. Thus, under the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, the United States formulated the two-and-a-half war sizing construct. One conflict would be in Europe, the decisive theater in the East–West standoff. A second would be in the Far East and could involve China or North Korea. The “half war” was a major counterinsurgency operation against a Soviet proxy. The U.S. deterrent strategy of graduated escalation relied on the ability to hold at bay, albeit temporarily, a Soviet attack on Europe or a proxy in the Far East, thereby creating intrawar firebreaks. Because it was never assumed that the United States and its allies could defeat a determined Soviet onslaught with conventional means alone, the force structure constructs deemed adequate to satisfy the requirements to fight in multiple theaters were lower than what a war-winning strategy would have necessitated.¹³

Changes in the global threat environment allowed subsequent Administrations to make adjustments to the two-and-a-half-war standard. The Sino–Soviet split

enabled the Nixon Administration to reduce the standard to the ability to fight one-and-a-half wars simultaneously. However, as the Soviet Union expanded its conventional military capabilities beginning in the 1970s, the Reagan Administration found it advisable to resurrect something akin to the old two-simultaneous-war standard. The Reagan Doctrine envisioned countering aggression by the Soviet Union or its proxies anywhere in the world. In addition, in the event of a conflict between the two superpowers in Europe or Asia, Reagan defense plans included options for expanding the scope of hostilities by escalating horizontally along the periphery of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Beginning in the late 1980s, U.S. defense planners began to rethink the character of a possible conflict with the Soviet Union, the central feature of U.S. force planning for more than four decades. Monumental political changes in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and Moscow's withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan caused the incoming Bush Administration to rethink the likelihood of a deliberate attack on Western Europe. Political changes elsewhere in the world, including an improving relationship between the United States and China and the rise of political Islam, suggested that future threats to U.S. security lay elsewhere than a classic East–West confrontation. In addition, the Reagan-era defense buildup was clearly coming to an end, and significant reductions in defense spending were in the offing.¹⁵

President George H. W. Bush framed the relationship between U.S. defense planning and future force structure and the strategic changes brought by the incipient Soviet reforms in advance of the collapse of

the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. Ironically, President Bush gave the speech on the same day that Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

Our task today is to shape our defense capabilities to these changing strategic circumstances. In a world less driven by an immediate threat to Europe and the danger of global war, in a world where the size of our forces will increasingly be shaped by the needs of regional contingencies and peacetime presence, we know that our forces can be smaller. Secretary Cheney and General Powell are hard at work determining the precise combination of forces that we need. But I can tell you now, we calculate that by 1995 our security needs can be met by an active force 25 percent smaller than today's. America's Armed Forces will be at their lowest level since the year 1950.¹⁶

The Department of Defense put forward a force-sizing construct termed the “Base Force.” This was the first attempt to define both a post–Cold War national security strategy and an appropriate force structure. It was motivated also by a desire to avoid a repeat of the precipitous drawdowns that had occurred after World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. It was also informed by the U.S. experience in the first Persian Gulf War when the U.S. deployed 500,000 soldiers. The experience of Desert Shield/Desert Storm profoundly affected the evolution of the two-MRC force-sizing metric. Among the most significant features of the 1991 conflict were:

- The location, scale, and speed of the crisis and conflict, which all came as a surprise to the U.S.
- The adversary possessed a large, well-equipped, and seemingly battle-tested conventional military supplemented by ballistic missiles and WMDs;
- The U.S. lacked significant forward-deployed forces in the Persian Gulf;
- Early arriving U.S. ground forces were by necessity light and, hence, vulnerable;
- Available airlift and sealift determined the campaign's time line;
- Early attainment of air dominance was absolutely critical to the unfolding of the campaign;
- Precision-guided weapons made a contribution out of proportion to the number employed;
- Reserve Component units were not deployable on the required time line; and
- The availability of high-demand/low-density enablers was critical to operational success.

The Base Force was described as the minimum force structure to enable the United States to address its continuing global security interests and to project the aura of a global superpower. In addition, the Base Force provided the foundation for a "reconstitution" of capabilities in the event of Russian "backsliding" into a Cold War-like confrontational posture or the rise of a new peer competitor.¹⁷

The Base Force proposed a 25 percent reduction in conventional forces and reductions in the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal. The total size of the armed forces would shrink from 2.1 million to 1.6 million active-duty end strength and from 1.6 million to around 900,000 reserves. The changes to the service components were equally dramatic. Instead of 20 active divisions, the Army would consist of 12 active and eight reserve divisions. The Air Force would make do with 16 active and 12 reserve tactical fighter wings versus a Cold War structure of 24 active and 12 reserve fighter wings. The Marine Corps would decline from an active-duty end strength of 195,000 to approximately 150,000 personnel in three active divisions plus 38,000 reserves. The Navy, which had spent the previous decade building up to nearly 600 ships, including 15 aircraft carriers, would shrink to 450 ships, including 12 carriers.

Reflecting the new focus on regional contingencies, the Base Force was segmented into a series of notional force packages. The Base Force was oriented around the historic, U.S.-centric, two-ocean view of the world, consisting of an Atlantic Force, a Pacific Force, a Contingency Force, and a Strategic Force. The Atlantic Force and the Pacific Force consisted of the bulk of all conventional forces. Each was tailored to the unique demands and threats of their respective portions of the world. The Atlantic Force, with primary responsibility for Europe and the Middle East, consisted of a relatively small set of units providing forward presence backed up by heavy conventional forces, including a large ground contingent. It was presumed that the largest threat that it faced was a resurgent Iraq. The

Pacific Force provided naval and air forces to address threats across the vast expanse of the Asia-Pacific region with a continuing land force presence in Korea and Japan. At the time, the dominant conflict scenario in this region was a renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The Contingency Force was a rapid reaction capability maintained to deal with lesser contingencies. Because the majority of U.S. forces would be based in the Continental United States, the Base Force concept assumed additional investments in support capabilities such as lift, logistics, and intelligence that would enable the different force packages to deploy rapidly and operate effectively once overseas.¹⁸

A key assumption underpinning the Base Force construct was that the United States needed to be prepared to respond to more than a single regional contingency.¹⁹ It was presumed at the time that either of the two likeliest conflicts, with Iraq or with North Korea, would require committing a full array of U.S. combined arms along with significant allied contingents. Yet at the same time, senior defense officials acknowledged that the Base Force would have difficulty managing even a single major regional contingency and that two simultaneous conflicts would place it "at the breaking point."²⁰ The Base Force construct set up a fundamental mismatch between strategy and forces, which has persisted until the present.

The Clinton Administration perceived the Base Force as a temporary fix, designed largely to avoid precipitous actions in the period of uncertainty following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Les Aspin, the incoming Secretary of Defense and former chairman of the House Armed

Services Committee, had published a number of papers on future defense policy in which he had criticized the Base Force as “essentially ‘less of the same,’ that is, a downsized force largely shaped by Cold War priorities” and a “robust force that hedged strongly against the risk that the Soviet Union might be revived.”²¹ Aspin had developed a series of alternative force structures based on different assumptions about the degree of future risk to U.S. security interests. Option C, the one he termed “the most prudent and promising,” called for cutting the Base Force by an additional three Army divisions, eight Air Force wings, 110 Navy ships, and 233,000 military personnel.²² This force structure retained the capability to fight and win one major theater contingency, what Aspin termed “the Desert Storm Equivalent.”²³ In addition, the Clinton Administration was intent on achieving a “peace dividend” from further reductions in defense spending. Even before it had completed its review and force posture assessment, the Administration presented a budget to Congress that cut defense spending by some \$112 billion over the 1994–1998 Future Years Defense Program.²⁴

To better match available resources to force structure, the Clinton Administration undertook the Bottom-Up Review (BUR), which was advertised as “a comprehensive review of the nation’s defense strategy, force structure, modernization, infrastructure, and foundations.”²⁵ Yet in its description of the changing security environment, identification of new threats, and description of U.S. security interests, the BUR differed little from the ideas that underpinned the Base Force. Most subsequent studies of strategy and force structure, including the 2010 QDR, reflect the same ideas.

The BUR added two important sets of metrics to previous DOD assessments of future force structure: a characterization of the operational element phases of an MRC and a definition of the forces necessary to conduct such an operation. The BUR assumed that, by adopting a force posture strategy based on forward engagement rather than forward deployment, the U.S. would be reacting to aggression in conducting MRCs. Therefore, an MRC was defined as consisting of four phases:

- Halting the invasion,
- A buildup of forces in concert with actions to reduce enemy strength,
- Operations to defeat the enemy decisively, and
- Residual missions to ensure post-conflict stability.

The BUR also defined an MRC “building block” as a force consisting of four to five Army divisions, four to five Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEBs), 10 fighter wings, 100 heavy bombers, four to five carrier battle groups, and special operations forces. Basically, a two-MRC force structure was twice this number of forces. This force construct also assumed the availability of large numbers of enablers, such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms; tankers and air transports; and well-stocked inventories of all munitions, particularly precision-guided weapons.²⁶

Although the BUR endorsed the principle of maintaining a force structure capable of fighting and decisively winning two MRCs, it hedged on the question of simultaneity. In the policy and strategy discussions that preceded the BUR,

Secretary Aspin floated the idea of conducting one MRC rapidly and decisively while holding a second aggressor at bay until sufficient forces could be swung from the first contingency to provide the decisive force. This variant of the two-MRC construct made a particular difference in the amount of airlift and sea-lift and the investments required in critical warfighting enablers. Dubbed “win-hold-win,” this trial balloon rapidly sank.

The two-MRC force structure served as a hedge against strategic surprise. The BUR declared:

[S]izing our forces for two major regional contingencies provides a hedge against the possibility that a future adversary might one day confront us with a larger-than-expected threat and then turn out, through doctrinal or technological innovation, to be more capable than we expected, or enlist the assistance of other nations to form a coalition against our interests.²⁷

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili made a similar argument a few years later:

If we were to discard half of this two MRC capability or allow it to decay...it would take many years to rebuild a force of comparable excellence. In today’s turbulent international environment, where the future posture of so many powerful nations remains precarious, we could find ourselves with too little, too late.²⁸

Thus, when it was published, the BUR appeared to hold to the two-simultaneous-MRC formula. In truth, the Clinton Administration

TABLE 1

Force Options for Major Regional Conflicts (MRC)

Strategy	Win One MRC	Win One MRC with Hold in Second	Win Two Nearly Simultaneous MRCs	Win Two Nearly Simultaneous MRCs Plus Conduct Smaller Operations
Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 active divisions • 6 reserve division equivalents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 active divisions • 6 reserve division equivalents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 active divisions • 15 reserve enhanced-readiness brigades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 active divisions • 8 reserve enhanced equivalents
Navy	8 carrier battle groups	10 carrier battle groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 carrier battle groups • 1 reserve carrier 	12 carrier battle groups
Marine Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 active brigades • 1 reserve division 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 active brigades • 1 reserve division 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 active brigades • 1 reserve division 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 active brigades • 1 reserve division
Air Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 active fighter wings • 6 reserve fighter wings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 active fighter wings • 7 reserve fighter wings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 active fighter wings • 7 reserve fighter wings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 active fighter wings • 10 reserve fighter wings

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the Bottom-Up Review*, October 1993, p. iii, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA275102> (accessed October 11, 2012).

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proposed much less. The U.S. could not address second a MRC simultaneously with the first. It would require drawing extensively on forces deployed for other operations, reserve formations, and elements transitioning from the first to the second contingency. (See Table 1.) As the BUR openly admitted:

[C]ertain specialized high-leverage units or unique assets might be “dual tasked,” that is, used in both MRCs. For example, certain advanced aircraft—such as B-2s, F-117s, and EF-111s—that we have purchased in limited numbers because of their expense would probably need to shift from the first to the second MRC.²⁹

In fact, the overall BUR force structure mirrored the force defined as adequate for a win-hold-win strategy.³⁰

BUR policymakers stated their aim to accomplish with a smaller force what the Base Force could do only with great difficulty, and placing it near its breaking point—providing a capability to fight two nearly simultaneous major conflicts. Furthermore, this force would also be employed in peace, humanitarian, and other non-warfighting operations to a much greater degree than had been envisioned in the Base Force and was said to require \$104 billion less than the Bush baseline had provided for the Base Force. This tenuous balance between strategy, forces, and resources struck in the BUR would set the stage for many of the problems encountered over the years that followed.³¹

The Clinton Administration’s subsequent strategic assessments reaffirmed the BUR’s focus on nearly simultaneous MRCs and the

associated force packages. The BUR force construct had been developed rather hastily, without a guiding national security strategy and in response to the need to achieve a peace dividend. Over the next several years, the Clinton Administration put in place a long-term budget projection and a new national security strategy and conducted more detailed force capability analyses. This more deliberate process essentially reconfirmed most of the BUR’s conclusions. The 1996 National Security Strategy of Enlargement and Engagement reaffirmed the BUR force-sizing construct.

To deter aggression, prevent coercion of allied or friendly governments and, ultimately, defeat aggression should it occur, we must prepare our forces to confront this scale of threat, preferably in concert with our allies and friends, but unilaterally if necessary. To do this,

we must have forces that can deploy quickly and supplement U.S. forward based and forward deployed forces, along with regional allies, in halting an invasion and defeating the aggressor, just as we demonstrated by our rapid response in October 1994 when Iraq threatened aggression against Kuwait.³²

In 1997, the first Quadrennial Defense Review sought to meet the missions set out in the National Security Strategy and establish a balance between near-term and far-term risks under the assumption that defense budgets would grow, at best, modestly over the next five to 10 years. It provided the first detailed definition of the size and structure of a two-MRC capability based on detailed analysis and war gaming. The requirement to fight and win MRCs—rebranded as major theater wars (MTWs)—became a basic design condition, although the time lines associated with the two MTWs was again adjusted from “nearly simultaneous” to “overlapping time frames.” The QDR also recognized three critical challenges that could radically alter the ability of the proposed force structure to meet the two-MTW objective: rapidly defeating initial enemy advances short of their objectives in two theaters in close succession, the second following almost immediately after the first; achieving U.S. war aims against an adversary who uses or threatens to use WMDs, information warfare, terrorism, or other asymmetric means; and quickly transitioning from a posture of global engagement to fighting major theater wars.³³ The 1997 QDR concluded that based on extensive analyses:

[A] force of the size and structure close to the current force was

necessary to meet the requirement set out in the strategy of being able to win two, nearly simultaneous, major theater wars in concert with regional allies. While slightly smaller forces were capable of prevailing without a significant increase in risk in the base case of the analysis, a larger force was judged necessary to conduct these operations with acceptable risk when either enemy chemical weapons were used or shorter warning times were played. Even with the current force, enemy use of chemical and biological weapons presents U.S. and coalition forces with considerable challenges.³⁴

To apportion forces appropriately, the relevant Combatant Commanders based their contingency planning on the assumption that the two concurrent MTWs would develop sequentially. The first or priority MTW would be allocated forces sufficient to conduct decisive operations followed by counterattack operations. Forces sufficient for these two operations would include the “Presidential Selected Reserve Call-up” and “Partial Mobilization Reinforcements.” In the event of a second, concurrent, lesser-priority MTW, the supported theater commander would receive forces sufficient to defend successfully and, where appropriate, engage in limited offensive operations.

A key variable in any judgment of the adequacy of the QDR force structure to meet the demands of two MTWs was the availability of significant mobility forces and prepositioned stocks of materiel and ammunition. With the shift from a strategy based on forward deployment to a strategy that emphasized forward presence and expeditionary forces,

a much larger fraction of war equipment and supplies had to be moved to the location of future conflicts. The experience in Desert Shield demonstrated that limits on lift assets and the lack of prepositioned equipment affects the ability to deploy any but light land forces to halt the aggression. To allow for the rapid deployment of heavy forces required increases in both lift capabilities (air and sea) and the prepositioning of large amounts of heavy equipment.³⁵

The QDR proposed that the minimum airlift capacity to support the two-war construct was approximately 50 million ton-miles per day with an additional surge sealift capacity of 10 million square feet. The Army needed six brigade sets of prepositioned equipment deployed forward in Europe, Korea, and Southwest Asia with an additional Marine brigade set in Norway. In addition, three Marine Corps Maritime Prepositioning Ship squadrons were to be available along with one heavy brigade set of Army equipment and selected munitions for the Air Force afloat.³⁶

Despite prepositioning significant quantities of equipment and war materiel ashore and at sea, there were reasons to believe that the force’s logistical and sustainment capabilities could not meet the demands of two nearly simultaneous MTWs. For example, throughout the 1990s, airlift capacity was well short of what was deemed necessary to fulfill the requirements for two MTWs. Similarly, the quantity of specialized ISR and command and control platforms was insufficient to support both contingencies at the same time.³⁷

Desert Storm demonstrated that airpower and precision munitions are integral to the ability of U.S. forces to halt aggression, create the

preconditions for the decisive defeat of an adversary, and counter the potential threat posed by WMDs and their long-range delivery systems. However, the QDR's critics pointed out that the proposed force structure and associated modernization program were inadequate to meet the anticipated requirements imposed on Air Force and Navy elements to achieve and maintain air dominance. Defense planners had failed to consider the implications of the proliferation of advanced surface-to-air defense systems and modern (late 20th-century) fighter aircraft. Significant investments in "fifth-generation" tactical aircraft and advanced air-to-ground weapons would counter this threat. Yet the proposed procurement of the F-22, the high-end tactical fighter designed to counter the emerging threat, was reduced to less than half the number initially planned.³⁸

The U.S. Army faced similar problems in the composition of deployable force packages. The Army's own analysis concluded that it needed 672,000 troops in deployable units (Active and Reserve components combined) to fight two nearly simultaneous MTWs. Although the Army had enough total manpower to conduct the two contingencies, the Army's structure resulted in too few forces being available in combat support and combat service support units. Some 195,000 in combat forces were required out of 350,000 available, but more than 470,000 were needed in support formations and only 417,000 were available.³⁹ In addition, a significant portion of the Army's combat power was resident in the Reserve component. These forces required significant time—in excess of 100 days—to organize, equip, and train. Unless a decision for full mobilization was taken simultaneously

with the initial deployment of forces to the first MTW, the result would be a gap of at least three months before the Army had sufficient forces to conduct a second contingency.⁴⁰

The continuing decline in real defense spending posed a larger problem for defense planners seeking to maintain a credible two-MTW capability. By the first QDR, defense spending had declined by 33 percent in real terms and procurement spending had fallen by 60 percent. This caused problems in both modernization programs and overall force readiness. Because of truncated modernization programs, the average age of the military's equipment pool was increasing, which also increased maintenance costs. Throughout this period, U.S. forces were continually involved in a series of deployments throughout the world. During the 1990s, the DOD was repeatedly required to reprogram significant funds from modernization accounts to operations and support. Even then, a significant gap between available funding and the resources necessary to support steady-state equipping and training persisted.⁴¹

The combination of shortfalls in modernization funding and growing costs of operations and support increased the overall risk to the entire force, but particularly to the military's ability to conduct two nearly simultaneous MTWs. While the 1997 QDR concluded that the proposed force was capable of conducting two nearly simultaneous MTWs with only "moderate risk," other contemporaneous DOD documents characterized the risk as "moderate-to-high" or even "high." Within a few months of the publication of the QDR, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton admitted in congressional hearings that

"the risks associated with the most demanding scenarios have increased. We now assess the risk factors for fighting and winning the 1st Major Theater War as moderate and for the 2nd MTW as high."⁴²

The National Defense Panel (NDP), an independent parallel study group designed to ensure the "honesty" of the QDR, also recognized the strategy-resource mismatch. The NDP argued that adversaries were unlikely to pose the kind of conventional threat for which the BUR and QDR force postures had been primarily designed. It was even less likely that the United States would face two such threats nearly simultaneously. Moreover, the NDP argued that the two-MTW construct along with the demands for significant forward presence requirements sapped the defense budget of resources needed to invest in transformational capabilities for the future:

The Panel views the two-military-theater-of-war construct as a force-sizing function and not a strategy. We are concerned that this construct may have become a force-protection mechanism—a means of justifying the current force structure—especially for those searching for the certainties of the Cold War era. This could leave the services vulnerable if one of the other major contingencies resolves itself before we have a transformation strategy in place, creating a strong demand for immediate, deep, and unwise cuts in force structure and personnel.

The two-theater construct has been a useful mechanism for determining what forces to retain as the Cold War came to a close. To some degree, it remains

a useful mechanism today. But, it is fast becoming an inhibitor to reaching the capabilities we will need in the 2010–2020 time frame.

The issue is not whether the current posture is useful. The real issue is where we are willing to take risk. The current posture minimizes near-term risk at a time when danger is moderate to low. A significant share of the Defense Department's resources is focused on the unlikely contingency that two major wars will break out at once, putting greater risk on our long-term security. While we cannot identify future threats precisely, we can identify the challenges. Our priority emphasis (including resources) must go to the future.⁴³

President George W. Bush came into office determined to reverse more than a decade of declining defense spending and invest in transforming the U.S. military into a 21st-century force. Appearing to echo the NDP's strategic argument, the new QDR rebalanced military priorities to provide additional attention and more resources to investments in "transformational capabilities." While still appearing to adhere to the two-MTW strategy, the Bush Administration subtly altered the contingency planning guidance to affect the forces that the Combatant Commanders would need to achieve war aims. According to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld:

We decided to move away from the "two major theater war" construct for sizing our forces, an approach that called for maintaining two massive occupation forces capable of marching on

and occupying capitals of two aggressors at the same time and changing their regimes. This approach served us well in the immediate post-Cold War period, but it really threatened to leave us reasonably prepared for two specific conflicts and under-prepared for the unexpected contingencies of the 21st century.

To ensure we have the resources to prepare for the future, and to address the emerging challenges to homeland security, we needed a more realistic and balanced assessment of our near-term warfighting needs. Instead of maintaining two occupation forces, we will place greater emphasis on deterrence in four critical theaters, backed by the ability to swiftly defeat two aggressors at the same time, while preserving the option for one massive counter-offensive to occupy an aggressor's capital and replace the regime. Since neither aggressor would know which the president would choose for a regime change, the deterrent is undiminished. But by removing the requirement to maintain a second occupation force, as we did under the old strategy, we can free up resources for the future and the various lesser contingencies which we face, have faced, are facing and will most certainly face in the period ahead.⁴⁴

The Bush Administration's first QDR was written in 2001, before the events of 9/11, but published in a slightly modified version soon thereafter. It focused on a broader set of strategic missions than those guided by the BUR and 1997 QDR, including enhanced protection of the U.S. homeland against both state

and non-state threats, deterrence in multiple theaters not only of direct aggression but also of investments in disruptive technologies such as ballistic missiles. In addition, the 2001 QDR explicitly abandoned the focus of prior defense planning documents on two canonical MTWs, one in Southwest Asia and the other in Northeast Asia. Instead, the Bush Administration asserted the need to plan to conduct two generic MTWs and a range of other missions against any set of adversaries.⁴⁵

The 2001 QDR proposed that for planning purposes U.S. forces be capable of "swiftly defeating attacks against U.S. allies and friends in any two theaters of operation in overlapping timeframes." However, the report failed to define "swiftly defeating" and "overlapping timeframes." U.S. operations in each MTW would emphasize fighting "from a forward deterrent posture with immediately employable forces, including long-range precision strike capabilities from within and beyond the theater, and rapidly deployable maneuver capabilities." It defined the minimum conditions for a successful outcome in an MTW as the elimination of enemy offensive capability across the depth of its territory, restoration of favorable military conditions in the region, and creation of acceptable political conditions for the cessation of hostilities. In one of these two theaters, the U.S. would deploy additional U.S. forces to allow a decisive defeat of an adversary, which the QDR defined as imposing America's will and removing any future threat it could pose. This could include the occupation of the adversary's territory and setting the conditions for regime change.⁴⁶

What is perhaps most interesting is, despite the rhetoric about the need for transformation and the

TABLE 2

Proposed Force Structure Changes: Base Force, BUR, and QDR

		FY 1990	1997 Base Force	1999 BUR Force	2003 QDR Force	FY 2001
Air Force	Tactical Fighter Wings (Active/Reserve)	24/12	15.3/11.3	13/7	12+/8	12+/7+
	Bombers (Active)	228	181	184	187	181
	Land-based ICBMs	1,000	550	550	550	550
Navy	Aircraft carriers	15/1	12/1	11/1	11/1	12/0
	Battle force ships	546	448	346	306	317
Marines	Divisions (Active/Reserve)	3/1	3/1	3/1	3/1	3/1
Army	Divisions (Active/Reserve)	18/10	12/8 ^a	10/5+	10/8	10/8
End Strength	Active	2,070	1,626	1,418	1,360	1,382
	Reserve	1,128	920	893	835	864

a — Reserve includes two cadre divisions.

Source: Eric V. Larsen, David T. Orletsky, and Kristin Leuschner, *Defense Planning in a Decade of Change: Lessons from the Base Force, Bottom-Up Review and Quadrennial Defense Review*, RAND Corporation, 2001, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1387.html (accessed October 11, 2012).

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desire not to be trapped into two large land campaigns, how little the 2001 QDR force structure differed from its predecessors going back to the BUR. (See Table 2.) In part, this reflected the impact of increased defense spending by the Bush Administration. It also was a function of the need to maintain significant forward presence in multiple regions of the world.

The 2001 QDR's statement of objectives in the event of major conflicts did result in substantial changes to the Combatant Commanders' war plans, termed operational plans. The Combatant Commanders for Southwest Asia and Northeast Asia reportedly revised their contingency operations plans to reflect the requirement to attain the lesser objectives of defeating an adversary's aggression if that theater became the second major contingency.⁴⁷

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan dominated strategic planning during the remainder of the Bush Administration. The global war on terrorism was the number one priority. The new force-sizing standard proposed in the 2006 QDR to replace it was termed 1-4-2-1. This stood for defending the homeland, deterring hostilities in four areas of the world, defeating two adversaries in nearly simultaneous combat operations, and being able to decisively defeat one of those two adversaries. The QDR retained the yardstick of fighting two MTWs—conventional campaigns—but with modifications. One of the two campaigns could be a protracted stability operation. Both campaigns would require a surge of forces. One of the campaigns would be to remove a hostile regime and destroy its military capacity.⁴⁸

In addition, it placed greater emphasis on “joint capabilities,” primarily aerial platforms and weapons. Although the number of F-22 fighters was capped at 187, the Air Force would increase its long-range strike capabilities by 50 percent and the penetrating component of long-range strike by a factor of five by 2025. Approximately 45 percent of the future long-range strike force would be unmanned. The capacity for joint air forces to conduct global conventional strikes against time-sensitive targets would also be increased. The Navy would build a large fleet with 11 carrier strike groups and modify its Fleet Response Plan to permit an increase in surge capability.⁴⁹ These investments were intended to significantly improve the DOD's portfolio of capabilities to address a range of missions, including but not limited to conventional campaigns against

regional adversaries armed with advanced weapons systems.

At the same time, both the 2006 QDR and the 2008 National Military Strategy argued that additional risk could be taken in the conventional force posture and even in some areas of advanced technology in order to harvest the additional resources needed to win the current fights. On a number of occasions, Defense Secretary Robert Gates beyond the official documents to question the likelihood of two major combined arms conflicts:

All told, this year's National Defense Strategy concluded that although U.S. predominance in conventional warfare is not unchallenged, it is sustainable for the medium term given current trends. It is true that the United States would be hard pressed to fight a major conventional ground war elsewhere on short notice, but as I've said before, where on Earth would we do that? We have ample, untapped striking power in our air and sea forces should the need arise to deter or punish aggression—whether on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, or across the Taiwan Strait. So while we are knowingly assuming some additional risk in this area, that risk is, I believe, a prudent and manageable one.⁵⁰

In his last major speech to the U.S. Army Corps of Cadets at West Point, Secretary Gates went even farther, questioning the likelihood and wisdom of the U.S. conducting major contingencies in either the Middle East or East Asia. According to Secretary Gates, the Army should not plan on fighting protracted, large-scale counterinsurgency/

stability operations such as Iraq and Afghanistan. “The odds of repeating another Afghanistan or Iraq—invading, pacifying, and administering a large third world country—may be low.” It also should not plan for a return to the good old days of major force-on-force conventional warfare:

The strategic rationale for swift-moving expeditionary forces, be they Army or Marines, airborne infantry or special operations, is self-evident given the likelihood of counterterrorism, rapid reaction, disaster response, or stability or security force assistance missions. But in my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should “have his head examined,” as General MacArthur so delicately put it.⁵¹

The Obama Administration came into office facing a number of serious challenges: the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the desire to place U.S. foreign and security policies on a new footing, and a deep economic crisis. Secretary Gates developed a plan for acquisition reform that substantially changed the modernization plans that he had approved in the final years of the Bush Administration. In addition to shifting priority and resources to programs to support the current conflicts, Secretary Gates canceled or truncated major modernization programs in all the services, including the Army's Future Combat System; the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle; the Air Force's F-22 fighter, Combat Search and Rescue helicopter, and long-range bomber; and

the Navy's new missile cruiser and DDG-1000.⁵²

The 2010 QDR was perhaps most noteworthy for its effort to avoid a commitment to the 20-year-old two-major-contingency force-sizing standard. The document explicitly acknowledged that past defense reviews have called for the nation's armed forces to be able to fight and win two major regional conflicts in overlapping time frames, but the report argued that the nation faced a much wider range of serious security challenges that made the two-war standard no longer a useful metric:

Because America's adversaries have been adopting a wide range of strategies and capabilities that can be brought to bear against the United States and its forces, allies, and interests, it is no longer appropriate to speak of “major regional conflicts” as the sole or even the primary template for sizing, shaping, and evaluating U.S. forces. Rather, U.S. forces must be prepared to conduct a wide variety of missions under a range of different circumstances.⁵³

In truth, the force-sizing construct developed for the 2010 QDR varied rather little from that proposed in 2001 by the Bush Administration. As described by one of its architects, the test of the 2010 QDR force was its ability, *inter alia*, to meet the following challenges in overlapping time frames:

- Conducting a large-scale stability operation, such as Operation Iraqi Freedom;
- Defeating a highly capable state adversary in a distant theater;

- Supporting civil authorities in response to a catastrophic event in the United States; and
- Continuing to execute a global campaign against al-Qaeda and its allies.⁵⁴

If anything, the 2010 QDR argued for a force-sizing construct that could be described as two MRCs plus. In addition to responding to multiple large-scale contingencies in geographically distant theaters, the U.S. military also was required to respond to “advanced cyber, nuclear, and antispace situations” and to meet the “increased demands for day-to-day global presence and partner capacity missions over a period of years.”⁵⁵

The 2010 QDR made only marginal additional changes to the force structure inherited from the Bush Administration. It proposed a number of modernization programs to support both the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and to address the growing A2/AD denial threat.

The Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel provided a very different perspective on the two-MTW standard and associated force structure. This bipartisan group criticized the 2010 QDR for failing to define the forces required to meet the two-major-conflict force-sizing standard as well as the absence of any alternative metric for determining the adequacy of the DOD’s basic force posture:

In evaluating the QDR force structure, we were hampered by the lack of a clearly articulated force-planning construct that the military services and Congress can use to measure the adequacy of U.S. forces. Since the end of the Cold War, the United

States has measured the adequacy of its force posture against the standard of defeating adversaries in two geographically separate theaters nearly simultaneously. Between 1993 and 2006, that requirement evolved from the desire to maintain the capability to defeat two conventionally armed aggressors to the need to conduct a campaign against a conventional adversary while also waging a long-duration irregular warfare campaign and protecting the homeland against attack. The 2010 QDR, however, did not endorse any metric for determining the size and shape of U.S. forces. Rather, it put diverse, overlapping scenarios, including long-duration stability operations and the defense of the homeland, on par with major regional conflicts when assessing the adequacy of U.S. forces.⁵⁶

The panel recommended an alternative force structure that would return the Air Force and Navy to the size proposed by the BUR almost 20 years earlier. In particular, the panel proposed increasing the size of the Navy to 346 ships, including 11 aircraft carriers and 55 attack submarines. The panel proposed an Air Force of 1,200 tactical aircraft, 180 heavy bombers, 32–33 airlift/aerial refueling squadrons with approximately 1,000 airplanes, three command and control wings, and eight space and cyber wings.⁵⁷ Perhaps more important, the panel stressed the need for the comprehensive modernization of the force.⁵⁸

In less than two years, the Obama Administration was back at the drawing board, seeking to define a new defense strategy and associated force posture based on the 2011 Budget Control Act’s requirement

to reduce planned defense spending by nearly \$500 billion over 10 years. Somewhat surprisingly, one of the basic assumptions guiding the formulation of the new defense strategy was the need to conduct two major conflicts at the same time. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta described the thought process behind the development of the appropriate force structure to support the new defense strategy:

We will have to look at force structure—and the size of the ground forces after Iraq and Afghanistan—recognizing that a smaller, highly capable and ready force is preferable to a larger, hollow force. While some limited reductions can take place, I must be able to maintain a sufficient force to confront the potential of having to fight more than one war. What can be helpful here is maintaining a strong National Guard and Reserve that can help respond to crises.⁵⁹

The new defense strategy drew the greatest public attention for its proposal for a strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region. Equally significant, however, was the new strategy’s revalidation of the two-major-conflict metric. The Obama Administration had earlier argued that the most likely conflicts confronting the nation involved counterterrorist operations at home and abroad and counterinsurgency campaigns similar to those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new defense strategy explicitly downplayed the likelihood of large-scale, protracted stability operations and placed much greater stress on the need to prepare for high-intensity combined arms conflicts with adversaries employing significant A2/AD capabilities.

However, it explicitly acknowledged the continuing requirement to be able to engage in two widely separated major conflicts at the same time:

As a nation with important interests in multiple regions, our forces must be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere. Our planning envisages forces that are able to fully deny a capable state's aggressive objectives in one region by conducting a combined arms campaign across all domains—land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace. This includes being able to *secure territory and populations and facilitate a transition to stable governance on a small scale for a limited period using standing forces and, if necessary, for an extended period with mobilized forces*. Even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, *they will be capable of denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—an opportunistic aggressor in a second region*.⁶⁰

To a significant degree, U.S. defense strategy has come full circle. Over the past 20 years, military leaders sought to match their defense strategies and associated force structures to changing geo-strategic circumstances. Successive defense reviews and analyses produced an evolution in strategic thinking away from the Cold War's theater-spanning, all-arms collision of superpowers to the Base Force and BUR's smaller versions of Cold War-era conventional conflicts, followed by the late 1990s planning

for replays of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, to plans in the Bush and early Obama Administrations to address a much more diverse array of challenges. Each Administration and every major study, review, and strategy document continued to plan for two major operations in overlapping time frames. The 2006 and 2010 QDRs, in particular, reflected the assumption that future regional conflicts would involve a wider range of adversaries than just regional state actors and a broader set of means than classic conventional combined arms forces. Perhaps too heavily influenced by the realities of conducting two large-scale stability operations, the 2005 and 2010 QDRs downplayed the two-major-contingency metric. Future enemies would seek to avoid direct engagement with a U.S. military so demonstrably superior in classic conventional combat and try to exploit weaknesses in U.S. defenses through asymmetric means. Now the focus has returned to major conflicts, albeit with the added challenges of continuing actions against the global terrorist threat and operating in new domains such as cyberspace.⁶¹

Although no Administration has found a viable alternative to the two-major-conflict metric, this does not mean that any of their proposed force postures were adequate to the task, particularly after factoring in the time dimension. While paying lip service to the two-major-contingencies standard, senior military and civilian leaders including Colin Powell, Hugh Shelton, Donald Rumsfeld, and Robert Gates each warned that the extant force structure was inadequate to meet the demand to conduct two major theater conflicts at the same time.⁶² Several reasons lead to this conclusion: reliance on the Reserve Component (particularly the Army

National Guard) in a second contingency, a lack of sufficient airlift and sealift, the shortage of high-demand/low-density enablers, and insufficient stocks of ammunition. Thus, the idea of conducting two regional conflicts simultaneously was abandoned in favor of less precise terms, such as overlapping time frames or on short notice. Finally, the notion of deliberately sequenced conflicts was entirely eliminated in favor of the requirement that U.S. forces be capable of responding to a second regional aggression while already engaged in a major theater conflict or substantial stability operation.

Defense planners also changed prospective war outcomes to avoid confronting the reality of force structure shortfalls. Defense plans generated a series of objectives that employed terms such as “swiftly defeat,” “halting aggression,” or “imposing unacceptable costs.” These were treated as distinct and lesser goals than the decisive defeat of an adversary, which involved destruction of his military forces and war-waging industry, occupation of territory, and even regime change. Beginning with the 2001 QDR, plans made an explicit distinction between the objective of defeating aggression and decisively defeating an adversary. As discussed above, the latter goal required significantly enhanced ground forces in order to occupy enemy territory.

A fundamental problem with all of these formulations is their failure to account for the unique characteristics of major conflict in every theater. Southwest Asia is different from Northeast Asia, and Iraq was a different adversary than Iran or North Korea would be. As a result, the planning challenge could not be reduced to the simple binary problem of first versus second major contingency.⁶³

It would be reasonable to conclude that since the late 1990s the best that U.S. forces could accomplish if compelled to fight two major contingencies simultaneously would be some variation of Secretary Aspin's infamous win-hold-win strategy. Even then, it was unclear whether the U.S. force structure was sufficient to achieve a decisive win in the second theater. As Defense Secretary Panetta acknowledged in his statement during the unveiling of the new defense strategy, "There's no question—there's no question—that we have to make some trade-offs and that we will be taking, as a result of that, some level of additional but acceptable risk in the budget plan that we release next month."⁶⁴ The Congressional Research Service's initial assessment of the new defense strategy characterized it as "doing less with less." The analysis further observed:

Perhaps more accurately, the guidance seems to call for meeting a somewhat different mix of future challenges with a distinctly different mix and application of capabilities. In doing so, the guidance makes significant assumptions about the future global context. It includes willingness to assume some greater risk, without specifying the scope and scale of that

risk, to accomplish simultaneous missions.⁶⁵

The current metric of winning one major theater conflict decisively while being able to halt a second conventional aggression may soon be a step too far. Reportedly, the Pentagon is altering its current war plans, increasing the time requirements to deploy forces to either major contingency and placing a greater reliance on allies.⁶⁶ Regrettably, it is not clear that U.S. allies will be able to take on the additional burden. The NATO countries are reducing their defense budgets and cutting military capabilities. U.S. allies in Asia are modernizing their military establishments, but only slowly.

A force structure capable of fighting and winning two major theater conflicts will depend heavily on advanced capabilities, particularly air, sea, and space. In fact, each strategic review and every iteration of the national military strategy or defense guidance has emphasized the need to invest more in advanced technologies and critical enablers. Decisions to retire older tactical aircraft, strategic bombers, and surface combatants have been taken based on the assumption that modernization programs would rapidly deliver improved capability. However, investment in such capabilities is

lagging, as the Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel observed.

Finally, the belief that the United States did not need to plan for a conflict with a peer competitor has been an article of faith for most of the past 20 years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the maximum challenge the United States faced came from regional adversaries on the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan. The shift in focus on the two MTWs was a method for breaking away from the Cold War paradigm, but in a cautious and sensible manner that did not reject the possibility of significant conventional conflict. Not since the early deliberations leading to the Base Force has U.S. national security planning explicitly considered the possibility of the rise of a peer competitor.⁶⁷ The BUR acknowledged the possibility of a greater-than-expected threat against which a two-MRC force structure served as a hedge. However, the 2010 defense guidance also raised the possibility of facing a greater-than-expected threat. As a consequence of this, the new strategy includes a requirement for "reversibility."⁶⁸ It is by no means certain that the current force structure, even if sufficient to prosecute two separate major contingencies at a time, is either adequate or appropriate to meet the challenge of a peer competitor.

Section III

Evolving Threats and Their Implications for the Two-MRC Standard

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory over Saddam Hussein's forces in Operation Desert Storm, it seemed as though the United States could take a more relaxed stance toward both the number of potential enemies the nation faced and their ability to harm the homeland, friends, and allies or other national interests. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell commented in a 1991 congressional hearing, "I am running out of demons. I am running out of enemies. I am down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."⁶⁹

Until the 2001 QDR replaced threat-based force planning with an approach based on portfolios of capabilities, the DOD continued to measure the adequacy of its force structure in terms of the ability to defeat the most likely threats. Since the two regions of primary concern were Southwest Asia (a resurgent Iraq) and Northeast Asia (an aggressive North Korea), it made sense to measure U.S. forces against the threats posed by their militaries. The 1991 Persian Gulf War provided something of a baseline for defining the threat against which to define the characteristics of an MRC-capable force. Representative Les Aspin, then-Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, proposed using the Iraq military as it existed during the 1991 Desert Storm campaign as the baseline regional threat. Logically, a "Desert Storm Equivalent," as he termed it, would be an appropriate MRC-capable force to address such a threat.⁷⁰

The BUR developed a canonical MRC threat that was largely based on the 1991 experience. The adversary was judged to be capable of fielding

military forces in the following ranges:

- 400,000–750,000 total personnel under arms;
- 2,000–4,000 tanks;
- 3,000–5,000 armored fighting vehicles;
- 2,000–3,000 artillery pieces;
- 500–1,000 combat aircraft;
- 100–200 naval vessels, primarily patrol craft armed with surface-to-surface missiles, and up to 50 submarines; and
- 100–1,000 Scud-class ballistic missiles, some possibly with nuclear, chemical, or biological warheads.⁷¹

The BUR went further, defining a set of "illustrative planning scenarios" to test the adequacy of the proposed force structure to deal with prospective future threats. The two employed for planning and assessment purposes were aggression by a remilitarized Iraq against Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and aggression by North Korea against the Republic of Korea. Both of these provided a test case of common features expected in future MRCs—a well-armed regional power initiating aggression thousands of miles from the United States with a short-warning, armor-heavy, combined-arms offensive against the outnumbered forces of a neighboring state. The resurgent Iraq and Korean scenarios also allowed for the assessment of the impact of critical parameters—such as warning time, the

threat, terrain, weather, duration of hostilities, and combat intensity—on the adequacy of the two-MRC force structure.⁷² Curiously, no evidence indicates that differences in the size and composition between Iraqi and North Korean forces or in regional critical parameters influenced the BUR force.

The Southwest and Northeast Asia constructs developed to support the BUR's force structure analysis became enshrined in U.S. defense planning, including subsequent QDRs, National Military Strategies, and DOD annual reports to Congress. Although defense officials quickly pointed out that the BUR's scenarios were not the equivalent of war plans, it was not long before those plans entrenched the canonical two-MTW focus, assuming overlapping scenarios, the four phases of conflict, and variations based on which theater was the first MTW.

In many respects the focus on MRCs involving these two regions was a reasonable approach. Until 2001, these two regions appeared to hold the greatest risk of major conflict. In 1994, the Clinton Administration found itself facing concurrent crises in both regions. As tensions were rising between North Korea and the international community over North Korea's nuclear program and, specifically, its threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Saddam Hussein began to move forces from central Iraq toward the border with Kuwait. The Pentagon began moving the lead elements of its designated two-MRC force to both regions, including a significant number of tactical fighters and a number of naval combatants. Both situations were

rapidly resolved. This experience caused then-Secretary of Defense William Perry to observe:

[D]eterrence worked because the United States had a ready force and was prepared to use it....

The United States strategy to maintain a force that can fight two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts is designed to prevent just this type of adventurism.⁷³

In the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and NATO's intervention in the Balkans, it became an article of faith in U.S. defense planning that no adversary would directly confront the United States and its allies if the U.S.-led coalition was able to execute its preferred operational plan. However, inherent in the U.S. approach to an MRC were a number of strategic and operational requirements against which an adversary could operate. In an MRC, the goal was to defeat the aggressor's forces, "win decisively [which could include holding an enemy's territory and even regime change], quickly, and with minimum casualties."⁷⁴ Given that the United States was unlikely to start a conflict with large forward-deployed forces, an MRC would need to be conducted in stages, what the BUR termed phases: halt, buildup, degradation of enemy capabilities, and decisive counteroffensive.

One long-time commentator on U.S. defense planning characterized the two-MRC strategy as a "High-Risk Military Strategy," elaborating that "the two-war standard is reasonable, but the defense program is too thin and rests on too many optimistic assumptions."⁷⁵ Among the many assumptions was that an

MRC could be conducted rapidly and with minimal casualties. In addition, the U.S. strategy clearly depended on being able to execute a specific sequence of events.

U.S. national security strategy and defense planning recognized that the balance of forces in regions of interest would not remain static and that prospective adversaries would acquire advanced capabilities over time. The 1997 QDR pointed to the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons and their means of delivery, information warfare capabilities, advanced conventional weapons, stealth capabilities, unmanned aerial vehicles, and capabilities to access or deny access to space.⁷⁶ The 2004 National Military Strategy warned that "access to advanced weapons systems and innovative delivery systems could fundamentally change warfighting and dramatically increase an adversary's ability to threaten the United States."⁷⁷

More recent analyses have made it clear that the United States is losing its monopoly on advanced military capabilities to states and non-state actors alike. This has already taken place in communications and even intelligence thanks to sources such as Google Earth. It is rapidly becoming the case with a wide range of advanced weapons and the training that goes with them. China is deploying a ship-killing, precision-guided ballistic missile. Iran has a mixed array of conventional aircraft, ships, and tanks along with sea-skimming cruise missiles, long-range ballistic missiles, advanced sea mines, and swarms of small boats. Many countries are deploying hundreds of surface-to-air missiles and other capabilities intended to deny the U.S. its long-held advantage in airpower. Hezbollah, Iran's surrogate, now

deploys a massive arsenal of rockets and missiles, anti-armor guided missiles and mines, and squad-level automatic weapons to complement traditional systems such as snipers and suicide bombers. The same proliferation will likely occur in man-portable anti-aircraft weapons, thereby challenging U.S. dominance in close air support. In 2011, Secretary Panetta warned that even as the United States was reducing its military capabilities, prospective adversaries were increasing theirs:

We are facing reductions at a time when we confront real threats in the world that continue to face this country. We are still facing the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. Places like Iran and North Korea continue to be a threat as they pursue nuclear weapons. Rising powers are rapidly modernizing their militaries and investing in capabilities to deny our forces freedom of movement in vital regions such as the Asia-Pacific area. We also face the prospect of cyber attacks that could inflict tremendous damage on our nation's infrastructure while operating with relative anonymity and distance. This is very much the potential battlefield of the future.⁷⁸

Moreover, it soon became evident that prospective regional U.S. adversaries had "gone to school" on the campaigns in the Middle East and Balkans. Secretary Perry was quite right that the ability to conduct two MRCs was a powerful deterrent. However, the strategy was based on a set of policies, operational concepts, technological advantages, and assumptions about adversary behavior that were subject to change. The

National Defense Panel's strategy of transforming the U.S. military was based on the belief that future adversaries would take steps to counter perceived U.S. operational and technological advantages:

We can assume that our enemies and future adversaries have learned from the Gulf War. They are unlikely to confront us conventionally with mass armor formations, air superiority forces, and deep-water naval fleets of their own, all areas of overwhelming U.S. strength today. Instead, they may find new ways to attack our interests, our forces, and our citizens. They will look for ways to match their strengths against our weaknesses. They will actively seek existing and new arenas in which to exploit our perceived vulnerabilities. Moreover, they will seek to combine these unconventional approaches in a synergistic way.⁷⁹

The 1997 National Military Strategy was the first to encompass the range of tactics, techniques, technologies, and procedures under the heading of asymmetric threats: "Such means include unconventional or inexpensive approaches that circumvent our strengths, exploit our vulnerabilities, or confront us in ways we cannot match in kind."⁸⁰ The 1997 QDR stressed the same point:

Indeed, U.S. dominance in the conventional military arena may encourage adversaries to use such asymmetric means to attack our forces and interests overseas and Americans at home. That is, they are likely to seek advantage over the United States by using unconventional

approaches to *circumvent* or *undermine* our strengths while *exploiting* our vulnerabilities. Strategically, an aggressor may seek to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States, using instead means such as terrorism, NBC threats, information warfare, or environmental sabotage to achieve its goals. If, however, an adversary ultimately faces a conventional war with the United States, it could also employ asymmetric means to delay or deny U.S. access to critical facilities; disrupt our command, control, communications, and intelligence networks; deter allies and potential coalition partners from supporting U.S. intervention; or inflict higher than expected U.S. casualties in an attempt to weaken our national resolve.⁸¹

The Department of Defense made a similar point in its 2012 strategy report:

In order to credibly deter potential adversaries and to prevent them from achieving their objectives, the United States must maintain its ability to project power in areas in which our access and freedom to operate are challenged. In these areas, sophisticated adversaries will use asymmetric capabilities, to include electronic and cyber warfare, ballistic and cruise missiles, advanced air defenses, mining, and other methods, to complicate our operational calculus. States such as China and Iran will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities, while the proliferation of sophisticated weapons and technology

will extend to non-state actors as well.⁸²

U.S. defense planners believe that an important feature of the future security environment will be something called "hybrid warfare." This is the idea that states will use a variety of traditional and asymmetric tactics, techniques, and procedures, including the use of surrogates in the event of a military confrontation with the West. Advocates of this vision also argue that what were once considered lesser threats—terrorists, insurgents, and even criminal gangs—may now pose a greater danger due to their ability to access advanced weapons systems.⁸³

According to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review:

The term "hybrid" has recently been used to capture the seemingly increased complexity of war, the multiplicity of actors involved, and the blurring between traditional categories of conflict. While the existence of innovative adversaries is not new, today's hybrid approaches demand that U.S. forces prepare for a range of conflicts. These may involve state adversaries that employ protracted forms of warfare, possibly using proxy forces to coerce and intimidate, or non-state actors using operational concepts and high-end capabilities traditionally associated with states.

We must also anticipate the employment of other novel methods. Future adversaries may use surrogates including terrorist and criminal networks, manipulate the information environment in increasingly sophisticated ways, impede access to

energy resources and markets, and exploit perceived economic and diplomatic leverage in order to complicate our calculus.⁸⁴

Examples of hybrid warfare include the Israeli–Hezbollah conflict in 2006 and the Israeli– Hamas conflict in 2009. These terrorist groups, backed by Syria and Iran, respectively, employed a blend of conventional and unconventional tactics and weapons systems to fight the Israeli military to a standstill. Although this conflict did not conform to many traditional elements of an MRC, it did suggest the possibility that the assumptions about the overwhelming potential of advanced Western military technology should be reconsidered. The 2006 conflict and parallel military operations against Hamas in Gaza suggested that some future theater conflicts might be more complex and challenging than had previously been considered:

Hezbollah and Hamas show that there is a “middle area” in the range of military operations between irregular warfare and state conflict. These state-sponsored hybrid adversaries create a *qualitative* challenge, despite their *smaller size*, because of their:

- Training, discipline, organization, and command and control
- Standoff weapons (ATGMs, MANPADS)⁸⁵
- Use of complex terrain (natural and/or urban) and fighting among the people.⁸⁶

In reality, the hybrid threat is not new. Historically, most wars

have demonstrated elements that are regular and irregular, symmetric and asymmetric. States have employed hybrid capabilities in a coordinated fashion since the 18th century. World War II saw numerous examples of hybrid strategies. The Vietnam War increasingly became a hybrid conflict involving a range of capabilities from North Vietnamese regulars equipped with main battle tanks to Viet Cong guerrillas with sapper charges and booby traps. Saddam Hussein attempted to conduct a form of hybrid warfare. He had plans in place before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom to employ the Fedayeen paramilitary forces and to conduct an insurgency. In fact, he had a defense consisting of at least five layers: the regular army, the Republican Guard, the Fedayeen, the secret police, and the insurgents. This was a natural way to exploit the variety of military formations and different security forces that he had created largely to ensure control over the Iraqi people.

Nor are hybrid threats really the type of challenge that some in the Obama Administration—and now the QDR—want to make it out to be. Only a few states and not many non-state actors can really manage a successful hybrid warfare campaign. Most of the world’s militaries cannot easily conduct even relatively simple conventional operations, much less a complex hybrid strategy. It is equally difficult to train irregular forces, much less terrorist groups, and to employ them effectively against high-end conventional capabilities. Hezbollah could not have organized itself for hybrid warfare if it had not exercised effectively total control over southern Lebanon for years with the full aid and assistance of the radical regimes in Iran and Syria.

The Israeli experience in 2006 was due primarily to a loss of traditional war-waging skills as a consequence of the protracted stability operation that the Israeli military had conducted in the Palestinian territory and the failure to recognize the need for a more traditional joint combined arms fire and maneuver approach. Operation Cast Lead, the 2009 Israeli campaign against Hamas in Gaza, was much more successful because it relied on extensive battlefield ISR, employment of joint fire and maneuver, and intensive planning and preparation.⁸⁷

A hybrid strategy is particularly effective when those employing it are on defense. In the event that Israel or the United States were to come to blows with Iran, the regime in Tehran would exploit its control of Hezbollah and other radical groups to unleash attacks on its enemies, but Iran cannot defeat Israel nor dominate the Persian Gulf by means of a hybrid strategy. Hybrid opponents are as much political challenges as a military problem. As one Israeli defense expert commented, “This hybrid-warfare system with its offensive and defensive capabilities achieves deterrence by holding Israeli civilians hostage and raising the cost of mounting an operation within the enemy territory.”⁸⁸ This is because Western security institutions, including those in the United States, have difficulty dealing with nontraditional actors and forms of conflict.

Thus, a hybrid adversary employs New Age technologies and Old World methods to attack elements of U.S. military strategy, particularly the desire for MRCs to be decisive, rapid, and low cost. As the 2010 Joint Operating Environment noted, the combination of lethal technology and the protracted and

population-centric nature of contemporary conflicts makes today's hybrid challenges particularly threatening.⁸⁹

If the hybrid threat is primarily a political challenge to the U.S., the evolving A2/AD threat is intended to more directly counter critical U.S. operational and technological advantages that are central to this country's preferred way of projecting power and conducting MRCs. According to the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), "anti-access refers to those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area. Area denial refers to those actions and capabilities, usually of shorter range, designed not to keep an opposing force out, but to limit its freedom of action within the operational area."⁹⁰ The NDP noted in 1997, "The cornerstone of America's continued military preeminence is our ability to project combat power rapidly and virtually unimpeded to widespread areas of the globe."⁹¹ The 2010 Joint Operating Environment similarly warned that in the future, joint force commanders will need to grapple with threats to logistics and access:

Given the proliferation of sophisticated weapons in the world's arms markets, potential enemies—even relatively small powers—will be able to possess and deploy an array of longer-range and more precise weapons. Such capabilities in the hands of America's enemies will obviously threaten the projection of forces into a theater, as well as attack the logistical flow on which U.S. forces will depend. Thus, the projection of military power could become hostage to the ability to counter long-range systems

even as U.S. forces begin to move into a theater of operations and against an opponent. The battle for access may prove not only the most important, but the most difficult.⁹²

The 2010 JOAC made a similar point:

Increasingly capable future enemies will see the adoption of an anti-access/area-denial strategy against the United States as a favorable course of action for them. The ability to ensure operational access in the future is being challenged—and may well be the most difficult operational challenge U.S. forces will face over the coming decades.⁹³

As the term suggests, A2/AD strategies are intended primarily to constrain these capabilities. Anti-access (A2) strategies include attacks against fixed forward bases, ports of debarkation, troop and logistics concentrations, naval formations, and command, control, and communication nodes. The proliferation of long-range strike systems, particularly ballistic and cruise missiles, could allow an aggressor to launch a surprise mass attack on these target sets. In addition, hostile A2 strategies include efforts to interdict sea-borne access by such means as sea mines, attack submarines, and fast attack boats.⁹⁴

Area denial (AD) operations aim to prevent freedom of action in the more narrow confines of the area under an enemy's direct control. Of particular concern to U.S. planners is the impact of AD strategies and capabilities on the Pentagon's ability to achieve and exploit air dominance. Air dominance is essential to virtually every operation the U.S. military

conducts. It is an essential component of the U.S. military's "DNA." Without air dominance, the U.S. military's operational concepts will unravel. As Representative Randy Forbes (R-VA) recently observed:

That dominance is now at risk, however, as current defense cuts threaten to do what no enemy can: end U.S. control of the skies. If we weaken our air superiority, our country's entire war-fighting strategy will be forced to change. We will no longer be able to operate anywhere on the globe without risk.⁹⁵

The value of airpower dominance is not lost on America's competitors and adversaries. Consequently, they are pursuing A2/AD capabilities and operational concepts intended to neutralize the U.S. advantage in the air. Their approaches include deployment of significant arsenals of more precise ballistic and cruise missiles to neutralize U.S. and allied airbases and related infrastructure, create sophisticated multilayered integrated air defense systems, and invest in electronic warfare and cyber capabilities to attack or neutralize U.S. ISR, command and control, and precision-strike capabilities. Fourth-generation fighters are proliferating, and several countries are developing fifth-generation combat aircraft.⁹⁶

How might these A2/AD strategies and capabilities affect the ability of U.S. forces to project military power? The ability of U.S. forces to deter and defeat aggression is critically dependent, inter alia, on the Air Force's ability to hold any target at risk across the air, land, and sea domains. According to the U.S. Air Force's 2013 Posture Statement, an A2/AD environment not only "prescribes the type of assets that can

employ and survive in theater,” but also restricts U.S. joint forces to “localized and temporary air dominance to achieve desired effects.”⁹⁷

A number of major regional powers, most notably Iran and China, have been pursuing an A2/AD strategy. They are acquiring capabilities and developing forces and operational concepts designed to limit the ability of hostile forces, primarily U.S. forces, to rapidly project military power into theater and conduct early, high-intensity aerospace operations designed to halt aggression and create a favorable environment for the buildup of forces in theater and the initiation of counteroffensive operations.

Iran is a prospective adversary with a relatively weak conventional military attempting to bolster its defensive strength by acquiring a range of asymmetric capabilities that may enable it to pursue an A2/AD strategy. “Iran’s military doctrine remains designed to slow an invasion; target its adversaries’ economic, political, and military interests; and force a diplomatic solution to hostilities while avoiding any concessions that challenge its core interests.”⁹⁸ While seeking to invest in improved conventional forces Iran has paid particular attention to deploying an array of A2/AD capabilities, including a growing arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles, an array of surface-to-air missiles, a large number of light attack boats, a significant arsenal of sea mines, and a handful of advanced diesel-electric submarines. In addition, Iran maintains sizable irregular forces in several different organizations, in addition to its international brethren Hezbollah and Hamas. Iran’s A2/AD strategy is predicated on unique geostrategic factors that give it some hope that asymmetric means could effectively

undermine the U.S. strategy of rapidly applying decisive force.⁹⁹ As long-time defense analyst Dr. Anthony Cordesman observed, the purpose of these investments is not to win an offensive campaign against its neighbors, but to deter the U.S. from large-scale military intervention in the Persian Gulf:

Iran has spent two decades building up capabilities for asymmetric and irregular warfare. The end result is still a mix of Iranian forces the US can counter relatively quickly with the large-scale use of its own forces. Still, no one wants this kind of war, and, Iran’s asymmetric warfare capabilities still give it a powerful capability to intimidate its neighbors. It is also a form of warfare that would be far harder for the US to defeat in a limited war of attrition or any other conflict where the US might not be able to act decisively, overwhelmingly, and disproportionately in striking Iranian forces and targets for political reasons or because of a lack of support from the Arab Gulf state.¹⁰⁰

The People’s Republic of China represents a very different challenge. Beijing’s investment in A2/AD is part of a broad and deep program of military modernization:

The pace and scope of China’s military build-up already puts regional military balances at risk. China is likely to continue making large investments in high-end, asymmetric military capabilities, emphasizing electronic and cyber-warfare; counter-space operations; ballistic and cruise missiles; advanced integrated air defense systems; next generation

torpedoes; advanced submarines; strategic nuclear strike from modern, sophisticated land and sea-based systems; and theater unmanned aerial vehicles for employment by the Chinese military and for global export.¹⁰¹

At its current pace of modernization, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could pose a formidable threat to U.S. interests and forces in the Western Pacific in a relatively short time. As a newly published independent assessment of the U.S. military posture in the Pacific region concluded, by 2020:

China’s official defense budget could total \$500 billion. Regardless of the actual total, the PLA could have all of the trappings of a major modern military power, including one or two aircraft carriers, twice as many major modern surface combatants (e.g., medium-to-long-range air defenses, long-range anti-submarine cruise missiles, growing anti-submarine warfare capability) as today, a large submarine force, a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent, and a modern air force with 5th-generation (J-20) fighters and strike aircraft. Beyond hardware the most significant variables probably would be the degree of “informatization” (i.e., C4ISR) and credible joint warfare capabilities. China could increasingly invest in information warfare, space-based architecture, and naval forces that could add further complexity to an evolving regional security environment.¹⁰²

The sheer scale of the PLA’s military modernization program could prove problematic to a U.S. Pacific

Command commander seeking to conduct an MRC in the face of Chinese opposition. Several studies suggest that the theater air component commander could lose control of the air even if all U.S. and allied platforms and weapons perform perfectly. The PLA Air Force could absorb everything the U.S. could throw against it and still have additional combat assets available when the U.S. runs out of air-to-air munitions. These surviving assets would then destroy U.S. command and control (C2) aircraft and aerial refueling tankers, achieving the PLA's A2 objective.¹⁰³

While much of China's military modernization is focused on developing a force structure capable of engaging in high-intensity, long-range, precision operations against regional adversaries, China also is clearly focusing on the possibility of conflict with the United States. In this context, Chinese military planners are looking to identify exploitable vulnerabilities. Ironically, one such vulnerability is the possibility that the United States might be involved in another MRC at the same time as it confronts China. Other vulnerabilities include inconsistent or weak allies and the American people's low tolerance for casualties.¹⁰⁴

In addition, the Chinese military recognize that the U.S. ability to execute its preferred MRC strategy depends heavily on a limited set of bases, facilities, and networks and that interdiction of them would almost certainly disrupt U.S. operations.

Authoritative Chinese military publications advocate a variety of specific military operations with potential effects. These can be grouped into attacks on the bases and platforms from which

adversary combat aircraft would operate; attacks on adversary systems and facilities used to transport, supply, and repair and maintain forces in the theater; and attacks on adversary systems used to collect, process, and disseminate information for forces in the theater.¹⁰⁵

The Department of Defense has identified a number of PLA investments that it believes are directly focused on restricting or controlling access to the land, sea, and air spaces along China's periphery or on countering U.S. capabilities to strike Chinese targets. These capabilities include:

- "Information blockade" operations including advanced electronic warfare systems, counterspace weapons, and computer network systems;
- Medium-range ballistic missiles designed to target forces at sea, combined with overhead and over-the-horizon targeting systems to locate and track moving ships;
- Conventional and nuclear-powered attack submarines capable of firing advanced cruise missiles;
- Surface combatants with advanced long-range anti-air and anti-ship missiles;
- Maritime strike aircraft armed with anti-ship cruise missiles to engage surface combatants;
- Land-based medium bomber and tactical strike aircraft with air-to-surface precision weapons; and
- Advanced surface-to-air missile systems, a large fleet of

fourth-generation fighters, and, soon, the initial deployment of fifth-generation aircraft.¹⁰⁶

Although China's military modernization program is broad and deep, one should not forget that at present Beijing sees itself as "out-gunned" by the United States. China is pursuing a classic competitive strategy designed to focus areas of Chinese strength against areas of U.S. weakness. As one authoritative Chinese text stated, "only by using its areas of strength to strike at the enemy's weakness can the People's Liberation Army achieve campaign victory in future wars against aggression."¹⁰⁷

When first promulgated, the two-MRC strategy was recognized as quite challenging. This challenge has been rendered even more complex by the changing geostrategic environment, the proliferation of advanced technologies, and the rise of new political entities that could pose a significant threat to U.S. national interests. Regional adversaries can deploy substantial conventional air, land, and sea forces. In addition, non-state actors with access to advanced military capabilities can complicate operations by U.S. forces in theater. However, once the U.S. can project and sustain significant conventional military power in theater, it will likely be able to defeat these adversaries.

Therefore, the greatest challenge to U.S. forces in the future will likely be states with significant A2/AD capabilities. As the JOAC warned,

The essential problem for future joint forces is to be able to project military force into an operational area and sustain it in the face of armed opposition when three trends apply:

- Antiaccess and area-denial weapons and technologies are dramatically improving and proliferating.
- U.S. overseas defense posture is changing.
- Space and cyberspace are becoming increasingly important and contested domains.

Meeting that challenge increasingly will require defeating integrated antiaccess/area-denial systems of growing lethality and sophistication.

Section IV

Building a Two-MRC Force for the 21st Century

*The only rational argument against the two-war standard is that we cannot meet it—but that is a commentary on the inadequacy of resources, not on the legitimacy of the requirement.*¹⁰⁸

The essential challenge for Cold War force planning was embodied in the title of a book written by two Kennedy-era defense officials. The book became required reading for two generations of would-be defense analysts and academics: *How Much is Enough?*¹⁰⁹ The question for the post-Cold War era has been the reverse: How much is too little? A related question would be: Too little for what?

The Obama Administration's new strategic guidance is the first defense plan in two decades that explicitly diverges from the two-MRC standard. Since 2001, DOD force planning efforts have sought to balance the need to meet the two-MRC standard while addressing other demands, such as the global war on terrorism, transformation, and forward presence. The 2010 QDR attempted to finesse the two-MRC standard by proposing to plan against a broader set of scenarios.¹¹⁰ The new strategic guidance calls for maintaining "forces that are able to fully deny a capable state's aggressive objectives in one region by conducting a combined arms campaign across all domains—land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace." Almost as an afterthought, it also states that "even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable of denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs

on—an opportunistic aggressor in a second region." In the event that the "one-and-a-half" MRC force structure proves inadequate and sufficient time is available, the guidance requires the DOD to maintain a capability to reverse course and expand the U.S. military in response to an unexpected increase in the size of the threat.¹¹¹

The strategic guidance did not assert that the U.S. military no longer needed to maintain the capability to address two major contingencies at the same time. Nor did it propose a new and innovative approach for solving the problem of an insufficient force structure. Rather, it solved the strategy-force structure problem by a sleight of hand. The guidance simply declared that in the case of the second major contingency it was sufficient simply to halt the aggression.

The new sizing standard is inadequate. In fact, it is not really a sizing standard at all, but rather a way of justifying reductions in the size of the military in the face of a declining defense budget. Some have characterized the new formulation as a one-and-a-half-war standard. Yet the threat of major theater wars in Southwest and Northeast Asia is no less today than it was when the two-major-theater-war standard was articulated some 20 years ago. If anything, the possibility of two major conflicts that overlap in time is increasing. The formulation of the mission for the second conflict as the capability to deny an aggressor's objectives or impose unacceptable costs is so vague as to be meaningless. The third part of the standard—reversibility and expandability—is also useless without both a defined

time line for restoring capability and a sizing standard indicating how many brigades, fighter wings, and naval task forces will be required.

The lack of a clearer, more precise, and usable standard for sizing the U.S. military leaves defense planners in a quandary. Is the one major theater war to take place in the desert, jungles, or mountains? Is it against a nuclear-armed adversary or one with only limited long-range strike capabilities? Will the U.S. have capable allies in theater or not? The two regions of the world of most interest to military planners are quite dissimilar and really require different force structures. Similarly, regarding the second part of the standard, how many fighter wings or strategic bombers are needed to deny an aggressor's objectives or impose unacceptable costs? One nuclear weapon should do it, but the U.S. is not about to go back to the good old days of the 1950s. Regarding the third element of the sizing standard, without a sense of against whom or when a buildup might be required, it is impossible for the military to judge how much equipment or which people and capabilities should be retained as it downsizes today in order to have the ability to expand in the face of a larger future threat.

The new guidance does permit the DOD to take additional risk by reducing those elements of the force structure that are deemed less necessary. This primarily affects the ground forces—the Army and Marine Corps—because the guidance included no requirement for a counteroffensive in the second contingency, much less the seizure of enemy territory and the overthrow of a hostile regime.

However, the one-and-a-half-war strategy has significant implications for the other services. For example, the Air Force concluded that the new guidance meant a reduced requirement for airlift and the ability to take additional risk in the provision of close air support:

As directed by the new strategic guidance, we accepted risk in our Combat Air Forces by retiring or reclassifying aircraft from seven squadrons: five A-10 squadrons, one F-16 squadron, and one training/support coded F-15 Aggressor squadron. Because of the Department's evolving posture, one of the retiring squadrons is an overseas squadron. We chose to retire more A-10s as a result of guidance to size our forces for one large scale combined arms campaign with sufficient combat power to also deny a second adversary, without conducting a large scale, prolonged stability operation.¹¹²

It can be argued that the DOD has also sought to maintain the forces to conduct one MRC to conclusion, but saw the requirement to retain forces for a second as interfering with plans to maintain readiness and modernization. Thus, as critics of both the two-MRC standard and successive defense budgets would point out, albeit with entirely different emphases, continuous shortfalls in strategic lift, war reserve stocks, and specialized assets made the threat of a full-fledged second MRC less than totally credible. Some critics went further, arguing that a narrow focus on the requirements to conduct two nearly identical major conflicts came at the expense of efforts to transform the U.S. military. What has always united these camps is that they identified

a clear disconnect between strategy, forces, and budgets.¹¹³

The new guidance would have a sounder footing if it had argued that no two regional crises were alike and that the requirement to conduct a full-scale decisive combined arms campaign in two locations at one time was not only unlikely, but failed to recognize strategic and operational advantages the U.S. might have in one or both of the two regions. The strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, in the event of the renewal of hostilities the United States would clearly have to deploy a large combined arms force both to halt the North's aggression and to topple the regime in Pyongyang. In such a scenario, the United States would have needed to provide not only a significant, possibly the largest fraction of air and naval forces required, but also significant armored formations, air defense units, and even logistical formations. Twenty years later, the economic, technological, and societal disparity between the North and South has become so profound that it could be argued that South Korea could provide most of the forces for both the halt and counterattack phases of a conflict, aided by some U.S. air and sea formations plus critical enablers. This approach would allow defense planners to argue that the classic MRC force of six to seven Army divisions, 10 Air Force fighter wings, 100 heavy bombers and four to five carriers was still needed to defend the Persian Gulf, but was excessive for a second MRC even in the region where it was most likely to occur. A second, reduced force, heavy on air and naval forces but lighter on ground elements, would be designated not only for a Northeast Asia

contingency, but also for any that might occur elsewhere, such as in the Balkans.¹¹⁴

Regrettably, the new guidance repeats an old pattern, going back almost to the founding of the two-MRC standard. It defines strategic and force-sizing objectives that it is not prepared to fund. In addition to the capability to fight two major conflicts to a tolerable if not satisfactory conclusion, U.S. forces have been directed to conduct or be prepared for a wide range of other missions. Over the past 20 years, that list has expanded to include a significant commitment to support civil authorities and to develop the capabilities of partner countries. In essence, at the strategic level, the U.S. military is being asked to do more with less.

At this point it is appropriate to ask the fundamental question: Given the 20-year commitment to the capability to "fight and win" two major contingencies at a time, what force structure does the U.S. military require to do so at reasonable risk?

A 21st-century, two-MRC standard must define both the quantity of military forces needed to address the full spectrum of future missions as well as the quality of forces—including advanced platforms and systems, training, and sustainment—necessary to address the proliferation of advanced technology and the prospect of confronting sophisticated A2/AD threats.

The first concrete definition of an MRC-size force was Les Aspin's proposal of a Desert Storm equivalent. It may be appropriate to update that with an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) equivalent. Between March 19 and April 18, 2003, the U.S. deployed 467,000 personnel, 30 percent of all active duty personnel.¹¹⁵ In addition, U.S. allies provided another 43,000 personnel. The U.S. Army

deployed more than four divisions, the Marine Corps contributed a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) that was the equivalent of two divisions, and the British Army deployed the equivalent of another heavy armored division for a total of more than seven divisions. The Coalition employed 1,800 aircraft, including more than 700 fighters, 51 bombers, 256 tankers, 132 airlifters, 73 Special Operations Forces aircraft, 118 ISR platforms, and more than 40 C2 aircraft. In addition, U.S. allies provided approximately 136 aircraft of all types. This air armada conducted 41,000 sorties, fired more than 800 Tomahawk cruise missiles, and struck 20,000 targets from a list that grew to 30,500. The U.S. Navy provided five carrier battle groups with one more in transit to the theater, two amphibious ready groups, and two amphibious task forces for a total of more than 70 surface combatants and submarines plus 37 Military Sealift Command ships. The total bandwidth employed in support of Coalition operations was estimated at 785 megabytes or 600 percent more than the pre-OIF level in the Central Command area of responsibility.¹¹⁶

It is also important to recognize the difference in the military situation between 1991 and 2003. The Iraqi military in 2003 was a shadow of what it had been in 1990–1991. The Iraqi Air Force was essentially non-existent, and the country's air defense system had been significantly degraded. Nevertheless, the Coalition force in 2003 was nearly as large as the one that defeated Saddam Hussein in 1991. In several respects, such as the presence of the B-2 stealth bomber, the availability of large stocks of precision weapons, the improvements in digital communications, and the increased numbers

of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), it was a much better force.

Other trends and lessons learned are of significance to a discussion of a future force structure. For example, in OIF, bombers accounted for less than 3 percent of the strike sorties, but dropped approximately 28 percent of all munitions. Similarly, the tanker-to-total-sortie ratio in the Second Gulf War was double that of Operation Desert Storm.¹¹⁷

As demonstrated by Desert Storm and OIF, the force structure needed to address even a single MRC is substantial. Nevertheless, without even considering evolving threats, one must conclude that based on the experiences of Desert Storm and OIF, a two-MRC force would consist of 10 Army divisions, two or three Marine Expeditionary Forces, 11 aircraft carriers, 120 large surface combatants, 38 large amphibious warfare ships, 200 strategic bombers, 20 tactical fighter wings, 400–500 tankers, 250 airlifters, and some 75 maritime support ships. This force would also require support from civilian air and sealift to sustain two large expeditionary forces. The requirement to perform two such operations in an overlapping time frame, while maintaining other critical deployment and retain a strategic reserve would strain a force of this size and character, perhaps to the breaking point. The availability of forces from coalition partners could make the difference to the ability to achieve the required combat capability for two MRCs.

Moreover, both MRCs would require a significant immediate surge capability. Within 10 days of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the U.S. had deployed into the region five fighter squadrons, 14 B-52s, more than 70 aerial tankers, two aircraft carrier battle groups, dozens of

airborne warning aircraft, and two battleships.¹¹⁸ It required approximately 60 days to deploy sufficient forces to theater to have reasonable confidence of being able to halt further Iraqi aggression. This force consisted of more than 400 tactical fighters (approximately six wings), 20 B-52s, 100 refueling tankers, 100 intra-theater transport aircraft, 20 C2 aircraft, dozens of ISR platforms, three Army divisions, two Marine Expeditionary Brigades, three carrier battle groups, 124,000 tons of cargo, and 21,000 tons of bombs and air-delivered ordnance.¹¹⁹

The forces deployed to the second MRC, particularly if it occurred without adequate strategic warning, would likely not reflect the optimal distribution of forces, especially in critical enablers. In addition, it is reasonable to consider tailoring each MRC to reflect specific variations in the regional security environment. A future Southwest Asian MRC force would likely resemble that deployed in the past two Persian Gulf conflicts, although it could conceivably have an even heavier land component. Conversely, a Northeast Asia MRC force could be tilted in favor of additional air and sea units with a smaller ground combat component in recognition of the capabilities of the South Korean army. A number of analysts have suggested that an MRC centered on the Taiwan Strait might see an MRC force consisting almost entirely of air and sea-based capabilities.

A 21st-century, two-MRC standard will have some different characteristics than those in the past. The capabilities of potential adversaries are changing as are the weapons systems and technologies deployed by U.S. forces. The 2001, 2006, and 2010 QDRs attempted to address this fact, but failed to make a compelling

argument, in part because they juxtaposed the requirements to maintain a two-MRC force structure with the requirements to address other missions and investment objectives, whether in capabilities for other missions or in advanced military technologies. Rather than competing with other strategic objectives, a properly sized and modernized two-MRC force structure would be central to the pursuit of the full range of U.S. defense objectives.

Yet successive defense programs have justified reductions in force structure on the grounds that quantitative improvements in platforms, systems, and manpower allow commanders to do the same or even more with less. This is a consequence of the ongoing revolution in information technology, networking, and precision weapons.¹²⁰ In the new guidance and recent remarks, the Administration has made it clear that it prefers small but superb over large and merely capable forces. “We know that the military of the 21st century will be smaller. But even if smaller, it must be supremely capable and effective as a force to deal with a range of security challenges.”¹²¹

But there is a limit to the ability to substitute quality for quantity, and the U.S. has exceeded that limit. If the force continues to shrink, it can do so only by accepting significant risk. Any future force structure clearly needs both quantity and quality. This is particularly important in view of the continuing requirement for forward presence forces, limited forward deployments, and partnership training activities, etc. The Defense Budget Priorities document that accompanied the new guidance defined the highest priority attribute of the proposed force structure as “adaptable and capable of deterring aggression and providing a

stabilizing presence, especially in the highest priority areas and missions in the Asia–Pacific region and the Middle East, while still ensuring our ability to maintain our defense commitments to Europe and other allies and partners.”¹²²

Moreover, the United States is no longer clearly capable of maintaining the qualitative technological edge on which it has relied for so long. U.S. airpower forces are emerging from a decade of conflict, battle worn, smaller, and older than when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan started. Critical modernization programs, particularly in the Air Force, have been truncated, delayed, or reduced in scope. The result is an airpower force structure, most notably for the Air Force, that is out of balance with respect to future demand:

At the same time, however, the Air Force budget, excluding contingency funding, has been essentially flat since 2004. Since 2001, we have reduced our inventory by over 500 aircraft and have added new missions, while end strength has come down by thousands of Airmen, leaving us next year with the smallest force since our inception in 1947. Meanwhile, the average age of Air Force aircraft has risen dramatically: fighters stand at 22 years; bombers, 35 years; and tankers, 47 years. Now a changing and more complex security environment is emerging against a backdrop of fiscal crisis and diminishing resources, which has driven the need for new strategic guidance. As the Air Force approaches further reductions, our fleets are already smaller and older than at the end of the post–Cold War downsizing.¹²³

Although the Pentagon and the three services that will receive the new aircraft have stated repeatedly their full commitment to the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) F-35 program, its fate is by no means assured, particularly if defense budgets decline further than currently planned. Critics of the program continue to argue that it does not meet performance standards and is too expensive.¹²⁴ Proponents counter that, if anything, the rate of production needs to accelerate to reduce unit costs and meet increased demand for stealth aircraft in the force structure. One former senior defense official described how failure to procure the F-35 would undermine U.S. airpower dominance:

Without substantial numbers of F-35s, the U.S. Air Force could shrink to a marginal fighter force and risk losing future air supremacy. The U.S. Navy will lose “first-day capability” and will be forced to put its expensive carriers in harm’s way. The U.S. Marine Corps will be unable to confidently support its forward deployed forces from amphibious ships.¹²⁵

Some analyses suggest that the resulting force may not be sufficiently robust to assure success in a major conflict even if current modernization plans are fully implemented.¹²⁶ Recent studies by the RAND Corporation suggest that, in the event of a major theater war involving China, the U.S. may simply not have enough air assets, regardless of how “superb” they are, to successfully counter the numerical superiority of the PLA Air Force and its capabilities to shut down forward air bases.¹²⁷ A recent Air Force exercise would appear to bear out some

of the concerns about the ability of U.S. airpower assets to successfully overcome an adversary with well-developed and fully resourced A2/AD capabilities.¹²⁸ Finally, one study of the Air Force's planned future force structure found that it is too focused on today's threats and lacks the advanced capabilities needed to address the expected A2/AD challenge.¹²⁹

Even holding in abeyance the changes in strategy and force structure proposed by the new guidance and associated Defense Budget Priorities documents, the DOD's current force structure differs in a number of important respects from the force structure required to meet a two-MRC standard. The primary shortfalls are in tactical aircraft, Navy surface combatants, amphibious warfare ships, and air/sealift and tankers.

Even in the relatively modest air defense environment of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States and its allies deployed approximately 10 tactical fighter wings. A more stressing threat might call for deployment of additional tactical fighters or possibly more strategic bombers. Currently, the Air Force maintains 16 tactical fighter wings, leaving a shortfall of four wings based on a two-MRC requirement for 20.

Two MRCs will require deployment of all available carrier battle groups plus amphibious ready groups and maritime task forces. An MRC in the Western Pacific will probably require more surface combatants and sealift than were deployed in OIF. The Navy currently has a fleet of 88 large surface combatants. The required number to support two MRCs is approximately 120, leaving a shortfall of approximately 35.

The Marine Corps' forcible entry requirement is to simultaneously

deploy two Marine Expeditionary Brigades. Each MEB requires 17 amphibious warfare ships. Given historical availability rates, in order to have 34 ships available, 38 are required. The planned size of the amphibious warfare fleet is 33 ships, leaving a shortfall of five.¹³⁰

The total amount of air/sealift and tanker support required to support two MRCs depends on the nature of those conflicts. However, based on the most recent Mobility Capabilities and Requirements Study 2016, there are significant shortfalls in strategic airlift, intra-theater airlift, and air refueling across a number of different scenarios. These include up to 100 large aerial refueling tankers and several dozen roll-on/roll-off ships.¹³¹

The 2012 Defense Guidance and Budget Priorities document has introduced new shortfalls and exacerbated existing ones. The decision to shift from the semblance of a two-MRC force structure to a one-and-a-half force suggests the opportunity for a significant reduction in ground forces. Already, the Army is cutting its end strength from 570,000 to 490,000, and the Marine Corps is slimming down from 202,000 to as few as 175,000. Army sources have talked about the Army declining to as low as 420,000. The Army is considering cutting the number of Active Component combat brigades from 45 to as few as 32 both to meet a lower end-strength ceiling and in order to add a third maneuver battalion to the remaining brigades.¹³²

The other services fare no better. The Navy will suffer a similar slippage in size and capability. The proposed plan would retire seven cruisers early, delay construction of the next large-deck amphibious warfare ship by one year, cancel the second *Virginia*-class nuclear-powered

attack submarine (SSN) in 2014, delay construction of two smaller amphibious warfare ships, and reduce procurement of littoral combat ships by two and joint high speed vessels by eight. The Air Force has plans to cut six tactical fighter squadrons, retire 27 older C-5As and 65 C-130s, and divest itself of the entire fleet of 38 C-27s. The new strategy also proposes reductions in critical enablers such as the Global Hawk Block 30.¹³³

The ability to conduct an MRC depends not only on forces and equipment, but adequate readiness and continuing support and sustainment. First, arriving forces, those intended to halt the aggression, must be at peak readiness and fully supplied. This is a lesson learned the hard way in the first Gulf War:

Time and again, we have learned that our readiness measures are unrealistic or fail to anticipate real-world demands.... The Gulf War, for example, demonstrated all of these problems. In spite of the highest readiness funding in our history, we were not ready to fight when we deployed. We took months to adjust the organization, training, and support structures of our active combat forces, we experienced major problems with some aspects of the call up and training of our reserves, and we literally had to make thousands of modifications to our combat equipment, munitions, support equipment, and battle management and communications systems. Without the months Saddam Hussein gave us, these readiness problems might well have cost us thousands of lives. Few future opponents are likely to give us the most precious gift of modern war: time.¹³⁴

As the report of the Navy/Marine Corps' Amphibious Capabilities Working Group observed, "Getting there quickly is not enough. In an austere environment, sustainment is the true measure of an 'expeditionary' force."¹³⁵ This requires not only sufficient air and sea transport, but large stockpiles of materiel, munitions, foodstuffs, water, and fuel.

Even if the regional security environments had not changed and prospective adversaries were not benefitting from the proliferation of advanced military technologies and developing strategies and forces to conduct A2/AD campaigns, the shortfalls between the projected U.S. force structure and that needed to prosecute two MRCs must be judged to be substantial. However, when the additional challenge of having to conduct not one, but possibly two such operations in an intense A2/AD environment, the strategy-forces mismatch increases dramatically. One analyst described the situation as "Not Your Father's MCO."¹³⁶

As discussed above, the key to rapidly projecting power across great distances and conducting sustained operations over a protracted period is the essence of the U.S. defense strategy. Prospective adversaries know this and are taking steps to delay, complicate, and even derail U.S. operations.

Maintaining a force structure sufficient to engage in large-scale, high-intensity combined arms campaigns and the advanced or specialized assets required to assure access to critical domains is essential to deterrence of conflict, much less war waging. One of the premier analysts of the military balances in the Persian Gulf recently commented:

In the real world, the mix of US and Arab Gulf forces, bases, and

resources give the US and Arab Gulf states a decisive advantage in virtually every aspect of conventional military competition. However, this same mix of Iranian and Arab Gulf strengths and weakness confronts the US with at least a decade in which it must compete with Iran by maintaining enough conventional forces in the Gulf, and credible surge capabilities, to deter and defend against the full spectrum of the Iranian threats to the Gulf region, including missiles, weapons of mass destruction, asymmetric forces, and conventional forces.¹³⁷

Equally important to U.S. security as having a force structure of sufficient quantity to conduct two MRCs is developing the appropriate capabilities—including operational concepts, tactics, platforms, and weapons systems—to address the hybrid and A2/AD threats. In some scenarios, the objective would be to deploy these capabilities so as to be able to conduct a "traditional" four-phased MRC. In other scenarios, particularly in which friendly territory had not been seized, there might not be a counteroffensive. Moreover, it is possible to see a future in which one possible MRC would involve primarily long-range engagements to control the air, sea, space, and cyberspace domains and to defeat an adversary's A2/AD forces. In both traditional and A2/AD-dominated MRCs, the primary challenge in the early phases of a conflict is for U.S. forces to rapidly project power into distant regions, negate A2/AD efforts, and halt the aggression.

Earlier arriving or surge forces have the mission of gaining access, even in the face of an A2/AD threat, halting the aggression, and establishing the conditions to support the

further buildup of forces. There are reasons to worry that the U.S. does not have a sufficient inventory of advanced stealth platforms (F-22s and B-2s) to achieve these objectives in even one MRC.¹³⁸ The introduction of the JSF and the Next Generation Jammer for the F-18G Growler will ameliorate this problem to some degree, but given their range and dependence on a small number of fixed bases or aircraft carriers, this will likely prove insufficient as well.

Much of the recent debates on U.S. force structure and operational concepts have focused on approaches and technologies for dealing with the challenge posed by the proliferation of advanced military capabilities in general and the A2/AD threat in particular. These include the JOAC and Air-Sea Battle. The JOAC seeks to "leverage *cross-domain synergy* to establish superiority in some combination of domains that will provide the freedom of action required by the mission."¹³⁹ The JOAC proposes a number of "precepts" intended to exploit vulnerabilities or deficiencies in A2/AD forces and operations. These include disruption of the adversary's C4ISR systems, reduction in the footprint or visibility of U.S. forces and bases, counterfire against critical nodes and systems, greater use of defensive capabilities, and exploiting the capabilities of new domains such as cyberspace.¹⁴⁰

Air-Sea Battle "mitigates access challenges by moving beyond simply de-conflicting operations in each warfighting domain, toward creating the level of domain integration necessary to defeat increasingly varied and sophisticated threats."¹⁴¹

Using these integrated air and naval forces, the Air-Sea Battle concept executes three main lines of effort:

- Disrupt an adversary's command, control, communications, computers and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR)—this reduces the adversary's ability to find or target us with large raids; they will have to spread out their attacks to all our potential locations.
- Destroy adversary weapons launch systems—To have sustained access to international seas and skies, we will eventually need to destroy the launchers on land, sea and in the air.
- Defeat adversary weapons—until we destroy the launchers, our forces will kinetically or non-kinetically prevent the weapons launched at us from getting a hit.¹⁴²

Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert argued in a recent article for increased investments in developing advanced payloads to enhance the capability of legacy platforms to counter advanced threats.

A focus on what our platforms carry will be increasingly important as anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) threats including new radars and more sophisticated surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles limit the ability of manned platforms to get close to an adversary in wartime. Our Air-Sea Battle Concept, developed with the Marine Corps and the Air Force, describes our response to these growing A2/AD threats. This concept emphasizes the ability of new weapons, sensors, and unmanned systems to expand the reach, capability

and persistence of our current manned ships and aircraft. Our focus on payloads also allows more rapid evolution of our capabilities compared to changing the platform itself.¹⁴³

Even as prospective adversaries have “gone to school” on the American way of war, the U.S. can respond in kind by developing and deploying counters to the emerging A2/AD threats. One detailed analysis of the military modernization program suggested a number of new or improved capabilities that would enhance the U.S. ability to counter Chinese anti-access strategies, including the following:

- Improved ballistic missile defense (BMD);
 - A capability to detect, identify, and attack mobile, time-sensitive targets;
- Improved land-based and advanced shipborne cruise missile defenses;
- Improved antisubmarine warfare capabilities;
- Improved minesweeping capabilities;
- An antisatellite capability, as well as counters to antisatellite attack;
- An extended-range air defense capability;
- Counters to long-range surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles; and
- Early strategic and tactical warning capabilities.¹⁴⁴

A number of studies have argued for sculpting a portion of the planned force structure specifically to

support counter-A2/AD operations in the context of an MRC. One such study proposed an approach for dealing with an Iranian A2/AD threat that centered on “operating from range to reduce the effectiveness of Iran’s A2/AD complex by degrading its ISR capabilities and decreasing the density of its offensive and defensive systems, including ballistic missiles, maritime exclusion capabilities, and air defense network.” Another study made a similar argument vis-à-vis China. In both instances, a counter-A2/AD strategy requires significant additional investments in new or modified capabilities and platforms.

- Acquisition of a next-generation bomber in large numbers (130+);
- Acquisition of a family of stealthy, long-range UAVs;
- Acquisition of an unmanned carrier launch and recovery vehicle (UCLASS) with both ISR and strike capabilities;
- Acceleration of the F-35 program;
- Increased war stocks of precision air-delivered weapons;
- Design and procurement of a new family of long-range cruise missiles and air-to-ground weapons, including a hypersonic missile, for both the Air Force and Navy;
- Accelerated procurement of the KC-46A tanker;
- Measures to protect space-based assets; and
- Expanded missile defense deployments at sea and around large military airfields.¹⁴⁵

The recent independent study of the U.S. force posture in the Asia–Pacific region by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) proposed an option for specific near-term deployments and investments intended to address capability gaps. The study proposed:

- Adding a second squadron of three SSNs to the one squadron already deployed at Guam;
- Adding a second Amphibious Ready Group at Pearl Harbor;
- Forward-basing a carrier battle group at Perth, Australia;
- Permanently basing a bomber squadron at Guam;
- Adding airborne ISR platforms, both manned and unmanned, at Australia or Guam;
- Adding bomber and tanker dispersal airfields in the Southwest Pacific;
- Adding THAAD and PAC-3 batteries to Anderson Air Force Base

on Guam and Kadena Air Base in Japan and possibly in Korea;

- Hardening facilities at Kadena and Guam;
- Adding special operations forces units (air and ground);
- Increasing stockpiles of ammunition and critical weapons; and
- Adding prepositioned stockpiles.¹⁴⁶

In sum, a two-MRC force structure for the 21st century would have the following characteristics:

- An Army of approximately 600,000 in the Active Component with 10 divisions/45 brigades and a Reserve Component of eight divisions/28 brigades, each with three maneuver battalions.
- A Marine Corps of 202,000 with the capacity to deploy two full Marine Expeditionary Forces.
- A Navy of 350 ships, including 11 aircraft carriers with 10 air wings, approximately 120 surface

combatants with at least one-third BMD-capable, 38 amphibious warfare ships, 55 SSNs, and 75 support and logistics ships.

- An Air Force built around 20 tactical fighter wings consisting of a mix of F-22, F-35, and F-15 fighters; 200 bombers consisting of B-1Bs, B-2s, B-52s, and a new platform; 400–500 tankers; 250 airlifters; 150–200 advanced stealth ISR platforms; and approximately 75 manned C2 and ISR platforms.
- An expanded suite of ballistic missile defenses including 20 Patriot and 10 THAAD battalions and acquisition of sufficient Standard Missile 3s to fully load every Aegis BMD-capable ship.
- Expanded war stocks sufficient to support the initial phase of both MRCs.
- A secure and redundant capability to operate in and through space as well as the means to deny adversaries the use of space.

Section V

Costing a Two-MRC Force

The Administration's proposed fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget is the first to reflect the impact of the new Defense Guidance and Budget Priorities. It proposes a base spending level of \$525 billion and a total of \$2,728 billion for FY 2013–FY 2017. By comparison, the FY 2012 budget proposed spending \$571 billion for FY 2013 and \$2,987 billion for FY 2013–FY 2017. The difference is a reduction of \$46 billion for FY 2013 and \$259 billion for FY 2013–FY 2017. Over the entire period of FY 2012–FY 2021, the Budget Control Act reduces defense spending by \$487 billion.

At a minimum, halting the force structure cuts proposed in the Budget Priorities document would require returning to the spending levels proposed in the FY 2012 budget. In addition, \$6 billion would need to be added to the FY 2013 budget to compensate for reductions made in the FY 2012 budget due to the assumption that reductions in ground force levels had begun. Moreover, rather than projecting a flat defense spending topline from FY 2013 through FY 2017, future budgets would need to include a nominal growth rate of about 3 percent. This would add approximately another \$70 billion on top of the \$266 billion (\$259 billion plus \$7 billion) for a

total of \$336 billion for FY 2013–FY 2017.

The two-MRC force developed in the preceding section includes specific new or expanded acquisition programs. Not all of these would be realized in FY 2013–FY 2017.

However, it is possible to estimate the additional cost of many of these programs:

- Five additional Patriot battalions and three additional THAAD battalions: \$4 billion.
- 35 additional Navy large surface combatants: \$60 billion–70 billion.
- Five additional large-deck amphibious warfare ships: \$10 billion.
- Four additional F-35 tactical fighter wings (288 aircraft): \$20 billion–\$28 billion.
- 130 new strategic bombers: \$72 billion.
- 150 advanced stealthy ISR platforms: \$10 billion.
- Modernization of 70 manned aerial C2 and large ISR platforms: \$20 billion.
- Expanded war stocks: \$20 billion.

The total cost of new or expanded programs is \$216 billion–\$234 billion.

The costs of the various infrastructure improvements proposed by the CSIS for the Asia–Pacific region are difficult to estimate. At one time, DOD planned to spend up to \$10 billion to modernize and expand the facilities at Guam. Home-porting an aircraft carrier in Australia would probably cost around \$1 billion. Other measures, such as surveying additional airfields, would be inexpensive. Overall, the cost of these measures would probably not exceed \$15 billion. A similar program to improve infrastructure security and increase the prepositioning of equipment and materiel in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region would probably cost no more than \$10 billion.

Thus, building a reasonable two-MRC force for the 21st century over the next decade would cost \$70 billion per year more than the Administration proposed for its defense program.

Section VI Conclusions

Since the end of the Cold War, the basic metric for judging the adequacy of the U.S. military has been its ability to fight in two geographically separated regions of the world at approximately the same time. Referred to at different times as Major Regional Contingencies, Major Theater Wars, or multiple large-scale operations, the two-war standard has stood the test of time because it reflects a basic strategic reality—one expressed well by the 2012 new strategic guidance for the Department of Defense: “As a nation with important interests in multiple regions, our forces must be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere.”¹⁴⁷

Moreover, at times the United States has found it prudent, even necessary to build up its forces in two different parts of the world in order to deter possible aggression. In 1994, the Clinton Administration faced a crisis on the Korean Peninsula resulting from Pyongyang’s violation of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In response to heightened tensions in Northeast Asia, the United States began to move additional forces to the region. At about the same time, Saddam Hussein, under U.N. sanctions and no-fly zones imposed since soon after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, began to move portions of his army from central Iraq southward in what could have been preparations for another attack on Kuwait. Again, the U.S. deployed an array of forces to that region. Secretary of Defense Perry later credited the maintenance of a two-MRC military for

Washington’s ability to deter conflict in both regions simultaneously.

Successive Administrations since the end of the Cold War have found the image of a two-MRC capability to be a useful deterrent, a reassurance to friends and allies, and a force large enough to actively address a wide range of security activities. Even if two specific threats cannot be clearly adumbrated, the two-MRC construct provides a useful guide for the development of future forces. Despite efforts to walk away from the standard, it remains.

It is painfully obvious that the two-war standard survived because—only because—no credible alternative existed. Planners could not shake the specter that a President, saddled with a one-war force, might be self-deterred in a crisis.... Equally obvious, the concept has shielded the military, to some degree, from tempting but unwise cuts in forces and programs.¹⁴⁸

The two-MRC force-sizing standard supports the maintenance of a relatively robust and flexible military, one appropriate to the range of challenges and missions that it routinely confronts without being optimized for any of them. Additionally, taken as a whole, the two-MRC force provides a base of capabilities on which to build the military might needed to address the threat of a peer competitor if one emerges. As such, the ways various Administrations have sought to meet this force-sizing standard, like the making of sausage, cannot bear intense scrutiny.

The Desert Storm equivalent as the foundation of an MRC force has

served defense planners well for some 20 years. However, it may be time to consider a different definition for the set of capabilities needed to conduct an MRC in the future. In particular, U.S. defense planners need to adjust for the proliferation of advanced military hardware and adversaries’ development of operational concepts designed specifically to undermine the ability of U.S. forces to gain and maintain access in contested domains. A senior DOD official described the new strategic challenge in this way:

I would argue today that we’re on the threshold of the post post-Cold War era. The defining feature of the post-Cold War era was that the United States, when push came to shove, could soundly, resolutely decisively defeat any of its state adversaries. We got very good at it, and our forces are very well suited to it. Unfortunately, our adversaries didn’t like it.... We’ve shaped the environment, but not in entirely desired or anticipated ways. Our superiority in the conventional realm has driven adversaries to innovate in ways that are making life very difficult for us.¹⁴⁹

As part of its new strategy, the Obama Administration announced a “strategic pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region, which would require shifting forces from other parts of the world to that region. China is pursuing a massive military buildup that includes aircraft carriers, stealth fighters, and anti-ship ballistic missiles. Recently, Beijing has been using some of its newly acquired military muscle to assert control

over disputed portions of the South China Sea. The U.S. plans to balance China's military buildup by deploying to the Pacific the first units equipped with advanced platforms and systems, such as the F-35, P-8, and Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) unmanned aerial vehicle.

With the strategic pivot already underway, the growing crisis over Iran's nuclear enrichment program has required the deployment of additional U.S. forces to the Persian Gulf. Over the past several months, the Pentagon has deployed to the region F-22 stealth fighters, minesweeping vessels, helicopters, and an amphibious assault ship reconfigured as an "afloat forward staging base." Most recently, the Navy announced the early deployment of the USS *John C. Stennis* aircraft carrier battle group to the Persian Gulf. The *Stennis* and its escorts had just returned to its home port in Bremerton, Washington, in March after a long Middle East deployment. The rapid turnaround of the *Stennis* battle group comes at a high price because its ships and planes will not receive all of the required maintenance and the crews will have had only a few months at home.

The truth is that while U.S. defense policy has always

advocated being able to fight two wars at the same time, successive Administrations have never provided sufficient resources to ensure a force structure of the requisite size and capability to achieve such a goal except at extremely high risk. It was possible to maintain this little charade in the past because the U.S. military was relatively modern as a result of the Reagan buildup and because potential adversaries were rather weak. Neither of these conditions holds true today. Moreover, further defense budget cuts as a consequence of sequestration will require reductions in force structure and modernization programs that virtually guarantee the United States will no longer be able to deploy credible military forces to two regions at the same time. The new Administration will face a difficult choice: increasing defense spending to ensure that the military can support our national security strategy or turning one important region of the world over to the tender mercies of authoritarian and even fundamentalist theocratic states.

The key to success in one, much less two, MRCs is the power and reach of early arriving forces. These forces do not have to win in the first days, weeks, or months. But they must be of sufficient quantity and

have absolute technological superiority in order to accomplish three missions:

- Gaining access to the region of interest even in the face of intense A2/AD opposition,
- Engaging the adversary's forces to halt the aggression, and
- Holding at risk high-value targets, which if destroyed or disrupted would impose high costs on the enemy and/or create the preconditions for a counteroffensive.

There remains one additional challenge: how to conduct MRCs in the shadow of nuclear weapons. The new Russian national security strategy envisions the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield as a means of forcing an end to hostilities if Moscow finds itself on the losing end of an MRC. It seems reasonable to assume that other nuclear-armed states could employ their weapons to achieve the same end. Thus, as it pursues innovative approaches for dealing with the A2/AD challenge, U.S. defense planners may be creating the conditions for escalation to the first use of nuclear weapons.

Glossary of Abbreviations and Terms

amphibious ready group	a U.S. amphibious task force consisting of one Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and supporting naval vessels (usually three ships) that can land the MEU by air and sea while providing limited air support and sea control.
A2	anti-access
A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
AD	area denial
Air-Sea Battle	the current U.S. battle plan for projecting power into contested areas by integrating Navy and Air Force capabilities across all warfighting domains. It is particularly designed to counter China's A2/AD efforts.
ATGM	anti-tank guided missile
MANPADS	man-portable air defense system
BMD	ballistic missile defense
BUR	Bottom-Up Review
C2	command and control
C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JOAC	Joint Operational Access Concept
JSF	F-35 Joint Strike Fighter
JSTAR	Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System
MCO	major combat operation
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade
MRC	major regional conflict
MTW	major theater war
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBC	nuclear, biological, and chemical
NDP	National Defense Panel
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
PAC	Patriot Advanced Capability
PLA	People's Liberation Army of the People's Republic of China
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
SSN	nuclear-powered attack submarine
THAAD	Terminal (formerly Theater) High-Altitude Area Defense missile system
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
WMD	weapon of mass destruction

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