The Heritage Foundation
LEADERSHIP FOR AMERICA

BACKGROUNDER

No. 2828 | JULY 18, 2013

The Impact of a Declining Defense Budget on Combat Readiness

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Abstract
Imbalances in combat readiness could undermine the U.S. military's ability to protect U.S. interests. Because some dimensions of combat readiness lack natural constituencies, readiness may suffer disproportionate and significant harm in the increasingly fierce competition for budgetary resources. Congress has an obligation to learn from history rather than repeat past mistakes of allowing military readiness to decline to a point that puts the lives of service members and U.S. national interests at risk.

Combat readiness is defined as "[t]he ability of US military forces to fight and meet the demands of the national military strategy."[1] This is the most important factor to our war fighters, but as basic as it is to them, it remains a complicated subject for others to understand. Due to its multidimensional and somewhat diffuse nature, it also has few natural supporters. For a state that builds ships, it is easy to support a policy that increases the number of ships in the Navy, but it is difficult to construct a constituency to support the complex issue of military readiness. Therefore, readiness may suffer significant harm in the increasingly fierce competition for resources.

To fight effectively, the armed forces must be manned, equipped, and trained to operate under dangerous, complex, uncertain, and austere conditions—often with little warning. They require the right personnel operating the right equipment with the right training to win.

Readiness is like a three-legged stool. The personnel, equipment, and training "legs" need to be balanced and in sync to support the

Key Points

- To fight effectively, the U.S. armed forces require the right personnel operating the right equipment with the right training to win.
- Even as defense budgets decline, we need to recognize that imbalances among the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions of readiness can weaken readiness as much as or more than the reduction in overall defense spending can.
- The world is still a violent and dangerous place, and major existential threats to U.S. interests remain vague and unfocused.
- Historically, maintaining effective balance among the different dimensions of readiness and having some ready capability to deal with a wide range of potential threats have been an effective way to hedge strategic bets.
- Failure to maintain an appropriate balance in combat readiness during the current period of budgetary uncertainty will significantly degrade America's ability to respond to threats to its interests.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/bg2828**
Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

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load. The most modern equipment is useless without highly trained personnel to operate and employ it. Conversely, outmoded or unreliable equipment can hamper the effectiveness of the most highly motivated and skilled personnel. To fight effectively, personnel must train with their combat equipment, practicing their combat missions under realistic, demanding conditions. Quality personnel, equipment, and training are the essential dimensions of combat readiness.

Failure to maintain an appropriate balance among these dimensions during the current period of budgetary uncertainty will significantly degrade America's ability to respond to threats to its interests. This can lead to major strategic setbacks and significant loss of life. The challenging balancing act requires wise and effective leadership across all defense-related institutions.

History repeatedly shows that unanticipated events often catch us by surprise and that as a nation, we have paid a high price in blood and treasure to compensate for our lack of preparedness. Lower levels of defense resourcing have not been the sole cause of unpreparedness. In many cases, there is an inability to answer the fundamental question of "what are we preparing to do?" Absent an effective answer that guides the allocation of resources, we can end up with forces that are inadequately manned, equipped, or trained to meet a comprehensive range of threats, some of them unanticipated.

Answering the "what, when, and where" question is particularly challenging and complicated in the current era of strategic uncertainty. The world is still a violent and dangerous place, and major existential threats remain vague and unfocused.

- In the Pacific, U.S. relationships with emerging powers and the future threats they may pose remain unclear.
- In the Middle East, the political instability that accompanied the Arab Spring may vastly alter the geopolitical landscape established in the 1920s, creating opportunities for a wide spectrum of Islamist parties to advance their undemocratic agendas.
- Terrorism by non-state actors like al-Qaeda continues to metastasize.
- At the same time, warfare is expanding into the economically vital cyberspace domain, and revolutionary developments in unmanned systems may be changing the very nature of conflict.

Rapid reductions in the defense budget are leading to the restructuring or elimination of many programs. This will damage the ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat threats to vital U.S. national interests. Maintaining a military posture capable of achieving these aims requires both sufficient forces of various types and the readiness of those forces for combat.

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History's Painful Lessons

All of these developments have the potential to harm U.S. interests significantly. Although we know that the future may hold significant dangers, they remain ill defined, creating a challenging analytical problem for national security policymakers.

History can provide useful insights into how to approach strategic uncertainty. We know we cannot "get it entirely right." Therefore, we should strive not to get it so far wrong that we suffer unacceptable consequences when hit by unexpected threats. Under conditions of uncertainty, a hedging strategy that provides a range of options makes the most sense. Historically, maintaining effective balance among the different dimensions of readiness

1. "Readiness is the synthesis of two distinct but interrelated levels. a. Unit readiness—The ability to provide capabilities required by the combatant commanders to execute their assigned missions. This is derived from the ability of each unit to deliver the outputs for which it was designed. b. Joint readiness—The combatant commander's ability to integrate and synchronize ready combat and support forces to execute his or her assigned missions." U.S. Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, s.v. "Readiness," March 15, 2013, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/data/r/6522.html (accessed May 2, 2013).

and having some ready capability to deal with a wide range of potential threats have been an effective way to hedge strategic bets.

In times of defense budgetary retrenchment, combat readiness of the armed forces often becomes one of the first casualties of fiscal tightening. This was particularly true of the years between World War I and World War II, when the Great Depression and isolationism made military preparedness a very low national priority. Despite the threatening war clouds rapidly expanding in Asia and Europe, the U.S. was woefully unprepared for global conflict. The shock of Pearl Harbor mobilized both the industrial capability and the moral determination to overcome the early, disastrous reversals in the Pacific and tactical defeats in North Africa. Once focused on military production, the U.S. economy rapidly produced overwhelming quantities of ships, aircraft, tanks, ammunition, and other matériel needed for America to become the "Arsenal of Democracy."

However, U.S. forces quickly learned that training for combat, particularly in developing military leaders, was just as complex and demanding. It took several years of internalizing battlefield lessons learned at high cost to train the leaders at all levels that brought the war to a victorious conclusion. After the war, "no more Pearl Harbors"[2] became the rallying cry of the supporters of a strong national defense.

Regrettably, the record of U.S. military preparedness following World War II has been rather checkered. Since then, the U.S. has had less than a year (often much less) to prepare for any of its major conflicts.

One of the earliest shocks hit in June 1950 when Soviet-supported North Korea invaded South Korea. After the Berlin Blockade in 1949, U.S. forces were focused on the Soviet threat to Europe. Less than five years after the defeat of Germany and Japan, they were ill prepared for more limited wars in areas of less than strategic interest. When the U.S. recognized that land forces would be required to stem the rout of the South Korean military, a hastily assembled force from an Army division on occupation duty in Japan was quickly committed to block the advancing North Korean army. Named after its commander, Task Force Smith was poorly equipped with World War II–era weapons and had no opportunity to train as a unit. In the opening battle between U.S. and North Korean forces, it was rapidly overrun and suffered disastrous losses.[3] Decades later, "no more Task Force Smiths" was still an object lesson in preparedness for U.S. Army leaders.[4]

After ending the war in Korea, and concerned with the economic costs of maintaining a large standing army, President Dwight D. Eisenhower relied on strategic air forces to deter Soviet aggression with the threat of massive nuclear retaliation.[5] The subsequent reduction in ground forces contributed to the difficulty the U.S. faced in dealing with the "wars of national liberation" that cropped up in the early 1960s, most significantly in Southeast Asia.

Committed to combat in Vietnam, the U.S. Army rapidly increased in size. This rapid expansion strained the Army's ability to induct and train new soldiers and junior officers. The conflict also strained the intellectual adaptability of the Army's senior leaders, most of whom had their formative combat experiences in the firepower-intensive, large-unit operations prevalent during World War II and the Korean War. Ultimately, this meant that leaders were slow in adapting to the different counterinsurgency requirements of Vietnam.

U.S. forces adapted relatively quickly to the realities of the post-Vietnam situation and refocused on the massive Soviet conventional threat to Europe, where combat readiness had suffered significantly

2. For an article that is representative of post–World War II American attitudes toward defense preparedness, see "No More Pearl Harbors?" *The Toledo Blade*, December 7, 1960, p. 32, http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=VggwAAAAIBAJ&sjid=AwEEAAAAIBAJ&pg=4372%2C2635470 (accessed July 10, 2013).

3. Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. (Brad) Smith, a courageous and competent officer, commanded 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division, then spread throughout Japan on occupation duty. His task force of 400 men supported by some medium artillery was the first to deploy to Korea as an "arrogant show of force." They delayed the North Koreans by only seven hours. T. R. Fehrenback, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 97–106.

4. General Gordon R. Sullivan, Chief of Staff of the Army from 1991 to 1995, often used this phrase to warn against repeating the mistakes of the pre–Korean War Army. James L. Yarrison, *The Modern Louisiana Maneuvers*, U.S. Army Center for Military History, p. 2, http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/Modern_Louisiana_Maneuvers/The_Modern_Louisiana_Maneuvers.pdf (accessed July 10, 2013).

5. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 525–526.

during Vietnam. New equipment and doctrine prepared the new all-volunteer force to fight and win while outnumbered. Most notably, Army and Air Force leaders recognized the high value of synergistic air–land operations and developed the appropriate war fighting concepts and organizations.[6]

The apparent requirement for large conventional forces evaporated when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and planning was put in place for significant reductions. However, Saddam Hussein's unexpected invasion of Kuwait in 1990 put that on hold. Saddam's decision not to press forward to seize Saudi Arabia gave the U.S. and its allies sufficient time to redeploy forces from Europe and elsewhere. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, U.S. air and ground units that were trained, organized, and equipped to fight the Soviets proved devastatingly effective against Iraqi forces armed with Soviet equipment.[7]

Readiness can degrade very quickly, so maintaining it requires continuous attention.

This again proved to be the case in 2003 when U.S. air and ground forces swept into Iraq, seized Baghdad, and toppled Saddam Hussein's government. However, when the U.S. occupation proved longer and more complicated than first thought, the U.S. Army was again slow in adapting to the changing nature of the conflict after having worked hard to put its Vietnam counterinsurgency experiences in its past.

While history never exactly repeats itself, we can draw several useful insights from the historical record. First, our ability to predict rapidly emerging threats is imperfect at best. Even in cases in which employment of force was optional, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, we have had well less than a year to prepare. Thus, dependence on having sufficient time to bring forces back up to the desired level of readiness before employing them can be a recipe for disaster.

As a corollary to this point, readiness can degrade very quickly, so maintaining it requires continuous attention. Readiness is also somewhat specific to each scenario. Forces prepared for one type of conflict may not be as capable in another. Additionally, leaders trained to operate in one type of conflict may not have the mental agility to perform well in another.

The Complexity of Military Operations

Understanding the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions of combat readiness requires some understanding of the operations that military organizations perform. Combat operations of almost any scale are exceptionally complex, requiring integration and synchronization of myriad activities ranging from individual actions to coordinated movements by large, geographically dispersed organizations. They are usually executed under dangerous, uncertain, austere, and urgent conditions that compound the challenge.

At the basic level of combat operations, individuals and crews must operate their equipment, ranging from individual weapons to combat vehicles, aircraft, and ships. This involves operating all of the systems for communications, situational awareness, etc. Then they must employ their equipment as part of larger unit teams, executing their part in tactical operations. Each smaller unit is part of an even larger team that incorporates many different functions ranging from fire support to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to logistical and medical support. As required, these can be combined into joint task forces that include all of these functions in land, sea, air, space, and even cyberspace dimensions.

All of these organizations, from the smallest units to joint task forces, must be tied together by command, control, and communications networks that provide them with awareness of the friendly and enemy situations and orchestrate their individual activities to achieve the commander's intended objectives. At the same time, they all require support, including transportation, refueling, rearming

6. The Army's new AirLand Battle Doctrine, which focused on defeating the massive Soviet ground threat in Europe, recognized the need to synchronize ground and air power at the operational (campaign) level. This necessary unity brought the Army and Air Force to agreement and enhanced the close working relationship between the Army and Air Force agencies responsible for developing the two services' future war fighting concepts. Richard G. Davis, *The 31 Initiatives: A Study in Air Force–Army Cooperation*, U.S. Air Force, Office of Air Force History, 1987, http://www.afhso.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-100525-029.pdf (accessed July 10, 2013).

7. Seymour M. Hersh, "Overwhelming Force: What Happened in the Final Days of the Gulf War?" *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2000.

with ammunition, maintenance, and medical evacuation and care.

Joint forces are composed of interdependent "teams" at many different levels that are only as strong as their weakest members. For example, the Army may have great airborne paratrooper units, but they are ineffective unless Air Force transport aircraft can deliver them to the right drop zone. These transports, in turn, may require tanker aircraft to refuel them in flight to reach the drop zone. Therefore, the readiness of a joint force to conduct major combat operations is determined by the readiness of its individual components, in turn a function of their manning, equipping, training, and leadership and the balance among these dimensions.

Because of their complexity, combat operations are often vulnerable to single points of failure. The loss to enemy action or equipment failure of a key communications node, radar, or other "low density" but essential capability at a critical point can put an entire operation at risk.[8]

The Dimensions of Readiness

The readiness of military organizations to execute these complex operations is a function of the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions of combat readiness and an appropriate balance among them. Regardless of service, combat organizations are designed to accomplish a specific range of tasks. For this purpose, they are allocated specific numbers of personnel of appropriate ranks, skills, and skill levels to man and maintain the various types and numbers of equipment that they are authorized to have to accomplish those tasks. They also receive annual budgets to provide the resources (e.g., fuel, ammunition, and replacement parts) to train with their equipment.

Personnel. High-quality, well-trained, and motivated personnel in the necessary numbers and ranks are essential to combat readiness. In the U.S. all-volunteer force, the first task is to recruit sufficient numbers of citizens with the required motivation and physical and mental capabilities to perform complex tasks under austere and often dangerous conditions. Here, the services compete with other opportunities afforded by the civilian economy.

The challenge, then, is to provide appropriate incentives to make military careers attractive. While patriotism should never be underestimated as a motive for service, the armed forces have found it necessary to provide salaries, educational opportunities, quality of life, retirement benefits, and health care to attract and retain the required numbers of quality recruits. The recent economic recession has reduced civilian opportunities, and the reductions in force size have reduced the number of recruits required to sustain personnel numbers and quality. However, if the economy recovers and generates more civilian opportunities, recruiting and retaining quality personnel may become increasingly more difficult.

Once recruited, service personnel must be taught the individual skills unique to their military missions. Teaching all of these required skill sets is a task of immense scale and scope, ranging from teaching rifle proficiency to Army privates to training naval aviators to operate high-performance aircraft from aircraft carrier flight decks. This requires relatively large training organizations staffed with the highest quality instructors, facilities, and equipment.

It is more effective and efficient to retain trained personnel by motivating them to remain in the service than it is to recruit and train replacements.

Moreover, personnel require individual training throughout their careers. Initially, junior officers must be taught basic tactics and leadership skills. As they become more senior and assume higher-level responsibilities, they must learn advanced skills ranging from organizational management techniques to national-level strategy. Enlisted personnel must also progress to become effective and mature leaders and managers at higher and higher levels.

As military operations and their enabling technologies become increasingly sophisticated and complex, the training required to master them demands even more time and resources. Thus, it is more effective and efficient to retain trained personnel by motivating them to remain in the service than it is to recruit and train replacements. Recruiting

8. Low-density capabilities are few in number relative to the size of the overall force. The resulting lack of redundancy often makes the demand for them high and can amplify the effect of their loss.

and training activities are both resource and time intensive, and limited assets are available to perform them. This reinforces the requirement to make continued military careers attractive by providing adequate salaries and benefits, especially for more mature personnel with families.

Leadership is the catalyst for the personnel dimension of combat readiness. It depends on native ability honed by training and experience. Leadership is an irreplaceable force multiplier. It often spells the difference between disaster and victory under the most trying of circumstances. Thus, the selection, development, and retention of the best leaders, especially those with combat experience, should be a top priority.

Napoleon said, "The moral is to the physical as three to one." This remains as absolutely true today as when he said it. Although intangible, morale is essential to readiness. It is very much a function of leadership, training, and the overall condition of the force. Poorly led and trained personnel trying to operate unreliable equipment and living in substandard conditions will most likely have low morale and not be very combat effective.

Equipment. Based on their missions, military organizations are authorized to have specific quantities of particular types of equipment. For example, armor battalions in the Army are authorized to have a certain number of tanks and the necessary support equipment, such as refueling and maintenance vehicles. Air Force fighter squadrons are authorized to have a certain number of fighter aircraft of specific models and associated ground support equipment.

Equipment readiness depends on two factors: the number and types of equipment in organizations and the operational status of that equipment. Service regulations authorize organizations to have specific numbers of specific models of equipment. However, the equipment they actually have (their "equipment fill") depends upon inventories of existing equipment and the procurement of new, usually more modern equipment to replace equipment that wears out, is destroyed, or becomes obsolete. As procurement accounts decline, procurement of new equipment can be delayed, affecting readiness in two ways.

- First, older generations of equipment are less effective than the newer generations.
- Second, delayed modernization means using older existing equipment, which is less reliable and more difficult and expensive to maintain. This tends to lower the operational status of equipment fleets.

Maintenance and repair of equipment are essential to combat readiness. They are also tremendously time and resource intensive, requiring large numbers of highly skilled personnel, technically sophisticated tools, and a steady, reliable supply of replacement parts. The scope of maintenance and repair ranges from the daily checks and services performed by operators and crews to repairs by unit maintenance personnel to detailed refurbishing done by depots, shipyards, and commercial corporations.

As available funding declines, equipment maintenance and repair can be one of the first bill payers. As such, it is often an early indicator of collapsing combat readiness. For example, reduced funding for repair parts can lead to a vicious downward spiral in equipment operational readiness rates. Without replacement parts, units are tempted to cannibalize parts from equipment that is already non-operational. Removing parts to keep other equipment operating or flying not only places additional demands on maintenance manpower, but also creates "hangar queens" missing so many parts that they become very expensive to repair.

Because most military equipment is designed for a long service life, it usually is scheduled for depot, shipyard, or commercial refurbishment several times during its "career." This is essential for corrosion control in aircraft and ships and replacement of major sub-assemblies, such as suspensions in ground vehicles. It is also economically smart because it can significantly extend the useful service life of the equipment. As budgets tighten, such maintenance may be deferred, creating large backlogs and leaving organizations with less reliable equipment that is prone to breakdown.

Training. Advocates for demanding, realistic training often quote Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who said, "The best form of welfare for the troops is first-class training, for this saves unnecessary casualties."[9] How well military organizations are trained for the full range of their assigned missions is a major determinant of success in combat.

9. Quotatio, s.v. "Erwin Rommel," http://www.quotatio.com/r/rommel-erwin-quotes.html (accessed July 10, 2013).

One reason that the U.S. armed forces have been world-class is that they trained more and better than any other nation's military. Institutions such as the Army's National Training Center, the Navy's Top Gun program, and the Air Force's Red Flag have set exceptionally high standards for realistic, demanding training that incorporates almost all of the functions and conditions of actual combat. Major large-scale joint exercises that include elements of all of the services and combined exercises with U.S. allies develop and refresh the critical abilities to deploy and sustain forces and train forces to operate together effectively.

One reason that the U.S. armed forces have been world-class is that they trained more and better than any other nation's military.

Realistic, demanding training is a tremendous confidence builder. It not only gives personnel confidence in their own units' capabilities, but also builds confidence in joint and combined teams. It is also a powerful leader development tool. Absent actual combat, intense training teaches invaluable lessons to junior leaders and gives their superiors unique opportunities to observe their ability to lead under highly stressful conditions.

Training is also very time and resource intensive, a major consumer of operations and maintenance funding. Although simulators have advanced significantly, there is no substitute for operating actual equipment, and that can be very expensive. It consumes large amounts of fuel, and the resulting wear and tear significantly increase the requirement for repair parts. Training ammunition can be expensive as well.

The service headquarters provide their operating organizations with annual budgets authorizing them to operate their equipment for a fixed amount of miles for ground equipment, flying hours for aircraft, and at-sea time for ships. Operating organizations are then responsible for planning and executing the training necessary to achieve proficiency in their assigned missions within these budgetary constraints.

Time. Time is a major factor in all of the different dimensions of readiness. Recruiting and training personnel, acquiring and maintaining equipment, and training organizations from small units to joint task forces all require time. Therefore, the readiness status that an organization maintains should be determined by when its capabilities might be required.

Organizations providing strategic deterrence and defense, immediate response to terrorist threats and attacks, and other capabilities that may be required on a moment's notice obviously need to maintain high levels of personnel and equipment fill and training. The same is true of units that are forward deployed in crisis areas, such as Korea or the Persian Gulf.

Units whose capabilities are not as time sensitive and do not need to be deployed immediately can be kept at lower states of readiness, depending on the time available to bring them up to full readiness before they are needed. This is a key factor in determining which missions should be assigned to active-duty forces and which can be assigned to Reserve components. During peacetime, Reserve forces have less time available to train; therefore, they usually require additional time to train during mobilization.

The biggest challenge lies in knowing how much time might be available to raise readiness to required levels before employing a force. Here, the historical record suggests erring on the side of caution. When we have unexpectedly found it necessary to employ force in defense of vital national interests, we have had to use the forces available regardless of their readiness.

Why Readiness May Be at Risk

As noted earlier, the dimensions of readiness are like the legs of a three-legged stool that must be in balance to be effective. However, the way that we manage the resourcing for each dimension can make it difficult to maintain this balance. This is compounded by the unpredictable length of time that might be available to increase readiness in a crisis.

Personnel, procurement, and operations and maintenance accounts are managed separately, making it difficult to assess how reductions in funding for one dimension may affect overall readiness. Additionally, the managerial and political natures of some aspects of readiness make them easier to reduce than others.

For example, equipment replacement and modernization is largely governed by the procurement

accounts. In many cases, these buy large, major pieces of equipment, such as tanks and fighter aircraft. Expensive as these are, they become increasingly more expensive to produce if production rates are reduced below a certain economic optimum. This is particularly true in shipbuilding, in which it is impossible to buy a fraction of a ship.

Additionally, manufacturing large equipment often involves interrelated chains of defense-specific industrial activities geographically spread around the country and employing relatively large numbers of highly skilled people in well-paying jobs. This can create large congressional constituencies who strongly support those programs.

Operations and maintenance accounts are much easier to adjust downward. It is possible to reduce expenditures for training incrementally by decreasing the amount of fuel or repair parts purchased. Moreover, these expenditures are widely distributed around the country and do not create the strong constituencies that support procurement. The same thing is true of the individual training base where much instruction is provided under contract.

It is even more difficult to understand the impact of reductions in personnel accounts. The challenge of sustaining the all-volunteer force through a decade of continuous conflict and deployment has significantly increased the per-person cost of personnel, not only in terms of salaries, but also in health care and retirement benefits. These benefits also have powerful constituencies in the widespread and vocal military retiree communities. Maintaining balance across the dimensions of readiness requires significant personnel reductions, but politically, these are increasingly difficult to achieve.

The challenge is to understand the relationships and interdependencies among the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions of readiness.

The challenge, then, is to understand the relationships and interdependencies among the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions of readiness. Readiness clearly has tipping points unique to each organization, but they are difficult to predict. At what point does the lack of funds for training and maintenance so discourage promising junior leaders that they leave the service? Do salaries and benefits counterbalance this? What is the minimal amount of training required to sustain proficiency at mission-essential tasks at a sufficient level to avoid putting a unit in jeopardy in a crisis? These are difficult questions. Quantitative readiness reporting and analysis can help to a degree, but some answers lie only in well-reasoned professional judgment.

What the U.S. Should Do

The U.S. has experienced significant downturns in defense spending many times. In almost every case, we have pledged to avoid repeating past mistakes that compromised the readiness of our armed forces. Our record in honoring those pledges is imperfect.

During World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, the size of U.S. armed forces increased significantly to meet the demands of those conflicts. Once those conflicts were resolved, the size of the armed forces and associated defense budgets declined to meet the perceived lower level of threats.

Our approach to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq following the September 2001 terrorist attacks was different. While defense spending increased significantly, the size of our ground forces increased only modestly, with few changes in air and maritime forces. Most of the increased spending was in overseas contingency operations funds to pay for the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These funds represented a significant percentage of the overall funding available to the services over the past decade, and their drying up has compounded the challenge that the services now face in meeting the requirements of the Budget Control Act. Attempting to manage this amount of budgetary change over a compressed time frame makes it difficult to maintain effective balance among the different dimensions of readiness. The exemption of some personnel accounts from sequestration has exacerbated this problem.

Regrettably, world events and potential threats to U.S. strategic national interests are not driven by the same forces that drive the political and budgetary gridlock in Washington. North Korea's increasingly bellicose rhetoric and actions endanger regional stability in the economically vital Western Pacific. The maelstrom of conflict in Syria threatens to engulf its

neighbors as Iran continues to pursue a destabilizing nuclear capability in the Middle East. The one-word descriptor for our strategic situation is "uncertain."

Under these conditions, allowing the readiness of our armed forces to decline is extremely unwise. Despite major political and legislative challenges, maintaining balance among the different dimensions of readiness should be a major goal of our defense policy, and defense resources should be apportioned accordingly. Even as defense budgets decline, we need to recognize that imbalances among the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions can weaken readiness as much as or more than the reduction in overall defense spending can.

Imbalances among the personnel, equipment, and training dimensions can weaken readiness as much as or more than the reduction in overall defense spending can.

To fulfill its obligations for national defense, Congress needs to maintain full awareness of the different dimensions of readiness, present and projected, and the relationships among them as the Defense Department navigates through the budget crisis. This will require a deeper look into readiness than is currently provided by the formal military readiness reporting system. It necessitates a more holistic understanding of how apparently unrelated changes in one dimension may have a longer-term and more far-reaching impact in others.

Conclusion

It is far better to learn the lessons of history than to repeat them. A decade of war, an antiquated and lethargic defense acquisition system, and now a national budget crisis are already putting combat readiness at risk. We need statesmen of vision and courage to understand the readiness challenges and to provide the leadership to overcome them before some unforeseen crisis once again makes them all too apparent. Trying to "fix" broken readiness after the fact puts both the lives of service members and U.S. national interests at risk.

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