

# BACKGROUND

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## Measuring Military Capabilities: An Essential Tool for Rebuilding American Military Strength

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### Abstract

*U.S. military strength is essential to a stable international security environment. Today's environment of international uncertainty and emerging threats demands an effective U.S. national security policy, one that achieves Churchill's "elements of persistence and conviction which can alone give security" and avoids the horrendous price of the "weakness of the virtuous." The effective rebuilding of U.S. military capabilities demands establishment of long-term goals and milestones to meet them, and the ability to measure progress toward these goals is essential to management of the rebuilding process.*

In the fall of 1945, much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins. The Soviet hammer and sickle flew over the German Reichstag and most of Eastern Europe, and Mao's red star rose higher over a China devastated by almost a decade of war and Japanese occupation. The world had paid an extraordinarily high price in blood and treasure to defeat Nazi and Japanese aggression. Moreover, the war unleashed the political, economic, and social instability that contributed enormously to the rise of totalitarian, hostile, and expansionist Communist regimes, which required more decades of Cold War vigilance and hot war sacrifice in Korea and Vietnam to restrain.

In 1948, Winston Churchill wrote in his history of the Second World War:

We have at length emerged from a scene of material ruin and moral havoc the like of which had never darkened the imagination of former centuries. After all that we suffered and achieved

### KEY POINTS

- Historically, democratic governments have experienced significant difficulty in maintaining the clarity of vision and persistence of effort needed to sustain the military strength to defend their vital national interests and preserve international stability.
- Therefore, they have sometimes paid a high price in blood and treasure to defend those interests in times of crisis.
- Unclear thinking often generates confusion, hampering development of an effective national security strategy to protect vital interests and the military capabilities needed to assure accomplishment of that strategy.
- To provide the necessary clarity of purpose, the U.S. should articulate a clear strategic goal of being able to defeat two nation-state adversaries in geographically separate theaters nearly simultaneously (the 2-MRC strategy).
- The ability to measure progress toward that goal is essential to achieving it.

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we find ourselves still confronted with problems and perils not less but far more formidable than those through which we have so narrowly made our way.<sup>1</sup>

The war's many complex and interrelated causes ranged from failed statesmanship by the European Allies to megalomania among German, Japanese, and Soviet leaders. These causes have long been debated, but one clearly stands out: Inadequate Allied forces employing outmoded operational concepts and caught by surprise were unable to thwart German and Japanese aggression from the outset. Massive mobilization, the sacrifice of millions of lives, and expenditure of enormous amounts of materiel finally brought the war to a victorious conclusion, but large parts of the globe took more than a decade to rebuild from the ashes. This enormous effort probably cost a thousand times more than what an effective level of prewar military preparedness might have cost.

This lesson was not lost on the generation that paid it. Opening his epic history of what he called the "Unnecessary War," Winston Churchill wrote:

It is my purpose, as one who lived and acted in these days, to show how easily the tragedy of the Second World War could have been prevented; how the malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous; how the structure and habits of democratic States, unless they are welded into larger organisms, lack those elements of persistence and conviction which can alone give security to humble masses; how even in matters of self-preservation, no policy is pursued for even ten or fifteen years at a time.<sup>2</sup>

Churchill had warned of the consequences of military weakness early on. In 1935, as he lamented the loss of British air parity with Nazi Germany due to political unwillingness to match the scope and pace

of Hitler's rearmament, he identified the root cause of the problem:

When the situation was manageable it was neglected, and now that it is thoroughly out of hand we apply too late the remedies which then might have effected a cure.

There is nothing new in the story. It is as old as the Sibylline Books. It falls into that long, dismal catalogue of the fruitlessness of experience and the confirmed unteachability of mankind. Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.<sup>3</sup>

Churchill went on to say that despite a clearly stated policy of maintaining air superiority over any threatening European power, the British government failed to resource that policy in the face of rapidly increasing German aircraft production.<sup>4</sup> His foreboding was borne out by history, and the consequences are well known.

As a democracy throughout its history, the U.S. has shared the same challenges in maintaining the military strength to support and defend its vital national interests. In the U.S. as in Britain, effective national security has depended on clear, sound, and relevant strategies supported by the military capabilities needed to achieve the operational objectives required by strategy. Acquiring and sustaining these capabilities in turn has rested on adequate, consistent resourcing over extended periods of time. As Churchill noted, "want of foresight ... lack of clear thinking ... confusion of counsel" can make developing and sustaining these elements difficult.

Among these impediments, "lack of clear thinking" is perhaps the most serious. If the strategy is

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1. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 1, *The Gathering Storm* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2009), p. 16.

2. Ibid. p. 12.

3. Winston Churchill, "Air Parity Lost," speech to the House of Commons, May 2, 1935, <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/90-air-parity-lost> (accessed April 25, 2014). The Sibylline Books are a collection of oracular utterances purchased from an ancient Greek woman prophet by the last king of Rome and consulted at momentous crises through the history of the Republic and the Empire. Eric M. Orlin, *Temples, Religion, and Politics in the Roman Republic* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1997), pp. 76-115.

4. Churchill, "Air Parity Lost."

unclear or irrelevant to the current threat environment, the operational objectives that flow from it will also be unclear and irrelevant. This in turn generates confusion as to the types and sizes of the military capabilities needed and can lead to the wasting and misallocation of resources. Worse, it can lead to strategic defeat in open conflict.

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## Today, more than a decade of war has eroded public support for America's role in the world and national defense in general.

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Democratic forms of government compound this challenge because sustaining the necessary amount of resourcing over time requires building and maintaining a sufficiently powerful multilevel political constituency to champion national security programs in the competition for limited national resources. Moreover, the political process tends to emphasize the distribution of resources—budgeting—while undervaluing the crucial relationship between those resources and the military capabilities that they develop and sustain and how those capabilities are needed to accomplish the operational objectives supporting the national strategy.

### A Possible Solution

Today's environment of international uncertainty and emerging threats demands an effective U.S. national security policy, one that achieves Churchill's "elements of persistence and conviction which can alone give security" and avoids the horrendous price of the "weakness of the virtuous." Since the end of World War II, the world has enjoyed remarkable stability, relative peace, and expanding prosperity supported by American economic, political, and military strength. Today, more than a decade of war has eroded public support for America's role in the world and national defense in general. Many see military capabilities as just another claimant for resources in an already overstretched national budget.

The solution to this conundrum, like many other challenges facing our democratic society, lies in effective political leadership. In developing and sustaining an effective approach to national security, U.S. leaders should:

- Set a consistent goal by articulating a consistent, effective, relevant, and clear national security strategy that can meet the full range of current and projected threats to vital national interests and that is flexible enough to meet potential but unanticipated threats;
- Establish a clear, focused, militarily achievable set of operational objectives that support the strategy;
- Develop and sustain that set of military capabilities necessary to achieve those objectives;
- Provide sustained, consistent resourcing for those capabilities that persists across Administrations; and
- Develop and sustain a broad-based, multilevel constituency for the previous four steps.

These steps toward rebuilding our military capabilities to meet the upcoming challenges of the mid-21st century will require a sustained, focused effort over the coming decades.

### Why Measuring Progress Is Important

A truly serious effort to rebuild and reform the U.S. military will require setting specific goals and milestones. This in turn requires the ability to measure progress toward those goals by measuring the relative change in military capability over time. To quote the famous football coach Vince Lombardi, "if you're not keeping score, you're just practicing."

Strategy is defined as the application of means to achieve desired ends. Means (in this case military capability) must be adequate to accomplish the assigned objectives to achieve the ends, or the strategy will fail. Developing the required balance between ends and means is complicated by the many different variables involved, the subjective judgment required, and the political process for allocating resources. The process needed to measure the adequacy of the available capabilities against the requirements of the strategy must be consistent over time to understand strategic trends and evaluate how well resource allocation is achieving intended results, "auditable" to ensure the validity of the subjective logic applied and supporting quantitative analysis, and transparent to the degree necessary to build the supporting constituency.

## What Is “Military Capability?”

Military capability can be thought of as:

the ability to achieve a specified wartime objective (win a war or battle, destroy a target set). It includes four major components: force structure, modernization, readiness, and sustainability.

a. force structure—Numbers, size, and composition of the units that comprise our Defense forces; e.g., divisions, ships, airwings.

b. modernization—Technical sophistication of forces, units, weapon systems, and equipment.

c. 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.

d. sustainability—The ability to maintain the necessary level and duration of operational activity to achieve military objectives. Sustainability is a function of providing for and maintaining those levels of ready forces, materiel, and consumables necessary to support military effort.<sup>5</sup>

The key in this definition is “the *ability* to achieve a *specified* wartime *objective*.” Thus, military capability must be measured against its effectiveness in accomplishing its assigned objectives.

## What Must Military Capability Be Able to Do?

U.S. military doctrine emphasizes using diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power to achieve strategic objectives. The military instrument is coercive in nature, using force or the threat of force to compel an adversary or to prevent the United States from being compelled.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the purpose of U.S. military capability is to achieve the strategic objective of deterring and, if necessary, defeating adversaries’

threats to vital U.S. national interests through the use of coercive force.

Consequently, determining whether or not U.S. military capability is adequate to the task requires assessment of those threats and the short-term, mid-term, and long-term strategies to meet them. Effective strategies require sufficient military capabilities to execute them. Thus, the ability to measure those capabilities against their strategy-driven requirements is absolutely essential to national security planning and efficient allocation of national security resources.

## How Much Capability Is Enough?

The Cold War was a defense planner’s dream. The major threat to U.S. interests was the Soviet Union, which had relatively clear strategic objectives and known capabilities. Relatively large standing U.S. forces were “sized” against this known threat and were assumed (sometimes incorrectly) to be sufficiently robust to deter or defeat lesser threats, such as regional insurgencies. Although defense policy and the forces to support it differed from Administration to Administration, the existential nature of the Soviet threat and the lessons of World War II generally created strong bipartisan support for defense.

Defense planners’ comfortable certainty ended with the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, then heralded as ushering in a new era of peace and international collaboration, in fact ushered in an era of increasingly murky strategic uncertainty. The relatively monolithic and well-understood Soviet threat has been replaced by a range of smaller but still very dangerous threats ranging from cyber attack to nuclear proliferation and terrorism to major regional aggression.

As Dan Goure described in “The Measure of a Superpower,” since the end of the Cold War, different Administrations have developed different strategies and force-sizing constructs to meet the full range of threats. All but the current Obama Administration have recognized the requirement to fight two major theater wars nearly simultaneously, referred to as

5. Rod Powers, “Military Capability,” About.com, <http://usmilitary.about.com/od/glossarytermsm/g/m3958.htm> (accessed April 23, 2014) (original capitalization; paragraphing modified for readability).

6. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, March 25, 2013, pp. I-12–I-13, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1.pdf) (accessed April 23, 2014).

the two major regional contingencies (2-MRC) standard.<sup>7</sup> As Goure explains:

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.<sup>8</sup>

### **Cooking the Military Capability Books**

While almost every Administration recognized the 2-MRC requirement, some saw strategy and force structure development more as an effort to justify reductions in defense resources than as an effort to develop adequate capability to meet threats.<sup>9</sup> Absent an adequate measurement of the resulting U.S. mil-

itary capabilities' effectiveness against potential threats, several Administrations have been able to "cook the books" and reduce force structure below the level needed to meet real threats under realistic assumptions. This has obscured the resulting strategy-capability imbalance and made it difficult for champions of defense outside of these Administrations to challenge unwise defense policies.

### **The relatively monolithic and well-understood Soviet threat has been replaced by a range of smaller but still very dangerous threats ranging from cyber attack to nuclear proliferation and terrorism to major regional aggression.**

Operation Desert Storm to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 was an initial object lesson in the need to retain the capability to deal with unanticipated regional aggression. However, the operation was conducted before U.S. forces had downsized considerably after the Cold War, and forces sized, organized, trained, and equipped to fight the Soviets had little problem dealing with Iraq while retaining a robust second theater war capability in reserve.<sup>10</sup>

Regrettably, the Desert Storm object lesson was lost on the incoming Clinton Administration's Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin. Aspin inherited from his predecessor, Dick Cheney, and then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell a relatively well-thought-out post-Cold War plan called the Base Force, which would reduce military strength by 25 percent over six years and refocus on region-

7. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review Report specifically drops the requirement to defeat a second adversary. Instead, its force planning construct states, "If deterrence fails at any given time, U.S. forces could defeat a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and deny the objectives of—or impose unacceptable costs on—another aggressor in another region." U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014*, March 4, 2014, p. 22, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf) (accessed April 25, 2014).
8. Daniel Goure, "The Measure of a Superpower: A Two Major Regional Contingency Military for the 21st Century," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No.128, January 25, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/the-measure-of-superpower-a-two-major-regional-contingency-military-for-21-century>.
9. For an excellent summary of Secretary of Defense Les Aspin's efforts to justify cutting the defense budget to free resources for President Bill Clinton's domestic efforts, see John T. Correll, "The Legacy of the Bottom-Up Review," *Air Force Magazine*, October 2003, pp. 55-56, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2003/October%202003/1003bur.aspx> (accessed April 23, 2014).
10. In fact, some of the major U.S. Army units already identified for inactivation after the Cold War were instead deployed to Saudi Arabia for the operation and then redeployed directly to the U.S. for inactivation. See Melanie Casey, "VII Corps: The Jayhawks," *The Citizen* (Stuttgart, Germany), July 13, 2004, [http://www.usarmygermany.com/Communities/Stuttgart/Images\\_The%20Citizen%201.htm](http://www.usarmygermany.com/Communities/Stuttgart/Images_The%20Citizen%201.htm) (accessed April 25, 2014).

al contingencies. In its place, Aspin proposed much more draconian defense cuts, roughly doubling the already significant reductions imposed since 1990.

Aspin's numbers were driven by the Administration's desire to free funds to revitalize the economy, not by any realistic threat assessment. In fact, "Aspin did not know what kind of force the new budget would buy."<sup>11</sup> He then directed the DOD to conduct the Bottom-Up Review (BUR) to assess the impact on military capability and make the strategic requirements meet his budget numbers. The budget tail wagged the strategy dog.

The available resources could not be made to meet the 2-MRC requirement, which Aspin belatedly recognized, and he was harshly criticized even within his own party:

[Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam] Nunn [D-GA] pointed out the fundamental imbalance of requirements and forces. "Our military forces are not capable of carrying out the tasks assumed in the Bottom-Up Review with this kind of eroding defense budget," he said. "We are either going to have to adjust the resources or our expectation of what military forces will be able to do, because the two are going in opposite directions."

Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), chairman of the House Armed Services subcommittee on military forces and personnel, said that "simple third-grade arithmetic" showed that the Bottom-Up Review force could not cover two major regional conflicts.<sup>12</sup>

Although Les Aspin remained in office for only 18 months,<sup>13</sup> his BUR had done its damage. In Washington, it is axiomatic that once resources are given away, it is difficult if not impossible to get them back again.

With the Clinton Administration focused on issues other than defense, and in the absence of significant public pressure to balance capabilities with

strategic requirements, most of the BUR force structure cuts remained intact throughout the 1990s. This led to significant stress on overtaxed, undersized U.S. forces, including the reserve components, when they were suddenly faced with the demands of the global war on terrorism in 2001.

In both the 2001 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs), the George W. Bush Administration recognized the need "to defend the U.S. homeland; operate in and from four forward regions; 'swiftly defeat' adversaries in two overlapping military campaigns while preserving for the President the option to 'win decisively' one of those campaigns; and conduct a limited number of lesser military and humanitarian contingencies." However, the 2006 QDR went on to say, "For the foreseeable future, steady-state operations, including operations as part of a long war against terrorist networks, and associated rotation base and sustainment requirements, will be the main determinant for sizing U.S. forces."<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the measure of capability for judging adequacy of U.S. forces was the "close knife and grenade fight" of conducting counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan rather than the ability to swiftly defeat regional aggression, the less probable but more dangerous threat to U.S. interests.

Yet even the stated metric had little reflection in practice. Although U.S. and allied forces quickly defeated Taliban forces and later Saddam Hussein, the overlooked requirement to stabilize both countries after this had been accomplished severely taxed undersized U.S. ground forces. As Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling wrote in 2007:

The most fundamental military miscalculation in Iraq has been the failure to commit sufficient forces to provide security to Iraq's population. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) estimated in its 1998 war plan that 380,000 troops would be necessary for an invasion of Iraq. Using operations in Bosnia and Kosovo as a model for predicting troop requirements, one Army study

11. Correll, "The Legacy of the Bottom-up Review," p. 57.

12. Ibid.

13. President Clinton asked Aspin to resign over his refusal to send armor and attack helicopters to Mogadishu, a contributing factor in the "Black Hawk Down" disaster. Editorial, "Les Aspin Resigns as Defense Secretary, Dec. 15, 1993," *Politico*, December 15, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1210/46378.html> (accessed April 23, 2014).

14. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, p. 36, <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/report/report20060203.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2014).

estimated a need for 470,000 troops. Alone among America's generals, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki publicly stated that "several hundred thousand soldiers" would be necessary to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq. Prior to the war, President Bush promised to give field commanders everything necessary for victory. Privately, many senior general officers both active and retired expressed serious misgivings about the insufficiency of forces for Iraq. These leaders would later express their concerns in tell-all books such as "Fiasco" and "Cobra II." However, when the U.S. went to war in Iraq with less than half the strength required to win, these leaders did not make their objections public.<sup>15</sup>

Because of this mismatch between strategy and resources, the U.S. had insufficient ground forces to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, even with massive involvement of the reserve components and civilian contractors.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, U.S. armed forces struggled for more than a decade to achieve an end state favorable to U.S. interests, but the end result is still very much in doubt in both countries. Retiring Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki's 2003 warning to "beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army"<sup>17</sup> (i.e., the BUR force) was ignored, resulting in a loss of U.S. prestige, an increase in regional instability, and major stress on U.S. forces.

Having inherited two increasingly unpopular wars and preferring to focus on its domestic agenda, the Obama Administration began to withdraw completely from Iraq and mostly from Afghanistan, reducing the requirement for deployed ground forces. In attempting to address the broader requirement for force, the Administration's 2010 QDR lacked clarity. The Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel noted:

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.<sup>18</sup>

Because the Administration failed to provide an adequate measurement of the resulting U.S. military capabilities' effectiveness against potential threats, there was no good way to assess how reductions in defense spending affected the ability to defend U.S. interests. While the service chiefs and others testified about the impact on the readiness of U.S. military capabilities, there was little discussion of the ultimate impact on the ability to accomplish operational objectives in support of national strategy. In a period of significant national fiscal challenges, this exposed U.S. military capability to the ravages of sequestration—one of the most foolhardy acts in the long and checkered history of American defense resourcing.

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15. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007.

16. Without a draft and lacking the resources to expand its regular ground forces significantly, the U.S. military leaned heavily on its reserve components and civilian contractors for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. To avoid "breaking the force" with back-to-back deployments, forces were deployed for rotations lasting a year or more, not for the "duration" of the conflict. As Yingling points out, the resulting force levels were inadequate to stabilize either country quickly, and the result was more than a decade of counterinsurgency operations conducted with less than decisive force levels. Both Iraq and Afghanistan required a temporary "surge" in troop levels to achieve even a modest degree of stability and allow U.S. forces to begin transitioning responsibilities to local forces.

17. General Eric K. Shinseki, remarks at retirement ceremony, June 11, 2003, <http://www.army.mil/features/ShinsekiFarewell/farewellremarks.htm> (accessed April 23, 2014).

18. Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel, *The QDR in Perspective: Meeting America's National Security Needs in the 21st Century*, final report, 2010, p. 54, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/qdr/qdrreport.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2014).

While sequestration was intended to be so awful that consideration of its consequences would drive both parties to a sound compromise over divisive budget issues, the failure to link resource reductions with their potential impact on military capabilities and national strategy limited understanding of its ultimate effect. This may have made the threat of sequestration less effective than it otherwise might have been. With no consideration of threats, strategy, or priorities, the Budget Control Act imposed draconian, across-the-board cuts on almost every defense program over such a short time frame that it was difficult or impossible to manage properly. To its credit, Congress has recently corrected some of the most egregious decisions, but the damage to U.S. capability will probably be long-lasting.

### What Does “Right” Look Like?

As noted, every Administration since the Cold War except the Obama Administration has recognized the 2-MRC standard. However, lack of clarity on exactly what operational capabilities this standard requires (i.e., a clearly defined and consistent goal for defense policy) has allowed Administration after Administration simply to shift the goal by restating threats and capabilities. This lack of a defined benchmark and an associated set of metrics for required military capability has made it difficult to assess the true effectiveness of any proposed force posture, leaving no way to hold an Administration accountable for meeting that standard. Defense resources have been allowed to decline and forces to shrink with little understanding of the “breaking point” and how close they are to that point.

This confusion may cause significant damage to U.S. military capability. With the high degree of uncertainty in the present—let alone the future—security environment, how can U.S. decision makers know what “right” looks like in resourcing U.S. defense establishments? In a recent interview, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates summed up the challenge:

I look around the world today and all I see is more trouble coming.... I see the Middle East getting worse, not better. I see problems in Asia getting worse, not better. And I don't see where we need

fewer aircraft, or fewer ships or, for that matter, significantly fewer ground forces. Because we have no idea where we'll use military force next. We *will*. But I we have no idea where.<sup>19</sup>

There is no crystal ball to show the way out of this conundrum. How, then, can Churchill's “elements of persistence and conviction which can alone give security” be achieved in an era of even greater strategic uncertainty than his own?

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### Because of this mismatch between strategy and resources, the U.S. had insufficient ground forces to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan.

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There is a potential solution, which has two parts. The first is to establish a consistent goal that U.S. military capabilities must be able to accomplish even if the precise time and location are unknowable. The period since the end of the Cold War shows pretty clearly that the 2-MRC standard should serve well as this goal as long as the operational objectives are clearly established.

However, since the Cold War, several Administrations have “cooked the books,” paid lip service to the 2-MRC goal, and then failed to provide adequate resources to meet it. They could negate challenges to these policies in part because there was no commonly agreed upon metric to measure the adequacy of military capabilities to meet that standard. The inclination has been to follow the dictum: “If you don't know how much you need, you probably don't need very much.”

Therefore, the second part of the solution lies in the ability to measure military capability. This measurement involves more than adding up force structure. It must also examine the balance between operating and supporting forces within that structure and potential adversaries' ability to exploit U.S. weaknesses. In particular, it must assess the interaction between the capabilities of adversaries and the United States in their efforts to achieve operational objectives.

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19. Dan Zak, “Robert Gates: A Man Still at War,” *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2014, p. C1, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/robert-gates-says-hes-at-peace-but-in-his-new-memoir-his-duty-seems-to-weigh-heavily/2014/01/12/54f1a8b0-7943-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/robert-gates-says-hes-at-peace-but-in-his-new-memoir-his-duty-seems-to-weigh-heavily/2014/01/12/54f1a8b0-7943-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7_story.html) (accessed April 25, 2014) (emphasis in original).



## Measuring the Unquantifiable

The challenge is that measuring military capability in any meaningful way is not entirely reducible to quantification and systems analysis. The working definition of military capability includes four variables: force structure, modernization, unit readiness, and sustainability. While some of these, such as the numbers of weapon systems and their performance, can readily be quantified, other variables such as unit readiness, which includes training proficiency and morale, are much more subjective.

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## Since the Cold War, several Administrations have “cooked the books,” paid lip service to the 2-MRC goal, and then failed to provide adequate resources to meet it.

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Moreover, the adequacy of military capability is a function of its ability to coerce a potential enemy's behavior. Thus, it should be assessed in the context of the enemy's capabilities and interactions with the enemy's strategies and capabilities. Ultimately, war is a contest of human wills conducted under the most frightening, uncertain, and trying conditions. As one noted American combat veteran once said, “it is like a fire in an orphanage on a frigid winter's night.”<sup>20</sup> While quantitative analysis can inform an assessment of comparative warfighting capability, it cannot be reduced to an algorithm.

What is needed is the ability to apply professional judgment, supported by quantitative analysis, in an auditable, repeatable way to answer the basic question: Under a reasonable set of assumptions, does the U.S. military now have the capability “without national mobilization, to defeat two nation-state adversaries in geographically separate theaters nearly simultaneously,” and will current policies, defense programs, and trends in threat evolution allow it to retain that capability in the future? Development of the methodology and process to answer that question and a mechanism to include the answer in the national political and budgetary discourse should be a high national priority.

This fundamental question should be a major focus of all future Quadrennial Defense Reviews. Since their inception in 1997, the QDRs have provided significant assistance in aligning threats, strategies, and military capabilities. Almost all have recognized some version of the 2-MRC requirement. However, the lack of an adequate “yardstick” for measuring military capabilities against that requirement has made it difficult to hold Administrations accountable for allocating adequate resources to provide those capabilities.

## Conclusion

To make hard strategic choices and sustain American military strength as a pillar of future global stability, Congress needs to maintain full awareness of the ability of existing and planned military capabilities to deter or defeat threats to vital national interests. Establishing a consistent and clear national strategic goal and the ability to measure progress toward that goal is an absolutely essential element of that awareness.

An ends-ways-means approach to strategy requires first identifying vital national interests and then determining what is necessary to defend or promote those interests. As a critical component of national power, the military needs to be sized, equipped, and postured adequately and appropriately for the task. While this may vary to a degree as conditions change, it has long been a requirement to have sufficient capability to defend U.S. interests globally, certainly in more than one region at a time.

Today, in the midst of substantial budget troubles, the challenge is to ensure that the U.S. military is up to the task by investing sufficient resources in the appropriate military capabilities. The force-sizing standard of two major regional contingencies is as relevant today as it has ever been. The U.S. needs to develop and use the ability to measure against that standard.

Above all, it is important to remember what is at stake. In a world of strategic uncertainty, murky but evolving and expanding threats, the U.S. dares not relearn the lessons of the 20th century in the 21st century. As Winston Churchill warned in 1935:

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20. General Richard E. Cavazos, presentation at the U.S. Army Command and Staff College Class, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1982.

Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.<sup>21</sup>

Today, some have the foresight to set the goals for adequate defense programs and develop the means

to measure progress toward them that can avoid this painful repetition. All we need is the conviction to do so.

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21. Churchill, "Air Parity Lost."