

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Defense Department puts the final touches on the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the Pentagon is wrestling with how to build a military that can fight and win wars today and in the future. It should focus on high-end conventional challenges while limiting the stresses of the current counterterrorism fight. Much is and will continue to be expected of the U.S. military. The

last 15+ years of conflict have taken a real toll on the U.S. military and the broader defense community. For it to meet these expectations, the Defense Department should seriously examine its strategic guidance landscape, take advantage of the congressional requirement to routinely assess its strategy, and engage in a broad dialogue about roles and missions.

## DEFENSE DILEMMAS

Today's global security landscape can be characterized as chaotic and competitive, with power increasingly dynamic and distributed. The nature of national security challenges is diversifying considerably across the continuum of conflict, and the technological landscape is evolving in ways that diminish traditional U.S. strengths. While the U.S. military generally operates under two key principles—fighting “away” games and maintaining unfair advantages—both are growing harder. And of course, domestic disarray works to the advantage of those who seek to harm America.<sup>1</sup>

As the Defense Department pulls together the 2018 National Defense Strategy in an effort to outline the ambitions and contours of the future U.S. military, it is wrestling with the following dilemmas, many of which will remain relevant for years to come:

- **Conflict spectrum:** The U.S. military must be able to credibly confront challenges across the spectrum of conflict, including nuclear, high-end conventional, gray zone,<sup>2</sup> and counterterrorism. These potential challengers include China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and violent non-state actors (e.g., ISIS 2.0, Hezbollah). It should prioritize countering rivals like China and Russia while limiting the stressors of violent non-state actors.
- **Regional focus:** The Asia-Pacific and Europe are the priority theaters for the U.S. military as it competes with rivals. However, the United States cannot remain a global power

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief is an adaptation of the author's written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee's hearing on Recommendations for Future National Defense Strategy on November 30, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has done some of the best work examining gray zone conflict, which it defines as “attempts to achieve one's security objectives without resort[ing] to direct and sizable use of force. In engaging in a gray zone strategy, an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in war.” See Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jack Douglas, “Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence,” (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2017), 21, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia>.

if it dismisses other regions. China is the most significant long-term challenge for the United States given its consequential military modernization over the past two decades. While the U.S. military remains preeminent, the gap is gradually narrowing. China is making it harder for the U.S. military to project power across Asia, and neither time nor geography work to the United States' advantage.<sup>3</sup> Russia is a medium-term challenge for the United States. Moscow's use of force in Europe and the Middle East has been rotten, but more worrying is its military's modernization over the last decade and its dangerous doctrine, euphemistically known as "escalate to de-escalate," in which Russia would employ nuclear weapons to end a conventional conflict. In reality, its doctrine is "escalate to escalate" as no clear-eyed observer would consider limited nuclear use de-escalatory. Moreover, the Russian way of war considers society and military fair game, blurs the line between conflict and peace, and wields cyber tools to sow doubt in U.S. institutions. In the wake of the 2011 Middle East uprisings, the region will remain fragile for decades to come. The counterterrorism fight there and in Africa will continue, degrading overall U.S. military readiness. Containing the regional chaos when and where possible, and limiting the toll it takes on the military, should be a priority.

- **Today vs. tomorrow:** The U.S. military must be able to counter near-term threats and exert U.S. presence globally, while also preserving readiness and modernizing the future force to effectively fight and win future wars. The Defense Department should prioritize the latter.

- **Nuclear vs. conventional investments:** The U.S. military must maintain a credible nuclear deterrent while not allowing it to overwhelm investments in conventional capabilities. Nuclear weapons must not be hived off in budget, strategy, or future force discussions; trade space between the nuclear and conventional portfolios requires meaningful adjudication to ensure the military has the capabilities it needs without bankrupting itself.
- **Reliance on allies and partners:** Allies and partners comprise the United States' comparative advantage in the global security environment. The U.S. military will always fight alongside allies and key partners. However, some will be more capable than others and the United States will perennially face an expectations mismatch between our needs and capabilities, and theirs.
- **Inheritance from 15+ years of war:** The U.S. military must reconcile all it has inherited from the longest period of war in U.S. history, particularly given the inconclusive nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The opportunity costs of this inheritance are profound. They include a force whose predominant experience has been countering terrorists and insurgents; frayed equipment; a readiness crisis; a bias for ground forces; muddled accountability; a disinterested American public, a nadir of civil-military relations; and, above all, neuralgia over the conflicts' loss of blood, treasure, and limited results.

There is no binary answer to these dilemmas. Instead, the National Defense Strategy will invariably bet and hedge across them. Nevertheless, one should review the National Defense Strategy with an eye toward efforts to make meaningful, not marginal, change. Everybody—every service, every combatant command—cannot be a winner, and the classified version of the strategy should be clear about that tally. The U.S. military is facing serious

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<sup>3</sup> RAND's Scorecards is the preeminent unclassified study of Chinese military modernization. See Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html).

modernization shortfalls that will only grow uglier, especially given that it has spent over 15 years fighting wars that look dramatically different from potential future conflicts, and the force should increasingly focus on high end conventional challenges posed by China and Russia in the mid to long term.

To be sure, the resource picture has exacerbated these dilemmas. Those of us involved in defense strategy and budgeting in recent years know the pernicious damage that sequestration has done. The national security community has a special responsibility to ensure it is not a partisan issue, but instead a bipartisan effort to rebuild the nation's defenses in a prudent and practical manner.

## CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT FORCE SIZE AND SHAPE

In building the future U.S. military, the Defense Department uses a wide range of scenarios to prescribe what the force should be able to do, in line with the strategy and its attendant explanation of priority objectives and missions. Examining scenarios associated with these missions and analytically adjudicating how the U.S. military will fight and win these conflicts directly informs the Defense Department's strategy, planning, and budgeting process in a number of ways. These include helping to identify gaps and shortfalls and outlining ways to mitigate risks, which range from adjusting investments, posture, and concepts of operations, to reassessing the strategy, among others.

An unclassified dialogue about force size and shape is rarely helpful or clarifying in sufficiently outlining the future force's abilities. Nevertheless, in considering the size and shape of the future U.S. military, one should look at the following elements:

- **Scenario selection:** While the scenarios used to determine the size and shape of the force are illustrative rather than exhaustive, their contours are crucial. They should align with U.S. national security interests and

an appropriate level of American strategic ambition, incorporating varying challenges across the conflict spectrum, while balancing between likelihood and consequence.

- **Scenario pairing:** The U.S. military must be able to fight and win multiple conflicts. Anything short of that is reckless. A force that can only wage one conflict is effectively a zero-conflict force since employing it would require the president to preclude any other meaningful use of force. In considering scenario pairing, their separation in time and distance should be realistic (not least because the theory behind preparing for simultaneous conflicts has not borne fruit: an opportunistic aggressor has not taken advantage of U.S. distraction to attack—indeed, the period since 2001 would have been an ideal opportunity to do so).
- **Scenario execution:** Scenario analysis must focus on how the military will fight and win a conflict. Risk should be delineated as specifically as possible, and underscore when and where the force will face “heart burn” (a conflict that is uglier with higher losses in blood and treasure) and “heart attack” (losing the conflict).

## DEFENSE POSTURE AND INVESTMENTS

The United States—thankfully—is generally geographically far away from the conflicts it wages. However, maintaining this distance requires the U.S. military to be much closer to the theater of a potential conflict. Forward posture enables a rapid response when conflict erupts, can deter rivals or adversaries from launching a conflict, and magnifies the force's capacity, capability, and readiness. In the near term, modest improvements in forward posture in Asia and Europe will have significant operational benefits. The U.S. military must be able to deploy anywhere around the globe at any time, which in these regions increasingly involves poking holes in Chinese and Russian attempts to impede U.S. power projection, aided by forward posture and technology.

Technology is changing how the U.S. military fights, but not why it fights nor what it fights for. The U.S. military must lean forward to exploit the benefits of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and autonomy, but it must do so responsibly by developing a shared understanding of its prospects and how to field such systems in a manner that is consonant with the American way of war. Key areas of investment for the future force should include undersea, long-range strike, combat air force (particularly modernizing fourth-generation aircraft and balancing the portfolio more broadly), counter-unmanned autonomous systems, short-range air defenses, munitions, cyber resilience, and technology that facilitates operations in contested environments with degraded communications.

## STRATEGIC GUIDANCE COHERENCE AND ASSESSMENT

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act took two crucial steps to facilitate strategic guidance coherence and assessment in the Defense Department. First, it changed the name of the Quadrennial Defense Review to the National Defense Strategy. Doing so made it clear to the entire national security apparatus that it represents the governing guidance for the Defense Department. This important step will mitigate the cacophony of strategies across the Department's guidance landscape, which has resulted in confusion over strategic direction, cherry-picking for parochial agendas, and discordant dialogue on the strategy's implementation and efficacy.<sup>4</sup> As a next step, policymakers in the Defense Department and on Capitol Hill should promulgate a vision of the Department's hierarchy of strategic guidance documents along with which entity should lead them. That framework should include a singular overarching strategy broken into classified documents for force development and force employment.

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4 Mara Karlin and Christopher Skaluba, "Strategic Guidance for Countering the Proliferation of Strategic Guidance," *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/strategic-guidance-for-countering-the-proliferation-of-strategic-guidance/>.

Second, the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act legislated a new requirement for the secretary of defense to annually assess the strategy and its implementation. Strategies will always be flawed; recognizing the ways in which they require adjustment is crucial. Who is involved in this assessment and how it is conducted will invariably shape its utility and efficacy. Governing principles for doing so should emphasize the importance of a broad, deep, and meaningful review run through an inclusive approach at the senior level. One venue for the Defense Department to facilitate the assessment is the deputy secretary of defense and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs' regular forum with the Department's leadership (known as the deputies' management action group, or DMAG). The assessment should be classified with unclassified portions released at the secretary of defense's discretion, diagnose the current state of affairs (and how it differs from earlier expectations), and outline in what ways the Department's trajectory will now shift.

## ROLES AND MISSIONS

The development, promulgation, and implementation of defense strategy invariably influences roles and missions of the military, and the 2018 National Defense Strategy will be no exception. Recent congressional steps to enhance the role of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by broadening it to include global integration may betray new dynamics in military-military and civil-military relations. Relatedly, striking the right balance between Defense Department civilians and military leaders in producing and implementing strategy can also have profound consequences among these cohorts. Finally, the increasing resonance of the term "best military advice" across the military merits reflection about how its continued use is influencing defense strategy development and civil-military relations.<sup>5</sup> These issues require serious

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5 The term best military advice has yet to be defined; nevertheless, its increasing use and resonance are meaningful. James Golby and Mara Karlin, "Why 'Best Military Advice' is Bad for the Military—and Worse for Civilians," *Orbis*, winter 2018 (forthcoming).

debate and consideration, and active Departmental and congressional involvement.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In reviewing the 2018 National Defense Strategy and in considering future iterations, the following questions can help illuminate key areas of interest:

1. What were the primary areas of debate and disagreement in pulling together the National Defense Strategy?
2. Who are the winners and losers in the National Defense Strategy? How has it prioritized investments in force structure and capabilities?
3. In what ways does the National Defense Strategy differ from the chairman of the joint chiefs' National Military Strategy, and why? What is the right balance between Defense Department civilians and military leaders in producing and implementing strategy?
4. How does the Department plan to implement the National Defense Strategy? How does the Department plan to assess it and make course corrections as necessary?
5. In what ways does the National Defense Strategy influence roles and missions? More broadly, has the Defense Department struck an appropriate balance in this vein?
6. How is the Defense Department assessing the last 15+ years of conflict and their impact on the force, including its biases, structures, and processes?

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