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Has the United States Lost the Ability to Fight a Major War?

Steven Metz

ABSTRACT: The 2015 *National Military Strategy* identifies war with a major power as a “growing” possibility. The more the United States demonstrates it is willing and able to undertake a big war, the more unlikely it is that it will have to do so. Thus, the US military should undertake analyses, wargames, and exercises focused on rapid expansion of the force, to include creating new formations.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States the focus of the American military shifted quickly and dramatically. Previously, most attention was on quick, high-tempo operations against the conventional forces of “rogue states.” Using advanced technology and exquisitely trained units, the US military was designed to crush state adversaries in short order. Desert Storm was the prevailing paradigm.¹

After September 11, the US intervention in Afghanistan, and the outbreak of insurgency in Iraq in 2003, the American military quickly shifted to counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and “man hunting.” This was a deep and far-ranging change. The human domain of warfare, which had drifted into insignificance during the “revolution in military affairs” of the 1990s, returned with a vengeance. Conventional forces learned the importance of cultural understanding in counterinsurgency. Special operations forces moved from the periphery to the centerpiece of American military strategy.² The military and the intelligence communities fused together to identify opponents and neutralize them. The defense industry provided a massive array of equipment and systems optimized for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. While this was a dramatically different type of activity than anyone had expected, thought about, and prepared for, the US military adapted on the fly.

While the American military was learning to fight extremists, insurgents, and terrorists, conventional war was given little thought and effort. As US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq subsided, defense officials and military leaders began redefining their focus once again. This has proved difficult. In the past, adversaries—whether the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or the Iraqi and Afghan insurgents—drove such reorientations and provided a beacon to guide defense policymakers and military leaders. In the contemporary

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1 For background, see Steven Metz, “America’s Defense Transformation: A Conceptual and Political History,” *Defence Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 1-25.

2 See Steven Metz, “Role Reversal: US Special Operations Forces After the Long War,” *World Politics Review*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15209/role-reversal-u-s-special-operations-forces-after-the-long-war>.

security environment, there is no predominant adversary. This complicates the military's ongoing reorientation since optimizing for one type of conflict or enemy results in suboptimizing for others. What is clear, though, is that the military must prepare for both irregular or state opponents. As the *2015 National Military Strategy* stated:

For the past decade, our military campaigns primarily have consisted of operations against violent extremist networks. But today, and into the foreseeable future, we must pay greater attention to challenges posed by state actors...Today, the probability of US involvement in interstate war with a major power is assessed to be low but growing.³

This is easy—and important—to say, but tough to do in an increasingly austere resource environment.

A future interstate war with a major power would not reprise Desert Storm or the 2003 invasion of Iraq in which the US military overwhelmed enemy forces in lightning campaigns with limited American casualties. Chances are it would be costly and possibly long. As the two world wars showed, major powers sometimes go to war expecting a short conflict—a Franco-Prussian War—only to stumble into a long, bloody slogging match. Even though every American wants to avoid this situation, it is important to consider its possibility. Since the *National Military Strategy* identifies interstate war with a major power as a “growing” probability, Americans must ask themselves whether the United States could still fight a conflict lasting years and demanding a major expansion of the armed forces.

History provides a platform for such thinking. The American tradition was to build only a “big war” military when it was needed and then demobilize it as soon as possible. The United States kept a small professional army and navy between big wars for pacifying the frontier, guarding the coast, keeping sea-lanes safe, and—importantly—to form cadres when it had to mobilize for big wars. The Cold War altered this tradition to an extent. As the United States assumed the role of global superpower and guarantor of stability around the world, the immense, and threatening Soviet military required the United States to sustain large forces in peacetime; the Korean War demonstrated neither the United Nations nor the US nuclear arsenal alone would deter communist aggression.

Although the hope was the Second World War had finally been the big war to end all big wars, American policymakers and military leaders recognized the capability to fight major conventional wars remained vital. But this had to be different: American strategists did not think they would have time to create a large military, as during the world wars. To avoid the financial and political costs of keeping huge forces at the ready, as the Soviet Union did, the United States combined active and fully equipped and trained reserve units. The idea was allies and forward-deployed US air and land forces could hold the Soviets until the United States mobilized its reserves, deployed them, and shifted other active units to the combat zone. It was a more frugal way of having a big war capability, one that made heavy use of American air and naval superiority.

³ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States, 2015* (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 2015), 3-4.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, sustaining a big war capability seemed less important. But unlike the end of the two world wars, American political and military leaders did not abandon this capability wholesale but simply downgraded it. The idea was the US military could undertake at least short major wars. This approach was possible because the American military was so qualitatively and technologically superior to any anticipated enemy force. Luckily, this assumption was never tested by a serious enemy.

Now the qualitative advantages undergirding US military strategy are eroding. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work phrased it, “our technological superiority is slipping. We see it every day.”⁴ At the same time, possible adversaries are increasing defense spending while many of America’s most important allies are slashing theirs. This development may lead potential enemies to believe as Tojo, Hitler, and Saddam Hussein did that they can either make intervention so costly that US policymakers will reject it in the first place, or withstand a US onslaught and force a negotiated settlement that reaps the fruits of their aggression. Put differently, US policymakers and military leaders are aware of the growing big war problem but have not yet found a solution.

Today, three plausible scenarios might compel American involvement in a big war. The first would be military aggression from North Korea, possibly a missile barrage or nuclear attack against US targets or a key American ally like South Korea or Japan. If this involved nuclear weapons the United States might have to invade North Korea and replace the Kim regime. Destroying North Korean conventional forces would be costly but would not take long. But there would then be extended period of pacification and occupation, possibly even large-scale counterinsurgency. The second plausible scenario would be Russian military aggression against a US ally, particularly a member of NATO. The third would be Chinese aggression against American partners in the Asia Pacific, or against the United States itself.

Of these three, only the first would likely lead to a strategically decisive outcome in the mode of World War II: regime change and democratization. Barring regime collapse in Russia or China, the other two would probably follow the anticipated pattern for a Soviet invasion of Western Europe during the Cold War, ending with a restoration of pre-conflict borders and, hopefully, weakened, chastised, and less aggressive regimes.

Whatever the precipitant, the decision to undertake a big war would be extraordinarily difficult because of the costs it would entail. Such an effort could not be put on the national credit card the way American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan were. A big war would mean higher taxes, probably much higher. It would force Americans to postpone or forego consumption and possibly involve World War II-style rationing. While there might be an initial surge in military volunteers, a big war might require a draft. The public might bear these costs if the stakes were high enough, but policymakers could not automatically assume so. After all, when the United States entered World War II the American public was already accustomed to enduring sacrifices after a

4 US Army War College Strategy Conference, Comments as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, April 8, 2015.

decade of economic depression. Today, the public is unaccustomed to crushing taxation or postponed consumption. It would not take long for dissatisfaction to grow, possibly generating pressure to negotiate a settlement short of victory.

A big war would also require Americans to stop the hyperpartisanship that paralyzes security policy today. Even during the Cold War partisan politics never did fully stop “at the water’s edge” as Senator Arthur Vandenberg phrased it, but there were limits to it when dealing with foreign enemies. Now security policy is used as a partisan cudgel even when it benefits America’s adversaries. Involvement in a big war would only be possible if that stopped, and Americans from across the political spectrum rallied behind whomever is president.

The costs and challenges of involvement in a big war do not stop there. For instance, a future big war would see many more challenges to the American homeland than in the past. During the two world wars there were attempts at sabotage in the United States, a few submarine attacks, and, in World War II, some hare-brained schemes for long-range bombing from Japan and Germany; but the direct threat to the United States was minimal. Those days are over: future wars are likely to see extensive terrorist and cyber attacks on the United States and a range of economic attacks. To fight a future big war, then, the United States would have to expand its homeland security force as much as its expeditionary military. But resources devoted to the expansion of homeland security, whether money, people, bandwidth, equipment, or something else, would be resources unavailable to the expeditionary military. Moreover, the American public would have to accept a level of risk, as well as surveillance and curtailment of civil liberties unseen since the Civil War.

Given all this, would US leaders and the American public accept the costs of a big war? As always, the answer is “it depends.” If the nightmarish North Korean regime uses nuclear weapons, there would be no alternative. Most Americans would support regime change in that case at almost any cost. Aggression by Russia or China in their own regions, even if against an American ally or friendly nation, would be more complicated. Some Americans would feel the blood and monetary costs of reversing aggression by a powerful state in its own region outweighed the benefits. It is impossible to know in advance whether this would be a majority or minority position, but it would certainly be more pronounced than hitherto, when the United States expected all of its wars to be short.

The way Chinese or Russian aggression unfolded would also complicate an American response. Neither is likely to undertake the sort of brazen aggression like Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Their opening moves would be “camouflaged” aggression to weaken their victims rather than simply sending their own divisions across international borders. They would launch unattributable cyber and economic attacks. This type of veiled aggression would make it difficult—but not impossible—for whomever is president to commit the United States to war. After all, had Japan not attacked Pearl Harbor even a politician as skilled as Franklin Roosevelt might not have been able to go to war against Japan and Germany, even at a time with significantly less

partisanship in security policy and a with a public more accustomed to sacrifice and deference to national leaders.

Even if American policymakers were considering involvement in a big war, what would the military's leaders tell them? It is not hard to imagine a future president asking, "General or Admiral, if we do this and it does not end quickly, can the military expand? Can it build new ground units, new naval and air squadrons, new cyber defense and attack organizations?" Such questions would certainly give military leaders pause. The problem would not be recruits. There would be a rush of those, at least at first. Training installations could be expanded or built in relatively short order. The challenge would be equipping and supplying the new units given the decline of the US defense industry and its reliance on foreign materials and talent. The United States was able to mobilize for World War II in part because it had an excess of industrial capacity due to the Great Depression. It also had abundant human capacity to tap for war production: women. Now, with the widespread stress on "just in time/just enough" principles, the full utilization of the work force, and globalized outsourcing, the United States has almost no excess industrial or logistics infrastructure, or human capacity to mobilize for war.

That might force future military leaders to advise the president they could build new units, squadrons, and organizations; but these would be inferior to pre-war ones not only in training, leadership, and experience, but also in equipment. Military leaders would then have to decide whether pre-war doctrine and operational concepts could be implemented by new, inferior formations, or whether they would need simpler—and possibly less effective—doctrine the new forces could follow. Alternatively, military leaders might also consider technological solutions. The new formations built during the military expansion might rely more heavily than pre-war ones on autonomous systems of all types, assuming industry could quickly produce thousands of new autonomous systems given economic, technological, and human constraints.

All things considered, politically and psychologically the United States could still fight a big war. While there has been growing support for some degree of strategic disengagement in recent years, most Americans still value global leadership and the tradition of opposing armed aggression. They would heed a call from political leaders to do this again, if necessary. But the old model of a relatively leisurely expansion of the US military while allies bore the brunt of the fighting is bankrupt. A future president might be faced with the horrible decision of deciding whether to sacrifice the pre-war US military to hold the line while new formations are created, or simply to accept aggression.

The more the United States demonstrates it is willing and able to undertake a big war, the less likely it is that it will have to do so. Past enemies believed the United States did not have the will to fight a major conventional war, and thus would leave them with what they gained by armed aggression. Many found that assumption was wrong. By demonstrating the ability to fight a big war once again, the United States can actually lower the chances of it happening. Inversely, assuming there will be no more big wars increases the probability of their occurrence.

Communicating both will and capability—and tamping the hyper-partisanship paralyzing American strategy—are largely the jobs of political leaders. But the military has a vital role to play as well. All the services should grapple with the challenges they might face fighting a big war and in rapidly expanding the size of their forces. The Joint Force should have a series of analyses, wargames, and exercises focused on rapid expansion, to include creating new formations, both expeditionary and those dedicated to homeland security roles. There should be a single organization within the Joint Force specifically assigned responsibility for understanding, preparing for, and planning big wars requiring full national mobilization.

The Army in particular has talked about “expansibility” as it has gotten smaller. One key component of that discussion is abandoning the “just in time/just enough” mindset. Expansibility requires excess capacity during peacetime and top-heavy organizations to provide foundations for expansion. It requires keeping unneeded installations and equipment as hedges against the future. Yet, in a political climate of increasing frugality, pressure is on all the services to get rid of excess capacity. Outgoing Army Chief of Staff GEN Raymond Odierno has already warned the public that his service is “dangerously close” to being cut so much it will not be able to perform its existing missions.⁵ America’s margin of safety is the smallest it has been for many decades.

If this trend continues, the capacity to expand and to fight a big war may atrophy all together. A future president might face a time when he or she feels fighting a big war is in America’s vital national interest, but may then discover it lacks the capacity to do so. If so, the United States might be forced to accept the outcome of aggression not because it is wise, but because it is the only option.

⁵ Michelle Tan, “Odierno: Army ‘Dangerously Close’ to Being Cut ‘Too Deep,’” *Army Times*, August 11, 2015.