



**Statement before the
Senate Armed Services Committee**

***“GLOBAL CHALLENGES, U.S. NATIONAL
SECURITY STRATEGY, AND DEFENSE
ORGANIZATION”***

A Testimony by:

Kathleen H. Hicks

Senior Vice President, Henry A. Kissinger Chair,
and Director of the International Security Program,
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

October 22, 2015

G-50 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. The scope of this hearing—to review the global security challenges, the national security strategy, and defense organization—is a daunting one. I will focus this written statement on the key challenges to the international security environment, the implications of a changing US role in the world, and the key takeaways for national security strategy development. I will end by emphasizing that whatever strategy the United States chooses to pursue, it must resource that strategy.

Key Challenges in the International Security Environment

Every day, it seems Americans awaken to a new crisis signifying a world out of their control. In Europe, our Allies and partners are coping with Russian aggression, ranging from cyberattacks and energy coercion to conventional military might and a renewed emphasis on nuclear weapons. There are two important doctrinal trends occurring in Russian military thought. First, it has shifted its doctrine over the past five years to the high-risk proposition of relying on its significant strategic capabilities—nuclear, cyber, and space—at the outset of conflicts. Its goal is to deter US and NATO intervention by adopting an early escalation strategy. In short, Russia may seek to de-escalate conflicts quickly by escalating them to the strategic realm at the outset. Second, Russia has been steadily improving its means for unconventional warfare, as we saw in Crimea. This includes extensive information operations capabilities, development and use of proxy forces, and funding for sympathetic local movements. The seeming goal, successful in the case of Crimea, is to achieve Russian security objectives without need for a costly and domestically divisive traditional military campaign.

At the same time, Europe grapples with the world's most significant migration crisis since World War II. The prospects for European political cohesion are uncertain. The debt crisis has fueled popular support for extremist political parties, including some with strong ties to Moscow. Freedom House's 2014 Nations in Transit report found that only two out of ten Eastern and Central European countries (Latvia and the Czech Republic), which joined to the EU in 2004 and

2007, have improved their overall democracy “score card” since their accession.¹ Russia’s annexation of Crimea to NATO’s east and its military maneuvers in Europe’s north compete with the threats posed by ISIS and others to NATO’s south for priority. All this is occurring in an overall environment of declining resources, although since NATO’s Wales Summit, there have been modest defense spending increases among some allies. NATO leaders hope that the Alliance can “walk and chew gum”—attending to disparate threats in various geographical regions—but the real test for European cohesion is occurring over migration, which is less directly a NATO issue and more centrally a test for the European Union.

In Asia, satellite images of China’s aggressive island building activities are widely viewed as corroborating that nation’s designs to control the air and sea space far from its shores. These efforts by China are significant. China has been schooling the United States about its territorial interests in East Asia for some time and has slowly eroded international norms regarding freedom of the air and seas along its periphery. It has also embarked on an extensive military improvement plan, focused largely on air and maritime capabilities. China will be the pacing challenge for the United States in most areas of high-end military capability over the coming decades, although Russia is likely to be at least an equal challenges in nuclear, cyber, and space capabilities. Meanwhile, Kim Jung Un appears to be building on his family’s legacy of dangerous force provocations and nuclear ambition. Although North Korea’s large conventional military is probably no match for South Korean combined armed forces, and certainly no match for the U.S. military, the North Korean threat today is worrisome not because of its sizable manpower but because of its increasing missile capability, emergent nuclear technology, special operations forces, and likely reliance on chemical and biological weapons.

As significant as the security situation is in these two regions, no area of the world is in greater tumult than the Middle East. From the destabilizing role of Iran, to the chaos of Libya, to the complete destruction of Syria and its implications for Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and beyond, the upheaval is dramatic. Iran has some impressive conventional military capabilities, especially with regard to conventional missiles, but they are currently not on par with the United States.

¹ Sylvana Habdank-Kończowska, *Nations in Transit 2014: Eurasia’s Rupture with Democracy* (Washington DC: Freedom House, 2014) 19. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2014%20booklet_WEBSITE.pdf

The most concerning threat posed by Iran today is instead its use of unconventional capabilities, manifest largely in its support for terrorist groups, to threaten US interests throughout the greater Middle East and beyond, and its ability to create a crisis in the Arabian Gulf due to its strategic position along the Strait of Hormuz.

Beyond those regional challenges, the global interconnectedness of peoples will continue to grow. However, the very tools that support globalization, especially social media, will also facilitate increasing segmentation along ideological, religious, familial, and other lines that individuals and small groups may choose to create. Moreover, individuals and small groups who are bent on using violence will more easily be able to acquire the means to do so, with militarily-relevant technology increasingly coming from the commercial sector, in accessible ways, and at accessible prices.

Moreover, we should expect to see some national security effects from climate change by the middle of this century, particularly the potential for conflict over changing natural resources and food and attendant migration patterns as well as worsening natural disasters. The growth of megacities on the littorals is a particular concern in this regard, as they are more at risk from disasters. The United States will also need to address challenges that arise when the Arctic begins to experience greater commercial, scientific, and military traffic.

Implications for US National Security Strategy

As this brief recitation of the international security environment demonstrates, the international system itself is shifting in ways not yet fully understood. The well-worn frameworks of “the unipolar moment,” “the post-9/11 era,” or even “globalization” cannot singularly explain the seeming growth of coercive tactics from major powers—manifest as provocations that fall short of traditional war—or the appeal of a quasi-state espousing militant Islamist ideology. Indeed, no single, compelling frame may exist that adequately captures the complexity and breadth of the challenges we face. As we seek to understand more fully the implications of changes now underway, we can already identify five important insights that should help guide policymakers devising a national security strategy.

Changing Power Dynamics

The first key factor shaping the role of the United States today is the paradox of enduring superpower status combined with lessening global influence. The United States will likely remain the world's sole superpower for at least the next fifteen years. The nation boasts enviable demographics, economic and innovative capacity, natural resources, cultural reach, and of course military power. At the same time, its ability to shape the behavior of other actors is lessening. How well the United States can wield power, and how much it chooses to do so, will vary by region and issue. Non-state problems, for instance, are particularly difficult to tackle with existing U.S. foreign policy tools. On the other hand, where there is an assertive nation-state competitor—such as Iran, Russia, North Korea or China—traditional U.S. security strengths tend to be more influential. Even in these cases, however, the United States has had difficulty deterring a wide range of provocations and coercive actions that run counter to its security interests.

Enduring American Support for Engagement

A second factor that shapes the likely U.S. role in the world is the constancy of American public support for international engagement. If there is a theme in American grand strategy that has persisted for the past seventy years, it is that taking a leading role in the world is generally to the benefit of U.S. interests. Those interests have themselves remained remarkably consistent: ensuring the security of U.S. territory and citizens; upholding treaty commitments, to include the security of Allies; ensuring a liberal economic order in which American enterprise can compete fairly; and upholding the rule of law in international affairs, including respect for human rights. Each presidential administration has framed these interests somewhat differently, and of course each has pursued its own particular path in seeking to secure them, but the core tenets have not varied significantly. An isolationist sentiment will always exist in American politics, but it is unlikely to upend the basic consensus view that what happens elsewhere in the world can affect us at home and, therefore, requires our attention.

The Reality of Selective Engagement

Equally important is a third factor that policy-makers should take into account when thinking

through the U.S. role in the world: a selective engagement approach to U.S. foreign policy is unavoidable. Despite the enduring, modern American consensus for international engagement, the United States has never had the wherewithal nor the desire to act everywhere in the world, all the time, or with the same tools of power. We have always had to weigh risks and opportunity costs and prioritize. The current budget environment makes this problem harder. Realizing greater security and military investment, through increased budgets and/or more aggressive institutional reforms and infrastructure cost cuts, should be pursued. Nevertheless, when it comes to the use of American force to achieve our ends, we should be prepared to surprise ourselves. As Robert Gates famously quipped in 2011, we have a perfect record in predicting our next crisis—we've never once got it right. Democracies, including the United States, can prove remarkably unpredictable. Policy-makers need to understand this reality and not lead the public to expect a universal template that governs when and where the nation may act in support of its interests.

Importance of Preventative Approaches

Another imperative for US national security strategy is to pursue an engagement and prevention approach. Driving long-term solutions, such as improved governance capacity in places like Iraq, takes a generational investment and typically a whole-of-government and multinational approach. Problems are seldom solvable in one sphere nor by one nation alone. The United States needs all instruments of power—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—to advance its interests. It also needs to work closely with the private sector and non-governmental partners as well as allies and partners abroad. The United States has proven neither particularly patient for nor adept at such lengthy and multilateral strategies. It is also difficult to measure the success of such approaches in ways that can assure taxpayers and their representatives of their value. Our national security strategy needs to put action behind a preventative approach, to include developing ways to measure the results of such efforts. Importantly, a whole-of-government approach also means ensuring sufficient funding for intelligence, diplomacy, and development. This is why the uniformed military is often the most vocal proponent for adequately resourcing the intelligence community, United States State Department, USAID, and other non-military foreign policy tools.

Challenges to Deterrence

The March 2014 events in Ukraine were a stark reminder that state-based opportunism is alive and well. If the United States ignores the challenges posed by major powers such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, it does so at its own peril. Although we have an excellent record of deterring existential threats to the United States, we face a deterrence challenge for so-called “grey area” threats. The United States must better shape the calculus of those states that wish to test our response to ambiguous challenges. This will mean clearly communicating those interests and our willingness and capability to act in defense of them. It also means carrying out threats when deterrence fails. Without that commitment, the value of deterrence will continue to erode, and the risk of great power conflict will rise.

Conclusion

The paradox of superpower status yet lessening influence, the American inclination toward international engagement, and the near-inevitability of selective engagement are realities that American policy-makers and prospective presidents would be wise to understand. They create imperatives for national security strategy and for the tools of foreign policy. Discerning the shifting nature of the international system, and designing an effective set of American security tools within it, are monumental tasks, but they are not unprecedented. It is the same task that faced “the wise men” who helped shape the U.S. approach to world affairs at the end of World War II. Our circumstances today are equally daunting, requiring a similar re-examination of our strategies and capabilities for securing U.S. interests. Self-imposed burdens, especially sequestration, threaten to undermine our defense policy from within. Ensuring the nation is prepared to lead effectively—and selectively—will require adequately resourcing any strategy we chose to pursue. Finally, successful national security strategy necessitates leadership from Washington and partnership with likeminded nations and entities around the world.