

# Alternative Approaches to Defense Strategy and Force Structure

## Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee

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by

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Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and members of this Committee: It is a great honor to testify before you today to share my thoughts on sizing and shaping the U.S. military such that it can defend the national security interests of the United States. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this discussion.

The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

I am delighted to know that this Committee is in the process of challenging all aspects of U.S. defense policy, starting with the underpinnings of national security interests, challenges to those interests, and practical approaches to relevant strategies. This session on force sizing rationales, the appropriate mix of military capabilities, and the multitude of issues that impact the ability of the U.S. military establishment to ready itself for effective action is an important step to ensuring America and its interests are adequately protected.

The problem, of course, is that there are differing opinions about the specifics of each of these. How many conflicts and of what type? Against what sort of opponent and for what period of time? What might be the role of advanced technologies and to what extent should future forces be shaped to account for such? That this committee has decided to aggressively tackle these challenging questions is not only laudable, but critical to ensuring Congress is appropriately informed in its deliberations on resource allocation.

This general topic has spurred a cottage industry of sorts. After fourteen years of continuous military operations, the loss of nearly 7,000 service members and almost 50,000 wounded,<sup>1</sup> and (by some accounts) a direct monetary expense of at least \$1.6 trillion,<sup>2</sup> to dubious benefit vis-à-vis U.S. interests, some openly question whether the U.S. military has lost its competency for winning wars. Now, with

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<sup>1</sup> iCasualties: Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Casualties, iCasualties.org, (October 28, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Hooker, Jr. and Joseph J. Collins, "Lessons Learned from the Iraq and Afghan Wars," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2015, [http://www.fpri.org/docs/hooker\\_collins-lessons.pdf](http://www.fpri.org/docs/hooker_collins-lessons.pdf) (October 28, 2015).

Russia in Ukraine and Syria and threatening NATO, Iran deeply involved in operations across the Middle East and expanding its military portfolio, China behaving ever more provocatively in the Asia-Pacific region, and North Korea developing longer-range missiles with the assessed ability to reach the United States, presumably with a nuclear warhead, the military services, senior civilian leaders within the Department of Defense, and a host of public and private institutions with an interest in national security affairs are all attempting to determine what changes are needed to ensure America has the military it will likely need in the years to come.

A number of organizations and individuals have suggested various models. The American Enterprise Institute argues for a three-theater standard as the basis for sizing U.S. forces.<sup>3</sup> Michael O'Hanlon, from the Brookings Institution, makes the case for a 1+2 construct, one large war and two smaller contingencies, noting a wide range of scenarios that would call for substantial ground forces in particular.<sup>4</sup> At the Hudson Institute, Seth Cropsey, Bryan McGrath, and Timothy Walton state that the size of the Navy should be based on a three-hub framework that demands 16 aircraft carriers and assorted support vessels<sup>5</sup> while Jerry Hendrix, at the Center for a New American Security, argues the carrier's days are numbered, at least when populated with conventional aircraft, and that more attention needs to be paid to unmanned systems.<sup>6</sup> Add to this the superb work of others like John Stillion and Bryan Clark from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, in air<sup>7</sup> and naval warfare,<sup>8</sup> respectively, who are challenging conventional thinking about these areas of competition and it is plain to see that this committee has ample material from which to draw in considering how big our forces need to be, what should inform their shaping, and what capabilities they likely need to possess.

In recent work with which I have been involved as editor of The Heritage Foundation's Index of U.S. Military Strength,<sup>9</sup> we took a different approach to considering how one might think about sizing the U.S. military and posturing it for the future. Instead of trying to predict where forces might be needed and for what type of conflict, we chose to look at what history tells us about the actual use of military

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<sup>3</sup> American Enterprise Institute, *To Rebuild America's Military*, October 2015, <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/To-Rebuild-Americas-Military.pdf> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Future of Land Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/books/2015/the-future-of-land-warfare> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Seth Cropsey, Bryan McGrath, and Timothy Walton, *Sharpening the Spear: The Carrier, the Joint Force, and High-End Conflict*, (Washington, D.C.: The Hudson Institute, October 2015), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/201510SharpeningtheSpearTheCarriertheJointForceandHighEndConflict.pdf> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Jerry Hendrix, *Retreat from Range: The Rise and Fall of Carrier Aviation*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for New American Security, October 2015), <http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNASReport-CarrierAirWing-151016.pdf> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> John Stillion, *Trends in Air-to-Air Combat: Implications for Future Air Superiority*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budget Analysis, April 2015), <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2015/04/trends-in-air-to-air-combat-implications-for-future-air-superiority/> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Clark, *Commanding the Seas: A Plan to Reinvigorate U.S. Navy Surface Warfare*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budget Analysis, November 2014), <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2014/11/commanding-the-seas-a-plan-to-reinvigorate-u-s-navy-surface-warfare/> (October 28, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2015), <http://index.heritage.org/military/2016/> (October 28, 2015).

force. We also reviewed the research of the top-level studies on national defense requirements from the past few decades, beginning with the Bottom-Up Review of 1992 through the latest Quadrennial Defense Review and National Defense Panel reports. What we found was that from the Korean War onward, the United States has found itself in a major war every fifteen to twenty years and in each instance used roughly the same size force. Likewise, each of the nine major studies came to roughly the same recommendations for end strength, major platforms, and large unit formations. In general, the historical record and these studies indicate the U.S. needs an active Army of 50 brigade combat teams (or an end-strength of approximately 550,000 soldiers), a Navy approaching 350 ships, an Air Force of at least 1,200 fighter/attack aircraft, and a Marine Corps based on 36 battalions. This size force would provide the U.S. the ability to fight a major war or handle a major sustained contingency while also having sufficient capacity to sustain large-scale commitments elsewhere or respond to an emergent crisis should a major competitor try to take advantage of a perceived “window of opportunity.” In other words, this force enables the country to handle one major crisis while deterring competitors from acting opportunistically.

I find this especially interesting in that this record spans sixty-five years, encompassing decades of technological advancements, various geographic regions, enemy forces, economic conditions, and shifts in political control of the executive and legislative branches of government.

It might be the case that each of the study groups found itself captive of previous work, but given the variety of participants and strategic contexts, it seems more likely that the groups simply could not dismiss the practical realities of the United States as a global power. Further, the historical record itself, capturing the actual use of force in vastly different decades, regions, and operational settings, says something about the enduring nature of war. I realize I am painting with a rather broad brush, but at this level of discussion, where Congress must determine how many hundreds of billions of dollars to spend and millions of people to retain in uniform, I think this is actually helpful. Trying to precisely define requirements when the breadth of scenarios is so great and our ability to predict is so poor seems a fool’s errand.

There are practical realities in the use of force that override nearly all other factors. The nature of war and the operating spaces within which it is waged—on land, at sea, and in the air—require large forces to control or to deny control by an enemy force. It takes a lot of people to control hundreds of square miles of territory, a significant urban area, or to interact with a large population. Similarly, the vast expanses of sea and air easily measuring thousands of square miles place substantial demands on fleets of ships and aircraft.

Then there is combat itself and sustained military operations of all types. In both instances, numbers really do matter. Sustained stability operations require a large rotational base as we have most recently seen in Iraq. Conventional combat operations, especially against a peer or near-peer competitor, require sizable forces to replace combat losses and to rotate fresh units into battle. Rotational “presence” missions and efforts meant to “build partner capacity” likewise call for a sufficiently large base of units to perform such tasks in many areas over time. Small numbers of exquisitely equipped forces are

inadequate to such situations and can lead to a force that is overly sensitive to combat losses or is quickly worn down by numerous deployments in rapid succession with little time to recover in between.

Then we come to the matter of preparing for the future and here, too, numbers matter. Nearly every voice in the debate over defense planning calls for innovation. In many cases this chorus focuses on technological innovation but many pundits also note the need to explore new operational concepts, creative ways of blending evolving technologies into existing forces, new organizational concepts that leverage emerging technologies, and even new ways of leveraging old tools. Often overlooked in this debate is the necessity of having the resources available to do all of this experimentation, resources that include people, units, and high-level institutional attention in addition to funding. In fact, the people part is arguably the more important component. Yet when the force is small and is already hard-pressed to meet current operational demands, little if any capacity is available to do the things everyone agrees are essential to prepare for the future. If we truly believe that new ways are needed to maintain a competitive advantage over opponents, then a portion of the force must be made available for such experimentation whether by reducing current demands on the force or enlarging the force so that it can do all the things being demanded of it. Instead, we continue to see further reductions and increased workload.

Just one week ago, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates appeared before this committee and noted that “turbulent, unstable, and unpredictable times have recurred to challenge U.S. leaders regularly since World War II,” and that “Americans, including all too often our leaders, regard international crises and military conflict as aberrations when, in fact and sad to say, they are the norm.”<sup>10</sup> He continued to say that “we always discover...that we [go] too far in cutting” and find we “need to rearm...but the cost in treasure and in the blood of our young men and women is always far higher than if we had remained strong and prepared all along.” The point he was making was that the U.S. continually cycles between ramping up for a crisis that no one predicted or believed would happen and cutting the force to some bare minimum once the crisis is over, with folks blithely assuming that another crisis won’t come along in short order or that we will somehow be able to predict when, where, and against whom it will occur.

As for needed capabilities, discussions about such usually come down to “all of the above.” As soon as we conclude that one form or another of warfare is obsolete, it comes roaring back with a vengeance. Billions of dollars are spent to field the latest in unmanned platforms or fused-intelligence support systems only to find that irregular forces using improvised weapons and lacking any modern combat systems prove yet again that a determined enemy operating on his home soil and fighting “total war” in his own eyes can routinely frustrate, if not defeat, U.S. “limited war” objectives despite our material advantages.

Yes, modern technologies provide U.S. forces clear advantages in many areas, especially against similarly equipped opponents, but they are usually expensive and can come at a cost in capacity. Should we

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<sup>10</sup> Robert M. Gates, “Future of Defense Reform,” testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, October 21, 2015, [http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Gates\\_10-21-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Gates_10-21-15.pdf) (October 28, 2015).

continue to explore the advantages of unmanned systems, advanced C4ISR networks, precision guided munitions, and the like? Certainly. But we should not lose sight of the fact that numbers matter in war especially when combat losses remain a feature.

On our current modernization path at existing levels of funding, we are likely to find ourselves with a military equipped with state-of-the-art capabilities yet incapable of conducting sustained operations against a credible opponent. This potential outcome is quite troubling and is something this Committee should seriously consider.

So, to sum up, I would emphasize that:

- Numbers matter. The capacity of our military for a great variety of operations is at least as important as how it is equipped, if not more so.
- The overall size of the force and how much of it is used in major contingencies appears to be independent of technology, strategy, internal organization, or force-sizing rationale.
- Too small a force has profound consequences for its readiness, health, and strategic value.

Once again I thank you for this opportunity and look forward to answering your questions.

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