



## **POLICY ROUNDTABLE:**

# **The Pursuit of Military Superiority**

*June 26, 2018*

How important is military superiority for U.S. national security? We asked a few experts to join the debate in our latest roundtable.

### Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: Dilemmas of Debating Military Superiority," by Mara Karlin
2. "More than the Military: Pitfalls in American Grand Strategy," by Paul K. MacDonald
3. "Avoiding Fair Fights: Military Superiority and U.S. National Security," by Evan Braden Montgomery
4. "Strategy First: What Price Is Military Superiority Worth?" by Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Kaija Schilde

## 1. Introduction: Dilemmas of Debating Military Superiority

*Mara Karlin*

Like the American Express commercials of yore, debates over U.S. military superiority too often render the same unhelpful assessment: It's priceless. Even if true, such a claim invariably squelches dialogue, particularly the voices of anyone who might advocate shifting resources away from defense or reallocating funds within the defense budget. One should therefore be wary of putting the concept of superiority on so high a pedestal as to render real debate meaningless. Fortunately, the contributors to this roundtable manage to avoid making that mistake, raising a number of problems with public discussions about military superiority.

Arguments about military superiority absent a specific threat are worth little, as Evan Montgomery of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments emphasizes. Montgomery notes that superiority is increasingly complicated to define, given the plethora of bad actors the U.S. military confronts in world affairs, the varied domains in which confrontation occurs, and the potentially short-lived nature of military advantages. The recently released *National Defense Strategy* is blunter and pithier than its predecessors in tackling this issue head-on. In one brief paragraph, it explains that the U.S. military must focus on five major challenges that cut across the spectrum of conflict: China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the National Intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, January 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Council has warned about the increasing risk of interstate conflict.<sup>2</sup> As I have argued previously, while “countering China and Russia is the preeminent theme of the NDS, the strategy subtly conveys that these two challengers are different, with China appearing to be the first among equals.”<sup>3</sup>

Even a cursory examination of recent U.S. history raises questions about what military superiority should look like, given that the U.S. military’s last victory in conflict was against a third-rate power in a quick fight with extremely limited aims. The 1991 Persian Gulf War is frequently trotted out in the defense community as the example to emulate, yet it may offer less guidance for future state-on-state conflict than one might hope. The U.S. military at that time had been built to counter an advanced threat — the Soviet military — and those capabilities proved useful against the less-sophisticated Iraqi military. The fight against terrorists and insurgents since 9/11 has created the opposite situation: It has optimized the U.S. military for fighting low-end threats from violent non-state actors, which makes the U.S. military ill-prepared to face China and Russia. Worse, U.S. military superiority — for the present, at least — has pushed opponents like China and Russia to exploit vacuums and uncertainties in the so-called “gray zone” in recent years.

Paul Macdonald of Wellesley College shares Montgomery’s view that the merits of military superiority have to be considered within a specified context. Yet while Montgomery benchmarks the value of military advantages relative to the adversaries in

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<sup>2</sup> National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, January 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Mara Karlin, “How to Read the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” *Brookings Institution*, Jan. 21, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/21/how-to-read-the-2018-national-defense-strategy/>.

question, Macdonald does so against the higher order concept of grand strategy. The merits of military superiority depend on how policymakers make use of it to achieve the nation's highest ends, which is best evaluated in the context of specific models of grand strategy. The problem, Macdonald argues, is that grand strategy scholars fundamentally distort the ability to evaluate military superiority accurately in several ways: by overemphasizing the U.S. role in global affairs, focusing on states rather than on other power constructs, obsessing over events that bleed into one another, and judging the utility of allies and partners ideologically rather than analytically. These shortcomings of the grand strategy literature give reason for skepticism of polemical claims about the merits of military superiority, whether its centrality or its uselessness. Macdonald is right to urge greater analytical modesty when it comes to “trends in U.S. relative military and economic power.”

But the question of how and when military superiority makes sense is moot if it can't be funded. The U.S. defense community is famous for its delusions of budgetary grandeur. The case for investing in the U.S. military is obvious to those who spend their days viewing Chinese and Russian military modernization with a wary eye.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is not clear if those cases resonate with an American public whose knowledge of, interest in, and sacrifice for conflicts abroad over the last 17 years have been superficial at best.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “An Interactive Look at the U.S.-China Military Scorecard,” RAND, accessed June 22, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/paf/projects/us-china-scorecard.html>. Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Yvonne K. Crane, “Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority,” RAND (2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2402.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html).

<sup>5</sup> Jim Mattis and Kori Schake, eds., *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, August 1, 2016).

Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Kaija Schilde, both of Boston University, warn readers about a downturn in the defense budget and make the counterintuitive argument that reduced defense spending can actually sustain U.S. military superiority if driven by strategic need rather than politics. Drawing on a number of historic examples during and after the Cold War, they expect that blunt cuts to defense spending are all but inevitable given the “increasingly diverse threat environment.”

Zielinski and Schilde argue that how budget cuts affect military superiority comes down to who does the cutting. They imply, though do not explicitly say, that congressional efforts to reduce or redirect investments are often based on parochial political interests, whereas military-driven reductions are more likely to be informed by strategy. For the Department of Defense, the budget is like an art gallery or a tasting menu at a fancy restaurant: each piece or dish arranged (and justified) logically and thoughtfully (but please do ignore the hideous painting in the corner or the dirty glasses and plates). But to Congress, the budget instead resembles the carts at a rowdy dim sum restaurant on Sunday afternoon: brimming with options and opportunities, but lacking vision — why are the sesame doughnuts arranged next to the shrimp dumplings?

Yet there is more blame to go around than Zielinski and Schilde imply, and that includes inside the Pentagon. The gap between the Trump administration’s bold and forward-leaning *National Defense Strategy*, released in January, and the bloated “everybody is a winner” Defense Department budget request for fiscal year 2019 is a reminder that parochial interests are prominent in the Pentagon too.<sup>6</sup> Defense analyst Susanna Blume

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, “Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request,” Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 2018,

[https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/FY2019\\_Budget\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/FY2019_Budget_Request.pdf).

notes two examples of that gap: First, the Army is modernizing much too slowly to cope with global threats to U.S. interests. Second, the Navy is underinvested in readiness and high-end capabilities.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, the current budget request “missed a rare opportunity to provide the future force with the capabilities it will need to execute” the *National Defense Strategy*’s focus on China and Russia.<sup>8</sup> Empowering the Pentagon with determining defense spending in times of fiscal austerity just might produce an endless wish list of unfunded “requirements” rather than a lean but capable military.

The four contributors to this roundtable bring different, complementary, and nuanced voices to a debate about military superiority that tends toward the simplistic, when it takes place at all. Yet, beyond the defense budget itself, the contributors only briefly touch on what goes into building a superior military, including personnel training and readiness, civil-military relations and potential tradeoffs between civilian oversight and delegated authority, organizational structure, and, of course, other tools in the national security toolbox, including diplomacy. More than a few of these are currently in short supply or under real threat. Take, for example, the gutting of the State Department, which will only add to the Pentagon’s already long to-do list. As RAND analyst Paula Thornhill has observed, the expansion of modern conflict into a larger number of domains will also surely shift the fundamental contours of what makes a superior military — from who counts as a warfighter to what counts as a weapon.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Susanna Blume, “What’s Wrong with the Defense Department’s 2019 Budget Request — And what Congress Can do to Fix It,” *War on the Rocks*, May 15, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/whats-wrong-with-the-defense-departments-2019-budget-request-and-what-congress-can-do-to-fix-it/>.

<sup>8</sup> Blume, “What’s Wrong with the Defense Department’s 2019 Budget Request.”

<sup>9</sup> Paula G. Thornhill, *The Crisis Within: America’s Military and the Struggle Between the Overseas and Guardian Paradigms* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1420.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1420.html).

Just before the Peloponnesian War started, Pericles warned: “I hope that none of you think that we shall be going to war for a trifle.”<sup>10</sup> Athens had a superior military, but managed to squander it on a foe that was not worth the price. In looking to the future, one can only hope the U.S. military will not make the same mistake.

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<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, “Pericles’ Last Speech Before the Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War,” accessed June 22, 2018, [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/students/modules/introhist/usefuldocuments/thucydides\\_i.139-146.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/students/modules/introhist/usefuldocuments/thucydides_i.139-146.pdf).

## 2. More Than the Military: Pitfalls in American Grand Strategy

Paul K. MacDonald

In the past few years, the once-vibrant debate surrounding the future of American grand strategy has both narrowed and stagnated. In the immediate post-Cold War period, scholars and practitioners discussed a range of “competing visions” for American foreign policy, ranging from neo-isolationism, offshore balancing, and selective engagement to cooperative security, liberal hegemony, and primacy.<sup>11</sup> Today, the conversation has settled on two options: “deep engagement,” which counsels continued investment in multilateral institutions and alliances,<sup>12</sup> and “restraint,” which recommends a dramatic reduction in U.S. security commitments and willingness to use force overseas.<sup>13</sup> The wide range of potential approaches has essentially been reduced to a binary choice: Should the United States be more or less involved in global affairs?

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997): 5-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539272>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/2013): 7-51, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00107](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00107); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-11-30/lean-forward>; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-01/pull-back>; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).



More broadly, a number of observers have questioned whether thinking in terms of grand strategic choices makes sense at all.<sup>14</sup> The arrival of Donald Trump, a president who seems to be driven more by his impulses and instincts than by any well-reasoned or coherent core principles,<sup>15</sup> would appear to confirm the view that the United States neither needs, nor can effectively pursue, a coherent grand strategy.

Yet, while grand strategy may have fallen out of favor among scholars, the U.S. government continues to do a lot of grand strategizing. Last December, the White House released its *National Security Strategy*, which called on the United States to “respond to the growing political, economic, and military competitions we face around the world.”<sup>16</sup> In January, the Department of Defense circulated an unclassified summary of its *National Defense Strategy*, which boldly declared that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>17</sup> And if “money is policy,”<sup>18</sup> the most recent Bipartisan Budget Act represents a profound strategic shift, with the base national defense budget slated to rise from \$551 billion in fiscal year 2017 to

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, David M. Edelstein and Ronald R. Krebs, “Delusions of Grand Strategy: The Problem with Washington’s Planning Obsession,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2015).

<sup>15</sup> See Micah Zenko and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “Trump is Going to Regret Not Having a Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 13, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/13/trump-is-going-to-regret-not-having-a-grand-strategy/>.

<sup>16</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 2, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, January 2018, 1, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Adams and Cindy Williams, *Buying National Security: How America Plans and Pays for its Global Role and Safety* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

more than \$629 billion in 2018.<sup>19</sup> Despite the Jacksonian skepticism of foreign entanglements that Trump expressed during the campaign, military primacy appears to be back on the agenda.

It bears asking, then, whether this military buildup, aimed primarily at rival states, is sensible. Will large increases in defense spending make America more secure or increase the general stability of the international system? In order to evaluate the merits of attaining military superiority, one must return, for better or worse, to the debate over American grand strategy. Examining the two primary rival visions of U.S. foreign policy, including their differences and their shared blind spots, can help clarify the risks and benefits of different strategic choices, thereby illuminating the more nuanced ways that the United States — and more specifically the Trump administration — can adapt its grand strategy to manage a more complex and competitive world.

### **The Contenders: Deep Engagement versus Restraint**

For proponents of deep engagement, the answers to these various questions are straightforward: The maintenance of current alliance ties, the pursuit of economic openness, and the embrace of international institutions are all essential to global peace and security. Retaining a strong and capable military is a crucial element of this strategy, because it allows the United States to deter potential aggression by adversaries and to reassure allies that they do not need to invest in their own capabilities, thereby preventing regional arms races. Forward deployments are equally important. They signal

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<sup>19</sup> See Seamus P. Daniels and Todd Harrison, “Making Sense of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 and What it Means for Defense,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 20, 2018,

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/making-sense-bipartisan-budget-act-2018-and-what-it-means-defense>.

that U.S. extended deterrence commitments are credible to allies and adversaries alike, while also providing hubs from which to project power and respond quickly to provocations. Security commitments can also provide ancillary economic benefits. Trade flourishes in stable regions, and allies may be willing to make favorable economic concessions in exchange for protection.

Those who promote a grand strategy of restraint, on the other hand, see continued U.S. engagement as both unnecessary and potentially counterproductive. By virtue of its favorable geography and possession of nuclear weapons, the United States already enjoys a great deal of security, and does not need to be overly concerned with instability in far-flung regions. It can safely relinquish many of its overseas commitments and reposition its military forces closer to home. According to this view, the United States has limited ability to prevent regional security competition, and U.S. security guarantees often make things worse anyway. Moreover, regional aggressors can take advantage of relatively cheap “anti-access/area-denial” capabilities to raise the costs of U.S. intervention. They also tend to care more about the issues that might be fought over, which makes them willing to endure more pain than the United States is. And if the United States tries to demonstrate its continued capability and willingness to prevail by bolstering its forward deployments, advocates of restraint argue, it risks sparking the kind of arms races it had hoped to prevent. The behavior of U.S. allies further complicates matters. Because they benefit from U.S. protection, allies have little incentive to invest in their own defense and every incentive to press their demands on potential adversaries, which can entrap the United States in unwanted and unnecessary conflicts in which it bears the brunt of the fighting.

The question of America’s proper role in the world hinges, to a significant degree, on the assumptions each side makes about the nature of military power. Take, for example, the

differing views about the utility of force. Deep engagers see military power as necessary for managing regional instability, whether that instability is caused by revisionist great powers, nuclear-armed rogue regimes, or failed states in need of rebuilding. Restrainers, in contrast, see military capabilities as mainly useful for protecting sea-lanes and deterring major-power wars, neither of which, in their view, requires forward military presence. The two sides also present divergent assessments about the relative cost of purchasing military power. Restrainers worry about the high costs associated with maintaining a globally-deployed, high-tech, all-volunteer force, and the large deficits that often accompany military buildups. Deep engagers see the defense burdens associated with primacy as minimal, and stress the technological breakthroughs that military research and development can produce — like the Internet — that benefit the civilian economy as a whole.

Part of what makes the debate between deep engagement and restraint so difficult to judge are the different standards each side applies to the same empirical cases. When confronted with the example of the Iraq War, which seems to suggest the downsides of using military force to restore regional stability, proponents of deep engagement claim this case is an aberration, better accounted for by domestic politics or the temptation to crusade on behalf of liberal values.<sup>20</sup> When it is pointed out that there are relatively few cases of allies dragging an unwilling United States into war, advocates of restraint respond by claiming that entrapment can work in indirect ways, subtly distorting U.S. policymakers' perceptions and redefining their interests.<sup>21</sup> Counterfactuals are often

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<sup>20</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth describe the Iraq War as an “outlier.” Brooks and Wohlforth *America Abroad*, 120. See also Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Realism, Liberalism, and the Iraq War,” *Survival* 59, no. 4 (August/September 2017): 7-26, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1349757>.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 7-48, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00197](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197);

poorly specified. Deep engagers take credit for almost every positive development in the post-war period, without considering whether these outcomes would have happened regardless of U.S. policy. Restrainers blame U.S. policy for every misfortune and embarrassment during the same timeframe, without assessing whether things would have been even worse had Washington simply abandoned its leadership role.

## Blind Spots and Shared Pitfalls in the Grand Strategy Debate

While discussions of deep engagement and restraint understandably focus primarily on their differences, it is worth pointing out that these worldviews share a number of blind spots. First, both sides exaggerate the importance of the United States in world politics. They assume that when we see regional instability it is either because an absence of U.S. engagement allowed local security dilemmas to flare up (deep engagement), or because an overabundance of U.S. engagement exacerbated regional rivalries (restraint). Except in cases where local actors can confidently take U.S. intervention as a given, however, it is likely that the decisions regional powers make about war and peace are driven much more by local concerns: their particular interests and vulnerabilities, the balance of power with their immediate neighbors, historical rivalries and animosities, domestic incentives and constraints, and so on. Just because the United States must make choices about how to engage with the world does not mean that those choices always matter to other states.

Second, both of these grand strategic visions prioritize to a fault the importance of state actors in international politics. American grand strategy should be oriented around either dampening the incentives for states to engage in security competition (deep engagement)

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Jennifer Lind, "ISSF Article Review 52 of "The Myth of Entangling Alliances,"" *H-Diplo/ISSF*, Apr. 13, 2016,

<https://issforum.org/articlereviews/52-entangling-alliances>.

or avoiding being drawn into security rivalries involving states (restraint). However, it is more difficult to apply the respective logics of these two theories to non-state actors, particularly those that use political violence to advance their goals. Advocates of deep engagement may be right in arguing that that military power is effective at deterring regional aggressors, but it is unclear whether U.S. military power can deter insurgent groups from rebelling or quickly defeat them once state authority has collapsed. Similarly, proponents of restraint may be correct that simmering tensions between rival states rarely threaten the United States directly, but it is harder to make the same case for transnational terrorist organizations, which can use regional safe havens to launch global attacks.

Third, both approaches elevate the provision of security as the primary purpose of any grand strategy. This stems, in part, from the fact that both of these views draw heavily from “realist” theories of world politics. The argument for restraint derives many of its key assumptions from classic “balance of power” theory, while deep engagement has a strong affinity to “hegemonic stability” theory. To the extent that they consider factors beyond military power, both argue that if their preferred security policies were adopted, then all manner of potential economic, diplomatic, or ideational benefits would follow. Proponents of deep engagement, for example, often claim that primacy pays various economic dividends. Yet, as political scientist Dan Drezner has emphasized, the connections between the global security architecture and the global economy are complex and often circumscribed.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on security, therefore, leads each of these grand strategies to exaggerate the importance of military investments, either as causes of or potential solutions to the challenges facing the United States.

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, “Military Primacy Doesn’t Pay (Nearly As Much As You Think),” *International Security* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 52-79, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00124](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00124).

The limitations of these two approaches extend beyond their security-focused, state-centric worldviews. Even accepting the statist perspective on grand strategy, both make a series of shared analytical moves that do not survive close scrutiny. First, both see the international system as highly contagious: In either approach, events in one part of the world inevitably influence events in other parts of the world. For advocates of deep engagement, this contagion is a reason to maintain U.S. security commitments, so that instability in one region does not spill over into another region, eventually imperiling the American homeland. For proponents of restraint, the prospect of contagion is one reason to withdraw from U.S. security commitments, to avoid being drawn from one insoluble regional flashpoint to another until the United States is hopelessly overextended. Yet, in some situations, international politics does not resemble a series of falling dominos at all, but rather a ship with multiple bulkheads: Crises do not spillover from one region to the next. Commitments do not expand from one domain to another. Conflicts remain localized within borders rather than spread across them.<sup>23</sup> If this is the case, great powers can retrench from obligations in some regions without fearing that this will imperil commitments in others. They can strengthen commitments in some areas without being obligated to do so everywhere. To the extent that commitments are discrete and independent, this affords U.S. policymakers the flexibility to tailor their grand strategies by issue and region.

Second, both approaches hold a rather jaundiced opinion of U.S. allies. In the view of deep engagement, alliances are essentially instruments of “management”: They prevent

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of when diffusion is more or less likely, see Alex Braithwaite and Sangmi Jeong, “Diffusion in International Politics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (June 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.548>.

U.S. clients from acting on their own in ways that might upset regional stability.<sup>24</sup> From the perspective of restraint, alliances are primarily vehicles of “entrapment”: They allow allies to draw the United States into minor disputes and provide cover for allies’ pursuit of risky or offensive policies.<sup>25</sup> Echoing similar arguments from the Cold War, both sides suggest that the basic character of alliance politics is the supervision of weak clients. Yet there is an older view of alliances that sees them as mechanisms for aggregating military capabilities and sharing defense burdens. Great powers can use alliances not to control clients with incompatible preferences, but to coordinate with partners who have similar interests. To the extent that willing and capable allies exist, this would allow U.S. policymakers to explore a grand strategy that incorporates greater contributions from allies.

Third, both sides premise their preferred grand strategy on self-assured assessments about trends in U.S. relative military and economic power. Deep engagers are confidently optimistic: The United States “is and will long remain” the most powerful state in the international system, so the costs of deterring regional revisionists should remain low.<sup>26</sup> Restrainers are confidently pessimistic: Because “the era of American ascendancy...is fast winding down,” Washington has no choice but to dramatically reduce its foreign policy

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<sup>24</sup> See Paul W. Schroeder, “Alliances, 1815-1914: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management,” in *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems*, ed. Klaus Knorr (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1975), 227; and Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> On the distinction between “entanglement” and “entrapment,” see Tongfi Kim, “Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (August 2011): 350-377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599201>.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/2016): 42-43, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00225](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225).



obligations.<sup>27</sup> But the actual trend lines of American power are not as stark as either of these views claim.<sup>28</sup> The United States is indeed in decline, but this decline is modest by historical standards, is evident more in economic indicators than in military or political ones, and is confined primarily to one region and a single rising challenger — China. The reality of gradual decline should spur fresh thinking rather than complacency in U.S. grand strategy, and yet, the modest character of the impending transition does provide policymakers time and space to adapt.

## Implications for Current U.S. Grand Strategy

How, then, might rival approaches to U.S. grand strategy interpret the Trump administration's recent strategic pronouncements, whether the White House's *National Security Strategy* or the Pentagon's *National Defense Strategy*? Proponents of deep engagement would probably welcome the administration's focus on great power rivalries and its announced defense buildup. Military superiority, after all, underwrites a global military presence and America's international commitments. The administration appears serious about deterring rising powers and pacifying potentially volatile regions.

At the same time, the administration has actively undermined other components of deep engagement, including diplomatic engagement through international institutions and economic engagement via multilateral trade pacts. While debates about grand strategy obsess about military power, advocates of deep engagement see it as necessary — but not

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (March 2012): 203-213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00704.x>.

<sup>28</sup> Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 189-191.

sufficient — for security. President Trump’s repeated criticism of allies in Europe and Asia likewise raises questions about whether these states can actually rely on U.S. security guarantees.<sup>29</sup> The administration may be purchasing a military that makes deep engagement possible, while simultaneously shredding the political and economic bargains that render American primacy palatable to both friends and foes.

Advocates of restraint are likely to find much less to applaud in the administration’s strategic approach to foreign policy. While they might sympathize with the president’s criticisms of free-riding allies, the sizable increases to the defense budget raise concerns about the fiscal sustainability of American foreign policy. Indeed, Congressional Budget Office figures suggest that, due to the combination of tax cuts and spending increases, the federal deficit could surpass \$1.2 trillion next year and federal debt could exceed 100 percent of gross domestic product within a decade.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, while restrainers would endorse the president’s criticism of “the failed policy of nation building and regime change,”<sup>31</sup> they would likely point out the vast divergence between the administration’s words and its actions. Despite claims it is preparing for major power conflicts, U.S.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Susan B. Glaser, “Trump National Security Team Blindsided by NATO Speech,” *Politico*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/05/trump-nato-speech-national-security-team-215227>.

<sup>30</sup> Alicia Parlapiano, “Budget Deficits Are Projected to Balloon Under the Bipartisan Spending Deal,” *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/08/us/politics/budget-deficits-debt-bipartisan-spending-bill.html>.

<sup>31</sup> “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript,” *Politico*, July 21, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>.

military forces have increased the tempo of operations across a range of conflict zones including Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.<sup>32</sup>

More broadly, the strategic vision articulated by the Trump administration stumbles into many of the same analytical pitfalls as both deep engagement and restraint, while making advocates of neither approach happy. It focuses primarily on security competition, rather than economic or diplomatic cooperation. It adopts a U.S.-centric view, assuming that more defense spending and a larger military will inevitably translate into greater influence and better outcomes. It takes the issue of a rising China seriously, but treats the emergence of strategic competitors as a uniform problem, missing opportunities to tailor U.S. strategy across different regions or actors. And it asks allies to spend more on defense, without reconsidering their roles and while proudly trumpeting a policy of “America First.”

At a time when the United States needs a supple grand strategy to manage a potentially difficult power transition in Asia, Washington appears to be embarking on a more defiant and confrontational path around the world. Military superiority may amount to very little, unless it is guided by a more flexible grand strategy designed to manage this profound shift in the global balance of power.

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Micah Zenko, “Donald Trump is Pushing America’s Special Forces Past the Breaking Point,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 1, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/01/donald-trump-is-pushing-americas-special-forces-past-the-breaking-point-jsoc-navy-seal/>.

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### 3. Avoiding Fair Fights: Military Superiority and U.S. National Security

*Evan Braden Montgomery*

How much military power does the United States need for its national security? Should it amass as much as it can to address emerging challenges and meet longstanding commitments? Or is the pursuit of superiority unnecessary and unachievable? These questions lie at the heart of current debates over U.S. grand strategy, military strategy, and defense investments. And they are increasingly relevant now that the dominance the United States once enjoyed is in decline. The Trump administration’s *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy*, and *Nuclear Posture Review* all acknowledge that adversaries have narrowed Washington’s lead in some areas and developed countermeasures in others.<sup>33</sup> These documents also express the United States’ determination to arrest this erosion of power and develop new advantages if possible, ensuring, as senior officials often put it, that no soldier, sailor, airman, or marine will ever find him or herself in a “fair fight.” But what will it take for the United States to recapture a large military lead over competitors, and how feasible is that goal? Three schools of thought answer these questions differently, based on the value they attach to U.S.

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<sup>33</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; The Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (January 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; and The Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018* (February 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

military superiority and the barriers they identify to restoring it. Existing approaches overlook several unique challenges to gaining and maintaining superiority in the current security environment, however, and underemphasize a number of key factors that could determine whether the United States achieves the goal it has set for itself.

### **Overmatch, Overkill, or Overstretch?**

For nearly three decades, U.S. military superiority has been a fact of international politics rather than an aspiration for policymakers. Washington entered the post-Cold War era in an incredibly powerful position and continued to spend more on defense than any other nation, sustain an unprecedented network of alliances, and field the world's best trained, best equipped, and most experienced armed forces. Yet America's competitors were not overawed by its military superiority, and did not abandon balancing because Washington's advantages appeared insurmountable.<sup>34</sup> Instead, competitors large and small worked to mitigate their capability gaps through a combination of military reform, emulation, and innovation — efforts that many observers overlooked or underplayed because they were focused on the global distribution of power rather than local distributions of power. It is increasingly apparent, however, that rivals do not need to match the United States' unique ability to project force throughout the world if they want to challenge its grand strategy or chip away at unipolarity. They only need to pursue the

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<sup>34</sup> For arguments that states would not balance, could not balance, or might only balance in limited ways, see Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894580>; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

much easier task of making it harder for Washington to project force into their regions — a goal they have already begun to achieve.<sup>35</sup>

Because U.S. military superiority has come into doubt, it is also now up for debate. And as that debate unfolds, it is likely to be dominated by three schools of thought: overmatch, overkill, and overstretch. Although these approaches are often implicit in the current literature, can overlap in policy discussions, and sometimes blur the value of superiority with the viability of maintaining it, distinguishing between them is a useful way to highlight some of the benefits and drawbacks of trying to restore U.S. dominance.

The overmatch school holds that a significant margin of military advantage is critical for national security. For more than 70 years, U.S. grand strategy has been guided by three goals: preventing hostile nations from controlling key areas, protecting allies and partners from external threats, and promoting freedom of the commons. Consequently, the United States has adhered to a military strategy of denial, which, in the broadest terms, entails stopping adversaries from using force to achieve their objectives rather than relying on economic coercion and peripheral campaigns to punish an opponent after the fact or mobilizing over time and eventually rolling back any changes to the status quo ante.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In other words, rivals have been more focused on “local balancing” than “global balancing.” Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014), [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00160](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00160).

<sup>36</sup> On the core features of U.S. grand strategy, see Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13), [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00107](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00107). On the distinctions between conventional military strategies of denial, punishment, and rollback, see Evan Braden Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Frontline: U.S. Defense Strategy and the Rise of China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), 32-34.

From this perspective, the erosion of superiority could encourage rivals to engage in revisionist behavior, either through probing actions or open aggression, and might cause allies and partners to doubt U.S. security guarantees. That, in turn, could enable conflicts to break out or spheres of influence to emerge.<sup>37</sup> In sum, military superiority underpins U.S. grand strategy, U.S. grand strategy underpins regional security, and regional instability endangers U.S. interests.<sup>38</sup> Regaining superiority, therefore, merits considerable effort and expense.

By contrast, the overkill school maintains that, although superiority confers some benefits, Washington can still make due with much less. To put this more sanguine view into context, proponents might note that although the United States' role in the world has long rested on a foundation of military power, for many decades genuine military superiority was the exception rather than the rule. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States was left with a homeland that was largely unscathed, clear dominance on the seas and in the sky, and a monopoly on nuclear weapons. Then, at the end of the Cold War, the United States was in the rare position of watching its only peer competitor collapse just as its "offset" investments in conventional precision strike were coming to fruition. The decades between these bookends were filled with vulnerabilities, setbacks, and stalemates, however, and the United States still managed to contain the most powerful opponent it has ever faced. Today, despite experiencing relative decline,

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<sup>37</sup> Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Hal Brands and Charles Edel, "The Disharmony of the Spheres," *Commentary* (January 2018), [http://halbrands.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Brands\\_Edel\\_Spheres-of-Interest.pdf](http://halbrands.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Brands_Edel_Spheres-of-Interest.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of the role that U.S. military superiority plays, see Van Jackson, "American Military Superiority and the Pacific Primacy Myth," *Survival*, 60, no. 2 (April/May 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448578>.



Washington has considerable advantages it can lean on. These include its allies and security partners, some of whom might take on a greater role in preserving regional stability as power projection becomes more difficult, as well as its dominant position in the global commons, which could allow Washington to blockade rivals from a safe distance in times of war rather than fight them up close.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the United States does not need to shoulder major financial burdens or make drastic changes to its armed forces in a quest for renewed dominance since it will quickly reach a point of diminishing marginal returns.

Lastly, the overstretch school cautions that military superiority is not only unnecessary but can also be self-defeating.<sup>40</sup> The United States, according to this perspective, is insulated from geopolitical competition due to its remote location, remains safe from

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<sup>39</sup> Leveraging allies is a growing theme among analysts who believe U.S. decline is modest or manageable. See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016), [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00249](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249); and Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017), [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00294](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294). On the opportunities and challenges of maritime encirclement, see Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.743885>; and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (August 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.790811>.

<sup>40</sup> This perspective is generally consistent with a grand strategy of offshore balancing. See especially Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). The military requirements of offshore balancing are more onerous than proponents suggest, however, given that they call for the United States to fight its way back into distant theaters after an adversary defeats local states and fortifies its position. See Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific."

major attacks thanks to its nuclear deterrent, and can resort to buck-passing behavior to avoiding paying the price of containment when great power threats do emerge. Pursuing military superiority also has the potential to be ruinously expensive and extremely provocative. In the end, no margin of advantage will ever be adequate because rivals will always try to catch up, and no self-interested nation will ever view a U.S. arms buildup as purely defensive because it knows that intentions can change quickly. Moreover, should the United States manage to restore its superiority, the unintended consequences of unchecked dominance could end up harming its security. For instance, a large margin of advantage can be a barrier to innovation by encouraging officials to emphasize legacy capabilities and concepts that become increasingly outmoded over time. Even more important, without the structural pressure imposed by power parity or something close to it, Washington might be tempted once again to engage in costly interventions against comparatively minor threats that sap its strength and create opportunities for rivals to catch up.

### **Superiority against Whom, in What, and for How Long?**

Although the United States is unlikely to recreate the highpoint of its primacy, it does appear determined to recapture some of its lost advantages. Senior officials generally do not share the optimistic conclusion of the overkill perspective that decline is easily manageable, nor do they adopt the pessimistic outlook of the overstretch school that dominance has downsides. There are, of course, many barriers that stand in the way of regaining military advantages, from fiscal constraints and budgetary uncertainty to the demands of ongoing operations and the costs of any future conflicts. But even with greater resources and greater restraint, efforts to restore superiority will need to wrestle with three key questions.

First, against whom is the United States trying to achieve overmatch? During the Cold War, Washington was able to concentrate its efforts against a single threat, the Soviet Union, although that threat came in many forms. For much of the post-Cold War era, defense planning has been geared toward hostile regional powers, which, compared with the Soviet Union, posed less severe but broadly similar challenges. But the situation today is more complicated. China and Russia are each far more dangerous than any rival the United States has faced in nearly three decades. North Korea poses a unique set of dilemmas and its challenge to U.S. superiority cannot be taken for granted, even in an era of renewed great power competition. Add Iran into the mix and Washington is contending with the presence of increasingly capable revisionist powers in each key region along the Eurasian Rimland — a situation that it has rarely had to grapple with in the past.<sup>41</sup> Finally, although the threat from violent extremist groups might decline, there is no indication it will go away. Collectively, the scope and scale of these challenges make the difficult task of achieving superiority that much harder and sharpen several tradeoffs at the heart of defense strategy and defense spending: between devoting resources to new capabilities or additional capacity, between tailoring investments toward specific adversaries and scenarios or developing options that have utility across many contingencies, and between maintaining forces in critical locations overseas or maximizing the flexibility to shift them between theaters.

Second, in what arena is the United States trying to achieve overmatch? Just as the number of serious rivals has multiplied, so too have the types of competitions that the United States is actively engaged in, as well as the domains in which conflicts might unfold. For instance, while U.S. superiority has given adversaries incentives to identify vulnerabilities in the American style of expeditionary warfare and develop the

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<sup>41</sup> Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Front Line*, 11-13.

conventional military tools to exploit them, it has also given them reasons to respond in other ways. At one end of the spectrum, U.S. adversaries can operate in the so-called “gray zone,” where the use of non-military and paramilitary tools allows opponents to avoid attribution or shift the burden of escalation onto the United States and its allies. At the other end of the spectrum, opponents can place greater emphasis on nuclear forces, which radically increase the potential costs of any clash. Consequently, the United States is attempting to deter or manage threats across the spectrum of conflict, often at the same time and against the same rival. Meanwhile, conventional military competitions are becoming more complex as the increasing volume and vulnerability of information suggest that future wars will be fought — and could perhaps be won or lost — in space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum. As the plane of competition between rivals expands into new and different areas, the demands of overmatch expand too.

Third, how long can the United States sustain overmatch if it succeeds? There is a growing consensus that emerging technologies like additive manufacturing, robotics, and artificial intelligence will have a major impact on the characteristics of power and the character of conflict, even if their specific impact remains speculative. Notably, some of the most important emerging technologies with potential military applications are being developed and advanced in the civilian commercial sector rather than by the U.S. government or U.S. defense industry, which opens the door to rapid diffusion through a variety of licit and illicit means.<sup>42</sup> As a result, it could be more difficult for the United States to monopolize new technologies, assuming that it gains access to them before its

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Julian E. Barnes and Josh Chin, “The New Arms Race in AI,” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 2, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-arms-race-in-ai-1520009261>.

adversaries do and leverages them in ways that enhance military effectiveness. It also means that any advantages it does achieve could be ephemeral.<sup>43</sup>

## The Softer Side of Military Superiority

Given these challenges, how can the United States make its pursuit of military superiority more successful? To start, it must set realistic expectations about what it can accomplish against the capable rivals that it faces. Washington is unlikely to enjoy a large margin of advantage over all its opponents and in all circumstances, especially because those opponents will often have the initiative, at least at the outset of a conflict, and will frequently be fighting closer to home, which can offer many benefits. Instead, superiority is likely, in most cases, to be limited geographically and temporally, and to certain domains or types of operations. It is therefore critical for the United States to more clearly assess which advantages will yield the greatest payoff against the most serious threats and in the most important scenarios, better understand which advantages are within reach given available resources and the countervailing efforts of rivals, and be ready to exploit these advantages for maximum effect before they expire.

In addition, the United States must focus on the non-material components of military power. Significant warfighting advantages are often gained through the combination of new weapons systems, concepts, and organizations. It is tempting to emphasize hardware alone, especially at a time when so many emerging technologies seem to have such great potential. But operational concepts are critical for innovation and adaptation: They influence how new technologies are integrated with one another, how they are combined

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<sup>43</sup> William T. Eliason, "An Interview with Robert O. Work," *Joint Force Quarterly* 84 (January 2017),

<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1038783/an-interview-with-robert-o-work/>.

with legacy platforms and existing styles of warfare, how they contribute to novel methods of employing and sustaining forces, and how they are repurposed when adversaries also acquire them. In short, concepts are critical to innovation and adaptation. Likewise, the appropriate organizational structures are required to fully exploit the benefits that new capabilities promise while managing the challenges they can introduce for decision-making, command and control, and execution.<sup>44</sup>

Lastly, it is important to appreciate and emphasize the diplomatic adjuncts to military power, including both alliance management and adversary manipulation. For instance, one area where subscribers to the overmatch and overkill schools would agree is that allies are an enormous source of advantage for the United States, one that it will need to exploit even more as security competitions intensify. That could require new divisions of labor with partners to reflect changing threats, increased collaboration on technology development to pool human capital and material resources, and better combined planning mechanisms to manage crises and conflicts.<sup>45</sup> U.S. policymakers need to be aware, however, that the structural constraints on managing alliances in an era of great power competition will only grow because some allies will have multiple patrons to choose from, giving them a degree of leverage that they have not had for decades. In addition to

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<sup>44</sup> Evan Braden Montgomery, *Defense Planning for the Long Haul: Scenarios, Operational Concepts, and the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009), 15-17.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, James P. Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition," in *Competitive Strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/dealing-with-allies-in-decline-alliance-management-and-u.s.-strategy-in-an->.

collaborating more closely with allies, Washington must look for ways to distract its opponents so they cannot single-mindedly concentrate their efforts on undermining its strategic objectives. Perhaps most important of all, in addition to worrying about rivals arming themselves more heavily, the United States should attempt to create or expand divisions between those rivals to ensure that they do not align with one another more closely.<sup>46</sup>

Debates over the merits of U.S. military superiority are not new and are not going away. Although these debates will be shaped by deeply-held assumptions regarding the causes of U.S. security, that should not obscure the nuances of what superiority looks like in a contemporary context or overshadow the challenges of achieving it. In the end, the United States cannot treat superiority as a stand-in for strategy.

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<sup>46</sup> On efforts to divide rivals, see Timothy W. Crawford, “Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011),

[https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00036](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00036).

## 4. Strategy First: What Price Is Military Superiority Worth?

*Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Kaija Schilde*

Long-term projections of the U.S. budget suggest spending decreases are coming. Stagnant tax revenue,<sup>47</sup> growing entitlement spending,<sup>48</sup> unfavorable demographic shifts,<sup>49</sup> and deficit pressures,<sup>50</sup> will combine to result in sustained military spending cuts. Indeed, various members of Congress and the military services have been sounding the alarm that the budgetary tap will be turned off and stay off for some time.<sup>51</sup> Anticipated spending cuts have historically been met with concerns from the secretary of defense, the chiefs of staffs, service chiefs, and members of Congress regarding readiness, inability to deploy the necessary number of weapons systems to deter and defend potential aggressors, and the ability to assure allies.<sup>52</sup> But is the trend towards sustained spending decreases necessarily catastrophic for military superiority? Perhaps not.

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<sup>47</sup> *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2018 to 2028* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, April, 2018), <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/53651-outlook.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> *Budget and Economic Outlook*.

<sup>49</sup> Zachary Selden, "Demography, Defence Budgets, and the Transatlantic Alliance," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2018): 59-80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794012.2018.1423604>.

<sup>50</sup> Marshall Jr., Tyrone, "Debt is Biggest Threat to National Security, Chairman Says," *American Forces Press Service*, Sept. 22, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=65432>.

<sup>51</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Speech delivered at the Eisenhower Library," May 8, 2010, <http://archive.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1467>; Joe Gould, "Congressman to Mattis: Prepare for 'a lean future' as national debt continues to rise," *Defense News*, Apr. 12, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2018/04/12/smith-to-mattis-prepare-for-lean-years/>

<sup>52</sup> Michèle Flournoy and Eric Edelman, "Cut to Defense Spending are Hurting our National Security," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/cuts-to-us-military-spending-are-hurting-our-national-security/2014/09/18/6db9600c-3abf-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a16a08125ccc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/cuts-to-us-military-spending-are-hurting-our-national-security/2014/09/18/6db9600c-3abf-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html?utm_term=.a16a08125ccc); Alexander Bolton, "Gates: 'Serious mistake to cut



Money is, of course, a necessary component of military superiority, but it is not everything. Sustaining military superiority in a constrained budget environment is very possible. It simply depends more on *how* the defense budget shrinks rather than whether or how much it does. The degree to which cuts decrease, maintain, or increase military capabilities depends on how they are implemented. Cuts can be targeted, preserving some line items or services while cutting others, or they can be across-the-board, impacting all areas of the budget uniformly, regardless of strategic priorities. History shows that cuts may actually increase capabilities if specific areas of the budget are spared and funds are redirected away from unnecessary or inefficient programs and towards investments tied more directly to strategic priorities, provoking innovation, deliberate retrenchment, and fiscal solvency.<sup>53</sup> Despite the advantages of targeted cuts,

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defense budget,” *Hill*, Mar. 9, 2014, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/200283-gates-serious-mistake-to-cut-defense-budget-now>; John T. Bennett, “Carter: Budget Cuts Threaten US Interests,” *Defense News*, Mar. 3, 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2015/03/03/carter-budget-cuts-threaten-us-interests/>; Statement of Admiral John M. Richardson, U.S. Navy Chief of Naval Operations Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services on Long Term Budgetary Challenges, Sept. 15, 2016, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richardson\\_09-15-16.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richardson_09-15-16.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> For an overview of works that address resource scarcity, budget competition, and military innovation, see Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 5 (2006): 910-913, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390600901067>. For strategic retrenchment and fiscal solvency see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5-48, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.4.5>; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 7-44, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00034](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00034); Charles Miller, “The Political Economy of Retrenchment,” in *Strategic Retrenchment and Renewal in the American Experience*, ed. Peter Fever (Carlisle PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 7-68. For an example at the program level, see Edward R. Harshberger and Russ Shaver, “Modernizing Airpower projection Capabilities: Looking to Get More out of Less,” in *New Challenges for*

they are not politically easy to achieve, and only take place when policymakers have confidence in their understanding of the nature of the international threat environment.

## Smart Cuts are Real

Between 1950 and 2014, the United States experienced 29 years of sustained military spending decreases.<sup>54</sup> Whenever spending cuts are suggested, they are routinely accompanied by warnings of their deleterious effects on military capabilities. For example, in response to the Budget Control Act in 2011, the Joint Chiefs of Staff forecasted “a hollow force, greater risk of coercion and fewer options to handle global adversaries.”<sup>55</sup> The Department of Defense warned training hours would be cut, aircraft carriers would stay in port, and weapons would remain undeveloped.<sup>56</sup> In the long term,

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*Defense Planning: Rethinking How Much is Enough*, ed. Paul K. Davis (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1994), 593-618.

<sup>54</sup> A sustained military spending decrease occurs when there are cuts in at least two categories (e.g., Personnel, Procurement, Operations and Maintenance, and Research and Development), for at least two, successive fiscal years, and there is an overall decrease in obligational authority. In contrast, since 1950, a full increase, in which all four line items rose, occurred in only 16 years between 1950 and 2014. The data reflects year-to-year change in total obligational authority (versus expenditures) of the most recently passed defense budget. Budgetary authority over expenditure as outlays represents the liquidation of obligations incurred over a number of years versus what decision makers anticipate having. All data is from, U.S. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY2016*, (March 2015), [http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY16\\_Green\\_Book.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY16_Green_Book.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Amaani Lyle, “Service Chiefs Testify on Risks of Sequestration,” *Armed Force Press*, Nov. 7, 2013, <http://www.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/223/Article/467469/service-chiefs-testify-on-risks-of-sequestration.aspx>.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *2014 Quadrennial Defense Report* (March 2014), [http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf); see also statements by the Service Chiefs of Staff: U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and

manpower levels would be unsustainable, deterrence impossible, and strategic interests put at risk.<sup>57</sup> Previous periods of spending cuts have also seen similar warnings. During the Nixon Era, various policymakers were concerned that deep cuts would put the United States at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Stennis (D-MS), for example, expressed concern that strategic program cuts would “destroy our deterrent and confront us with a situation we could not tolerate. Our very survival may hinge on the decision we make this year — I repeat, this year — on Safeguard [Anti Ballistic Missile system].”<sup>58</sup>

But these kinds of claims are sometimes exaggerated, and concerns about spending as a goal in itself can be strategically misguided. The U.S. military has often come out of periods of budget austerity with a global force that no other military can match.

Decreases in defense budgets are frequently not detrimental to military superiority because they prompt strategic review of spending needs. Under pressure, military services have mostly been able to avoid across-the-board cuts to defense investments. Some targeted cuts can be beneficial. For example, the 1950s-era cuts were both targeted and aligned to national security priorities: Manpower was scaled back with the savings going to increases in strategic airpower. The Air Force was set to expand from 114 to 137

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Sequestration on National Security,” Jan. 28, 2015, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/15-01-28-mpact-of-the-budget-control-act-of-2011-and-sequestration-on-national-security>.

<sup>57</sup> Tony Capaccio, “Pentagon’s Budget-Cut Response Risks Higher Costs Later,” *Bloomberg*, Nov. 7, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-11-07/pentagon-s-budget-cut-response-risks-higher-costs-later.html>.

<sup>58</sup> “Congress Authorizes Defense Funds After Long Debate.” CQ Almanac, 1970.

“<https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal70-1293428>

wings by 1957, but Congress reduced personnel by 13 percent.<sup>59</sup> Despite deep cuts to the Army,<sup>60</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Arthur Radford stated “[...] the economic stability of the U.S. is a great factor of military importance over the long pull.”<sup>61</sup> He believed the Soviets aimed to entice the United States into excessive military expenditures, leading to an economic collapse, and allowing them to attain their objective without firing a shot.<sup>62</sup> Thus, while there was some dissent regarding the targeted cuts — the extent to which manpower should be cut and the speed of the Air Force build up — all relevant parties agreed that the money saved should be reinvested to achieve strategic priorities.

When cuts are targeted, scaling back some line items or services while preserving others can make the force more efficient and sustainable. On the other hand, when cuts are made to all areas of the budget uniformly, regardless of strategic priorities, U.S. military superiority is indeed in jeopardy. Since World War II, ambiguous threat environments have invited an across-the-board reduction approach to defense austerity. Given today’s increasingly diverse threat environment, it is likely that broad cuts will be the norm, continuing for the foreseeable future to the detriment of U.S. military superiority.

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<sup>59</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, “The New Look of 1953,” in *Strategy, Politics and Defense Budgets*, edited by Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1962), 384. The reduction was unequally distributed among the services: 79 percent to the Army alone and 21 percent to the Navy-Marine Corp., while the Air Force gained 1.5 percent. Richard M. Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look, 1953–1956* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office 2001), 236–237.

<sup>60</sup> Donald A. Carter, “Eisenhower versus the Generals,” *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 4 (2007): 1179, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/130052784>.

<sup>61</sup> Snyder, “The New Look of 1953,”

<sup>62</sup> Snyder, “The New Look of 1953,” 477.

## The Nixon and Obama Eras of Threat Ambiguity

The across-the-board defense spending decreases from both the Nixon and Obama eras illustrate this dynamic. After President Richard Nixon's inauguration, he directed a review to consider the security and foreign policy implications of a wide range of alternative budget levels and options for nuclear-related and general-purpose forces. The result of the endeavor was an affirmation of the inability to access Soviet intent as well as an increasingly diverse threat environment.<sup>63</sup> No longer was the United States confronted with a monolithic communist threat but a complex and varied one.<sup>64</sup> Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird addressed the strategic ambiguity stating, "The international environment is dynamic, confusing, and in some aspect disconcerting. The rate of change — political, economic, social and technical — is perhaps the greatest we have ever known."<sup>65</sup> The same could be said about today's strategic threat environment.

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<sup>63</sup> "National Security Study Memorandum No. 3, Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Director of Central Intelligence, 'U.S. Military Posture and the Balance of Power,'" Jan. 21, 1969, declassified by the National Security Council, [https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm\\_003.pdf](https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_003.pdf). See also Robert L. Bovey, *National Security Study Memorandum 3: A Pivotal Initiative in US Defense Policy Development* (Alexandria, VA.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 1998) and National Security Council Review Group Meeting, "Review of U.S. Strategic Posture," May 28, 1969, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/SIOP-7.pdf> and NIE 11-8-70, "Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Attack," in *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996), 54, [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000283817.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000283817.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Richard Nixon, "First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970s," Feb. 18, 1970, accessed at *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2835>.

<sup>65</sup> Melvin Laird, "Statement of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird Before the House Armed Services on the 1973 Defense Budget and FY1973-1977 Program," Feb. 17, 1972, 28,

Unable to coalesce around a clear threat mandate, the Nixon administration implemented across-the-board cuts guided by the Bureau of the Budget and its successor, the Office of Management and Budget.<sup>66</sup> In 1970, Nixon stated: “Taking the Services down evenly to keep everyone happy is coming.”<sup>67</sup> Instead of being guided by strategic priorities, these cuts were designed to preserve military flexibility. As Laird noted, “We have made no irrevocable decisions on the future composition of our strategic, general purpose, or mobility forces.... The precise mix of those forces depends on many uncertain factors; some of them are subject to our control, others outside our influence.”<sup>68</sup>

Armed with the president’s guidance, Bureau of the Budget Director Robert Mayo put together a list of programs to cut, in order to spread the pain among the services. When pressed for further cuts, Laird placed a ceiling on outlays more or less equally across the services: Army, \$24.7 billion, Navy, \$22.3 billion, and Air Force \$24.8 billion.<sup>69</sup> When Congress wanted more cuts, Laird continued to apply them evenly. The FY1972 and FY1973 budgets faced similar challenges. For FY1972, anticipating pressures to economize, Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard asked for an across-the-board alternative to the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed budget that amounted to a \$1 billion reduction for each

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[http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual\\_reports/1973\\_DoD\\_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150625-420](http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1973_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150625-420).

<sup>66</sup> Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and Nixon’s Quest for a Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy 1969–1973* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2014), 74.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Nixon “President’s Review of Defense Posture San Clemente July 28, 1970 [.] Selected Comments,” <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/SIOP-14.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Laird, “Statement of Secretary of Defense,” 13.

<sup>69</sup> Laird, “Statement of Secretary of Defense,” 79.

military department in each fiscal year.<sup>70</sup> For FY1973, Henry Kissinger and George Schultz engaged in a budget scrub, implementing the Office of Management and Budget's identified reductions across the military departments.<sup>71</sup> In an ambiguous threat environment, Nixon's cuts were not driven by any particular strategic rationale.

During the Obama administration, the sources of the threats to U.S. interests were numerous and unclear, ranging from asymmetrical and irregular warfare to classic balance-of-power contests with rising states such as China. Key strategic documents defined threats as "complex and rapidly shifting" and emanating from many sources, including states, non-state actors, and transnational forces.<sup>72</sup> In the face of these competing threat assessments, there was no clear mandate for what to cut and where to reinvest the funds. While there were some efforts at making targeted cuts — including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' attempt to cut expensive procurement programs and reinvest in readiness and low-intensity conflict, and Obama's Strategic Defense Review — threat ambiguity and the corresponding lack of a strategic mandate allowed congressional parochialism to win the day and resist targeted cuts. The Pentagon and the military services complained that Congress "had diverted about \$74 billion of what we asked for in savings in our proposed budget [...] to other areas that, frankly, we don't need," including "aircraft, ships, tanks, bases, even those that have outlived their usefulness,

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<sup>70</sup> Walter S. Poole, *The JCS and National Policy, 1969–1972* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Joint History, 2013), 39. See also Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and Nixon's Quest for a Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy 1969–1973* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2014), 293, 300, and 438–439.

<sup>71</sup> Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military*, 445.

<sup>72</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America," August 2009, 3, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nis2009.pdf>. See also Robert M. Gates, "Testimony to the U.S. Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations," June 16, 2010.

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg54962/pdf/CHRG-111shrg54962.pdf>

[but] have a natural political constituency.”<sup>73</sup> The Department of Defense was under “pressure [...] to retain excess force structure and infrastructure instead of investing in the training and equipment that makes our force agile and flexible and ready.”<sup>74</sup> For example, the Army Chief of Staff asked Congress to prevent the acquisition of 280 M1A2 Abrams tanks, saying “[t]he conundrum we have is that we don’t need the tanks [...],” and that the Army would just send the new tanks directly to storage depots if it acquired them.<sup>75</sup> Across-the-board cuts were the only remaining option. It became “hellishly hard to reduce a major defense acquisition program,” making broad cuts “more palatable than attacking individual military programs” because “the constituency for each factory and workforce is deeply embedded in the Congress.”<sup>76</sup> While the effects of sequestration are recent, these across-the-board cuts will pose a risk to military superiority over the next decades.

## Making the Most of Tough Situation

Military spending cuts can be opportunities to eliminate unnecessary programs and redirect spending toward strategic priorities. Take, for instance, the U.S. technological advances that came at the end of sustained reductions in the 1990s. From 1992 to 1997,

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<sup>73</sup> Walter Pincus, “It Appears from the Hill that the Military Has Money to Spare,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 19, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Pincus, “It Appears from the Hill.”

<sup>75</sup> Brendan McGarry, “Biden and Ryan Argue Over Tank Funding Army Doesn’t Want,” *Bloomberg*, Oct. 16, 2012, <http://go.bloomberg.com/political-capital/2012-10-16/biden-and-ryan-argue-over-tank-funding-army-doesnt-want/>, archived at <http://perma.cc/3PXC-BY7X> (accessed May 4, 2018).

<sup>76</sup> Laura Litvan and Julie Bykowitz, “Defense-Cut Hypocrisy Makes GOP Converge With Democrats,” *Bloomberg*, Feb. 19, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-20/defense-cut-hypocrisy-makes-gop-converge-with-democrats.html>.



deep cuts to procurement were made and the fiscal savings went to operations and maintenance, and research and development. Savings from base closures and reductions in major procurement programs such as the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, F-22s, V-22s, and the Joint Strike Fighter, accelerated a shift in U.S. force structure towards more advanced technology.<sup>77</sup> A more recent example is House Armed Services Committee Chair Mac Thornberry's attempts to significantly cut Pentagon administrative bureaucracy by 25 percent in order to improve readiness and increase personnel pay.<sup>78</sup> However, unlike targeted reductions, across-the-board cuts are detrimental because they decrease spending across services and line items, irrespective of the prevailing national defense strategy.

Today's complex and diverse threat environment is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, making it difficult to decide where and how to make targeted cuts. That means that the temptation will be to make broad cuts instead. Nevertheless, policymakers should resist the urge to settle for blanket decreases that hobble America's ability to defend its interests abroad in the name of austerity. Declines in defense spending can actually help sustain military superiority, but only if the cuts are targeted and the savings reinvested into strategic priorities.

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<sup>77</sup> Anthony Cordesman, "Trends in US Defense Spending, Procurement, and Readiness: The Growing Gap Between Strategy, Force Plans, and Resources," Center for Strategic and International Studies (April 1998):

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<sup>78</sup> Connor O'Brian, "House easily approves defense bill with new nukes, cuts to Pentagon bureaucracy," *Politico*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/24/house-defense-bill-2018-567767>.

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