Reforming the US Military for a New Era

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Introduction
The United States will enter 2021 facing an array of security, public health, and economic challenges that should shape the next presidential administration’s defense strategy. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is our most immediate concern, the United States also faces threats from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), where General Secretary Xi Jinping’s vision of national rejuvenation seeks to restore his country’s primacy in world affairs. In the process, Xi would subordinate the United States, along with its friends and allies. The PRC will be empowered in this effort by its strong post-pandemic economic position, which could allow it to continue entangling partner nations in damaging economic relationships while modernizing the People’s Liberation Army to rival US and allied forces in relevant scenarios.

However, the administration that takes office in January may have difficulty finding money to address the pandemic’s continued economic impact and the challenges posed by the PRC. US public debt is at more than 135 percent of gross domestic product, the US government has incurred record-breaking federal deficits, and interest on the debt risks crowding out future discretionary spending on everything from infrastructure to military hardware.

The next national security strategy will need to chart a course toward improved US and allied security within the government’s resource constraints. An essential element of future US strategy should be catalyzing the efforts of manufacturers, universities, laboratories, and suppliers in the National Security Innovation Base (NSIB). This community underpins American economic strength, supports the US military, and generates new technologies and concepts like those that enabled US predominance at the turn of this century. An invigorated NSIB could help carry the United States toward a successful whole-of-society competition against the PRC without breaking the federal budget.

The administration will need to complement its broader governmental and commercial security initiatives with a new approach to defense. Some tenets of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) remain sound, including its emphasis on using dynamic force postures and distributed operations to deter aggression. Other elements—such as prioritizing lethality or attrition above the force’s overall effectiveness and separating concept development from modernization—fail to exploit changes in the character of warfare and emerging technologies.

The team that takes office in January should address the evolving strategic environment and the shortfalls of 2018’s defense strategy through three lines of effort: accelerating introduction of new force designs that better integrate decision-centric operational concepts with new technologies; implementing new priorities in force employment; and managing personnel in ways that attract and retain people with needed skills who can enable faster introduction of new capabilities.

Building a Force for Information and Decision Superiority
The new operational concepts that US military services are pursuing, from Joint All-Domain Operations to Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, rely on distribution, complexity, and actions in multiple domains to gain an advantage over opponents. Although effective fires and defense are essential to these approaches, all fundamentally depend on gaining an information and decision-making edge to succeed. Given resource constraints and the US position as a status quo power, the US military will need to adopt operational strategies and concepts designed to deter adversaries by creating uncertainty and imposing complexity, rather than attempting to win wars of attrition along the borders of nuclear-armed great powers.

The current force designs of the Department of Defense (DoD) are ill-suited for decision- and information-centric warfare. The US military, predominantly composed of large, multimission platforms and troop formations, needs to shift toward a larger
number of smaller and disaggregated units to become more affordable, adaptable, and able to impose greater complexity on the enemy. In part, the current force is the product of congressional resistance to retiring legacy programs in favor of new ones. However, it is also a product of the Pentagon’s sometimes unfocused and protracted research and development efforts. Fortunately, emerging capabilities such as the sensors, countermeasures, networks, and autonomous systems needed for decision superiority can be ready to field during the next five years, and a new administration should prioritize investment in them.

The military services are moving toward better structures for decision-making advantage, but they should accelerate these efforts by more rapidly incorporating new technologies like unmanned systems and autonomous decision-support tools. The Navy should more quickly rebalance toward a larger number of smaller vessels to improve the fleet’s flexibility and resilience. The Marine Corps is already adopting a more distributed force that will operate from a diverse array of amphibious ships, retiring legacy armored units to fund new fires and electronic warfare systems. The Army’s modernization priorities are nearing fruition, but the service likely cannot afford all the resulting new kit; given growing access challenges, its top priorities should be fires, communications, and soldier performance. The new Air Force chief of staff argues the service must “accelerate change or lose,” and that it should retire some long-standing manned tactical and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft to free up resources for new systems with greater reach, stealth, and interoperability.

The new Space Force and Space Development Agency, far from being lean startups, inherited a mature collection of organizations and equipment. As a result, similar to the other services, they will need to transition from expensive, monolithic legacy satellites to more distributed constellations; integrate and manage a diverse set of capabilities from different eras; and protect US space infrastructure in an increasingly contested environment. US cyber forces similarly must contend with challenging threats to both military and civilian networks, but DoD should exploit the opportunity that cyber capabilities offer to affordably wage decision-centric operations at a pace and scale beyond the capacity of other forces.

Within these broad trends, DoD strategy and program decisions should be guided by four overarching factors. First, the force must be affordable to buy and own, so strategy, force planning, and budgeting should work hand in hand. Second, the Pentagon should assess the force using less-exquisite modeling tools but a wider range of scenarios that increase DoD’s emphasis on operations other than multi-phase major power war. These include intense, unexpected engagements like an opportunistic land grab, or protracted confrontations such as breaking a blockade. Third, to maximize the combat performance of the force, assessments should realistically evaluate needs for logistics; operational infrastructure; sustainment; and command, control, and communications. And fourth, DoD should identify the munitions capacity needed for potential scenarios and assess the benefit of buying more weapons—even at the expense of ships, aircraft, or vehicles.

Rationalizing the US Defense Posture

The 2018 defense strategy introduced dynamic force employment, which seeks to “prioritize maintaining the capacity and capabilities for major combat, while providing options for proactive and scalable employment of the Joint Force.” Although the concept’s associated operating model of contact, blunt, and surge layer forces could improve the US military’s adaptability and affordability, DoD continues to conduct regular rotational force deployments that do not create uncertainty for opponents or allow forces to prepare for high-intensity combat.

One constraint on the US military’s ability to be more dynamic is its posture in the Middle East, where its presence
increased in response to Iranian provocations and attacks, and US operations in Syria persist on an indefinite timeline. New air defense artillery, maneuver, aviation, and naval assets have been deployed to the region, robbing the Joint Force’s capacity for deterring the PRC. Most egregiously, the secretary of defense continues sending carrier strike groups to the Arabian Gulf, including through taxing “double-pump” deployments that sacrifice future readiness for a dubious strategy today.\footnote{11}

The force design changes described above would help enable a more dynamic posture by giving combatant commanders additional options. For example, instead of tying up a carrier group in the Arabian Gulf, Central Command could rely on US and allied land-based aviation, combined with smaller surface warships that are better suited for the environment. Smaller Army units are already deploying to Europe. However, equipping battalion and company formations with compact unmanned vehicles, fires, sensors, and electronic warfare systems, and granting them access to longer-range systems currently held at the brigade or division level, would give combatant commanders more flexibility and allow distribution of troops over larger areas.

More-selective force employment could also enhance training and operational innovation. The Pentagon should embrace the model of contact, blunt, and surge forces by using forward-based forces in the contact layer, where their familiarity with the region and proximity to it would allow higher operational tempos. Instead of racing through series of certifications to reach a minimal level of readiness, pre-deployment training for US-based units in the blunt layer should exploit their longer operational cycles to achieve warfighting mastery using extended exercises and experimentation.

DoD should also exploit virtual and constructive training capabilities as part of its efforts to affordably improve innovation and proficiency. Home station training, where units practice tactics and integrate new operators, is especially ripe for the benefits of computer-based simulation. Today, shortfalls in home station preparation often require units to undergo remedial training during pre-deployment certification events, slowing their progress and reducing their readiness.

**Attracting the Best People**

Better training will be undermined if the US military cannot attract and retain smart, creative, and capable personnel. Demographic trends suggest the population of qualified recruits will shrink in the coming decades.\footnote{12} And automation and autonomous systems, rather than eliminating positions, will shift personnel to more-sophisticated functions that emphasize technical, managerial, and analytic skills. To retain the talent needed for increasingly interesting jobs, the military will need to reinvigorate service schools and create training paths that develop operators, technicians, and supervisors over the course of their careers.\footnote{13} The benefits in effectiveness and readiness from improved training facilities, curricula, and opportunities could be significant enough to warrant funding them by reducing the number of platforms or systems the trainees would eventually operate.

While DoD pursues more robust training and professional development, it should also explore ways to better control the growth in personnel costs. Cash and noncash compensation rose significantly during the past two decades, crowding out spending for improved training and readiness. DoD could pursue a variety of changes to pay structures, retirement benefits, and health care to slow the growth in personnel costs, while still attracting and retaining a high-quality force and caring for the nation’s disabled veterans.\footnote{14}

**Collaborating with Congress**

Periods of record deficits have historically been followed by downturns in defense spending, and there is no indication the incoming administration would follow a different path.\footnote{15} DoD should therefore maximize the value of every dollar spent...
on defense. Given the scale of its pressing challenges, the Pentagon will need to implement disruptive changes in the way US forces fight and the equipment they use. Adopting dramatically different concepts and systems, however, will depend on the confidence and buy-in of Congress.

The recent report from congress’ Future of Defense Task Force highlights the substantial bipartisan agreement on changes needed in US defense policy and programs, as well as a path to greater collaboration between military leaders and legislators. In line with that report, DoD should take several steps, including: accelerate its efforts to implement new operational concepts through force design changes that require retiring legacy systems and adopting new capabilities; reform personnel policies established in law; and evolve the Pentagon’s resource allocation process to focus on missions instead of platforms.

To promote collaboration, Pentagon leaders should be clear about DoD’s operational challenges with members and staffs and regularly brief them on the choices under consideration—even before the president’s budget is submitted or a new strategy finalized. At worst, this transparency can better prioritize defense spending in flat or declining budgets; at best, it can motivate Congress to accelerate transition of the force and provide additional funds to shore up gaps.

Throughout US history, a well-informed Congress led the defense establishment forward through monumental pieces of legislation, such as the Two-Ocean Navy and the Goldwater-Nichols Acts. Now facing a combination of fiscal, health, and security challenges, Congress and the Pentagon will need to work together to protect the interests of the United States and its allies.
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Before joining Hudson Institute, Bryan Clark was a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) where he led studies for the DoD Office of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Defense Advanced Research Products Agency on new technologies and the future of warfare. Prior to joining CSBA in 2013, Mr. Clark was special assistant to the Chief of Naval Operations and director of his Commander’s Action Group, where he led development of Navy strategy and implemented new initiatives in electromagnetic spectrum operations, undersea warfare, expeditionary operations, and personnel and readiness management. Mr. Clark served in the Navy headquarters staff from 2004 to 2011, leading studies in the Assessment Division and participating in the 2006 and 2010 Quadrennial Defense Reviews. Prior to retiring from the Navy in 2008, Mr. Clark was an enlisted and officer submariner, serving in afloat and ashore submarine operational and training assignments including tours as chief engineer and operations officer at the Navy’s nuclear power training unit. He received his M.S. in national security studies from the National War College and B.S. in chemistry and philosophy from the University of Idaho.

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Endnotes


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