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United States

The United States: A Strong Foundation but Weak Blueprint for National Security

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This chapter assesses U.S. national resources, U.S. competence in converting those resources into national power, and the adequacy of current and future defense budgets and force structures.

**MAIN ARGUMENT**

The U.S. possesses a large, balanced, dynamic, and adaptive economy. Other major strengths include a rich supply of natural resources, favorable demographic profile, and extensive network of alliances and partnerships. Although the U.S. has the potential to continue world leadership, national performance in recent years has declined. Economic weaknesses include too few skilled workers, obsolete infrastructure, and lack of energy security. In addition, the government has recently been unable to balance budgets, and legislation on immigration reform, energy security, and tax reform has failed. In the area of national security, the U.S. is hampered by an obsolete government structure and has not forged a bipartisan national security strategy supported by the public since the end of the Cold War. Some individual regional strategies—for example, in East Asia and Africa—have been consistent and largely successful, but U.S. policy in other areas—most notably in the Middle East—has fallen short. U.S. military power is still the strongest in the world. However, to meet likely future missions under constrained budgets, its current structure and equipment will have to be adjusted.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- U.S. strengths are structural and enduring, while weaknesses can be overcome with the restoration of a political consensus to solve national problems.

- The greatest national security imperatives are updating the national security structure and the development of a bipartisan, publicly supported strategy for the complex future international environment.

- Within that strategy, the most pressing tasks are forging an enduring strategy for the Middle East and East Asia and making hard choices in the defense budget and force structure.
The United States: A Strong Foundation but Weak Blueprint for National Security

Dennis C. Blair

For the decade roughly corresponding to the 1990s, the United States’ leading position in the world in political, economic, and military power was historically unprecedented. No observer with any knowledge of history thought such a dominant position would last, and it has not. Success breeds its own counterforces. Formerly powerful and developing competitors like Russia and China, respectively, looked for ways to check U.S. influence, while powerful neutral countries like India and even friends in Europe mistrusted a single dominant power and had no interest in helping sustain it. The sense of urgency and purpose that drove the United States’ rise, fueled by the existential challenge first of fascism and later Communism, diminished with victory in the Cold War.

The first decade and a half of the new century saw relative U.S. power and influence slip. The sequence of Middle East involvement beginning with the first Iraq war and expanding with the September 11 attacks, the war in Afghanistan, and the second war in Iraq absorbed large resources without producing decisive results. Meanwhile, China’s historically unprecedented economic development, accompanied by a rapid military buildup, contested the U.S. position in Asia. The 2007–8 financial crisis in the United States that spread to much of the world not only stalled GDP growth but also damaged the U.S. reputation for economic prowess. The question this chapter addresses

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is whether the United States can or will reverse this trend and maintain its overall leading world position.

The short answer is that the United States can—it has the resources and the competence to do so. However, it is not clear that Washington can muster the national leadership and popular support for a series of difficult programs to overcome current shortcomings. Some improvements will likely happen; others are unlikely without a dramatic crisis.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: First, it assesses U.S. national resources. Economic performance is the most important component of national strength and is addressed at greatest length, but the U.S. network of alliances and partnerships and the habit of world leadership are also important. While these three components are significant U.S. strengths, the assessment discusses the negative trends undermining each and the prospects for reversing them. The second section assesses U.S. competence, or the skill with which American leaders are able to formulate, generate support for, and execute policies and programs for long-term improvements in national strength. With respect to national security, competence is the capacity to pursue consistent and successful policies that support or improve U.S. interests, both in the major regions of the world and on global issues. Although this section identifies some recent successes, readers will find it critical of much of recent U.S. performance. The final section of the chapter addresses the military power of the United States. It measures the currently planned armed forces against the likely missions they will face. The assessment finds that adjustments in the force structure and potentially to the traditional service shares of the defense budget will be required if the United States is to have an armed forces that can handle its most likely future missions.

**National Resources**

*Economic Strength*

Economic size and strength generate international influence directly through financial interactions and trade. In addition, the economy provides the tax resources that fund military forces and foreign financial assistance, the primary direct tools for influencing other countries.

The United States has the world’s largest economy, measured in exchange rate terms.\(^1\) The U.S. economy is both advanced and balanced, not being dependent on a single sector. The United States possesses a large

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internal market and domestic supplies of raw materials and is roughly half as dependent on foreign trade as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. Among developed countries, the United States has achieved higher growth rates over the last fourteen years than the Japanese or eurozone economies as well as the OECD average for the last four years. With a slow but steady recovery from the 2007–8 recession, the U.S. economy has stronger growth prospects than other advanced economies.

The dollar is projected to continue to be the world’s reserve currency for at least the next several decades. This gives the United States a major line of credit, financed by the savings of other countries. In addition, because almost all international energy transactions and about half of all global trade are denominated in dollars, the United States can use its dollar clearing function to block transactions and put pressure on other countries, as in the case of sanctions on Iran.

The driving and disruptive force for economic development for at least the next several decades will be the digital revolution, and the United States is well positioned to continue to take advantage of it. The U.S. economic system has unique advantages in fostering innovation. U.S. investment in R&D is the largest in the world. In rankings of the world’s top colleges and universities, U.S. institutions dominate. American researchers, working primarily at universities, also lead in international prizes in technical subjects. Major U.S. companies dominate or have strong international positions in both the hardware and software domains of the digital industry. In addition, the United States has a unique culture of digital entrepreneurship that provides a steady stream of new ideas and funding for small companies to go to market. As the information technology (IT)

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component of many products increases, large IT companies or even wealthy individuals are mounting challenges to established industries through the development of satellites, rockets, and even automobiles. Whether or not these challenges succeed, they are forcing innovation and efficiency within established industries and creating companies that will ultimately contribute to economic growth.

Ten years ago, the United States was projected to be a major importer of both petroleum and natural gas. Because of the shale revolution, the United States is now projected to be a significant liquefied natural gas exporter and a major producer of oil. Whereas imported hydrocarbons historically have amounted to roughly half of the country’s trade deficit, in the future oil and gas exports will make a positive contribution to the trade balance. In addition, the availability of inexpensive and reliable sources of electricity and natural gas give an advantage to locating manufacturing activities in the United States.9

The United States has a relatively healthy demographic profile for the next several decades. By contrast, birthrates in East Asia and Europe are below replacement levels. China’s one-child policy has already resulted in a decreasing workforce and increasing elderly population, and by 2050 the proportion of the Chinese population over the age of 65 will surpass that of the United States.10

Economic Challenges

Despite the United States’ overall economic strength, three major negative factors have the potential to hinder growth: shortages of skilled workers for the advanced economy, obsolescence of the national infrastructure, and lack of energy security. Although these factors are widely recognized, the only one for which serious remedial measures are underway is the shortage of skilled workers.

Employers in both the manufacturing and service industries report thousands of skilled job openings that they are unable to fill with qualified

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workers. The demand for educated workers will only increase in the future.\textsuperscript{11} There are two solutions to this problem: (1) training and education and (2) immigration. The imperative to improve training and education, especially in technical fields, is widely recognized in government, private business, and the philanthropic sector. Although so far all the public and private efforts to improve education have failed to produce dramatic improvements, this is one of the few public issues on which there is currently bipartisan political consensus. These factors make it likely that the United States will discover and implement the right combination of improvements to provide the highly skilled workers needed for its advanced economy to grow.

The second solution to help meet the demand for higher skill levels is immigration. The United States has traditionally benefitted from relatively open immigration, especially for highly skilled workers. Foreign participation in the U.S. digital revolution is no exception. Roughly half of the IT startups in Silicon Valley have foreign-born founders.\textsuperscript{12} Likewise, roughly half of those studying for technical degrees in U.S. universities are international students.\textsuperscript{13} Currently many of them want to remain in the United States to work but are unable to obtain visas.\textsuperscript{14} Increasing the number of green cards for foreign-born graduates of technical courses in the United States would contribute to both GDP growth and job creation.

The last two administrations have attempted unsuccessfully to reform U.S. immigration law. However, the digital revolution will continue, increasing the demand from businesses for higher-skilled workers. It is probable that there will be immigration legislation in the next few years increasing the supply of skilled and entrepreneurial workers.

The second major obstacle to continuing U.S. economic growth is increasingly obsolete economic infrastructure. Increases in U.S. productivity have been driven in recent years by quickly moving people, goods, and data


around the country—and around the world. U.S. companies have thinned their supply chains, outsourced functions that can be done more efficiently by specialists, and provided their workers with data and analytical tools to operate more efficiently. Efforts to continue and even maintain these trends are hampered by increasingly obsolete seaports, highways, railroads, and air traffic control systems, as well as by inadequate broadband speeds and unsecured digital networks.¹⁵ Failing infrastructure could cost U.S. businesses $958 billion in sales by 2020 and $2.5 trillion by 2040.¹⁶

Congress has not passed a transportation bill with an authority longer than two years since 2005, and the Department of Transportation’s 2013 estimate of the backlog of shovel-ready and economically efficient investments in roads and bridges stands at $649 billion.¹⁷ The Highway Trust Fund, which manages most federal spending on highway and transit infrastructure, has a $13 billion annual deficit that grows, while the fund’s primary revenue source (the gas tax) has been eroded by fuel efficiency gains and inflation. Modernizing major U.S. ports to handle the ever-larger container ships coming into the world’s transportation fleet is estimated to cost $51 billion through 2040.¹⁸ Likewise, in 2014, airports calculated that they need $33.5 billion to fund capital investments, with the federal government providing $3 billion per year.¹⁹ A replacement air traffic control system that will allow more planes on the same routes has been in development since 2004 and has an estimated future cost of $14 billion.²⁰ Finally, the United States ranks seventh in the World Economic

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Forum’s Network Readiness Index, but 17% of Americans—and half of rural residents—still lack adequate broadband access.\textsuperscript{21}

Lawmakers understand the importance of these projects but differ on priorities and on how they should be funded. The enormous government expenditures required will have to be carved out of already strained local, state, and federal budgets. Moreover, the enabling legislation for public-private partnerships, a possible funding solution besides full government funding, will have to be passed in a difficult political environment against the opposition of those benefitting from the current system. These factors make it unlikely that the U.S. economic infrastructure will improve substantially soon.

The third negative factor in continued U.S. economic growth is the lack of energy security. Although the increase in domestic shale oil and gas production will continue to be a strength of the U.S. economy, it has not provided the United States energy independence or even energy security. A country is energy secure when acts of nature or events in energy-producing countries do not substantially affect its economic or national security interests. According to a careful ranking by the nonprofit organization Securing America’s Future Energy, the United States is only the ninth most energy-secure country in the world.\textsuperscript{22} Because oil is bought and sold in a worldwide market, U.S. citizens and businesses pay the global price no matter how much the United States produces or from where the rest is imported. The U.S. transportation sector is projected to remain over 90% dependent on oil for decades to come. Demand is inelastic—when prices go up due to supply shortages somewhere in the world, U.S. families and businesses must pay the higher prices and compensate elsewhere in their budgets.\textsuperscript{23} As a result, oil price increases have been a major factor in the last six recessions in the U.S. economy.\textsuperscript{24}

The current glut of oil and low prices will not continue indefinitely; rather, the balance of global oil supply and demand is projected to be tight


over the long term as larger middle classes emerge in developing countries. The global economy is also still vulnerable to natural or geopolitical supply interruptions. When they occur, U.S. oil companies will enjoy higher profits, but U.S. consumers and businesses will have to pay higher prices, thereby halting or even reversing economic growth. Moreover, the swing producers of oil—the countries that are able within a few months to compensate for oil price spikes caused by supply interruptions—will remain Saudi Arabia and potentially other Gulf countries, including Iraq. Only they can increase production quickly and at low cost. This means that the United States will continue to be heavily involved in the Middle East and will remain in strategic partnerships with countries of antithetical values and uncertain long-range futures.

To achieve energy security, the United States must diversify the fuel sources for its transportation sector away from petroleum. There are some actions already underway. For example, approximately 3.5 million hybrid electric vehicles and 287,000 plug-in electric vehicles were sold and 191 models were on the market through 2014. However, the total car fleet in the United States is about 250 million vehicles, so there is a very long way to go to diversify fuel sources in a significant way. Either inspired government action or another oil crisis will be necessary to make a dent in petroleum’s current lock on the transportation sector.

In summary, the continued growth of the U.S. economy is most seriously threatened by three factors: lack of a highly skilled workforce, obsolete infrastructure, and energy insecurity. There are good prospects for improving workforce skills through education reform and new immigration policies. However, the goals of modernizing the country’s transportation and digital infrastructure and improving U.S. energy security are very difficult and will only be achieved either by political consensus and leadership of a type not observed recently in the United States or in reaction to a very serious economic crisis. The chances for continued U.S. economic growth still must be considered favorable, but it is unlikely that the country will realize its full economic potential.

25 Projected long-range future energy balances are between 2.0 and 4.5 million barrels per day, with world consumption at roughly 100 million barrels per day. See Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, “Oil Security 2025,” 17, 82.
26 For an extensive discussion of future scenarios, see Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, “Oil Security 2025.”
Alliances and a Tradition of Leadership

There are important components of U.S. national power beyond economic strength. One is the network of alliances and partnerships that the United States has established over the last 70 years. These countries do not follow U.S. direction on all issues, but alliances and partnerships provide a foundational convergence of important interests that the United States can draw on when dealing with a major issue or crisis. Most of these alliances were formed during the Cold War and have endured in modified form. Many Eastern European countries have joined NATO or expanded relations short of NATO membership; the alliance with Japan has been updated; countries in Africa and Latin America that were suspicious of or hostile toward the United States during the Cold War have become friendlier. No other country has the web of alliances and partnerships that the United States enjoys. This group, for example, includes eleven of the twenty wealthiest countries in the world.

In recent years, however, there have been striking instances of a weakening of traditional U.S. alliances. France declined to join the small coalition of countries that the United States led in the second Iraq war, the British Parliament refused in 2013 to join the United States in taking military action against Syria for its use of chemical weapons, and Israel has expressed very public disagreement with the United States over Iran. However, these differences with allies and partners have not resulted in fundamental ruptures of U.S. alliances and partnerships, and there have been counterexamples—for instance, the dramatic recent strengthening of the alliance with Japan, the formation of new strategic partnerships with several countries in Asia, and the restoration of military relations with New Zealand. Thus, the United States’ extensive system of alliances and partnerships most likely will continue to be a strong component of U.S. international power and influence.

The final component of U.S. national power is the habit of world leadership. In both the economic and the security areas, the United States has considered itself the world’s leader in addressing both long-term structural issues and regional crises and challenges; the rest of the world typically has looked to the United States to take the lead.29 Although there have been many exceptions, this position of leadership has meant that the United States could shape the international approach to major challenges and issues in a way that favored U.S. interests.

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In the world economy, for example, as the wealthiest nation in the world following World War II, the United States took the lead to construct, support, and expand a system that generally favored free trade. World trade in the last 70 years has expanded at one and a half times the rate of global economic growth. In other words, the American-led world trade and financial system has provided an opportunity for developed and developing countries alike to increase their rates of growth beyond what they could have accomplished relying on their domestic markets. The United States itself benefitted greatly from the system, both in gaining markets for its exports, in the availability of lower-priced products for American consumers and businesses, and in the influence deriving from its position of leadership.

Similarly, in international responses to regional crises, the United States has traditionally been the country that led. This habit of leadership, born during World War II and exercised throughout the Cold War, continued after 1990. The United States led the response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; after some delay, led the NATO response to the violence in the Balkans; and more recently has led the international campaign against al Qaeda. As in the case of economic issues and crises, by taking a leadership role, the United States was assured of a solution that was favorable to its own interests.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the United States has not settled on a broad national security strategy in the post–Cold War era. As a consequence, or perhaps for the same reasons, the U.S. habit of leadership, along with the instinctive expectation of American leadership by much of the rest of the world, has diminished in recent years. Leadership on international economic issues has continued to be strong, with ongoing U.S.-led efforts to negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. However, in the security area the United States has recently assumed a less forceful leadership role. This trend has been most apparent in the Middle East but also can be seen in Eastern Europe. The international coalition for the second Iraq war in 2003 was much smaller than in the first war in 1991. The U.S. role in dealing with Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine since February 2014 has been less forceful and comprehensive than it was in dealing with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1991. It is too soon to tell whether the current U.S. tentativeness in world leadership is an aberration. If the trend continues, however, the United States will lose some of its control of the international agenda and will have to settle for outcomes that are less in line with fundamental U.S. interests.

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National Security Performance

*Foundational Elements*

U.S. overall performance in the area of national security is governed by a number of different factors: basic private sector and governmental competence, including fiscal competence; an effective set of authorities, organizations, and procedures for conducting national security; a competent national security workforce and adequate national security funding; and finally a consistent and effective national security strategy that is supported by Congress and the public and sustained across changes of administration.

For the United States, many of these factors are strong and positive. In general, U.S. national security competence compares favorably to that of other major countries. However, maintaining its leading world position requires several important improvements.

*Government Competence*

The U.S. government’s response to national challenges has deteriorated in recent years. Despite increasing evidence of deep-seated national problems that require legislative solutions along with competent executive branch action—for example, entitlement payments, healthcare, education, national infrastructure, immigration, and energy and disaster response—for the past fifteen years there has been scant government progress on the great majority of these issues. As the political parties have moved away from the center, propelled by the nature of their primary elections, unrestrained campaign contributions, gerrymandering, and the controversy-obsessed media, discussions of solutions to every major national problem degenerate relatively quickly into a stalemate. It has been impossible to fashion practical compromises that blend both public and private action. Beyond their failure to take on big problems, Congress and the executive branch have become less capable of carrying out even the routine functions of government—passing budgets on time and confirming appointees to key positions.

As stated earlier in the chapter, the lack of government action on immigration, national infrastructure, and energy security has directly handicapped U.S. economic growth. The 2007–8 recession and the spectacle of polarized U.S. politics of recent years have had the short-term effect of undercutting U.S. influence and authority. Countries around the world are less inclined to look to the United States as a model and to follow U.S. advice.

Adversaries or competitors like Russia and China are having an easier time discrediting U.S. ideas.

So far this loss of influence due to the deterioration of government and some private sector competence is recoverable. The United States has recovered from similar periods in the past when it seemed to be losing competence and leadership. When leading on international issues such as the TPP, Iran’s nuclear program, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Washington finds ready partners. However, a protracted period of absence from a leadership role or misguided leadership will be difficult to surmount.

**Government Fiscal Competence**

An important factor in national security performance is fiscal competence. Budgets for defense and other national security departments and agencies must be sustained and adequate. Recent years, however, have raised doubts about the United States’ capacity to handle its fiscal affairs.

At the national level, the U.S. government has not balanced a federal budget since 2001, and the national debt has roughly tripled from $6 trillion in 2001 to $18 trillion today. Low interest rates have kept increasing debt service payments manageable, but the liabilities are huge and will likely have an impact on long-term national growth. Federal budgets are projected under the most optimistic forecasts to be in deficit for the next ten years. The current federal debt-to-GDP ratio of the United States is above 100%, having averaged about 60% for the previous 50 years.

All this fiscal pressure does not bode well for sustained and healthy funding for national security programs, from overseas assistance to the State Department’s budget to the acquisition accounts of the Department of Defense. While Congress has always funded the current operating expenses

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of the armed forces in crisis or conflict, defense procurement accounts have been reduced, equipment has aged, and readiness has suffered during times of budget pressure. This would seem to be the prospect for the future.

The process for passing federal budgets in recent years has been uniquely inconsistent, partisan, and wasteful. Sequester legislation has resulted in heavy pressure on all components of the federal budget and forced stop-and-go funding that is especially damaging to the defense budget. When defense acquisition programs—the purchase of new systems—cannot be planned on a multiyear basis, major additional costs are incurred.\textsuperscript{37} Over the last several years, tens of billions of defense dollars have been wasted as the military services have had to continually revise plans for equipment programs based on different possible budgets. Revisions to contracts with defense equipment suppliers have added cost while reducing procurement quantities. Although the worst appears to be over, the sequester process leaves a legacy of deferred funding requirements that will take years to absorb.

In summary, one of the strongest constraints on U.S. armed forces in the future will be the overall tight budget picture at all levels of government as well as the inefficiency of unpredictable annual funding. The potential ramifications of such fiscal pressure will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

\textit{National Security Authorities, Organization, and Procedures}

The basic structure of the U.S. national security organization was established following World War II and refined during the Cold War. Authority for directing national security actions was invested in the president, and the chain of command ran directly from the president to the secretaries of the major departments and agencies. The National Security Council was established as a high-level coordinating mechanism to assist the president in providing direction to the national security departments and agencies, but funding and direction flowed through departments.\textsuperscript{38} Even during the Cold War, this rigid and stove-piped chain of national security command was often inadequate. For handling complex contingencies with interlinked military, diplomatic, and economic aspects, no established mechanism existed for making decisions in the field to integrate the actions of the different departments. Interagency disputes could not be decided short of presidential

\textsuperscript{37} A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report cites analysis by the Defense Department that found 2\%–8\% in savings in multiyear acquisitions. See Ronald O’Rourke and Moshe Schwartz, “Multiyear Procurement (MYP) and Block Buy Contracting in Defense Acquisition: Background and Issues for Congress,” CRS, CRS Report for Congress, R41909, June 12, 2015, 3.

\textsuperscript{38} For a full discussion of these issues, see the Project on National Security Reform, “Forging a New Shield,” November 2008, http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS106470.
action, and the execution of presidential decisions was still transmitted back to the field through separate departmental authorities.

In the complex world that followed the Cold War, such rigid, department-centric authorities and procedures became even more of a handicap. All the major national security challenges, from Iraq to Haiti to Bosnia to Afghanistan, have required tightly integrated diplomatic, military, and economic action in the field. On occasion, largely because of the personalities of senior officials on the scene from the State Department, armed forces, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), there was tight cooperation and the results were positive. Too often, however, leading officials from different departments and agencies were at odds, and there was no way to settle differences and pursue a consistent policy short of presidential intervention. The result was a great deal of friction in the field, wasting resources, missing opportunities, and jeopardizing the success of national missions.39

Successive administrations have noted these problems in interagency coordination in the field, and their solution has generally been to attempt to assert greater control of field actions by the National Security Council staff. The results of this approach, however, have not been uniformly positive. What is needed instead is an updated set of authorities, responsibilities, and procedures that enable the different levels of the national security structure to play their appropriate roles and to work smoothly together. Unfortunately, the unique combinations of circumstances that prompted the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which was designed to integrate different military services under single operational field commanders, and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 have not occurred to enable or compel wider national security reform. The attempt by the Project on National Security Reform in 2008 to convince the incoming Obama administration to enact these reforms was unsuccessful. The chances for reform are thus dim, and the United States will most likely pay the price of reduced effectiveness in all its important national security actions.

**National Security, Human Capital, and Financial Resources**

U.S. competence in the middle and lower ranks of national security departments and agencies is greater than it ever has been. The military officer corps performs its duties superbly, and the high tempo of combat operations since the end of the Cold War has produced a generation of combat-tested

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field-grade officers. Foreign Service officers have been shifted in large numbers from comfortable embassy assignments in developed countries to difficult and dangerous jobs in developing countries in Asia and Africa and have performed their duties with courage, dedication, and initiative. Intelligence officers have deployed in large numbers to combat zones, where they have gained invaluable experience in providing operational intelligence when lives are on the line. Bright and dedicated young U.S. citizens continue to volunteer in large numbers for military, diplomatic, and intelligence service, so the prospects for the future are positive.

Budget resources for national security departments and agencies have been generally adequate during the 27 years since the end of the Cold War, despite the shortcomings in fiscal competence described earlier in this chapter. Shortages of budget resources have not been responsible for failures during this period in achieving important national security objectives. As shown in Figure 1, the budget of the Department of Defense was cut by roughly a third during the 1990s without major damage to U.S. interests. Following September 11, there was a steady and continuous increase in funding,

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1** Department of Defense budgetary authority, 1990–2015

ending in 2010, followed by four years of steady decline to the present.\textsuperscript{40} However, during this period, the defense budget process within both the executive branch and Congress has become disconnected from basic policy and strategy.\textsuperscript{41} Within Congress there is now an unusual combination of conservative lawmakers determined to reduce total government expenditures no matter what and liberal members who believe that defense spending should be reduced in order to provide more resources for domestic programs without a strong enough offsetting group of senators and congressmen who can make a strong strategic case for an adequate level of funding for the armed forces to carry out a bipartisan national security strategy. As a result, national security budgets have not been determined through a logical process of setting priorities among national interests, relating desired objectives to resources, and assessing the effectiveness of programs. There is great uncertainty about future spending levels with the withdrawal of major U.S. forces from Afghanistan and overall pressure to balance the budget and address domestic priorities.

The State Department and USAID did not enjoy the same budget increases as the defense and intelligence communities following September 11. According to the testimony of successive secretaries of state, and even some secretaries of defense, the State Department is underfunded for its responsibilities.\textsuperscript{42} Although highly unlikely, substantial increases would be an important indicator of a new approach to national security.

\textbf{National Security Strategy}

Despite the talented middle ranks of national security professionals and generous funding, especially for the Defense Department and the intelligence community, the United States’ national security record since the end of the Cold War is mixed. These results are primarily due to the failure to fashion a consistent national security strategy for the different international environment that emerged following the United States’ victory in the Cold


War. A country’s real national security strategy includes its understanding of the international environment, its vision and goals for the future, and its priorities across regions and functional areas. Since 1988 there have been four administrations—two Republican, two Democrat—and each has written its own national security strategy.43 Across those 27 years the United States has tried many different approaches to the challenges of the post–Cold War era. Some individual elements have been consistent and largely successful. Several regional strategies, for example, have worked well, including in Africa, Latin America, and the Far East. Relations with Europe have by and large been handled competently during some difficult times. The region in which the United States has most damagingly failed to come up with a good strategy is the Middle East. However, functional global issues—combating violent Islamic extremists, dealing with issues of global climate change, and building a global rules-based order—have been handled less consistently and with sparse positive results.

There are many reasons for this failure to forge a national security consensus and strategy. The first was the overwhelming military and economic superiority of the United States after the fall of the Soviet Union. With power superiority, Washington had little incentive to develop a clever strategy. Second, and related, was the lack of a single overarching existential threat to compel the United States to set priorities and provide an overall national goal. Third, and also related, the inevitable tensions between individual national interests, whether regional or functional, led to compromise and inconsistency in the absence of an ordering threat or national objective. The fourth factor was the growing polarization of U.S. politics described earlier in this chapter. Although national security issues have been somewhat less partisan than domestic issues, the antipathy between the major political parties has increasingly made the forging of a consensus difficult. Fifth and finally, September 11 played a role. The terrorist attacks by al Qaeda had a shock value that caused a U.S. reaction far in excess of the threat posed by such a small and stateless organization. Elevating the campaign against this group to the country’s top strategic objective interfered with the formulation of a strategy that could address the full range of threats and opportunities.

With all these factors thwarting development of an overall strategy that would set priorities, provide principles for action, and guide resource allocation, successive administrations since 1988 have generally handled

crises in an ad hoc fashion, taking the best short-term action decided on through a series of White House–led meetings.

What would a real national security strategy look like? It would have to deal with the three major strategic challenges that stand out in the future security environment: the rise of China, the breakdown of stability in the Middle East, and the emergence of violent extremist Islamic groups.

The United States has been most successful in developing a strategy for the first of these challenges—the rise of China. The strategy has included engagement across economic, diplomatic, and some military dimensions, seeking to bring China into the world order, along with the hedge of a continued strong military presence in East Asia and maintenance of allied relationships. Successive U.S. administrations have pursued this basic strategy, and it has been largely successful. China’s rise in the future will present different challenges from those of the past, requiring adjustments in U.S. strategy, but a solid foundation exists for dealing with these challenges.

The United States has been much less successful in constructing a strategy to handle the remaining two interrelated challenges: instability in the Middle East and Islamic extremism. Developing a consistent strategy, or even a set of strategic principles, for dealing with the Middle East is not simple. U.S. interests often conflict—for example, short-term interests such as cooperation against extremist groups conflict with longer-term interests such as the promotion of democratic governance and human rights. Since the 1970s, the U.S. approach to the region has become heavily militarized. Military campaigns have failed to produce decisive results despite great expenditures of blood and treasure, yet in the Middle East diplomacy without the credible threat of force is generally not effective.

The elements of an effective long-term strategy for the region include several strategic principles and objectives:

- improving U.S. energy security through domestic measures to lessen the importance of Saudi Arabia and other low-cost oil-producing states in the region
- involving other countries from Europe and Asia, including India and China, in maintaining a regional balance of power that checks the ambitions of Iran or any other country seeking a dominant position in the Middle East
- making greater and earlier use of military measures short of the commitment of major combat units, including the allocation of appropriate equipment and sustained training
• shifting much of the campaign against extremist groups in fragile countries from direct military and intelligence action to support for better governance and effective host-nation security capacity

• sustaining support for long-term peaceful democratic change in the region

There will be constant individual crises in the region requiring short-term responses, but the United States needs to make progress on these strategic principles and objectives as it works its way through the crisis of the moment.

Improvements are needed in U.S. strategy to deal with extremist Islamic groups beyond rebalancing operations in fragile states in the Middle East where most of the groups are based. Since September 11, the United States has learned a great deal more about these organizations and the threat they pose even as their names and locations have changed. In addition, the United States has employed a full range of approaches to dealing with them and has the experience to forge a successful strategy in the future.

As numerous government officials have testified, the United States is capable of detecting and preventing large terror attacks by multiple teams on the scale of September 11; however, it is not capable of detecting and preventing all attacks by small groups or individuals on the scale of the Boston Marathon bombings. For several years, these attacks, planned and conducted by individuals or small groups living in the United States, have been the most common, and many, but not all, have been thwarted by timely law enforcement action.

An improved strategy to deal with this threat should include the following principles and objectives:

• National leaders persistently and consistently explaining the necessity and legal basis for the programs conducted by intelligence and law enforcement agencies to detect and prevent terrorist attacks. These explanations can be made without compromising classified information.

• Maintaining the FBI- and local law enforcement–led campaign to identify and prosecute terror plots originating within the United States.

• Continuing to improve the Department of Homeland Security–led campaign to prevent members of violent extremist Islamic groups from entering the country. There is still a great deal of work to be done to merge all of the information and intelligence available to identify those who pose a threat.

• Promoting national resilience along the lines of Boston’s reaction to the deadly bombs during one of the city’s iconic events.
The lack of a consistent strategic approach to the Middle East has been felt not only in that region but also elsewhere. The commitment of large-scale U.S. combat power in Iraq and Afghanistan with inconclusive results has undercut the reputation of the U.S. armed forces throughout the world. Likewise, the setting of red lines in the region that are not enforced when crossed raises doubts among U.S. allies around the world about the reliability of the United States’ commitments to global security.

Another lost opportunity concerns the impetus that a robust national security strategy provides for domestic reform. In the past, a broad consensus on national security has driven major domestic programs of substantial and lasting economic impact. For example, the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 caused massive federal investments in scientific, engineering, and language education that propelled subsequent U.S. economic growth. The absence today of a strong national security justification for domestic programs of widespread economic benefit makes it more difficult to overcome the opposition of groups with vested interests in the current system.

It is difficult to foresee whether the United States will be able to forge a national security strategy that will find bipartisan political and public support, lay out a sustained successful approach to the Middle East and Islamic extremism, and provide the rationale for appropriate military budgets. The most realistic positive scenario is that, having tried a series of different national security approaches over the past quarter century, the country’s leadership has learned what works and what does not. New administrations would avoid repeating past mistakes while simultaneously building a record of successful actions and gradually improving the process of integrating the actions of the different departments and agencies. This scenario would be an improvement over much U.S. national security performance since the end of the Cold War and would provide the basis for more substantial improvement.

**U.S. Values**

There is a final intangible, but very important, component of U.S. national security performance that needs repair. One of the great advantages that the United States has traditionally enjoyed is the attractiveness and power of its values. In recent years, however, the United States has fallen short of its ideals in too many instances. At the root of most of these failures has been the so-called war on terrorism. In its zeal to suppress violent extremist terrorist

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organizations, the United States has cooperated closely with authoritarian regimes from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia to Egypt. In many cases, such cooperation took place directly with the security services of these countries, the very organizations that were the most egregious violators of the freedom and human rights of local populations. Partly as a consequence, the United States failed to anticipate and take advantage of the Arab Spring to bring a measure of democratic reform to these countries, while at the same time undercutting the appeal of radical groups tolerating or advocating terrorism.

In its use of secret detention centers and enhanced interrogation techniques in the first months following the al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., the United States also fell short of its ideals. These measures could perhaps have been justified in the frightening days following September 11, but it was apparent in a matter of months that such actions were no longer necessary. Rather than making a clean break with the past, the U.S. government simply discontinued the use of such measures as secretly as it had started them. This has mired Washington in a debate that continues to this day about whether such actions were necessary, thereby further tarnishing the United States’ reputation.

According to the careful and consistent surveys conducted by Freedom House, freedom, democracy, and human rights around the world have deteriorated over the past nine years.\(^{45}\) The retreat has been due primarily to dictatorships that observe the rituals of democracy—such as elections, the establishment of multiple media outlets, and formal judicial processes—but use their power to rig the results in their favor. However, any instances of diminishment in the perceived commitment to and performance of the United States in democracy and human rights undercut its moral authority, which has been an important component of U.S. influence.

As time passes since September 11, the chances of the United States strengthening the values-based tradition of its national security strategy increase. While some short-term compromises on specific issues will always be necessary, in the future there should be less reason for values to conflict with interests. Although another major attack on the United States could change this calculation, the country is much better protected from major terrorist attacks than it was before September 11, and the experience of the intervening years should help prevent a repetition of the mistakes that were made.

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**Overall Assessment of National Competence**

This litany of the shortcomings of U.S. national performance in recent years, both in general and in the area of national security, seems overwhelming. It might appear that the United States is in a downward spiral that can only lead to diminished national power and influence.

However, there are two important qualifications to the foregoing analysis. In the first place, national security competence is relative. Virtually all major countries suffer in varying degrees from many of the shortcomings observed in the United States and have their own inherent limitations. None of the United States’ allies or partners has developed a real national security strategy following the end of the Cold War. European NATO nations have grown inward-focused and have neglected both their armed forces and other regions of the world; Japan stagnated economically and in its security thinking for twenty years and is only beginning to break out of that period; major authoritarian countries suffer from erratic leadership, corruption, and wasted human capital. All things considered, U.S. national security performance is not markedly worse than the performance of other major powers, though it is also not markedly superior. In the second place, unlike the components of U.S. national power described in the first section of this chapter, which are enduring and difficult to change, the shortcomings in national performance can be addressed and improved relatively quickly.

One of the virtues of U.S. democracy has always been its resilience—its ability to learn from shortcomings, develop initiatives to fix problems, and improve its performance. To formulate an effective and sustainable national security strategy, to rebuild bipartisan political support for and public confidence in that strategy, and to act more in accordance with national values is the work of a few years and of a dedicated group of leaders both inside and outside the government. The human capital for such a positive change is readily available in the United States and needs only a catalyst. There are many distinguished and influential voices in the United States at all levels pointing out the same shortcomings described in this discussion of national performance and recommending general and specific steps to take to remedy them. It remains only for the number of these leaders and supportive citizens to achieve a critical mass and influence.

**National Security: The Military Dimension**

*Assessing U.S. Military Strength*

Despite recent budget reductions, U.S. military capabilities are overwhelming compared with those of any other country. The U.S. defense
budget equals in size the sum of the next seven countries. At 3.8% of GDP, the United States spends a relatively large proportion of its national income on defense every year. It has officer and senior enlisted leadership with the most recent and sustained combat experience of any major military force, while the U.S. nuclear force is equal by treaty to Russia’s and much larger than any other country’s. There is no doubt that in a major conflict the armed forces of the United States can defeat those of any other country in the world and will be able to do so for the foreseeable future.

Side-by-side comparisons, however, are largely irrelevant in assessing the adequacy of U.S. military forces. What matters is their ability to perform the missions they are currently assigned and will likely face in the future. The United States, with many treaty allies around the world that it is pledged to defend, is generally satisfied with the status quo. Its most important major military task is to deter cross-border aggression against its allies or other friendly countries, ranging from members of NATO to South Korea and Japan. This mission involves the maintenance of ready conventional force units strong enough, in combination with the armed forces of allies and treaty partners, to convince potential aggressors that a cross-border military attack would not succeed.

The other major U.S. military mission is to deal with violence within states, such as insurgencies and civil wars, when it causes wide-scale suffering or when adversary countries take advantage of instability to increase their power and influence. Examples run from Ukraine to Yemen. U.S. military support in these cases can be for a government defending its authority (e.g., in Iraq and Yemen) or insurgents challenging the government (e.g., in Syria). Such support generally takes the form of equipment, advisers, air strikes, and logistic support.

Finally, specialized military forces are required for operations in a small number of fragile states that are home to violent extremist Islamic organizations that threaten the United States and its friends and allies. Current examples include Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, Libya, and Syria.

In order to assess the adequacy of U.S. military forces, it is necessary to judge the amount and type of equipment and the skills and number of personnel against the likely range of missions (both in deterring military aggression against friends and allies and in dealing with intrastate violence.

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47 Of the fifteen largest military spenders, only Russia (an estimated 4.5%), Saudi Arabia (10.4%), and the United Arab Emirates (an estimated 5.1%) spend a higher percentage of their GDP on defense. Perlo-Freeman et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014,” 2.
with wider effects). Finally, it is important to assess the possibility of multiple simultaneous military contingencies and the strategy for addressing them.

**Regional Military Assessments**

In Latin America and most of Africa the primary missions of the U.S. armed forces are increasing the proficiency of friendly military forces and responding to natural disasters. The U.S. Department of Defense maintains regional command structures, and their prospective missions do not employ significant numbers of combat units. Internal conflicts and violent extremist Islamic groups in Africa potentially threaten U.S. interests—most notably the insurgencies of Boko Haram in western Africa and al Shabab in eastern Africa. However, it is unlikely that U.S. military support for government forces battling these groups would amount to significant conventional force units. More likely, the military component of assistance would be the provision of equipment and advisers to local government forces, along with U.S. Special Forces to conduct raids against the leaders of these groups. As mentioned earlier in this chapter in the discussion on strategy development, one of the strategic challenges in these countries is to develop long-term approaches to improving governance in fragile states where these groups operate. Direct U.S. operations are a short-term measure; over the longer term the United States and its allies and partners need to help countries develop economically and politically to minimize the attractiveness of radical groups and develop the security forces to handle them. For these longer-term goals, an integrated U.S. program of military, political, and economic actions is necessary. Yet as discussed earlier in this chapter, the effective implementation of such a program will require improved national security authorities and procedures.

In Europe, the major military mission is deterring Russia from further armed aggression in Eastern Europe. This mission falls primarily to ground and air forces and is shared by all the members of the NATO alliance. Among its members, NATO has combined ground, naval, and air forces far stronger than those of Russia. NATO also has refined doctrines, communications, and command structures for operating its forces together. The United States is the leader of NATO and is obliged to contribute combat units to the defense

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48 These regional and functional assessments are based on the author’s experience in government as a senior military officer and as director of national intelligence.

49 For more on such programs, see Dennis Blair, Ronald Neumann, and Eric Olsen, “Fixing Fragile States,” *National Interest*, September–October 2014.

of its European members, including by basing some of the units in Europe. A small number of air wings and army divisions should be adequate for fulfilling U.S. responsibilities in Europe, with reinforcements available from the United States in case of serious crisis or conflict.

The most challenging military missions for the United States lie in the Middle East and in the Far East. Events in the Middle East have been very difficult to anticipate in recent years. However, it is possible to describe the types and qualities of military forces that the United States needs to support its interests in that part of the world and to assess their overall adequacy.

The only conventional force combat operations that seem possible in the Middle East would be directed against Iran. The United States, even with a nuclear agreement with Iran, needs to maintain the capability to heavily degrade Iran’s nuclear capability through air and missile strikes. This means continued improvement of U.S. capabilities to penetrate medium-sized but advanced air defense systems and to destroy deeply buried nuclear facilities. The U.S. armed forces have been preparing for these missions and should be able to conduct them effectively indefinitely. The other potential conventional force combat operation against Iran is to protect the Strait of Hormuz against Iranian naval, air, and mining attacks. This operation would involve conventional air and naval forces to destroy Iranian ships, boats, and planes and their support bases within range of the strait. It would also require specialized minesweeping units involving ships and helicopters. The United States should have the support of many allies for this operation, and even of countries like China and India that depend on oil shipments through the strait. U.S. reinforcements may be required to provide assistance to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states with defenses against Iranian missile and air attacks. Although coalition partners would be needed to provide mine clearance forces to finish clearing operations in a timely fashion, projected U.S. air and naval forces are more than adequate to these missions.

More numerous and likely U.S. military force requirements in the Middle East involve intervention in insurgencies, civil wars, and attacking extremist Islamic groups that threaten U.S. interests. In Afghanistan, the United States will be required to maintain for an unknown period of time a task force to continue to train the Afghan National Army and to support it with intelligence, air strikes, other specialized combat support functions, and special forces to conduct raids to capture or kill leaders of violent extremist Islamic groups. A similar package of capabilities may be required in Iraq and possibly Yemen. In Syria and Libya, military force might be directed to support one of the contending factions in the ongoing civil wars in those countries. The mixture of forces required for this mission is similar to those for support of the governments of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen.
There are many other possibilities for instability and violence in the Middle East and Africa beyond those described here. However, the nature of the required forces would be similar. Note that there is no requirement discussed for the commitment of major conventional ground forces of the size sent to Iraq for the first and second Iraq wars, or even to Afghanistan in 2009–10 at the height of U.S. involvement. With the bad memories of Iraq and Afghanistan fresh, and, more important, without any country likely to take the aggressive actions that played a major role in the decision to invade these two countries, it seems far-fetched, if not out of the question, to project a requirement for major U.S. ground forces in the Middle East.\footnote{Thom Shanker, “Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan,” \textit{New York Times}, February 25, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/26gates.html?_r=0.}

Air and naval (including Marine Corps) air forces under any reasonable projection will be adequate for their missions in the Middle East. They will be expected to carry out direct-strike and ground-support missions that are in their regular line of training and skills. The adequacy of army and Marine Corps ground forces, however, is not as clear, even without the requirement for multi-division invasion and occupation forces. The Middle East could generate requirements for advisers well beyond the capability of Special Forces Command, currently the Department of Defense organization with the assignment to organize, train, and equip units for the adviser mission. It is conceivable that thousands of such specially trained and experienced personnel would be required in the Middle East and North Africa, well beyond the current supply in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps.

The Far East is the other area where the U.S. armed forces will need to maintain robust capabilities. There are three existing contingency requirements for U.S. military force in this region: the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Senkaku Islands. It is most likely that these requirements for deterrent forces will continue. For all three contingencies, the United States will need to maintain trained and ready forces strong enough to support the forces of the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to defeat North Korean or Chinese aggression and therefore deter it from occurring. In all three cases, the United States has the important advantage of advanced allies with capable armed forces that have an even greater stake than the United States in the successful deterrence and defeat of aggression.

In the event of a North Korean attack across the demilitarized zone, the Republic of Korea has adequate ground forces to stop an attack before it reaches Seoul. However, the United States would need to assist with intelligence collection, air strikes, air defense, and sea control in order to support effective ground operations and minimize damage to South Korea from air and missile strikes and unconventional attacks. U.S. ground forces
of corps size might also be required to support a counteroffensive into North Korea after the initial attack is contained. These forces could be the same type as those potentially required for serious confrontations with Russia in Europe.

In the Senkaku Islands, the United States is committed to support a Japanese-led maritime and air operation to repel a Chinese attack or recapture the islands if a surprise Chinese raid occupies them. This would not be a large-scale ground operation; however, the campaign for air and sea superiority over the Senkakus could be fierce because the islands are within close range both of Chinese air and naval bases and of Japanese air and naval bases from which Japanese and U.S. forces would operate. The maintenance of air and sea control is a core mission of the U.S. Navy and Air Force, a mission for which the services continually modernize their equipment and training. Japan is similarly committed to maintaining advanced capabilities, and the combination of Japanese and U.S. air and naval forces should be adequate for deterrence or victory in case of conflict.

For deterrence of a Chinese military attack on or coercion of Taiwan, the Taiwanese armed forces have the responsibility for early defense against a surprise assault. Taiwanese air and maritime forces have the capability to degrade a Chinese assault during its transit across the Taiwan Strait, but in a matter of a few weeks the numerically far superior Chinese air and naval forces would wear them down. To fulfill its obligations to assist Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States needs to maintain the air and maritime capacity for sea and air control around Taiwan. So long as it does so, Chinese forces cannot successfully invade and occupy the island.

The state of military technology offers two advantages to the Chinese armed forces that they have been pursuing steadily and will continue to develop: submarines and missiles. Both submarines and anti-ship missiles threaten the U.S. naval forces that reinforce Taiwan, and ground attack missiles can damage the bases in the Philippines, Guam, and Japan that support U.S. air and naval operations. The United States, Japan, and Taiwan are all developing counters to Chinese submarines and missiles, but the technology leverage is adverse: it is less expensive to build effective submarines and missiles than it is to build effective defenses against them. Although there are potential technological developments that could change this balance, for the immediate future, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States all need to make the investments to maintain and improve robust levels of antisubmarine and missile defenses.

In summary, the currently planned U.S. armed forces appear to have the capability to protect U.S. interests in all major regions of the world with a few additions: greater numbers of trainers and advisers in the army and the Marine Corps, greater joint theater air and missile defense in East Asia,
and greater antisubmarine capability in East Asia. If the defense budget is constrained in the future, as is likely, then increases in capability in part of the armed forces will require decreases elsewhere. The consequences of this reality will be explored below.

**Functional Military Assessments**

In addition to the regional contingencies described above, the U.S. armed forces face three sets of functional force requirements: nuclear modernization, cyberdefense, and space defense.

In the next twenty years virtually the entire current nuclear triad—land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and long-range bombers—will need to be replaced. There is a chance to avoid some replacement costs if the United States were to choose to field two different nuclear attack systems (a dyad) rather than the triad it currently operates. In either case, however, procurement of these very expensive and top-priority systems will leave much less of the defense acquisition budget available for acquiring new and replacement conventional weapons systems. Estimates of the total cost of renewing the triad range from $220 billion to $390 billion over the next 10 years and between $836 billion and $1,082 billion over 30 years in then-year dollars (see Figure 2).

In the cyber domain, current technology favors the network attacker over the defender. The United States will have a devastating capacity to attack the computer networks of an enemy. However, even an opponent like North Korea or Iran can pose a formidable threat to U.S. military networks. Both China and Russia devote large resources and skilled personnel to offensive cyberunits. Securing U.S. military networks will require an ongoing major investment by the Department of Defense in technology, highly qualified personnel, and continuous training and exercises. These expenditures will reduce the resources available to spend on other military requirements. The department estimates that it will spend around $5.5 billion on cyberprograms in each of the next five fiscal years. Level funding for cybersecurity will be inadequate to deal with the continually evolving and improving threat to the networks of the Department of Defense, and expenditures will undoubtedly increase.

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The technology for attacking satellites in orbit, their ground stations, and the networked systems that control them is becoming less expensive and more widespread. With the likely theaters of military operation all far from U.S. shores, the United States depends heavily on space-based intelligence and communications to support military operations. Survivability of satellite systems could be improved by design features, operational maneuvers, and other techniques. The United States will need to spend more resources in the future on its space systems to ensure that they can be effective against attacks.
from even medium-level threats. The additional $5 billion recently requested by the Department of Defense is a start but is hardly adequate.\(^5^4\)

In summary, more challenging functional military missions will require increased investment in nuclear force modernization as well as cyber and space defenses. These requirements increase the offsets that must be found elsewhere in a constrained defense budget.

**Overall Military Assessment: Strategic Choices by the United States and Its Allies**

Besides individual regional contingencies and technological threats, a key consideration in assessing whether U.S. military forces will be adequate to their likely missions is the simultaneity of operational requirements. Virtually all U.S. military forces are flexible and can be moved from one theater to another. Currently planned forces are quite capable of responding to one major threat while continuing to handle several minor threats at the same time. Force shortages could arise, however, in the case of two major simultaneous contingencies occurring along with the usual number of minor threats. For example, should the United States be involved in the aftermath of a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities that included Iranian attacks on U.S. facilities in the Middle East, missile launches against Israel, and a concerted Iranian mining, air, and naval campaign to close the Strait of Hormuz, Washington would be hard-pressed to respond quickly to a contingency in Taiwan. In that case, the United States would have to prioritize, concentrating forces against the more dangerous situation and fighting back later into the other theater. The United States has enormous capacity in the event of a serious crisis to mobilize its reserve and national guard forces, expand defense industrial production, and generate sufficient forces to win several major wars. However, this process takes time. In deciding on the overall level of its forces for the future, the U.S. government will make decisions on the amount of risk it is willing to run that there will be enough time between major contingencies either to shift forces around the world or to rely on its capacity to generate new forces.

The consequences of U.S. strategic defense budget choices will not be felt acutely in dealing with insurgencies, civil wars, and special operations against violent extremist Islamic organizations. These contingencies happen over prolonged periods of time, and there are numerous forms of assistance that the United States can offer that do not strain force structure.

The U.S. military budgets and force structures have traditionally been roughly balanced among the three major services, with the service shares remaining at approximately one-third each during both the Cold War and the post–Cold War periods. However, the logical approach for the future within constrained budgets would be to reduce and adapt army and Marine Corps ground force structures, while sustaining and adapting the navy and air force with new technology, especially in antisubmarine warfare and missile and space defense capabilities. Spending should be increased for nuclear modernization, cyberdefense, and space defense technology across all services.

However, it is probable that the overall U.S. defense budget will not grow; that increased expenditures for modernization of strategic nuclear forces, cyber defenses, and resiliency of space forces will be necessary; and that the army’s and the Marine Corps’ shares of the budget will remain roughly what they have been. In this case, navy and air force capabilities will be adequate to handle the air and maritime requirements of a single contingency—either heavy involvement in the Middle East or a major Taiwan or Korean Peninsula contingency—but not both if they are simultaneous or closely spaced. The United States will simply accept the risk of simultaneous major military contingencies.

For the allies on the front lines of aggression, however, the risk calculation looks different. They risk becoming a secondary theater in the event of simultaneous contingencies. It is possible that U.S. allies and partners would increase their own defense expenditures to compensate for any delay in U.S. deployments. However, a combination of continued Chinese military buildup, Russian truculence, North Korean provocations, and Iranian expansion of power and influence in the Middle East would raise the risk for U.S. allies to a very high level. In such a scenario, they could lose confidence in the capability of the United States to come to their assistance in the event of crisis or conflict and could choose to accommodate regional adversaries, severely reducing U.S. influence and power. It is impossible to determine the point at which this spiral would commence. However, continuation of the currently planned reductions in U.S. defense budgets would make it inevitable at some point.

Summing up this review of future U.S. military force requirements, it appears that requirements for air forces, both sea- and ground-based, will remain steady, but forces will need to be modernized. For example, remotely piloted vehicles will displace manned aircraft for some missions. With China’s continued building program, naval requirements will grow in both size and

required capability. The scale of ground force requirements—of both the army and Marine Corps—will diminish, but the nature of these forces will evolve. Requirements for training and advising deployments will increase. The army and to a lesser extent the Marine Corps need to retain a reserve and national guard structure that can be expanded and brought into active service in case of an unexpected major national threat or convergence of simultaneous threats. Modernizing the strategic nuclear deterrent and improving cyber and space defenses will place heavy demands on the air force budget in particular, and developing new technologies that promise greater effectiveness—from remotely piloted vehicles to new antisubmarine systems—will require additional budget resources. It is clear by any measure that the United States needs to halt the current downward trend in defense budgets and make difficult decisions that will change traditional service organizations and funding shares. The alternative will be a loss of U.S. influence and power as allies and partners fend for themselves in a dangerous and violent future security environment.

Conclusion

As it looks to the future, the United States has very strong and enduring advantages: it has a large, balanced, and dynamic economy; the country’s demographic profile is favorable; it possesses many natural resources (especially energy); and the dollar is the world’s reserve currency. Challenges to its economic future include a workforce that does not have adequate high-technology skills, economic infrastructure that needs upkeep and modernization, and continued energy insecurity. The United States has a well-established set of wealthy and advanced allies, and both these allies and other countries look to it for leadership on major international issues and global and regional crises. On the other hand, U.S. willingness to form and lead international coalitions has recently declined.

U.S. national performance has deteriorated in recent years. The United States’ inept financial leadership brought the recession of 2007–8 on itself and much of the rest of the world, and the government at the national level is gridlocked and postpones solving well-known major problems. The organization, authorities, and processes of the national security structure also need to be updated. The United States has very experienced and dedicated officials in its national security departments and agencies, and it has funded them well in recent years. However, Washington has not developed a coherent, sustained, and bipartisan national security strategy since the end of the Cold War, and its strategy for the Middle East has been especially inconsistent and unsuccessful. Since September 11, U.S. actions have fallen short of the
country’s ideals for democracy and human rights, diminishing its moral authority. None of these performance shortfalls is fatal, and all can be fixed with fresh leadership that draws on lessons of the last 25 years and takes corrective policies and actions.

The United States’ military forces are by far the most advanced and powerful in the world. In the future they will be challenged to meet potential major military requirements in both the Middle East and the Far East simultaneously, while modernizing weapons systems, strengthening cyber and space defenses, and funding strategic nuclear force modernization. To meet all these requirements while maintaining the traditional roughly equal balance among the service budgets will be difficult to achieve in view of other government fiscal pressures. National security budgets might increase quickly if there were bold and successful aggression by another major power against U.S. interests. However, at likely budget levels, and without national security disasters or dire threats, maintaining the military capability to support its strong influence and alliance structure in the Middle East and Far East will require the United States to change the traditionally proportional service shares of the defense budget and adjust the mixture of capabilities within the services.

Although this chapter has identified a series of shortcomings in U.S. performance in recent years and highlighted individual programs that need to be pursued, the challenge to the United States calls for more than simply a checklist of national improvements. Maintaining U.S. security in the future will require mustering a combination of leadership and popular support for a comprehensive and robust national security policy and capability based not on defeating a single hostile threatening country but on dealing with a set of diverse and dynamic enemies and competitors within a complex international security environment. Although China has the potential to be a dominant threat, important aspects of the Sino-U.S. relationship are cooperative and mutually beneficial. It is thus not good strategy to treat China as an enemy. Violent extremist Islamic groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS are actual enemies capable of horrific acts against Americans; however, they do not challenge U.S. power in the fundamental way that another nation can, and the policies and capabilities to defeat these groups are not sufficient to protect other U.S. interests. Global issues such as mitigating climate change, countering the spread of nuclear weapons, and suppressing international people and drug trafficking are important as well, but they do not amount to an ordering principle for U.S. national security strategy.

Most important for the United States is the development of a national security strategy based not simply on threats to its current position and interests but on a positive global vision for the future. Positive national
security goals will better inspire the American public and will also better attract support from other countries. A positive strategy provides reasons that threats must be confronted and that important national issues must be faced.

The United States has the potential to play the primary role in bringing about a world that is both safer and more aligned with its ideals and those of most other countries. To do so, Washington needs to develop a realistic and convincing view of that world and the challenges it presents, find a positive objective for the kind of world that the United States would prefer to inhabit, and set sustained policies and programs to achieve such goals. Once a national consensus is forged on these points, the country has plenty of resources to do the job.