



**A BALANCED FORCE STRUCTURE  
TO ACHIEVE A LIBERAL WORLD ORDER**

**by Mackubin Thomas Owens**

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**THE NEW SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**

The post-9/11 security environment is characterized by uncertainty and the need to be prepared to confront a wide range of adversaries across the spectrum of conflict. At one end of the spectrum is the potential threat to US security by the rise of China. Indeed, the similarities between the cases of Wilhelmine Germany and Great Britain at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and China and the United States today are compelling.

At the other end of the spectrum lies what some have called "fourth generation warfare" (4GW), in which our opponents rely on asymmetric, low-tech tactics and networks of people rather than networks of state-of-the-art weapon systems. [1]

The fact is that the United States today faces a defense dilemma similar to that confronting by the British at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: whether to focus its effort on defense of its empire, relying on the Royal Navy and colonial troops or to revamp its defenses to deal with the possibility that it might have to fight Germany's first-class army on the continent of Europe. Great Britain chose defense of its empire and paid a high price for this decision from 1914 to 1918 when the threat posed by Germany forced the British to make the "continental commitment." [2]

Unfortunately, the nature of the international system and the goals of the United States make it impossible to choose to confront one threat and not another.

**A STRATEGY OF PRIMACY**

The interests of the United States are straightforward and easy to identify: to keep the nation its and citizens safe, prosperous, and free. Both reason and experience teach that the best way to achieve these goals is to maintain a liberal world order, one characterized by economic liberalism and an expanding number of liberal democracies. It is this sort of global environment that would seem to offer the best hope of continued peace and prosperity.

No matter what presidents have declared the policy and strategy of the United States to be, US strategy in practice is best described as primacy, which is predicated on the idea that the key to future peace and prosperity is for the United States to maintain the power position it held at the end of the Cold War. [3] The twin objectives of primacy are to underwrite a liberal world order by providing security, while preventing the emergence of a potential new rival along the lines of the former Soviet Union. The basis of primacy is hegemonic stability theory. According to the theory of hegemonic stability, a decline in relative US power could create a more disorderly, less peaceful world.

A grand strategy of primacy through US global leadership does not require unilateral US action everywhere. Realistic primacy depends on the interaction of Churchill's "two As," arms and alliances. To employ a common analogy, the US is not so much the world's policeman as it is the world's sheriff who organizes the posse to maintain order: alliances, coalitions, and the various international institutions that create, at least in some parts of the world, an international society, the *sine qua non* of cooperative security. And it does not mean that all regions of the world are of equal importance to the United States: a strategy by definition implies priorities.

**PRIMACY AND THE LOGIC OF FORCE PLANNING**

A strategy of primacy requires a balanced force that can be employed across the spectrum of conflict and prevail under diverse circumstances against adversaries employing a variety of strategies, including conventional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive approaches. These forces must be able not only to prevail in war, but also reassure friends and allies and generally influence actors in those parts of the world of the greatest importance to the US, especially Eurasia.

These forces must be capable of operating jointly in all operational environments: land, sea, air, space, and across the electromagnetic spectrum, both now and in the future. Accordingly, while remaining of sufficient size and composition both to fight and win major theater wars and carry out constabulary operations in the present, this force structure must also be

flexible enough to exploit new technologies, doctrine, organization, and operational concepts in order to maintain military preeminence in the future.

A military force able to execute the necessary operational concepts and to overcome likely operational challenges must possess a number of capabilities including:

- \* the ability to operate from the global commons—international waters and airspace, space, and cyberspace
- \* the ability to dominate adversaries across the entire spectrum of conflict
- \* the ability to conduct information operations in all environments
- \* the ability to execute compressed operational cycles
- \* the ability to sustain forces but with a reduced logistics footprint
- \* strategic and tactical mobility
- \* the ability to penetrate enemy defenses with stealthy platforms
- \* the ability to strike targets and carry out operations at increased ranges
- \* an improved precision strike capability

A military force capable of carrying out the extensive demands of the strategy of primacy would possess a number of characteristics. Those forces should be joint and highly integrated, expeditionary, networked to ensure situational awareness in all environments, decentralized, flexible and adaptable, i.e. modular -- capable of "plug and fight," lethal, able to achieve decision superiority and full-spectrum dominance with reduced support infrastructure.

How much is enough? Having identified the force characteristics and the mix of necessary capabilities of a future transformed force, it is still necessary to determine force size. This leads to the second question. What size force is required to execute the war plans? Throughout the process the planner must constantly evaluate risk. Strategic military risk manifests itself as 1) operational risk (how well will is the existing force prepared to defeat adversaries—this includes force performance and force sustainability), force preparation risk (how well do planners anticipate future military requirements, and do they prepare for the future by transforming or hedging?), and affordability risk. [4]

#### **FUTURE FORCE STRUCTURE**

**Land Forces.** The US Army. Today the Army is currently too small for what it is asked to do and proposals for expansion do not go far enough. This is especially true as our adversaries shift to "irregular" threats, which tend to require a boots-on-the-ground solution. The current Army plan calls for an increase in brigade combat teams (BCTs) from 33 to 43. But in order to fully meet all of its requirements under the 1-4-2-1 force sizing construct, the number of the Army's needs 48 BCTs. The current plan for an Army National Guard force structure of 34 BCTs is acceptable, but these units should be focused primarily on homeland defense.

**The Marine Corps.** The future Marine Corps will probably be a hybrid force. One part of the new Corps will return to the job of providing "colonial infantry" focusing on irregular threats, operating in close cooperation with Special Operations Forces (SOF) to execute both direct action and foreign internal defense missions. Another part will continue to refine procedures for forcible entry from the sea.

**Maritime Forces.** The United States is unique among the states of the world in being able to project a full array of overwhelming and sustainable military power over vast distances. It can do this because the Navy dominates the world's great "commons," the sea. [5] As such US naval forces can, at the discretion of the appropriate policy makers, conduct amphibious operations and launch precision strikes against land targets employing air, cruise-missiles, and vertical launch missile assets.

The Navy of the future must be able to do three things:

- \* Provide sea-based power projection and regional deterrence. This task requires a large number of strike platforms and maneuver support platforms with multi-dimensional defense capabilities
- \* Assure access to contested or denied areas. This task requires standoff weapons, unmanned systems, and stealthy platforms capable of extended-range operations in a high-threat environment.
- \* Provide global presence in support of the GWOT. This task requires large numbers of cheap, lightly manned combatants, backed up by a global maritime surveillance network, capable of mounting a distributed close blockade of the GWOT theater littorals; cost-effective global patrol and maritime interdiction platforms; and persistent overt and covert strike, SOF, and light maneuver support platforms.

**Air Forces.** The United States should shift from reliance on short-range fighters that require in-theater bases for strike operations to a combination of stealthy bombers and carrier based assets. This will reduce the political risks associated with the use of airpower that plagued the United States during Operation Iraqi Freedom and increase the flexibility of the air instrument.

At present, the United States has 20 USAF air wing equivalents organized into 10 Air Expeditionary Forces (AEFs), 10 carrier air wing equivalents, and three Marine air wings. Bomber wings should be increased and USAF tactical fighter wing equivalents reduced to offset the bomber increase.

**Nuclear Forces.** Traditional nuclear deterrence can be achieved with a force of 10 Trident submarines with a capacity of 240 D5 missiles armed with 8 W88 warheads each. In addition, to deter rogue state and non-state actors, the United States should develop and deploy low-yield warheads capable of deep-earth penetration.

## **TRANSFORMATION: TECHNOLOGY, TRAINING, AND DOCTRINE**

There is no question that the United States relies heavily on material factors to implement the "American way of war." Technology is usually considered to be the most important of these material factors and the source of military transformation.

The problem with what might be called technocentric thinking -- the belief that an edge in technology itself is enough -- is that it can lead to a dangerous de-emphasis of other factors critical to success in war, especially force structure, doctrine, and training.

The radical restructuring of US force structure from a balanced force of air, land, naval, and space capabilities to one that relies primarily on long-range air- or ship-delivered precision strike would be very risky. Such an unbalanced force structure might work fine against an opponent that has not mastered the modern system of force employment but against one that has, it would be at a severe disadvantage. Accordingly, the United States also must guard against over-reliance on technology at the expense of those factors that enhance soldierly excellence, such as high recruiting standards, quality training, and operational readiness, can ultimately reduce future US military capability relative to our adversaries, both actual and potential.

## **ALLIANCES**

The central requirement generated by a strategy of primacy is to be able to shape the security environment in order to defeat the terrorist strategy of Islamic extremist, sustain a stable, liberal international order and prevent the emergence of a hostile global competitor. The main constraint faced by the United States in meeting this requirement is geography. Since most threats to international order have arisen on the Eurasian land mass, the US must be able to influence actors there. To do so requires dealing with the "tyranny of distance." Therefore a cornerstone of primacy is to maintain bilateral and multilateral relations with allies and friends on the littorals of Eurasia.

To reassure friends and allies and deter/defeat adversaries, especially on the Eurasian landmass, the US must maintain the capability to project power over substantial distances. Sometimes it will be sufficient to project power by means of long-range precision strike. On other occasions it will be necessary to actually employ land forces, relying on sea basing or a system of small, expeditionary bases. To be assured of achieving our national interests, it is necessary for the United States to be a de facto Eurasian land power. But to be a Eurasian land power, the US must also, as noted before, be a global sea, air, and space power.

Constabulary operations or "imperial policing" are essential to shaping the security environment, drawing allies into a cooperative security system, and defeating irregular threats. On the other hand, if the United States is to deter war, it must possess a credible war-fighting capability, and it certainly requires such a capability if deterrence fails.

## **CONCLUSION**

Strategic requirements have evolved considerably since 9/11, requiring us to reevaluate the interrelationship among ends, means, and the security environment. Potential mismatches between ends and means create risks. If the risks resulting from an ends-means mismatch cannot be managed, we must reevaluate and scale back the ends, increase the means, or otherwise adjust our strategy.

A strategy of primacy is militarily demanding. The United States must be able to lead coalitions to defeat terrorists, restore order to unstable regions, support international law, and enforce peace in regions of vital interest to the United States, and deter aggression and win if deterrence fails. Primacy requires flexibility and a force structure able to respond to contingencies across the entire spectrum of conflict.

This strategy will require a higher level of defense spending than in the recent past. This remains a bargain. After all, US military forces essentially provide an international "public good" by underwriting the security upon which global stability, interdependence, and ultimately prosperity depend. If the US forces that provide this public good are stretched thin because they are under-funded, the result may be a decline in stability and prosperity. World War I illustrates how rapidly an interdependent world order can collapse if the rise of aggressive powers are not checked.

## **NOTES**

[1] Thomas Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Zenith Press, 2004).

[2] Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Temple Smith, 1972).

[3] Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Winter 1996/97.

[4] See Richard F. Mackenzie, Jr., "Assessing Risk: Enabling Sound Defense Decisions," Chapter Seven of Flournoy, ed., *Op. cit.*

[5] See for instance, Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Summer, 2003.

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