

## Editor's Corner

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by Mackubin T. Owens

### *In These Pages*

In the winter issue of *Orbis*, Kori Schake observed that the national debt is the most serious security problem facing the United States and suggested a number of steps for reducing defense spending. A cluster of articles for this issue of *Orbis* continues the discussion, featuring two pieces that suggest concrete steps to cope with the reductions in the defense budget that have already begun to emerge.

David W. Barno, Nora Bensahel, and Travis Sharp of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) outline a strategy and force structure for shifting the focus of the United States to Asia, an approach that is similar to what the president proposed earlier this year. Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan of the Cato Institute make the provocative argument that current U.S. military policy will most likely remain extravagant because it is sustainable, that the current strategy—which amounts to trying to run the world with the American military—is what the U.S. government has chosen because it is possible, not because it is the wisest course.

Audrey Kurth Cronin examines America's counterterrorism approach since 9/11 in the context of a U.S. grand strategy. Joshua Rovner challenges the current dominant narrative regarding counterinsurgency doctrine (COIN). Robert Killbrew, David Glaser, and Matthew Irvine discuss the relationship between transnational crime and U.S. security. Stephen Blank contends that Russia's internal problems have reduced its influence in East Asia.

Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba discusses the role of demographic trends in fostering instability in developing countries. Adrian Basora compares and contrasts the "Arab Spring" movements with the post-Communist transitions. Kenneth Moss examines the impact of the differences between the United States and Europe concerning the decision to use military force. David Karl explores the past and future of U.S.-India relations.

This spring issue concludes with Arthur Cyr's review essay on books by John Mearsheimer and Hans Morgenthau.

*Impromptus and Asides:  
Dangerous Waters: The New Strategy  
and Defense Budget Cuts*

The president has now outlined a strategy to guide the substantial cuts to the defense budget that will occur over the next decade. The strategy is driven in part by the requirement to reduce defense spending by at least \$450 billion over the next decade under the best of circumstances and by twice that if the automatic spending reduction triggered by the failure of the deficit reduction “super committee” to reach an agreement late last year, actually goes into effect.

The new strategy envisions a regional focus on the Asia-Pacific and a shift from a two-war capability to a “win-spoil” plan that maintains the capability to fight and win one regional war while spoiling the military aspirations of another adversary in a different theater. In terms of force structure, the strategy reduces ground forces while maintaining air and naval assets in order to optimize operations in Asia-Pacific, primarily a maritime theater.

Critics argue that the cuts that drive the new strategy undermine the ability of the United States to defend itself. That’s not altogether true. The cuts are necessary for economic reasons and sufficient resources for defense remain. The danger is that the new strategy that the administration has adopted to guide the cuts may head the United States down a dangerous path it has traversed before, to the detriment of American security: a primary reliance on a single military

capability or a focus on a single region.

The administration’s focus on Asia-Pacific and the proposal to reduce ground forces in favor of air and naval forces are both manifestations of what the late Samuel Huntington called “strategic monism,” the domination of defense policy by a single strategic concept. Strategic monism presupposes an ability to predict and control the actions of possible enemies, discounting the common sense view that the world is dynamic and characterized by uncertainty. Instead it seeks to impose a single vision on the U.S. defense establishment. If this vision is correct, things will be fine. If not, disaster may await American arms in the future.

There is an old saying that “any war plan that depends on the cooperation of the enemy is likely to fail.” This is the fatal flaw of strategic monism. Strategic monists fail to recognize that enemies respond to our actions in asymmetric, unpredictable ways. Unfortunately, the record reveals that defense planners have not been particularly successful in predicting the future. Indeed, the United States has suffered a significant strategic surprise once a decade since 1940.

The risks of strategic monism are illustrated by the strategy pursued by the Eisenhower administration of the 1950s. The centerpiece of the “New Look” was long-range strategic air power. This focus on strategic bombing to the exclusion of other capabilities resulted in strategic inflexibility: The United States largely

lacked the ability to respond to threats at the lower end of the spectrum of conflict. Our adversaries responded by moving away from nuclear and conventional confrontation toward insurgencies and “peoples’ wars.”

The New Look demonstrated that although a dominant capability may be critical to deterrence and war fighting, it often lacks nuance. Thus, the threatened use of a dominant capability in situations involving something less than a vital interest lacks credibility. It is therefore not always politically useful. This deficiency led to the replacement of the New Look by the strategy of Flexible Response in the 1960s.

Ironically, after the Gulf War of 1991, some defense analysts resurrected the idea that a nearly exclusive reliance on air power could solve the defense dilemmas faced by the United States. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan disabused us of this notion.

Strategic monism stands in contrast to “strategic pluralism,” which calls for a wide variety of military forces and weapons to meet a diversity of potential threats. Given the geopolitical position of the United States requiring that it plan to respond to threats around the globe, strategic pluralism seems more appropriate to American strategic culture than the one put forward by the Obama administration.

Strategic pluralism presupposes an uncertain security environment. Despite our desires, there is much in this world that we do not and cannot know in advance. As noted above, threats to our interests are not necessarily predictable. For instance, an assumption underlying the reduction of ground troops is the expectation that the United States will not be undertaking expensive, troop-intensive counterinsurgency campaigns, such as those waged in Afghanistan and Iraq. Force planners made a similar assumption after Vietnam. The assumption was wrong then and most likely is wrong now.

Strategic pluralism hedges against uncertainty by generating responses across the entire spectrum of conflict, building on the existing capabilities of a variety of forces—air, space, naval, land, and cyber—to create a flexible and adaptable response to challenges to U.S. interest that may arise across the globe.

At the same time, retaining multiple capabilities complicates planning by potential adversaries. The smaller the number of options a force structure can generate, the easier it is for an enemy to develop a low cost counter. That is what our enemies have done in the past and it is what they will do in the future, especially if we make it easy for them by adopting the tenets of strategic monism.

