

The case for spending on defense

By Gary Schmitt

Since the Cold War's end, domestic affairs have dominated America's political agenda and not enough attention has been paid to America's defenses. However, as the latest crisis with Iraq reminds us, the policy options available to U.S. decision makers in such instances are very much circumscribed by the state of the American military.

What shape U.S. armed forces are in today and what shape we expect them to be in the future inevitably dictate how assertive or passive we are in protecting American interests and principles abroad. The fact that 1998 will mark the 13th straight year authorized spending for defense in this country will have gone down (in real, inflation-adjusted dollars) suggests we are headed into an era in which U.S. security decisions will be increasingly made under the shadow of a declining military capability.

The existence of this looming defense straightjacket and its implications for American grand strategy have begun to reveal themselves in a variety of ways — a shortage of men, weapons, lift and training — but no more so than in the publication over the past year of two major, congressionally mandated reviews of U.S. defense plans and requirements.

Last May, the Pentagon issued its Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a review of U.S. defense strategy through the year 2005. Then, in December, the National Defense Panel (NDP) published its report ("Transforming Defense") on the U.S.'s long-term (2010 and beyond) defense plans.

The focus of the QDR was shorter than that of the NDP and was done by the existing Pentagon bureaucracy. To hardly anyone's surprise, the QDR largely defended the current size and structure of U.S. forces. The NDP report, on the other hand, was authored by military defense experts from outside the Pentagon and its charge was to think through the military's requirements a generation ahead. Again, to nobodys surprise, the NDP chal-

lenged current military plans — in particular, the Defense Department's assumption that it needs forces large enough to handle two major regional conflicts at the same time — and pushed instead for the Pentagon to take advantage of emerging technologies and the changing nature of warfare to revolutionize the U.S. military.

Broadly put, the QDR emphasized today's missions over the needs of the future, while the NDP stressed tomorrow's requirements over current concerns. Of course, both documents take care not to put matters so starkly. The QDR readily admits the potential benefits in the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs and the NDP takes note of current threats and the value of a strong U.S. military in promoting regional and global security. But as critics of both reports point out, the QDR talks about the need to transform the U.S. military in the future but falls short on how it might be done, while the NDP's concern with how it might be done leads it to give short shrift to the issue of whether, today, the U.S. military can safely handle its global commitments and possible conflicts in the Middle East and Korea.

After reading each report, one is left with the view that the country faces an either/or proposition. Either we take care of today's military requirements at the expense of tomorrow's, or we prepare for the future by downplaying current responsibilities and concerns. This shouldn't be the case. The QDR makes a strategically compelling argument that the U.S. has a remarkable opportunity at hand. Preeminent militarily and economically, the country has the ability not only to preserve the current security environment — in which we have no peer rival, ideologically or materially — but also to extend this situation well into the future if we keep ourselves globally engaged and our military capability robust. For its part, the NDP makes the case that we are entering into a period in which the military's requirements — stealth, sensors, robotics, information systems, and

weapons are fought in profound ways. If the U.S. doesn't maintain its lead in this revolution, it runs the risk of a catastrophic defeat by an ostensibly less powerful but more adroit adversary in the future. History is full with examples of powers brought low because they ignored or misapplied advances in military affairs.

But if the core arguments of both the NDP and the QDR are right, why is the Pentagon being asked to choose between them? The answer is that the amount we are spending on defense is too little to support both visions. By 2002, the U.S. will be spending approximately 2.7 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense, a burden far below any Cold War year. Even during the Carter presidency — the low point for Cold War Pentagon budgets — the defense burden was at least 40 percent greater. For most of the Cold War, the U.S. spent somewhere between 6 percent and 9 percent of GDP on defense.

The claim is that we cannot afford to spend more. But this judgment is political and not economic. The 1950s were marked by balanced budgets and huge defense expenditures. Ultimately, the reason defense spending has continued to decline since the mid-1980s is not because the Cold War ended. Rather, defense has been squeezed by the persistent rise in federal spending for entitlement and domestic programs. Over the past decade, and in spite of concerns about the federal debt, non-defense domestic discretionary spending has risen 24 percent above the rate of inflation. And it continues to go up even under the balanced budget agreement reached this summer. The only thing that doesn't go up, it seems, is defense.

The implicit point of both the QDR and the NDP is that the country has to make a choice between being militarily ready today or prepared tomorrow, and that we have to gamble that the choice of one will not produce a strategic disaster when it comes to the other. Sometimes, nations are forced to make such choices. Britain, for example,

between the end of World War I and the start of World War II, could not afford both to maintain its imperial forces and fully modernize its army and navy. That is not our situation. The U.S. economy is strong and we can afford to spend more. If defense spending was boosted to 3.3 percent to 3.5 percent of GDP — a level modest by modern standards — and held there for the next decade, there would sufficient funds to keep the U.S. militarily preeminent today, tomorrow and well into the future.

Over the next year, the U.S. will face a number of important foreign policy issues: Iraq, Bosnia, modification of the ABM Treaty, NATO expansion, instability on the Korean peninsula, among other things. Reversing the decline in defense spending would perhaps be the single most important step Congress and the executive branch could take to ensure that the policy decisions which result are based on what our interests and principles call for, and not merely on what we can supposedly "afford" to do.

Gary Schmitt is executive director of the Project for the New American Century.

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