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The State of American Power and Defense Challenges for a New Era

Despite claims of America's relative decline, it still has no peer in terms of power and influence. According to Janine Davidson, this gives the country a unique opportunity to lead the kind of creative global efforts that will be needed to meet future transnational threats.

By Janine Davidson for ISN

In 2009 a newly elected President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for what the committee described as his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples." In his acceptance speech, Obama openly acknowledged the apparent irony of being among the ranks of the world's greatest peacemakers, given that he was a "Commander in Chief of a nation in the midst of two wars." Three years later, a newly elected President Obama can take credit for having charted a course to end these two wars; and, having done so, he has opened a window of opportunity to focus on the more peaceful, cooperative future the Nobel Committee no doubt had in mind.

National security for the United States is intimately intertwined with global security. As its troops come home from Afghanistan, the US can neither garrison itself physically to keep its citizens safe, nor cordon itself off from the rest of the world economically, culturally, and diplomatically if it wants to continue to thrive. In this respect, the United States is like any other globally connected society. But with respect to "state power," it would be naïve not to recognize the United States' unique position on the global stage and the opportunities for leadership and security it presents.

The state of US power

Despite dire claims of America's relative decline, no other nation compares to the power and influence of the US, militarily, economically, or from a "soft power" perspective. The American economy is still by far the largest and most developed in the world. It represents nearly a quarter of global GDP, compared with less than 10% for China and approximately 18% for the nations of the Euro zone combined, and it has sustained a positive growth rate for 60 years. The US military is the largest and most capable in world, battle-hardened and with a demonstrated ability to adapt and innovate to meet a complex array of challenges. And US "soft power," as reflected in American influence across the cultural landscape and in US leadership of major public and private institutions and regimes, reflects the sustained attractiveness of America's ideals of freedom, human rights, and democracy. This full package of American power presents an opportunity — indeed a responsibility —

to provide leadership in an increasingly complex and evolving world.

Militarily, the United States will strive to maintain readiness and competence in its armed forces across the so-called "spectrum of conflict" while also cutting budgets as part of the overall US economic recovery. Such downsizing is a familiar story for the American military, which traditionally grows during times of war and contracts when the fighting stops. This was true after the American Civil War, the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, and it will happen again. Following redeployment from Afghanistan, the Pentagon plans to downsize its ground forces to a number slightly larger than before the wars began, which reflects little degradation in fighting strength.

The greater challenge will have less to do with the size of its military than with focus. With the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, there will be a tendency among some American military leaders to forget all the hard-learned lessons from the past ten years. Militaries loathe these messy, protracted types of conflicts and have repeatedly throughout history tried in vain to avoid them by simply not preparing to conduct them. But the fact is that militaries do not get to choose the nature of the conflicts they are sent to fight or the environments in which these conflicts occur. Failing to prepare for missions everyone would prefer to avoid is a recipe for failure. Military leaders must note the continuing and emerging trends that are likely to drive violent conflict in future along with the changing nature of warfare in general and organize, train, and equip their institutions accordingly. Simultaneously, the military must support diplomatic efforts to prevent violent conflict by engaging globally with other militaries and positioning the right types of forces in the right places to deter threats and respond to crises.

Security challenges

The security threats facing America and the world in the coming decades will be less about traditional peer state rivalry and the threat of major state-on-state conventional warfare than about terrorism, transnational crime, proliferation of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, cyber-attacks, piracy, freedom of navigation disputes, and the ever-present likelihood of intra-state violent conflict, humanitarian crises, and mass atrocities. The following trends define the most likely and pressing challenges the US and the world will confront in the coming years:

Continued volatility in the Middle East and North Africa. The most volatile region of the world in the short- and medium- term will continue to be the Middle East and North Africa. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons continues to pose a grave threat to the region. Although it should remain an option of last resort, the US military will need to sustain its ability to respond militarily, should all other options fail. Meanwhile, the crises in Egypt, Libya and Syria are likely to continue and potentially spill over to other countries in the region with similar socio-political dynamics. The various international responses to these crises reveal how difficult it is for the international community to intervene in full support of an unorganized opposition, whose long-term political complexion, much less its overall coherence and competence, is in question. Still, given the threat of humanitarian crises and the potential for use or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in these conflagrations, the United States will continue to find itself, along with its allies, engaged in such crises. Its military will need to remain postured in the region, and in Europe, and capable of engaging — along with allies — when required.

Criminal networks and non-state actors. Pirates, terrorists, insurgents, traffickers and cyber-criminals will continue to disrupt global stability in the coming decades. These "bad actors" do not accidentally operate in the gray area between what we traditionally consider "crime" and "war;" indeed, they know exactly where the legal, institutional, and cultural gaps are, and they actively exploit them. Pirates off the Horn of Africa, for instance, understand that they are neither likely to be targeted by navies as combatants, nor tried in any particular court as criminals. As the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, Admiral Stavridis, explains, piracy now reflects a

"ten-billion-dollar-a-year discontinuity in the global transport system." Taffickers in drugs, humans, and weapons likewise have become more sophisticated in their logistics and tactics. As they have become more well-armed than the police, but still are categorized as "criminals" and thus off limits to direct military engagement in many places, they are increasingly able to operate with near impunity in this crime-war gap. Meanwhile, transnational terrorists, along with cyber-criminals, are able to leverage legal structures and licit networks to facilitate their illicit activities.

Tackling this gap between crime and war at the local, national, and international levels will require new ways of thinking about law enforcement and military tasks and about how our international institutions can adapt to this threat. President Obama's targeted drone program against al-Qaeda reflects one approach to addressing this conundrum, but it has not come without cost. Critics ask what ethical and legal precedents are being set and whether strategically it will prove to have been effective anyway. Addressing the transnational terrorist threat will continue to challenge the United States, who must find the right balance between keeping its citizens safe and staying true to its own values.

Uneven investment in defense among partners and allies. Militarily preparing for, preventing, and responding to these various security threats require well-coordinated multilateral efforts. While the US will maintain the option to respond unilaterally if absolutely necessary, it will continue to resist conducting such missions on its own. Although Asian allies and partners are increasing their levels of investment and making modest gains in multilateral cooperation and interoperability, they are still a long way from operating on an even level with the United States. The enhanced military partnership with Australia that will see up to 2500 marines rotating through Darwin to train with their counterparts and hopefully with other countries in the region is designed to enhance bilateral, and ultimately multilateral, interoperability in amphibious operations, humanitarian relief and disaster response. This move reflects the vision of a more cooperative region capable of maintaining its own stability; but it requires investment and commitment from allies and partners in the region, not just rotational American military presence.

Meanwhile, decreasing military investment by many of America's other core allies, especially those in NATO, is troubling. The US still values NATO as the premier fighting alliance and it will continue to urge its fellow members to "keep up." Given the economic constraints European countries are facing, they may need to consider game-changing arrangements to develop shared capabilities in order to ensure their collective security. The United States can provide higher end capabilities and integrating functions as its core contribution, but it needs the other members to sustain investments that will ensure interoperability for capabilities such as command, control, and communications systems, cyber, intelligence fusion and out-of-area missions.

Power shifts and competition in Asia. Looking to the longer term, the United States seeks to re-affirm its commitment to the Asia-Pacific. The rise of China has generated angst among countries in the region and increased concern about the potential for conflict. Disputes over territories in the South and East China Seas threaten to escalate, and North Korean provocations continue to raise the stakes. Meanwhile, the region, which has enjoyed over 70 years of peace, underwritten largely by America's robust military presence there, has grown exponentially in economic strength and global influence. President Obama's "rebalance" strategy recognizes the growing economic importance of the region and the myriad ways in which US prosperity is intertwined with Asian, and especially Chinese, prosperity. The rebalance, which is as much about economic and diplomatic engagement as it is about military posturing, thus re-affirms the US commitment to peace and security in the region and underscores that stability is a prerequisite to economic prosperity.

Militarily, the challenge for the United States is to implement the Asia rebalance without appearing

provocative to China. The goals of the US rebalance are to enhance regional security by strengthening bilateral ties across the region and, importantly, promoting multilateral military cooperation on shared regional challenges. This is the right approach for a region that sees one third of the world's maritime trade traffic but that lacks practiced multilateral processes and structures to respond cooperatively to threats such as piracy, trafficking, or natural disasters due to climate change. Accordingly, the US multilateral maritime engagement will be focused on assisting countries in the region in managing such threats on their own; while its military presence would also be designed to respond to various freedom of navigation threats, especially in key choke points, such as the Straits of Malacca. Instead of seeing itself as the focus of these efforts, China can and should be a positive participant in developing and maintaining rule-based regimes for these challenges. Meanwhile, for American allies in the region, such as Japan or the Philippines, who have territorial disputes with China, enhanced US support can be a double-edged sword, as it could accidentally embolden these nations to be more assertive. Thus, US presence and policy will need to strike a delicate balance between assurance and provocation to avoid the very types of conflict the rebalance seeks to prevent.

American leadership for future security

The majority of the challenges discussed above are beyond the scope of any one nation, much less any one leader, to solve on their own. Thus, keeping America safe in the future security environment will require non-traditional and multilateral approaches, both military and non-military. Given America's continued dominant position in the world, the country has a unique opportunity to lead such efforts by catalyzing new multilateral action on specific challenges as well as through traditional international institutions. Such cooperative multilateralism is not just about sharing the burden of global security in tough economic times; it is about the recognition that transnational threats to national security require creative global action.

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