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Fiscal Reality and the American Way of War

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What is the strategic meaning of America's military drawdown? In this article, Macgregor explains the rationale for a reduced footprint overseas and the resulting demand for "high lethality/low density forces" in American military power.

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How and when America's ongoing budgetary crisis will be resolved after Americans elect a President in November 2012 is a mystery, but trillion-dollar deficits stretch as far as the eye can see and the Federal Debt is now 100% of U.S. gross domestic product.[i] When interest rates on the U.S. Treasury's securities rise – and they will – the U.S. Government's cost of servicing the nation's ballooning debt will soar,[ii] confronting Americans with a new, more profound fiscal crisis: in Senator Tom Coburn's words, "the specter of default." [iii] Mitt Romney's grandiose plans for a 450-ship navy, along with Rick Santorum's determination to wage war on Iran (or anyone else for that matter) will vanish like smoke in the wind after January 2013 when the next financial crisis strikes. [iv] America's domestic social and economic problems will become so severe that the world will have to tend to itself for a decade while Americans sort themselves out. Regarding "ends, ways, and means", what does all of this tell us about US fiscal realities and the American way of war?

Frankly, the U.S. will be fortunate to maintain a defense budget of 250 to 300 billion dollars. Economic power is the foundation for American military power and it must be restored. Withdrawal from most of the United States' overseas garrisons is inevitable, resulting in a reduced overseas footprint, and laser-like focus on rebuilding prosperity at home. This is not a new response to changed strategic conditions. In the aftermath of World War II, George Kennan's strategic concept of containment took these realities into consideration too. But it would be a mistake to assume a carefully crafted national military strategy is at work inside the White House, the Pentagon or Congress.

In lean times, like all of the English-speaking powers, the United States is of necessity a global maritime and aerospace

power, but not necessarily a global land power. American control of the oceans and the air gives the United States the opportunity to wage war on its own terms, at places and under conditions of its own choosing. When there is no existential military threat and fiscal crises constrain defense spending, Americans – along with their British, Australian and Canadian allies – have the luxury of refusing battle and sailing home.

As seen in the recent budget announcements, this truth is reasserting itself in American national security policy, with a vengeance and for good reason. Americans have neither the money nor the appetite for future nation building occupations in hostile, backward societies. Counterinsurgency (COIN) demands too much money, time, and manpower, and the probability of an outcome that favors U.S. policy is low. Economy of Force (damage control) is the principle that must shape future U.S. military engagement in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and Latin America. In strategy, always measure what you might gain by what you might lose. Again, this is a traditional British strategy that Americans will increasingly embrace.

For anyone in American military uniform to suggest Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen or Marines should treat the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as a rich source of lessons for future war is tantamount to insisting the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign or the 1920 Sunday shooting of Irish civilians by British Soldiers at Croke Park in Dublin were successes. In the end, a lot of money was spent, a lot of innocent people were killed, but the British withdrew ignominiously from Gallipoli and Ireland, just as we withdrew from Iraq (Iran's new ally) and just as we will eventually withdraw from Afghanistan.

In addition, warfare changed significantly in the twenty years that separate the first Gulf War from today. ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and strike capabilities (kinetic and non-kinetic, largely provided by American air and naval forces) now decisively influence not only tactical maneuver on land, but also the operational and strategic conduct of operations. These conditions give rise to *dispersed, mobile warfare* – a condition that creates the demand for what I call "high lethality/low density forces" in the conduct of future U.S. military operations. Both the Navy and the Air Force are striving to meet the demand for high lethality/low density forces. The point is that future formations on the ground must

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mobilize combat power disproportionate to their numbers. This means organizing and equipping differently, as well as integrating with strike, ISR and sustainment capabilities across service lines. The result should be formations capable of withstanding punishment and continuing to fight. This recognition places a premium on mobile armored firepower and unmanned systems in ground combat formations. Martin van Creveld's well-known argument for self-contained combat formations is spot on.

For the Army and Marines, however, reorganizing the warfighting structure to exploit new capabilities is tantamount to major surgery. But organizational change in how these forces fight on land is unavoidable if the Army and Marines are to provide high lethality/low density forces on future battlefields far more destructive and dangerous than anything seen since 1991.

Amphibious warfare (AW) is supposed to be all about "gaining access" with force.[v] sending U.S. Marines ashore from the sea, no matter how robust the opponent's defenses. But today any enemy that attempts to defend a beach will be targeted and destroyed from the air. The more likely conflict scenario involves area denial operations that capitalize on sea mines and unmanned systems, plus submersible, aerial and surface assets, to protect critical approaches from the sea, while dispersed enemy forces (non-state or state actors) defend inland with mobile armored firepower, ready to attack and destroy any light Marine forces that managed to come ashore. Yet, the Marine Corps remains focused on the conduct of amphibious operations with light infantry against defended beaches.[vi] Moreover, Amphibious Warfare is prohibitively expensive and increasingly too dangerous to execute against a capable opponent. In any region of importance to the U.S. and its allies, the home team always enjoys an enormous advantage of range and proximity. An amphibious force operating anywhere from the Strait of Malacca to the Caribbean would have to launch thousands of pre-emptive strikes against the opposing force's coastal bases before beginning amphibious operations.

For an Army that is culturally predisposed towards detailed planning, over-control and aversion to risk, the prospects for intelligent change in force design and operations are even dimmer.[vii] Suggestions that 21st Century warfare is somehow different because the *global war on terror* (GWOT) produced only 51,600 American military casualties (6,200 dead and 45,400 wounded) have gained far too much traction inside the Army.[viii] Such notions are foolish and dangerous. The quality of the opposing force makes a huge difference.

At the battle of Omdurman in 1898, an Anglo-Egyptian Army of 15,000 equipped with machine guns and artillery handily destroyed a horde of 50,000 Sudanese tribesmen and lost fewer than a dozen Soldiers. Sixteen years later between 23 August and 5 September 1914 the 150,000-man British Expeditionary Force sustained 10,000 casualties in seven days as it retreated 250 miles from Mons, Belgium to the Marne River in France.

In roughly two and a half months of fighting for control of Sadr City, an area of Baghdad spanning 35 square kilometers, or roughly half the size of Manhattan in New York City, Army

forces killed at least 700 Shiite militiamen while losing only six Soldiers.[ix] Does anyone seriously think the lightly armed Shiite Militias of Sadr City are any more indicative of what lies ahead for Soldiers and Marines than the Sudanese Tribesmen were for the British Army in 1898?

Of course they are not. It's time to sober up from years of *Kool-Aid* consumption at the poisoned well of nation building and counterinsurgency. Since 1991, we've engaged weak Muslim insurgents armed with rifles, RPGs and mines, but we have not fought a single opponent with an army, an air force, air defenses or even coastal naval forces.

Today, if Army and Marine forces were hit and hit hard, if American Soldiers and Marines faced an air defense threat that knocked out a few aircraft, manned or unmanned, or a mobile ground force that could launch determined attacks of their own, the collective psyche of the Army and Marines would be shocked, and its predominantly infantry forces paralyzed.

Nation states with growing scientific-industrial power such as China, Japan, India, Korea, Russia, Brazil, Iran, Turkey, and, even Venezuela are all building armed forces with technology that is often as potent as our own.[x] To be effective none of these forces has to match American military capabilities on a one for one basis. A little lethality in the right hands goes a long way. From 6 June to 7 December 1944, U.S. Army ground forces in France and Belgium sustained 90,000 battlefield casualties per month or 3,000 casualties a day against perhaps 25% of the German Army; a force that fought in Western Europe without any tactical air support.[xi]

In a world where the old alliances and the international institutions that supported them are crumbling in front of us, we cannot know with certainty today who will test American resolve to defend its security interests in five or ten years. Yesterday's partner could be tomorrow's opponent and yesterday's opponent could be tomorrow's ally.

The increasingly likely removal of Syria's dictator Bashar al Assad from office will eventually bring to power a Sunni Muslim Islamist government in Damascus, similar in character to the Islamist regime gaining strength in Cairo, Egypt. Many in the West will celebrate Assad's removal as a strategic setback to Iran's domination of the region from South Lebanon on the Mediterranean to Iraq on the Persian Gulf. But its long-term meaning is more ominous. The Islamist Spring will evolve between now and 2020 into an Islamist Winter of discontent with ominous consequences for the West and Israel. Discontent at the inability of the region's new Islamist regimes to deliver on a range of social, economic and political issues will focus Sunni Islamist frustration and anger on external foes, particularly in Europe where the presence of tens of millions of unwanted and, increasingly, unemployed Muslims create an explosive situation. For the United States that is turning inward, these developing conditions will create a serious dilemma.

In the next ten years, these Sunni Muslim Arab states may well form an alliance led by Islamist Turkey and supported by Saudi Arabia, not Iran, an alliance hostile to the West and one that will present Israel with the dilemma of a two front war. [xii] Suddenly, China, surrounded by powerful states with the

scientific-industrial power to contain Chinese assertiveness – states like South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, India, and, yes, even Russia, a nation that harbors no illusions about long-term Chinese designs on resource rich Siberia – may not be the principal future military focus that Americans currently anticipate.

The salient point is that while the United States is preeminently a global aerospace and maritime power, it must also be prepared to engage in operational-level maneuver and strike operations that include robust ground combat forces. Army and Marine forces must start now to be ready for a very different strategic environment in five to ten years. “Going to war with the Army we have” as Donald Rumsfeld did in 2003 is not the answer. Poorly thought out solutions rooted in the past will only compel the Army and the Marines to relive the past, not master the future.

Quincy Wright, the author of the landmark book, *A Study of War*, pointed out “A single unexpected change in international relations, such as that of the Soviet-German pact in 1939, had an influence on many relations in a way which [conventional wisdom and quantitative analysis] could not foresee.” [xiii] Quincy Wright deserves to be taken seriously. Surprise is inevitable. There is no easy way to prepare for surprise, but General Matthew Ridgway’s words should resonate with every Soldier and Marine from private to four star general, “The primary purpose of an army is to be ready to fight effectively at all times.” [xiv]

The question is: will the next Administration address this problem and appoint new leadership to ensure the Army and Marines are in fact ready to fight as part of the Joint Force? The prospects are not hopeful.

Very few people in the U.S. care what happens beyond their borders until American military involvement ends up harming their standard of living or results in a loss of life and property at home that Americans will not tolerate. This is why Neo-Conservatives enjoyed the freedom to squander American blood and treasure at will. For ten years, people and equipment were misused, over-used, and abused in Afghanistan and Iraq because successive Administrations were accustomed to getting a “can do” response from “Yes Men” with stars on their shoulders. Any officer who raised objections was marginalized, then retired. Thanks to a compliant and supportive media, American military failure was presented as success to a disinterested and uninformed public. Congress is responsible for putting a stop to this, but it is too individually and collectively cowardly to do so; they would rather give the President free rein, and then complain (usually along partisan lines) when things go awry.

America’s economic emergency means the choices the next President and Congress make to commit American military power can no longer be reached without a strategic framework relating military power to attainable strategic goals.[xv] After all, strategy and geopolitics always trump ideology and military action is not merely a feature of geopolitics and statecraft – it is the employment of it.

Footnotes

[i] Dr. Barry J. Eichengreen, “Why the Dollar’s Reign is Near an End,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2011, page 1.

[ii] Peter Wallison, “Republican’s and Obama’s New Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2010, OPED page.

[iii] Senator Tom Coburn, M.D. (R-OK) “Why I voted against the debt deal,” *The Washington Post*, 2 August 2011, OPED page.

[iv] Alvaro Vargas Llosa, “Do Obama’s Re-Election Chances Ride On A U.S. Bailout Of Europe?” *Forbes*, 11 October 2011, OPED. Llosa writes: “Rescue plans have failed these last three years. The Federal Reserve has tripled its balance sheet and trillions of dollars have been spent on stimulus efforts by Washington – all to no avail.”

[v] William H. McMichael, “Exercise Helps USN Emphasize Corps’ Sea Roots,” *Defense News*, 23 January 2012.

[vi] Alex Berenson, “Fighting the Old-Fashioned Way in Najaf,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2004. Also see Bryan Bender, “Marine Units Found To Lack Equipment Corps estimates of needs in Iraq are called faulty,” *Boston Globe*, June 21, 2005. Bender writes: “The report, (according to an investigation by the Marine Corps’ inspector general), obtained by the *Globe*, says the estimated 30,000 Marines in Iraq need twice as many heavy machine guns, more fully protected armored vehicles, and more communications equipment to operate in a region the size of Utah...The Marine Corps leadership has “understated” the amount and types of ground equipment it needs, according to the investigation, concluding that all of its fighting units in Iraq “require ground equipment that exceed” their current supplies, “particularly in mobility, engineering, communications, and heavy weapons.”

[vii] Edward Filiberti, “Transformation: In Search of Conceptual Clarity,” an unpublished paper prepared at the Army War College, 24 February 2009.

[viii] “Why 21st Century Warfare is Different,” *StrategyPage.com*, 14 August, 2011.

[ix] David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel and Brian Shannon, “The 2008 Battle of Sadr City”, *RAND Occasional Paper*, 2011, page 13.