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Steven Metz

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Strategic Insights: America's Strategic Debate - And Why It Matters To The Army

September 25, 2014 | Dr. Steven Metz

Since becoming a global superpower, the United States often adjusted its national strategy. Over time, the effectiveness of any given strategy erodes. This sparks debate about America's appropriate role in the world, and about where, when, and why national power should be used. From the debate, a revised approach takes shape and lasts until its effectiveness fades. Then the cycle starts again.

Weary of the long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and frightened by huge government deficits, Americans once again are debating their national strategy. Both the political right and left, Republicans and Democrats, are reevaluating the extent and form of American involvement in maintaining global security. Within the public, the community of security experts and Congress, the constituency for global activism and a strong military has shattered. While it is impossible to tell where this debate will lead, one thing is clear: it is particularly important for the Army. History is shifting, and whatever new strategy emerges will determine the extent and form of Landpower that the United States needs for many years.

The debate is driven by big questions about America's role in the world. Immediately following World War II, the United States hoped that global security would be managed by the victorious allies, using the newly created United Nations. Once it became clear that the Soviet Union was uninterested in cooperation, Washington accepted a leading role in maintaining the security of what became known as the "free world." The Army helped prevent a conventional Soviet takeover of Western Europe and later assisted nations

facing communist insurgencies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States remained—in Madeleine Albright’s words—the “indispensable nation.” With only one superpower, American involvement was vital to security and conflict resolution everywhere.

Now elected officials, policymakers, and security experts are questioning America’s indispensability. Calls for strategic retrenchment are growing. Its advocates favor less military involvement in far flung regions, even when the United States wades in diplomatically. But Americans have been down this road before. Since the end of World War II, U.S. strategy has seen recurring cycles of retrenchment and revival.¹ While it remains to be seen whether this round of retrenchment will be followed by a later revival, there is no doubt that the United States is decreasing its global engagement in many ways and many places. The open question is how far and how fast this will go.

Another key question in the debate on the future of American strategy is whether the United States should continue attempting to resolve conflicts or switch to simply managing threats. This apparently simple issue has profound implications for the Army. Threat management means limiting involvement in a conflict absent a direct challenge to the United States or a close American ally. For instance, the United States might leave Islamic extremists alone so long as they do not sponsor transnational terrorism. By contrast, a strategy of conflict resolution commits the United States to assisting governments fighting extremism. The idea is that these partners, once bolstered, can address the political, economic, and ideological factors that allowed extremism to take root. Rather than repeatedly attacking terrorists, the United States would help alter the factors that spawn terrorism.

An American strategy aimed at conflict resolution is a relatively recent development. Since American disengagement from Europe after World War I contributed to the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of another world war, U.S. political leaders were determined not to repeat the mistake. Instead they committed to sustained global engagement and building regional security systems that addressed the weaknesses that communism exploited. It worked: America’s global engagement played a major role in the eventual demise of communism.

Now some national security experts and political leaders favor returning to threat management. Often this is called “offshore balancing.” The Army has a deep stake in this issue. It is the component of the Joint Force with the greatest capability to seize and control territory and thus is vital for conflict resolution. Threat management—the periodic and recurring punishment of enemies—can be done from afar. If the United States decides that it no longer wants to pursue conflict resolution, it only needs small, expeditionary ground forces. Pushed to extremes, the United States could make do with a

large Air Force and Navy, a Marine Corps, and no Army. This would be an extraordinarily risky venture but, to some Americans, the cost savings make it a risk worth taking.

Another important issue in the ongoing debate over the future of American strategy concerns red lines. Under what conditions should or must U.S. political leaders use force? During the height of the Cold War, ideology helped answer this question: nearly every anti-communist government facing a threat from a communist or Soviet-aligned enemy was eligible for U.S. help. The enemy of our enemy was our friend. After the Soviet Union collapsed, U.S. policymakers, seeing little chance that American military action would escalate or that any enemy could bloody the United States badly, became even more inclined to use force, deploying troops to places like Kuwait, Somalia, and the Balkans.

Today no one knows what America's red lines are, particularly for the application of Landpower. There are humanitarian disasters in Syria and other places; Libya and Yemen are in chaos; Russian proxies control parts of Ukraine; and, sociopathic extremists have declared a new "caliphate" in Iraq. Yet the use of American ground forces is not on the table. This lack of consensus on strategic red lines is not simply an attribute of the Barack Obama administration but reflects deeper schisms and disagreements within the American public and the persistent hyperpoliticization of national security policy. The Army finds it hard to plan for the long-term future since it does not know when, why, or how political leaders might use it.

The third issue of great importance to the Army is whether America's global strategy should continue to focus on large-scale war between the armed forces of nations. For several decades, U.S. political and military leaders assumed that, while major war was unlikely, it would be the most challenging mission the military could face. If the armed services were prepared for it, they automatically would be able to handle other, ostensibly less challenging tasks. While sound in theory, preparing for large-scale conventional war is always expensive. It requires capacity which is seldom, perhaps never, used and hence is deeply inefficient. When the United States could afford inefficiency, the cost of preparing for an improbable war was tolerable. Now it is not. That creates big problems for the military. Money spent on big war capability is money not spent on something else which may be more likely. But America's political leaders have not taken big war off the table. This means that the services must spend huge amounts for systems and equipment they may never use instead of investing in things that are likely—even certain—to be needed.

Depending on how the debate on the future of American strategy unfolds, the Army faces three possible futures. One is to preserve something like a smaller version of the current force. The emphasis would remain on preparing for conventional war, building partner capacity, and, to a lesser extent, fighting nonstate enemies. The diminution of capacity without an equivalent diminution in tasks or missions would simply increase the

risk the Army confronts. A second option would be a redesigned Army with the entire force taking on the attributes of the Special Forces. It would concentrate on “small footprint” operations against nonstate opponents, perhaps with the Reserve Component providing the mobilization capability if the United States becomes involved in a major war. The third option would be a reserve-based Army with a small active force to spearhead mobilization in case of national emergency.

Unfortunately, the Army cannot simply wait for the national debate on the future of American strategy to finish before moving out. Instead, the Army’s leaders have to guess how policymakers will use Landpower in the coming decade. They may guess wrong, but there are no alternatives. The best that the Army’s strategic thinkers can do is actively participate in the ongoing debate and be ready to redirect or refocus the service’s evolution once a new consensus on America’s world role takes shape.

ENDNOTE

1. Peter Feaver, ed., *Strategic Retrenchment and Renewal in the American Experience*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, August 2014.

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