

Running ragged—narrowed edge for the US; Russia, China, and beyond; NATO and hybrid war

EW, ATTRITION, AND SURVIVAL

With the US military facing the very real possibility of renewed sequestration cutbacks, defense officials are increasingly concerned that the whittling down of force structure is affecting the calculations of adversaries.

This is why the “third offset strategy” is so important, Deputy Defense Secretary Robert O. Work said at a McAleese & Associates/Credit Suisse Defense Programs Conference in Washington, D.C., on March 17. Work unveiled a new joint electronic warfare panel within the Pentagon to coordinate EW efforts.

Investment in enablers is becoming more important the longer sequestration grinds on. As US military force structure has contracted, potential adversaries have grown their force structure, said Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. James A. “Sandy” Winnefeld Jr., who also spoke at the event.

“We’re working our forces so ragged right now that our proficiency advantage is also shrinking,” Winnefeld said. US military “overmatch is definitely slipping.”

This is worrisome to many senior military leaders because it’s widely believed a future “high-end” conflict could involve modern, precise weaponry—specifically, precision guided munitions and medium- and long-range ballistic missiles. Surviving and coming out ahead in that exchange is what the “third offset” is seeking to secure.

From Russia to China and beyond, “competitors have caught up on this regime” of precision attack, Work said. If the US can no longer convince a potential adversary that it will “dominate in that competition, then they may feel emboldened to pull the trigger, and they may feel that they can forestall us from projecting power into a theater,” he said.

Officials are still working out exactly how the US could “ride it out” if someone throws “a salvo of 100 guided munitions,” Work said. He entreated defense industry rep-

resentatives for ideas that could lead to a “raid breaker,” preserving enough military power to effectively respond and project power.

“It doesn’t have to be a kinetic solution. Hell, I don’t really want a kinetic solution,” he added. This would put the US on a path toward the losing end of a cost imposition strategy. The Fiscal 2016 budget request reflects DOD’s priorities for long-range research and development, funding research on high energy lasers, unmanned systems, air dominance concepts, electronic warfare, and stealth improvements.

“Payloads will become more important than platforms,” Winnefeld noted, particularly with regard to electronic warfare and unmanned systems.

The department needs to move EW beyond just being an “enabler,” Work said, because adversaries are treating EW as an “important part of their offensive and defensive arsenal.”

“We need platforms in the services that are appropriate for their mission areas,” said Kendall. Each service is going to have to make investments in “some things that are unique and some that are shared, and what we’re going to do with that council is be as effective at that as we can be.”

ASSESSING AMERICAN “HARD POWER”

In early March, the Heritage Foundation unveiled its inaugural *Index of US Military Strength*, a 300-plus-page assessment of American military power, the operating environment the US military faces around the globe, and potential threats to US interests.

Using a blend of both qualitative and quantitative assessment, the *Index* lays out the state of US interests, the condition of the global operating environment, and the “status of our nation’s military forces.”

The *Index* focuses on so-called “hard power.” It is not exhaustive, however, nor does it seek to be. It is concerned solely with the state of US Active Duty military forces, as opposed to the Total Force. Unlike the Obama Administration, it embraces the “two major regional contingencies (MRC) requirement,” arguing that the US should strive to maintain the military power required to engage and defeat one opponent, while still retaining the ability to do the same with another. And its assessment of the global security environment focuses solely on three key regions—Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—as the security challenges in other regions “do not currently rise to the level of direct threats to America’s vital security interests as we have defined them.”

Europe remains the most favorable operating environment of the three regions, according to the report. Despite the recent actions of Russia, Europe is judged a largely “stable, mature, and friendly environment” with “favorable” marks for established allies, political stability, and modernized, yet shrinking, military forces.

In contrast, the Middle East is beset with “unfavorable” political instability linked to the fallout from the Arab Spring, but the US maintains a “moderate” military posture it has built up with its core allies since the end of the first Gulf War, and it has extensive experience conducting operations.

USAF photo by MSgt. Adrian Cadiz



Robert Work predicts payloads will become more important than platforms.

Though Asia has “favorable” long-standing alliances, its vast expanse and more dispersed US military footprint makes military power projection more challenging than in other theaters.

The report’s assessment of threats downplays states and non-state entities that lack “physical ability to pose a meaningful threat to the vital security interests of the US.” As a result, four of the six “threat actors” assessed in the report are nation states—Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea (with “Middle East terrorism” and “Af-Pak terrorism” the other two categories).

China and Russia both received “high” threat ratings. The authors claim both countries deserve these ratings due to their deep and “rapid modernization and expansion of their offensive military capabilities,” a point senior military leaders often make before Congress. While Iran and Middle East-based terror threats warrant concern, both these threats have limited ability to “project military power outside of their immediate areas.”

Finally, the report judges US military power in terms of its capability, capacity, and readiness, broken down by US military service, with the exception of the nuclear deterrent, which is separated into another category.

While the US military has gained valuable experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, its experience is “ephemeral and context-sensitive,” states the report. As the composition of the force changes over time and members come and go, it may be called to perform in far different military operations than counterinsurgency campaigns. The current joint force, as a result, is experienced, but is “aged and shrinking in its capacity,” the report states.

THE STRENGTH OF THE AIR FORCE

Heritage’s interservice analysis describes the air service as the most capable at present.

The Air Force is the only military service judged to have a “strong” overall rating for the state of its military power, with the authors citing the service’s high operations tempo and the fact that its current force structure, while it has shrunk since 2001, maintains “significantly more aircraft than required for a two-MRC force.” The Air Force also fields appropriate fighter forces to meet the demand of combatant commanders, but not enough ISR or bomber forces, states the report.

However, the report bases its military power assessment around the “tactical aircraft” required by a two-MRC-sized force, benchmarked at 1,200 air superiority, strike, and attack airframes. It concludes that the 1,098 fighter aircraft in USAF’s Fiscal 2014 force structure is 91 percent of the needed figure, but a great deal of that force is old and nearing the end of its life, which poses capability challenges in the future.

The report also highlights the high average age of USAF’s fleet and notes that some of its modernization efforts are “problematic,” which could affect capability in the long-term. Thus, while USAF retains a “strong” rating for capacity and readiness, the report’s authors rate the service’s capability as “marginal.”

As for the other services, the Army’s power is dubbed “marginal” for its weak readiness and marginal capacity, as is the Marine Corps. Although the Marine Corps has higher readiness, it also suffers from “troubled” replacement of some of its core ground vehicles.

Informed deliberation on US military power is “needed today more than at any other time since the end of the Cold War,” the report’s authors claim, as US interests are under significant pressure and fiscal and economic burdens are growing, both at home and for US allies abroad.

NATO will be judged by how it adapts its missions and forces to deal with Russia’s embrace of “hybrid warfare,” said North Atlantic Treaty Organization leaders and military officials during the Alliance’s annual “transformation seminar,” held in Washington, D.C., March 24 to 26.

Improving NATO’s ability to gather information to inform strategic decision-making and its ability to project forces quickly in response to crisis will be crucial to that evolution, the Alliance’s leadership declared during the conference, which was hosted by NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and the Atlantic Council.

The outgoing head of NATO ACT, French Air Force Gen. Jean-Paul Palomeros, told attendees at the Willard InterContinental Hotel that the Alliance now faces a “hardened security environment,” both in Europe and beyond. Russia’s actions in and around eastern Ukraine have displayed how state and non-state actors can harness innovation, military force, and “higher ambiguity” to achieve goals rapidly.

To respond to these challenges and to regain the “battle of the narrative,” NATO forces must improve “strategic awareness” and invest in better tools and techniques for information sharing, joint intelligence gathering, and “real-time” intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, Palomeros said.

The push for improved C2 and ISR tools comes as NATO begins a preliminary study on how it will replace its 17-airframe E-3 AWACS fleet by 2035. The aircraft are frequently deployed in support of operations from air policing to flying surveillance sorties. For example, the AWACS fleet was mobilized to assess Russian military activity from Romania and Poland last year.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in his March 25 keynote speech, declared hybrid warfare is as “old as the Trojan horse,” but today the scale is much larger, the speed and intensity is greater, and it is breaking out on the Alliance’s borders—with proxy soldiers, unmarked special forces, disinformation, and propaganda all combining to create a “thick fog of confusion ... and to attempt deniability.”

This new brand of hybrid warfare is a “dark reflection of our comprehensive approach” and seeks to destabilize rather than build up. Russia’s increasing use of “snap” military drills, such as the massive exercises staged from the borders of the Baltic states all the way to the Black Sea in early March, are concerning, Stoltenberg told reporters after his speech. He noted NATO member states saw similar drills used as a cover for launching “aggressive actions” in Ukraine last year.

Despite Russian actions, Alliance leadership cautioned its member-state representatives at the conference that NATO would not retrench solely into a Cold War-like posture, saying that the Alliance still has to balance its obligations.

The Alliance no longer has “the luxury to choose between collective defense and crisis management. For the first time in NATO’s history we have to do both at the same time,” Stoltenberg said.

These demands have driven the creation of a 30,000-strong NATO response force and a “spearhead force” of 5,000 personnel, with lead elements that could “move within as little as 48 hours,” Stoltenberg said. This fall NATO will hold Exercise Trident Juncture with some 30,000 troops in Spain, Portugal, and Italy in a broad test of the response force concept, said Palomeros.

But reconciling the needs of crisis reaction with an Alliance structure built around consensus, whether responding to cyber attacks or hybrid threats, means NATO has to find a way to “reconcile oversight with speed,” Stoltenberg said, adding, “We need to develop a common understanding of events and our potential adversaries.”

Doing so will allow NATO the basis to effectively “identify, anticipate, plan, and react in a crisis.”