FOREIGN POLICY BRIEFING

No. 62 **October 17, 2000**

A Hollow Debate on Military Readiness

by Ivan Eland

Executive Summary

The 2000 election campaign has seen the presidential candidates sparring over the unlikely and arcane topic of military readiness—the ability of military forces to deploy quickly and perform initially their wartime mission. The candidates are already in a bidding war to see who can throw the most money at the Pentagon. However, the alleged shortage of funds available to be spent on readiness is largely illusory. Gaps in readiness could be plugged without increasing the budget for national defense. Vast amounts are already being spent to give the United States bone-crushing dominance over any other military in the world.

"Pockets of unreadiness" in the U.S. military have three causes: profligate commitment of U.S. forces overseas, misallocation of funds by the Pentagon and Congress, and excessive readiness requirements. The record pace of humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations during the Clinton administration has worn out equipment and people, taken time and money that could have been used to train troops to fight a major war, and incurred significant costs.

Also, money that could be spent on training, spare parts, and other items to remedy readiness gaps is wasted through misallocation to less worthy objectives. Excess military bases are retained, procurement of defense items is inefficient, unnecessary weapons are purchased, and too much money is spent on military pay and benefits. Finally, in the benign threat environment of a post–Cold War world, U.S. armed forces do not need to be kept in the high states of readiness they were during the Cold War.

If U.S. commitments overseas were reduced, inefficient and wasteful defense spending were eliminated, and post–Cold War readiness goals were more realistic, gaps between those goals and the state of the forces could be eliminated without increasing the defense budget.

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Introduction

The 2000 election campaign has seen the presidential candidates swapping salvos over a very unlikely and arcane topic—military readiness. ("Readiness" is defined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the ability of military forces to deploy quickly and perform initially in wartime as they were designed to do.)[1] Gov. George W. Bush declared, "The next president will inherit a military in decline." Vice President Al Gore shot back, "Our military is the strongest and the best in the entire world." Then the squabble degenerated into a debate over whether 2 of the Army's 10 divisions were ready to fight. To date, the campaign debate over readiness has been predictably vacuous and will probably result in a bidding war to see who can throw the most cash at the Pentagon for political gain.

Does the Department of Defense really need more money? The answer is a resounding no. One would never reach that conclusion, however, listening to the rhetoric of the presidential candidates or the advocates of large increases in defense spending from 3 to 4 percent of gross domestic product.[2] Although the military has experienced shortages of personnel, spare parts, and training, the "readiness crisis" is largely illusory.

Al Gore was making an understatement when he called the U.S. military the best in the world. U.S. forces have bone-crushing dominance over any other military on the planet—including the large but hollow Russian forces and an antiquated Chinese military that is modernizing only slowly. The American military is more potent relative to its enemies than were the militaries of any great power in world history—including the Roman Empire, 19th-century Britain, and Nazi Germany in 1940. Gregg Easterbrook, a senior editor at the *New Republic*, provides data that eloquently sum up

Table 1
Spending on National Defense: The Top Eight Nations (billions of dollars)

Country	Amount Spent in 1998[a]	Rank
United States	270.2	1
Total of countries 2 through 8	264.3	
Russia[b]	55.0	2
France	40.6	3
Japan	37.7	4
China[b, c]	37.5	5
United Kingdom	37.4	6
Germany	33.0	7
Italy	23.1	8

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 1999–2000* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 10–11, 20, 52, 56, 61, 75, 112, 186, and 191.

[a]NATO's definition of defense spending was used for all nations. The year 1998 is the most recent year for which standardized budgets were compiled.

[b]The figure has been adjusted for purchasing-power parity.

[c]Official Chinese defense spending is roughly $11 billion. If off-budget expenditures are included, total Chinese defense spending is about $37.5 billion.

U.S. dominance in the military realm:

- Because of the dismal state of the Russian nuclear force and the robust nature of its U.S. counterpart, America's strategic nuclear deterrent is stronger relative to the rest of the world than it was at any time since the days of the U.S. nuclear monopoly in the late 1940s.
- The United States has greater numbers of heavy bombers, advanced tactical fighter aircraft, and aerial tankers than does the rest of the world combined. The U.S. military services have three classes of stealth aircraft already deployed and three more in development; no other nation has even one on the drawing board.
- The U.S. Navy has more than twice the number of primary warships operated by the Chinese and Russian navies combined. The United States operates 12 supercarriers; the only other large carrier in the world is a decrepit ship in Russia. The U.S. Navy is the only navy in the world that is designed to regularly operate outside its own region.
- The U.S. Army's nearly 8,000 M-1 Abrams tanks—the best armor in the world—are more than the combined number of modern Chinese and Russian tanks.
- The U.S. Marine Corps is the only standing heavy amphibious force in the world.[3]

Despite the post–Cold War cuts in the U.S. defense budget, the United States accounts for about one-third of all military spending in the world. U.S. defense spending is as much as the combined defense spending of the next seven countries (Table 1). The United States is spending about $300 billion per year. The next best militaries on the planet—those of our wealthy allies—spend only $20 billion to $40 billion a year and are afraid of falling so far behind U.S. forces that they will no longer be able to operate with those forces. (The sums listed for Russia and China are a bit misleading. The Russian military is a decrepit, hollow force, and the Chinese military is antiquated and modernizing only slowly.) The United States spends 19 times the combined amount spent by the "states of concern"—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Cuba, and North Korea.

George W. Bush is correct when he cites growing problems with readiness in the military—shortages of spare parts and training, problems with recruitment and retention of personnel, and low morale among the troops. Yet it is a leap of logic to conclude from those "pockets of unreadiness" that the military needs a budget increase. This paper will examine the causes of readiness problems and how they could be solved without increasing the defense budget; in fact, defense spending could even be reduced while improving readiness.

According to a recent report by the Congressional Budget Office, if the United States expects its military to be able to win two wars in quick succession and perform frequent peacekeeping missions (the current national strategy), as well as modernize each piece of equipment on a one-for-one basis, another $51 billion would need to be added to the $289 billion spent on defense in fiscal year 2000.[4] Some of the press coverage of the study erroneously reported that the CBO concluded that the military was "woefully underfunded,"[5] and many hawks will trumpet the finding as an endorsement of whopping increases in defense spending. CBO was criticized by the Department of Defense for the questionable assumption that each piece of equipment would be modernized on a one-for-one basis (the military does not plan to do so because the new high-tech weapons have greater combat power than did the old equipment).[6] If the one-for-one standard were relaxed, the disparity between the funding needed to sustain a modernized military and the current budget for national defense would be less than $51 billion.[7] However, the report is probably correct that the military is overextended—that is, given the current national strategy, the force cannot be mod-

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ernized within the current defense budget. But, of course, increasing the defense budget is only one solution—and not the best one. To describe the military as woefully underfunded is inaccurate. A better characterization is that U.S. armed forces are woefully overcommitted and overprogrammed (too many weapons are planned for the funds available). In the benign threat environment of the post–Cold War world, the United States should seriously reconsider the commitments of U.S. forces overseas, the current force structure, and even DOD's modernization plans (which are more modest than the one-for-one replacement assumption in the CBO report).

The current readiness gaps (discrepancies between readiness goals and the state of the forces) in the U.S. military have three basic causes: excessive commitments of U.S. forces overseas, misallocation of funds by DOD and Congress, and unwarranted readiness requirements.

Excessive U.S. Military Commitments Overseas

Governor Bush was correct when he argued that the Clinton administration has stretched the U.S. armed forces to their limits. By 1999 the administration had undertaken a record-setting 48 peace enforcement and combat missions. Many of those missions—for example, U.S. deployments to Bosnia and Kosovo—have little or nothing to do with U.S. vital interests.[8]

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Readiness Gaps Are Caused by Too Many Commitments

Many of the pockets of unreadiness in an otherwise dominant military are caused by those furious and far-flung deployments, which rapidly wear out equipment and people and incur significant costs. Although part of the recent problem in recruiting and retaining certain categories of U.S. military personnel results from competing opportunities in the roaring civilian economy, senior military officials admit that part of the problem is caused by low morale. Morale is low because troops who signed up to be warriors end up essentially as policemen and aid workers and are forced to perform their assignments with worn-out equipment. For example, after surveying almost 10,000 officers and enlisted personnel, a private research firm—hired by the Army to discover why so many soldiers were leaving the service—found that the most cited reason for the exodus was open-ended peacekeeping missions overseas.[9]

In addition, the military's imperfect and subjective system for measuring readiness is properly based on whether the units are ready to fight a major war (that might prove necessary to defend truly critical U.S. interests). However, when units are deployed on a peacekeeping or humanitarian mission, they forgo the training that would allow them to attain a high readiness rating for such a war. Candidate Bush suggested that the two Army divisions that were briefly classified as unready for war suffered from budget cuts and low morale. In reality, the low readiness rating resulted from large portions of the two divisions' being deployed on peacekeeping missions to Bosnia and Kosovo. During peacekeeping missions, U.S. forces act more as policemen and do not get training in attacking, defending, and maneuvering in large units needed to fight a major war.[10] The forces must make up this training when they rotate back home. Furthermore, when operations and maintenance (O&M) money—the "readiness account" in the defense budget—is used to deploy and maintain forces overseas on peacekeeping missions, fewer funds are available to provide training for war.

To solve that problem, operations other than major war should not be conducted. U.S. security was not enhanced by interventions in places such as Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Conflicts in areas peripheral to the main centers of technology and economic power (Western Europe and East Asia) do not threaten U.S. vital interests. The readiness problems in the

U.S. military would quickly evaporate if the United States desisted from intervening in brushfire conflicts around the world. Easing the breakneck pace of deployment would dramatically decrease the wear on soldiers and equipment and would allow O&M funds to be used to buy spare parts and provide combat training.

Unfortunately, a bipartisan consensus exists between the major presidential candidates to maintain an overextended foreign policy combined with some increases in defense budgets. No matter which candidate is elected, the military is likely to be stretched too thin. Although George W. Bush has said that he will review all U.S. military commitments, he is suspiciously vague on which ones he would eliminate. Al Gore makes no bones about continuing President Clinton's hyperactive use of the military abroad. Readiness gaps in the military could be easily remedied by a thorough and honest review of the minimal threats that foreign militaries pose to the United States in a post–Cold War world and the consequent pruning of excessive U.S. commitments overseas. If unnecessary commitments were eliminated, the already-bloated U.S. military budget could actually be reduced significantly without excessively stressing the armed forces and their personnel.

The Military's Role in Drug Interdiction

Drug interdiction has become a major mission in recent years. Military forces—such as ships and planes—conduct surveillance and interdiction missions to stanch the flow of drugs into the United States. The interdiction mission has proved ineffectual and a waste of taxpayer dollars. Only 5 to 15 percent of the drugs entering the United States are interdicted. Drugs are expensive only because the drug trade is illegal (drug traffickers make huge profits to compensate for the high risk of getting caught and incarcerated), not because the substances are expensive to produce. Therefore, the producers of drugs anticipate that a certain percentage of their product will be interdicted and compensate by producing and distributing that extra amount. The only way to truly impede the drug trade is to eliminate or reduce demand for the product. Thus, the military (and law enforcement) should abandon the futile and costly mission of drug interdiction. That commitment strains the military by expending valuable funds and time that could be used for training to fight wars.

Misallocation of Defense Funds by Congress and DOD

The misallocation of defense resources robs the coffers set aside for unglamorous spending on readiness (for example, buying spare parts and paying for training). The misallocation of resources can take several forms.

Inefficiencies in Pentagon Spending

Wide agreement exists among executive branch officials, the military, and defense analysts that more military bases need to be closed. The problem is that Congress will not close any more bases until at least 2003 (if then). After the Cold War ended, the military was reduced by about 33 percent,[11] but the number of major bases was reduced by only about 20 percent.[12] The drawing down of forces and the concomitant retention of excess military infrastructure are one reason that real O&M spending per troop has been increasing 3 percent per year.[13] In fact, the military now spends annually about $70,000 per soldier on operations and maintenance—30 percent more in real terms than it spent a decade ago.[14] (Measured readiness was at its height during that period.) But readiness gaps in the military occur because members of Congress would rather spend that money to subsidize the economies of their states and districts—by keeping unneeded bases open—than pay for spare parts, training, and health care for the troops. The Republican Congress complains that the Clinton administration has shortchanged the military but then refuses to

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The United States should reconsider the commitments of U.S. forces overseas, the current force structure, and DOD's modernization plans.

approve base closures, which would allow $5 billion annually to be reallocated to spending on readiness. Congress needs to approve further rounds of base closures.

Further inefficiencies are caused by the grossly wasteful way in which the Pentagon buys things. DOD has exacting, but unneeded, specifications for even mundane items that could be purchased commercially. The Pentagon also uses military and civilian government personnel to do jobs that could be "outsourced"—that is, contracted to private companies. Such work includes accounting, payroll, information systems, family housing, utilities, maintenance, firefighting, and building. New Zealand has even outsourced the training of pilots, sealift, and aircraft and ship maintenance.[15] The Pentagon now runs "competitions" between government workers and private companies to perform certain functions, but those competitions inherently favor public employees. Those functions and many more similar ones should simply be outsourced to the private company with the best bid. Roughly 80 percent of DOD's civilian employees perform work that could be done commercially.[16] According to Ret. Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney, president of Business Executives for National Security, if the Pentagon purchased more nonmilitary items in standard commercial ways, outsourced all work that does not require military personnel, and closed unneeded military bases, it would reap annual savings of $30 billion (or 10 percent of the $300 billion annual defense budget).[17]

The way large weapons are procured also needs to be reformed. Complex weapon systems now take an average of 11 years to develop.[18] It can take up to 20 years to develop, produce, and field a modern weapon system. By then much of the technology is outdated when compared with that of the civilian sector. With every new generation of weapons, costs take a quantum leap. For example, the F-22—which has a price tag of about $200 million per aircraft—costs triple what the F-15 did.[19] The B-2 bomber cost more than $2 billion per plane—a startlingly high cost for an aircraft. New surface warships cost $1 billion apiece, and the next aircraft carrier will cost over $5 billion—even without its air wing, which is even more expensive. Overspecification of defense systems and mounds of procurement regulations are barriers to entry for innovative nondefense commercial firms. Those firms also want to avoid DOD's intrusive requirements for cost and pricing data—they do not trust the government with such proprietary information. Elimination of those barriers might encourage nondefense companies to breathe some fresh air into the overregulated defense business.

True competition in defense contracting is hard to come by. Defense contracting is highly politicized. Weapons contracts flow into the states and districts of powerful members of Congress who sit on the Senate and House Armed Services Committees rather than to the companies that can do the best work for the best price. In addition, large defense contractors spread subcontracts to as many states and congressional districts as possible to ensure that weapon systems will not be killed. Weapons factories that should be closed are kept open in the name of creating "competition," although no real competition can exist because the military demands only small quantities of a particular weapon. For example, the government keeps two shipyards producing submarines and two other shipyards building destroyers, when demand exists to keep only a single shipyard producing each.[20] Keeping open such infrastructure is costly to taxpayers and merely a welfare program for corporate America. In addition, government-owned shipyards, maintenance depots, and arsenals should be closed and production shifted to the private sector.

Closing bases and making defense procurement—of both mundane items and complex weapons—more efficient would save significant amounts of money. Some of that cash could be spent plugging readiness gaps and some could be returned to taxpayers. Yet with increasing defense budgets, DOD, the military services, and Congress have fewer incentives to make the hard choices needed

to generate savings by reforming the system.

Pork Spending

In addition to keeping unneeded bases and weapons factories open in states and congressional districts, Congress regularly builds weapons that are not needed or even requested by the military. For example, Congress regularly appropriates money for unrequested C-130 cargo planes, F-15 fighters, and Marine amphibious ships. Normally, those weapons are built in the states and districts of powerful members of Congress. For example, the plant that builds C-130 aircraft provides employment in the Georgia congressional district of former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and the shipyard that produces amphibious ships is in Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's home state of Mississippi.

Congress loves to extend the production of such mature defense programs. Because the hometown companies have had a chance to get the kinks out of the production process, their profits are higher for those programs than for research and development efforts or weapons just going into production. Roughly $5 billion to $10 billion per year could be saved if Congress resisted the temptation to add pork to any administration's budget.

Spending on Expensive and Unnecessary Weapons

Complaints abound in the media that the military was so stretched that assets had to be cobbled together to fight the war in Kosovo.[21] For example, the Kosovo campaign required the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft assigned on paper to fight two wars. In addition, the military had to temporarily end its policing of the no-fly zone over Iraq so that tanker and electronic warfare (jamming) aircraft could be diverted to Kosovo. Yet, the Pentagon has a shortage of those unglamorous assets because they always receive a low priority when resources are handed out.

Instead, the Pentagon is wasting billions buying expensive, "sexier" weapons that either are unneeded or were designed during the Cold War. The United States currently has three types of new tactical fighter aircraft under development or in production—the Air Force's F-22, the Navy's F-18E/F, and the Joint Strike Fighter—that will ultimately cost $350 billion. Although the F-22 is a very capable aircraft, no new air-to-air threats are on the horizon to threaten bone-crushing U.S. dominance of the skies. Despite the F-18E/F's high cost, the aircraft is only a marginal improvement over the F-18C/D.[22] Both aircraft should be cancelled.

Other weapon systems should also be terminated. DOD tried to cancel the V-22 tiltrotor aircraft (a propeller-driven plane that takes off vertically and transports Marines to the beach during an amphibious assault), but Congress and the Clinton administration—to win votes—allowed it to be built. Cheaper helicopters could do that mission almost as well. The Army complains that it needs more money to convert some of its units to a medium-weight force but refuses to cancel the Comanche light attack helicopter, which was designed during the Cold War, and the Crusader self-propelled artillery piece, which is too heavy to fight with the new medium-weight units. The Navy continues to build huge unstealthy supercarriers that may be vulnerable to attack by submarines and small surface ships firing antiship cruise missiles. In addition, the Navy is building a new class of submarines when no foreign nation comes close to challenging U.S. dominance under the sea.[23]

Believe it or not, U.S. military dominance is so great that all of the aforementioned weapon systems (except the Joint Strike Fighter) could be cancelled without surrendering U.S. dominance. In many cases, cheaper substitutes could be found. When George W. Bush advocates skipping a generation of weapons and developing new military technology, the implication is that some weapon systems currently in development or production need to be cut or eliminated. Unfortunately, for political reasons, Bush rarely mentions specific candidates for the axe. Table 2 might provide the presidential

If unnecessary commitments were eliminated, the U.S. military budget could be reduced significantly without excessively stressing the armed forces and their personnel.

Table 2
Total Program Costs for DOD's Most Expensive Programs

Rank	Program	Cost (billions of dollars)	Recommendation[a]
1	Joint Strike Fighter (2,852 aircraft)	250.0	Delay
2	Virginia-Class submarine (30 submarines)	65.2	Cancel
3	F-22 fighter (341 aircraft)	62.7	Cancel
4	DDG-51 destroyer (57 ships)	54.0	Finish procurement
5	F/A-18E/F fighter (548 aircraft)	47.0	Cancel
6	C-17 airlifter (134 aircraft)	44.9	No additional procurement
7	B-2 bomber (21 aircraft)	44.4	No additional procurement
8	Comanche helicopter (1,292 helicopters)	43.0	Cancel
9	V-22 tiltrotor aircraft (458 aircraft))	36.2	Cancel
10	D-5 Trident II missile (453 missiles)	27.4	Finish procurement
11	Seawolf submarine (3 submarines)	13.4	Finish procurement
12	LPD-17 (12 ships)	9.9	Buy only 6 ships
13	CVN-77 aircraft carrier (1 ship)	5.2	Cancel

Sources: Costs compiled by the Center for Defense Information from DOD selected acquisition reports and Congressional Budget Office cost estimates for the Joint Strike Fighter and Comanche programs.

[a]Recommendations are the author's.

hopeful with a more complete list of suggestions for termination.

Despite pockets of unreadiness, the Joint Chiefs of Staff contend that they need increases in the defense budget because spending on current readiness creates a shortage of funds to buy new equipment.[24] In the benign threat environment, perhaps the military should rein in its expensive taste for sophisticated combat hardware. If the Pentagon cancelled the aforementioned unneeded or gold-plated weapon systems and replaced the latter with cheaper alternatives, the funding problem would evaporate. In fact, if even a few of those big-ticket weapons were terminated, some of the savings would rectify any shortfalls in readiness and give the taxpayers a nice rebate.

The misallocation of defense resources robs the coffers set aside for unglamorous spending on readiness, such as buying spare parts and paying for training.

Excess Spending on Personnel

In an all-volunteer force, adequate pay and benefits for the troops are important. However, in an ostensible attempt to solve the mild recruitment and retention problems by closing a perceived pay gap between the military and civilian worlds, Congress lavished on the military across-the-board pay increases and a reinstatement of a costly retirement program to replace the "redux" program. (The reinstatement increases benefits for those military personnel retiring after 20 years from 40 to 50 percent of basic pay. The presidential candidates are talking of further increases in pay and benefits.) In a rush to score political points, the president and Congress ignored the analysis of most of the respected, nonpartisan experts on pay, recruiting, and retention.

The alleged 13.5 percent gap in "basic pay" between the military and the civilian sector was concocted by the Military Coalition, a group of lobbying organizations, to vastly inflate the problem. The 13.5 percent was merely the difference between civilian wage growth over an 18-year period and military wage hikes over the same period.[25] Of course, the proponents of across-the-board military pay increases conveniently left out the growth in military allowances for food and housing.[26] In fact, what civilian

employer provides housing and subsidized food for its employees? In addition, military personnel get four weeks of paid vacation, comprehensive health care, tuition assistance during service, and as much as $50,000 for college, as well as bonuses for enlistment, reenlistment, and special skills.[27]

According to RAND, CBO, and Cindy Williams, a senior research fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after equalizing age, education, job differences, and the timing of military and civilian pay raises, military personnel were actually paid more than most of their civilian counterparts were paid. Military men and women earned more than did 70 to 75 percent of civilians with the same education and experience.[28] RAND concluded: "It may be disconcerting to learn that military pay appears to compare well with civilian pay. Far from being below average, the military [pay] is above average."[29]

RAND, CBO, and the U.S. General Accounting Office all noted that increased retirement benefits and across-the-board pay hikes may not be the most cost-effective way to solve the recruiting and retention problems.[30] Not surprisingly, RAND found that targeted pay increases were likely to result in dramatic productivity gains and were the most cost-effective way to solve the recruiting and retention problems the military was experiencing in some job categories.[31] (RAND, CBO, and Williams noted that hiking selected reenlistment bonuses and increasing spending to pay more recruiters and to buy more advertisements were also cost-effective.)[32]

Sophisticated studies comparing military and civilian pay were probably unneeded; common sense would indicate that, if certain categories of highly skilled personnel—for example, pilots—are leaving the service, their compensation should be increased until the hemorrhage stops. After all, military and civilian pay does not need to be equal. Military service can provide some benefits not found in the civilian sector that would motivate people to stay in the armed forces even if the pay were lower (for example, civilian pilots have no opportunity to fly high-performance fighter aircraft).

A GAO report also noted the importance of nonpecuniary factors in recruitment and retention. According to the report, although military personnel care about pay and benefits, the four top reasons they cited for leaving the armed forces were problems with the military health care system, frequent and extended deployments that separate them from their families, shortages of equipment and spare parts, and a military leadership unconcerned about their problems.[33] Of course, the president, the military, and Congress have failed to do anything about scaling back military commitments or providing adequate leadership. Funding to reform the health care system and to buy needed equipment and spare parts has been eaten up, in part, by profligate spending on excessive increases in pay and retirement benefits.

Since the grand, yet vapid, congressional debate on military pay and retirement, recruiting and retention have improved but at great cost. Congressional actions that disregarded sound analyses of the problem will create many future costly unfunded liabilities—which will ultimately take money from the readiness accounts and could lead to future recruitment and retention problems. At the very least, congressional reinstatement of the expensive retirement program needs to be reversed.

Excessive Readiness Requirements

Instead of changing the way the military operates, some analysts want to change the way readiness is measured. Those analysts imply that operations other than war (for example, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions) should count toward maintaining the unit's readiness. For example, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution argues, "The idea that it counts if you're training to fight Saddam but doesn't count if you're actually deploying deterring Milosevic

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When the secure geostrategic position of the United States is added to the equation, a reduction in the readiness of much of the U.S. military can be allowed.

or containing conflict in the Balkans is a strange artifact of our national military strategy, and makes little sense."[34] Those analysts would like to move away from the requirement that the military be sized, equipped, trained, and measured against a criterion of fighting two wars almost concurrently. The analysts would like to lower the criterion to a one-plus war strategy, which would size, equip, train, and measure the military against a criterion of fighting one war and engaging in several "operations other than war" concurrently. Although not necessarily endorsing that course of action, John Hillen, a defense policy scholar who has been an adviser to the Bush campaign, stated, "You can fix the problem by changing the way you measure it."[35]

Although any military unit's scores are subjective and imperfect indicators of its readiness to fight a war, the scoring system should reflect how well the military can carry out its primary mission—to fight a war to defend the United States or its vital interests. The nation's security depends on accurate information about the military's ability to carry out this critical mission. Operations other than war should not be allowed to muddle those readiness scores. The scoring system should be retained as is.

Of course, moving toward a one-plus war criterion is not in itself a bad idea. But the "plus" should be some added air power as a hedge in case the United States faces a potent enemy or the fighting does not go as well as expected. The plus should not be forces allocated to operations other than war. Nevertheless, reducing the force from the number of military units needed to fight two wars to those forces needed to satisfy the one-plus criterion would result in significant savings that could be applied to closing any readiness gaps in the units remaining.

But if the United States retained enough forces to be able to implement a one-plus war strategy, a more fundamental question must be addressed. In the post–Cold War world, no major threat looms on the horizon for at least 15 to 30 years. If the United States avoids getting involved in brushfire conflicts that are not critical to its security or vital interests (for example, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia), does the vast bulk of the U.S. military really need to be kept in high states of readiness for war? In other words, without corrupting the measuring system for military readiness, could the United States just accept lower scores for many of its units?

The readiness of U.S. forces has slipped a little since its peak during the Bush administration, but O'Hanlon has shown that the mission-capable rates for tanks, aircraft, and other major systems are still about 70 to 80 percent—about what they were during the Reagan administration, at the height of the Cold War.[36] Yet the Cold War is over and no major threat to U.S. security looms on the horizon.

Readiness scores cannot be examined in isolation or even compared solely with the readiness scores of the same U.S. military units during past periods. At each point in time, the potential threat the U.S. military would be arrayed against must be identified and the degree of readiness to deter (or fight) that threat needs to be determined. For example, because the threat level is much lower now than it was during the Reagan administration, many units of the U.S. military could have lower readiness scores than they did during the 1980s without jeopardizing U.S. national security.

Lawrence Korb, a former assistant secretary of defense for readiness during the Reagan administration, asked, "Who is out there that is more ready than we are?"[37] The answer is that no country even comes close. The Russians have a large, decaying military that undertakes few deployments. The Chinese have a huge, antiquated military that has pockets of modernization but will take 20 to 30 years to be able to project sustained force in the East Asian region.[38] The so-called rogue states (Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, North Korea, and Cuba) are all poor, spend annually on defense only about $14 billion combined (compared with the $300 billion spent by the United States), and

have the obsolescent forces to show for it. When the secure geostrategic position of the United States (which has friendly neighbors and is oceans away from the major areas of conflict) is added to the equation, a reduction in the readiness of much of the U.S. military can be allowed without compromising U.S. security.

Sen. John McCain has proposed a "tiered" readiness system in which some forces are made more ready than others or more forces are placed in the reserves, or both.[39] The late James L. George, a former congressional committee staff member for national security affairs, also proposed a tiered readiness system that does both. He proposed cutting active Army, Navy, and Air Force units and relying more heavily on the reserves. Only a portion of the remaining active forces would need to achieve the high states of readiness that were required during the Cold War. George noted that the proposed force structure would be more than sufficient to fulfill the requirements for fighting a regional war and responding to any crisis in the more benign post–Cold War environment. According to George, even if China were to become a threat by 2010, a U.S. military that reflected a tiered readiness posture could use the long warning time to expand.[40]

Conclusion

Members of both parties have decried the "abysmal state of military readiness" and advocated increases in defense spending to remedy it. But no increases in spending would be needed to remedy "pockets of unreadiness" if U.S. overseas commitments were cut back, misallocation of resources by the Pentagon and Congress ceased, and readiness requirements were reduced in a benign post–Cold War threat environment. Some of the savings generated from those policy changes could be used to plug any remaining gaps in readiness, and some could be returned to taxpayers. Thus, the net effect would be to reduce the defense budget.

Notes

1. James L. George, "Is Readiness Overrated? Implications for a Tiered Readiness Force Structure," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 342, April 29, 1999, p. 2.

2. John Donnelly, "Keeping Today's Military Power Requires $51 Billion More a Year: Estimate, from CBO, Due Out Today," *Defense News* (special supplement), September 14, 2000, p. 2. Such a hefty boost would increase the Pentagon budget from about $300 billion currently to $442 billion in 2002 and $509 billion in 2007 (in 2001 dollars).

3. Gregg Easterbrook, "Apocryphal Now: The Myth of the Hollow Military," *New Republic*, September 11, 2000, p. 22.

4. Congressional Budget Office, *Budgeting for Defense: Maintaining Today's Forces* (Washington: CBO, September 2000), pp. vii–xiv.

5. Thomas Ricks, "Report: Pentagon Underfunded: $50 Billion Yearly Boost Is Needed to Keep Edge, CBO Says," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2000, p. A25.

6. Christian Lowe, "Pentagon Comptroller Refutes CBO Defense Budget Report," *Defense Weekly*, September 25, 2000, p. 7.

7. CBO's assumption of one-for-one modernization is curious, because the agency usually estimates whether the budget is sufficient to fund the military's modernization plans, which do not make that assumption. So, in a sense, CBO's report is irrelevant to whether the military has enough money to carry out its plans.

8. Ted Galen Carpenter, "Kosovo as an Omen: The Perils of the 'New NATO,'" in *NATO's Empty Victory: A Postmortem on the Balkan War*, ed. Ted Galen Carpenter (Washington: Cato Institute, 2000), pp. 178–81; and Barbara Conry, "U.S. Security Strategy," in *Cato Institute Handbook for Congress* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1999), pp. 459–64.

9. The *Washington Times* obtained a copy of the firm's report to the Army Research Institute. See Bill Gertz, "Army Gripes," *Washington Times*, September 22, 2000, p. A10.

10. Steven Lee Myers, "What War-Ready Means, in Pentagon's Accounting," *New York Times*, September 4, 2000, p. A11.

11. William Cohen, *Annual Report to the President and Congress* (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, 2000), p. C-1.

12. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Bases: Status of Prior Base Realignment and Closure Rounds* (Washington: GAO, December 1998), p. 12. The report cites a figure from DOD.

13. Amy Belasco, *Paying for Military Readiness and Upkeep: Trends in Operations and Maintenance Spending* (Washington: CBO, 1997), p. xii.

14. Greg Jaffe, "Military Could Face Modernization Problems: Aging Tanks, Planes May Eclipse Debate over U.S. Readiness," *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2000, p. A36.

15. Lisa Burgess, "Business Leaders Promote Outsourcing to Pentagon," *Defense News*, June 8–14, 1998, p. 44.

16. Percentage calculated from Jensine Frost, "Business Executives for National Security Tooth-to-Tail Commission Update #16," May 29, 1998, http://www.bens.org.

17. Easterbrook, p. A25; and "Boosting Funds Won't Stanch Wastefulness," Editorial, *USA Today*, January 10, 1999, p. A27.

18. Easterbrook, p. A26.

19. Ibid., p. A25.

20. Ivan Eland, "Subtract Unneeded Nuclear Attack Submarines from the Fleet," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 47, April 2, 1998.

21. See, for example, John Robinson, managing editor of *Defense Daily*, "Ready or Not?" Letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, September 7, 2000, p. A25.

22. Williamson Murray, "Hard Choices: Fighter Procurement in the Next Century," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 334, February 26, 1999, pp. 10–17.

23. Eland, "Subtract Unneeded Submarines," pp. 2–3, 5–6, 16.

24. Steven Lee Myers, "A Call to Put the Budget Surplus to Use for the Military," *New York Times*, September 28, 2000, p. A22.

25. Cited in Tobias Naegele, "The Pay Gap/Most Enlisted People Are Earning More Than Civilians, a New Study Shows," *Air Force Times*, November 9, 1998, p. 3.

26. Cindy Williams, "Our G.I.s Earn Enough," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2000, p. A19.

27. Ibid., p. A19.

28. Dale Eisman, "Pension Boost May Not Keep Troops; Bigger Bonuses for Specialists Could Do More, Analyst Contends," *Virginian-Pilot*, February 26, 1999, p. A1; Christopher Jehn, assistant director, National Security Division, CBO, Statement on Military Pay and Benefits before the Subcommittee on Personnel of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 106th Cong., 1st sess., March 3, 1999, pp. 4–5; James Hosek, Christine Peterson, and Joanna Zor Heilbrunn, *Military Pay Gaps and Caps* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1994), p. ix; and Williams, p. A19. A more recent RAND study is cited in Naegele, p. 3.

29. Cited in Naegele, p. 3.

30. Jon Rosenwasser, "Pay Raises Aren't the Priority," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1999, p. A35; Mark Gebicke, director, Military Operations and Capabilities Issues, National Security and International Affairs Division, GAO, "Military Retirement: Proposed Changes Warrant Careful Analysis," Statement before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel of the House Committee on Armed Services, 106th Cong., 1st sess., February 25, 1999, pp. 2–3; Jehn, pp. 2–3, 5–6; and Naegele, p. 3.

31. Cited in Naegele, p. 3.

32. Jehn, p. 5; Williams, p. A19; and the RAND study cited in Naegele, p. 3.

33. Dan Smith, "Running Out of a 'Few Good Men—and Women'?" *Weekly Defense Monitor*, February 25, 1999, p. 2; and Rosenwasser, p. A35.

34. Quoted in Myers, p. A11.

35. Quoted in ibid.

36. Easterbrook, p. 25.

37. Quoted in Jaffe, p. A36.

38. Ivan Eland, "Tilting at Windmills: Post–Cold War Military Threats to U.S. Security," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 332, February 8, 1999, pp. 21–23, 26–29.

39. John McCain, "Ready Tomorrow: Defending American Interests in the 21st Century," March 1996.

40. George, p. 20.