2012

A US Perspective on Dealing with Today's Security Challenges - Doing Less with Less

Jeffrey D. McCausland
Dickinson College

Recommended Citation

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
A US perspective on dealing with today’s security challenges

Doing less with less

On both sides of the Atlantic, the military is falling prey to austerity measures and is assuming a reduced role. Consensus on defence spending between the US and Britain is thus vital for the future security of both countries, writes Col (Ret’d) Jeffrey D McCausland, Minerva chair and professor of research at the US Army War College.

A former US Army Chief of Staff once observed, “If you don’t like change, you are going to like irrelevance even less.” These words are more relevant than ever as the United States and its military continue to deal with three enormous changes that have occurred over the past 20 years or so. These dramatic shifts have fundamentally altered how the nation considers its national security policy.

The first great change was the end of the Soviet Union, which had been the nation’s primary adversary and focal point throughout the long Cold War. During these four decades, Americans viewed this confrontation as central to national security. It dominated thinking, strategy and the development of military forces and associated doctrines. The second change was precipitated by the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001. The assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon not only revealed the vulnerability of the United States to asymmetric attack, but also forced a dramatic reassessment of American national security strategy. The nation soon embarked on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have now been the longest wars in America’s history. Finally, the third major shift was the economic downturn of 2008 – the most serious economic dislocation since the Great Depression.

Some four years later, the nation still suffers from high unemployment, massive structural debts and continued economic dislocation. This will force a further reassessment of the United States’ national security posture as the Iraq war comes to a close. What does this imply for the national security strategy of the United States as it moves further into the second decade of the 21st century? How will Washington deal with the ‘aftershocks’ of these movements in the geostrategic tectonic plates and fashion strategy appropriate to a period of austerity?

One of the enduring aspects of US strategic thinking has been its ‘special relationship’ with the UK, but London is also undergoing dramatic change in its security posture. How will these two nations continue to cooperate in national security affairs, and what does change portend for the ‘special relationship’?

CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

In January 2012, President Obama presented a revised vision of American national security strategy that took account of these dramatic changes. Obama maintained that the American strategic focus needed to shift to the Pacific theatre, while reshaping the uniformed services. The President asserted that in the years ahead America’s armed forces must become smaller, more agile and cheaper. The eight-page report, Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century, was initially short on specifics, but did pledge to reduce military spending by more than $450 billion over a period of 10 years. It further suggested that reductions of an additional $500 billion might be required if Congress was unable to agree on other reductions, or on increases in revenues to deal with the nation’s growing budget deficits. The administration announced that the budget cuts would follow four overarching principles:

- Maintain the world’s finest military;
- Avoid hollowing out the force;
- Generate savings in a balanced manner with everything on the table, including politically sensitive issues; and,
- Preserve a high-quality, all-volunteer force.

As part of the presentation, Secretary of Defense Panetta observed: “The country is at a strategic turning point after a decade of war and, therefore, we...
US soldiers at the Brassfield Mora military camp in Samara, Iraq. The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are now the longest campaigns in American history.
are shaping a joint force for the future that will be smaller and leaner, but will be agile, flexible, ready and technologically advanced.” Consequently, it was clear from the onset that there would be major changes to nearly all facets of defence programmes and forces — including end strength and personnel costs.

The Pentagon plan for slowing the growth of military spending included cutting the size of the Army and Marine Corps, retiring older aircraft and trimming war costs. The administration requested $525 billion for its ‘base budget’ to run the Pentagon in 2013 ($6 billion less than the budget for the previous year). War costs (which are not considered part of the base budget) would decline from $115 billion to $88 billion, reflecting the completion of the American withdrawal from Iraq.

Not surprisingly, the administration’s announcement drew quick criticism from Republicans in Congress, but this shift did not come as a surprise to those who follow American national security affairs. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, stated in August 2010 that the greatest threat to American security was the spiralling national debt. Many leading economists have also publicly argued that it is difficult to see how the American government can achieve the dramatic reductions in overall federal spending that are required without a significant cut in defence spending.

**BUDGET REDUCTION**

In this regard it is important to realise that, in reality, the plan proposed by the Obama administration only slows the overall growth in defence spending. When President Obama took office in January 2009, the Pentagon’s base budget was $513 billion. In 2001, it was $297 billion; so ‘defence’ spending has nearly doubled in a decade, particularly when the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are included. The administration’s new proposal projects that the base budget will increase to $567 billion in 2017, as opposed to the previous projection in 2011, which called for $622 billion in spending by 2017. The Pentagon counts these reductions in projected future spending as ‘defence savings’.

In terms of military strategy and doctrine, the ‘pivot to the Pacific’ would appear to be clearly aligned with the Pentagon’s new AirSea Battle’ concept that has been gaining momentum. Advocates for this effort argue that the ability of the United States to project and sustain significant military power is threatened by the spread of advanced military technologies and the growth of Chinese (and to a lesser extent Iranian) military power. This threatens American access to the Western Pacific and Persian Gulf, which are key to long-term US interests. AirSea Battle, therefore, seeks to create new forces and operational concepts designed to preserve American power-projection capabilities in these key regions.

In a bid to pre-empt election-year Republican criticism, Secretary of Defense Panetta also maintained that Advocates of the Pentagon’s new ‘AirSea Battle’ concept argue that the ability of the US to project and sustain significant military power is threatened by the spread of advanced military technologies and the growth of Chinese military power.

There will also be reductions in the Air Force and Navy but, consistent with the shift towards Asia and the doctrinal discussions of AirSea Battle, these appear to be far less than those planned for the ground forces. The Air Force will retire some older planes, including about two dozen C-5A cargo aircraft and 65 of its oldest C-130 Hercules. Most significantly, the Navy has seen no reduction in its aircraft carriers. It will retain a fleet of 11 aircraft carriers, but will retire seven cruisers earlier than planned. The Navy will, however, delay purchase of some other ships, including a new Virginia-class submarine.

**SHIFT IN US STRATEGY**

The purchase of F-35 stealth Joint Strike Fighters, to be fielded by the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps, will be slowed, and there could be a 40 per cent reduction of planned US procurement of this aircraft. Still, this remains the largest procurement item in American defence spending and is still planned to include acquisition of the F35B vertical takeoff aircraft for the Marine Corps – the variant most plagued with development problems. Some experts expect the Pentagon eventually to announce a total procurement plan of 244 jets in the period 2013-17, compared to a plan of 423 one year ago. International sales for the same period should be about 230 jets and could actually surpass US annual purchases by fiscal year 2016.

With regard to strategic forces, the Obama proposal calls a two-year delay in the construction of a new generation of submarines to carry long-range nuclear missiles. The current fleet of nuclear-capable bombers and land-based nuclear missiles will be left unchanged.

Overall, this decision appears to be the first step in a larger plan that could result in further reductions in ground forces and a significant cutback in the nation’s ability to conduct a large ground war abroad. It clearly implies an overall shift in American strategy. Future American defence posture will place a greater focus on Asia and towards the development of greater ‘standoff’ military power provided by the Air Force, Navy, and Special Operations Forces. The President also asked Congress to approve a new round of...
domestic base closures in an effort to economise. This will be bitterly opposed and will likely result in additional pressure on the administration to reduce foreign bases while retaining infrastructure at home. Still, future American defence planning will be dependent not only on world events but also on the strength of the American economy. Clearly, the United States will seek to reduce spending in a period of retrenchment and move towards a strategy that embraces the projection of smaller, more lethal forces for shorter periods of time.

CHANGE IN THE UK
Great Britain was affected by the same shock waves that struck the United States but, due to differences in election cycles, Her Majesty’s Government addressed the challenges about one year sooner. In October 2010, the newly arrived Cameron government released its plan entitled: *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: the Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR). The US perspective on this is important, firstly because it has a significant influence on how the large US body politic regards the UK as an ally, secondly, because the UK needs to be aware of how the US (and the rest of the world) watches and interprets its actions.

SDSR was seen as being designed to set priorities for British national security spending over the coming decade in light of constrained resources and the continuing debate over Britain’s role in the world. All British political parties had committed to undertake a review, the first since 1998, prior to the general election that resulted in the first coalition government in the United Kingdom in many decades. The US watched as the SDSR was conducted over five months in parallel with a Comprehensive Spending Review designed to bring government expenditures in line with projected resources and reduce debt from 11 per cent to 11 per cent of GDP by the end of the current Parliament. It was seen in the US as calling for a downward recalibration in British defence capabilities and capacities in light of fiscal restraints and a focus on emerging threats. Its supporters are understood to have argued that it was not a wholesale retrenchment from global engagement, while its opponents remained convinced that it was solely budget-driven and may only be a ‘down payment’ on additional reductions that will be required in future. Whether it can achieve the goals the Cameron government has proclaimed, US analysts are still waiting to see. Clearly it will be affected by political, economic and security developments over time.

The plan reduces defence spending by roughly eight per cent by 2015, from an annual defence budget of $59 billion. It will also eliminate 25,000 civilian jobs, reducing the Ministry of Defence staff to approximately 60,000 by 2015. The final total British force structure will be roughly 175,000, about the size of the US Marine Corps. The Army will lose 7,000 soldiers, while the Navy and Air Force will each lose 5,000. This will result in an 18 per cent cut in programme resources, given a number of unfunded obligations. The belief in the US is that important decisions will still need to be made in implementing these cuts over the next few years if the UK is to maximise its military output from these diminished resources.

The American military’s ability to counteract the threat posed by the growth of Chinese military power will increasingly shape US defence policy.
Many experts on both sides of the Atlantic have suggested that UK defence cuts could have been a lot worse. Even a few weeks prior to its release, budget cuts of 10 to 20 per cent were actively being discussed. It was reported that American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus had privately urged their respective counterparts in the UK to show restraint. There was even some suggestion in the US that British leaders specifically asked ‘what the Americans would like their future force to look like’, but that senior Obama officials refused to respond in detail. A letter written by British Defence Secretary Liam Fox to Prime Minister Cameron was made public shortly before the SDSR report was released. It argued against larger cuts that many in the Cameron government were thought in the US to want. Some US observers believe Fox threatened to resign if draconian reductions in the military were announced.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS
It was noted in the US that Britain will, however, continue to meet the NATO goal of spending two per cent of GDP on defence for at least the next four years. In 2009, only three European nations met this goal — the United Kingdom, France and Greece. The resulting budget still leaves the United Kingdom with the fourth largest defence budget in the world after the United States, China and Russia. The report also reaffirmed the UK’s commitment to its existing force levels of 9,500 in Afghanistan, but clearly indicated that by the end of 2014, it expects to have reduced these forces significantly. It further endorsed the need to establish a long-term relationship with Afghanistan that is focused on training and capacity-building following the withdrawal of British combat forces.

The SDSR was seen as a strategic decision to try, as far as possible, to maintain a broad spectrum of capabilities, so there is pain for all (perhaps most for the Navy), but there is no doubt in the minds of US analysts that new gaps will appear. It was noted that many experts in the UK were hardly satisfied with the results. Perhaps the best-reported quote was from Lord George Robertson, who authored the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR). In an apparent ‘Lloyd Bentsen/Dan Quayle’ moment, he said: ‘I know a strategic defence review, I did a strategic defence review, and this is no strategic defence review.’ And for many in the US this is the main verdict. Most US observers believe that the effort was largely driven by the Treasury and, consequently, reflects short-termism, pragmatism and politics rather than being a real formula for long-term UK defence and security interests.

It was widely reported in the US that Defence Secretary Fox had complained that the effort was “more like a super CSR (Comprehensive Spending Review)” than a Strategic Defence Review. He worried also that this was an attempt to “bridge a gap that is, financially and intellectually, virtually impossible”. Fox further argued that a more modest reduction in defence spending would require other government departments to make cuts averaging 25 per cent, and this, over time, could place additional strains on the coalition government. In summary, it was reported in the US that, according to the greater part of the British defence and security community, the SDSR did not take the chance to make a radical reassessment of the UK’s position in the world.

Many in Washington were concerned by this retrenchment in British military capabilities and how this would affect the ‘special relationship’. Overall, many US experts predicted that continued economic stagnation in the United Kingdom would likely result in additional cuts in defence. Clearly, they argued, Great Britain would be far less capable to undertake unilateral joint military operations, but might still maintain enough conventional capability to lead a coalition of nations in a small-scale contingency. The United Kingdom might also be able to provide a significant contribution to an American- or NATO-led mission, such as occurred in Libya. Still, most US experts seem to agree that, though the British leadership has stated its commitment to be able to deploy and sustain a brigade-sized unit anywhere on the globe, in fact this ability may already have been compromised.

THE WAY AHEAD?
Both the American and British national security establishments are confronting the enormous aftershocks associated with dramatic changes in the international security and economic environments that have occurred in the past two decades. Clearly, continued commitments coupled with new threats and shrinking resources mean that both nations will be doing ‘less with less’ in relation to their military posture and future deployments. Overcoming these deficits and maintaining, if not enhancing, the ‘special relationship’ will demand the concerted efforts not just of leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, but of the whole defence community, especially on the part of the UK. This is because the deficits may require more to put them right than simply making better choices about the application of shrinking resources.

The amount of British pounds and American dollars devoted to defence, as well as the number of combat aircraft, naval ships, tanks, soldiers, and so on
are all-important measures of the two allies’ military power. Furthermore, an examination of these capabilities, and particularly their capacities, must be placed in the context of political ‘willpower’. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic have frequently raised the issue of ‘continental drift’. Even a casual observer would conclude that key differences exist between the two nations with regard to their respective histories and domestic politics. Consequently, a sober assessment must also acknowledge that the United States is becoming more introspective as it confronts serious economic and social challenges. On the other side of the Atlantic some in the United Kingdom argue that the Iraq war may not only have been a ‘high watermark’ in Anglo-American cooperation, but also the beginning of a decline. While many Americans have come to regret the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many in Great Britain show an even higher level of resentment. Americans comment on the perception in many parts of the United Kingdom that their country was transformed into a client state of Washington, and this has engendered a certain level of bitterness. This challenge must be addressed over time if the relationship is to endure and thrive. A new wave of British and American decision-makers will not necessarily share the current generation’s knowledge of, concern for, or sentimental attachment to the transatlantic relationship.

Both President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron appear to recognise the importance of this and are making appropriate efforts. These are cause for some optimism and should be endorsed by political leaders across the party spectrum. Washington and
London announced the formation of a new joint US-British National Security Council designed to facilitate the sharing of intelligence on long-term security challenges, particularly in the Middle East. This joint board will give the United States and Great Britain a forum to focus on strategy for dealing not just with newly emerging threats, but also with long-term concerns. This is a most worthwhile idea that should be pursued vigorously. Both sides must acknowledge that joint and combined large-scale military deployments such as those that occurred in the Second World War, Korea, the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and more recently Iraq, are unlikely in the near future.

**FUTURE COOPERATION**

Still, there are new challenges and opportunities that can best be addressed collectively. Expanded training, discussions on the use of Special Operations Forces, the employment of drones, counterterrorism, and war in cyberspace are obvious candidates. Serious conversations about the future of nuclear weapons and the role of these weapons, along with the conventional forces necessary for their protection and use, in national and alliance deterrence strategies, are also critical and urgent. But these discussions will only be successful if they are embraced by both political establishments and are conducted in total candour. The Cold War relationship is rapidly coming to an end. There should be little doubt in London that the United States expects Europe to assume more responsibility for its own security, as well as dealing with North Africa, while remaining a close partner in the Middle East more broadly. Washington will want London to be a leader in this effort. Consequently, the Libyan operation in 2011, though hardly the epitome of allied defence cooperation, may serve as a model for operations in the future. It also, however, demonstrated serious allied force weaknesses that must be addressed. Secretary of Defense Gates described this challenge unmistakably in his well-known valedictory address at NATO headquarters in June 2011. He stressed some of the positive aspects of the Libyan mission, but also observed: "If current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders — those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me – may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO to be worth the cost."

Prime Minister Cameron and President Obama struck a note of optimism during a meeting in Washington in the spring of 2012. They noted that the alliance between the United States and Great Britain is a ‘partnership of the heart’ that is steeped in common interests and values. But both men candidly stated that the fundamental prerequisite in a changing world will be to ‘keep it up’. That challenge looms large in both our futures.

The Cold War relationship is rapidly coming to an end – the United States expects Europe to assume more responsibility for its own security.