THE MILITARY BUDGET AND FORCE POSTURE

Policymakers should

- adopt a grand strategy of restraint to guide military spending reductions;
- move away from a grand strategy that demands military dominance in multiple theaters simultaneously and toward strategies of denial;
- make the U.S. Army leaner and shift resources to the U.S. Air Force and Navy;
- phase out legacy weapons systems that are expensive to maintain and unsuited to the modern battlefield, such as the Ticonderoga-class cruiser, the littoral combat ship, and the A-10 aircraft, among other capabilities;
- transition from a nuclear triad to a dyad by phasing out ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles; and
- adopt a nuclear strategy that uses nuclear weapons to deter a shorter list of adversary actions.

On August 30, 2021, the United States ended its nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan. The end of America's longest war offered an opportunity to reflect on how the United States wields its military power, how much it spends on war, and why its preferred grand strategy calls for frequent military intervention. Unfortunately, this moment came and went without introspection or strategic change.

Instead, the Biden administration has held on to the outdated goal of sustaining U.S. military dominance in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific simultaneously, which demands astronomical levels of defense spending. The fiscal year 2022 enacted defense budget was $781.8 billion. In spring 2022, the Biden administration asked Congress for a FY 23 national defense budget of $813.4 billion, a 4 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. Both the House and Senate have voted to authorize more spending than the administration's FY 23 request, indicating an appetite for taking defense spending even higher.

If the United States continues down its current path, it will not take long for defense spending to cross the $1 trillion threshold, and advocates of an unrestrained, global U.S. military posture will undoubtedly regard even that sum as too little.

Strategic inertia is tempting because it allows policymakers to avoid harder policy questions. So long as the United States remains wedded to a grand strategy of primacy, defense budgets will continue to rise.

This chapter argues for a different approach, one of grand strategic restraint. Under this alternative grand strategy, the U.S. military would focus on countering a narrower set of threats via a more conservative approach to military strategy that abandons the idea of sustaining U.S. military dominance in all three regions. Restraint would force allies to take on a greater share of the burden for their own defense, would reduce the overall size of the U.S. military, would reduce the role and number of forward-deployed forces, and would adopt a rightsized nuclear strategy.

The Problems with Primacy

Primacy is the current U.S. grand strategy. It is based on the idea that the forward deployment and frequent use of military power have prevented great-power conflict. During the Cold War, the United States established military alliances in Europe and Asia to contain the Soviet Union. Large deployments of U.S. troops on allied territory became the norm. This globe-spanning military presence continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the expansion of U.S. alliances and a new rationale of maintaining the United States atop the international order.

U.S. military strategy under primacy emphasizes going on the offensive quickly and decisively. Because primacy takes an expansive view of threats to U.S. security, the military must be able to fight terrorist groups, great powers like Russia and China, and "rogue states" like Iran and North Korea in their own backyards. This in turn requires large numbers of forward-deployed U.S. forces in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. In other words, under a grand strategy of primacy, the U.S. military must be able to go on the attack against a long list of adversaries across three large regions with the potential to fight multiple conflicts at the same time.

This approach has performed well against the regular military forces of small, weak U.S. adversaries. The United States was able to easily sweep away opposing militaries in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, but the disastrous consequences of those interventions point toward the significant problems of primacy and its associated military strategy.

Primacy's overarching goal of maintaining the United States atop the international order via unrivaled military strength goes hand in hand with threat inflation. It is good to be the king of the international system, but this position looks precarious to the country at the top. Any challenge to U.S. military dominance—be it a rising China, Iran seeking a nuclear weapon, or terrorist groups wreaking havoc in the Middle East—is a threat to the United States, not because war is at America's doorstep but because the challenge risks shaking the international order. Perceived threats are everywhere, so the U.S. military must also be everywhere.

In the 2000s and 2010s, threat inflation and global military presence combined in the Global War on Terror, which saw frequent U.S. military interventions against terrorist groups and states that harbored them. These wars were costly. The Costs of War Project at Brown University estimates that the United States spent $8 trillion on the Global War on Terror, including Department of Defense Overseas Contingency Operations funding, Department of State war expenditures, care for veterans, Department of Homeland Security spending, and interest payments.

Another major problem with primacy is that it makes prioritization impossible. If there are many potential threats to U.S. dominance, then focusing on one specific threat and adjusting U.S. force posture accordingly creates unacceptable risks because the military will be less prepared to respond to other contingencies.

That inability to prioritize also makes it difficult for the military to shed outdated legacy systems that are costly to maintain. For example, the U.S. Navy wants to retire 22 *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers by FY 27, which are 35 years old on average. Although each ship can carry upward of 120 missiles, their aging components and systems have a higher likelihood of breaking down, which means more time and money spent on repairs. Furthermore, the radar systems on the cruisers are being outstripped by new systems, and it would be too costly and time-consuming to upgrade the ships. However, several members of Congress—including the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces—oppose retiring the ships because it would reduce the overall size of the fleet while China's navy is growing.

Restraint: An Alternative Approach

Policymakers should abandon primacy and instead adopt a grand strategy of restraint with an associated military strategy of denial that uses force less often and has a smaller forward-deployed footprint.

The military component of restraint has three pillars. First, the United States should abandon the goal of sustaining global military dominance against all potential threats and instead emphasize preventing other great powers from achieving dominance over Europe and Asia. Second, the United States should shift the burden for regional stability onto its allies and reduce its forward-deployed military presence significantly in all regions while removing forces entirely from the Middle East. Third, the United States should change its military force posture to reduce the size of the army and turn the air force and navy into surge forces that could deploy quickly should allied forces face decisive defeat by a regional great power and vital U.S. interests come under threat.

U.S. military strategy under restraint would emphasize denial—preventing quick and easy victory by an attacker. It is generally easier to prevent an opponent from establishing a dominant military position than it is to maintain overwhelming U.S. military advantages in perpetuity. Under a strategy of denial, the United States could focus more on playing defense and making it harder for opponents to project military power outward rather than going on the offensive itself.

A denial strategy requires much smaller forward deployments of U.S. troops because these units would no longer be expected to defeat the attacker outright. Instead, smaller forward-deployed units or "stand-in" forces would be light, mobile, and dispersed to avoid destruction while still being a thorn in the attacker's side. Some ground units could remain in the stand-in force, but these deployments would be minimal and geared toward frustrating an offensive push by an adversary rather than going on the attack. Stand-in air and naval forces would likewise focus on defensive operations, but most of the U.S. Air Force and Navy would serve as a surge force that could deploy should the stand-in forces and U.S. allies prove insufficient.

American policymakers should expect allies to pull their own weight, especially since allies face much greater immediate risks from regional great powers. U.S. allies in Europe and Asia have the economic capacity to increase defense spending—in 2021, the combined gross domestic product of the four largest European NATO members (France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) was seven times that of Russia; and given their geographic proximity to Russia and China, they have a strong strategic incentive to bolster their defenses. Allies will understandably lack the political will to make serious, sustained investments in their own defense if the United States is willing to increase its own military presence at the first sign of danger.

Of all the military services, the U.S. Army should be cut most. The active-duty army should be substantially smaller and postured mostly for defense of

the U.S. homeland. Active-duty army end strength should be cut by 20 percent, from approximately 486,000 soldiers to approximately 389,000. This smaller army should also emphasize different capabilities, reducing its armored units while improving its ability to fight at longer range with more unmanned reconnaissance systems, longer-range artillery, and better air and missile defense. These types of capabilities will help the army operate at longer range and protect itself against attack in the rare event that it needs to deploy.

The U.S. Marine Corps is more relevant to a grand strategy of restraint than is the U.S. Army. Under the Force Design 2030 (FD 2030) plan, the marine corps is getting rid of all tanks, reducing manned aircraft, and reducing its active-duty end strength to increase investments in long-range missiles, unmanned vehicles, and mobility. According to a May 2022 review, divestments from equipment and manpower guided by FD 2030 allowed the marine corps to free up $16 billion over two and a half years that it reinvested in new capabilities.

FD 2030 is primarily aimed at China. The proposed changes would help smaller marine units survive in a fight against China and give them the ability to prevent Chinese ships from getting close to whichever island the marines are holding.

FD 2030 is drawing criticism from retired marine corps generals who argue that it will make the service less flexible, but serious long-term prioritization and difficult tradeoffs are exactly what each military branch ought to be doing. Policymakers should encourage full implementation of FD 2030 and emphasize it as a model for the rest of the armed services.

Unlike the ground warfare services, the U.S. Air Force and Navy would not face large budget cuts so much as shifts in posture and priorities. Both services would see reductions in forward deployments, but they would also retain the capacity to surge into a theater if vital U.S. interests were threatened and regional allies were incapable of addressing the threat.

The big change for the U.S. Air Force under restraint would be a reduced need to penetrate heavily defended airspace, since a military strategy of denial places a lower premium on offensive operations. This change in air force missions would mean the service could reduce emphasis on stealthy aircraft such as the F-35A. The air force currently operates approximately 300 F-35As. According to the Department of Defense's comptroller, the FY 23 budget request aims to procure 33 F-35As for $3.9 billion, or roughly $118 million per aircraft.

Under a grand strategy of restraint, the air force could reduce its procurement of F-35As and instead buy more F-15EXs, a modernized version of the F-15 fighter aircraft that is less expensive to both procure and maintain than the F-35A. The F-15EX is not a stealth aircraft, which means it would struggle to

penetrate modern air defenses. However, the F-15EX is well suited for defensive counterair missions (shooting down opposing, attacking aircraft) thanks to its larger weapons payload. The FY 23 budget request could procure 24 F-15EXs for roughly $2.7 billion, or $112 million per aircraft. The Trump administration's air force acquisition chief suggested capping the F-35A fleet at 800 aircraft or roughly 11 wings, and the air force currently plans on fielding two wings of F-15EXs. Shifting this mix to five wings of F-35As and eight wings of F-15EX would save the air force around $3 billion in procurement costs alone.

U.S. Air Force changes under restraint would go beyond these two airframes of course, but the F-35A versus F-15EX tradeoff is one look into the adjustments and cost savings possible with a new grand strategy.

The U.S. Navy would be the most important service for implementing a grand strategy of restraint, but it would need to be redesigned. The navy should reduce its number of exquisite, expensive ships, such as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, to build larger numbers of smaller ships. Larger warships are powerful, but they are also very expensive, take a long time to build, and are increasingly vulnerable to relatively inexpensive, long-range anti-ship weapons. Smaller warships are less powerful but can be built faster and—thanks to advances in the accuracy and range of missile systems—can punch above their weight.

A June 2022 report from the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft on shifting the United States to a denial strategy in East Asia offers a blueprint for how the navy could adjust its fleet. The report recommends shedding 4 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers (100,000-ton ships) between now and 2035 and fielding 10 light aircraft carriers (45,000-ton ships) through a combination of new ship construction and repurposing of some existing ships. The fleet would also reduce its stock of large amphibious assault ships by retiring and not replacing seven Wasp-class landing helicopter docks. Larger surface ships—destroyers and cruisers—would drop from 92 to 73, primarily via retirement of the *Ticonderoga*-class ships (22 hulls to 3 by 2035). Smaller surface ships would get a significant boost, with 35 new *Constellation*-class frigates joining the fleet between now and 2035.

Overall, the 2035 fleet envisioned in the Quincy Institute report would have more ships than the current fleet, but it would be less expensive. The report estimates that its proposed fleet would save $13 billion annually by 2035.

Finally, restraint calls for a different nuclear force posture and approach to deterrence. The United States is currently modernizing all three legs of the U.S. nuclear triad (land-based missiles, submarines, and nuclear-capable aircraft). Over the next 30 years, this modernization effort will cost over $1 trillion. A 2021 Congressional Budget Office report assessed that more than half of this amount, $634 billion, will come due between 2021 and 2030. This

upcoming period when nuclear modernization costs rise as programs move out of research and development and into procurement is commonly known as the "bow wave." Navy and air force leadership have raised concerns that nuclear modernization costs will crowd out funding for conventional capabilities unless defense spending increases.

Nuclear strategy would also change under restraint. If allies shoulder a greater burden for preventing and responding to regional threats with larger conventional forces, then the United States could depend less on nuclear weapons to deter those threats. Washington should move toward a "sole purpose" doctrine that contemplates using nuclear weapons to prevent nuclear but not conventional attack. This alternative approach to deterrence requires fewer nuclear weapons. Policymakers should cancel the new land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program and begin a phased retirement of existing ICBMs to move from a triad to a dyad of nuclear-armed submarines and bombers. Eliminating the ICBM leg of the triad would save $150 billion over 30 years.

Conclusion

Policymakers should begin the process of moving from a grand strategy of primacy undergirded by global U.S. military dominance toward a grand strategy of restraint. Sustaining dominance is a recipe for ever-growing defense spending. Restraint would push U.S. allies to do more for their own defense by drastically reducing forward-deployed U.S. troops. The U.S. Army would see steep cuts, and the marine corps could focus on being a lighter, more mobile force that could work alongside allied units to blunt potential attacks. The U.S. Air Force and Navy could be restructured to become a surge force that could intervene if lighter U.S. stand-in forces and allies are not strong enough and vital U.S. interests came under threat.

Restraint is a more effective, less expensive grand strategy that better reflects the minuscule threat to the U.S. homeland and the capacity for allies to do more to uphold stability in their own backyards. Implementing restraint would require a smaller, less forward-deployed U.S. military and reduce the defense budget. Policymakers should begin moving toward this alternative defense strategy immediately.

Suggested Readings

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Gomez, Eric, Christopher A. Preble, Lauren Sander, and Brandon Valeriano. "Building a Modern Military: The Force Meets Geopolitical Realities." Cato Institute White Paper, May 26, 2020.
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