

Thomas Donnelly
Director, Center for Defense Studies
American Enterprise Institute

TESTIMONY
House Armed Services Committee
13 September 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Smith, for the opportunity to testify today. I know we “outside experts” are an imperfect substitute for the former secretaries of defense who you had planned to hear from today, but given the gravity of the moment – I believe that the future health of the U.S. armed forces and the security of the United States may well be in the hands of the members of the “Super Committee” and, generally, in the consideration of our government’s finances.

That is not to say that I concur with Admiral Mike Mullen’s view that our deficits and debts are the greatest security challenge we face. Quite the opposite: I am worried that our future prosperity depends first and foremost on our future security. I cannot imagine that today’s global economy, itself a manifestation of American power and international leadership, will be nearly so fruitful absent the guarantees we provide. The fiscal problems of the federal government are neither the result of military spending, nor can they be cured by cutting military spending. And, of course, as a percentage of American wealth and federal spending, Pentagon budgets have been constantly cut since the 1980s. And during this administration, the Department of Defense has been the bill-payer of first and almost only choice, coughing up hundreds of billions of dollars while other agencies have been fed a diet rich in “stimulus.”

But rather than focus on the finances or even the programmatic consequences of the cuts in prospect – which are severe and, should Super-Committee “sequestration” or the equivalent come to pass, debilitating to our armed forces – I would like to talk a bit about the likely strategic consequences. It has become fashionable to talk about American “decline” in the abstract, or to describe “strategic risk” in an anodyne fashion. And so I will take a quick tour of the strategic horizon, looking at particular global and regional balances of power that can only become more volatile with the diminished presence of American forces or the diminished capabilities that they may bring to bear.

I derive the framework of this tour from the work of the Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel, the bipartisan – nay, “nonpartisan” – effort that was essentially the creation of this committee. The panel quickly discovered that the formal process of defense strategy-making in the QDR had become bankrupt, and thus was thrown back upon its own long experience and knowledge about the persistent patterns and habits of U.S. security strategy; that is, not what we have said we would do, but what we actually have done in the course of the post-World War II decades, during the time where America has come to its position of global leadership. This I offer also as the most

reliable benchmark about what would be different about the world to come, the world without American leadership.

The panel deduced four consistent U.S. national security interests:

- The defense of the American homeland;
- Assured access to the “commons” on the seas, in the air, in space and in “cyberspace;”
- The preservation of a favorable balance of power across Eurasia that prevents authoritarian domination of that region; and
- Providing for the global “common good” through such actions as humanitarian aid, development assistance, and disaster relief.

Carrying out the missions associated with securing these four fundamental interests have been the *raison d’être* of U.S. military forces under presidents of both parties in times of conflict, of Cold-War competition, and in moments relative stability and peace. Taken together, they define America’s role in the world. I will consider how each might be affected by a loss of American military power.

Defense of the American Homeland

The tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, if nothing else, provided a reminder of the primacy of the mission of defending the American homeland. That there has been no repeat of those terrifying attacks is both a surprise – certainly I anticipated that there might be more to come – and a testament to the efforts made. The al Qaeda organization which conducted those attacks has been badly punished and our defenses vastly improved, indeed to the point where complacency, not “overreaction,” is as big a concern. The role of the Department of Defense has often been a supporting and secondary element in the immediate defense of the United States proper, but it nonetheless has brought immense capabilities to bear in that support; the military’s intelligence-gathering contributions amount to tens of billions of dollars annually.

Second, the distinction between homeland defense and foreign operations is very slim in the case of international terrorist groups. Homeland defense must not begin at the borders, and, if it is to continue to be effective, must be tactically and operationally offensive, preventing and disrupting attacks, not merely responding to them. September 11 shattered our belief in “strategic depth,” that physical distance was sufficient to protect us against otherwise weak enemies.

Lastly, we should not forget the full meaning of America’s “homeland.” The term traditionally is meant to incorporate all North America and the Caribbean Basin; it is something we share with our neighbors. Over the past decade, our neighborhood has become more dangerous, particularly to the south, where criminal gangs and criminal regimes are increasingly enveloped in a kind of syndicate – one that can include terrorist groups – that preys upon fragile democracies and which makes for violent acts even within the United States.

One measure of the consequences of defense cuts is likely to be that the Defense Department's "homeland commands" – Northern and Southern commands – are prime targets for reductions, consolidation, even elimination under various "reform" proposals that treat these headquarters, which are truly combatant commands, as "overhead." But NORTHCOM is still in its infancy while SOUTHCOM has constantly been a neglected child and a source of "savings" in the post-Cold-War years. Yet these two commands reflect our oldest and most critical security interests.

Access to the 'Commons'

Describing the maritime, air, space and cyberspace "realms" as "international commons" is an imprecise term – there are, for example, sovereign waters and air space – but nonetheless these domains are critical components of international security and also commerce. And assured access, and in terms of war, dominance and supremacy, to these realms is a critical element of U.S. national security strategy.

To observe that Americans are seafaring people or to describe the United States as a "maritime power" is hardly a controversial point. Even the most isolationist elements of the domestic political spectrum will support the power-projection posture of the U.S. Navy, despite its British imperial overtones. And the importance of secure sea lines of communication – particularly the shipping route that stretches from the Persian Gulf through the Red Sea, Indian Ocean to the Malacca Straits and South China Sea to Northeast Asia, which carries an immense and growing volume of the world's trade – remains critical to international security. But a smaller Navy, even one with more-capable ships but fewer overseas bases, is less frequently present in places such as the South China Sea, where who "rules the waves" is open to doubt and a matter of potential conflict. Likewise, new technologies are allowing China and others to develop a range of "anti-access" and "area-denial" capabilities that are shifting the naval balance. The U.S. Navy is as small as it has been since World War I; force reductions would both encourage adversaries and discourage allies or would-be strategic partners.

But the cardinal virtue of U.S. military power – and, in the age of the aircraft carrier, even of naval power – has been the quality of American air power. Two decades ago, in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, U.S. air supremacy reached its zenith, fabled not only for its firepower but its unprecedented precision; war from the air was a uniquely American way of war. At the core of this mystique was the ability to mass and synchronize large swarms of tactical aircraft. This method of operations built a mountain of effects out of a molehill of airplanes, relying on access to bases in the theater of operations. The same technologies that threaten surface ships now hold these air bases at risk – but also, the swarms of "fourth generation" F-15s, F-16s and F/A-18s are aging and their numbers are shrinking. The cuts in view could result in a fighter force half the size of the "Desert Storm"-era armada. And the generation-long failure to modernize is felt most directly in the tactical air forces: the F-22 program was stopped at 187 Raptors when 750 were once planned, and the F-35 would certainly be the prime target of future cuts.

Access to space – which has long been “militarized” much to the advantage of the United States – is no longer a sure thing. And even where access might be retained, military dominance and supremacy are uncertain. This is a critical vulnerability for U.S. forces, whose weapons, operations, communications and more depend on it. As observed above, intelligence satellites are essential in even the smallest, most irregular operations against the tiniest terrorist groups, but the loss of larger networks in a conflict against a more sophisticated foe – and China is at the forefront in developing and recently testing anti-satellite systems – would be catastrophic.

Strategic and operational thinking about “cyberspace” is still being developed, but the best analogies and precedents are to be found in regarding this realm as similar to the maritime domain. The Internet is indeed much more a venue for commerce and civilian communication than a military asset, though it is that; sharing information has been a key to the process of “transformation.” It has already been a domain for private “pirates” and used, notably by Russia, as a battlefield. No one is quite sure what it means to “secure” cyberspace, but suffice it to observe that the failure to do so in a significant way would be a critical test of international politics and an easily imaginable provocation to war.

In sum, even as the “common” realms where commerce, communication and security intersect are expanding and the burdens of “securing the commons” or “assuring free access” to them appear to be growing, the U.S. military is already at full stretch. A fading of American power would inevitably result in a contest to control these commons.

Continental Balances

The corollary of the commonplace observation that America is a “maritime power” is that U.S. strategic posture has been – and should return to – that of an “offshore balancer,” intervening only in conflicts across the Eurasian landmass to prevent a “hostile hegemon” from dominating Europe or the Middle East or East Asia. But, as quickly became clear to the members of the QDR Independent Panel, close attention to these continental balances has been the core of American strategy-making for decades.

The most obvious example and most obvious success is to be found in Europe – a continent that has been intertwined with the American security since the discovery of the “New World.” The pursuit of a “Europe whole and free” was the central goal of the Cold War, but even that was a recognition that World War II left the situation across the continent dangerous and unstable. Conversely, the end of the Cold War appears to have put a punctuation mark on centuries of conflict; it is hard to imagine a large-scale war in Europe, and that is a direct result not only of American “offshore balancing” but American presence and alliance-building since 1945. U.S. military presence in Europe is a shadow of its former self, though it remains critical as a “lily pad” for deployments elsewhere – Libya is the most recent example but all the recent operations in the Middle East were enabled by Europe-based forces. And the unprecedented peace of Europe is itself a great blessing that comes at low cost.

Likewise, the American commitment to the “Middle East” – a very loose term – has grown even as we have been able to draw down in Europe. In 1979, U.S. Central Command did not even exist; the Carter Administration cobbled together a “Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force” in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that could neither deploy very rapidly or bring much force to bear. Every president since then has found reason to take a larger hand in a very volatile but important region, from the 1987 reflagging of oil tankers to Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. In particular, we have come to see the region as many theaters in one. The focus of most efforts of the last generation has been on the Arab world, but it is increasingly clear that South Asia is a problem unto itself; we walk away from Pakistan only at extreme peril.

Finally, our engagement in East Asia, north and south, on Pacific islands and ashore, is as long-lasting and, over time, as large as that in Europe. But no event is of greater geopolitical import than the rise of China; how we respond to that – and the course of China itself – is the salient issue of the moment and for the future. We have treaty allies in Japan, South Korea and elsewhere, whose safety, prosperity and – perhaps surprisingly but assuredly – democracy depend upon our regional posture and our military power. What is not surprising is that China is lately making the most mischief in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, where we were once constantly present and supremely powerful. Ironically, the one nation to resist U.S. force, Vietnam, is leading the call for American to return to the scene.

The Global Good

One of the supreme reasons why the American exercise of military power attracts even former adversaries is that, at least in contrast to others, we can and do use our forces not only to deter, punish and defeat but to relieve, aid and develop. Be it a response to a humanitarian crisis – a tsunami, a nuclear meltdown or a combination of the two – or an uncertain and open-ended attempt to replace what John Quincy Adams called “derelict” states with legitimate government, contributing to a common good beyond the strict national interest has been and ought to remain an important mission for the U.S. military.

To protest that, especially in tough times, we must conserve our strength only for those occasions that demand “warfighting” capabilities or the kind of sophisticated operations and high technologies only possessed by our armed forces is, if experience counts for anything, to expect too much – or too little. Given the character of our political principles and the extent of our power, the kind of hard-nosed “realism” of the international relations professoriat is a theory that American strategic practice is unlikely to fulfill. It is not realistic to expect the United States to be like Bismark’s Prussia.

Moreover, the failure to act in pursuit of a global and common good would make the practice of harder power more difficult. The rest of the world sees how we behave – indeed, they spend most of their own strategy-making energy in first trying to figure out what we will do – and behaves accordingly. If the United States falters in its attempts at making the world a better place, if we think we can “lead from behind,” we will find it harder to make it a very safe place.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to the committee's questions.