Ending America’s Grand Strategic Failures

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It is all too tempting for Americans to focus on the Coronavirus crisis, the pandemic’s impact on the U.S. economy, and the existing levels of racism revealed by the killing of George Floyd. The fact remains, however, that the U.S. is still facing equally serious challenges in national security. The U.S. may be spending more on defense, but it lacks a meaningful and well-focused approach to strategy, force planning, and dealing with its strategic partners in virtually every area of national security.

The most recent case example is the cut of some 9,500 U.S. troops in Germany – more than 25% of the total U.S. troops stationed in Germany. These U.S. troops perform critical roles in shaping NATO’s deterrent and defense capabilities and also in supporting U.S. global power projection. The motive for these cuts may be the fact that Germany has not spent 2% of its GDP on defense, but it may also be a retaliation against Chancellor Angela Merkel for not attending a G-7 conference held in the United States that seems to have been designed largely for political visibility rather than actual diplomatic importance.

This is scarcely the only time the U.S. has faced major national security challenges or needed to make major changes in its strategy. Since 1945, various Presidents and Congresses have faced crises like the beginning of the Cold War, the nuclear arms race, Vietnam, the decision to invade Iraq, and the state and conduct of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. All were challenges the U.S. met slowly and with mixed results.

However, these past decisions were reactions – successful or failed – to events that were driven from outside the U.S. and ones that involved major new areas of uncertainty. Today’s failures do involve meeting some new challenges, but many involve the decline of America’s global position through a focus on the wrong priorities and neglect of the right ones.

The U.S. has made progress in one area: making increases in the defense budget, but far too many of these increases have gone to funding the readiness and the shopping lists of the U.S. military services. There have been few original ideas and changes that have actually benefitted national security.

The U.S. still lurches from one budget year to the next budget year with no clear path for shaping its strategy, planning, programing, or shift in a direction that goes beyond past underfunding or near-term reactions to events. The U.S. has failed to build effectively on its new National Security Strategy (NSS) issued in 2017. The new strategy was only the rough shell of a real strategy when it was initially issued, and it has never been turned into real plans or any consistent effort at implementation.

Moreover, the cost of U.S. defense has escalated far beyond $700 billion a year without any clear sense of direction, and it has done so at a time when even the highest estimates of Chinese spending do not go beyond $250 billion and estimates of Russian spending rarely go beyond $62 billion. There are no areas where increases in spending have been publicly tied to net assessments of the threat or to the comparative effectiveness of each side’s military spending.

The FY2021 budget submission is said to be a strategy-driven document, but it is really a list of each military services’ immediate spending priorities with no real strategy for any region, combatant command in key areas, or joint warfare. There is no real future year defense plan, and
the only serious planning for the future that has taken place that affects U.S. strategy has come largely out of the combatant commands rather than from the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

To the limited extent there has been any major shift in national strategy, it has taken the form of an erratic focus on “worst case” major wars with Russia and China and on their advanced nuclear systems and missile defenses. The U.S. has moved away from global engagement at a time when Russia and China are scoring their greatest gains through limited “gray area” acts of political and military intimidation, economic pressure, support of outside state and non-state actors, and information/cyber warfare. China and Russia now are “winning” largely through efforts to undermine U.S. strategic partnerships.

While the Joint Chiefs’ interest primarily lies in ending the focus on counterterrorism since 2001 and going back to traditional military roles, it is partly to blame because the key problem has been an approach that is drifting towards neo-isolationism. The U.S. has minimized the importance of strategic partnerships, undermined or rejected serious arms control efforts, and focused on strategic partner and allied total military spending to the near exclusion of an interest in maintaining and strengthening key strategic partnerships.

One example is focusing more on a vain effort to create a partnership with North Korea’s dictator than on creating an effective level of deterrence in South Korea. Another is giving the U.S. role in the Trans-Pacific Partnership as a gift to China, which created a broad climate of uncertainty and distrust throughout much of Asia from Australia and New Zealand to Mongolia.

The U.S. seems to have no cohesive civil-military strategy for dealing with China. Regional defense planning seems to have been left largely to the Indo-Pacific Command, and the U.S. has no clear posture for dealing with Southeast Asia or the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). U.S. trade, sanctions, and tariff efforts have been more a matter of opportunistic exercises in seeking transactional advantage than part of coherent efforts to define stable new long-term strategies and relationships.

As for Central and South Asia, the U.S. seems to have abandoned any effort to deal with human rights in dealing with India, and it has done so without having made clear gains in establishing a solid strategic relationship. The U.S. has effectively left its focus on Central Asia, has no clear policy towards Pakistan, and may or may not be determined to leave Afghanistan on the basis of a Vietnam-like failed peace. Like so many other areas, states in these regions are now in the position of “waiting for Godot” to get any serious and lasting set of U.S. strategic priorities.

No one in the Gulf or the Middle East – from Israel to Saudi Arabia – can see a strategy that goes beyond Iran, counterterrorism, and a focus on burden sharing and arms sales. Trust in America has been eroded by sudden shifts in force cuts to force build-ups and return. It has also been eroded by demands for more spending by our strategic partners at a time when partners like Oman, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are spending far more of their economies on defense than the United States.

The Arab-Israel peace plan has been largely an exercise in abandoning the two-state solution. Seventeen years after invading Iraq, the U.S. still has no clear policy for dealing with Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, or the Red Sea states. Putting maximum pressure on Iran and withdrawing from the JCPOA has so far seriously increased the risk of clashes and war in the Gulf and has also led a major increase in Iran’s production of enriched Uranium and in its other nuclear efforts.
More broadly, no one in the Gulf can now predict the level of U.S. commitment to staying in the region or of the risk that U.S. pressure on Iran will provoke a war. Dependence on the U.S. is now coupled to a region-wide lack of trust, and the end result gives China and Russia new opportunities and also wastes decades of U.S. efforts to build up stable relationships since the Iran-Iraq War and the fight to liberate Kuwait.

The successful break-up of the ISIS Caliphate in Iraq and Syria was the product of military advice and professionalism. This expertise now seems to be lacking as the U.S. announces sudden withdrawals and build-ups without providing real leadership. The military may have defeated the ISIS protostate in Iraq and Eastern Syria, but it has so far failed to lead in dealing with Syria, has failed to demand a clear strategy for dealing with the aftermath of breaking up the Caliphate, and has dithered over troop levels and military commitments to staying in the Gulf.

Any level of success in counterterrorism, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf states has been largely the product of career professionals and area experts. It has also been almost exclusively oriented towards dealing with the military threat posed by ISIS and Iraq. There has been little to no focus on dealing with the causes of extremism, civil instability, and economic failure – issues the Coronavirus and oil price crises have now made far more critical throughout the region.

As for our strongest alliance, the new plan to reduce U.S. forces in Germany highlights the fact that Europe and NATO is an area where the U.S. focuses on spending rather than actually increasing defense and deterrence – a posture which has critically undermined America’s national security. While the U.S. military has worked with their European counterparts to create a more effective structure of deterrence in the forward areas near Russia, the U.S. focus on increasing allied capabilities without any clear public focus on providing more effective forces has done little more than alienate key strategic partners and has been seen largely as burden sharing bullying and a lack of firm U.S. commitment to collective security.

Part of this is the collective fault of NATO. Its focus on two mathematically and functionally absurd spending goals – 2% of GDP on military forces and 20% of military spending on R&D and procurement – ignores every real aspect of strategy. It focuses on goals which say nothing about whether a given ally’s efforts are currently effective, if more money is needed in a certain area, or on how to unite NATO in creating more effective deterrent and defense capabilities.

The decision to react to Chancellor Merkel’s refusal to join a G7 meeting held before the U.S. election by cutting the U.S. force posture in Germany by 25% is a further example of pursuing the wrong goals without a real strategy. Germany is a critical station for U.S. air movements to the Gulf and to any redeployments that affect U.S. efforts to deter Russian pressure on NATO, and it has been a center of key medical facilities for military evacuees from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Germany has made real mistakes, and it can and should do more to create and maintain effective military forces. There is a real need for dialogue on both German and NATO-wide defense planning that focuses on real priorities for improving deterrence and defense. But, there is also a far greater need to push Germany to make its forces more effective in the areas that really matter, instead of pressuring Germany to reach spending levels as a fixed percentage of GDP.

Moreover, the broader U.S. focus on burden sharing has created a critical need to take a hard look at just how valuable our key strategic partners are throughout the world. To put such burden sharing efforts in real world perspective, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that Russia had a defense budget of $48.2 billion in 2019 and defense expenditures of
$61.6 billion. These figures are not directly comparable to NATO official figures, but they still provide a good indication of the relative size of Russian and NATO efforts.

If one uses the $61.6 billion total figure for Russian military spending, NATO estimates that U.S spending alone was $730.1 billion in current $US in 2019, which was 11.9 times higher than the higher IISS figure for Russia. This makes it a far better case for examining the comparative allocation of resources – and the effectiveness of such spending on each side – than just asking for more money for the U.S. defense budget.

But here, NATO Europe also compares remarkably well with Russia. NATO reports that NATO Europe spent $284.0 billion on defense in current $US in 2019. This was 4.6 times more than total Russian spending. It is also worth pointing out that Germany alone spent $54.1 billion or 88% of the Russian total, France spent $50.7 billion (82%), and the U.K. spent $60.7 billion (99%). And, if Canada is included among our allies, the total comes to $305.9 billion or 5.0 times more than the Russian total.

The official NATO estimate of total spending in 2019 was $984.2 billion or 16.0 times higher than Russia’s spending. Russia has no meaningful strategic partners in terms of military spending.

The closest thing Russia has to a direct ally is Belarus, and it only spent $.136 billion on military forces in 2019. Given these figures, the value of our NATO strategic partners becomes far more clear, and the priority for effective force planning again is obviously far greater than meeting arbitrary percentage of GDP goals by burden sharing.

When it comes to comparative economic resources, the issue is equally clear. The NATO estimate of the size of each member country’s economy or GDP is reported in constant dollars, and uses a metric called “Real GDP” based upon 2015 prices and exchange rates. It estimates the U.S. GDP as being $20.004 trillion in 2019, and the GDP of its NATO European allies GDP as being $17.568 trillion – raising the U.S. total to $37.572 trillion or by 88%. The IISS puts Russia’s GDP in 2019 at only $1.64 trillion in 2019 – a little over 4% of the total NATO GDP of $39.243 trillion and 9.3% of the NATO European total. Belarus only had a GDP of $62.6 billion.

And, the dollar value of our strategic partners is scarcely confined to Europe. The figures for Asia are less clear because there are no equivalent official sources of comparable data as there is for NATO. The IISS estimates, however, that key strategic partners like Australia spent $25.5 billion on defense in 2019. Japan spent $48.5 billion, South Korea spent $38.8 billion, New Zealand spent $2.7 billion, Singapore spent $11.3 billion, and Thailand spent $7.1 billion. Defense spending by these U.S. strategic partners totals $133.9 billion, and this compares with an IISS estimate of $181.1 billion for China.

Two other key powers that have security issues with China include India ($60.5 billion) and Vietnam ($5.2 billion). If they are added to the total, China faces other Asian states that spent $199.6 billion compared to $181.1 billion for China. And, the IISS estimates that China only accounted for 42% of all Asian defense spending in 2019. Even allowing for Chinese underreporting of its military spending – and other estimates for China that go as high as $250 billion a year – these strategic partner spending levels are still very significant figures.

The figures for the Middle East show the same trends. Key strategic partners like Bahrain spent $1.5 billion in 2019, Egypt spent $3.4 billion, Israel spent $19.7 billion, Jordan spent $1.7 billion, Kuwait spent $6.4 billion, Morocco spent $3.6 billion, and Saudi Arabia spent $78.4 billion. Two other key partners with high spending levels – Qatar and the UAE – did not report, but this still
produces a total of $114.7 billion. Iraq – which may become a U.S. partner – spent another $20.5 billion. This compares with $17.4 billion for a hostile Iran.⁷

These issues are critical in shaping a grand strategy that will serve both U.S. and partner interests as well as in real world competition with China, Russia, and other nations like Iran and North Korea. The key resource issues are not spending more, but spending far more wisely. The key strategic priorities are to make our partnerships as effective as possible, to develop consistent plans and budget for both military and civil programs, and to modernize and strengthen the aspect of our military capabilities where it is shown to be clearly necessary and cost-effective.

The U.S. must return to a focus on nuclear arms control and pursue nuclear modernization. But, preserving mutual assured destruction simply ends in pushing China and Russia to compete in economic and political terms, gray area operations, and low-level or third-party wars. It is consistent U.S. efforts to modernize and strengthen the global structure it has been building since the end of the last World War – on the civil, economic, and military level and on a region-by-region and nation-by-nation basis – that should be the focus of U.S. strategy.

To put it simply, the U.S. will be far better off working with its allies and other states – particularly in view of the Coronavirus crisis – than it is by ignoring them, by alienating them through burden sharing, by arbitrarily cutting the forces the U.S. deploys, or by dropping out of treaties and regional agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement. To put it bluntly, we need to focus on the values that have made us a global leader and to stop wasting the legacy made from decades of past efforts.


