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December 3, 2021

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The shift in U.S. strategy from a focus on terrorist threats to a focus on the potential threats from China and Russia, as well as the lesser threats from Iran and North Korea, means the U.S. must look beyond building up deterrent forces and U.S. options for warfighting. So far, however, the U.S. has done far better in strengthening its military forces to compete with China and Russia, and lesser enemies like Iran and North Korea, than it has done to compete in political and gray area terms. A military response to such threats is critical in meeting the Chinese and Russian challenge, but it is only half the battle.

If the U.S. and its strategic partners are to compete successfully with Russia, China, and other major threats, they must also succeed in winning gray area conflicts and "white area" political, diplomatic, and economic competition.

As was the case in the Cold War, U.S. grand strategy must look beyond deterrence and warfighting. It must focus on finding areas of cooperation that reduce tension and the risk of war; on strengthening deterrence by competing for allies and economic partners; and on using diplomacy, trade, investment, and political influence to both support U.S. interests and counter hostile actions and influence building by its major competitors.

The U.S. needs to pay attention to Sun Tzu as well as Clausewitz for other reasons. Any war with China or Russia that escalates to a theater level or higher levels, any war that involves nuclear conflict, or any war that leads to major damage to critical facilities and infrastructure will inflict massive costs and damage to the U.S. and its partners, as well as to the enemy. Even a limited conflict over an objective like Taiwan will have high to massive immediate costs, and it will almost certainly trigger a process of costly further military competition that can extend for decades and trigger further conflicts in the process. Real victory will come from winning in the white and gray areas that can prevent a major conflict, not in "winning" serious wars and major battles.

It may be an exaggeration to talk about "wars" of influence, but if one focuses on "white area" operations and competition, the ability to shape perceptions of the Chinese, Russian, and other major threats will be critical, as will building a consensus about the gravity of such threats with the U.S.'s strategic partners.

The same will be true of building an understanding of the nature of global competition with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. These are areas where the U.S. government needs to be as proactive as possible. This will include conducting regular diplomatic activity, informing the media, and supporting analysis outside the U.S. government. It also, however, means developing and promoting official studies and reports – ways of communicating the nature of the threat that can draw on all the assets used to develop classified and official information to produce "weapons of influence" in unclassified form.

The Secretary of Defense's *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021*

Arguably, the best current example of the need for such reporting is the need for better reporting on the key threats that have led the U.S. to change its strategy. These are the areas where unclassified sources face the most severe limitations and where the U.S. government needs to do the most to inform its own people, its strategic partners, its senior officials, its military officers, both domestic and foreign media, and the analysts of other states.

It is also an area where the U.S. has already made important progress in the form of the Secretary of Defense's latest annual report to Congress on Chinese military power, which was issued in November 2021. This report – now entitled *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* – was first issued years ago as a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) document called *Chinese Military Power*.[1] It built on the precedent set by an annual report issued during the Cold War called *Soviet Military Power*, which had become a critical reference for communicating the real nature of Soviet military developments.

Like this report on Soviet forces, the annual reports on Chinese military power have become a reference that is widely used by analysts on a global level. Unlike reporting that is not based on access to classified data, the annual reports on China provide declassified analyses by the U.S. intelligence community. Their statements, judgments, trend estimates, maps, graphics, and charts have also been as factual as can be provided in an "open source" (unclassified) document.

The original DIA report on China has also expanded in depth each year, and the latest version – *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021* – includes a wide range of additional information on the trends and shape of Chinese military efforts that no source outside the Chinese government and U.S. intelligence could provide, including an analysis of the trends in Chinese strategy and the integration of Chinese civil and military efforts.[2]

This does not mean that other sources of data on threats like China are not of great value, and the U.S. government should do everything it can to quietly provide aid to such efforts. To name a few, the *Military Balance* issued by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) receives informal input from a number of governments and provides a key reference on Chinese forces that has steadily improved in content in recent years.[3]

Janes provides a good set of commercial references on foreign military powers, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provides independent estimates of Chinese and other military spending as well as arms transfers, although it is one that uses its own unique methodology and metrics. At least three other governments and strategic partners – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – provide consistent declassified insights into Chinese forces and trends.

A wide range of think tanks and academic centers – as well as Congressional reports and foreign governments – also contribute studies of key issues relating to China as well as other threats. They provide a range of coverage and opposing views that no U.S. government report can provide, although at some point their accuracy is almost inevitably shaped by their access to official reports – or the lack of it.

The fact remains, however, that no other single source has the same level of access to the U.S. intelligence community or has the breadth of coverage with the same level of detail as the *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021.* The official U.S.

report also has a lasting and incremental impact where press briefings are usually ephemeral at best, often lack substantive content, are given by uninformed spokespersons, or sometimes are full of political spin. One key aspect of any document that is to become a "weapon of influence" is that it must be trusted, and it can only achieve that by earning such trust over time.

There is, however, an important limit to the current report that future drafts will need to address. The *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021* does not cover Chinese civil actions – like China's development of ports, growing presence in the MENA region, role in Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), mining of strategic minerals like cobalt, and acquisition of sensitive foreign manufacturing capabilities. The document's focus is more military than strategic, and it is weak in covering China's longer-term efforts to build-up its strategic presence and compete in "white area" operations. It needs to address Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Europe in more depth.

Similar Reporting Efforts on Russia, Iran, and North Korea Are Too Limited and Sporadic

The report on China is also the exception, rather than the rule. U.S. strategy now focuses on four major threats: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea – and only the report on China has so far emerged as an effective weapon of influence.

The DIA has issued at least one similar report on all three of the other countries that pose major threats. There are reports on *Russia Military Power* in 2017, on *Iran Military Power* in 2019, and on *North Korea Military Power* for 2021. These reports – along with the DIA report on *China Military Power* in 2019 – can be found on the DIA web page under "DIA, Military Power Publications."[4] The same page also provides a short video on the history of *Soviet Military Power* and illustrates its influence in shaping global perceptions of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

Each of the country reports on Russia, Iran, and North Korea does provide a uniquely reliable unclassified reference on the military developments for the year when the report was issued. However, each report has only been issued for a single year. The reports on Russia, Iran, and North Korea have also been limited in coverage compared to the most recent report on China. They have been more topical snapshots of current national forces and order of battle data rather than full assessments of the specific country's mission and key scenario capability or of its future capabilities and trends.

Like the report on China, the reports on Russia, Iran, and North Korea fail to fully cover related civil and white area competition or to cover the impact of their national military and security activities on neighboring states and the U.S.'s strategic partners. For example, each does a good job of warning about the uncertainties in both official and outside estimates on the size of their military spending or on its impact on the national economy, but their assessment of the range of possible spending and its real world purchasing power relative to neighboring states differs sharply in quality from report to report. It also is scarcely surprising that such sporadic reporting has gotten far less outside attention than the consistent series of annual reports on China – and that a single effort has not led to an evolving pattern of steadily better open source coverage.

The U.S. should make official annual reports on Russia, Iran, and North Korea the rule, rather than the exception. The cost should also be relatively minimal in comparison with their potential impact on how the world sees each threat. Documents should draw on work that the DIA will already be

performing to cover additional issues by the director of the National Security Council (NSC) and Department of Defense (DoD) and can draw on the work of other members of the intelligence community, who have to some extent, been left in limbo when they should be used as key weapons of influence and promoted as such.

Looking at Other "Weapons of Influence"

More broadly, the U.S. needs to do far more to make use of its other official reports and websites in an effort to inform and influence other governments, civilian analysts, foreign militaries, and diplomats. There are a wide range of areas of official reporting which could be rapidly developed to provide material to support policy studies and substantive reports, and to promote official reporting as weapons of influence.

Examples include:

- **The Annual Presidential Budget Submissions for the Department of Defense and the Department of State**: These budget submissions should explain the budget trends in ways that explicitly demonstrate how U.S. spending on military forces and foreign aid can support U.S. strategy, how the U.S. is shaping its force posture, and how it is allocating security assistance and civil aid to support its strategic partners and friendly states.

  In practice, the annual Department of Defense budget submission claims to be a strategic document, but it makes almost no substantive effort to link U.S. spending to strategy, to support its strategic partners, and to detail the threats the U.S. faces. Aside from a few token references to strategy in its overview, it is largely a service-by-service shopping list. It lacks the content and focus that the Secretary of Defense's annual posture statement once provided – as well as anything approaching a Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) and its justification.

  The State Department's budget submission makes even less attempt to tie spending to strategy. Its complex reporting structure is budget category driven, rather than functional in explaining the allocation of activity by country and region, and it makes it needlessly difficult to assess U.S. aid activity and the civil side of strategy. Some aspects divide spending by individual bureaucratic element to the point where the cumulative impact of spending on a given country or aid activity borders on the unintelligible.

  Both the Department of Defense and State Department need to report in ways that communicate what the U.S. is doing to support strategic partners, how it is enhancing U.S. power projection and aid capabilities, and how the U.S. is competing and countering the activities of key threat powers and dealing with other threats like terrorism.

- **The Websites of the Eleven Major Combatant Commands for the U.S. military:** These websites include six regional commands (European, Indo-Pacific, Central, Africa, Northern, and Southern) and five functional commands (Strategic, Space, Cyber, Special Operations, and Transportation). A few do provide meaningful posture statements and data on the size and role of the command, but most focus more on the orientation and support of U.S. troops, command biographies, and media contacts. They do little to provide any clear picture of how the U.S. supports its strategic partners, or how it provides regional security, deterrence, and security assistance.

Each major command website needs comprehensive review to develop better in-depth reporting on the role of U.S. military forces in providing local and regional security. This should include a comprehensive posture statement, explanation of how U.S. strategy impacts a given region and functional area, and explanation of how the U.S. provides support to other states. In most cases, there is little or no reason to classify what is obvious to other intelligence services, and the command often provides such material in unclassified testimony to Congress and briefings – often in detailed forms that get little or no mass media or web distribution but would greatly improve outside reports and analyses if they were properly presented in web form.

- **The Congressional Research Service**: The Congressional Research Service (CRS) provides a wide range of research explaining U.S. politics, defense, foreign affairs, and federal spending. The CRS provides balanced and bipartisan reports on U.S. national security activity; the debates and issues that are of interest to Congress and other U.S. decisionmakers; key developments in U.S. foreign policy and national security; as well as coverage on the developments that affect U.S. strategic partners, aid efforts, and developments in potential threats. In many cases, the authors have exceptional access to U.S. government sources and can obtain unclassified versions of U.S. official data.

  This work, however, gets only mixed levels of domestic and foreign attention because the CRS works for the U.S. Congress, and even Americans are sometimes unaware of how useful a source it can be. Outside users – particularly foreign users – are often unaware of the range of CRS reporting and its potential value. Outside users must also depend on a CRS access point at https://crsreports.congress.gov/Home/About that can be a bit difficult to find and use, or on unofficial CRS websites like https://www.everycrsreport.com.

- **The State Department Reports on *Human Rights, Freedom of Religion, and Terrorism*:** The U.S. State Department has long issued three reports on global trends that are of major value in both explaining key aspects of national security and activities with threat states and by hostile NGOs.

  These now often get only limited attention, however, in spite of the fact that two of the reports provide a more balanced and in-depth report than outside sources.

  - *The State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* draw extensively on NGO reporting, but generally avoid the exaggeration in some such reporting.[5] They also are one of the few sources that reports on the quality of law enforcement by country, levels of authoritarian abuse, and the use of paramilitary forces to control the population.
  - *International Religious Freedom Reports* provide a country by country analysis of the extent to which religion is controlled by the state, and the degree to which it is subject to authoritarian abuse or presents a serious internal security issue.[6] The country reports also estimate religious demographics and describe the level of local unrest and the reasons why sectarian tension can lead to repression and/or civil violence. They do not, however, fully report on overall levels of religious violence and sectarian political divisions.
  - *The State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* has yet to be updated.[7] It is not clear at this writing why no report has been made for 2020. It is

clear, however, that the 2019 report was very poorly edited, had a statistical annex from a new source where much of the content seemed to be a data dump rather than useful analysis, and that the credibility of much of the data and analysis was uncertain. It is unclear how the input data are derived. The report generally does not address the causes of terrorism, the structure and effectiveness of counterterrorism forces, and acts of terrorism by the state as distinguished from non-state actors. The coverage of smaller terrorist groups and of the differences and divisions between and within terrorist groups is limited. Put bluntly, the 2019 report tended to be something of a pointless failure, and the future direction and purpose of this report is unclear.

- **U.S. Foreign Aid:** The U.S. provides a web site called *U.S. Foreign Assistance By Country* explaining the trends in total U.S. foreign aid on a global basis and by country – as well as by activity, top partner, and top sector – at https://foreignassistance.gov/. This site provides some of the best options for organizing information into graphics, maps, and trend data of any U.S. government website. However, there is no narrative explaining the aid effort or putting it in context, and it receives far less attention than it deserves. It is also difficult to identify security assistance spending. Expanding this site to include a narrative explaining the spending and promoting it on a country level – as well as creating a central database – would help users to understand the full nature of U.S. aid efforts and the value of the U.S. as a strategic partner.

- **State Department Countries and Areas Websites**: These web sites do not follow any standard pattern, and some are obviously not maintained or updated. Some do show past efforts to establish links to other U.S. government reports like the *CIA Factbook*, but the site for China has nothing more substantive than a "fact sheet" containing material from the end of the Trump administration as of December 1, 2021.[8] The Russian site has not been updated for some time and lists other sites that are no longer operational.[9] By and large, these sites do not provide any useful information on U.S. policy, reporting, and security issues. As weapons of influence, most fire blanks.

- **U.S. Security Partnerships and Security Assistance.** The Department of Defense has a wide range of databases that report some of the individual trends in U.S. overseas deployments, bases, security assistance, arms transfers, and prepositioning. Such reporting often has serious gaps, however, and a search of the different DoD websites can be something of an analytic nightmare. The end result is that the DoD does surprisingly little to make the full nature of U.S. security partnerships clear.

  Providing an integrated country report for each security partnership and providing the individual country reports on the U.S. military combatant command websites would do a great deal to show how much support the U.S. does provide to its allies, and it could include other forms of direct and indirect support by U.S. forces as well as the impact of offset programs.

- ***World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* (WMEAT)**. The original version of this report was prepared by the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency from 1964 to 1999, until the Agency was absorbed by the Department of State in 1999. During that time, it was a weapon of influence where a U.S. government source was seen as the source for accurate data on military spending and arms transfers, and it provided a level of

transparency that ensured that strategic partners and friendly states could compare the level of arms transfers in their region as well as the levels of transfer by hostile powers and the potential threats.

After that time, work by SIPRI and the IISS partially replaced the vacuum left by ceasing to publish WMEAT, although the IISS could not estimate military spending data on a number of countries, and SIPRI attempts to estimate the comparative value of weapons sales, rather than the market value of all arms transfers. The Congressional Research Service did provide more limited estimates by experts like Richard F. Grimmett, but these estimates have evidently been cancelled.

The State Department's Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance: It did begin to publish an online version of WMEAT in 2005, and then from 2012 to 2019 in the form of an Excel spreadsheet, but it has not been updated since 2019, and the data were extremely dense and hard to use – without a supporting program for creating tables or graphs. Defense and National Security data are minimal at best. The current status of the report is unclear, but it has had little or no actual use by outside analysts in recent years compared to the printed version of WMEAT. As a weapon of influence, nothing is left but a self-inflicted wound.

- **The CIA *World Factbook*:** The CIA *Factbook* and the format of its website have been steadily improved in recent years.[10] The narratives, however, often do not address key issues and problems, and they are often lacking in subcategories where there are serious issues affecting national stability. There are no equivalents to the governance and economic summary rankings issued by the World Bank. Updates in given data categories are also highly erratic.

  Links to maps are limited. However, links to comparative world rankings have improved. No trend analyses, data, or graphics similar to those provided on the IMF and World Bank websites are provided.

  The military and security data have been improved for a number of countries in recent years, and it sometimes provides useful lists of military and paramilitary forces, military expenditures, force strengths, and summary military data (e.g. see "Iraq").[11]

  There also is a useful – if sometimes dated – annex on terrorist organizations.[12] It covers "65-plus terrorist groups designated by the US State Department as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), as well as an additional 10 non-designated, self-proclaimed branches and affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) FTO. The information provided includes details on each cited group's history, goals, leadership, organization, areas of operation, tactics, weapons, size, and sources of support."

- **Census Bureau International Database (IDB):** The IDB provides critical data for estimating population pressures and stability/security issues like the need for youth employment.[13] While it does not qualify as a weapon of influence in the sense that is used elsewhere in this paper, it covers population size (by single year of age and sex), and components of change (fertility, mortality, and migration) that are available from an initial or base year through 2100 for each calendar year.

- **Reports to Congress on U.S. Wars by Special Inspector Generals:** The U.S. Congress has created special inspector generals to report upon the Iraq War and the Afghan conflict.

These include the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and the Lead Inspector Generals (LIG) of DoD and State for both the Afghan and Iraq conflicts.

The work of these Special Inspector Generals proved to be exceptional in providing unclassified data and objective assessments, but the first round of efforts on Iraq (SIGIR) has virtually disappeared into an awkward university run archive, labeled "Cyber Cemetery."[14] The future of the current Lead Inspector General reports covering Iraq/Syria/ISIS and Afghanistan – at https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/ and https://www.stateoig.gov/reports/overseas-contingency-operations/ – and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – at https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/ – is unclear. Their role in producing summary "lessons of war" reports is equally uncertain.

- **Government Accountability Office (GAO)**: The GAO provides auditing, evaluation, and investigation for the U.S. Congress which is often a model of the kind of transparency that should be the standard for all countries. The annual *Performance and Accountability Report Fiscal Year 2021* is a case in point.[15]

  In the past, the GAO has also released assessments on the lessons from operations involving the State Department, such as the July 2006 U.S. evacuation from Lebanon. The GAO should provide consistent audits on U.S. agencies to ensure lessons are remembered from previous operations and can be implemented into a future framework in crisis response, such as the Afghan evacuation in 2021.

- **The Congressional Budget Office (CBO):** The CBO provides another model of transparency, and one that shows that the U.S. gives priority to civil spending rather than military forces and strategic competition. It also provides a picture of the long term trends in U.S. military spending that have disappeared from the steadily less comprehensive Department of Defense budget submissions and strategy documents, which now lack anything approaching a credible Future Year Defense Plan.

  For example, see the list of reports at https://www.cbo.gov/topics/defense-and-national-security, the CBO's estimates of future national budgets, and individual studies like *Long-Term Implications of the 2021 Future Years Defense Program*.

- **U.S. Influence on NATO reporting**. The U.S. does not report on NATO, but it has produced a major impact in driving NATO reporting to focus on the extent to which member countries meet arbitrary 2% of GNP goals for total defense spending of which 20% of total defense expenditures are on equipment.[16] These shifts occurred largely because of a U.S. effort to shift the burden of spending to its allies, without any regard to the radically different funding capabilities of given NATO states or their actual priorities for military spending, modernization, and improvements in modernization. The end result has been to shift NATO away from effective force planning and efforts to meet the threat from Russia and others.

Re-Focusing the U.S. Government Effort

These examples cover only a limited portion of the U.S. government official reporting that can be used as "weapons of influence" to shape both domestic and international perceptions of security issues, encourage defense reform and transparency in the U.S.'s strategic partners, and show the need to compete with and/or deter other powers.

They make it all too clear, however, that the U.S. needs to modernize, expand, and update a great deal of its open source reporting. It not only needs to do this to support its white and gray area operations but to deal with the fact that many of the reports listed earlier have not been properly updated and maintained in an era where it is far easier to support the creation of tailored databases, graphics, and maps.

It is also striking that none of these reports have made use of efforts to provide net assessments, or that the narratives, which explain U.S. defense plans and future force postures, often are far less developed than they were from 1960 to Harold Brown's era in 1981. It is equally clear that this failure is bipartisan. The Trump administration never translated its new *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* into meaningful plans. The Biden administration's brief public summary of its *Global Posture Review* that the Department of Defense issued in late November 2021 had roughly the same depth of content as the average greeting card.[17]

It should be stressed that this analysis is not an argument against public affairs efforts, supporting the media, and providing public briefings. It is an argument, however, that studies, analyses, and net assessments are also important tools, which are critical in shaping official policy and enduring perceptions of the United States, its strategic partners, and competitors as well as potential threats. It should also be stressed that the real-world costs of doing this are minimal. The U.S. is already spending enough to do it well, almost all of the material needed is already being generated, and – once a key database has been properly set up on the web in computerized form – using it in new and innovative ways becomes remarkably easy.

[1] U.S. Department of Defense, "DOD Releases 2021 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," November 3, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2831819/dod-releases-2021-report-on-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-pe/.

[2] Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021, November 3, 2021, https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF*

[3] *The Military Balance*, IISS, https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance.

[4] Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *Military Power Publications*, https://www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications/.

[5] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, https://www.state.gov/reports-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/.

[6] U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Reports*, https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/.

[7] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism*, https://www.state.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-2/.

[8] U.S. Department of State, *China*, https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/china/.

[9] U.S. Department of State, *Russia*, https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-russia/index.html.

[10] CIA, *World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/.

[11] CIA, "Iraq," *World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/.

[12] CIA, "Terrorist Organizations," *World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/references/terrorist-organizations/.

[13] U.S. Census Bureau, *International Data Base*, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/international-programs/about/idb.html.

[14] "CyberCemetery," UNT Digital Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu/explore/collections/GDCC/browse/?start=120.

[15] Government Accountability Office, *Performance and Accountability Report Fiscal Year 2021*, November 15, 2021, https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-4sp.

[16] See NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021),* https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf.

[17] U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD Concludes 2021 Global Posture Review, November 29, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2855801/dod-concludes-2021-global-posture-review/.