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Defense Outlook 2018

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The second year of a presidency is often the most important for cementing a defense legacy. Administration transitions take time: key leaders need to be onboarded, priorities determined and communicated, and resources appropriately directed. Perhaps no transition year has been as tumultuous as 2017. However, as we enter 2018, the stage for defense is now set. The president has signed the National Security Strategy and delivered the State of the Union Address. The secretary of defense has released the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR); the Missile Defense Review is soon to follow. The White House has made its FY 2019 budget request, and posture hearings are close at hand. Anticipation about the Trump administration's defense direction can give way to a fuller assessment.

The unclassified summary of the NDS provides the broad strokes of Secretary of Defense James Mattis's strategic framework, if not the desired details of its connective tissue. He foreshadowed the document's key themes—lethality, alliances, and defense reform—early in his tenure and highlights the same primary challenge to U.S. interests as the National Security Strategy: winning in competitions against capable adversaries, with special emphasis on pacing the multidimensional threats posed by China and Russia. This focus accords with a broad consensus within the defense community about the challenges posed by these two quite different actors. Although the U.S. military must prepare for myriad challenges, state-based competition is the right strategic priority for the United States. No nation should doubt the intentions of these countries, nor should they wonder if the United States understands the implications. The accountability for action is set. The task ahead is for the administration to execute integrated winning strategies in response.

The framing of the Defense Department's contingency force planning construct continued along the long-established trajectory of better defining and differentiating the scale and nature of its multitheater assumptions. In shorthand, whereas the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) described a need to

“defeat and deny” adversaries in two regions, the 2018 NDS describes a need to “defeat and deter” the same. This is the most recent manifestation of efforts since the 2001 QDR to adjust from an assumption that the United States will develop a force capable of two nearly simultaneous all-domain wars to an assumption that it will be capable of conducting one such intensive campaign, while conducting a range of other actions that do not require an immediate expenditure of similar all-domain capacity (especially in ground forces and key enablers). If the department is signaling a further downshift in capacity and capability by moving from “deny” to “deter” in the second theater, it should be called to clarify that in upcoming posture hearings.

The Nuclear Posture Review hints at one way the Defense Department may be seeking to mitigate the risks of opportunistic aggression under this new “defeat and deter” construct. The NPR emphasizes U.S. readiness to use nuclear weapons to deter and respond to some nonnuclear threats. Although this cross-domain approach is consistent with long-standing U.S. nuclear declaratory policy, the care taken to highlight it in this administration’s NPR is new. One reading of this shift is that the United States will now rely primarily on the U.S. nuclear force to manage even conventional crises in a second major theater or against a second aggressor. If so, it echoes President Dwight Eisenhower’s “New Look” reliance on nuclear forces (as well as Vladimir Putin’s) and is worthy of public deliberation. Although in many ways the NPR builds directly off its Democratic predecessor, there are a few other noteworthy changes. Foremost are the potential reintroduction of sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles to the U.S. inventory and the overall goal of meeting the growth in Russian tactical nuclear weapons symmetrically.

Ambition often outpaces resources, and as with the Obama administration, there is reason for concern with the administration’s plans.

As with the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, on which the unclassified summary of the NDS is modeled, the Department of Defense may falter first on its assumptions that it can shift resources away from the Middle East or North Korea. In fact, the strategic hopes of the last three presidents have rested at one point or another on the ability to shift toward a focus on “great powers” and away from the array of other challenges that test our preparedness, chew up our readiness, and consume an annual \$69 billion of Overseas Contingency Operations funds. Having participated in some way in all these prior attempted shifts—from Clinton’s revolution in military affairs (RMA) to Bush’s transformation to Obama’s rebalance—I both applaud

the continued dedication and remain chastened by experience. As military historians are quick to remind us, the enemy indeed gets a vote, as do the American people.

Even if the global environment cooperates with our plans, the defense budget proposed by the White House for FY 2019 barely outpaces inflation. And yet Secretary Mattis has said the planned budget can bring the United States [“back to a position of primacy.”](#) Increased resources and the budget stability created by Congress’s two-year budget deal help, but we are unlikely to buy our way out of our current strategic position. We will also need cultural change to pace our ambition.

Competing effectively in the national security domain requires us to leverage our asymmetric strengths, integrate national means, educate our future workforce, conduct operational experimentation and develop associated operational concepts, reform the defense acquisition system, and increase our efficiency. Mattis’s trinity is a good summation of this cultural mandate: lethality, alliances, and defense reform. So far, however, signs of real change are modest. There has been no indication of a pending package of major legislative initiatives, no request to reduce excess infrastructure, no revived joint experimentation hub with associated institutional leadership and funds, no policy-significant breakthroughs in defense-to-defense relations, and no fundamental overhaul of the sclerotic defense contracting process. No one knows any better today [“who speaks for the needs of the future joint warfighter”](#) than we did when Joint Forces Command shuttered its doors in 2011 (p. 51). This should be the foremost waking thought of every chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as former Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) commander General Mattis surely knows.

The success of our military is not solely dictated by preparedness inside the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). Far greater problems lie beyond DoD. First is America’s crumbling support from allied and partner publics. Our alliance and partner networks are America’s center of gravity, described by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* as “the most effective target for a blow” (p. 485). The ability to affect a center of gravity is “determined and limited by the cohesion of the parts” (p. 485–486). The more we hold together, the more difficult for other states to undermine our interests. Accordingly, our alliances have been key targets of Russian (née Soviet) and Chinese efforts for decades. Recently, however, President Trump has helped these adversaries by routinely drawing “us” and “them” lines in public and private. Even if world leaders can be convinced to ignore his tweets, evidence suggests their publics will not. This creates untenable electoral

dilemmas for foreign officials who might like to work with the American administration in defiance of public opinion. It also creates easy excuses for those who prefer to diverge from the United States on key issues. As the NDS appears to understand, we are neither so powerful nor so charming that we can ignore these risks, which originate largely in the White House.

Our inability to capitalize on U.S. and Western advantages across the broad national security tool kit is a second significant constraint largely imposed on the military from outside. As the United States learned in the Cold War, gray zone competitions are seldom waged in the military domain. The deliberate siege to starve the Department of State is not only crippling America's current diplomatic corps but also its future potential. There also does not appear to be a vibrant international economic or trade agenda for the United States. Strategic messaging is hampered by lack of funds, focus, and Twitter-to-podium policy coherence. And, as we devolve decisions on use of force and forces to the operational level, we risk inadvertently dictating our foreign policy choices from the bottom up even as we ignore the imperative to invest in diplomacy and development "closers" needed to consolidate military gains. Filling out the Defense Department's civilian ranks helps curb these trends, but it cannot compensate for the sidelining and disintegration of the U.S. Department of State.

The defense agenda for the Trump administration may now be clear, but its outcome is not predetermined. Aggressive cultural change inside DoD must accompany the rhetoric, along the secretary's themes of lethality, alliances, and defense reform. Likewise, Congress will need to recognize the imperative of removing barriers to speed and innovation—perhaps even throwing out the book in select areas—as well as provide needed resources. Elsewhere, diplomatic, trade, strategic messaging, and development initiatives must be integrated and resourced to support competition against those nations demonstrating greater agility at using all means at their disposal. Finally, the strength of our military has always rested foremost on the strength of our constitutional democracy. This year will likely continue to test the nation's institutions and its unity. If we can emerge stronger in both, we will advance our security further than any mere defense investment, innovation, or reform ever could.

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