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Bad Idea: Making Strategy Whilst Whistling Past the Budget Caps

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The process of creating defense strategy is one of aligning goals, approaches, and resources. For the past several years, the Budget Control Act of 2011 has placed an extraordinary level of restraint on that process for the Department of Defense (DoD). Coupled with the threat of sequestration and fixed budget caps, the Budget Control Act failed in its intention to drive compromise. The intervening years witnessed Russia occupy Crimea, ISIS declare and lose its caliphate, and North Korea steadily advance its nuclear weapons program, all while the United States military has maintained a high operational tempo around the world. The response by many strategists, including officials in both the Obama administration and the Trump administration, has been to wish away the budget caps rather than find ways to adapt to the inflexible certainty provided by the budget caps.

This is not a new problem. In 1991, Dr. Anthony Cordesman wrote, “It will be necessary to break the cycle of the past in which the United States formulated strategies and requirements that could not be met and then procured forces based on available funds simply by cutting the share of the pie for each service.” Worse yet, the odds of actually solving this problem are not likely. A majority of participants on the web and in person for a panel at the 2017 CSIS Global Security Forum entitled “[Is Strategy Dead?](#)” predicted that the United States would not be capable of resolving the gap between its current ambitions and the available means in the current environment. So what makes this a bad idea rather than just a lamentable status quo? First, the problem is getting worse. Second, the lack of political consensus and fraying institutions is limiting what the United States can achieve abroad more so than the federal debt.

While the President expressed [a range of views](#) about America’s strategic and operational commitments during the campaign, U.S. ambitions and operations have been steadily rising since he took office. As [CNN noted in July](#) the “US has established a more robust and active military presence in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq,

Syria and Afghanistan.” Greater deployments in Europe and a still nebulous end to strategic patience toward North Korea represent less of a strategic shift, but instead underline rising costs to maintain the status quo. As [Shawn Brimley notes](#), this change has been paired with talk of a “Trump buildup” to U.S. force structure that cannot “be remotely accomplished with a \$603 billion defense budget.” Brimley’s next graft captures the larger pattern:

This outsized rhetoric can’t be entirely blamed on Trump. Over the last few years, between the military services, the combatant commands, Congress, and even the Obama White House, one can find affirmative statements of the need to increase funding for basically everything – more force structure, more readiness, more overseas posture, and more resources for modernization. While I support strong defense budgets, the paucity of any real signaling from defense leaders that they are willing to scale back some areas of the defense program to enable growth in other areas exposes much of debate as wishing [sic] thinking and political posturing that does little except hold out false hope and retard true strategy development. The nation deserves better.

Stepping back to assess the larger foreign policy picture, the situation is even more dire. The neglect of the civilian and diplomatic aspects of U.S. foreign policy, relative to priorities in defense, has [been long noted](#). The problem has only compounded over the past year, leading to a [mass exodus of senior diplomatic personnel](#) from the State Department. Members of Congress from both parties have fought against proposed budget cuts for Foggy Bottom, but restoring what is lost, let alone achieving a balance between military and civilian tools, will be a slow and costly process. In sum, increasing American obligations and operations overseas are writing checks that American national security capabilities cannot cash.

However, this gap is widely acknowledged and [its consequences are debated by more experienced and wiser experts than myself](#). Dr. Kathleen Hicks identifies multiple reasons to “predict far more continuity than change in U.S. defense strategy over the coming year” and, in the meantime, recommends reform that can be made within the “[iron triangle of painful trade-offs](#).” This approach makes sense for those charged with implementing policy, as adjustments to national ambitions will be chosen by political leaders. Nonetheless, strategists both within government and outside of it prepare the menu for policymakers. Even if the alignment of means and ends is unlikely in the current environment, there is still work to be done.

[Secretary Mattis](#) has said that “security and solvency are my watchwords.” This echoes the argument made by retired [Admiral and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mike Mullen](#) “that our long-term debt is the single greatest threat to our national security.” The bipartisan list of luminaires supporting this idea should give pause, however, as examining the evidence reveals it to be a category error. U.S. debt levels are high in relative and absolute terms, but interest rates remain remarkably low and tax rates are similarly low compared to both other developed nations and the nation’s own historical rates. Their axiom that U.S. strength in foreign policy is rooted in a flourishing economy holds true, but unfortunately the threat is not the debt. Instead, as Dr. Hicks pointed out at the “Is Strategy Dead?” panel, weakness in institutions, democracy, and political consensus are a bigger threat to security.

The responsibility of balancing guns, butter, and tax cuts lies primarily with Congress, not with the Secretary of Defense. The budget caps resulted from the inability of Congress to reach an agreement on funding priorities and also, as [documented by John Bennett](#), a deliberate outcome of a transpartisan coalition seeking to cut Pentagon spending. Likewise, [Robert Lieber](#) has shown that partisan politics are shaping the public’s view of foreign policy endeavours. Even after the budget caps expire in fiscal year 2021, as long as present political conditions prevail, we will likely see more continuing resolutions on top of the 30 passed of the past ten years.

In the panel discussion, Dr. Hicks identified the best course for enabling the achievement of ambitious national strategies: healing weaknesses in our institutions, our democracy, and our political consensus. In the meantime, a common contemporary definition of strategy provided by Sir Lawrence Freedman will serve us well, strategy is “about maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means; about identifying objectives; and about the resources and methods available for meeting such objectives. This balance requires not only finding how to achieve desired ends but also adjusting ends so that realistic ways can be found to meet them by available means.”

Any strategy that fails to reckon with our diminished political fundamentals, a challenge that pre-dated the 2016 election, risks the foreclosure of options in the future. Worse yet, there is the possibility of a vicious circle of heightened risks, poor results, loss of confidence, and further diminishment of resources. Accepting our available means does not end the debate, it starts it on realistic terms. Neither liberalism nor realism

have a set price tag, and regionalists are vital for outlining what plausible transitions might look like. [Force structure rebalancing exercises](#) and force sizing constructs are a good start, as are critics getting into [policy details](#) in a way that [did not happen in the 2016 election](#). Even if a better alignment of means and ends is unlikely in the coming year, there is an opportunity to build on groundwork for a more constructive debate among political leaders, especially in Congress. For those in the Pentagon, focusing on the iron triangle of painful tradeoffs may be the best way to manage risk given the directions from above. For those outside, treating the budget caps as a one-off mistake, rather than a reflection of diminished political capacity, is a bad idea.

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