

CHAPTER 1

State of the Security Environment—and the Purposes of American Power

Before getting into a detailed discussion of forces, weapons, capabilities, and deployments, it is important to ask—what are the purposes of U.S. military power?

When there is an acute and obvious threat to the nation, as in World War II, the answer to this question can become obvious. More often than not, however, the threats are distant, diffuse, or nascent, and the question is difficult. Indeed, even in World War II, the United States needed to decide on the proper ordering of its efforts, electing to focus first on Europe. Even in the Cold War, it took many years to figure out how to implement the military dimensions of containment policy through means such as the NATO alliance and the creation of the U.S. Armed Forces' overseas command structures.

Since the Cold War ended, the task has not gotten any easier. The absence of a single overriding threat may have made the world less acutely dangerous, yet it has complicated the task of strategists and military planners. On balance, I

would say that this is a good problem to have. Nostalgia for the Cold War, and remembrances of its supposed stability, are often overdone. But the complexity of today's international security environment nonetheless poses a challenge.

A number of concepts have been advanced in an attempt to provide a unifying purpose to America's role in the post-Cold War world and, by extension, its military strategy. President George H. W. Bush spoke of a new world order, and reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait to uphold it. President Bill Clinton had a national security strategy of engagement and enlargement, which led to the expansion of NATO and numerous peacekeeping missions in places like the Balkans. President George W. Bush responded to 9/11 with the concept of preemption and emphasis on a "balance of power that favors freedom"—in many ways a new slogan for America's longstanding interest in promoting democracy. Barack Obama, chastened by the Bush experiences and later the unfolding of the so-called Arab spring, has placed less emphasis on classic foreign policy matters, attempting to focus more on global issues such as climate change as well as the domestic agenda. In fact, through it all, U.S. military strategy and posture have not changed radically from one administration to the next during the quarter century since the Cold War ended. But there is a fair amount of churn in the conceptual underpinnings of American grand strategy—and a real challenge for the next president about how to describe his or her core national security tenets and policies.

The best way to get at the question of American grand strategy is to take stock of the character of the international security environment today. The United States is interested, in the first instance, in protecting its own people and territory from acts of aggression. But it also has sought to foster a global order in which key overseas allies and interests are

protected, in the interest of broader American security and prosperity, and in awareness of the fact that ignoring problems abroad has generally hurt U.S. security. (The United States tried a policy of non-interference, related to today's academically popular paradigm of offshore balancing, before both world wars and to some extent the Korean war.) There are problems with this overall narrative, to be sure, as the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump campaigns in the United States have helped reveal in 2015 and 2016. For one thing, the United States spends a higher share of its gross domestic product on its military than almost all of its allies and security partners, raising valid questions about burden-sharing. Yet these issues are no more acute than during the Cold War and indeed, on balance they are probably less concerning now, given that American military spending has dropped to a modest share of the nation's economic output. A larger problem is that, even though America as a nation has never been richer, members of its middle economic classes often feel disempowered and disenfranchised by the forces of globalization. They also feel poorer and less secure than before, and less hopeful about the future. Sustaining support for American internationalism therefore undoubtedly requires significant steps to make the middle classes more supportive of such a goal—which in turn has repercussions for tax policy (and the progressivity of the tax code), for education policy, and for the labor provisions of trade agreements among other matters in public policy.

All that said, the internationalist role of the United States has been on balance very beneficial, and it is important to recognize as much. Indeed, despite the recent bedlam affecting the Middle East in particular, overall trends in human history have been clearly favorable in recent decades.¹ The overall frequency of interstate violence has declined greatly.

Casualties from all types of war, particularly when adjusted for the size of the human population, are down substantially. Prosperity has extended to many corners of the world that were previously extremely poor.

Of course, there is much left to do, and much that can still go wrong. Deterrence can still fail owing to misperception about commitments, the ascent to power of risk-prone leaders in key nations, enduring historical grievances that resurface at a future date after a period of quiet, and disputes over resources of one type or another.² Here we should think of Vladimir Putin and his recent behavior, or the leadership of Iran, or the ongoing rivalries between the Koreas and between India and Pakistan.

Moreover, there have been more than thirty civil wars at any given point during much of the twenty-first century. This remains a higher figure than in much of the twentieth century.³ Estimated fatalities from those wars, typically 20,000 to 40,000 annually in recent years, and perhaps twice as great since 2011, are substantially less than from the civil wars of the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s but not appreciably less than those from the 1950s and certain other periods. In other words, there may be a generally hopeful trend toward decreased global violence, but it is hardly so pronounced or so definitive as to foretell an obsolescence of armed conflict.⁴ Moreover, civil wars are very difficult to resolve definitively, and often recur even after peace accords are in place.⁵

There were still some seventeen UN peace operations globally as of 2014, involving more than 100,000 personnel in total. Additional non-UN missions continue in other countries. Total numbers of peacekeepers, under UN auspices and otherwise, have consistently grown in this century even without counting the Afghanistan operation.⁶ In places

such as Syria and Iraq, serious violence continues. Largely as a result, world totals for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain high. More than 10 million refugees are under the care of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (down from an early 1990s peak of 18 million but much greater than 1960s and 1970s totals), with the largest numbers from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These same countries along with Colombia, have large numbers of IDPs as well. Indeed, global totals for IDPs are at historic highs. All told, forced displacement in recent years topped 50 million globally for the first time since World War II.⁷

Terrorism has increased dramatically in this century by comparison with the latter decades of the twentieth century.⁸ Some extremist movements are now able to hide away within the world's great and growing megalopolises to a greater extent than many previous insurgent or rebellious movements in history. In so doing, they can gain access to information, communications, transportation systems, funding, and recruits.⁹ President Obama frequently talked about al Qaeda or ISIL being on the run or on the path to defeat in 2012, 2013, and 2014. But that optimism was premature at best. It could really only be said to apply to the traditional core of the organization that attacked the United States in 2001,¹⁰ and perhaps now to the core of ISIL within Iraq and Syria as the group started to clearly lose ground by late 2015 in these areas. Al Qaeda affiliates remain active in dozens of countries. ISIL has now gained adherents from Nigeria and Libya to the Sinai to Afghanistan while continuing to attract many recruits to the Middle East—and to inspire terrible attacks around the world.¹¹

In regard to the so-called democratic peace, it is true that established, functioning constitutional democracies

fight each other much less often, statistically speaking.¹² It is also true that such countries are becoming more common, with about 120 countries, or nearly two-thirds of the nations of the planet, electoral democracies by the turn of the twenty-first century. However, even such countries are not impervious to the possibility of civil war (as the American Civil War showed), or to a possible coup or hijacking by a strongman, who then misrules the state (as Hitler's hijacking of the Weimar Republic demonstrates), or to other aberrations. The extraordinary popularity of Vladimir Putin in Russia since 2014, even if partly fabricated and engineered by the Kremlin, should alone throw some cold water on any excessive optimism about the hypothesis that the trappings of democracy will automatically produce naturally peaceful nations. Egypt's extremely turbulent recent history provides another timely reminder. Democratic peace theory may work well for established, inclusive, constitutional democracies based on the liberal principle of the rights and worth of the individual. However, such states are rarer than are electoral democracies in general, and not yet sufficiently widespread for the planet to depend on any particular system of governance to ensure the peace.¹³

UN peacekeeping operations are prevalent in today's world, as noted, and are worthy enterprises in most cases. But they still fail perhaps 40 percent of the time; some conflicts are just too deeply rooted, or the world's collective peacekeeping and conflict resolution capacities are too lacking, to do better than that. This is not an argument against such missions—which do in fact succeed in whole or part some 60 percent of the time.¹⁴ But it should remind us that, as in most things, change is often slow and uneven.

The notion that nuclear deterrence has created a world in which major powers are less likely to engage in all-out war

against each other is probably true. However, nuclear deterrence would seem less dependable in cases where states consider or engage in limited war (which may or may not remain limited once they start) or in situations in which one of them has a disproportionately greater interest than the other in regard to the issue that precipitated the crisis at hand and is therefore willing to risk brinkmanship, in the belief the other side will blink first. Conflicts can also erupt in which renegade local commanders may have their own agendas, or in which command and control systems for nuclear weapons are less than fully dependable.¹⁵ Moreover, the history of nuclear deterrence has not been as easy or as happy as some nostalgically remember it being. There were near misses during the Cold War, with the Berlin and Cuban missile crises. The spread of nuclear capabilities in places such as South Asia and the Middle East increases the odds that the tradition of nuclear nonuse may not survive indefinitely.¹⁶

Then there is the hope that economic interdependence and globalization will make the idea of warfare so irrational and unappealing as to ensure no major conflict among the great economies of the world. There is indeed some basis for this observation. Alas, nations historically have proven able to convince themselves that future wars will be short (and victorious), allowing for the creation of narratives about how conflict would not preclude prosperity. Also, joint economic interests among nations have existed for centuries, even as war has continued; international trade and investment were strong just before the outbreak of World War I, for example.¹⁷

On balance, it is probably true that major war in today's world has become less likely as a result of the sum total of nuclear deterrence, the spread of democracies, globalization, and other factors, including awareness of the destructiveness of modern conventional weaponry as well.¹⁸ But

that provides no grounds for complacency. The overall chances of war could be lower than before and the duration of time between catastrophic wars longer, yet the potential damage from conflict could be so great that war might remain just as much a threat to humankind in the future as it has been in the past. For example, even a small-scale nuclear war in a heavily populated part of the planet could wreak untold havoc, and decimate infrastructure that might take years to repair, with huge second-order effects on human well-being for tens of millions of individuals. Biological pathogens far more destructive than the generally noncontagious varieties that have been known to date could be invented (also superbugs could develop naturally, for example through mutations). And the effects of climate change on a very densely populated globe could have enormous implications for the physical safety and security of tens of millions as well, causing new conflicts or intensifying existing ones. The case for hope about the future course of the world is fairly strong—but it is a case for hope, not a guarantee.¹⁹

And that hope for a better future is almost surely more credible with a strong United States. To be sure, there are differences of opinion over how U.S. strategic leadership should be exercised. Some do express concern that specific mistakes in U.S. foreign policy could lead to war.²⁰ There is also disagreement over whether the concepts of American primacy and exceptionalism are good guides to future U.S. foreign policy.²¹ But there is little reason to believe that a truly multipolar world would be safer than, or inherently preferable to, today's system, or that a different leader besides the United States would do a better job organizing international cooperative behavior among nations.

Today, the United States leads a coalition or loose alliance system of some sixty states that together account for

some 70 percent of world military spending (and a similar fraction of total world GDP). This is extraordinary in the history of nations, especially by comparison with most of European history of the last several centuries, when variable power balances and shifting alliances were the norm. Even in the absence of a single, clear threat, the NATO alliance, major bilateral East Asian alliances, major Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf security partnerships, and the Rio Pact have endured. To be sure, this Western-led system is under stress and challenge. Yet it remains strong—and at least as appealing to most rising powers as does any alternative political or economic model.

What this long discussion is meant to achieve is an analytical rationale for a U.S. military that remains engaged globally in protecting the so-called commons (international air and sea zones, that is), partnering with allies to enhance their security, deterring great-power conflict, and constraining proliferation where possible. Ideally, it would also contribute to urgent humanitarian needs when others cannot provide them alone, such as prevention of genocide or provision of humanitarian relief. In other words, it should continue to uphold the international order, working with allies and employing other elements of national power in the process. Coupled with an economic strategy that has fostered international trade and investment, and a diplomatic strategy that has favored inclusiveness for all nations, such an American foreign policy has since World War II helped facilitate the greatest progress in the well-being of humans in the history of the planet. Correctly applied, it is also the best strategy to prevent the rise of a hostile power and the prospect of a World War III, and to minimize the dangers of nuclear proliferation as well.