U.S. Defense Posture in the aftermath of Sequestration, the Pivot, Crimea, the Caliphate and Ebola

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*DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE*

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Abstract

In 2011, the United States enacted two policies with potentially profound implications for its future defense posture. First, the Budget Control Act imposed a decade of fiscal restraint on defense spending. Second, the administration announced that it intended to re-balance its defense and diplomacy efforts towards the Asia-Pacific, a policy widely known as the “pivot.” Notwithstanding the intention to prioritize that region, three crises in 2014—Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Islamic State’s proclamation of a caliphate and the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa—provided a stark reminder of continuing security challenges in Europe and the Middle East, as well as the potential for crises in other regions of the world. This paper evaluates whether the triple surprises of 2014 are likely lead to any appreciable change in the resource constraints on U.S. defense policy. It argues that significant changes are unlikely in the short-term. In light of that, it presents a series of policy recommendations intended to reduce the risks associated with carrying out current U.S. defense policy given fiscal constraints and the competing demands on U.S. resources in various strategic regions of the world.
I: Introduction

Since 2011, U.S. defense policy has been conducted in an environment of fiscal constraint and in the context of a stated intention to re-balance U.S. defense assets towards the Asia-Pacific region. The triple surprises of 2014—Ukraine, ISIS and Ebola—have raised a host of questions for U.S. foreign and defense policies. With regards to the latter, this paper addresses two in particular. First, what is likely to happen to the overall trajectory of U.S. defense spending in their aftermath? This paper tackles that question in a positivist way; it analyzes what is likely to happen to defense spending, rather than what should happen in an ideal world. Second, given the answer to the first question, what should happen to the U.S. defense posture to maximize capabilities and reduce risk? That is, in light of the likely trajectory of defense spending, what adjustments should be made to the defense posture given the administration’s preferred military strategy and the lessons learned so far from the responses undertaken to the 2014 crises?

Following Krepinevich and Work, the U.S. defense posture comprises seven interconnected components¹:

1. Forward-based forces;
2. Forward-deployed forces;
3. Global attack forces;
4. Strategic mobility and logistics infrastructure;
5. Forcible entry and rapid base construction forces;
6. Global command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I) network; and
7. Supporting security relationships and legal arrangements.

The following analysis finds that the triple surprises witnessed this year are unlikely to drive transformative changes in the resource environment. While there are likely to be some adjustments—such as potentially continuing the reprieve from sequestration cuts for the Defense Department through FY2016 and adding additional resources to the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget—there will not be a flood of new resources for the Pentagon. Defense policies will still be pursued in a resource-constrained environment for the next several years. The policy recommendations are presented in that context and derive from two major assumptions: (1) there is a valid strategic rationale for devoting increased attention to the Asia-Pacific region over the medium- and long-term; (2) even so, the U.S. will retain significant interests in Europe and the Middle East, necessitating a capability to provide reassurance to partners and allies and to respond to crises in those regions. Of course, the validity of those assumptions can be contested. Anyone who rejects either or both of them completely is unlikely to be persuaded by the recommendations put forward. But, for those who agree with the assumptions, the policy proposals are designed to further the interests embodied within them, taking into account fiscal constraints and the administration’s preferred military strategy, which favors refraining from deploying U.S. ground troops and, instead, enabling partners when possible.

II: The Pivot & Fiscal Constraint

Re-balancing towards the Asia-Pacific

The conceptual underpinning for the strategic shift originally known as the “pivot,” but subsequently described by the administration as the “re-balance,” was set out by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a Foreign Policy magazine article published in October 2011. She argued that the United States should undertake “substantially increased investment—diplomatic,
economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.”

The central rationale for the rebalance is the Asia-Pacific’s high and growing strategic and economic importance. Illustrative of the region’s importance are the facts that five of the top fifteen U.S. trading partners are in the region, five of the seven security treaties that the U.S. has entered into are focused on the region and over half of the world’s total shipping tonnage passes through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok. The most significant military deployments and initiatives announced as part of the rebalance have been:

- Home-porting 60 per cent of total U.S. naval assets in the Asia-Pacific region, as compared to 50 per cent in the past. The net additional assets allocated to the region include one carrier, seven destroyers, ten Littoral Combat Ships (including four to be forward-stationed in Singapore) and two submarines.
- Allocation of 60 percent of the U.S. Air Force’s overseas-based forces to the region.
- An agreement with Australia to allow greater access by U.S. military aircraft to Royal Australian Air Force Facilities. Additionally, the Marine Corps will build up to a 2,500-strong rotational presence in Australia.
- Ongoing discussions with the Philippines and Vietnam regarding U.S. access and basing rights.

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• Discussions about revising the U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines in an effort to foster greater cooperation between the two allies.  

Of particular note, the main changes above involve mobile assets. For example, as Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Greenert recently emphasized, a major component of the Navy’s increased focus on the region is home-porting assets in Pacific waters. The majority of navy ships commissioned in the past five years have been home-ported on the west coast of the continental U.S. and Hawaii. For example, the last three guided missile destroyers commissioned (DDG 110, DDG 111 and DDG 112) are all home-ported in either San Diego or Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile, all four of the Littoral Combat Ships commissioned so far have gone to the west coast. We will return to the significance of orienting the re-balance primarily around mobile assets in the section outlining policy recommendations.

In addition to new deployments in the Asia-Pacific, in 2012 the Pentagon announced fairly significant changes to its defense posture in Europe. Specifically, then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that the following changes would be made:

• Inactivation, by fiscal year 2014, of the Army’s 170th and 172nd Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in Germany (which had been based in Baumholder and Grafenwoehr respectively).
• By 2017, inactivation of approximately 2,500 personnel from enabler units in Germany.

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Inactivation of the Air Force’s 81st Fighter Squadron, which had been flying A-10 aircraft, at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany.

The announcement also stated that the total number of U.S. service personnel in Europe would fall from 80,000 to 70,000 by 2017. In the fall of 1991, that number had stood at 285,000 and in the fall of 2000 it was 117,000. In order to compensate for the inactivation of the two BCTs in Germany, the Army would allocate a U.S.-based BCT—the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, based at Fort Hood, Texas—to the NATO Response Force and would rotate a battalion-sized task force from that BCT to Europe to conduct multinational training exercises. The frequency of such rotations was to be determined in due course. Major land units remaining in Europe after these changes are the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Vicenza in Italy and the 2nd Cavalry Regiment based in Vilseck, Germany.

Fiscal Constraint

The Budget Control Act (BCA) of August 2011 imposed caps on all government discretionary spending through Fiscal Year 2021 and included a specific limit on the national security budget for fiscal years 2012 and 2013. In addition, the BCA established a “supercommittee” of lawmakers charged with finding an additional $1.2 trillion in spending reductions; failure to do so by January 2012 would lead to automatic, across-the-board cuts in

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10 Parrish, “Panetta Outlines U.S. Troop Changes in Europe.”
14 Ibid.
15 “U.S. Army Europe: Units and Commands.”
discretionary spending. As is well known, the supercommittee did not come up with the required cuts and “sequestration” went into effect in March 2012.

The budget deal brokered by Senator Patty Murray and Representative Paul Ryan in December 2013, which passed Congress as the Bipartisan Budget Act, brought some good news for the Pentagon. It effectively halted sequestration for two years, which meant that the expected low point for the base defense budget was due to be reached in fiscal year 2016, rather than fiscal year 2014 as would have originally been the case. Figure 1 shows the path of defense spending under the original BCA, as well as its path in the aftermath of sequestration and the subsequent deal reached by Senator Murray and Representative Ryan.

In spite of the Bipartisan Budget Act, the Department of Defense still faces a decade of fiscal constraint. In addition, as the law currently stands, sequestration is due to return in

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17 “Defense Spending and the Deficit Debate.”  

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FY2016. In March 2014, the Administration released its Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget, as well as the latest Quadrennial Defense Review. The budget requested a total of $560.4 billion in funding for DoD, comprising $495.6 billion in the base budget, $6.2 billion in mandatory funding, and $58.6 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding. The Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) base budget exceeds the BCA budget caps by approximately $116 billion over the next five years. That is, the administration made clear its position that the sequestration cuts should not be re-imposed in FY2016.

Key aspects of the defense posture as reflected in the FY 2015 budget and the QDR are as follows:

- **Air Force:** prioritization of “critical modernization efforts,” including the F-35 fighter aircraft, a new long-range strike aircraft and the KC-46A next-generation tanker/cargo aircraft.

- **Army:** the size of the regular force is due to be reduced from its recent war-time peak of 570,000 personnel to 440,000-450,000 soldiers. In the event that sequestration cuts are re-imposed, the active duty strength would fall to 420,000.

- **Navy:** The ship inventory is due to grow into the 2020s. In the event that sequestration cuts are re-imposed in FY2016, the USS George Washington aircraft carrier may be retired before

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21 Todd Harrison, “Analysis of the FY2015 Defense Budget.”
23 Ibid., 35.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 30.
its scheduled overhaul, which would leave the U.S. with 10 carrier strike groups rather than 11.\textsuperscript{26}

- **Marine Corps:** the service will have a strength of 182,000 active duty Marines, down from a peak of 203,000 in 2009.\textsuperscript{27} If sequestration-level cuts are enacted in FY2016, the service’s size will fall to 175,000.

- **Special Forces:** the total size of special operations forces will grow to 69,700.\textsuperscript{28}

Hence, the land forces will bear the brunt of the personnel reductions resulting from the constrained budgetary environment. As Sharp points out, that reflects the historical norm. He notes that “since World War II, the United States has usually paid its peace dividends by taxing the Army, which typically receives less funding than the Navy and Air Force during peacetime.”\textsuperscript{29} Meanwhile, the QDR warns that budget-led restrictions have increased the risks associated with fulfilling the Pentagon’s assigned missions:

> “Budget reductions inevitably reduce the military’s margin of error in dealing with risks, and a smaller force strains our ability to simultaneously respond to more than one major contingency at a time. The Department can manage these risks under the President’s FY2015 Budget plan, but the risks would grow significantly if sequester-level cuts return in FY2016, if proposed reforms are not accepted, or if uncertainty over budget levels continues.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{30} “Quadrennial Defense Review 2014,” 22.
III: What has happened since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the rise of ISIS & the Ebola outbreak?

The FY 2015 budget and the most recent QDR were released in March 2014. They were drafted prior to the most acute part of the Ukraine crisis, the rapid expansion of ISIS and the outbreak of Ebola. The triple surprises have led to responses with potentially significant implications for the U.S. defense posture.

*European Reassurance Initiative and changes to NATO Defense Planning*

In early June 2014, President Obama requested a $1-billion authorization from Congress for a new “European Reassurance Initiative.” The funds are intended to support measures providing additional reassurance to NATO’s European members in the face of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. The measures include:\(^ {31}\):

- Increasing the rotational U.S. military presence in Europe. For example, in April approximately 600 paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade deployed for training rotations in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.
- Conducting additional bilateral and multilateral exercises and training with Allies and partners.
- Increasing the prepositioning of U.S. defense equipment in Europe.

At the NATO summit in Wales in early September, the alliance approved a Readiness Action Plan.\(^{32}\) It committed to enhancing the capabilities and responsiveness of the NATO Response Force (NRF). In particular, it committed to establishing a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which is a joint force able to deploy within a few days to respond to challenges, particularly on the periphery of NATO’s territory.\(^{33}\)

**U.S. and coalition operations against ISIS**

In a primetime speech on September 10, 2014, President Obama outlined the U.S. strategy for what it would do, in cooperation with partners, to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS. The strategy comprises four major facets:\(^{34}\):

1. A campaign of airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria.
2. Increased support to forces fighting ISIS on the ground, notably including Iraq’s security forces, Kurdish forces and the Syrian opposition.
3. Using counterterrorism capabilities—including cutting off funding to ISIS, as well as improving intelligence and defenses—to prevent ISIS attacks.
4. Providing humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by ISIS.

In the speech, the president emphasized that the U.S. would not be re-introducing large numbers of ground troops into Iraq. Two weeks after the President’s speech, the United States launched airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria. It was supported by five Arab partners,


\(^{33}\) Ibid.

namely Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In late September, the Department of Defense stated publicly that it was spending between $7 million and $10 million per day in operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, funded from the Overseas Contingency Operations budget. On November 7, the President authorized the deployment of a further 1,500 U.S. military personnel to Iraq—in addition to the 1,600 troops already authorized—to train and advise Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

**U.S. military assets deployed as part of Ebola response**

In mid-September 2014, the President announced that the U.S. military would play a lead role in U.S. efforts to tackle the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Africa Command was tasked with establishing a Joint Force Command in Monrovia, Liberia, in order to provide command and control support to U.S. military efforts. It was estimated that the overall effort would involve around 3,000 U.S. military personnel. Africa Command was also tasked with establishing an intermediate staging base to facilitate the transportation of equipment, supplies and personnel. Additionally, the U.S. military would build Ebola Treatment Units in affected areas of West Africa.

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39 Ibid.
IV: Will the triple surprises of 2014 lead to any significant change in the trajectory of U.S. defense spending?

In theorizing how changes in the external environment can drive changes in grand strategies, Miller presents two possible causal chains. In the first one, changes in the external environment change decision-makers’ perceptions and beliefs, leading them to adopt a new grand strategy. In the alternative causal pathway, changes in the external environment lead to a change in the nature of domestic battles over strategy.

For present purposes, I employ Miller’s causal chains as possible pathways for how changes in the external environment could lead to changes in U.S. military strategy, which is derived from but narrower than grand strategy and is understood as the relationship between military means and objectives. The postulated relationship is shown in figure 2.

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Figure 2: Assumed framework for how changes in the external threat environment could change U.S. military strategy. The two causal pathways are from Miller, 2010.

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41 Ibid.
In the case of the United States, the first causal chain represents a situation in which the President and the senior members of the administration change their beliefs about appropriate military strategy in response to an altered international environment. In the second causal chain, one military strategy gains more support domestically than others. Of course, as Miller correctly points out, the two causal chains can work in tandem.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, given the separation of powers in the United States, changes in the external environment are only likely to significantly change military strategy if they activate both causal chains. That is, to alter military strategy in a major way, changes in the international environment would have to drive changes in the beliefs of administration officials, as well as altering the domestic support—and therefore congressional support—for particular strategies. Changes in decision-maker beliefs and the domestic debate over strategy are also likely to affect one another, hence the vertical arrows shown in figure 2.

Is there any evidence to suggest that the beliefs of key decision-makers regarding the appropriate objectives of, and required resources for, military strategy have changed in light of the unexpected events of 2014?

Since his presidential campaign, Barack Obama has repeatedly emphasized the importance of using all elements of U.S. power in pursuing foreign policy objectives. He has repeatedly stressed that U.S. foreign policy should not be overly reliant on military power alone. For example, in his 2007 speech at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs—one of the most important foreign policy speeches of his presidential campaign—Obama stated that:

\begin{quote}
“In order to advance our national security and our common security, we must call on the full arsenal of American power and ingenuity…. None of these expressions of power [diplomacy, alliances, the intelligence community, putting the U.S. fiscal house in order, \end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
reducing American demand for oil] can supplant the need for a strong military. Instead, they complement our military, and help ensure that the use of force is not our sole available option.”

Four years later, in his March 2011 remarks explaining the U.S. response to the threat of a massacre in Benghazi by Muammar Qaddafi’s forces, the President emphasized that key objectives of U.S. military strategy would, unsurprisingly, be defending the American people, the U.S. homeland, allies and core interests. In cases in which U.S. values were threatened, but not core interests, American military power would be used if certain conditions were met, including an ability to prevent mass violence, possession of an international mandate and the existence of a broad coalition. Whenever possible, American power would be used to facilitate action by allies and partners to address common security threats. As the President articulated in his remarks on Libya:

“As we have in Libya, our task is instead to mobilize the international community for collective action. Because contrary to the claims of some, American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all.”

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
The objectives of military strategy would not extend to re-making other societies. As the President put it in May 2012, it was time for the United States “to focus on nation building here at home.” Two years later at West Point, he again cautioned against the dangers of a strategic approach that is too reliant on military power:

“No one else will. The military that you have joined is and always will be the backbone of America must always lead on the world stage. If we don’t, no that leadership. But U.S. military action cannot be the only -- or even primary -- component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”

The crises of 2014 have not driven any pronounced change in the President’s publically stated beliefs about the appropriate objectives of U.S. military strategy. In his September 10 speech outlining the strategy to combat ISIS, President Obama reiterated that the United States should not be overly reliant on addressing security challenges through its own military efforts. Instead, U.S. military power would be used in support of countries directly challenged by ISIS, who were to have the primary role in addressing the threat. The President emphasized that:

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“But this is not our fight alone. American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.”  

In terms of resources for carrying out the mission against ISIS, the President once again stressed that, while the U.S. response would include supporting Iraqi and Kurdish forces with American advisers, the administration would not deploy U.S. combat forces on the ground. In the President’s own words, “these American forces will not have a combat mission—we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq.”

Regarding the allocation of defense resources more generally, neither the President nor other senior administration officials have called for a dramatic alteration in the overall trajectory of defense spending in the aftermath of the triple surprises. Instead, they have called for the easing of specific constraints. Namely, they have stressed the need to eliminate the sequestration cuts due to take effect again in 2016. Speaking at the Pentagon in early October 2014, the President stated that it was important “to make sure that Congress is working with us to avoid, for example, some of the draconian cuts that are called for in sequestration.” Meanwhile, in response to a press question in late September 2014 about the impacts of the anti-ISIS campaign on the Pentagon’s budget, General Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs, acknowledged that:

“Commitments have gone up [compared to when the latest DoD budget was prepared in March]. The things that we were looking for in terms of flexibility have only very

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49 “Statement by the President on ISIL | The White House.”
50 Ibid.
minimally been delivered. So if you’re asking me do I assess right now, as we go into the fall review for ‘16, that we're going to have budget problems? Yes.”

When questioned in late September about the resource implications of the campaign against ISIS, Secretary of Defense Hagel stated that:

“Well, as you know, we are generally spending roughly, since this effort [the campaign against ISIS] started, $7 million to $10 million a day. That is being funded out of OCO, overseas contingency operations, and we are going to require additional funding from Congress as we go forward. As you know, the continuing resolution is due in December 11. We’re working now with the appropriate committees on how we go forward with authorizations and funding.”

Hagel was stressing the potential need for additional authorizations for the Overseas Contingency Operations budget. He did not offer any indication that the administration would be arguing for a significant reassessment of the proposed trajectory of the Pentagon’s base budget. That is consistent with the President’s continued emphasis on the careful and relatively tailored use of American military power.

Turning to the second causal pathway, have there been any significant changes in the domestic political battles over the appropriate objectives of and resources associated with U.S. military strategy? Within the U.S. domestic debate, there are certainly prominent voices calling for an increase in proposed levels of defense spending. Even before the triple crises of 2014, for

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53 Ibid.
example, Senators McCain and Graham were publically cautioning against the risks of defense austerity to U.S. national security.\textsuperscript{54} In early October 2014, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, also a Republican, gave a speech in which he called for arresting the downward trajectory in defense spending and, instead, setting a commitment to spend 4 percent of GDP on defense.\textsuperscript{55} Meanwhile, at a Bipartisan Policy Center event on October 23, Eric Edelman and Michele Flournoy, both former occupants of the office of undersecretary of defense for policy and members of the National Defense Panel, called for an effort to build public support for future increases in defense spending. Flournoy remarked that “there’s this huge disconnect between where we see the world going with the U.S. military and what our policy is.”\textsuperscript{56}

Do such proposals stand a chance of being translated into future policy? Regrettably for present purposes, there has not been a major poll undertaken since May 2014 that has asked respondents about their views on defense spending. Hence, we do not yet have any indication about how the recent surprises have affected the views of the American public on defense resources. The poll conducted in May was the Chicago Council’s annual survey on foreign policy attitudes. It found that 39 percent of respondents wanted to keep defense spending about the same, 25 percent wanted to expand it and 28 percent wanted to cut it back further.\textsuperscript{57}

Recent polls have asked respondents about their views on foreign policy more generally. They have shown that foreign affairs—and the rise of ISIS in particular—were important issues

to registered voters in the 2014 mid-term elections. In a Gallup poll conducted in April 2014, 62 percent of registered voters stated that foreign affairs would be either extremely important or very important to determining their vote for Congress in November.\(^5\) By late September, the equivalent figure had increased to 69 percent, while 78 percent of respondents said that the rise of ISIS was extremely important or very important.\(^6\) Even so, a poll conducted in mid-October revealed public support for the administration’s reluctance to deploy ground troops to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria: 55 percent of the public opposed sending ground troops, while 39 percent said that they would favor doing so.\(^7\)

The increased importance placed on foreign affairs and ISIS suggests that there might be an opportunity for those arguing for increases in defense spending to garner public support for their position. That said, 73 percent of voters stated in late September that the federal budget deficit was either extremely important or very important,\(^8\) suggesting that the public also remains concerned about fiscal prudence. That concern, along with the public’s reluctance to deploy U.S. ground troops to fight ISIS (i.e. a reluctance to undertake expansive military operations), probably militates against a surge in public support for dramatically increased levels of defense spending. Combining that fact with the stated positions of senior administration officials suggests that the most likely effect of the triple surprises of 2014 will be to increase support for postponing the sequester again in FY2016 so that DOD gets a further reprieve. In addition, the administration has announced that it will request $5 billion in additional funds for

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8 Andrew Dugan, “U.S. Voters Give GOP Edge vs. Dems on Handling Top Issues.”
the OCO budget to furnish resources for the campaign against ISIS. But, there is little to suggest that the shocks of 2014 have been significant enough to spur an end to the resource-constrained era for the Pentagon. We are unlikely to see a re-opening of the defense resource spigot in the final two years of the Obama administration. Gordon Adams, an expert on defense policy and national security budgets, has argued that although foreign policy played a big role in the mid-term elections, and in spite of Republican control of Congress, the impacts on the defense budget are unlikely to be huge. He notes that, even if Republicans in Congress write a budget resolution that shifts resources from domestic spending to defense, that will be part of a larger budget debate and the President is unlikely to agree to higher levels of defense at the cost of domestic spending.

Of course, if the threat from any of the three crises becomes dramatically larger then that would plausibly drive the allocation of more resources to defense. For example, if ISIS was successful in launching a mass-casualty attack against the U.S. homeland or Russia moved to attack a NATO member, then the trajectory of defense spending would likely be altered upwards. As Gaddis emphasizes, it has been the historical tendency of the United States, when confronted with unexpected dangers, to expand rather than contract the nation’s sphere of responsibilities.

Given the view that the trajectory of defense spending is unlikely to be significantly altered in the short-term, the next section sets out a series of policy recommendations for how the U.S. defense posture might be tailored in light of the challenges exhibited so far in the response to Ukraine, ISIS and Ebola, while remaining cognizant of the fiscal constraints under which DOD is operating.

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62 Cooper and Shear, “Obama to Send 1,500 More Troops to Assist Iraq.”
V: Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations outlined below are designed to meet five criteria:

1. Reducing the risks associated with meeting current U.S. defense commitments.

2. Requiring few additional burdens on defense resources given existing fiscal constraints.

3. Enhancing the capacity to carry out the administration’s preferred military strategy, which favors refraining from deploying U.S. ground troops and, instead, enabling partners when possible.

4. Addressing some of the challenges that have become apparent in the responses undertaken so far to the Ukraine crisis and ISIS.

5. Enabling the U.S. to continue to devote increased attention to the Asia-Pacific, while facilitating reassurance and crisis response in Europe and the Middle East.

Recommendation 1: Making the re-balance effective through operational planning and public diplomacy

The recent crises in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have led numerous commentators to ask whether the pivot to Asia is over. The re-balance is not over, nor should it be given the strategic rationale underpinning it. As noted, the major military assets associated with the initiative are mobile and re-deployable, which means that they will continue to be available for contingencies in other regions should that be needed. For example, while the primary area of operations for an aircraft carrier strike group home-ported in the Pacific will be in that region, it could be re-deployed to the Gulf, for example, should it become necessary to do

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Admittedly, doing that is less efficient than deploying a carrier strike group home-ported on the east coast. It is almost 3,000 nautical miles further from San Diego to the Gulf (travelling via Singapore) than it is from Norfolk to the Gulf. That leads to a transit time that is approximately 10 days longer in each direction for a west coast-ported strike group (assuming a 12-knot average speed of advance) than an east coast-ported one. The key point is that while shifting naval assets to the Pacific lengthens the required response time should they need to be deployed to the Gulf, it emphatically does not preclude using those assets to respond to non-Asia Pacific contingencies.

Therefore, given that central elements of the re-balance are oriented around mobile assets, the crises of 2014 have not spelled the end of the pivot. That observation leads to two recommendations for making the pivot effective; one is related to operational planning and the other to public diplomacy. In terms of the former, the Department of Defense should undertake the requisite operational planning to minimize the burdens associated with having to shift assets increasingly focused on the Asia-Pacific to other regions. For example, given that the additional return transit time to the Gulf is twenty days for a west coast carrier group, if the U.S. is faced with the need to deploy Pacific-ported assets to other regions with some frequency, then doing so could quickly lead to a further lengthening of deployment times. The Department of Defense should conduct preparatory planning to mitigate, as much as possible, the adverse impacts associated with such shifts, especially to deployment times. Furthermore, in extremis, in the event that the U.S. military finds itself responding to prolonged crises in the Gulf or Europe, it may be faced with a need to re-shift assets that have moved to the Asia-Pacific back to other

regions for a significant period of time. Planning should be undertaken now to allow that to happen if necessary. For example, the appropriate planning should be put in place to allow naval assets home-ported west to be moved back to east coast ports for significant periods if needed.

Not only is it necessary to undertake such operational planning, it would be useful to communicate clearly that the re-balance is largely based upon mobile assets and that the necessary arrangements are in place to allow them to be deployed to other theaters as required. U.S. policymakers have already gone out of their way to emphasize that the re-balance does not imply a lessening of the defense commitment to Europe. For example, in February 2013, on his inaugural trip overseas as Secretary of State, John Kerry told a youth audience in Berlin that “we are paying attention to Asia, and so are you, and so should you. But we’re not doing it at the expense of Europe, not at all.”

What has not been sufficiently communicated is that by orienting the military re-balance around mobile assets, the United States has retained the capacity to shift those assets to other theaters as needed. Articulating that point more clearly than has been achieved thus far would serve to reassure allies and partners located in other parts of the world and would help to bolster deterrence by underscoring to potential adversaries that the re-balance does not preclude re-deployment to other regions as needed.

**Recommendation 2: Maximizing the effectiveness of efforts to train & assist partner forces**

Defense experts have argued persuasively that—given the strategic choice to cut the land forces—it is important that the Pentagon plan now for how it would effectively re-generate those forces if that became necessary due to future threats. Additionally, the need to retain the lessons learned about conducting counter-insurgency operations has been stressed, in case the U.S. finds

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itself waging future COIN campaigns.\textsuperscript{69} As well as those two sensible policy suggestions, there is another short-term need related to the ground forces given the administration’s preferred military strategy. An important aspect of that strategy is the deployment of U.S. military personnel to support partner forces with training, advice and intelligence so that those partners, rather than the U.S., can lead the fight against common adversaries. For example, a central part of the effort to tackle ISIS involves U.S. military personnel advising Iraqi security forces and training 5,000 members of Syrian rebel forces in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{70} The key tasks envisaged by the current military strategy are what the Army terms “security force assistance” and “foreign internal defense.”\textsuperscript{71} Although the two tasks have elements in common and can be undertaken in conjunction with one another, they are distinct. Security force assistance involves efforts to “organize, train, equip and advise foreign security forces and relevant supporting institutions.”\textsuperscript{72} Meanwhile, foreign internal defense includes “indirect support, direct support (not involving U.S. combat operations), and combat operations” in an effort to assist “another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security.”\textsuperscript{73}

Both tasks will primarily fall to special operations forces and other elite units, such as the Army Asymmetric Warfare Group. As noted, the latest defense budget proposed that the total SOF community will grow to 69,700 personnel. In addition to increasing their numbers, it is worth considering two possible policy efforts to ensure that those forces can most effectively


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 1–10.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 1–11.
carry out the security force assistance and foreign internal defense tasks required. First, it will be beneficial to find ways to incentivize and reward such missions, as well as ensuring that the morale of those performing them remains high. Several experts who have analyzed SOF activities over the past decade have highlighted a sense within the special forces community and within the Army more broadly that advise and train missions are less valued than the direct action missions that have been a primary focus of special forces since 2001.  

A 2013 RAND study on lessons learned from security force assistance efforts in Afghanistan reported the following results of qualitative research:

“Thirteen SFAT [Security Force Assistance Team] members said that they viewed their Advise and Assist assignments as “career killers” within the Army. And, in five cases, advisors spoke of low morale giving way to depression with those who longed for more combat-oriented assignments. Approximately 12 of those 13 advisors said that they would have preferred a command assignment because of the inherent prestige associated with such positions…….Telling is the fact that a majority of the 67 interviewees opined that the processes were not in place to choose the right individuals for the Advise and Assist mission, for which they blamed the lack of interest many had for SFA compared with interest in traditional combat missions.”

Meanwhile, Malvesti notes that “more effective employment of engagement-oriented approaches to Special Operations also rests with the broader incentive structure. For decades,

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SOF’s warrior-diplomats have been underrepresented among the highest leadership and command ranks within the community.”75 Maximizing the effectiveness of efforts to train and assist partner forces depends upon raising the incentives, rewards and prestige associated with such efforts.

In addition, the ability to partner with, assist and train other forces is likely to be enhanced by deep knowledge regarding those partners, their cultures and societies. Understandably, the major focus of the SOF community recently has been in the CENTCOM region. For example, in 2010 around 12,560 members of SOF were deployed. Of those, 85 percent were deployed in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, while around 7 percent were in the PACOM area and 2 percent were in the EUCOM area.76 It is worth considering what can be done to enhance the knowledge and experience that relevant personnel possess of all strategic regions in order to allow them to most effectively assist and train partners in those regions if needed. For example, the Ukraine crisis has underscored that, in the future, the U.S. may derive strategic benefits from deploying military advisors in Eastern Europe to bolster the capabilities of partners in that region. Equipping relevant personnel with the knowledge and experience to undertake those tasks would serve to maximize potential options. The Army’s Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) initiative should be viewed as an important effort in that regard.77 Ways of further enhancing knowledge and expertise regarding specific regions warrant consideration.

75 Michele Malvesti, “To Serve the Nation,” 16.
76 Ibid., 30.
Recommendation 3: Consider the decision-making structures required to allow rapid response by NATO

As noted, at the NATO summit in Wales the alliance committed itself to establishing a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). In thinking about the necessary requirements to enable such a force to deploy rapidly, the Wales discussions focused upon the military assets required, such as command and control assets and in-place force enablers on the territories of eastern Allies. But, military assets are not the only requirements to permit rapid deployment. It will also be necessary to have crisis decision-making processes in place that can act rapidly. After all, even if the alliance has in place military forces and assets that can move quickly, they can only respond after a political decision has been taken to do so. As it stands, given the tradition of unanimous assent within the North Atlantic Council, the military capabilities associated with the rapid reaction force will not necessarily be the major impediment to quick NATO response. Instead, slowness in political decision-making is likely to be the more significant obstacle. NATO members should give consideration to the appropriate political decision-making structures to allow swift deployment of its rapid-reaction capabilities.

Recommendation 4: Refrain from any further troop reductions in Europe and continue significant commitments to multi-lateral exercises with NATO allies

During a visit to Germany in early November 2014, Army Chief of Staff General Odierno confirmed that there were no plans to further reduce the number of U.S. troops based in Europe at the moment. He stated that “the Army itself has reduced significantly in Europe

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78 “Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales.”
already. And we’re probably about as low as we can go.” Given the events in Ukraine in recent months, keeping U.S. troop levels at least at their current levels makes strategic sense, as a means of contributing to reassurance and deterrence. Furthermore, it will be beneficial to sustain significant U.S. commitments to exercises with NATO allies.

Despite having announced in 2013 that it would rotate a battalion-sized task force from the U.S. to Europe to conduct multinational training exercises, the United States faced criticism from some defense commentators following what was perceived as a meager contribution to the Steadfast Jazz exercise held in November 2013. The exercise was designed to test the air, land, maritime and special forces components of the NATO Response Force. A total of 6,000 NATO troops took part in the exercise; around half participated in a live exercise, while the remainder where headquarters personnel. However, the United States only contributed 250 troops to the exercise. To make matters worse, only about 40 were from the U.S.-based BCT assigned to rotate forces to Europe. By contrast, France sent 1,200 troops to the exercise, while Poland contributed 1,040 soldiers.

By contrast, recent U.S. commitments to multilateral exercises in Europe—in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis—have been encouraging. Since April 2014, approximately 600 U.S. troops from the 173rd Airborne BCT, based in Vicenza, Italy, have been taking part in

training exercises in Poland and the Baltic states. Then, in October 2014, 600 soldiers from the Fort Hood-based 1st BCT, 1st Cavalry Division rotated to Europe to take part in multi-national exercises. Such commitments to alliance exercises should continue for the foreseeable future as an important means of bolstering reassurance of NATO allies and improving inter-operability with them.

**Recommendation 5: Review required ISR capabilities**

Recent operations against ISIS have underscored the importance of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) aerial capabilities. Airstrikes against the group in Iraq and Syria have required considerable use of ISR assets in order to build up adequate intelligence pictures. In the first two months of operations against ISIS, more than 700 ISR sorties were flown in support of those missions. Senior defense officials reportedly stated that the high number of ISR assets assigned to Afghanistan was limiting operations in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, even unmanned ISR sorties are a labor-intensive undertaking, given that around 30 personnel are needed to operate a drone orbit, while a further 80 personnel are needed for analyzing the information collected. The necessity of a plentiful supply of ISR assets is increased by the administration’s preferred strategy of refraining from deploying large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground. Without a substantial ground presence, the importance of building up intelligence pictures through aerial assets is enhanced.

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86 Ibid.
ISR capabilities were viewed as a source of possible savings in order to meet budgetary restrictions. As part of the 2015 budget release, the Pentagon announced that it was planning to reduce the growth in its ISR drone fleet. Following the campaign against ISIS, there are signs that the decision is being re-considered. In September, Michael Vickers, the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, stated that “we’ll probably wind up with a different ISR mix after the budget cycle than we would have a year ago because of the rise of ISIL and other challenges.”

Following the surprises of 2014, the Air Force should review what it believes is required in terms of ISR. Although winding down the U.S. presence in Afghanistan will reduce the demand for ISR resources in that theater, the crises of 2014 have emphasized the possibility of needing to deploy such assets across several theaters at once. In reviewing requirements in this regard, the Air Force should consider what would be needed if it faced a similar campaign to the anti-ISIS one in the Middle East in future, concurrently with a contingency in the Asia-Pacific.

VI: Conclusion

The triple surprises of 2014 are unlikely to lead to any appreciable change in the current trajectory of U.S. defense spending. The Pentagon is likely to continue to operate for the foreseeable future within a fiscally-constrained environment. Within that environment, U.S. military strategy should continue to re-balance to the Asia-Pacific, while retaining the capabilities to perform reassurance and crisis response in other key regions of the world, notably including Europe and the Middle East. The five recommendations outlined are intended as

87 Ibid.

efforts in pursuit of those objectives, which would not require huge commitments of new budgetary resources.