



# Broader challenges, smaller budgets: The future of the US military

by Jan Joel Andersson

With the war in Iraq over and the one in Afghanistan drawing to a close, the United States is in the process of rethinking its military's future role. As commander-in-chief, President Obama issued a new strategic guidance document for the Department of Defense (DoD) in January 2012, which emphasised how the US is to focus on a broader range of challenges and opportunities, such as ensuring the security and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. It also demonstrated awareness that these challenges could not be overcome by US military might alone. To ensure that that US military remains ready to counter the full range of future threats, the document acknowledged that preparing for the future requires strengthening all the tools of American power including: diplomacy, development aid, intelligence capabilities, and homeland security.

In September 2013, in a speech given at the UN General Assembly in New York, President Obama reiterated that the country is shifting from a 'perpetual war footing' and that the use of military means is only one of several options in the US toolbox. He did, however, also stress that the United States remains prepared to make use of all elements at its disposal (including force) to secure its core interests.

In an even more recent speech, delivered in early November at the CSIS Global Security Forum in Washington D.C., US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel outlined his view of the shifting long-term national security challenges facing the US and the role of

the military in addressing these challenges. Taken together, these two speeches provide a good indication of how Washington is preparing to adapt its military to a new world of broader challenges and smaller budgets.

The starting point for both President Obama and Secretary Hagel is the end of an era dominated by the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This post-9/11 world is characterised by changing geopolitical centres of gravity, shifting towards the Asia Pacific as a result of the global diffusion of economic power and demographic changes. The rise of countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey is leading to a global realignment of influence and interests, the likes of which have not been seen since the decade following the Second World War. Terrorism, destructive technologies, natural disasters, pandemic diseases, and pariah nations like Iran, Syria, and North Korea – in combination with rapid population growth and inadequate educational and employment opportunities across the globe – will all contribute to uncertainty and pose a risk to peace and stability in the 21st Century.

Although these challenges are not the responsibility of the US alone, all will demand a certain level of continued US global leadership and engagement. This being said, the American leadership will increasingly depend on an understanding of the limits of US power and the wise application of its influence by forming coalitions with partners based on common interests. Secretary Hagel has warned against both the 'false notion of

American decline' and the risk of falling 'prey to hubris'. The key for the US policymakers is therefore to make a better effort to understand how the world views the US and to listen more to what others have to say.

## Reassess and review

To effectively navigate this emerging world order, Secretary Hagel advocates an American role that pursues a 'principled and engaged realism that employs diplomatic, economic and security tools – as well as our values – to advance our security and prosperity.' While the US military will remain an essential tool, it cannot, and will not, be the only one to address the many diplomatic, economic, and cultural components of the challenges outlined above. The US therefore needs to place more emphasis on its civilian instruments of power while adapting its military to remain second-to-none on the world stage and relevant in the face of threats that differ greatly from those of the Cold War and the conflicts of the past two decades.

As a member of the 2007 CSIS Commission on Smart Power, co-chaired by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, then Senator Hagel was an early proponent of an integrated strategy combining hard and soft power to achieve American objectives. This approach has also been promoted by both President Obama and former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates. Such an 'integrated approach' can be understood as one in which military force always remains an option, but an option of last resort. According to both Obama and Hagel, the US military should play a supporting, not leading role in US foreign policy.

While Hagel has warned against overreliance on the military, he maintains that the US must remain militarily unrivalled. The US military, however, needs to be reshaped in order to maintain its capability and readiness in face of budget cuts (the DoD is facing sequester-level budget cuts of some \$500 billion over 10 years, in addition to the ten-year \$487 billion reduction already underway). In light of the global challenges facing the US and the current budgetary restrictions, Secretary Hagel initiated a 'Strategic Choices and Management Review' in his first weeks in office. Given the limited funds available, difficult choices and trade-offs in military capabilities must be made – but the situation also provides opportunities to implement much needed changes and reforms.

Secretary Hagel has identified six priorities:

- pursue institutional reform following more than ten years of war and budget increases. The US military will have to continue cutting back on 'the world's largest back office', despite a 20% reduction in headquarters

budgets having already been implemented to make structures flatter and more responsive;

- re-evaluate the assumptions and scenarios that guide how the US military organises, trains, and equips its forces. These assumptions need to better reflect current US goals, the shifting strategic environment and the evolving capacities of allies, partners, and opponents alike;
- maintain readiness with less money available for training. Smaller budgets mean fewer exercises and flying hours, potentially leading to a future military readiness crisis. The US may therefore have to accept a tiered system in which not all units can be at full readiness at all times;
- protect investments in future military capabilities, especially in the areas of space, cyber, special forces, military intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. As more and more countries invest in advanced technologies, it is important that the US maintains its decisive technological edge in the future;
- find the right balance between capacity and capability, between active and reserve forces, between forward and home-based deployment, and between conventional and unconventional forces. While some rebalancing is already underway – such as focusing on smaller and more modern forces (rather than maintaining larger ones with older equipment) and moving away from a garrison military – more can be done;
- limit personnel and compensation policies that presently consume about half of the Department of Defense budget. This area may be the most difficult to tackle but the risk of the US military becoming a well-compensated, but poorly trained and equipped force with limited readiness is real. Here Congress will have to partner with the DoD to help curb personnel costs.

Similarly to the US, military establishments in Europe are now facing the challenges of adapting to a post-Afghanistan world. Whilst smaller budgets are forcing European governments to make difficult choices and trade-offs in military capabilities, they are also providing opportunities to implement long-overdue reforms. The six priorities outlined by Secretary Hagel provide an interesting example of how to proceed in identifying the changes required on the other side of the Atlantic as well.

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