



BACKGROUND

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Strategic Balance: The U.S. Military in the 21st Century

Frankie Sturm, Truman National Security Project
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The United States is facing the double challenge of an overstretched military and an overstretched budget. Undisciplined spending and reckless policymaking under eight years of conservative leadership have failed to prepare and equip our armed forces for the challenges of the 21st century. It is up to the new Obama administration to outfit our military for the challenges ahead. To reverse the conservative legacy of poor defense spending at a time when budgets are shrinking, the new administration will have to choose between four basic approaches.

Vision #1: The Guillotine. One approach to funding America's military is to simply cut the defense budget across the board—this is what Barney Frank, for instance, is calling for with 25% cuts.¹ Less spending will certainly create fiscal sobriety and force defense officials to make the tough choices. But this method is as arbitrary as the Bush administration was undisciplined. Arbitrary cuts will no more assure fiscal wisdom than devoting a fixed percentage of GDP to military spending will guarantee wise choices. Blindness cannot induce clarity. ***We must look at our needs and the threats we face before we set any kind of spending level. The guillotine fails this test.***

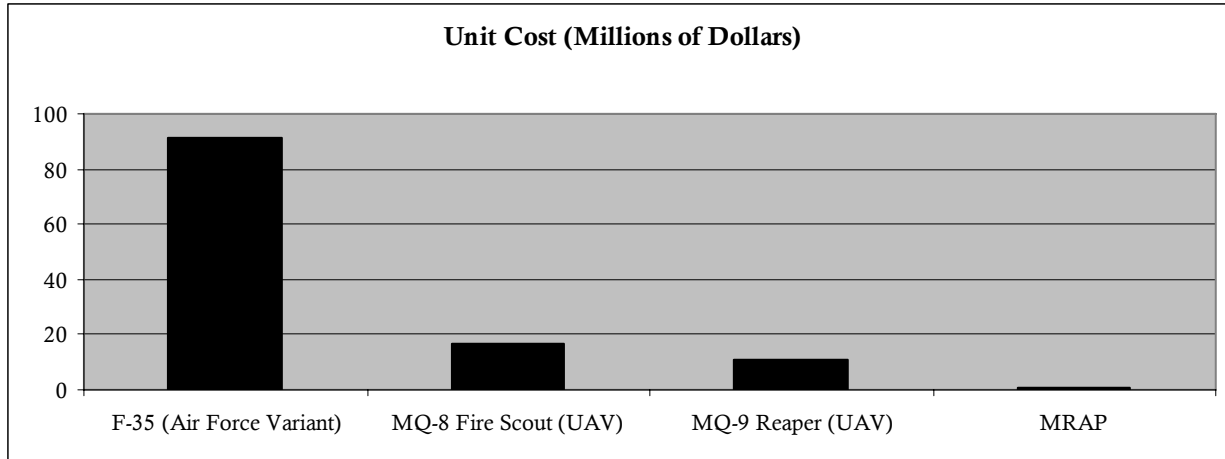
Vision #2: Back to the Future. Some thinkers want to see the United States hit the reset button. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have stretched the military thin. Our equipment is depleted, our troops are overworked, and our will is wavering. To rebuild our military, we need to replace the

“We must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future conflicts that we neglect to provide all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as the U.S. is in today.”

- Secretary of Defense
Robert Gates

equipment and the manpower we have lost since 2001, and continue investing in high performance weapons system programs started decades ago. This approach is correct to highlight the importance of enhancing manpower, replacing used materiel, and developing new conventional capabilities. However, it ultimately falls short because it attempts to take the U.S. military back to the 20th century, when the identity of our enemies was clear and our national security relied almost solely on conventional military power and nuclear deterrence. ***We live in a new century whose threat environment differs greatly from that of the past. Hitting reset will not be enough.***

Vision #3: Unconventional Wisdom. While some military thinkers advocate a return to the 20th century, others recommend a return to the eighteenth. Similar to the days of our founding fathers, who excelled at counterinsurgency against the British, unconventional warfare is all the rage these days. Its tenets have helped stem the tide of violence in Iraq, and some argue for a similar strategy in Afghanistan. On the one hand, unconventional warfare deserves its resurgent status. In complex wars with shifting alle-



giances against enemies that hide amongst the populace, counterinsurgency provides essential lessons, and has spawned success. Nevertheless, this approach remains fundamentally flawed. The doyens of unconventional war may be able to see the forest for the trees, but they have forgotten that the world contains more than one forest. Al Qaeda may not have a navy or an air force, but China, Russia and Iran do. *Neither conventional nor unconventional war deserves an altar on which to sacrifice the other. American security requires a balancing act between new threats and old mainstays.*

Vision #4: Strategic Balance. What is the threat environment the United States will face in the years to come? This is the heart of strategic balance – an insistence on evaluating and re-evaluating the reigning threat environment. The answer should determine the shape and size of the U.S military and guide the defense spending that funds it. Just as we need Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), which helped turned the tide during counterinsurgency operations in Iraq,² we also need fighter aircraft and a blue water navy to deter potential adversaries. Just as we need more troops to ease the burden of repeated tours of duty, we also need officers who speak Arabic and technicians who can ensure our cyber security. America needs a multifaceted military to defeat and deter a new generation of threats. *Only strategic balance is up to the task of preparing our armed forces for all the battles we are likely to fight.*

Competing Visions in a Time of Tight Budgets

The supremacy of strategic balance becomes clearer as our budget becomes tighter. Even in the best of times, we cannot afford everything we would like. And these are hardly the best of times. The Bush

administration avoided tough choices in defense spending, choosing to throw around vast sums of money and hope for the best. This naïveté – in economic and military affairs alike – is what landed us in the mess we are in today. Aping the mistakes of the past will not lead to success in the future. The road to recovery begins with smarter spending. Smarter spending begins with strategic balance.

Take, for example, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. At a price tag of \$242 billion, it is the most expensive aircraft program in the history of the Department of Defense (DoD) and thus a prime candidate for cutting back and saving money.³ Those who look longingly at the past and see the era of conventional warfare as a time of innocence will fight to fully fund the F-35, while those wielding the guillotine and the partisans of unconventional war will try to slash its funding or cut it altogether.

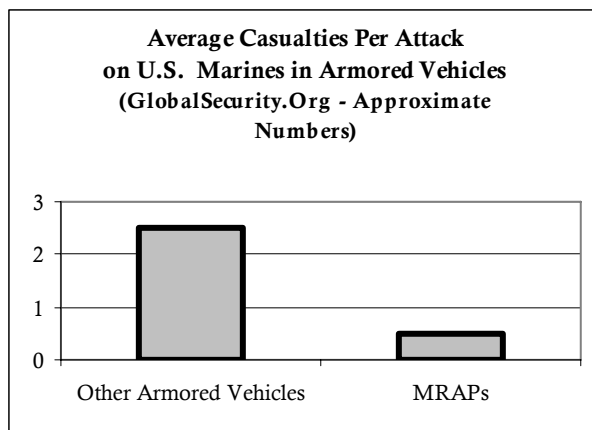
A policy of strategic balance would recognize that the F-35, in which many of our allies are invested, is crucial to operating together with allies in joint wars. At the same time, it would recognize that the F-35 program is extremely expensive, and has duplicative capabilities that we can no longer afford – and never needed in the first place – in a belt-tightening environment.

To maintain America's military preeminence in the future, a strategic balance approach would pause to reevaluate funding for this vast program. Based on reports from nonpartisan organizations such as the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the Congressional Research Service, a policymaker using the strategic balance approach might decide to cut the Navy variant of the F-35 that adds little necessary capability, reduce the number of purchases for the Air Force variant so that we have enough new



aircraft to replace the aging F-16s, and continue funding a Marine Corps variant that provides new and needed capabilities for potential conventional wars in the future.⁴ Somewhere between a guillotine and a reset, such a sensible strategy would allow us to operate alongside our allies who have also invested in the F-35, and provide capabilities we need to remain on the cutting edge technologically. And it would free up funds for moving towards the future.

The savings generated by the remaining cuts would then be invested in technologies that create a ripple effect and arm the U.S. military for both the present and the future. For instance, investing in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) would provide greater flight range and time over target than the F-35, and can be used for both conventional and unconventional warfare. For both the present and the future, greater funding for UAVs makes sense.



Investing in greater fuel efficiency would have a similar ripple effect. Every time the price of oil increases by \$10 per barrel, DoD is forced to spend another \$1.3 billion on fuel – that’s the equivalent of the Marine Corps’ entire annual procurement budget!⁵ Fuel efficiency also has life and death consequences: seventy percent of battlefield tonnage is attributed to transporting fuel. Attacks on fuel convoys in both Iraq and Afghanistan have become a major cause of U.S. casualties.⁶ A more fuel-efficient military would save the U.S. billions of dollars and untold lives.

An investment in not only additional manpower, but in certain kinds of manpower, would be welcome as well. Instead of merely adding new troops, the military could add capacity in civil affairs, psychological operations, engineers, military police, and surveillance assets. Even better would be Secretary of Defense Gates’ plan to transfer a portion of DoD funds

to the Department of State or USAID in order to procure similar capabilities.⁷ This would free DoD from the burden of developing those new capabilities on its own, letting troops focus on fighting, while augmenting our ability to keep the peace in fragile states.

Managing Risk and Stepping Up to the Plate

Only foresight can spare us from the condemnation of hindsight. We are facing an economic crisis and fighting two wars at the same time. This means that in the great balancing act of pitting today’s risks against the potential risks of the future, we need to err on the side of winning the wars we’re fighting today. To the greatest degree possible, we must channel our investments toward capabilities we can use in both conventional and unconventional warfare – such as UAVs – and away from those that are only applicable to one sort of conflict – such as the F-35. For eight years, conservatives spent defense dollars without a strategic vision. The result is a weaker military. Progressives must do better by restoring strategic balance to our defense spending.

End Notes

- 1.) Roxana Tiron, “Frank’s plan to cut defense faces resistance,” *The Hill*, 28 October 2008.
 - 2.) Tom Vanden Brook, “Troops in Iraq get safer Vehicle,” *USA Today*, 10 May 2007; Andrew Feickert, “U.S. Army and Marine Corps Equipment Requirements: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, 15 June 2007.
 - 3.) Steve Kosiak and Barry Watts, “U.S. Fighter Modernization Plans: Near Term Choices,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2007
 - 4.) Kosiak and Watts, *Ibid*; Christopher Bolkcom and Anthony Murch, “F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program: Background, Status, and Issues,” *Congressional Research Service*, 29 August 2008.
 - 5.) House of Representatives. *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism*, 5; HR 5122, 109th Congress, 2nd sess., 2006, sec. 102 (b).
 - 6.) “Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicle Program,” GlobalSecurity.org.
 - 7.) Gerry Gilmore, “Gates, Rice Support Extension of Security-Assistance Legislation,” *American Forces Press Service*, 15 April 2008; Robert Gates, Speech at Kansas State University, 26 November 2007.
- Unit Cost Chart:** *Building a Military for the 21st Century*, Center for American Progress, December 2008; Erhard and Work, “The Unmanned Combat Air System Carrier Demonstration Program,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 10 May 2007; “MRAP deliveries to Top Year-End Goal,” Defense Link, 19 December 2007

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1420 K Street NW, Suite 250

Washington, DC 20005

Telephone: 202-216-9723

info@trumanproject.org

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