WAR ON THE ROCKS

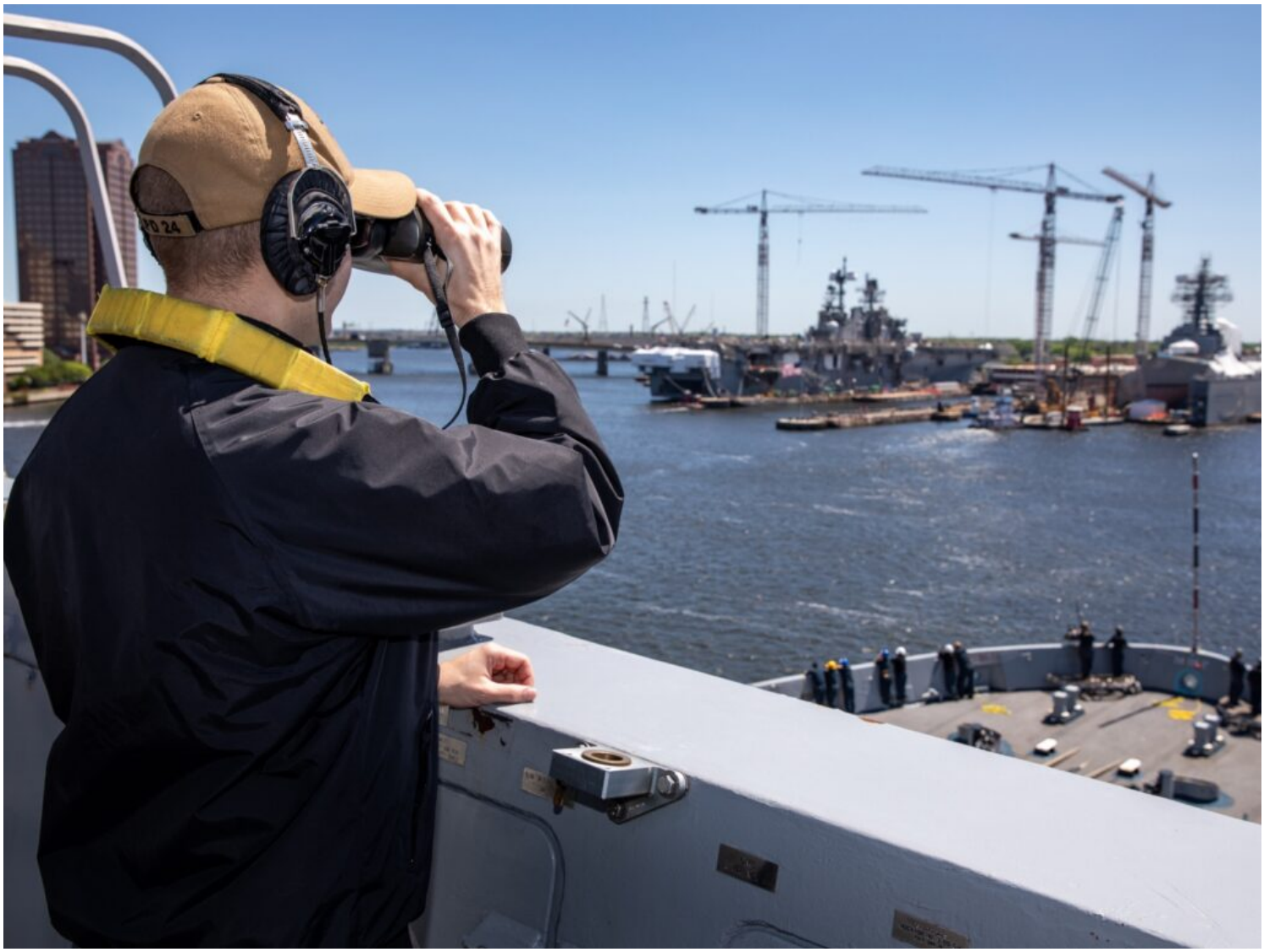
TEXAS NATIONAL SECURITY REVIEW

BEATING THE OSSIFICATION TRAP: WHY REFORM, NOT SPENDING, WILL SALVAGE AMERICAN POWER

MICHAEL J MAZARR

FEBRUARY 15, 2024

COMMENTARY



Here's a question: If you could add $200 billion to the defense budget — or wave a magic wand and pass every needed reform to defense procurement, personnel, business and budget processes, and other areas crying out for change — which would you do? For many defense professionals, the answer is obvious: Show me

the money. With crises breaking out around the world, from Ukraine to Gaza to the South China Sea, some observers of U.S. defense strategy warn that the United States isn't spending enough on its military. Threats are piling up, while spending — assessed against inflation — is at best holding flat. The time has come for a major defense buildup, some say, which the country can easily afford since current defense budgets remain well below post–World War II averages.

That impulse is understandable. It is also mistaken. There is a gap between the aspirations and capabilities of U.S. defense strategy — but the problem isn't the amount of money America is spending or the size of the U.S. military. The ends-means gap emerges in part from excessive strategic ambitions and the demands they place on the U.S. military. But in terms of defense policy, the gap is a function of the deeply ingrained inefficiencies, bureaucratic and political egotism, vague conceptual foundations, self-defeating policies, and often pointless rules, regulations, and restrictions that keep the Defense Department from gaining the full value of the money it already spends. To be prepared for a more dangerous era, the United States should overhaul its defense institutions before it pours more resources into them.

An Aging Power

The United States is showing many symptoms of having slipped into a typical pattern for aging great powers: They become overgrown with rules, bureaucracy, and established ways of doing business. Major social actors grow more concerned with following procedure, preserving institutional habits, and hoarding power and resources than generating positive outcomes. Call it the Ossification Trap —

decaying into a tangle of fossilized institutions that undermine dynamism, eat away at public confidence in governance, and project an image of ineptitude.

The United States is well along this road. It has allowed overwhelming and enervating bureaucratic requirements to invade every area of economic and social life, from education to medicine to starting new businesses. The resulting bureaucratic constraints generate alienation and disempowerment. Their frequently generic and absolute rules prevent people from exercising simple common sense or creative judgment in the unique context of specific circumstances. Meantime entrenched interests work to preserve their power and preferences, often generating suboptimal choices.

Problems with bureaucratic sclerosis in defense are just one symptom of this larger disease. But the crisis in defense strategy, much like the crisis in medicine or higher education, can be traced at least in significant part to the effects of the Ossification Trap.

The background to the current disarray in defense strategy begins with the end of the Cold War. Faced with multiple regional threats from smaller powers, the United States adopted a defense strategy that could be termed *expeditionary force projection* — an approach based on flowing massive U.S. forces to areas of risk, gathering overwhelming power, and imposing Washington's will on adversaries through technological dominance. The apotheosis of this approach came in the 1991 Gulf War, where U.S. forces spent months building up before launching an overwhelming shock and awe campaign against Iraqi forces.

Since that time, all of the major assumptions of that approach have been crumbling. The strategy was oriented to lesser regional powers rather than peer competitors like China. It assumed that the United States would have months to assemble these dominant force packages, and that it could do so free from attacks on its logistics chains — neither of which will be true in the future. It assumed

that the United States would enjoy unquestioned air superiority, which it won't be able to count on in campaigns against distant great powers.

With impressive foresight and intellectual energy, the U.S. defense establishment has recognized these trends and begun to respond. The last two National Defense Strategies admit ebbing U.S. predominance and point toward new approachesto warfare that will require growing investment in emerging technologies like unmanned systems. New concepts of operations — the guidebooks for how the U.S. military will fight in the future — have started to emerge. To speed adoption of new technologies, the Department of Defense and services have created a laundry list of transformation and innovation offices, task forces, and units — most prominently, the Defense Innovation Unit.

But these important ideas and initiatives — though they are generating impressive amounts of creative thinking and handfuls of usable capabilities — haven't been matched by enough actual change. The combined effects of bureaucratic logjams, parochial interests, and budgetary politics have reached a critical mass that prevents the U.S. national security establishment from innovating at scale, recruiting and retaining enough of the best quality people, or adapting to new forms of warfare.

Broken Defense Institutions

Examples of such barriers are legion. Most infamously, the defense procurement system — the process to conceive, design, and build weapons systems — remains slow and inefficient, plagued with dozens of program requirements that impose years of delay. The latest poster child for this dysfunction is the Navy's Littoral Combat Ship, a potentially $100 billion misadventure to acquire unreliable, poorly armed craft that are being rapidly decommissioned.

While the Defense Innovation Unit has made real progress, most recently releasing a "DIU 3.0" agenda to "deliver strategic impact," it and other incubators remain tiny pieces of the defense establishment. The Navy's drone effort, to take

one example, is “the dust particle on the pocket lint of the budget,” in the words of the unit’s head. When former Defense Innovation Unit director Michael Brown left in 2022, he described the larger Department of Defense’s attitude toward the unit as “benign neglect.” The Defense Innovation Board recently published a series of in-depth studies that conclude, among other things, that a “culture of obstruction” continues to plague the procurement process.

As crippling as it is, the procurement mess is just one of many examples of calcified bureaucratic institutions. Another is the Department of Defense’s process for cultivating new ways of fighting. On one level, progress has been impressive. The services have developed the outlines of many new operational concepts: multi-domain operations, expeditionary advanced base operations, agile combat employment, distributed maritime operations, and a joint warfighting concept that in theory integrates these discrete notions. Yet the department still lacks a unified, comprehensive theory of success for large-scale contingencies. Many of these concepts are thoughtful collections of suggestive phrases and ideas rather than actionable plans. Most remain service-specific ideas not meshed into truly joint approaches.

At the same time, efforts to pursue what might be the most recent National Defense Strategy’s leading priority — tighter integration with allies and partners — continues to be hamstrung by inefficient processes for military sales and information sharing. Career and recruitment reform is another area ripe for change, in everything from hiring cyber experts to revising assignment patterns for foreign area officers to the role of professional military education in officers’ careers. U.S. security cooperation efforts are dogged by hundreds of restrictions, regulations, and procedures that impose limits on everything from the medals and awards U.S. personnel can give partner personnel to the ability to help militaries with checkered but improving human rights practices.

Bureaucratic strangulation extends all the way down to the tactical level. U.S. Army company commanders labor under a mountain of bureaucratic

requirements. The Navy struggles to retain surface warfare officers in part because of their immense burden of paperwork — burdens that have been associated with a recent series of accidents.

In these and many other areas well beyond big-ticket procurement disasters, the numbing effect of crushing, risk-averse, procedure-addicted bureaucracy stifles innovation, morale, and efficiency through every nook and cranny of the U.S. defense establishment. Far too much time is spent working through byzantine processes, filling out forms, coordinating drafts, scheduling pre-meetings for pre-meetings of meetings, and checking a thousand other bureaucratic boxes, as opposed to doing the things that drive defense effectiveness. This situation isn't new and is hard to measure in any objective way. But in recent years, it seems to have reached a critical mass.

Replicator: Right Idea, Challenging Context

All of these elements — the urgent need to do things differently, the recognition of that need by thoughtful leaders in the Department of Defense, some hopeful

moves hemmed in by powerful barriers to change — are evident in the newest poster-program of defense reform, the Replicator initiative. Aimed at a truly critical priority (getting masses of low-cost unmanned systems into operational service), announced with an admirable sense of urgency, Replicator could become an exception to the rule of stagnating defense reform.

There are many reasons for skepticism. As the American Enterprise Institute's William Greenwalt put it in a comprehensive — and disheartening — survey of barriers to innovation, "the Department's culture and business practices stack the odds against the Replicator initiative succeeding." It's a long way from a handful of prototypes to a large number of deployed systems — and then integrating those systems into warfighting concepts, command and control networks, and targeting grids. (Six months have already passed in the initiative's claimed 18- to 24-month target for mass production.) Early reports suggested that innovative smaller firms of the type Replicator needs to engage were confused by the program and intimidated by the Department of Defense's crushing regulatory burdens. Long-term funding appears uncertain.

None of this guarantees that the program will fail. It is moving forward, with a department steering group identifying missions and technologies. Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks chose the first set of capabilities for assessment in December and describes the project as "on track." As with so many reform initiatives, Replicator reflects great intentions and real effort. The question is whether it, or any similar ideas, can truly thrive without a broader detonation of the barriers to change.

Nimble Institutions as the Route to Strategic Success

Reformed defense institutions will boost U.S. warfighting capabilities in many ways. Improved procurement processes can help avoid dead ends like the Army's Future Combat System and the Navy's Littoral Combat Ship, which together wasted hundreds of billions, and cost overruns of the sort that the Government

Accountability Office has pegged at half a trillion dollars from ongoing programs alone. One internal Department of Defense report estimated that slashing bureaucracy could produce five-year savings of $125 billion. More engaged and motivated workforces could substantially improve productivity. Bold new approaches to acquisition, combined with a wider embrace of cutting-edge technologies, could bring large numbers of smaller, cheaper, autonomous, and swarming capabilities as well as new-generation sensing and targeting networks into the force far more quickly. Modernized career path and talent management approaches could attract thousands of top-flight people to the defense sector. Perhaps most importantly, fully matured, thoroughly joint operational concepts that specify clear cause-effect linkages and theories of success can help assure that U.S. capabilities are employed in the most effective way.

The defense competition between the United States and China ultimately isn't about numbers of aircraft or ships or divisions. It is a contest to build and sustain the most dynamic, effective, and efficient defense systems. Those in turn will, over the long run, generate the best concepts and the most innovative weapons. They will nourish the most creative and sometimes iconoclastic people. They will inspire public support for defense efforts. And critically, effective defense institutions have a tremendous signaling value, indicating to observers around the world which system is the better long-term bet as the security partner of choice.

Some will reject the binary choice between reforming defense *or* spending more. While fully appreciating the institutional malaise in defense, they will argue that we must do both: Threats are multiplying, time is short, and changing ingrained habits is slow. Reforms might help us get some systems quicker and cheaper, but that alone might not reverse current trends in capabilities. Reform isn't a substitute for bigger budgets; it is a complement to them.

But a major new bout of spending will not solve many key problems, and in some cases could make things worse. It will inevitably suppress urgency for especially

tough reforms by suggesting the cavalry is on the way in the form of new weapons or force structure. Inefficiencies mean that a significant fraction of the new spending will not be translated into actual capability. Indeed, the maladies of the current system create a dilemma: In theory, the Department of Defense could focus added resources on high-leverage investments reflecting risk-taking on new technology and concepts — but the system is unlikely to make those choices consistently until it is reformed. More money combined with an almost desperate sense of urgency is likely to lead defense institutions to revert to what they know to make a quicker difference.

Inviting a spending race is also a losing strategy. China, which still officially spends only about 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense (the real figure is somewhat higher), could match U.S. increases. And because of purchasing power parity differences, China gets bigger bang for every additional buck than the United States, meaning that such a stepwise spending race might favor the People's Liberation Army. In the most demanding scenario — a conflict over Taiwan — U.S. forces face challenges of distance, military access, and willpower that money alone can't cure. Finding new trillions for defense will also collide with the need to get U.S. debt under control. Interest payments will soon exceed defense spending in the federal budget, and the historical lesson for great powers is clear: Massive debt is a one-way road to strategic decline.

More spending is the lazy way to deal with a more dangerous world. The hard way — and ultimately the only way that will keep the United States ahead of the threats and risks of a complex and uncertain future — is bringing greater adaptability and flexibility to U.S. defense institutions through reforms that everyone agrees ought to happen, but mostly never do. The only sure route to greater dynamism and competitiveness, in defense as in other areas, is to create a more dynamic, creative, and adaptive engine of national power.

Reform is also urgently needed to shore up the political foundations of U.S. defense strategy. Reports of wasted spending and inefficiencies undermine public

support — not only for defense spending, but for the global commitments it underwrites. Americans' faith in public institutions has been falling for decades, and even faith in the military has recently taken hits. Pouring more money into an unreformed defense establishment is an unsustainable approach.

In fact, given Russian and Chinese limitations, the powerful contributions of U.S. allies and partners, and the potential to trim the roster of U.S. global commitments, the United States ought to be able to meet the demands of its defense strategy with today's level of defense spending — *if* we can transform our national security institutions. And without such reform, bigger budgets will achieve little in any case because they will be forced through broken machinery.

A compromise solution would be to identify a handful of areas where a temporary increment of spending could have a disproportionate effect on medium-term defense readiness — such as a time-limited fund to buy more munitions and build out associated industrial base capacity. But these investments should be small in number and highly targeted. Their purpose should explicitly be to buy time and fill critical gaps before a reenergized set of defense institutions begins to generate lasting advantage.

A Path to Reform

To start down such a path, the Defense Department doesn't need new studies or recommendations. It just needs a new conviction that bold and dramatic change is necessary — as well as a strong partnership with Congress, which is itself responsible for a good portion of America's bureaucratic nightmare and must share the leadership of any effort to escape it. The time has come for a new bipartisan consensus, built on urgent discussions between Congress and the executive branch, to inaugurate a period of radical reform designed to smash through barriers to change and burn away decades of accumulated bureaucratic underbrush.

Such a legislative-executive reform team could start with one or two issue areas as a demonstration concept. One pressing example would build on the Replicator initiative with a broader slate of reforms to innovation, procurement, and force design to both dramatically improve the process of buying legacy systems and accelerate the shift toward new technologies. Over perhaps six to nine months, the team could review all the existing studies and analysis on those issues, talk to working-level officers and civil servants, and develop a bold and comprehensive plan of attack. They could translate those ideas into legislation that could be offered like the Base Realignment Commission process, creating an over-arching presumption of action on recommendations approved by the president as a total package, absent a congressional resolution of disapproval.

The results will surely generate howls of protest and embody some risk. But with the right people involved and enough analytical rigor, there is a good chance of getting at least most of the answers right. The goal should be the sort of liberation from bureaucratic rule and routine described in broader terms by Philip K. Howard — to free people to a much greater degree to apply their common sense, case-specific judgment, and creativity. The need for such an agenda to shock the U.S. defense establishment out of its bureaucratic coma is now so obvious that taking risks with bold change is not only acceptable — it is urgently necessary.

Those who worry about U.S. defense readiness are right about two things: An increasingly complex and unstable world is emerging, and the United States will need potent, effective military power to deal with it. But the growing chorus to spend more, buy more, and field more forces along current lines gets the response all wrong. Leaders in Congress and the executive branch should be ready to act with urgency and determination. But that energy needs to be put toward a once-in-a-century campaign of reform to produce a national security establishment that is more adaptable, innovative, efficient, and rewarding for its people.

Michael J. Mazarr is a senior political scientist at RAND.

Image: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Bellino

COMMENTARY

MISSION

PEOPLE

FOUNDER'S CLUB

CONTACT

MEMBERS

JOIN

WAR HALL

PODCASTS

WOTR

NET ASSESSMENT

JAW-JAW

HORNS OF A DILEMMA