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Defending Forward

Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad

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Foreword

By former Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta

Besieged by a global pandemic, saddled with growing federal debt, and distracted by other domestic challenges, Americans are not thinking about U.S. defense policy or global military posture. Lately, they have grown concerned about the very state of our democracy.

When foreign policy manages to enter a conversation, it often takes the form of support for “ending endless wars.” I certainly appreciate the desire to end military conflicts and deployments. Too often as secretary of defense, I found that my most difficult responsibility was calling or writing families to inform them that a loved one tragically paid the ultimate price for our country.

But whether we like it or not, the United States confronts a growing array of serious national security threats. Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang, in addition to a number of determined terrorist organizations, continue to pursue objectives inimical to American interests.

In considering how to best respond, I draw lessons from my five decades of public service.

One of them is the realization that keeping our homeland safe and prosperous requires Americans to lead on the international stage – engaging other nations and building capable coalitions. Withdrawing into a defensive and insular crouch here at home risks leaving Americans more isolated and more vulnerable to threats. Large oceans do not provide the protection they once did.

More than ever, Americans must go abroad to remain secure at home. Such a view is neither a right nor left policy – it is smart policy informed by a modern history of devastating wars, hard lessons from more recent conflicts, and current realities.

Such a policy requires well-resourced and capable American diplomats, development experts, and intelligence professionals. But it also requires a ready and well-trained military, forward-positioned and equipped with the most modern and advanced weapons and systems available.

I also know from my time in government that the threats we confront are simply too numerous and complex for Americans to address alone. We simply lack the resources to defend our country and our citizens sufficiently against revisionist powers, rogue states, and terrorist organizations simultaneously. The economic impact of the global pandemic will only widen the gap between the defense resources required and those available.

Thankfully, America is blessed with an unparalleled network of allies and partners to help mitigate this resource gap. The right U.S. military posture can empower local partners, deter aggression, and defend our interests. This approach can ultimately reduce the demand on the U.S. military and the U.S. Treasury.

My experiences in government also teach me that every military deployment and withdrawal deserves intense scrutiny. Military interventions almost never go as planned, and they often last longer and include more challenges than originally anticipated. The use of armed force should be considered a last resort.

Americans are certainly right to scrutinize and debate military interventions. There is much to criticize, for example, about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and how the campaign in Afghanistan has been conducted.

THEN-U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LEON PANETTA SPEAKS TO MILITARY PERSONNEL DURING HIS VISIT TO CAMP LEMONNIER ON DECEMBER 13, 2011, IN DJIBOUTI. (PHOTO BY PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS – POOL VIA GETTY IMAGES)

But we must also apply the same scrutiny to withdrawals. In doing so, Americans will find that some withdrawals can be equally deleterious to our national security, especially when the withdrawals are conducted precipitously and without clear preconditions.

Unfortunately, debates about war often devolve into opposing sides caricaturing one another as “militant” on one side and “naïve” on the other – neither advancing knowledge nor illuminating the American interest. If we agree that those calling for withdrawal are not advocates for American “weakness,” we must also be willing to say that those making the case for forward defense-in-depth military deployments are not advocates for “endless war.”

Given the consequences, we must encourage a more serious and substantive discussion regarding America’s global military posture and what is required to protect our core national security interests.

That is exactly the kind of national conversation this monograph, edited by Bradley Bowman, seeks to inform.

Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad is a collection of essays by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and its Center on Military and Political Power. The monograph’s 22 essays, written by an impressive array of experts and former officials, are divided into five sections.



Illustrations by Daniel Ackerman/FDD

The first section includes essays that provide helpful historical context, describe the current state of the debate, and make the policy argument that retaining – not restraining – forward-positioned U.S. forces in key locations alongside allies and partners represents the best way to defend U.S. interests.

Sections two, three, and four examine three regional combatant commands that are vital to U.S. security and prosperity: Central Command, European Command, and Indo-Pacific Command, respectively. The contributions in each section describe U.S. national security interests, the leading threats to those interests, and the necessary American military posture in each region.

Section five includes essays that focus on the path forward, offering specific suggestions related to Beijing’s policy of military-civil fusion, the cyber domain, special operations, Israel and China, and a Pacific Deterrence Initiative. Each of these chapters offers a new perspective to traditional discussions regarding U.S. overseas military posture.

This volume is certainly not designed to end the debate, but to enhance it. The debate is the continuation of one whose roots trace back to the “Vietnam Syndrome,” which has saddled American strategic thinking for decades.

Readers will find arguments in this monograph with which they may agree or disagree. That is the intent. Let us hope they spark a serious, timely, and substantive discussion about our national defense. It is long overdue.

Leon E. Panetta

Former Secretary of Defense

Member, Board of Advisors, FDD's Center on Military and Political Power

Monterey, California

The Retrenchment Syndrome

By Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster

Many Americans have come to believe that retrenchment would avoid the costs of military operations overseas and improve U.S. security. The opposite is true. Disengagement from competitions overseas would increase dangers to Americans and ultimately require more costly military interventions.

"Endless Wars" and the Danger of Ignoring History

By Clifford D. May and Bradley Bowman

Leaders should certainly seek to avoid war and shorten their duration given the horrible human and financial costs. But successful leaders understand the prevalence of war in history and appreciate that prioritizing the avoidance of military conflict above all else only invites aggression.

Retain American Power, Do Not Restrain It

By Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz

Some want to retain U.S. power abroad, and others want to restrain it. The best way to protect American interests is to engage internationally, and to maintain a well-designed, forward-deployed military presence alongside allies and partners.

The Jihadist Threat Persists

By Thomas Joscelyn

Jihadists will continue to target Americans whether the United States withdraws its forces from key locations or not. The only question is whether the United States will meet the terrorist threat proactively overseas or belatedly at greater cost in the American homeland.

Avoiding a Self-Inflicted Wound in the Sinai

By Bradley Bowman and Major Amoreena York

Ending the modest U.S. military contribution to the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai would be short-sighted and represent a self-inflicted wound to American national security interests.

America's Small but Effective Presence in Syria

By David Adesnik and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Green

The U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State in Syria has been successful because it draws on painful lessons from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The modest U.S. military presence in Syria helps to advance a range of American interests at a minimal cost.

Learning the Correct Lessons From Iraq

By John Hannah

In evaluating U.S. military posture in Iraq today, the lessons of 2011, rather than those of 2003, are most relevant. The question is not whether to sustain a large-scale ground war, but whether to retain a small force to support an imperfect but important partner.

Countering the Iranian Threat in the Persian Gulf

By Mark Dubowitz, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Varsha Koduvayur

A chorus of voices is calling for a withdrawal of most U.S. troops from the Middle East, regardless of the consequences. Such an approach would invite additional aggression from the Islamic Republic of Iran, give terrorist organizations the space to operate, and endanger American interests.

America Does Not Have to Choose Defeat in Afghanistan

By Bill Roggio

If Washington ignores conditions on the ground and conducts a calendar-based withdrawal in Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda will have won, potentially overthrowing the government of Afghanistan. That could allow Afghanistan to once again become a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the United States.

American Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean

By Ambassador Eric S. Edelman and Aykan Erdemir

The United States should act urgently to develop a coherent strategic vision for the Eastern Mediterranean and to strengthen U.S. military presence there. It is currently insufficient to deter adversaries.

Preserving America's Military Posture in Germany

By Bradley Bowman and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges

NATO represents one of America's greatest grand strategic assets. The U.S.-German bilateral relationship serves as a key pillar of the alliance. American troops are in Germany because their presence serves U.S. interests, and any adjustments to U.S. force posture should focus on military readiness.

Strengthening NATO in the Black Sea Region

By Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges

NATO has strengthened military readiness along its eastern flank since 2014, particularly in the Baltic Sea region. The alliance, however, must address continued vulnerabilities and gaps in the Black Sea region.

China's Military Aims

By Craig Singleton

The leading threat to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific is the Chinese Communist Party and its People's Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA is undertaking a comprehensive restructuring and modernization effort designed to produce a capable and agile expeditionary fighting force.

Seizing the Advantage in the Asia-Pacific

By Eric Sayers and Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery

The growing military capabilities of the People's Liberation Army require the United States – along with regional allies and partners – to undertake a series of military posture shifts, doctrinal developments, and capability investments.

Standing with the Free People of Taiwan

By Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery and Bradley Bowman

To defend its core interests in Asia and avoid war with China, Washington must strengthen Taiwan's capability to defend itself; enhance the U.S. military's ability to surge to Taiwan's defense; build interoperability between the Taiwanese and American militaries; and counter Beijing's diplomatic efforts to isolate Taiwan.

Japan Remains the Cornerstone of the Pacific

By Mathew Ha, Major Stephanie Mafrici, and Colonel (Ret.) David Maxwell

If Washington and Tokyo are to defend their core interests and deter regional aggression, they must pursue an even stronger defense partnership – one that includes a robust U.S. military posture in Japan, improved Japanese military capabilities, and demonstrated interoperability between U.S. and Japanese forces.

Partnering with Seoul to Deter Pyongyang

By Colonel (Ret.) David Maxwell and Mathew Ha

The U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula protects vital U.S. interests in the region and deters military attack by North Korea against both the U.S. homeland and South Korea. A significant U.S. military withdrawal from South Korea would be unwise, even dangerous.

Countering Beijing's Fused Overseas Strategy

By Emily de La Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic

To effectively counter Beijing and optimize U.S. military posture overseas, Washington must understand the Chinese Communist Party's strategy of military-civil fusion.

Defending Forward in the Cyber Domain

By Samantha Ravich and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ed Cardon

America's adversaries seek to counter the United States in all domains. For the United States to be effective, Washington must defend forward not just in the air, land, sea, and space domains – but also in cyberspace.

Enhancing Special Operations for Sustained Counterterrorism Operations

By David Kilcullen

Some believe the strategic risks associated with military withdrawals can be mitigated through sustained counterterrorism operations conducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). However, without a network of nearby military bases, SOF can sometimes struggle to accomplish such missions safely.

Strengthen the Alliance With Israel to Contain China

By Mark Dubowitz and Jonathan Schanzer

To win the intense military-technology competition of the 21st century, Washington must strengthen and secure its economic and military cooperative research and development relationships with America's key tech-savvy democratic allies, such as Israel.

Lessons From the European Deterrence Initiative

By Bradley Bowman and Major Scott Adamson

Indo-Pacific Command warns that the U.S. military balance of power with China continues to erode. A Pacific Deterrence Initiative can help, and the European Deterrence Initiative offers some valuable lessons.

Charting a Bipartisan Path to Secure American Interests

By Bradley Bowman

Americans find themselves at an inflection point. We must decide what role we want to play in the world. Serious problems at home pull attention and resources inward, yet grave international threats loom. Persuaded by calls to “end endless wars,” some Americans support withdrawing into what former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta calls “a defensive and insular crouch here at home.”

But informed by his many decades of public service, including his time as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Panetta cautions against such an approach. Instead, he suggests three lessons that are worth revisiting to build a bipartisan national consensus on the future of U.S. global military posture.

GOING THERE TO BE SECURE HERE

The first lesson is that “Americans must go abroad to remain secure at home.” Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 terror attacks, and now COVID-19 have reminded Americans that what happens overseas matters at home. Threats neglected “over there” may ultimately hurt Americans “over here.” And as American business leaders have long understood, the overwhelming majority of the world’s consumers live outside the United States. Therefore, to sustain American prosperity and secure the economic foundation on which U.S. national security rests, Americans must retain unfettered access to overseas markets and resources.

Such assertions are not a call for “endless war” or American “military domination,” as some suggest.¹ Arguing that America must position some forces forward is not akin to calling for an over-militarized U.S. foreign policy that encourages ill-advised U.S. military interventions.

Much of the competition with China and Russia occurs outside the military sphere. The United States needs robust and well-resourced diplomatic and development capabilities. This calls for a comprehensive U.S. strategy that goes well beyond the Department of Defense and employs all the tools of national power.² For that reason, Congress was right to overturn the Trump administration’s efforts to slash funding for the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development.³

But if the United States does not also maintain a modernized and ready military in key locations abroad, all of America’s other capabilities will not be sufficient to deter aggression and secure American interests. This is particularly true as China and Russia work to field military capabilities superior to those of the United States.

America’s great power and rogue state adversaries have consistently tried to avoid direct military conflict with the United States, because of superior American military forces positioned in key locations. Instead, adversaries have preferred to challenge the United States in other domains. But if the United States permits its relative military power to erode and fails to retain sufficient forward defenses, one can reasonably expect more direct military aggression from adversaries.

Therefore, the question is not whether American forces must be deployed abroad to secure Americans and their interests. The question is when and where those deployments should occur and what form should they take.

AMERICA NEEDS HELP

The second lesson Panetta highlights is that “the threats we confront are simply too numerous and complex for Americans to address alone.”

As is often said, the essence of strategy is the coordination of ends and means. America must delineate core national interests, assess the most dangerous and likely threats to those interests, detail the means available and required, and outline the ways those means should be employed.

When one considers the resources required to simultaneously compete with China and Russia, deter Iran and North Korea, and keep pressure on Islamist terrorist organizations, it becomes clear the United States needs help.⁴ The United States lacks the resources and capacity to address all of these challenges alone.

Adding to the complexity, these threats and other challenges tend not to remain in neatly confined and compartmentalized regions abroad. Beijing is engaged in activities hostile to American interests all around the globe, and Moscow’s malign activities are not relegated simply to NATO’s eastern flank. Iran continues to inch closer to a nuclear weapons capability while expanding its ballistic missile arsenal and exporting terrorism far and wide.⁵ Meanwhile, North Korea has nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can strike the American homeland.⁶ And terrorist organizations still relish the opportunity to kill Americans at home.

“Thankfully,” Panetta writes, America is not confronting these threats alone. We are “blessed with an unparalleled network of allies and partners that helps to mitigate this resource gap.” This network is the envy of America’s adversaries. It represents a strategic asset of enormous value that Washington should nurture, not neglect.

In recent years, much of the White House rhetoric may have left a different impression. Allies and partners have often been characterized as burdens to be jettisoned, and the presence of U.S. military forces in some countries has been treated as a charity to be extended or withdrawn.

There are certainly frustrations and challenges associated with alliances and partnerships. But this does not negate the fact that securing America requires Washington to maintain and strengthen relationships with countries that share common interests and values.

As Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell argue in their book, *The Unquiet Frontier*, the forward deployment of U.S. forces alongside allies accrues numerous benefits. Forward-positioned allies and partners supported by U.S. forces can deter war, discourage bandwagoning with America’s rivals, deny those rivals key terrain and chokepoints, provide early warning, enable American power projection, and help achieve victory if conflict comes.⁷

Kori Schake, former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, former U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral (Ret.) Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter make a similar argument in a November 2020 article in *Foreign Affairs*. They argue for a “forward strategy” consisting of “U.S. diplomats and military forces in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East” positioned alongside

allies. This “defense in depth” posture gives “credence to U.S. commitments” and establishes “a bulwark against threats, a shock absorber and an early warning system that gives time and space to meet dangers when they arise.”⁸

Consider a few examples. In Syria, the United States worked with the SDF to defeat the ISIS caliphate. The SDF, which provided most of the ground forces, suffered an estimated 11,000 to 13,000 deaths.⁹ Without these partners, augmented by U.S. air, logistical, and intelligence support, the caliphate would still exist or American forces would have made those sacrifices instead.

Afghanistan offers a similar lesson. The U.S. military effort there has been far from ideal. But in the country from which al-Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks, Afghan security forces have doggedly battled al-Qaeda and their Taliban partners. Afghans do not want their country overrun by terrorists who stone women in soccer stadiums. Americans are not – and should not be – indifferent regarding the outcome; our values and security are at stake.

A few thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan, augmented by an equal or greater number of NATO allies, can support Afghan partners to avoid a terrorist takeover, while mounting counterterrorism operations that keep pressure on terrorists and deny them the space they need to attack our homeland. The benefits of retaining a modest military presence in Afghanistan put the burden of proof on those arguing for a timeline-based withdrawal that ignores conditions on the ground.¹⁰

It also is worth remembering that Europe generated two world wars in less than 30 years – ultimately pulling the United States into both. But following World War II and the 1949 establishment of NATO, Europe has enjoyed an extraordinary period of relative peace. While Moscow has invaded non-NATO countries Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin has not invaded a NATO member country since the alliance was formed.

What explains this? The presence of U.S. combat forces in Europe make clear to Moscow that America and its NATO allies have both the political will and military capability to honor their Article 5 commitments to defend against an attack.¹¹

Admittedly, the costs of maintaining this U.S. military presence in Europe have been significant. But the costs of forward-stationing U.S. forces there pale in comparison to the cost of a conflict with Russia.

Similarly, in East Asia and the South China Sea, Beijing seeks to expel the U.S. military to bully its neighbors and take control of Taiwan. This threatens core American economic, diplomatic, and national security interests.¹²

In the case of Taiwan, in particular, the People’s Republic of China is developing the military capabilities to initiate lightning-quick aggression to achieve Beijing’s objectives and then prevent U.S. reinforcements from arriving.¹³

But by deploying U.S. forces in Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere alongside increasingly capable allies while strengthening military partnerships with Australia, India, and others, Washington can cause Beijing to wonder whether its aggression would come at too steep a cost. This is the essence of deterrence – a key component of U.S. military strategy for seven decades.

NOT ALL WITHDRAWALS ARE GOOD

A third lesson Panetta highlights is the idea that both military deployments *and* withdrawals deserve serious scrutiny.

Many Americans have understandably lost patience with the U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Owing to wild swings in U.S. foreign policy, Washington has failed to consistently explain the persistent interests and threats in those theaters. This has left many Americans with the false impression that the United States can complete timeline-based withdrawals with few negative repercussions.¹⁴

Those pushing for American military retrenchment, however, “do not acknowledge that U.S. withdrawal often leaves a vacuum that enemies and adversaries are eager to fill,” writes Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, chairman of FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power.¹⁵ That is certainly the case in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Some advocates conflate decisions to withdraw U.S. military forces with the initial decision to intervene or how the deployment has been prosecuted. But to best serve U.S. interests, each decision deserves robust and independent scrutiny.

As authors in this monograph suggest, one can assert that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a mistake and also believe that America should still maintain a few thousand troops in Iraq and a few hundred in Syria to help prevent the return of the ISIS caliphate.

Similarly, one can believe that the American effort in Afghanistan has been poorly prosecuted while also asserting that a timeline-based withdrawal that relieves pressure on terror groups there could permit the country to once again become a launchpad for international terror attacks.

With the U.S. military withdrawals currently underway, the United States on January 20, 2021, will have fewer than approximately 6,000 U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria – combined. Compare that to a peak of over 170,000 U.S. troops in Iraq in 2007 and approximately 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2011.¹⁶

This relatively small U.S. force posture is playing an outsized role in preventing terrorist groups from gaining too much strength. There may come a time when such U.S. military deployments in these theaters are no longer necessary. But for now, the burden of proof again rests with anyone who suggests the United States can simply ignore the very clear threats that remain.

LOOKING AHEAD

President-elect Biden said on November 24 that his administration will be “[r]eady to lead the world, not retreat from it.”¹⁷ That sentiment is laudable and consistent with the best bipartisan traditions of U.S. foreign policy. But such a policy must not apply solely to America’s diplomatic and development efforts; it must also apply to America’s military posture abroad.

There are forces within both political parties pulling on Washington to shrug at threats abroad and withdraw U.S. forces, come what may. As this monograph argues, that would be a dangerous mistake. America requires a military posture of “Defending Forward.” This will help secure American interests and provide the best hope to avoid conflicts in the 21st century.

EVENT: Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad

 TRANSCRIPT

Notes

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2. Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York City: Harper, 2020).
3. Cory R. Gill, Marian L. Lawson, and Emily M. Morgenstern, “Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2021 Budget and Appropriations,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 1, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46367.pdf>)
4. U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America,” January 19, 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy->

5. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Remember, Iran's Terror Network Is Global," *Radio Farda*, February 8, 2020. (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-terror-network-is-global-qods-khamenei/30424117.html>); Bradley Bowman and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Successful SM-3 weapons test offers missile defense opportunity," *Defense News*, November 21, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/11/21/successful-sm-3-weapons-test-offers-missile-defense-opportunity/>)
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