

US strategic overstretch and regional impact

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FIVE YEARS AGO THERE WAS UNIVERSAL CONSENSUS THAT THE US WAS THE DOMINANT POWER GLOBALLY AND that this strategic position would persist indefinitely. Today, there are various predictions of a US decline, loss of strategic pre-eminence, and the rise of regional powers such as China, at the expense of the US. Where does the reality lie? Is the US a spent power destined to follow the Soviet Union, British Empire, or even the Roman Empire, into strategic decline and eventual obscurity?

When the Soviet Union fractured and collapsed in 1991, the US was the great strategic winner, with a robust economy that was the largest on the global scale, and a formidable force structure evolved over decades to break the back of the Soviet war machine. The US was introducing two key 'information age' military technologies (stealth and networking) that would further enhance US military power against opponents equipped with 'industrial age' technology forces. The US was at a pinnacle in relative global military capabilities; no nation or even alliance of nations had the combination of military technology, operational technique and sheer mass to challenge the US, anywhere on the globe.

Desert Storm was the public demonstration of US power. Within six weeks US air power broke the most powerful regime in the Middle East, rendering it impotent to this day. The world was presented with six weeks of media spectacle, as smart bombs and cruise missiles rained down relentlessly on Saddam's forces. Within a matter of days US and Coalition ground forces swept away the remnants of what was once the most feared military in the Arab world. It was clear that air power would be the key measure of national power in coming decades, a sledgehammer to be brought down on any opponent's land and maritime forces.



The US aims to achieve air combat superiority with its F-22 Raptor. (USAF)

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As the euphoria following Desert Storm and the collapse of the USSR continued, the US embarked on the largest program of military downsizing seen since the end of World War II. Standing air force, navy and army equipment fleets were chopped down and equipment mothballed, sold to allies at fire sale prices or scrapped. A Base Realignment And Closure (BRAC) program led to

basing facilities, many in continuous operation since the 1940s, closed down and more than often sold off as prime real estate.

Over this period Pax Americana applied, and no major nation sought to challenge the US politically, let alone economically or militarily, over the subsequent decade. The US engaged in various small police actions, including Somalia and Bosnia; this culminating in the bombardment of Serbia in 1999 over the ethnic cleansing of predominantly Muslim Kosovo. A minor spat between China and the US over a collision between a PLA-N J-8 Finback and US Navy EP-3C Aries II signals intelligence aircraft did not produce more than heated language.

Cracks were, however, beginning to appear in the new world order. Russia objected strongly to the campaign against Serbia, and China provided the Serbians with intelligence support. US power was being tested, only in small increments, but nevertheless tested.

The global consensus in the analytical community remained that the US would continue as the unchallenged and preeminent global power. US strategists were less optimistic, pointing to the ongoing reluctance of Administrations and Congress to bite the bullet on force structure recapitalisation:

the replacement of Cold War era force structure elements and formations with newer technology.

The 1990s were not a good period for US force structure recapitalisation. The US Navy lost the A-12A Avenger A-6 Intruder replacement program, then the F-22N NATF F-14 replacement program, ending up with the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet instead. The Navy's surface and submarine fleets progressively shrank in numbers, as older combatants were not replaced.

The Army suffered reductions in force numbers, and deferrals and cancellations in various programs, especially for the replacement of heavy equipment and helicopters with new technology.

The Air Force suffered repeated reductions in funding for the F-22A, intended to replace the F-15 fleet, from over 600 aircraft down to 322 by the end of that decade. The 400 strong F-111 fleet was mothballed, including the vital EF-111A Raven jammers in 1999. The B-2A 'batwing' was an early casualty, with the planned 132 replacements for the B-52 fleet chopped to a mere 21 aircraft, paralleled by the retirement of around half the extant B-52s. Older F-15s and F-16s were mothballed, as were the A-7Ds. One of the few successes was the C-17 program, which replaced the legacy C-141 fleet. Despite being the declared centrepiece of the



Funding problems arising from the global war on terror have severely restricted the rate at which the US can recapitalise its ageing fleet of Cold War era equipment, the backbone of US military power. Less widely appreciated is that the increased tempo is burning the life out of US equipment fleets much faster than peacetime usage rates would. (USAF photos)

future US force structure, air power fared poorly during the 1990s downsizing. At the turn of the millennium, more than half of the US heavy bomber fleet was of 1960s vintage, 80 per cent of its tanker fleet capacity was 1960s vintage, and more than half of its heavy airlift fleet was early 1970s vintage. Two thirds of the F-15 fleet was built during the 1980s, as was much of the critical ISR fleet. The US Air Force faced block obsolescence on multiple fronts.

The outlook was not all gloom and doom, since effective ageing aircraft and block upgrade programs were put in place for many key assets, allowing up to three decades for planned block replacements.

Everything changed with the events of 9/11, the Enduring Freedom campaign in late 2001, and the subsequent Iraqi Freedom campaign of 2003.

The US became embroiled in a global counterinsurgency campaign, straddling the whole Muslim world, a geographical extent spanning South East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. With standing troop deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as a result an ongoing demand for Air Force and Navy support, the whole equation changed.

With operational tempo at the highest since the peak of the Cold War, and often much higher, service life across the diverse fleets of aircraft, helicopters, ships and land vehicles was being burned out at rates often several times greater than the peacetime operating hours budgeted for since the early 1990s. That these fleets were much smaller than during the Cold War had the simple and unwanted effect of driving up annual operational hours per equipment item, on average. US strategists and the Bush Administration expected that the Global War On Terror (GWOT) would follow the pattern of the Cold War (running for decades) until the Islamist movement burned itself out, no differently than the Soviets did. It was implicitly assumed that much of this campaign would follow the pattern of the Cold War, with periods of stability punctuated by shorter periods of high military activity, as campaigns were conducted.

Reality, as is usually the case, has proven much messier. Iraq and Afghanistan have been protracted and sustained insurgencies, which have placed genuine pressures on manpower, be it regular forces or National Guard units. This has resulted in an historically unprecedented situation. For instance, Air Force and Navy support personnel have been deployed into theatre as substitutes for Army, Marine Corps and National Guard support units, which needed to be rotated following extended tours.

The Navy has experienced sustained high op-tempos as a result of maritime patrol and interdiction of sea lanes throughout the GWOT geographical footprint. The Air Force, and Navy

carrier aviation, have been committed to 'on call' precision close support for ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, with Air Force tanker aircraft providing persistence for combat air patrols lasting many hours. The Air Force transport fleet has been increasingly burdened with intra-theatre lift tasks, as roadside bombs have driven up the cost of replenishment by convoy.

What the Islamo-fascist insurgency has successfully achieved is to drive up the raw long-term dollar cost of US operations in the GWOT, even if they have been relatively ineffective in inflicting personnel casualties, let alone achieving any effect other than chaos and 'ungovernability' in parts of Iraq and Afghanistan. As insurgencies go, they have been woeful failures compared with the Soviet Bloc sponsored insurgencies of the Cold War period. However, the setting is now very different and the US is not funding or maintaining the standing force sizes it maintained during the Cold War, putting in relative terms much greater pressure on what assets the US currently has, be it in manpower or equipment fleets.

Since 9/11 there has been a shifting picture in terms of relative economic and military strength globally. Asia has been locked into a sustained 'creeping arms race', which now sees China building an Air Force that almost competes in size with key elements of the US Air Force. Smaller nations in Asia are spending just as aggressively, replacing Cold War inventories of aircraft, missiles and naval vessels with state of the art equipment, usually of Russian, US, EU or Israeli origin.

In terms of raw numbers, the scale of what is being observed in Asia today compares closely with the Warsaw Pact spending surge of the early 1980s. That surge burned out the economies of the Soviet Bloc, resulting in bankruptcy and collapse, as the unbalanced Soviet Bloc 'Comecon' economic system was built around its military industrial complex, which followed Leninist doctrine. The same is not true of the Asian arms race, which is riding on the back of buoyant manufacturing economies that now supply the bulk of manufactured consumer goods for the global market.

Additional pressures resulting from this are increasing global energy prices, reflecting growing demands from China and India. As the world industrialises, energy is becoming an increasingly valuable commodity, followed by raw materials to feed manufacturing economies. Australia's recent economic prosperity has far more to do with global demand for these commodities than with any prodigious feats of economic management by the nation's political leadership.

US strategists are now confronting the unwanted reality that economic and consequent military growth in Asia is now challenging the ability of the US to maintain a dominant position in the Pacific Rim and Indian Ocean regions.

China's military growth and active policy of self-promotion across Asia, modelled in many respects on the US approach, has been of greatest concern. With China's planned air power force structure now appearing in increasingly numbers and quality of equipment, like the current US force structure, the US will have to confront a potential opponent with strength sufficient to force a global redeployment of US air and naval assets should a contingency arise.

The reality is that deterrence can only be achieved if a potential opponent is confident of suffering unreasonable or prohibitive losses in combat, making the use of military force unprofitable in resolution of disputes.

To use the Soviet term, the 'correlation of forces' in the Pacific Rim is increasingly painting a picture of the United States being unable to decisively deter China should it decide to use military force to deal with Taiwan, or indeed any other regional nations it chooses to confront.

This is not fait accompli at this stage, as the US still has the option of force structure changes to frustrate this emerging strategic picture, but that will require significant investment in new military capabilities, especially recapitalising the US Air Force and US Navy carrier aviation.

However, this recapitalisation will have to compete against the sustained funding drain of GWOT operations and equipment maintenance, in a political climate where the Bush Administration has been on an ongoing defensive against its many critics. This is complicated by many extant equipment recapitalisation programs, framed against the strategic circumstances of the 1990s. These programs could result in force structure components ill suited for the strategic geography and circumstances of the Pacific Rim. The Joint Strike Fighter, designed around Middle Eastern and European geography, is a prime example.

This strategic morass affects Australia, with its increasing strategic dependency on US forces. Force structure planning in Canberra has been recently focused away from regional capability priorities, playing instead on the global stage as a supporting actor. This has been a strategic miscalculation of unprecedented proportions and needs to be addressed urgently, since there is no certainty at this stage that the US will be able to recover its strategic position in the Pacific Rim within the coming decade.

While it is far too early to arbitrarily write the US off as a spent power, the US is entering a decade of serious stress in its military budgets and force structures, resulting ongoing difficulties in maintaining a credible deterrent posture in the Pacific Rim region.

For the foreseeable future, Australia cannot and should not plan around immediate US force deployments to solve its regional problems.