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New Age of American Defense Planning

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Get ready for resurgence in planning the future of the American military. It's long overdue. In fact, serious thinking about the "future force"—what America will need to assure national security in the face of foreseeable, emerging threats—has been largely lacking in the post-Reagan era. Thankfully, that seems to be changing.

The Pentagon recently announced the winning bid to build its new bomber. It's the military's first new big-ticket acquisition in quite a while. The Clinton administration largely lived-off the benefits of the Reagan defense buildup. Bush sent big bucks to the Pentagon, but largely to fund the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Obama administration has been consciously deemphasizing reliance on military power since it came into office. As a result, there is an enormous pent-up demand to refurbish and reinvest in the armed forces.

Recently, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Foreign Policy Initiative released The State of the US Military: A Defense Primer. The report concluded, "Even though the number and severity of threats to the United States continues [sic] to expand, the US military is only getting smaller."

Meanwhile, The Heritage Foundation released its Index of U.S. Military Strength, the only annual, non-governmental, comprehensive assessment of the state of the armed forces. The index findings were equally pessimistic concluding, "The common theme across the services and the United States' nuclear enterprise is one of force degradation resulting from many years of underinvestment, poor execution of modernization programs, and the negative effects of budget sequestration (cuts in funding) on readiness and capacity."

Conservative think tanks are not alone in thinking about this. The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) recently released an assessment of the American nuclear arsenal and has frequently writing on proposals for the future of naval carrier forces.

Lawmakers are paying attention, too. Last week, the full Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on the future of defense planning. It featured testimony from AEI, Heritage and CNAS, as well as two other think tanks: the Center for American Progress and the Cato Institute.

How much attention the next administration devotes to rethinking defense planning will depend upon the strategic direction picked by the next president. If he or she departs from Obama and opts for a more muscular approach to bolster its stature with friendly nations and counter threats from the Middle East, Russia and China, the president will have to pay more attention to our post-Obama military can and cannot do.

Fiscal issues will also impact defense planning. Even a White House that wants more robust military capabilities will have to figure out how to fund defense without blowing up the national debt or sparking rampant inflation.

Presidents also must face the reality that a just-in-time defense industrial base no longer exists. Even if they wanted to spend tons more money on weapons, equipment and materiel there isn't enough of an industrial base to produce it all. That might result in more of a gradual ramp-up in spending rather than a dramatic, immediate leap in defense buying. It might also lead to a greater effort to source globally to help meet immediate defense needs.

Just the fact that there is more talk about doing more in the defense space has people talking. America's allies would be all for it (ditto for U.S. defense companies). More important, it looks like the American people are ready for this discussion. On average, recent polls show disapproval of Obama's handling of foreign affairs at over 50 percent. That is significant. Also telling, approval of Mr. Obama's foreign policy is lower than his overall job approval ratings or his handling of jobs and the economy.

Bottom line—a renaissance in debating defense planning could be just around the corner.