

Pentagon's Strategy to Counter Russia, China, Begins to Take Shape

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The nation's top generals and admirals will gather in the coming weeks to mull over ideas on what the Pentagon must do to close the gap as Russia and China continue to push the edge of their military capabilities.

These talks are likely to shape decisions on what investments, policy and organizational changes the Defense Department would have to make to offset adversaries' advances in high-tech weaponry such as precision weapons and air defense systems.

The Pentagon fears China and Russia are gaining an "asymmetric" edge as they perfect their precision-guided weaponry and become poised to blunt the long-held dominance of U.S. warships and combat aircraft.

"Our competitors are approaching us in that capability," said Air Force Gen. Paul J. Selva, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The precision munitions arms race is not lost yet, but adversaries are catching up, Selva said March 10 at the McAleese & Associates defense industry conference in Washington, D.C.

Chinese and Russian advanced weapons "may have bested us in range, but they have not yet bested us in precision or the ability to integrate effects," Selva said. "But they're not far behind us, so what do we change next?"

A number of war games and experiments have been launched to try to answer that question, he said.

The overarching plan, known as the "third offset," quickly entered the military and defense lexicon after it was introduced last year by Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work. But much of

the conversation has been about semantics, and whether the phrase “third offset” might be too esoteric for audiences who may not know the history of the Pentagon’s first and second offset efforts over the past five decades.

The Pentagon is now trying to “move this process to a higher level of debate, not just discussing if the name is cool or not,” Selva said. “The third offset is about figuring out what we do differently. What do we change that allows us to apply technology, operational concepts and organizational structures to defeat their advantage in long range precision strike systems.”

Leading the process along with Selva are Work and senior officials from the intelligence community. “We chair a committee to drive these issues to some sense of resolution so we can move forward with some experimentation and operational design,” he said.

A two-star level war game is under way, looking at recommendations that have been put forth by the team, Selva said. “In about three weeks, we are going to move it to the four-star level,” bringing together the chiefs and vice chiefs of the services, as well as regional combatant commanders, “and let them argue if the concepts are useful.”

Russian-backed military operations in Ukraine are illustrative of what the United States should consider in the third offset strategy, Selva said. “The Ukraine experience is instructive.” Separatist forces trained by Russia are a “capable army that brought to the tactical level rapid command and control, and electronic warfare in an attempt to control the timing and place of the battle,” Selva said. “What that tells us about the future, at the very least in a ground formation, is that we’re going to have to have very resilient tactical electronic warfare capabilities, we’re going to have to have very tight navigation and timing criteria that will allow for rapid command and control. You can’t have one without the other,” he added. “And we’re going to have to have the ability to counter precision fires.”

Similar trends are making their way to Syria, said Selva. “We see all those components in the ground forces deployed, and similar components in air forces that are being deployed to support the ground forces.”

Selva cautioned that the third offset strategy — focused on inserting next-generation technologies such as robotics, directed energy and rapid manufacturing into military systems — may not be enough to deter nuclear powers like China and Russia unless it is accompanied by a modernization of U.S. nuclear forces.

“The other piece of this is strategic nuclear deterrence,” he said. “I believe our capacity to deter nuclear foes adds credibility to our conventional force. If we are ever threatened by a nuclear foe that is our equal or better, our conventional force loses relevance quickly,” Selva said. This is a

debate that reaches beyond the confines of the Pentagon because it requires a national financial commitment of hundreds of millions of dollars to upgrade the nation's aging intercontinental nuclear missiles, long-range bombers and submarines, known as the nuclear triad.

"We have a bill to pay to modernize our nuclear force, all three legs of the triad," Selva said. "We need to figure out how to talk about that."

Defense industry insiders have "textbook answers" to explain the rationale for the nuclear triad. "But as a nation we have to have a discussion about how much, why it's important, why it keeps us a great power and why each leg keeps the other two legs credible," he said. "As long as you have a triad it's highly unlikely anyone will get an edge on us."

Where the Pentagon goes next with the third offset strategy has become a parlor game in national security circles. Defense analysts worry that the Pentagon's lumbering decision-making machinery will bog down efforts.

Whatever comes out of the third offset strategy will only "buy us five or 10 years," said Jerry Hendrix, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. "It's going to have to be a continuous R&D effort to stay ahead of competitors."

The commercial industry is continuously leaking technical data that is allowing U.S. adversaries to produce stealth and precision targeting weapons, Hendrix said March 9 at a Cato Institute forum.

"What is happening in the world of technology is fundamentally changing," said Andrew P. Hunter, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. At least two-thirds of global R&D investment comes from the private sector, he noted. This has fueled innovation on a global scale but the "dark side" of this trend has been the widespread availability of technology that can be exploited and used against the U.S. military.

"Commercial technology has increasing relevance to military applications," Hunter said. Technology that allows pinpoint targeting is one of the most glaring examples. The electronics that revolutionized warfare in the 1980s and 1990s and required hundreds of millions of dollars in military investment now are mass-produced and applied to consumer products. "I can image something, I can geo-locate it. I can transmit that data back to someone and show them exactly what needs to be blown up," Hunter said. This is a big "paradigm change that the department has to deal with," he added. "They are trying to deal with it. The third offset is intended to respond to the fact that the technological advantage the United States has enjoyed is narrowing."

The Pentagon cannot stop the increasing democratization of technology, but it can change how it

buys and employs technology. “How do we change our system, our way of doing things to adapt to a cycle of months, not years?” Hunter asked. “It’s possible that the person who can adapt more quickly wins, and the technology revolution gives the advantage to the one that adapts faster.” Hunter gives the Pentagon credit for putting emphasis on the “human element” as part of the third offset discussion. “How to use technology in new ways is important.”