



## Fighting threats in the age of austerity

By Reihan Salam – 11/13/12

---

Nov 13 (Reuters) - Now that President Obama has been reelected, he faces a number of basic questions about the future of America's national security strategy. The most immediate of these concerns how the president will address the deep cuts to defense expenditures that will be triggered under last year's Budget Control Act if congressional Republicans and Democrats can't reach an agreement on a deficit deal. Answering this question requires a broader sense of the threats we face and what we ought to do about them.

When compared to the height of the Cold War, when the Soviet empire had nuclear weapons trained on virtually every inch of U.S. soil, it is fair to say that the world is a much less dangerous place for Americans, and we shouldn't forget it. But when compared to the relative peace and security, Islamic terrorism notwithstanding, we've enjoyed in the two decades since the Soviet collapse, there is good reason to believe that the threat level is increasing. This is happening at the same time that sluggish economic growth and rising social expenditures are squeezing America's ability to pay for an enormous military establishment.

Since the 9/11 terror attacks, America's national security conversation has focused primarily on the threat of mass-casualty terrorism. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been devoted by the public and private sectors to harden domestic targets, with no small success. A fundamental problem, however, is that a free society will always be vulnerable to conventional terrorist attacks, which can be executed by disaffected individuals as well as by highly-trained violent extremists. And while we can harden one set of targets, like airplanes and airports, there will always be softer targets for terrorists to exploit. Moreover, conventional terrorist attacks, as horrifying as they may be, are much less of a threat to public safety in the United States than, say, traffic accidents. John Mueller, a provocative political scientist at Ohio State University, has observed that far fewer Americans died in 2001 from transnational terrorism than from peanut allergies, yet the U.S. government has yet to declare war on peanuts. As awful as it sounds, the best approach to conventional terrorism might be for Americans to allow the intelligence services to do the difficult, painstaking work of containing it while accepting that it will be part of our future in a violent world.

What is unacceptable, however, is nuclear terrorism, which could result in tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of deaths. One of the ironies of the emerging foreign policy consensus is that while President Obama and his erstwhile presidential rival, [Mitt Romney](#), were both committed to preventing [Iran](#) from acquiring a nuclear weapon, both candidates also accepted the idea that U.S. combat troops should leave [Afghanistan](#) by 2014. Given the amount of blood and treasure the United States has committed to a seemingly hopeless war in [Afghanistan](#), this consensus is easy to understand. Yet as Stephen Biddle—a political scientist and historian at George Washington University best known for his incisive analyses of Afghanistan and Iraq—has argued, the fall of the U.S.-backed Kabul government to Taliban forces would greatly empower Islamist elements in neighboring [Pakistan](#), where a bona fide civil war is now raging. This matters because Pakistan is a nuclear weapons state in which key figures in the intelligence bureaucracy are known to sympathize with anti-American terrorists. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan can be understood as a hedge against a chaotic collapse of Pakistan that could, in a worst-case scenario, lead to nuclear-armed terrorism. That doesn't change the fact that the U.S. combat troops will almost certainly leave Afghanistan as planned. But we should not kid ourselves about the risks that this will entail.

[Iran](#) is, at least in contrast to [Pakistan](#), relatively stable. A nuclear-armed [Iran](#) would be extremely bad news for the United States and its allies in the Gulf for a number of reasons, among them that it may set off a proliferation spiral in which other regional powers seek nuclear weapons of their own; that Iran might become more inclined to engage in military adventurism once it has a nuclear shield against a U.S. counterattack; and that [Israel](#), America's chief ally in the region, would be extremely vulnerable to an Iranian nuclear strike.

It is also true, however, that even an effective U.S. campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities would create enormous new risks. Most assume that the United States could launch bunker-busting attacks from the air and be done with it, but the U.S. must also be prepared to use ground forces in the event that an attack spirals into a larger conflict. And the unfortunate truth is that after more than a decade of high-intensity conflict, the U.S. military is in rough shape. One of the more striking aspects of recent conflicts has been the fact that reenlistment rates have remained quite high, even as many outside observers had warned that the U.S. military was reaching the breaking point. The problem, however, is that while combat experience is extremely valuable, there is a point at which too much combat experience can actually diminish effectiveness. Preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon is important. But it is just as important that the United States use its military carefully and wisely. Leaving [Afghanistan](#) only to enter into a new conflict in Iran will exact a serious toll on the men and women serving in the armed forces.

It is this human dimension that we tend to neglect when we discuss national security strategy. During the presidential campaign, President Obama and [Mitt](#)

[Romney](#) traded barbs about battleships and bayonets, yet the central problem facing a modern military is the need to attract and retain a talented workforce. This is particularly challenging for volunteer militaries in affluent market democracies like the United States, where would-be servicemembers have attractive opportunities in the private sector. Northwestern University political scientist Jonathan Caverley has highlighted this problem in the context of counterinsurgency. Successful counterinsurgency campaigns are very labor-intensive, as you need a fairly high ratio of security personnel to civilians to provide security in the midst of a serious armed conflict. Yet using large number of expensive, highly-trained Americans to protect, say, Afghan civilians is a difficult proposition to sustain for a long period of time, particularly if taxpayers balk at the growing cost. If you want to understand why the U.S. military relies so heavily on drone strikes, look to the high costs of having boots on the ground.

This human capital problem is growing more challenging, in part because the cost of providing medical care to military personnel is rising so rapidly. If the United States is going to contain the growth of military expenditures without seriously endangering national security, it must embrace a revolution in human resource management as far-reaching as the so-called revolution in military affairs that gave us "shock and awe." Recently, Andrew Krepinevich Jr., one of the most respected defense intellectuals in the country, wrote an important Foreign Affairs essay on "Strategy in a Time of Austerity." In it, he makes the case for a serious reduction in U.S. ground forces, in particular to the U.S. troops defending the Korean peninsula. Krepinevich recommends that rather than focus on providing boots on the ground, the United States concentrate on the capital-intensive pieces of military operations, such as projecting sea and air power, and on high-end human capital contributions, such as Special Forces.

Yet Krepinevich leaves us wondering how the U.S. military will get more out of fewer people. Fortunately, that question is answered in "Bleeding Talent," a brilliant forthcoming book by Tim Kane, chief economist at the Hudson Institute and a former U.S. Air Force intelligence officer. Kane calls for transitioning from the Pentagon's extremely rigid, seniority-based system of allocating jobs and promotions to what he calls a Total Volunteer Force (TVF) in which service members are given far more flexibility to shape their military careers. Among other things, Kane calls for greater specialization, an expansion of early promotion opportunities, allowing former officers to rejoin the active-duty military and giving commanders more freedom to hire as they see fit and officers the freedom to apply for jobs that suit them best. Kane argues that TVF will help the military retain talented personnel while also making them more effective. Ideally, TVF would allow the U.S. military to deliver substantially more bang for the buck. To have any hope of remaining a low-tax country with a social safety net, that is exactly what we need.