The Future of Land Warfare

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IN THIS BOOK, I have the pleasure and honor of helping initiate a new Brookings book series linked to the upcoming 2016 presidential race as part of the Foreign Policy program’s Order from Chaos project of 2015–16.

The nation’s next president and Congress, when they begin to govern in 2017, will confront issues addressed here, especially defense planning in a time of austerity. The 2011 Budget Control Act remains in effect and, as of this writing, continues to hang like the sword of Damocles, threatening a return to sequestration for all programs funded through federal discretionary spending—the military budget, foreign aid and diplomacy accounts, homeland security funding, and domestic investment in matters ranging from education to infrastructure to scientific research to food and highway and air safety. National security funding will decrease as much as one-third from its annual peak of more than $750 billion (expressed in 2016 dollars) in the late Bush and early Obama years. Of course, that will hardly result in an austere military budget by most perspectives—$500 billion for the Pentagon would still roughly equal the cold war average adjusted for inflation and would exceed China’s budget by roughly a factor of three, while accounting for nearly 40 percent of global military spending. But the projected pace and steepness of funding
declines will nonetheless be severe compared to 2010 (indeed, they will be severe even if sequestration-level cuts are averted).

In this context, some, such as Gary Roughead, former admiral and chief of naval operations, have called for very deep cuts in the U.S. Army—roughly 50 percent, in his case. My analysis can be read as a counter to his proposal and, more generally, to those who would attempt to handle declines in defense spending largely by cutting the nation’s ground forces. My solution is a more measured one, combining various defense reforms with modest real increases in the nation’s annual spending for the base defense budget going forward (anticipating that war costs will continue to decline somewhat).

Viewed in the context of the Order from Chaos project, spearheaded by my friends and colleagues Martin Indyk and Bruce Jones, the book has a slightly different additional purpose. With parts of the world showing signs of anarchy in 2014 and beyond, the questions for the United States become, how do we reduce the chaos in ways compatible with American interests and at a reasonable cost?

The world writ large, however, is not necessarily chaotic at this juncture of history. Crises from Ukraine, to Iraq and Syria and Yemen and Libya, to Liberia and Sierra Leone and Nigeria have created a sense of deep unease in recent times. Many of the problems will surely endure through the 2016 presidential campaign and beyond. But at the same time, the prospects for stability in Asia look reasonable (Jim Steinberg and I wrote about how to make them more promising in our 2014 book, Strategic Reassurance and Resolve). And while the crisis in Ukraine is surely serious, it is at present confined to a relatively modest swath of that single country in Central Europe.

As such, a book focused on the future of the U.S. Army, and to a somewhat lesser but still important extent on the U.S. Marine Corps as well, should in my eyes take a balanced perspective. The goal is not to undertake a number of imminent large-scale missions; we have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan about the limits, challenges, and costs of such operations. But at the same time, the goals of maintaining deterrence of other great powers as well as smaller powers such as North Korea, and of being able to help stabilize key trouble spots that may be afflicted with various forms of civil warfare, terrorism, natural disaster, or other maladies, require substantial American ground forces. Drones, cyberwarfare, and special forces cannot do it all; pretending that we can turn our backs
on insurgency simply because Iraq and Afghanistan proved so hard is not viable either. In that sense, the book is at least a partial challenge to some of the logic of the Obama administration’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, which deemphasized stabilization missions in American military planning.

Mine is not a radical book, relative to where the consensus in U.S. defense policymaking has been for most of the quarter century since the cold war ended. But it does sharply disagree with some of the ideas percolating through the American strategic debate today, ideas that would change the course of defense policy in a more pointed direction.

I am indebted to a wide range of colleagues, especially at the Brookings Institution but also beyond, in writing this book. Working at a defense center embedded in one of the best foreign policy programs of any think tank or university in the country has been an extraordinary privilege. It has helped me greatly with the tour d’horizon of the world’s countries and likely future hot spots that was integral to the methodology of this book project.

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