Updated November 8, 2018

Defense Primer: Geography, Strategy, and U.S. Force Design

World geography is an influence on U.S. strategy, which in turn helps shape the design of U.S. military forces.

World Geography and U.S. Strategy

Most of the world's people, resources, and economic activity are located not in the Western Hemisphere, but in the other hemisphere, particularly Eurasia. In response to this basic feature of world geography, U.S. policymakers for the last several decades have chosen to pursue, as a key element of U.S. national strategy, a goal of preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon in one part of Eurasia or another, on the grounds that such a hegemon could represent a concentration of political, economic, and military power strong enough to threaten vital U.S. interests. The Trump Administration's 2018 national security strategy document states that the United States "will compete with all tools of national power to ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power." Although U.S. policymakers do not often state explicitly in public the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia, U.S. military operations in recent decades—both wartime operations and day-to-day operations—appear to have been carried out in no small part in support of this goal.

U.S. Strategy and Force Design

The goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia is a major reason why the U.S. military is structured with force elements that enable it to cross broad expanses of ocean and air space and then conduct sustained, large-scale military operations upon arrival. Force elements associated with this objective include, among other things:

- An Air Force with significant numbers of long-range bombers, long-range surveillance aircraft, and aerial refueling tankers.
- A Navy with significant numbers of aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered (as opposed to non-nuclear-powered) attack submarines, large surface combatants, large amphibious ships, and underway replenishment ships.
- Significant numbers of long-range Air Force airlift aircraft and Military Sealift Command sealift ships for transporting ground forces personnel and their equipment and supplies rapidly over long distances.

Consistent with a goal of being able to conduct sustained, large-scale military operations in distant locations, the United States also stations significant numbers of forces and supplies in forward locations in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and the Asia-Pacific.

Comparing U.S. Forces to Other Countries' Forces

The United States is the only country in the world that designs its military to cross broad expanses of ocean and air space and then conduct sustained, large-scale military operations upon arrival. The other countries in the Western Hemisphere do not design their forces to do this because they cannot afford to, and because the United States is, in effect, doing it for them. Countries in the other hemisphere do not design their forces to do this for the very basic reason that they are already in the other hemisphere, and consequently instead spend their defense money primarily on forces that are tailored largely for influencing events in their own local regions. (Some countries, such as Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France, have an ability to deploy forces to distant locations, but only on a much smaller scale.)

The fact that the United States designs its military to do something that other countries do not design their forces to do can be important to keep in mind when comparing the U.S. military to the militaries of other nations. For example, the U.S. Navy has 11 aircraft carriers while other countries have no more than one or two. Other countries do not need a significant number of aircraft carriers because, unlike the United States, they are not designing their forces to cross broad expanses of ocean and air space and then conduct sustained, large-scale military aircraft operations upon arrival.

As another example, it is sometimes noted, in assessing the adequacy of U.S. naval forces, that U.S. naval forces are equal in tonnage to the next several navies combined, and that most of those several navies are the navies of U.S. allies. Those other fleets, however, are mostly of Eurasian countries, which do not design their forces to cross to the other side of the world and then conduct sustained, large-scale military operations upon arrival. The fact that the U.S. Navy is much bigger than allied navies does not necessarily prove that U.S. naval forces are either sufficient or excessive; it simply reflects the differing and generally more limited needs that U.S. allies have for naval forces. (It might also reflect an underinvestment by some of those allies to meet even their more limited naval needs.)

Measuring the Sufficiency of U.S. Forces

Countries have differing needs for military forces. The United States, as a country located in the Western Hemisphere with a goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia, has defined a need for military forces that is quite different from the needs of countries that are located in Eurasia. The sufficiency of U.S. military forces consequently is best assessed not through comparison to the militaries of other countries (something that is done quite frequently), but against U.S.

strategic goals, which in turn reflect U.S. policymaker judgments about the U.S. role in the world.

CRS Products

CRS Report R43838, *A Shift in the International Security Environment: Potential Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke

CRS Report R44891, *U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke and Michael Moodie

Other Resources

White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 55 pp., accessed August 6, 2018, at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, undated, released January 19, 2018, accessed August 6, 2018, at: https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

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IF10485