In Future Wars, the U.S. Military Will Have Nowhere to Hide

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> New technologies enable Russia and China to destroy U.S. bases and logistics networks—including those on the homeland.

For most of its history, the United States has had the luxury of fighting its wars from safe havens. No major international battles have taken place on the continental United States in more than two centuries, and its offshore territory has not suffered a serious attack since Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in World War II. For the past few decades, even U.S. bases on foreign soil have faced few conventional military threats.

The unprecedented immunity has enabled a particular American way of war that involves massive assaults launched from nearly invulnerable and geographically removed sanctuaries. In recent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Serbia, for example, the U.S. military used secure bases and logistics networks stretching from the U.S. heartland to the enemy's borders. From these vast safe spaces, the military was able to pick its battles strategically and churn out air and missile strikes with industrial efficiency. As a result, the outcomes of the immediate wars—if not their aftermaths—were never in doubt.

In future wars, however, new technologies may enable rival great powers, such as China and Russia, to carry out precise and devastating attacks on U.S. military bases and logistics networks, even including those located within the United States itself. Advances in the fields of aerospace, robotics, machine learning, 3D printing, and nanomaterials are creating new classes of missiles and lethal drones that can be launched discreetly, travel great distances, and hamstring massed forces—all for a fraction of the cost of traditional manned weapons.

New hypersonic missiles, for example, combine the speed and range of ballistic missiles with the maneuverability and accuracy of cruise missiles. Unmanned aerial vehicles and underwater gliders have achieved transoceanic range. Algorithms can coordinate swarms of more than 1,000 drones. Carbon 3D printers can produce 1,000 drone bodies a day for less than $10 per copy, and nanomaterials can equip drones with warheads that are twice as powerful as conventional explosives.

The diffusion of these technologies will render the United States' current way of war obsolete. Armed with large and growing arsenals of long-range missiles and armed drones, China and Russia are increasingly capable of denying the U.S. military operational sanctuary. In previous technological eras, striking America's bases required daring raids, which were typically too small and sporadic to dent U.S. combat power, or nuclear missile strikes that would trigger a massive retaliation in kind. Now, however, China and Russia can send hordes of conventional missiles and expendable drones to wreak havoc on America's networks, destroying U.S. weapons platforms while they are on base, cutting U.S. communications links, and wiping out vital fuel and ammunition dumps.

The U.S. military would have trouble quickly responding to such attacks because it is so unprepared for them. Most bases have few, if any, missile defense systems or hardened shelters. Combat aircraft

and warships often are parked in the open, side by side. Communications between command centers and soldiers in the field rely heavily on satellites that follow predictable orbits and on undersea cables that are mapped in open sources. The U.S. logistics force consists mainly of unarmed steam-powered vessels, most of which are due to be retired within 15 years, and U.S. warships and submarines cannot be reloaded at sea, so in wartime they have to commute between the combat theater and a handful of ports on U.S. and allied territory.

Such gaping U.S. vulnerabilities combined with rapid technological change have produced something of a paradox: The United States has the most powerful military in the world by a wide margin but routinely "gets its ass handed to it" in simulated wars when Russia or China unleashes its missile and drone forces.

The problem may get even worse. In an effort to counter China's and Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which target the United States' forward-deployed forces, the U.S. military is increasing its dependence on combat systems that require secure bases and logistics networks to function. For example, the United States is spending billions of dollars to produce a new stealth bomber, the B-21, to penetrate A2/AD networks. These exquisite aircraft are a decade away from being operational, but Russia and China may already be able to destroy them on the ground. Both countries may have put advanced cruise missiles in shipping containers that could strike the future home of the B-21—Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri—from the Gulf of Mexico. Another example: The U.S. Navy plans to build hundreds of new warships over the next 30 years and disperse them in small groups. These distributed maritime operations will reduce U.S. exposure to enemy A2/AD systems, but they also will run ragged U.S. logistics forces, which will have to shuttle supplies to hundreds of ships spread over millions of square miles. China and Russia already have plans to hit these logistics lines with missiles and smart mines.

It is past time for the U.S. military to prepare to fight without sanctuaries. Instead of waiting for wars to break out and then surging vulnerable aircraft carriers and armored brigades overseas, the United States should preposition missile launchers and armed drones on allied territory and merchant ships in potential conflict zones. For wars against Russia and China, that means near the Baltics and in the East and South China seas. These missiles and drones would act as high-tech minefields. They could destroy Chinese and Russian power projection forces but would be difficult for either country to eliminate and would not require large crews or logistics tails. This approach capitalizes on a fundamental asymmetry in the war aims of the United States and its adversaries; whereas China and Russia need to seize control of territory (for example, Taiwan or part of the Baltics) to achieve their main objectives, the United States just needs to deny them that control, a mission that modern missiles and drones are well suited to perform.

The United States has the technology to make this strategy work, but powerful domestic players are hesitant to commit to it. The Navy wants big warships, not missile barges. The Air Force favors manned aircraft, not autonomous drones. Defense contractors want to build expensive power projection platforms, not cheap munitions; and many members of Congress share this preference because fancy platforms and decades-long procurement cycles produce jobs in their districts. Cutting through this logjam and updating the American way of war for a new technological age will require a strong commitment from top officials in the Defense Department and steady pressure from an educated public. Historically, the United States has overhauled its military posture only after suffering a major shock. It would be tragic if the next shock involved losing a war to a weaker but more technologically savvy opponent.

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