WINNING A PEER WAR

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A war with a peer is very unlikely to start tomorrow. If it did, however, the United States would be forced to fight with the ideas and the equipment that currently exist. America might in the final analysis prevail, but the challenge would be extreme and the cost likely to be high before victory was attained. On the other hand, if the war does not start for a decade or more, the United States has the opportunity to prepare well to win at an affordable price in a reasonable period of time. America's survival, and that of the West writ large, demands we find the solutions that will lead to victory in a war with a peer opponent. The United States cannot afford to gamble that there will not be a serious peer war in a foreseeable future.

Since the dawn of history, military organizations have tended to fight current wars consistent with the last war in which they participated. Although militaries are frequently criticized for this type of behavior, it is quite common in virtually every profession. This tendency is especially pernicious, however, when it is applied to militaries upon whose successes frequently lie the survival of their nations.

For the last quarter of a century, the United States has been participating in the small wars of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Although these wars have been challenging at an individual level and certainly expensive for the country, they are dramatically different from the kinds of wars that take place between peer nations. This article defines a peer opponent as one that has the capability to match the United States in the majority of potential applications of combat power ranging from basic infantry to the most sophisticated air and space warfare.

Most importantly, however, a peer opponent has the capability to attack into its enemy's strategic base including attacks on infrastructure such as electrical power, communications, and manufacturing. In World War II, the United States fought against great power opponents who were very capable at tactical and operational levels but had only a marginal ability to strike into America's strategic depths. Their attacks had little impact on American war preparations.

Conversely, barely a year after declaring war, the United States began to bring Germany under severe strategic attack and in just over two years did the same to Japan. These attacks had an overwhelming impact on the very survivability of both nations as well as on their ability to conduct war against the United States.

Since the 1990s, the United States has had the luxury of conducting operations at its own pace with historically low losses. Most importantly, America has also had almost complete security from any kind of an attack on its strategic centers of gravity. To date, US forces have been able to operate with impunity in the air over opponents. At sea the United States remains unchallenged. On the ground, the United States faced determined opponents who, on an individual basis were quite capable, but on a unit basis were simply no match for our ground forces.

So going back to the observation about how militaries (and nations) tend to fight the last war, it is conceivable the United States would be unprepared mentally and technically to take on a peer opponent. It is easy to think America is so adaptable that it can quickly shift into a different form of warfare against a different opponent. At tactical levels this may be true, but on a higher strategic level, it is certain to be extraordinarily difficult at best.

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America's survival and that of the West writ large demand we find the solutions that will lead to victory in a war with a peer opponent. America must not forget: if the United States loses a war against a peer, the whole country and our way of life are in jeopardy. In other words, the United States cannot afford to gamble that there will not be a serious peer war in a foreseeable future.

War Planning Methodology

What does it take to win a war? Good weaponry and employment tactics are important. In fact, the United States has excelled in this regard in virtually all its conflicts since the Korean war. That tactical excellence, however, has not made the outcome of all those conflicts satisfactory or better for the country—which has been the historical norm for millennia.

Neither tactical superiority, better weapons, nor larger forces are well correlated with victory. Of all the things a country or an organization can do to give itself the best chance of victory, getting strategy right is the most important. If the strategy is roughly right, the chance of success is excellent. Conversely, in the absence of strategy, good weapons, good tactics, and big battalions are unlikely to bring victory. Unfortunately, the most senior people in military, politics, and business tend to go directly to tactical solutions when a problem arises. More than anything else, this omission has led to poor to disastrous outcomes in most US wars from Korea to the present day.

In the wars the United States has fought since and including Korea, the nation could tolerate unsatisfactory outcomes, however distasteful. This will not be the case if America ends up in war with a peer enemy; thus, focusing on war planning methodology and especially on strategy development and execution are absolutely essential. The US military has a variety of methodologies to develop tactical plans, and many of these work well to solve tactical issues. The military does not, however, have an accepted and practiced methodology for developing strategy.

All strategy should begin with a clearly defined statement of what America wants its opponent and itself to be at the end of the military conflict. I like to think of this as a "future picture," a term meant to suggest something very concrete and real as opposed to an intention, objective, or goal. It should describe clearly the condition of both sides that would represent unequivocal success.

This picture must be high resolution—not a platitude such as the Wilsonian World War I "making the world safe for democracy." This future picture must also be given sufficient thought to reduce or eliminate choosing war termination conditions for both about which the United States would not be happy. The end point should never be merely defeating or destroying the opponent's armed forces, although doing so may occasionally be a necessary means to an end; such a goal should rarely, if ever, be an end in itself despite the siren call of its alluring simplicity.

After developing the future picture, the next step involves conceptualizing the United States and the enemy as a system to locate the entities on both sides against which effort must be committed. Failure to address this area from the highest to the lowest levels of command is another common failure manifested in a leap from a generally vague (or absent) future picture to a tactical solution. Thus, in the Johnson administration, the response to slow or no progress on the ground in Vietnam was to send more troops even if it was unclear what, if anything, that might have accomplished.

In the planning of the Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), the US military called the internal and external entities "centers of gravity." To realize the future picture, it was necessary to change Iraq as a system. The United States would accomplish this objective by attacking strategic and operational centers of gravity. This step necessarily precedes the selection of attack platforms and weapons—one determines the centers of gravity that need to be attacked, determines what needs to happen to them and when it needs to happen, and only then decides attack methodologies and weapons.

Depending on the center of gravity and the desired effect determined for it, the attack methodology could range from special forces teams to stealth bombers to space-based lasers to cyber weapons. This sequence is key to building a coherent and integrated campaign or campaigns to realize the future picture. It also provides an excellent tool for force and logistics planning because the nature and number of centers of gravity are generally discernible well in advance of conflict. To work, however, the planning requires participation and approval at the very highest level of command, including the president. Strategy is not something that should be delegated!

Time is the third element of strategy: When does the United States intend to realize its future picture? This, in turn, is based on answering the strategic question, how

much time do we have to win, not the tactical question, how long will it take? Certainly, one of the many strategic errors of our recent wars was the lack of a time element, which allowed the planning and the execution alike to be meandering and unmeasurable and resulted in lack of commander and planner accountability from the president down.

The last necessary element of strategy is determining the conditions and the method for exiting a war whether it has been successful or not. All wars end; it is the job of the strategist to ensure that the end game is carefully planned. The only good time to make end-game plans is before the conflict begins, for once it does, emotion rapidly takes hold and irrational decisions or lack of decisions become common.

America's recent record of strategic thinking and planning has been abysmal. Fortunately, however, the nature of US wars and opponents in the last three quarters of a century gave the country the latitude to muddle along without success at a price it was able and willing to tolerate. The United States will not have that luxury in a war with a peer competitor. If America intends to succeed in the future, it must resolve to learn, practice, and inculcate a strategic war planning methodology which addresses all the elements of strategy and provides the best possible probability of victory.

Strategic Principles to Follow

A real strategic principle is one which has general validity in most circumstances. Two of the most important strategic principles to understand and inculcate are *parallel war* and *strategic paralysis*.

Parallel war is a concept that flies in the face of several hoary principles of war, but its validity became clear in the Persian Gulf War. Parallel war is striking enough key targets (centers of gravity) in a time period sufficiently compressed to preclude the ability to repair or react effectively. Doing so prevents the attacked system from functioning at the level required to defend itself or to conduct offensives.

At a macro level, the two basic approaches to attacking enemy centers of gravity are to attack serially or attack in parallel. Serial attack has been the historical norm and is the basis for much current military (and business) thinking. Serial attack commences one step at a time, and success is needed to move onto the next step. Given nearly unlimited time and resources, the linear approach may work, but while the first move is taking place, the attacked opponent is responding either defensively or offensively. This process quickly devolves into brutal force-on-force attrition warfare where the outcome is hard to predict—other than that it will be very expensive and time consuming for both sides.

The other side of the spectrum is parallel warfare in which many enemy centers of gravity are brought under near simultaneous attack in a compressed timeframe. Parallel attack, adequately conceived and executed, leads to strategic and operational paralysis, makes effective enemy response difficult to impossible, dramatically reduces the cost in blood and treasure—to both sides—and enables short conflicts.

Execution of decisive parallel operations depends on the ability to strike many centers of gravity that are potentially widely separated, in a relatively short period of time.

The ability to do so is clearly enhanced by having sufficient attack mechanisms to neutralize the requisite centers of gravity. Fast, survivable, and precise attack mechanisms are powerful enablers of parallel operations.

Parallel attack is so difficult to defend against that if one side makes a successful parallel attack, the war is probably decided in that side's favor. It is imperative the United States thoroughly understands the concept of parallel operations, that it develops the capability to use it offensively, and that it takes steps to reduce its own vulnerabilities. In doing so, America will have the potential to impose strategic and operational paralysis on its opponents while working to ensure the nation does not suffer this debilitating (if not fatal) affliction.

Strategic paralysis is most easily induced with parallel operations. In essence, strategic paralysis is a condition wherein a nation or military has experienced enough degradation in key processes (command, communication, mobility) in a short enough time period that it is not capable of doing anything the opponent does not want it to do including reacting effectively to conduct counterattacks or mounting useful defenses.

This may happen (as it did to Iraq in the Persian Gulf War) with nothing remotely like the area damage inflicted by aerial attack on Germany and Japan in World War II. With current technology, we can achieve effective mass without large numbers—mass without massing. In addition, the strategic paralysis suffered by Iraq happened before the widespread availability of offensive cyber weapons that can exploit weaknesses in highly connected societies such as the United States. Imagine the results in the United States and its major cities if they were attacked as was Iraq in 1991: surprisingly few centers of gravity were neutralized in hours and in parallel, leading to rapid and irreversible strategic paralysis.

A counterattack response to a parallel attack is paradoxically far more challenging than responding to the kind of nuclear attacks envisioned in the Cold War that simply needed authorization to execute preplanned operations against preplanned targets by redundant preplanned forces. Clearly the United States cannot afford to be the victim of strategic paralysis.

Strategic Defense

Strategic defense, that is general defense of the United States itself, began to fade after intercontinental ballistic missiles proliferated on both sides of the Cold War. Over the course of these decades, the United States effectively adopted the concept of mutually assured destruction, which suggested that any kind of defense increased the chances of war. Despite a brief resurgence of interest and activity in connection with President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (colloquially known as "Star Wars") and subsequent establishment of a capability to deal with a small ballistic missile attack, the country has devoted few resources to improving strategic defense capability, including that of civil defense.

Why should the United States now revive the concept of strategic defense and devote significant resources to it? The answer is simple: America has a potential enemy

that has, or will have in the foreseeable future, a capability and an apparent willingness to attack into the nation's strategic depths. This reality should be sufficient to make developing defenses a matter of priority. In addition, future peer competitors might not be as deterrable as the former Soviet Union was believed to be.

Assuming the opponent strikes first and the United States is unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to act preemptively, the highest requirement is to ensure the opponent cannot affect enough centers of gravity in a short enough period to drive the country into strategic paralysis. If that happens, the ability to continue resistance is nil. To prevent strategic paralysis, the United States must ensure a basic set of centers of gravity remains adequately functional.

These critical centers of gravity include: key national leaders, command centers (civil and military), civil and military national communications (telephone, satellite, internet, financial data, television, radio), electricity, energy distribution (oil and gas pipelines), national surface and air mobility (key bridges and airfields), and offensive capabilities. These centers of gravity must remain sufficiently functional for long enough for the country to conduct strategic counterattacks to impose paralysis on the opponent. The required duration will largely be a function of the quality of advanced planning and preparation. Of course while all this is happening, civil and military authorities must find ways to give the civilian population as much protection as possible to include air raid shelter, emergency rations, and perhaps even evacuations.

After identifying the centers of gravity to defend, determining the types of weapons or tools required for sufficient defense can begin. Broad vulnerabilities and the need for near-instant reaction suggest using space-based systems such as those that were under development for the Strategic Defense Initiative. Most, if not all centers of gravity may be vulnerable to cyberattack. Cyber defenses, therefore, are a necessity, which probably include firewall-type defense and rapidly deployable cyber counterattack weapons. The US military needs also to consider the types of enemy attack platforms that may be employed, although leaders and planners need to be very careful not to limit their thinking to current operating systems.

The platforms that might be used against our strategic depths include intercontinental ballistic missiles, short- to medium-range ballistic missiles launched from sea or air vessels; cruise missiles (and unmanned aerial vehicles) launched from a variety of locations including the immediate vicinity of targets; space-based weapons that can attack the surface with beams or kinetics; electromagnetic pulse weapons from a variety of platforms; long-range aircraft (or short- or medium-range aircraft based surreptitiously in adjacent territories), and native or inserted saboteurs. The US military must also develop and field as many different types of defenses as possible to complicate the enemy's choice of attack platforms.

Although the United States can certainly improve its strategic defenses, the best defense will ultimately remain a good offense.

Strategic Offense

Strategic offense is necessary for victory—at best, defense simply buys time and makes the enemy attack more costly. As in defense, the choice of strategic offense depends on the enemy centers of gravity that must be destroyed in order to induce strategic paralysis and on the attack time required for results. The enemy centers of gravity that must be neutralized will be like those the United States needs to defend, but their relative importance may vary somewhat as a function of the enemy's type of government and how centrally these nodes are linked.

There is no good way to know in advance how much time can be allowed to impose strategic paralysis, but the presumption must be that it is very short. That, in turn, gives planners some ideas about how quickly US forces must be able to reach and neutralize enemy centers of gravity. The following criteria provide a starting point:

- Impose strategic paralysis within 48 hours of initial enemy attack.
- Be capable of making first attacks on the enemy's strategic depths within minutes to hours of attack decision.
- Ensure attack platforms are numerous and survivable enough to neutralize enemy centers of gravity that number about the same as those of the United States.
- Base multiple attack platforms on multiple modalities such as low visibility, velocity, and standoff distance to improve the chances of successful attack and greatly complicate enemy defensive preparation.
- Ensure no single-point failure nodes that would affect the success of the attack force, such as universal dependence on global positioning satellites (GPS).
- Strive to have multiple revolutionary capabilities that are fielded quickly enough to thoroughly confound enemy force development.

Properly managed, developing a force with these capabilities need not be overly expensive. In any event, if the United States can choose to spend trillions of dollars for clearly optional social programs or deal with hypothetical problems a century in the future, the country can certainly choose to spend similar sums when the fate of the nation is at stake. In addition to force structure for defense and offense, command arrangements suitable for dealing with a peer competitor are essential. Moreover, the composition, culture, and character of the force must be up to the severe challenges posed by such a conflict.

Strategic Command

The command arrangements of today were not designed for the threat the country currently faces in that they neither equip the president adequately nor do they provide the responsiveness and flexibility needed to engage in a peer-competitor war. Under the Constitution of the United States, the president is the commander in chief of the

armed forces and thus has ultimate responsibility and authority for war decisions. To be effective in this role requires the president receive a range of military advice.

Before and during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had independent military advice from each of the service chiefs (including the chief of the Army Air Forces) and Admiral William Leahy, who served as the president's personal chief of staff. Each one of these officers had direct and independent access to the president who frequently received highly divergent views and recommendations from each of them. This divergence was exactly what any good leader, and especially the president of the United States, should demand and have as a matter of course.

As stated on the website of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

> The Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 identifies the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the senior ranking member of the Armed Forces. As such, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the principal military adviser to the President. He may seek the advice of and consult with the other JCS members and combatant commanders. When he presents his advice, he presents the range of advice and opinions he has received, along with any individual comments of the other JCS members.[1]

With these guidelines, it is highly unlikely a future president will hear a full range of ideas or the strongly held position of one dissident eloquently and passionately presented—as happened with some regularity the last time the country mobilized as a nation against highly capable enemies. This guidance does not even require the chairman to consult anyone else—"he may seek," not "he must seek."

The second issue that seriously compromises the ability to fight and win a war with a peer competitor is the disposition and command of American air, sea, and land forces. Although commanders and planners cannot know the details of a future peer war, they can reasonably assume it will be fast, violent, and deadly, requiring a quick-reaction concentration of forces deployed to a variety of places around the globe. Accomplishing this task requires a central authority that can plan and direct forces on a moment's notice without consultation or coordination with subordinate commanders. And yet we now have an organization that is the opposite of what is needed.

Again, citing the chairman's website:

> Under the DOD Reorganization Act, the Secretaries of the Military Departments assign all forces to combatant commands except those assigned to carry out the mission of the Services. . . . The chain of command to these combatant commands runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense directly to the commander of the combatant command. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may transmit communications to the commanders of the combatant commands from the President and Secretary of Defense but does not exercise military command over any combatant forces.[2]

In other words, no central competent authority has the responsibility and accountability for planning and committing forces as needed. The US military has been able

1. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), "About," CJCS (website), accessed December 30, 2021, https://www.jcs.mil/About/The-Joint-Staff/Chairman/.

2. CJCS, "About."

to live with this arrangement for decades in large part because the system was never severely stressed. This will not be the case in the future.

Two serious challenges must be resolved: The president must hear all the options, and the US military must be able to develop the ability to plan and commit forces rapidly and globally without bureaucratic constraints. The solutions to these problems are clear, namely, (1) enable the service chiefs' free right of access to the president without the permission or attendance of the chairman or secretary of defense, and (2) place all US forces under a central authority so they can be dispatched rapidly and freely in peace or in war. There may be other, better solutions, but they must be based on preparing the United States to plan and execute a war with a peer competitor.

While the United States is solving the current command problems, another question arises: Is the country doing everything necessary to ensure people who constitute US forces are ready and capable of winning a war that is well outside their personal experience?

The People of the Force

The composition, culture, and character of the people manning the force at the time of a war with a peer competitor will have a significant impact on the outcome of the conflict. War with a peer competitor will be incredibly dangerous and unlike anything with which the United States has any relevant experience. Because the conflict will be so different and winning an absolute necessity, the United States should build a force designed explicitly to win a peer war. Creating such a force will require selective recruiting, focused education at all career levels from entry to retirement, and a renewed emphasis on character and ethics. Although this is a multifaceted task, two major focus areas will be key to making it a reality: recruiting and education.

Recruiting for accession, assignment, and promotion should have one primary, *overriding* principle: find and select people who can make the strongest contributions to national security and to winning a tough war either as direct participants or in providing needed support. This principle must supersede every other consideration to include diversity, gender, background, and class.

Education, at a minimum, must lead to members being comfortable with technologies and the science on which they are based, conversancy with the history of how nations have dealt with extreme threats, working knowledge of mathematics, statistics, and probability, and the ability to read critically, write clearly, and speak articulately. Clearly, every member of the force does not need to be an expert in all these areas, but sufficient numbers of those recruited and promoted must be capable of acquiring these skills or already have them.

To the extent proper selection depends on testing, the tests used must be carefully reviewed to ensure they are identifying individuals who meet the overriding criterion of being able to make maximum contributions to victory.

Conclusion
Si vis pacem, para bellum!
(If you want peace, prepare for war!)

It is now three quarters of a century since the last great power war. Although there is nothing inevitable about another war of this nature in the near future, that there would be one could hardly be surprising. Moreover, as capable as were the participants in those past wars, not a single one was a peer competitor compared to the United States. Given the non-negligible probability of such a conflict, the only rational action is national preparation. Unlike the past, peer competitors are on the horizon and the kind of peace the American people expect and demand is in serious jeopardy. Thus, the United States must do as the ancient Romans instructed, "if you want peace, prepare for war!"

Si vis pacem, para bellum is actually a powerful double entendre.[3] First, if you are prepared for war, you are more likely to win and be able to transition back to a desirable peace; and second, robust preparation may preclude war from occurring, thus prolonging the existing peace.

This article has delineated the robust preparation necessary to set the stage for victory while simultaneously discouraging a would-be peer attacker. It has six requirements:

1. The national will to undertake preparations for war
2. A command process and structure designed to win
3. A sufficient, ready, survivable national defense to preclude US paralysis and to protect US offensive potential until it can be employed successfully
4. A sufficient, ready, survivable offense to respond quickly and impose paralysis on the attacker
5. A force manned by people who have the character and the mental and physical toughness to win
6. Plans practiced and ready to execute

In the political climate of what some are calling the second "Roaring Twenties," finding the will even to think about a peer confrontation, let alone making the decisions to *para bellum* will be tough. Once there is agreement to think seriously about the possibility of a peer war, outlining and agreeing on the steps to prepare become feasible. This process is unlikely to start in the existing national security organizations especially if the party of the president is averse to ideas that increase the power of the United States vis-á-vis the rest of the world or ideas that attack a fundamental underpinning of deterrence theology—the impropriety of effective strategic defense.

3. Paraphrased from Flavi Vegetius Renati, *Epitoma Rei Militari*, Latin ed. (Charleston, SC: Nabu, 2010), 65.

If acknowledging the problem and planning to deal with it are unlikely to start in the national security bureaucracy, the American people must demand action. This can only come following a concerted campaign of education that uses all the tools of modern marketing: books, journals, social media, television, and radio. Ideally, an existing think tank or political party would take on the task, but absent one, it may be necessary to enfranchise a new one focused on this specific task. In the meantime, we must encourage speaking and writing by those who see the problem and are willing to lead the charge.

Creating a public demand for action may not be easy but is not without precedent. In the military sphere, the impetus for airpower development really came as a result of work by impassioned advocates such as Army Air Corps General Billy Mitchell. Without his efforts and those of a handful of like-minded officers and civilians, it is unlikely that airpower would have developed with such rapidity or that the United States would have been ready to build its aerial strategic offensive capability in time to deal with threats that materialized on both sides of the world in the World War II. It is my hope this article may help to spark the interest and dedication that will lead to the flames needed to illuminate the situation and mark the path to success. *Æ*

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