Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War

A nation's capability and will to fight are interdependent critical factors in determining military operational success in conflict. The possibility of a kinetic war, however slight, now occupies the minds of policy makers. As great power competition and worry over potential great power conflict (GPC) increases, it is vital to consider the effects of attrition and the demands such conflict would require. The United States' ability to tolerate manpower attrition and sustain the force in a war against a near-peer competitor is one factor that could determine American will to fight—and ultimate success—in a great power war. Many planners expect conflict to remain in the "grey zone" or the cyber domain with less risk of violence. But what if they are wrong? In the next GPC the nation may be vulnerable to platform and human attrition. The potential of such a conflict ultimately raises questions of the will to fight, reasonable risks, and associated casualties.

Conversations about the military balance tend to focus on projected capabilities and platforms while the need for personnel and possibility of large-scale casualties receive less attention. Planners should seriously consider not just the vulnerabilities of platforms they field but also how mobilization and loss of service members would change national decisions, capabilities, and will to fight. Against a near-peer competitor, what level of attrition can the US tolerate? Will society be willing to engage in a great power war? These are important considerations when assessing US preparedness and should inform talent management, military end strength, and force composition. To understand this argument, one must first consider the context of attrition and then explore the nuances of platform and human attrition.

Context of Attrition

Planning for the next war requires not only modernization of precision munitions and advanced platforms but also consideration of troop strength and societal stamina. American society has immense confidence in its military, in large part due to its perceived competence and professionalism.[1] However, in the case of GPC, the inability of the professionalized force to achieve victory on a large scale may negatively influence popular

support for the war and civil-military relations. Will to fight is fickle, determined by political, economic, and military factors.

The RAND Corporation developed a model to better understand the contexts and mechanisms that influence will to fight.[2] Strong indicators of a country's will to fight include the government's ability to make political, economic, and military sacrifices; adjust strategy to address changing events and expectations; and take risks. However, war has to be seen as a legitimate use of blood and treasure to be sustained. It is unclear if political leaders would be willing to take the necessary risks. Political reticence and societal apathy to tangential interest areas call into question the willingness to fight over political ideology a world away. How long would the US public be willing to sustain a war in Asia?

Capability and personnel attrition resilience are key in a potential great power war. How the US would mobilize a significant force against its competitor is a primary consideration with a near-peer rival: "Nation-state warfare is mostly an exercise in national attrition. The nation that can mobilize its forces and better bring them to bear on the enemy over time usually prevails."[3] The US national security apparatus has justifiably expressed concern about current planning and thought given to mobilization.[4]

The next great power war will likely be fast, and the US is unlikely to have the lead time to prepare and organize a large force before a fait accompli. Due to its own political and societal will, China will benefit from political sustainment of a regional conflict as well as proximal escalation dominance. Conversely, the US is likely to need to scale quickly— without sufficient training time—and run the risk of unnecessary losses. The US expects to have advantages in the air and space domains, which are easier to mobilize than manpower. The hope is that dominance in air and space would delay or supplant the need for ground troops.

When the armed forces need to grow quickly, training time is cut short and standards are lowered. The low-intensity nature of Iraq and Afghanistan have not demanded scaling beyond the reserve components, though the Army still had to lower enlistment standards to meet end-strength goals. This begs the question, Whom will the military rely on in GPC? The US Army's Bold Shift plan offers pre-mobilization training to the Army Reserve that could shorten training time for units preparing to deploy.[5] Even so, the US has shown widespread inefficiencies in mobilizing troops.

Additional considerations in GPC include the state of civil-military relations and popular support from both the public and allies. An important commonality among these factors is their susceptibility to influence by high casualties or misinformation and disinformation efforts. What

kind of decisions could pull the US into war with China, and what are potential reactions? The RAND model posits that superior military capabilities generally inflict greater casualties on an opponent, negatively influencing an adversary's national identity, political cohesion, or allied support. It indicates that "a government that suffers many casualties over time may lose popular support, allied support, or the economic means to sustain the war, thereby lessening the government's expectation of victory and diminishing its will to fight."[6] What if US capabilities are not superior? Contrary planning demands consideration of the possibility.

Platform Attrition

Most projections of conflict with near-peer competitors assume a technological, information, or economic competition that is regional and limited in scope. War gaming and scenario planning focus more on the multidomain aspects and platform resilience, primarily concerned with Air Force and Navy capabilities. However, there is a certain irony in the US high-cost, high-technology capabilities. The US is betting on a low number of highly capable platforms—requiring longer training times—that have higher attack ratios. At the same time, the loss of each platform represents a greater percentage of total capability. Particularly acute for the Air Force and Navy, the multimillion-dollar cost of high-priced machines may be at a disadvantage fighting low-cost, highly attritable platforms.[7] Could fear of significant platform attrition self-deter their use? Should a large number of fighter aircraft—or a carrier group—be destroyed, the force would be severely strained.

Despite ongoing technological advancement, ground combat remains a feature of warfare. Past examples of war in the midst of technological development do not tell a story of seamless technological integration into operational/combat scenarios but rather of technological shortcomings. Notoriously, troops were sent into a meat grinder because military leadership failed to understand changing weapons technology.

The success of the revolution in military affairs during the Gulf War is in large part due to US overmatch in platforms but is also attributable to substantial US military training hours and support from allies. Weapons modernization changes in the decades prior to the Gulf War meant the US maintained overmatch against Iraq from the beginning. This advantage demonstrated the synergy between investments in military technology and force professionalization, yet it contributed to a bias toward advanced weapons systems and capabilities away from training and personnel management—limiting military effectiveness in the post-9/11

era. The lack of sufficient training time has led to accidents across the services in recent years.

US adversaries' focus on cyber, electronic, and communication platforms has been of particular interest: the Chinese plan to "attack the American battle network at all levels, relentlessly, and they practice it all the time."[8] Missiles, airpower, and C3 are similarly technologically-minded solutions to confront China's industrial base and mass. As a near-peer competitor that has heavily invested in military modernization and cyber capabilities in recent decades, China is particularly prepared for regional conflict in the South China Sea. While it does not currently outmatch the US, in past years China put extensive effort into building up its cyber, air, sea, land, and personnel capabilities. In recent years the US advantage has eroded across domains, particularly in a Taiwan scenario and in the case of an air base or antisurface warfare scenario.[9]

Human Attrition

The challenge of human attrition has the greatest impact on will to fight, further compounded by the likely decrease in end strength over time, longer replacement times for high-tech weapons expertise, and strains on the force without significant personnel change. So, is the US military bench deep enough to sustain any kind of large strike against it or a prolonged land war?

The US has not had to face a scenario in which it loses significant numbers of military personnel since the Cold War, nor has it had to mobilize outside the professional military since the Vietnam War. Coming out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military, the public, and politicians experienced few service member casualties at any given time. Any conflict with China could immediately eclipse casualties of the past 17 years. Since 2001, fewer than 8,000 service members and Department of Defense civilians have died in the combined operations in Iraq and Afghanistan whereas the deadliest battles of WWI and WWII saw tens of thousands dead in a day.[10] The first 48 hours of a hot war—not to mention a prolonged conflict—with China could see the US lose that many or more troops; precision munitions will only increase casualty numbers.

Whether or not the US can sustain high levels of human attrition in GPC is highly dependent on the conflict setting. Political and societal will to continue the fight is the basis for sustaining warfare and can vary dramatically based on the perception of aggression (who started the fight), location of the attack (US overseas base or US territory), level of US casualties, and the level of US interests.[11]

High deployment and unit activity (OPTEMPO), personnel move-ment (PERSTEMPO), and deployment time during the Iraq and Af-ghanistan wars created turbulence and strained units, even as the military has become more experienced and professionalized.[12] In addition, the US has maintained an operational reserve through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, cyclically drawing on its reserve force for operations support. Yet US posture remains ready to "fight and win the wars of the future" and "preserve peace through strength."[13] The question becomes whether a highly professional, voluntary, innovative military can overcome huge losses and remain an effective fighting force.

The experienced professionals of recent conflicts—especially since the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and drawdown in Afghanistan—have aged and been broken by years of service. In the next 10 to 15 years, the US military will lose the bulk of this professionalized force to the civilian world, and those with operational knowledge will be hollowed out. The Air Force already experiences a pilot shortage; the training time during mobilization would further strain the force. Similarly, the Navy may not be able to sustain attacks that take out a number of sailors. GPC warfare would further sap the Navy and Air Force of key personnel who are al-ready spread thin across the force and are difficult to grow given training time constraints. Currently a small all-volunteer force, the Army struggled last year to meet its recruiting mission, just as the other services are find-ing it difficult to recruit specific skill sets. As the force becomes more technical, this trend will only continue. In each of the world wars, the US waited years before entering the conflict and relied heavily on allies to take the brunt of the casualties. In Vietnam, the military slowly grew its pres-ence, only reaching peak strength in 1968—four years after first sending ground troops. Until the advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973, the US had a standing army designed to expand significantly in the event of a crisis. Today, especially in the face of high casualties, it could take years to develop and field a fully competent army.

Expecting public support of the will to fight cannot be assumed. The public understood the whole-of-nation implications of the world wars, but today's professionalized force distances the public from war. This dis-tance between the American public and its military has grown. Many new recruits join due to exposure: they have a family member who also serves. The development of a "warrior caste" has been cautioned against due to who is relied upon to go to war and how use-of-force decisions may be affected.[14] In a great power war, the warrior caste may affect public stand-ing on going to war and will to fight. Today, the military is out of sight and

out of mind. Many parents and grandparents are tepidly supportive of military service and on the whole would not recommend it to their child or grandchild.[15]

Conclusion

Given current national security and political concerns about great power conflict, political leaders would likely follow in the steps of FDR and push for mobilization to war.[16] The best way for the US government to motivate the public is to clearly define the aggressor. However, diminished public trust and confidence in government bodies is historically low.[17] While FDR's speech after Pearl Harbor was carefully crafted to elicit support for war with the Axis powers, today's public may have less faith in the veracity or motivations of government officials, even in times of conflict. Use of information warfare is on the rise, and adversaries will use their full capabilities to obscure and confuse reality.

Finally, the US goes to war with its allies. What allies would come to play against China? At the moment, the US is leading the charge for competition against multiple great power rivals while much of the world is not as concerned. Traditional support for US conflicts comes from Europe, though NATO will largely be irrelevant in the Pacific theater, with greater pressure on regional allies. Australia is the US's most reliable ally in the Indo-Pacific but finds itself questioning US commitment to the region in light of the US's strained force and other obligations. Economic ties with other nations and regional politics may complicate whether allies in the Indo-Pacific would be willing and able to support US efforts against China.

Because defense spending, training, and experience are not equal across allies, operational-level training could heighten the success of the US against an adversary when deploying with less-prepared allied troops. Years of democratic peace dividends and low levels of defense spending by allies has led to a lack of manpower to support the US in a large-scale conflict. Signaling from the Trump administration has damaged relationships with allies, sparking growing sentiment that our allies cannot rely on the US as they used to.[18] Long-term consequences of the erosion of US credibility call into question which allies would respond to a call for support against China.[19]

Casualties in a great power war would likely be in the thousands—much more than the slow drip of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. The public tolerance for casualties may be low compared to twentieth-century conflicts; such losses in a kinetic war with a near-peer competitor are likely to seem excessive by today's standards. RAND's study finds that "superior

capabilities and infliction of greater casualties should lead to victory." However, when the will to fight is equal, it could lead to stalemate and make considerations of attrition critical to analysis of GPC war.[20] Policy makers and military planners must incorporate will to fight into their analysis and take a hard look at the potential realities of war with a great power rival if the US plans to succeed. **SSQ**

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Notes

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9. Eric Heginbotham et al., *The US-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), https://www.rand.org/.

10. The first statistic includes Operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, Enduring Freedom, Inherent Resolve, and Freedom Sentinel. Department of Defense, "Immediate Release: Casualty Status," as of 30 September 2019, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom /Casualty-Status/.

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17. "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2019," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, 11 April 2019, https://www.people-press.org/.

18. Kenneth Schultz, "Allies Can't Rely on America Like They Used To. And Not Just Because of Trump," *The Washington Post*, 31 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost .com/; and Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone, and Matilda Steward, *Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defence in the Indo–Pacific* (Sydney, Australia: the United States Studies Centre, 2019), https://www.ussc.edu.au/

19. Under President Trump, the US has continued the flip-flop of engagement and isolationism. The America First position welcomes a certain kind of American-centric non-interventionism, despite the president's militant stance on many issues.

20. McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, xv.