

# US military advantage has eroded and could lose war against China or Russia, study says

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The United States has lost its military edge to a dangerous degree and could potentially lose a war against China or Russia, according to a report released Wednesday by a bipartisan commission that Congress created to evaluate the Trump administration's defence strategy.

The National Defence Strategy Commission, comprised of former top Republican and Democratic officials selected by Congress, evaluated the Trump administration's 2018 National Defence Strategy, which ordered a vast reshaping of the US military to compete with Beijing and Moscow in an era of renewed great power competition.

While endorsing the strategy's aims, the commission warned that Washington was not moving fast enough or investing sufficiently to put the vision into practice, risking a further erosion of American military dominance that could become a national security emergency.

At the same time, according to the commission, China and Russia were seeking dominance in their regions and the ability to project military power globally, as their authoritarian governments pursue defence build-ups aimed squarely at the United States.

"There is a strong fear of complacency, that people have become so used to the United States achieving what it wants in the world, to include militarily, that it isn't heeding the warning signs," said Kathleen Hicks, a former top Pentagon official during the Obama administration and one of the commissioners.

"It's the flashing red that we are trying to relay."

The picture of the national security landscape that the 12-person commission sketched is a bleak one, in which an American military that has enjoyed undisputed dominance for decades is failing to receive the resources, innovation and prioritisation its leaders need to outmuscle China and Russia in a race for military might reminiscent of the cold war.

The military balance has shifted adversely for the United States in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, undermining the confidence of American allies and increasing the likelihood of military conflict, the commission found, after reviewing classified documents, receiving Pentagon briefings and interviewing top defence officials.

"The US military could suffer unacceptably high casualties and loss of major capital assets in its next conflict. It might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia," the report said.

"The United States is particularly at risk of being overwhelmed should its military be forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously."

In its list of 32 recommendations, the commission urged the Pentagon to explain more clearly how it intends to defeat major power rivals in competition and war.

It assailed the strategy for relying at times on "questionable assumptions and weak analysis" and leaving "unanswered critical questions".

Eric Edelman, a top Pentagon official during the Bush administration, who co-chaired the commission along with retired admiral Gary Roughead, said the report wrestled with the consequences of years of ignored warnings about the erosion of American military might.

Russia and China have “learned from what we’ve done. They’ve learned from our success. And while we’ve been off doing a different kind of warfare, they’ve been prepared for a kind of warfare at the high end that we really haven’t engaged in for a very long time,” Edelman told Michael Morell, the former acting director of the CIA and a fellow member of the commission, during a forthcoming episode of Morell’s podcast, *Intelligence Matters*.

Edelman said people had lost sight of how complicated the international security environment had become for the United States, and argued that for a lot of reasons the American public and Congress haven’t been as attentive to the urgency of the situation as they should be.

The commission argued that despite a US\$716 billion American defence budget this year, which is four times the size of China’s and more than 10 times that of Russia, the effort to reshape the US defence establishment to counter current threats is underresourced.

It recommended that Congress lift budget caps on defence spending in the next two years that in the past have hobbled the military’s ability to plan for the long term.

“It is beyond the scope of our work to identify the exact dollar amount required to fully fund the military’s needs,” the report concluded.

“Yet available resources are clearly insufficient to fulfil the strategy’s ambitious goals, including that of ensuring that (the Defence Department) can defeat a major power adversary while deterring other enemies simultaneously.”

The call for even more robust defence spending comes as the Democrats take over the House and seek rollbacks of key Pentagon programmes.

It also comes after the White House instructed the Pentagon to pare back its planned budget for the coming year by some 4.5 per cent, or about US\$33 billion, after the federal deficit increased sharply following last year’s tax cut.

White House national security adviser John Bolton recently said he expected the defence budget to remain relatively flat in the coming years, as the administration seeks to cut discretionary spending, and suggested the Pentagon would need to reshape the military with funds derived from cuts to other areas.

Money saved from planned Pentagon reforms will prove insufficient to see through the kind of investment the military needs to see through the new national defence strategy, the commission found.

It also said Congress should look at the entire federal budget, including entitlement spending and tax revenue, to put the nation on more stable financial footing, rather than slash defence spending.

To counter Russia and China, the commission said the US Navy should expand its submarine fleet and sealift forces; the US Air Force should introduce more reconnaissance platforms and stealth long-range fighters and bombers; and the US Army should pursue more armour, long-range precision missiles and air-defence and logistical forces.

In its recommendations, the report advocated seeing through the modernisation of the US nuclear arsenal and putting a top Pentagon official in charge of developing additional air and missile defences.

Another area of focus for the commission was innovation.

It described current Pentagon acquisition programmes as too risk-averse, and urged the Defence Department and Congress to create a new category of pilot programmes aimed at “leap-ahead” technologies that could serve as breakthroughs to help retain American military dominance.

The report also resurfaced questions about the civilian-military divide that arose after retired Marine Corps general James Mattis took over as defence secretary, thanks to a vote in Congress that waived a requirement for military officers to be out of uniform for 10 years before serving in that role.

In his nearly two years as secretary, Mattis has relied more on current and former military officers for expertise than his recent predecessors have.

Without singling out Mattis, the commission warned that “responsibility on key strategic and policy issues has increasingly migrated to the military,” and urged Congress to exercise oversight to “reverse the unhealthy trend in which decision-making is drifting increasingly toward the military on issues of national importance.”

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