The Cost of War and Strategic Triage
Supporting Enduring Commitments versus “Endless Wars”

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The United States clearly needs to refine and improve its current pattern of global engagements, and make hard judgments about its current active military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria. The U.S. cannot survive, however, as a major, modern global economy and retreat from the world while other competitors seek to expand their influence through the global economy and develop their military capabilities.

America cannot turn away from its role as a global power and rely on random and arbitrary withdrawals and force cuts. It cannot preserve and build strategic partnerships by focusing on transactional burden sharing. Retreating from America’s enduring commitments can only end in making the U.S. its own worst enemy.

Neo-isolationism is not a viable option, but neither is repeating America’s past mistakes. On the one hand, the United States can only secure its position by maintaining an effective level of defense, and deterrence, and through the selective use of force. On the other hand, the U.S. must make hard choices as to where it makes commitments, must exercise “strategic triage” so that it put its forces where they can be effective, and must accept the fact that it can neither police the world or eliminate every source of risk.

This is why the Burke Chair at CSIS is issuing a greatly revised version of an analysis of two key aspects of how the U.S. can properly exercise this strategic triage.

The Sharply Dropping Cost of War

The first half of the analysis shows that the U.S. has already found methods of greatly reducing the cost of its current wars and the cost of supporting of the military operations of strategic partners – choices that do not ensure any form of “victory,” but greatly reduce the costs and risks of the Afghan War and Syria/Iraq conflicts, and that illustrate the need make the cost of war and the role of strategic-partners a critical dimension of strategic triage.

This half of the analysis is divided into several sections:

The first shows that the level of the burden U.S. military spending puts on the federal budget and the U.S. economy has not increased significantly in constant dollars since 1950, as a result of warfighting, and virtually all of the increases in federal spending have come from steadily rising spending on civil programs. The analysis shows that U.S. defense and national security expenditure in constant dollars have had little growth since 1950, and that virtually all of the pressure on the U.S. federal budget has come from steady increases in expenditures on social and domestic economic programs. It shows a steady long-term decline in national security spending as a percentage of both the U.S. GDP and total federal spending.

The second part shows that while the U.S. made drastic mistakes in strategy and supporting its strategic partners that wasted well over a trillion dollars in fighting the first decade of Afghan conflict and Iraq/Syria Wars, U.S. military engagements do not now strain U.S. military resources, the federal budget, or the American economy in spite of the fact that the U.S. is still fighting two wars. America’s “long wars” have now cost close to two trillion dollars in direct federal spending, but the U.S. has only spent only a comparatively limited portion of its
national budget and economy on military these wars, and total U.S. overseas deployments are now far smaller than they were at the time of the Cold War.

The third part shows how U.S. has made major changes in its methods of war fighting since the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 that have radically reduced the cost of its present wars over time. It shows that the U.S. has already made critical changes in its military posture that have already greatly reduced the current cost of U.S. involvements in the Afghan and Iraq/Syria conflicts, and shown that the U.S. can find affordable ways to fight such wars.

These changes include shifts from a reliance on massive deployments to a reliance on host country forces advised and supported by small cadres of expert U.S. ground forces and continued support from precision air strikes. They exemplify the need to tailor U.S. military efforts to limit the costs and risks of war, focus on building up host country forces as quickly as possible, and carefully performing strategic triage in ways that avoid over-commitment to failed states.

The analysis then addresses how these changes must be judged by the broader standards the U.S. should apply to war fighting as part of strategic triage. It makes it clear that reducing the cost of war cannot justify past overspending on the wrong forms of war fighting or imply that the way the U.S. now fights in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria properly serves America’s strategic interests. The analysis addresses the broader issue of how strategic triage should be applied to shaping future U.S. military commitments. It indicates that the U.S. has not properly applied strategic triage to any aspect of its current wars, that this has sharply raised their cost and has left their outcome uncertain and without any clear strategic objective.

The Low Cost of America’s Overseas Commitments

At the same time, the data provided on the sharp reductions in the cost of the Afghan and Iraq/Syria wars does shows that the tendency of some critics to focus on the total costs of such war from 2001 to date – without examining how these costs have changed over time – is seriously misleading in showing the way the U.S. should apply strategic triage to its current and future wars and gray area operations. The U.S. needs to learn from its mistakes, not retreat from the world.

Accordingly, the second half of the analysis shows that the normal peacetime overseas commitments of the United States have never strained the American economy, are made in cooperation with America’s strategic partners, and provide a remarkably cost-effective mix of deterrence and containment of potential threats.

The analysis also shows that the broader deployments of U.S. forces overseas are now at a record low, and the forces that remain produce immense benefits in terms of strategic partnerships throughout the world, and that they are essential elements of any strategy that focuses on Russia and China, as well as the myriad of other threats and challenges that exist in the rest of the globe.

At the same time, this part of the analysis warns that the U.S. has not addressed massive failures in the civil side of its civil-military campaigns. The U.S. has reduced the costs of such operations largely by abandoning them, making claims to progress that it did not achieve, and failing to focus on both the cost of effectiveness of its civil operations. Worse, it is approaching the second decade of such war without any credible grand strategic plan for bringing lasting civil stability to either Afghanistan or Iraq. The U.S. has made critical advances in reducing the cost of the military half of its wars – and expanding the role of its strategic partners – but it has largely
abandoned effective nation building, and efforts to reshape the failures of host country
governments that are the key causes of extremism, terrorism, and violence.
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Key Failures in War Fighting and “Strategic Triage” from 2001-2016

Many of the critics of America’s present wars are all too correct in stating that the U.S. has made singularly bad choices in shaping its commitments to its “long wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria over the last two decades. The U.S went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq without clear strategies for shaping their outcome, and without properly weighing the risks, the cost, and the potential outcomes and the potential cost-benefits of the war’s ultimate outcome.

The U.S. consistently failed to carefully estimate the actual cost of each war and military engagement, failed to make the choices that would minimize each war’s potential cost and risk before it initiated its wars, and failed to act quickly to develop host country forces and carefully manage actual spending once military action began.

At the same time, cost was only one factor shaping these failures. One senior U.S. military officer, – who was deeply involved in the wars and military actions that reflected these choices – has divided America’s strategies and successes since that time into four different quadrants:

- A sound strategy executed reasonably well (First Gulf War, limited and reasonably clear goals, and we ended operations once those goals were achieved).
- A sound strategy executed poorly (Somalia intervention with the strategic goal of only supporting famine relief in 1992, but our execution suddenly (and without much coherent forethought) pivoted into hopelessly aspirational nation-building).
- An inadequate strategy executed reasonably well (overthrowing and strategically replacing the Saddam Hussein regime, but because the strategy failed to address what
came after combat operations, we “overthrew” pretty well, but totally failed in “replacing”).

- An inadequate strategy executed poorly (Libya, and a lot of other things we’ve done… arguably making this the quadrant we’ve tended to live in the most).

There is no question that these strategic failures have affected the way the U.S. shaped its deployments, uses of force, strategic partnerships, and dealings with host countries. They were also compounded by gross failures in the civil dimension of each war.

The U.S. grossly underestimated the challenges in nation-building in Afghanistan after the seeming collapse of the Taliban in 2001, and the resurgence of the Taliban and other extremist threats from 2002-2010. It did so at least in part because it became committed to a long and more challenging war in Iraq, and partly because it badly underestimated the resurgence of Taliban while it overestimated the success of the Afghan government.

In June 2011, the U.S. tried to rush the development of Afghan forces so that it could withdraw its own forces, and slashed its largely failed nation-building programs. When it went on to largely withdraw its combat forces during 2011-2014, it found that Afghan forces could only survive with continued U.S. military support. This effectively forced President Obama – and then President Trump – to maintain a massive combat air support effort, and deploy large cadres of U.S. Special Forces and newly formed Security Force Assistance Brigades.

The U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 for the wrong reasons and without a meaningful plan to stabilize the country once Saddam fell from power. It tried to convert Iraqi politics, governance, and rule of law to meet American standards and values while effectively allowing the country to divide itself into Arab Shi’ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Once again, U.S. nation building plans were rushed, poorly structured, and failed – once again creating one of the most corrupt and ineffective governments in the world. The U.S. also disbanded Iraqi security forces, and initially left a “security vacuum” aside from the U.S. and allied forces.

As a result, the rise of Al Qaida and other Islamist extremist threats triggered a major military campaign that had to be fought largely by U.S. forces because Iraqi forces had initially been disbanded, and the U.S. was again slow to rebuild them as new threats emerged.

A massive surge in U.S. ground forces and support from alienated Iraqi Sunnis in Western Iraq largely defeated this threat. As was the case in Afghanistan, however, the U.S. did an equally bad job of assessing the risks in withdrawing its forces. As several of the figures later in this analysis show, it withdrew its combat forces from Iraq in 2011, leaving a failed Iraqi government whose leader – Maliki – prioritized his own power over Iraq’s national interest. The end result was the rebirth of Sunni and Shi’ite sectarian divisions in Iraq, the rise of ISIS, and the creation of both its territorial “caliphate” and its global network.

From 2016 to early 2019, the U.S. had to fight its third war in Iraq since 1990. The end result has been a success both in breaking up the ISIS territorial “caliphate, and in. reduced the cost of the war.” The U.S. still however, has no clear grand strategy for Iraq, the region, or for fully defeating ISIS and extremism. It also has no meaningful civil program to help Iraq overcomes its massive problems with corruption, ineffective governance, failed economic reform, critical employment problems and continued ethnic and sectarian divisions.
As the following analysis shows, the cost of each war is now far lower than at its peak, but neither
war as yet as a clear end, or one that clearly offers the U.S. lasting benefits – even in terms of local
strategy stability. As is the case in Afghanistan, Iraq’s ineffective and corrupt government may or
may not be able to survive. It not only faces major unrest from its own people, but major challenges
from Iran. It is already all too clear that Iraq’s political leadership and security forces will face
major challenges in fully defeating ISIS and mitigating the influence of pro-Iranian Popular
Mobilization Forces, particularly when its forces are preoccupied with subduing protesters. None
of these actions support U.S. strategic interests in Iraq.

As for Syria, the U.S. failed to act decisively when a civil war began in Syria after 2011, did not
react effectively when Russia and Iran backed the forces of the Assad dictatorship, defeated the
part of the physical ISIS “caliphate” that existed in Syria without a meaningful plan for a stable
peace, and has now largely withdrawn from Syria – virtually abandoning its Kurdish and Arab
allies and opening up the Arab Levant to Assad, Russian, and Iranian domination.

So far, the U.S. has only had a peripheral role in the wars in Yemen and Libya, and has only had
low-level involvements in a wide range of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns in
Africa. It has not demonstrated that it has any effective strategy for limiting or ending the wars in
Libya and Yemen, although its far more limited efforts in Africa often do seem to have helped
contain the terrorist and extremist threat.

**Setting the Stage: The Overall Trends in Federal Spending and the
Impact of Defense and Warfighting**

The financial costs of these failures in strategy and warfighting are outlined in depth in analyses
that follow, but they need to be kept in perspective. There is a tendency to analyze the cost of war
and defense spending without looking at the overall trends in the U.S. federal budget, and to
exaggerate their impact relative to civil spending.

In practice, their impact has been relatively low compared to other forms of federal spending:

- **Figure One** examines the overall cost of national security spending relative to civil
  spending and the increases in the federal debt – a debt driven as much by tax cuts and
  spending. It is clear that defense and foreign aid spending in constant dollars has been
  relatively constant since 1950, but that civil spending and the national debt have increased
  some five times in constant dollars and have driven almost all of the increase federal
  spending in real terms. It is also clear that the rise and fall in wartime spending that seems
  so dramatic when it is isolated from civil spending in the analysis that follows has been
  relatively minor compared to the shifts in civil spending.

- **Figure Two** reinforces this point by showing the extent to which defense spending has
dropped as a share of total federal spending and the GNP. National defense spending has
dropped from a peak of some 70% during the Korean War and height of the Cold War to
well under 30%. Spending as a percent of GDP has dropped from early 14% to well under
4%.

- **Figure Three** shows that Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects that defense
spending will continue to drop as a percent of GDP between 2019-2029 – just as it has
since 1969 – a total drop of 5.6% of the GDP.
In contrast, Mandatory Outlays like Social Security, Major Health Care Programs, and Other will continue to rise. Social Security is projected to rise by 3.2% of the GDP between 1969 and 2029, Major Health Care Programs by 5.8% of the GDP, and Other by 0.3% – a total of 9.3% of the GDP. The CBO projects that the total federal budget will shift from a surplus in 1969 to a deficit 4.8% of the GDP.

- Finally, **Figure Four** shows that unless a costly new war or other major new defense spending contingency emerges, total defense spending in 2034 in constant FY2020 dollars is projected to be lower than it was in 2008, one of the peak years in wartime spending on the Afghan and Iraq Wars.

Seen from this perspective, war and national security are scarcely cheap, but they also are scarcely the factors driving the federal budget, or that pose a serious and growing burden relative to the growth of the U.S. economy.
Figure One: Defense as a Percent of Total Federal Spending and GDP
(In Constant FY 2012 Billions of $US Dollars)

Source: OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE (COMPTROLLER), NATIONAL DEFENSE BUDGET ESTIMATES FOR FY 2020, MAY 2019,
Figure Two: Defense as a Percent of Total Federal Spending and GDP

National Defense as a Percent of Federal Spending

National Defense as a Percent of GDP

Figure Three: CBO’s Baseline Projections of Outlays and Revenues, Compared with Actual Values 25 and 50 Years Ago

Percentage of Gross Domestic Product

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<th>Mandatory Outlays</th>
<th>Discretionary Outlays</th>
<th>Net Interest</th>
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<td>Major Health Care Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>2029</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Outlays</th>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>18.7</td>
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<td>1994</td>
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<td>2029</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>18.2</td>
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</table>

Source: Congressional Budget Office.

In 2028, October 1 (the first day of fiscal year 2029) falls on a weekend, so certain payments that are due on that date will instead be made in September, thus boosting outlays in fiscal year 2028 and reducing them in 2029. Such shifts affect projections of outlays for the major health care programs, other mandatory outlays, defense discretionary outlays, total outlays, and the deficit. A similar shift boosted outlays in those categories in 1994. The data presented here have been adjusted to exclude the effects of these timing shifts.

a. Consists of outlays for Medicare (net of premiums and other offsetting receipts), Medicaid, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, as well as outlays to subsidize health insurance purchased through the marketplaces established under the Affordable Care Act and related spending.

Figure Four: CBO’s Projections of Funding for the Department of Defense: 1980-2034

Source: Congressional Budget Office, Long-Term Implications of the 2020 Future Years Defense Program, August 2019, p. 3.
Changes After 2016: The Cost of Failure vs. Affordable Methods of Fighting

That said, the fact remains that U.S. still paid well over $1.8 trillion dollars – an immense cumulative cost – for its failures to control costs and apply the proper degree of strategic triage in the Afghan and Iraq/Syria conflicts. Much of this expenditure was avoidable, and was wasted – particularly in the period between FY2003 and FY2012. The fact that America’s mistakes were affordable does not make them excusable.

But, it is equally important to note that the financial cost of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria did drop radically over time. Any effort to assess the cost of war needs to properly assess these changes, and understand the importance of shaping U.S. participation in future conflicts in ways that best serve its longer-term strategic interest, rather than simply rush out at the cost of creating yet another set of strategic vacuums its competitors and enemies will exploit.

Focusing on the total cost of war to date rather than the changes in these costs ignores the fact that the U.S. did learn from some of its mistakes. Complaining about “endless wars” is largely irrelevant in a world of endless threats and risks. So is complaining about the total historical cost of wars without examining the changes made in the way the U.S. fights them and the role of allied and host country power.

The questions that should be asked are rather what is the strategic justification of U.S. wars, what are the war’s cost-benefits, and how can necessary wars best be shaped and managed to reduce the costs and risks and ensure the potential benefits. The scrutiny applied to the initiation, cost, and ability to successfully terminate wars with lasting benefits must be equally applied to what both ongoing wars have become today and any future uses of military force.

This is why the fact the U.S. made critical mistakes in initiating and fighting its wars for at least the first decade of each conflict does not mean that the changes it made in its methods of war fighting and in finding more sustainable and effective approaches to reducing the cost of each war are so important.

**Putting the Steadily Dropping Cost of War in Perspective**

The first key step in putting the cost of U.S. wars in perspective is to consider their changing cost relative to overall U.S. defense spending, and the burden they place upon the U.S. economy. It should be noted that the cost estimates that follow are official U.S. government budget estimates and use the normal government definitions of cost.

Some private and NGO estimates take a strikingly ideological approach to such costing, attempt to cost outyear expenditures for years in to the future, and add opportunity costs relative to other ways to spend federal money that would grossly exaggerate the cost of every aspect of federal spending. These estimates have produced total costs as high as $4 trillion on to $7.9 trillion, but many adopt methodologies and assumptions that would raise the cost of virtually every other aspect of federal spending in similar ways – including entitlement expenditures.

Some estimates from outside government attempt to include “opportunity costs” for other uses of the money, and military health and retirement – seeking to boosting the cost as much as possible for ideological reasons. Other estimates, within government, are based on questionable accounting and may underestimate the direct cost of war while simultaneously including Baseline expenditures war costs.
The most credible versions of the higher estimates have been issued by the Cost of Wars Project at Brown University, and are addressed in detail in two previous Burke Chair studies:


The work by the Cost of War Project do show that alternative cost models analyses deserve careful attention. However, virtually all planning and analysis of the U.S. federal budget does rely on official reporting, and these are the data which are the focus of this analysis.

Moreover, even official U.S. government estimates of the change annual cost of war sometimes differ sharply in content and definition, and focus on different aspects of the war.

**Figure Five**, for example, expands upon the data shown in Figure Four to provide an estimate of the total cost of Department of Defense military operations and war fighting in constant 2020 dollars. This use of constant dollars provides a more realistic picture of the long-term trends in the cost of war than the current dollar budget data used in most official reporting and acts as a reminder that past years expenditures are generally reported in ways that underestimate their real cost. It also helps to put wartime spending in perspective by comparing it to total defense spending over the same years.

It is quite clear that the level of wartime or OCO costs dropped sharply over time – although it did rise again briefly in FY2018 during the peak fighting against ISIS. At the same time, the CBO makes it clear that these data do overestimate the cost of war since FY2016 because the U.S. Congress included more than an average of more than $50 billion a year of ordinary DoD Baseline expenditures in the wartime Overseas Contingency Operations budget in order to bypass the budget caps set by the Budget Control Act.

(See Congressional Budget Office, Funding for Overseas Contingency Operations and Its Impact on Defense Spending (October 2018), www.cbo.gov/publications/54219.) These same problems affect most NGO estimates, regardless of whether they are in constant or current dollars.

**Figure Six** provides a more recent estimate of the trends in the Department of Defense’s total wartime Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) relative to the total cost of maintaining peacetime U.S. capabilities for deterrence and defense, and the overall trend in defense spending as a percentage of GDP. It also uses the “then year” or “current dollars” common in virtually all of the official U.S. budget data used for actual budget planning.

It again reveals key trends in total defense spending and in the cost of war, and strongly indicates that that the overall burden of defense, and of being a global power, are limited and acceptable relative to the risks inherent in any major withdrawals from America’s present global commitments:

- First, the cost of actual warfighting is still scarcely cheap, but **Figure Six** shows it has become a relatively a minor part of American defense spending. Ever since FY2011 Baseline or peacetime defense expenditures have risen while the costs Overseas
Contingency Operations have dropped. Since FY2012, almost all of the burden defense spending has imposed on the U.S. economy and taxpayer has had little to do with the current annual cost of America’s wars. The figure shows that in FY2010, the cost of wars was $163 billion or 23.6% of a total defense Budget Authority of $691 billion. In FY2020, the projected cost of America’s wars is $66 billion or 9% of a total of $718 billion.

- Second, the total burden of all defense spending places on the economy and the American taxpayer has dropped sharply over time because of the growth of the US economy. It has dropped from an average of around 6% of the GDP during the Cold War, and a peak of 4.5% of the GDP at the peak of current U.S. wartime spending in FY2010, to only 3.2% in FY2019. The total projections through FY2024 are questionable, but – barring massive changes in the character of current wars or U.S engagement in a new conflict – virtually all of any future rises in spending are likely to be driven by Baseline spending.
DoD = Department of Defense; FYDP = Future Years Defense Program; FYDP period = 2020 through 2024, the period for which DoD has estimated its total costs; OCO = overseas contingency operations. Before 2025, funding for the total budget (which includes funding designated as either OCO or emergency) and funding for the base budget are shown individually. DoD indicated that about 60 percent of the amount it designated as OCO in 2020 and 2021 would have been used for base-budget costs to avoid the spending limits that were in place at the time the FYDP was prepared—specifically, the caps in effect under the Budget Control Act of 2011. Those caps were later increased by the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019. DoD characterized the small amounts designated as OCO from 2022 through 2024 as “placeholders” because actual costs will depend on how overseas operations change over time.

Funding for operation and support is the sum of the appropriations for military personnel, operation and maintenance, and revolving and management funds. Acquisition funding is the sum of the appropriations for procurement and for research, development, test, and evaluation. Infrastructure funding is the sum of the appropriations for military construction and family housing.

Source: Congressional Budget Office. *Long-Term Implications of the 2020 Future Years Defense program,* August 2019, pp. 3 and 10; and
Figure Six: Department of Defense Projection of the Cost of U.S. Wars – and the Burden They Impose on the U.S. GDP

Discretionary Budget Authority in Then Year (Current) Dollars in Billions

DoD Outlays as a Percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) FY 1953 – FY 2024

Major Reductions in the Annual Cost of Each Major War

The factors driving these changes in the cost of war become clearer when the cost of each war is examined separately. The U.S. may have made major mistakes in shaping and fighting the first decade of each of its “long wars,” but it then radically changed the way it fought each war, and increased its reliance on host country ground forces and on U.S. advisory teams and U.S. airpower at different times and in different ways. In both cases, however, the U.S. massively reduced the annual cost of combat in the process.

Cutting the Direct Military Cost of War

The official data that follow seem to broadly correct, but a careful reading will show significant differences in U.S. official reporting over time and from source to source. Accordingly, one key aspect of improving American strategic triage is the need for more honest and transparent cost analysis. At present, neither the Executive Branch or any element of Congress comes close to meeting its basic responsibilities for full, honest, and transparent reporting.

It is still possible, however, to provide a reasonable picture of the changes in the cost of America’s wars by comparing key U.S. government reports. The Department of Defense estimates of the total military cost of each war and other major overseas activities – as of March 31, 2019 – are summarized in Figure Seven.

These data do not include State Department and USAID foreign aid and civil programs, or military medical costs through Veteran’s programs. The data in Figure Seven also again exaggerate the cost of the actual fighting in at least FY2014 onwards because they include substantial Baseline spending – largely in the totals for the Afghan War – which the Congress allowed as a way of avoiding the budget caps set on Baseline spending under the Budget Control Act. Once again, neither the Executive Branch – nor any element of Congress – has ever presented a full and audited estimate of the real total cost of U.S. wars – one showing the cost of both civil and military operations, breaking out the long-term cost of Veterans medical services, and eliminating baseline spending.

Nevertheless, the total government-wide Appropriated cost (BA) of America’s wars drops from $190 billion in FY2008 to $83 billion in FY2013, and to $70 billion in FY2019, and these totals include substantial on-war expenditures as well as Noble Eagle. The drop in DoD Obligations (BO) – the actual spending used in measuring the impact on the budget and GDP – is much sharper. It drops from a peak of $162 billion in FY2008 to $24 billion in FY2019 (15%).

The difference in the timing on the cuts of each war is striking. The DoD cost data show a steady rise in. the cost of the Iraq Ear from FY2004 onwards to a peak cost of $130 billion a year in FY2008, and then a sharp decline form FY2009 onwards. U.S. spending was negligible during FY2013-FY2014, and then rose to moderate levels of $4 billion to $8 billion during the struggle to defeat the ISIS territorial “Caliphate” from FY2015 to FY2019.

These costs differed sharply from those of the Afghan War because the U.S. surged its own ground forces to defeat Sunni extremists through FY2011, then saw an apparent period of peace, and used airpower and elite ground troops and advisors to build-up effective Iraqi and Syrian ground forces to defeat the ISIS “Caliphate.”

The data for Afghanistan show that the U.S. failed to engage seriously in Afghanistan until FY2008, and then built up to the point where costs rose from $20 billion in FY2007 to a peak of
$98 billion in FY2012. As has been noted earlier, the U.S. gave priority to the Iraq War that helped to allow the Taliban to make a major recovery, and then carried out a much more limited and ineffectual surge of its ground troops in Afghanistan for several years, while it attempted to rush the creation of effective Afghan ground forces. It then withdrew most of its limited surge and other ground combat troops and – as was the case earlier in Iraq – relied on U.S. airpower, and elite U.S. troops to advise Afghan ground troops. Unlike Iraq, the U.S. focused on protecting major population centers in Afghanistan and did not attempt to fully defeat the Taliban and other insurgents. Even so, the cost of the Afghan War went from $10-14 billion in FY2003-FY2006 to a peak of $98 billion in FY2012, and remained around $36 billion to $47 billion in FY2014-FY2018.

**Cutting the Total Civil-Military Cost of War**

The major cuts in all aspects of direct U.S. spending on each war after FY2011 are equally clear from other data provided by the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations. These totals show that both military spending and U.S. spending on nation-building were slashed to levels around 25% of their peace after FY2011.

These data are shown – along with earlier estimates of defense Baseline and OCO spending – in **Figure Eight**. This Figure shows that total Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of State (DOS)/USAID OCO spending was $94 billion in FY2013. For FY 2019, the DoD requested $617 billion in base funding and $69 billion in OCO funding.

The FY 2019 DoS and USAID budget request totaled $39.3 billion, a reduction of $14.7 billion (27 percent) from the amount appropriated by Congress for FY 2018, and 41% of the total for FY2013. The total DoS and USAID budget request was lower than any amount appropriated by Congress during the past decade.

In general, civil spending was too low in both Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria to fund the kind of programs need to bring stability and win popular support. At the same time, most experts feel that the civil programs were so badly planning and managed, and so caught up in the political turmoil and corruption in both countries that even the spending that did occur was largely wasted.

**Cutting Casualties: The Most Critical Cost of All**

Finally, **Figure Nine** reflects a very different type of reduction in the cost of war. It shows the most important single aspect of these reductions: The cuts in U.S. killed, injured, and wounded.

The phases of the fighting in Iraq that relied primarily on U.S. ground troops produced 4,432 killed and 31,994 wounded in action. The phases that relied on Afghan Ground forces produced 162 killed and 378 wounded.

Similarly, the phases of the fighting in Afghanistan that relied primarily on U.S. ground troops produced 2,352 killed and 20,147 wounded in action. The phases that relied on Afghan Ground forces produced 82 killed and 491 wounded.

From a narrow financial perspective, these cuts involve immense additional savings in terms of medical/retirement cost and force retention. From a human perspective, no aspect of “cost” has more value and no dollar savings can be as important.
Figure Seven: The Cost of Major U.S. Wars: September FY2001- March 31, FY2019 (in $US Billions)

Funding Appropriated through War-related Requests FY 2001 – FY 2019 ($1,841B)

Note: Includes funding for OIF/OND/OIR, OEF/OFS, and ONE. Beginning in FY 2005, ONE is funded in the DoD baseline. Source: Department of Defense Appropriations Acts, Data as of March 31, 2019

Department of Defense Cost of War Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred

Note: Obligation data shown against year funds obligated. Does not include non-DoD classified programs. Source: Defense Finance and Accounting Service, Cost of War Monthly Report, Data as of March 31, 2019

For FY 2019, the DoD requested $617 billion in base funding and $69 billion in OCO funding.

The FY 2019 DoS and USAID budget request totaled $39.3 billion, a reduction of $14.7 billion (27 percent) from the amount appropriated by Congress for FY 2018.

Moreover, the DoS and USAID budget request was lower than any amount appropriated by Congress during the past decade.

In FY 2019, the DoS and USAID did not request separate OCO funding, and instead included funding for OCOs as part of their enduring budget request.

Figure Nine: Trends in U.S. Casualties, FY 2008-FY 2020

Iraq, Syria, and MENA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM U.S. CASUALTY STATUS</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>KIA</th>
<th>Non-Hostile</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>WIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. Military Casualties</td>
<td>4,419</td>
<td>3,481</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. DOD Civilian Casualties</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,432</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,490</strong></td>
<td><strong>942</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>31,994</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM includes casualties that occurred between March 19, 2003 and Aug. 31, 2010, in the Arabian Sea, Bahrain, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Persian Gulf, Qatar, Red Sea, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Casualties in these countries before March 19, 2003, were considered Operation Enduring Freedom. Personnel injured in OIF who die after Sept. 1, 2010, will be included in OIF statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATION NEW DAWN U.S. CASUALTY STATUS</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>KIA</th>
<th>Non-Hostile</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>WIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. Military Casualties</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. DOD Civilian Casualties</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>298</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE U.S. CASUALTY STATUS</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>KIA</th>
<th>Non-Hostile</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>WIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. Military Casualties</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIF U.S. DOD Civilian Casualties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>88</strong></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>80</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE includes casualties that occurred in Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the Mediterranean Sea east of 25° longitude, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Afghanistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM U.S. CASUALTY STATUS</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>KIA</th>
<th>Non-Hostile</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>WIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan Only 3</td>
<td>2,218</td>
<td>1,833</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20,091</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Locations 4</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OEF U.S. DOD Civilian Casualties</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worldwide Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,352</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,848</strong></td>
<td><strong>504</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>20,147</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (Afghanistan only) includes casualties that occurred between Oct. 7, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2014, in Afghanistan only.

4 OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (other locations) includes casualties that occurred between Oct. 7, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2014, in Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Philippines, Seychelles, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Yemen. Wounded in action cases in this category include those without a casualty country listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL U.S. CASUALTY STATUS</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>KIA</th>
<th>Non-Hostile</th>
<th>Pending</th>
<th>WIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OFS U.S. Military Casualties</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFS U.S. DOD Civilian Casualties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>491</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL includes casualties that occurred in Afghanistan after Dec. 31, 2014.

Changing Cost and Risk by Changing the Way the U.S. Fights

It is far from clear that the U.S. will fight future wars in the same way, or how long it will continue to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria. It is clear, however, that the cost reductions shown in Figure Five to Figure Nine were not simply the result of reducing the U.S. military effort. They represented major changes in the way the U.S. was fighting, and in the role of host country allies.

The evolution of these changes took time, involved many detailed changes, and often faltered in terms of timely action and resourcing. It did, however, radically reduce the cost of war as shown in the two different phases of each war that are shown in Figure Ten.

The Department of Defense Cost of War report for March 31, 2019, from which these data are drawn, notes that the cost data differ sharply between the periods when the U.S. relied largely on its own land combat forces, and the periods after the U.S. withdrawals of most ground forces, after which it relied on host country ground forces supported by cadres of elite U.S. ground troops and mixes of piloted aircraft and RPVs.

- The international combat mission, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), formally ended on December 31, 2014. Operation FREEDOM’S SENTINEL (OFS) began on January 1, 2015. OFS continues the train, advise, and assist mission of the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) at the corps and Ministry of Defense level, as well as with the Ministry of the Interior.

  The focus is on those processes associated with financial management, human resource management, force sustainment (logistics), and command and control. This includes a significant effort to further integrate and enhance aviation capabilities and intelligence support into the operations of the ANDSF.

- Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR) began in August 2014, as a military air power intervention in Iraq and Syria in response to the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

  - The OIR campaign seeks to deny and degrade ISIS through precision air strikes and intelligence collection, disrupt the flow of foreign forces, and build partner capacity.

  - Efforts include working with and through the Government of Iraq’s (GoI) Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Iraq and Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) forces in Syria to build key security force capabilities, help professionalize their security forces, and promote stability in the region.
Figure Ten: Changing Operational Cost of War in Shifting from Reliance on U.S./Allied Ground Forces to Reliance on Host Country Ground forces, Elite U.S. Ground troops, and U.S./Allied Airpower – Part One

US Land Force Intensive Fighting ($1,310.2 billion) vs. Reliance on Host Country Forces ($238.3 billion)
Figure Ten: Changing Operational Cost of War in Shifting from Reliance on U.S./Allied Ground Forces to Reliance on Host Country Ground forces, Elite U.S. Ground troops, and U.S./Allied Airpower – Part Two

Total Cost of Afghan and Iraq Wars to March 31, 2019

- Between September 11, 2001, and March 31, 2019, the Department of Defense (DoD) obligated $1,548.5 billion for war-related costs (100%). If Noble Eagle is not included, cost drops to $1,520.6 (98%)

Cost of Operations Primarily Reliant on U.S. and Allied Ground Forces (From September 11, 2001 to Date Shown ($1,310.2 billion (84%))

- Iraq/Syria: Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)/NEW DAWN (OND) OIF combat role formally ended on September 1, 2010. Cost of OND continues to December 31, 2014: $730.9 billion (48%)

- Afghanistan Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF): Ended December 31, 2014: $579.4 billion (37%)

Cost of Current Contingency Operations Primarily Reliant on Host Country Ground Forces, Small elite elements of U.S. ground forces, and U.S. and Allied Airpower to March 31, 2019. ($120.4B (13%) If Operation Noble Eagle is included ($238.3 billion (15%)

- Iraq/Syria: OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR): Began August 2014. Cost to March 31, 2019: $34.1 billion (2%)

- Afghanistan: OPERATION FREEDOM’s SENTINEL (OFS): Began January 1, 2015. Cost to March 31, 2019 was $176.3 billion (11%) including some Baseline and other support costs.

- US/Canada Homeland Defense OPERATION NOBLE EAGLE (ONE): $27.9 billion (2%)

Average Monthly cost in FY2019

- The average monthly spending for all Operations: $3.9 billion
- The average monthly spending for OFS: $3.1 billion (77%)
- The average monthly spending for OIR: $0.9 billion (23%)
- The average monthly spending for OIF/OND: $<0.1 billion (1%)
- The average monthly spending for OEF: $-0.1 billion* (-2%)
- The average monthly spending for ONE: $<0.1 billion (1%)

* The negative average monthly spending amounts result from normal deobligations and adjustments made within the fiscal year to align costs properly to the appropriate contingency operation.

**Shifting to Reliance on Host Country Ground Forces**

Both in the case of Afghanistan and in the case of Iraq/Syria, the major divisions in the major combat operations in Figure Ten not only represent periods when major changes took place in the direct costs of U.S. wars, but periods which reflect a major shift from U.S. reliance on U.S. and allied ground combat forces to a reliance on host country Afghan Army forces in Afghanistan and on Kurdish and Arab host country forces Iraqi and Syria – backed by major improvement in the targeting and use of U.S. manned and unmanned air strikes.

They also mark clear divisions between periods before and after the U.S. developed rotating cadres of experienced Special Forces, Train and Assist Brigades, and other highly experienced and expert U.S. forces to advise and support host country forces at every level from forward combat forces to the Corps equivalent level.

Some of the details of these shifts in the U.S. train and assist effort are classified. It is clear, however, that the U.S. has also gradually sent more and more train and assist personnel forward to help shape Afghan, Iraqi government, and SDF Syria forces in the field. The U.S. ground effort now focuses on assisting a limited number of elite Iraqi forces with a classified number of actual Special Forces and other elite forces.

This shift within the second broad period in each war has been critical since the U.S. initially tried to keep train and assist personnel in the rear and at higher comment levels to reduce the number of casualties. This sharply limited the initial value of such U.S. deployments, but the U.S. has gradually relaxed such constraints and it has become clear – as it did in Vietnam and Korea – that the forward deployment of train and assist soldiers is vital to real success in such missions.

The U.S. has also recently created specialized Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs). These are still experimental, but their success is clear. One of the key reasons for the problems in creating effective Afghan forces was that major gaps existed in the number of trainers through CY2012, and far too many soldiers assigned to training roles did not have real qualifications for the job. Moreover, far too many were assigned to basic training roles and far too many Afghan (and Iraqi forces) were then sent forward to combat without meaningful train and assist support.

The SFABs assigned to Afghanistan are still somewhat experimental and were only first deployed in 2018. They are composed of elite forces that are specially selected and have special incentives to serve. Their core mission is to conduct training, advising, assisting, enabling, and accompanying operations with allied and partner nations.

These SFABs have also already had considerable success at both the forward combat level and in ensuring proper support and use of combat units. They had this success although they initially had nine-month deployments that cover all of the elements of Afghan forces – something that may have stretched them too thin. The 1st Security Assistance Brigade, for example, had only 800 soldiers but was formed into 58 advisory teams that were partnered with 30 Afghan Kandaks or battalions, and 15 brigades – nearly half the Afghan National Army.

Barring further sudden, unplanned force reductions; the Army will build up to three active SFABs and one National Guard SFAB, with the third active SFAB activated in July 2019, and since deployed. Their future mission may focus on smaller parts of host country forces, but remain capable of providing such support with high levels of independence and in active support of units in combat missions.
It should be noted, however, that so far, the United States effort to restructure its retraining efforts still has one critical defect. The U.S. no longer attempts to train and equip most police, paramilitary, and local forces to secure and protects areas where regular host country forces are not present and where such forces are critical to the “hold mission” in preventing the return of threat forces.


**Cutting U.S. Military Manpower and War Costs as a Result of These Shifts**

There is no exact correlation between the funding data in Figure Ten and the cuts in U.S. military personnel. However, Figure Eleven shows just how dramatic the total personnel cuts were in each war during the years between 2001 and 2017—although the cuts in Afghanistan came years after the cuts in Iraq.

Figure Twelve reinforces the correlation between this new approach to shaping the role of U.S. ground forces, total personnel, and the cost of war. It shows the trends in both total military manning and the cost of war through FY2020. It is clear that the declines in U.S. ground force deployments do broadly correlate to the funding profiles shown in Figure Six and Figure Seven.

The differences in total manning and total cost in these sets of figures does again highlight the continuing uncertainties in official U.S. estimates of the cost of war, and which shows just how difficult it can be to separate out actual cost of war from Baseline spending, as well as to distinguish what elements of basing and support costs outside Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria should be included.

At the same time, it is clear that levels of such uncertainties do not affect the conclusion that the U.S. found ways to sharply reduce the cost of its present wars. It also illustrates the fact that proper planning and focus on longer-term strategic objectives, can greatly ease the challenges in strategic triage.
Figure Eleven: Reducing Military Personnel in U.S. Wars

Iraq and Afghanistan: 2002-2010

Iraq and Afghanistan: FY2002-FY2017

Sources: DOD, Monthly Boots-on-the Ground reports provided to CRS and congressional defense committees, 2001-June 2014. For month-by-month troop levels, both in-country and in-theater, see Table A-1.

Notes: Reflects U.S. troops in-country; excludes troops providing in-theater support or conducting counter-terror operations outside the region.
The FY 2020 budget request reflects an important change in how the DoD accounts for OFS appropriations and expenditures. In previous years, the DoD Comptroller reported OFS requests and appropriations that exceeded $45 billion annually. However, this figure included activities that support the OFS mission but are not executed in Afghanistan and may be shared across the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility (such as logistics, transportation, intelligence, and equipment reset). The OFS accounting category also included funding for smaller OCO missions, including the Operation Pacific Eagle—Philippines and classified missions.

In this year’s budget request, the DoD Comptroller adjusted the FY 2019 and FY 2020 OFS account to include only funds for combat operations in Afghanistan that will not be necessary after the cessation of hostilities. All enduring requirements that will continue following the end of combat operations, such as overseas basing, depot maintenance, and ship operations, are reported separately. Operation Pacific Eagle—Philippines and classified operations are included in the new “enduring requirements” category.

Increasing the Major Cuts in Total U.S. Combat Forces and war Costs by Increasing Actual Air Strikes and Using RPVs and Advanced IS&R Assets

These improvements in ground force support are only half the story. It is equally important to note that the cuts in the cost of war, and in the need for U.S. ground combat forces, were also made possible by shifting to a heavy reliance on a mix of manned bombers, strike fighters, and remotely piloted vehicles – supported by the most advanced network of tactical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems in the world. This increase in the number of air munitions delivered, and the ability to reduce dependence on piloted and crewed aircraft, is shown in Figure Thirteen and Figure Fourteen.

These Figures also show a critical defect in most reporting on the Afghan and Iraq/Syria wars. Most such reporting focuses on total military personnel – regardless of what they do and the fact that there are more contractors performing military tasks than people in uniform – but the U.S. also has played a critical role in deploying major intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) air missions and air strikes. And, these forces have involved a major shift from largely manned combat air strikes in support of U.S. land combat forces to the renewed use of U.S. air combat strikes by both manned aircraft and increasing numbers of RPV supported by steadily more advanced combinations of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

This new focus on using small elements of highly expert U.S. forces to make host country ground forces effective, while continuing to provide air combat support from piloted and remotely piloted aircraft, has been critical in allowing the U.S. to make the massive reductions in U.S. military personnel shown in Figure Thirteen and Figure Fourteen.

- **Figure Fourteen** shows that the U.S. compensated in part for its cuts in ground forces by making a major increase in the number of actual U.S. and Coalition airstrikes on Taliban and other threat forces – many of which were in direct combat support of Afghan ground forces. This support has continued through 2019 because Taliban forces continue to gain in a near stalemate with Afghan forces.

- The AFCENT data show that the total number of weapons released dropped from 2,758 in 2013 to 2,365 in 2014, and 947 in 2015 as the U.S. attempted to phase out its combat role. It rose to 1,337 in 2016 as it became clear that Afghan forces could not survive on their own, and then to 4,361 in 2017, and 7,362 in 2018 – with 790 during the first two months of 2019. It is clear from reporting on the fighting at the time that Afghan government forces would have been decisively defeated in at least several provinces if the U.S. had not provided this massive air support effort. (https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/FINAL%20Feb%202019%20APS%20Data.pdf?ver=2019-04-03-072821-247)

- The situation is different in the case of Iraq/Syria. The fighting was far more constant and intense than in Afghanistan, and U.S. and Coalition air strikes played a critical role in supporting Iraqi and SDF forces in Iraq in halting ISIS offensives from 2014 on, and then in supporting the initial phase of the offensives that eventually regained the territory under the ISIS “Caliphate.” By 2017, however, the bulk of the fighting shifted to ground force fighting in urban areas until the final phase of the offensive in Mosul and Syria, which again required an increase in air strikes.
• As a result, total crewed and remotely piloted strike sorties shifted from 28,696 in 2015 to 30,743 in 2016, and to 39,577 in 2017, but dropped to 8,713 in 2018.

• **Figure Fourteen** tells only part of the story because of the limits to the unclassified data currently available. It does show, however, that the U.S. ability to combine RPV air strikes with an advanced IS&R net in Afghanistan – during fighting that involved comparatively episodic battles – allow the U.S. to sharply reduce its reliance on manned strike aircraft and use RPVs with long loiter times over target.

• In contrast to the sharp increase in actual weapons release described earlier, Part One of **Figure Fourteen** shows that the number of manned aircraft strike sorties in Afghanistan dropped sharply from 2012 to 2019. They dropped from 21,900 in 2013 to 12,978 in 2014, 5,774 in 2015, 5,162 in 2016, and to 4,603 in 2017, although an increase in Taliban offensive action in 2018 (and some shifts in RPV and IS&R assets) led them to nearly double to 8,196 sorties.

• This was far less possible in Iraq and Syria, where most of the fighting was highly intense and dynamic urban warfare, and became sharply more offensive over time. Crewed air strike sorties totaled 21,116 in 2015, 19,680, in 2016, and 16,056 in 2017 – a much smaller cut than took place in Afghanistan.

• Part Two of **Figure Fourteen** shows that other aspects of airpower were also an essential part of the U.S. shift to a reliance on host country ground forces. Crewed IS&R, passenger airlift and airlift cargo in tons sorties played a critical role in both wars, and were critical to the success of host country and local ground forces. The air dropping of supplies was also important, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Crew sorties delivered 111,200 pounds worth in 2015, 822,171 pounds worth in 2016, 641,746 pounds worth in 2017, and 606,970 pounds worth in 2018.

This shift in the way the U.S. fight its current wars was only possible because the U.S. developed an extraordinary level of expertise in the field over time, and could draw on forward bases in the region as well as carriers and ships equipped with cruise missiles.

This expertise was also critical in limiting the number of civilian casualties and collateral damage. War is war and there is no way to eliminate such casualties and damage. This presents problems in strategic communications because the end result is highly visible, inevitably leads to anger or hostility to the U.S., and becomes a form of political warfare that enemies can exploit by exaggerating real world losses.

Here, the U.S. needs to learn that it is better to recognize and admit that airpower has such effects, but that it is also necessary to repeatedly explain that the cost of not using its airpower can often lead to far higher civilian suffering from enemy occupation, ground warfare, and the inability to defend and/or bring a tactical encounter to a successful conclusion.

Preserving such expertise and deployment capabilities in forward deployed forces, and in CONUS, is again critical to using such efforts in future combat partnerships with other host country and partner forces, as well as to sustaining U.S military involvements in Afghanistan, Iraq-Syria, and other current combat operations.

The U.S. cannot use small cadres of U.S. forces to sustain combat operations with host country and strategic partner forces unless it retains and develops such expertise and prepares for such
operations in advance – rather than waiting for a crisis to escalate to actual conflict. Forward basing and forward training are absolutely critical to limiting the size of future U.S. combat deployments.
Figure Thirteen: Number of Munitions Released in Manned and Remotely Piloted (RPV) Aircraft Sorties in Afghanistan (OFS) and Iraq/Syria (OIR)

Afghanistan

Source: Adapted by Max Molot from data provided by source: AFCENT (CAOC) Public Affairs, as of September 30, 2019, afcent.pa@afcent.af.mil.
Figure Fourteen: Combat Air Support Strikes and Manned Aircraft Sorties in Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria from 2013 Onwards – Part One

Afghanistan (OFS) Percentage Change in Cumulative Total Manned Aircraft Sorties and Cumulative Number of Weapons Released (Manned and RPA Sorties) from 2013-2018; Year-to-Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Change in Cumulative Manned Sorties</th>
<th>% Change in Cumulative Number of Weapons Released from Manned and RPA Sorties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>+74.1%</td>
<td>+85.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>+23.4%</td>
<td>+107.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>-19.2%</td>
<td>+23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>+14.8%</td>
<td>-18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>+13.4%</td>
<td>+22.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Iraq/Syria (OIR) Percentage Change in Cumulative Total Manned Aircraft Sorties and Cumulative Number of Weapons Released (Manned and RPA Sorties) from 2015-2018; Year-to-Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Change in Cumulative Manned Sorties</th>
<th>% Change in Cumulative Number of Weapons Released from Manned and RPA Sorties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>107.1%</td>
<td>107.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted by Max Molot from data provided by source: AFCENT (CAOC) Public Affairs, as of September 30, 2019, afcent.pa@afcent.af.mil
Figure Fourteen: Combat Air Support Strikes and Manned Aircraft Sorties in Afghanistan, and Iraq and Syria. from 2013 Onwards – Part Two

Afghanistan (OFS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strike Aircraft (manned)</th>
<th>Number of Weapons Released (Manned &amp; RPA strike assets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorties</td>
<td>Jan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>21,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>12,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5,774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5,162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>8,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1,188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics provided includes numbers of sorties (not strikes) and munitions expended by aircraft under CFACC control.

Iraq/Syria (OIR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strike Aircraft (manned)</th>
<th>Number of Weapons Released (Manned &amp; RPA strike assets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorties</td>
<td>Jan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>21,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>21,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>19,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>16,056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2,612</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics provided includes numbers of sorties (not strikes) and munitions expended by aircraft under CFACC control.

Source: Adapted from AFCENT (CAOC) Public Affairs, as of September 30, 2019.
Strategic Triage: Putting the Military Costs of War in Broader Perspective

The previous analysis shows that the military cost of current wars is now affordable in financial terms, that adopting the right military tactics and approaches to fighting and strategic partnerships can reduce costs to far more acceptable levels, and that experience, forward deployments, and creating more effective strategic partnerships can have critical advantages.

At the same time, it again needs to be stressed that the military costs of war are only one key factor in applying strategic triage. The fact that warfighting has become more affordable does not – by itself – imply that the U.S. should continue supporting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria indefinitely or eliminate the need for constant review of the overall strategic value of each of America’s current wars and overseas commitments.

In practice, effective strategic triage will always involve serious uncertainties and unpredictable risks, may often have no “good” or high confidence options, and involve almost the same risks in acting or not acting. Accordingly, the lessons of America’s current wars warn that strategic triage must also focus on the following issues:

- **Does the military engagement have a credible change of serving American strategic interests in ways that clearly justifies the full range of risks involved in engaging in combat?** The U.S. grossly underestimated the risks of invading Iraq in 2003 in spite of widespread warnings from its Arab security partners and many experts within the U.S. government. It went to war for ideological considerations without any clear plans for what would happen once it won. Failing to act decisively can ultimately be as costly and dangerous as acting without proper justification. Strategic triage must be based on objective assessments, and expert analysis, and the cost benefits of major engagements need to be red-teamed and subject to full interagency analysis.

- **Does the course of the war justify continued engagement over time?** In both the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. face real potential continued threats once it engaged, but failed to properly assess the weaknesses in the host country political structures, governments, and forces that it relied upon. Over time, the U.S. tended to systematically exaggerate host country capabilities at both the civil and military levels, and failed to carry out “zero-based assessments of the value of continuing the conflict. Strategic triage means rejecting open-ended commitments and engagements that do not provide clear future strategic benefits.

- **Is there a credible plan and properly resourced effort to create effective host country military and security forces?** The U.S. was initially slow to build effective host country forces, and then attempted to rush development at an impossible forced pace. It initially attempted to withdraw long before host country governments and forces were ready, and then had to rebuild its force development efforts at a major increase in cost. Strategic triage requires effective strategic partnership in the security dimension.

- **Is there a credible host country civil capability to win the war, or justify military intervention, and one that will credibly create enough popular support and unity to both help win the conflict and create a lasting peace?** The U.S. grossly exaggerated the level of popular support for the host country governments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its ability to transform each country’s politics, governance, rule of law, and economy. It initially set
impossible goals for nation building and then virtually abandoned such efforts – calling for reform without enforcing effective conditionality or creating effective aid efforts. Strategic triage must focus as much on the civil dimension as on combat.

• **What are the risks of hostile outside intervention at the state and non-state level, and can they be deterred or countered?** The U.S. underestimated the roles of Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and outside non-state actors, and was slow or failed to counter them. The U.S. must virtually count on such intervention given the patterns of regional instability in the world, and in creating gray area opportunities for Russia and other hostile states or competitors. Strategic triage must explicitly analyze such risks.

• **What are the risks that changes in threat tactics, organization, and popular support – and arms transfers and other support from outside states and non-state actors can radically change the balance?** The U.S. radically changed the balance in Afghanistan against Russia with a limited advisory and financing effort, and supply of a manportable surface-to-air missile. It should never ignore the vulnerabilities of its own forces and tactics. For example, its success in Iraq/Syria and ability to sustain the Afghan conflict have been highly dependent on the inability of its opponents to create any effective air defenses. Strategic triage must analyze such risks, particularly if there is any prospect of a conflict becoming extended.

• **What are the real-world probabilities of create a stable, favorable, post conflict outcome that justifies a given level of military support and intervention?** The fact a threat is real does not mean fighting and defeating it will bring lasting strategic benefits. Aiding failed states and intervening in countries with deep internal divisions and hostile neighbors can easily be a pyrrhic gesture. Failed efforts to create a state that can win lasting popular support and defend itself can have the same effect. There will always be strategic partners that have a credible case for aid, and where the end result will be lasting strategic and humanitarian benefits. By definition, strategic triage means focusing on the nations and conflicts where the U.S. can credibly achieve such benefits, and avoiding commitments to nations and conflicts where it cannot – regardless of how tragic their situations may be.

This does not mean that the military cost of war is not a critical consideration, and one where the U.S. has done a remarkably bad job of attempt to plan and manage its wars in the past – as well as to fail to examine the cost of its options for maintaining its key combatant commands, deployments, and power projection options.

It does mean, however, that effective strategic triage must address two other critical aspects of U.S. planning and analysis that go far beyond the military cost of war. The first is the need to effectively plan, resource, and execute the civil dimension of war. Important as it may be to win at the tactical and military level, it is also too easy to keep winning battles and lose the people – which almost inevitably means either losing the war or what passes for peace.

Second, focusing on both the military and civil costs of war ignores the broader strategic issue of how best to shape strategic partnerships to deter actual fighting, contain external threats, limit the use of U.S. military forces, and build lasting local and regional stability. Valuable as U.S. strategic partnerships and overseas deployment may be in warfighting, they have proved to be far more important in limiting the risk of war and the risk of escalation in local conflicts.
The growing U.S. focus on burden sharing and attempting to exploit strategic partnerships to gain narrow transactional advantage now threatens America’s strategic position throughout the world. It ignores the fact that even relatively small wars can be far more expensive than effective deterrence, and that it is far easier and cheaper to force strategic partnerships based on preventing wars than it is to force such partnerships to actually fight them.

**The Missing Investment in the Civil Dimension of Civil-Military Operations**

No analysis of the cost of America’s current wars and the need for “strategic triage” can avoid noting that the progress the U.S. has made in reducing the military cost and risk of its current wars has not taken place in dealing with the civil dimension of U.S national security operations. These civil failures involve complex issues in warfighting that are addressed in several other Burke Chair studies, including:


In broad terms, however, these studies show that the U.S began by making civil side of “nation building” a key part of its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It did so with the understanding that any lasting form of victory had to be the product of effective political unity, governance, economic development, and efforts to meet the critical needs of all of a nation’s people.

These initial programs were based far more on U.S. models and values, however, than on the perceptions and needs of Afghans and Iraqis. They were poorly prioritized, structured and managed. They helped created dysfunctional and corrupt political systems and then ended in doing more to discredit “nation building” than build strong partners and win broad popular support. As Figure Three has already shown, however, such civil efforts became a relatively negligible aspect of U.S war time spending after FY2012.

**Boom and Crash in Aid to Iraq**

The U.S. appropriated $60.48 billion between for all forms of aid FY2003-FY2012, obligated $55.19 billion, and expended obligated $53.26 billion. The bulk of this aid ($20.19 billion appropriated, $18.76 billion expended) went to crash efforts to rebuild Iraqi Security forces after the U.S. initially disbanded them without regard to the impact on Iraq’s stability.

The U.S. did however, appropriate $5.13 billion in civil aid, and expend $4.20 billion in State and USAID economic support funds. State appropriated $1.31 billion in additional funds to support the rule of law, and a total of $9.02 billion in additional smaller funds to support reconstruction and civil recovery: A total of $15.46 billion. Major nation building efforts in Iraq halted after FY2012, however, and Iraq must now largely fund its post war/post ISIS economy on its own. U.S. aid in Syria began after 2011. It was largely humanitarian – a from aid that can buy time, but
does not have a lasting impact in creating future stability. (See SIGIR, *Quarterly Report to Congress*, October 2012, pp. 16-22).

**Boom and Bust in Aid to Afghanistan**

The U.S. civil aid program in Afghanistan was been much larger. Its total cost from FY2002 to the third quarter of FY2019 is shown in Figure Fifteen, both in comparison to the total cost of war and in terms of how the money was allocated overtime by major aid program. This estimate indicates that the U.S. had spent $764.5 billion in cumulative obligations as of June 30 2019, although the U.S. only obligated $121.7 billion (16%) of this money for reconstruction and the volume of such aid again dropped sharply after FY2012.

Once again, the bulk of the reconstruction aid ($78.5 billion or 64%) actually went to warfighting and was spent on Afghan security forces. Only $24.1 billion (20% of the reconstruction money went to USAID, and this was only 3% of the money obligated as part of the total cost of war reported to Congress. If one looks at spending in terms of major programs, the total Economic Support Funding appropriated as of September 30, 2019 was only $20.50 billion out of total reconstruction appropriations of $132.55 billion or 15%.

Figure Sixteen shows the patterns in annual patterns in reconstruction spending for Afghanistan by major area of aid activity and by year from FY2002 onwards. The resulting “mountain ranges” are equally typical of the cycles of boom and bust spending in Iraq. These “mountain ranges” reflect massive sudden swings in spending that represent an incredible mixture of erratic and constantly changing efforts that cumulative rushed up total spending in reaction to the resurgence of the Taliban and then imploded it downwards as the U.S. cut its combat forces and lost interest in nation building.

The swings in military aid spending show two major peaks. One in 2007, when planner still assumed that the Taliban would be relatively easy to defeat. The second came as part of a rushed and initially critically understaffed effort to prepare for the withdrawal of U.S. land combat forces. A similar sudden surge took place in the commander’s emergency response program, while a range of sweeping an uncertain rises and falls took place in a largely failed INCLE counternarcotics effort.

Civil aid funding shows similar boom and bust cycles for ESF aid – which was the main source of actual nation building aid. The Title II food aid program rose and fell with Afghan rainfall and crop yields, and was then cancelled. It was largely humanitarian aid and had no little impact on nation building. The same was true of IDA foreign disaster assistance and immigration and refugee assistance – although they continue to provide major humanitarian benefits.

There is no question that much of this civil spending did help Afghans over time, and did provide real benefits. Many dedicated members of State and USAID did accomplish a great deal at a personal or individual project level. However, anyone familiar with large-scale federal programs will realize that this level of turbulence in spending has to flag a mix of incredibly erratic efforts over time, and cumulative lack of an effective planning, programming, budgeting, and continuity of effort. Combined with the fact that Afghanistan has one of the most corrupt governments in the world, it also inevitably led to extremely high levels of fraud, excessive charges, and abuse.
**The “Hole in Government” Approach**

Most of the details of U.S. efforts to develop integrated civil-military plans remain classified, or simply have never been made public and subject to detailed outside examination and review. It is all too clear, however, that while the U.S. had significant successes at the project level, and in some broader aspects of civil aid and advisory efforts for limited periods of time, it proved incapable of both developing effective civil plans and coordinating civil-military efforts in to a real world “whole of government approach.”

The U.S. did gradually come to the point of making aid more conditional and tying it to reform and reductions in corruption, but such efforts were faltering and uncertain. It many areas it grossly over spent and undermanaged, and it cumulatively did at least much to encourage corruption as it did to fight it.

In fairness, America’s allies and international institutions did little better, and anyone who talked to a variety of country aid teams in Afghanistan and Iraq became aware of the fact that each country created its own approach to aid with too little practical understanding of actual national needs and too much intervention from capitals. The UN effectively ceased to operate in Iraq after a bombing early in the war, and the UN effort in Afghanistan (UNAMA) never provided an effective effort to even try to coordinate and integrate aid efforts.

In country team efforts by the World Bank did provide excellent diagnostics for Afghanistan, but the World Bank failed to address corruption, governmental incompetence, and key issues like narcotics. Both the World Bank and IMF focused on generic reform recommendations for both Afghanistan and Iraq at the institutional level – largely ignoring the ethnic, sectarian, and political realities dividing the two countries and failing to address popular concerns and needs as distinguished from fiscal concerns.

**Underspending Can Be as Bad as Overspending: Failing Civil Aid for Failed States**

More generally, the U.S. has failed to address the civil dimension effectively in all of its wars in the region. As a Burke Chair study on *Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen: The Long-Term Civil Challenges and Host Country Threats from ‘Failed State’ Wars* shows, the net impact of all the various national programs directed towards improving civil stability and nation building had virtually no net effect in changing the extraordinarily low UNDP, CIA, World Bank, IMF, Transparency International, and other outside assessments of the any given host country’s progress in political unity, governance, economic development, reducing corruption, and meeting the critical civil needs of its people.

In short, the U.S. may have made progress in reducing the cost of the military side of war, without sacrificing the ability to at least contain the enemy, but it failed to win the civil half of all of its conflicts. Moreover, rather than adapt as the U.S. military did, the U.S. effectively abandoned most of its national building efforts – hiding this failure through “spin” and sheer neglect in official U.S. reporting on the real-world level of civil problems. No effort to address the real-world requirements for effective strategic triage can ignore this reality.
Figure Fifteen: Afghanistan as a Case Study in the Failure to Fund U.S. Efforts to Deal with Civil Instability and Challenges – Part One

Total Afghan Cost of War and Reconstruction, Annual and Cumulative Obligations FY2002-FY2019 (Q3) ($US billions Appropriated as of September 30, 2019)

Total Afghan Cost of Reconstruction Aid, Cumulative Obligations FY2002-FY2019 (Q3) ($US billions Appropriated as of September 30, 2019)
Figure Fifteen: Afghanistan as a Case Study in the Failure to Fund U.S. Efforts to Deal with Civil Instability and Challenges – Part Two

Total Cumulative Afghan Cost of Reconstruction and Humanitarian (Aid) by Funding category, 2019 ($US billions Appropriated of September 30, 2019)

[Graph showing cumulative costs from FY 2012 to FY 2019]

Total Annual Afghan Cost of Reconstruction and Humanitarian (Aid) by Funding category, 2019 ($US billions Appropriated of September 30, 2019)

[Graph showing annual costs from FY 2012 to FY 2019]

Source: Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to Congress*, October 30, 2019, pp. 48-49 46-47
Figure Sixteen: Afghanistan as a Case Study in the Turbulence and Gross Instability in U.S. Civil-Military Efforts


Source: Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Quarterly Report to Congress, October 30, 2019, pp. 54-61.
Focusing on the Cost-Benefits of Deterrence and Containment: The Critical Role of Overseas U.S. Deployments and Basing

Finally, any analysis of the cost of war and strategic triage should sound a warning that focusing on the cost of war can be separated from a focus on the key alternative: creating and maintaining strategic partnerships and U.S. forward basing and power projection capabilities that deter war and contain threats with little or no use of U.S. military force.

Security Based on Deterrence, Overseas Deployments, and Strategic Partnerships

Perhaps the greatest single strength of America’s current strategic position is that its defense posture is based on a solid basis of peacetime deployments and major strategic partnerships that have given the United States effective levels of military deterrence and defense capability to deal with competitors and potential threats ever since the end of World War II.

America has fought wars in spite of this structure. Even the best deterrents can never be a full substitute for the use of force in a world as troubled by national and region tensions and conflicts as this one. However, the United States has built up a mix of strategic partnerships and deployments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia that has provide a remarkably effective mix of deterrence, stability, and containment. It is also a mix of deterrent capabilities that prevented what could have been catastrophically costly conflicts as a result of the Cold War, and the escalation of many of the conflicts and confrontations the U.S. has faced since 1945.

Making the mix of deployments and partnerships as effective as possible should be the most important single objective of U.S. strategic planning and defense spending. In practice, however, the U.S. focuses more on the cost of war than it does on the cost of maintaining the peace. Worse, it has increasingly focused on self-seeking efforts at increasing partner military spending – or “burdensharing” – than on making its strategic partnerships and oversea deployments more effective.

At the same time, the United States still shapes its defense budget by military service and by line item input, rather than by major mission and the joint expenditures on each mission. This decouples much of the U.S. programming and budgeting process from the real-world joint forces and command structure of U.S. military forces, and from their role in deterrence and contingency capabilities for war fighting.

As Figure Seventeen shows, U.S. major military commands and deployments are centered around regional and global deployments and strategic partnerships the range from NATO Europe to Israel and the Gulf in the Middle East, and to Japan and South Korea in Asia. The short summaries of the role of each command also make it clear that all of America’s geographic combatant commands depend directly on strategic partnerships for their success in deterrence and in promoting strategic stability. The same is true of the functional combatant commands – each of which can project U.S. power in different ways and play its own role in supporting America’s strategic partnership both in deterrence and in the event of actual combat.

While some have talked about this security structure as if it were some form of American empire, it is also important to point out that the U.S. has no sovereign control over any host country where it bases forces overseas. The direct costs of U.S. overseas deployments have almost always exceeded the value of Partner offsets, and the U.S. has focused on free trade rather than any form
of economic advantage. The U.S. has also left any country where it based its forces when that country requested that it do so – as the cases of France, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia illustrate.

**Failing to Focus on the Most Important Costs that Shape U.S. Strategy**

This scarcely means that the U.S. commands and overseas deployments reflected in **Figure Seventeen** should not be subject to all of the criteria for strategic triage listed earlier. Unfortunately, this is not currently possible when it comes to the cost side of strategic triage. The U.S. has never developed public cost estimates of its defense spending by major command or deployment – and the limited data that has been leaked indicates that it probably does not have credible cost estimates at any classified level – particularly ones that reflect the incremental of power projection capabilities from the and the estimated benefits from support by its strategic partners.

This is one of the most critical single failures in the way in which the U.S. Department of Defense has failed to develop an effective structure for planning, programming, and budgeting. The lack of such data effectively decouples strategic planning from the ability to track and estimate the cost-effectiveness of present deployments and capabilities and to properly future options.

**But, America’s Overseas Deployments and Strategic Partnerships Are Clearly Affordable**

At the same time, it is still clear from the macroeconomics of U.S. defense spending that this structure over overseas deployments and strategic partnerships is remarkably cost-effective, as well as truly by the consent of America’s partners. The gross trends in U.S. defense spending alone show it is must be highly cost-effective.

**Figure One** through **Figure Four** have already shown that the financial burden that *all* Baseline and peacetime U.S. defense spending places on the U.S. GDP is remarkably small – even compared to that of many developing countries. It has also shown how affordable America’s total military forces and deployments have been – even at a time when the U.S. has not only been fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria, but has been actively building up its capabilities in NATO and the Gulf, and the readiness and capabilities of its forces in Asia.

**Figure One** has shown shows that it is the social and economic programs make up mandatory or entitlements spending that have driven the rises in the total cost of the federal budget and the deficit since beginning of the Cold War, and are projected to keep driving this rise through end of the current future Year Defense Program in FY2024.

**Figure Two** through **Figure Three** have shown how much *total defense spending* – including spending on nuclear weapons and other spending outside the Department of Defense – has dropped as a percent of total federal spending as well as a percent of the U.S. GDP. Once again, it is clear that America’s current force posture is highly affordable relative to the value of effective deterrence and warfighting capability, and that there has been a substantial drop in the defense spending as a percent of GDP since the U.S. shifted from a reliance on U.S. ground forces to a mixed reliance on partner ground forces and U.S. airpower.
It is also clear from the data that the permanent deployments reported in the Department of Defense reports on peacetime deployments overseas are much smaller and more dependent on strategic partnerships than most Americans realize. Figure Eighteen shows that U.S. PCS overseas deployments are now at a 60-year low.

Figure Nineteen shows just how limited U.S. overseas deployments actually are relative to the size of the portion of the U.S. military forces deployed in the United States. There are some problems in making exact estimates because Department of Defense reporting is based largely on permanent changes of station (PCS), and does not accurately reflect temporary deployments (TDY). The DoD data also omit or alter numbers for some combat and sensitive countries, and Figure Nineteen is adjusted in some cases to use media estimates.

Nevertheless, the data are still broadly correct in showing that some 1,957,664 (91%) U.S. military personnel out of a worldwide total of 2,147,529 are deployed in the U.S., and that only 189,865 (9%) are deployed overseas in PCS assignments.

Figure Twenty highlights these facts by showing the numbers of U.S. military deployed overseas by key region and country. The numbers shown for East and Southeast Asia only total a little over 90,000 men and women to deal with China – America’s only emerging peer competitor – and North Korea. Those permanent stations are critical to maintaining a U.S. strategic partnership with key allies like Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and a wide range of other partner states – as well as access to the entire Indo-Pacific Region.

An enhanced U.S. presence in Europe and NATO totals some 67,000. This compares with 1,849,000 military personnel provided by NATO Europe plus 72,000 Canadian military. It also compares with nearly 400,000 U.S. military deployed across all of Europe in the early 1960s and at the height on the Cold War.

Figure Twenty-One goes further and attempts to use various background briefings to guess at current U.S. deployments that include personnel on TDY and “Black” assignments. These numbers are in constant transition, but they do provide a warning that official Department of Defense reporting does not include all uniformed personnel or list contractors – which may equal or surpass the number of uniformed personnel in some cases.

Rightly or wrongly, the U.S. has already chosen to withdraw from Syria, and the numbers now deployed in Iraq are minimal compared to its strategic importance and the need to compete with Iran. The numbers shown as PCS personnel for the rest of the MENA region seem to significantly understate the total including TDY personnel, but still would be limited compared to the threat from Iran, ISIS, and instability in the region.

The Self-Destructive Narrow Focus on Burdensharing

In recent years, the U.S. has sometimes done more to undermine its own strategic position than reinforce it, and America has to some extent become its most active threat to its own strategic interests. Arbitrary and badly planned U.S. withdrawals – and cutbacks in readiness, exercises, and capability – are at least as bad a set of actions to take as making arbitrary and badly planned commitments or decisions to go to war. The same is true of trying to substitute transactional exercises in burdensharing, bluster, and bullying for real partnerships, building mutual trust, and
accepting the fact that the U.S. must often commit its own resources. As a result, allied confidence in the U.S.’ strategic resolve is wavering and the focus on budget share over real partnership undermines the deterrence effect of the U.S.’ strategic commitment by transmitting signals of discord to U.S. adversaries.

U.S. strategic interests are critically dependent on America’s willingness to continue to deploy forces in troubled and unstable areas across the world, to create stable and effective strategic partnerships, and find ways to use military forces to support unstable host countries. The U.S. has made serious mistakes and suffered serious failures ever since the end of WWII, and many of the nations and allies it has worked with have been anything but perfect.

However, effective action to contain regional instability and violence, limit the influence and success of outside powers in gray area operations, and limit the direct growth of threats to the United States requires the U.S. to partner with – and fight with – the countries, regimes, and movements that are in the areas where America’s interests are threatened. The U.S. cannot deter future wars – or use military force effectively – if it attempts to substitute “withdrawal from commitments and sacrifices abroad that we find either difficult, frustrating, or distasteful.” It must instead use strategic triage to find the cost-effective ways to match strategic objectives with budgetary realities, deploy and use military force, and limit the resulting costs.

**Applying Strategic Triage to Future Contingency Needs**

Any serious effort to perform strategic triage – and judge the cost-effectiveness of America’s current strategic posture – must be based upon the fact that the U.S. will have to deter, contain, and fight new military operations against extremist movements during at least the next decade, as well as deter or fight a variety of gray area wars for other reasons. In most such cases, it will need to both support strategic partners and deploy U.S. forces in efforts to deter such conflicts or check their escalation as soon as possible.

More broadly, the false hopes for “globalism” and “an end to history” that would result in the smooth, progressive, and successful conversion to Western capitalist democracies has proved to be a dangerous farce rather than a near-term future. So have the initial hopes emerging from the political upheavals in the Middle East in 2011.

As has been true in so many prior cases – ranging from the French revolution to the European upheaval in 1948, the Chinese revolution in 1911, and the Russian revolution in 1917 – reality has transformed the prospect of an “Arab spring” into the reality of an “Arab winter.” Only a handful of Arab states have not become steadily more unstable in the years that have followed, do not have worse governance ratings, security ratings, and levels of poverty, corruption, and unemployment.

The emphasis that the new U.S. National Defense Strategy has placed upon on the potential threat from Russia and China also poses at least as much of a threat in terms of their gray area operations – and efforts to exploit the internal divisions and conflicts between states in the MENA region, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America – as it does of any direct conflict.

The same has so far proved to be true of Iran, and may come to include action against North Korea as well. Moreover, it is difficult to envisage what kind of serious military threat to U.S. national security, or war, can occur that would not be fought at a major distance from the United States – even if some strikes do occur against U.S. territory.
This means that strategic triage needs to be applied to every aspect of maintaining and creating U.S. strategic partnerships, alliance, bases, and overseas deployments and power projection as well as actual warfighting. This means taking the cost of these capabilities into full account – but with the understanding that forward basing and deterrence will inevitably be cheaper and involve fewer risks than actual warfighting.

It also means focusing on how U.S. forces can best help partner countries deter and fight local wars. The best way the United States can apply strategic triage – and shape and limit the overall cost of defense – will be for the United States to deter possible wars as well as to fight actual conflicts. This, however, means applying strategic triage in ways that go far beyond the specialized forms of land-air operations in support of host country forces described in this analysis. NATO, the Koreas, and Iran and the Arab Gulf are three critical examples of cases where the U.S. will need to apply strategic triage to planning and potentially deploying for key contingencies from gray area political warfare to major conventional conflicts, and even extended nuclear deterrence.

The United States not only needs to apply strategic triage to find the most cost-effective ways to properly assess the best form of overseas U.S. deployments and presence. It needs to apply strategic triage – including cost analysis – to peacetime activities like joint exercises, security assistance and advice, arms sales and transfers, and reinforcement plans that both deter and create effective military capabilities. This, in turn, means maintaining and developing partner relationships that establish continuity and trust – rather than seek transactional advantage.
Geographic Combatant Commands

- **United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM)** is responsible for military relations with African nations, the African Union and African regional security organizations. It protects and defends the interests of the United States by strengthening the defense capabilities of African nations and, in cooperation with African governments, conducts military missions that increase security while deterring and defeating a variety of transnational threats.

- **United States Central Command (USCENTCOM)** is responsible for operations in twenty countries that fall in the “central” area of the globe: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Yemen. United States Central Command utilizes national and international partnerships to build cooperation among nations, respond to crisis, deter and defeat threats and support development that ultimately increases stability in the region.

- **United States European Command (USEUCOM)** works with NATO and other partner nations to address the security and defense needs of nations in Europe and parts of the Middle East and Eurasia. EUCOM coordinates with these nations to find cooperative solutions in peace and wartime alike, to plan training missions, provide humanitarian assistance and to develop strategies for promoting peace and stability in the region.

- **United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)** oversees an area of responsibility stretching from the waters of the United States west coast to the western border of India, and from Antarctica to the North Pole, encompassing 36 diverse nations. USPACOM and its partners work to promote the development of the region while cooperating to enhance security, deter aggression, respond with force when necessary and to provide humanitarian assistance.
Figure Seventeen: Major U.S. Commands – Part Two

- **United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM)** operates in the area of responsibility encompassing the continental United States, Alaska, Mexico, Canada, portions of the Caribbean and surrounding waters. NORTHCOM is primarily responsible for civil support and homeland security and also oversees the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). It has few permanent forces and is instead assigned forces by the Secretary of Defense or the President whenever required for the execution of its missions.

- **United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM)** oversees an area of responsibility encompassing 31 nations in Latin America south of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean Sea. USSOUTHCOM works to increase the security of the United States by engaging its partners to enhance the peacekeeping abilities of the region, to promote human rights, to deter illegal activities associated with illicit trafficking and to conduct multinational military exercises designed to strengthen partnerships while developing collective capabilities.

**Functional Combatant Commands**

- **United States Space Command (USSPACECOM)** mission is to "deter aggression and conflict, defend U.S. and allied freedom of action, deliver space combat power for the Joint/Combined force, and develop joint warfighters to advance U.S. and allied interests in, from, and through the space domain."

- **United States Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM)** mission is to direct, synchronize, and coordinate cyberspace planning and operations to defend and advance national interests in collaboration with domestic and international partners.

- **United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)** is responsible for planning for and conducting special operations. It offers direct action in the form of short duration strikes and small-scale offensives, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, counterterrorism, psychological operations, information operations, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, security force assistance, counterinsurgency operations and any specific activities directed by the President or the Secretary of Defense.

- **United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM)** provides the Department of Defense with an aggregate of transportation capabilities and assets. Together with commercial partnerships, USTRANSCOM enables a diverse array of joint mobility missions.

Source: Adapted from; Department of Defense, [https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Combatant-Commands/](https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Combatant-Commands/) and [https://dod.defense.gov/About/Military-Departments/Unified-Combatant-Commands/Copp/](https://dod.defense.gov/About/Military-Departments/Unified-Combatant-Commands/Copp/)
Figure Eighteen: Trend in U.S. Overseas Military Deployments Reaches 60 Year Low

Total in U.S: 1,957,664 (91%). Total Overseas: 189,865 (9%). Total Worldwide: 2,147,529

These troop counts are as of June 2019, and do not account for recent announcements of new troop deployments, except for current deployments to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan which are not included in the DoD database, and which are therefore filled in from reports. Furthermore, these numbers are based on soldiers’ permanent stations and do not account for temporary duty (TDY) locations.

Figure Twenty: PCS Deployments of U.S. Troops Overseas Reported by the Department of Defense

Figure Twenty-One: Guesstimate of PCS and TDY Deployments in the MENA Region

\[(9,300 + 7,629 = 16,929 \text{ Less Personnel at Sea: Total seems under 24,000. Some estimates put total for MENA + Afghanistan as high as 40,000-60,000)}\]

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