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Up Front

Opinion: Pentagon's Offset Strategy Needs A Big Idea

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Defense Offset Strategy Needs a Big Idea



It seems clear what is foremost for Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work these days. At the [Pentagon's](#) April 9 press conference endorsing "Better Buying Power 3.0," Work said the impetus for his new "offset strategy" is an urgent concern about "a steady erosion of our technological superiority that we have relied upon for so long in all our defense strategies."

The day before, he had implored students and staff at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania to join the initiative's modernization campaign "to identify the technologies, identify the operational and organizational constructs . . . to fight our future adversaries."

The time is surely right for the Pentagon to focus its attention on retooling military capabilities. The counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have, of necessity, imbalanced our forces' readiness for other kinds of conflict. And the flat outlook for U.S. defense spending will continue to impose trade-offs that test priorities. But the occasion for this initiative also arises from historical changes within the arenas of economics and technology. And while there is plainly an appreciation of how the distribution of economic power and diffusion of technologic know-how is transforming the threat, too little is being said about how these factors also will shape the particular leverage the U.S. and the West can employ to offset adversaries' comparative advantages. Simply put, I believe our reflex to gain that leverage from yet another technological revolution is misguided.

By invoking the term "offset strategy," Work is harkening to two historical precedents. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (left photo) announced the results of a "New Look" at U.S. force posture in Europe, where the Warsaw Pact enjoyed an overwhelming advantage of conventional forces. To counter Soviet superiority without bankrupting the West, the New Look traded manpower for nuclear warheads

and their delivery systems, in which the U.S. enjoyed a decisive technological advantage.

By the mid-1970s, when the Soviets' development of nuclear weapons and adaptation of conventional forces again called into question the credibility of European defenses, then-Defense Secretary Harold Brown initiated what came to be regarded as the second offset strategy. The result—clearly expressed in the Long-Range Research and Development Planning Program (LRRDP) run from William Perry's (center photo) directorate for research and engineering—set out to achieve decisive military advantage by using precision-guided weapons orchestrated through a network of command, control, communications and intelligence.



Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, former Defense Secretary William Perry (center) and current Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work. Credits: U.S. Institute of Peace (Perry) and U.S. Defense Department (Work)

New Look marked a lethality revolution in U.S. defense planning, and the LRRDP is credited with instigating a precision revolution that has differentiated U.S. military capabilities from the Persian Gulf war in 1991 through today. So what kind of revolution in U.S. military capabilities will Bob Work's (right photo) turn of the offset strategy produce? To answer that, the Pentagon will need to discern the most problematic military challenges adversaries present and, in turn, the comparative advantages from which our society can gain leverage.

At Carlisle, Work proffered a three-pronged challenge confronting U.S. military forces: The proliferation of precision munitions amplified via an "informationalized" operating concept and employed by a diversity of fighting formations. Sharpening that formulation into a problem statement as compelling as the ones "Ike" and Bill Perry had would go a long way toward focusing the work of the initiative, which today seems diffused across a too-broad range of objectives. Unhelpfully, Work now speaks of not one but several offset strategies encompassing a multitude of potential competitors, each of which is "probably going to require a different approach and a different strategy."

More important, realizing an effective new offset strategy also will require a new understanding of the sources of America's comparative advantage in the 21st century. The initiative seems to assume that decisive advantages in the two strategies to offset Soviet military power—superior economic and technological resources—can be relied upon again. They cannot: Economic power is today broadly distributed and most advanced technologies are accessible around the globe.

If the U.S.'s economic and technological resources are no longer truly discriminating, where will we find the leverage needed to fuel the strategy? Will the third offset strategy mark a revolution in military adaptation that leverages our society's nearly unique capacity to absorb and prosper from change? Will it harness our dominant media and entertainment industries to overmatch adversaries' attempts to command the narrative of conflict? Or will the third offset strategy be remembered as a revolution in operating and organizational constructs that exploits the American propensity for business-model innovations that build "blue oceans" of uncontested market space?

These are the big ideas at the heart of the problem facing the Pentagon's offset strategists; let us hope they are addressed before simply trying again to invent our way to sustaining U.S. military dominance into the 21st century.

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