

## Opinion: The Trillion Dollar Defense Strategy

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[Steven Grundman](#)

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The recent report to Congress of the National Defense Strategy Commission has drawn too little notice. In it, the dozen sober-minded commissioners sound a clarion alarm about a “crisis of national security” arising from “dangerous” erosion of U.S. military superiority that risks “grave and lasting” consequences for the nation. Were the caliber of its authors less uniformly high, the report’s klaxon might well be dismissed as hysteria. Instead, it warrants our attention.

It also merits a hard-thinking response. If the larger purpose of the report, titled “Providing for the Common Defense,” is to urge improvement to the defense posture of the U.S., I worry the frame in which it renders the strategic challenge will fail to induce hard choices and innovative remedies. In particular, its recommendation to increase annual defense budgets by \$200-300 billion over the next five years will deflect rather than focus attention onto the hard analytic and political work that the report otherwise so smartly commends. In addition, its general treatment of allies as simple objects of U.S. patronage overlooks that they should be regarded as key strategic assets with which to promote aims and abate risks.



The House and Senate armed services committees conceived the commission in the summer of 2016 and included its establishment in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2017, which was passed at the end of that year. The law charges the 12-member commission with reviewing the defense secretary’s National Defense Strategy (NDS), making an independent assessment of the strategic environment and U.S. defense posture, and providing Congress with recommendations to improve the strategy. The chairmen and ranking members of the

two committees each appoint three of the 12 commissioners. Then-Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) selected Ambassador Eric Edelman as one of the co-chairs; Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) selected U.S. Navy Adm. (ret.) Gary Roughead as the other.

The commission's critique of the NDS promulgated in January under Secretary James Mattis' signature is polite but unsparing. After faintly praising the NDS as "a constructive first step" and applauding the priority it places on competition with China and Russia, the commission calls it out for "assuming too much risk in its approach to achieving its stated objectives and far greater risk than is publicly understood."

The commission's own assessment of the strategic environment and defense posture affirms several familiar challenges—hybrid warfare, a risk-averse acquisition culture and spotty readiness indicators among them—and a few that are fresh, such as the need for a whole-of-nation strategy, a deficit of core defense-planning analytics and the special leverage of electronic warfare.

Among more than 30 discrete recommendations the commission makes in response to its assessment, three stand out. Foremost is its call for a clean-sheet reconsideration of the operating concepts linking strategic objectives to the capabilities we buy and build in programs and budgets. Second, the panel unabashedly endorses industrial policies that would promote and protect what it deems the "U.S. National Security Innovation Base." Finally, there is its aforementioned call for "increas[ing] the base defense budget at an average rate of 3-5% above inflation through the Future Years Defense Program and perhaps beyond." In sum, the panel has issued a powerful diagnosis and comprehensive assessment of the national defense posture.

But if strategy is the stuff of making choices about how to achieve one's objectives with constrained resources and in a context of contending interests, there is too little in the report that illuminates the choices necessary to achieve a more coherent U.S. defense strategy. The strategy it implies simply obviates the need for difficult choices by overweighting the availability of fiscal resources and underweighting the possibilities to shape interests that impede us while engaging those susceptible to promoting our objectives.

It is an approach that does little to suggest practical strategies by which to reconcile what the commissioners rightly observe are a divergence of the ends, means and interests in the U.S. defense posture. A better imperative driving innovative thinking and a smart strategic initiative would be to discipline that posture to roughly the current level of defense spending, a level that is, after all, higher in constant-dollar purchasing power than in any year of the Cold War.

The siren of this report's diagnosis notwithstanding, righting the defense posture of the U.S. will be quite a bit harder than the commission would have us believe.

*Contributing columnist Steve Grundman is the principal of Grundman Advisory and Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. The views expressed are not necessarily those of Aviation Week.*

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