

Planet of War

Still Trapped in a Greater Middle Eastern Quagmire, the U.S. Military Prepares for Global Combat

By Danny Sjursen

November 20, 2018 "[Information Clearing House](http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/50635.htm)" - American militarism has gone off the rails -- and this middling career officer should have seen it coming. Earlier in this century, the U.S. military not surprisingly focused on counterinsurgency as it faced [various](#) indecisive and seemingly unending wars across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa. Back in 2008, when I was still a captain newly returned from Iraq and studying at Fort Knox, Kentucky, our training scenarios generally focused on urban combat and what were called security and stabilization missions. We'd plan to assault some notional city center, destroy the enemy fighters there, and then transition to pacification and "humanitarian" operations.

Of course, no one then asked about the dubious efficacy of "regime change" and "nation building," the two activities in which our country had been so regularly engaged. That would have been frowned upon. Still, however bloody and wasteful those wars were, they now look like relics from a remarkably simpler time. The U.S. Army knew its mission then (even if it couldn't accomplish it) and could predict what each of us young officers was about to take another crack at: counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fast forward eight years -- during which this author fruitlessly toiled away in Afghanistan and taught at West Point -- and the U.S. military ground presence has significantly decreased in the Greater Middle East, even if its wars there remain "[infinite](#)." The U.S. was still bombing, raiding, and "advising" away in [several](#) of those old haunts as I entered the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Nonetheless, when I first became involved in the primary staff officer training course for mid-level careerists there in 2016, it soon became apparent to me that something was indeed changing.

Our training scenarios were no longer limited to counterinsurgency operations. Now, we were planning for possible deployments to -- and high-intensity conventional warfare in -- the Caucasus, the Baltic Sea region, and the South China Sea (think: Russia and China). We were also planning for conflicts against an Iranian-style "rogue" regime (think: well, Iran). The missions became all about projecting U.S. Army divisions into distant regions to fight major wars to "liberate" territories and bolster allies.

One thing soon became clear to me in my new digs: much had changed. The U.S. military had, in fact, gone global in a big way. Frustrated by its inability to close the deal on any of the indecisive counterterror wars of this century, Washington had decided it was time to prepare for "real" war with a host of imagined enemies. This process had, in fact, been developing right under our noses for quite a while. You remember in 2013 when President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began talking about a "[pivot](#)" to Asia -- an obvious attempt to contain China. Obama also [sanctioned](#) Moscow and further [militarized](#) Europe in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and the Crimea. President Trump, whose "[instincts](#)," on the campaign trail, were to pull out of America's Middle Eastern quagmires, turned out to be ready to escalate tensions with China, Russia, Iran, and even (for a while) North Korea.

With Pentagon budgets reaching [record](#) levels -- some \$717 billion for 2019 -- Washington has stayed the course, while beginning to plan for more expansive future conflicts across the globe. Today, not a single square inch of this ever- [warming](#) planet of ours escapes the reach of U.S. militarization.

Think of these developments as establishing a potential formula for perpetual conflict that just might lead the United States into a truly [cataclysmic war](#) it neither needs nor can meaningfully win. With that in mind, here's a little tour of Planet Earth as the U.S. military now imagines it.

Our Old Stomping Grounds: Forever War in the Middle East and Africa

Never apt to quit, even after 17 years of failure, Washington's bipartisan military machine still churns along in the Greater Middle East. Some 14,500 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan (along with much U.S. air power) though that war is [failing](#) by just about any measurable metric you care to choose -- and Americans are still [dying](#) there, even if in diminished numbers.

In Syria, U.S. forces remain [trapped](#) between hostile powers, one mistake away from a possible outbreak of hostilities with Russia, Iran, Syrian President Assad, or even NATO ally Turkey. While American troops (and air power) in Iraq helped destroy ISIS's physical "caliphate," they remain entangled there in a low-level guerrilla struggle in a country seemingly incapable of forming a stable [political](#) consensus. In other words, as yet there's no end in sight for that now 15-year-old war. Add in the drone strikes, conventional air attacks, and special forces raids that Washington regularly unleashes in Somalia, Libya, Yemen, and Pakistan, and it's clear that the U.S. military's hands remain more than full in the region.

If anything, the tensions -- and potential for escalation -- in the Greater Middle East and North Africa are only worsening. President Trump [ditched](#) President Obama's Iran nuclear deal and, despite the recent drama over the [murder](#) of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, has gleefully backed the Saudi royals in their arms race and cold war with Iran. While the other major players in that nuclearSTLS pact remained on board, President Trump has appointed unreformed Iranophobe neocons like John Bolton and Mike Pompeo to key foreign policy positions and his administration still threatens [regime change](#) in Tehran.

In Africa, despite talk about downsizing the U.S. presence there, the military advisory mission has only [increased](#) its various commitments, backing questionably legitimate governments against local opposition forces and destabilizing further an already unstable continent. You might think that waging war for two decades on two continents would at least keep the Pentagon busy and temper Washington's desire for further confrontations. As it happens, the opposite is proving to be the case.

Poking the Bear: Encircling Russia and Kicking Off a New Cold War

Vladimir Putin's Russia is increasingly autocratic and has shown a

propensity for localized aggression in its sphere of influence. Still, it would be better not to exaggerate the threat. Russia did annex the Crimea, but the people of that province were *Russians* and desired such a reunification. It intervened in a Ukrainian civil war, but Washington was also [complicit](#) in the coup that kicked off that drama. Besides, all of this unfolded in Russia's neighborhood as the U.S. military increasingly [deploys](#) its forces up to the very borders of the Russian Federation. Imagine the hysteria in Washington if Russia were deploying troops and advisers in Mexico or the Caribbean.

To put all of this in perspective, Washington and its military machine actually prefer facing off against Russia. It's a fight the armed forces still remain comfortable with. After all, that's what its top commanders were trained for during the tail end of an almost half-century-long Cold War. Counterinsurgency is frustrating and indecisive. The prospect of preparing for "real war" against the good old Russians with tanks, planes, and artillery -- now, that's what the military was built for!

And despite all the over-hyped talk about Donald Trump's complicity with Russia, under him, the Obama-era military escalation in Europe has only expanded. Back when I was toiling hopelessly in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Army was actually removing combat brigades from Germany and stationing them back on U.S. soil (when, of course, they weren't off fighting somewhere in the Greater Middle East). Then, in the late Obama years, the military began returning those forces to Europe and [stationing](#) them in the Baltic, Poland, Romania, and other countries increasingly near to Russia. That's never ended and, this year, the U.S. Air Force has [delivered](#) its largest shipment of ordnance to Europe since the Cold War.

Make no mistake: war with Russia would be an unnecessary disaster -- and it could go nuclear. Is Latvia really worth that risk?

From a Russian perspective, of course, it's Washington and its [expansion](#) of the (by definition) anti-Russian NATO alliance into Eastern Europe that constitutes the real aggression in the region -- and Putin may have a point there. What's more, an honest assessment of the situation suggests that Russia, a country whose economy is about the [size](#) of Spain's, has neither the will nor the capacity to invade Central Europe. Even in the bad old days of the Cold War, as we now know from Soviet archives, [European](#)

[conquest](#) was never on Moscow's agenda. It still isn't.

Nonetheless, the U.S. military goes on preparing for what Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller, addressing some of his forces in Norway, claimed was a "[big fight](#)" to come. If it isn't careful, Washington just might get the war it seems to want and the one that no one in Europe or the rest of this planet needs.

Challenging the Dragon: The Futile Quest for Hegemony in Asia

The United States Navy has long treated the world's oceans as if they were American lakes. Washington extends no such courtesy to other great powers or nation-states. Only now, the U.S. Navy finally faces some challenges abroad -- especially in the Western Pacific. A rising China, with a swiftly growing economy and carrying grievances from a long history of European imperial domination, has had the audacity to [assert](#) itself in the South China Sea. In response, Washington has reacted with panic and bellicosity.

Never mind that the South China Sea is Beijing's Caribbean (a place where Washington long felt it had the right to do anything it wanted militarily). Heck, the South China Sea has *China* in its name! The U.S. military now claims -- with just enough truth to convince the uninformed -- that China's growing navy is out for Pacific, if not global, dominance. Sure, at the moment China has only [two](#) aircraft carriers, one an [old rehab](#) (though it is building more) compared to the U.S. Navy's 11 full-sized and [nine smaller](#) carriers. And yes, China hasn't actually attacked any of its neighbors yet. Still, the American people are told that their military must prepare for possible future war with the most populous nation on the planet.

In that spirit, it has been forward deploying yet more ships, Marines, and troops to the Pacific Rim surrounding China. Thousands of Marines are now [stationed](#) in Northern Australia; U.S. warships cruise the South Pacific; and Washington has sent mixed [signals](#) regarding its military commitments to Taiwan. Even the Indian Ocean has recently come to be seen as a possible future battleground with China, as the U.S. Navy increases its regional patrols there and Washington [negotiates](#) stronger military ties with China's rising neighbor, India. In a symbolic gesture, the military recently [renamed](#) its former Pacific Command (PACOM) the

Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).

Unsurprisingly, China's military high command has escalated accordingly. They've [advised](#) their South China Sea Command to prepare for war, made their own set of [provocative gestures](#) in the South China Sea, and also [threatened](#) to invade Taiwan should the Trump administration change America's longstanding "One China" policy.

From the Chinese point of view, all of this couldn't be more logical, given that President Trump has also unleashed a "[trade war](#)" on Beijing's markets and intensified his anti-China rhetoric. And all of this is, in turn, consistent with the Pentagon's increasing militarization of the entire globe.

No Land Too Distant

Would that it were only Africa, Asia, and Europe that Washington had chosen to militarize. But as Dr. Seuss might have [said](#): that is not all, oh no, that is not all. In fact, more or less every square inch of our spinning planet not already occupied by a rival state has been deemed a militarized space to be contested. The U.S. has long been unique in the way it divided the entire surface of the globe into geographical (combatant) [commands](#) presided over by generals and admirals who functionally serve as regional Roman-style proconsuls.

And the Trump years are only accentuating this phenomenon. Take Latin America, which might normally be considered a non-threatening space for the U.S., though it is already under the gaze of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). Recently, however, having already threatened to "[invade](#)" Venezuela, President Trump spent the election campaign rousing his base on the claim that a desperate caravan of Central American refugees -- hailing from countries the U.S. had a significant [responsibility](#) for destabilizing in the first place -- was a literal "[invasion](#)" and so yet another military problem. As such, he [ordered](#) more than 5,000 troops (more than currently serve in Syria or Iraq) to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Though he is not the [first](#) to try to do so, he has also sought to [militarize](#) space and so create a possible fifth branch of the U.S. military, tentatively known as [the Space Force](#). It makes sense. War has long been three dimensional, so why not bring U.S. militarism into the stratosphere, even

as the U.S. Army is [evidently](#) training and preparing for a new cold war (no pun intended) with that ever-ready adversary, Russia, around the Arctic Circle.

If the world as we know it is going to end, it will either be thanks to the long-term threat of climate change or an absurd nuclear war. In both cases, Washington has been upping the ante and doubling down. On climate change, of course, the Trump administration seems [intent](#) on loading the atmosphere with ever more greenhouse gases. When it comes to nukes, rather than admit that they are unusable and seek to further downsize the bloated U.S. and Russian arsenals, that administration, like Obama's, has committed itself to the [investment](#) of what could, in the end, be at least \$1.6 trillion over three decades for the full-scale "modernization" of that arsenal. Any faintly rational set of actors would long ago have accepted that nuclear war is unwinnable and a formula for mass human extinction. As it happens, though, we're not dealing with rational actors but with a defense establishment that considers it a prudent move to [withdraw](#) from the Cold War era Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with Russia.

And that ends our tour of the U.S. military's version of Planet Earth.

It is often said that, in an Orwellian sense, every nation needs an enemy to unite and discipline its population. Still, the U.S. must stand alone in history as the only country to militarize the whole globe (with space thrown in) in preparation for taking on just about anyone. Now, that's exceptional.

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