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Future Defense Trends

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Predicting the future ain't what it used to be. On one hand, no one ever gets it quite right, and on the other, even the most peculiar predictions can sometimes end up on target. So with those two historically proven caveats out of the way, here are five significant trends--not predictions, per se--that will affect the defense community, sorted by approximate order of importance.

Leading the way, small wars become the "last war" the military is always accused of fighting. This trend started with an incorrect juxtaposition of "most likely threat" with "most serious threat." Since we really don't know the future, strategies must reflect not only what is most likely to happen--that is, small and irregular wars, but must also consider less likely events of greater impact. This might include, for example, a hot war with a non-peer, a near-peer, or a WMD (weapons of mass destruction) event on allied or U.S. soil. The financial markets have shown that uncertainty and risk cannot be tightly controlled, so well-reasoned strategies should include plenty of hedging against the more and most dangerous adversary actions.

The second trend is that manned systems are out and unmanned systems are in. Call it the rise of the machines, but this has been a long-term trend we first saw with ICBMs, then in space, then in the air, and now on the ground. The use of highly capable unmanned and unblinking systems, all autonomous or else controlled from a safe distance, will increase in the times ahead. Stealth and firepower will be enhanced in an effort to reduce anti-access concerns, which has not been a significant issue for the last decade or more. Ensuring the connectedness and interoperability of the mechanisms and procedures that are used to command and control these systems will become more important.

Next will be an extended procurement holiday for America's defense community. While identifying this trend does not require an electron microscope, the point of emphasis is that it will continue. This is due in large part to the difficulty in acquiring systems that meet cost, performance, and schedule parameters. The reasons for these failures start with the many value-subtracted activities that are routinely prescribed by government. These practices include service, DoD (Department of Defense), and Congressional funding unsteadiness, unrestrained "requirements," the planned use of immature technologies (unobtainium and vaporware anyone?), and massive amounts of rework. Paradoxically this procurement holiday will coincide with the nation's increased dependence on the defense *service* industry to provide "non essential support" ranging from launching rockets to running the chow hall.

Fourth, "lawfare," that is, legal warfare, becomes increasingly important. Lawfare will affect everything, but most notably training, the space and cyber domains, and intelligence. Training will be affected adversely when lawfare attempts to limit or even block the use of military training areas and systems. Space lawfare will be waged by China, Russia, and others to keep the U.S. in the Cold War's space law box while ignoring such law themselves. Cyber lawfare will be used to restrict the efforts to gather information and fight in the cyber domain, constraints that will be worsened by seams in jurisdiction and disconnects between U.S. and international laws. Finally, intelligence must deal with lawfare as seen by trends towards subjecting freedom of action to international approvals, or by criminalizing policy decisions after-the-fact. Lawfare will be vigorously pursued to the detriment of U.S. national security using both the American judicial system and international organizations and agencies. Interest groups and proxies will execute much of the lawfare.

The corollary to these third and fourth trends is that bureaucratic power -- that is, power exercised by the ability to say 'no,' -- will move towards preeminence. The figurative arrangement will be as follows: any one can keep you from doing anything while no one person or group possesses the authority to proceed. Because of this, skills in negotiations, communications, language, collaboration, and networking will become more important. Conversely, the efficacy of outcomes in dealing with bureaucratic institutions will decrease even though disengagement is not plausible.

Finally, nuclear deterrence and missile defense will become more poorly funded. You could argue this really belongs in the "procurement holiday" bin, but it really warrants its own entry. The anti-nuclear and anti-missile defense communities (is it some form of weird dissonance to be in both groups?) will decry missile defense's need for "rigorous operational testing" while concurrently working to block any nuclear weapon testing. A viable missile defense system provides deterrence by itself and having nuclear weapons systems that work, and having enough of them, will be just as important -- or more so -- as it was during the Cold War.

These trends should have major implications for the Quadrennial Defense Review, which is a legislatively mandated review of the DoD's strategy and priorities. Although the QDR is due out late this year, expect the biggest trend to be for national security decisions to be based largely on inertia and emotion and less on well-debated policy and strategy.

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