

# Sovereign Options

## Securing Global Stability and Prosperity A Strategy for the US Air Force

*Michael W. Wynne, Secretary of the Air Force*

*The mission of the United States Air Force is to deliver sovereign options for the defense of the United States of America and its global interests—to fly and fight in Air, Space, and Cyberspace.*

IN 2007, Congress asked the Air Force to explain its strategy for organizing, training, and equipping its forces. The question is important. The Air Force spends a great deal of effort programming its forces but surprisingly little explaining how the forces it builds support the nation's needs. We say in our mission statement that we deliver *sovereign options* for the defense of the country and its global interests, but we have not made as much of an effort as we could to explain what *sovereign options* are or to link our mission to the particular mix of forces we have requested from Congress. We do our contingency planning and write our strategy memos for internal consumption, but we often neglect to share our thinking with the nation.

Stated briefly, as the Air Force builds its forces, its central goal is to offer the nation a flexible mix of capabilities that allow it to act in a world of growing strategic uncertainty. We program our forces to allow policy makers to act across the spectrum of violence, from strikes against individual terrorists to major-power wars. We construct our forces to provide presidents and combatant commanders the widest possible range of options to assure friends and dissuade and deter those who seek to use violence to pursue their ends. We assemble our forces so that, when we must fight, our air, space, and cyber forces provide the nation with capabilities that maximize the chances that we will be able to pit our asymmetric advantages against our opponents' vulnerabilities.

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Michael W. Wynne is the Secretary of the Air Force, Washington, DC. He is the 21st Secretary and was confirmed on 3 November 2005. He is responsible for the affairs of the Department of the Air Force, including the organizing, training, equipping, and providing for the welfare of its nearly 370,000 men and women on active duty, 180,000 members of the Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve, 160,000 civilians, and their families. With an annual budget of approximately \$110 billion, he ensures the Air Force can meet its current and future operational requirements.

The Air Force provides the United States with powerful advantages that it does not obtain from land or maritime services. We currently possess unparalleled advantages in air and space—domains that cover the entire surface of the earth. So long as our air and space superiority forces allow us to dominate these domains, we will be able to observe any part of the planet, communicate that information to where it will do the most good, and project force to that location. The capabilities we bring to the fight allow the Air Force to act alone or to magnify the power of all joint and coalition forces.

## **The US Role in the World**

According to the US Constitution, the government of the United States is responsible for providing for the common defense and promoting the general welfare. From the beginning, meeting these goals has required a military capable of defending the homeland and of projecting power to defend our interests abroad. Since 1775, we have maintained a force for homeland defense, and as early as 1801, when Pres. Thomas Jefferson authorized raids on Barbary pirates, have used our expeditionary forces to promote the general welfare.<sup>1</sup> In the process, not only has our own republic become a bastion of security and prosperity, the peaceful nations of the world have benefited from the zone of stability our military has helped to create.

Over the last century, the scope of US international responsibility has vastly increased, but the Constitutional imperatives that guide our military's mission remain unchanged. When scholars look at the role the United States has played in the international system since WWII, they sometimes compare it to the *Pax Romana* or the *Pax Britannica* of previous centuries. There is some truth to this, but if there is an American *Pax*, it is a very generous one; the sort that seeks to increase the well-being and liberty of all who wish to join and asks only that those who do not join refrain from using violence against those who do.

The benefits the international system derives from US leadership are impressive. For over half a century, the United States has been the world's foremost defender of international stability and has taken the leading role in building and leading the coalitions that preserve it. This leadership led to the fall of the Nazi and Soviet regimes and provided the stable backdrop against which countries like Japan, Germany, and China initiated their economic miracles. It also contributed to 60 years without major-power

war, the establishment of open international trading relations, and the unprecedented spread of democratic governance.

Unfortunately, in the current era, many have become so accustomed to global stability that they wonder why the United States continues to invest in its armed forces. Over the last two decades, we have allowed our strategic forces to atrophy as our major-power competitors have increased their own; and we have readily discussed peace dividends as we stretched our combat forces to the breaking point.

It is true there is a great deal of goodwill in the international system today, yet the current security and prosperity enjoyed by those living within the borders of the United States and its allies are based on more than goodwill. Major-power competitors regularly probe US defenses in the air and continuously attack our military infrastructure in cyberspace. Mid-range competitors persistently purchase technologically advanced surface-to-air missiles and fighters that undermine our deterrent forces. Numerous actors have the capability and desire to disrupt the existing system. Since the last days of the Cold War, US-led coalitions have fought wars in six countries—Panama, Kuwait, Bosnia, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—and participated in many other military operations.

Perhaps more important than the wars we have fought over the last two decades are the wars we have *not* fought. It has been many years since an opposed major power threatened us directly. Our globally deployed forces, our alliances and coalitions, and the quality and quantity of our strategic forces signal states around the world that aggression does not pay. This type of *peace through strength* was the dream of the League of Nations and later of the United Nations, but neither organization achieved the consensus necessary to carry out its vision. Today the United States, acting with allies or ad hoc coalitions of the willing, has let both the peaceful and violent states of the world know through its action that we will preserve peace.

The impact of this deterrent presence cannot be overstated. In most regions of the world, peaceful states no longer feel the need to build large armed forces to defend against bellicose neighbors, and many potentially revisionist states understand that the resource requirements to compete militarily with the United States are too high—our own capability deters such conflicts from even emerging. While we fight vicious battles on the frontiers, we must not forget that the zone of stability we have created through our vigilance and forward presence is the largest in history.

This is not a responsibility the United States can shirk or hand off to another state or organization. No other country in the world today is able to pick up the US leadership mantle. No other country or coalition is able to project power globally; nor could anyone else develop that capability in the face of the current anti-air and anti-sea threat environment. From one perspective, America's existing global power projection capability is a unique historical accident. At a time when the United States controlled almost half of the world's GNP, it also faced a bellicose Soviet Union. This combination led the United States to spend unprecedented sums on its strategic forces (approximately half of its robust defense budget on the Air Force alone). The global web of bases, air refueling aircraft, strategic bombers, satellites, and air superiority technology has served us well for half a century. Like the legendary Roman roads that enabled the *Pax Romana*, or the fleet and global network of naval bases that underwrote the *Pax Britannia*, US airpower vastly magnifies our ability to project power beyond our borders.

Maintaining these strategic forces carries a price tag, but the United States does not fight so regularly or deter so thoroughly for purely altruistic reasons. Without the peaceful environment facilitated by American diplomacy and arms, the United States would not enjoy its current level of security and prosperity. The security and economic health of the United States are closely intertwined with the stability and prosperity of the international system. Our citizens enjoy peaceful lives at home because no major power believes it can challenge us and win; they prosper because we protect the global commons. The United States cannot neglect its position of leadership without grave consequences. When Rome surrendered its mantle of leadership, the lights went out in Europe for a thousand years. Between the time the British Empire declined and the United States rose, the world fought two world wars and numerous lesser conflicts. It is true that the role the US military plays in the world today carries a price tag, but is more than worth the cost.

## **The Threats We Face**

In the current international system, the United States and its allies face two principal threats. The first comes from major-power opponents with access to modern conventional and nuclear weapons. It is easy to dismiss the possibility of major-power war in today's peaceful system, but big wars, with their apocalyptic potential for suffering and destruction,

have a tendency to happen unexpectedly. Even when they do not occur, America's opponents often base their demands on their perception of our ability to fight and win wars. Such major conventional or nuclear wars are by far the gravest military threat we face, and the perception that we are too weak to stand behind our global commitments is the surest route to such a war. Above all, the US military must prevent major-power opponents from believing they can benefit from using their military power against America's vital interests.

The most common threats the United States faces, however, come from weaker state and nonstate actors. At least since the fall of the Soviet Union, the most common problems the US military has faced come from opponents that engage in "salami-slicing" tactics. Our opponents are as familiar as we are with the Weinberger Doctrine.<sup>2</sup> They know that we prefer to fight wars where political objectives are clear and where vital national interests are unquestionably at stake. They take advantage of this by nibbling away at the edges of stability. When should the United States have acted against al-Qaeda and its state sponsors? When it began raising money and training killers at its bases in Sudan? When it co-opted the government of Afghanistan? When it bombed US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya? When it attacked the USS *Cole*? Against a country that has only one military option—all-or-nothing wars—symmetric tactics are a powerful weapon.

In a similar vein, our opponents have become adept at choosing the location and types of conflicts we fight to pit their strengths against our weaknesses. Islamic radicals' terror bombing of US targets in the United States and around the world before 9/11 is an example of the enemy choosing where we fight. Iraqi and Afghan rebels' use of guerrilla warfare in ongoing conflicts is an example of enemies choosing the type of conflict to suit their own strengths. Again, against a country armed with only one option for fighting wars, this strategy can be effective.

Nor are al-Qaeda and various rebel groups the only opponents who have attempted to exploit the US preference for all-or-nothing war. The last two decades contain a rogues' gallery of opponents that have used these methods. Sudanese, Somali, and Rwandan killers have launched genocide campaigns within their own borders knowing that their actions would probably not elicit a full-scale US invasion. Leaders in North Korea and Iran have taken advantage of the US global preoccupation to pursue nuclear weapons knowing the United States is unlikely to launch another regime change at-

tempt aimed at either country. The United States cannot deter them with an option they believe the United States will not employ.

One can wonder whether these asymmetric tactics are having an impact on America's ability to perform its global mission. If not stopped, these tactics could eat away at international stability and wear down US military capabilities and political will. After seven years of the most intense and sustained operations since the Vietnam War, our tactical forces are described as stressed. Our strategic forces are on hold, with minimum modernization and despite our great maintainers, aging and in general decline. After most US forces left Iraq, the Air Force stayed to contain that regime through Operations Northern and Southern Watch. Eighteen years later we are still there. Year after year, we put off recapitalizing our inventory. Today we are flying the oldest equipment in our history. As our opponents modernize their air and space technology, we are focusing our investment budgets on fighting current wars. As our strategic margin is whittled away, so is our capability to deter and dissuade our most dangerous competitors. It is our strategic forces, not our tactical forces, that deter our major-power opponents. Unless their general decline can be arrested and modernization efforts restored, the US military will eat into the margin we have enjoyed for decades and risk its ability to perform its most important function.

### **The Air Force Strategy: Sovereign Options**

In response to the current threat environment, the US Air Force has implemented a strategy of *sovereign options* to guide it as it organizes, trains, and equips its forces. *Sovereign options* refer to the spectrum of choices air, space, and cyberspace capabilities offer US policy makers for solving problems. For Airmen, *sovereign options* communicate layers of meanings. On one level *sovereign options* represent the unique options that only air, space, and cyberspace power can provide. In this sense, Air Force strategy reflects how Airmen contribute directly to solving problems. In another sense, the term *sovereign options* means that Airmen provide ways to enrich strategies and operations by contributing capabilities that combine with those of other services or agencies. Finally, *sovereign options* communicate that Airmen provide capabilities to secure US goals and interests without involving the resources or territory of other states or entities—only Airmen can deliver air, space, and cyberspace effects anywhere on the planet from the sovereign territory of the United States with speed, precision, and global reach.

Our goal is to provide options that maximize America's ability to tailor its responses to meet current and future threats across the continuum of conflict.

At the lower end of the spectrum, the concept of Air Force *sovereign options* allows the United States to provide humanitarian aid and disaster relief in order to save lives and sometimes defuse tensions before they erupt into conflict. After the tsunami of 2004 swept across Southeast Asia and after the earthquake of 2005 devastated Pakistan, Airmen offered the first contact many in those countries had with the United States and provided a powerful corrective to the extremist propaganda that dominates the media in those regions. During the opening days of Operation Enduring Freedom, disaster relief took on another aspect. As we fought Taliban forces in Afghanistan, the Air Force dropped food and leaflets to villages as part of a successful effort to communicate that our war was against the Taliban regime and their al-Qaeda allies, not with the Afghan people who suffered under their lash. Only the Air Force had the capability to deliver these effects directly to these inland regions.

After Operation Desert Storm, the United States found yet another way to use its air assets in the gray area between peace and war. Throughout the 1990s, Saddam Hussein responded to UN sanctions and weapons inspectors with *cheat and retreat* tactics. These tactics were a variant on the so-called *nightmare scenario* of the Gulf War, in which the coalition feared Hussein would comply with the president's demand that he leave Kuwait, only to invade again after US ground forces left the theater. Since the cost of repeated ground deployments would be prohibitive, Saddam could use these tactics to achieve his goals while simultaneously wearing down the United States. The use of no-fly zones, however, backed up by a single brigade-sized land element, contained Hussein for over a decade. Similarly, rather than deploy US ground forces into a civil war in the Balkans, for over three years we used airpower, first to limit the aggression of the Bosnian-Serbs and then as the basis for a coercive air campaign that worked with indigenous ground forces to force a peace agreement. These innovative options allowed US presidents to defeat our opponents' plans at an exceedingly low cost in US lives and treasure.

At a higher point on the spectrum of conflict, for over 50 years, the visible movement and basing of Air Force assets have often been the clearest method the United States has, short of using force, to signal its commitment during crises. During the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Yom Kippur War, the visible

dispersal and movement of aircraft provided US presidents with an instantly recognizable means to convey their intent to the Soviets without actually using violence. During the Berlin Blockade, airlift provided a means short of war to assert our commitment to Berlin. More recently, the presence of Air Force assets in the Persian Gulf, Guam, and many other bases conveys to friends and potential opponents alike the strength of our commitment to those regions. The small manpower footprints of Air Force bases also are relatively unobtrusive and allow us to convey commitment while limiting negative effects on local economies and politics.

In recent wars, the Air Force has offered policy makers another option for fighting and winning without risking the lives of large numbers of US servicemen and women. In Operation Deliberate Force, Operation Allied Force, and more recently, Operation Enduring Freedom, the US Air Force worked directly with indigenous ground forces to defeat the genocidal armies of the Bosnian-Serb, Serbian, and Taliban regimes. Better yet, when combat subsided, the presence of friendly indigenous armies on the ground greatly eased the transition to nation-building operations. Working with indigenous populations increases the likelihood that there will be a friendly population to work with after the fighting.

Against the current counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Air Force has provided even more options. Unlike in previous guerrilla wars, because of the sensors, range, and accuracy of our UAVs, space, and manned aerial assets, our opponents have been unable to mass. When they try to mass, we quickly find and destroy them from the air. By preventing the enemy from acting in large groups, Airmen save countless US lives, magnify the capabilities of our own ground forces, and provide the Iraqi government time to build its institutions and security forces.

At the far end of the spectrum of violence, the Air Force presents our country with its ultimate force in combat. In major conventional operations, no enemy can mass or maneuver so long as the United States possesses air dominance. In Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, airpower penetrated enemy defenses and decimated our opponents' ground forces. Air, space, and cyber sensors tracked both the enemy and coalition forces in real time. Our global space and cyber grid communicated that information to joint and coalition forces. For nearly two decades, the United States has been able to win conventional wars quickly and easily. Unlike WWII and Korea, where we suffered enormous casualties, in recent years our airpower technology has often allowed us to inflict hundreds of casualties for every

one of our own servicemen and women killed in combat. As nuclear weapons spread to new countries, Air Force ICBMs and bombers provide us with our ultimate deterrent force.

The Air Force derives its capability to provide *sovereign options* from its ability to simultaneously dominate air, space, and, increasingly, cyberspace. Our ability to operate freely across these domains is a prerequisite for US freedom of action. When we control these domains, we are able to provide our joint forces with Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power, greatly increasing the nation's overall military power.

- *Global Vigilance* is the persistent, worldwide capability to keep an unblinking eye on any entity—to provide warning on capabilities and intentions, as well as identify needs and opportunities.
- *Global Reach* is the ability to move, supply, or position assets—with unrivaled velocity and precision—anywhere on the planet.
- *Global Power* is the ability to hold at risk or strike any target, anywhere in the world, and project swift, decisive, precise effects.

The ability to dominate operations across the domains of air, space, and cyberspace magnifies the military power of US and coalition forces. Fielding a force of Airmen, trained and equipped to exploit the advantages of advanced air, space, and cyberspace technologies, combined with the strategic reach and power to exploit our dominance across the domains, extends our ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat our adversaries. The mix of technology and global presence supplied by the Air Force provides us with a historically unique ability to project power to assure friends and dissuade, deter, or defeat foes—the US Air Force is America's asymmetric advantage.

## Implementing the Strategy

The Air Force currently provides joint and coalition forces with a bridge to the rest of the world and a colossal advantage on the conventional battlefield. This dominance of air and space capability has existed for less than 20 years and will only persist into coming decades if it is carefully nurtured. In addition, both may be lost if we do not improve our ability to fight in cyberspace.

The Air Force is able to achieve air and space dominance today because, at this time, it enjoys a significant lead over its opponents in those technologies and sufficient quantities of air and space craft to create global presence. When war involves air, space, and cyberspace, even small tech-

nological advantages in equipment often mean the difference between victory and defeat. As recently as the Vietnam War, the Air Force lost more than 2,200 aircraft because we failed to dominate the airspace over enemy territory. We had neglected air superiority's technological and operational art over the previous decade and paid for our neglect with lives and aircraft. Today we find ourselves in a similar position. We have neglected our air superiority technology since the 1980s. In recent years, opponents have developed advanced antiair and antispace technologies specifically designed to counter our inventory. This equipment is rapidly diffusing to potentially hostile states and nonstate actors.

Equally worrisome is the rapidly shrinking aerospace industrial base. Our strength and ability to capitalize on advances in air and space technologies is due in large part to our vibrant and diverse aerospace industry. America's asymmetric advantage in this important part of our economy and defense industry is in peril. Production lines have closed, skilled workforces have aged or retired, and companies have shut their doors. The US aerospace industry is rapidly approaching a point of no return. As Air Force assets wear out, the United States is losing its ability to build new ones. This erosion must be halted through increased investment.

Beyond advantages in technology, demonstrating America's commitment abroad requires an expeditionary Air Force. An underlying tenet of America's National Security Strategy is that America's military will engage forward in peacetime and fight forward in wartime. While long-range bombers and missiles are the ultimate guarantors of US security and power, expeditionary presence is the face of US deterrence and the indispensable source of *sovereign options*. The Air Force must field sufficient forces to sustain a rotational base without degrading our overall readiness for larger conflicts. The essence of *sovereign options* is this scalability; airpower provides options in peacetime as well as wartime. The mechanism for sustaining this rheostat of capability is our mature *air and space expeditionary construct* that provides joint force commanders with ready and integrated air and space forces to execute their plans. To maintain its expeditionary capabilities, the Air Force needs a force that is not only capable but also procured in sufficient quantities to avoid burning out an Air Force faced with continuous demands during times of both peace and war.

Underlying all Air Force capabilities is its strategic base. The Air Force can provide global vigilance, reach, and power only so long as it possesses robust space; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); missile

defense; and air mobility capabilities. Particularly important in this regard are our cyber capabilities. Today, our joint and coalition capabilities rely on collecting, storing, manipulating, and transmitting electronic information through the cyberspace domain. This allows us to find our opponents, process the information, route it to where it is needed, and guide our munitions to their targets. Increasingly, our enemies also depend on cyber systems. Safeguarding our own cyber capabilities while engaging and disrupting our opponents' capabilities is becoming the core of modern warfare.

Most immediately and critically, if the Air Force is to play its crucial role, we must develop and maintain technological leads in the areas of air-superiority fighters and penetrating next-generation bombers to hold targets at risk anywhere in the world. We must also field sufficient long-range and theater mobility and strike capabilities to assure dominance across all levels of war for the conduct of joint operations. We must continue to treat space as an operational domain by creating architectures and systems to provide the appropriate situational awareness and communication capability giving tactical-to-strategic advantage to leadership at all levels. This, as well, demands the US Air Force be resourced to meet our constitutional responsibility to "provide for the common defense" and allows our nation and our friends around the world to prosper.

## Conclusion

US security and prosperity are best assured by working with other states to preserve the existing stable and prosperous international system. The Air Force contributes to US security by providing an array of *sovereign options* for decision makers. These options maximize our ability to assure friends and to dissuade and deter both small and large threats across the spectrum of operations. When opponents cannot be deterred, these options provide alternatives to invasion and occupation and increase the chances that we, rather than our opponents, will choose the types of wars we fight. In the event of war, the Air Force provides the nation with its most lethal—and proven—force for defeating major-power opponents. By controlling air, space, and cyberspace, the Air Force provides the nation with the capability to dominate across these domains and expands the options available to our sister services to dominate their respective domains. So long as the Air Force possesses a significant lead over potential opponents and maintains a global presence, the service will

continue to provide the nation with the means to lead the fight for global stability and prosperity—in turn guaranteeing our own. **SSQ**

#### **Notes**

1. Congress authorized Jefferson to have his commanders seize all vessels and goods of the Pasha of Tripoli “and also to cause to be done all such other acts of precaution or hostility as the state of war will justify.” *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875*, The American Memory Project from the Library of Congress, *Statues at Large*, vol. 2, 7th Cong., 1st sess., 1802, chap. 5, 130, <http://memory.loc.gov/ll/llsl/002/0100/01680130.tif>.

2. The Weinberger Doctrine was articulated by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in 1984. It suggests a list of principles governing the use of US military force.