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THE ROLE OF THE RESERVES IN GREAT POWER COMPETITION

By Cmdr. Daniel R. Green, USNR, Ph.D.

Since the publication of the U.S. Department of Defense's National Defense Strategy in 2018, the department has aggressively sought to implement its key recommendation that the U.S. must re-focus its strategy on the long-term challenge of great power competition.¹ These efforts encompass a range of activities, including bolstering U.S., allied, and partner deterrence against aggressive actors, such as China and Russia, to better competing below the threshold of conflict for influence.

The enormity of the threat the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) poses to U.S. interests and values and the global range of its activities from cyber to space has prompted an organizational and conceptual revolution within the Department of Defense. While the department is better aligning its resources toward modernizing its forces and bolstering deterrence against Chinese actions, it has also undertaken a systematic rethink of how it fights wars and how it globally competes with China. While any strategy vis-a-vis the PRC will, of necessity, be a whole-of-government if not whole-of-nation affair, there are several key challenges the U.S. military reserves can focus on to implement the NDS's priorities fully as well as to address the long-term threat of the PRC.

Warfighting

The reserves play a vital role in the defense of the United States, but the strategy requirements of great power competition, as well as great power war, will require new thinking. There is a profound gap between the strategies

the U.S. Department of Defense is currently pursuing with respect to the PRC and the structures (e.g., reserves) through which it must implement them. Even though 20 years of combat and counterinsurgency have prompted great change within the reserves, it is still ostensibly organized along conventional warfare lines, focused on short and sharp conflicts, and is acculturated to operating in an uncontested homeland environment. Additionally, as warzone deployment requirements have shrunk, cautious careerism is creeping back into the reserves, and more and more barriers are being erected to ostensibly "professionalize" reservists.

The practical effect of many of these changes is to chase away unconventional applicants and non-traditional current members. The creation of more onerous onboarding requirements, additional boards of qualification, and the inability to recognize civilian achievements in military credentials provide incentives for members to adhere to careful paths of career milestones versus taking professionally enhancing opportunities that will benefit the nation. Further, a generation of reservists who have deployed multiple times to warzones is confronting a reserve community that rewards members who took a risk-averse career path and so are missing out on promotion opportunities because of it. The reserves need to better prepare for a large-scale contingency and evaluate its structures and processes to shed this burgeoning peacetime mindset and continue to attract, retain, and promote unconventional thinkers.

¹ The National Defense Strategy, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018

ing China

While the focus of any such conflict with the PRC would likely be in the Indo-Pacific region, its operations are multi-faceted and global in scale. The reserves, of necessity, would likely focus on the main fight, which would be heavily conventional, although cyber and space operations will require significant support.

Additionally, the PRC's military presence in other regions of the world such as the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa will also have to be addressed. The global nature of any such conflict would challenge the reserves, as will the full spectrum of PRC's operations, including military forces and its political, economic, diplomatic, ideological, and informational capabilities. As much as there is a quantity component to its military abilities, there is, increasingly, a qualitative component to it as well. The implications of this for the reserves will be significant. Leadership will need to think through how the reserves are organized and whether they are optimally designed to operate on such a global scale across disparate warfighting domains for a prolonged duration.

This may require establishing multi-functional units with deep subject matter expertise where service members are allowed to homestead in it well beyond the usual rotations. Such operations will also necessitate a rethink in how U.S. reserve forces deploy, their peacetime footprint overseas, and their integration with active-duty components.

Full-Scale Mobilization

One of the key transitions the reserves must grapple with is full-scale mobilization in a contested homeland with a peer adversary that can degrade and challenge this process with great freedom. By and large, the U.S. has had the luxury to mobilize its forces on a timeline of its choosing in a relatively secure environment. While mobilization procedures have significantly improved following the attacks of 9/11,

they have never had to grapple with a full-scale mobilization of the kind likely to occur in a great power war. The logistical considerations of processing records, organizing travel for members to training and deployment, and linking up with supported units will be profound.

As large as these challenges will be, if a peer adversary is hacking reserve networks, deleting medical records, spreading disinformation, and, in general, inhibiting the mobilization process, the reserves will be hard-pressed to support the active-duty component. Additionally, the scale of such a mobilization will put great stress on activating all reservists, not just those who actively drill but those in the Individual Ready Reserve. Greater effort must be made to prepare these members for duty.

Competition

It is customary in the U.S. military to focus on deterring and, if called upon, defeating the conventional militaries of nation-states using overwhelming military force on its own timeline. The strategy the Peoples' Republic of China is pursuing against the U.S., its allies and partners, and the international system more broadly, however, reflects its Communist authoritarian system, interests, and values.²

While dramatically increasing the overall size of its military forces and investing in high-end capabilities, the PRC also seeks to gain an advantage by engaging in economic and political coercion, intimidation, propaganda, the blurring of civil and military approaches, and military operations below the threshold of open conflict. The range of competition with China includes day-to-day activities, long-term struggles for position, gray zone influence (e.g., propaganda, etc.), securing science and technology advantages, and influence with allies and partners.

The reserve community has, resident in its ranks, a plethora of unique skill sets and training, connections,

² Elizabeth C. Economy, "China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping." *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018): pp. 60-74.

employers, and experiences that can be better harnessed in great power competition. Many of these capabilities are not captured well by reserve personnel systems, and others are not systematically encouraged due to outdated promotion systems and priorities. These skills can range from advanced language abilities (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian) and high-tech training (e.g., engineering, aerospace, cyber) to advanced degrees (e.g., Ph.Ds., law degrees, MBAs). Additionally, many of the most complex challenges of great power competition are multidisciplinary, and units ostensibly organized along these lines to work on these specific problem-sets should be evaluated.

Allies and Partners

One of the key advantages the U.S. possesses in the Indo-Pacific is its robust network of allies and partners. If a conflict were to break out in the region, the U.S. would partner with these nations and rely upon them for military assistance, access, basing, and overflight rights, as well as political, economic, and diplomatic support.

Various capabilities exist within the active duty and reserve community to build partner capacity and relationships with these countries, but more must be done. The National Guard's state partnership program, for example, is a crucial enabler for our allies and partners through the assigning of guard units to specific countries to develop their capabilities.

Missions by special operations forces (e.g., SEALs and special forces) to build indigenous proficiency also play key roles. The reserve community should review its institutional design to better align its units to not just the Indo-Pacific region but to expand its mission sets beyond purely functional capabilities to focus on building relationships with specific countries. The reserves must broadly embrace the traditional roles of working by, with, and through allies and partners. Instead of a unit focusing on a specific warfighting or support mission, the practicality of having assigned countries and regions should be explored and opportunities to partner with the militaries of those countries. This will require greater resources to assist with language and cross-cultural training as well as learning how to advise partnered operations. It will also require a broadening of missions for many units and some institutional reforms.

Prolonged Warfare

The U.S. military and the reserves have become acculturated to relatively low casualty rates over the past 20 years. The force requirements of the wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq have not significantly affected mobilization procedures, timelines, and processes. While both conflicts have been long, the nature of the warfare did not fundamentally challenge the relatively steady state of manning, weapons procurement programs, munitions supplies, maintenance, and reconstitution efforts.

The challenge of fighting the PRC would not only be one of deterring and defeating their sizable military forces but also their ability, as a nation-state, to fight a prolonged war on a scale the U.S. is not currently accustomed to. The casualty numbers would likely be quite high, and mobilizations would be not only on a scale not seen in generations but also significantly longer. Behaviors, practices, and procedures will need to be revisited across the board and analyzed with an eye for prolonged warfare in a contested environment. The reserves will have to grow significantly and be prepared for longer and larger deployments in more forward-deployed stations than the current mobilization process has had to contend with.

Additionally, many reservists may not be able to deploy due to their essential skills in a civilian war economy. How the reserve community balances these competing needs will also have to be thought through. Finally, even though the military shifted to an all-volunteer force in 1973, the possibility of a draft will need to be reexamined if a prolonged conflict seems likely.


Conclusion

The 2018 National Defense Strategy charged the Department of Defense with reestablishing deterrence in key regions of the world (e.g., Indo-Pacific and Europe) while preparing for great power competition. Secretary of Defense Austin's recent message to the department on March 4, 2021, to "Prioritize China as the Pacing Challenge" versus China and Russia, which the 2018 National Defense Strategy focused on, indicates the priorities for the future.

The reserve community is well placed to play vital roles along the whole spectrum of competition to conflict to war termination. Still, fundamental changes need to take place for it to make the greatest contribution to the nation's efforts. There are significant gaps between the strategies the department wishes to pursue and the structures through which it needs to implement them in the reserves. There are misalignments of missions, resource misallocations, and institutional design considerations that must be addressed.

Further, a peacetime mindset and a cautious careerism have returned that seemingly prioritizes institutional interests over warfighting requirements. In many respects,

we have to overcome ourselves in order to create tailored institutional adaptations for the problems and potential warfights that confront our nation versus those we prefer to work on and fight. This will require significant leadership to overcome these obstacles and a conscious rethink about how the reserves recruits, retains, and promotes its members and how it is fundamentally organized and operates. The Peoples' Republic of China presents a determined challenge to U.S. interests and values and its role as a source of stability for the international system.

Meeting this challenge requires a multi-generational commitment from the United States. U.S. reserves are poised to serve an indispensable role in defending the nation across the whole spectrum of conflict in this era of great power competition. But reforms must be adopted to prepare for the long-term challenge of deterring peer adversaries and, if need be, defeating them. 

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.



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