

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Offset World

If national security was a category on Jeopardy, the answer would be “Everything.” The question? “What is the biggest threat to United States?” It’s an uncomfortable reality. The focus isn’t on one peer adversary, but many adversaries of varying capabilities dispersed around the world. The technological playing field has been greatly levelled, both in traditional and emerging domains. National security agencies continue to operate under budget constraints and complex acquisition policies. The Pentagon’s recently unveiled Third Offset Strategy invests in emerging human-machine teaming technologies to create sustained global advantages in this threat environment. The hardest question is, however, will it be enough for what the U.S. is up against?

At the tip of threat environment is global terrorism, which is more pervasive and inescapable than ever. Islamic extremist terror groups are increasing recruitment, training and attacks. The most prolific, ISIS, also adds to the turmoil in the Middle East. The civil war in Syria continues to intensify, drawing everyone into its fray. In July, a possibly staged coup further destabilized democracy in Turkey. Months after downing a Russian jet that may or may not have entered their airspace, Turkey started repairing its relationship with Moscow. Speaking of Russian jets, airstrikes in Syria were launched from an airbase in Iran. Iran continued ballistic missile testing and was directly linked to a 2013 cyber attack against a New York water dam. Meanwhile, Iraq and Afghanistan still remain high priorities.

Other regional conflicts are less violent, but still volatile. In Europe, Turkey’s instability rattled NATO. The shocking Brexit vote rattled the European Union. Ukraine may be rattled again as Russia built up troops on its border and resumed the hostile rhetoric that preceded Crimea’s annexation. In Latin America, the Rio Summer Olympics went rather smoothly, despite mass anti-government protests and corruption allegations against Brazil’s current and former presidents. However, Brazil’s President was eventually impeached for manipulating the budget. As Venezuela’s economic and political crisis worsens, leading officials from their anti-drugs agency were indicted in a U.S. federal court for helping drug traffickers.

Pivoting to the Asia Pacific. North Korea stepped up ballistic and nuclear missile testing (successfully from a submarine), as well as anti-American rhetoric. China’s hegemonic tendencies continue, as do tensions and posturing in the South China and East China Seas. And last month China increased personnel training and humanitarian aid to Assad’s Syrian government, signaling Beijing’s growing concern over course of Syria’s civil war.

Cyber warfare and security may have quickly risen to prominence, but the first battle of any future war will likely be for command and dominance of space and the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS). The U.S. faces stiff competition across the spectrum, as China and Russia have demonstrated that their EMS investments have paid off. Along with this future come many old threats, such as nuclear weapons, human trafficking, and political instability.

The Third Offset Strategy attempts to position the U.S. to prevail against resurging global power competition, multi-regional conflicts and cross-domain challenges. Whether or not these new technologies will succeed in countering any or all of these threats is uncertain. What’s certain is that advantages will be needed since there are few reassuring answers when national security is in question.