

## Positioned to Prevail? Reading the Roadmap of the Third Offset Strategy

From war rooms to battlefields, positioning is critical to national security. Yet the latest move in national security isn't with a cool new piece of equipment or a newly set up command, but with the Third Offset Strategy.

The new strategy is an attempt to offset shrinking U.S. military force structure and declining technological and operational superiority in light of a resurging global power competition, multi-regional conflicts and cross-domain challenges. The Third Offset investments fall into six targeted areas: anti-access and area denial, guided munitions, undersea warfare, cyber and electronic warfare, human-machine teaming, and war gaming and development of new operating concepts. These capabilities come with an initial investment advertised at \$18 billion over five years for research and development. Much of it is weighted toward the Air Force and Navy while one-third will be spent on classified programs.

The First Offset Strategy was designed during the Cold War era to offset the Soviet Union's significant quantitative advantage in conventional forces with nuclear weapons, a technology on which the U.S. had a monopoly at the time. That advantage was short-lived as the Soviets quickly developed their own nuclear capabilities. The Second Offset Strategy came in the 1980s. This time the U.S. capitalized on a revolution in information technology and electronics to develop a new generation of precision-guided weapons, targeting and control networks, ISR platforms, and advanced military communications and navigation. Coupled with stealth technologies, the Second Offset gave the U.S. an unchallenged advantage as the Soviet empire collapsed.

Offset strategies are intended to generate and sustain strategic advantages as part of a long-term competitive strategy. The First Offset succeeded because nuclear weapons were an advantage that the U.S. already enjoyed and had already proven to be extraordinarily effective in ending World War II. In the second case, a great deal of its success was due, on one hand, to the combination of these new technologies, and, on the other, due to the secrecy surrounding the programs. For example, virtually nothing was known about stealth capabilities until the U.S. military revealed them with devastating effect against a far inferior Iraqi military during Operation Desert Storm. The technologies and underlying concepts of the Second Offset, however, were never employed against its intended, but now extinct target – the Soviet Union.

The Third Offset Strategy is already starting with some conceptual disadvantages. First, there is no single adversary over whom to gain an advantage; there are many of varying capabilities dispersed around the world. Second, the technological playing field has been greatly levelled, through dissemination, copying and enhancing existing technologies, and outright theft. Next, despite the relatively hefty investment, the Department of Defense is operating under a constrained budget, complex acquisition policies, and with a new Presidential administration on the horizon. This third iteration raises important concerns about the strategy's direction, effectiveness, and its potential impact on American and global security.

The American concept of national security has largely been based on military-technical superiority, forward presence, a network of alliances, and superior human capital. This construct held largely true for a long time. However, the past 15 years were a stark reminder that

technological superiority is no guarantee of security. Simpler tools and weapons, such as IEDs and commercial GPS, have been just as effective as (and even more lethal than) advanced weapons systems. There are obvious advantages to technological superiority, especially in peer competition with Russia or China or in terms of intelligence gathering and situational awareness. However, this doesn't hold across the threat landscape. The Third Offset is largely focused on emerging technologies, such as manned-unmanned teaming, that will transform the military for a payoff sometime in the future. In the meantime, the hard-earned experience of counter-insurgency operations with their necessary focus on agility and adaptability seem to be receding in importance. Also, as the U.S. bets on a set of capabilities, it has to be sure that they will be the right capabilities to fight the right battles. Just as insurgents have redefined the battlefield, adversaries may decide to fight differently and on different battlefields in the future.

Sustainable advantages are also hard to create when coming from behind. Arguably, a key driver of the Third Offset is to bridge the gap created while the U.S. was embroiled in Iraq, Afghanistan and the War on Terror. During that time, much of the world caught up technologically, economically and strategically to varying degrees. Take China's economic might and anti-access and area denial capabilities. Then there is Russia's resurgence and integration of cyber, information warfare and kinetic attacks (just ask Ukraine). Even Al Qaeda and ISIL recruit and mobilize support worldwide, but physically operate out of few locations. Adversaries will continue to advance while the U.S. tries to catch up. This begs several questions. Who should the U.S. catch up with or compete against? What defines catching up? And how does one prevent others from getting ahead? Not only will opponents not wait for the U.S. to catch up, they will forge ahead. Without addressing such questions, perceived gaps may not be closed and lasting advantages will not likely be created.

Then there's the issue of transparency. Unique to the Third Offset Strategy has been how openly it's been presented and discussed. The Department of Defense has announced the technological and spending priorities in considerable detail. It seems the U.S. has, either inadvertently or deliberately, exposed its vulnerabilities. Furthermore, by revealing which technologies and concepts will constitute priority investments, the U.S. has basically shown its opponents what they should plan to deter, counter or destroy (and likely do it cheaply). If the Second Offset succeeded in part because of its secrecy, then how can the Third be successful when opponents know what to expect?

As for priorities, the Third Offset Strategy is driven by manned-unmanned teaming technologies. Focusing so heavily on human-technology integrated tools and concepts creates a new risk – the dangerous elimination of the human factor. “The hope is that the Third Offset Strategy will do for the military what is already being done for parking garages, fast food restaurants and retail stores: reduce the need for human beings.”<sup>1</sup> The danger comes from two issues. First, technologies still need human direction. Warfare has traditionally been considered a personal exchange. However, long-range forecasts, such as the “Joint Operating Environment 2035,” anticipate powerful robotic systems that will make autonomous decisions and deliver lethal

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Goure, “The Pentagon's Third Offset: Just a Smoke Screen for a Shrinking US Military?” *The National Interest*, June 14, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-pentagons-third-offset-just-smoke-screen-shrinking-us-16583>.

force.<sup>2</sup> Such technologies are blamed for making fighting impersonal, and therefore, winning that much harder. After all, it's hard to conquer an unseen enemy or even to resolve a dispute remotely. Then there are questions of effectiveness. The use of drones in airstrikes, while demonstrating remarkable success, has also yielded a whole set of problems. From development to use, smarter technologies need smarter humans. There will need to be significant investments in human capital and a focus on enhancing human interactive processes in warfighting, beyond creating new technologies. Finally, the most important thing in preparing against national security threats is remembering that each threat has very basic human roots. Looking around said threat landscape reveals a clear picture. Russia (more specifically Vladimir Putin) wants to regain their former glory. China is driven by economic success, regional hegemony and the perception of strength and unity. North Korea, neurotic from its self-imposed isolation, is afraid that their controlled bubble will burst. Even terrorists generally have some kind of purpose and lash out at those who they perceive as preventing it. In an environment where 'naming the enemy' has underpinned the national security debate, neglecting the human nature of war isn't just impersonal, but impractical. The results of conflict are directly correlated with the will of the adversaries; their people, their government, and their military.

Ultimately all strategies are targeted toward a clear end state. Phrases like "reimagine our strengths," "repurpose for new mission," and "shift the axis of competition" have been used to describe the Third Offset. So what is its desired end state? The strategy's leading advocate, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, said, "We're trying to conceive of how this will unfold. That's very important. We don't have an endpoint in this. This is very much a walk, crawl, run – see what we can do, how we train our people, how our people react."<sup>3</sup> This doesn't seem particularly compelling, considering the Offset is supposed to create sustainable advantages over the long-term. Even only looking past the next election, "the small bets approach of 'prepar[ing] as many demonstrations on advanced capabilities as we possibly can for the next administration to determine ... the way they want to go' is good leadership, but politically and bureaucratically risky."<sup>4</sup> Even this cautious approach needs to be positioned within a broader context of foreign and economic challenges and policies. Without clear end state goals, the Third Offset Strategy is unlikely to yield sustainable results.

The Third Offset Strategy invests in a set of emerging technologies in hopes of paying off big in terms of sustained global strategic advantages. Revitalizing U.S. national security technologies and operational concepts is a necessary, iterative process, to prevail against any and all threats. Without more clarity in addressing these fundamental questions about its nature and purpose, the Third Offset Strategy might wind up leaving the U.S. in some challenging positions.

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<sup>2</sup> "Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World," July 14, 2016, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joe/joe\\_2035\\_july16.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joe/joe_2035_july16.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Pomerleau, "DOD's Third Offset Strategy: What man and machine can do together," *DefenseSystems*, May 4, 2016, <https://defensesystems.com/articles/2016/05/04/dod-work-on-third-offset-strategy.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Shawn Brimley and Loren DeJonge Schulman, "Sustaining the Third Offset Strategy in the Next Administration." *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/sustaining-the-third-offset-strategy-in-the-next-administration/>.