



Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century

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Dov Zakheim, Vice Chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, served as Undersecretary of Defense (comptroller) and chief financial officer for the U.S. Department of Defense (2001-04) and Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Planning and Resources (1985-87). He also served as DOD's civilian coordinator for Afghan reconstruction (2002-04). This is a slightly revised version of the keynote address he delivered to the Current Strategy Forum at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, RI on June 18, 2013.

Abstract: America's strategy has become increasingly budget-driven in the face of ongoing cuts, culminating in the sequester. As a result, fewer funds are, and will be, available for critical operations, notably exercises and training with foreign forces that are the key both to strengthening alliances and partnerships and to deterring current and potential adversaries. That Washington continues to revise its defense strategy virtually on an annual basis has further undermined its credibility worldwide. Given its long-standing global interests, and uncertainty regarding when and where it might again have to commit forces to defend them, the United States must reinvigorate its efforts to streamline the Defense Department so as to maintain its global posture in the face of budget pressures. Measures to improve defense efficiency include reductions in the civilian and contractor work forces, overhaul of the military medical and retirement systems, and repeal of anachronistic laws that foster waste in defense acquisition.

We are now well into a century that began with a war that has yet to end. Yet the circumstances that surrounded the commencement of the war in Afghanistan are far different today. The government that America sought to displace is long gone, but its key support is far from destroyed. The Taliban continues to operate both inside Afghanistan and from safe havens in Pakistan's tribal areas. And it has been joined by other groups, such as the Haqqani network.

Al Qaeda, whose act of mass destruction triggered America's war in Afghanistan, is a minor player in that country; but its offshoots are spread far and wide, from Yemen to Syria, from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel and Mali.

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America's most crucial ally in those early days, Pakistan, has become a major question mark for American policymakers. Is it still part of the solution or, with its home-grown Taliban and on-and-off support for the insurgency in Afghanistan, is it now part of America's problem in Central Asia?

Russia sprang to the support of the United States in the days that followed 9/11. Today it is re-emerging as a major rival to American influence in the Middle East, having re-established itself as a critical actor in the Syrian civil war.

Like Russia, Iran was prepared to cooperate with the United States in the removal of the Taliban and the reconstruction of Afghanistan (in Russia's case, Moscow agreed—after hard negotiations—to forgive all \$8 billion of Afghan debt). Washington chose not to work with Tehran. Twelve years later, Iran has now crossed numerous red lines set by the west and Israel and soon may be close to the threshold of acquiring the nuclear weapons capability that threatens to destabilize the entire Middle East.

China, which the United States had faced down during the Taiwan strait crisis of 1996, and which barely avoided a clash with America during the April 2001 Hainan Island EP-3 incident, stood on the sidelines in the aftermath of 9/11. Today, flexing its military muscles in support of claims in the East and South China Seas, deploying its navy to support anti-piracy operations, it has continued to amass a force whose anti-access/area denial strategy poses a far greater challenge to the United States than ever before.

When the United States attacked Afghanistan, the Arab world had seen little change in the previous quarter century. The traditional monarchies continued to amass money to buy arms they did not use, while the secular kingdoms continued to be ruled by the same dictatorial, kleptocratic families many of which had seized power in the 1960s and 1970s. A dozen years later, the Arab Spring had removed the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen; the United States had fought an eight-year war in Iraq that resulted in the replacement of the Sunni strongman Saddam Hussein with a Shia strongman named Nuri al-Maliki, and NATO—backed by the United States—had toppled Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, who had previously reached an agreement with the United States to dismantle his nuclear program.

For the past decade, Turkey has been the most stable Muslim state in the Middle East. That is no longer the case. Indeed, it is ironic that while Iran held elections after which people danced in the street, Turkey's streets have been bloodied by clashes between liberal protesters and pro-government police and independent thugs.

When the Twin Towers were hit on September 11, 2001, the United States appeared to be at the apogee of its power, economically as well as militarily. The previous year, the federal budget had been in surplus; the national debt was being reduced. The stock market was soaring and the dot-com bubble had only just begun to burst.

Today, the United States continues to struggle toward recovery after the great recession of 2007-2008. It has only begun to bring what for a time were runaway budget deficits under some degree of control. But that control has come with a steep price tag: the sequester that no one believed would come to pass now

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