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U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission Report Conclusions

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski

A recently published report by the U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission (NDSC) is an important non-partisan document that may influence debates on the defence budget in the new Congress. The NDSC assessed the main problems within the U.S. armed forces and the necessary steps for modernisation and budgeting. The unclassified report gives good insight into the scale of the challenges and efforts ahead of the U.S. and other NATO-member militaries. However, the NDSC report does not directly address the issue of the U.S. Army permanent forward presence on NATO's Eastern Flank but it recommends to the Pentagon and Congress to fully re-create in the long term its heavy division in Europe.

Status of the Commission and Its Report. The NDSC was a non-partisan panel of experts created by the U.S. Congress in 2017, initiated by the late Sen. John McCain. Its main task was to review the existing strategies of the Department of Defense and provide an alternative to them and an independent assessment and recommendations. McCain's intention was to generate a report that would be helpful in reaching bi-partisan consensus among Republicans and Democrats on U.S. defence strategy. Twelve experts on the NDSC were selected by Congress from among former and widely recognised high-level officials from various administrations. It was chaired by Eric S. Edelman, a former ambassador and undersecretary of defense under Robert Gates, and Adm. Gary Roughead, former Chief of Naval Operations. The NDSC was supported by its own staff and the Trump administration was obliged to render full cooperation with it.

The importance of the NDSC's conclusions follows from its non-partisan nature and full access to key officials and files of the U.S. Department of Defense and the intelligence community. The Commission's 98-page report references the classified version of the [U.S. National Defense Strategy, a summary of which was published in January 2018](#). The report also assesses other Trump administration documents, especially the [National Security Strategy](#) and [Nuclear Posture Review](#). The NDSC's deadline was extended by 11 months from its planned end date and its report is now addressed to the Pentagon and [the new Congress](#). There is no doubt that the former will be crucial for the approval or rejection of the NDSC's recommendations during debates on the future U.S. military budget.

Diagnosis of the Problems. The NDSC's report contains many alarming conclusions on the condition of the U.S. military. According to the panel's analysis, the hard-power backbone of America's superiority and influence have eroded to a dangerous degree. The commission suggests that the consequences this state, if not promptly remedied, will be grave and lasting. The NDSC report does not question the assumptions by the Trump administration on military threats from China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea. The commission put a generally positive grade to the strategy prepared by Defense Secretary James Mattis notes there are many unanswered questions. Moreover, the NDSC concluded that both Congress and the Pentagon have neglected the rule of civilian control over the military by frequently ceding to military commanders

decisions that are really of a political-strategic nature. The commission's report also strongly criticises the current unstable system of national defence budgeting, noting it is not providing enough funds for long-term investment in personnel and weapons.

The NDSC's report stresses the distance between the military capabilities of the U.S. and its rivals is shrinking. This stems from the fast progress by China and Russia in the modernisation of their nuclear and missile arsenals, as well as their growing capabilities in cyberspace, electronic warfare, and anti-satellite weapon systems. The report is a warning on both countries' conventional and asymmetric capabilities. It also assesses the most likely scenarios of conflicts between the U.S. and China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea. The commission notes China's military advantages in the South China Sea and Russia's in the Baltic region. According to the panel, the U.S. might even be defeated in conflicts over Taiwan or the Baltic States. The report also analyses U.S. rivals' wide use of aggression within the "grey zone," i.e., disinformation, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare. The commission warns against optimism concerning the denuclearisation of North Korea and the dangers of an increase in the number of radical Islamists and Iran's influence in the Middle East if the U.S. reduces its military presence in the region. The report stresses the unique importance of NATO for the U.S. and the scale of threats and challenges in Europe. According to the panel, the U.S. military lacks operational concepts and solutions to complicate or neutralise Russia's conventional advantages over its NATO neighbours. The commission also concludes that U.S. nuclear plans are unclear and imprecise in case of an escalation in any given region.

NDSC Recommendations. The commission's report contains 32 general and specific recommendations, which might be divided into three areas. The first is the need for the development of new operational concepts and plans for Asia and Europe to preserve or regain military advantages over potential U.S. enemies. According to the commission, new and creative approaches are needed for defence against hybrid warfare and for nuclear deterrence in each region of the world. The second area is better cooperation between the Pentagon and defence industry. The NSDC appeals for stronger protection of American companies from industrial espionage, as well as for industry to focus on developing some selected and prospective technologies. The third and broadest area is the need for short- and long-term plans for military modernisation, both for the U.S. and its allies. According to the report's authors, the U.S. Army needs to expand and add new equipment, the U.S. Navy needs new attack submarines, and the U.S. Air Force needs more stealth multirole aircraft and bombers. The commission also suggests maintaining the current level of 185,000 U.S. Marines. The panel recommends appraising the modernisation needs of strategic and non-strategic U.S. nuclear forces. Moreover, the NDSC is recommending Congress introduce 5-year agreements—modelled on Scandinavian countries' deals—between the political parties to guarantee stable, long-term budgeting for the Pentagon and with it, smooth implementation of technical modernisation plans.

The NDSC report directly assesses U.S. military needs in Europe, in the short term, recommending a separate headquarters for a division or corps, and to augment current forces on the continent with additional long-fire, helicopter, and short-range air-defence units. In the long-term (not precisely defined but likely more than five years), the NDSC recommends the U.S. restore a heavy division to Europe, in addition to the existing two Brigade Combat Teams, as well as invests in electronic warfare and intelligence. The report is also clear on the need for the modernisation of forces and capabilities of the NATO allies. It recommends they increase "smart" munitions stocks and add more short-range air-defence and armoured units in NATO European countries. These should be accompanied by additional fifth-generation aircraft, long-range weapons, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

Implications. The NDSC report should be viewed in the context of the changes in the U.S. Congress and likely continuation of partisan divisions on defence budgeting. Some Democrats favour cuts in the defence budget while the Pentagon and NDSC report are recommending growth. The NDSC's proposed investments in modernisation in each branch of the armed forces demand some shifts in the Pentagon's current \$700 billion budget and then increase it for a few years to \$746 billion. To meet the modernisation needs, the panel recommends the creation of a stable defence budget with bi-partisan consensus. It seems that this solution would be also useful for other NATO countries to implement, especially in the light of the scale of threats from Russia. Also very important in the NATO context is the commission's recommendation for the gradual re-creation of a full heavy division, though feasible only in a longer timeframe. The NDSC report also stresses in many places the effectiveness of the U.S. forward military presence in Asia and Europe in deterring potential aggressors. In this regard, the report's conclusions are proof of the arguments for a permanent and visible presence of U.S. forces on NATO's Eastern Flank. These will be important in the coming debate on a rotational or permanent presence of U.S. forces in Poland, an issue which should be answered in a separate report by the Pentagon expected in March 2019. Of no less importance are the commission's expectations regarding the necessary investments in capability gaps between NATO European countries and those of Russia.