



WARFIGHTING AND MILITARY READINESS AFTER THE POST 9/11 WARS

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TOP LINES

- The United States' sustained presence in the post-9/11 wars in the nations of Iraq and particularly Afghanistan has obfuscated the Department of Defense's focus on its core responsibilities of deterring America's adversaries and winning America's wars.
- This obfuscation led to American service members and contractors performing non-war activities that were unrelated to the core mission set of the Department of Defense.
- Subsequently, with the Pentagon's intellectual investment focused primarily on the Middle East, the rising threat in the Indo-Pacific region was neglected and the Pentagon became increasingly introspective.
- This introversion and inability to intellectually pivot towards the Indo-Pacific region has indirectly led to the infiltration of the culture war—specifically the excessive emphasis on diversity and inclusion—within the Pentagon.
- Conversely, the primary services of the Indo-Pacific theatre—the U.S. Navy and Air Force—appear lethargic and unprepared to amend themselves given the burgeoning threat landscape.
- The Pentagon needs to be able to adapt to this new environment, while learning the mistakes of the last two decades to enhance its readiness and return its focus back to warfighting or risk becoming unable to achieve its primary mission of deterring America's adversaries and winning America's wars in the future.

INTRODUCTION

In April of 2021, the Biden Administration announced plans to continue the Trump Administration's scheduled departure from Afghanistan, bringing America's longest war closer to an end ([DeYoung & Ryan, 2021](#)). The American public has since witnessed the catastrophic execution of the Afghanistan withdrawal and the Taliban resurgence with the fall of Kabul ([Hookway & Shah, 2021](#)). This sequence of events provides an opportunity to understand the impacts this two-decade long engagement in Afghanistan has had on the Department of Defense (DoD) overall and on the United States military more specifically. Fundamentally, after nearly 20 years in Afghanistan spent on nation-building missions, the Department of Defense has strayed from its core mission of deterring America's adversaries and winning America's wars. While the first two years of our involvement should be

considered righteous—as we hunted down the culprits responsible for the 9/11 attacks—the 18 years that followed strayed from the military’s core mission. This itself is far from a newfound realization, as many experts within the American national security industry throughout the past decade have criticized the nation-building mission ([Whitlock, 2019](#)).

While the analysis provided in this paper should not be considered an attempt to tie all conclusions directly to America’s time spent in Afghanistan, it does argue that the sustained U.S. presence in the country without serious reassessment of the mission reflected perhaps a broader inability or unwillingness to consider the military’s core mission of warfighting within the context of the threats the United States faces. Although to its credit the Pentagon has recently shifted its military posture towards the Far East in recognition of the threat from China, these changes alone do not signify the kind of institutional and cultural reckoning of the complexity of the threats from China. In its place, the Pentagon is currently grappling with topics far remote from the narrow mission of warfighting – how to deter America’s adversaries and winning America’s wars. The intellectual pivot required by the Department of Defense to understand and adequately address the complexity of the threats from China will require more than adopting the traditional approach in a different theater. It will require a fundamental rethinking in what the military services are doing today as the threat landscape has metamorphosed to include more unconventional methods of confrontation that will be discussed later in this paper.

The Pentagon’s lack of focus on not only the future of warfare, but the basic principle of fighting and winning America’s wars has had profound implications for the DoD. Prominently, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan has stymied the DoD’s ability to intellectually pivot from the Middle East to the Far East and politicized the most respected institution within the United States ([Andrews, 2021](#)).

Deterrence and winning America’s wars is, and ought to be, the primary mission of the Department of Defense. Getting the DoD back into the mindset of warfighting is urgently needed if America is to seriously address the increasingly dangerous threats from China.

AFGHANISTAN AND THE MOVE AWAY FROM WARFIGHTING

When the United States originally entered Afghanistan in 2001, it did so sensibly with the narrow focus of hunting down the Al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for the egregious attacks on September 11 and the Taliban who were harboring them ([Zucchino, 2021](#)). President Bush in an address to Congress in 2001 after 9/11 made this very clear as he stated defiantly:

“Al-Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country...[and] by aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. [The Taliban] will hand over the [Al-Qaeda] terrorists or they will share in their fate” ([Bush, 2001](#)).

Al-Qaeda and its notorious chief, Osama bin Laden, proved elusive to U.S. authorities until 2011. The U.S. government was finally able to successfully locate and eliminate bin Laden on May 2, 2011, which—when coupled with the joint effort of America and international partners to degrade Al-Qaeda to a shell of its former self—completed America’s original objective within Afghanistan.

However, with Al-Qaeda's base of operations in Afghanistan effectively diminished, senior military leadership—both uniformed and civilian—began to justify a continued presence and intellectual investment in Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East based on the fact that global terrorism remained a significantly more palpable security threat throughout the United States and the West. Due to popular opinion at the time, in combination with sacrifices of American lives and the opinions of many of America's top generals in the region, the United States continued to sustain a presence in the region.

Afghanistan, a tribal nation notoriously resistant to foreign occupations ([Pillalamarri, 2017](#)), had experienced a resurfacing of the civil war between the American-backed government and the Taliban since the United States drove the Taliban from power in late 2001. The DoD, rather than turning its focus to the Far East—and specifically towards the ever-growing threat presented by China—decided to remain focused on the intra-Afghanistan conflict and non-combat projects rather than its primary focus on warfighting. This focus was given many names—state building, stabilization operations, and international development to name a few ([Runde & Savoy, 2017](#))—but the label “nation-building” took hold as the cost in dollars and lives mounted for American warfighters and the finances of the Department of Defense. Some of the projects the United States undertook include a \$6.7 million project to build a women's compound at the Afghan National Police training center in Jalalabad that was never occupied after the Afghan Ministry of Interior placed a moratorium on training women ([Glenn, 2021](#)). In another example of wasteful spending, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) paid \$3.1 million for a teacher training facility which remained incomplete four years later ([Bandow, 2017](#)). USAID also spent nearly \$2.2 billion on critical infrastructure throughout the country, like roads and highways, and it was estimated in 2017 that nearly 85% of them are “in poor shape” and “the majority cannot be used year round” ([Bandow, 2017](#)).

These failures across the country culminated in a report by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)—created in 2008 to investigate reports of fraud and excessive spending in Afghanistan—in 2018 when it reported the following conclusions regarding U.S. operations in the country:

“The U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of its stabilization strategy...[and] the large sums of stabilization dollars the United States devoted to Afghanistan in search of quick gains often exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents” ([SIGAR, 2018](#)).

Almost three years since such conclusions, the United States under the Trump Administration began to finally reduce its presence in Afghanistan and start laying the foundation for a responsible, conditions-based end to America's presence in the country. All the while, the United States has used service members and contractors to conduct most of the country's nation-building operations. Under the banner of Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), the DoD took the lead on reconstruction efforts—therefore, devoting significant financial resources and intellectual attention—in Afghanistan. What began as a righteous mission to eliminate terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks shifted to more mundane nation-building projects at the expense of hardworking taxpayers and the labor of America's men and women in uniform.

For example, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Congress has appropriated \$2 trillion in discretionary budget authority designated as OCO funding for non-war activities—a moniker

for nation-building—and approximately 15% of that was directed towards carrying out U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq ([McGarry & Morgenstern, 2019](#)). In addition, a gargantuan total of about \$300 billion in taxpayer dollars was allocated to the Pentagon and invested in places like Afghanistan for an explicit purpose of conducting non-war activities. Beyond dollars spent in the Middle East, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq exposed how the Pentagon has seemingly assumed a sizable quantity of “secondary” and “peripheral” missions unrelated to the traditional warfighting functions of command and control, information, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment ([Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, pp. III-1-47](#))—ergo diverting resources from the military’s overall readiness and top priorities ([Eaglen, 2019](#)). These secondary and peripheral activities range from the U.S. Navy resuming counter-drug operations in the Western hemisphere to the deployment of soldiers for supportive services to the Southern border ([Eaglen, 2019](#)). While these are more direct consequences from the post-9/11 wars, there were greater implications for the U.S. military beyond wasteful spending and inappropriate allocation of resources.

While the Pentagon continued to request increases for its OCO repository and dedicate tremendous resources to reconstruction operations, senior and highly invested military leadership became akin to political operatives, the military became engulfed in American culture wars, and China continued its rise. Put simply, America’s military leadership was distracted.

AN INABILITY TO INTELLECTUALLY PIVOT TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

With an undue focus on Afghanistan—due to flawed recommendations from senior military leadership—civilian authorities’ ability to pivot the current intellectual concentration away from the Middle East and towards the Indo-Pacific did not occur ([Kellogg, 2021](#)). Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, noted the same point when he remarked:

“While American policymakers have embroiled this nation in multiple [Middle East] wars, China has steadily built its strength, its economy, and its military—all at American expense...we can begin [preventing a conflict while securing American prosperity and safety] by bringing a close to the “forever wars” in other theaters and redirecting our military’s attention to the Asia-Pacific” ([Hawley, 2019](#)).

The Pentagon’s recent budget proposal and a recent report commissioned by members of Congress illustrate this worrying predicament ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). However, before visiting the DoD’s proposed budget, it is important to discuss what a pivot towards the Indo-Pacific would look like.

The Pentagon has already taken a variety of actions, particularly the redeployment of troops towards the Indo-Pacific. Going forward, U.S. military installations in Hawaii, Guam, Alaska, Japan, and Australia could all serve as likely candidates to receive a greater share of personnel from the Middle East ([Ratcliffe & O’Brien, 2021](#)). However, while personnel allocations represent a more visible and literal step in pivoting towards the Indo-Pacific, there are several options that the United States could take to reinforce America’s commitment in the region, ranging from expediting Taiwanese purchases of U.S. military equipment, to maintaining embassies across the sparsely populated but collectively strategically significant Pacific nations like Tonga and Kiribati, to increasing the United States’ presence on Antarctica—given the Chinese have begun to expand their presence on

the continent bracketing the Indo-Pacific ([Ratcliffe & O'Brien, 2021](#)). Steps like these would require redirecting relatively small sums of money within the DoD and would not only boost U.S. credibility to a greater capacity, but—when considered altogether—would clearly show the prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region to our foes and allies alike in the Indo-Pacific ([Ratcliffe & O'Brien, 2021](#)).

Not only has the United States failed to take many concrete steps towards a true intellectual pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, but the Pentagon's budget priorities also suggest the current administration does not consider it priority. For example, with the release of the Biden administration's budget for the DoD for fiscal year (FY) 2022, senior officials in the current administration have called the Pentagon's request the "largest ever" for research, development, testing, and evaluation funding—while significantly cutting the procurement budget ([Gould, 2021](#)). While it is true that a strong emphasis on research will indeed be needed to properly address the challenges presented by an increasingly provocative China, the current administration has presented a false dichotomy between research and procurement budgets. If China is truly the greatest threat facing the United States—and the Indo-Pacific continues to grow in importance—why must the U.S. Navy choose between a carrier, submarine, or destroyer ([Eckstein, 2021](#))? However, the misalignment between U.S. national security challenges and its budgetary priorities do not end there.

The FY22 budget request for the Pentagon totals at \$715 billion—which, when accounting for inflation, marks a reduction from the previous year's budget. Within this budget cut there exists a substantial decrease in the Pentagon's procurement budget—the purchasing accounts used to buy new equipment—of approximately \$8 billion, or 6% ([Gould, 2021](#)). In addition to the choice of ships facing the U.S. Navy, the current budget request chooses to prioritize near-term readiness by investing in ship and aircraft maintenance, rather than building the fleet—while simultaneously calling for \$5.1 billion to spend on a "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" ([Tomlinson & Griffin, 2021](#)). Outside of budgetary analysis, according to the Government Accountability Office, between 2015 and 2019 only 25% of the U.S. Navy's ships made it out of the maintenance on time ([Larter, 2020](#)). While this trend is slowly beginning to change, it will be difficult for the U.S. Navy to maintain a fleet with well below even 50% of ships sticking to scheduled maintenance time ([Larter, 2020](#)). This choice, to prioritize near-term readiness rather than expansion, is as unnecessary as it is problematic. There is no need to create a trade-off between an investment in maintenance and the expansion of our military, as both are needed to deter America's adversaries and win America's wars.

There is little doubt that the U.S. Navy, alongside the U.S. Air Force, will be the primary services if the United States is looking to deter future Chinese aggression and protect U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, given the budget proposed by the Pentagon—and a recent acknowledgement by the DoD that China now boasts the world's largest Navy ([Department of Defense, 2020](#))—it is clear that the current rhetoric does not match its budget priorities. This disconnect is further proof that the DoD has not made the intellectual pivot necessary to address the growing concern in the Far East. From hypersonic missiles to world's largest Navy, China continues to outpace the United States ([Department of Defense, 2020](#)). The DoD's problems are also related to structural deficiencies that plague each service.

A recently released report commissioned by Senator Tom Cotton and Congressmen Jim Banks, Dan Crenshaw, and Mike Gallagher detail a host of challenges confronting the U.S. Navy's surface fleet ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). Three of the problems constitute some of the most disturbing issues facing the service—namely, an insufficient focus on

warfighting, under-investment in surface warfare officer training, and a poorly resourced and executed ship maintenance program.

With respect to an insufficient focus on warfighting, the report found that rather than seeking and sinking enemy fleets, the surface fleet found a host of “bureaucratic excess, rewards for administrative functions... [and a] surface warfare community...[that has] lost its fighting edge” ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). When examining the under-investment in the surface warfare officer training, respondents in the report noted a focus on being a “land-attack” community rather than being a “ship-handling community,” denoting that the Navy has prioritized its support functions for land operations over its primary responsibility to maintain freedom on the high seas ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). This has, in return, led to poorly resourced and executed surface ship maintenance. Ships frequently experienced cancellations, delays, and drastically reduced maintenance availability of ships that are supposed to serve as a recognition of America’s power across the globe.

However, the U.S. Navy is not the only branch subject to structural deficiencies, as the U.S. Air Force—the other significant service as the United States looks to prioritize in the Indo-Pacific—is also under scrutiny. Like the U.S. Navy, the Department of the Air Force requested a higher budget for research, development, testing, and evaluation earlier this year while subsequently cutting its procurement budget by nearly \$4 billion ([Insinna, 2021](#)). This cut will require hundreds of aircraft to be forced out of commission like the A-10 Warthog, a dominant air and ground support aircraft, and two refueling tankers ([Insinna, 2021](#)).

Outside of budgetary shortfalls, the U.S. Air Force has failed to produce a next generation fighter to reduce the burden often placed on old, fourth generation fighters like the F-15 Eagle and F-16 Fighting Falcon. It attempted to do so with the introduction of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning. However, that aircraft faces an extensive array of concerns. For example, the F-35 fighter had an egregious 111 category 1 deficiencies when it was first introduced to the wider Air Force ([Pickrell, 2019](#)). A category 1 deficiency is the most severe classification and is defined as a shortcoming that could cause death, severe injury, or illness to the pilot, and could cause loss or damage to the aircraft or its equipment, critically restrict the operator’s ability to be ready for combat, prevent the jet from performing well enough to accomplish primary or secondary missions, result in a work stoppage at the production line, or block mission-critical test points ([Mehta, Insinna, & Larter, 2020](#)). The entire F-35 program—which in fairness has spanned several administrations—has been such an abject failure that the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force admitted so himself earlier this year ([Axe, 2021](#)). Moreover, like with the U.S. Navy in comparison to its Chinese counterpart, the U.S. Air Force seems aloof and unprepared to challenge the Chinese Air Force. For example, the Chinese Air Force has introduced new drones, a functional fifth generation fighter, and their deployment of Russian-produced S-400 and S-500 air defenses ([Osborn, 2020](#)).

The report’s damning observations ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)) of the U.S. Navy alongside the problems facing the U.S. Air Force could be considered a result of a peace-time force, but if both services are rendered unable to address significant deficiencies within their respective branches, how can they be expected deter adversaries abroad? This predicament for the Navy and Air Force is especially puzzling given that the current administration seemingly has continued the same rhetoric as its predecessor on China, indicating that their policy choices would reflect their concern. Budget constraints and procurement pitfalls are damaging components that hurt the military’s readiness and its ability to fight America’s wars, especially when paired with the slew of flawed

recommendations from military leadership during the post-9/11 wars and a failure to intellectually pivot towards the Indo-Pacific.

Beyond structural and intellectual deficiencies, there is also evidence to suggest the U.S. military is now increasingly subject to a cultural crisis as well. With the arrival of the latest culture war in America—often denoted as “wokeism”—the armed forces seem to be at an inflection point in their over two-century-long history.

CULTURE WARS OVER WARFIGHTING

Culture wars throughout the United States have seemingly found their new target for change in the American military and, perplexingly, senior military leadership has appeared to oblige. Rather than focusing on deterring adversaries and winning America’s wars, the U.S. military has been bogged down over discussions surrounding diversity and inclusion ([Losey, 2021](#)). This is not to suggest that the U.S. military should not be a diverse and inclusive force. A distinct characteristic of the American military is that it looks like the population it is sworn to defend. However, with the rise of “wokeism” throughout the United States, it seems that military leaders have forgotten the Pentagon’s primary role of warfighting.

Throughout the DoD, programs surrounding diversity and inclusion have made their way into the force, while other core competencies have faded to the background. Testimony from a Navy lieutenant recorded in the aforementioned report stated quite concerningly that “sometimes I think we care more about where we have enough diversity officers than if we’ll survive a fight with the Chinese Navy. It’s criminal. They think my only value is as a black woman...but you cut our ship open with a missile and we’ll bleed the same color” ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). Similar concerns were expressed throughout the report, including one from a retired officer who noted that “I guarantee you every unit in the Navy is up to speed on their diversity training, I’m sorry that I can’t say the same of their ship handling training” ([Schmidle & Montgomery, 2021](#)). These sentiments have been expressed across other services as well and fundamentally point to the concern that the U.S. military is focused more on appearances than capabilities ([Pawlyk, 2021](#)).

While a diverse and inclusive military is important to health and the esprit de corps, a dangerous fixation on diversity and inclusion can also harm the military’s readiness and warfighting ability ([Jackson, 2021](#)). And there is no quicker way to undercut the morale of the brave men and women who wear the uniform than mission failure. When questioning whether the U.S. military’s current training, investments, and intellectual faculties are focused on warfighting and future conflicts, it is abundantly clear the answer is no. The concerns of America’s men and women in uniform are more than mere isolated incidents, with the military’s top uniformed official focusing on “white rage” and a commission on January 6th ([Horton, 2021](#)). Yet there is no such commission on the disastrous withdrawal of Afghanistan.

Some politicians are prone to utilizing culture wars for political purposes. However, the purpose of the military is to be an institution focused on warfighting. Engagement in petty culture war squabbles with politicians or responses to a major television host ([Madani, 2021](#)) about how the military conducts itself is beneath such an institution and degrading to its history. All members of the United States armed forces swear an oath to protect and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. However, the balance has

seemingly tipped in favor of the latter rather than the former, defining domestic enemies as anyone who is adversarial to the “woke” worldview.

There are steps the military could take that would convey at least some semblance of concern with the growing threat in the Pacific. While some measures have been taken—for example, as of June 2021, the Pentagon has finally announced that it will restructure professional military education (PME) to prioritize China ([Myers, 2021](#))—most of the military’s actions indicate a preference for addressing events at home rather than abroad ([Lamothe, 2021](#)). The Pentagon has made diversity in top ranks a military readiness issue ([Widener, 2021](#)) and there are countless events hosted by the DoD on diversity and inclusion, yet the Pentagon’s withdrawal from Afghanistan has been compared to the likes of the Fall of Saigon ([Simon, 2021](#)) and the Iran Hostage Crisis ([McGurn, 2021](#)). Deterring America’s adversaries and winning America’s wars has seemingly become a secondary concern of the military.

Attention that ought to be turned outward has become introspective in nature and subsequently serves as a distraction from the profession of arms. This paradigm has left the United States increasingly unable to confront future challenges and conflicts.

THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT

Although the terrorism issue is bound to reemerge in light of how the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, the U.S. military must remain focused on the strategic shift to both understand and face the complex range of threats from China. Paired with the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, a recent barrage of cyber-attacks, and the growing threat in the Far East, it is clear the United States is lagging in its adjustment to the emerging threat landscape. However, it is important to analyze what comprises this threat landscape to help shift from a known point and meet these diverse set of challenges.

Most pressingly, there is the growing threat emanating from China in the Far East, which is related not just to current capabilities but also current intentions and future capabilities. Discussions concerning China’s military prowess are often subject to hyperbole from commentators and analysts across the national security spectrum, as it is doubtful they have the necessary manpower or resources to serve as an offensive actor against the United States ([Hartung, 2021](#)). The Chinese Navy, while larger than that of the United States, still pales in quality. However, this should not be an incentive to ignore the growing threat they remain for the United States with their international recognition as the world’s leader in development in hypersonic missiles ([Yeo, Pittaway, Martin, Raghuvanshi, & Ansari, 2021](#)). The Chinese, realizing their limited capability to deter their adversaries outside of hypersonic missiles, have relied mainly on the economic tools to spread their influence around the world.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has risen as China’s primary means for global influence. This massive infrastructure project—reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road—would consist of a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and shipping routes from the east coast of China to as far West as the Netherlands and as far south as Nairobi, Kenya ([Kuo & Kommenda, 2018](#)). China, using its predatory economic policies, has been notably successful in executing its blueprint for world prominence. Conversely, policymakers in the United States continue to debate whether the nation ought to maintain a sizable presence in the Middle East ([Pompilio & Fisher, 2021](#))—even after the withdrawal—and Pentagon officials see

it best to cut the procurement budget of both of the military's premier forces for an Indo-Pacific conflict.

Additionally, with the start of the current administration, there has been an increase in cyber-attacks facing the United States ([Myre, 2021](#)). Malign actors operating within Russia—most likely with the consent of Vladimir Putin ([Myre, 2021](#))—have exposed serious flaws in protecting cyber infrastructure. For example, since the start of the Biden Administration, the United States has been hit with major cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure ([Jefferey & Ramachandran, 2021](#)). In May of 2021, the Colonial Pipeline—the largest petroleum pipeline in the continental United States—was attacked by a criminal hacker group apparently operating out of Russia ([Turton & Mehrotra, 2021](#)). It was the largest cyberattack on an American energy system in U.S. history and resulted in enormously high prices in states along the East Coast. Senior administration officials seemed to have no answer to address the threat beyond paying the ransom ([Holland & Bose, 2021](#)).

Shortly afterwards, JBS USA, a company based in Brazil and currently the world's largest meat supplier, announced it had also been a victim of cyber-attacks by criminals, resulting in the shutdown of 10 of its global plants throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia ([Collier, 2021](#)). Additionally, Sol Oriens, a small government contractor that works with the Department of Energy on issues concerning the nation's nuclear stockpile, was attacked by another Russian-based hacking group, and hackers linked to Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service installed malicious software on a Microsoft system, allowing them to gain access to accounts and contact information ([Wellons & Javers, 2021](#)).

The DoD in its current form seems unprepared and unable to protect against damaging cyber-attacks that attack our nation's critical infrastructure—and that are most likely executed with the consent of an adversary's head of state—and has a force that seems unprepared for the realities of warfare between nation-states in the 21st century. Instead, the ennui from years spent on Afghanistan nation-building efforts has contributed to intellectual atrophy and distraction regarding the military's proper warfighting focus, with the military increasingly dedicating intellectual resources inward on culture war issues rather than on sharpening America's outward preparedness to deal with the increasingly important Indo-Pacific theater. As the military has grown increasingly introspective, it has neglected the existential threats to the United States abroad, therefore allowing adversaries like China and Russia to challenge its hegemony on the international stage.

In the face of existential crises such as a surge of cyber-attacks and a dangerous encroachment of the Chinese Communist Party, the U.S. military needs to enhance its readiness and warfighting capabilities now more than ever. Unfortunately, the Pentagon's current purview seems devoid of many substantive steps needed to reorient the DoD back toward its primary mission.

CONCLUSION

As the United States completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan under the Biden administration, there is no doubt that the threat landscape will evolve in new ways ([Kellogg, Ratcliffe, & Wolf, 2021](#)). The Pentagon must be able to adapt to this new environment, while learning from the mistakes of the last two decades. This means a serious rethinking of past policies and a shift towards enhancing warfighting across domains. A distracting concentration on culture wars has permeated the profession of arms due to an inability to

intellectually pivot towards the Indo-Pacific and therefore deter America's adversaries. Given the threat landscape of future conflicts, it is imperative for the U.S. military to enhance its readiness by returning its focus back to warfighting, or the armed forces run the risk of becoming unable to achieve their primary mission of deterring America's adversaries and winning America's wars in the future.

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