

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO PROTECT AMERICA?

Combatting Global Asymmetric Threats

What Does It Take to Protect America? Combatting Global Asymmetric Threats was the 10th Asymmetric Threat Symposium held by CACI International Inc on October 26, 2017. The symposium was co-sponsored by the Center for Security Policy, the Institute for the Study of War, and the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies. The series is designed to promote dialogue on critical national security issues, focusing on ideas, events, and technologies that drive the evolution of strategic thought and practice. Below is a summary of the discussion.

The core question embedded in the symposium's title reflects the realization that the world is at an inflection point, wherein a combination of technological, political, social, economic, and cultural factors changes all the answers, as well as many of the questions. This inflection point portrays a complex threat array, featuring peer-state adversaries and competitors; foreign and domestic terrorism; and a volatile, rapidly changing, and increasingly hostile global environment. The historically bright line between peace and war has been blurred, raising the question whether the U.S. is already engaged in a multi-front conflict, but hasn't yet fully faced that reality.

New, more intricate, and more numerous problems have come to define the national security landscape, complicating political and strategic rejoinders. Simply put, the operating environment is highly complex precisely because it is no longer structured along the clear boundaries the U.S. and its allies have taken for granted. The distinctions between issues and actions that are political, military, civilian, and private have been blurred. The flattening of the chain of command, due to both speed of action and ubiquitous technology, has pushed decision-making to the tactical edge. Innovation is both necessary and encouraged, but often stymied by entrenched bureaucracies and dogmas. An avalanche of data, delivered at an unprecedented speed, makes critical information easier to miss. It is increasingly difficult to connect the dots when one isn't certain what is real and what is "fake"; when the noise-to-signal ratio is increasing exponentially; and when adversaries are so diverse that it is difficult to ascertain what might deter or provoke. Consequently, the potential for surprise increases. Growing with it is the risk of miscalculation.

Technology advances at a dizzying pace, yet the laws, policies, and authorities governing its use have not kept pace. Self-imposed constraints on employing both old and new have likewise hampered progress. Sequestration, overall decline in defense appropriations, and budget uncertainties have materially damaged U.S. readiness. At the same time, the United States finds itself on the wrong side of the cost-imposition curve, where an adversary can inflict significant damage by acquiring lethal or disruptive technology at a fraction of the cost the U.S. has to bear to develop countermeasures. This itself is a substantial asymmetric threat.

The proliferation of cutting-edge technologies to state and non-state actors raises moral and legal dilemmas, as adversaries are less constrained when it comes to ethics and the laws of kinetic warfare. In an environment where adversaries bend the rules of war – if not ignore them altogether – and deliberate collateral damage is at the core of their strategy, how can the United States prevail without forfeiting the moral high ground and, thus, its very identity?

While the range of mission remains unchanged – reassure allies, deter and, if deterrence fails, decisively defeat those who threaten our security and prosperity – the emerging consensus is that the United States must do new things in new ways, or fall behind. America’s technological, strategic, and operational edge has eroded over 20 years of fighting at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Meanwhile, adversaries have not taken a time out. To the contrary, they exploited America’s focus on Iraq and Afghanistan to evolve strategic approaches, innovate, and invest in competitive capabilities. Consequently, the U.S. faces an environment where every domain – land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace – is congested, contested and, potentially, denied.

Offsetting these changes will require new operational concepts, innovative technologies, rapid modernization and re-capitalization, improved tactics, techniques and procedures all delivered at an unprecedented speed. America’s historic superiority in all domains and its ability to secure global access can no longer be taken for granted.

In this increasingly inhospitable environment, human factors – an area of traditional U.S. advantage – gain an even greater weight. This, in turn, places a premium on recruiting, training, and retaining the future force. Novel approaches must incorporate new technologies and decision-making paradigms, while inculcating the ability to operate effectively with only broad guidance, and in complex, dynamic conditions that require peerless operational and tactical skill, as well as a finely-tuned moral compass and the readiness to take risk.

Two technology sets deserve special mention: deep learning, a subset of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and nuclear weapons. While the path to human-machine teaming and a plethora of robotic systems operating in tandem in the battle space seems wide open, uncertainties abound. Some of the autonomous technology is widely available, readily accessible, and easy to employ by even unskilled actors. Nation-state adversaries possess more advanced autonomous systems and are unlikely to be as constrained as the United States would be in their lethal employment. In either case, the decision to cede life-or-death choices to autonomous systems and smart machines will, most probably, be made at the highest political levels.

Nuclear weapons conjure up similar political, moral and ethical dilemmas. Deterrence and employment concepts can no longer be relegated to theoretical discussions or mathematical calculations of escalation control. America’s ultimate asymmetric advantage is aging rapidly. The anticipated costs of modernization and recapitalization are staggering, yet the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them necessitates both new systems and new deterrence concepts, suitable to the rapidly evolving, asymmetric, multipolar world. The actual employment of nuclear weapons might no longer be the taboo it has been since 1945.

The only affordable path to innovation is through divestiture of obsolescence. Platforms that can’t survive in the new environment, technologies that no longer out-match emerging threats, and outdated intellectual and institutional constructs must be abandoned. Likewise, cumbersome acquisition processes that lag both the pace of combat and technological change must be adjusted or replaced by more agile constructs often adapted from the commercial world.

Time is not on America’s side, but one thing is clear. “It’s everybody’s job to protect the country.” The American people must be made better aware of the dangers and the required responses. The ability to harness the Nation’s talent, ingenuity, will, and determination are – as they’ve always been – the keys to victory.