



# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## U.S. Military Power: Strong Enough to Deter all Challenges?

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**H**ow strong is the U.S. militarily? Recent history would suggest very strong indeed—the U.S. armed forces are undefeated in two stand-up fights with Saddam Hussein, and one each with Slobodan Milosevic and the Taliban. The Grand Strategy of the Bush administration seeks to improve this already impressive position. “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

This objective goes well beyond the traditional U.S. objective of deterring attacks. The Bush administration hopes to create barriers to entry that are so high that they will seem insurmountable to possible challengers. Such a goal could not even be contemplated if the U.S. were not already well ahead of the pack.

Yet, observers of the continuing insurgency in Iraq and the strains it has put on U.S. forces might retain some skepticism about the extent of U.S. superiority. Though U.S. forces have bested Iraqi regulars and irregulars in almost every single direct encounter, the irregulars have proven much tougher to eliminate. As the insurgency has dragged on, a growing percentage of U.S. active and reserve ground forces have done at least one tour in Iraq or Afghanistan, and some are on their second tour. Though morale has held up well, recruitment of new personnel for the reserves and to a lesser extent the active forces, is becoming a problem.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there are also some limits to U.S. capabilities. Below, I explore conceptually the areas of U.S. strength that are likely to prove enduring, and make some cautionary observations about limits to U.S. military power that are also likely to prove enduring.

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**Table 1: Major Centers of Wealth, Population, and Military Power 2003**

(Source: Data drawn from IISS, Military Balance 2004-2005)

Country	GDP (Trn.\$)	Defense Spending (bn.\$)	Population (mns.)
USA	10.9	405	291.0
Japan	4.3	43	127.0
Germany	2.4	35	82.5
UK	1.8	43	59.2
France	1.8	46	59.7
Italy	1.5	28	57.6
China	1.4	56	1288.0
Russia	1.3	65	143.4
India	0.6	16	1060.0

*continued from page 1* — Table 1 tells an oft-told tale; the U.S. spends substantially more on military preparedness than the next eight significant powers combined. These are also the world's most economically productive countries; because military power is distilled from industrial power there is not a lot of military potential left in the world to mobilize beyond these states. U.S. spending does not produce more military people in uniform than these other countries, but it almost certainly does produce more combat power. U.S. Department of Defense figures suggest that in air, sea, airlift, and aerial refueling capabilities the United States maintains more capability than all 26 of its principal allies put together—including NATO Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and several Persian Gulf countries—most of the richest countries in the world. (Comparable figures for Russia, China, and India are not available.)<sup>3</sup> Only in ground power do the allies together exceed the capability of the U.S. Finally, the United States enjoys what appears likely to be an enduring qualitative advantage. In 2003 the U.S. Department of Defense budgeted \$56.8 billion for military research and development—nearly as much as Germany plus France (or the United Kingdom) together budgeted for their entire military effort.<sup>4</sup> The United States seems destined to be on the cutting edge of weapons technology for a very long time.

## Command of the Commons

The United States has attained a very high degree of military capability on and under the sea, in the air (above 15,000 feet), and in space. I have dubbed this capability “Command of the Commons.”<sup>5</sup>

**Definition 1.** The “commons,” in the case of the sea and space, are areas that belong to no one state and provide access to much of the globe. Airspace does technically belong to the countries below it, but there are few countries that can deny their airspace above 15,000 feet to U.S. warplanes.

**Definition 2.** Command does not mean that other states cannot use the commons in peacetime. Nor does it mean that others cannot acquire military assets that can move through or even exploit them when unhindered by the United States. Command means that the United States gets vastly more military use out of the sea, space, and air than do others, that the United States can credibly threaten to deny their use to others, and that others would lose a military contest for the commons if they attempted to deny them to the United States. Having lost such a contest they could not mount another effort for a very long time and the United States would preserve, restore, and consolidate its hold after such a fight.

Command of the commons is the key military enabler of the U.S. global power position. It allows the United States to exploit more fully other sources of power, including its own economic and military might as well as the economic and military might of its allies. Command of the commons also helps the United States to weaken its adversaries, by restricting their access to economic, military, and political assistance. Command of the commons has permitted the United States to wage war on short notice even where it has had little permanent mili-

tary presence. This was true of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the 1993 intervention in Somalia, and the 2001 war in Afghanistan. The United States put a credible offensive capability into the Persian Gulf by the end of November 1990, four months after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The United States waited until January to start the war so that it could bring in even more force. The United States was at war with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan roughly a month after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001.

Command of the commons provides the United States with more useful military potential for a hegemonic foreign policy than any other offshore power has ever had. When nineteenth century Britain had command of the sea, its timely power projection capability ended at the maximum range of the Royal Navy's shipboard guns. The Royal Navy could deliver an army many places on the globe, but the army's journey inland was usually difficult and slow, and without such a journey, Britain's ability to influence events was limited. As the nineteenth century unfolded, the industrialization of the continental powers, improvements in land transportation, and the development of coastal warfare technologies like the torpedo and mine, reduced the strategic leverage provided by command of the sea.<sup>6</sup>

The United States enjoys the same command of the sea that Britain enjoyed, and it can also move large and heavy forces around the globe. But command of space allows the United States to see across the surface of the world's land masses—to gather vast amounts of information on what is going on there. At least on the matter of medium-to-large-scale military developments, the United States can locate and identify military targets with considerable fidelity and communicate this information to offensive forces in a timely fashion. Airpower, ashore and afloat, can reach targets deep inland, and with modern precision-guided weaponry, can often hit and destroy those targets. U.S. forces can even more easily do great damage to a state's transportation and communications networks, and economic infrastructure. When U.S. ground forces do venture inland, they do so against a weakened adversary, and they have decent intelligence, good maps, and remarkable knowledge of their own position from moment to moment. They can also call on a great reserve of responsive, accurate, and often deadly air delivered firepower, which permits the ground forces considerable freedom of action. Political, economic, and technological changes since the 1980s have thus partially reversed the rise of land power relative to sea power that occurred in the late nineteenth century, and which helped produce the erosion of Britain's formal and informal empire.

### The Sources of Command

What are the sources of command of the commons? One obvious source is the general U.S. superiority in economic resources. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, the United States

produces 23 percent of gross world product (GWP); it has more than twice as many resources under the control of a single political authority as either of the next two most potent economic powers—Japan with 7 percent of GWP, and China with 10 percent.<sup>7</sup> With 3.5 to 4 percent of U.S. GDP devoted to defense (nearly one percent of Gross World Product), the U.S. military can undertake larger projects than any military in the world. The specific weapons and platforms needed to secure and exploit command of the commons are expensive. Nuclear powered aircraft carriers and attack submarines, amphibious assault ships, and reconnaissance satellites now reckon their unit costs in billions of dollars. Even combat aircraft now cost tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars each. These weapons depend on a huge scientific and industrial base for their design and production. The military exploitation of information technology, a field where the U.S. military excels, is a key element.

The systems needed to command the commons require significant skills in systems integration and the management of large scale industrial projects, where the U.S. defense industry excels. The

design of new weapons and the development of new tactics, depend on decades of expensively accumulated tactical and technological experience embodied in the institutional memory of public and private military research and development organizations.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the military personnel needed to run these systems are among the most highly skilled and highly trained in the world. The barriers to entry to a state seeking the military capabilities to fight for the commons are very high.

### The Contested Zone

The closer the United States gets to enemy held real estate, however, the more inherently competitive the enemy will be. This arises from a combination of political, physical, and technological facts. These facts combine to create a contested zone—arenas of conventional combat where weak adversaries have a

good chance of doing real damage to U.S. forces. The Serbs, the Somalis, the still unidentified hard cases encountered in "operation Anaconda" in Afghanistan, and even the Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah have demonstrated that it is possible to tilt with the U.S. military. Only the Somalis can claim anything like a victory, but the others have imposed costs, preserved their forces, and often lived to tell the tale—to one another, unfortunately. These countries or entities have been small, resource poor, and often militarily "backward." They offer cautionary tales.

The adversaries that the United States has encountered since 1990 have come to understand U.S. military strengths and they work to neutralize them. The U.S. military often uses the term "asymmetric" threats to encompass an adversary's use of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, or any mode of conventional warfare that takes into account U.S. strengths. This category is a kind

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of trap—smart enemies get a special term, but by subtraction, many are expected to be stupid. This is unlikely to prove true; in any case it is a dangerous way to think about war.

The essential facts are as follows:

First, local actors generally have strong political interests in the stakes of a war—interests that may exceed those of the United States. Their willingness to suffer is therefore often greater.

Second, however small the local actors are, they usually have one resource in more plentiful supply than the all-volunteer U.S. military—males of fighting age. The two remaining designated members of the “axis of evil,” Iran and North Korea, have conscript armies: These two countries have 13 million males between the ages of 18 and 32.<sup>9</sup> Though these numbers are no longer the most crucial ingredient of land warfare, they do remain important, particularly in cities, jungles, and mountains and especially so in insurgencies.

Third, local actors usually have some kind of “home-court advantage.” Just as the U.S. military has built up an institutional memory over decades that has helped it to preserve command of the commons, the local actors have often built up a similar institutional memory about their own arenas. They have intimate knowledge of the terrain and the meteorology and may have spent years adapting their military tactics to these factors. This advantage is magnified by the fact that the local actors are often on the defense, which permits their military engineers to disperse, harden, and camouflage their forces, logistics, and command and control.

Fourth, foreign soldiers have studied how the U.S. military makes war. The Cold War saw a great deal of foreign military education as a tool of political penetration by both the U.S. and Soviet blocs. Potential adversaries have been taught Western tactics, and the use of Western weaponry. They may not be able to emulate U.S. tactics or obtain advanced U.S. weaponry, but they may understand both well enough to devise useful countermeasures. There are even reports that those who have fought the U.S. forces share information on their experiences.

Fifth, the weaponry of the close fight—on land, in the air at low altitudes (anti-aircraft guns and low altitude surface-to-air missiles), and at sea in the so-called littorals (mines and anti-ship missiles)—is much less expensive than that required for combat in the commons. A great deal of useful weaponry was left over from the Cold War, especially Warsaw Pact pattern weaponry, and it is particularly inexpensive. Warsaw Pact pattern infantry weapons—rifles, machine guns, mortars, anti-tank grenade launchers, and their ammunition—are plentiful and absurdly cheap. Demand for new weaponry has diminished greatly since the Cold War ended, so there is plenty of manufacturing capability looking for markets.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the diffusion of economic and technological capabilities in the civil sector is paralleled in the military sector. New manufacturers are emerging, who themselves will seek export markets. Weaponry for close-range combat is also being continuously refined. Old weapons are becoming more lethal because of better ammunition. New versions of old weapons are also more lethal and survivable. Because these weapons are

inherently relatively inexpensive, even some of the newer versions will find their way into the hands of smaller and poorer states.

Taken together, these factors, which are mutually reinforcing, create a “contested zone.” In this zone, interactions between U.S. and local forces will often be a real military contest. This is not a prediction of U.S. defeat. It is a prediction of adversity. It is a prediction of a zone in which the U.S. military will require clever strategies and adroit tactics. It is a zone in which the U.S. military must think carefully and candidly about its own strengths and weaknesses, and how to leverage the former and buffer the latter. It is a zone where patient and committed adversaries can extend the duration of military action to their advantage. And it is a zone where U.S. casualties are a normal cost of action, rather than an unusual consequence of occasional bad luck or the odd piece of not quite perfected technology.

The United States is probably the greatest global military power that has ever existed. Yet, the adjective “global” must be understood. U.S. capabilities are particularly well suited to extend its influence across the world, to affect the conduct of international politics everywhere, and to prevent others from similarly extending their influence. The United States may be able to discourage others from trying to become global military powers because the project is so difficult, and the U.S. lead is so great. Global military power, however, is not quite the same as an ability to dominate every local actor, nor to convince local actors that they cannot build sufficient military capability to challenge the U.S. in their own neighborhoods. Committed, medium-sized nations can, at moderate financial cost, still turn themselves into porcupines. The United States will not be able to discourage or prevent this because it is not so difficult, and because local actors will be very strongly motivated to develop what they will believe are essentially defensive capabilities, which all states want. Sometimes the United States may be forced by circumstances to war with such nations, but the costs will often surprise us. Careful consideration must be given to whether such engagements are essential, and if so, how the U.S. can leverage its global military power to achieve local military success.

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### article footnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Moniz, "Army Misses Recruiting Goal," *USA Today*, March 3, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense*, July 2003, Table C-2, C-3, "Selected Indicators of Contributions," pp. C3-4.

<sup>4</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2003-2004* (London: 2002), pp. 233,247-249.

<sup>5</sup> The following draws substantially on my "Command of the Commons, The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 5-46.

<sup>6</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan, 1983, first published in 1976 by Allen Lane), chapter 7, "Mahan versus Mackinder (1859-1897)", pp. 205-237.

<sup>7</sup> I have calculated these percentages from the country entries in *The World Factbook*, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2001), [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov). The purchasing power parity method used by the CIA creates an exaggerated impression of China's current economic and technological capability. Measured by currency exchange rates, the United States had 29.5 percent of gross world product in 1999, Japan had 14 percent, and China had only 3.4 percent. See "World Gross Domestic Product by Region," Table A3, Appendix A, *International Energy Outlook*, 2002, Report DOE/EIA-0484 (Washington, D.C.: Energy Information Administration, 2002), <http://www.eia.doe.gov>.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Allen Kaufman, "Security Lessons from the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (July/August 1999), pp. 77-89.

<sup>9</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 2002-2003*, pp. 103-105, 153-154, 279,299. Nearly 10 million are in Iran, which conscripts perhaps only 125,000 of its 950,000 eligible males annually. North Korea appears to conscript virtually all of its eligible males.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Williams and Nicholas Wood, "Iraq finds Ready Arms Sellers from Baltic Sea to Bosnia," *International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 2002, [www.iht.com](http://www.iht.com)



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