

CHALLENGES OF DEFINING A COUNTRY'S MILITARY POWER

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The concept of military power seems straightforward, but it is a lot more complex than it appears at first glance, which has direct implications on defense decisions and analyses. A crucial issue in building a country's armed forces and deciding on its appropriate size/strength derives from the fact that there is only one situation in which a country's military power can be precisely assessed, that is in time of military conflict. Excluding this situation, the best military planners and decision makers can do in peacetime is try to estimate the required and actual strength of a country's military, an attempt not devoid of challenges. The focus of this paper is to address a few of the issues and challenges encountered in defining the concept of a country's military power.

Key words: *military, power, challenges.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of national security and the duty of the armed forces to provide national defense is found in many strategic documents, in most of the countries around the world. Strategies are useful as guiding documents, but when it comes to the implementation of the goals and objectives set into them and translating national defense into measurable indicators, things get complicated. Decisions such as building and maintaining an "appropriate level" of defense forces, estimating the "real military strength" of a country against a potential

enemy, making financial decisions regarding the "appropriate level of budgetary allocations for defense" all depend on the clarification of one concept, namely what exactly is military power.

2. CHALLENGES IN DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF MILITARY POWER

A crucial issue in building a country's armed forces and deciding on its appropriate size/strength derives from the fact that there is only one situation in which a country's military power can be precisely

assessed, with all its inter-related components (from personnel and its morale to the number of available equipment and its maintenance, the level of technological sophistication, the quality of strategies, doctrines, operational concepts, the leadership, the political will to use the forces in a timely and appropriate manner, to name but a few). This situation refers to a less-than desirable occurrence, meaning the event of a military conflict, in which a country's military is used against an enemy. In this situation, the true size of a country's military strength is starkly revealed, but at the same time most countries and military planners do not desire such a harsh acid-test.

Excluding the situation or armed conflict, the best military planners and decision makers can do in peacetime is try to *estimate* the required and actual strength of a country's military. A first crucial step in this respect is the realization that no country can assess its military power in a vacuum, that even in the age of capabilities based planning and comprehensive approaches, Andy Marshall's words remain true: "estimating the military power... can only be done relative to that of another country, or a set of countries viewed as an alliance" [1].

The shift from the threat based planning towards capabilities based planning from 2001 onward (first in the US, then NATO and other countries)

marked a change from the traditional threat based approach, considering that focusing on a specific enemy in order to build a country's defense is obsolete. In the words of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "the capabilities-based model focuses more on how an adversary might fight rather than specifically whom the adversary might be or where a war might occur...the US States must identify the capabilities required to deter and defeat adversaries who will rely on surprise, deception, and asymmetric warfare to achieve their objectives" [2].

This approach was not without criticism, as other experts consider also the limitations of capabilities based planning, that seems to refer to a "nameless, faceless adversary who may be technologically advanced... but that adversary has no connections to any geography, culture, alliance structure or fighting methodology. That adversary has no objectives, no systemic vulnerabilities, and no preferred way of fighting. Instead, the enemy is a collection of weapons systems that we will fight with a (presumably) more advanced set of similar systems, in a symmetrical widget-on-widget battlefield on a flat, featureless Earth." [3]

The concept of capabilities based planning (as was initially understood) cannot be separated from the context it appeared in, namely the attacks on the Twin

Towers in New York in 9/11/2001 and the need for the US to shift from an approach to develop its military power still tributary to the Cold War philosophy to a world where the enemy could be a state or non-state actor. Since then, the concept of CBP has evolved and matured into the current concept, in which capabilities become less theoretical and reflexive and do not exclude the comparison with a distinct foe. Individual countries as potential foes (more often Russia, China, or North Korea) are once again mentioned in security and defense strategies of various countries [4] or alliances [5] and reputable military experts once again focus their analyses on cross-country comparisons of military power [6]. United States Department of Defense, the originator of the CBP approach, "is in the opening stages of "redesigning the force" around the challenges of Russia and China" [7].

The complex consideration regarding what really means military power have prompted military planners and experts to explore better complex methods of determining the level of military strength. Still, political decision makers often tend to favor simpler ways, and they often prefer using *quantitative indicators*. For instance, the use of 2% of GDP allocated for defense is often used lately as a substitute of indicator of military strength [8], especially by the Trump administration in its

attempt to pressure the European NATO allies to increase their military expenditures. Though convenient and easy to use, this type of indicator does not present an accurate picture of the real capabilities / military strength of a country and not even of the overall level of defense expenditures, as that depends on the economic strength and the size of the Gross Domestic Product of each individual country. Neither does the use of the 2% of GDP for defense indicator present an accurate picture of the overall military strength of an alliance, which is far from being the result of an arithmetic sum of the member's individual strength and capabilities. The level of expenditures on equipment as a share of total defense expenditure (another indicator favored by NATO) doesn't present either the entire picture of how effective a military force or an alliance really is. A specific country may spend a lot of money on a system that may serve its needs, but not be fully interoperable with other member's weapon systems (the example of Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S400 air defense systems is relevant). Overall, an alliance's military power is the result of more than the sum of military equipment and number of personnel, or the amount of money spent on defense by individual countries. The individual military power of the member countries is important, but also the shared strategic interests

and cohesion of the members, that underlines the political will to use the existing forces for the achievement of the alliance's objectives, and of the existence of modern, interoperable forces at an appropriate level of readiness (expressed and a measure of usability and sustainability).

Also, a country's military power is not exclusively dependent on its own military forces, as the geographical location, the availability of bases, logistic support, transportation, the network of allies are also an important factor. US's military power may not be quite the same without its bases in European and Asian countries, and without the support of its allies. Syria's military would never had been able to conquer back so much of the country's territory from the rebel forces without the decisive intervention of Russia's air force.

The different perceptions of what means the military power derive also from the *differences in the scope* of the concept: a nation's military power can be understood in the broad sense or a narrow sense.

The *narrow sense of military power* is easier to define, as it refers to country's own military forces, capacity and capabilities. This is the most common used approach in quantifying a country's military power, for example in the International Institute for Security Studies' annual assessment of the military capabilities and defense

economics of 171 countries worldwide, the Military Balance [9]. Usually, this type of analysis starts from the assessment of the required and existing "means" (personnel, equipment, weapons, communication systems etc.) required to achieve a military outcome. To this, military planners need to add the operational context in which the forces will likely be used, clear tasks, objectives and doctrines, slowly building up to the concept of military capabilities, defined as "the ability to achieve a desired effect in a specific operating environment" [10] or "the ability to achieve a specified wartime objective...includes force structure, modernization, readiness and sustainability" [11].

The *broad sense of military power* is rather difficult to define, as it is not an easy task to draw a clear line between the military power and the other instruments of power. For example, would the perceived military power of Romania be the same if the country was not a NATO member and did not enjoy the additional benefits derived from the status of a member in a military alliance? Most NATO countries could afford to downsize their armed forces, specialize in providing specific capabilities and make significant savings due to the fact that the military planners included the benefits of NATO's military power in their requirements assessments. The costs to the national

defense budgets would have been a lot bigger (perhaps unaffordable for some countries) if they had to design their armed forces in complete autarchy (for example including capabilities such as air interdiction). Due to this symbiotic relation between the national military power and the Alliance's military power, it is very difficult to accurately assess the "real" military power of a NATO member on its own, especially for countries that do not aspire to more autonomous posture, such as France.

Another difficulty in accurately defining a country's military power in the broader sense is related to the purpose of having military power in the first place. Usually, the goal of a country's armed forces is defined in the strategic documents as defending the country against armed foreign aggression. In other words, it also refers to the ability to produce a desired effect in relation to the behavior of another country, through coercive means (defeating the other country's armed forces in battle), but also through non-coercive means. These non-coercive means do not refer to other instruments of power (such as economic or diplomatic), but to the perception of military power projected by a country. This perception is closely linked to the concept of *deterrence* ("the practice of discouraging or restraining someone—in world politics, usually a nation-state—from taking

unwanted actions, such as an armed attack.") [12] and *dissuasion* (the process of making an aggression as unnecessary as it is costly, of convincing a potential attacker that the costs it will incur by launching an attack far outweigh the potential benefits). [13]

Deterrence does not mean that a country relies solely on perceptions and illusions of military power, as it requires clear policies, actions and allocation of resources to build sufficient forces in order to increase the costs and the risks for a potential foe in the event it would attack. Still, these actions will not be enough on their own, as their effects depend on the image perceived by the other countries. For instance, no military analyst can claim to accurately be able to estimate the real military power of North Korea, but the state is engaged in a sophisticated power game of changing perceptions and presenting itself as a military power to be reckoned with, through carefully timed and missile launches combined with communication campaigns.

Dissuasion, on the other hand, is the soft side of deterrence, as it also offers the "carrot" of presenting the benefits of engaging in cooperation with that country as opposed to the "stick" of deterrence (focusing on the potential costs for the aggressor state).

In this complicated picture of perception versus reality, it is

difficult to make a clear distinction between real forces that may produce real effects and the image/perception of the military power of a particular country.

Related to the issue of defining military power in the broader sense, of producing a desired effect in relation to the behavior of another country, *asymmetric warfare* (to use one of the many expressions that are trying to define the concept) poses a particular challenge. Asymmetric warfare, defined here as “as a way of fighting by a belligerent who rejects the rules of engagement and principles that underlie the strategic culture of its opponent, and uses methods which are unexpected, alien, and not acceptable by the adversary” [14], is not a new concept, as it has been around, in one form or another, since the beginning of mankind. The novelty in the modern world resides from the use of the advances in technology, psychology and the changes in the society (such as the rising popularity of social media) to achieve military objectives. Asymmetric warfare, unconventional warfare, new generation warfare – all refer to a combination of methods intended to facilitate the achievement of specific goals for the country using them. In today’s volatile and extremely complex security environment, it is an impossible challenge to clearly differentiate between military power

and the power generated through asymmetric measures. Asymmetric warfare is waged through a combination of inseparable military (such as intelligence military units, special operation forces or cyber units belonging to the ministry of defense) and non-military means (hackers, influencers, bribery, espionage etc.), whose effects cannot be easily separated. It can take part on its own (for example as an attempt to influence the electoral process in a target country) or as part of a military operation (the example of Russia’s campaign in Crimea is a textbook example).

Another factor that makes military power difficult to estimate relates to the *will to use it in the most appropriate way to deliver the optimum results*. The best weapon is useless in the hands of an unskilled warrior, and the effectiveness of hard power is also directly affected by the willingness of the decision makers to use it and on their proficiency. Right before the Second World War, United Kingdom had a clear policy of maintaining air force superiority and in the words of Winston Churchill regarding the German air menace “we estimate that we shall still have in Europe alone a margin of nearly 50 per cent” [15]. Still, the outcome during the first year of the war is well known in history, to the detriment of the UK, as it did not initially make good use of its air

superiority, by failing to resource it properly. Political willingness to use a country's military power to its true potential is a key component of a successful result, as it has been proven many times in history, from the Second World War, to Vietnam war and in modern times during NATO's operation Unified Protector in Libya, when sustainability issues (the ability to maintain the necessary level of military effort until the achievement of the set objectives) forced some participating countries to retire their forces soon after the beginning of the operation.

Finally, when trying to estimate the level of a country's military power, we cannot overlook the *issue of time and resources*. Armed forces cannot be developed on short term, even if a country's defense budget would be increased 200%. The best strategies and doctrines are useless until the appropriated resources are allocated, at the appropriate time. A strategy will not produce results in terms of military power if it is not followed through from one legislature to another, if priorities change often and the maximum time-frame for defense related decisions is 4 years (deriving from specifics of the 1 year budget cycle and three years estimations, but also of the electoral cycle).

Political decision makers are tempted to favor in terms of resource allocations those areas that produce results on short term, which are useful

to keep the support of their electoral base and have to decide towards what area of the government sector to allocate scarce resources. Developing an appropriate level of military power takes time, as acquiring expensive military equipment through multi-year acquisitions programs, training a professional staff, developing appropriate doctrines, and all the other components of a military capability usually take a medium time to achieve and the results are likely to be shown in the following legislature. This makes the change of building a country's military power a long term endeavor, based on clarity and consistency in determining what exactly is the required level of military power, given the current and future security environment, and the evolution towards the set goals.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In order to achieve an appropriate level of military power, a country's top level decision makers have to be aware of the complex issues underlying this seemingly straight forward concept. The contemporary environment is increasingly complex and uncertain, adding to the traditional challenges faced by military experts and political decision makers the unique characteristics of the modern conflicts that are no longer fought exclusively on a physical battlefield.

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