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The Pentagon Pathology

by GABRIEL KOLKO

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The allocation of money within the American military system is reflected in which weapons are chosen—and why. What is at stake are rivalries among military branches, which have influence and connections with arms producers, the Congress, and the entire complex matrix of factors that determine who wins and loses in the Pentagon budget process. The United States has, by far, the largest military budget of any nation on earth but it also loses wars, cannot procure everything the military services dream up, and ultimately it too must choose between weapons at the expense of the priorities and demands of other services.

In plain English, if the Air Force gets an ultra-modern aircraft which may cost many billions, even trillions, and takes years to iron out the technology (and may ultimately even never operate) there will be less money for the Army and Navy to attain its dreams—or visa versa.

Here some historical background is in order.

In April 1950 the U. S. National Security Council (NSC) produced a policy paper, which remained top secret until 1975, which discussed a wide range of crucial national security problems, and among many things led to the creation of H-bombs. One of its major conclusions was that the American and Western European economies faced the danger of a slowdown unless the governments spent more. The Congress still had members who wanted to balance the budget, and it and the public did not adequately appreciate that the Cold War would continue and require yet greater efforts. There are many contingencies at play, ranging from a roll-back of Communism in Eastern Europe to the need for the U.S. to be ready to negotiate with the Soviets

under certain circumstances. There was an excessively simplistic view of what the U.S.S.R.'s ultimate objectives were, an utterly inadequate view of the Sino-Soviet relationship, and the weaknesses in the Soviet system that ultimately led to the complete disappearance of the U.S.S.R. in 1991. The NSC report advocated "a substantial increase in expenditures for military purposes," and up to \$50 billion was later agreed upon. - The original Pentagon budget for 1950 was \$13 billion. The outbreak of the Korean War the following June reinforced the NSC's worst assumptions about Soviet intentions, blaming it for the war but ignoring the extent to which the North Koreans, like Tito in Yugoslavia or the Chinese, were independent actors. The Pentagon's budget became the backbone of the American economy in the late 1940s, and has been crucial ever since.

In this context, the controversy over the Air Force's B-36 bomber broke out, pitting the Air Force against the Navy, which wanted the money the Air Force was getting for the B-36 to build super-carriers. The fight between the Air Force and Navy went public, with the Navy even arguing that the B-36, which carried nuclear weapons, was "morally reprehensible," an argument that the Air Force called cynical, since super-carriers could also deliver nuclear weapons and even then the Navy was developing the Polaris submarine, which carried mainly strategic nuclear bombs. The Navy—with the help of some elements of the Air Force, who wanted the bomber money for tactical fighters, and competitive airframe producers—played too dirty for the Truman Administration. Some of its spokesmen pointed out that the contract for the B-36 airframe would go to Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Company, which needed the contract to bail out its sinking economic fortunes. The Secretary of Defense at the time had once been a member of Vultee's board of directors. Truman was eventually to fire at least one senior Naval officer over this affair.

Are the military officers merely fronts for competitive aerospace firms anxious to get contracts? Private corporations often take the initiative, investing their own funds in the process, for military innovations they then present to the services, which then underwrite the development of some of them. The B-36 eventually ended as scrap after billions were spent developing it. Closing its bases—any bases for that matter—had to confront the resistance of Congressmen from the districts the bases were located in. There were 225 military bases in the U.S. at the beginning of the 1960s, about a quarter of which the Department of Defense deemed useless. Resistance to closing them was intense; most have remained operational.

Right before September 11, 2001, China was slated to be the main problem facing the U.S., but after the attacks China became far less important than "terrorism," a nebulous category that displace "Communism" from being the main American enemy. This move produced some confusion in the ranks. The Pentagon needs an enemy to justify its vast spending, and "terrorism" sufficed until the past few years, when the U.S. military declared it had won victories in Iraq and Afghanistan—which it, of course, did not—and began pulling out.

Only in 2012, when it was far more powerful and had much more economic as well as military might, was China revived as a potential enemy with President Obama's "pivot" towards Asia. The very same people who conjured up the alleged Chinese menace for Rumsfeld did so for Obama. Many in the Pentagon, particularly in the Army and Marines, who fear the strategy being conjured up for a potential conflict with China will sidelined them, deplore it as one that

would result in “incalculable human and economic destruction.” -The Air Force and Navy see it as justification for their very expensive projects. Merely considering the concept of a contest with China is like playing with fire; but because it brings in money then the Navy and Air Force have promoted it. It is probable that a conflict elsewhere will make the assumptions underlying an Air-Sea Battle (which is war with China), a notion that becomes abstract, of lower priority. On the other hand, the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessments is run by Andrew Marshall, who was the leading hawk on China for Bush and now is advising the Obama Administration. Marshall has the power to allocate up to \$19 million in study grants to assorted think tanks, who thereby have a huge financial incentive to tell him what he wants to hear and keep the money coming. Some of these outside “thinkers,” get enormous incomes.

War with China is a quixotic idea, and it could go nuclear. The Navy has a super-modern destroyer on the drawing boards, already in production but the technology in it is only partially developed (and like other technologically ultra-modern projects is likely to take years to perfect in some form or another), the DDG-1000, which is also very expensive (up to seven billion dollars each if research and development is included), and has already been cut from the 32 that originally were to be ordered to seven, and now only three are being built. Some defense experts think it’s a waste of money that could be better allocated elsewhere in the Navy. A senior Chinese Navy officer has already dismissed the DDG-1000 and outlined a way to sink it. But China I have predicted that the so-called Pacific pivot—which is supposed to take 10 years to complete—is simply talk and China is unlikely to be the U.S.’ main focus in 2022. The U.S. is now active in the Middle East, Africa, and many places besides the Pacific. Where will it be 10 years from now? No one knows, the Pentagon included. If a nation has global ambitions then it could become involved in a crisis anywhere.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld thought that a modern American military’s “shock and awe” capacity would prevail—but he was oblivious to the political aspects of all conflicts. And the political context of a war can be decisive. The U.S. always has superior military power, even if it pays far too much for it, but military superiority is irrelevant to inherited ethnic tensions in nations or with decentralized subsistence economies. The existence of threats, whether Communist or “terrorist” is essential to justify the Pentagon’s vast budgets. By now, that budget, however its divided, is an aspect of the basic American identity. It has too many well-connected basic interests supporting it, ranging from members of the House and Senate, companies dependent on military contracts and unions in arms factories.

The B-36 was supposed to be super-modern and do things that earlier bombers could not. For about a decade it was the backbone of the Strategic Air Command, when almost all of the 384 built were scrapped. The B-36 was conceived in early 1941, intended to bomb Nazi Germany, but after 1945 it was intended to bomb the U.S.S.R. Fortunately it never dropped any nuclear devices or did any of the things it was designed for. Some experts thought it “arguably obsolete from the outset.” The bomber had terrible accidents, including some crashes in which nuclear weapons were involved. It was a total waste of money but the Air Force would not admit it, so the B-36 stayed in service for 10 years. Until the intercontinental strategic missile was developed, it was the only means the Air Force had to drop nuclear weapons on the Soviet Union.

The problem of super-modern planes—such as the F-35, also called the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), of which Lockheed-Martin is the principal contractor and cost from \$197 to \$238 million each (depending on the model)—is that they often incorporate technology that has yet to be developed or they have performance kinks which emerge that must be investigated. Some are resolved fairly quickly, but the F-35 remains plagued by problems. The Air Force plans to buy about 2,400 jets for the U.S. alone, serving as the nation's main tactical fighter until about 2040. It is also set to become NATO's main tactical fighter. Over its 50-year lifetime, the U.S. alone will pay about one trillion dollars for all the F-35s, perhaps more.

There is a Pentagon study that the maintenance cost alone of the F-35 over its lifetime may be another one trillion dollars. Even the Pentagon would like to reduce this immense figure. It is an astonishing sum for a tactical fighter that cannot do much more than those the Air Force already has and may turn out to be completely useless. But the Air Force in this case reflects a pathology and culture that is expressed in spending more money regardless. All that is certain is that the F-35 will run up the U.S. debt.

The JSF has been criticized as too heavy, too expensive (its price is always rising), unable to cope with modern air defenses, and the like. Some have argued that the existing fleet of tactical aircraft is quite adequate. It has not been produced for actual use yet—late 2015 is the earliest date given for delivery—and that date is probably too optimistic.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in January 2011 deprecated “the culture of endless money” that the ever-more expensive JSF fighter reflected, and talked about the possibility of canceling the whole program. But Gates' successor, Leon Panetta, thought the JSF2—the most disputed and technically sophisticated of the variations of the basic JSF—had made “sufficient progress.”

But the JSF project has been characterized by delays. The first jet rolled off the production line in February 2006. But like most sophisticated, complex technologies, the production runs and redesigns take many years to complete projects, during which time the world political-military context can change radically and render the assumptions used to procure a specific weapon outdated. Because of delays, a weapon that costs a fortune can be useless even before it is finished. The B-36 is a good example.

Predictably, serious cost overruns and delays have caused some nations who originally intended taking the JSF in some form to balk at the increased costs inherent in fighters that incorporate technology that still doesn't exist, also revealing the disunity inherent in the U.S.'s strategic alliances.

It is an ingrained Air Force habit to innovate by relying on ultra-modern technologies, which have frequently yet to be made functional, and to spend money rather than being practical. The Pentagon loses major wars, politically if not militarily. It requires another mindset. But if the past is any precedent, it will certainly not find one.

The U.S. has imperial ambitions and illusions, which are used to justify spending money, but the service branches also have interests in getting weapons at each other's expense. Ultimately, however, even Pentagon spending has its limits. These constraints foster inter-service rivalries.

There is never enough money to satisfy all of their dreams, which often requires new technologies. There is a complexity about U.S. military policy, mainly caused by a combination of technological fetishism and American chauvinism, that befuddles anyone who tries to assess it and determine the real causes of actions—it often perplexes me too. The U. S. military has immense confidence in the prowess of advanced arms and its abilities, and its failures in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have not altered the Pentagon's belief in its own superiority. But the U.S. military brass refuses to really internalize the fact that other nations are ahead of it in some of the most important aspects of modern warfare. China may already match or exceed it. For example, the U. S. has about 1,000 cyber-security experts but needs at least twenty times that number.

This complexity affects those who are critics of America's policies but also produces fatal illusions among those who have power, illusions which often require a great deal of money. Determining what the Pentagon branches do that is self-serving or based on false premises—or even both—is very difficult. The only consequence for critics is that they may be inaccurate. People in power can load the system with more debts, false premises that lead to yet more mistaken decisions, military engagements, or even both—and have much more serious consequences.

In any case, priorities are determined by who has power, and here I want to show how this process leads to the neglect of obtaining weapons that are more functional than those the Pentagon actually buys. Priorities are often decided by forces—political, interests, arms lobbies, etc.—and who has the clout required for obtaining what they think important. Rationality is impossible when a system, in this case the Pentagon, makes crucial decisions because a service branch has influence in Congress, vested corporate interests and arms manufacturers who lobby and oppose budget cuts, and the like to back up its expensive fantasies. The result is that the United States still undertakes military engagements based on the naïve premise that its weapons superiority can overcome the political weaknesses that bedeviled it in Korea, Vietnam, and now Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Impossibility of Practicality

On the whole, the Army is the least able of the three major services to obtain the funding it wants or needs. It is the very nature of the services that the largest development funding goes to the Air Force and Navy, where technological innovations are more common. The U.S. Army's ultimate function is to win wars, including killing those who get in its way or want to thwart it. Yet, it has not won a war since 1946. It fought to a draw in Korea and lost in Vietnam. Wars are very complex and conventional armies alone tend not to win them. The U.S. Army is very conventional,

The basic American weapon, the assault rifle, now the M-16 and its variants, is not a functional gun. The Army has spent less money than the Air Force and Navy on expensive weapons, but this is only relative. It still has invested vast sums in other ground weapons, but its basic combat weapon is poor. Those in the Defense Department who write about the M-16's inadequacies have not been able to get the Army to adopt a better weapon or bullets—the M-16, according to a writer in an official Army publication, has become like the “Holy Grail,” not to be criticized

even though the Soviet-built AK-47, is better suited to fight in the very diverse environments that exist in Third World nations, where the U.S. fights most of its wars.

The U. S. Army has altered the basic infantry M-16 rifle and bullet, and tried to improve it, but these changes have still been unable to match the Soviet-designed AK-47 or its improvements, and both in Vietnam and Afghanistan some American soldiers have resorted to using captured AK-47s to get around the M-16's liabilities—which include a propensity to jam because of a basic design flaw.

All factors considered, including the fact that the AK-47 is much cheaper than the M-16 and its variants, there are now around 100 million AK-47s and variants of it in the world and only about eight million M-16 and its variants. Each has assets and liabilities, but the M-16s has major jamming problems that have often been fatal to American troops. -It is far more complex than the AK-47. Though inferior to the M-16 in certain regards, the AK-47 is far easier to use. It is produced in countless nations, from Bangladesh to Togo, and even in the U. S. it has over a dozen manufacturers. -“Good enough” is the justification for the AK-47's simplicity and reliability. It is ubiquitous and is the weapon of choice of the U.S.'s enemies or potential opponents. “We are clearly outgunned,” a Defense Department analyst concludes in a recent issue of the Army's MILITARY REVIEW.

Why is this? One would think that a military that spends so much money would have the best weapon possible. Technical fetishism? A lack of intelligence or bureaucratic inertia? All of them? Perhaps something else, like a lack of a firm with a sufficient vested interest and political influence to see a better weapon produced? Some critics of the Army who are within the Pentagon say that good replacements for the standard battle weapon already exist. Rather than dwell on this conundrum it is sufficient to remark that at the same time the U.S. has super-modern weapons its basic weapon is not adequate for its very ambitious goals.

This fact is a bit fantastic, and hard to believe. The U. S. wants to police the world and is building super-modern weapons, many of which either don't work or they have design flaws that neutralize their effectiveness. The Pentagon's budget is helping to bankrupt America, but it lacks a good basic weapon for its soldiers.

Myths run throughout America's leadership, many reinforced by Congressional hawks who insist the Pentagon spend money, especially on weapons built by companies within their districts. There are Pentagon hawks too who need no pushing. But often Congress is even more hawkish than the military leaders. For example, the idea that the U. S. should be able to fight two wars simultaneously is a cherished notion of hawkish Congressmen, but President George W. Bush was compelled to add the Reserves to fight in Iraq. The American military in Iraq and Afghanistan never attained victory. The theory that they should do so in the future remains just a theory, if not a fantasy.

The problem is dealing with nuance: sometimes the advocates of higher spending are the defense industry and their lobbyists, sometimes the Congress—House and Senate. The defense industry is opposed to cuts because they want to sell arms. Boeing is predicting disaster if the Congress cuts military spending by a tenth, and the top five arms firms increased their spending on

lobbying 11.5 percent in the first quarter of 2012 over the first quarter of 2011. But if we are compelled to categorize President Obama, he too is a hawk. In his January 5, 2012 speech in the Pentagon's briefing room he talked of saving \$450 billion from their budget over the next decade but also maintaining the ability to cope with any challenge. To Obama, this means investing in intelligence, surveillance, counterterrorism, and prevailing in all domains, assuring that the U. S. has a military that is "...ready for the full range of contingencies."

This strategy is largely dependent on finding new technologies and that means more long-term contracts for defense firms. Aside from taking an unpredictable amount of time to develop (the American defense industry usually requires much time to create sophisticated technology, which generally cost much more than originally predicted), it also assumes that those who the U.S. deems potential enemies have no ability to find effective measures to get around the new American devices—the principles of which have been well advertised in advance.

The enduring problem is that the U.S. has retained its overweening ambitions and learned nothing from its failures over the past decades. If this seems a bit surrealistic it is because it is.