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The U.S. Army's War Over Russia

Top brass profess to be really worried about Putin. But a growing group of dissenters say they're overreacting to get a bigger share of the defense budget.

By Mark Perry
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During the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864, a unit of Robert E. Lee's army rolled up some artillery pieces and began shelling the headquarters of Union commander Ulysses S. Grant. When one of his officers pleaded that Grant move, insisting that he knew exactly what Lee was going to do, Grant, normally a taciturn man, lost his temper: "Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do," he said. "Some of you always seem to think he is going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do."

The story was recalled to me a few weeks ago by a senior Pentagon officer in citing the April 5 testimony of Army leaders before a Senate Armed Services Subcommittee. The panel delivered a grim warning about the future of the U.S. armed forces: Unless the Army budget was increased, allowing both for more men and more materiel, members of the panel said, the United States was in danger of being "outranged and outgunned" in the next war and, in particular, in a confrontation with Russia. Vladimir Putin's military, the panel averred, had outstripped the U.S. in modern weapons capabilities. And the Army's shrinking size meant that "the Army of the future will be too small to secure the nation." It was a sobering assessment delivered by four of the most respected officers in the Army—including Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, his service's leading intellectual. The claim is the prevailing view among senior Army officers, who fear that Army readiness and modernization programs are being weakened by successive cuts to the U.S. defense budget.

But not everyone was buying it.
"This is the 'Chicken-Little, sky-is-falling' set in the Army," the senior Pentagon officer said. "These guys want us to believe the Russians are 10 feet tall. There's a simpler explanation: The Army is looking for a purpose, and a bigger chunk of the budget. And the best way to get that is to paint the Russians as being able to land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. What a crock."

The Army panel's assessment of the Russian danger was reinforced by an article that appeared in these pages two days later. The article reported on an expansive study that McMaster has ordered to collect the lessons of Ukraine. It paraphrased Army leaders and military experts who warn the Russian-backed rebel army has been using "surprisingly lethal tanks" and artillery as well as "swarms of unmanned aerial vehicles" to run roughshod over Ukrainian nationalists. While the reporting about the Army study made headlines in the major media, a large number in the military's influential retired community, including former senior Army officers, rolled their eyes. "That's news to me," one of these highly respected officers told me. "Swarms of unmanned aerial vehicles? Surprisingly lethal tanks? How come this is the first we've heard of it?"
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The fight over the Army panel's testimony is the latest example of a deepening feud in the military community over how to respond to shrinking budget numbers. At issue is the military's strategic future: Facing cuts, will the Army opt to modernize its weapons' arsenal, or defer modernization in favor of increased numbers of soldiers? On April 5, the Army's top brass made its choice clear: It wants to do both, and Russia's the reason. But a growing chorus of military voices says that demand is both backward and dangerously close-minded—that those same senior military officers have not only failed to understand the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq and embrace service reform, they are inflating foreign threats to win a bigger slice of the defense budget.

Indeed, the numbers seem to be on the sign of the reformers. Recent estimates show the Russian military is overmatched. The United States spends seven times the amount of money on defense as Russia ($598 billion vs. $84 billion), has nearly twice the number of active duty personnel (1.4 million vs. 766,000), just under six times as many helicopters (approximately 6,000 vs. 1,200), three times the number of fighters (2,300 vs. 751) and four times the total number of aircraft. We have 10 aircraft carriers, the Russians have one. And while it's true that the Russians field nearly twice the number of tanks as the U.S. (15,000 vs. 8,800), their most recent version, the T-14 Armata, broke down during the 2015 Moscow May Day Parade. America's M1A1 Tank, on the other hand, has never been defeated in battle. Ever. The idea that you can look at these numbers and think that the U.S. military is in serious trouble is ridiculous, the reformers say.

The most outspoken critic of the Army panel's testimony has been retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, head of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies. "It's time to stop waving the bloody red shirt," he wrote to me. "Calling for more resources because you're taking casualties is a wake-up call for a new approach—not for throwing more folks into the meat grinder. We really

need to think in a deliberate goal-oriented way to secure national interests, not just parochial Army interests."

To underscore this point, Deptula and Doug Birkey published an article singling out McMaster's testimony that the U.S. military would be "outranged and outgunned by many potential adversaries in the future." The statement was true, Deptula and Birkey pointed out, so long as you don't count the Air Force. "What was troubling about General McMaster's testimony is that he advocated a single service approach," Deptula and Birkey wrote. (McMaster declined to comment for this article.) "Contrary to his testimony, it is exceedingly unlikely the U.S. Army will ever be 'outranged and outgunned' because when the U.S. goes to war it does so with components from all the services—not just the U.S. Army."

What Deptula and Birkey were saying is what senior Air Force officers have been quietly saying since the end of World War II, and the sentiment has been echoed by many across the services in the wake of the Army panel's Armed Service Subcommittee hearing. In the words of a senior Air Force commander, "the Army would like to pretend that they're the only ones who fight America's wars."

It didn't help the Army's position that the panel's testimony was reinforced by retired Army General Wesley Clark, who told Politico that the Russians had developed tanks that are "largely invulnerable to anti-tank missiles." According to the senior Pentagon officer with whom I spoke, the Clark statement sparked a near-chorus of derisive hoots, even among those who agree that the Army needs to upgrade its capabilities. "What nonsense. If the Russians have developed tanks that can't be destroyed that would be the first time that's happened in the history of warfare," the officer noted. "Amazing."

(Clark defended his statement in a telephone conversation with this reporter. "I never said that Russian tanks are invulnerable," he argues. "What I said is that the Russians have developed a technology that makes their tanks difficult to defeat and we have to acknowledge that. That's a military assessment that I'll stand behind.")
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But Clark is hardly a disinterested observer. The retired general and former presidential candidate led NATO in its 1999 war against Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic, whose Serb-backed forces were murdering Muslim Albanians in Kosovo. When the conflict ended, Clark famously ordered British Lt. Gen. Sir Mike Jackson to send British paratroopers to confront Russian peacekeepers occupying Kosovo's airport at Pristina. Jackson was stunned, and refused: "I'm not going to start the Third World War for you," he told Clark. ("This incident is a little more complicated than you think," Clark told me. "General Jackson was exhausted and overwrought. I was stunned by his statement. The last thing I wanted was a confrontation with the Russians.")
But Clark's public statements certainly make him sound like he's pushing for a confrontation with the Russians. During a series of speeches in early 2015, he warned that Russian-backed forces would invade the Ukraine in a "renewed offensive from the east" before VE day, on May 8, which the U.S. should respond to by providing lethal aid to the Ukrainian military. The

invasion never happened. And during an appearance at Northwestern University, Clark, who was accompanied by political aides to Ukrainian President and Russia adversary Petro Poroshenko, compared Russia to Nazi Germany.

Clark also recently suggested that the real reason Russia withdrew some of its forces from Syria was so they could reinforce their troops on the Ukraine's border—which, unless the U.S. responded with more troops of its own, could mean "the practical end of the European Union."
But it's not just the Army that is issuing a "sky is falling" assessment of the Russian threat. A number of currently serving senior Pentagon officers of all branches told me they have been concerned with a series of inflammatory statements issued by Air Force General Philip Breedlove who, until just last week, was America's NATO commander in Europe. While Breedlove's replacement, Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, is known for taking a more measured approach to the U.S. buildup in Europe, Breedlove's warnings rankled America's European allies.

Six weeks ago, in early March, Breedlove, who declined to comment for this article, told a group of Washington reporters that Russia had "upped the ante" in Ukraine with "well over a thousand combat vehicles, Russian combat forces, some of their most sophisticated air defense [units and] battalions of artillery." The situation, Breedlove said, "is not getting better. It is getting worse every day."

The problem with the Breedlove report, according to a senior civilian Pentagon adviser, was that it wasn't true. "I have no idea what the hell he's talking about," he told me. That comment echoed statements coming from Berlin, where advisers to German Chancellor Angela Merkel characterized Breedlove's comments as "dangerous propaganda." It sounded to Merkel's advisers like Breedlove was purposely undermining Germany's efforts to mediate the Ukraine dispute—what one American diplomat disparagingly described as "Merkel's Moscow stuff." It wasn't the first time Merkel had been undermined, according to German officials. An article that appeared in *Der Spiegel* in the wake of Breedlove's statement catalogued a series of Breedlove claims that played "directly into the hands of [anti-Russian] hard-liners in the U.S. Congress and in NATO."

Ironically, given Breedlove's Air Force background, the warnings also played into the hands of the Army—specifically those officers like McMaster who are arguing that Russia's growing military strength requires that the U.S. send more troops to Europe—which would demand a larger Army budget. In late March, just a few weeks after Breedlove released his assessment, the Pentagon announced that it would send an additional Brigade Combat Team to Europe to "reassure" America's NATO allies "in the wake of an aggressive Russia in Eastern Europe and elsewhere."

But retired Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, a prominent Army critic whose high profile 2013 article in the *Armed Forces Journal* called for Pentagon reform, including a "purge" of the Army's leadership, doubts the Europeans will be reassured—or the Russians intimidated. "You think Putin is scared of a brigade combat team?" Davis asks. "This doesn't scare anybody. In fact, it does just the opposite—it plays right into Putin's narrative, gives him an excuse to spend more money on his

own military and pushes the Russian public into his hands. This is all very predictable: He'll up the ante and the Army will say 'See, we don't have enough troops.' So here we go again."
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Indeed, the escalating spiral Davis warns about seems to be in motion. The March announcement that an additional U.S. brigade would be sent to Europe reinforced the Army's warnings that increasing threats would stretch the Army's existing capabilities—buttressing McMaster's April 5 warning that the Army would now have a "harder and harder time for the small force to keep pace with the demand" and would have to sacrifice modernization programs to keep up with the new requirements.

A growing group of dissenters both in and out of uniform think that McMaster's grim warnings about Army capabilities dodges the real issue—of whether the Army is willing to change the way it fights wars. "We've always been outnumbered," Deptula notes. "We've been outnumbered since 1945. That's the whole point of developing an offset—we're offsetting their numbers with our capabilities. But the Army has always resisted that by arguing for more soldiers." He adds: "The Army is just dead wrong on this. We need to fight smarter instead of just blowing the whistle and sending our boys over the top."

Retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor, a longtime outspoken Army critic renowned for his leadership of armored combat troops in Desert Storm (and McMaster's former commander), agrees. He slammed the April 5 testimony, and the budget ask. "If you read the statement you'll realize that McMaster and his fellow officers aren't asking for more money for enhanced combat capabilities—they want a bigger Army," he said. "But bigger isn't necessarily better."
Macgregor also took on former Army Chief of Staff Gordon Sullivan, the influential head of the Association of the U.S. Army, the service's powerful advocacy arm. In an April 14 article, Sullivan defended McMaster's statements by painting his appeal for more money as a defense of the common soldier. A "broken budget process," Sullivan warned, would cost American lives. "It's soldiers we are thinking of when worrying about the undermanned, under-ready and underfunded Army we've created," Sullivan wrote.

"The statement is sickeningly false," Macgregor wrote to me. "If the generals actually gave a damn about the soldiers the last 15 years would have been totally different. What happened to the thousands of lives and trillions of dollars squandered in Iraq and Afghanistan? What happened to the billions lost in a series of failed modernization programs since 1991?"

As entrenched as the views of McMaster and his colleagues seem in the upper echelons of the Army there are signs of cracks. Even Army Chief of Staff Mark Milley appears to have doubt.
While Milley supported the statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, on April 6, just one day after McMaster issued his warning, his defense was tepid—at best. "I love [H.R.] like a brother," he said, but then squirmed through the rest of the answer. "To say 'many' is probably an overstatement. … In terms of size of force, yes, I agree with his comment on size of force. But outranged, outgunned on the ground, I think it is a mixed bag."

According to the senior Pentagon officer with whom I spoke, Milley's statement was evidence that many in the Army were uncomfortable with McMaster's claim—and the firestorm of

comment it sparked. In this case, the officer said, McMaster's well-earned reputation for bluntness would cause Milley problems with the other service chiefs, who have purposely refrained from any public criticism of the Army's budget views. That restraint, Milley apparently fears, may be at an end—with the other services now debating whether to issue public criticisms that the Army is looking out for its own interests, at their expense.

"When your commander says he 'loves you like a brother' watch out," this officer said, "because it is usually followed by the phrase 'you dumb son-of-a-bitch.'" The Pentagon officer explained that, prior to his testimony, Milley had given a private, informal, briefing to an Army War College class that focused on capabilities—and underplayed the question of whether the Army actually needs more soldiers. "It was very impressive," he said, "because it advocated interservice cooperation and modernization. This might be the best chief of staff we've had in a long time, because he's telling his commanders to stop whining about budget numbers and figure out how to fight. There was absolutely no sense of panic. It struck just the right tone."

In fact, Milley's Army War College remarks seemed to imply that the Army's problem is not that it doesn't have enough soldiers, but that it has them in the wrong places. Milley reinforced this view in his April 6 Senate testimony. "We need to pare down our headquarters," he said, adding that the Army's top-heavy brigade structure provides a potential enemy with "nothing but a big target"—a point the Army's critics have been making for the past 10 years. For Army reform partisans, Milley's views provided a stark shift from those of previous Army leaders, who'd focused on leadership, courage—and numbers—instead of capabilities. "They don't get it," this officer noted. "If I can shoot my armored piercing shell further than you can shoot yours, I live and you die. It's that simple."

The argument over numbers and capabilities might strike some Americans as exotic, but the debate is much more fundamental—with enormous political implications. "You know, which would you rather have—a high-speed rail system, or another brigade in Poland? Because that's what this is really all about. The debate is about money, and there simply isn't enough to go around," the Pentagon officer told me. "Which is not to mention the other question, which is even more important: How many British soldiers do you think want to die for Estonia? And if they don't want to, why should we?"

Which means that the debate over whether, in fact, the U.S. is "outranged and outgunned," is unlikely to end anytime soon. As Milley, McMaster, Deptula, Davis and Macgregor surely know, the claim of American military weakness provides ready political fodder, particularly during an election season, where talk of U.S. military weakness is a red flag for voters who see a terrorist on every corner—and a Russian soldier on every flank.