

# **American Power Moves Beyond the Mere Super**

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By GREGG EASTERBROOK

The American military is now the strongest the world has ever known, both in absolute terms and relative to other nations; stronger than the Wehrmacht in 1940, stronger than the legions at the height of Roman power. For years to come, no other nation is likely even to try to rival American might.

Which means: the global arms race is over, with the United States the undisputed heavyweight champion. Other nations are not even trying to match American armed force, because they are so far behind they have no chance of catching up. The great-powers arms race, in progress for centuries, has ended with the rest of the world conceding triumph to the United States.

Paradoxically, the runaway American victory in the conventional arms race might inspire a new round of proliferation of atomic weapons. With no hope of matching the United States plane for plane, more countries may seek atomic weapons to gain deterrence.

## **Seapower**

For the extent of American military superiority has become almost impossible to overstate. The United States sent five of its nine supercarrier battle groups to the region for the Iraq assault. A tenth Nimitz-class supercarrier is under construction. No other nation possesses so much as one supercarrier, let alone nine battle groups ringed by cruisers and guarded by nuclear submarines.

Russia has one modern aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, but it has about half the tonnage of an American supercarrier, and has such a poor record that it rarely leaves port. Britain and France have a few small aircraft carriers. China decided against building one last year.

Any attempt to build a fleet that threatens the Pentagon's would be pointless, after all, because if another nation fielded a threatening vessel, American attack submarines would simply sink it in the first five minutes of any conflict. Knowing this, all other nations have conceded the seas to the United States, a reason American forces can sail anywhere without interference. The naval arms race -- a principal aspect of great-power politics for centuries -- is over.

## **Airpower**

United States air power is undisputed as well, with more advanced fighters and bombers than those of all other nations combined. The United States possesses three stealth aircraft (the B-1 and B-2 bombers and the F-117 fighter) with two more (the F-22 and F-35 fighters) developed and awaiting production funds. No other nation even has a stealth aircraft on the drawing board. A few nations have small numbers of heavy bombers; the United States has entire wings of heavy bombers.

No other nation maintains an aerial tanker fleet similar to that of the United States; owing to tankers, American bombers can operate anywhere in the world. No other nation has anything like the American AWACS plane, which provides exceptionally

detailed radar images of the sky above battles, or the newer JSTARS plane, which provides exceptionally detailed radar images of the ground.

No other nation has air-to-air missiles or air-to-ground smart munitions of the accuracy, or numbers, of the United States. This month, for example, in the second attempt to kill Saddam Hussein, just 12 minutes passed between when a B-1 received the target coordinates and when the bomber released four smart bombs aimed to land just 50 feet and a few seconds apart. All four hit where they were supposed to.

American aerial might is so great that adversaries don't even try to fly. Serbia kept its planes on the ground during the Kosovo conflict of 1999; in recent fighting in Iraq, not a single Iraqi fighter rose to oppose United States aircraft. The governments of the world now know that if they try to launch a fighter against American air power, their planes will be blown to smithereens before they finish retracting their landing gear. The aerial arms race, a central facet of the last 50 years, is over.

### **Ground Forces**

The American lead in ground forces is not uncontested -- China has a large standing army -- but is large enough that the ground arms race might end, too. The United States now possesses about 9,000 M1 Abrams tanks, by far the world's strongest armored force. The Abrams cannon and fire-control system is so extraordinarily accurate that in combat gunners rarely require more than one shot to destroy an enemy tank. No other nation is currently building or planning a comparable tank force. Other governments know this would be pointless, since even if they had advanced tanks, the United States would destroy them from the air.

### **Electronics**

The American lead in electronics is also huge. Much of the "designating" of targets in the recent Iraq assault was done by advanced electronics on drones like the Global Hawk, which flies at 60,000 feet, far beyond the range of anti-aircraft weapons. So sophisticated are the sensors and data links that make Global Hawk work that it might take a decade for another nation to field a similar drone -- and by then, the United States is likely to have leapfrogged ahead to something better.

### **Space**

Further, the United States holds an overwhelming lead in military use of space. Not only does the Pentagon command more and better reconnaissance satellites than all the rest of the world combined, American forces have begun using space-relayed data in a significant way. Space "assets" will eventually be understood to have been critical to the lightning conquest of Iraq, and the American lead in this will only grow, since the Air Force now has the second-largest space budget in the world, after NASA's.

### **Spending**

Last year American military spending exceeded that of all other NATO states, Russia, China, Japan, Iraq and North Korea combined, according to the Center for Defense Information, a nonpartisan research group that studies global security. This is another area where all other nations must concede to the United States, for no other government can afford to try to catch up.

The runaway advantage has been called by some excessive, yet it yields a positive benefit. Annual global military spending, stated in current dollars, peaked in 1985, at \$1.3 trillion, and has been declining since, to \$840 billion in 2002. That's a drop of almost half a trillion dollars in the amount the world spent each year on arms. Other nations accept that the arms race is over.

### **Ultimate Power?**

The United States military reinforces its pre-eminence by going into combat. Rightly or wrongly, the United States fights often; each fight becomes a learning opportunity for troops and a test of technology. No other military currently has the real-world experience of the United States.

More important, overwhelming power hardly insures that the United States will get its way in world affairs. Force is just one aspect of international relations, while experience has shown that military power can solve only military problems, not political ones.

North Korea now stares into the barrel of the strongest military ever assembled, and yet may be able to defy the United States, owing to nuclear deterrence. As the global arms race ends with the United States so far ahead no other nation even tries to be America's rival, the result may be a world in which Washington has historically unparalleled power, but often cannot use it.