
Special Commentary: Post-COVID Transformation: DOD Goes into the Matrix?

June 29, 2020 | Professors Nathan Freier, Robert Hume, Al Lord, and John Schaus

DOD'S CHOICE IS NEO'S CHOICE

These are complex, turbulent, and uncertain times to be sure. The Department of Defense (DOD) is at an important inflection point. COVID-19 has irrevocably altered the dynamics of international security and reshaped DOD's decision-making landscape. As a result, DOD will have to adapt to significantly different strategic circumstances post-COVID than those assumed operative in the [2018 National Defense Strategy \(NDS18\)](#). We recommend that DOD recognize this to be true, seize the initiative, create opportunity from crisis, and recraft defense strategy to re-emerge from COVID as a stronger, more [hypercompetitive](#) institution.

The past is definitely prologue in this regard. DOD's current strategic circumstances mirror those of the immediate post-9/11 period. The wars that followed 9/11 forced a [substantial strategic course correction on DOD](#). By 2003, it was clear that the azimuth set in the [2001 Quadrennial Defense Review \(QDR01\)](#) was fundamentally compromised by the stark reality of the Iraq and Afghan wars and the wider "Global War on Terrorism."

There was corporate recognition at the time that the path described in QDR01 was not likely to position the American military for the demands of the post-9/11 environment. Just as war reshaped DOD's strategic agenda then, COVID-19 will change the dynamics of great power rivalry and the defense choices associated with it going forward as well. By itself, we suggest this necessitates a thoughtful re-examination of the assumptions and approach described in NDS18.

To use a pop culture analogy, DOD's current situation is reminiscent of "Neo's choice" in the dystopian movie *The Matrix*. In the film, rebel leader Morpheus offers protagonist Neo the [choice of a red pill or a blue pill](#). The red pill extends to Neo an unvarnished view of "the matrix" and its broader and more difficult set of governing facts. The blue pill, on the other hand, returns Neo to his prior blissfully naïve existence plugged into a land of computer make-believe. The blue pill is all about doubling down on a comfortable yet already discredited past. The red pill offers Neo the opportunity to boldly enter a difficult but nonetheless transformational future. In the end (spoiler alert), Neo chooses red.

Like Neo, DOD has its own difficult “red or blue” choice on the near-horizon. COVID forced the issue. DOD’s choice is between prudent risk-taking, transformation, and increased hypercompetitiveness (red) on the one hand, and status quo, steady decline, and inevitable loss of position in key regions and domains on the other (blue). As in the case of Neo, we suggest that DOD choose the former (red pill) transformational option.

WHY TRANSFORM NOW? WHY IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS?

Former White House Chief of Staff and former Chicago Mayor [Rahm Emmanuel once suggested](#), “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste, and what I mean by that [is that crisis provides] an opportunity to do things you could not do before.” This is precisely what we suggest with respect to DOD and COVID. The COVID crisis can incentivize real innovation across the defense enterprise if DOD is willing to exploit crisis in pursuit of profound change in strategy, concepts, capabilities, and posture.

COVID-19 is without question a national crisis. And, DOD continues to have a significant role in responding to it directly. However, the pandemic also creates an excellent opportunity for defense and military leadership to thoughtfully re-imagine post-COVID strategy and “do things [they] could not do before.” Seizing that opportunity may well yield a more adaptive, forward-looking, and hypercompetitive defense enterprise that creates greater synergy across highly contested regions and domains.

This matters now precisely because there is a palpable change imperative across the department. In successive studies of [gray zone rivalry](#), [risk](#), [hypercompetition](#), and [US Indo-Pacific Command \(USINDOPACOM\) theater design](#), we find real erosion in US military advantage vis-a-vis great power rivals China and Russia. As we see it, and many defense analysts continue to argue, US rivals China and Russia have a significant head start on the United States in resurgent great power competition. China and Russia hold the strategic initiative and use it to generate, seize, and exploit opportunities at US expense. They also have an edge in terms of proximity, strategic depth, strength of interest and/or motivation, and risk tolerance as it relates to on-going contests for regional primacy.

Their persistent counter-US gray zone resistance is real indication that the prospective conflicts described in NDS18 are, in fact, already well underway in the eyes of Beijing and Moscow. Naturally, China and Russia are transforming their military capabilities and methods to improve warfighting prospects in the event rivalry with the United States escalates to armed hostilities. However, so far, there is no sign either would actually have to go that far to secure objectives. They already succeed short of armed conflict by attacking US vulnerabilities in what CSIS’s Anthony Cordesman calls “[wars of influence](#).”

DOD as an institution has simply not fully come to terms with the character of twenty-first century rivalry, a more vulnerable United States, and the eroded position accompanying both. According to a [2019 RAND study on gray zone threats](#), “The United States and its allies...have

yet to come to terms with the challenge of the threat, let alone fashion a strategy to neutralize it or roll it back.”

While rivals China and Russia retain the initiative and hypercompete (at present, predominantly through gray zone maneuver), the United States is only just now catching up. A singular US focus on terrorism and irregular warfighting over nearly twenty years of perpetual post-9/11 war effectively delayed American recognition of and adaptation to the Chinese and Russian threats. And, even now, US risk sensitivity, a bias for convention, service parochialism, and glacial corporate decision-making processes continue to stymie the kind of sweeping defense innovation called for by the accelerating threats in and from the European, Eurasian, and Indo-Pacific regions.

In the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility, for example, the United States is out of position physically, conceptually, and with deployed and anticipated forces and capabilities, in the face of an aggressive and transforming Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In a 2019 report, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work and colleagues at the Center for a New American Security suggest, “[\(T\)he PLA may hold the initiative and control the time line.](#)” Vis-à-vis an even more reckless Russian threat, DOD has also not yet come fully to grips with Russia’s unique brand of counter-American resistance that is decidedly “[at odds with the general US understanding of warfare.](#)”

In addition to external threats, there are internal post-COVID challenges as well. Within DOD, there will inevitably be new resource pressures effecting DOD’s pursuit of virtually any strategic course of action. These downward pressures on budgets, missions, manning, modernization, and readiness are largely the same ever-present challenges facing all DOD senior decision makers. COVID will likely magnify their impact.

DOD will never be completely out of money. However, it may have less money or less discretion in spending it coming out of the COVID experience. Absent executive leadership, innovation, and creativity, resource constraints may only hasten erosion of US military influence worldwide. Perceived scarcity, after all, can end in even more intense inter-service rivalry, sub-optimal enterprise-wide compromise, and, ultimately, an ineffective, astrategic distribution of resources and priorities.

CHOOSE RED—TRANSFORMING INTO THE POST-COVID ENVIRONMENT

The forces described above in combination put excessive pressure on DOD. Pre-COVID the United States was already in the midst of its most consequential great power struggle since the fall of the Soviet Union, facing not one but two capable and, increasingly, hostile opponents in China and Russia. Before COVID, the United States [was already vulnerable to catastrophic losses in an escalating conflict](#) with either rival as well. COVID only compounded that challenge. The risks associated with great power rivalry have likely only become more acute since the

COVID crisis began. Nonetheless, COVID is also creating space for transformational change in DOD.

The [strategic shock of COVID](#) provides senior defense leadership with an opportune break from business as usual and a relatively brief window of opportunity for fundamentally re-imagining a more hypercompetitive strategy in the post-COVID environment. Re-imagination implies a return to first principles. It suggests revisiting NDS18 in detail. And, finally, it argues for remaking US strategy mindful of even greater vulnerability as the United States emerges from pandemic. In brief, re-imagination argues strongly for DOD opting for the transformational red pill over the status quo blue.

Absent some adaptation and looking forward into the post-COVID environment, the animating US defense prescription for great power rivalry seems to be more of the same but better—the blue pill, status quo ante. According to David Ignatius, in a [review of the recently published book](#), *The Kill Chain—Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare*, status quo ante is par for the course for DOD. Ignatius observes, “The Pentagon is good at doing what it did yesterday.”

We argue that pursuit of status quo ante post-COVID may limit near-term transformational pain but also almost certainly increase longer-term risk. A return to status quo ante would not, generate the kinds of [asymmetric approaches essential to the United States](#) regaining exploitable initiative and serial advantage against rivals China and Russia.

Consistent with NDS18, post-COVID strategy should boldly aim to “[out-think, out-maneuver, out-partner, and out-innovate](#)” US rivals. But, we suggest it should also be a hungrier, more realistic, “play from behind” approach than its predecessor. It should not, for example, assume—as does NDS18—a future “[Joint Force that possesses decisive advantages](#)” over all rivals. Instead, post-COVID transformation should optimize the department, its components, and its Joint concepts and capabilities to prevail across domains in a “[persistent struggle to gain, exploit, and regain transient advantage](#)” against capable opponents who will often enjoy positional, conceptual, and technical advantages.

It is true that DOD is only just now putting programs in place to achieve NDS18’s objectives. However, it is also true that the NDS18 emerged well before COVID and that the pandemic and its downstream effects will no doubt have an outsized impact on DOD’s future operating environment and the attendant strategic choices available to the defense department.

Dramatic defense re-imagination in the midst of a global pandemic is tough to believe possible for the slow-moving defense bureaucracy. However, there may be no better time for it. Choosing the transformational red pill now might yield the kind of institutional change only possible when visionary leadership sees opportunity in the midst of a profound crisis.

Indeed, we suggest it would be prudent for DOD leadership to recognize that the great power that sees, understands, and exploits the dramatically altered post-COVID decision-making

landscape first will be in the best position to secure a more hypercompetitive strategic position in the future. We recognize that choosing the transformational red pill now will be bitter, disruptive, and, at times, viscerally counter-cultural. However, in the right dose, it may also turn post-COVID uncertainty into American advantage and usher in a more [hypercompetitive transformational DOD vision](#).

That vision need not—and likely should not—be as or more expensive as the pre-COVID defense proposition. It should, however, be more strategic. After all, if DOD seizes the transformational opportunity COVID provides, it may discover that the strategic and operational answers to its many demands are not always tied to bigger budgets but instead to better and more innovative ways of doing business.

This is no time for DOD to aspire to “steady as she goes.” Doing so may needlessly squander an opportunity to steal the march on rivals China and Russia. As of now, the accumulating successes of both will continue to erode confidence in US leadership, increase risk to US interests, and deny American freedom of action to the point of US irrelevance. We suggest their emergence from the COVID experience and ours will largely determine a new distribution of power and influence for decades to come in key regions of the world.

Seizing the opportunity provided by the COVID pandemic—making Neo’s choice to embrace transformational change—implies exposing the limitations of existing biases and business models. It means actually embracing the realities of twenty-first century rivalry, developing a more unified defense and Joint vision to contend with it, and creating new enterprise, global, theater, and all-domain approaches to thrive in an environment of ceaseless great power hypercompetition. We were warned. So what will it be? Red or Blue?

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