

An aerial photograph of the Pentagon building, showing its iconic pentagonal shape and surrounding infrastructure. The image is dark and serves as the background for the book cover.

CLOSE THE PENTAGON

RETHINKING NATIONAL SECURITY
FOR A POSITIVE SUM WORLD

CHARLES KENNY

Close the Pentagon:

**Rethinking National Security for
a Positive-Sum World**

Charles Kenny

“You don’t have to be a peacenik or a lefty to be persuaded by this trenchant and witty book that the 21st-century American war machine is stupefyingly wasteful, protecting us against threats that no longer exist and failing to protect us against those that do.”

Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor, Harvard University,
and the author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

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Chapter One: The World's Largest Bureaucracy

The Pentagon, famed as the world's largest office building, sits on 24 acres of land across the Potomac River from Washington DC. Its massive structure, home to 3.7 million square feet of offices, was constructed during the Second World War. To save steel, it is low-rise -- only five stories tall-- with ramps in place of elevators between floors. Its labyrinthine design ensures the unfamiliar are quickly lost navigating the corridors -- endless, squat and windowless. Car parks sprawl across much of the rest of the 280 acre site -- valuable real estate, worth perhaps \$2 billion.ⁱ

Until the 1930s, both the State Department and the War Department were co-located in the "State, War, and Navy Building," now known as the Old Executive Office Building. The Defense Department had been slated to move into a new Foggy Bottom site that is now home to the Department of State, but the military's rapid expansion as the Second World War approached had left that building too small. In anticipation of the military shrinking again after the war, the Pentagon structure was designed to be easily converted into a records storage center. Of course, that never happened (nor would it make sense in an

age of cloud computing). While it was originally built in seventeen months for a cost of \$83 million, a little over \$1 billion in today's dollars, a recent Pentagon renovation project took 17 years and cost \$4.5 billion.ⁱⁱ

That history leaves the Pentagon building as a potent symbol of America's foreign policy infrastructure: dominated by a massive, increasingly inefficient military machine better suited to the challenges of the mid-Twentieth Century than the early Twenty-First.

It is a machine that carries considerable direct economic costs but, more important, overshadows other foreign policy tools more effective to confront the global problems that the United States faces today. And just as the Pentagon is no longer fit for its backup purpose of records storage center, nor is the Department of Defense well placed to readjust to new roles –anti-terror or cyber security, let alone responding to climate, pandemic threats or global financial crises.

This book argues that the Department of Defense should be downsized in terms of budget and manpower (and they are overwhelmingly men), while other tools of US foreign policy including diplomacy and development are given more resources. The United States does not need the world's largest office building for the Defense Department, because it no longer needs many of 23,000 bureaucrats housed within, nor many of the 1.3 million military personnel they oversee. And America urgently needs to overhaul the strategic thinking adopted by –but far from unique to—Donald Trump's Administration.

That thinking was on display in an op-ed published by the *Wall Street Journal* in May 2017. The authors, Trump's then National Security Advisor HR McMaster and then director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, praised their boss for his recent trip to Europe and the Middle East: "The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a 'global community'" they wrote, "but an area where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage." The next day came news that the President would pull out of the Paris Accords – a 147 country effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change.

The op-ed and the withdrawal between them sum up what there is of a Trump Doctrine on foreign policy – the US is engaged in a frequently violent, inevitably zero-sum competition with other countries where the benefits of cooperation are limited.

The doctrine is not a radical new departure for American foreign policy – indeed, the 'realist' thinking it reflects is a model of international relations even older than the President himself. When Donald Trump was in his thirties, Robert Gilpin argued international politics is about power and "the essential fact of politics is that power is always relative; one state's gain in power is by necessity another's loss."ⁱⁱⁱ A few decades later, Stanley Hoffman suggested zero-sum thinking is "a valid account for considerable portions of world politics."^{iv}

But 'realism' has also long been questioned: in 1960, Thomas Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict*

suggested most international situations involve both conflict and cooperative elements, for example.^v Joseph Nye's 1990 article "The Changing Nature of World Power" argued that "[i]n an age of information-based economies and transnational interdependence, power is becoming less transferable, less tangible, and less coercive."^{vi} You could no longer simply add up one country's 'power resources' in isolation, he suggested.^{vii}

And one sign of the disconnect between Trump's dark view of global anarchy and actual reality is that the world has never been more peaceful. Take the most violent form of inter-state competition –warfare. For all the horrors of Syria and continuing tragedy from South Sudan to the Ukraine, war deaths worldwide remain near historic lows, and the wars that are ongoing are overwhelmingly within, not between, states. Since 1975, according to data compiled by Oxford economist Max Roser, the average year has seen less than two inter-state conflicts ongoing anywhere in the world –and the trend is downward.^{viii} There were only two in total between 2004 and 2011. There are a lot more civil conflicts worldwide (around thirty per year in recent years), but the great majority of those are small-scale.

And there is a strong economic reason for the low level of global conflict: war doesn't pay, even for the victor. Military competition has long been a negative sum game –the costs of the military and the destruction of war subtracted from a net zero transfer of resources or control. Nonetheless, through much of history, launching a war for resources –land, gold,

slaves—could still make sense. The Second World War was fueled in part by resource concerns: Germany's Lebensraum ('living space') and Japan's obsession with obtaining an independent oil supply, heightened by a US trade embargo.

But access to land or natural resources is just a smaller and smaller part of what makes a country rich and powerful. That is how South Korea, controlling 0.1% of the planet's land surface, can produce more goods and services than the whole planet did in 1820.^{ix}

Although it was not fought for resources, the Iraq war –one of the very few inter-state wars of recent times-- demonstrates the dire economics of international conflict that results from these changes. The war has cost the US alone around \$2.2 trillion according to the Watson Institute at Brown University.^x The US only imported a total of \$246 billion worth of oil in 2014 –the vast majority of that not from Iraq. Had the war been about controlling Iraqi oil, or even if Mr. Trump's plan to take the oil export had come to fruition, it would have been a terrible return on investment.^{xi}

The World's output and wellbeing is increasingly determined by ideas, technologies and market institutions rather than physical resources. The World Bank made an effort to calculate the wealth of nations –the value of physical capital like infrastructure and buildings; natural capital including forests, farmland and subsoil resources; as well as stocks of education, ideas and other 'intangible capital.' The Bank suggested that in 2005, total global wealth was \$708 trillion. Intangible capital accounted for 77 percent of

that total, and physical capital 18 percent. The value of natural capital was \$44 trillion, or just six percent of the total.^{xii}

The great thing about the ideas, technologies and market institutions that make up much of the value of intangible capital is that many countries can use them at the same time. If you use the oil pumped out of a well in Texas, I can't. But if you use the technology of double-entry book-keeping, or word processing, that doesn't stop me from using it. Indeed, if we both use it, it becomes even more valuable to the both of us.

The global economy is increasingly built on such collaborative rather than competitive foundations: positive sum rather than zero-sum inputs to production. The genius of trade is that it supports such collaboration –companies from many different countries working together in global production chains to make a finished product. Half of China's exports involve unfinished goods –parts of equipment to be assembled elsewhere. And 80 percent of the value of those exports is made up of products previously imported into China.^{xiii}

Beyond driving poverty reduction in China and elsewhere along with providing new export and investment opportunities for US companies, the growing complexity of trading patterns has increased the potential costs of conflict between trading partners. In particular, war between major economic powers would be significantly more damaging than it was when nearly all trade was in commodities or finished goods. Even the Trump Administration's saber rattling with tariffs has had a significant effect

on trade patterns –and cost a lot of jobs in both the US and China. Anything that really disrupted global commerce would collapse global production chains. And it would provoke considerably more opposition as a result.

Meanwhile, poor countries are the only places left where natural resources play a truly significant economic role. In economies with an income per capita below about \$1,000 a year, the World Bank's estimates suggests that natural capital still accounts for 36 percent of total wealth. That is one reason why conflict is increasingly concentrated in the poorest, least globally integrated countries.

Reviewing the literature on the causes of civil war, Chris Blattman and Ted Miguel at UC Berkeley suggest the best predictors of civil conflict are low incomes and slow economic growth.^{xiv} Especially when natural resources are concentrated in areas of a poor country occupied by ethnic minorities, they can spark violence – something that has occurred in countries from Nigeria through Indonesia to Sudan and Myanmar.^{xv} Thankfully, the number of low income countries worldwide halved from 63 at the turn of the millennium to 31 in 2015. Civil-war prone countries are developing out of their susceptibility.

That does not mean all wars will end –the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Syrian Civil War demonstrate that comparatively wealthy countries see fighting, too. But it does suggest the long-term trend towards less violent conflict will likely continue. And an increasingly pacific world is reflected in smaller military budgets: defense expenditure worldwide was

worth 6.2 percent of global GDP in 1960, today that is down to 2.1 percent.

In a positive-sum global economy, the price of conflict between major powers has climbed exponentially. But so have the potential costs of other threats to US and global security. An interconnected world increases the risk of a new disease outbreak spreading worldwide, for example. The 1918 global influenza pandemic killed more people than the First World War –and that in an age where the fastest way to cross an ocean was by boat. Again, production is becoming lighter and resource-intensity is dropping, but not yet fast enough to ensure climate stability –and the costs to the US alone of climate change could reach into the trillions of dollars by century’s end.^{xvi} The world wide web of Internet connections exposes everyone to viruses and cybercrime. The global web of financial connections rapidly transmits waves of panic from a local bank collapse across oceans.

Yet America’s utterly predominant foreign policy bureaucracy –the military-- is overwhelmingly focused on dominance in old wars. US defense spending has declined as a percentage of GDP since 1960 –from 8.6 percent to 3.2 percent. Still, the US devotes an outsized proportion of its economy to the military --and in absolute terms, it is simply in a league of its own. The country accounts for more than one out of every three dollars spent on the military worldwide, greater than two and a half times the next biggest spender (China) and more than ten times Russia.

Each American citizen —man, woman and child— currently pays an average of \$1,983 a year to the Department of Defense. Over an average lifetime, that would add up to \$156,000 per person. It is a simply incredible sum for a country at zero risk of invasion and with a reasonable aversion to violent territorial expansion (even Mr. Trump wanted to buy Greenland rather than invade it).^{xvii}

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is grossly inefficient in spending its fortune. Of the US defense budget, 71 percent goes to research, development, testing, procurement, operation and maintenance—mostly involving advanced weapons systems where massive cost escalations are the rule rather than the exception.^{xviii}

And the utility of a large, technologically advanced force like America's to deal with civil war in the poorest countries or the terror threats that they may foster is limited: over half of all terror deaths worldwide in 2016 were in Iraq and Afghanistan –two countries which have been host to a considerable US military presence of late.^{xix} At sea, a piracy threat involving men on dinghies operating from failed states really doesn't need aircraft carriers as a response.

Garry Reid, a top deputy to the undersecretary of defense for intelligence under President Obama, admitted to this problem: "We're sitting on top of the most powerful military arsenal ... ever assembled," he said. But most conventional and strategic forces "are barely applicable" to the array of threats we face. "That is quite a vexing scenario," he added.^{xx} Others might see it as an opportunity to rethink spending priorities.

The foreign policy fight in the current administration, one that spills out across the pages of newspapers through leaks and tweets, is between isolationism and military adventurism. It is a debate that made little sense in the decades when the old, draft dodging men who are having it were born. It makes no sense at all today. The choice we face is about *how* to engage globally. Isolationism is simply off the table given American prosperity and wellbeing is increasingly dependent on global prosperity. Military adventure sadly still is an option, and has proven increasingly costly and ineffective. We should be engaging with the world, but not nearly so often with an M4 carbine at the shoulder.

If the US wants to reduce the number of civil wars and their resulting spillovers, for example, the deterrence model really doesn't work. Another F-35 in Florida won't prevent fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For all of its imperfect record, United Nations peacekeeping has proven itself a more effective and considerably cheaper tool to tamp down conflict than US invasion.

And the long-term key to reduce the threat of civil and international war is to tie countries into the global economy, foster development and reduce the importance of natural resources to output. That's a job for the US Trade Representative and migration policy, alongside agencies including the US Agency for International Development. It isn't something the Department of Defense should lead.

But compared to 3.5 percent of the economy going to the military, less than 0.2 percent of US GDP goes to

aid programs. Again, there are far more procurement officers in the Pentagon than foreign service officers in the State Department.

The new threats to national security are based on problems that will take global cooperation to solve. And, in the past, the United States has shown itself fully capable of leading that cooperation. With the support of the US under President Ronald Reagan, the world has already headed off one planetary threat through a series of protocol agreements to phase out the use of chlorofluorocarbons –which were damaging the ozone layer. Without action there would have been 6.3 million additional skin cancer deaths in the US alone.^{xxi} Thanks to the agreements, the ozone hole is shrinking.

Similar global cooperation will be a cornerstone of efforts to tackle other threats from cybercrime through climate, which is why withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accords sets such a tragic precedent.

Rising threats to the global commons combined with the economics of war, peace and prosperity means that the long term-strategy for a stable, sustainable planet and a successful America is to bind the world even closer together. The US should be fostering trade relations that create jobs. It should be supporting the infrastructure like ports and roads needed to make trade work through US aid and multilateral financiers like the World Bank. It should support scholarships and visas for people from the world over to travel to the US for education and to build economic ties. And it should embrace global agreements from the International Law of the Sea

through the Paris Accords while leading on new collaborative efforts to tackle emerging threats including pandemics.

Going in the other direction towards armed isolationism will do harm the rest of the world but simply hobble the US. And the idea that America can be great only by making others worse off is the thuggish stupidity of the schoolyard tyrant.

The next chapters will make the case outlined above in greater detail. Chapter Two opens by accepting that prophecies of peace have gone awry before and it is too early to declare we are in a totally new era. But the decline of violence means that – currently at least-- we are left with the remnants of war. Violent threats to the US and its allies are from small groups not big armies, and are a serious but exaggerated policing issue.

There are arguments over the causes of the relative peace of the post-1945 era: nuclear weapons, deterrence, hegemony, new institutions, new values, new connections. But while many factors may play a role, there are reasons to doubt the importance of a large US military to peace and reasons to highlight economic and social factors including new norms of behavior.

Chapter Three discusses the changing nature of state power and economic wealth from people and land through resources and manufacturing to institutions, ideas and interconnection. Resource reliance is now the curse of poor countries, and fighting for those resources a strategy that only makes sense in broken economies. That suggests the death of

zero sum international relations and the importance of integration to global prosperity and peace.

Chapter Four looks at the new threats to national security --real and not so real. Terror is a real threat, but not as large a threat as our response to it. The number of 'failed states' is declining. The new global threats include the warming atmosphere, polluted seas, disease, financial instability and international crime. These threats require collective response to shore up the global commons and preserve and extend our positive sum gains.

Chapter Five notes that the US military is obscenely, inefficiently, over-fit for the purpose of deterring aggression against the US and its allies. At the same time, the Pentagon's effectiveness in foreign entanglements is demonstrated by its mostly- not-winning-streak over the past seven decades: Korea, Vietnam, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq. US military presence doesn't prevent civil wars and the US Navy is over-equipped for duty against pirates. A massive Pentagon bureaucracy, including a huge army of contractors, runs a dysfunctional military management and procurement system.

Chapter Six asks if the Pentagon should lead on new national security threats. The answer is no: it is ill designed to tackle cyber-'war' or support research and development programs, let alone lead on global pandemic response. Other tools including aid agencies have a far better track record in delivering results.

Chapter Seven sets a short term goal of cutting military spending to one and a half times our nearest

competitor's as part of a realignment of international relations spending. It sets a longer term goal of reducing it to the global median of 1.5 percent of GDP.

A portion of that money should be redirected so that the US reaches the United Nations goal of 0.7 percent of GDP going towards aid flows to developing countries. It should also provide finance for reinvigorated engagement in trade and investment agreements as well as international organizations and treaty making. The Defense Department still has vital roles: sea lanes protection, logistics for the responsibility to protect, training, defending the homeland and allies. But new national security threats take global cooperation best managed outside of the Pentagon.

Chapter Eight asks, what could go wrong? Even if it is a significant cause of peace, US primacy won't last. It is inevitable that America will lose relative power to countries like China, India and Nigeria. The question is, how do we sustain peace in a multipolar world? The answer: bind the new global powers into a peaceful, rules-bound world system. And the problem: Washington DC is busy heading in the other direction.

All that said, this book is not a work of pacifism, let alone one of disdain for soldiers. I believe the US military should be considerably smaller, but that it is still vital to national defense and to global security. In addition, the US armed forces embody a set of admirable values and features: the military is a meritocracy that gives people from all backgrounds the opportunity for education and advancement, and provides a good health and welfare system to

members and retirees. These are all things that America should adopt more broadly.

I respect the US servicemen I have met and worked with, and I am grateful for their service. My mother's father, whom I loved, fought for the US in the Italy campaign in World War II. I admire that my father's father was in the UK Merchant Marine. But my maternal grandfather was so horrified by the experience he would never talk about it. And my paternal grandfather died when his ship was torpedoed.

Troops continue paying a high price for donning a uniform. Thinking of better ways to conduct international relations than a huge standing military is not disrespectful to my grandfathers or to today's armed forces, it is the least we can do to honor their sacrifice. This book is not 'an attack on the troops.' It is an attack on their political leaders inside and outside the Pentagon, who have created an awesomely massive, sprawling and ineffective military bureaucracy as America's primary foreign policy tool.

Again, this is not a call to a partisan fight. We will see Dwight Eisenhower argued persuasively and presciently about the threats of a military-industrial complex. We have seen Ronald Reagan understand the need for binding international agreements to tackle some of our most pressing global challenges. Republican internationalism has a storied past, as (sadly) does Democratic isolationism. But the current administration represents an unprecedented turn towards a simplistic and grossly inaccurate view of

international relations. That is a turn we --Americans and the world as a whole-- can ill-afford.

Endnotes

ⁱ A tenth-acre lot in neighboring Alexandria was listed on Zillow in 2018 for \$660,000, suggesting the land alone under the Pentagon may be worth nearly \$200 million.

ⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/after-17-years-pentagon-renovation-is-complete/2011/06/03/AGBpp3eH_story.html accessed 8/23/2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilpin, Robert (1975) *US power and the multinational corporation* Basic Books

^{iv} Hoffmann, S. (1981). Notes on the Limits of "Realism". *Social Research*, 653-659.

^v Schelling, T. C. (1980). *The strategy of conflict*. Harvard university press.

^{vi} Nye Jr, J. S. (2004). The changing nature of world power. In *Power in the Global Information Age* (pp. 61-75). Routledge.

^{vii} In a sign of how times have changed, but also which kinds of power may matter, Nye's Changing Nature of World Power took on seriously the idea that Japan was the world's next superpower, but concluded "In command power, Japan's economic strength is increasing, but it remains vulnerable in terms of raw materials and relatively weak in terms of military force. And in co-optive power, Japan's culture is highly insular and it has yet to develop a major voice in international institutions."

^{viii} <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace> Accessed 11/15/2019

^{ix} World GDP: Angus Maddison (2001), *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, OECD.
http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/other_books/appendix_B.pdf.
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<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>. Accessed 11/15/2019.

^x <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/> Accessed 10/12/2018

^{xi} <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/historical/petr.pdf> Accessed 11/15/2019.

^{xii} <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/wealth-accounting> Accessed 11/15/2019.

^{xiii} Baldwin, R. (2011). *Trade and industrialisation after globalisation's 2nd unbundling: How building and joining a supply chain are different and why it matters* (No. w17716). National Bureau of Economic Research.

<https://www.nber.org/papers/w17716> Accessed 11/15/2019.

^{xiv} Blattman, C., & Miguel, E. (2010). Civil war. *Journal of Economic literature*, 48(1), 3-57.

^{xv} Morelli, M., & Rohner, D. (2015). Resource concentration and civil wars. *Journal of Development Economics*, 117, 32-47.

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^{xvi} <https://www.epa.gov/cira/climate-action-benefits-key-findings#national-highlights> Accessed 11/15/2019.

^{xvii} Data source:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD> Accessed 11/15/2019

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https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/defbudget/fy2015/fy2015_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf Accessed 11/15/2019

^{xix} Global terrorism index 2017. Institute for Economics and Peace.

<http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf> Accessed 11/15/2019.

^{xx} *Foreign Policy* (2015) Top Intel Official: US Facing Unprecedented Array of Threats

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/26/top-intel-official-u-facing-unprecedented-array-of-threats> Accessed 11/16/2019

^{xxi} https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-07/documents/achievements_in_stratospheric_ozone_protection.pdf Accessed 11/15/2019.