National Security Competition or Cooperation Preparing for 21st Century Threats

By Robert J. Roller
"We need to recognize the modern realities, that the cold war is over, and we don’t see any imminent threat from military action to our continental United States."

— Senator Thad Cochran at the Nomination Hearing for FEMA Administrator James Lee Witt, March 31, 1993

“Our strategic competitors, Russia and China, possess the capability and have demonstrated their intent to hold the homeland at risk, both kinetically and non-kinetically.”

— General A.C. Roper, Deputy Commander NORAD/NORTHCOM, July 14, 2022

Abstract

“National Security Competition or Cooperation: Preparing for 21st Century Threats” is a short-form essay that identifies an important and yet unaddressed challenge related to the reemergence of peer and near-peer threats to the homeland, and it presents important initial steps to address them. The thesis asserts that the U.S. defense and homeland security/emergency management communities are highly interdependent but are not organized or equipped to address simultaneous domestic and overseas missions, and as a result, both are vulnerable to acute resource shortfalls if the same resources are need at home and abroad simultaneously. The article also posits that both stakeholder groups should first recognize this interdependence and then work to develop cooperative resource prioritization mechanisms as well as supporting preparedness and mitigation efforts thereby reducing the requirements at home and freeing forces for the fight abroad.

Suggested Citation


Introduction

Much has been written recently about the slow reorientation of the United States to the threat of peer and near-peer military confrontation after three decades of strategic slumber, but that shift ignores key resource and capability challenges that will hamstring the United States’ ability to address this threat. The problem stems from an expectation that civilian and military decisionmakers will support each other during a conflict without realizing that both rely on a shared pool of resources and capabilities insufficient to support separate yet concurrent missions. Military doctrine includes assumptions regarding the civilian government helping the military mobilize, deploy, and sustain forces in wartime without recognizing those civilian organizations will likely be otherwise engaged addressing the effects of adversary attacks as well as naturally occurring disasters within the United States. Conversely, emergency managers fail to recognize the reemergence of this old threat and that the military support that increasingly underwrites the response and recovery to severe disasters cannot be guaranteed if those same forces are tasked to defend the homeland.
or fight a large-scale war overseas. There are simply not enough national resources, material or personnel, available to support domestic consequence management resulting from an attack on the United States or the military response to it, and few deconfliction or prioritization structures exist to make the best use of scarce resources and personnel.

To resolve this problem, both the defense and emergency management communities and the United States as a whole, should redouble preparedness and mitigation efforts to reduce acute resource requirements resulting from an attack. This should accompany efforts to plan, train, and conduct exercises to execute these critical concurrent missions that assume loss of personnel and key resources to better reflect the threat environment and expose gaps that may be overlooked. Longer-term efforts should expand this cooperation beyond the initial stages of a war to include efforts to support a protracted conflict in parallel with other domestic challenges including both attacks on the United States and more frequent natural disasters, thereby freeing resources to fight and win America’s next war while keeping the United States safe.

**Background**

The emergency management community was born from Cold War-era civil defense efforts intended to protect the United States from a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union while helping the military mobilize, deploy, and fight a major war against it, with natural disasters and other emergencies added as a secondary concern. FEMA, for example, describes its origin as a consortium of civil preparedness offices dispersed across the federal government merging into a single agency to address emergency preparedness for nuclear war and other disasters. Through the 1980s, this community led by FEMA maintained a “dual-use” concept that allocated preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities for disasters of varying sizes and “the ultimate emergency—war.” This bifurcated approach is evident in the policy and legislative developments of the period that separately addressed natural disasters as well as the response to a “massive nuclear attack” deemed essential to national defense.

The “dual-use” approach abruptly ended in 1993 following the collapse of the Soviet Union and also the devastation caused by Hurricane Andrew where FEMA was harshly condemned. Shortly thereafter, both the incoming Clinton Administration and Congress redirected the millions spent annually on nuclear war preparations towards “all-hazards” natural disaster preparedness and mitigation programs favored by state and local governments and their Congressional representatives. As FEMA notes in its own history, “the reduction in geopolitical tensions occasioned by the end of the Cold War enabled the Agency to redirect resources from civil defense to disaster relief, recovery, and mitigation programs.”

In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, the emergency management community largely discarded its civil defense mission of complementing the military to focus more attention on natural disasters and terrorism. However, they also became increasingly reliant on support from the military to address domestic threats and hazards to the extent that over 70% of FEMA’s Stafford Act Mission Assignments issued for disaster response and recovery are provided to the Defense Department (DoD). Recent examples include the 2017 hurricane season where DoD leadership testified just a month after the landfall of Hurricane Maria.
to the sheer volume and diversity of this support including over 300 Mission Assignments totaling $3.9 billion for the three major hurricanes including:

search and rescue operations; port and airfield assessment; aerial port operations; emergency route clearance; air and ground transportation and evacuation; patient transportation and aeromedical evacuation; National Disaster Medical (NDMS) patient movement, reception, and medical care; medical support; strategic airlift to transport personnel, relief supplies, and equipment; imagery; fuel distribution; life-sustaining commodity (e.g., food and water) distribution; power distribution restoration; temporary shelters; water purification; logistics support; maritime freight support; Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-capable radars; installation support bases and responder support camps for FEMA responders; and mortuary affairs support.\(^{15}\)

Luckily, there was not a major war or threat thereof restraining military support during the critical period where this support was most needed, or the outcomes from these hurricanes may have been much worse.

**National Defense Challenges**

In parallel with the changes made in the emergency management community, adjustments swept through the military as the threat of peer and near-peer threats receded during the 1990s and the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that followed.\(^{16}\) Yet, the return of aggressive revanchist behavior by China and Russia and the longstanding threats posed by hostile regional dictatorships such as Iran and North Korea have influenced a recent shift in strategic thinking back towards great power competition and the risks associated with it. Unfortunately, if the United States once again finds itself in a shooting war with peer or near-peer adversary, there is no reason to believe the adversary will wait until American troops arrive in an overseas combat zone before attacking them.

Key U.S. military leaders commented as early as 2018 that the “homeland is no longer a sanctuary” from these acts of violence.\(^{17}\) More recently, leaders including the current head of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) & U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), the military organization tasked with both leading Homeland Defense and supporting disaster response led by civilian authorities, stated that in future conflicts the U.S. military will be “fighting to get to the fight,” including overcoming attacks in the United States that disrupt key transportation and logistics nodes and/or to inflict pain and hardship on the American people sufficient to dissuade American support for the war.\(^{18}\) The recognition that the United States is at risk of attack is further addressed in the recent National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, the latter citing missile defenses as “critical to the top priority of defending the homeland and deterring attacks against the United States.”\(^{19}\) The recently updated Army Field Manual for operations takes this guidance one step further and includes an entire appendix devoted to “contested deployments.”\(^{20}\) These developments make clear that the Administration and military leaders understand the threats to the United States.
Unfortunately, very little is written about the unique challenges associated with the contested deployment of forces from within the United States using vulnerable and privately-owned critical infrastructure to an overseas combat zone. One of the few scholars researching this topic suggests “the Army and the Department of Defense writ large must evaluate the scenarios within a contested homeland where they will require support and response for their deployment and the security of their bases,” assuming that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other Federal Departments and Agencies will prioritize and support the military warfighting mission so long as the military can “predetermine its requirements and set conditions within the framework for the support it will need from civil elements.”

This concept assumes the Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) paradigm whereby military support is provided for disasters can be reversed, with those same civilian agencies instead supporting the warfighting mission in lieu of their primary domestic responsibilities and essential functions.

But despite its proven lifesaving criticality, DSCA has always been the military’s last priority behind, in order, homeland defense, force protection, and mission assurance. There are no Congressional appropriations for DSCA, and DoD must rely on Mission Assignments and the Economy Act for reimbursement of DSCA expenses. Moreover, the Secretary of Defense is the only cabinet official with the presumed authority to decline a Mission Assignment issued by FEMA during a Presidentially-declared disaster, and the major incident management policies issued since 2001 have specific exemptions for DoD to ensure the military can maintain its focus on warfighting. To make the point more clear, the Army’s public website highlights warfighting in unambiguous terms and without reference to DSCA:

**OUR MISSION**

**OUR PURPOSE REMAINS CONSTANT**

To deploy, fight and win our nation’s wars by providing ready, prompt and sustained land dominance by Army forces across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force.

The Army mission is vital to the Nation because we are the service capable of defeating enemy ground forces and indefinitely seizing and controlling those things an adversary prizes most – its land, its resources and its population.

Further, at least one scholar assumes the legacy civil defense mission led by FEMA and its antecedent forebears can be dusted off and revitalized to address modern nation-state threats. This includes developing “a comprehensive strategy and supporting programs to support and defend the population of the United States during times of war and to mobilize, sustain and expand its defense industrial base while under attack from a peer or near-peer adversary.” This theory suggests either FEMA, or DHS under which FEMA resides, should address the acute challenges the military will have sending forces overseas in a time of heightened tension or crisis as well as the long-term economic and industrial mobilization challenges. This expansive theory also suggests these agencies must develop “a framework based around Civil Defense, the mobilization and sustainment of the nation’s manpower and
defense industrial base, protecting and sustaining its morale and political institutions, and support to the Department of Defense (DOD) efforts to deploy forces overseas while contested domestically by its adversaries” in order to shape future preparedness efforts. The failure of the United States to do this may “end its next great war before it even begins.”

Emergency Management Challenges

The emergency management community has major challenges as well. Most notably is the massive increase in recent presidentially declared disasters. For example, the National Preparedness Report notes that in 2021 alone there were twenty weather-related disasters with losses exceeding $1 billion each, whereas the average for the past forty years since FEMA’s creation is 7.4 incidents per year, and these figures exclude the COVID-19 response. This increase in disaster activity suggests a shift from “all-hazards” to essentially all-hazards all the time.

Civilian emergency managers have in fact begun to face the return of the long-dormant threat of peer and near-peer conflict in addition to an avalanche of year-round natural disasters, but the centrality of military support for any significant disaster has no easy workaround. An attack, such as a nuclear or non-nuclear cruise missile strike on the United States, would almost certainly spur the military into action against the aggressor but would also create critical response and recovery missions in any U.S. cities targeted in the attack. It is not unreasonable to assume that the kinds of that attacks upon Ukrainian civilian infrastructure seen on television every night could occur within the United States, and recent history including the attacks of 9/11/2001, the Oklahoma City bombing, and others serve as reminders that even conventional or cyber-attacks upon the United States could be catastrophic and require massive amounts of support to address.

In addition to the challenges noted above regarding the loss of critical military personnel and capabilities needed at home, emergency managers must also contend with the potential loss of critical supplies and commodities. For example, during the 2017 hurricane season noted above where extensive military support was provided, “FEMA and the American Red Cross, coordinated with federal, SLTT, and non-governmental partners to provide more than one million shelter nights and the longest feeding mission in FEMA’s history in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.” This mission was executed with support from DoD through the Defense Logistics Agency leveraging similar contract vehicles for similar commodities that the military would need for homeland defense or warfighting. Again, the United States was lucky there were no major combat operations in 2017 that would have otherwise engaged DLA or competed for those meals and other support needs, or the feeding mission for hundreds of thousands of disaster survivors would have been imperiled, forcing the President to weigh the risk to national defense against the risk to critical civilian needs and potential loss of life.

An additional challenge includes the Defense Production Act (DPA) and its implementing provisions that allow DoD to apply their large acquisitions workforce and delegated authority from the Department of Commerce to acquire the goods needed to prosecute a war that would also be in short supply at home. The General Services Administration (GSA) might be able to
serve as a counterweight to the juggernaut that is DoD acquisitions, but it is unclear if GSA can handle this responsibility in the short term. Furthermore, there are no generalized prioritization and deconfliction structures beyond the loose framework set in national policy that would allow resourcing decisions to be made in a timely manner; few people have expertise on these provisions, they have never been incorporated into major exercises or national plans, and it is not clear how well or how quickly these systems can be employed on a large scale. This lack of expertise and likelihood of scarce resources desperately requires objective analysis and formalized decision frameworks for future use.

### Domestic Competition Risks

Unfortunately, the solutions offered thus far to address the warfighting problem are incomplete, and there are no ready-made solutions to address the likely domestic consequence management resource shortfalls should military support be unavailable. The flaw in the “contested deployment” and FEMA-DHS civil defense theories is the failure to recognize the severe steady-state stresses of civilian decisionmakers already spread thin trying to address natural disasters caused by the worsening climate crisis as well as the additional stresses that a military conflict will place on them at home—apart from any concurrent requirements to support the military. The pace and severity of natural disasters is increasing as are the requirements to address them, and it is not clear how additional support can be squeezed from these organizations for new responsibilities in support of the military. This is especially challenging considering that these same agencies are required by law and policy to continue “to ensure resiliency and continued performance of their organizations’ essential functions”—which mostly do not involve support to the military—“under all conditions.” At the same time, it is not evident that the emergency management community is prepared for the sudden loss of military support if those forces are needed elsewhere. As a result, if the United States is attacked, both the military and civil authorities will have severe resource shortfalls at the moment those resources are needed most.

In the scenarios envisioned by these existing strategies and recent publications about adversarial threats, every location an adversary attacks would become ground zero for a disaster site, but these same theories fail to recognize military forces will be expected to support needs of survivors in these communities just as they always do. The military will not just need to be “fighting to get to the fight,” but will also likely be directed to peel away capability to address attacks on United States at home. But there are not enough personnel, supplies, and equipment to support concurrent military and domestic crises, and there are few mechanisms to deconflict, prioritize, and ensure cooperation between the military and emergency management communities. The National Incident Management System only addresses resource needs at the lowest level and is not designed to address resource conflicts with the military because military considerations are explicitly placed outside the scope of this system. Trade-offs will be necessary at every location attacked concerning the amount of military support dedicated to address the consequences of an attack at home and the support available to the warfight abroad. It is not clear that this point is widely understood.

It is true, or at least presumed, that the military can decide on its own how much support to allocate to the needs of disaster survivors without creating significant shortfalls to its primary warfighting mission. However, this assumes the President, as Commander-in-Chief, will permit
the military to deploy its forces as the Secretary of Defense sees fit without reapporportioning forces to address the needs of those Americans affected by an attack upon the United States, especially in circumstances where there are immediate lifesaving requirements within the United States that only military forces, especially those stationed near an affected area and able to respond under their immediate response authority, can provide.\textsuperscript{44}

Moreover, the sudden mobilization and deployment of National Guard and Reserve component forces either for Homeland Defense or overseas warfighting contingencies will cause cascading impacts on the civil capability to manage domestic consequences, let alone support the military, simply because so many of these personnel also perform critical services in their steady-state occupations. These components draw heavily from emergency services, medical, transportation, and logistics among many other disciplines, and the sudden mobilization of these forces, which can be done without requiring consent from a State Governor, will strip their communities of key personnel at a time when they are needed most to address the consequences of an attack or other emergency. In some states, the National Guard is heavily relied upon for disaster response and capabilities that are not plentiful within their jurisdictions, but National Guard forces might be employed extensively in a future conflict due to their unique specializations including suppling the Space Force with 20\% of its space professionals and 60\% of the military’s offensive electronic warfare capability in addition to cyber warfare capabilities.\textsuperscript{45}

The resourcing challenges extend beyond the federal government as well. Planning and preparedness efforts conducted since 9/11/2001 have included catastrophic plans and exercises including acts of terrorism and attacks with improvised nuclear devices; however, all these scenarios are based on an assumption that mutual aid and support provided by neighboring state/local/tribal/territorial governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations will always be available and in sufficient quantities to meet disaster survivor needs.\textsuperscript{46} The all-hazards framework upon which the modern emergency management paradigm was built assumes that no other concurrent crisis is happening domestically or internationally. \textsuperscript{47} In a contested homeland it is unclear if these stakeholders will authorize the deployment of lifesaving capabilities before it becomes evident that follow-on attacks will not occur on these unaffected areas. Given the difficulty mobilizing and executing a war against an adversary, it might take months to neutralize these threats sufficiently to allow the unaffected communities to feel safe enough to release their resources to support others. Therefore, it is entirely uncertain if the mutual aid or Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) agreements can be met if the disaster is caused by an adversary who can keep the entire nation at risk of further attack for an indefinite period. These unmet needs will fall onto the federal authorities in concert with the private sector, and especially the military, for resolution.

As noted above, it should not be assumed that EMAC or mutual aid can backfill these gaps, because no part of the nation can assure its population they won’t be the next target, and few specialized expeditionary civilian government personnel exist beyond small groups of disaster-focused capabilities such as the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) or Urban Search and Rescue teams that are both limited in number and sourced from local communities that are similarly vulnerable to these same staffing shortages.\textsuperscript{48} This impact will be further compounded because these teams deploy via military transport, move patients via the U.S. Air Force Air...
Mobility Command, and Public Health personnel also serve roles supporting U.S. Navy hospital ships and backfilling military treatment facilities with medical expertise.

In more blunt terms, in a scenario where the United States is attacked, emergency managers and military professionals may be forced into a zero-sum ad hoc resource competition, pitting both groups against each other. Expect this contest to play out over every gallon of fuel, meal, cot, aircraft, and servicemember needed to address the consequences of a domestic attack that might also be needed for homeland defense or warfighting abroad. These challenges are not insurmountable, and both communities work well together and have strong relationships forged by decades of cooperation, but this is a new twist on a mostly forgotten problem set, and trying to solve it on the fly amidst a catastrophic emergency is the least preferred way to do it.

Cooperation Opportunities

The defense and emergency management communities are inherently interdependent but are not organized to address concurrent simultaneous missions. This must change. Both communities must first recognize that the future will likely require their longstanding and robust interdependence to endure and that efforts to adapt these relationships to address concurrent missions will reduce the likelihood of resource competition in a crisis. Each partner should work cooperatively to build, train, and exercise a resourcing system that is rapid, effective, and adaptable to dissimilar problems requiring similar resources. This should include planning for the assistance of civilian authorities helping the military get to the fight and to help repair and rebuild infrastructure attacked to disrupt movement, while simultaneously, the military should expect to include support to impacted American communities into plans that guide the movement of forces or affected by other disasters. Large-scale exercises should include provisions for competing simultaneous domestic and overseas warfighting/homeland defense missions that stress existing systems and processes to the failure point, aiming to be as difficult as the expected real-world incident.

Non-federal stakeholders at all levels of government and the private sector should also recognize the new reality as well as the resource challenges it presents and should also work to both reduce the requirements needed and to also make the best use of those resources available in a crisis. Civil defense efforts to help the American public prepare for the previous iteration of nation-state threats were rightfully derided as ineffective, but they can serve as useful teaching points to improve public engagement and messaging in the future. More recently, efforts to mitigate the risk associated with known natural hazards have reduced the resource requirements and costs associated with response and recovery, and similar efforts applied to reduce the impact of adversarial attacks may show similar benefits, thereby reducing the requirements at home and freeing forces for the fight abroad.

The final piece of this puzzle should also include steps to incorporate national mobilization processes abandoned a generation ago, but the next iteration should first recognize that FEMA, like most of the emergency management community, has little capability to undertake this mission given the sheer volume of natural disasters and the new threats posed by hostile nations. This includes better use of existing authorities and structures such as the Defense Production Act and should include efforts to expand, protect, and build resilience into domestic manufacturing, supply
chains, and critical infrastructure leveraging both re-discovered best practices from the Cold War and those learned in the years since. Resilience is a shared responsibility of governments at all levels, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations and individual citizens, and a truly whole-of-nation approach to a whole-of-nation problem will require a whole-of-nation effort to build resiliency against these threats including the ability to balance domestic and overseas requirements and deter aggressors from attacking the United States in the first place.

About the Author

Robert J. (Bob) Roller serves as the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) National Planning Branch Chief and is one of the most versatile and experienced emergency response professionals in the United States. He has deployed to wildfires, mass migrations, hurricanes, and pandemics. He is a Certified Emergency Manager, a Nationally Registered Paramedic, and a civilian graduate of the US Army’s Command and General Staff College. He also has years of experience as a firefighter and emergency medical services provider in both wilderness and urban environments and was one of the first board-certified wilderness paramedics in the world. He frequently authors academic articles describing his work, he has taught emergency management and homeland security courses domestically and abroad, and he recently published a memoir about his early experiences as a wildland firefighter. Bob and his wife Merabeth live with their young children and adopted Labrador mix in the suburbs of Washington, DC. He writes in his personal capacity, and the views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of FEMA or the United States government. He may be reached at rollerrj@yahoo.com.

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**Notes**


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