The military forces of the United States are on the threshold of fielding new capabilities that, in concert, represent a revolutionary transformation in the ability to prosecute large-scale theater warfare. These capabilities, if fully exploited, can allow comparatively small numbers of forces to observe, assess, engage, and effectively attack enemy assets—especially moving land, sea, and air forces—over a large area. These new capabilities are thus well suited to meeting the needs of a demanding U.S. defense strategy that calls for forces that can rapidly project military power over long distances, apply that power in a discriminate fashion, and achieve highly asymmetric, favorable outcomes.

Despite the promise of these emerging capabilities, it is not clear that U.S. forces will be assured of prevailing over their adversaries in future major theater conflicts. Our potential enemies are not standing still—many already have lethal chemical and biological weapons and delivery vehicles, antiship mines and missiles, and capable air defenses, all of which can impede the deployment and employment of U.S. forces in hostile regions. Spreading technology and an open global arms market will allow nations with enough money and technical competence to field more-advanced versions of these weapons in the years to come. Thus, new challenges to U.S. power projection operations are arising.

But the most important factors determining the future balance between the capabilities of U.S. forces and those of our adversaries are in our own hands: The Department of Defense (DoD) may not be making the most of its considerable resources to develop and field
with dispatch the new capabilities essential to defeating future threats. Overall U.S. force structure has been more or less frozen since the early 1990s. At the same time, the press of a heavy tempo of operations has placed considerable strain on many elements of U.S. active and reserve forces, imposing a steady drain on maintenance and training budgets. These realities have reinforced an innate and generally well-founded reluctance among U.S. force planners to trade force structure for qualitatively new capabilities. And despite determined efforts by DoD’s leadership to downsize and modernize its huge support infrastructure, gaining meaningful savings from these accounts is proving to be a difficult and time-consuming task.

Hence, while the technical and operational communities within the U.S. defense establishment are generating impressive new opportunities for meeting emerging needs, these opportunities too often are postponed or abandoned because of inappropriate funding priorities. This is regrettable because traditional approaches to theater warfare, in which massed land forces with massive firepower are relied upon to defeat enemy ground forces, are not likely to be successful in the face of some important future challenges. Competent adversaries will seek to exploit surprise, speed of maneuver, and access denial capabilities to seize important objectives quickly before large-scale U.S. and allied defensive forces can be brought to bear. Without high-leverage enhancements that can allow forward-based and rapidly deploying forces to locate, identify, and destroy attacking forces, we may find it increasingly difficult to deter and defeat this kind of aggression.

Fortunately, new operational concepts are emerging that can address this endemic problem. For example, fixed-wing fighter and bomber aircraft, directed to their targets by theater surveillance and control systems and equipped with smart antiarmor munitions, can be an order of magnitude more effective in destroying mechanized ground forces than similar forces of the recent past. Similarly, these surveillance and control systems, along with advanced munitions, are making U.S. attack helicopters, long-range missiles, and artillery vastly more effective. Given sufficient shifts of investment toward these and other capabilities, it now appears possible to halt a large-scale combined arms offensive with forces that can be brought to bear within a matter of days rather than months.
There is much more to this new approach to power projection than just killing tanks, however. In regions where U.S. interests face threats of short-notice aggression, the key components of a modern U.S. “halt force” include:

- Joint forces deployed forward in peacetime that can monitor developments, train with allied and indigenous forces, and conduct initial defensive operations should deterrence fail
- Airlift, aerial refueling aircraft, and prepositioned assets for rapid deployment of reinforcements
- Forces that can protect rear area assets—such as airfields, logistic hubs, command centers, and ports—from air and missile attacks
- Forces that can quickly wrest from the enemy control of operations in the air, opening up enemy territory and forces to observation and attack from the air
- Airborne and space-based surveillance and control assets that can locate and characterize enemy maneuver forces and mobile air defenses in near-real time and pass that information to attack platforms
- Forces that can damage and destroy attacking enemy maneuver forces and their lines of communication, using munitions that offer a high probability of kill for each round expended, regardless of weather
- Small (brigade-sized) but highly capable maneuver forces able to defend key theater objectives against enemy ground forces that might survive or might avoid heavy attacks by longer range allied firepower assets.

Systems to provide these capabilities either exist today or are in advanced stages of development. If fielded in sufficient numbers, they would allow U.S. forces to halt armored invasions promptly, even under the stressing circumstances of a short-warning attack supported by concerted efforts to deny U.S. expeditionary forces access to the region of conflict. But investments in key elements of this halt capability are lagging: Under current plans, by 2005 U.S. inventories of advanced antitank munitions will be significantly smaller than those needed for two plausibly stressing major conflicts. Other
programs at risk include high-leverage systems for theater surveillance and for sensor-to-shooter communications, avionics and other upgrades to existing aircraft to allow best use of advanced munitions, advanced concepts for suppressing modern surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, and prepositioning of wartime assets in the Gulf region.

Given projections of a flat or declining DoD budget, investing adequately in these and other critical capabilities will require cuts in other accounts. Because it is so important that U.S. and allied forces prevail in the opening phase of a major conflict, if cuts must be imposed upon deployable forces, they should, in general, come from systems and units that are not available for the halt phase; that is, from later-arriving forces intended for use in a counteroffensive. In our estimation, cuts of 10 to 15 percent in these forces would be sufficient to fund robust modernization of forces for two nearly simultaneous halt operations.

Such cuts are warranted both because of the importance of the early halt of enemy forces and because advanced information and firepower systems enable a shift in the division of labor on the battlefield. Heretofore, longer-range firepower systems, such as aircraft, missiles, and artillery, were seen primarily as delaying and disrupting attacking enemy ground forces, whereas heavy ground forces and supporting fires were relied upon to play the leading role in destroying and halting the enemy. Henceforth, longer-range firepower will be increasingly relied upon to bear the greatest share of this burden. This shift represents a new approach to the conduct of joint theater campaigns that should prompt a thorough review of our operational concepts, force mix, and investment priorities.