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Lights Out at the Office of Net Assessment: Implications for the US-China Military Competition

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SYNOPSIS

The disbandment of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) could significantly alter the balance of US-China military competition, bolstering China's advantage in future confrontations. The ONA provided long-term foresight, helping leaders anticipate and shape future conflicts. Its closure redirects the Pentagon's focus to short-term priorities, undermining US capabilities in analysing Chinese strategies and heightening the risk of miscalculations and conflict escalation.

COMMENTARY

On 13 March 2025, US secretary of defense Pete Hegseth ordered the "[disestablishment](#)" of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA), a secretive think tank within the Pentagon that consisted of over a dozen members. While the ONA's personnel will not be fired, they will be reassigned to "[mission-critical](#)" roles elsewhere in the Department of Defense (DOD).

Despite its small size, the shuttering of the ONA has raised [significant concerns](#) among US defence professionals, given its outsized role in providing long-term strategic foresight for DOD leaders. Without the ONA, the United States risks losing its edge in anticipating and preparing for future conflicts with its primary adversaries.

Motives Behind the Closure

The ONA's closure is part of a broader trend of recent DOD shake-ups that involved [major budget cuts](#), [personnel layoffs](#), [leadership purges](#), and a [possible pause in conducting offensive cyber operations](#). Although these actions are officially framed as efforts to increase efficiency and readiness, the ONA, which ran on a modest budget of [US\\$10–20 million per year](#), has long been portrayed by Trump acolytes as a

[troublesome](#) and [nefarious anti-Trump entity within the DOD](#). Therefore, the dismantlement of the ONA was at least partially driven by politics. This suspicion has been corroborated in a [DOD Rapid Response X post](#) on 14 March that accused the ONA of partaking in the so-called “Russian collusion hoax.”

The Functions and Achievements of the ONA

“Net assessment” refers to the [comparative analysis of the United States and its adversaries](#) to identify relative strengths and weaknesses, assess potential competition, and determine exploitable vulnerabilities. While specific ONA projects remain classified, its focus has historically been on long-term strategic threats — [first the Soviet Union during the Cold War and later China](#). Unlike most DOD divisions that prioritise security challenges of the present, the ONA specialises in forecasting conflicts [10 to 50 years into the future](#) and developing strategies for the United States to secure a comparative advantage. ONA personnel were known for their independence and critical thinking, providing honest, apolitical [advice to senior DOD leaders](#). The ONA’s guiding belief was that anticipating long-term challenges is preferable to merely reacting to them. Thus, the ONA operated under the principle that whoever identifies future conflicts first can plan for contingencies, impose costs on rivals, and deter wars. If conflict does arise, the best-prepared nation is more likely to execute successful operations and emerge victorious by asserting its comparative advantages. Achieving such success requires the United States to have a [deep understanding of its adversaries’ strategic thoughts and developmental trajectories](#) while proactively seeking to outmanoeuvre them.

For almost 42 years, the ONA was led by its founder, Andrew W. Marshall, a believer in [Sun Tzu’s maxim](#): “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.” Marshall pioneered the net assessment methodology that ONA researchers utilised to analyse future conflict trends and understand the minds of US adversaries. Essentially, [the methodology is diagnostic](#), seeking to discern key characteristics of US competitors. Marshall’s approach emphasised a [multidisciplinary perspective](#), incorporating history, economics, cultural studies, and other social science disciplines to provide a holistic understanding of US competitors beyond only military considerations. Furthermore, the methodology seeks to identify discontinuities, examining how adversaries might evolve, anticipating major shifts, and determining how the United States could gain a comparative advantage. Using this methodology, the ONA played a crucial role in [exposing Soviet vulnerabilities](#), [advancing the Revolution in Military Affairs](#), [advocating the Air-Sea Battle concept](#), [supporting the Third Offset Strategy](#), and [shaping US efforts to counter China’s rise in the Western Pacific](#).

Consequences of the ONA Closure for US-China Military Competition

The dismantling of the ONA has several serious consequences for the United States in competing against China’s rising military power. First and foremost, the DOD lost a critical think tank responsible for providing long-term strategic foresight to its leaders. This loss will weaken the US military’s ability to anticipate future conflicts and outplan its adversaries before the next war begins. Without the ONA, the DOD is likely going to shift its focus towards achieving short-term objectives and preparing for present-day conflicts.

Second, the United States will struggle to maintain a thorough comprehension of Chinese strategic thinking and behaviour. A key function of the ONA was to analyse how China's leadership thinks and prepares for future wars. With diminished expertise, the United States is more likely to misjudge Chinese intentions, increasing the risk of miscalculations and unintended conflict escalation.

Third, the likelihood of the United States maintaining a comparative advantage over China will decrease. Unlike the United States, China continues to support institutions dedicated to long-range strategic assessment. In contrast, the ONA closure, combined with planned budget cuts, is likely to affect other US think tanks engaged in similar research. This will reduce the United States' ability to identify and exploit China's strategic vulnerabilities, potentially giving Beijing an edge in preparing for future military confrontations.

Fourth, disbanding the ONA and reassigning its experts to different DOD divisions means the loss of a cohesive team of independent thinkers who provided honest, apolitical advice. Given the increasingly politicised atmosphere in the US government, it is possible that critical, unbiased assessments will no longer be tolerated. [As has happened with other governmental bodies](#), net assessment may become subject to political pressures, forcing analysts to tailor their findings to the personal preferences of the US president. The decline in neutrality could lead to lower-quality assessments and create opportunities for China or other US adversaries to engage in deception and misguide American leaders into making ill-advised military planning decisions.

In sum, the closure of the ONA is a major win for China and a serious setback for the United States. As political turbulence continues to weaken America's ability to plan for the long term, China may emerge as the better-prepared party in future conflicts — an outcome with far-reaching consequences for global security. Without the intellectual power that the ONA provided to DOD leaders, the United States risks losing its ability to establish a comparative advantage over China or even fully grasp Beijing's strategic thinking. The elimination of this small yet influential office could tip the scales of US-China military competition in Beijing's favour.



The closure of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) is a major win for China, weakening the United States' ability to anticipate and understand future military challenges. *Image source:* [CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons](#).

Conclusion

The disbanding of the ONA marks the end of an era in DOD strategic forecasting. Throughout its existence, the ONA provided [important foresights](#) that contributed to the Western bloc's victory in the Cold War and helped US leaders navigate great power competitions in the 21st century. However, the Trump administration's lack of interest in grasping the strategic thinking of US adversaries, together with its prioritisation of short-term tactical gains over long-term US strategic interests — evident in its ongoing [Ukraine peace gambit](#) — has led to a diminished appreciation for institutions like the ONA.

Breaking up the ONA will have long-term consequences for the United States. China's military capabilities will continue to grow, while the United States' ability to understand and counter the Chinese military challenge will weaken due to the loss of decades' worth of expert knowledge and strategic wisdom. If this trend continues, China may outcompete the United States in the long run as America undermines its own capacity to anticipate and prepare for future conflicts.

Irrespective of this development, it remains vital for think tanks elsewhere — whether in the East or West — to preserve and exercise the ONA's methodology for their own benefit. In an era of increasingly global instability, it is even more pertinent to retain the knowledge and intellectual frameworks essential to understanding future wars and the modus operandi of adversaries. The survival of states, at a time when the rules-based international order faces the threat of disintegration, may well hinge on their ability to refine and leverage these critical insights.

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