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It's Global. Get Used to It.

The dogfight over the U.S. Air Force's decision to buy new tanker aircraft from a Northrop Grumman/EADS team instead of Boeing might eventually produce a useful result. By the time the contrails clear, the need for forward-thinking in defense procurement will be staring us in the face.

Most of the KC-135 tankers in service today were built during the Eisenhower administration. These workhorses played a major, three-decade-long role in winning the Cold War, but they are on the verge of giving out. The choice of their replacements is equally crucial because the U.S. will have to live with the decision for the next 30 or 40 years. The nation had better think ahead, and that necessarily means thinking beyond its own borders.

Perfect foresight may require a crystal ball, but two bets are as sure as death and taxes. The first is that defense procurement is a matter of life and death. Given manufacturing lead times, the decisions the U.S. makes today will determine whether American service personnel have the superior infrastructure and weaponry they need to stay alive in battle in 2020.

New weapons systems and other military infrastructure depend on technology from the best minds in the world.

Fundamental war-fighting capabilities such as aerial refueling must take priority over the interests of a single company or even the hallowed notion of protecting the American defense industry. The Air Force cannot afford to treat the tanker replacement procurement as an entitlement program for American manufacturers, and politicians must not sacrifice the future to serve their own short-term parochial interests. Instead, such enormous and fundamental buys must be dictated by the merits.

Taxes necessarily enter the picture, too, because even the most hawkish observers know there has to be some limit on the U.S. defense budget, in both absolute terms and as a share of our economy. Annual defense appropriations already stand at half a trillion dollars. A shrinking economy and declining tax base ultimately will collide with the ever-

growing costs of social programs to meet the needs of an aging population. A new Congress and administration in Washington may feel compelled to kill some extremely important acquisitions. With costs for 72 major weapons programs already 26% above original estimates, that day may not be far off.

There is, however, plenty we cannot predict. Accordingly, American war planners must design into every procurement the flexibility to deal with unexpected situations. The need for airlift capability is obvious, but what will be most critically needed at any given moment in 2018? Fuel, medical supplies, other cargo or personnel? The Air Mobility Command decided that the Northrop Grumman/EADS KC-45A tanker offered "more passengers, more cargo, more fuel offload, more patients, more availability, more flexibility and more dependability" than the home-grown Boeing 767-based rival.

It was clear to everyone, going into the tanker competition, that the Air Force needed flexibility in airlift capability over the coming decades. The big shock and outrage comes from the Air Force's decision to go looking for a big part of the solution in Europe. The argument to overturn the Air Force's choice boils down to the potential impact on "our defense industrial base."

The fuss and feathers from the multi-million-dollar effort to overturn the Air Force's choice may have the unintended but useful result of making everyone wake up to one undeniable fact: The world's industrial base is global now. Given the dependence of new weapons systems and other military infrastructure on technology from the best minds in the world, it surely will become more global, not less, over the next 30 to 40 years.

CNN's Lou Dobbs and other sputtering television pundits can rant against the Air Force until every television screen in America explodes, but they cannot turn the clock back to the "good old days" before globalization. A "government that works" goes where it must to find the best the world has to offer. If the Air Force's tanker decision holds up, as it should, American defense icons like Boeing will have to face these facts if they want to play a leading role in assuring American war-fighting capabilities into the middle of the 21st century. 