



## ANALYSIS

### TRENDS IN ALLIED ASSURANCE: CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

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“In some ways, the worst thing that happened to America was the hubris that it could think ‘we won the Cold War and Russia is no longer an adversary.’”

*Paul Dibb, Emeritus Professor  
Australian National University<sup>1</sup>*

The United States generates capabilities to influence adversaries’ and allies’ decisions regarding whether they are deterred and assured respectively. In this sense, extended deterrence, like allied assurance, are in the eye of the beholder. This article examines trends in allied assurance from the perspective of experts in allied countries in Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states that were interviewed for the purposes of this study.<sup>2</sup> Despite U.S. allies facing serious diverse challenges to their national security, the interviews revealed common threads of agreement on how the United States can increase the likelihood that its allies remain assured. They include improving allied communication, modernizing U.S. nuclear and conventional forces, and rebuilding capacity to be a serious contender in two simultaneous regional contingencies. The interviews also revealed troubling trends that have the potential to disrupt U.S. alliance structures should the United States fail to attend to allied concerns in a timely manner, including whether U.S. forces are sufficiently postured to fight wars in defense of allies in two regions, whether it can maintain a domestic consensus that alliances are beneficial and U.S. global engagement worth it, and whether it will stand firm to support Ukraine or be deterred by Russia’s coercive nuclear threats. U.S. allies’ actions also make clear that there is intra-alliance disagreement, both regional and within NATO, regarding the seriousness of threats allies are facing, introducing an additional layer of complexity.

#### **The Perennial Concerns over the Credibility of U.S. Extended Deterrence**

After Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, questions related to U.S. allied assurance gained increased salience, not just in Europe, but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Growing concern over U.S. willingness to intervene in support of an ally was apparent among many experts interviewed for the purposes of this study. The United States was one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Zoom interview with Paul Dibb, February 1, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on interviews with more than a dozen national security experts knowledgeable on nuclear weapons policy, extended deterrence, and allied assurance. The interviews were conducted remotely between December 2023 and February 2024. The list of some of the interviewed experts can be found in the appendix, others chose to conduct interviews under the Chatham House rules.



guarantor states of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.<sup>3</sup> In the document, Ukraine acceded to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and gave up nuclear weapons on its territory in exchange for a pledge that its independence, sovereignty, and existing borders would be respected.<sup>4</sup> Since then, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba indicated it was a mistake for Ukraine to agree to the Memorandum<sup>5</sup>, and former President Bill Clinton said he regretted his role in making Ukraine give up nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Even though U.S. guarantees to Ukraine are comparatively weaker than treaty obligations made to U.S. allies, countries are closely observing the dynamic of U.S. help to Ukraine. The conflict is somewhat of an indicator of the likelihood the United States would come to allies' defense. On one hand, Ukraine is not a formal ally; on the other, the conflict does not require U.S. direct involvement and therefore providing help should be easier politically than a conflict requiring "boots on the ground."

U.S. allies have always worried about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence to one degree or another, particularly after the Soviet Union reached strategic parity with the United States in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The United States invested significant resources in mitigating perceived gaps, including deploying hundreds of thousands of troops and thousands of nuclear warheads to Europe, the primary area of concern at the time. After the end of the Cold War, the West experienced a period of unquestioned U.S. leadership in a new world order, which many hoped would mark the end of nation-state conflict, large defense budgets, and nuclear competition. The defense capabilities that America spent decades building up were dismantled in a few years and the defense industrial base atrophied. The prospects for its reconstitution are bleak in the short-term, even if Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine serves as a wake-up call.

Practically speaking, there is no viable alternative to the United States being the primary guarantor of allied security for the time being. That is why some allies concluded that questioning U.S. credibility publicly would be somewhat pointless and perhaps could even send the wrong message to adversaries and increase risks to NATO's frontline allies. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "The European Union cannot defend Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> The other two being the United Kingdom and, ironically, the Russian Federation.

<sup>4</sup> *Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*. Budapest, December 5, 1994, available at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Morton, "Ukraine foreign minister: Giving up nuclear weapons wasn't smart," *The Washington Times*, February 22, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/22/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-foreign-minister-giving-nucl/>.

<sup>6</sup> Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, "Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons," *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

<sup>7</sup> David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), pp. 31-38, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

Eighty percent of NATO's defence expenditures come from non-EU NATO allies.”<sup>8</sup> Allies would have to spend much more on defense than they currently are to achieve a similar degree of capability, even accounting for additional investments since February 2022. It would take significant time and effort to develop key conventional enablers, e.g. airlift, that the United States currently provides. Allies could develop their own nuclear capabilities, a prospect discussed more often today than ten or so years ago; but that option is fraught with its own political, diplomatic, and fiscal difficulties. Lastly, they could collaborate with adversaries, an option perhaps most damaging to U.S. interests. Hungary and Slovakia appear to be choosing this route with Russia (and China), potentially creating difficulties for NATO, which customarily operates by unanimous consensus agreement.<sup>9</sup>

Openly questioning U.S. commitments warrants rather unpleasant follow up questions. If the United States cannot credibly guarantee allied security, which other country (or combination of countries) could do so? The alternatives entail large costs that the public is unlikely to support. Striking a separate deal with an adversary has all the markings of a future disaster and is unlikely to be supported by the public either, although the pro-Russian shift in Hungary and Slovakia shows a concerning degree of plausibility regarding this scenario. Germany, with its years of pursuing cooperative policy toward Russia, has learned the hard way that ill-advised attempts at reconciliation bring more discord when strategic objectives and perceptions are fundamentally at odds, even opening one to massive intelligence penetration.<sup>10</sup> That Germany is not applying this hard-obtained knowledge to its relations with China is a matter of significant concern to some other NATO countries, including the United States.

The nuclear aspect of allied assurance is not well understood among many allied politicians, even though, as then-U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles Richard pointed out, “Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD [Department of Defense], rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, ... is holding right.”<sup>11</sup> He further elaborated that “if that assumption is not met, particularly with nuclear deterrence, nothing else in the Department of Defense is going to work the way it was designed.”<sup>12</sup> Just like the United States, its allies, too, took a break from thinking about nuclear deterrence after the end of the

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<sup>8</sup> Sabine Siebold and John Irish, “NATO chief says Europe meeting spending targets after Trump comments,” *Reuters*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-chief-says-18-countries-meet-2-military-spending-target-2024-02-14/>.

<sup>9</sup> Eric S. Edelman, David Manning, and Franklin C. Miller, “NATO's Decision Process Has an Achilles' Heel,” *New Atlanticist*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-decision-process-has-an-achilles-heel/>.

<sup>10</sup> An instructive example are Angela Merkel's (and other German politicians') efforts to further relations with Russia. See Matthew Karnitschnig, “Putin's useful German idiots,” *Politico*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-merkel-germany-scholz-foreign-policy-ukraine-war-invasion-nord-stream-2/>.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in, Amy Hudson, “Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Cold War, and states that joined NATO since then did not have to think seriously about it until recently.

Many politicians in allied countries appear to take the credibility of nuclear deterrence for granted. They assume that nuclear deterrence is always there, working, and does not need to be thought of on an everyday basis. Perhaps these attitudes are a consequence of these countries not possessing nuclear weapon capabilities. According to Karel Ulík, member of a Permanent Delegation of the Czech Republic to NATO, non-nuclear allies implicitly trust that nuclear powers “know what they are doing with their nuclear weapons.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than focusing their primary attention on nuclear guarantees, they are quick to point out the value of a steady U.S. conventional forward presence; permanent, if possible, rotational if need be, and, in the case of allies in Europe, from other NATO countries when the first two options are unavailable.

Perhaps there is a silver lining to so few politicians understanding the nuances of U.S. nuclear policy and the infrastructure that supports it. U.S. nuclear modernization might easily run into difficulties as defense budgets shrink and programs pick up the pace (and therefore consume more resources). The sorry state of a U.S. nuclear production complex that is anything but flexible and resilient, despite all *Nuclear Posture Reviews* committing administrations to making it so, should cause significant concerns for those relying on it as a part of deterrence. Perhaps allied politicians would not feel as assured if they wholly comprehended the serious problems that follow decades of neglect of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure.<sup>14</sup>

A few experts interviewed raised concerns about whether the United States will be able to sustain its nuclear weapons modernization program, which is “desperately”<sup>15</sup> needed. They consider continued progress important. More specifically, they would not welcome the cancellation of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N) proposed by the Biden Administration.<sup>16</sup> Other interviewees commented on a lack of diversity in U.S. nuclear arsenal given threat developments, particularly considering that nuclear deterrence is most likely to fail in a regional context. Rod Lyon, Program Director for Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute of Canberra, stated that the United States “would seem to need not only more nuclear warheads, but more kinds of nuclear weapons, and—especially in the Indo-Pacific—more deployment options.”<sup>17</sup> Sugio Takahashi, Head of the Defense Policy Division of the Policy Studies Department at the National Institute for Defense Studies in Japan, argued that “the United States should not abandon a goal of being close to the

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<sup>13</sup> Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023

<sup>14</sup> The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report highlights some of them. See Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Insinna, “Biden administration kills Trump-era nuclear cruise missile program,” *Breaking Defense*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/biden-administration-kills-trump-era-nuclear-cruise-missile-program/>.

<sup>17</sup> Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

combined nuclear forces of Russia and China. It does not need to match them perfectly; it is more a matter of having capabilities that could support escalation management at lower levels.”<sup>18</sup> The United States ought to be thinking about a modern version of flexible response.<sup>19</sup> One interviewed expert stated that “there should be greater urgency in the United States to change things from a political perspective, including accelerating nuclear adaptation that we’ve done slowly in the past decades, but also in terms of capabilities.”<sup>20</sup>

In a way, nuclear deterrence is a victim of its own success. The tacit assumptions, not wrong, are that first, nuclear deterrence is working in its most important aspect (preventing a nuclear attack against the U.S. homeland and allies). Second, because nuclear deterrence is working, it does not need to be questioned or publicly discussed very much (and in fact, it would be counterproductive to do so). And third, that the United States, the United Kingdom, and France know what they are doing with their nuclear arsenals, and it is not allied governments’ place to comment on the particulars. At the end of the day, U.S. taxpayers bear the consequences of U.S. armament choices and the details have to be worked out within the U.S. political process (or the British or the French accordingly). But that does not mean that other countries consider U.S. force posture decisions unimportant, as the case of the Japanese government’s reaction to the retirement of a nuclear-capable Tomahawk illustrates.<sup>21</sup> It certainly does not mean that all is well with U.S. assurance.

### **Can the United States Prevail in Two Regional Theaters Simultaneously?**

The interviews highlighted allied concerns over whether the United States maintains sufficient conventional capabilities to be able to uphold its global obligations, particularly in a situation in which it might be required to exert itself on behalf of allies in two theaters on opposite sides of the globe. The principal questions are whether the United States has (and will continue to have) enough conventional forces to support its alliances in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions, how would it prioritize capabilities if it needed to do so, and how steadfast its commitment would be to both theaters. European allies are worried that the U.S. focus on China on the heels of a pivot to Asia will diminish U.S. attention to Europe, while allies in the Indo-Pacific worry about whether the U.S. focus on Ukraine and assuring NATO allies will leave it incapable of devoting a sufficient level of attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific region.

Would the United States have enough capability to fight two regional wars with a nuclear peer in each theater and a lesser nuclear power in one of them, particularly given

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<sup>18</sup> Zoom interview with Sugio Takahashi, February 16, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> This expert wished to remain unanimous.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Costlow and Keith Payne, “TLAM-N and SLCM-N: Lessons for Extended Deterrence and Assuring Allies,” *Information Series* No. 567 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 15, 2023), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/matthew-r-costlow-and-keith-b-payne-tlam-n-and-slcm-n-lessons-for-extended-deterrence-and-assuring-allies-no-567-november-15-2023/](https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-and-keith-b-payne-tlam-n-and-slcm-n-lessons-for-extended-deterrence-and-assuring-allies-no-567-november-15-2023/).

collaboration between Russia and North Korea and Russia and China? The *2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report* stated that “If the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater.”<sup>22</sup> The United States inflicted some of its defense capability wounds. This fiscal year, Congress’ inability to pass a regular budget on time cost the Department of Defense close to \$300 million *a day*; and continuing resolutions preclude a topline increase or starting new programs, making the required investments to U.S. capability to sustain a fight more difficult and less efficient.<sup>23</sup> The last time Congress passed budget on time was in 1997.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to whether the United States has enough *existing* capability, a related question is whether it would be able to respond flexibly and quickly enough to a requirement of fighting two regional wars simultaneously given the rather slow pace of defense recapitalization and modernization efforts. As Lyon pointed out, as the security environment grows worse in the next 10 years, the demand for U.S. assurance will outrun the supply.<sup>25</sup> As that happens, “the United States will need to be aware of overreach and will have to prioritize. That suggests we’re going to be looking at a ‘shake-out’ of current alliances, and a more selective form of U.S. strategic engagement.”<sup>26</sup> This need for prioritization, potentially at the expense of one region over another, makes allies nervous and their nervousness is made worse by U.S. think tank and advocacy pieces proposing to focus more on one region over another.<sup>27</sup>

## Differing Threat Perceptions a Potential Future Source of Alliance Trouble

For some allied states, Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine fundamentally underscored the importance of U.S. extended deterrence and nuclear guarantees. This need was born out of historical experience. Prior to World War II, Central and Eastern European states were left at the mercy of German and Russian invaders, despite having France’s and the United Kingdom’s security guarantees.<sup>28</sup> While the geopolitical situation in today’s

<sup>22</sup> Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine McCusker, “Congress is wasting time while danger builds,” *The Hill*, February 16, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4470044-congress-is-wasting-time-while-danger-builds/>.

<sup>24</sup> Gus Wezerek, “20 Years Of Congress’s Budget Procrastination, In One Chart,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 7, 2018, available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/20-years-of-congresss-budget-procrastination-in-one-chart/>.

<sup>25</sup> Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> For a prominent example of this argument see Masahiro Okoshi, “China threat should be bigger U.S. priority than Ukraine: analyst,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 20, 2023, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/China-threat-should-be-bigger-U.S.-priority-than-Ukraine-analyst>.

<sup>28</sup> Germany took over Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland, an area with about 3 million German-speaking Czechoslovaks, with the United Kingdom’s agreement, in October 1938. Poland was invaded by Germany from one direction and the Soviet Union from the other in September 1939. France and the United Kingdom’s reaction was very limited.

Europe is different than before World War II, the United States remains the preferred security guarantor for many NATO members that joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War.

Today, European NATO members are not uniformly in agreement on the degree to which Russia presents a threat, even if they appear to agree in public statements. If defense spending levels convey a reasonable approximation of a state's threat perception, only 18 NATO member states are expected to hit the benchmark of two percent of GDP for defense in 2024,<sup>29</sup> up from 11 that met the threshold in 2023.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, countries that did not meet the benchmark in 2023 include some of the richest members of the Alliance, including France and Germany. Their publics prefer that governments spend resources on domestic programs rather than on defense. The governments are beholden to that dynamic, even if they are slowly trying to communicate that a change in priorities is warranted.

While there is much to criticize about setting two percent of GDP as a benchmark against which to judge whether a country is meeting its defense obligations, the fact is that the threshold was formalized voluntarily among all member states after Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, prior to the further deterioration in Europe's security environment. This begs a question whether two percent is enough to be able to deter and adequately respond to future conflicts given the fact that Russia has switched to a war economy and has modernized almost all of its nuclear weapon arsenal in recent years. Others argue that some states' defense budgets cannot absorb such an increase in a short period of time and endorse an incremental approach. The challenge is to spend these resources well, not just to spend them, they say. Nevertheless, because so few states actually met the benchmark in the years following 2014, some of these increases will be spent on recapitalization rather than on generating new capabilities.

Some U.S. allies are concerned about U.S. calls for burden-sharing increases, in recent history most aggressively personified by former President Donald Trump. As much as allied politicians find his statements bewildering at times, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte recently said "Stop moaning and whining and nagging about Trump."<sup>31</sup> He went on to argue that "We do not spend more on defense or ramp up ammunition production because Trump might come back. We have to do this because we want to do this, because this is in our interests."<sup>32</sup> For some, the hyper-focus on President Trump's statements only serves to deflect from the problem of allied governments not being willing to invest in defense.

The more immediate challenge for those states in Europe that do meet the 2 percent threshold already (or have been meeting it for years) is in the U.S. political discourse. One

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<sup>29</sup> James Frater and Joshua Berlinger, "Record 18 NATO states expected to meet 2% defense spending threshold this year," *CNN*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/14/europe/nato-defense-spending-target-intl/index.html>.

<sup>30</sup> NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)," July 7, 2023, available at [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Karen Gilchrist, "Germany's Scholz commits to spending 2% on defense 'in the 2020s, in the 2030s and beyond'," *CNBC*, February 17, 2024, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/17/germanys-scholz-commits-to-spending-2percent-on-defense-over-next-10-years.html>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

interviewed expert stated that “Europe is treated as a whole, and in some cases the narrative is created in such a way that Poland and the Baltic states are victims of Germany not paying enough and being considered the same.”<sup>33</sup> U.S. security guarantees to NATO member countries ought not depend on how much Germany spends on its defense budget. At the same time, it is plausible to suspect that the more assured U.S. allies feel, the less likely they are to contribute to their own defense. In this light, could NATO states’ recent budget increases be interpreted as an indicator of diminishing trust in U.S. security guarantees?<sup>34</sup> Could the UK’s recent decision to increase its nuclear warhead cap for the first time since the end of the Cold War reflect a perception that the U.S. nuclear deterrent is stretched too thin?<sup>35</sup>

Some experts and policy-makers question whether Russia is a threat to NATO at all, given the abysmal performance of its forces in Ukraine, and argue that, irrespective of Moscow’s imperialist rhetoric, Russia remains a serious threat only to its non-NATO neighbors, such as Georgia or Moldova.<sup>36</sup> This perception is not shared universally. Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen recently stated that “Russia’s capacity to produce military equipment has increased tremendously,” and that it “cannot be ruled out that within a three- to five-year period, Russia will test Article 5 and NATO’s solidarity. That was not NATO’s assessment in 2023. This is new knowledge that is coming to the fore now.”<sup>37</sup> He is by no means alone. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius warned that Russia could attack NATO within 5-8 years.<sup>38</sup> Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said the Lithuanians understood that if Russia was not stopped in Ukraine, it could continue and “then it’s the Baltic states who would be next.”<sup>39</sup> The prospect of Ukraine losing undoubtedly increases NATO states’ collective perception of danger.

Despite Russia’s capability loss in Ukraine, General Christopher Cavoli, Commander of the U.S. European Command, recently testified that Russia is reconstituting forces faster than U.S. initial estimates suggested and that its army is now 15 percent larger than when Russia invaded Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> Russia’s focus on Ukraine means that it is less of a direct conventional

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<sup>33</sup> This expert wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hochberg and Leonard Hochberg, “Our Restraint Destroys Your Deterrence,” *RealClear Defense*, February 10, 2024, available at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/02/10/our\\_restraint\\_destroys\\_your\\_deterrence\\_1010986.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/02/10/our_restraint_destroys_your_deterrence_1010986.html).

<sup>35</sup> Claire Mills, “Integrated Review 2021: Increasing the cap on the UK’s nuclear stockpile,” *House of Commons Library*, March 19, 2021, available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9175/>.

<sup>36</sup> Zoom Interview with Michael Rühle, former Head, Climate and Energy Security Section, Emerging Security Challenges Division, NATO, December 13, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen, “Danish defence minister warns Russia could attack NATO in 3-5 years -media,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/danish-defence-minister-warns-russia-could-attack-nato-3-5-years-media-2024-02-09/>.

<sup>38</sup> Nicolas Camut, “Putin could attack NATO in ‘5 to 8 years,’ German defense minister warns,” *Politico*, January 19, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-germany-boris-pistorius-nato/>.

<sup>39</sup> Sergey Goryashko, “Will Putin attack NATO? No chance, says Lithuanian general,” *Politico*, January 25, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-nato-putin-ukraine-russia-war/>.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Cavoli, *Statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee*, April 11, 2024, p. 3, available at [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cavoli\\_statement.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cavoli_statement.pdf).



threat to U.S. Indo-Pacific allies, despite having territorial disputes with some of them (e.g. with Japan). On the other hand, in the context of continued significant losses in Ukraine, Russia could increase its reliance on nuclear forces. This will likely create new problems for NATO because the Alliance has grown to see U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in some European countries as weapons with a political rather than military mission.<sup>41</sup> Russia's mobilization, ability to fight a war on an industrial scale, and willingness to absorb large losses is a source of concern for NATO, particularly in the context of what appears to be a U.S. waning commitment to European security.<sup>42</sup>

The disparity in NATO member states' threat perceptions has the potential to cause intra-alliance tensions. One interviewed expert pointed out that "many countries in Europe wish that war would go away; many countries in Europe say the right things and do things symbolically in Ukraine, but they are not willing to do real things and explain them to their electorate."<sup>43</sup> States that feel more threatened are those geographically closer to Russia's borders and tend to be among the poorer members of the Alliance. They perceive Russia's conventional threat more acutely and may even see a silver lining in Russia's nuclear forces spending, because that spending is then not available for conventional capabilities and because Russia would unlikely contaminate with radiation territories it would need for sea access.

While the increases in defense spending are supported by these member states' publics in general, driven by a sense of an increased threat, a question "why are we spending so much while much richer countries are not" could over time become a source of polarization. Moreover, it would not be surprising if this particular cleavage became a target for Russia's influence operations as Russia tries to further undermine allied unity. At the same time, "remaining cohesive is important so there isn't much of an appetite for airing these grievances in the public; countries don't like that others spend less but there doesn't seem much to be done on the intra-European level," according to one expert.<sup>44</sup>

While Russia is a more immediate threat in Europe, China is more of a global threat, and its immediate cooperation with Russia directly challenges the U.S.-led global world order.<sup>45</sup> This world order has been beneficial to the largest number of people in the history of

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<sup>41</sup> Amanda Macias, "U.S. intel chiefs warn Putin is expanding his nuclear weapons arsenal as the war in Ukraine drags on," *CNBC*, March 28, 2023, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/08/us-intel-chiefs-warn-putin-is-becoming-more-reliant-on-nuclear-weapons.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Max Bergmann, "A More European NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2024, available at [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/more-european-nato?utm\\_medium=social](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/more-european-nato?utm_medium=social).

<sup>43</sup> A recent quote in *The New York Times* alludes to the same dynamic: "Germans, and even the Social Democrats, "have come to the realization that Germany lives in the real world and that hard power matters," said Charles A. Kupchan, a Europe expert at Georgetown University. "At the same time," he said, "there's still this hope that this is all just a bad dream, and Germans will wake up and be back in the old world." Steven Erlanger and David E. Sanger, "Germany Braces for Decades of Confrontation With Russia," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2024; available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/03/world/europe/germany-russia.html>.

<sup>44</sup> This expert wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>45</sup> This study has not considered the problem of deterring China's aggression against Taiwan. For a detailed study on the topic, see "Special Issue: Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Policy & Strategy* Vol. 2, No. 2 (2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Special-Issue-final.pdf>.

mankind, and was paid for dearly with American and allied blood and treasure during the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century. But European NATO allies consider the PRC too distant a threat and are preoccupied with managing Russia's resurgence on the continent.

Interviewed experts shared that there is a very acute perception of a deterioration of the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. There are significant uncertainties regarding China's military buildup and the meaning of its military exercises in the region. They consider the U.S. willingness to stand by Ukraine in its resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion a litmus test for how willing the United States would be to stand by its treaty allies, and the situation is not wholly encouraging. Potentially conflicting objectives abound. For example, China is the second most important market for South Korea. The U.S. turn against China makes it more difficult for the South Korean government to navigate the situation. Russia's strategic decision to cooperate with China and North Korea is likely to exacerbate regional negative security trends. North Korea is reportedly obtaining technological assistance in exchange for sending ammunition to Russia, which could translate into better missile technology.<sup>46</sup>

For countries with smaller resources and in different geographic regions, it is nearly impossible to treat Russia and China as a threat of the same or even similar importance, and for a good reason. Europeans are understandably more concerned with Russia, the Japanese and South Koreans with China and North Korea. Some countries in Europe are worried about alienating China at a time when they are bearing the burden of economic sanctions against Russia and potentially upsetting their relations with a U.S. administration focused on great power competition. The South Koreans are most immediately concerned with North Korea.

## Challenges to a Public Debate

The debate regarding U.S. nuclear assurance is often conducted in the broader context of the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, which involve more than just U.S. nuclear weapons. In general, the debate about the nuclear aspect of U.S. assurance is rather poorly informed, particularly in countries that do not possess nuclear weapons themselves.<sup>47</sup> Allied states face the problem of a paucity of military officers and government officials conversant on issues related to nuclear deterrence.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes, regional experts are not particularly knowledgeable about nuclear policy issues.<sup>49</sup> There is also a generational divide between people who started their careers during the Cold War and those who started their careers during the post-Cold War era. The Cold War-era experience is not always applicable to challenges stemming from a nuclear environment with two-nuclear peers and other nuclear-

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<sup>46</sup> Sangjin Cho and Christy Lee, "North Korean-Russian Military Cooperation Could Threaten Global Security," *VOA*, January 1, 2024, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korean-russian-military-cooperation-could-threaten-global-security/7404703.html>.

<sup>47</sup> France is a special case, as Bruno Tertrais pointed out during his December 20, 2023, interview: "We are not gonna have a public debate on U.S. nuclear policy in France, and we don't need to; it is not really a relevant question for France."

<sup>48</sup> Zoom interview with Beatrice Heuser, November 27, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Zoom interview with Bo Ram Kwon, December 4, 2023.

armed states. The challenge is not unique to U.S. allies. In August 2022, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard stated that the United States is “furiously” rewriting deterrence theory to account for the rise of nuclear-armed China.<sup>50</sup>

Some allied governments may prefer to avoid a public debate about the size of the defense budget, nuclear deterrence, and most things defense simply because their publics would not support the necessary budgetary increases commensurate with the growth in the threat. Regarding Australia, Lyon said that “there are no deep-thinking nuclear theorists in Australian party government. That’s not unreasonable: political leaders tend to be pragmatists concerned with the problems of governance. But a public debate that was not well led would be problematic. The nuclear issue could easily become misrepresented and polarizing among Australia’s population, which generally isn’t well informed about nuclear issues.”<sup>51</sup> The situation is not dissimilar in other NATO member states. According to David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull, “The general level of debate about nuclear strategy and anything nuclear is extremely poor in the United Kingdom.”<sup>52</sup> The problem is not exclusive to the United Kingdom and is broader than just nuclear issues. Lonsdale pointed out that “the West has lacked political leadership. We haven’t had good leaders since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They had principles and clear positions and they were excellent communicators.”<sup>53</sup>

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine appears to have shifted public attitudes toward U.S. forward-deployed nuclear weapons, with surveyed European publics more in support of hosting a U.S. nuclear deterrent.<sup>54</sup> Prior to February 2022, the majority of Germans were skeptical of the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe.<sup>55</sup> Since Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the mood in Europe has appreciably changed.<sup>56</sup> Debates about the influence and importance of nuclear weapons have become more common, particularly following Russia’s brandishing of nuclear threats against the United

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<sup>50</sup> Tara Copp, “US Military ‘Furiously’ Rewriting Nuclear Deterrence to Address Russia and China, STRATCOM Chief Says,” *Defense One*, August 11, 2022, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2022/08/us-military-furiously-rewriting-nuclear-deterrence-address-russia-and-china-stratcom-chief-says/375725/>.

<sup>51</sup> Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, and Tom Etienne, “Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine,” *Global Policy*, January 5, 2023, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1758-5899.13179>.

<sup>55</sup> Michal Onderco and Michal Smetana, “German views on US nuclear weapons in Europe: public and elite perspectives,” *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2021), p. 640, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09662839.2021.1941896?needAccess=true&role=button>.

<sup>56</sup> Michaela Dodge, “European Allies’ Views of Russia’s Nuclear Policy after the Escalation of Its War in Ukraine,” *Information Series* No. 570 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 12, 2023), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-european-allies-views-of-russias-nuclear-policy-after-the-escalation-of-its-war-in-ukraine-no-570-december-12-2023/#\\_ednref10](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-european-allies-views-of-russias-nuclear-policy-after-the-escalation-of-its-war-in-ukraine-no-570-december-12-2023/#_ednref10).

States and NATO.<sup>57</sup> Under these circumstances, a unilateral U.S. nuclear weapon withdrawal—an idea occasionally floated in Washington—would be extremely detrimental to allied assurance.

### **Solid Communication a Key to Allied Assurance**

All interviewed experts emphasized the value of the United States promoting and sustaining communication with allied governments. Generally speaking, the more communication channels the United States and allies have, the better. According to some interviewees, communication and U.S. declarations to U.S. allies could be just as important as the make-up of forces the United States deploys in support of its global commitments. Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research in France, pointed out that “if a strong stated commitment to nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence was accompanied by a complete divestment from U.S. nuclear modernization and infrastructure, then we would see incongruence and be nervous. All things equal, the perception of credibility of U.S. extended deterrence is more dependent on statements and declaratory policy than offense-defense calculus.”<sup>58</sup> Communication also helps to build trust among allies and the United States over time.

According to Lyon, “when one considers the levels of dialogue, the most valuable is a leader-to-leader dialogue. That one is also the most important because on the nuclear level, the U.S. president is the sole authority for launching nuclear weapons, so other commitments do not have as much value as the president committing to the defense of an alliance with all available means.”<sup>59</sup> High-level visits with nuclear policy issues on the agenda tend to command significant attention. The higher the representative, the more attention the issue on the agenda gets. The meetings also provide an excellent opportunity to communicate with the public. They can be accompanied by press conferences with foreign journalists that can then report in domestic media and contribute to an increase in the overall debate level.

Other types of assurance by high-level government officials are valuable, including articles by U.S. government officials published in foreign media. Press releases showcasing capabilities of a particular weapon system that mention allies send a message of both extended deterrence and assurance. According to South Korean national security journalist Dong-hyun Kim, “the United States should link programs and weapon system rationales to their missions in the context of extended deterrence and assurance and communicate these.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For a related discussion, see Michaela Dodge, “What Do Russia’s Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?” *Occasional Paper* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol.-4-No.-1.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> Zoom interview with Bruno Tertrais, December 20, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Zoom interview with Dong-hyun Kim, December 22, 2023.

Some of the experts interviewed warned against the United States making significant unilateral changes to its declaratory posture or deployment prior to consultations with allies. At the same time, specific discussions about how the United States should respond to challenges to the credibility of nuclear guarantees are not an issue on which allied governments typically are forward leaning. This is partly because they are concerned about their relationship with the U.S. administration, especially if that administration's ideas of what is necessary to assure an ally and deter an adversary differ.

The interviews also made clear that the United States lacks skilled public communicators that can connect with the publics and political representatives in allied countries. National security communities in most allied countries are small, so the challenge of lacking skilled public communicators in this area is not exclusive to the United States. Generally speaking, most U.S. allies welcome the U.S. lead on national security discussions, particularly those pertaining to nuclear matters. The atmosphere in which these discussions happen is important, and the United States should avoid creating a perception it is talking down to allies. Washington can also help allies to develop a cadre of younger nuclear deterrence experts that could advise their governments in matters of public communication.

Even though national security has moved to the forefront of news since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, foreign affairs are usually not what the publics in allied countries are interested in most when they vote for their representatives. That creates a burden on the U.S. and allied governments to explain the value and benefits of alliances to the public. The difficulties come when the moribund quality of public discourse regarding the roles and purposes of nuclear weapons threatens to diminish the support for the ongoing nuclear modernization program.<sup>61</sup>

## Arms Control Is Taking a Backseat

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China's nuclear build up have dimmed prospects for arms control, and perhaps even enthusiasm for it, among allied states. Russia's stream of nuclear threats against western states supporting Ukraine makes clear that Russia is not interested in the kind of arms control that would be mutually beneficial to both parties.<sup>62</sup> Dominik Jankowski, a member of Poland's Permanent Delegation to NATO, emphasized that "arms control must not be a goal of its own, but ought to be linked to our deterrence objectives."<sup>63</sup> Support for arms control among allied governments could increase if Russia withdrew from Ukraine, but that prospect appears unlikely in the near-term.

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<sup>61</sup> Kyle Balzer, "America's Leaders Don't Understand Nuclear Weapons," *National Review*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/03/americas-leaders-dont-understand-nuclear-weapons/>.

<sup>62</sup> For a more detailed elaboration of this argument, see Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?" *Information Series* No. 564 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2, 2023), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects-no-564-october-2-2023/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects-no-564-october-2-2023/).

<sup>63</sup> Zoom interview with Dominik Jankowski, December 11, 2023.

Allied countries are unlikely to support any steps that would appear too conciliatory toward Russia or that would disadvantage NATO vis-à-vis Russia. Even an appearance of dealing with Russia as an equal during an arms control process could be problematic for some governments, and some interviewed experts were of the opinion that arms control is neither desirable nor feasible at this time. On the other hand, as Ulík pointed out, “there might be some value in demonstrating willingness to do arms control to show the Global South we are trying our best,”<sup>64</sup> but allied governments would have to be informed about the process.

Even in arms control, the United States appears to have a public relations problem and its continuous efforts to engage Russia and China in the process remain largely overlooked, let alone appreciated. According to one interviewed expert, “the United States should start highlighting that Russia and China (especially China’s lack of transparency) are a problem for arms control. The United States is putting forth proposals much more often than either of these countries but doesn’t get much credit for it.”<sup>65</sup>

Candidate Biden supported a “no first use” (NFU) nuclear declaratory policy during his presidential campaign for the 2020 elections. As a candidate, Biden stated that “the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack” and that he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”<sup>66</sup> Soundly, the administration rejected changes to U.S. declaratory policy after consultations with allies during the *Nuclear Posture Review* process. Several experts interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of refraining from changing U.S. declaratory policy so that the option to employ nuclear weapons first is preserved. Changes to this policy, particularly if executed without prior consultation with allies, would be highly detrimental to U.S. assurance goals.

## **U.S. Domestic Polarization a Significant Source of Allied Concerns**

U.S. domestic polarization is a major source of concern for many experts interviewed for this study. This concern has to do with the unpredictability and uncertainty that polarization brings into the U.S. political process. Most recently, the perilous effects of polarization demonstrated themselves when Mike Johnson, the Republican Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, refused to put further military assistance for Ukraine to a vote for months.<sup>67</sup> The Russians have already been able to take advantage of U.S. assistance delays and make battlefield gains in Ukraine. Polarization also fosters erratic decision-making, as witnessed by a lack of enforcement of “red lines” in Syria during the Obama Administration. More

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<sup>64</sup> Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> This expert wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

<sup>67</sup> The assistance bill ended up passing the House of Representatives on April 20, 2024, despite a majority of the Republicans opposing it.

recently, the Biden Administration's hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan damaged allied perceptions of U.S. credibility according to some experts interviewed for this study. Even if there may be some deterrence-related benefits to appearing erratic and unpredictable—possibly inducing some caution on the adversary's part—these features are also a significant long-term obstacle to alliance credibility.

Several experts expressed concern over then-President Donald Trump's transactional management style, particularly as he is the likely Republican nominee for the 2024 presidential elections. This concern was independent of the actual implementation of the Trump Administration's or U.S. government's policy. It shows that because the president is such a prominent foreign policy actor, his statements have a disproportionate impact on how allies perceive U.S. collective willingness to come to their defense. Also important is the fact that it is rather difficult for allied policymakers to understand the U.S. foreign and defense policy-making process and the different actors that shape it. As a consequence, the United States and allies sometimes appear to talk past each other. While U.S. national security experts tend to pay attention to specific programs and capabilities and whether they match the rhetoric, some interviewees emphasized that foreign policymakers and experts tend to focus on general atmosphere and headlines rather than policy implementation.

After these interviews were concluded, former President Trump reportedly stated that the United States would not come to the defense of any country that does not meet the two percent threshold and that he would encourage the Russians "to do whatever the hell they want" with those countries.<sup>68</sup> President Trump's former National Security Advisor John Bolton asserted that President Trump could seek to withdraw from NATO if elected for a second term.<sup>69</sup> Such debates reverberate throughout the U.S. alliance system. Allies in the Indo-Pacific might ask how likely the United States is to come to their defense if it is not willing to defend a NATO member state with relatively stronger guarantees and a history of defense cooperation.

Former President Trump's statements reflect a broader shift among the U.S. public. The 2023 Chicago Council survey documented a continued decline in respondents' support for an active engagement in world affairs.<sup>70</sup> In fact, 42 percent said the United States should stay out of world affairs, among the lowest recorded levels of support for engagement in the survey's almost 50-year history. The decline is concerning for U.S. allies going forward in the context of U.S. decision-making that appears less stable than ever. Some of it appears to be grounded in a loss of vision. Lonsdale observed that "there was a consensus on the need to defeat the Soviet Union but now we seem to have a situation where there is a lack of

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<sup>68</sup> Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," *CNN*, February 11, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Kelly Garrity, "Why John Bolton Is Certain Trump Really Wants to Blow Up NATO," *Politico*, February 13, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/02/13/bolton-trump-2024-nato-00141160>.

<sup>70</sup> Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Americans Grow Less Enthusiastic about Active US Engagement Abroad," *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 2023, p. 1, available at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/CCS%202023%20US%20Role.pdf>.

consensus amongst the political classes on the value of the transatlantic relationship. There is a lack of consistency in a U.S. position and what the U.S. stands for; and that is a problem because we look to the United States for that leadership. The call of the Western alliance during the World War II was a call to defend our way of life; we shared common principles and notions.”<sup>71</sup> It is not immediately apparent how the U.S. political system can overcome the effects of polarization.

## Ways Forward

The United States is in a position to take steps that would improve and support its allied assurance efforts in the short-, medium-, and long-run. Washington would likely find willing partners because, especially on nuclear issues, U.S. allies tend to follow where the United States leads.

The United States ought to continue to foster robust nuclear weapons policy dialogues in allied countries. Some of these efforts could be a continuation or expansion of ongoing strategic dialogues. They should involve government officials, members of academia and think-tanks, and journalists. Presently, there simply is not enough funding and government support available for such endeavors, particularly in allied countries.

The United States and allies have a window of opportunity provided by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s accompanying nuclear threats that are generating more public interest in topics related to nuclear policy and strategy. A cadre of knowledgeable government experts could help to explain the importance of U.S. nuclear guarantees to the political representatives who then could communicate more effectively with the public. This “bench” of nuclear experts should be deep enough to serve politicians regardless of political affiliation and party (parties) in power. There is often a missing communications link between government and its constituents, which makes continued education in this area important.

Not all experts that were interviewed agreed that having a public discussion on nuclear deterrence issues was desirable at present due to polarization and a general low level of information. A discussion in these conditions could split a ruling coalition and further diminish the fragile support for necessary defense budget increases. An additional challenge is that governments are not completely in control of the messaging and that adversaries are exploiting these potentially polarizing issues in information operations against NATO and Indo-Pacific allies. By not having a debate in the hope that governments would not have to defend their position on such important issues, they open themselves up to potentially more successful disinformation attacks than otherwise would be the case. An informed debate could also mitigate politicians’ ill-informed and ill-coordinated quips that could cause a challenge to assurance.

NATO followed the U.S. example in taking a break from thinking about nuclear matters after the end of the Cold War. It is time to raise its collective nuclear IQ, for example by

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<sup>71</sup> Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.



conducting more exercises that incorporate a nuclear aspect. Tertrais argued that even though France does not participate in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), continued allied countries participation in the NPG “helps allies understand nuclear issues better and share at least a modicum of strategic culture with the United Kingdom and France.”<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the United States and allies, including in the Indo-Pacific, should further operationalize and make known the relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons. Expanding the discussion about joint planning and operations to include allied publics would contribute to their assurance.

One of the key questions for NATO “is whether the dual capable aircraft (DCA) mission should have military credibility”<sup>73</sup> in addition to its political contribution that was emphasized starting in the Obama Administration. Given Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such a debate is timely and appropriate. The United States is in the best position to lead it.

The United States has a unique opportunity to reinvigorate a strategic debate in countries that are planning on purchasing the F-35 fighter. If a country procuring the F-35 fighter is a NATO member state, it could contribute to NATO’s nuclear burden-sharing, and perhaps plan on purchasing nuclear-certified fighters to further complicate Russia’s calculus. For example, Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that, “The problem above all is that we [Poles] don’t have nuclear weapons” and that the topic of Polish participation in nuclear sharing is open.<sup>74</sup> He recently stated that Poland was ready to host nuclear weapons.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, countries that joined NATO after the end of the Cold War might be interested in expanding their participation in NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, up to hosting U.S. nuclear forces.

There are other ways short of hosting U.S. nuclear forces in which NATO countries might adjust their posture to complicate Russia’s calculus. For example, countries could increase their participation in military exercises that include a nuclear component, such as *Steadfast Noon* or participate in the SNOWCAT (Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics) program.<sup>76</sup> NATO could designate several Polish airfields as potential Dispersed Operating Bases to provide additional dispersal options, hence complicating Russia’s targeting and “potentially increase survival and sortie rates.”<sup>77</sup>

The experts who were interviewed would welcome any steps the United States can take to increase the visibility of U.S. commitments to extended deterrence. Allies tend to feel safer when the systems are closer rather than far away, even if the main attribute of a system is its stealthiness, as in the case of nuclear submarines. For example, the United States sent an

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<sup>72</sup> Zoom interview with Bruno Tertrais, December 20, 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in, Jo Harper, “Poland in talks to join NATO nuclear sharing program,” *Anadolu Agency*, October 5, 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/poland-in-talks-to-join-nato-nuclear-sharing-program/2703041>.

<sup>75</sup> Claudia Chiappa, “Poland: We’re ready to host nuclear weapons,” *Politico*, April 22, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-ready-host-nuclear-weapons-andrzej-duda-nato/>.

<sup>76</sup> “Poland’s bid to participate in NATO nuclear sharing,” *International Institute for Security Studies*, September 2023, available at <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/polands-bid-to-participate-in-nato-nuclear-sharing/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

*Ohio*-class submarine to Busan in South Korea in July 2023,<sup>78</sup> even though port calls potentially compromise the survivability of the system, even if temporarily. U.S. B-1B strategic bombers approached Russia's borders in October 2023.<sup>79</sup> With regard to NATO force deployments, Ulík argued that "we should be doing more of what we are doing, and we should show more unpredictability to the Russians" to strengthen peacetime deterrence.<sup>80</sup>

Reiteration of the U.S. commitment to NATO's Article V can help assure leaders in Europe; the more senior the U.S. official making the commitment, the better. The U.S. president (and Commander in Chief) would be the most preferred person to articulate security guarantees. The United States ought to do so often and unequivocally, lest Russian leaders think they might have a window of opportunity to attack NATO and complicate Russia's messaging in NATO member states that are reconsidering their geopolitical orientation, e.g. Slovakia or Hungary.

While few politicians in allied countries understand the nuances of U.S. nuclear weapons policy, let alone issues related to the infrastructure that supports it, conventional forces are a visible sign of U.S. willingness to come to defense of its allies with more than diplomatic demarches. Therefore, one of the key elements of assurance in the eyes of interviewed experts would be to maintain U.S. forward-deployed forces at least at a current level or greater.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent use of unmanned systems, indiscriminate shelling, and ballistic missiles against civilian targets underscores the importance of missile defense for regional conflicts.<sup>81</sup> The United States, given its capabilities, has a major role to play in terms of providing missile defenses and helping allies think through their utility, even if its capabilities cannot yet fully counter Russia's or China's arsenal, including with respect to their long-range forces.

## Conclusion

This analysis considers U.S. assurance from an allied perspective. Several trends are clear. The deteriorating international security environment generates a perception of potential insufficiency on the part of the United States, particularly if a conflict happens in different regions. How acute those perceptions are is not universally shared across the alliance structure, which could introduce intra-alliance rifts in the future.

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<sup>78</sup> Heather Mongilio, "Guided-Missile Submarine USS Michigan Pulls Into South Korea," *USNI News*, June 16, 2023, available at <https://news.usni.org/2023/06/16/guided-missile-submarine-uss-michigan-pulls-into-south-korea>.

<sup>79</sup> Maxim Rodionov, "Russia sends fighter jets as two US bombers, drone approach its border," *Reuters*, October 24, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-sends-fighter-jets-two-us-bombers-drone-approach-its-border-2023-10-24/>.

<sup>80</sup> Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> For an elaboration of this point, see Michaela Dodge, "Will We Heed Lessons from Russia's War in Ukraine?" in David Trachtenberg (eds.), "Lessons Learned from Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 3, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2023), pp. 29-40, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/OP-Vol-3-No-10.pdf>.

Worsening security conditions generate noticeable pressure on U.S. capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, with U.S. allies having a better understanding of conventional than nuclear forces. A lack of government officials and experts conversant in nuclear weapons policy and strategy complicates efforts to adjust to this new security environment. A continued sustained investment in building up a cadre of nuclear experts and maintaining a robust dialogue on several levels would at least begin to remedy this shortcoming.

Lastly, the assurance of allies is not only a matter of U.S. military capabilities or rhetoric. Almost all experts that were interviewed were concerned about the rise of U.S. domestic polarization and the impact it has on U.S. foreign policy, particularly as it relates to U.S. support for Ukraine, even though Ukraine is not a U.S. treaty ally. The ways in which U.S. domestic polarization shapes allied assurance perceptions warrants careful consideration given the importance U.S. allies attribute to it and how U.S. policymakers generally disregard it.

### **Appendix: List of Interviewees**

- Kosuke Amiya, Director, Japan-U.S. Security Treaty Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan;
- Paul Dibb, Emeritus Professor, Australian National University;
- Jacek Durkalec, Staff Officer, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization;
- Lukáš Dyčka, Lecturer, Baltic Defense College;
- Beatrice Heuser, Professor, University of Glasgow;
- Dominik Jankowski, Permanent Delegation of Poland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization;
- Dong-hyun Kim, South Korean National Security Journalist;
- Bo Ram Kwon Associate Research Fellow, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses;
- Rod Lyon, Program Director for Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute of Canberra;
- David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer, University of Hull;
- Michael Rühle, Head, Climate and Energy Security Section, Emerging Security Challenges Division, NATO;
- Michal Smetana, Associate Professor, Charles University, Czech Republic;
- Sugio Takahashi, Head, Defense Policy Division of the Policy Studies Department, National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan;
- Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director, Foundation for Strategic Research (France); and
- Karel Ulík, Permanent Delegation of the Czech Republic to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.