



ANALYSIS

THE NEED FOR A “TWO-WAR STRATEGY” TO REINFORCE EXTENDED DETERRENCE AND ASSURANCE

David J. Trachtenberg

Introduction

For years following the Cold War, the United States was considered the sole superpower and the U.S. military was the preeminent fighting force in the world. In the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union, U.S. military strategy transitioned from a focus on deterring global conflict to one centered on regional contingencies. Accordingly, U.S. military planners designed a strategy that called on the United States to prepare to fight two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously.

This two-MRC construct was embedded in various unclassified U.S. military strategy documents and required U.S. forces to be sized and capable of successfully engaging adversaries in both Europe and Asia. It required a military that was sufficiently forward deployed and equipped with the most modern and sophisticated military technology that would ensure a U.S. advantage on the battlefield. This two-war standard became the benchmark against which the adequacy of U.S. forces was judged.¹

Over time, the two-war standard was modified and scaled back to focus on irregular warfare and defeating one regional adversary while imposing severe costs on another. With the re-emergence of sharp great power conflicting interests as outlined in the 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the United States shifted its conceptual focus from irregular warfare and lesser regional contingencies to threats posed by Russia and China. Yet U.S. military forces remained ill-prepared to prosecute a two-war scenario, especially one involving Sino-Russian collaboration.

The critical question is whether the U.S. armed forces today have adopted or are postured to adopt a revised force-planning construct that prepares for simultaneous regional conflicts

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¹ Over the years, the “two-war” strategy was officially referred to in a variety of ways. As described by one expert analyst: “Since the end of the Cold War, the basic metric for judging the adequacy of the U.S. military has been its ability to fight in two geographically separated regions of the world at approximately the same time. Referred to at different times as ‘Major Regional Contingencies (MRCs),’ ‘Major Theater Wars,’ or ‘multiple, large scale operations,’ the two-war standard has stood the test of time because it reflects a basic strategic reality that was well expressed by the 2012 Strategic Guidance for the Department of Defense: ‘As a nation with important interests in multiple regions, our forces must be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere.’” See Daniel Gouré, “Building the Right Military for a New Era: The Need for an Enduring Analytic Framework,” *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, The Heritage Foundation, October 7, 2014, available at https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2015_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength_Building%20the%20Right%20Military%20for%20a%20New%20Era_The%20Need%20for%20an%20Enduring%20Analytic%20Framework.pdf.



against nuclear peer adversaries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Failing to do so carries significant implications for both U.S. adversaries and U.S. allies: It likely encourages adversaries to challenge the United States militarily while simultaneously causing allies to question the credibility of U.S. security assurances.

A Dangerous Decline and A False Choice

The current conflict in Ukraine has exposed severe limitations in U.S. military readiness and capabilities, as the U.S. defense industrial base struggles with the demands of supporting Ukraine with sufficient equipment and materiel without negatively affecting U.S. warfighting readiness. Moreover, there are those who are calling for the United States to shift scarce defense resources away from supporting Ukraine's fight against Russia and toward confronting China in the Indo-Pacific. Such calls reflect concern that the United States is ill-prepared to fight a two-front war with great powers.² The situation is made even more precarious by the emergence of a hostile Sino-Russian entente that is threatening key U.S. allies in two different theaters. In addition, the United States now finds itself increasingly embroiled in a Middle East conflict that is likely to siphon additional military resources away from deterring great power rivals.

The current situation is a legacy of conscious decisions made by multiple U.S. administrations in the aftermath of the Cold War to reduce U.S. military capabilities in anticipation of a more benign strategic security environment. This was done without any apparent concern for the future assurance of allies in the event that the threat context dramatically worsened—which, unfortunately, has been the case. The expectation was that China would rise peacefully and that Russia would either be irrelevant to U.S. national security concerns or cooperative, i.e., a partner with the West rather than an adversary. As is now evident, those predictions did not materialize as expected. The international security environment today is arguably more dynamic, more uncertain, and more dangerous than ever before.

Any potential conflict with China is likely to rely heavily on U.S. air- and sea-based assets. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration sought a 600-ship Navy. Today, the U.S. Navy has shrunk in size to fewer than 300 ships. While individual platforms possess greater capability today, the U.S. capacity to deploy forward as part of a deterrence strategy is much less than it was four decades ago. Likewise, the Air Force is cutting platforms, raising questions regarding the U.S. ability to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. As one Air Force official reportedly stated, "By any measure, we have departed the era of conventional

² For example, see Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

overmatch” with respect to China. Beijing has “advanced so far and so fast in its air and space power that the Air Force’s ability to deter through conventional forces is at risk.”³

In addition to reducing U.S. conventional military power, Washington has repeatedly delayed essential nuclear modernization programs. In fact, the current U.S. nuclear modernization program is a legacy of the Obama Administration and was proposed at a time when the era of great power rivalry was considered a remnant of the past. Indeed, the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) declared that “Russia and the United States are no longer adversaries, and prospects for military confrontation have declined dramatically,” noting, “The threat of global nuclear war has become remote....”⁴ Indeed, the 2010 NPR explicitly placed highest priority *not* on deterrence, but on nuclear non-proliferation and limitations on nuclear forces. In light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the multitude of nuclear threats Moscow has levied against the United States and the West in the past several years, such conclusions now appear naïve at best, and the nuclear modernization program of record from the earlier optimistic era is now problematic.

As a result of Washington’s abandonment of a two-war strategy and the corresponding relative decline in U.S. nuclear and conventional military capabilities, the United States is confronting calls to “prioritize” its defense requirements in order to avoid spreading itself too thin militarily. With active conflicts going on in Europe and the Middle East, and with the growing potential for conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the United States no longer has the luxury of being confident in its capacity to deter reliably all potential adversaries in all potential regions. Consequently, some former Pentagon officials now argue that the focus of U.S. defense investments must be on China, which is deemed the greatest security threat to the United States and to U.S. interests abroad.

However, the view that the United States can only afford to prioritize defeating a single major adversary in one theater of operations carries significant ramifications for extended deterrence and assurance of allies. Indeed, as one study has concluded, “The United States cannot commit its forces to one regional contingency without impacting the deterrence posture in the other region.”⁵ And as others have noted more succinctly, “...a one-war force invites opportunistic aggression in a second theater.”⁶ U.S. allies and strategic partners who rely on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their own security surely recognize the

³ Cited in Mackenzie Eaglen, “The Bias for Capability Over Capacity Has Created a Brittle Force,” *War on the Rocks*, November 17, 2022, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2022/11/the-bias-for-capability-over-capacity-has-created-a-brittle-force/>.

⁴ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2020, pp. iv, 3-4, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

⁵ Jacek Durkalec, Charlotte Henderson, and Lindsay Rand, *Extended Deterrence and the Two-War Problem: Workshop Summary*, Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, April 6-7, 2022, available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Workshop_Extended_Deterrence_and_Two_War_Problem_CGSR_Summary.pdf.

⁶ Mark Gunzinger and Kamilla Gunzinger, “Ukraine makes clear the US must reconsider its one-war defense strategy,” *Defense News*, March 14, 2022, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/03/14/ukraine-makes-clear-the-us-must-reconsider-its-one-war-defense-strategy/>.

increased risk that accompanies a U.S. military that is limited in its ability to respond to aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously.⁷

Heightened Allied Anxieties

In light of reduced U.S. military capabilities, concerns about an overextended U.S. presence abroad, and an apparent U.S. reluctance to commit military resources to ongoing conflicts in other theaters, even a focus on deterring China from attacking Taiwan has not been sufficient to quell Taiwanese anxiety over American willingness to come to Taiwan's defense should China seek to move militarily against the island. As one Taiwanese academic noted, "there is substantial skepticism" over the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of overt Chinese aggression.⁸ Indeed, when it comes to U.S. security guarantees, a recent poll found that only 34 percent of Taiwanese believe the United States is a trustworthy country.⁹

Elsewhere in Asia, concerns over the credibility of U.S. security guarantees are growing, with both Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) openly questioning whether they should acquire their own nuclear deterrent. In the ROK, polling data indicates that more than 70 percent of South Koreans support the deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory—either the re-introduction of American nuclear weapons or the acquisition of their own.¹⁰ This is a reflection of these allies' growing threat perceptions and the simultaneous declining confidence in the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. As one recent poll found, more than 60 percent of South Koreans doubt the United States would use its nuclear deterrent to protect the ROK in the event of a military conflict on the Korean peninsula.¹¹ This skepticism appears to be a result of the combination of North Korea's aggressive increase in its nuclear and missile programs and the decline in U.S. military capabilities following Washington's rejection of the two-war strategy.

⁷ For an excellent analysis of this issue, see Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World, Occasional Paper Vol. 2, No. 10* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/OP-Vol.-2-No.-10.pdf>.

⁸ Damien Cave and Amy Chang Chien, "Taiwan's Doubts About America Are Growing. That Could Be Dangerous," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/20/world/asia/taiwan-united-states-views.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Lester Crown Center on U.S. Foreign Policy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2022, available at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf>. See also, "South Koreans want their own nukes. That could roil one of the world's most dangerous regions," *The Associated Press*, November 30, 2023, available at <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15070825>.

¹¹ Ji Da-gyum, "Over 60% of S. Koreans lack trust in US nuclear umbrella: survey," *The Korea Herald*, February 5, 2024, available at <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240205000663#:~:text=Over%2060%25%20of%20S.%20Koreans,in%20US%20nuclear%20umbrella%3A%20survey&text=Over%2060%20percent%20of%20South,for%20Advanced%20Stu dies%20on%20Monday>.

In Japan, public debate over acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent has reached unprecedented levels—a remarkable development for the only country to have suffered through two atomic bombings. Even Japan’s former prime minister, the late Shinzo Abe, suggested Japan should consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons on Japanese soil for its own defense.¹² While this may remain a minority view among the Japanese public, it suggests growing doubts about the reliability of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees.

In Europe as well, some of America’s traditional key allies are growing more concerned about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. One survey of more than 15,000 respondents in 11 European countries found that a majority believe China is on the ascendancy and will overtake the United States in relative power over the next ten years. It concluded that Europe cannot depend on the United States to defend European security. The survey also exposed a belief that Europeans should invest more heavily in their own security and adopt a position of neutrality in any conflict involving the United States, China, or Russia.¹³ As an analysis of the survey concluded, “The growing mistrust about Washington’s reliability and power is changing the nature of the transatlantic alliance.”¹⁴

Additional evidence exists of European concerns over American reliability. For example, French president Emmanuel Macron has argued that Europe should adopt a policy of “strategic autonomy,” reducing its dependence on the United States and avoiding involvement in any potential U.S.-China confrontation over Taiwan.¹⁵ And as one analyst commented, U.S. security guarantees in NATO, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific are all in need of an “integrity check” as “treaty allies and partner nations are reassessing their bilateral security relationships with the United States.”¹⁶ In addition, one study conducted by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs concluded that the lack of a U.S. two-war strategy could lead to opportunistic aggression, noting: “If two major wars occur either simultaneously or sequentially, US military capability will be put under great stress. In the event of a second war, the US may find itself in a situation of conventional military inferiority, which it might have to compensate for with greater reliance on nuclear weapons.”¹⁷

¹² Jesse Johnson, “Japan should consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons, Abe says,” *The Japan Times*, February 27, 2022, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/27/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-japan-nuclear-weapons-taiwan/>.

¹³ Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, *Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate A Competitive World*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, June 2023, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Keeping-America-close-Russia-down-and-China-far-away-How-Europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world-published.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, “The crisis of American power: How Europeans see Biden’s America,” *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/>.

¹⁵ Jamil Anderlini and Clea Caulcutt, “Europe must resist pressure to become ‘America’s followers,’ says Macron,” *Politico*, April 9, 2023, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-china-america-pressure-interview/>.

¹⁶ R. Clarke Cooper, “American security cooperation needs an ‘integrity check,’” *Atlantic Council*, September 3, 2021, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/american-security-cooperation-needs-an-integrity-check/>.

¹⁷ Jyri Lavikainen, “China as the Second Nuclear Peer of the United States,” *FIIA Briefing Paper No. 383*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, February 2024, p. 2, available at https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/bp383_china-as-the-second-nuclear-peer-of-the-united-states.pdf.

One of the starkest expressions of concern over U.S. reliability was conveyed in a recent warning to European powers by two long-time scholars of transatlantic relations: “Recent events have shown that the United States will not vigorously and reliably defend you. The United States cannot credibly threaten escalation to defend our allies.” Their bottom-line summation: “Dear Allies: Do not look to the United States for your defense.”¹⁸

These changes in perceptions, in part, reflect concerns over official U.S. wariness to engage directly or indirectly in actions that could lead to escalatory outcomes. That wariness corresponds to the U.S. military retrenchment that began years ago with the movement away from a two-war strategy and the necessary procurement of military capabilities that could effectively execute that strategy.¹⁹ As U.S. military capabilities have declined, allies and strategic partners of the United States have become increasingly skeptical of U.S. security guarantees. Consequently, the Biden Administration has sought to publicly reassure partners in Europe and Asia of the “ironclad” nature of America’s commitment to their security.²⁰ The need for such reassurances suggests recognition of a growing uneasiness among allies over the credibility of such guarantees.

Addressing the Challenge

Over the past decade, there have been several calls for a return to a two-war strategy in light of contemporary security developments. The prospect of a revanchist China and Russia working together or engaging in opportunistic aggression to challenge U.S. national security interests worldwide suggests that the time has come to restore the two-MRC force-sizing construct as a necessary means of bolstering deterrence.

Restoring a two-MRC standard will require greater regional power projection capabilities, including an expanded U.S. force presence abroad, along with a greater number

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ While some attribute growing allied concerns over American security guarantees to domestic U.S. politics—in particular concerns over how U.S. policy might change in a second Trump Administration—the inability of the United States adequately to defend its global interests in an increasingly contested international security environment characterized by two peer nuclear adversaries has arguably contributed to the belief that the United States may not be a reliable security partner. It has also fueled the controversy over whether and how the United States must choose between deterring adversaries in multiple potential theaters of conflict.

²⁰ Over a one-day period, President Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner all publicly reasserted that U.S. security guarantees to Japan, the Philippines, Israel, and South Korea were “ironclad.” As a DoD press release noted, the United States “affirmed its ironclad commitment to extended deterrence....” See Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller, “Biden says US support for Philippines, Japan defense ‘ironclad’ amid growing China provocations,” *Associated Press*, April 11, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/japan-philippines-trilateral-kishida-marcos-biden-03e6288c5b5155af1bb693a464de875d>; Tweet by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, April 11, 2024, available at <https://twitter.com/SecDef/status/1778570526396424598>; and Department of Defense, “Joint Press Statement for the 24th Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue,” April 11, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3739122/joint-press-statement-for-the-24th-korea-us-integrated-defense-dialogue/>.

of more flexible, technologically sophisticated, and survivable offensive and defensive military assets both in theater and capable of rapid deployment to theater as needed.

The impact of a less than two-war strategy on extended deterrence and assurance is manifestly detrimental to the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies and their corresponding assurance. The credibility of America's security guarantees corresponds to the capability and willingness of the United States to act on its commitments, and to be seen as willing to do so. A failure of U.S. resolve in one region cannot help but raise doubts about U.S. steadfastness and resolve among allies and strategic partners elsewhere. The end result is likely to be a weakening of trust in the United States and a greater movement by friends and allies toward accommodation and appeasement of U.S. adversaries. In the emerging threat environment, where the United States faces not one but two nuclear peer adversaries, the U.S. ability to project power and make good on its extended deterrence and assurance commitments is more critical than ever.

The force expansion necessary to implement a two-war strategy will require additional fiscal resources beyond those currently budgeted. Some in Congress have shown a willingness to go beyond the levels of defense spending requested by the Biden Administration. However, the results of recent budget negotiations are likely to constrain the procurement of the additional forces needed to implement adequately a two-war strategy. And the president's proposed defense budget for fiscal year 2025 reportedly will reflect only a one percent increase over the previous year—which translates to a real *reduction* in actual defense purchasing power given the rate of inflation.²¹ This actual reduction in U.S. defense spending purchasing power is likely to preclude the implementation of the current strategy, much less a two-war strategy.²²

Some have suggested that it is up to America's allies to shoulder a greater burden of defense preparedness and that this should be a prerequisite for any increase in U.S. support to allies or strategic partners such as Ukraine that are engaged in their own efforts to counter

²¹ See Tony Capaccio, "Biden to Seek 1% Increase in 2025 Defense Budget Under Cap," *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2024, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-06/biden-to-request-1-increase-in-2025-defense-budget-under-cap?embedded-checkout=true>. Also see Brad Dress and Ellen Mitchell, "Biden seeks modest bump for record \$895B defense budget," *The Hill*, March 11, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4524735-biden-record-895b-defense-budget/>. *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial board referred to this as "a military budget fit for 1991" and stated that "the U.S. military is in a state of managed decline." See The Editorial Board, "Biden Shrinks the U.S. Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-defense-budget-pentagon-u-s-military-china-russia-israel-ukraine-ba7fd46b>.

²² Some in Congress have reportedly argued that the defense budget is more than \$400 billion below what is required to meet current commitments. For example, Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) called for a defense budget of \$1.3 trillion, or five percent of U.S. Gross Domestic Product. See Senator Roger Wicker, *21st Century Peace Through Strength: A Generational Investment in the U.S. Military*, May 2024, p. 7, available at <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/services/files/BC957888-0A93-432F-A49E-6202768A9CE0>. Also see Stephen Groves, "Key Republican calls for 'generational' increase in defense spending to counter US adversaries," *Associated Press*, May 29, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/us-military-spending-pentagon-china-russia-iran-1af566ecfca060ce3042b23d9feb2438>; Bryant Harris, "A nearly \$1 trillion defense budget faces headwinds at home and abroad," *DefenseNews*, March 7, 2024, available at https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2024/03/07/a-nearly-1-trillion-defense-budget-faces-headwinds-at-home-and-abroad/?utm_campaign=dfn-ebb&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru&STOverlay=2002c2d9-c344-4bbb-8610-e5794efcfa7d#:~:text=As%20the%20Pentagon%20seeks%20to,and%20where%20it's%20falling%20short..

military aggression.²³ While the issue of allied “burdensharing” has long been controversial, and greater allied defense investments should be encouraged, there is no substitute for American leadership. The U.S. inability to demonstrate both a willingness and capability to deter, and if necessary defeat, aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously—particularly in the face of a growing Sino-Russian entente—risks encouraging the very aggression U.S. defenses are intended to deter.

Today, the United States remains constrained by the choices it made decades ago. U.S. military prowess remains limited by a one-war standard (which, some argue, is really a one-half-war standard) and related defense spending limits. With few exceptions, allies have not stepped up to take up the slack for their own defense. Eventually, U.S. allies will be compelled to make tough choices: either work with the United States to seriously rearm; rearm themselves independently; or conciliate to the Sino-Russian entente. Without a demonstrable American commitment to reenact a two-war strategy, the last option may be increasingly inevitable for some allies.

A policy of accommodation or appeasement is unlikely to forestall any aggressive acts by a Sino-Russian entente. Some European states have demonstrated the will to increase their own defense capabilities in the face of growing Russian assertiveness and aggression. Yet there is no substitute for U.S. leadership and power; it falls on the United States, as the leader of NATO and the ultimate guarantor of European security, to shoulder much of the burden. Doing so undoubtedly entails moving expeditiously toward re-adoption of a two-war strategy and procuring the conventional and nuclear capabilities needed to implement that strategy. Only in this way will allied confidence in the credibility of U.S. security guarantees increase and the efficacy of the U.S. extended deterrent be preserved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The need to reconsider a more robust force-sizing construct to strengthen deterrence in an era of two great power rivals has received strong bipartisan support. Recently, the congressionally mandated Strategic Posture Commission concluded that a one-war strategy is inadequate and inappropriate to the contemporary military challenges facing the United States. It declared that “U.S. and allied conventional military advantages in Asia are decreasing at the same time the potential for two simultaneous theater conflicts is increasing.”²⁴

This structural challenge facing extended deterrence and assurance cannot be solved with robust rhetoric from Washington and NATO. The 2022 NPR shows some recognition of the problem but eliminates “hedging” as a requirement despite the need for greater

²³ See, for example, Rep. Mike Waltz, “Europe must do more for Ukraine; U.S. has to protect its own border,” *The Highland County Press*, September 26, 2023, available at <https://highlandcountypress.com/europe-must-do-more-ukraine-us-has-protect-its-own-border#gsc.tab=0>.

²⁴ Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, pp. 8, 90, available at <https://ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

flexibility and adaptability in U.S. force preparedness. However, a renewed two-MRC standard would help provide a needed hedge against resurgent Russian revanchism, the rise of Chinese aggression, and a combination of both. Without such a hedging strategy, the risks of aggression, including opportunistic or coordinated aggression will increase.

In light of the more dangerous international security climate, especially the growing threats to the United States and its allies posed by a revanchist Russia and a more assertive and aggressive China, the deficiencies in U.S. strategy and force posture must be remedied if deterrence is to be preserved and strengthened. This will require a serious effort and major additional defense investments.

Among the actions that should be taken are the following:²⁵

1. The United States must reassess its current military strategy and re-posture itself to deter simultaneously multiple nuclear and non-nuclear adversaries in several distinct theaters of operation. This will require readopting a “two-war” standard for force planning. While the exact number of forces and platforms needed to implement a two-war strategy is debatable, there can be no question that recommitting to such a strategy will require a greater number of defense assets to strengthen deterrence, as well as better logistics, improved readiness, and overseas basing facilities. In addition, the Department of Defense should incorporate a two-war scenario in its war games and exercises.
2. The United States should increase the level of defense investment and resources in both conventional and nuclear forces to implement adequately such a strategy. It seems increasingly clear that the capabilities of both U.S. nuclear and conventional forces must be augmented to support the possibility to deter—or should deterrence fail—to defeat two nuclear-armed opponents, operating independently or in concert, in two distinct theaters. This includes expediting greater production of weapons and munitions that will allow the United States to implement a two-war strategy without compromising the nation’s ability to protect U.S. interests and support U.S. friends, allies, and partners. The resources to implement such a course of action will no doubt be sizable, but the risks of failing to invest in the necessary capabilities outweigh the costs. The price of peace may be expensive, but it is always cheaper than the costs of war.
3. The United States must improve its global power projection capabilities. The decline in U.S. power projection capabilities is noticed by allies and adversaries alike. Without the ability to deploy forces where needed on a timely basis to affect the outcome of a conflict, U.S. deterrence will suffer. The United States should conduct a serious reassessment of its globally deployed force levels and capabilities to strengthen deterrence in light of the expansion in force deployments and capabilities by both Russia and China. Forward deploying additional U.S. forces to the European

²⁵ Some of the recommendations that follow are addressed in David J. Trachtenberg, “Deterrence Implications of a Sino-Russian Entente,” in James H. Anderson and Daniel R. Green (eds.), *Confronting China: U.S. Defense Policy in an Era of Great Power Competition* (forthcoming), Praeger Security International, 2024, pp. 169-192.

and Indo-Pacific theaters, on a permanent and/or rotational basis, would convey a tangible and credible commitment to protect U.S. security interests as well as the security of regional allies and strategic partners.

4. U.S. allies must step up their own defensive investments and enhance their contributions to the common defense. Currently, most NATO allies have failed to meet their two percent of GDP defense spending commitment, agreed to at the 2014 Wales Summit. At the upcoming Washington Summit in July, NATO nations should reevaluate the Wales benchmark and commit to doubling the two percent target goal—to at least four percent of GDP. Such a level is eminently affordable for European economies that have prospered and benefitted from disproportionate expenditures on domestic priorities and that have relied on the United States to shoulder the majority of the burden of collective security. The current inadequacy of defense investments by many NATO members is no longer satisfactory or acceptable in the current security environment. It is time for U.S. allies to step up to their responsibilities for their security by increasing both defense expenditures and the procurement of military hardware that will improve their deterrent capabilities in the face of repeated threats by opponents. This is a necessary action to forestall a “crisis of deterrence credibility.”
5. The United States must reject the false choice of prioritizing deterrence in one theater over another. Despite concerns expressed by some that the United States cannot “walk and chew gum at the same time,” the U.S. economy is resilient enough to ensure a credible and effective deterrent against multiple adversaries across multiple theaters of operation. What is required is a serious commitment to take the necessary actions to restore a robust deterrent posture against the prospect of regional aggression by multiple opponents, including Russia and China working independently or in concert, to undermine U.S. security.
6. The United States should work to assure allies of the credibility of U.S. security guarantees by demonstrating that the United States is serious about rebuilding a force that can successfully deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression by multiple adversaries in multiple theaters. If states that have previously been content to rely for their ultimate security on U.S. assurances, including those that fall under the U.S. “nuclear umbrella,” come to believe the United States can no longer be trusted to live up to its security promises, they may take other measures to ensure their own security and survival—including the acquisition of nuclear weapons. This would result in a major setback to decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy. Of course, reinforcing U.S. security guarantees to allies should not be an excuse for allied countries to fail to invest adequately in their own defense. The gathering storm of instability and the ubiquity of uncertainty in the international security environment demands a serious commitment to strengthening deterrence in light of serious challenges to the existing world order.

7. The United States must restore “hedging against uncertainty” as an explicit goal for U.S. forces. Restoration of a two-war planning construct would help hedge against uncertainty. It would contribute to deterrence of opportunistic aggression and help assure allies and strategic partners of U.S. resolve. Yet the *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly eliminates “hedging” as a requirement for U.S. nuclear forces despite the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in U.S. force preparedness. Given the greater deterrence challenges resulting from the deteriorating international security environment, the ability to hedge against uncertainty should be an essential component of any U.S. military force planning. In fact, a “hedging” strategy has been part of every U.S. administration’s planning process for nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War. The same should apply to planning for conventional conflict.

Accomplishing the needed improvements in U.S. planning and capabilities for extended deterrence and assurance will require a long-term effort, backed by strong political support. It also will require the necessary increase in fiscal and material resources to get the job done. In today’s increasingly dynamic and dangerous international security environment, nothing less will suffice.

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.