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# The Demise of the “Two-War Strategy” and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance

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**The Demise of the “Two-War Strategy”  
and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence  
and Assurance**

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## Executive Summary

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.

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 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.

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. 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.

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. U.S. allies and strategic partners who rely on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their own security surely recognize the increased risk that accompanies a U.S. military that is limited in its ability to respond to aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously.

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. 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 Europe as well, some of America's traditional key allies are growing more concerned about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees.

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. As U.S. military capabilities have declined, allies and strategic partners of the United States have become increasingly skeptical of U.S. security guarantees.

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 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 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 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 and/or toward independent military capabilities and planning. 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. This is hardly sufficient to implement the requirements of the current strategy, much less a two-war strategy.

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). 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 appears increasingly likely for at least 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 now 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 to procure 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.

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 will also 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.



## Introduction

In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the United States developed a force-sizing metric that served as a theoretical benchmark for judging the adequacy of U.S. military capabilities. That metric was based on the ability to fight and win two major conflicts in two different regions simultaneously. Known colloquially as the “two-war” strategy, and officially described as a “two major regional contingency” (“two MRC”) or “two major theater war” (“two MTW”) strategy,<sup>1</sup> it reflected a demanding standard for military readiness in light of significant national security challenges posed by regional actors across Eurasia.

As the post-Cold War world evolved, so did U.S. military strategy. The United States sought to leverage

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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).

its success in the Cold War and to take advantage of the demise of the Soviet Union by reducing its commitment to a two-MRC force requirement and adopting a lesser standard for sizing the force—one which was easier to achieve, required fewer manpower and equipment resources, was less stressing, would reflect the more benign strategic environment, and would be less expensive. The Clinton Administration sought to adopt a “win-hold-win” strategy, which would allow U.S. forces to defeat two adversaries sequentially rather than simultaneously. This approach met with strong resistance on Capitol Hill and was eventually abandoned. U.S. strategy later adopted a requirement to defeat one major regional power while preventing a second from achieving its intended military objectives.

Although the rubric changed over time, the trend during the post-Cold War was to scale back U.S. military requirements and capabilities. Victory in the Cold War left the United States as the sole global superpower. Many of the Soviet Union’s former Warsaw Pact allies sought NATO membership. And pressures intensified to reduce defense spending and capitalize on a “peace dividend.”

Yet capabilities, once abandoned, are often difficult to regenerate. Consequently, with the resurgence of a revanchist and aggressive Russia, along with the emergence of China as a major military adversary, the United States for the first time in its history now faces the need to deter two nuclear-armed peer adversaries with a military force that is less prepared than during the Cold War to meet the requirements of a possible two-front war. The implications of this for extended

deterrence and assurance are sobering. With Russia’s ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, increased emphasis on nuclear weapons, and brazen nuclear threats, along with China’s increased military aggressiveness, extensive nuclear build-up, and growing threats to Taiwan’s political autonomy, the credibility of American security guarantees to allies and partners is coming under increasing strain.

This paper examines the impact of a reduced U.S. military posture on extended deterrence and allied assurance. It also offers recommendations for addressing allied concerns over the credibility of U.S. security guarantees in light of the emergence of two nuclear peer adversaries that may act in collusion to undermine U.S. and Western security.

## **Evolution of the “Two-War” Standard**

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. As the 1992 *National Military Strategy of the United States* explained, “Because of the changes in the strategic environment, the threats we expect to face are regional rather than global.... [therefore] our plans and resources are primarily focused on deterring and fighting regional rather than global wars.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategy of the United States*, January 1992, p. 11, available at



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.<sup>3</sup> As one former Pentagon official noted, "Every subsequent review of U.S. defense policy and programs has reaffirmed the two-war standard. In fact, every Administration for the past two decades found that a force sized to fight two wars was essential for meeting the ongoing demands for forward presence, crisis response, regional deterrence, humanitarian assistance, building partnership capacity, homeland defense, and support to civil authorities."<sup>4</sup>

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<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nms/nms1992.pdf?ver=AsfWYUHa-HtcvnGGAuWXAg%3d%3d>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, p. 12, available at

<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR1997.pdf?ver=qba2TZwCFGCIKIgPIpNvg%3d%3d>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Gouré, *The Measure of a Superpower: A Two Major Regional Contingency Military for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, The Heritage Foundation, Special Report No. 128, January 12, 2013, p. 1, available at <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-measure-superpower-two-major-regional-contingency-military-the-21st-century>.

The rationale for the two-war standard was explained in the 1993 Department of Defense *Bottom-Up Review*:

One of the central factors in our analysis was the judgment that the United States must field forces capable, in concert with its allies, of fighting and winning two major regional conflicts that occur nearly simultaneously. This capability is important in part because we do not want a potential aggressor in one region to be tempted to take advantage if we are already engaged in halting aggression in another. Further, sizing U.S. forces to fight and win two major regional conflicts provides a hedge against the possibility that a future adversary might one day confront us with a larger-than-expected threat.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of fighting a two-front war against major powers is not simply theoretical. The United States did so in World War II. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the United States was ill-prepared militarily to prosecute a conflict against Germany and Japan simultaneously. Consequently, as recounted by one historian, U.S. leaders agreed on "a global strategy for the United States in the event of a two-front, coalition war against Germany and Japan which called for a defensive effort in the Far East so that American and Allied forces could concentrate in the European

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<sup>5</sup> Les Aspin, Department of Defense, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review*, October 1993, p. iii, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA359953.pdf>.

theatre to defeat Germany first.”<sup>6</sup> This sequential approach to warfighting was considered half a century later as the Clinton Administration drafted a military strategy that was dubbed “Win-Hold-Win,” but which reportedly was abandoned as untenable.<sup>7</sup>

A modified version of the two-war standard carried over into the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), which noted: “For planning purposes, U.S. forces will remain capable of swiftly defeating attacks against U.S. allies and friends in any two theaters of operation in overlapping timeframes.”<sup>8</sup> However, the 2001 QDR adjusted U.S. military planning to focus on decisively defeating an adversary in one theater of operations before securing victory in another while conducting “a limited number of lesser military and humanitarian contingencies.”<sup>9</sup> As the strategy explained, “At the direction of the President, U.S. forces will be capable of decisively defeating an adversary in one of the two theaters in which U.S. forces are conducting major combat operations by imposing America's will and removing any future

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<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Stoler, “The ‘Pacific-First’ Alternative in American World War II Strategy,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1980, p. 432.

<sup>7</sup> John T. Correll, “Back to Win-Hold-Win,” *Air Force Magazine*, October 1, 1999, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/1099edit/>.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 3, 2001, p. 21, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2001.pdf?ver=AFts7axkH2zWUHncRd8yUg%3d%3d>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, p. 36, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-111017-150>.

threat it could pose.”<sup>10</sup> As another analysis concluded, “the notion that two MTWs will still be the main danger to world peace seems increasingly a stretch.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2006, the Department of Defense revised its “Force Planning Construct” to focus on irregular warfare and to “consider a somewhat higher level of contributions from international allies and partners” that would allow the United States to “wage two nearly simultaneous conventional campaigns (or one conventional campaign if already engaged in a large-scale, long-duration irregular campaign), while selectively reinforcing deterrence against opportunistic acts of aggression.”<sup>12</sup> By 2010, however, the United States apparently had revised the two-MRC construct as a force-sizing measure to focus on counterterrorism and irregular warfare.<sup>13</sup>

The 2014 QDR further scaled back U.S. planning objectives, seeking to defeat one regional adversary while imposing severe costs on another. It called for a force,

...capable of simultaneously defending the homeland; conducting sustained, distributed

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 3, 2001, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler, “Revising the Two-Major Theater War Standard,” *Strategic Forum*, No. 179, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, April 2001, p. 2, available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=450343>.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, available at [https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2010.pdf?ver=vVJYRVwNdnGb\\_00ixF0UfQ%3d%3d](https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2010.pdf?ver=vVJYRVwNdnGb_00ixF0UfQ%3d%3d).

counterterrorist operations; and in multiple regions, deterring aggression and assuring allies through forward presence and engagement. If deterrence fails at any given time, U.S. forces could defeat a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign and deny the objectives of—or impose unacceptable costs on—another aggressor in another region.<sup>14</sup>

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. Subsequently, the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* noted, “Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world.”<sup>15</sup> Yet U.S. military forces remained ill-prepared to prosecute a two-war scenario, especially one involving Sino-Russian collaboration.

The shift away from a two-war standard to what has been described as a “one-war” standard has been criticized by numerous experts as imprudent and dangerous. As several analysts have noted:

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<sup>14</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, 2014, p. 44, available at

<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2014.pdf?ver=tXH94SVvSQLVw-ENZ-a2pQ%3d%3d>.

<sup>15</sup> The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, p. 8, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

This shift represents the most significant departure in American defense strategy since the end of the Cold War.... In fact, a one-war standard could increase...risk by tempting an opportunistic adversary to use force in one theater while Washington is occupied in another.... In short, the one-war standard exposes a serious mismatch between America’s global commitments and the military challenges it can realistically meet – a grand strategy-defense strategy gap that may prove extremely damaging in war and peace alike.... [This] is a recipe for disaster.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, a one-war standard likely raises allied concerns that the United States will be reluctant to commit major forces to their defense, if doing so would increase the risk of opportunistic aggression elsewhere that the United States is ill-prepared to defeat. This is especially true if the opportunistic aggressor is a major peer adversary such as Russia or China. In other words, a “one-war” standard in theory could, in the eyes of dependent allies, equate to a “zero-war” standard in practice.<sup>17</sup> The implications of this for extended deterrence and assurance are sobering.

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<sup>16</sup> Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Spring 2020, pp. 80-92, available at <https://tnsr.org/2020/03/one-war-is-not-enough-strategy-and-force-planning-for-great-power-competition/>.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Testimony of Mara Karlin before the Senate Armed Services Committee, November 30, 2017, p. 3, available at [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Karlin\\_11-30-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Karlin_11-30-17.pdf).

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 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.

### **U.S. Abandonment of the “Two-War” Standard and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance**

As the congressionally mandated Commission on the National Defense Strategy of the United States concluded in 2018, “The [Defense] Department has largely abandoned the longstanding ‘two-war’ construct for a ‘one major war’ sizing and shaping construct. In the event of large-scale conflict with Russia or China, the United States may not have sufficient remaining resources to deter other adversaries in one—let alone two—other theaters by denying them the ability to accomplish their objectives without relying on nuclear weapons.”<sup>18</sup>

The inability of the United States to project sufficient power into two theaters to fight two simultaneous wars with great powers is on display

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<sup>18</sup> *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, November 2018, p. 2, available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/11/providing-common-defense>.

today. As former Chief of Naval Operations Michael Gilday stated, “...I think we’d be challenged. You know, right now the force is not sized to handle two simultaneous conflicts. It’s — it’s sized to fight one and to keep — keep a second adversary in check. *But in terms of a two — two all-out conflicts, we are not sized for that.*”<sup>19</sup>

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. 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

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<sup>19</sup> Adm. Michael Gilday, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 12, 2022, cited in Ronald O’Rourke, “Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense — Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, Report R43838, January 10, 2024, (emphasis added), available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>.



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 then-President George H. W. Bush stated:

A new partnership of nations has begun ... An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. ... A world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.<sup>20</sup>

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.

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<sup>20</sup> George H. W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, "Bush 'Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,'" *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

### *A Dangerous Decline?*

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 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.”<sup>21</sup> This decline in U.S. military capabilities has resulted in what has been described as a “brittle force.”<sup>22</sup>

More than two decades ago, the United States deployed 13 active Army divisions, an equal number of Marine divisions, a dozen Navy carrier battle groups, and 20 Air Force fighter wings—both active and reserve.<sup>23</sup> Today, the Army has 10 active divisions and the Marine Corps has only four (three Active and

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<sup>21</sup> 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/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Binnendijk and Kugler, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

one Reserve).<sup>24</sup> The number of Navy carrier battle groups today stands at 11, with only one forward deployed overseas (in Japan).<sup>25</sup> And the Air Force has reduced the number of fighter squadrons per wing as the overall number of aircraft (Active, Reserve, and Air National Guard) declined from nearly 6,000 in 1987 to fewer than 3,000 today.<sup>26</sup> Since 1980, the total size of the active-duty U.S. military force has declined by more than 37 percent.<sup>27</sup>

As a recent assessment concludes, “the Army has less than two-thirds the forces it would need in its Active Component to handle more than one major regional conflict.” In addition, the Air Force has been judged inadequate to meet the demands and requirements of a two-war strategy: “The result is an Air Force that probably is able to handle only a single major conflict, and that only by resorting to global sourcing, leaving it unable to do much else.” And, “The Navy needs a battle force consisting of 400

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<sup>24</sup> “Military Divisions,” Medals of America, available at <https://www.medalsofamerica.com/content--name-military-divisions>.

<sup>25</sup> See “About America’s Navy,” available at <https://www.surfpac.navy.mil/Ships/Carrier-Strike-Group-COMCARSTRKGRU-9/About/#:~:text=The%20Navy%20maintains%2011%20carrier,is%20forward%20deployed%20in%20Japan>.

<sup>26</sup> John Venable, “U.S. Air Force,” *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, The Heritage Foundation, January 24, 2024, available at [https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessment-us-military-power/us-air-force#:~:text=Of%20the%2054%20operational%20fighter,\(See%20Figure%204.\)](https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessment-us-military-power/us-air-force#:~:text=Of%20the%2054%20operational%20fighter,(See%20Figure%204.)).

<sup>27</sup> USAFacts Team, “How many people are in the US military? A demographic overview,” USA Facts, February 21, 2024, available at <https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-people-are-in-the-us-military-a-demographic-overview/#footnote-3>.

manned ships to do what is expected of it today. Its current battle force fleet of 297 ships reflects a service that is much too small relative to its tasks.”<sup>28</sup>

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 was no longer an adversary of the United States and the risk of a direct U.S.-Russia military confrontation had diminished substantially, noting, “The threat of global nuclear war has become remote...”<sup>29</sup> 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.

Indeed, the congressionally mandated bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission concluded that “the

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<sup>28</sup> Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, The Heritage Foundation, January 24, 2024, pp. 22-23, available at [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/2024\\_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/2024_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> 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](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf).

United States must re-evaluate the size and composition of the U.S. nuclear force that would be adequate to fulfill longstanding roles of that force. These roles include deterrence, assurance, achieving objectives should deterrence fail, and hedging against adverse events.”<sup>30</sup> Further, the Commission concluded: “U.S. defense strategy to address the two-nuclear-peer threat requires a U.S. nuclear force that is either larger in size, different in composition, or both; therefore, decisions must be made now to meet evolving deterrence requirements.”<sup>31</sup>

For the United States, this may mean reassessing the number of strategic nuclear forces deployed and on alert; rebasing strategic nuclear assets in more survivable basing modes; and adding non-strategic nuclear capabilities – such as low-yield ballistic missile warheads, and developing and deploying the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) – to fortify extended deterrence and assurance of allies. In addition, Russia’s “suspension” of the New START Treaty and its treaty violations, along with China’s refusal to consider any arms control limitations on its nuclear buildup, mandate a reassessment of the New START Treaty’s impact on U.S. deterrence and extended deterrence requirements.

Regarding conventional forces, the Commission highlighted a decline in U.S. and allied non-nuclear military advantages in Asia while noting an increase in

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<sup>30</sup> 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, p. 90, available at <https://ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the risk of two simultaneous conflicts occurring in multiple theaters. It further concluded that:

...the U.S. conventional forces needed to fight a theater conflict in Europe differ from those required for Asia. The currently planned force is not structured to be able to fully reinforce both theaters simultaneously – especially given the growing adversary non-nuclear capability to hinder U.S. ability to flow additional forces to Asia or Europe. This shortfall, combined with increases in China’s nuclear capabilities, has the potential to undermine deterrence, especially deterrence of opportunistic aggression.... The Commission concludes that dismissing the possibility of opportunistic or simultaneous two-peer aggression because it may seem improbable, and not addressing it in U.S. strategy and strategic posture, could have the perverse effect of making such aggression more likely.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, as Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has shown, the U.S. defense industrial base is hard-pressed to produce a sufficient quantity of weapons and munitions in a timely manner to support friends, allies, and partners without drawing down the existing inventory of America’s “arsenal of democracy.”<sup>33</sup> This must change, especially if the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Thomas G. Mahnken, “A Three-Theater Defense Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 5, 2024, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/theater-defense-war->

United States is to meet the requirements of a two-war strategy.

### *A False Choice*

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.<sup>34</sup> And the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* calls China the "pacing challenge"

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asia-europe-middle-east. Also see Cynthia Cook, "Reviving the Arsenal of Democracy," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2023, available at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-03/230314\\_Cook\\_SurgingDefenseIndustrialCapacity\\_v6.pdf?VersionId=wh.T8roPLeyF.jkoUEvsbboyh19cc\\_iT](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-03/230314_Cook_SurgingDefenseIndustrialCapacity_v6.pdf?VersionId=wh.T8roPLeyF.jkoUEvsbboyh19cc_iT).

<sup>34</sup> As one former DoD official has written: "...there are now structural limitations on what the United States can do — it cannot do everything at once. Thus, it must make hard choices... the United States should not size, shape, or posture its military to deal simultaneously with any other scenario alongside a war with China over Taiwan" which must be an "overriding priority." See Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. x, xvi.

against which U.S. defense investments must be focused.<sup>35</sup>

The strategic importance of the United States being able to deter or defeat adversaries in more than one theater of operation has not been lost on U.S. allies and strategic partners. Despite calls in some quarters to prioritize U.S. efforts to deter China from moving militarily against Taiwan, the Taiwanese Foreign Minister stated, “When people ask us whether it is OK for the United States to abandon Ukraine, the answer is no, because the world is operating not in a black-and-white way, or if you only look at one theater at a time. The world is interconnected.”<sup>36</sup> This comment demonstrates the critical importance of assuring allies that the United States is a credible security partner and will uphold its worldwide security commitments. Anything less will likely reverberate negatively as other countries call into question the ability and willingness of the United States to back its “ironclad” security guarantees.

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.

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<sup>35</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 2022, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1183514.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Wong, “Taiwan’s Top Diplomat Says U.S. Aid to Ukraine Is Critical for Deterring China,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/28/us/politics/taiwan-china-ukraine-aid.html#:~:text=ukraine%2Daid.html,Taiwan's%20Top%20Diplomat%20Says%20U.S.%20Aid%20to%20Ukraine%20Is%20Critical,would%20fuel%20anti%2DAmerican%20propaganda>.



Indeed, it is increasingly unlikely that the United States can engage militarily in one regional contingency without eroding deterrence in another region.<sup>37</sup> And as others have noted more succinctly, "...a one-war force invites opportunistic aggression in a second theater."<sup>38</sup> U.S. allies and strategic partners who rely on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their own security surely recognize the increased risk that accompanies a U.S. military that is limited in its ability to respond to aggression in multiple theaters simultaneously.<sup>39</sup>

### *Allied Queasiness Over U.S. Security Guarantees*

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

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<sup>37</sup> 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](https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Workshop_Extended_Deterrence_and_Two_War_Problem_CGSR_Summary.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> 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/>.

<sup>39</sup> 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>.

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.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, public opinion polls have highlighted a lack of faith among allied publics in U.S. extended deterrence commitments and assurances. 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.<sup>41</sup> South Korean confidence in U.S. extended deterrence assurances is similarly low.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, concerns over America’s “ironclad” security assurances to allies in Europe and Asia have multiplied in light of several factors. These include the Biden Administration’s reluctance to provide Ukraine with more sophisticated weapons to roll back Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine amid concerns over possible escalation of the conflict, a growing reluctance within some segments of the U.S. population and its elected leaders to support greater U.S. involvement in

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<sup>40</sup> 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>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, “Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence,” *Issue Brief*, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 27, 2024, available at <https://www.asaninst.org/contents/comparing-allied-public-confidence-in-u-s-extended-nuclear-deterrence/#:~:text=A%20December%202023%20survey%20by,6%20percentage%20points%20to%2039.3%25.&text=In%20short%2C%20South%20Korean%20confidence,extended%20deterrence%20commitment%20remains%20low>.

overseas hostilities, and the strain on the U.S. defense industrial base to support U.S. warfighter requirements. U.S. support for Ukraine has exposed significant weaknesses in the U.S. defense industrial base, leading the Department of Defense to release, for the first time, a *National Defense Industrial Strategy* designed to address key industrial base shortfalls affecting U.S. military preparedness.<sup>43</sup>

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, despite the U.S. reiteration of its “ironclad” commitment to South Korea’s defense in the 2023 Washington Declaration,<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> This is a reflection of these allies’ growing threat perceptions and the simultaneous declining

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<sup>43</sup> Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 2023, available at <https://www.businessdefense.gov/docs/ndis/2023-NDIS.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> The White House, “Washington Declaration,” April 26, 2023, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>.

<sup>45</sup> 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>.

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.<sup>46</sup> 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. In addition, the U.S. military posture in Korea (including authorities, command relationships, and logistics, as well as overall military capabilities) has been judged inadequate against the prospective threats posed by North Korea and China. As one recent study concluded:

If the United States, in concert with South Korea, does not undertake major adjustments to its capabilities and approaches to strengthen deterrence and resilience in the face of aggression in and around the Korean Peninsula... the probability of strategic deterrence failure will increase in comparison to today, while the likely operational and

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<sup>46</sup> 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%20Studies%20on%20Monday>. Also see, Peter K. Lee and Kang Chungku, “Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence,” *Issue Brief*, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, March 27, 2024, available at <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/comparing-allied-public-confidence-in-u-s-extended-nuclear-deterrence/>.

strategic consequences for such failure will also increase.... Analysis of deterrence in Korea must also recognize that US leaders no longer have the dominant role in determining a South Korean-US response to North Korean escalation, nor are there even many US unilateral military options, short of strategic strikes, that are truly independent of South Korea.<sup>47</sup>

Importantly, the same study concluded that the current U.S.-ROK military posture is ill-suited to counter existing and evolving threats to South Korea's security, noting that the existing force posture "is largely a legacy of choices made decades ago and has little to do with today's requirements for strategic deterrence of North Korea...."<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> While this may remain a minority view among the Japanese public, it suggests growing doubts

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<sup>47</sup> Markus Garlauskas and Lauren D. Gilbert, "Deterrence is crumbling in Korea: How we can fix it," The Atlantic Council, November 9, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/deterrence-is-crumbling-in-korea-how-we-can-fix-it/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> 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/>.

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.<sup>50</sup> As an analysis of the survey concluded, “The growing mistrust about Washington’s reliability and power is changing the nature of the transatlantic alliance.”<sup>51</sup>

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

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<sup>50</sup> Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, *Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate A Competitive World*, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 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>.

<sup>51</sup> 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/>.

confrontation over Taiwan.<sup>52</sup> 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.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, based on interviews with experts in allied countries conducted between December 2023 and February 2024, it was apparent that they are concerned about whether the United States would be able to support a regional conflict while active hostilities are going on in another region.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, 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.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> 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/>.

<sup>53</sup> 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/>.

<sup>54</sup> These interviews were conducted by Dr. Michaela Dodge as part of a project undertaken by the National Institute for Public Policy and will be presented in a forthcoming publication.

<sup>55</sup> 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->

The lack of a serious two-war strategy and the resulting decline in U.S. military capabilities has led some in NATO to express concern about the U.S. leadership role in the alliance. As former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stated, "Recent global events in the Taiwan Strait, in the Middle East, in Ukraine are all results of American hesitance to actually lead.... Time and again we see that .... if the U.S. is not exercising global leadership, then the bad guys would take advantage of the situation.... When America leads, then the bad guys retreat."<sup>56</sup> Former Polish President Lech Walesa stated, "Numerous civilizations in the past have crumbled because somewhere along the way they forgot about leadership, and we are heading in this direction. We will destroy our civilization unless the United States retakes its leadership role."<sup>57</sup> Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski was also blunt: "If America cannot come together with Europe and enable Ukraine to drive Putin back, I fear that our family of democratic nations will start to break up. Allies will look for other ways to guarantee their safety. They'll start hedging. Some of them will aim for the ultimate

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content/uploads/2024/02/bp383\_china-as-the-second-nuclear-peer-of-the-united-states.pdf.

<sup>56</sup> Anders Fogh Rasmussen, reported in *Politico National Security Daily*, January 17, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2024/01/17/ex-nato-chief-world-conflicts-result-of-american-hesitancy-00135916>.

<sup>57</sup> Margret Johnston, "'Our Grandchildren Will Never Forgive Us': Walesa Says World's Moment To Forge Russia's Future Is Now," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 10, 2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/lech-walesa-ukraine-russia-war-united-states-support/32813630.html>.



weapon, starting off a new nuclear race.”<sup>58</sup> And as one member of the European Parliament stated, “...Europe must be able to stand on its own in terms of foreign policy and be able to defend itself independently.... Europe must build deterrence, we must be able to deter and defend ourselves.... We all know that when push comes to shove, the nuclear option is the really decisive one.”<sup>59</sup>

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.”<sup>60</sup>

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

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<sup>58</sup> Remarks by Radoslaw Sikorski to the Atlantic Council, February 26, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/polish-foreign-minister-radoslaw-sikorski-helping-ukraine-is-not-only-a-good-deed-its-also-a-good-deal/>.

<sup>59</sup> Manfred Weber, quoted in Jacob Hanke Vela and Nicolas Camut, “As Trump looms, top EU politician calls for European nuclear deterrent,” *Politico*, January 25, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-nuclear-warfare-deterrence-manfred-weber-vladimir-putin-ukraine-russia-war/>.

<sup>60</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).

movement away from a two-war strategy and the necessary procurement of military capabilities that could effectively execute that strategy.<sup>61</sup> Much of this resulted from budget-driven decisions taken in the expectation of a more peaceful world and a more benign international security environment. Indeed, various strategy and military posture reviews have validated the importance of American global leadership and the need to deter aggression in multiple theaters of operation. However, U.S. defense budgets have been inadequate to support such a posture, as critical modernization programs have been cut or delayed and the maintenance of existing systems has often been postponed.<sup>62</sup> As two senior defense experts concluded more than a decade ago, “the [U.S.] military is too small and is forced to use equipment that is too old. Consistent with ongoing obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military cannot fight one regional contingency like Desert Storm, much less two.”<sup>63</sup> The Obama Administration’s revision of the two-war strategy, occasionally described as a “one-and-a-half”

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<sup>61</sup> 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.

<sup>62</sup> Gouré, *The Measure of a Superpower*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Mackenzie Eaglen and Jim Talent, “A Clear and Present Danger,” *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2009, cited in Gouré, *The Measure of a Superpower*, op. cit., p. 4.

war standard, was rightly characterized as inadequate and an attempt to justify cuts in defense spending and reductions in the overall size of the armed forces.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, a budget-driven strategy that presumes a low-risk threat context carries risks not only for the United States but for extended deterrence and assurance as well.

A telling historical analogy is the experience of Great Britain prior to the outbreak of World War II. After the first World War, the British government, for budgetary reasons, established what became known as the “Ten Year Rule,” which left Britain with a “skeletal” defense establishment under the questionable assumption that the country would not face any major conflict for a least the next ten years. This was a tragic mistake that nearly spelled doom for Britain several years later when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and, shortly thereafter, began an aggressive assault on the continent.<sup>65</sup>

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.<sup>66</sup> The need for such

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<sup>64</sup> Gouré, *The Measure of a Superpower*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>65</sup> Martin C. Libicki, “A ten-year rule for defense planning,” *Orbis*, Volume 45, Issue 3, Summer 2001, pp. 387-399.

<sup>66</sup> 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

reassurances suggests recognition of a growing uneasiness among allies over the credibility of such guarantees. As one commentary noted, “The United States and its allies are not situated to fight a two-front limited nuclear war in East Asia; the PRC may be soon. U.S. and allied capabilities...are unsuited to prevent simultaneous conflict with the PRC and North Korea and/or a limited nuclear attack or provide robust response options if they occur.”<sup>67</sup>

The decline in U.S. power projection capabilities is noticed by allies and adversaries alike and must be arrested. Without the ability to deploy forces where needed on a timely basis to affect the outcome of a conflict, U.S. deterrence will suffer. This will require additional platforms, improved mobility, and greater forward-basing options. As one South Korean analyst

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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/>.

<sup>67</sup> Markus Garlauskas, “The United States and its allies must be ready to deter a two-front war and nuclear attacks in East Asia,” *The Atlantic Council*, August 16, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/>.

commented, “We feel safe when the systems are closer rather than further away.”<sup>68</sup>

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.

### *Addressing the Challenge*

In 2010, when the international security environment was considered more benign, and well before Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, the United States devoted more than four percent of its GDP to defense. Today, that figure has declined by more than one-third, to just over three percent—a near historic low—and is projected to decline to less than three percent over the next decade.<sup>69</sup> When compared to the level of economic output devoted to defense during the Cold War (anywhere from five to 11 percent of GDP), this is

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<sup>68</sup> National Institute for Public Policy interview with Dong Hyun Kim, Security Policy Journalist for the Voice of America Korean Service, December 22, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Statista Research Department, “U.S. defense outlays and forecast as a percentage of GDP 2000-2033,” *Statista*, November 3, 2023, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/217581/outlays-for-defense-and-forecast-in-the-us-as-a-percentage-of-the-gdp/#:~:text=The%20statistic%20represents%20the%20U.S.,percent%20of%20the%20U.S.%20GDP.>

hardly indicative of a serious commitment to national defense.

The United States invests between three and six percent of the overall Department of Defense budget in support of the current nuclear modernization program—hardly an exorbitant amount. In fact, the current modernization program was initiated by the Obama Administration in 2010 under the assumption that Russia would be a cooperative partner and China would not emerge as a serious threat to the United States. Both assumptions turned out to be wishful thinking, and there are calls to reconsider the adequacy of the current nuclear modernization program.

The force expansion necessary to implement a two-war strategy will require additional fiscal resources beyond those currently budgeted. The resources to implement such a course of action will no doubt be sizable. Some estimates have suggested that the cost of building a military force capable of implementing a two-war strategy may add at least \$70 billion to the defense spending totals that were projected more than a decade ago and could add more than \$300 billion to the overall defense budget.<sup>70</sup>

Some in Congress have shown a willingness to go beyond the levels of defense spending requested by the Biden Administration. For example, the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee have approved levels of defense funding well in excess of the administration’s budget

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<sup>70</sup> For example, see Gouré, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

requests.<sup>71</sup> And the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, signed into law by President Biden on December 22, 2023, also increased the level of defense funding to more than \$883 billion, well beyond that originally requested by the administration.<sup>72</sup>

Despite some positive signs, the results of recent budget negotiations are likely to constrain the procurement of the additional forces needed to implement adequately a two-war strategy. For example, anticipated reductions in the number of weapons platforms across all the Services, including F-35 fighters, nuclear submarines, and other military equipment as a result of defense budget caps signed into law by President Biden last year as part of the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, will seriously impact any move toward restoring a two-war defense

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<sup>71</sup> The Senate Armed Services Committee approved a level of defense funding roughly \$45 billion more than what the administration requested. See Senate Armed Services Committee Press Release, "Reed and Inhofe File Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act," July 18, 2022, available at <https://www.armedservices.senate.gov/press-releases/reed-and-inhofe-file-fiscal-year2023-national-defense-authorization-act>. The Senate Appropriations Committee also added significantly to the administration's defense request. See "Senate appropriators seek \$850 billion for defense, largest total of 4 key committees," *Breaking Defense*, July 28, 2022, available at <https://www.google.com/amp/s/breakingdefense.com/2022/07/senate-appropriators-seek-850-billion-for-defense-largest-total-of-4-keycommittees/amp/>.

<sup>72</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, "Summary of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act," available at [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy24\\_ndaa\\_conference\\_executive\\_summary1.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy24_ndaa_conference_executive_summary1.pdf).

capability.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the president’s proposed defense budget for fiscal year 2025 reflects 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.<sup>74</sup> As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated, the cuts will result in “targeted reductions to programs that will not deliver capability to the force until the 2030s....”<sup>75</sup> This actual reduction in U.S. defense spending purchasing power is likely to

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<sup>73</sup> Lara Seligman, Connor O’Brien, Lee Hudson, and Paul McLeary, “Pentagon slashes weapons programs to stay under debt deal,” *Politico*, February 21, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/21/pentagon-slashes-weapons-programs-debt-deal-00142465#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%20struck%20a,stay%20under%20the%20spending%20caps>.

<sup>74</sup> 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>. (paywall)

<sup>75</sup> Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Releases the President’s Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget: Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the President’s Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget,” March 11, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3703410/departments-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2025-defense-budget/>.



preclude implementation of the current strategy, much less a two-war strategy.<sup>76</sup>

The problems created by caps on U.S. defense spending and the corresponding lack of consideration of a two-war strategy are being exacerbated by increasingly aggressive adversary threats and closer collaboration between China and Russia. Indeed, the risks of opportunistic aggression by Moscow or Beijing, acting unilaterally or in concert, will likely grow without a concerted U.S. effort to adopt a more robust deterrence posture. This will also place increasing pressures on extended deterrence and assurance.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> 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 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](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). 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 and Leo Shane III, "How a Republican majority in the House will affect defense policy," *DefenseNews*, December 8, 2022, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/12/05/how-a-republican-majority-in-the-house-will-affect-defense-policy/>.

<sup>77</sup> As one analyst noted, "the premise that the United States will only need to fight one adversary in one part of the world seems like a bad bet. The United States may not yet be confronting a true 'axis of evil,' but American adversaries are becoming more tightly aligned, leaving

Nevertheless, there is considerable resistance in Washington to reinstating a two-war standard. Such a posture would require greater resources and investments by the Services in additional military capabilities, a prospect which some find unappealing. As one recent assessment has noted, “The [Marine] Corps has consistently maintained that it is a one-war force and has no intention of growing to the size needed to fight two wars, and both its annual budget requests and its top-level planning documents reflect this position.”<sup>78</sup> In addition, the report’s overall assessment of U.S. military preparedness is sobering:

...the current U.S. military force is at significant risk of being unable to meet the demands of a single major regional conflict while also attending to various presence and engagement activities. The force would probably not be able to do more and is certainly ill-equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous MRCs – a situation that is made

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the United States with a one-war force for an increasingly multi-war world.” See Raphael S. Cohen, “Ukraine and the New Two War Construct,” *War on the Rocks*, January 5, 2023, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/ukraine-and-the-new-two-war-construct/>. Also see Greg Weaver, “Part I: US Deterrence Requirements In The Coming Two-Nuclear-Peer Threat Environment,” in Greg Weaver and Amy F. Woolf, *Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in a Two-Nuclear-Peer Environment*, Atlantic Council and Los Alamos National Laboratory, February 2, 2024, p. 8, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Requirements-for-Nuclear-Deterrence-and-Arms-Control-in-a-Two-Nuclear-Peer-Environment-Weaver-and-Woolf.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, op. cit., p. 518.

more difficult by the generally weak condition of key military allies.<sup>79</sup>

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.

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 military aggression.<sup>80</sup> Currently, many NATO allies have failed to meet their two percent of GDP defense spending commitment, agreed to at the 2014 Wales Summit. According to NATO's most recent Annual Report, only 18 NATO countries have met their two percent commitment (Iceland has no military and therefore is not included in this calculation).<sup>81</sup>

For decades, NATO members have invested more in domestic social initiatives rather than defense

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 631.

<sup>80</sup> 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>.

<sup>81</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2023*, p. 48, available at [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf).

spending. Indeed, many NATO members appear to consider the U.S. commitment under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty as an excuse to avoid spending additional fiscal resources on defense. And, the more the United States seeks to reinforce its “ironclad” security guarantees to allies, the less allies may be willing to spend on their own defense capabilities. As one Australian analyst noted, “assurance of support from the United States in times of need enables... an annual defence budget of roughly two percent of GDP instead of a much higher figure.”<sup>82</sup> And, as a French expert commented, the more robust the American military presence the less likely it is that Europeans will step up their own defense contributions: “The United States is saying to the Europeans that they should increase their share of the defense burden, but why would they do that when they see that the Americans are more present than ever?”<sup>83</sup>

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.

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<sup>82</sup> National Institute for Public Policy interview with Rod Lyon, Senior Fellow for International Strategy at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 7, 2023.

<sup>83</sup> National Institute for Public Policy interview with Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, December 20, 2023.

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.

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,” chiding the Biden Administration’s strategy documents by noting:

The 2022 NDS [*National Defense Strategy*] also adopts a “one major war” sizing construct, while both the 2022 NDS and the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) hint at increased reliance on U.S. nuclear forces to deter opportunistic aggression. But neither addresses the nature of the U.S. conventional force, including space and non-kinetic capabilities, or nuclear force that will be required to do so when facing two peers. As noted in the 2022 NPR: “In a potential conflict with a competitor, the United States would need to be able to deter opportunistic aggression by another competitor. We will rely in part on nuclear weapons to help mitigate this risk, recognizing that a near-simultaneous conflict with two nuclear-armed states would constitute an extreme circumstance.”<sup>84</sup>

The Strategic Posture Commission’s criticism of the current one-war force planning construct was echoed recently in a detailed report by Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS). The report called for a “two-war force sizing construct” that would allow the United States to successfully prosecute a potential conflict with China, plan for “protracted warfare,” ensure defeat of a

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<sup>84</sup> 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, op. cit., p. 90.

second aggressor, deter other adversaries, and serve as a “hedge force” against specific threats.<sup>85</sup>

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 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.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

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

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<sup>85</sup> Senator Roger Wicker, *21<sup>st</sup> 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>.

<sup>86</sup> Gouré, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Also see Mark Gunzinger and Lukas Autenried, *Building A Force That Wins: Recommendations for the 2022 National Defense Strategy*, The Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, Air Force Association, June 2021, pp. 5, 22, 45, available at <https://mittellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Building-a-Force-that-Wins-FINAL.pdf>.

come to restore the two MRC force-sizing construct as a necessary means of bolstering deterrence.

As the aforementioned National Defense Strategy Commission concluded, "The United States now faces five credible challengers, including two major-state competitors, and three distinctly different geographic and operational environments. A two-war force sizing construct makes more strategic sense today than at any previous point in the post-Cold War era."<sup>87</sup>

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 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

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<sup>87</sup> *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, op. cit., pp. 35, 66.



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.<sup>88</sup>

## Recommendations

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 extended deterrence is to be preserved and strengthened. This will require a serious effort and major additional defense investments.

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<sup>88</sup> As two former senior U.S. officials have commented, “Credibility among allies and potential enemies alike depends on our perceived will to maintain our longstanding commitments to support and defend like-minded democratic states.” A failure to do so, such as in Ukraine, “will cause all of our other allies and friends (including Taiwan) to question whether we would at some point abandon them too.” They argue, “Because American security commitments are not severable, such a loss of confidence would cause longtime allies to drift away, to be more accommodating of our potential enemies to our detriment, all leading, therefore, to a weakening of our own ability to shape world events.” Indeed, they conclude that anything less than a two-theater defense planning construct “is no longer sufficient in the two nuclear peer world in which we now find ourselves,” and that “Any suggestion that the U.S. military is too weak to engage in two theaters simultaneously – and therefore to deter in two theaters simultaneously – fundamentally misunderstands the nature of potential wars in NATO and in the Pacific.” See Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, “We Must Return to and Maintain the Two Theater Defense Planning Construct,” *RealClear Defense*, August 1, 2023, available at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/08/17/we\\_must\\_return\\_to\\_and\\_maintain\\_the\\_two\\_theater\\_defense\\_planning\\_construct\\_973522.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/08/17/we_must_return_to_and_maintain_the_two_theater_defense_planning_construct_973522.html).

Among the actions that should be taken are the following:<sup>89</sup>

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.

The two-war strategy was a post-Cold War creation to deal with the possibility of confronting major regional contingencies in two geographically dispersed regions. Despite this approach, the strategy was under-resourced at the time. Since then, the threats to American security have increased while U.S. force levels and deterrence capabilities have not kept pace.

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.

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<sup>89</sup> 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.

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 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 United States now confronts a situation where it must deter two nuclear peer adversaries in diverse regions thousands of miles from U.S. shores. This requires the United States to project power abroad. Power projection is a visible sign of American presence and commitment to defend U.S. and allied interests globally. Yet, as the level of U.S. forces has shrunk, so has the U.S. ability to project power abroad.

As a relatively insular nation, the United States is separated by two oceans from areas of major instability

and conflict. This complicates the U.S. ability to project sufficient power on a timely basis where and when needed. The tyranny of time and distance is especially acute in the Pacific, where China's regional military activities and threats to Taiwan are increasing.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is determined to break Taiwan's autonomy and bring the island under the political control of Beijing. The United States must deploy sufficient air and naval power in the region to deter any Chinese military aggression against Taiwan. Yet, U.S. air and naval assets have declined precipitously over the past several decades.

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 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.

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has opened the eyes of several NATO states to the gravity of the danger Moscow poses to European security and stability. Yet some, such as Germany, still have no plans to meet their Wales commitment until later this

decade.<sup>90</sup> In fact, the two percent of GDP benchmark was agreed to a decade ago when the international security environment was considered much more benign than today; it should be regarded as a minimum base as opposed to an adequacy standard. It is imperative for NATO states to increase their defense expenditures and activities to a level commensurate with the threats they face.

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.”

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<sup>90</sup> Katrina Bishop, “Germany’s defense minister says NATO’s 2% target is just the start: ‘We’ll probably need more,’” *CNBC*, February 17, 2024, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/17/germanys-defense-minister-boris-pistorius-says-2percent-defense-spending-just-the-start.html>.

5. The United States must reject the false choice of prioritizing deterrence in one theater over another.

The Department of Defense has argued that China is the "pacing challenge" for the United States and that U.S. defense priorities should focus on the Indo-Pacific. However, this prioritization need not come at the expense of adequate deterrence in other theaters, including Europe. 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.

It is a supreme U.S. interest to prevent the liberal world order from collapsing in the face of simultaneous challenges in multiple distant theaters from those who seek to remake the world order in their autocratic image.

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.

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.

As previously noted, the two-MRC force planning construct provided for a hedge against the possibility of a resurgence in Russian revanchism, the rise of a second major power adversary, or a combination of both. 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.

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.

### **The Bottom Line**

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 will also 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.





## *About the Author*

Hon. David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit research center in Fairfax, Virginia and teaches in Missouri State University's Defense and Strategic Studies Program.

Mr. Trachtenberg was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on October 17, 2017 as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and served in this capacity until his retirement from government service in July 2019. He previously served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and as a Professional Staff Member with the House Committee on Armed Services (HASC) where he was head of the committee's policy staff and staff lead for the HASC Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism.

Mr. Trachtenberg is a two-time recipient of the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service. He holds an A.B. in International Relations from the University of Southern California and a M.S. degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University. He is the author of *The Lawgivers' Struggle: How Congress Wields Power in National Security Decision Making*, National Institute Press, 2020.



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