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National Security Decisions for the Next President

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The next President of the United States will face an extraordinarily complex and dangerous international security environment which could rapidly deteriorate. America now confronts an unprecedented array of national, functional, and transnational threats. In particular, the United States is engaged in a geostrategic contest with a new entente of Axis powers. Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are led by autocratic regimes with revisionist or irredentist political aims to change the international system at the expense of U.S. interests.

Within days of being sworn-in, the next President will be forced to make decisions that will determine the future direction of U.S. national security policy. Whether prepared or not, America could face multiple, potentially concurrent, crises or conflicts around the world involving vital or extremely important U.S. interests.¹ It would be imprudent to expect that the U.S. homeland will be a sanctuary in the event of a conflict. Indeed, it may be a prime target for attacks by America's enemies.



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The next President will also inherit a mismatch among the national security objectives (ends), ongoing courses of action (ways), and allocated resources (means) to protect and advance U.S. interests, including support commitments to allies and partners. This article examines key national security decisions that await the next President.

Russia and Ukraine

Since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has provided military and economic assistance as well as critical intelligence support and cyber defenses to Kyiv.² Such aid has been essential to Ukraine's survival. The next President will determine whether the United States continues to support the defense of Ukraine or instead seeks a negotiated settlement to that conflict, even if such an agreement is likely to yield a less than fully satisfactory outcome.

Recently, President Biden lifted some restrictions on the use of certain U.S.-supplied munitions that allows Kyiv to strike military forces in Russia that are attacking or are preparing to attack Ukraine.³ Putin responded by striking a children's hospital among other targets. Ukraine also has launched strikes against high-profile targets deep inside Russia.⁴ The Biden Administration has been publicly silent on whether it supports such Ukrainian attacks.

The next President must decide whether the United States will use its influence to promote a negotiated ceasefire and potential settlement to the conflict that would allow Russia to retain control over a portion of Ukrainian territory in exchange for an end to hostilities. Some will argue that such an outcome makes the best of a bad situation and note that Ukraine is not a NATO member country and therefore U.S. vital interests and treaty obligations are not at stake. Advocates for this position might also argue that the war in Ukraine is siphoning off critical U.S. financial resources and military equipment that could be used to bolster U.S. defenses in other important regions.

Supporters of Ukraine will argue that such an outcome amounts to a "sell out" of the brave Ukrainian people, rewards Russian aggression, encourages further provocations and undermines U.S. extended deterrence elsewhere, including the Indo-Pacific region. They might also note that the U.S. provided security assurances to Ukraine in exchange for its denuclearization, recommend increasing the flow of U.S. arms to Ukraine, and urge the President to permit Ukraine to expand attacks on high value Russian military targets. Furthermore, they may push for accelerated Ukrainian membership in NATO.

Only the President can make the decision on U.S. strategy for the conflict in Ukraine. Putin, however, could choose to escalate the conflict. Indeed, he has ramped up threats to use nuclear weapons. A decision for the next President is whether to sustain or increase support to Ukraine, and risk widening the war, to push for a diplomatic settlement or achieve a solution.



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China

China is intensifying its aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific. Taiwan has come under unrelenting political, military, diplomatic pressure to capitulate to Beijing's demands and faces a rapidly accelerating threat of a blockade or invasion.⁵

China's military modernization program has produced an increasingly capable force that could make a campaign to defend Taiwan or other U.S. allies and partners in the region an extremely difficult and bloody affair.⁶ Warning time of a potential PRC military attack on Taiwan has shrunk considerably, affecting the U.S. ability to mount a timely and adequate response.⁷ Chinese air and naval forces are conducting increasingly aggressive and dangerous military operations against U.S. and other nations' military and non-military vessels and aircraft throughout the region.⁸

China is taking similarly provocative actions in an attempt to intimidate the Philippines over disputed territory in the South China Sea. It is also helping to finance Russia's war against Ukraine as part of a "no limits" alliance. China has exported critical dual-use technologies, enabling Russia's defense industrial base reconstitution, which is being used, in turn, to provide Iran and North Korea advanced military capabilities.⁹

President Biden has repeatedly stated that the United States would come to Taiwan's defense; however, administration officials have immediately sought to walk-back those comments.¹⁰ The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act established that the United States will "consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means...a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and a grave concern to the United States."¹¹

Decisions for the next President are whether to defend Taiwan against China, where Taiwan's defense fits in terms of U.S. security priorities compared, for example, to Ukraine, South Korea, Japan, NATO, or Israel, and determining the steps necessary to ensure the United States can deter or, if necessary, defeat Chinese aggression.

Iran

Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism throughout the world. Tehran and its proxies have repeatedly attacked U.S. forces and interests in the Middle East and across the globe. In addition, Iran also may be within months of having one or more usable nuclear weapons.¹² Israel has indicated that it will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran and is already combatting Iranian proxies including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah.¹³

The United States has strongly supported Israel's military campaign to defeat Hamas following the October 7, 2023, terrorist attack,¹⁴ but has held back delivery of certain munitions and publicly pushed for a ceasefire.¹⁵ The United States has loosened economic and other sanctions against Iran as inducements and continues to engage Iran via diplomatic channels, despite Tehran's unresponsiveness. The transfer of missile and other deadly technology from Iran to the Houthis in Yemen has threatened international shipping in the Red Sea/Bab-el-



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Mandeb waterway. And Tehran has supplied Russia with drones and a factory to produce them for its war in Ukraine.¹⁶

Some officials have argued that the United States has lost deterrence against Iran. The commander of U.S. Central Command recently told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Iranian actions have instigated a “convergence of crises” with its support to Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen, calling it “the most volatile situation in 50 years.”¹⁷

The next President must decide whether the United States should take military action to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons; whether the United States should actively support an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear, missile, and other targets through intelligence-sharing and/or use of U.S. refueling aircraft; what U.S. military actions should be taken if an Israeli attack leads to Iranian reprisals against Israel, Saudi Arabia, other friends in the region, as well as our forces deployed abroad; whether to support and promote an agreement to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia; and, what additional steps should be taken to strengthen deterrence of Iran and its proxies.

Korea

North Korea is undertaking an “exponential” expansion of its nuclear weapons and missile forces, including rockets with the range to strike American cities.¹⁸ Kim Jong Un has rejected further negotiations with the United States and tensions with South Korea have escalated.¹⁹ He has embraced Putin and is providing large quantities of artillery shells and other munitions for Russia’s war against Ukraine.²⁰

In response, the United States has enhanced coordination with South Korea on military exercises, nuclear consultations, conventional-nuclear force integration, and U.S. bomber and submarine deployments.²¹ A thaw in South Korea-Japan relations may enhance regional deterrence. The United States, Japan and South Korea recently signed a Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework that includes “senior-level policy consultations, information sharing, trilateral exercises, and defense exchange cooperation, to contribute to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, in the Indo-Pacific region, and beyond.”²² Additionally, polling indicates that a majority of South Koreans support Seoul developing its own nuclear deterrent.²³

The next President must decide whether the United States will sustain the current approach to its security commitments to South Korea, including the stationing of almost 30,000 U.S. forces on the peninsula and expanding consultations on nuclear deterrence; what steps need to be taken to bolster South Korean and Japanese forces; and, what U.S. policy should be regarding Seoul developing its own nuclear arsenal.

NATO

The Atlantic Alliance is a cornerstone of international security. The European members of NATO, however, have often failed to meet their financial commitments for collective security.²⁴



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Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia's proximity to their borders, and U.S. interests beyond Europe, sustaining U.S. domestic political support for the Alliance will require them to assume a more equitable responsibility for the common defense.

Several NATO nations have recently increased their expenditures on defense.²⁵ The German government also announced plans for the "episodic deployment" of U.S. intermediate-range ballistic missiles and developmental hypersonic missiles capable of striking targets inside Russia.²⁶ In this regard, it is worth recalling the deployment of U.S. Pershing-2 and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles in certain NATO countries, associated widespread anti-nuclear protests, and the robust Soviet active measures campaign to block the deployments. President Reagan, German Chancellor Kohl, and British Prime Minister Thatcher deftly steered the Alliance to enable those deployments. This laid the foundation for President Reagan and Soviet leader Gorbachev to negotiate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, from which President Trump withdrew following Moscow's prolonged material violations.

Decisions for the next President include whether the United States will sustain the financial burden for collective defense if its European allies do not meet their financial commitments; how the U.S. President will work with European leaders to enable new missile deployments and force build-ups given domestic divisions and likely countervailing Russian military deployments and associated political warfare; whether and how the United States might reduce its military footprint in Europe as European nations strengthen their contributions to security; how the growing disparity of tactical nuclear forces between the United States and Russia should be addressed; and determining the best strategy for responding to Putin's nuclear threats.

Outer Space

Successive Presidents have asserted that freedom of access to and operations in space are U.S. vital national interests.²⁷ Outer space reflects the terrestrial security environment and the geostrategic competition is extending across the Earth-Moon system. Both China and Russia are "regularly attacking U.S. satellites" with "non-kinetic weapons, including lasers, radio frequency jammers, and cyber-attacks."²⁸ China seeks to supplant America as the preeminent space power by 2049 and control the natural resources in cislunar space, including on the Moon.²⁹

The Biden Administration has primarily relied on diplomacy and passive countermeasures to address the threat to the freedom of space. Yet, diplomacy has not succeeded and Russia may deploy a space-based nuclear anti-satellite weapon in violation of the Outer Space Treaty.³⁰ The administration's recent budget request reduces funds for national security space missions, just as the astropolitical competition is intensifying.³¹ The U.S. Government has yet to fully leverage commercial and allied space assets for U.S. national security. Moreover, it has not issued a plan to counter China's aim to win the space race and control access to the Moon and its resources.



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Decisions for the next President include how to prevent conflict from beginning in or extending to space; under what circumstances the United States should resort to the use of force to protect and defend U.S. interests in space; and, whether and how the United States should more aggressively leverage the commercial space sector and international partners to advance our interests in space.

Cyberspace

Foreign cyberattacks against America can be expected in times of crisis or conflict. Adversaries possess cyber weapons that can disrupt or damage critical infrastructures such as electrical power generation and water supplies. They will aim to delay mobilization of U.S. military forces, cause economic disruptions and societal panic, and distract U.S. leaders. Indeed, reports indicate that Russia and China have penetrated key U.S. critical infrastructures.³² China's "Volt Typhoon" campaign to exploit vulnerabilities in such infrastructures is a particularly worrisome example of the increasingly sophisticated cyber threat America now faces.³³

Current U.S. policy requires critical infrastructure owners and operators to improve cybersecurity on their own or face penalties; it also helps them assess and recover from such attacks. This approach is unlikely to produce significant near-term enhancements in cyber resilience nor will it deter attacks on critical infrastructures. Instead, a new public-private partnership and robust funding is needed to identify and fix the most glaring cyber vulnerabilities.³⁴

Decisions for the next President include whether to ensure the United States has the capabilities and resources to defend against sophisticated cyberattacks on critical infrastructures; and, whether to establish public-private partnerships with U.S. critical infrastructure owners and operators and essential defense industrial base companies to strengthen our national cybersecurity posture.

Homeland Defense

America simultaneously confronts multiple nuclear-armed adversaries who are rapidly building up long-range nuclear delivery systems, while violating or abandoning arms control agreements and refusing to discuss new restraints. Concurrently, the United States lacks an effective integrated air and missile defense of the homeland. Long standing U.S. policy has been to tolerate homeland vulnerability to save money and reinforce flawed deterrence concepts such as a "balance of terror." Yet adversaries never bought into the Western "logic" of mutual societal vulnerability as the basis for "stability."

The morality of such willful vulnerability is questionable. Moreover, it may encourage attacks to "decapitate" the U.S. political and military leadership as well as nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems. Indeed, Russia and China have developed and fielded modern weapon systems, including new intercontinental ballistic missiles, long-range



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air- and submarine-launched cruise missiles, and hypersonic weapons that could be used in such attacks.

Key decisions for the next President include whether to rapidly modernize and harden NC3 systems as well as develop and field an effective integrated air and missile defense to protect the U.S. homeland; and, how much political capital should be expended to convince legislators to allocate the resources necessary to rapidly field such a defense.

Border and Homeland Security

Millions of foreign nationals have entered America illegally over the past several years and have dispersed around the country. The Director of the FBI informed Congress that many of these illegal aliens are dangerous individuals.³⁵ Illegal entrants associated with transnational criminal organizations, terrorist groups, and foreign intelligence and security services may have infiltrated America in preparation for direct action missions such as sabotage and assassination. They may have been sent here to attack high profile public targets and instill fear, contaminate water supplies, murder military personnel or assassinate political leaders, target U.S. critical infrastructures, or disrupt shipments from military bases. Indeed, there have been numerous recent instances of foreign nationals conducting surveillance or trying to enter U.S. military bases across the country.³⁶

Similarly, NATO governments report that Russian-sponsored sabotage is growing and U.S. bases in Europe were recently placed on a higher alert security posture in anticipation of possible attacks.³⁷ A series of Russian-sponsored arson attacks and bombing plots have taken place in Riga, London, Warsaw, Prague, and Paris.³⁸ Iran also reportedly developed plans to assassinate former President Trump and other U.S. officials.³⁹ Putin's intelligence services have attacked emigres in the West and China has harassed Chinese nationals in America.⁴⁰ Russia has also sent "illegals" to assimilate into American society and conduct espionage.⁴¹

Key decisions for the next President include what actions should be taken and resources devoted to ensuring U.S. borders are secure and the homeland is safe against foreign espionage, sabotage, and terrorism; how to hold the perpetrators and their sponsors accountable; and, whether the United States should commit to aggressively targeting the financial backers and funding networks of these organizations?

Conclusion

The next President will face an international security environment with unprecedented dangers and a geostrategic contest with Axis powers and their proxies. Numerous national security issues will vie for the next President's immediate attention. Fundamental considerations that cut across each are the risk of action versus inaction and what strategy, plans, force structure, and posture are required to advance and protect U.S. interests in multiple (potentially concurrent) crises or conflicts.



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Today, the U.S. armed forces are sized to support one major regional conflict. Yet, there is a real prospect that several vital U.S. interests may be attacked simultaneously. Moreover, the United States faces major industrial base and supply chain challenges impeding rapid production of armaments and equipment. A multiple-conflict scenario would place a serious strain on U.S. weapons, equipment, and personnel. America's enemies understand and may seek to exploit this fact.

The next President will be called upon to make fateful decisions about U.S. grand strategy and competing priorities among vital and extremely important national security interests. He or she will have to resolve the mismatch among the ends, ways, and means of U.S. national security strategy. Consequently, those seeking the high office of President must be clear with the American people as well as our friends and allies about their goals and strategies for safeguarding the nation and its interests in these perilous times.

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