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Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions

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**Trends in Allied Assurance:
Challenges and Questions**

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Executive Summary

The United States generates capabilities to influence adversaries' and allies' decisions regarding whether they are deterred and assured, respectively. In this sense, extended deterrence, like allied assurance, is in the eye of the beholder. This *Occasional Paper* examines trends in allied assurance from the perspective of experts in allied countries in Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states that were interviewed for the purposes of this study.¹ The reader can find four select interview transcripts starting on page 36.

After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, questions related to U.S. allied assurance gained increased salience, not just in Europe, but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Growing concern over U.S. willingness to intervene in support of an ally was apparent among many experts interviewed for this study. In some ways, these worries are not new. During the Cold War, the United States invested significant resources in mitigating perceived gaps, including deploying hundreds of thousands of troops and thousands of nuclear warheads to Europe, the primary area of concern at the time. After the end of the Cold War, the West experienced a period of unquestioned U.S. leadership in a new world order, which many hoped would mark the end of nation state conflict, large defense budgets, and nuclear competition. The defense capabilities that America and allies spent decades building up were dismantled in a

¹ The *Occasional Paper* is based on interviews with more than a dozen national security experts knowledgeable about nuclear weapons policy, extended deterrence, and allied assurance. The interviews were conducted remotely between December 2023 and February 2024. The list of some of the interviewed experts can be found in the appendix; others chose to conduct interviews under the Chatham House rules.

few years and the defense industrial base atrophied. The prospects for its reconstitution are bleak in the short term.

Practically speaking, there is no viable alternative to the United States being the primary guarantor of allied security for the time being. That is why some allies concluded that questioning U.S. credibility publicly would be somewhat pointless; perhaps it could even send the wrong message to adversaries, and increase risks to NATO's frontline allies. Without the United States, allies would have to spend much more on defense than they currently are to achieve a similar degree of capability, even accounting for additional investments since February 2022. It would take significant time and effort to develop key conventional enablers, e.g. airlift, that the United States currently provides. Allies could develop their own nuclear capabilities, a prospect discussed more often today than 10 or so years ago, but that option is fraught with its own political, diplomatic, and fiscal difficulties. Lastly, they could collaborate with adversaries, an option perhaps most damaging to U.S. interests. Hungary and Slovakia appear to be choosing this route with Russia (and China), potentially creating difficulties for NATO, which customarily operates by unanimous consensus agreement.

The nuclear aspect of allied assurance is not well understood among many allied politicians, even though, as then U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles Richard pointed out, "Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD [Department of Defense], rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, ... is holding right."² Just like the United States, its allies, too, took a break from thinking about nuclear

² Quoted in, Amy Hudson, "Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities," *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

deterrence after the end of the Cold War, and states that joined NATO since then did not have to think seriously about it until relatively recently. Many politicians in allied countries appear to take the credibility of nuclear deterrence for granted. They assume that nuclear deterrence is always there, working, and does not need to be thought of on an everyday basis.

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

Despite U.S. allies facing serious diverse challenges to their national security, a few expert interviews revealed common threads of agreement on how the United States can increase the likelihood that its allies remain assured. They include improving allied communication, modernizing U.S. nuclear and conventional forces, and rebuilding capacity to be a serious contender in two simultaneous regional contingencies. The interviews also revealed troubling trends that have the potential to disrupt U.S. alliance structures should the United States fail to attend to allied concerns in a timely manner, including whether U.S. forces are sufficiently postured to fight wars in defense of allies in

two regions, whether it can maintain a domestic consensus that alliances are beneficial and U.S. global engagement worthwhile, and whether it will stand firm to support Ukraine or be deterred by Russia's coercive nuclear threats. U.S. allies' actions also make clear that there is intra-alliance disagreement regarding the seriousness of threats allies are facing. This introduces an additional layer of complexity and creates further challenges for U.S. alliance management.

The author is extremely grateful to friends and colleagues who lent their time and talent to sharpen the analytical underpinnings of this work and provided their expert commentary on the topic.

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

--Paul Dibb, Emeritus Professor
Australian National University³

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

³ Zoom interview with Paul Dibb, February 1, 2024.

threats allies are facing, introducing an additional layer of complexity.

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

After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, questions related to U.S. allied assurance gained increased salience, not just in Europe, but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Growing concern over U.S. willingness to intervene in support of an ally was apparent among many experts interviewed for the purposes of this study. The United States was one of the guarantor states of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.⁴ In the document, Ukraine acceded to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and gave up nuclear weapons on its territory in exchange for a pledge that its independence, sovereignty, and existing borders would be respected.⁵ Since then, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba indicated it was a mistake for Ukraine to agree to the Memorandum⁶, and former President Bill Clinton said he regretted his role in making Ukraine give up nuclear weapons.⁷

⁴ The other two being the United Kingdom and, ironically, the Russian Federation.

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

⁶ Victor Morton, "Ukraine foreign minister: Giving up nuclear weapons wasn't smart," *The Washington Times*, February 22, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/22/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-foreign-minister-giving-nucl/>.

⁷ Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, "Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons," *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, available

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

U.S. allies have always worried about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence to one degree or another, particularly after the Soviet Union reached strategic parity with the United States in the 1970s.⁸ The United States invested significant resources in mitigating perceived gaps, including deploying hundreds of thousands of troops and thousands of nuclear warheads to Europe, the primary area of concern at the time. After the end of the Cold War, the West experienced a period of unquestioned U.S. leadership in a new world order, which many hoped would mark the end of nation-state conflict, large defense budgets, and nuclear competition. The defense capabilities that America spent decades building up were dismantled in a few years and the defense industrial base atrophied. The prospects for its reconstitution are bleak in the short-term, even if Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine serves as a wake-up call.

Practically speaking, there is no viable alternative to the United States being the primary guarantor of allied security for the time being. That is why some allies concluded that

at <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

⁸ David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), pp. 31-38, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

questioning U.S. credibility publicly would be somewhat pointless and perhaps could even send the wrong message to adversaries and increase risks to NATO's frontline allies. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "The European Union cannot defend Europe. Eighty percent of NATO's defence expenditures come from non-EU NATO allies."⁹ Allies would have to spend much more on defense than they currently are to achieve a similar degree of capability, even accounting for additional investments since February 2022. It would take significant time and effort to develop key conventional enablers, e.g. airlift, that the United States currently provides. Allies could develop their own nuclear capabilities, a prospect discussed more often today than ten or so years ago; but that option is fraught with its own political, diplomatic, and fiscal difficulties. Lastly, they could collaborate with adversaries, an option perhaps most damaging to U.S. interests. Hungary and Slovakia appear to be choosing this route with Russia (and China), potentially creating difficulties for NATO, which customarily operates by unanimous consensus agreement.¹⁰

Openly questioning U.S. commitments warrants rather unpleasant follow up questions. If the United States cannot credibly guarantee allied security, which other country (or combination of countries) could do so? The alternatives entail large costs that the publics are unlikely to support. Striking a separate deal with an adversary has all the markings of a future disaster and is unlikely to be supported by the publics either, although the pro-Russian shift in Hungary and Slovakia shows a concerning degree of

⁹ Sabine Siebold and John Irish, "NATO chief says Europe meeting spending targets after Trump comments," *Reuters*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-chief-says-18-countries-meet-2-military-spending-target-2024-02-14/>.

¹⁰ Eric S. Edelman, David Manning, and Franklin C. Miller, "NATO's Decision Process Has an Achilles' Heel," *New Atlanticist*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-decision-process-has-an-achilles-heel/>.

plausibility regarding this scenario. Germany, with its years of pursuing cooperative policy toward Russia, has learned the hard way that ill-advised attempts at reconciliation bring more discord when strategic objectives and perceptions are fundamentally at odds, even opening one to massive intelligence penetration.¹¹ That Germany is not applying this hard-obtained knowledge to its relations with China is a matter of significant concern to some other NATO countries, including the United States.

The nuclear aspect of allied assurance is not well understood among many allied politicians, even though, as then-U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles Richard pointed out, “Every operational plan in the Department of Defense, and every other capability we have in DOD [Department of Defense], rests on the assumption that strategic deterrence, and in particular nuclear deterrence, ... is holding right.”¹² He further elaborated that “if that assumption is not met, particularly with nuclear deterrence, nothing else in the Department of Defense is going to work the way it was designed.”¹³ Just like the United States, its allies, too, took a break from thinking about nuclear deterrence after the end of the Cold War, and states that joined NATO since then did not have to think seriously about it until relatively recently.

Many politicians in allied countries appear to take the credibility of nuclear deterrence for granted. They assume that nuclear deterrence is always there, working, and does

¹¹ An instructive example are Angela Merkel’s (and other German politicians’) efforts to further relations with Russia. See Matthew Karnitschnig, “Putin’s useful German idiots,” *Politico*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-merkel-germany-scholz-foreign-policy-ukraine-war-invasion-nord-stream-2/>.

¹² Quoted in, Amy Hudson, “Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

not need to be thought of on an everyday basis. Perhaps these attitudes are a consequence of these countries not possessing nuclear weapon capabilities. According to Karel Ulík, member of a Permanent Delegation of the Czech Republic to NATO, non-nuclear allies implicitly trust that nuclear powers “know what they are doing with their nuclear weapons.”¹⁴ Rather than focusing their primary attention on nuclear guarantees, they are quick to point out the value of a steady U.S. conventional forward presence; permanent, if possible, rotational if need be, and, in the case of allies in Europe, from other NATO countries when the first two options are unavailable.

Perhaps there is a silver lining to so few politicians understanding the nuances of U.S. nuclear policy and the infrastructure that supports it. U.S. nuclear modernization might easily run into difficulties as defense budgets shrink and programs pick up the pace (and therefore consume more resources). The sorry state of a U.S. nuclear production complex that is anything but flexible and resilient, despite all *Nuclear Posture Reviews* committing administrations to making it so, should cause significant concerns for those relying on it as a part of deterrence. Perhaps allied politicians would not feel as assured if they wholly comprehended the serious problems that follow decades of neglect of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure.¹⁵

A few interviewed experts raised concerns about whether the United States will be able to sustain its nuclear weapons modernization program, which is “desperately”¹⁶

¹⁴ Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023

¹⁵ The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report highlights some of them. See Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

¹⁶ Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

needed. They consider continued progress important. More specifically, they would not welcome the cancellation of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N) proposed by the Biden Administration.¹⁷ Other interviewees commented on a lack of diversity in U.S. nuclear arsenal given threat developments, particularly considering that nuclear deterrence is most likely to fail in a regional context. Rod Lyon, Senior Fellow, International Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute of Canberra, stated that the United States “would seem to need not only more nuclear warheads, but more kinds of nuclear weapons, and—especially in the Indo-Pacific—more deployment options.”¹⁸ Sugio Takahashi, Head of the Defense Policy Division of the Policy Studies Department at the National Institute for Defense Studies in Japan, argued that “the United States should not abandon a goal of being close to the combined nuclear forces of Russia and China. It does not need to match them perfectly; it is more a matter of having capabilities that could support escalation management at lower levels.”¹⁹ The United States ought to be thinking about a modern version of flexible response.²⁰ One interviewed expert stated that “there should be greater urgency in the United States to change things from a political perspective, including accelerating nuclear adaptation that we’ve done slowly in the past decades, but also in terms of capabilities.”²¹

In a way, nuclear deterrence is a victim of its own success. The tacit assumptions, not wrong, are that first,

¹⁷ Valerie Insinna, “Biden administration kills Trump-era nuclear cruise missile program,” *Breaking Defense*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/biden-administration-kills-trump-era-nuclear-cruise-missile-program/>.

¹⁸ Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

¹⁹ Zoom interview with Sugio Takahashi, February 16, 2024.

²⁰ Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

²¹ This expert wished to remain unanimous.

nuclear deterrence is working in its most important aspect (preventing a nuclear attack against the U.S. homeland and allies). Second, because nuclear deterrence is working, it does not need to be questioned or publicly discussed very much (and in fact, it would be counterproductive to do so). And third, that the United States, the United Kingdom, and France know what they are doing with their nuclear arsenals, and it is not allied governments' place to comment on the particulars. At the end of the day, U.S. taxpayers bear the consequences of U.S. armament choices and the details have to be worked out within the U.S. political process (or the British or the French accordingly). But that does not mean that other countries consider U.S. force posture decisions unimportant, as the case of the Japanese government's reaction to the retirement of a nuclear-capable Tomahawk illustrates.²² It certainly does not mean that all is well with U.S. assurance.

Can the United States Prevail in Two Regional Theaters Simultaneously?

The interviews highlighted that allied concerns over whether the United States maintains sufficient conventional capabilities to be able to uphold its global obligations, particularly in a situation in which it might be required to exert itself on behalf of allies in two theaters on opposite sides of the globe. The principal questions are whether the United States has (and will continue to have) enough conventional forces to support its alliances in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions, how would it prioritize

²² Matthew Costlow and Keith Payne, "TLAM-N and SLCM-N: Lessons for Extended Deterrence and Assuring Allies," *Information Series* No. 567 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 15, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-and-keith-b-payne-tlam-n-and-slcm-n-lessons-for-extended-deterrence-and-assuring-allies-no-567-november-15-2023/.

capabilities if it needed to do so, and how steadfast its commitment would be to both theaters.²³ European allies are worried that the U.S. focus on China on the heels of a pivot to Asia will diminish U.S. attention to Europe, while allies in the Indo-Pacific worry about whether the U.S. focus on Ukraine and assuring NATO allies will leave it incapable of devoting a sufficient level of attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific region.

Would the United States have enough capability to fight two regional wars with a nuclear peer in each theater and a lesser nuclear power in one of them, particularly given collaboration between Russia and North Korea and Russia and China? The *2023 Strategic Posture Commission Report* stated that “If the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater.”²⁴ The United States inflicted some of its defense capability wounds. This fiscal year, Congress’ inability to pass a regular budget on time cost the Department of Defense close to \$300 million *a day*; and continuing resolutions preclude a topline increase or starting new programs, making the required investments to U.S. capability to sustain a fight more difficult and less

²³ For an argument that the United States does not have sufficient forces to meet the two-war standard and how it impacts assurances, see David Trachtenberg, “The Demise of the ‘Two-War Strategy’ and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance,” *Occasional Paper No. 6, Vol. 4* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vol.-4-No.-6.pdf>.

²⁴ Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture*, op. cit.

efficient.²⁵ The last time Congress passed budget on time was in 1997.²⁶

In addition to whether the United States has enough *existing* capability, a related question is whether it would be able to respond flexibly and quickly enough to a requirement of fighting two regional wars simultaneously given the rather slow pace of defense recapitalization and modernization efforts. As Lyon pointed out, as the security environment grows worse in the next 10 years, the demand for U.S. assurance will outrun the supply.²⁷ As that happens, “the United States will need to be aware of overreach and will have to prioritize. That suggests we’re going to be looking at a ‘shake-out’ of current alliances, and a more selective form of U.S. strategic engagement.”²⁸ This need for prioritization, potentially at the expense of one region over another, makes allies nervous and their nervousness is made worse by U.S. think tank and advocacy pieces proposing to focus more on one region over another.²⁹

²⁵ Elaine McCusker, “Congress is wasting time while danger builds,” *The Hill*, February 16, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4470044-congress-is-wasting-time-while-danger-builds/>.

²⁶ Gus Wezerek, “20 Years Of Congress’s Budget Procrastination, In One Chart,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 7, 2018, available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/20-years-of-congress-budget-procrastination-in-one-chart/>.

²⁷ Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ For a prominent example of this argument see Masahiro Okoshi, “China threat should be bigger U.S. priority than Ukraine: analyst,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 20, 2023, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/China-threat-should-be-bigger-U.S.-priority-than-Ukraine-analyst>.

Differing Threat Perceptions a Potential Future Source of Alliance Trouble

For some allied states, Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine fundamentally underscored the importance of U.S. extended deterrence and nuclear guarantees. This need was born out of historical experience. Prior to World War II, Central and Eastern European states were left at the mercy of German and Russian invaders, despite having France's and the United Kingdom's security guarantees.³⁰ While the geopolitical situation in today's Europe is different than before World War II, the United States remains the preferred security guarantor for many NATO members that joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War.

Today, European NATO members are not uniformly in agreement on the degree to which Russia presents a threat, even if they appear to agree in public statements. If defense spending levels convey a reasonable approximation of a state's threat perception, only 18 NATO member states are expected to hit the benchmark of two percent of GDP for defense in 2024,³¹ up from 11 that met the threshold in 2023.³² On the other hand, countries that did not meet the benchmark in 2023 include some of the richest members of

³⁰ Germany took over Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, an area with about 3 million German-speaking Czechoslovaks, with the United Kingdom's agreement, in October 1938. Poland was invaded by Germany from one direction and the Soviet Union from the other in September 1939. France's and the United Kingdom's reactions were very limited.

³¹ James Frater and Joshua Berlinger, "Record 18 NATO states expected to meet 2% defense spending threshold this year," *CNN*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/14/europe/nato-defense-spending-target-intl/index.html>.

³² NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)," July 7, 2023, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf.

the Alliance, including France and Germany. Their publics prefer that governments spend resources on domestic programs rather than on defense. The governments are beholden to that dynamic, even if they are slowly trying to communicate that a change in priorities is warranted.

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

Some U.S. allies are concerned about U.S. calls for burden-sharing increases, in recent history most aggressively personified by former President Donald Trump. As much as allied politicians find his statements bewildering at times, then-Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (now NATO Secretary General) recently said "Stop moaning and whining and nagging about Trump."³³ He went on to argue that "We do not spend more on defense or

³³ Karen Gilchrist, "Germany's Scholz commits to spending 2% on defense 'in the 2020s, in the 2030s and beyond'," *CNBC*, February 17, 2024, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/17/germanys-scholz-commits-to-spending-2percent-on-defense-over-next-10-years.html>.

ramp up ammunition production because Trump might come back. We have to do this because we want to do this, because this is in our interests.”³⁴ For some, the hyper-focus on President Trump’s statements only serves to deflect from the problem of allied governments not being willing to invest in defense.

The more immediate challenge for those states in Europe that do meet the two percent threshold already (or have been meeting it for years) is in the U.S. political discourse. One interviewed expert stated that “Europe is treated as a whole, and in some cases the narrative is created in such a way that Poland and the Baltic states are victims of Germany not paying enough and being considered the same.”³⁵ U.S. security guarantees to NATO member countries ought not depend on how much Germany spends on its defense budget. At the same time, it is plausible to suspect that the more assured U.S. allies feel, the less likely they are to contribute to their own defense. In this light, could NATO states’ recent budget increases be interpreted as an indicator of diminishing trust in U.S. security guarantees?³⁶ Could the UK’s recent decision to increase its nuclear warhead cap for the first time since the end of the Cold War reflect a perception that the U.S. nuclear deterrent is stretched too thin?³⁷

Some experts and policy-makers question whether Russia is a threat to NATO at all, given the abysmal performance of its forces in Ukraine, and argue that,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ This expert wished to remain anonymous.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Claire Mills, “Integrated Review 2021: Increasing the cap on the UK’s nuclear stockpile,” *House of Commons Library*, March 19, 2021, available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9175/>.

irrespective of Moscow's imperialist rhetoric, Russia remains a serious threat only to its non-NATO neighbors, such as Georgia or Moldova.³⁸ This perception is not shared universally. Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen recently stated that "Russia's capacity to produce military equipment has increased tremendously," and that it "cannot be ruled out that within a three- to five-year period, Russia will test Article 5 and NATO's solidarity. That was not NATO's assessment in 2023. This is new knowledge that is coming to the fore now."³⁹ He is by no means alone. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius warned that Russia could attack NATO within 5-8 years.⁴⁰ Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said the Lithuanians understood that if Russia was not stopped in Ukraine, it could continue and "then it's the Baltic states who would be next."⁴¹ The prospect of Ukraine losing undoubtedly increases NATO states' collective perception of danger.

Despite Russia's capability loss in Ukraine, General Christopher Cavoli, Commander of the U.S. European Command, recently testified that Russia is reconstituting forces faster than U.S. initial estimates suggested and that its army is now 15 percent larger than when Russia invaded

³⁸ Zoom Interview with Michael Rühle, former Head, Climate and Energy Security Section, Emerging Security Challenges Division, NATO, December 13, 2023.

³⁹ Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen, "Danish defence minister warns Russia could attack NATO in 3-5 years -media," *Reuters*, February 9, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/danish-defence-minister-warns-russia-could-attack-nato-3-5-years-media-2024-02-09/>.

⁴⁰ Nicolas Camut, "Putin could attack NATO in '5 to 8 years,' German defense minister warns," *Politico*, January 19, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-germany-boris-pistorius-nato/>.

⁴¹ Sergey Goryashko, "Will Putin attack NATO? No chance, says Lithuanian general," *Politico*, January 25, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-nato-putin-ukraine-russia-war/>.

Ukraine.⁴² Russia's focus on Ukraine means that it is less of a direct conventional threat to U.S. Indo-Pacific allies, despite having territorial disputes with some of them (e.g. with Japan). On the other hand, in the context of continued significant losses in Ukraine, Russia could increase its reliance on nuclear forces. This will likely create new problems for NATO because the Alliance has grown to see U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in some European countries as weapons with a political rather than military mission.⁴³ Russia's mobilization, ability to fight a war on an industrial scale, and willingness to absorb large losses is a source of concern for NATO, particularly in the context of what appears to be a U.S. waning commitment to European security.⁴⁴

The disparity in NATO member states' threat perceptions has the potential to cause intra-alliance tensions. One interviewed expert pointed out that "many countries in Europe wish that war would go away; many countries in Europe say the right things and do things symbolically in Ukraine, but they are not willing to do real things and explain them to their electorate."⁴⁵ States that feel

⁴² Christopher Cavoli, *Statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee*, April 11, 2024, p. 3, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cavoli_statement.pdf.

⁴³ Amanda Macias, "U.S. intel chiefs warn Putin is expanding his nuclear weapons arsenal as the war in Ukraine drags on," *CNBC*, March 28, 2023, available at <https://www.cnb.com/2023/03/08/us-intel-chiefs-warn-putin-is-becoming-more-reliant-on-nuclear-weapons.html>.

⁴⁴ Max Bergmann, "A More European NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2024, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/more-european-nato?utm_medium=social.

⁴⁵ A recent quote in *The New York Times* alludes to the same dynamic: "Germans, and even the Social Democrats, "have come to the realization that Germany lives in the real world and that hard power matters," said Charles A. Kupchan, a Europe expert at Georgetown University. "At the same time," he said, "there's still this hope that this is all just a bad dream, and Germans will wake up and be back in the old world." Steven Erlanger and David E. Sanger, "Germany Braces for

more threatened are those geographically closer to Russia's borders and tend to be among the poorer members of the Alliance. They perceive Russia's conventional threat more acutely and may even see a silver lining in Russia's nuclear forces spending, because that spending is then not available for conventional capabilities and because Russia would unlikely contaminate with radiation territories it would need for sea access.

While the increases in defense spending are supported by these member states' publics in general, driven by a sense of an increased threat, a question "why are we spending so much while much richer countries are not" could over time become a source of polarization. Moreover, it would not be surprising if this particular cleavage became a target for Russia's influence operations as Russia tries to further undermine allied unity. At the same time, "remaining cohesive is important so there isn't much of an appetite for airing these grievances in the public; countries don't like that others spend less but there doesn't seem much to be done on the intra-European level," according to one expert.⁴⁶

While Russia is a more immediate threat in Europe, China is more of a global threat, and its immediate cooperation with Russia directly challenges the U.S.-led global world order.⁴⁷ This world order has been beneficial to the largest number of people in the history of mankind, and was paid for dearly with American and allied blood

Decades of Confrontation With Russia," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2024; available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/03/world/europe/germany-russia.html>.

⁴⁶ This expert wished to remain anonymous.

⁴⁷ This study has not considered the problem of deterring China's aggression against Taiwan. For a detailed study on the topic, see "Special Issue: Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Politics and Strategy* Vol. 2, No. 2 (2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Special-Issue-final.pdf>.

and treasure during the course of 20th century. But European NATO allies consider the PRC too distant a threat and are preoccupied with managing Russia's resurgence on the continent.

Interviewed experts shared that there is a very acute perception of a deterioration of the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. There are significant uncertainties regarding China's military buildup and the meaning of its military exercises in the region. They consider the U.S. willingness to stand by Ukraine in its resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion a litmus test for how willing the United States would be to stand by its treaty allies, and the situation is not wholly encouraging. Potentially conflicting objectives abound. For example, China is the second most important market for South Korea. The U.S. turn against China makes it more difficult for the South Korean government to navigate the situation. Russia's strategic decision to cooperate with China and North Korea is likely to exacerbate regional negative security trends. North Korea is reportedly obtaining technological assistance in exchange for sending ammunition to Russia, which could translate into better missile technology.⁴⁸

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

⁴⁸ Sangjin Cho and Christy Lee, "North Korean-Russian Military Cooperation Could Threaten Global Security," *VOA*, January 1, 2024, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korean-russian-military-cooperation-could-threaten-global-security/7404703.html>.

competition. The South Koreans are most immediately concerned with North Korea.

Challenges to a Public Debate

The debate regarding U.S. nuclear assurance is often conducted in the broader context of the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, which involve more than just U.S. nuclear weapons. In general, the debate about the nuclear aspect of U.S. assurance is rather poorly informed, particularly in countries that do not possess nuclear weapons themselves.⁴⁹ Allied states face the problem of a paucity of military officers and government officials conversant on issues related to nuclear deterrence.⁵⁰ Sometimes, regional experts are not particularly knowledgeable about nuclear policy issues.⁵¹ There is also a generational divide between people who started their careers during the Cold War and those who started their careers during the post-Cold War era. The Cold War-era experience is not always applicable to challenges stemming from a nuclear environment with two-nuclear peers and other nuclear-armed states. The challenge is not unique to U.S. allies. In August 2022, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard stated that the United States is “furiously” rewriting deterrence theory to account for the rise of nuclear-armed China.⁵²

⁴⁹ France is a special case, as Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research in France, pointed out during his December 20, 2023, interview: “We are not gonna have a public debate on U.S. nuclear policy in France, and we don’t need to; it is not really a relevant question for France.”

⁵⁰ Zoom interview with Beatrice Heuser, November 27, 2023.

⁵¹ Zoom interview with Bo Ram Kwon, December 4, 2023.

⁵² Tara Copp, “US Military ‘Furiously’ Rewriting Nuclear Deterrence to Address Russia and China, STRATCOM Chief Says,” *Defense One*, August 11, 2022, available at

Some allied governments may prefer to avoid a public debate about the size of the defense budget, nuclear deterrence, and most things defense simply because their publics would not support the necessary budgetary increases commensurate with the growth in the threat. Regarding Australia, Lyon said that “there are no deep-thinking nuclear theorists in Australian party government. That’s not unreasonable: political leaders tend to be pragmatists concerned with the problems of governance. But a public debate that was not well led would be problematic. The nuclear issue could easily become misrepresented and polarizing among Australia’s population, which generally isn’t well informed about nuclear issues.”⁵³ The situation is not dissimilar in other NATO member states. According to David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull, “The general level of debate about nuclear strategy and anything nuclear is extremely poor in the United Kingdom.”⁵⁴ The problem is not exclusive to the United Kingdom and is broader than just nuclear issues. Lonsdale pointed out that “the West has lacked political leadership. We haven’t had good leaders since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They had principles and clear positions and they were excellent communicators.”⁵⁵

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine appears to have shifted public attitudes toward U.S. forward-deployed nuclear weapons, with surveyed European publics more in support of hosting a U.S. nuclear deterrent.⁵⁶ Prior to

<https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2022/08/us-military-furiously-rewriting-nuclear-deterrence-address-russia-and-china-stratcom-chief-says/375725/>.

⁵³ Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

⁵⁴ Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, and Tom Etienne, “Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine,”

February 2022, the majority of Germans were skeptical of the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe.⁵⁷ Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the mood in Europe has appreciably changed.⁵⁸ Debates about the influence and importance of nuclear weapons have become more common, particularly following Russia's brandishing of nuclear threats against the United States and NATO.⁵⁹ Under these circumstances, a unilateral U.S. nuclear weapon withdrawal—an idea occasionally floated in Washington—would be extremely detrimental to allied assurance.

Solid Communication a Key to Allied Assurance

All interviewed experts emphasized the value of the United States promoting and sustaining communication with allied governments. Generally speaking, the more communication channels the United States and allies have,

Global Policy, January 5, 2023, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1758-5899.13179>.

⁵⁷ Michal Onderco and Michal Smetana, "German views on US nuclear weapons in Europe: public and elite perspectives," *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2021), p. 640, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09662839.2021.1941896?needAccess=true&role=button>.

⁵⁸ Michaela Dodge, "European Allies' Views of Russia's Nuclear Policy after the Escalation of Its War in Ukraine," *Information Series* No. 570 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 12, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-european-allies-views-of-russias-nuclear-policy-after-the-escalation-of-its-war-in-ukraine-no-570-december-12-2023/#_ednref10.

⁵⁹ For a related discussion, see Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?" *Occasional Paper* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol.-4-No.-1.pdf>. f

the better. According to some interviewees, communication and U.S. declarations to U.S. allies could be just as important as the make-up of forces the United States deploys in support of its global commitments. Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research in France, pointed out that “if a strong stated commitment to nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence was accompanied by a complete divestment from U.S. nuclear modernization and infrastructure, then we would see incongruence and be nervous. All things equal, the perception of credibility of U.S. extended deterrence is more dependent on statements and declaratory policy than offense-defense calculus.”⁶⁰ Communication also helps to build trust among allies and the United States over time.

According to Lyon, “when one considers the levels of dialogue, the most valuable is a leader-to-leader dialogue. That one is also the most important because on the nuclear level, the U.S. president is the sole authority for launching nuclear weapons, so other commitments do not have as much value as the president committing to the defense of an alliance with all available means.”⁶¹ High-level visits with nuclear policy issues on the agenda tend to command significant attention. The higher the representative, the more attention the issue on the agenda gets. The meetings also provide an excellent opportunity to communicate with the public. They can be accompanied by press conferences with foreign journalists that can then report in domestic media and contribute to an increase in the overall debate level.

Other types of assurance by high-level government officials are valuable, including articles by U.S. government officials published in foreign media. Press releases showcasing capabilities of a particular weapon system that

⁶⁰ Zoom interview with Bruno Tertrais, December 20, 2023.

⁶¹ Zoom interview with Rod Lyon, December 7, 2023.

mention allies send a message of both extended deterrence and assurance. According to South Korean national security journalist Dong-hyun Kim, “the United States should link programs and weapon system rationales to their missions in the context of extended deterrence and assurance and communicate these.”⁶²

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

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

Even though national security has moved to the forefront of news since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, foreign affairs are usually not what the publics in allied

⁶² Zoom interview with Dong-hyun Kim, December 22, 2023.

countries are interested in most when they vote for their representatives. That creates a burden on the U.S. and allied governments to explain the value and benefits of alliances to the public. The difficulties come when the moribund quality of public discourse regarding the roles and purposes of nuclear weapons threatens to diminish the support for the ongoing nuclear modernization program.⁶³

Arms Control Is Taking a Backseat

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China's nuclear build up have dimmed prospects for arms control, and perhaps even enthusiasm for it, among allied states. Russia's stream of nuclear threats against western states supporting Ukraine makes clear that Russia is not interested in the kind of arms control that would be mutually beneficial to both parties.⁶⁴ Dominik Jankowski, a member of Poland's Permanent Delegation to NATO, emphasized that "arms control must not be a goal of its own, but ought to be linked to our deterrence objectives."⁶⁵ Support for arms control among allied governments could increase if Russia withdrew from Ukraine, but that prospect appears unlikely in the near-term.

Allied countries are unlikely to support any steps that would appear too conciliatory toward Russia or that would

⁶³ Kyle Balzer, "America's Leaders Don't Understand Nuclear Weapons," *National Review*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/03/americas-leaders-dont-understand-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁶⁴ For a more detailed elaboration of this argument, see Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?" *Information Series* No. 564 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects-no-564-october-2-2023/.

⁶⁵ Zoom interview with Dominik Jankowski, December 11, 2023

disadvantage NATO vis-à-vis Russia. Even an appearance of dealing with Russia as an equal during an arms control process could be problematic for some governments, and some interviewed experts were of the opinion that arms control is neither desirable nor feasible at this time. On the other hand, as Ulík pointed out, “there might be some value in demonstrating willingness to do arms control to show the Global South we are trying our best,”⁶⁶ but allied governments would have to be informed about the process.

Even in arms control, the United States appears to have a public relations problem and its continuous efforts to engage Russia and China in the process remain largely overlooked, let alone appreciated. According to one interviewed expert, “the United States should start highlighting that Russia and China (especially China’s lack of transparency) are a problem for arms control. The United States is putting forth proposals much more often than either of these countries but doesn’t get much credit for it.”⁶⁷

Candidate Biden supported a “no first use” (NFU) nuclear declaratory policy during his presidential campaign for the 2020 elections. As a candidate, Biden stated that “the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and, if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack” and that he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”⁶⁸ Soundly, the administration rejected changes to U.S. declaratory policy after consultations with allies during the *Nuclear Posture Review* process. Several experts interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of refraining from changing U.S. declaratory policy so that the

⁶⁶ Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023.

⁶⁷ This expert wished to remain anonymous.

⁶⁸ Joseph Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

option to employ nuclear weapons first is preserved. Changes to this policy, particularly if executed without prior consultation with allies, would be highly detrimental to U.S. assurance goals.

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

U.S. domestic polarization is a major source of concern for many experts interviewed for this study. This concern has to do with the unpredictability and uncertainty that polarization brings into the U.S. political process. Most recently, the perilous effects of polarization demonstrated themselves when Mike Johnson, the Republican Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, refused to put further military assistance for Ukraine to a vote for months.⁶⁹ The Russians have already been able to take advantage of U.S. assistance delays and make battlefield gains in Ukraine. Polarization also fosters erratic decision-making, as witnessed by a lack of enforcement of “red lines” in Syria during the Obama Administration. More recently, the Biden Administration’s hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan damaged allied perceptions of U.S. credibility according to some experts interviewed for this study. Even if there may be some deterrence-related benefits to appearing erratic and unpredictable—possibly inducing some caution on the adversary’s part—these features are also a significant long-term obstacle to alliance credibility.

Several experts expressed concern over then-President Donald Trump’s transactional management style, particularly as he is the Republican nominee for the 2024 presidential elections. This concern was independent of the actual implementation of the Trump Administration’s or

⁶⁹ The assistance bill ended up passing the House of Representatives on April 20, 2024, despite a majority of the Republicans opposing it.

U.S. government's policy. It shows that because the president is such a prominent foreign policy actor, his statements have a disproportionate impact on how allies perceive U.S. collective willingness to come to their defense. Also important is the fact that it is rather difficult for allied policymakers to understand the U.S. foreign and defense policy-making process and the different actors that shape it. As a consequence, the United States and allies sometimes appear to talk past each other. While U.S. national security experts tend to pay attention to specific programs and capabilities and whether they match the rhetoric, some interviewees emphasized that foreign policymakers and experts tend to focus on general atmosphere and headlines rather than policy implementation.

After these interviews were concluded, former President Trump reportedly stated that the United States would not come to the defense of any country that does not meet the two percent threshold and that he would encourage the Russians "to do whatever the hell they want" with those countries.⁷⁰ President Trump's former National Security Advisor John Bolton asserted that President Trump could seek to withdraw from NATO if elected for a second term.⁷¹ In an interview on NATO policy in the potential Trump second term, the administration would reportedly look for NATO's "radical reorientation" and a significant downsizing of U.S. forces in Europe.⁷² Such debates

⁷⁰ Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," *CNN*, February 11, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

⁷¹ Kelly Garrity, "Why John Bolton Is Certain Trump Really Wants to Blow Up NATO," *Politico*, February 13, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/02/13/bolton-trump-2024-nato-00141160>.

⁷² Michael Hirsh, "Trump's Plan for NATO Is Emerging," *Politico*, July 2, 2024, available at

reverberate throughout the U.S. alliance system. Allies in the Indo-Pacific might ask how likely the United States is to come to their defense if it is not willing to defend a NATO member state with relatively stronger guarantees and a history of defense cooperation.

Former President Trump's statements reflect a broader shift among the U.S. public. The 2023 Chicago Council survey documented a continued decline in respondents' support for an active engagement in world affairs.⁷³ In fact, 42 percent said the United States should stay out of world affairs, among the lowest recorded levels of support for engagement in the survey's almost 50-year history. The decline is concerning for U.S. allies going forward in the context of U.S. decision-making that appears less stable than ever. Some of it appears to be grounded in a loss of vision. Lonsdale observed that "there was a consensus on the need to defeat the Soviet Union but now we seem to have a situation where there is a lack of consensus amongst the political classes on the value of the transatlantic relationship. There is a lack of consistency in a U.S. position and what the U.S. stands for; and that is a problem because we look to the United States for that leadership. The call of the Western alliance during the World War II was a call to defend our way of life; we shared common principles and notions."⁷⁴ It is not immediately apparent how the U.S. political system can overcome the effects of polarization.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/02/nato-second-trump-term-00164517>.

⁷³ Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Americans Grow Less Enthusiastic about Active US Engagement Abroad," *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 2023, p. 1, available at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/CCS%202023%20US%20Role.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024.

Ways Forward

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

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

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

Not all experts that were interviewed agreed that having a public discussion on nuclear deterrence issues was desirable at present due to polarization and a general low level of information. A discussion in these conditions could split a ruling coalition and further diminish the fragile support for necessary defense budget increases. An additional challenge is that governments are not completely in control of the messaging and that adversaries are

exploiting these potentially polarizing issues in information operations against NATO and Indo-Pacific allies. By not having a debate in the hope that governments would not have to defend their position on such important issues, they open themselves up to potentially more successful disinformation attacks than otherwise would be the case. An informed debate could also mitigate politicians' ill-informed and ill-coordinated quips that could cause a challenge to assurance.

NATO followed the U.S. example in taking a break from thinking about nuclear matters after the end of the Cold War. It is time to raise its collective nuclear IQ, for example by conducting more exercises that incorporate a nuclear aspect. Tertrais argued that even though France does not participate in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), continued allied countries participation in the NPG "helps allies understand nuclear issues better and share at least a modicum of strategic culture with the United Kingdom and France."⁷⁵ Additionally, the United States and allies, including in the Indo-Pacific, should further operationalize and make known the relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons. Expanding the discussion about joint planning and operations with publics to include allied would contribute to their assurance.

One of the key questions for NATO "is whether the dual capable aircraft (DCA) mission should have military credibility"⁷⁶ in addition to its political contribution that was emphasized starting in the Obama Administration. Given Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such a debate is timely and appropriate. The United States is in the best position to lead it.

The United States has a unique opportunity to reinvigorate a strategic debate in countries that are planning

⁷⁵ Zoom interview with Bruno Tertrais, December 20, 2023.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

on purchasing the F-35 fighter. If a country procuring the F-35 fighter is a NATO member state, it could contribute to NATO's nuclear burden-sharing, and perhaps plan on purchasing nuclear-certified fighters to further complicate Russia's calculus. For example, Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that, "The problem above all is that we [Poles] don't have nuclear weapons" and that the topic of Polish participation in nuclear sharing is open.⁷⁷ He recently stated that Poland was ready to host nuclear weapons.⁷⁸ Moreover, countries that joined NATO after the end of the Cold War might be interested in expanding their participation in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, up to hosting U.S. nuclear forces.

There are other ways short of hosting U.S. nuclear forces in which NATO countries might adjust their posture to complicate Russia's calculus. For example, countries could increase their participation in military exercises that include a nuclear component, such as *Steadfast Noon* or participate in the SNOWCAT (Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics) program.⁷⁹ NATO could designate several Polish airfields as potential Dispersed Operating Bases to provide additional dispersal options, hence complicating Russia's targeting and "potentially increase survival and sortie rates."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Quoted in, Jo Harper, "Poland in talks to join NATO nuclear sharing program," *Anadolu Agency*, October 5, 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/poland-in-talks-to-join-nato-nuclear-sharing-program/2703041>.

⁷⁸ Claudia Chiappa, "Poland: We're ready to host nuclear weapons," *Politico*, April 22, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-ready-host-nuclear-weapons-andrzej-duda-nato/>.

⁷⁹ "Poland's bid to participate in NATO nuclear sharing," *International Institute for Security Studies*, September 2023, available at <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/polands-bid-to-participate-in-nato-nuclear-sharing/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

The experts who were interviewed would welcome any steps the United States can take to increase the visibility of U.S. commitments to extended deterrence. Allies tend to feel safer when the systems are closer rather than far away, even if the main attribute of a system is its stealthiness, as in the case of nuclear submarines. For example, the United States sent an *Ohio*-class submarine to Busan in South Korea in July 2023,⁸¹ even though port calls potentially compromise the survivability of the system, even if temporarily. U.S. B-1B strategic bombers approached Russia's borders in October 2023.⁸² With regard to NATO force deployments, Ulík argued that "we should be doing more of what we are doing, and we should show more unpredictability to the Russians" to strengthen peacetime deterrence.⁸³

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

While few politicians in allied countries understand the nuances of U.S. nuclear weapons policy, let alone issues related to the infrastructure that supports it, conventional

⁸¹ Heather Mongilio, "Guided-Missile Submarine USS Michigan Pulls Into South Korea," *USNI News*, June 16, 2023, available at <https://news.usni.org/2023/06/16/guided-missile-submarine-uss-michigan-pulls-into-south-korea>.

⁸² Maxim Rodionov, "Russia sends fighter jets as two US bombers, drone approach its border," *Reuters*, October 24, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-sends-fighter-jets-two-us-bombers-drone-approach-its-border-2023-10-24/>.

⁸³ Zoom interview with Karel Ulík, December 15, 2023.

forces are a visible sign of U.S. willingness to come to defense of its allies with more than diplomatic demarches. Therefore, one of the key elements of assurance in the eyes of interviewed experts would be to maintain U.S. forward-deployed forces at least at a current level or greater.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent use of unmanned systems, indiscriminate shelling, and missiles against civilian targets underscores the importance of missile defense for regional conflicts.⁸⁴ The United States, given its capabilities, has a major role to play in terms of providing missile defenses and helping allies think through its utility, even if its capabilities cannot yet fully counter Russia's or China's arsenal, including with respect to their long-range forces.

Conclusion

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

Worsening security conditions generate noticeable pressure on U.S. capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, with U.S. allies having a better understanding of conventional than nuclear forces. A lack of government officials and experts conversant in nuclear weapons policy

⁸⁴ For an elaboration of this point, see Michaela Dodge, "Will We Heed Lessons from Russia's War in Ukraine?" in David Trachtenberg (eds.), "Lessons Learned from Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2023), pp. 29-40, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/OP-Vol.-3-No.-10.pdf>.

and strategy complicates efforts to adjust to this new security environment. A continued sustained investment in building up a new cadre of nuclear experts and maintaining a robust dialogue on several levels would at least begin to remedy this shortcoming.

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

Appendix

List of Interviewees

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

Select Interviews

The following section includes four select interviews published in their entirety. They offer a glimpse into experts' thinking on the important matter of allied assurance at a time when U.S. ability to assure them is becoming more contested.

Interview with Dong-hyun Kim, South Korean National Security Journalist December 22, 2023

If the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns with regard to the South Korea government's views and their priority?

South Korea is always under a nuclear threat and the outcome of negotiations between the United States and North Korea will play an important role in South Korea's perception of its sovereignty and security.

We are concerned because of the mismatch between U.S. nuclear modernization funding and South Korea's threat perceptions, although most South Koreans do not understand the scope of the challenge to U.S. nuclear modernization. In other words, we are concerned whether the United States will have the necessary nuclear capabilities to deter evolving and advancing threats. We perceive negatively that the Biden Administration appears to be giving up the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile.

South Korea is concerned over the U.S. demand for burden-sharing, which became a very salient issue during President Donald Trump's tenure. The South Korean public perceives the United States as its principal ally, and then wonders why it is so stingy since the presence of United States Forces Korea is believed to be crucial for the U.S.'s

own national security interest, whether its geopolitical role serves against North Korea aggression or vis-à-vis a greater competition against the People's Republic of China

If South Korea has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what measures could the United States take to help address these concerns?

The current government sees less hope for denuclearization for the foreseeable future, and so it now focuses much more on conventional deterrence. Conventional deterrence needs to be strengthened while the United States continues to provide nuclear guarantees.

South Korea is noticing the development of offensive options in the United States (e.g., left of launch) leading to a more aggressive deterrence posture. South Korea is thinking through a much more active defense posture, too. It recognizes the priority to be a rigorous and active defense, including strong signals from the ROK's president about decapitating the DPRK's leadership in the case of a conflict. China and Russia are building hypersonic weapons, which gives us less faith in missile defense.

How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine resonates quite a bit because of the DPRK's help to Russia. South Korea's defense industry-related exports got a boost because of war. While the cooperation between China and Russia is concerning, the priority for us is North Korea.

The situation raises concerns over how much attention the United States can spare for North Korea given all the other developments. There is a certain nervousness about U.S. comments regarding two-peer adversaries. The primary threats to U.S. interests are Russia and China, while the DPRK and Iran are considered secondary. This prioritization makes South Korea nervous because there is

a limited amount of equipment and an insufficient U.S. modernization budget.

What if China invaded Taiwan? How much would the United States commit to that fight versus saving for a fight with North Korea? Would the United States care less about South Korea in such a hypothetical? The prioritization of U.S. resources is a major concern when it comes to extended deterrence and assurance. Additionally, the credibility of the nuclear umbrella deteriorated during the Trump Administration. This is because the persona of the president is associated with nuclear weapon use, which led to questions about whether the president would be willing to trade California for South Korea.

South Korea, the United States, and Japan should address the threat of North Korea, Russia, and China, but their publics do not want to do that if it impacts their economic well-being. South Korea is less concerned about China and Russia, but more focused on North Korea and what would happen to extended deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea if the U.S. focus shifted to Russia and China.

South Korea's geopolitical situation is such that we do not want the current confrontation with China because of the market (China had been our largest trading partner, and the United States our second largest trading partner for decades). South Korea is very uncomfortable with threats between China and the United States and worries that South Korea's interests will be neglected in the confrontation. The South Korean government wants to strengthen the Indo-Pacific, but not so much that it would antagonize China, which in turn complicates relations with the United States. To us, it is difficult to see that China would be a worse long-term threat than the DPRK. China's alignment with Russia is complicating the matters further.

What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

I think the government officials in South Korea clearly understand the U.S. extended deterrence posture, but the problem is with the general public's understanding.

What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

Reassurances by U.S. officials are important; so is linking programs and weapon system rationales to their missions in the context of extended deterrence and assurance. The United States ought to communicate with foreign journalists more because information from official news briefings makes its way to the foreign press. Logical explanations can boost credibility. The public diplomacy link to the South Korean public is very weak and that is something we should change. We ought to have more articles written by U.S. and South Korea's government officials. Defense companies' press releases can link a weapon system's capabilities to a regional context and ought to be a part of this public diplomacy effort.

The U.S. position emphasizes the strength of the nuclear umbrella now, but that may not be enough for South Korea as the threat evolves. The South Koreans are told that nuclear sharing is not possible, but U.S. officials do not explain to the public why nuclear sharing is not an option in South Korea. A better explanation of how nuclear sharing works in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is important, because South Koreans do not know that.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in South Korea?

Increasing the visibility of the strategic assets is helpful and significant. We feel safe when the systems are closer rather than farther away. This also explains why the notion of having tactical nuclear weapons on South Korea's territory is so popular; we want to feel safe.

What is the state of public debate regarding the value of alliance with the United States, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, and nuclear disarmament, inter alia?

There is a difference between the government's and the public's thinking on U.S. extended deterrence. South Korea's presidential candidates discussed problems with extended deterrence during the debates, and the previous unsuccessful candidate spoke in favor of nuclear sharing akin to NATO's. The public's support for an independent nuclear deterrence or the re-deployment option of U.S. nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula is very high. The government in Seoul has to reflect how the nation feels.

Support for a nuclear program pre-dates North Korea's nuclear program and goes back to the 1980s and 1990s. It stems from our notions about sovereignty as much as North Korea's evolving threat. The liberals and the conservatives differ on many policy issues, but they understand that the best option is sticking with U.S. deterrence policy and focusing on a much more practical approach of increasing engagement between South Korea and the United States. They use the public support for an independent deterrent or U.S. redeployed tactical nuclear weapons as a tool to pressure the U.S. administration to make nuclear assurances more robust.

South Korea and Japan were very seriously against the no-first use (NFU) policy. Japan was very vocal in terms of trying to stop the Biden Administration from including that

policy in the *Nuclear Posture Review*. How realistic the NFU policy is would require a more robust public discussion.

**Interview with David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer,
University of Hull, United Kingdom
January 17, 2024**

What are the British government's views regarding the value of the U.S. alliance? How important is it for the government?

It is pretty clear that the British government regards the alliance with the United States very highly. We still insist on using the special relationship title. In fact, the United States is our most important ally. We value the alliance for benefits to international security; we share and exchange military technologies, which is particularly important in the nuclear realm. We collaborate on military training, weapon systems' interoperability, and intelligence sharing.

What is the value of extended nuclear deterrence?

Certainly, the British government generally recognizes that U.S. extended deterrence and forces, including nuclear, are essential to North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) security. The United Kingdom (UK) values the extended deterrence aspect of the U.S. nuclear posture, whilst also recognizing the significance of a European contribution to deterrence (complicating decision-making, etc.). The government recently increased the UK's warhead cap. It is not entirely clear as to what the rationale for the increase is. Some academics speculate whether there is a concern that U.S. extended deterrence is being stretched too thin, and perhaps the UK feels it may have to do more and make a bigger contribution to western deterrence.

The nuclear debate does not seem to engender large passions in the UK. The British public is, on balance, in favor of retaining the nuclear capability (particularly after

Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Perhaps that is tied to perceptions of the UK as a medium power. Nuclear weapons allow the UK to punch above its weight (e.g., as a Permanent Member of the Security Council of the United Nations and such). There was some debate about Trident replacement but, unsurprisingly, the replacement is moving forward. There is also some limited debate about the possible re-deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to the UK.

What is the British government's view of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

It would be surprising if the government openly expressed concerns. Nonetheless, the UK was unhappy about the U.S. handling of the Afghan withdrawal. Seemingly, UK advice was ignored; we were not really involved at all. Ultimately, the withdrawal seemed to be largely about U.S. domestic politics. The matter is not tied to assurance directly, but it raises concerns about how reliable the United States is as an ally. That being said, there have been moments in history when the alliance has not seemed as strong (e.g., Suez, Vietnam, etc.), but we have generally remained firm allies.

What are the British government's views of the force posture requirements for extended deterrence?

Not surprisingly, the British government does not articulate specifically what the Western alliance needs.

From my perspective, it is important that we take steps to enable U.S. nuclear weapons on British soil if required, and that the British government speaks to the need to forward deploy U.S. forces to Europe. There should be greater U.S. presence in Europe's security environment, and we ought to consider expanding NATO's tactical nuclear options.

There is a vague sense that we need some increased flexibility and need to be able to match the Russians a bit

more in terms of low-level capabilities. There is a strong sense that Russia's actions in February 2022 have changed the game. In the past, we feared escalation and antagonizing the Russians; now, their actions have opened the door to further debate on Western nuclear posture. At the same time, the British government is not discussing getting a new delivery capability in addition to Trident replacement. We will probably stick with the Trident replacement and create some flexibility with lower yield warheads.

If the United Kingdom has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns with regard to the government's views and their priority?

We do not know for sure that there is a credibility issue with U.S. extended deterrence. U.S. force modernization programs are reasonably encouraging and desperately needed. Self-evidently, the requirement for U.S. force modernization stems from the Chinese and the Russian nuclear modernization programs.

From a UK perspective, Trident and warhead replacement are essential for the UK to credibly stay in the deterrence game. We also see discussions about the need for more Western joint planning and more communication. Of course, the West needs enhanced capabilities, but also the West must be more coordinated.

There is also the matter of burden-sharing and how much we are spending on defense. Europe needs to do more. The UK public generally supports increased defense spending, which is driven by Russia's aggression and a little bit by China's military buildup and revisionist policies. On the other hand, there has been a long-standing debate in the UK about how much British forces were left to deteriorate over the past generation. That is changing, and hopefully the UK can lead the way and set an example for other NATO allies in Europe to follow. The UK sees NATO as the centerpiece of its security. In a British Foreign Policy Group

poll from 2023, 75 percent of respondents think the UK is safer with NATO.⁸⁵ That is why the UK is eager to see more effective use of NATO.

How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Russia's aggression is regarded as the biggest threat in British public opinion polls, with China also identified as a security concern. In this sense, Russian actions seem to have driven a lot of changes in government policy, certainly in terms of emphasis.

Moreover, our government now shares an understanding that nuclear weapons are back in business. The UK never seriously discussed abolition, although successive governments aspired to some degree to arms control and disarmament. Officially, that stays the same, but it is a much more pragmatic approach and a realistic appraisal of the position. There is a recognition that we have to take nuclear strategy much more seriously, and we are a bit more conscious of tailored deterrence.

While substantial details are unavailable, there is some notion of flexibility in the UK's nuclear strategy, and some thinking is being done on enhancing NATO cooperation. The dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission is seemingly a big factor for NATO, and the Alliance is discussing more broadly cross-domain deterrence.

My opinion is that to prevent a breakdown of deterrence in a regional context, we need a modern flexible response, even if U.S. strategic nuclear forces will always be the ultimate guarantor.

⁸⁵ Evie Aspinall, "Britons' Enduring Support for NATO," *British Foreign Policy Group*, July 11, 2023, available at <https://bfpfg.co.uk/2023/07/britons-enduring-support-for-nato/>.

One of the problems for extended deterrence is that some allies spend too little on their conventional defense. How does the United Kingdom perceive this unequal burden sharing on the part of some of the other well-off NATO members?

In some respects, the asymmetry does not seem to be a big debate, not in the way it is in the United States. The UK does not seem to feel that it is being short-changed by other European allies, perhaps because the UK is still trying to establish its relations with them post-Brexit. Additionally, there is a broader recognition that we have allowed our defense sector to atrophy too much, and so we feel that we have to make these investments for our own security.

We still realize how valuable our European relations are, but we are also trying to establish an independent position free from the European Union. We are also trying to build closer relations with the United States. In some respects, the UK seeks to continue to act as the link between the United States and continental Europe. Moreover, there is a general sense that NATO remains essential as the security environment continues to change.

What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

One of the problems for Western security is what is going on in U.S. domestic politics and the resultant instability in the U.S. decision-making process. While one always gets changes in presidential transitions, it seems like there used to be more consistency. For example, there was a consensus on the need to defeat the Soviet Union, but now there is some lack of consistency in U.S. positions and what the United States stands for. That is a problem, because we look to the United States for Western leadership. The call of the Western alliance during World War II was a call to

defend our way of life and our shared common principles and notions.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in the United Kingdom?

The general level of debate about nuclear strategy and policy is extremely poor. A part of it is naivete, because instinctively people want to take the minimum deterrence mindset and do not want to think about the unthinkable. That is a problem when it comes to a policy debate, because the policymakers can take the path of least resistance (for example, being in favor of a like-for-like replacement without considering warfighting or new capabilities).

More broadly, the West has lacked political leadership. We have not had good leaders since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They had principles and clear positions, and they were excellent communicators. We need leaders like that again.

**Interview with Rod Lyon, Senior Fellow,
International Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy
Institute of Canberra
December 7, 2023**

What are the Australian government's views regarding the value of the alliance with the United States? How important is it for the government?

Well, I don't speak on behalf of the Australian government, so I should make clear at the outset that the views I give here are merely my own. Still, this first question is easily answered: a steady procession of governments has believed that the alliance is of fundamental importance to Australia. It offers an assurance of support from the United States in times of need; enables a stronger Australian Defence Force through technology transfer, joint exercising

and intelligence exchanges; and underpins an annual defence budget of roughly two percent of GDP instead of a much higher figure. In accordance with the dictum that success has many fathers, both Liberal-National and Labor governments claim paternity of the alliance relationship. Moreover, the alliance enjoys strong public support, making governments wary about being seen to damage it.

Still, each government comes to power facing a unique configuration of international and domestic constraints. Today's strategic circumstances are particularly challenging, especially in relation to power shifts in the Indo-Pacific. The strategic conversation in Australia both within and beyond the government turns upon the question of how best to prepare to live in a more unsettled and competitive region. And since governments don't rule by strategic considerations alone, those decisions are shaped by a range of imperatives, including, for example, the wish to maintain a budget surplus. Moreover, the Australian Labor Party is not of one mind upon the critical issue of nuclear weapons, making the government reluctant to lead a public discussion on the issue, lest doing so 'spooks the horses,' so to speak.

What is the value of extended nuclear deterrence?

This is a harder question, since governments are not inclined to ruminate upon the value of particular strategic concepts. I suspect the government's thinking is still rather traditionalist. The Asia-Pacific was a secondary theater to Europe in U.S. strategic thinking and nuclear weapons were not as important here. That thinking still permeates the Australian view of extended deterrence, complicating thinking about an already esoteric subject. For the reasons given above, the current government has not set forth to lead an informed discussion with the public on the changing shape of nuclear coercion, and what that implies for U.S. allies and partners. Both the Australian government

and public need to invest more heavily in thinking about the changing roles of conventional and nuclear weapons in a more multipolar Asia.

Further, the value that the Australian government places upon extended deterrence is not determined solely by importance of the doctrine for Australia itself. The U.S. umbrella provides security against large-scale military attack for dozens of countries worldwide, many of which are more directly exposed to coercion than Australia is. Were the doctrine to fail, it might well precipitate a wave of proliferation that doubled the number of nuclear-armed states in the world.

What is the Australian government's view of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

That's a difficult question to answer. Australia enjoys the luxury of a geographical location remote from the region's strategic front lines, and so doesn't feel quite the same strategic pressures that some other countries do. But it's hard to believe that questions about the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella aren't increasingly being raised within government. Moreover, a reading of the previous government's Defence Strategic Update 2020 would suggest that such questions aren't new. The prospect of a second Trump Administration adds fuel to the flames.

What are the Australian government's views of the force posture requirements for extended deterrence?

There is no special trick that automatically makes extended deterrence more credible. The allies have in recent years explored the force posture requirements needed to diversify U.S. deployment options in the region, including the rotational presence of U.S. Marines in the Northern Territories, and improved access for naval and air assets, including as part of the AUKUS agreement. Indeed, over the past decade the force posture initiatives have wrought,

unbeknownst to most Australians, a mini revolution in terms of operationalizing the alliance.

More difficult to distill from publicly available information is the extent to which the Australian government might be willing to explore increased cooperation in regard to nuclear weapons. Australian membership in the Treaty of Rarotonga constrains stationing and storage options, but seems to leave some space for weapons deemed to be 'in transit.' Still, given the worry about spooking horses, it is hard to imagine the current Australian government being especially venturesome in exploring such options. That's disappointing, as the pace of strategic change in the Indo-Pacific currently provides a rationale – some might even say a requirement – for bolder thinking about the diverse forms that increased nuclear sharing might take.

If Australia's government has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns and their priority?

There are concerns about the duration and prioritization of U.S. engagement in the world, doubts about whether the pivot to Asia really was a pivot, and uncertainty about how much we should expect to change. Ukraine shows important equities in other parts of the world and the pivot to Asia appears remarkably to be a long time coming.

For some decades, Australian governments have quietly believed that if Australia was attacked the United States would have little choice but to come to the assistance of its ally. Australian membership in the Five Eyes arrangement was thought to strengthen the U.S. treaty assurance to something closer to a guarantee. But those calculations have been the subject of renewed speculation given the uncertainties that a candidate like Donald Trump brings to U.S. policy, which could be chaotic for years.

How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

In all likelihood the security environment will be worse in 10 years than it is now, and demand for assurance will outrun the supply. As that happens, the United States will need to be aware of overreach and will have to prioritize. That suggests we're going to be looking at a 'shake-out' of current alliances, and a more selective form of U.S. strategic engagement.

U.S. extended deterrence will probably evolve to match that new pattern of engagement. It is not just that the United States needs to follow through on its current program of strategic nuclear modernization—although that's a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for sustaining the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence in the years to come. After all, allies are protected best by a soundly-defended United States.

But the current U.S. nuclear arsenal lacks diversity, particularly on the non-strategic side given that nuclear deterrence seems more likely to break at the regional rather than the intercontinental level. Nowadays, the U.S. non-strategic nuclear arsenal is a mere shadow of what it used to be through much of the Cold War. It would seem to need not only more nuclear warheads, but more kinds of nuclear weapons, and—especially in the Indo-Pacific—more deployment options. The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991, which removed non-strategic nuclear warheads from surface vessels, attack submarines and naval aviation, are now acutely felt in a region lacking ground-based deployments in allied countries.

The United States continues to promote arms control policies and to expect that arms control policies can solve security problems. Some of these U.S. arms control endeavors appear to have damaged U.S. capabilities for extended deterrence and assurance (e.g., no-first use policy,

retirement of the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear, or PNIs). How does the Australian government think about the tensions between pursuing arms control goals and the damage these goals cause to extended deterrence and assurance in the long term?

This is not a subject upon which the Australian government is inclined to speculate publicly. The dominant paradigm is inclined to see arms control as a method of enhancing stability—classically, arms race stability and crisis stability. Nowadays, that includes the danger of a U.S.-China strategic relationship which slips into conflict because of a lack of ‘guard rails.’ By contrast, the government is reluctant to venture too closely to any form of endorsement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), despite pressure from anti-nuclear activists and some of its own back bench.

How does the Australian government communicate its policy preferences to the United States?

There is no shortage of meetings between the governments, and there is even some belated recognition in Australia that we need more dialogue, particularly on missile defense issues.

When one considers the levels of dialogue, the most valuable is a leader-to-leader dialogue. That one is also the most important because, on the nuclear level the U.S. president is the sole authority for launching nuclear weapons, so other commitments do not have as much value as the president committing to the defense of an alliance with all available means.

The closest one gets to the presidential articulation of a specific U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitment to Australia is President Richard Nixon’s Guam Doctrine, but that commitment—part of a generic assurance to allies in the Asia-Pacific—is thin and dated. The United States should be clearer in what it is offering for Australia’s defense and what Australia is accepting as a consequence.

Ideally, one would reach an Australian version of the Biden Administration's Washington Declaration, but that would be very difficult for Australia's domestic politics.

Below a leader-to-leader level, there is an entire range of government-to-government meetings, but most of this activity—with the notable exception of the annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations—has little public profile, and Australians would probably not feel assured if they knew about it. AUKUS, for example, helps to sustain the alliance; but it does so at the price of presenting nuclear propulsion as good, but nuclear weapons as bad.

The third level of contacts are trusted advisors, or people outside the government who know the issues and can effectively communicate them to others. Kim Beazley is an example of a defense and security realist and a good communicator; but his generation is passing, and we haven't identified the replacements.

In your experience, do U.S. government officials interpret such communication in a way the Australian government intends it?

Yes, if Australia knows its own mind, and it is not always clear it does; the closer one gets to the core of extended deterrence, the less thinking we have done about it.

What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

Australia needs to clarify its own thinking; it needs to do that by growing its own base of nuclear expertise, which it does not have at the moment.

What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

They could and should take more interest in nuclear strategy and assurance issues. We need to improve the depth and quality of nuclear thinking in Australia and that would go a long way in improving bilateral communication. We need a new generation of talented civilians to fill this gap.

In your experience, which ways of communication did you find most effective in terms of assuring the Australian government?

One of the most effective ways to communicate is repeating and reinforcing leader-to-leader exchanges akin to the Washington Declaration. But, as I've said, Australia has to do more to clarify its own thinking. Channels of communication work best when both parties know their own minds and have things to say. In today's environment we need to be comfortable addressing hard topics, such as the growing possibility of nuclear proliferation by advanced, status-quo-supporting states. It is ironic that we can stop proliferators we like, but not the ones we don't like; the risk calculus always works against us.

In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in Australia?

It would be difficult to do so because the government does not want to stir up a debate on nuclear issues. So there's little interest in an informed debate. Maybe the Australian Minister for Defence could make a speech on nuclear deterrence, but even that might be too difficult domestically.

The other way to promote debate is to use a U.S. trigger as it were, such as the Strategic Posture Commission report.

The key question is how do we follow up in ways that bring the problem back to Australia? Thinking on these important matters is practically non-existent here; there are no deep-thinking nuclear theorists in Australian party government. That's not unreasonable: political leaders tend to be pragmatists concerned with the problems of governance. But a public debate that was not well led would be problematic. The nuclear issue could easily become misrepresented and polarizing among Australia's population, which generally isn't well informed about nuclear issues.

What is the state of the public debate regarding the value of alliance with the United States, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, and nuclear disarmament, inter alia?

The value of the alliance with the United States is generally accepted and its approval is consistently high in the public polls. Public debate on nuclear issues is undercooked. If these issues are discussed, they are mostly in the form of rancorous and ill-informed exchanges in which people talk past each other.

Communicating about the threat would perhaps help some, but there is a two-level denialism in the Australian government. One, some deny that China is a threat, and two, some deny that nuclear weapons make a useful contribution to deterring a more dominant China. In some ways China was perceived more as a threat back in 2017, when it imposed sanctions against various trade groups, than it is now. Some in the government would say this is how great powers behave and China is a great power so there's a degree of pushiness that we have to tolerate. Focusing on China would not be enough by itself.

The government has yet to internalize just how much has changed. We have great powers behaving coercively with nuclear weapons (Russia, China, North Korea), Iran on

a nuclear threshold, and the security environment will be worse 10 years down the road.

Ukraine shows a nuclear-armed power acting in an aggressive coercive way, which is more than unsettling, especially if China and Russia cooperate and become Eurasian hegemons. This is partly why nuclear deterrence is more important now than it has been in decades.

**Interview with Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director,
Foundation for Strategic Research (France)
December 20, 2023**

What are the French government's views regarding the value of the U.S. alliance? How important is it for the government?

For all the talk about the French being independent-minded and sometime tricky allies, I think it is fair to say that the U.S. alliance is very important to them. The United States-France alliance is one of the oldest ones in the world, if not the oldest. The French have always been staunch defenders of Article V, believing that collective defense is NATO's core business.

What is the most likely option to address the problem of the credibility of U.S. assurances in the French government's view? What is the government's primary driver behind this position?

Starting in the late 2000s, the French wanted to emphasize NATO as a nuclear alliance and the French were worried about some allies wanting to rely on missile defense more than nuclear deterrence (Germany in particular). The French wanted to emphasize that nuclear deterrence is the heart of the transatlantic alliance.

France is not a part of NATO's nuclear sharing, but nuclear sharing is important to the French. We welcome that as many European allies as possible are immersed in

and participate in NATO's nuclear mission, because it gives these allies an idea of what the nuclear responsibilities are and allows them to share at least a modicum of strategic culture with France and the United Kingdom, the other two nuclear-armed states in Europe. The only reservation the French have is that the nuclear mission leads some of the NATO non-nuclear allies to buy F-35s at a cost that the French tend to think is an excessive drag on the defense budget.

A key question today is whether the dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission should have a military credibility. Up until the mid-2010s, one could hear quite often in the transatlantic circles that the DCA mission was more political than military and that the military credibility of DCA was less important. Now, with the revanchist Russia and the next generation of aircraft becoming operational, the question is whether the military credibility of the DCA should become once again important. That is something that the United States and its allies should clarify.

If France has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what measures could the United States take to help address these concerns?

There doesn't seem to be a consensus that Russia is a threat in the United States, not just in Europe. One can argue it is a case of a half-full, half-empty cup. The related question is whether Russia is perceived as a threat and whether it will be perceived as such in the future. That Russia is weaker than it was thought is widely recognized. The Europeans see the reality that the United States is more present today than it was in the early 2010s. 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?

The United States being a geographically distant ally, the French have never believed in the very nature of U.S. extended deterrence. They do not believe that a distant country would risk its cities and populations for an ally (whether the belief is mistaken is a different problem). So the French have always considered the very notion of extended deterrence in Europe problematic. When the United States extends deterrence to Canada, it is more credible than the United States providing extended deterrence to Germany because Canada is much closer. Furthermore, anytime the United States refrains from supporting an ally, it is seen in Paris as a dent in the credibility of extended deterrence. In particular, President Obama's abstention in Syria was seen as undermining U.S. credibility and was a shock to the French. It underlined their concerns regarding U.S. credibility.

But the French believe that the mere existence of their own nuclear force provides a modicum of protection to their neighbors.

One of the problems for extended deterrence is that allies spend little on their conventional defense. Why does France spend just below the NATO agreed threshold of two percent?

I am not sure that is the problem in itself. Why should it? Defense spending remains a sovereign decision. The two percent is a very poor metric to measure the actual contribution by allies to burden sharing. One has to look at the trajectory of defense spending over the past six years or so. The French perceive they are carrying their fair share.

From Europe's standpoint, the United States is there and picking up the slack. It would take a shock of a second Trump election to do that. Why should the Europeans do more just because the United States is asking them? It takes a lot of time for a country like Germany to change the

political course. Now, a political course has been set but it will take time.

How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

There are two opposite narratives. One, that what we do in Ukraine does not matter for China. The other, that what we do in Ukraine matters for China. But it is impossible to gauge whether Xi Jinping saw our collective attitude as glass half-full or empty. Our actions probably have bearing, but not to the point that they are the only critical factor.

The United States continues to promote arms control policies and to expect that arms control policies can solve security problems. Some of these U.S. arms control endeavors appear to have damaged U.S. capabilities for extended deterrence and assurance (e.g., No First Use or NFU, Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear retirement, or Presidential Nuclear Initiatives). What does the French government think about the tensions between pursuing arms control goals and the damage these goals cause to extended deterrence and assurance in the long term?

This is an issue where the French see the "software" more important than the "hardware." We tend to believe that U.S. statements, declaratory policy, and actions ultimately matter for extended deterrence more than how many warheads on which delivery systems the United States has. The French do not care that much about what the United States used to call the "second to none" policy. All things being equal, the perception of credibility of U.S. extended deterrence is more dependent on statements and declaratory policy than the offense-defense calculus.

Arms control is probably reconcilable with credible deterrence as long as one does not hamper extended deterrence. The French were and remain opposed not only

to NFU but also to a “sole purpose” policy – they believe it would affect the very credibility of nuclear deterrence.

So the idea is that the attitude to nuclear deterrence matters more than the exact makeup of nuclear forces. That said, if a strongly stated commitment to nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence was accompanied by a complete divestment from U.S. nuclear modernization and infrastructure, then we would see incongruence and be nervous.

With regard to nuclear infrastructure, we do not doubt intentions of U.S. administrations to modernize and sustain the nuclear complex, but we look at results and think they are not there yet. On the other hand, we do not see it as absolutely critical for what we do see as the most important aspect of nuclear deterrence, which is whether Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping would believe that a U.S. president would be willing to use nuclear weapons on behalf of allies. We were concerned during the Trump Administration because the president’s statements were erratic. Perhaps there was some benefit of being a bit unpredictable. The North Koreans were completely perplexed about President Trump, and maybe that was good for deterring them. But that very unpredictability may also be an obstacle to the credibility of extended deterrence in the long run.

How does the French government communicate its policy preferences to the United States?

Washington and Paris maintain a strong bilateral dialogue on nuclear deterrence initiated in the 1990s. These are in-depth and very frank discussions that cover all topics of nuclear deterrence. And both countries – though I would say especially the United States – have been very transparent to one another. The dialogue is very important to the French who have always used it to speak their mind to the United States, perhaps more than in the public. Also,

the French were consulted during the past two iterations of the Nuclear Posture Review process.

What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

The United States at NATO should discuss how much NATO's DCA mission should be political rather than practical. One cannot invest as much as we do in the DCA mission if military credibility does not matter and that is something that is not very clear in the public debates. We want Russia to consider that mission militarily credible because the Alliance could be implicated rather early in a nuclear crisis (and this message should be made clear by the U.S. administration).

How do we ensure that the military credibility is restored in the eyes of Moscow?

We should not foreclose the option of putting theater nuclear weapons in Poland, if only as a political signal to Moscow, and even though I don't think there would be a consensus in NATO for that. But we need to make clear to Russia that there are consequences for putting nuclear weapons in Belarus. Also, we have not yet discussed whether events in Ukraine should change missile defense policy in Europe and how that would change the nuclear posture in Europe.

What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

France does not have a large strategic community. The issue is fairly consensual within the government. Our strategic community takes a pretty realistic, hard-nosed view of the world (which differentiates us, for example,

from the Germans, although they have made some headway).

In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in France?

We are not going to have a public debate on U.S. nuclear policy in France, and we do not need to. It is not really a relevant question for France.

The problem we have is that some allies are very uncomfortable discussing nuclear weapons policy in Europe without the Americans being in the room. For example, it is difficult to foster a real debate between France and Germany, because some Germans would not discuss it without the United States being present. Perhaps it would be good for the United States to say that it is okay for allies to discuss these matters without the United States in the room.

About the Author

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. Before joining the National Institute, Dr. Dodge worked at The Heritage Foundation from 2010 to 2019. She took a leave of absence from Heritage to serve as Senator Jon Kyl's Senior Defense Policy Advisor from October to December 2018. Her last position at Heritage was as Research Fellow for Missile Defense and Nuclear Deterrence.

Dr. Dodge's work focuses on U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense policy, nuclear forces modernization, deterrence and assurance, and arms control. She was a Publius Fellow at the Claremont Institute in 2011 and participated in the Center for Strategic and International Studies' PONI Nuclear Scholars Initiative. Her 2020 book, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action*, details factors that contribute to ballistic missile defense cooperation between two states in the context of alliance cooperation, as well as Russia's influence operations.

Dr. Dodge received her Ph.D. from George Mason University, and earned a Master of Science in Defense and Strategic Studies from Missouri State University. At Missouri State, she was awarded the Ulrike Schumacher Memorial Scholarship for two years. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations and defense and strategic studies from Masaryk University, the Czech Republic.

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