# THE NEED FOR OUR NATIONAL SECURITY PROFESSIONALS TO REFOCUS

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### PART I
### ESCALATION: A TOOL TO BE CONSIDERED, NOT DISMISSED[1]

In recent years, it has become nearly gospel that "escalation" during an acute crisis or conflict is inherently a bad thing. Indeed, "escalatory" has become a synonym for "bad" or "dangerous" or "undesirable." As a result, many of our national security professionals and uniformed officers nearly reflexively dismiss taking actions or postures that could be considered "escalatory" or "provocative" in both real-world and simulated crisis or conflict.

These ideas and practice are flawed. Crises and conflicts, especially between great powers, are ultimately issues of stake and resolve, and become competitions in risk taking. In many cases, escalation, or the threat of escalation, is required or desirable to achieve the desired objectives. In fact, deterrence by cost imposition inherently requires the withheld threat of escalation and is not credible without a willingness to do so.

This paper is based upon our years of service within the Defense Department as (respectively) a senior military officer and a civilian. These views are offered with an eye towards re-examining the concept of escalation as a useful tool of statecraft.

## Escalation Defined

Escalation, defined as an increase in the intensity of violence or the geographic or other scope of a conflict, is a tool. Escalating a conflict can perform a number of functions, from communicating stake and will to demonstrating capability, to outright winning the conflict. It is also a critical component of deterrence itself. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Keith Payne has written, deterrence, at its core, is the withheld threat of escalation.[2] Escalation or the threat of escalation can be accomplished with any instrument of national power.

## On the Avoidance of Escalation

Escalation can make a conflict worse, if employed with an improper regard for potential adversary reactions. However, it can also end a conflict sooner by convincing adversaries

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[2] Keith B. Payne, "The Great Divide in US Deterrence Thought," *Strategic Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2020), pp. 16-48, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-14_Issue-2/Payne.pdf.

that they have miscalculated and undervalued one's stake and commitment and that one is therefore prepared to intensify the level of violence or expand the conflict geographically.

Indeed, escalation is not necessarily inconsistent with the Law of Armed Conflict and can be advantageous by ending the conflict in a way that minimizes civilian casualties and broader collateral damage.[3] Ultimately, national security professionals may find during acute crisis or during the midst of an active conflict that escalation may be *required* to deter further aggression, defeat aggression, and achieve an outcome that maintains security for the United States and its allies.

Unfortunately, the United States has a generation of national security professionals trained to think "escalation" is always bad. Indeed, in wargame after wargame, we have observed that officers use "escalatory" as a synonym for "bad" or more precisely "a path we should not pursue." Instead, actions that demonstrate "restraint" on the part of the United States are overwhelmingly posited as inherently good courses of action—irrespective of whether such restraint actually helps the United States achieve its objectives.

Both authors have facilitated or directly observed numerous wargames and tabletop exercises where national security professionals avoid taking steps seen as potentially "escalatory" for fear of provoking the adversary. Very often these professionals, when discussing potential courses of action, will say "that's escalatory" to options or postures that could make a decisive difference in the course of the scenario's conflict. Those options at times have included what are indeed escalatory steps that could increase the level of violence significantly—but very often, even relatively benign options are described as "escalatory" and are therefore dismissed out of hand. Instead, players often times tout catch phrases such as "we show our strength by exhibiting restraint"—whatever that means. Indeed, the only totally, completely, inherently de-escalatory step one can take is to surrender.

Two examples of players avoiding escalation and exhibiting restraint come to mind. In one exercise, senior military officers—almost all general officers or flag officers—emulated a national security council advising the Blue president in the face of Red aggression against a non-treaty partner. When Red employed a limited number of low-yield nuclear weapons against the Blue partner, the players decided neither to escalate the level of violence nor expand the conflict—nor did they choose to respond in kind, for fear of being perceived as too *escalatory*. Consequently, the Blue players showed restraint by continuing to support fighting Red with conventional forces. Put another way, Red paid no cost for its nuclear employment. Two moves—and 41 Red nuclear detonations on the non-treaty partner and a number of full-fledged Blue treaty allies later—the Blue players decided that it was indeed time for a nuclear response, but that such a response should come from Blue's nuclear armed allies—not Blue itself. In this scenario, because of Blue's fear of escalation and the lack of cost imposed upon Red, the scenario that unfolded was one of near continuous Red employment of nuclear weapons across half a continent.

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[3] International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Law of Armed Conflict – Basic knowledge," available at https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/law1_final.pdf.

The second example involved mid-grade officers operating as a Blue Command staff. While setting up a deterrence posture to dissuade Red from initiating aggression against an overseas Green ally, the players decided not to flow Blue fighters, bombers, and ground forces into theater, because such a move could be seen as escalatory. Two moves later, Red was advancing across Green, and Blue did not have the time to get the requisite forces into theater before Green was overrun. During the post-exercise, when asked what they would have done differently, one colonel responded with "I sure wish we had flowed forces into theater in Move 1."

In both cases, the desire to avoid escalation made victory much more difficult to achieve once the conflict began or once the adversary chose to escalate to a particular level of violence. By not taking considered and prudent risks at the beginning of the conflict (when the stakes were lower and less blood and treasure had been spent by both Red and Blue), the U.S. national security professionals had set themselves up for failure. One of the lessons they learned was that the drive to avoid all risk can lead to a worse situation later in a conflict when *the adversary, not the United States,* had escalated and set the operational tempo—and corresponding level of violence—within the conflict. Consequently, the players were faced with the dilemma of making ever more dramatic, and therefore strategically riskier moves, in an attempt to restore deterrence—or accept defeat.

While it is tempting to think that these are isolated incidents, this is far from the case. Indeed, we see real world examples of national security professionals consistently and almost reflexively calling for restraint and de-escalation. From Secretary of State Antony Blinken's calling for Israel to show restraint and underscoring "the importance of avoiding further escalation" following Hezbollah strikes on northern Israel,[4] to calls not to "escalate" in response to the killing of five American service members and two contractors in Iraq by Iran-backed groups,[5] to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's call for Israel not to escalate the conflict with Hamas,[6] it seems that national security policymakers' first impulse is to seek de-escalation. In none of the aforementioned cases have those policymakers described why escalation may be bad. Instead, it was often times presented as fact that "escalation" is inherently counter to U.S. or allied interests.

Why is this the case? Why is there an almost reflexive default position among U.S. national security professionals to avoid escalation? There are no easy answers to these questions. Part of it may be a consequence of the Defense Department's Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) system, in which upwardly mobile officers and civilians are trained by

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[4] "Blinken to Gallant: Important to avoid further escalation of the conflict*," Israel National News*, June 25, 2024, available at https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/392060.

[5] Idrees Ali, Simon Lewis, and Phil Stewart, "US has communicated need to not escalate conflict to Iran and Israel, says Blinken," *Reuters*, August 6, 2024, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-has-communicated-need-not-escalate-conflict-iran-israel-says-blinken-2024-08-06/.

[6] Jim Garamone, "Austin Urges Israeli Counterpart to De-escalate Conflict With Hamas," *DOD News*, May 19, 2021, available at https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2624439/austin-urges-israeli-counterpart-to-de-escalate-conflict-with-hamas/.

other civilian and military leaders. Part of it may be a culture of risk aversion among national security professionals due to the decades-long U.S. role as a status quo power.

## Risk Perception Among Status Quo Versus Revisionist Powers

The United States has, since the end of Cold War, been a status quo power that seeks to preserve and defend the existing international order that is characterized by free and open trade, a historical lack of interstate conflict (particularly interstate conflicts for which the goal is territorial conquest), and a promotion of classical liberal values and human rights. The United States has opposed threats to the existing international order for decades, particularly when states that wanted to overturn the status quo employed force to achieve revisionist aims.

States that seek to preserve and defend the status quo by their nature seek to return to the status quo once a conflict ends.[7] By definition, they do not seek radical changes to existing systems or arrangements. Consequently, they tend to be risk averse—they like what they have, they do not want to lose it, particularly through potentially risky actions.

Revisionist states—states that are highly motivated to overturn the status quo—are by their nature more willing to accept risk. Simply put, the status quo is intolerable for them, which is why they are willing to accept risk as a means to overturn the status quo. Escalation inherently involves some risk. But revisionist powers seeking to overturn an existing order are willing to accept the risks that come with escalation.

We now have perhaps two generations of officers and civilians who have been trained to think about escalation—and the risks inherent in escalation—in an exclusively negative light. Consequently, escalation has become, if not forbidden in American strategic thought, a tactic seen as undesirable and avoidable. This view of escalation among American national security professionals creates real problems when it comes to not only pre-conflict and intra-war deterrence, but to conflict termination and achieving desirable outcomes.

Since deterrence involves a withheld threat of escalation, an apparent unwillingness to escalate undermines one's ability to deter. Messaging that one's priority is to avoid escalation can render a deterrent threat or actions taken to restore deterrence questionable or even incredible. This is true even if an actor has the capability to escalate, given that deterrence requires both capability and will to be effective. Put another way, it does not matter how much capability an actor has if the receiver of the deterrent message questions one's will to employ force. It should be remembered that seeking to avoid escalation or provocation is

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[7] For more in-depth analysis on risk aversion and decision-making see, Jon K. Maner, Matthew T. Gailliot, David A. Butz, and B. Michelle Peruche, "Power, Risk, and the Status Quo: Does Power Promote Riskier or More Conservative Decision Making?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 33, Issue 4 (April 2007), available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167206297405; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Power Politics and the Balance of Risk: Hypotheses on Great Power Intervention in the Periphery," *Political* Psychology, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 177-211, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/3792561; and, William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, "Status Quo Bias in Decision Making" *Journal of Risk and* Uncertainty, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1988), pp. 7-59, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/41760530.

not the same as deterring, and may, in fact, degrade deterrence--something that U.S. national security professionals often confuse.

## Adversary Reactions: Pricing-In and Wrong-Footing

An actor's decision to initiate a crisis, conflict, or a provocation is the summation of their perceptions of the potential costs and benefits of action and restraint, coupled with a risk analysis based upon projected outcomes. Said another way, for every action revisionist actors take, they "price-in" the expected response from the status quo power.

Put simply, revisionist state "Red" knows its provocation likely will trigger a reaction from status quo state "Blue." Red has gamed out the likely Blue reaction(s) before it has initiated a conflict. If Red believes that Blue will respond in a way that does not include significant escalation, but instead demonstrates restraint, it is more likely to initiate conflict. Moreover, if Red initiates a conflict and Blue responds in a non-escalatory fashion in an attempt to appeal to Red restraint, Red is unlikely to alter its course of action, because Blue's response was already "priced-in" by Red pre-conflict.

The key to restoring deterrence or convincing opponents to alter their course of action is to show them that their calculations that one's reaction would be tolerable are wrong. Some refer to this as the concept of "wrong-footing" an adversary.

Wrong-footing is not easy. It requires doing something that one's opponent did not expect, such as imposing an unexpected cost or exposing an unknown vulnerability on the Red actor who initiated the conflict in order to convince it that Red has underestimated Blue's decision-making and therefore miscalculated. Blue must further convince Red that not only is the conflict not going the way it planned, but there is a high chance that Red will lose the conflict it initiated. Wrong footing must sow enough doubt in Red's decision making such that Red sees it must recalculate the willingness of Blue to do what is necessary to deny Red victory or impose intolerable cost on Red—and therefore compel Red to seek an end to the conflict on terms that are still somewhat acceptable to both parties. Most importantly, Blue must convince Red that if the conflict does not end soon, Red could find itself in a worse place than the status quo ante.

## Escalation: Not Too Hot, Not Too Cold

There is a degree of art to crafting a strategy that employs escalation. One must ensure that any escalation is not "too hot"—but also that it is not "too cold." It is necessary to avoid a threat so disproportionate that it is incredible, or its execution provokes a higher, unacceptable level of violence. Escalation could—if calibrated incorrectly—make the conflict worse and cause the adversary to escalate in response.

As an example, using nuclear weapons on an opponent's strategic forces as an escalatory response to a revisionist power conducting a limited invasion of one of its neighbors would

likely be incredible because employing strategic nuclear weapons against strategic targets would be highly disproportionate to a limited invasion.

An inadequate threatened response, however, is unlikely to change the course of the adversary's behavior. For example, an actor may be tempted to impose economic sanctions on the invader, but if the invader believed that such sanctions were the likely response to the invasion, and proceeded with the invasion anyway, then those sanctions would not change the invader's behavior. The use of sanctions would not be sufficient—or, escalatory enough—to get the invader to back down.

Stakes must be understood. An actor must decide how far it will go to defend its various interests. If an actor employs military force to defend its interests and the status quo, it must accept a certain level of violence. In that sense, the threat or act of escalation could end the violence before the adversary engages in a protracted conflict that is ultimately more costly to all parties.

Indeed, if an actor does not wrong-foot an adversary and the adversary continues down the path of conflict, it is possible that the conflict could become protracted, more intense, and ultimately more costly for all parties. Alternatively, escalation—if calibrated correctly—may end the conflict decisively and early.

Ultimately, national security professionals must understand their nation's stakes, limits, objectives, and what a post-conflict status quo might be that is desirable for them (and does not plant the seeds for another conflict), and then employ what tools are required—potentially, to include a decisive escalation—to achieve the objectives laid out for them.

## Of Off-ramps

Instead of escalating during wargames and tabletop exercises, many national security professionals offer their opponents "off-ramps"—that is, an opportunity for their opponents to end a conflict in a way that "saves face." But revisionist powers initiate conflict not to "save face," but to overturn an order they find intolerable.

The idea of offering off-ramps is a phenomenon that has come become fashionable over the last twenty years. This is seen in wargames when military officers playing the "Blue" or "good guy" team have taken significant military losses and seek to offer their opponent a path to conflict termination that they hope Red will accept.

This approach rarely works in multi-celled wargames, where military officers and civilian defense policy makers emulate Red decision makers. There is a particularly good reason for that. Off-ramps to a conflict are only attractive when an actor wants to get out of a conflict. A Red team representing a revisionist power that is winning a conflict and is on a path to achieve its objectives has no incentive to accept an offramp from a Blue that is losing—particularly if they believe that the Blue team has an aversion to accept risk or failed to escalate the conflict in a decisive fashion.

Indeed, off-ramps *are only* accepted by an adversary when it is compelled to do so, i.e., when one is clearly winning the conflict, and the adversary is losing. To demonstrate this, a

simple analogy is useful. Two middle-school boys are in a fistfight after school. The boy who is losing the fight is in no position to offer the boy who is winning the fight an off-ramp; the boy who is winning the fight will decide at what point the fight will end, and therefore is in a position to offer terms. The boy who is losing the fight can seek one of four options: 1) accept the terms of the boy who is winning the fight; 2) break free and run away; 3) seek third party intervention or additional allies of his own; or 4) come up with a bold new plan to change the course of the fight and achieve victory.

Far too often, however, the authors have seen military officers in the midst of simulations in which they are losing a conflict with a revisionist adversary prematurely offer off-ramps— very often with disastrous "in-game" consequences.

# Conclusion

Our nation's military officers and civilian policymakers must understand escalation dynamics. They must think deeply and critically about risk acceptance—and how avoiding operational risk and showing "restraint" may put the United States at greater strategic risk. They must understand that escalation can be a tool—useful at times, dangerous at others— within a larger toolkit, not one to be dismissed out of hand.

If America's national security professionals do not do these things, our nation runs the risk of not only failing during a large-scale conflict, but actually incentivizing adversary aggression and escalation.

## PART II
### ON VICTORY AND THE SEARCH FOR A STATUS QUO ANTE BELLUM[8]

In a recent publication, the authors—a former senior military commander and a defense policy civilian—argued that America's national security professionals are far too quick to dismiss escalation as a tool of statecraft—a position that undercuts America's ability to deter its adversaries.[9]

Another consequence of a hesitancy to consider escalation by America's national security practitioners—particularly military officers—is a loss of focus on the goal they ostensibly should be most focused upon: victory. In the authors' experience, very often during a conflict (real or simulated) American national security professionals do not think in terms of achieving a victory that can lead to a newer, potentially better status quo. Instead, the current

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[8] This analysis was originally published in, Admiral Charles Richard, USA (Ret.) and Robert Peters, "On Victory and the Search for a Status Quo Ante Bellum" *Information Series*, No. 603 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 24, 2024).

[9] See Admiral Charles Richard, USN (Ret.) and Robert Peters, "Escalation: A Tool to be Considered, Not Dismissed," *Information Series*, No. 600, National Institute for Public Policy, October 2, 2024, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/admiral-charles-richard-usn-ret-and-robert-peters-escalation-a-tool-to-be-considered-not-dismissed-no-600-october-2-2024/.

generation of national security professionals focuses on reestablishing the *status quo ante bellum*, or the situation as it existed before the war.

## Status Quo Powers and the Dangers of Mirror Imaging

As established in the authors' earlier article, "Escalation:  A Tool to be Considered, Not Dismissed," the United States is a status quo power that seeks to defend the existing global status quo from Europe to the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, American national security professionals are inclined to want to reestablish the status quo ante bellum as the desired end state of a conflict with a revisionist power.  This inclination, however, often creates a number of problems.

Adversaries seek to overturn the status quo which American national security professionals want to preserve.  To think otherwise is to mistake adversary goals for our own goals—to mirror image. In fact, U.S. adversaries are almost always revisionist powers for the very reason that the status quo we seek to preserve is intolerable for them. That is why revisionist powers—be they Russia with Ukraine, Iran with its proxies, or possibly China with Taiwan—initiate conflicts in the first place. They ultimately seek a new status quo that better aligns with their broader strategic objectives.

Indeed, seeking an end to conflict only to re-establish the "status quo" is another way of returning to the conditions in which deterrence already failed. Therefore, entreaties by American national security professionals which seek to convince a revisionist power to return to the status quo ante bellum will likely be opposed because revisionist powers: 1) find the status quo intolerable; and, therefore, 2) are willing to accept risk, employ force, and accept cost to achieve victory.

Moreover, once a conflict begins, revisionist powers will continue to employ force so long as they:  1) are able to sustain force; 2) see a pathway to victory; and, 3) do not pay costs that outweigh the benefits of the objective they seek once they create a new status quo. Attempts by national security professionals to convince themselves that a pathway exists to conflict termination that ends with a status quo ante bellum that is appealing to a *revisionist power* is one that is almost assuredly doomed to failure, or worse. If the revisionist power sees the status quo as intolerable, it has no reason to accept conflict termination short of a new status quo post bellum so long as the revisionist power has some hope that conflict protraction will serve its interest.  That adversary will neither seek nor accept conflict termination so long as it can sustain the conflict or until it can achieve its revisionist goals.

U.S. national security professionals are mistaken when they expect that their opponents value a return to the status quo ante bellum as much as they themselves do.  This form of mirror imaging does not take into account the actual desires and objectives of their opponents.  Such mirror imaging makes it virtually impossible to craft a conflict termination strategy that will be enduring or even acceptable to the adversary.

# Better Pathways to Conflict Termination and Decisive Victory

If not seeking to convince the revisionist power to return to the status quo ante bellum, what then should American national security professionals do when formulating conflict termination pathways? Put simply, they should seek pathways to achieve a better, new status quo that can be implemented after a decisive military victory.

Indeed, overly focusing on a return to status quo ante bellum, while desirable from an American point of view in many ways, also presents real dangers for the United States. To begin with, by focusing on non-escalatory pathways that are characterized by restraint for the restoration of status quo, national security professionals may end up not deterring the opponent and prolonging a conflict, and therefore increasing the numbers of civilian and military casualties in a conflict.

Even if a U.S.-led coalition "wins" a conflict with a revisionist aggressor, a failure to achieve a meaningful "victory" (however defined within a particular context, but one that very often is a decisive victory on the part of a U.S. or U.S.-led coalition that can dictate a new post-conflict status quo that benefits the existing system and U.S. interests), but instead reinstates the previous status quo ante bellum, leaves in place the reasons that the conflict began in the first place. That is, the revisionist state that initiated the conflict because it found the status quo intolerable, unless defeated decisively, will simply seek to change the status quo when conditions are (for them) more favorable.

Put another way, the goal of returning to the status quo ante bellum may sow the seeds for another future conflict over the same fundamental issues. Such was the case with the 1801 Peace of Amiens between the British Empire and Napolean Bonaparte, when the underlying causes of the first half of the Napoleonic Wars were unaddressed—but neither side was defeated—thus setting the stage for the second half of the Napoleonic Wars. Or, it may hold the seeds for a future conflict, because the new post-conflict status quo actually incentivizes a future conflict by creating animosity among the vanquished without substantially increasing the victor's benefits or expanding the coalition of the victors. For example, consider the post-World War I settlement in Europe, when the German Empire was defeated, but retained revanchist goals and the basic elements of power needed to dominate Europe given the disestablishment and break-ups of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. Decisive victory attained on the field of battle is the necessary condition by which a new status quo can be established that can prevent a follow-on conflict from unfolding.

Decisive victory ultimately deters a future war by changing the conditions that allowed a revisionist power to pursue conflict in the first place. This decisive victory could take a number of forms. It could be a victory in which the victors lead the vanquished to change their behavior by offering them a new role in a different post bellum security environment (as was the case with Germany and Japan after World War II). Decisive victory could also create the conditions for a more stable and therefore enduring peace by seeking accommodation with the vanquished (as was the case at the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, when both sides of the Napoleonic Wars, to include the successor regimes to the Bonapartist

coalition, cooperated for almost a century to defuse most foreign policy or security disputes in Europe and beyond). Finally, decisive victory could include an expansion of the coalition of the victors (such as occurred following the Cold War, when NATO expanded to include most of the former members of the Warsaw Pact). In almost all cases, decisive victory takes the form of a new, better status quo post bellum that is based on a new power and political relationship between the victor and the vanquished.

A new, better status quo could take many forms. It could result in a weakened adversary that has fewer instruments of national power and thus is unable to present a significant threat to U.S. or allied interests (such was the case after the first Gulf War). It could result in a strengthened alliance system that is better able to contain, deter, and ultimately defeat future aggression (as was the case after World War II). It could result in a better correlation of forces or some other basic change in the allocation of power. However, in almost all cases, a new status quo post bellum requires a decisive prior victory of some kind.

However the conflict ends, the military should focus on achieving decisive victory that leaves adversaries in a weaker position than before, in order to make them pay a price that demonstrates that their initial decision for conflict was a grave mistake and undermines their ability to initiate future conflicts. This new condition also serves as a warning to other actors who may seek to initiate conflict as a means to change the status quo.

Without a decisive victory that fundamentally changes the security environment into an enduring, stable, and therefore peaceful status quo post bellum, security challenges persist because the fundamental challenges that existed before the conflict erupted remain. In addition to the examples listed above, history offers many examples of post-conflict settlements that failed to address the fundamental tensions or security challenges that triggered the conflict in the first place. Whether it is the Arab-Israeli conflict, Kashmiri border disputes between India and China, or between China and Taiwan, cease-fires or peace treaties that fail to address the fundamental point of disagreement between two parties—and which therefore make a status quo intolerable for one or more parties—simply set the stage for a future conflict at a later date.

## Conclusion

Our nation's military officers and civilian policymakers need to get back to basics. They must think deeply and critically about risk acceptance—and how avoiding operational risk and showing "restraint" may put the United States at greater strategic risk. In the final analysis, they need to think hard about *victory* and how to set the conditions for a successful conflict termination that improves America's position in a new status quo post bellum and ends an adversary's desire and power to challenge the status quo. This must be done in concert between uniformed military professionals and civilian policymakers. It must be done with a deep understanding of history, why an adversary found the existing status quo intolerable in the first place, the reasons that a conflict began, and a plausible path to a new status quo post bellum that will set the conditions for a new, enduring and stable peace.

If America's national security professionals do not do these things, our nation runs the risk of winning a war, only to refight it years later, due to a failure to focus on a decisive victory that enables an enduring peace.

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