INTERVIEWS

As part of its continuing effort to provide readers with unique perspectives on critical national security issues, National Institute has conducted a series of interviews with key subject matter experts on a variety of contemporary defense and national security topics. In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present three interviews: the first with Admiral Charles Richard, USN (ret.) former Commander, U.S. Strategic Command, and the University of Virginia Miller Center's James R. Schlesinger Distinguished Professor. Adm. Richard discusses worsening national security conditions, deficiencies in the current nuclear force posture and the urgency of adjustments required to counter them, and offers insights on the continued importance of nuclear deterrence. This interview was conducted at National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, VA on August 12, 2024. The second interview, conducted by Michaela Dodge, is with the Chair of the National Defense Strategy Commission Congresswoman Jane Harman and Vice Chair of the National Defense Strategy Commission Ambassador Eric Edelman. They discuss the most important findings from the recently published report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy, the importance of increasing defense resources, and harnessing innovation for defense needs of the country. The third interview, conducted by Michaela Dodge, is with Prof. Eliot Cohen, the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Robert E. Osgood Professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and Prof. Phillips O'Brien, Senior Associate (non-resident), Center for Strategic and International Studies and Head of the School of International Relations, at the University of St. Andrews, on their most recent co-authored report titled "The Russia-Ukraine War: A Study in Analytic Failure." In addition to the interview, the *Journal* brings you select excerpts from the report in the "Documentation" section.

An Interview with
ADM Charles Richard, USN (Ret.)
former Commander, U.S. Strategic Command,
University of Virginia Miller Center's
James R. Schlesinger Distinguished Professor

Q. The current nuclear modernization program is a legacy of the Obama Administration. Yet, in the past 14 years since it was initiated, the threats facing the United States and allies have expanded and become more dangerous, including nuclear threats. Does the United States need to augment the current nuclear program of record to strengthen the credibility of the U.S. deterrent, including extended deterrence, in this more dangerous threat environment? If so, how?

A. The recent, bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission report makes several profound points. It endorses the conclusions of the Strategic Posture Commission on nuclear forces and missile defense, and also calls for a multi-war force sizing-construct. We need a

separate force-sizing construct for strategic forces as compared to our current "one war" construct. We need a larger, more diverse force to address the potential for three-party aggression. In short, we now have a strategy-to-resources mismatch.

Beyond our current capabilities, we must have forces and procedures that can be effective in scenarios involving two nuclear peers without having to make intolerable choices, including whether one should prioritize defense of an ally in one theater over another. We have known for a long time that we have a capacity issue, e.g., in bombers and tankers. We can address that issue by adding more resources to defense. We have a twenty-nine trillion-dollar economy; we can afford necessary defenses. As Secretary of Defense James Mattis has said "America can afford survival."

There needs to be greater urgency in nuclear force modernization. Strategic deterrence needs to function under the worst conditions. But despite the speed with which nuclear threats to this country and allies have matured, the new systems will not be coming online at a sufficient rate until the end of the decade or more, and so we must figure out what we can do with the forces we have. In the shorter term, absent treaty limits, we can upload nuclear warheads, which is also desirable as a hedge against Russia's and China's closer cooperation. We also ought to exercise holding higher levels of readiness for extended periods of time and with different forces, including re-alerting a part of the bomber force. The nuclear command, control, and communications network also is critical. While planning for new forces, we must ensure continued maintenance of the legacy forces; they must be as good on their last day as they were on their first, and that takes resources. We are not now on a trajectory to do that and there is no sense of urgency.

In this more dangerous era with multiple nuclear-armed opponents, the United States places an ever greater deterrence burden on strategic forces. We must think about the gaps at the strategic force level as they appear to opponents and allies. U.S. leaders should not be in a position in which they are overly constrained in the alert level options available during a crisis, or the number of missiles devoted to surety tests, or the frequency and duration of exercises. I am concerned that without additional resources, the United States may be taking on unnecessary risk at a time when it can least accept it.

Q. The Trump Administration initiated the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N) program; the Biden Administration subsequently opposed it. Congress, however, has approved proceeding with it on a bipartisan basis. What is your view of the potential deterrent value of SLCM-N? Is it likely to be important for the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments and allied assurance?

A. The SLCM-N will offer an extremely important capability, particularly for allies. It will provide an option to generate capabilities undetected, which may be useful during a crisis when the United States does not want to make visible changes in its forces but still chooses to maintain an increased level of readiness. It also provides the United States with unique force posture options that are likely to be significant in some scenarios, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Q. You have spoken presciently of the expansion of China's nuclear arsenal. What do you believe are China's goals in significantly expanding its nuclear forces? Do you believe China is seeking to use its expanded nuclear capabilities for coercive purposes in addition to traditional deterrence purposes?

A. It will be a challenge to make it through the next ten years without conflict with China. Our opponents in Moscow and Beijing are authoritarian regimes. They are betting the legitimacy of their regimes on the outcome of their efforts to overturn the existing international order and the conflicts that goal may generate. Any such conflict will likely involve existential stakes for these adversaries. This suggests an asymmetry in the stakes of a potential engagement that makes U.S. deterrence goals more problematic. Disadvantageous asymmetries in U.S. capabilities will make the situation more difficult, especially if U.S. strategic forces are not sufficiently survivable and credible at the top level of the escalatory ladder (e.g., in the case of a coordinated or opportunistic aggression on the part of China and Russia).

Q. What are the biggest problems facing the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) today? Does STRATCOM have the resources it needs to accomplish its missions?

A. The greatest challenge is deploying modernized capabilities in time, given the threat trajectory adversaries are presenting. We lack a sense of urgency commensurate to the threat we face.

The largest gap in STRATCOM's capabilities is in prompt global strike. Such capabilities could allow us to conventionally strike many of the targets for which we currently require nuclear weapons. This also feeds into the larger problem of supported and supporting commanders in the military since any conflict with peer adversaries is likely to be global in scale and across all domains—making the geographic and functional command structure we have today difficult to operate effectively, and perhaps a hindrance.

I am also concerned about the general "business as usual" attitude pervading parts of the U.S. Government. There is a distinct lack of urgency, even among some in the military who perhaps recognize there are growing nuclear threats and yet are unwilling to adapt their practices and requirements to the new reality. We need more options, including a greater range of pre-planned posture options.

Q. Have you seen allied perceptions of the United States affected by the political polarization in Washington? If so, do you believe that the political polarization in Washington negatively affects allied views of U.S. credibility or in any other way that undermines the U.S. alliance system?

A. Yes, allies appear worried about the long-term U.S. commitment and about our potential unwillingness to escalate to nuclear weapons use on their behalf. Allies perceive a lack of U.S. will to risk escalation to a level that may be necessary to provide for their defense. There is

a growing strain of isolationism in U.S. domestic politics, which is a reflection of the political polarization in Washington that is of concern to our allies.

Q. There appears to be a growing entente among Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran—with each working more closely together in an effort to displace the United States in global affairs. Should Washington take the emerging Sino-Russian entente seriously into account in its planning and preparations for deterrence, including extended deterrence (the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review appears to suggest not)? If so, how might that entente, and the prospect for coordinated or opportunistic Sino-Russian aggression, affect U.S. deterrence planning and preparations?

A. Sino-Russian cooperation is very concerning. We have never had to deter two peer, nuclear capable potential adversaries at the same time who have to be deterred differently. In the past, we worried about the Russian Federation (or the Soviet Union earlier), but we have never had to worry simultaneously about China's arsenal to such a degree. To deter, the United States needs to deploy more forces to be able to hold at risk targets in Russia, China, and potentially North Korea simultaneously, particularly as their cooperation deepens.

We also have to keep in mind that some scenarios are improbable because our hard work to deter over the decades has made them improbable, for example, a "bolt out of the blue" attack against the U.S. homeland. Unlike during the Cold War, there is now little concern about the potential for an opponent's (or opponents') "bolt out of the blue" nuclear attack. But it must not be forgotten that such a scenario became improbable only because the United States sustained the needed credible deterrent capabilities. We have designed weapons, command and control arrangements, and maintained degrees of readiness so adversaries know they cannot achieve their objectives by such an attack. If we fail to do so, a bolt out of the blue attack could become a plausible option for an adversary. Deterrence is not a condition that persists on its own; it takes massive, continuing U.S. effort.

Q. Do you have recommendations in the areas of force posture, strategy, or policy as they relate to deterring opportunistic and coordinated aggression by the emerging entente? Are there aspects of these two problems that you believe deserve greater study?

A. We appear to confuse avoiding provocation and escalation with deterrence stability. But U.S. deterrence goals require that opponents fear, and perceive as credible, the potential for U.S. escalation. Deterring opponents in crises virtually demands that they concede a goal, perhaps a dearly held goal. Our challenge is to develop capabilities and options that Washington can credibly wield in ways that present opponents with prospective costs that they deem intolerable for themselves. This includes in regional conflicts because the most likely path to nuclear use runs through a failure of regional conventional deterrence. We want to make crisis confrontations so potentially costly for adversaries that they will

continually decide not to pursue conflict with the United States or its allies. They must continually conclude, "not today." We also must keep in mind that there is nothing automatic about deterrence working as hoped; adversaries must decide to be deterred.

We can use our posture for signaling purposes. We are in a situation where we have more options than during the Cold War, yet we need more options that can be fine-tuned to communicate degrees of risk so that the adversary knows that we can outmatch him and create intolerable difficulties for him on any level of the escalatory ladder. In short, for credible deterrence, we need greater force capacity to provide more options for tailored signaling in many plausible scenarios.

In wargames, we can consider how nuclear weapons impact the decision-making process, including during a conventional conflict. Any wargame that does not consider this aspect is unrealistic from the beginning and its results likely invalid. Any conflict with a nuclear power will involve the shadow of nuclear weapons. We also ought to conduct more surprise exercises to expose potential flaws in practices or plans.

Q. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review states that the United States may need to rely more on nuclear weapons to deter opportunistic aggression—but it does not elaborate. What might "increased reliance" on nuclear weapons to deter opportunistic aggression mean in practice?

A. We must have readiness in our nuclear forces now to be able to strengthen deterrence of opportunistic aggression. The problem is that we do not invest enough resources into the kinds of activities and exercises that generate readiness. We do the bare minimum to keep our nuclear forces. We forget that nuclear forces are unique among U.S. capabilities and cannot be replaced by other capabilities, particularly for deterrence; no other capability in the U.S. arsenal can present opponents with the prospect of incalculable costs on short notice.

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An Interview with Congresswoman Jane Harman, Chair, Commission on the National Defense Strategy and Amb. Eric Edelman, Vice Chair, Commission on the National Defense Strategy

Q. One can observe a great deal of continuity between the 2018 and the 2024 National Defense Strategy Commissions' reports. What are the main differences?

A. As noted, the two Commissions found that the threats to U.S. national security are grave and growing while the ability of the United States to meet the threats is decreasing. That trend (which began before the 2018 Commission) is exacerbated by the worsening of the

strategic environment over the past couple of years: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Hamas' attack on Israel both happened after the 2022 NDS was written, underscoring our belief that the United States must be postured and prepared to fight multiple adversaries in multiple theaters at the same time. As such, the 2024 Commission report goes further in calling for an "all elements of national power" approach and farther-reaching changes to U.S. force structure and national security spending.

Q. The Commission pinpoints domestic polarization as a significant impeding factor in getting defense spending on track. How can the United States overcome the effects of domestic polarization?

A. The Commission believes that U.S. leaders have not informed the public at large of the challenges and threats we face and why it is so important that the United States retains its global leadership role. Public support is the necessary foundation not just for increased national spending—and the taxes and reforms to entitlements that spending will require—but for the viability of the all-volunteer force, the needed partnership between the government and the private sector, and for the resilience that will be required at home if the nation goes to war. There are elected leaders on both sides of the aisle who understand the situation and they must share in the responsibility of informing the public and making the case for an engaged foreign policy. It is time for our national leaders to treat the American people like adults.

Q. What is, in your opinion, the most difficult obstacle to implementing the NDS Commission's recommendations?

A. We suffer from enormous bureaucratic inertia and risk aversion. We saw it at the Department of Defense throughout our work but it is also true in Congress. Too often, significant change in the government is only possible with the continued, direct involvement of very senior leaders, all of whom are extremely busy. The President, NSC principals, and Congress need to foster a culture where innovation and change come at lower levels so that not all change has to be driven from the top. We have found the will to act quickly in our history, but all too often it followed a tragedy like Pearl Harbor or 9/11. We hope that our report will help push action before a disaster opens people's eyes.

Q. How has Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine shaped the Commission's recommendations?

A. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that the United States and its allies can't be solely focused on the threat posed by China. The nature of the war in Ukraine showed that conflicts can be protracted and our industrial base isn't able to produce the weapons, munitions, and equipment needed in large numbers or rapidly. The war has also highlighted

lessons we must learn for involving space, cyber, information operations, and rapid technical innovation.

Russia's inability to quickly subdue Ukraine led to Russia's massive mobilization of personnel and industrial output, and its operational partnership with China, Iran, and North Korea—both of which have major ongoing strategic implications for the United States. We have seen military cooperation among these nations that makes each one more capable, to include Iran and North Korea gaining insights from the battlefield and likely technology transfer from Russia and Russian-Chinese joint training operations. The bloc of partnered nations, including two with UN Security Council vetoes, also makes international sanctions more difficult to impose and enforce.

Q. If there is limited political support for increased defense spending, what can the Department of Defense do to posture itself to counter Russia's and China's aggressive policies?

A. There are certainly ways that the Department of Defense can make better use of the existing defense budget, as we lay out in the report. It can and should change how it spends money as well as what it spends money on. Congress, for its part, should stop the regular use of continuing resolutions and provide more budget flexibility to allow DoD to move money around more effectively and efficiently. But ultimately, we unanimously agreed that meeting the multi-theater threat from multiple peer and near-peer adversaries will require spending more—at DoD and other parts of the government that contribute to national security—as well as spending smarter.

Q. The Commission proposes "a Multiple Theater Force Construct" to address simultaneous conflict in two geographically distinct theaters. Is this construct different from an earlier strategy that called for the United States to prepare to fight two major regional contingencies? If so, how?

A. The two-war construct that followed the Cold War was designed to shape the military around lesser contingencies—basically dealing with rogue states like Iran and North Korea. That construct was replaced in the last decade by one that prioritized effort against a more capable adversary: China or Russia. Our Commission notes that there are already two theater wars going on, in Europe and the Middle East, and China's military modernization and aggressive action in the Taiwan Strait and the South and East China Seas require that the United States and its allies maintain focus and presence in that theater as well. Our recommendation is based on the reality that wars along multiple fronts or multiple wars across theaters is not only possible, but likely if the United States and its allies fail to deter them. China and Russia may not have the global reach that the United States does, but both are able to cause problems far from their homeland, and across all domains. More importantly, the partnership between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea means that if

conflict begins with any of them, the others could either make a concerted or an opportunistic aggressive effort in another theater. This scenario is much more like the axis that existed during World War II than disparate rogue states after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Q. Is the Department of Defense doing enough to foster innovation? How can Congress best help the Department of Defense to harness innovation for defense purposes?

A. Innovation is happening in the commercial sector at increasing speed, but most of it is unconnected to defense work. Numerous reports have found that DoD has an "innovation adoption" problem. DoD itself has recognized this—starting with Ash Carter and the original stand-up of the Defense Innovation Unit—but the large majority of DoD's R&D and acquisition budgets are still tied to defense-centric production from an increasingly small number of suppliers. Part of the problem stems from the legal and regulatory barriers that make it so much harder for companies to work with DoD than to operate commercially. But DoD continues to have a risk-averse culture more likely to continue to evolve existing programs than to do things entirely new.

Q. Can you elaborate on what the Commission believes might happen if its recommendations are not adequately addressed?

A. There are countries around the world that very much want to upend the status quo—including by erasing national borders, removing U.S. influence from their regions, and installing authoritarian regimes around the world. They are ramping up their conventional and nuclear arsenals to do so and undermining stability, democracy, and free trade every day through gray zone military operations, mis- and disinformation campaigns, and building on their ability to project power and influence globally.

We tried to be very clear that the United States is not prepared for these challenges. We are losing our ability to deter other nations from taking actions we oppose—actions like invading U.S. allies, restricting access to critical minerals, or compromising our computer networks. If it comes to war to protect our interests, we may lose. History shows that no nation remains predominant indefinitely. If our recommendations are not addressed, we will likely lose our position as the global economic, scientific, and military superpower.

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An Interview with Prof. Eliot Cohen, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Robert E. Osgood Professor, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Prof. Phillips O'Brien, Senior Associate (non-resident), Center for Strategic and International Studies and Head of the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews

Q. Your most recent co-authored report "The Russia-Ukraine War A Study in Analytic Failure" discusses some of the ways in which the U.S. national security community was wrong in assessing the course of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. What inspired you to look back and undertake the project?

A. My friend Phil O'Brien, a professor of military history at St. Andrews University and I [Eliot Cohen] were early optimists about the war, and were surprised at the pervasive pessimism about Ukraine's possibilities. We began comparing notes and realized that the errors were large, systemic, and consequential, and decided to dig in further.

Q. What are the most important findings from this effort?

A. As I [Eliot Cohen] said, that the errors were large, systemic, and consequential, extending well beyond normal estimative error. One of the most important findings was that the nature of the Russia military analytic community – insular, narrow, and resistant to outside critique – missed a great deal about both militaries. The biggest errors had to do with a radical underestimation of the importance of intangibles (e.g., corruption); a tacit and probably subconscious acceptance of Russian views of Ukraine; ignorance of some fundamentals of military campaigning as seen throughout history.

Q. The study identifies eight misplaced assumptions that informed U.S. policy vis-à-vis Ukraine, e.g. that the war will be short or that Russia's army was far more competent than it turned out to be. Do you see any of them continuing to be relevant in today's policy debate on Ukraine? And if so, how can they be rectified?

A. The belief that the Ukrainians can only be helped not to lose, or to not lose quickly, continues to restrict the kinds and quantity of weapons we supply Ukraine, and the urgency with which we deliver them. It is important to note that the analysts who were most off base in their predictions before the war continue to be some of the most influential voices commenting about it, and engaging government, today.

Q. In the cases of experts correcting their initial wrong assumptions, was there any common denominator as to why they were able to correct while others were not?

A. For the most part, analysts have admitted that they underestimated Ukrainian will to fight and overestimated the competence of the Russian military, although there are still voices saying that the original assault would have worked without political or FSB interference. We reject those arguments.

Q. How can we prevent repeating similar analytic errors in the future?

A. Bring outside expertise in a variety of subjects to bear on these kinds of estimates; create opportunities for sharp debate and disagreement within expert communities that too often have powerful internal incentives for consensus and deference to senior figures; foster wider and deeper knowledge, particularly of military history.

Q. Are there any other areas of national security policy where you see experts agreeing on how international events are going to unfold with certainty that perhaps is not justified?

A. It happens all the time – in the Middle East for example. But the issue is not just military: look how many people shared the consensus view that expanded trade and economic development would cause China to liberalize. It has not. Fundamentally, the future is always opaque, and we have to recognize that. The problem is that the current media environment, from broadcast to social media, incentivizes certitude: we have to fight that.

Q. Your report is on what experts got wrong and why. What did experts collectively get right that stands out to you?

A. The intelligence community, and the outside expert community with which it is linked, understood that Putin would attack. Many of them understood as well that he intended to occupy most if not all of Ukraine, certainly to overthrow its government and replace it with a puppet regime. And by and large, I [Eliot Cohen] think they knew that this was not a reaction to the growth of NATO through the accession of the Baltic and East European states.