



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Journal of
POLICY & STRATEGY



Vol. 6, No. 1

Journal of Policy & Strategy

Contributing Editors

Matthew R. Costlow · Michaela Dodge ·
Keith B. Payne · David Trachtenberg

Editorial Advisory Board

Kathleen Bailey · Jennifer Bradley · Lisa Bronson · Kevin Chilton ·
Stephen Cimbala · J.D. Crouch · Peppi DeBiaso · Joseph DeTrani · Eric Edelman ·
Gary Geipel · Rebecca Heinrichs · Robert Joseph · Susan Koch ·
Thomas Mahnken · John Mark Mattox · Curtis McGiffin · Franklin C. Miller ·
Brad Roberts · Nadia Schadlow · Mark B. Schneider · Jonathan Trexel

Managing Editor

Amy Joseph

Editorial Office

National Institute for Public Policy, 12150 Monument Dr., Suite 125, Fairfax, VA 22033 USA,
Telephone: 703-293-9181, Fax: 703-293-9198, www.nipp.org

Copyright © 2026 by National Institute Press®

All rights reserved. No part of the *Journal of Policy & Strategy* may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by an electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The views expressed in the journal are the authors' alone and do not represent any institution with which he or she is or has been affiliated.

The National Institute Press would like to express their appreciation to the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made the *Journal of Policy & Strategy* possible.

Design by Stephanie Koeshall

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Note	1
Analysis	
German Nuclear Independence From Washington?..... <i>Keith B. Payne</i>	3
Political Objectives, Nuclear Forces, and the Enduring Value of U.S. Intercontinental-Range Ballistic Missiles..... <i>Michaela Dodge</i>	13
Emerging Technology and Presidential War Powers..... <i>Blaine Ravert</i>	23
A New Latin American Policy: The Trump Doctrine or a Trump Corollary?..... <i>Santiago Spadilero</i>	43
Interviews	57
Wess Mitchell, author of <i>Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger</i>	
Proceedings	
Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience, September 2025..... <i>David J. Trachtenberg (moderator), Michaela Dodge, Robert G. Joseph, Susan Koch, Christopher Ford, J.D. Crouch</i>	61
Ending the Threat from Iran, October 2025..... <i>David J. Trachtenberg (moderator), Robert G. Joseph, David R. Shedd, Joseph DeTrani, Ilan Berman</i>	75
Should the United States Resume Nuclear Testing?, December 2025..... <i>David J. Trachtenberg (moderator), Mark B. Schneider, Franklin C. Miller, Thomas Scheber</i>	85
Literature Review	95
Victor Davis Hanson, <i>The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation</i> <i>Reviewed by Michaela Dodge</i>	
Kelsey Davenport, <i>Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons</i> <i>Reviewed by David J. Trachtenberg</i>	
Documentation	99
Document No. 1. U.S. Department of State, <i>Agency Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2026-2030</i> , January 2026 (select excerpts)	
Document No. 2. U.S. Department of Defense, <i>2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age in America</i> , January 2026 (select excerpts)	
Document No. 3. U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, <i>Hearing to Receive Testimony on Strategic Competition in an Unconstrained, Post-New START Treaty Environment</i> , February 3, 2026 (select excerpts)	
From the Archive	135
Colin S. Gray, <i>Out of the Wilderness: Prime-time for Strategic Culture</i> (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2006)	





EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the first issue of Volume 6 of National Institute's online *Journal of Policy & Strategy*—a quarterly, peer-reviewed publication. In this initial 2026 issue, the “Analysis” section includes several thought-provoking articles by Keith Payne, Michaela Dodge, Blaine Ravert, and Santiago Spadilero. The topics deal with Germany's views on the desirability of an independent nuclear deterrent, the political and military value of the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile force, the impact of emerging technology on the presidential war powers debate, and the Trump Administration's new approach to Latin America as reflected in the November 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

This issue also includes an interview with Wess Mitchell, former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and author of the book *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger*. In the interview conducted by Michaela Dodge, Dr. Mitchell discusses the importance of diplomacy as an essential tool to advance U.S. national interests abroad and assesses the evolution of U.S. diplomatic statecraft as an “instrument of strategy,” especially in an era of great power competition.

This issue of the *Journal of Policy & Strategy* also includes proceedings from National Institute's regular online informational symposia, or “webinars,” moderated by David Trachtenberg. These proceedings reflect the views of subject matter experts who participated in three different symposia held in September, October, and December 2025. The topics covered included: “Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience”; “Ending the Threat from Iran”; and “Should the United States Resume Nuclear Testing?”

This issue's “Literature Review” includes two reviews. The first, by Michaela Dodge, examines *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation*, by Victor Davis Hanson. The book chronicles multiple conflicts over the centuries and how human nature increases the risk of extreme catastrophe. The second review, by David Trachtenberg, critiques a report on *Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons*, written by Kelsey Davenport, in which she calls on leaders to “pursue bold, creative steps to reduce nuclear risk and reverse the buildup of nuclear weapons capabilities.”

The “Documentation” section includes select excerpts from the January 2026 State Department's *Agency Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2026-2030*; the Department of Defense's *2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age in America*, published in January 2026; and selected excerpts from the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on Strategic Competition in an Unconstrained, Post-New START Treaty Environment*, held on February 3, 2026.

Finally, this issue's “From the Archive” section presents a 2006 article by Colin S. Gray, co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, entitled, “Out of the Wilderness: Prime-time for Strategic Culture.” In the article, Dr. Gray contends that strategic thought encapsulates “the engine of thought and behaviour,” noting that its “principal function is to make sense of the world for us.” He calls strategic culture “vitally important” to understanding the nature of both friends and foes and how “different security communities think and behave somewhat differently about strategic matters.”

As always, we seek to bring you, our readers, a variety of informative and thought-provoking commentaries and analyses relevant to today's most critical national security issues. We hope this issue of the *Journal of Policy & Strategy* meets your expectations and that you find value in the pages that follow. Above all, we thank you for your interest in and support of the Institute's work.





ANALYSIS

GERMAN NUCLEAR INDEPENDENCE FROM WASHINGTON?

Keith B. Payne

Introduction

The question of an independent German nuclear capability was seemingly settled in 1969 with Bonn's signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The decision to sign the NPT followed a long, highly-contentious debate within West Germany. Finance Minister and Christian Social Union (CSU) Party leader Franz Josef Strauss led the opposition to the NPT, fearing Germany would be "boxed in." Then-Foreign Minister and head of the Social Democrats (SPD), Willy Brandt, led NPT support. The final German decision to sign the NPT came only with the elections of September 1969, which led to Willy Brandt becoming Chancellor. Brandt signed the treaty for Germany in November 1969.

Germany's signing and ratification of the NPT (the latter in 1975) confirmed Germany's non-nuclear status and came with several expressed conditions, including undisturbed NATO collective security, continuation of the U.S. nuclear security guarantee, and that "...the treaty does not hinder the union of European states."¹ Nevertheless, the German nuclear question effectively was settled; serious debate about an independent German nuclear capability all but disappeared as German politicians essentially dropped the subject and continued to seek escape from the shadow of National Socialism and past German militarism.

However, the German nuclear question has been re-emerging slowly for approximately a decade, at first faintly, then much more noticeably since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and particularly since the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024. Numerous German political commentators, academics, and even senior military officers have increasingly called for some form of German nuclear capability that is independent of the United States.² In fact, German public commentary is now so skeptical of Washington, and by extension NATO, that its dogged German defenders have been compelled to write articles explaining "why transatlantic relations can still be saved" ["Warum die transatlantischen Beziehungen noch zu retten sind"].³ With regard to the future of NATO, an independent German or "Euro" nuclear deterrent could be both a result of the expectation of NATO's demise, and a

¹ "Note der Bundesregierung vom 28. November 1969 anlässlich der Unterzeichnung des NPT: „Die Bundesregierung geht davon aus,... daß der Vertrag den Zusammenschluß der europäischen Staaten nicht behindert.“

² See the discussions of this in, Martin Debes, et al., "Braucht Deutschland Die Atombombe?," *Stern*, January 29, 2026; Konrad Schuller, "Brauchen Wir Die Bombe?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, January 4, 2026; Eckhard Lübckemeier, "Pro: Aufbruch zu einer europäischen Selbstverteidigungsunion," *Internationale Politik*, Issue 1 (January/February 2024), pp. 110-113; and, Markus Kaim, "Trump und die deutsche Bombe," *Der Spiegel*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/verteidigungsfahigkeit-d>.

³ Michael Rühle, "Warum die transatlantischen Beziehungen noch zu retten sind," *Cicero*, February 5, 2026, <https://cicero.de/aussenpolitik/usa-und-europe-warum-die-transatlantischen-beziehungen-noch-zu-retten-sind>.



contributor to its demise given the underlying premise that Europe must be able to defend itself independently of Washington.

Most recently, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz announced that he and French President Macron had begun talks on a “European nuclear deterrence” within the Alliance.⁴ Previously, in December 2023, former German Foreign Minister and senior politician with the Green Party, Joschka Fischer, who earlier advocated in favor of nuclear disarmament, came out in favor of Germany’s participation in a Euro nuclear deterrent independently of Washington.⁵ French President Emmanuel Macron has floated the notion of French nuclear weapons providing extended deterrence for European partners, and the German Vice-Chancellor, Lars Klingbeil, reportedly has said publicly that he is open to talks with France about such an extended deterrent.⁶ Some members of the increasingly popular (and politically unorthodox) Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party have explicitly called for German nuclear weapons.⁷ Separately, in a co-authored statement, former Chief of Staff of the German Armed Forces, Gen. Klaus Naumann, called for German participation in a European nuclear deterrent “of its own,” because the Russian threat is from “tactical nuclear weapons,” not conventional.⁸ Brigadier General Frank Pieper, the Director of Strategy at the Bundeswehr’s Leadership Academy (Strategie an der Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr) recently said publicly, “Germany needs its own tactical nuclear weapons” (“Deutschland braucht eigene taktische Atomwaffen”).⁹ One German survey surprisingly shows the respondents evenly split on the question of whether “Germany needs its own nuclear weapons?”¹⁰ Other surveys show the majority of respondents remain opposed to German nuclear weapons.¹¹

⁴ See, The Federal Government, *Speech by the Federal Chancellor at the Munich Security Conference on 13 February 2026 in Munich*, February 13, 2026, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/federal-government/speech-munich-security-conference-2407298>.

⁵ Interview with Joschka Fischer, “Ich schäme mich für unser Land,” *Die Zeit*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-11/joschka-fischer-nahost-konflikt-israel-hamas-antisemitismus-ukraine>.

⁶ See the discussion in, Rudy Ruitenberg, “NATO’s Rutte says Europe can’t defend itself without U.S.; France balks,” *Defense News Online*, January 27, 2026.

⁷ See for example, “‘Europe cannot rely solely on the US,’ AfD calls for Germany to acquire nuclear weapons,” *BalkanWeb*, January 19, 2026, <https://www.balkanweb.com/en/europa-nuk-mund-te-mbeshtetet-vetem-te-shba-te-afd-ben-thirrje-ge-gjermania-te-marre-arme-berthamore/#gsc.tab=0>.

⁸ See Klaus Naumann, et al., “Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own,” *Atlantic Council*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-needs-a-nuclear-deterrent-of-its-own/>. This article is from, Klaus Naumann, et al., “Gastkommentar: Wir brauchen eine Europasierung der NATO,” *Handelsblatt*, July 11, 2023.

⁹ “Zur Abschreckung Russlands: Neue Rufe nach taktischen Atomwaffen für Deutschland,” *n-tv*, January 29, 2026, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Neue-Rufe-nach-taktischen-Atomwaffen-fuer-Deutschland-id30298746.html>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See for example, “Deutsche mehrheit gegen Atomwaffen,” *n-tv*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Deutsche-mehrheitlich-gegen-eigene-Atomwaffen-id30318979.html>.

It seems doubtful, under *currently existing* conditions, that this re-emerging interest will actually lead to German withdrawal from the NPT and development of nuclear weapons.¹² Nevertheless, the European security threat context is extremely dynamic, as are German domestic politics. There are several plausible conditions, domestic and external, that could converge to make the seemingly “unthinkable” a realistic prospect. These conditions include the character of the Russian threat and the U.S. security commitment to NATO, including the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.

This article briefly examines U.S. policy implications of the currents in the emerging German debate regarding national security and the nuclear question, and draws some tentative conclusions with regard to the prospective internal and external conditions that would be likely to accelerate or ameliorate German interest in independent nuclear capabilities. The issues of immediate interest are: Why is the question of German nuclear weapons now “on the table,” and what set of conditions could move Germany toward or away from nuclear weapons independent of the United States? This is a significant question given the international turbulence a German decision in favor of independent nuclear capabilities would have—certainly with Russia, but also potentially with Washington and some European allies. For example, Polish leaders have signaled interest in Polish nuclear capabilities or the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on Polish territory.¹³ How German moves in this regard might affect Polish decision making is an open question—but manifest German interest in nuclear capabilities independent from Washington is unlikely to ease Polish interest.

Assuring Berlin and Deterring Moscow

A repeated theme in the German national press is the perception that Donald Trump is hostile toward continuing U.S. security commitments to Europe.¹⁴ Vocal claims that the U.S. security commitment to NATO Europe can no longer be trusted are not limited to Germany.¹⁵ In some German quarters, this has led to increasing doubts about U.S. extended nuclear deterrence credibility, and to suggestions of a German, or a European, nuclear deterrent

¹² See the discussion in, Joachim Krause, “Die Idee ‘europaischen Atombombe’ ist unrealistisch,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 1, 2024; and, Michael Rühle, “The German Bomb: Much ado About Very Little,” *Defense News*, January 22, 2026.

¹³ See, Mike Glenn, “Polish president says Warsaw should consider having its own nuclear weapons,” *The Washington Times*, February 16, 2026.

¹⁴ See for examples, Debes, et al., “Braucht Deutschland Die Atombombe?,” op. cit.; Thomas Gutschker, Johannes Leithauser, Michaela Wiegel, Matthias Wyssuwa, “Was macht Europa, wenn Trump gewinnt?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, December 3, 2023; and, Jacques Schuster, “Der Verlust des amerikanischen Schutzschirms,” *Welt am Sonntag*, December 9, 2023.

¹⁵ See the discussion in, Ruitenbergh, “NATO’s Rutte says Europe can’t defend itself without U.S.; France balks,” op. cit.

independent of the United States.¹⁶ This thesis is separate from any concerns that the balance of U.S. nuclear forces with Russia (and China to a lesser extent) has become inadequate to provide credible extended deterrence—that a “gap” in extended deterrence has arisen given the much larger Russian (and Chinese) theater nuclear arsenals and apparent lowering of Russia’s threshold for nuclear employment.¹⁷ This latter dynamic for concern regarding the credibility of extended deterrence is apparent in the U.S. public discussion, but not much in the German discussion.

In short, the German public debate generally reflects doubts about the U.S. political commitment to European security but reflects little apparent doubt about the U.S. and NATO *nuclear* force posture needed to support extended deterrence. In contrast to expressed U.S. concerns about the correlation of forces, German concern appears to focus virtually entirely on a U.S. political relationship with Europe that many see as having been consciously and irrevocably broken by Washington.¹⁸

The significance of these two different reasons for questioning U.S. extended deterrence credibility is in the very different “fixes” that follow. These two different potential sources of currently-expressed concern about extended deterrence credibility—a concern about the U.S. political commitment to European security apparent in Germany, and a concern about the correlation of forces apparent in the United States—correspond to different expectations about the “fix” needed to sustain credible U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, and thereby mitigate potential German interest in nuclear capabilities. Addressing the reason for questioning the reliability of extended deterrence prominent in Germany involves, as some German commentators have suggested, only “waiting out” the Trump tenure and hoping for a new presidential administration that returns to previous U.S. security priorities and commitments.¹⁹ This supposed “fix” may be quite easy or not, depending on the direction of U.S. politics.

The second, separate balance of power-related reason for questioning the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence takes the focus off of the Trump Administration’s various disturbing expressions regarding European security and focuses instead on correcting the

¹⁶ See Heike Anger, et al., “Neue Debatte über nuklearen Schutzschirm für Europa,” *Handelsblatt* (online), January 16, 2026; and, Friederike Hofmann, et al., “Wie Frankreichs Nuklearschirm Deutschland schützen könnte,” *Handelsblatt* (online), February 1, 2026.

¹⁷ See for example, Gregory Weaver, “The urgent imperative to maintain NATO’s nuclear deterrence,” *NATO Review*, September 29, 2023; and, Greg Weaver, *The imperative of augmenting US theater nuclear forces* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2025). See also, Jim Stokes and Yamitsa Dyakova, “Nuclear Deterrence,” *NATO Nuclear Deterrence*, Issue 41, Article 16, 2025, pp. 53-57, https://www.jwc.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/issue41_Art6_NATONuclearDeterrence.pdf. The Chairman of the JCS, Gen. Dan Caine, said that, “Our adversaries are advancing, global nuclear threats are on the rise and deterrence is paramount.” Moreover, “Our national defense requires urgent action and reform across the board. We must go faster. We must move with a sense of urgency. We can never forget that our number one job is to create peace through overwhelming strength.” Quoted in, Bill Gertz, “New Pentagon chairman: U.S. lacks ability to deter adversaries,” *The Washington Times*, April 15, 2025.

¹⁸ An exception is, Naumann, et al., “Gastkommentar: Wir brauchen eine Europasierung der NATO,” *op. cit.*

¹⁹ See the discussion in Martin Erdmann and Michael Rühle, “Die NATO wird Trump überleben,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, January 10, 2026.

U.S./NATO position in a nuclear balance of power that has long seen a steep decline vis-à-vis Moscow. The corresponding “fix,” i.e., adjusting a degraded nuclear balance of power, would demand much more effort and time than would renewed U.S. expressions of commitment to European security, even assuming a U.S. administration supportive of nuclear deterrence and past U.S. security priorities.

These two different potential sources of doubt regarding U.S. extended deterrence and their respective corrections are, of course, not mutually exclusive. An adequate force posture *and* a recognized political commitment are likely both necessary for credible U.S. extended deterrence and for assuring Germany, respectively. But they typically are not combined in contemporary critical German commentary or in much American commentary—each focuses on a different problem.

Discussions of deterrence and assurance seem often to neglect that the twin goals of deterring Russia and assuring allies involve two separate audiences and dynamics that must be addressed simultaneously. U.S. declarations about security priorities, allies and alliances drive German perceptions of U.S. assurance via extended deterrence, and thus potential German interest in nuclear weapons (national or in cooperation with other European powers). The requirements for deterring Russia obviously include Moscow’s perceptions of the U.S. political relationship to Europe, but they also include as a priority an adequate U.S. and NATO correlation of forces, nuclear and conventional.

Expressions of U.S. commitment seem paramount for assuring Berlin, but the correlation of forces is paramount for deterring Moscow. “Fixing” German perceptions of an absence of a reliable U.S. political commitment to European security may repair German doubts about assurance but do nothing to address the “gaps” in the correlation of forces needed for actually deterring Moscow. Coincidentally, fixing those “gaps” without also addressing German concerns about the U.S. political commitment may do nothing to ease Berlin’s lack of assurance—and, correspondingly, nothing to moderate German interest in nuclear weapons independent of Washington. With these two different dynamics at work simultaneously, involving two different audiences, the United States must address deficiencies in both the assurance of Germany and the deterrence of Moscow, but with different, if overlapping, political and military solution sets.

This juxtaposition suggests a necessary caveat to the famous “Healy theorem.” Denis Healey, a British Labour politician and Defence Minister, often observed during the Cold War that, “it takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five percent to reassure the Europeans.”²⁰ The neglected point here is the difference in the conditions needed for German assurance and those needed for the credible deterrence of Russia. The emerging failure to assure Berlin following from a perception of a failing U.S. political commitment to European security is separate from the potential inadequacy of the U.S. and NATO force posture. Perhaps ironically, the priority requirement for German assurance and the priority requirement for deterring Russia (and China) involve different

²⁰ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

respective emphases, i.e., Washington's renewed expressions of a strong political commitment to European security versus fixing a deficiency in the correlation of forces.

Recognition of these two problems and their needed "fixes" involves significant differences. For example, the specific requirements for assurance may be relatively easily understood given key allies' obvious willingness/eagerness to voice their fears and concerns. The requirements for deterring Russia (and China) are inherently more speculative given the simple facts that opponents do not broadcast what would deter them and often instead seek to deny Washington that knowledge. In contrast to identifying what is needed for assurance, what is needed to deter is discerned much more by inference and involves a greater, inherent level of uncertainty.

In summary, a manifest U.S. political commitment and adequate force posture are likely both best practice for assurance and credible extended deterrence. However, if the needed "fix" for the assurance of Germany is renewed U.S. expressions of political commitment—as is suggested by most German commentary—without also advancing a renewed U.S./NATO force posture, Germany may be assured, but Russia (and China) may be inadequately deterred. Similarly, if Washington and NATO were to address force posture "gaps" to strengthen the deterrence of Moscow, without also renewing U.S. expressions of political commitment to European security, Washington may sustain credible extended deterrence, but still not assure Berlin and stem German interest in nuclear deterrence independent of the United States.

Looking at Deterrence and Assurance From Both Sides Now

Ameliorating German interest in nuclear weapons is not likely the highest U.S. policy goal, and thus decisive in policy choices, but it almost certainly remains a U.S. goal of some priority. If the United States continues to place priority on both its global alliances and on its traditional nuclear non-proliferation goals, as seems almost self-evidently prudent, Washington needs to consider how to adapt the contours of its policies and expressions regarding: NATO; allies (including their domestic policies); Russian aggression; regional security priorities; non-proliferation; force posture decisions, conventional and nuclear; and, of course, U.S. arms control initiatives.

For non-proliferation, Washington must cease dismissive statements/commentary regarding allies and the U.S. commitment to their security. The alternative is to fan the flames of German and other allies' interest in nuclear capabilities that are independent of Washington, with an attendant potential cascade of nuclear proliferation.²¹ In contrast, to address the likely requirements for deterrence of Russia and China, Washington and NATO must strengthen their nuclear and conventional force postures as necessary in the face of

²¹ It must be recognized that some American neo-isolationist commentators are sympathetic to some nuclear proliferation, calling it a potential "antidote to American overextension in Europe." See for example, Doug Bandow, "Maybe It is Time for a European Nuclear Weapon," *American Conservative Online*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/maybe-it-is-time-for-a-european-nuclear-weapon/#:~>.

determined foes with expanding nuclear and conventional capabilities, and aggressive, coordinated agendas. This latter requirement demands that Washington continue to call out allies for greater contributions to the common cause of creating the force posture necessary for deterring authoritarian aggression. President Trump has rightly called attention to, and for the first time in decades demanded with effect, an end to allied free riding. Doing so *was not and is not a mistake*; it is wholly needed for deterrence purposes.

However, doing so with attendant language that leads allies to seriously doubt U.S. reliability and to search for alternative security structures is wholly unnecessary and harmful to U.S. non-proliferation and deterrence goals. Calling out the need for Washington to find the proper balance to support deterrence and assurance goals simultaneously is a “no brainer,” and not politically partisan. In searching for this needed balance, it is important to recognize that Washington’s relations with allies are far from entirely transactional, i.e., following from concerns about financial gain or loss. National pride often is involved, which, if deeply insulted, can harm relations significantly despite transactional gains or losses. Avoiding gratuitously insulting and threatening language toward allies is a first step for Washington to find the proper balance needed for deterrence and assurance.

If Washington can achieve this balance, the needed prudent German policy response also is reasonably clear. Berlin must decide to help lead continental Europe in cooperative, determined common cause with Washington to establish a much more powerful force posture, nuclear and conventional, vis-à-vis the “axis of authoritarian evil.” France cannot, and likely will not, do so. This will not be inexpensive for European states long accustomed to free riding, including Germany, but it will be much less expensive than any real attempt to “go it alone” without Washington—not to mention infinitely less expensive than being the victim, yet again, of aggressive, militaristic authoritarian powers with malevolent intentions.

One critical element in this needed direction seems largely unrecognized in Germany: That is the need for serious German efforts to help reduce the risks and costs that Washington must bear for its commitment to European security—an inherently risky enterprise. Doing so will demand much more German support for NATO nuclear and conventional capabilities—which may be a hard sell in Berlin. But, in an increasingly threatening nuclear and geopolitical context, calling on the United States to continue to shoulder the burden and risk of a serious extended deterrence commitment to European security, without also helping to ease that burden to the extent possible, is what is no longer tolerable for Washington—whichever political party is in power. “Waiting out Trump” may sound convenient and relatively inexpensive, but it cannot solve a problem for European security that is inherent in the structure of emerging threats and geopolitics. The era of European free riding and viewing emerging threats through rose-colored glasses must end.²² Fortunately, the German leadership appears finally to have recognized the harsh realities of the new threat environment following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Then-German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s famous “Zeitenwende” [turning point] remarks reflect that

²² See Michael Rühle and Keith Payne, “Die Kultur des Trittbrettfahrens ist vorbei,” *Welt Am Sonntag*, July 21, 2024.

recognition.²³ A corresponding recognition of the necessary transformation in NATO Europe seems underway, at least in part,²⁴ if not derailed by unnecessary and self-destructive rhetoric from Washington.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after decades, the confluence of several factors has brought back the question of Germany and nuclear weapons, either as a national capability or (more likely) as part of a yet-to-be-defined “Euro nuclear deterrent.” In-depth analyses of this subject, at least for public consumption, remains largely absent in both the United States and Germany—particularly in comparison to its potential import.²⁵

The most basic factors driving the return of the German nuclear question include: A manifestly aggressive Russia that issues nuclear threats frequently, and the Trump Administration’s departure from past U.S. expressions of commitment to European security and—most shocking for many Europeans—coincident suggestions that military force is an option to secure U.S. interests in (Danish) Greenland. The rise of a populist German political party, the AfD, that does not appear to be pro-American or to have “Atlanticist” roots may also become an important factor in how the German nuclear policy debate proceeds.

The return of the German nuclear question in contemporary conditions should be unsurprising given the confluence of factors noted above. Professor Gary Geipel foreshadowed the emerging debate in 1993:

Like every powerful nation, Germany will find a nuclear umbrella somewhere. The United States is the most likely place. But if the United States does not provide a credible nuclear deterrent, who will? Short of a genuine European federal union that takes over the nuclear capabilities of France and Britain, it is difficult to imagine that Germany would rely for long on the nuclear deterrent of its weaker neighbors.²⁶

²³ See, “Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag,” Berlin, February 27, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

²⁴ See for example, NATO-OTAN, *Defence expenditures and NATO’s 5% commitment*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/defence-expenditures-and-natos-5-commitment>; Chris Lunday and Rixa Fürsen, “New German military plan views foreign sabotage as preparation for war,” *Politico.eu*, December 30, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-new-military-plan-foreign-sabotage-hybrid-attacks-as-preparation-for-war/>; and Marco Seliger, “Das Ende des parasitären Pazifismus,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 12, 2025.

²⁵ An exception is the generally useful analysis in, Tobias Bunde, et. al., *Minding the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe’s Nuclear Options, Report of the European Nuclear Study Group* (Munich: Stiftung Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz, February 2026). There also are several useful chapters in a 2024 text on the subject. See, Ulrich Kuhn, ed., *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Atomic Zeitenwende?* (London: Routledge, 2024).

²⁶ Gary L. Geipel, *Germany in a New Era* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1993), p. 193.

The German nuclear question should be an increasingly significant consideration for U.S. security policies. Independent German nuclear capabilities, or the creation of a “Euro” nuclear deterrent outside NATO and independent from Washington, could be part and parcel of the effective demise of NATO—Moscow’s goal for decades—and a cascade of subsequent nuclear proliferation. Either of these outcomes would create an essentially new international security environment with unpredictable and potentially extremely negative consequences for U.S. security. Understanding the “German mind” in this matter and adjusting U.S. policies to reduce the prospect for these potential outcomes, somewhat surprisingly, is now an important national security priority.

Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, Professor Emeritus and former Department Head at the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He is the author or co-author of over 225 published articles and 50 books and monographs on international security issues.



ANALYSIS

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES, NUCLEAR FORCES, AND THE ENDURING VALUE OF U.S. INTERCONTINENTAL-RANGE BALLISTIC MISSILES*

Michaela Dodge

Intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), or missiles that fly over 5,500 kilometers (approximately 3,400 miles), have been a key component of the U.S. nuclear triad since the 1960s. (The other two components of the triad are submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers.) The Minuteman III system is the only ICBM in the U.S. arsenal today. But the system is old and challenges to its sustainability mount. The United States is planning on replacing the system in the next several decades with the Sentinel ICBM. The program will have to compete for attention and resources with other Department of War modernization priorities in the context of budgets that for years have not been commensurate with the threat the United States and allies are facing. Despite some prominent calls for the elimination of the ICBM leg of the triad, the system is more important than ever because of threat developments and decreases in the flexibility and diversity of the U.S. nuclear arsenal since the end of the Cold War.¹ ICBMs continue to make a critical contribution to U.S. national security strategy—and will continue to do so for years to come.

Growing Threat

Threats facing the United States faces have played a major consideration in the development and deployment of ICBMs. Much has been written on the emergence of the tripolar nuclear environment, in which China is rapidly approaching U.S. and Russian nuclear capabilities. In 2022, then Commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard called China's nuclear expansion "breathtaking."² He stated that China "can do any plausible nuclear employment strategy regionally. This will backstop their conventional capability and will

* This article was originally published in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 119, 4th Quarter 2025, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq%20119/jfq-119-political-objectives-nuclear-forces-and-the-enduring-value-of-u-s-intercontinental-range-ballistic-missiles.pdf>.

¹ William J. Perry, "Why It's Safe to Scrap America's ICBMs," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/opinion/why-its-safe-to-scrap-americas-icbms.html>; and William J. Perry and James E. Cartwright, "Spending Less on Nuclear Weapons Could Actually Make Us Safer," *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/spending-less-on-nuclear-weapons-could-actually-make-us-safer/2017/11/16/396ef0c6-ca56-11e7-aa96-54417592cf72_story.html.

² Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander, United States Strategic Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2022, p. 2, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2022%20USSTRATCOM%20Posture%20Statement%20-%20SASC%20Hrg%20FINAL.pdf>.



potentially constrain our options, that is, we will be the ones that are getting deterred if I don't have the capability to similarly deter them."³

Russia has been using its nuclear forces coercively to achieve its current strategic objectives, including subjugation of Ukraine; maintains an active nuclear modernization program; and has, by some unclassified estimates, a 10- to 1- advantage in non-strategic nuclear forces.⁴ In June 2023, Vladimir Putin noted "We have more such nuclear weapons than NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will, right? A popular phrase. Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage."⁵

Russia and China are now strategic partners. Russia would not be able to prosecute its ongoing war against Ukraine at the current scale without China's support. Both countries share an objective of replacing the U.S.-led world order. Such a replacement would be to the detriment of the United States and its allies. While it may be the case that a genuine strategic alliance is beyond the interests of both countries, their alliance needs to last only long enough to diminish U.S. capabilities and influence in the Indo-Pacific region and in Europe.

North Korea is a nuclear-armed regional challenger. Pyongyang's strategic cooperation with Russia could significantly improve its missiles and nuclear warheads.⁶ Iran could have enough material for a nuclear weapon in days, although the recent Israeli and U.S. strikes may have altered the timeline for producing a deliverable nuclear weapon.⁷ These countries are particularly worrisome to U.S. allies in their respective regions. In this context, it bears mentioning that U.S. security guarantees, including nuclear guarantees, have been one of the most successful, if not the most successful, tools of U.S. nonproliferation policy. When allies can rely on the United States coming to their defense, they are less likely to develop their own independent nuclear capabilities.

³ Jamie McIntyre, "We will be the ones deterred': STRATCOM commander on China's 'breathtaking' nuclear buildup," *Washington Examiner*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/we-will-be-the-ones-deterred-stratcom-commander-on-chinas-breathtaking-nuclear-buildup>.

⁴ 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), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-what-do-russias-nuclear-threats-tell-us-about-arms-control-prospects-no-564-october-2-2023/.

⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Remarks at the Plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum," June 16, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>.

⁶ Anthony Kuhn, "Concerns mount as Russia and North Korea commit to a mutual defense pact," *NPR*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/20/nx-s1-5011604/leaders-of-russia-and-north-korea-sign-pact-indicating-a-deeper-cooperation>.

⁷ "Statement of General Anthony J. Cotton, Commander, United States Strategic Command, before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Senate Armed Services Committee," March 26, 2025, p. 6, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/testimony_of_general_anthony_j_cotton1.pdf; Rob Picheta and Thomas Bordeaux, "Israel's strikes zeroed in on Iran's nuclear program. How much damage was done?," *CNN*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/14/middleeast/iran-israel-nuclear-facilities-damage-impact-intl>; and Geoff Brumfiel, Brent Jones, and Alyson Hurt, "Obliterated? Damaged? Inoperable? What's known about Iran's nuclear facilities," *NPR*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/06/26/nx-s1-5443666/obliterated-damaged-inoperable-iran-nuclear-facilities>.

U.S. adversaries are revisionist powers that use nuclear forces to advance their regional and global interests that are contrary to those of the United States. The situation is unlike the problems the United States faced during the Cold War. Then the focus was on deterring the Soviet Union, a single nuclear-armed adversary, with an underlying assumption that if Moscow were deterred, Beijing—with a much smaller nuclear arsenal—would also be.⁸ The triad continues to be necessary to give the Nation the flexibility and adaptability to respond to new developments.

Nuclear Forces Support Political Objectives

The U.S. nuclear triad is sometimes presented as redundant and owing its existence only to parochial fights between the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army, but that would be a significant mischaracterization of how the United States arrived at the current posture. Today, the Navy “owns” the seabased leg of the nuclear triad, and the Air Force owns the air- and the ground-based legs. The National Nuclear Security Administration owns the warheads. While bureaucratic infighting played a role in the development of the nuclear triad (and other nuclear forces), it is useful to discuss political goals that nuclear forces help to achieve. Requirements generated by these goals have shaped the size and attributes of U.S. nuclear forces over time and will continue to do so.

The first and foremost political goal is to deter a large-scale attack, nuclear or conventional, against the U.S. homeland.⁹ More than 40 years ago, the Scowcroft Commission noted: “Deterrence is not, and cannot be bluff. In order for deterrence to be effective we must not merely have weapons, we must be perceived to be able, and prepared, if necessary, to use them effectively against the key elements of [an enemy’s] power.”¹⁰

U.S. adversaries demonstrably do not share the same values as the United States: appreciation for human life and emphasis on economic prosperity for the citizenry (rather than for the select few of the regime). Contrary to the popular belief, the United States does not deliberately target cities to maximize casualties.¹¹ Since the mid-1970s, U.S. leaders understood that a deliberate threat against populations lacks credibility and desired deterrence effect, let alone being completely against U.S. values and Just War principles.

⁸ Keith B. Payne, “Why Rebuild the Triad? Because a Nuclear War Cannot Be Won and Must Never Be Fought,” *Information Series*, No. 488 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 4, 2021), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-why-rebuild-the-triad-because-a-nuclear-war-cannot-be-won-and-must-never-be-fought-no-488-may-4-2021/.

⁹ The following objectives are taken from U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. 3, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872877/-1/-1/1/executive-summary.pdf>. They have been largely consistent throughout administrations.

¹⁰ The Report of the President’s Commission On Strategic Forces (The Scowcroft Commission) April 1983, pages 2-3 <https://web.mit.edu/chemistry/deutch/policy/1983-ReportPresCommStrategic.pdf>.

¹¹ David Trachtenberg, “Mischaracterizing U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policy: The Myth of Deliberate Civilian Targeting,” *Information Series*, No. 542 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 14, 2022), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-mischaracterizing-u-s-nuclear-deterrence-policy-the-myth-of-deliberate-civilian-targeting-no-542-december-14-2022/.

ICBMs enable the United States to hold at risk credibly and promptly what the adversaries value most—their tools of external aggression and internal oppression.

Because ICBMs are dispersed over five U.S. states, there is no simple way for an adversary to destroy them. An attack on U.S. ICBM fields would be a clear declaration of war against the United States. An adversary would have to use many of its own warheads against U.S. ICBM fields, thus minimizing the relative damage to the rest of the country. The difference in casualties could be in the millions by some accounts.¹² A hypothetical nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States could result in 75 million casualties.¹³ Should the ICBM leg be eliminated, the number could rise to 125 million, according to some calculations.¹⁴ ICBMs create an extremely high barrier to a first-strike attack, not only because of the other legs of the triad, but also because ICBMs are designed to withstand such an attack and be available for retaliation, if needed.

The second important political objective is assurance of U.S. allies. Even here, ICBMs have played an ever more important role because of reductions in U.S. forward-deployed nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War. Strong strategic deterrence means the United States is more likely to intervene on behalf of an ally facing a nuclear-armed adversary. Reductions in U.S. nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War, combined with vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to long-range missiles, have resulted in a situation in which U.S. assurances are likely perceived as less credible.¹⁵

The third important political goal is achieving U.S. objectives should deterrence fail. The authoritarian nature of U.S. adversaries means they value tools of internal oppression to keep the current elites in power. Their desire to change the international status quo means they prize tools of external attack, including their conventional and nuclear forces. Of these, nuclear forces are particularly important because of their destructive potential. Holding promptly and reliably at risk the key targets that adversaries value generally requires nuclear weapons. Doing so quickly and precisely demands ICBMs. These weapons played a unique role in this mission throughout most of the Cold War because it was not until the 1980s that U.S. sea-launched missiles acquired a similar precision (and therefore capability against hardened targets) to that of the ICBM force.

ICBMs remain the most responsive leg of the nuclear triad and can reach any target in the world in less than 30 minutes. They are always on alert and can be launched within minutes of a Presidential decision to do so. This degree of responsiveness currently does not occur in the bomber leg of the triad and may not always be present right when the U.S. President

¹² Matthew Kroenig, "The Case for the US ICBM Force," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Fall 2018), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-12_Issue-3/Kroenig.pdf

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Keith B. Payne, "Arms Control: Past Practices Threaten Extended Deterrence Today," *Information Series*, No. 594 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 16, 2024), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-arms-control-past-practices-threaten-extended-deterrence-today-no-594-july-16-2024/.

needs it in the submarine leg of the triad.¹⁶ Some opponents argue that this “hair trigger” alert is more likely to involve the United States in an accidental war, but the United States maintains a robust redundant command and control network.¹⁷ This network needs to be modernized along with the new delivery systems.

An ICBM can be launched only “upon receipt of an authenticated, encrypted, and securely transmitted order from the President of the United States.”¹⁸ The risk of an accidental launch is minimal, and in any event, U.S. ICBMs are targeted on open ocean areas, not at other countries. The usual proposed solution to this not-real problem is de-alerting—making them less than launch-ready. This would strip ICBMs of responsiveness, one of their most important attributes, which is why all administrations have rejected the idea. Moreover, because ICBMs are always on alert, there is no need for potentially destabilizing posture changes during times of heightened tensions.

The fourth important political objective is contributing to the capacity to hedge against an uncertain future. ICBMs force adversaries to disperse their efforts to counter U.S. strategic systems. If this leg of the triad were to be eliminated, an adversary could apply all its resources to defeating the seabased leg, which would be its next difficult problem to solve. Bombers are not on alert anymore, so the United States effectively has a dyad for day-to-day operations. As General Larry D. Welch stated, “Neither effort is worth the cost and risk for the adversary so long as the ICBM force is constantly ready.”¹⁹ ICBMs can also carry up to three warheads each, and this upload capability becomes more important in light of Russia’s and China’s modernization and force increases and the U.S. inability to produce new nuclear warheads in the near-term.²⁰ It is also worth mentioning that if the United States unilaterally reduces its ICBM leg of the triad, or any nuclear forces for that matter, any potential future equitable arms control will be more difficult to achieve.²¹

¹⁶ Donald Alston, “Open Letter to the Commander-in-Chief Deterrence and the ICBM A Practitioner’s Perspective,” 2017, p. 7, <https://alstonstrategicconsulting.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/deterrence-and-the-icbm-alston-nov-17-tpf.pdf>.

¹⁷ See for example William J. Perry and James E. Cartwright, “Letter from William J. Perry and James E. Cartwright to President Trump,” Ploughshares Fund, October 31, 2017, <https://www.ploughshares.org/letter-william-j-perry-and-james-e-cartwright-president-trump>; Bruce G. Blair, Jessica Sleight, and Emma Claire Foley, *The End of Nuclear Warfighting: Moving to a Deterrence-Only Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, September 2018), pp. 32-33, 81, <https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ANPR-Final.pdf>; or *Global Zero: Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report, May 2012*, https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Nuclear Force Posture and De-Alerting,” December 14, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/250644.htm>.

¹⁹ “Conversations on National Security: Part One, General Larry D. Welch (USAF, Ret.),” *Information Series*, No. 491 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 3, 2021), https://nipp.org/information_series/conversations-on-national-security-part-one-general-larry-d-welch-usaf-ret-no-491-june-3-2021/.

²⁰ Mark B. Schneider and Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload, Occasional Paper Vol. 5, No. 6* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Vol.-5-No.-6.pdf>.

²¹ Matthew R. Costlow, “Unilaterally Cutting U.S. ICBMs Would Undermine Prospects for Arms Control,” *Information Series*, No. 435 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 17, 2018), https://nipp.org/information_series/costlow-matthew-r-unilaterally-cutting-u-s-icbms-would-undermine-prospects-for-arms-control-information-series-no-435/#_edn4.

Evolution of the Program

ICBMs were primarily conceived of as a cheaper way to deliver destruction relative to bombers. They are still the cheapest leg of the nuclear triad to operate. They are also a testament to the fact that the United States can go fast if needed. Only 4 years passed between the setup of the Western Development Division—the Air Force’s management group created to develop an ICBM—and the launch of the first U.S. ICBM. The second and third generations of the system were developed within three years after that.²² It took prioritization on the part of the Department of Defense and the White House, and “reporting access to the Pentagon’s senior leadership on all decisions related to the overall direction of the program”²³ The current program manager for the Sentinel system must be green with envy. The Sentinel’s first developmental flight test has been delayed from 2023 to 2026 and in 2024, the program triggered the Nunn-McCurdy Act review for critically breaching its cost projections.²⁴

The survivability of the nuclear force is a key requirement for deterrence. One of the rationales for the development of ICBMs in the 1950s was the vulnerability of bombers to a Soviet nuclear attack, since the Strategic Air Command parked them in the open. Ukraine’s recent attack on Russia’s strategic bombers illustrates not only this continued vulnerability but also difficulties in responding to a significant portion of an air-leg of a nuclear triad being destroyed by (fairly cheap) conventional means.²⁵

ICBMs and sea-launched ballistic missiles continue to have an unquestionable advantage over bombers in this regard, particularly because bombers no longer carry nuclear weapons during day-to-day operations and because of the development in adversary air defense capabilities. Bombers cannot always penetrate defenses, and ensuring they do is too costly given their other mission demands. Moreover, unlike ICBMs, bombers and submarines can be destroyed by conventional weapons, thus generating possible ambiguity about an adversary’s intentions.

The decline of the U.S. nuclear enterprise will one day make an excellent case study in strategic shortsightedness. The Minuteman III system was designed for 10 years of service life and entered the force in 1970. It is currently deployed with the W78 and W87 warheads.²⁶ The 1970s and 1980s debates regarding basing of a follow-on missile that eventually became the MX Peacekeeper indicated concerns over the Minuteman’s survivability, yet the United States is still deploying it 40 years later. The system has been

²² Peppi DeBiao, “Building a Golden Dome: Lessons from the 1950s,” *Center for International and Strategic Studies*, May 12, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-golden-dome-lessons-1950s>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anya Fink, “Defense Primer: LGM-35A Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile,” *Congressional Research Service*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11681>.

²⁵ Paul Brown and Thomas Spencer, “How satellite images show scale of Ukraine’s drone attack on Russian bombers,” *BBC*, June 4, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg9zdxwk29o>.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear Matters, *Nuclear Matters Handbook*, 2020, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/ncbdp/nm/NMHB2020rev/chapters/chapter4.html>.

upgraded and its service life extended, but it is still the same system. Some argue the United States should continue to extend its life, just long enough for national security conditions to improve so Washington can get rid of it.²⁷ Yet Admiral Richard was very clear that further extending the Minuteman III system is not cost-effective and is, in fact, quickly becoming impossible because “in some cases, the drawings don’t exist anymore, or where we have drawings, they’re like six generations behind the industry standard.”²⁸ Counting on future national security conditions to improve is imprudent, particularly when recent trends suggest the exact opposite.

The United States scaled back and then stopped nuclear weapons modernization after the end of the Cold War in expectations of a benign national security environment. This assumed “that Washington could depend on international organizations to help it confront major challenges and that ‘global governance’ would emerge with the help of American leadership. ...That view presumed that since other countries were progressing inexorably toward liberal democracy, they would share many of Washington’s goals and would play by Washington’s rules.”²⁹ The expectation was false, and now the United States finds itself with a much smaller, less diverse, and increasingly aged nuclear weapons systems and an infrastructure that cannot respond to unanticipated developments in any sort of flexible and resilient manner.

Enduring Value

If the United States eliminated the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad, the number of warheads required to attack nuclear weapons-related infrastructure and military bases on the U.S. homeland shrinks from hundreds to a handful. That knowledge could embolden our adversaries not just in strategic scenarios but also in regional conflicts. In conflicts between nuclear-armed adversaries, states with larger arsenals are generally more successful in achieving their objectives during high-stakes crises.³⁰

The Sentinel program’s challenges are not a commentary on futility of the ICBM leg of the triad; rather, they are a commentary on a nation that became too comfortable with its post-Cold War status. The feeling of safety, and its accompanying lack of urgency, prevails against reason. The post-Cold War optimism was a baseline for recommending that the United States (yet again) extend the life of the Minuteman III system rather than replace it altogether and

²⁷ Garrett Hinck and Pranay Vaddi, “Setting a Course Away from the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile,” *War On the Rocks*, February 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/setting-a-course-away-from-the-intercontinental-ballistic-missile/>.

²⁸ Brian W. Everstine, “STRATCOM Welcomes Nuke Review, but Says Minuteman III Life Extension Should Not Be Considered,” *Air Force Magazine* (January 5, 2021), <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/stratcom-welcomes-nuke-review-but-minuteman-iii-life-extension-should-not-be-considered/>.

²⁹ Nadia Schadlow, “The End of American Illusion,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), p. 37.

³⁰ Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

then work with Russia on arms control measures to eliminate the ICBM leg of the triad.³¹ These arguments ring hollow after Russia's aggressions, most recently against Ukraine; its extensive nuclear modernization; its arms control violations; and China's nuclear build up and revisionist global agenda.

The Sentinel program is currently behind schedule and over budget and is undergoing a review.³² The Air Force is planning on 400 deployed Sentinel missiles, but this requirement could change since it rests on a rather optimistic assessment of the national security environment during the time when the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty was negotiated.³³ After all, the system is supposed to be in service at least until 2080. That would be like the difference between about 1970 and today. Considering that time frame, one can easily perceive how different conditions can be under which a system must remain effective in the future.

Why Does the United States Maintain a Triad?

While each of the nuclear triad legs are complementary, more important is that the triad compels an adversary to disperse its investments, preparation, and attention.³⁴ For example, investments into antisubmarine warfare would become much more interesting and have potentially higher payoff if ICBMs were eliminated. Bombers are vulnerable already, and the United States cannot currently be on continuous air alert without breaking the force within a few months. A more diverse set of forces would be inherently more stable than a diminished one.

The U.S. nuclear triad is the crown jewel of U.S. forces in strategic terms—and will continue to be so in the future. It is a visible demonstration that can help to influence an adversary's calculus and deter actions against U.S. strategic interests. It is also an essential enabler for U.S. conventional forces. Admiral Richard stated: "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."³⁵

The current U.S. nuclear force posture reflects the optimism of the early 1990s. Yet forces the United States considered sufficient in the 1990s and early 2000s are unlikely to suffice now or in the future, given that its adversaries are modernizing. As Admiral Richard argued: "We have a triad...in part because of the flexibility it provides, the ability to hedge inside of

³¹ Garrett Hinck and Pranay Vaddi, "Setting a Course Away from the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile," op. cit.

³² Government Accountability Office, "Weapon Systems Annual Assessment," June 2025, p. 80, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107569.pdf>.

³³ See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, Jr., *A New Nuclear Review for a New Age* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2017), p. 22, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-New-Nuclear-Review-final.pdf>.

³⁴ Colin S. Gray, "The Strategic Forces Triad: End of the Road?," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 56, No. 4 (July 1978), p. 784.

³⁵ Quoted in, Amy Hudson, "Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities," *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

it...what it also enables you to do is address the threat or the risks you didn't see coming. We always built margin into our strategic forces to make sure that we could account for the unknown risks that may be out there alongside the risk that we could reasonably see."³⁶

More broadly, eliminating a leg of a nuclear triad now when adversaries are doubling down on modernization would send a signal that the United States is ceding the competition in this area to them. That would likely mean more aggression against U.S. and allied interests, more global instability, and consequently less economic prosperity.

As the United States is planning its force posture modernization, it must consider adversary forces and goals and what the President can threaten with U.S. nuclear forces to frustrate them. The decrease in the diversity and number of U.S. nuclear forces is a problem—and a difficult path lies ahead in trying to repair it. It begins with the recapitalization of the U.S. nuclear enterprise, including the laboratories, so they can build new nuclear warheads and be more flexible and agile in the face of dangerous national security trends.

Conclusion

Eight former commanders of United States Strategic Command wrote in 2017 that “The combined capabilities of the triad provide the [P]resident with the mixture of systems and weapons necessary to hold an adversary’s most valuable targets at risk, with the credibility of an assured response if needed—the essence of deterrence.”³⁷ The United States simply must maintain its strategic nuclear triad into the future. There is no substitute for ICBMs within that force and reducing the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad will leave the United States and its allies less safe.

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. She is an award-winning scholar, having most recently (August 2025) been awarded Strategic Command’s annual Gen. Larry Welch Writing Award.

³⁶ Quoted in David Deptula, “Five Persistent Misconceptions About Modernizing The U.S. ICBM Force,” *Forbes*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davedeptula/2020/12/22/five-persistent-misconceptions-about-modernizing-the-us-icbm-force/?sh=42a92cb63ba7>.

³⁷ Gen. C. Robert Kehler, Gen. Larry D. Welch, Adm. James O. Ellis, Gen. Kevin P. Chilton, Adm. Cecil D. Haney, Adm. Henry G. Chiles, Gen. Eugene E. Habiger, Adm. Richard W. Mies, “The U. S. Nuclear Triad Needs an Upgrade,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-nuclear-triad-needs-an-upgrade-1484179459?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=ASWzDAgbgimakzrU1Wv8ExOP7uvChYjpYUIW96ZTQ1CF4r3fiG-mvjZFueye&gaa_ts=68629d41&gaa_sig=xCCvRLN1d_hi3bWzdj0lbPtm_GwyNKCbYH6eJemMH3mpiRqmBNbp23-kcBU_audFucMa5osoTu8kiZc1b-oVnw%3D%3D.



ANALYSIS

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY AND PRESIDENTIAL WAR POWERS¹

Blaine Ravert

Introduction

On September 3, 2025, President Donald Trump ordered a drone strike which killed 11 alleged members of the Trans De Aragua gang using a boat to smuggle drugs into the United States.² As of November 11, at least 15 additional boat strikes were conducted, killing over 60 people.³ On November 3, the Trump Administration declared the strikes did not count as “hostilities” under the 1973 War Powers Resolution (WPR), claiming these actions fell under unilateral presidential authority.⁴ Following a build up of military forces in the Caribbean, on January 3, 2026, U.S. military forces captured Venezuela leader Nicolas Maduro. President Trump stated that “We’re going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition.”⁵ These actions have produced mixed reactions. Many commentators argue these strikes lack a sound legal basis.⁶ Others, such as the *Wall Street Journal* Editorial Board, argue that Trump is within his constitutional authority to take this

¹ This analysis was in the final stages of editing in December 2025. As such, it does not include any detailed commentary concerning the Trump Administration’s January 3, 2026 operation against Venezuela.

² Matt Murphy and Joshua Cheatham, “US Strike on Venezuela Drug Boat,” *BBC News*, 3 September 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjzw3gplv7o>.

³ Jeremy Chin and Margaret Chin, “Timeline of Vessel Strikes,” *Just Security*, November 6, 2025, <https://www.justsecurity.org/124002/timeline-vessel-strikes-related-actions/>.

⁴ Filip Timotja, “Congressional approval for drug boat strikes not needed, White House says,” *The Hill*, November 3, 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/5587430-white-house-argues-drug-strikes/>.

⁵ Konstantin Toropin, “A Look at the US military’s unusually large force in the Caribbean Sea.” Associated Press, October 21, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/us-military-buildup-caribbean-venezuela-ships-troops-810f6181371f53536c723ea562c5277c>; Alan McPherson, “Trump’s squeeze of Venezuela goes beyond Monroe Doctrine,” *The Conversation*, November 2, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/trumps-squeeze-of-venezuela-goes-beyond-monroe-doctrine-in-ideology-intent-and-scale-its-unprecedented-268845>; Tiago Rogero, “Pentagon’s largest warship sent into Latin America waters as US tensions with Venezuela rise,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/nov/11/navy-carrier-trump-drugs-caribbean-latin-america>; and, *Associated Press*, “U.S. strikes Venezuela and says leader Maduro has been captured and flown out of the country,” January 3, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/us-strikes-venezuela-and-says-its-leader-maduro-has-been-captured-and-flown-out-of-the-country>.

⁶ Benjamin Wittes, “I Never Signed Up for This Kind of Targeted Killing,” *Lawfare*, September 7, 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/i-never-signed-up-for-this-kind-of-targeted-killing>; and, Blaine Ravert, “Strikes on drug boats raise troubling constitutional issues,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 18, 2025, https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/column/article_37c59673-c784-44db-915b-72b7ee6781af.html.



unilateral action.⁷ Congressional efforts to limit Trump's ability to conduct these strikes have so far failed.⁸

These boat strikes are not the first time Trump has courted controversy regarding war powers. In June, President Trump ordered a major bombing strike against three Iranian nuclear facilities.⁹ From March to May, Trump ordered a series of strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen.¹⁰ These strikes each raise the issue of the degree of unilateral authority the president has in order to use force. In the age of great power competition, including the possibility of China invading Taiwan, this issue is likely to become increasingly important.¹¹ These strikes are connected by another factor: they each used technologies frequently employed in modern warfare, including drone and missile strikes, supported by cyber operations. This fact highlights another issue: the current legal frameworks regarding the balance of war powers between the executive and legislative branches were not designed to take these technologies into account.

These technologies are connected by several common features that make congressional oversight of their usage by presidents more challenging. Expansive presidential unilateral war powers generate several concerns, including increased escalation risk, lack of long-term strategic planning, and decreased accountability to Congress. This analysis utilizes case studies of congressional oversight of drone strikes by the Obama Administration and the Department of Defense's 2018 offensive cyber strategy shift to explore these issues. These challenges are likely to impact congressional oversight of the second Trump Administration, 2025 to 2029.

The War Powers Struggle

The proper balance of war powers between the president and Congress is a consistent area of contestation between the executive and legislative branches, centering around three core

⁷ The Editorial Board, "The War Powers Irresolution," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/opinion/donald-trump-war-powers-senate-congress-venezuela-e801f43a?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWetsqesTPrqRwdRIIRCIFP0kH2KwVRmW5B_uwd1EdCJ0r9yX4w95EJldJGKr4tXLhY%3D&gaa_ts=6914d32d&gaa_sig=M1nvyIQWRqykBAU_7XRRB7_3LFYDlmU6U6f2yXk7-Q_7d8dn1yl6ZKxfVf27FMWKFnr-MN_ZS9XS_Lwx09Vd0g%3D%3D.

⁸ Frank Thorp V, "Senate rejects bipartisan resolution that would block Trump military action against Venezuela," *NBC News*, November 6, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/senate-rejects-resolution-block-trump-military-action-venezuela-rcna242485>.

⁹ Peppino DeBiaso, "Striking Iranian Nuclear Facilities: A vital U.S. Interest, not Altruism," *Information Series*, No. 631 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 1, 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/IS-631.pdf>, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ Heather Mongilio, "Operation Rough Rider," *USNI News*, April 29, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/04/29/operation-rough-rider>.

¹¹ Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, "Victory Denial: Deterrence in Support of Taiwan," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/OP-Vol.-2-No-3.pdf>, pp. 9-27; and, Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, "Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>, pp. 20-40.

sources of war powers authority: The Constitution, the 1973 WPR, and the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs).

Constitution

The Constitution divides war powers between the president and Congress. Article I, Section 8, grants Congress the power to declare war, grant letters of marque, fund the military, and regulate land and naval forces.¹² An initial draft of the Constitution granted Congress the power to “make war,” eventually changed to “declare war” to enable presidents to respond to sudden attacks.¹³ The presidents’ war powers are more ambiguous. Article II, Section 1 vests the president with the “executive power.”¹⁴ While Congress can declare war, the president is Commander-in-Chief, the highest-ranking military officer. Broadly, the system of war powers between the branches is designed to prevent either branch from acting unilaterally.

WPR

The 1973 WPR was passed by Congress in response to the Vietnam War.¹⁵ No president has accepted the WPR as constitutional.¹⁶ Section 2 declares the president can only enter into “hostilities” with respect to at least one of three conditions: one, when war has been declared; two, “specific statutory authorization”; or three, a national emergency.¹⁷ Section 3 requires presidents to consult with Congress “in every possible instance” prior to entering into “hostilities.”¹⁸ Section 5 creates a 60-day clock during which the president can use force unilaterally. This window can be extended another 30 days if the president certifies in writing to Congress that necessity requires U.S. forces remain engaged in “hostilities.” After this window closes, the president is required to withdraw forces if Congress has not affirmatively authorized this action.¹⁹ Theoretically, the WPR mandates substantial congressional involvement in the decision to use force.

¹² National Archives, “The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription,” <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>, Article I, Section 8.

¹³ Stephen P. Mulligan, “The Declare War Clause, Part 1: Overview and Introduction,” Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/LSB/LSB11230>, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Article II, Section 1.

¹⁵ Peter E. Quint, “The Separation of Powers Under Nixon: Reflections on Constitutional Liberties and the Rule of Law,” *Duke Law Journal*, 1981, No. 2 (February 1981). <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2763&context=dlj>, pp. 6-9.

¹⁶ Scott R. Anderson, “The Underappreciated Significance of the War Powers Resolution,” *Lawfare*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-underappreciated-legacy-of-the-war-powers-resolution>.

¹⁷ The War Powers Resolution, H.R. 542, 93rd Congress (1973), <https://www.congress.gov/93/statute/STATUTE-87/STATUTE-87-Pg555.pdf>, Section 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 5. Geoffrey Corn offers an excellent description of this section, highlighting its role as a fail-safe measure to retain congressional control over war powers. Geoffrey Corn, “Trump’s Latest Military Campaign Tests limits of

AUMFs

The 2001 AUMF was passed on September 18, 2001. The act authorizes the president to use “all necessary and appropriate force,” against “nations, persons, or organizations,” involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks, granting sweeping authority to presidents.²⁰ The 2002 AUMF authorizes the president to use all measures necessary to defend the United States against Iraq.²¹ More than 20 years after they were enacted, both AUMFs remain in effect (although at the time of this writing the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) would repeal the latter) and have been used to justify a wide variety of presidential actions.²²

The Proper War Powers Balance

As these debates and tensions show, the relevant authorities leave a large amount of room for debate regarding the best allocation of war powers. Some policymakers and scholars claim the president should possess primary influence over war powers. A common argument for this position is that the president is best equipped to take rapid and decisive action to defend national security while maintaining operational secrecy.²³ Others argue that Congress should possess primary authority, providing necessary deliberation to ensure uses of force are fully considered.²⁴ Additionally, the drafters of the Constitution were concerned that presidents, driven by a desire for fame, would use force purely to win public support.²⁵

Presidential War Powers,” *The Cipher Brief*, November 4, 2025, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/war-powers-caribbean-counternarcotics>.

²⁰ To Authorize the use of United States Armed Force against those responsible for the attacks against the United States, Pub. Law. 107-140, 107th Congress (September 2001), <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf#page73>, pp. 1-2.

²¹ To Authorize the use of Armed Force against Iraq. Pub. Law, 114, 107th Congress (October 2002), <https://www.congress.gov/107/statute/STATUTE-116/STATUTE-116-Pg1498.pdf#page73>, pp. 1-4.

²² Tim Kaine and Todd Young, “War, Diplomacy, and Congressional Involvement,” *Harvard Journal of Legislation*, 58, No. 1 (June 2021), https://journals.law.harvard.edu/jol/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2021/06/201_Kaine-Young.pdf, pp. 198-200; Patrick Hulme, “Repealing the 2002 Zombie AUMF(s),” *Lawfare*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/repealing-zombie-iraq-aumfs-clear-win-constitutional-hygiene-unlikely-end-forever-wars>; and, Matthew C. Waxman, “War Powers Reform: A Skeptical View,” *Yale Law Journal Forum*, March 8, 2024, https://www.yalelawjournal.org/pdf/WaxmanYLJForumEssay_uop6awkf.pdf, p. 683.

²³ Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist 70,” March 17, 1788, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed70.asp; and, Richard Cheney, “Address,” *Washington University Law Quarterly*, 68, No. 3 (Fall 1990), <https://journals.library.wustl.edu/lawreview/article/4984/galley/21817/view/>, p. 528; and, David J. Trachtenberg, “Clarifying the Issue of Nuclear Weapons Release Authority,” *Information Series*, No. 503 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2021), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-clarifying-the-issue-of-nuclear-weapons-release-authority-no-503-september-22-2021/, pp. 1-5.

²⁴ Jack Goldsmith and Matthew C. Waxman, “The Legal Legacy of Light Footprint Warfare,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 39, No. 2 (Summer 2016), https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/goldsmith_and_waxman.pdf, pp. 10-11.

²⁵ William Michael Treanor, “Fame, The Founders, and The Power to Declare War,” *Cornell Law Review*, 82, No. 1 (May 1997), <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2685&context=clr>, pp. 771-772.

Congressional involvement in war powers is required to ensure this desire does not lead to unwise military action.

The Rise of Drones and Cyber Operations

In recent years, a variety of emerging technologies, including drones and cyber operations, have played an increasingly important role in warfare. Unmanned aerial vehicles, known as drones, have played an increasing role in warfare since the War on Terror began. The United States has used drones since the Vietnam War. In 2000, a drone captured an image of Osama Bin Laden, prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.²⁶ After those attacks, drones emerged as a key tool of counterterrorism operations.

In recent years, cyber operations have posed increasing concerns. Cyberspace consists of multiple systems involved in maintaining the upkeep of computer networks and connections.²⁷ Offensive Cyber Operations (OCOs) are “any cyber activity which can have an effect on a computer system or network.”²⁸ OCOs seek to degrade or manipulate computers and computer networks while cyber espionage operations seek to gain action about adversary systems and intentions.²⁹

Three Factors

These technologies share three factors that make congressional influence over their usage particularly challenging.

First Factor: Speed of Action

Simply put, it takes time for Congress to effectively exercise war powers.³⁰ Additionally, under the WPR, the president can deploy forces and engage in “hostilities” for up to 90 days without needing express congressional approval. Due to the speed with which drone strikes and cyber operations can be conducted, a lot can happen in 90 days.

Second Factor: Legal Constraints

Most drone strikes and cyber operations do not rise to the level of “war,” which requires congressional authorization. For example, in 2011, the Office of Legal Council, a branch of

²⁶ John W. Rollins, “Armed Drones: Evolution as a Counterterrorism Tool,” Congressional Research Service, November 7, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12342>, p. 2.

²⁷ National Institute of Science and Technology, “Cyberspace,” <https://csrc.nist.gov/glossary/term/cyberspace>.

²⁸ Juliet Skingsley, “Offensive Cyber Operations,” Chatham House, September 19, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/offensive-cyber-operations/01-introduction>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ida A. Brudnick, “The Congressional Research Service and the American Legislative Process,” Congressional Research Service, April 12, 2011, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33471>, pp. 7-9.

the Justice Department dedicated to providing the president legal advice, argued the Obama Administration's support of a no-fly zone in Libya did not constitute a war because it was not a "prolonged and substantial military engagement" which exposed U.S. military personnel to "significant risk."³¹ The Obama Administration further argued this engagement did not rise to the level of "hostilities," meaning the WPR did not apply.³² This episode highlights the growing tension between the use of technology in modern warfare and existing authorities designed to regulate war powers.³³

Third Factor: Issue Placement in Congress

An additional challenge created by these ambiguities is what elements of Congress are best suited to conduct oversight of these operations. There is extensive debate regarding whether the Senate and House military or intelligence committees should be tasked with overseeing presidential actions. This challenge is intensified due to issues related to information sharing between committees, creating a patchwork of oversight authorities.³⁴

This analysis considers two case studies, the first dealing with congressional involvement in drone strikes conducted by the Obama Administration, 2009 to 2017, and the second addressing congressional oversight of presidential cyber policy during the first Trump Administration, 2017 to 2021, focusing particularly on the Department of Defense's (DOD's) shift toward a more offensive cyber strategy.

Drone Case Study

The Obama Administration made extensive use of drone strikes. While the exact number of strikes conducted by the administration is unclear, the number is likely around 500.³⁵ President Obama's strikes expanded outward from the prior Bush Administration's focus on Pakistan to include Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.³⁶ One drone strike drew particular focus. In September 2011, President Obama ordered a drone strike against Al-Qaeda cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki. The Obama Administration stated there was clear evidence

³¹ United States Department of Justice, "Authority to Use Military Force in Libya," April 14, 2011, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/opinions/2011/04/31/authority-military-use-in-libya.pdf>, p. 8.

³² "The Law: Military Operations in Syria: No War? No Hostilities," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 42, No. 1 (February 2012), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2012.03947.>, pp. 181-182.

³³ Eric Talbot Jensen, "War Powers Resolution and Future War," *Emory International Law Journal*, 29, No. 3 (December 2014), https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1240&context=faculty_scholarship, pp. 534-543.

³⁴ Oona A. Hathaway et al, "Congressional Oversight of Modern Warfare: History, Pathologies, and Prospects for Reform," *William and Mary Law Review*, 63, No. 4 (October 2021), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3914&context=wmlr>, pp. 150-160.

³⁵ Micah Zenko, "Obama's Final Drone Strike Data," Council on Foreign Relations, January 20, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/obamas-final-drone-strike-data>.

³⁶ Anna Holyan and Tobias T. Gibson, "Under Fire: Targeted Killings, UAVs, and Three American Presidents," in *Contextualizing Security: A Reader*, ed Tobias T. Gibson and Kurt W. Jefferson (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2022), p. 122.

that Al-Awlaki (a U.S. citizen) was inspiring attacks against the United States.³⁷ The strike led to intense controversy regarding the scope of presidential authority to conduct lethal drone operations, highlighting the limited role congressional engagement played in this decision.³⁸

On November 15, 2011, the Department of Justice produced a white paper which argued that a U.S. citizen could be targeted under three conditions. First, the individual had to pose an “imminent threat.” Second, the individual could not feasibly be captured. Finally, the strike had to be consistent with the law of war.³⁹ The memo defined “imminent threat” broadly, including the chance that a target was currently plotting lethal attacks.⁴⁰ This loose definition raised questions about when and how these guidelines were applied.⁴¹ In 2013, President Obama stated “his [Al-Awlaki’s] citizenship should no more serve as a shield than a sniper shooting down on an innocent crowd should be protected from a SWAT team.”⁴² On July 1, 2016, Obama issued an executive order mandating the government publish a yearly report detailing the number of drone strikes and associated civilian casualties.⁴³

Congressional Responses

This section describes three ways Congress responded to the Obama Administration’s use of drones. First, multiple members of Congress pressured the Obama Administration to be more transparent regarding drone strikes. During a House Judiciary Committee hearing, ranking member John Conyers (D-MI) stated committee members had sent President Obama letters requesting memos which formed the basis of the 2011 Justice Department white paper regarding the targeting of Al-Awlaki, but that these requests had been denied.⁴⁴

At the start of a Senate Judiciary hearing on drones, held April 23, 2013, former committee chairman Dick Durban (D-IL) stated the committee had received these memos.⁴⁵ In March 2013, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) filibustered the confirmation hearing

³⁷ BBC, “Islamist cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki killed in Yemen,” September 30, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15121879>.

³⁸ Tobias T. Gibson, “Bring Back The Drone Debate, Sen. Paul,” *The Hill*, April 21, 2015, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/defense/239483-bring-back-the-drone-debate-sen-paul/>.

³⁹ United States Department of Justice, “Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a U.S. Citizen Who is a Senior Operational Leader of Al-Qaeda or an associated force,” November 15, 2011, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/oip/legacy/2014/07/23/dept-white-paper.pdf>, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Justice, “Lawfulness,” op. cit., pp. 7-8.

⁴¹ Holyan and Gibson, “Under Fire,” op. cit., p. 124.

⁴² The White House, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” May 23, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

⁴³ United States White House, “Executive Order-United States Policy on Pre- and Post-Measures to Address Civilian Casualties In U.S. Operations Involving The Use of Force,” July 1, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/01/executive-order-united-states-policy-pre-and-post-strike-measures>.

⁴⁴ Drones And The War On Terror: When Can the U.S. Target American Citizens Overseas, House Committee on Oversight and Reform, 113th Congress (2013), <https://www.congress.gov/113/chrg/CHRG-113hhr79585/CHRG-113hhr79585.pdf>, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

of Central Intelligence Agency director John Brennan for 13 hours, vowing to keep talking until the Obama Administration confirmed whether it had the legal authority to kill a U.S. citizen on American soil.⁴⁶

Congress members proposed a variety of bills restricting various aspects of the Obama Administration's drone program. The first group of bills prevented the administration from targeting U.S. citizens.⁴⁷ The second group of bills focused on limiting the ability of the Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Homeland Security to conduct drone strikes.⁴⁸ None of these bills succeeded. While certain Congress members sought tighter restrictions on drone policy during Obama's eight years in office, Congress did not support these efforts.

Between 2008 and 2017, Congress held four hearings regarding drone strikes. The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held the first two hearings in Spring 2010.⁴⁹ The Senate and House Judiciary Committees each held one hearing in 2013.⁵⁰ These hearings highlighted concerns related to the degree to which the 2001 AUMF applied to drone strikes, the degree of transparency regarding these strikes, and strategic concerns related to the effectiveness of these strikes in eliminating terrorist threats.⁵¹ However, in spite of Congress discussing these issues, no legislation directly resulted from these hearings, meaning they were ultimately of limited importance.⁵²

On balance, congressional responses to Obama era drone policy were lacking. While there were multiple attempts to pass legislation limiting drone strike authorities, none of these efforts were successful. Even though the Congress repeatedly pressured the Obama Administration to release more specific details regarding various drone policies, transparency concerns remained throughout the remainder of Obama's time in office. While the four congressional hearings held in 2010 and 2013 raised many of these concerns, they were only marginally useful.

This case study reveals multiple challenges relating to the scope of the 2001 AUMF. Much of the debate and discussion throughout the four congressional hearings centered on

⁴⁶ Carrie Johnson, "When Rand Paul Ended Filibuster, He Left Drones On Center Stage," *NPR*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/10/173864536/when-rand-paul-ended-filibuster-he-left-drones-on-national-stage>.

⁴⁷ To prohibit the use of drones to kill citizens of the United States within the United States, S. R. 505, 113th Congress (2013), <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/s505/BILLS-113s505pcs.pdf>, pp. 1-4. To prohibit the use of drones to kill citizens within the United States, H.R. 1242, 113 Congress (2013), <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/hr1242/BILLS-113hr1242ih.pdf>, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸ Drone Accountability Act, H.R. 1283, 113th Congress (2015), <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/hr2183/BILLS-113hr2183ih.pdf>, pp. 1-4.

⁴⁹ Rise of The Drones: Unmanned Systems And The Future Of War, House Committee on Oversight and Reform, 111th Congress (2010), https://irp.fas.org/congress/2010_hr/drones1.pdf, 7, p. 7. Rise Of the Drones Part II: The Legality of Unmanned Killing, House Committee on Oversight and Reform, 111th Congress (2010), <https://www.congress.gov/111/chrg/CHRG-111hhr64922/CHRG-111hhr64922.pdf>, pp. 7-20.

⁵⁰ Drones and the, p. 113; and, *Drone Wars: The Constitutional and Ethical Implications of Targeted Killing*, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 113th Congress (2013), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg26147/pdf/CHRG-113shrg26147.pdf>, pp. 8-16.

⁵¹ Pages 40-45 of my thesis describe these hearings in more detail.

⁵² This lack of action highlights the fact that mere oversight is not enough to produce effective changes.

whether the 2001 AUMF authorized drone strikes against terrorist targets outside of countries (such as Afghanistan) where the United States was actively engaged in armed conflict. This issue ties into the question of what counts as “hostilities” under the WPR, because drones enable uses of force without requiring troop presence in a given area. The scope and application of the 2001 AUMF and WPR to drone warfare remains highly contested.

A central theme throughout proposed legislation and congressional hearings was whether the DOD should exclusively conduct drone strikes. This issue hints at the broader question of what congressional committees should deal with drone related issues. If drone strikes are best considered covert action, it could make sense for the Senate and House Intelligence Committees to have primary oversight responsibility. However, if these strikes are best considered as military action, the Senate and House Armed Services Committees (SASC and HASC) could have a better oversight claim. Daniel E. Rosenthal, former director of Counterterrorism at the National Security Council, writes “while the DOD may go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the armed services committee receives ... information... the DOD may completely ignore ... requests by the intelligence committees.”⁵³ Additionally, because information regarding drone programs is stovepiped, no single committee has access to all relevant information.⁵⁴ Overall, the second and third factors, as previously noted, appear to have played a substantial role in undermining congressional efforts to influence drone policy throughout Obama’s two terms.

Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward Case Study

In 2018, under the first Trump Administration, the DOD adopted a new, assertive posture in cyberspace, Persistent Engagement via Defending Forward. Defend Forward focuses on increased offensive action in cyberspace.⁵⁵ This engagement seeks to force attackers to pour more resources into defensive actions.⁵⁶ President Trump reportedly signed a presidential directive granting the DOD increased authority to conduct OCOs to enable this posture.⁵⁷ Defend Forward is part of the broader concept of Persistent Engagement, which seeks to

⁵³ Rosenthal, “Congress Perhaps.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ United States Department of Defense, “2018 Cyber Strategy,” 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658/-1/-1/1/cyber_strategy_summary_final.pdf, pp. 6-7; and, United States Cyber Command, “Achieve and Maintain Cyber Superiority,” March 2018, <https://www.cybercom.mil/Portals/56/Documents/USCYBERCOM%20Vision%20April%202018.pdf>, p. 6.

⁵⁶ United States Cyber Command, “Achieve and Maintain Cyber Superiority,” March 2018, <https://www.cybercom.mil/Portals/56/Documents/USCYBERCOM%20Vision%20April%202018.pdf>, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Mark Pomerleau, “Two years in, how has a new cyber strategy changed cyber operations,” *C4ISRNET*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/dod/2019/11/11/two-years-in-how-has-a-new-strategy-changed-cyber-operations/>.

engage adversaries proactively and consistently.⁵⁸ This overarching concept was maintained under the Biden Administration.⁵⁹

The classical deterrence framework (via punishment and denial) does not clearly apply to cyberspace for multiple reasons.⁶⁰ First, due to the number of possible attack surfaces in cyberspace, under most circumstances, if an adversary is determined enough to attack a given target, the attack will eventually succeed.⁶¹ Second, attribution is a famous challenge in cyberspace. If the United States is unable to effectively attribute an attack to a given actor, the credibility of deterrence by punishment will be severely degraded.⁶² Third, many cyberattacks do not rise to the level of impact that would credibly entail a kinetic response, while it is extremely challenging to figure out appropriate counter responses in cyberspace to a given attack. As a result, it is hard to create red lines which adversaries know not to cross if they wish to avoid escalation.⁶³ Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward are based on the view that these challenges mean that relying on traditional deterrence in cyberspace will be ineffective at preventing attack.⁶⁴ A new framework is needed to effectively advance U.S. security in cyberspace.

Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward offer this new framework. In addition to seeking to deter cyberattacks which rise to the level of a kinetic use of force, cyber operators should constantly engage adversarial networks, seeking to undermine these actors, along with gaining intelligence which can be used to limit the effectiveness of adversary attacks.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Paul M. Nakasone and Michael Sulmeyer, "How to compete in cyberspace," *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-25/cybersecurity>.

⁵⁹ United States Department of Defense, "2023 Cyber Strategy," 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Sep/12/2003299076/-1/-1/1/2023_DOD_Cyber_Strategy_Summary.PDF, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁰ Payne offers a description of the fundamental concepts inherent in deterrence. "the basic principle of deterrence as applied to international relations in general is *not* complicated: a latent threat is posed with the expectation that an opponent may decide, via its calculation of cost, benefit, and risk, not to take an action for fear of that latent threat." Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is more Difficult," *Information Series*, No. 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IS-527.pdf>, p. 2.

⁶¹ Martin C. Libicki, "Cyberdeterrence and Cyberwar," RAND Cooperation, 2009, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG877.pdf, pp. 13-24.

⁶² Jon R. Lindsey, "Tipping the Scales: The attribution problem and the feasibility of deterrence against cyber attacks," *Journal of Cyberpolicy*, 1, No. 1 (September 2015), <https://academic.oup.com/cybersecurity/article/1/1/53/2354517#37861698>, pp. 61-66; Timothy M. McKenzie, "Is Cyber Deterrence Possible," *Fundamentals of Cyber Power*, 2017, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Nov/20/2001846608/-1/-1/0/CPP_0004_MCKENZIE_CYBER_DERRENCE.PDF, pp. 8-9; and, William Banks, "Cyber Attribution and State Responsibility," *International Law Studies*, 97, 2021, <https://digitalcommons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2980&context=ils>, pp. 1046-1048.

⁶³ Thomas Van de Velde, "Cyber Deterrence is Dead. Long Live Integrated Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 109, No. 3 (Fall 2023), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-109/jfq-109_41-50_Van-de-Velde.pdf, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁴ Thomas F. Lynch, "Forward Persistence in Cyber Great Power Competition," *Cyber Defense Review*, Fall 2024, https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/2024-Fall/Lynch_CDRV9N3-Fall-2024.pdf, pp. 87-90.

⁶⁵ There is a clear tension between Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward and traditional understandings of deterrence. The exact contours of how this tension should be resolved in strategic discussions has been lacking in DOD public discussion. As Jon Lindsey and Eric Gartzke write "cyber warriors find themselves in the awkward position of explaining how cyber contributes to "integrated deterrence." Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsey, "The U.S. Department of Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-u-s-department-of-deterrence/>.

Over time, the intensity of cyber conflict will be reduced, as adversaries have to spend more time defending their own networks, rather than attacking the United States, hopefully leading to a more stable equilibrium of conflict intensity.⁶⁶ While the logic of Defend Forward is plausible, this strategy has several possible downsides.

The first, and perhaps most obvious risk associated with Persistent Engagement via Defend Forward is unintended escalation.⁶⁷ Just because a cyber attack is perceived by the United States to be mildly escalatory does not mean that an adversary will perceive this action similarly. One pair of scholars, Jason Healy and Robert Jervis, argue that increased offensive action in cyberspace could generate intense and perhaps unintended escalation, especially when combined with existing geopolitical tension. They ask, “states are getting closer to crossing the threshold of death and major destruction outside of wartime. How long until one state, through mistake, miscalculation, or maliciousness crosses that line?”⁶⁸ To be clear, the risk of escalation must be balanced against the potential benefits of a given cyber operation.⁶⁹ The second concern regards the impact of Persistent Engagement via Defending Forward on allies. Without close and clear lines of communication, allies could feel they are being entangled in U.S. cyber operations, leading to increased friction.⁷⁰ The final, and perhaps most basic concern, is how will Defend Forward’s success or failure be measured? In order to determine if a strategy is working, one has to have metrics for success. Jason Healey worries this lack of metrics could lead to “some future cyber general [echoing] what seems a constant refrain in other US ... wars: We’re turning the corner in Iraq/Afghanistan/cyberspace ... we just need more resources and fewer constraints.”⁷¹

Overall, Persistent Engagement, driven by Defending Forward, is a logical and coherent cyber strategy, with several possible downsides, including unintended escalation, allied friction, and lack of metrics. Each of these downsides offers support for Congress to be involved with overseeing this strategy. The 2018 through 2020 NDAs offer more insight into how Congress sought to influence cyber policy.

⁶⁶ Jason Healey, “The implications and logic of persistent (and permanent) engagement in cyberspace,” *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 5, No. 1 (2019), <https://academic.oup.com/cybersecurity/article/5/1/tyz008/5554878>, pp. 6-8.

⁶⁷ There is a rich discussion of escalation and cyberspace. For a few examples, Rebecca Hersman, “Wormhole Escalation In The New Nuclear Age,” *Texas National Security Review*, 3, No. 3 (Summer 2020), <https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/>, pp. 94-100; Martin C. Libicki and Oles Tkacheva, “Cyberspace Escalation: Ladders or Lattices,” NATO Defense Center For Cyber Excellence, https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2020/12/3-Cyberspace-Escalation-Ladders-or-Lattices_ebook.pdf, pp. 1-13; Jason Healy and Virantpap Vikram Singh, “Amplifiers and Dampeners of Cyber Escalation,” *War on the Rocks*, March 19, 2025, https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2020/12/3-Cyberspace-Escalation-Ladders-or-Lattices_ebook.pdf.

⁶⁸ Jason Healey and Robert Jervis, “The Escalation Inversion And Other Oddities Of Situational Cyber Stability,” *Texas National Security Review*, 3 (2020). <https://tnsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TNSR-Vol3-Iss4-Healey-and-Jervis.pdf>, p. 32; and, Bailey, “Offensive,” 249.

⁶⁹ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for this point. This balancing act is extremely complex and warrants further discussion which this piece cannot engage with, due to space constraints.

⁷⁰ Max Smeets, “Cyber Command’s Strategy Risks Friction With Allies,” *Lawfare*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/cyber-commands-strategy-risks-friction-allies>.

⁷¹ Healey, “Implications,” 11; Jacquelyn Schneider, “The Cyberspace Solarium Commission,” *Lawfare*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/persistent-engagement-foundation-evolution-and-evaluation-strategy>.

2018 NDAA

Section 1631 modified Title 10 of the U.S. Code to require the Secretary of Defense to submit a report of any “sensitive military cyber operation,” conducted within 48 hours to the “congressional defense committees.” The provision contained a section stating this requirement did not apply to covert action.⁷² Section 1632 included a notification requirement, mandating the Secretary of Defense provide a quarterly briefing to congressional defense committees regarding cyber activities.⁷³ Section 1633 required the president to send a report to Congress regarding U.S. cyber posture, including efforts to develop offensive cyber capabilities.⁷⁴ Overall, the 2018 NDAA demonstrates that Congress sought to enhance oversight of cyber operations.

2019 and 2020 NDAAs

Section 1632 of the 2019 NDAA states the Secretary of Defense has authority to conduct cyber operations under the level of “hostilities.” Section C states that clandestine military operations in cyberspace count as traditional military activities and that the Secretary of Defense must report these operations to the congressional defense committees.⁷⁵ Additional sections mandate enhanced U.S. focus on preventing damaging cyber attacks.⁷⁶ The 2020 NDAA modified the notification requirement by mandating that only activities which had a medium to high degree of risk needed to be reported.⁷⁷ Because of this activity, much cyber activity was placed outside of the oversight framework established by the 2018 and 2019 NDAAs.

NDAA Critiques

These provisions overall expanded DOD authority to conduct OCOs while limiting oversight via three mechanisms. First, the WPR does not apply to most OCOs, meaning these activities would not be covered under the legislation.⁷⁸ Second, the covert action statute, meant to oversee intelligence related activities, does not apply to most cyber activities. The 2019

⁷² National Defense Authorization for Fiscal Year 2018, Pub. L. No., 2810, 115th Congress (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/115/statute/STATUTE-131/STATUTE-131-Pg1283.pdf>, Section 1631.

⁷³ Ibid, Section 1632.

⁷⁴ Ibid, Section 1633.

⁷⁵ National Defense Authorization for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No., 5515, 116th Congress (2019), <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr5515/BILLS-115hr5515enr.pdf>, Section 1636.

⁷⁶ Ibid, Section 1636-1642.

⁷⁷ National Defense Authorization for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 1790, 117th Congress (2020), <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ92/PLAW-116publ92.pdf>, Section 1642. Due to the highly uncertain nature of cyberspace, it can be challenging to determine what counts as a “medium or high risk” operation.

⁷⁸ Gaudion, “Answering,” p. 155; Jensen, “Future,” p. 54; and, Bailey, “Offensive,” pp. 259-260; Ashley Deeks, “Will Cyber Autonomy Undermine Democratic Accountability,” *International Law Studies*, 96 (2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2929&context=ils>, pp. 479-485.

NDAAs declares that most cyber activities count as traditional military activities, therefore are not subject to the covert action statute.⁷⁹ Third, due to the 2020 NDAAs notification requirement modification, most cyber activities (those deemed to not be medium or high risk), would not be covered under the 2018 NDAAs's 48-hour reporting requirement.⁸⁰

Successive NDAA's lacked provisions enhancing congressional oversight of U.S. cyber policy. Meanwhile, the Biden Administration maintained the concepts of Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward in the 2023 Cyber Strategy,⁸¹ while placing them under the broader umbrella of "integrated deterrence," which "combines every military, economic, and political capability possessed by the United States and its allies in a purposeful way to deter major ...threats to the rules-based order."⁸² President Trump has not yet revealed whether his administration intends to retain this concept.⁸³

Overall, Congress pushed for an assertive cyber strategy, while undermining oversight needed to ensure this strategy is effective. While the 2018 NDAAs required briefings regarding relevant cyber activities, successive legislation degraded this requirement. Congressional oversight is needed to ensure strategic effectiveness for several reasons.⁸⁴ First, mandating that officials involved in cyber strategy and policy defend the logic of their actions helps ensure that cyber strategy and policy is based on clear and compelling logic.⁸⁵ Additionally, oversight can force proponents of Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward to engage critics in public and private settings.⁸⁶ Second, Congress can use oversight to determine if the amount of money delegated to DOD cyber operations is sufficient.⁸⁷ Third,

⁷⁹ Deeks, "Will," op. cit., p. 485.

⁸⁰ Gaudion, "Answering," op. cit., p. 163.

⁸¹ United States Department of Defense, "Summary of 2023 cyber strategy," 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Sep/12/2003299076/-1/-1/1/2023_DOD_Cyber_Strategy_Summary.pdf, pp. 1-2. Emerson T. Brooking and Erica Lonergan, "Welcome to Cyber Realism," *War on the Rocks*, September 25, 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/welcome-to-cyber-realism-parsing-the-2023-department-of-defense-cyber-strategy/>.

⁸² James J. Writs and Jeffrey A. Larson, "Wanted: A strategy to integrate deterrence," *Defense and Security Analysis*, 40 (2024). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14751798.2024.2352943>, p. 361; and, United States Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy," 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>, pp. 8-14.

⁸³ For discussion on whether integrated deterrence is likely to be retained, see Jeffrey A. Larson and James J. Wirtz, "Obstacles to Integrating Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 117 (2025). <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1239&context=joint-force-quarterly>, pp. 14-20.

⁸⁴ Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who made me consider this point.

⁸⁵ Todd Garvey, Mark J. Oleszek, and Ben Wilhelm, "Congressional Oversight and Investigations," Congressional Research Service, December 3, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF10015/IF10015.6.pdf, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Chuck Grassley, President pro tempore of the Senate, makes this point in a different context. Chuck Grassley, "Chuck Grassley on the importance of Congressional Oversight," June 25, 2018, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/grassley-on-the-importance-and-responsibility-of-congressional-oversight>. Possible critiques of Persistent Engagement and Defend Forward include that it does not effectively explain what role deterrence should play in cyber strategy, risks unintended escalation, and lacks clearly definable goals.

⁸⁷ For an in-depth treatment of the complexities raised by the power of the purse in foreign affairs, see Zachary S. Price, "Funding Restrictions and Separation of Powers," *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 71, No. 1 (2018), <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=vlr>, pp. 365-378. For a recent

oversight enables Congress to determine if it needs to mandate additional policies and resources to enhance U.S. security in cyberspace. Overall, while Defend Forward and Persistent Engagement are a sound cyber strategy in theory, the lack of clearly defined measures of success and failure undermines an effective cost/benefit assessment of the strategy. Given the role that the cyber domain is likely to play in future conflicts, this assessment is needed.

It is important to note that OCOs rely on a large degree of secrecy to be effective.⁸⁸ For example, if China becomes aware the United States has penetrated a given network, China can increase focus on this network, looking for ways to protect it from intrusion. As such, the more information regarding U.S. offensive capabilities that is released publicly, the more these capabilities could be degraded. As a result, much congressional cyber engagement should be classified, to reduce the harm this information could do to national security. At the same time, due to the importance of U.S. cyber strategy to U.S. citizens, some degree of public transparency should be maintained. The exact place to draw this line between secrecy and accountability is outside the scope of this analysis.

Analysis

There was little direct discussion in materials reviewed regarding speed of action as a major concern in cyber operations. However, the discussion of the 48-hour reporting requirement could raise similar concerns to the 90-day clock contained in the WPR⁸⁹ because of how much cyber activity can occur within 48 hours.

Traditional means of regulating military force might not apply to OCOs, as these operations typically do not rise to the level of a use of force.⁹⁰ This line blurring contributes to challenges relating to what congressional committees are best suited to oversee military uses of OCOs and other emerging technologies. This tension stands out in the debate over

example, see James Fitzgerald, "Congress ups Pressure to release boat strikes video," *BBC News*, December 9, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c773de38p2go>.

⁸⁸ For more on the impact of secrecy on deterrence, see Jason Healy and Robert Jervis, "Over classification and Its Impact On Cyber Conflict And Democracy," Modern War Institute, March 22, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/overclassification-and-its-impact-on-cyber-conflict-and-democracy/>; and, Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay, "The U.S. Department of Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-u-s-department-of-deterrence/>. For more on challenges related to oversight and classification, see Oona A. Hathaway, "Secrecy's End," *Minnesota Law Review*, 106 (2021). https://minnesotalawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/3-Hathaway_MLR.pdf, pp. 691-801. Of course, congressional oversight increases the risk of leaks which can undermine national security. The more congress members and associated staff are read in on a given operation, the greater this risk. While important, this challenge is outside the scope of this piece.

⁸⁹ War Powers Resolution, Section 2.

⁹⁰ For one prominent U.S. statement of when a cyber attack could count as a use of force, see Harold Koh, "International Law in Cyberspace," United States Department of State, September 18, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/197924.htm>.

whether cyber activities are best described as military activity or covert action.⁹¹ On balance, this case study suggests Congress should reevaluate existing mechanisms for overseeing and shaping cyber strategy.

Why Do These Trends Matter?

The prior discussion gives rise to a natural question: Why should Congress seek to become more engaged in war powers? First, as the case studies highlight, there are multiple strategic concerns associated with drone strikes and OCOs. These issues, such as the effectiveness of drone strikes in reducing terrorism versus their potential for generating blowback which could harm U.S. security deserve congressional scrutiny. Second, these technologies have enhanced the ability of presidents to conduct offensive operations without clear paths toward congressional scrutiny and accountability, increasing the risk that injustices occur. Third, due to the lack of clear escalation thresholds in cyberspace, Defend Forward and Persistent Engagement could inadvertently generate aggressive adversarial responses that ultimately undermine U.S. cyber security.⁹² This same risk applies to kinetic military action as well. For example, Trump's ongoing strikes against drug boats could spark a response from Venezuela that drags the U.S. into a broader military engagement in Latin America.⁹³ Escalation risk is not intrinsically harmful, however Congress should play a role in ensuring such risk is justified.⁹⁴

Recommendations

There are four sets of recommendations Congress should consider to address these concerns.

Modify the WPR

The WPR should be modified to effectively encompass the range of technologies used in modern conflict. First, the word "capabilities" should be added to the discussion of armed forces.⁹⁵ Second, violations of sovereignty, should be added as a trigger for the WPR's 90-day

⁹¹ Joshua Rovner, "Cyber War as an Intelligence Contest," *War on the Rocks*, September 16, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/cyber-war-as-an-intelligence-contest/#:~:text=The%20cyberspace%20competition%20is%20an,and%20stealing%20information%20from%20rivals.>

⁹² Healey and Jervis, "The Escalation Inversion," op. cit., pp. 34-43.

⁹³ Roxanna Vigil, "U.S. Military Boat Strikes Escalate Tension with Venezuela," Council on Foreign Relations, September 9, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/us-militarys-boat-strike-escalates-tensions-venezuela>.

⁹⁴ Charles Richard and Robert Peters, "Escalation: A Tool to be Considered, not Dismissed," *Information Series*, No. 600 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2, 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/IS-600.pdf>, pp. 5-7.

⁹⁵ The article uses the phrasing "personnel, supplies, or capabilities are introduced or effectuated." Jensen, "Future," op. cit., p. 552.

clock, along with hostilities.⁹⁶ A violation of sovereignty should be considered an action intended to produce nonconsensual military relevant impacts in another country's territory.⁹⁷ Additionally, this modification should state that sovereignty would only be violated per the WPR if the action was intended to cause an effect, rather than generate information that could be used to cause an effect in the future. This change would help ensure the WPR remained focused on war powers, not intelligence operations.⁹⁸ Additionally, Section 2, subsection C of the resolution should be modified to state that the president can undertake unilateral action in cases of imminent threats, where there is "necessity of self-defense, instant, and overwhelming, [which] leav[es] no choice of means and no moment of deliberation."⁹⁹ This revision should further state that if a president acts according to this provision Congress must be informed of the evidence supporting this justification within 48 hours of operation commencement.¹⁰⁰ Making this change would grant presidents the authority to act when Congress cannot due to time constraints.

Repeal the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs

The 2001 and 2002 AUMFs have outlived their usefulness.¹⁰¹ In response, Congress should repeal and replace these authorizations with a narrowly targeted AUMF that authorizes the president to pursue action against specific terrorist groups, in a clearly defined geographic area, for 3 to 5 years, with the option for renewal. Multiple DOD officials have argued against this legislative change.¹⁰² One argument for keeping the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs is that terrorist threats can arise anywhere, anytime, meaning a more limited AUMF could undermine U.S. national security. However, a new AUMF should still be created for three reasons. First, the national security benefits from the current AUMFs might not outweigh the potential harm done to separation of powers from this language being contorted.¹⁰³ Second,

⁹⁶ Ibid, pp. 552-554.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 554. This wording is intended to give the president freedom of action regarding other tools of statecraft outside military power.

⁹⁸ This wording is not perfect, and would likely generate controversy regarding how it should best be applied. This recommendation is intended to improve on the status quo, not be a perfect solution.

⁹⁹ Matthew C. Waxman, "The 'Caroline' Affair in the Evolving International Law of Self-Defense," *Lawfare*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/caroline-affair>. The other modifications described in this section, along with enhanced U.S. congressional oversight, are needed to ensure this clause does not become distorted.

¹⁰⁰ This statement should explain why the relevant (and clearly defined) threat arose so quickly there was not enough time for the U.S. Congress to respond.

¹⁰¹ Bradley and Goldsmith, "AUMF Legacy," op. cit., pp. 636-638.

¹⁰² Matthew C. Weed, "The 2001 AUMF: Issues Concerning its Continuing Application," Congressional Research Service, April 14, 2015, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43983.pdf>, p. 12; and, Terri Moon Cronk, "Mattis: AUMF Authorizations Remain Sound," *DOD News*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1358069/mattis-military-force-authorizations-remain-sound/>.

¹⁰³ Gene Healy and John Glaser, "Repeal, Don't replace the 2001 AUMF," *CATO Institute Policy Journal*, July/August 2018, <https://www.cato.org/policy-report/july/august-2018/repeal-dont-replace-aumf>; Oona A. Hathaway, "Replacing the 2001 AUMF: Opening statement," April 9, 2021, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3808779, pp. 1-3. For a description of this overall debate, see Kenneth Katzman et al, "The Islamic State Crisis and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, February 11, 2015,

the “imminent attack” change to the WPR would cover situations where a terrorist group not covered under the new AUMF had to be quickly targeted, while requiring the president to explain the reasoning behind these strikes to Congress. Third, Congress can add a new group or geographical area to the AUMF if needed. A carefully crafted AUMF could effectively enable the president to defend national security, while maintaining effective congressional engagement in war powers. Congress has taken a preliminary step in this direction by repealing the 2002 AUMF via the 2026 NDAA, though it did not authorize a new AUMF.¹⁰⁴

Drone Case Study Specific Recommendations

One major challenge identified in the first case study is that drone strikes do not neatly fall under the existing division between intelligence and armed forces oversight in Congress. This issue can undermine the effectiveness of oversight efforts. In response, Congress should consider centralizing authorization to conduct kinetic drone strikes meant to eliminate terrorists and terrorist supporters as part of the War on Terror within the DOD. New SASC and HASC subcommittees should be created to address strategic, legal, and ethical issues related to these targeted killing operations.¹⁰⁵ This division, while not perfect, would likely enable stronger oversight by reducing the challenges related to information stovepiping between defense and intelligence committees, denying any one committee full access to the information needed to effectively conduct oversight. Taken in conjunction with legislation to centralize targeted killing authority within the DOD, this proposal could help center drone oversight efforts more clearly, enhancing overall oversight.¹⁰⁶

https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20150211_R43612_c6248653f2c76dd3d7123e4c2d7e770f16e0e11b.pdf, pp. 25-33.

¹⁰⁴ “Kaine & Young Applaud Inclusion of Bipartisan Legislation to Formally End Iraq Wars in FY26 NDAA,” *Kaine.senate.gov*, December 8, 2025, <https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/kaine-and-young-applaud-inclusion-of-bipartisan-legislation-to-formally-end-iraq-wars-in-fy26-ndaa>.

¹⁰⁵ The language about targeting of individuals is meant to exclude drones which are used for information gathering purposes. More broadly, drones play an increasing role in modern warfare. The drone discussion in this piece is limited to the sort of targeted killing program undertaken by the Obama Administration, not drone usage in an active combat scenario, such as in defense of Taiwan. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for making me consider this point. For a discussion of drone usage in modern conflict, see Noah Robertson, “Replicator: An Inside Look at the Pentagon’s ambitious drone program,” *Defense News*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2023/12/19/replicator-an-inside-look-at-the-pentagons-ambitious-drone-program/>; Stacie Pettyjohn, “Evolution Not Revolution: Drone warfare in Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine,” Center For New American Security, February 2024, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-Defense-Ukraine-Drones-Final.pdf>, pp. 1-67; and, Stacie Pettyjohn, Hannah Demis, and Molly Campbell, “Swarms over the Strait: Drones in a future fight over Taiwan,” Center for New American Security, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/swarms-over-the-strait>, pp. 1-100.

¹⁰⁶ This proposal seeks to reduce this challenge, rather than solve it. One committee will not be able to cover all aspects of drone warfare. However, this change would remove some complications associated with coordinating between the defense and intelligence committees.

Defend Forward Specific Recommendations

Congress should consider passing legislation mandating that OCOs only be conducted by the DOD. This change would enable oversight authorities regarding cyber operations to be more centralized, enabling the SASC and HASC to gain a better overall picture of the overall state of cyber operations. Following this change, the SASC and HASC subcommittees focused on cyber operations should lead two sets of actions to enhance effective oversight of Defend Forward and Persistent Engagement. First, DOD cyber officials should be pressured to provide clear metrics via which the success or failure of Persistent Engagement via Defending Forward can be measured, in a mix of classified and unclassified settings.¹⁰⁷ Second, Congress should consider requiring a quarterly briefing regarding all OCOs, not just ones deemed to be “medium to high risk.”¹⁰⁸ By taking these steps, Congress could more fully assess the risks and benefits of the current U.S. cyber strategy along with generating more insight into the exact scope of cyber operations.

None of these proposed reforms are perfect. Reforming the WPR and repealing and replacing the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs could create multiple interpretative challenges.¹⁰⁹ While increased oversight of presidential war powers could increase congressional knowledge of administration activities, without clear actions by Congress in response, the impact of this increased knowledge could be limited. Still, these combined measures would place Congress in a stronger position to reassert influence regarding war powers.

Conclusion

Emerging technologies, including drones and cyber operations have changed the way in which modern warfare is conducted. The Constitution, the 1973 WPR, and the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs do not effectively address the complex challenges raised by emerging technology. As a result, the ability of Congress to effectively engage in the war powers struggle has been undermined. By pursuing the above sets of policy recommendations, Congress can place itself in a better position to engage with war powers in the current age.

Certain members of Congress want to move in this direction. In March 2023, the Senate voted to repeal the 2002 AUMF, an effort led by a bipartisan pair of senators, Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Todd Young (R-IN).¹¹⁰ The bipartisan nature of this effort reflects the understanding that war powers engagement can and should transcend partisanship. In September 2025,

¹⁰⁷ Possible metrics include the rate and intensity of attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure networks, examples of unintended escalation from U.S. OCOs, and measures of the amount of time and effort that actors spend trying to attack U.S. systems.

¹⁰⁸ The wording “should consider” is used in case the number of OCOs is too large for effective briefing, forcing these briefs to focus on the most important operations.

¹⁰⁹ Any new AUMF should be careful to clarify which groups and geographic regions U.S. presidents can target, within what timeline.

¹¹⁰ Tim Kaine, “Kaine and Young Applaud passage of Senate 2001 and 1992 AUMF repeal, Formally end Iraq and Gulf Wars,” March 29, 2023, https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/kaine-and-young-applaud-senate-passage-of-their-bill-to-repeal-1991_2002-aumfs-formally-end-gulf--iraq-wars.

the House passed the 2026 NDAA, containing a provision repealing the 2002 AUMF¹¹¹ and this repeal was included in the final version of the Fiscal Year 2026 NDAA. The combination of these two votes could soon mean the formal repeal of the 2002 AUMF. While the practical impact of this appeal could be limited, this action would send a clear signal that Congress actively sought to reclaim war powers authority, an act of “constitutional hygiene.”¹¹² However, more work remains to be done to turn this intention signaling into actual, substantive action.

Blaine Ravert is a Spring 2025 graduate of Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. This article is a condensed and somewhat modified version of his Master's thesis.

¹¹¹ Ellen Mitchell, “House passes defense policy bill with proposal to repeal Iraq war authorizations,” *The Hill*, 10 September 2025, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5497564-house-passes-defense-bill/>.

¹¹² Hulme, “Repealing,” op. cit.



ANALYSIS

A NEW LATIN AMERICAN POLICY: THE TRUMP DOCTRINE OR A TRUMP COROLLARY?

Santiago Spadilero

Introduction

In January of 2025, President Donald J. Trump inaugurated his second term by promising to “Make America Great Again” and protect it from its “enemies from within.”¹ These enemies include not only, as stated by the president, radical, left-leaning groups, but also illegal immigrants stemming from Latin America. A White House fact sheet, published two days after the presidential inauguration, states that, “Today, President Trump signed an Executive Order that suspends the physical entry of aliens engaged in an invasion of the United States through the southern border.”² This was then translated into different actions, policies, and decisions that brought the Western Hemisphere, or in other words, the Americas, back into prominence. This was done in response to the belief that the United States had prioritized power projection overseas for too long, instead of attending to its own hemisphere. This allowed criminal organizations and record migration flows to threaten the very safety of the nation.³

In December of the same year, the Trump Administration released its National Security Strategy (NSS), which placed this continent at the top of the list of regions of concern. Moreover, the document also stated that this “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine is a common-sense and potent restoration of American power and priorities, consistent with American security interests.”⁴ This study concludes that the Trump Administration is enforcing a mix of these two principles: the defense of the Western Hemisphere from extra-continental adversaries (China, Russia, Iran), while actively intervening against those groups (mostly cartels, sometimes state governments) that pose or may pose a threat to the U.S. national security/interests. It analyzes some differences that the new Trump Corollary

¹ Indeed, in a speech addressing top military leaders in Quantico, Virginia, President Trump stated that “We’re under invasion from within, no different than a foreign enemy, but more difficult in many ways because they don’t wear uniforms.” President Donald J. Trump, “Speech: Donald Trump Addresses Military Leadership in Quantico, Virginia - September 30, 2025,” at *Rollcall*, September 30, 2025, <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-department-of-defense-leaders-quantico-september-30-2025/>.

² White House Fact Sheet, “FACT SHEET: President Donald J. Trump Protects the States and the American People by Closing the Border to Illegals via Proclamation,” *The White House*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-protects-the-states-and-the-american-people-by-closing-the-border-to-illegals-via-proclamation/>.

³ Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Juliana Rubio, Jessie Hu, and Sam Smith, “President Trump’s Latin America Policy: Short-Term Gains, Long-Term Risks,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 6, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/president-trumps-latin-america-policy-short-term-gains-long-term-risks>.

⁴ President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (White House, 2025), p. 15, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.



presents vis-à-vis its predecessor, the Roosevelt Corollary, and the new stakes and regions affected by the American shift in its foreign policy.

The Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary

In principle, the threats that Washington faces on its side of the world seem similar to those the United States faced at the dawn of its history. At the time, many former colonies, following the American example, were set free from their imperial metropolis across the continent. By 1823, concerns that Spain, Britain, France, or any other European power would try to reconquer stretches of the American continent, or intervene against Latin American independence movements, fermented the soil for a policy developed and implemented by the James Monroe Administration. This concern understandably followed the war of 1812, in which British troops crossed into the United States from Canada and attacked and burned Washington, D.C. along with the White House and many other government buildings.⁵ This concern was also observed in the area today known as Florida, at the time a Spanish territory. American leaders started to raise the alarm on the possibility of a British purchase or claim over the territory, from which it could harass American states and disrupt commerce. Florida, in other words, was “seen by Monroe (President Monroe) exactly as many of his successors would see other parts of Latin America – as pieces of unattractive land that nonhemispheric (*sic*) adversaries might use as a base to attack the United States.”⁶ This set the course for America’s first consistent foreign policy in regard to Latin America.

This policy, in the words of the historian Mark Gilderhus, had three goals: to keep the Europeans out, especially after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the surge of conservative and monarchical alliances in the Old World; to safeguard order and stability in areas of special concern; and to ensure open access to markets and resources.⁷ Although in later decades the policy was not emphasized by the American government, nor did European powers show much interest in Latin America per se, it came back to prominence in a more fervent fashion by the end of the century. At first, during the American involvement in the Venezuela vs. British Guiana dispute in 1895—a dispute that still stands to this day in the Essequibo region; and more clearly in the American involvement in the Cuban civil war, in 1898. The latter had clear goals underlined by the Monroe Doctrine: the expulsion of the Spanish presence from the Caribbean, the restoration of peace, and the establishment of a special relationship with the nascent Cuban nation.⁸ In the years to come, the policy was used to keep European and then Communist foes away from the Americas, but it became largely

⁵ Office of the Historian, “War of 1812–1815,” *U.S. Department of State*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/war-of-1812>.

⁶ Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 17.

⁷ Mark T. Gilderhus, “The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): p. 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552742>.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 10.

unnoticed after the end of the Cold War. In addition, in the early years of the 20th century, a new foreign policy regarding Latin America came to be known as the “Roosevelt Corollary” that went beyond the original ideas of the Monroe Doctrine.

In December of 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt presented the following message to the American audience: “...in the Western Hemisphere, the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.”⁹ If the Monroe Doctrine was designed to keep the European powers out of the continent, the Roosevelt Corollary was meant to legitimize interventions on it. This was openly carried out during the first decades of the century in Panama and the Caribbean in general, but also after the end of the Second World War and throughout the Cold War. As noted by the scholar Walter LaFeber: “It is the Roosevelt Doctrine, not Monroe’s, that Dulles, Acheson, Johnson, Reagan, and Weinberger had in mind when they justified unilateral US intervention in the internal affairs of Latin American States.”¹⁰ As noted, these two policies became the foundations of American control and oversight over the Western Hemisphere, over its backyard. For almost two centuries, American decision-makers decided to keep extra-continental powers outside of the continent, but the end of the Cold War, the period known as “Pax Americana,” and perhaps some influence of globalization phenomenon, led to the withdrawal of American interest in the region and left a vacuum. A vacuum that has since been filled by Washington’s foes and illicit organizations.

Criminal Threats in Latin America

In Latin America, several different elements have sought to fill the power vacuums left by weak governments and the withdrawal of U.S. influence over the region. Some of these elements are composed of local or state-wide criminal and terrorist organizations, while extra continental adversaries, such as China, Russia, and Iran, have emerged in the region to raise their influence and partnerships with local governments to the detriment of America’s. The combination of these two developments has created a problematic situation not only alongside the U.S. southern border but also within the nation as the long-standing War on Drugs has not produced significant results.¹¹ This study now proceeds to explore the origin and current situation of these threats, as they paved the way for the revival of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary in the 21st century.

On February 20, 2025, the U.S. Department of State issued a press release in which it designated several Latin American international cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations

⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, in Serge Ricard, “The Roosevelt Corollary,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): p. 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552743>.

¹⁰ Walter LaFeber, in *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹ The War on Drugs started in 1971, after then-President Richard Nixon set in motion a tough-in-crime policy agenda that involved harsher sentencing laws and increased enforcement actions. Betsy Pearl, “Ending the War on Drugs: By the Numbers,” *Center for American Progress*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/ending-war-drugs-numbers/>.

(FTOs) and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). Some of the organizations so identified were the Tren de Aragua, Mara Salvatrucha, and Cartel de Sinaloa.¹² This began a series of military and enforcement operations against these organizations within the United States and in the Caribbean region. On the domestic front, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reportedly has more than 6,200 active gang investigations into local neighborhood gangs across the country, which often act as vital partners to the cartels by helping them expand and evade U.S. law enforcement.¹³ To dismantle these organizations the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are creating a Homeland Security Task Force (HSTF) to extend the reach of law enforcement operations, share intelligence in real time, and target these organizations at every level.¹⁴ This HSTF has already carried out more than 2,500 arrests this year, mostly thanks to the designation of these organizations as FTOs. According to Jose Perez, Assistant Director of the Criminal Investigative Division of the FBI, the designation of these organizations as FTOs has expanded the bureau's intelligence collection capability and the collaboration with the intelligence community and the U.S. military. In addition, it has allowed the FBI to work alongside the Department of Justice (DOJ) to bring additional charges against the members of these cartels.¹⁵

In the Caribbean, the War against Drugs has been more noticeable. Beginning on September 2nd, 2025, the U.S. military started to carry out strikes against drug trafficking vessels in the Caribbean Sea that belonged, reportedly, to FTOs. Since then, there have been more than 20 strikes against similar targets in the region. According to Ara Friedman, from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, this has been a change in policy for the U.S. approach to maritime drug trafficking off the coast of Latin America, which has historically been treated as part of the U.S. Coast Guard's jurisdiction.¹⁶ Regardless of the legal or moral justification of this change of policy, the modification has raised several questions regarding the Trump Administration's plans on the continent to achieve its objectives. Moreover, it has also raised questions regarding the possible role of Latin American governments in the expansion of these cartels and other criminal organizations, such as in Venezuela. These groups and organizations have become the centerpiece of America's new effort on the continent. In short, this administration has repurposed two, centuries-old foreign policies designed to address the problems emanating from Latin America and brought these to the Twenty-First century's challenges.

¹² Office of the Spokesperson, "Designation of International Cartels," *U.S. Department of State*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-international-cartels>.

¹³ Statement of Jose Perez, Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, June 24, 2025, p. 2, <https://www.justice.gov/ola/media/1404816/dl?inline>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Ara Friedman, "The Trump Administration and Venezuela: Michael Shifter analyzes maritime strikes and possible regime change," *Georgetown University School of Foreign Service*, November 14, 2025, <https://sfs.georgetown.edu/news/the-trump-administration-and-venezuela-michael-shifter-analyzes-maritime-strikes-and-possible-regime-change/>.

Extra-Continental Threats in Latin America

The Trump Administration's new focus on Latin America includes the battle against extra-continental influence in the region. Among the different external adversaries that have sought to limit U.S. influence on the continent, China, Russia, and Iran have been the most successful. In the case of Beijing, its world-wide, ambitious foreign policy, the Belt & Road Initiative, has been highly successful, including in Latin America. This project was conceived in 2013 as the new masterpiece in China's foreign policy doctrine. The purpose was to restore China as an influence superpower that could fight and replace Western influence globally.¹⁷ To achieve this goal, Beijing has poured billions of dollars/yuans into developing countries, seeking to develop a debtor-lender relationship between these nations and China. Indeed, dependence on these funds can push economically unstable countries, such as Venezuela, into what critics call debt traps that can result in default.¹⁸ In this process, China's foreign investment on the continent amounted to roughly \$8.5 billion in 2024, about 6% of Beijing's total outward foreign direct investment.¹⁹

In most cases, economic ties lead towards political ties which often also lead to security commitments. Some Latin American countries have followed this roadmap, such as Venezuela, which is China's most important partner in the region. In terms of security, it is the top purchaser of Chinese military equipment in the region, while hosting training operations and military drills alongside Beijing.²⁰ In addition, other countries, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, have also purchased Chinese military aircraft, ground vehicles, radar systems, assault rifles, and other equipment. In the Caribbean, Cuba has hosted the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for port visits and training on the island. U.S. intelligence officials have also warned about evidence that China is strengthening its intelligence cooperation with Havana.²¹

Furthermore, the financing of several maritime projects by China in the region, such as the Chancay Port in Peru, has also raised alarms regarding the Chinese penetration in South America. This port, for instance, has the potential to transform the logistics dynamics of the Pacific, affording significant benefits to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the customers and users to whom it gives preferred access, at the expense of its global logistics rivals.²² This could in turn facilitate PRC control over a range of ports and other infrastructure projects not only in Peru but across South America. Finally, it could also give

¹⁷ Santiago Spadilero, "Uninvited Guests in the Backyard: Dangers and Risks of Terrorist and Anti-American Activity in Latin America" (MS Thesis, Missouri State University, 2023), p. 37.

¹⁸ Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 6, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Evan Ellis, "Strategic Implications of the Chinese-Operated Port of Chancay," *REDCAEM*, November 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3959936/strategic-implication-of-the-chinese-operated-port-of-chancay/>.

PRC-controlled companies easier access to the mining, agricultural and other products of the region, becoming these countries' most important trade partners. Overall, Beijing's influence over the continent has grown exponentially in the last two decades, signing dozens if not hundreds of trade and security agreements with the nations of this region. Perhaps more importantly, it has also established ports and bases on the continent, such as the deep-space station in the Argentinean Patagonia region.²³ But it is not the only extra-continental adversary present in the region.

Russia is also active on the continent, mostly behind the autocratic or near-autocratic regimes of the region, including Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. These countries, alongside Peru and Bolivia, to a lesser extent, are the main purchasers of Russian military equipment, which is not a minor detail considering the multiple sanctions the Russian military-industrial sector received after the outbreak of its invasion of Ukraine.²⁴ In Nicaragua, for instance, Russia has supplied ninety percent of the country's arms imports. Moscow apparently views Latin America as a counterpoint to U.S. policy in the European theater. In terms of areas of influence, Russia believes that the United States has intervened in Moscow's own region, thus making it "reasonable" for Russia to do the same in Latin America. This is done not only through military activities but also through commercial agreements, in information warfare operations, and by generating anti-U.S. coalition regimes in the region. Nonetheless, Russia's influence over the region is less dynamic or pronounced than China's.

Finally, Iran's activity on the continent is on two different fronts: Its formal ties with other autocratic regimes in the region, such as Venezuela and other aforementioned nations; and, with its command and control over terrorist organizations, namely Hezbollah, active in the region. Iran's dangerous presence on the continent predates China's by over a decade. Since the late 1980s and 1990s, Tehran's militant-terrorist arm, Hezbollah, established itself in the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Moreover, Iran has set up cordial relationships with the autocratic regimes of the region, including by creating cultural linkages with the local populations of these regions, with the creation of Shiite Islamic cultural centers.²⁵ In this effort, Venezuela leads the charge by opening the doors to Iranian financial and military investment in the country. At the time, during the administration of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's oil wealth and diplomatic clout gave Tehran a powerful platform to advocate for an expanded role on the continent.²⁶ In June of 2023, for instance, then-President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, visited Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, highlighting the

²³ For more information on the PRC base in Argentina, see Carlo J. V. Caro, "The Patagonian Enigma: China's Deep Space Station in Argentina," *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-patagonian-enigma-chinas-deep-space-station-in-argentina/>.

²⁴ Ryan C. Berg, "China and Russia engage Latin America and the Caribbean differently. Both threaten US interests," *Atlantic Council*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/china-and-russia-engage-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-differently-both-threaten-us-interests/>.

²⁵ Santiago Spadiliero, op. cit., p. 48.

²⁶ Henry Ziemer, Tina Dolbaia, and Mathieu Droin, "Russia and Iran in Latin America: Same Outlook, Similar Playbooks," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 25, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-iran-latin-america-same-outlook-similar-playbooks>.

need for the revolutionary movements in both Iran and Latin America to reassert their independence and sovereignty.²⁷

At the same time, and perhaps more concerning, the activity of Hezbollah in the region has, according to a RAND report, not diminished: “Hezbollah’s Latin American networks could exploit cross-border vulnerabilities, manipulate existing trafficking routes into U.S. cities, and potentially leverage criminal networks for intelligence-collection or operational support within the United States.”²⁸ Still, this presence is not new. Hezbollah has been active on the continent since at least the early 1990s, when they carried out two terrorist attacks against Israeli targets in Buenos Aires, Argentina.²⁹ It controls drug trafficking, money laundering, document fraud, and contraband smuggling operations in the region.³⁰

The Trump Doctrine, or the Trump Corollary?

In this context, China and Russia have emerged as powerful contestants against the American-led order. They have sought not only to secure and expand their own areas of influence, but to influence decisions and actions in America’s backyard. Moreover, insecurity, corrupt governments, and poverty, among other factors, strengthened the ranks of criminal organizations across the region that have expanded their operations and deepened their contacts within local governments. Perhaps these reasons have been sufficient for the Trump Administration to veer the course of American military focus and effort. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Latin America lost its position within America’s national security and foreign policy concerns in favor of the Middle East and East Asia. This was a reasonable measure, given the rise in terrorist activity in the former and the emergence of North Korea as a nuclear state in the latter. However, the U.S. government may not need to implement a new policy towards Latin America but reutilize these two old policies designed to control and intervene in the region.

First, the Trump Administration will seek to establish a new Monroe Doctrine across Latin America to prevent the spread of anti-American values encouraged by extra-continental adversaries. Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, scholar and current professor at the Universidad Torcuato di Tella in Argentina, asserts in his 2024 article for *Americas Quarterly* that Trump sees Latin America in largely negative terms: “a destructive source of instability, drug trafficking, migrants, and criminals to the detriment of the United States—and barely relevant in economic terms.”³¹ However, the region is now linked to those afflictions

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Marzia Giambertoni, “Hezbollah’s Networks in Latin America,” *RAND Corporation*, March 31, 2025, p.14, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3585-1.html>.

²⁹ For more on the terrorist presence in Latin America, see Mark P. Sullivan and June S. Beittel, “Latin America: Terrorism Issues,” *Congressional Research Service*, December 15, 2016, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RS/PDF/RS21049/RS21049.54.pdf.

³⁰ For more on Hezbollah’s activities on the continent, see this report from *RAND Corporation*: Marzia Giambertoni, op. cit.

³¹ Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, “Donald Trump and the Return of the Monroe Doctrine,” *Americas Quarterly*, September 4, 2024, <https://americasquarterly.org/article/donald-trump-and-the-return-of-the-monroe-doctrine/>.

challenging U.S. security. Congressman French Hill (R-AR), Chairman of the House Committee on Financial Services, stated that “After all, challenges here at home are often inextricably linked to tackling those in our backyard. Meanwhile, conscious efforts on nearshoring and supply chain diversification could bring manufacturing, economic growth, and investment to the Americas — thereby making America First into Americas First.”³² Furthermore, in 2023 eleven Republican legislators presented a resolution in the Senate commemorating the 200 years of the Monroe Doctrine while reaffirming its validity to “oppose a foreign power extending malign influence” in Latin America.³³

In this context, the Trump Administration has carried out several measures to limit the spread of extra-continental influence, mostly Chinese, in the region. First, it has provided important political support to those elites and regimes that support America’s foreign policy and values, or that try to contain the Chinese presence in the region. Argentina’s president Javier Milei, and his Salvadoran counterpart, Nayib Bukele, have received significant support from the Trump Administration in the last year. In the case of the former, the U.S. government authorized a \$20 billion currency swap with Buenos Aires amid a severe trade balance deficit with the Latin American nation. According to Scott Bessent, U.S. Treasury Secretary, “We do not want another failed state in Latin America, and a strong, stable Argentina as a good neighbor is explicitly in the strategic interest of the United States.”³⁴ Furthermore, the Treasury has also stated that “the United States has an interest in the success of Milei’s agenda, as his commitment to the unfettered market is setting an important example for the rest of the region.”³⁵ In other words, assisting Argentina has the intention of securing the support base for an allied regime that could help spread pro-American interests across the southern cone of the continent, while limiting the reach of Chinese activities in the region. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has followed a similar political and ideological path as Milei, becoming one of America’s closest allies. In April of 2025, President Bukele visited the White House to underscore his cooperation with the U.S. government’s plan to deport some migrants to El Salvador for imprisonment, while recently signing a reciprocal trade agreement with the country.³⁶

³² Congressman French Hill, “President Trump Can Make the Americas Great Again,” *United States House Committee on Financial Services*, January 26, 2026, <https://financialservices.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=410998>.

³³ Congress.gov. “Text - S.Res.434 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): A resolution commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine.” October 26, 2023. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-resolution/434/text>.

³⁴ U.S. Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, in Michael Stratford, “Bessent inks ‘economic stabilization’ deal with Argentina,” *Politico*, October 21, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/10/21/bessent-argentina-economic-deal-00616391>.

³⁵ Brad W. Setser, “Will Trump’s \$20 Billion Backing Help Milei Change Argentina’s Fortunes?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 14, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/will-trumps-20-billion-backing-help-milei-change-argentinas-fortunes#chapter-title-0-5>.

³⁶ Liz Mineo, “Closer look at ‘coolest dictator in the world’,” *The Harvard Gazette*, May 15, 2025, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2025/05/closer-look-at-coolest-dictator-in-the-world/>; and, “Joint Statement on Framework for United States-El Salvador Agreement on Reciprocal Trade,” *The White House*, November 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/11/joint-statement-on-framework-for-united-states-el-salvador-agreement-on-reciprocal-trade/>.

Along these lines, in an article written by Christopher Hernandez-Joy et al., the authors recognized that “The current administration seems to be adopting a ‘Monroe Doctrine 2.0’ approach to the Western Hemisphere: decimating soft-power initiatives in favor of deploying (or threatening to deploy) military force, while also relying on economic coercion and trade pressure.”³⁷ In the authors’ argument, the Trump Administration has employed soft and hard power policies in Latin America. Securing alliances with some friendly regimes in the region to help contain the expansion of anti-American rhetoric should be part of this soft power package. In other words, the new Trump Doctrine may support friendly regimes alongside other measures to “encourage nations to limit their links to China, Russia, and Iran.” These other measures include cutting down USAID assistance for these countries and to reduce other types of economic and political assistance for some Latin American regimes. Nonetheless, the hard power policies have been more visible and tangible, at least for those countries that reject alignment with U.S. interests.

Secondly, the Trump Administration confirmed its intention to include a “Trump Corollary” to the traditional tenets of the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, the NSS clearly states that “After years of neglect, the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, and to protect our homeland and our access to key geographies throughout the region,” and that “We will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere.”³⁸ This document also declares that “Our goals for the Western Hemisphere can be summarized as ‘Enlist and Expand.’ We will enlist established friends in the Hemisphere to control migration, stop drug flows, and strengthen stability and security on land and sea. We will expand by cultivating and strengthening new partners while bolstering our own nation’s appeal as the Hemisphere’s economic and security partner of choice.”³⁹ This last point includes some differences from the original Roosevelt Corollary.

In an article written by James Holmes for *The National Interest*, he identified three differences between the Roosevelt Corollary and its namesake. First, the context is both similar and different. In the NSS, the word “restoration” was used as the sole purpose of the revival of this policy. This implies the perspective that the United States fell behind others in its own hemisphere, and it was now seeking to reestablish supremacy in the region. On the other hand, the Roosevelt Corollary also saw the challenges posed by a different set of threats, but at the time, the United States was a regional great power in ascent; “Roosevelt’s America was a confident newcomer to regional great power.”⁴⁰ Today, the United States has been a superpower across the world for the last 80 years, which marks an important difference regarding means and goals.

³⁷ Hernandez-Joy et al., op. cit.

³⁸ President of the United States, op. cit., p.15.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

⁴⁰ James Holmes, “What Would Teddy Roosevelt Think of the ‘Trump Corollary?’” *The National Interest*, December 9, 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-would-teddy-roosevelt-think-of-trump-corollary-jh-120925>.

The second difference involves the different stakes and adversaries. President Theodore Roosevelt was mostly concerned about hostile armadas barging into the Caribbean, while the Trump Administration is worried about guarding the homeland against threats posed by substate as well as state wrongdoers.⁴¹ Previously, attacking the fleet of an already established great power could have carried the United States into an unwanted war. Today, the stakes are lower. It is unlikely that the bombing of drug trafficking boats and vessels or the intervention over a Latin American state could trigger the involvement of another superpower, such as Russia or China. According to Holmes, “The Roosevelt Corollary sought to exclude extraregional conventional forces from the Caribbean and Gulf. The Trump Corollary aspires to manage a far more variegated, blurrier threat seascape than the one that confronted TR [Theodore Roosevelt].”⁴² In this sense, as the threats have shifted, so have the stakes and tools.

Finally, the NSS asserts that “We will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere,”⁴³ which raises the question of the definition of “vital assets.” In President Roosevelt’s time, customhouses and ports were certainly counted as vital assets since an adversary could then physically and geographically occupy a territory and convert it to malign use. Are these vital assets the same? According to Holmes, depending on how the administration defines that concept could have seismic impact on how it implements its corollary.⁴⁴ These non-territorial vital assets in the Americas could involve economic dependence of Latin American countries on extra-continental nations which may then acquire beneficial agreements to the detriment of the U.S. interests; information control over the region, which might make it easier for foreign nations to acquire information on America’s weaknesses or interests in the region; and control over logistical nodes and vital supply chains that could raise costs in America. To tackle these multiple threats and issues, U.S. carrots and sticks may not be enough.

Setting the Example: Venezuela

Since the emergence of President Hugo Chavez as the leader of Venezuela in 1999, the country has faced several crises that have undermined the political authority of the democratic institutions, turning a once prosperous democracy into an autocratic regime whose only allies can be counted with one hand, i.e., Russia, Iran, China, North Korea, and Cuba. The political and economic turmoil inside the country prompted millions of Venezuelans to leave their homes and migrate across the continent: some to the United

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ President of the United States, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ James Holmes, *op. cit.*

States, some to Europe, some to other parts of Latin America.⁴⁵ This is just one of the many problems that the Venezuelan leadership, led by President Nicolás Maduro, created for its neighbors. This section briefly analyzes the dangers posed by the Venezuelan regime in the eyes of the Trump Administration and the use of the “stick” to correct its course.

Namely, two crises emerged since the Maduro regime decided to derail what was once one of the most prosperous nations of the continent. First, the migration crisis has led millions of Venezuelans to flee overseas to other nations, creating social crises in those countries unprepared for their arrival. According to the U.S. delegate to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 8 million Venezuelans have left since the crisis in their homeland began, of which almost a million arrived in the United States.⁴⁶ Secondly, the Venezuelan regime first led by Chávez and then by Maduro set the foundations for the institutional decline that would allow drug trafficking organizations to expand their operations in the Caribbean nation and region, mostly after the expulsion of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration back in 2005.⁴⁷ Moreover, other authors also agree that “Venezuela is not only not making efforts to combat drug trafficking but rather appears to be even allowing drug-trafficking operations free range over its borders.”⁴⁸ Finally, and in tune with the growing potential of these organizations, uncontrolled migration has allowed some of these elements to set up bases in the United States. The U.S. Department of Treasury stated in 2024 that “From its origins as a prison gang in Aragua, Venezuela, Tren de Aragua has quickly expanded throughout the Western Hemisphere in recent years.”⁴⁹ In March of 2025, Joseph Humire, Executive Director of the Center for a Secure Free Society, provided testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on Federal Law Enforcement, in which he offered his analysis on the weaponization of migration. In this capacity, he stated that “China, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela (and Russia) are all finding ways to capitalize on the U.S. border and immigration crisis, by partnering with or utilizing Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) to destabilize American communities and steal U.S. sovereignty.”⁵⁰ These threats emanate from Venezuela and may also do so from other countries, and in response, the current administration seems to be more decided to

⁴⁵ For more on the Venezuelan crisis and the fall of the “petrostate,” see Diana Roy and Amelia Cheatham, “Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/venezuela-crisis>.

⁴⁶ USA for UNHCR, “Venezuela Crisis Explained,” April 17, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/venezuela-crisis-explained/>.

⁴⁷ Juan Miguel Matheus, “How Venezuela Became a Gangster State,” *Journal of Democracy*, September 2025, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-venezuela-became-a-gangster-state/>.

⁴⁸ Francisco R. Rodriguez, in Bernard Gwertzman, “Rodriguez: Chavez Using Attack on FARC to Bolster Diminishing Popularity,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2008, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/rodriguez-chavez-using-attack-farc-bolster-diminishing-popularity#:~:text=Of%20course%2C%20FARC,over%20its%20borders>.

⁴⁹ Press Release, “Treasury Sanctions Tren de Aragua as a Transnational Criminal Organization,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, July 11, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2459>.

⁵⁰ Joseph Humire, “Enhancing Federal, State, and Local Coordination in the Fight Against Criminal Illegal Aliens: Testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Federal Law Enforcement,” *U.S. House of Representatives*, March 11, 2025, <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Humire-Written-Testimony.pdf>.

actively intervene in Latin America on behalf of America's interests than any administration in the last three decades.

Because of these threats, the Trump Administration decided to increase its pressure on the Venezuelan regime and its coalesced FTOs by starting a campaign of bombings against alleged drug trafficking vessels in the Caribbean Sea. The operation, named Operation Southern Spear, started in early September of 2025 and launched over 25 kinetic strikes against these vessels, killing at least 82 narco-terrorists.⁵¹ Moreover, President Trump himself ordered a direct military operation on Venezuelan soil against Maduro and his wife, Celia Flores. On January 3rd of 2026, a complex operation was launched to capture the leader of Venezuela and his wife and extradite them to U.S. soil where they could be prosecuted in narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons charges.⁵² After the operation, Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as interim President of Venezuela, while President Trump has stated that the United States will "run" Venezuela until a transition takes place, and that Venezuelan officials must turn over "sanctioned oil" and negotiate an energy deal with the United States.⁵³

The traditional "big stick" campaign devised by President Roosevelt might work in the current century, as the case in Venezuela shows, at least for the short-term. As historian H. W. Brands remembers: "In his 1904 annual message to Congress, Theodore Roosevelt issued a statement claiming for the United States the right to act unilaterally and, if necessary, preemptively, to maintain order in the Western Hemisphere."⁵⁴ In doing so, President Trump has shifted the emphasis of America's foreign policy, from global affairs to neighborhood affairs. And Venezuela was the first to feel the effect.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration made a 180-degree turn from the last 30 years of America's foreign policy. From combating terrorism in the Middle East and growing Chinese ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, the administration has enhanced its efforts in its own neighborhood. It sees this shift as in the vital interest of U.S. national security due to two main concerns: massive migration, and drug production and trafficking that affects the lives of thousands if not millions of Americans. To accomplish these new goals, the Trump Administration has ramped up its military presence in the region, strengthened connections and political influence in the area, and increased the pressure and punitive actions against opponents, including narco-terrorist organizations and autocratic regimes.

⁵¹ Matthew Olay, "Pentagon Provides Update on Operation Southern Spear, Reaffirms Socom Called for Second Strike on Drug Boat," *Pentagon News*, December 2, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4346303/pentagon-provides-update-on-operation-southern-spear-reaffirms-socom-called-for/>.

⁵² Clare Ribando Seelke, "U.S. Capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro: Considerations for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12618>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ H. W. Brands, in Ricard, op. cit., p.18.

The expanding threats in the region are varied in nature and power. China, Russia, and Iran have established themselves in the autocratic regimes of the region. China has become the largest trade partner for some of the countries in the region while building important mega infrastructure projects in Peru and Brazil. Russia is—or was—Venezuela’s most important military equipment partner and a powerful anti-American blockbuster. Iran, on the other hand, presents important trade agreements with Venezuela and Cuba, mostly in the energy sector, as it attempts to avoid the sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies. Finally, FTOs have grown in power and sophistication, delivering thousands of tons of drugs into the United States via several ground and maritime paths. The Trump Administration’s expansive new policy seeks to counter these threats and return the Western Hemisphere solely to America’s sphere of influence.

The Trump Administration is not enforcing a new type of policy over Latin America, but an updated version of two, centuries-old foreign policies framed under the Monroe and Roosevelt Administrations. These policies were used to design this administration’s approach to Latin America, but with its own characteristics. First, the United States is no longer an empire in construction, but a nation that seeks its “revival,” as expressed in the recently published NSS. Secondly, the stakes are different. The new purpose of the Trump Corollary is not to fight and sink European armadas but FTO vessels and hubs. Finally, the vital assets to be protected in the region may be different than before. Physical enclaves could be protected or taken, but more abstract elements such as information and propaganda could be much harder to fight if the administration does not utilize the right tools in the right way. Future research could delve into the outcomes of the U.S. policy in Latin America at the informational level: how has propaganda modified the conceptions and perspectives from local populations vis-à-vis America’s new policy in the region. As of now, the effort has shifted to Latin America, and the Trump Corollary is emerging as America’s most important foreign policy in the 2020s.

Santiago Spadilero is Program Director and Graduate Research Faculty Member at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies where he currently co-teaches the course "Security Challenges in the Americas."



INTERVIEWS

This section of the *Journal* features an interview with Wess Mitchell, former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. In the interview, Michaela Dodge asks questions about Mitchell's recently published book *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger*.

An Interview With Wess Mitchell, author of *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger*

Q. What was the most surprising lesson learned from studying careers of successful diplomats in the past?

A. One thing that struck me while writing the book is how much past practitioners of diplomacy conceived of their trade in terms of constraints. Classical diplomacy has been the art of using negotiations to constrain the options of another power, especially a potential adversary, while keeping one's own options as open as possible.

I was also struck by how limited the uses of money have been in diplomacy. In the modern era we put a lot of stock in financial leverage and sanctions. Historically, money has not been a very powerful motivator. I found a lot of examples of states using money successfully to persuade another country to do something *for* them, but not many examples of them using money successfully to prevent someone from doing something harmful *to* them. Money in other words is better at attraction than coercion or compellence.

Q. Your book is short on policy recommendations for today's practitioners. Why is that?

A. Books with policy recommendations don't age very well. There are several reasons for that. One is that they inevitably lead the author to think about the past in terms of the present, which hampers his understanding of the past itself. Another is that policy is fluid. The policy debate is constantly shifting, so a book written with the present in mind will generate insights that quickly become irrelevant. When you pick up a book written during the Cold War about the policy debates of that time, it's like stale bread. It only holds interest to a narrow segment of people who are studying the decision-making dynamics and personalities of that time. I wanted to write a book that would aspire to some timeless truths. Something a person can pick up twenty years from now and learn something useful about diplomacy without knowing today's foreign policy debates and personalities involved in contemporary foreign policy decisions.



Q. What would be your top three policy recommendations how to restore diplomatic competency within the U.S. government?

A. We need to get back to the basics of diplomacy as a tool for advancing the national interest, narrowly defined. After the post-Cold War, U.S. foreign policy embraced a transformationalist agenda. We wanted to remake the world in our image by spreading liberal economics, which was supposedly going to lead to political liberalization. The idea was to eventually transform other countries, including our main rivals Russia and China, into liberal democracies.

That project has failed, and now we are in a very different era of history where great powers are competing for the things they have competed over for millennia: territory, resources, allies, prestige. We would benefit from refocusing diplomacy on its age-old fundamentals, which revolve around cultivating skills for advancing core interests in competition with other states.

Diplomatic bureaucracy has to maintain a disciplined focus on those skills. Bureaucracy emerges in the history of diplomacy as a way of gaining advantage in competition. The Byzantines for example created a “Bureau of Barbarians” and its job was to gather and preserve certain forms of strategic knowledge that gave the empire an edge. Those included things like amassing particularist details about the geography, languages and habits of neighboring states and tribes, keeping records of past treaties, teaching envoys how to negotiate.

Since the Cold War, U.S. diplomacy has strayed from these core missions. Over time, the State Department developed a bigger and bigger bureaucracy, and its mission strayed into all kinds of things that aren’t directly connected to diplomacy. Like other U.S. public institutions, the State Department embraced prevailing progressive political orthodoxies. Everything from public diplomacy to hiring and advancement practices came to reflect “woke” proclivities. And along the way, the Department allowed the truly important disciplines, like deep regional expertise and negotiating skills, to atrophy. I found this out when I was an Assistant Secretary. We were negotiating an agreement with another country. I asked my people who in the Department was seen as a good negotiator to advise us on the process. The response was silence. The system is not designed to reward good negotiators. It actively discourages deep accumulation of expertise.

Secretary Pompeo took a big step to address that with his initiative to professionalize the State Department. Marco Rubio is building on that now with his reform effort. That’s consistent with the pattern I saw in my book. Time and time again, bureaucracies stretch their missions as they grow, but when the geopolitical scene worsens, states refocus bureaucracy on its main mission. Most of the great practitioners of diplomacy were also great reformers, who wrangled bureaucracy back into alignment with the needs of the state or bypassed it and created their own channels.

Q. In your book, you illustrate that diplomacy can delay a state having to fight a multi-front war. But it seems to me that in doing so, successful diplomacy contains seeds of a

state's own demise because a sense of security makes it more difficult to muster support for the military capabilities a state needs to counter the rising challenge. What do you think?

A. There are probably examples in which that dynamic is present. But diplomacy's job in strategy is to provide an expedient for bridging gaps between the means at a state's disposal (especially its military power) and the ends, or external threats, to which those resources can be applied. This comes into play most when a state faces threats too numerous to deter or defeat with the power immediately at its disposal. That does not mean of course that the resulting policies are always wise or that they will always succeed. Late in his negotiations with Hitler, for example, Neville Chamberlain came to believe that his diplomacy would *remove* the need for Britain to continue its military buildup. But in most cases I looked at, states were using diplomacy with rivals at the same time that they were engaged in military buildups to deter the adversary.

One of the most important roles of diplomacy historically has been to facilitate strategic concentration. In the early 1900s, British leaders used a series of diplomatic agreements to temporarily "turn off" several theaters of competition demanding their naval and military attention. This enabled the British to concentrate naval assets in the North Sea vis-à-vis the main threat, which was Imperial Germany. There are numerous examples in my book of great powers using diplomacy in this way. Properly understood, diplomacy is a tool that aids a state in making the optimal use of its military resources. As I say in the book, it is the instrument *par excellence* for rearranging power in space and time. So its role is intimately connected with force.

Q. Is diplomacy, then, the art of delaying the inevitable?

A. It can be, and it has played that role on occasion in the past. That role is important and we should not trivialize it. For example, the Edwardian Brits extended the life of their empire, and all the benefits that entailed, by perhaps a generation or more.

But it is not categorically true. Great powers also use strategic diplomacy in their prime to expand or enhance their power position. A great power doesn't have to be in decline to perceive gaps between means and ends, or to have a practical need to delay or avoid a major war. Look for example at Otto von Bismark. He was a Chancellor when the German Empire was at the peak of its power. He used diplomacy astutely to keep Germany's rivals divided and avoid a situation where his empire would get strangled in the cradle by a two-front attack by Russia and France. That didn't just avoid war, it also helped Germany avoid open-ended defense buildups.

Diplomacy really is an art of managing time and devising a system of constraints in ways that are affordable, but this is not done only in moments of decline.

Q. What is the most striking difference between the past and the present conduct of diplomacy?

A. In the modern era, diplomacy has come to be thought of as something separate from competition. In the liberal conception, it is a kind of escape hatch from competition. On this view, people are rational and conflicts arise from misunderstandings. Diplomacy's job is to clear up the misunderstandings. And build multilateral institutions that will eventually transcend the nation-state itself and expunge war from the human condition. That would allow mankind to reach a kind of nirvana, where would realize Immanuel Kant's dream of a world without conflict.

Historically, diplomacy was widely understood not as a tool for escaping competition but for *excelling* at it. It was an instrument of strategy that leaders use to gain an advantage. In other words it was integral to conflict. I think this is the classical form of diplomacy that we will have to rediscover in the emerging era of great-power competition.

Q. What is the most surprising consistency?

A. Throughout history the most consistent feature of diplomacy has been the manipulation of constraints. Properly understood, diplomacy is a defensive tool that was historically used by conservative states to prevent a hostile power conglomeration. Negotiations with an opponent are not a gift or a form of surrender. They are about gaining time and leverage and allies for oneself and limiting their availability to an opponent who would use them against you.

We see this mentality re-emerging in the current international landscape. The diplomacy of the Trump Administration is inherently competitive in nature. It is about reshaping the gameboard to America's advantage, and not about advancing a nebulous "rules-based international order." It puts the national interest back where it belongs, at the forefront of our statecraft.



PROCEEDINGS

CHALLENGING THE ARMS CONTROL MYTHOLOGY: A CENTURY OF EXPERIENCE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on September 23, 2025. The symposium highlighted a forthcoming National Institute study led by Michaela Dodge on the long-standing and persistent arms control myths that defy practical experience of the past century, what lessons can be drawn from them, and what U.S. policy makers should emphasize going forward.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar with the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Arms control, as practiced by the United States, has, to put it generously, a checkered history. Despite American expectations for arms control typically outpacing results, there remains a belief in some quarters that arms control is necessary: to improve the political climate among adversaries; to avoid a spiraling, costly, and dangerous arms race; to provide predictability regarding strategic programs; to ensure stability in international affairs; to lower the costs of national defense; to sustain support for necessary defense and nuclear modernization programs; and to lock in a host of other positive results that presumably benefit U.S. national security.

Moreover, there has been a pervasive belief that the United States is the primary driver of adversary arms developments, and that if the United States exercises strategic restraint, including through arms control, others will follow suit. This is just one of the numerous myths that have endured over the past century, despite empirical evidence of their fallacy.

In particular, the notion that arms control is essential to prevent an arms race is a frequently heard refrain from those in the arms control community who seek to stymie long-overdue U.S. nuclear modernization programs. For example, as one recent commentary concluded, “as the expiration of New START in 2026 approaches, the choices before both capitals remain stark: either allow the collapse of the last pillar of bilateral arms control and eventually risk a renewed arms race or take bold steps toward a more comprehensive and future-oriented arms control framework....if both Cold War rivals can seize this moment, they may still avert a dangerous and uncontrolled arms race.”¹

The desire for arms control solutions that alleviate U.S. strategic problems reminds me of Alexander Pope’s comment that, “Hope springs eternal.” Nowhere may this phrase be better applied than when it comes to arms control, which may also be described, as Samuel Johnson once described second marriages, as the “triumph of hope over experience.”

¹ Fakhar Alam, “What could be the Future Scenario of US-Russia Arms Control?,” *Modern Diplomacy*, September 11, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/09/11/what-could-be-the-future-scenario-of-us-russia-arms-control/>.



Despite a burgeoning inventory of examples demonstrating the fallacy of relying on arms control to solve America's strategic problems, the myths surrounding arms control continue to live on—like zombies that refuse to die.

Why these arms control myths live on may be a reflection of the West's optimistic belief in the nature and goodness of man; an example of the triumph of idealism over realism in U.S. foreign policy; the belief that all parties share common goals and a common desire to avoid conflict; and that in matters of war and peace, leaders will allow their better angels to triumph. Of course, the arms control lobby is a large, vocal, and well-funded enterprise, so admitting arms control shortcomings and failures is hardly good for business.

Today, perhaps more than ever, with the goals and objectives of the United States and its potential arms control partners at such cross purposes, the odds of achieving any arms control agreement that serves U.S. national security interests are slim to nonexistent. After all, the United States seeks to preserve the strategic stability created by American power while both Russia and China seek to overturn it through the expansion of their massive military and nuclear programs. These fundamentally incompatible goals and objectives essentially guarantee that meaningful arms control is an exercise in wishful thinking and ultimate futility.

But whatever the reasons for the pervasiveness of these arms control myths, an objective assessment of the empirical data over the past century should help set the record straight. And that is precisely the rationale for the study we are discussing today.

Let me close with this thought: A friend and colleague often references Marie Kondo, a Japanese TV personality who has become popular among households, and who developed a method of sorting through accumulated clutter. I don't know how many of you are familiar with her, but she even has a series on Netflix explaining how to tidy up. Her approach is, "That which does not bring you joy, thank it for its service and send it on its way."² I would suggest this commonsense approach has applicability to arms control agreements, which we should acknowledge have not given us the joys of stability and predictability we expected, and we should thank them for their service and send them on their way.

Michaela Dodge

Michaela Dodge is Research Scholar with the National Institute for Public Policy.

For worse rather than better, arms control has traditionally played an important role in U.S. national security. The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) called it "the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use."³ President Trump wants arms control with the Russians and the Chinese.

² Referenced in Tom Karako, "A Marie Kondo Moment for MTCR: Tidying Up the U.S. Approach to Missile Proliferation," *CSIS Briefs*, September 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/marie-kondo-moment-mtr>.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, 2022, p. 16, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/NPR/>.

Yet, historical experience shows that in hostile times, arms control does not matter at best, and is actually damaging to U.S. long-term objectives. Several fallacious concepts are so entrenched in our collective arms control thinking that we often do not pause to examine them. Yet, examining them closely is a goal of this upcoming study and I am so grateful that we have some of the best thinkers on this topic joining us in this endeavor.

One ought not be optimistic about potential national security accomplishments of future arms control treaties. Today's adversaries are unlikely to solve our security problems for us, especially not through arms control. A courtesy of several decades of process that its proponents still call a success, we face worsening geopolitical conditions without credible tactical nuclear weapons, sufficient missile defense, and likely too few strategic nuclear weapons. We also lack infrastructure that could redeem these flaws on a reasonable timeline. Yet, we continue to advocate for more arms control, not fully appreciating the malign role it has played during the Cold War and since the 1990s.

Let me discuss the first fallacy that has persistently captured the arms controllers' imagination. I am grateful to my boss, Keith Payne, for his input in putting the initial list together.⁴ The first fallacy is that arms control negotiations and agreements will drive improved political relations. Thus, the value of the process is as important as the substance—or more so. Consequently, the United States should seek agreements for the priority purpose of easing political hostilities rather than the specific limits of the agreement. Specific limits do not matter that much if one ends up in a better spot politically at the end of the process than he would without it.

The focus on the process allows a shift in the discussion, from other states' political goals to the general desirability of peace brought about by states possessing fewer weapons. That is often necessary because political considerations would show the practical impotence of prevailing arms control and disarmament ideas in the context of an adversary's goals and his determination to use weapons to advance them. Colin Gray observed that "Arms control agreements have the effect of focusing attention on the strategically irrelevant question of whether a tolerably even balance of forces has been negotiated. Save with isolated reference to the arms control process, the United States has no interest in achieving a tolerably even balance of forces [with the Soviet Union]."⁵ That is because the United States is a status quo power.

Soviet (and now Russia's and China's) goals, have to do with restraining the United States in areas of its advantage (e.g., missile defense) while leaving the space for their own nuclear force expansion as wide open as possible. I would like to mention New START briefly here. Ambassador Steven Pifer argued that "The relationship [between the United States and Russia] has improved substantially since then [when the treaty negotiations started], and

⁴ Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence and Arms Control: Ending the Deceptive 'Holiday from History,'" *Information Series*, No. 616 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 10, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/.

⁵ Colin Gray, "The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control," in Staar, eds., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality*, op. cit., p. 24.

New START has been a major driver of that improvement.”⁶ Even if this statement was true, and one ought not forget that Russia did declare itself openly hostile to U.S. interests in 2007,⁷ how worthy was this supposed improvement given Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014? How caught off-guard was the United States because a majority of its foreign policy elite believed the mirage of the Obama Administration’s “reset” policy, of which New START was to be a crown jewel? How weak has been our response to years of Russia’s New START violations?

Real reconciliation of hostile political relations will lead naturally to reduced military requirements. The swaths of arms control agreements of the 1990s attest to that. The reverse, however, is not true. On the basis of this enduring historical pattern, Gray concluded that this phenomenon is reflected in “virtually all twentieth-century experience with arms control or its absence” and, as a consequence, arms control “is either impossible or unimportant.”⁸ Understanding this reality is critical because, when the value of arms is subordinated to the pursuit of an illusory political goal, arms control enthusiasms can degrade or eliminate U.S. capabilities that are needed because of political hostilities that are not ameliorated. That is precisely the situation in which we are finding ourselves today.

The second assumption is that the other party will comply with his arms control obligations and that the United States will be able to enforce compliance. Dr. Johnny Foster memorably remarked “I don’t understand why we go to the trouble of negotiating with a potential adversary with the understanding that the adversary is going to cheat.”⁹ Neither do I.

Arms control initiatives often are advanced with the promise (or expectation) that opponents will not risk the potential cost of non-compliance, or that violations can be alleviated or corrected by consultations or via some form of compellence, if necessary. This is a variable of the unsound assumption that weapons are “not tools dearly bought to accomplish ends for the sake of which foreign leaders are willing to kill and die, but rather, that they are expensive burdens that these leaders would prefer to shed.”¹⁰ If weapons violating agreements have utility in obtaining leaders’ goals, a symbolic punishment or public opinion pressure will not make countries give them up.

The challenge in punishing violations is two-fold. One, a country that seeks to punish violations might have its own difficulties in admitting that violations are happening because its own government might be the one invested in an arms control treaty. Two, a government

⁶ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” op. cit.

⁷ For the text of the speech, see Vladimir Putin, “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>; and Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, “The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was,” *Politico*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.

⁸ Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, op. cit., pp. x, 16-19. (Emphasis added.)

⁹ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 17, July 15, 20, 27, and 29, 2010), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

¹⁰ Malcolm Wallop and Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion* (Institute of Contemporary Studies, 1987), p. 42.

may not be willing to use effective pressure points for a fear of undermining whatever is left of the arms control regime. Fred Iklé, who went on to serve as the Reagan Administration's Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, famously articulated more than half a century ago that "detecting violations is not enough. What counts are the political and military consequences of a violation once it has been detected, since these alone will determine whether or not the violator stands to gain in the end."¹¹

The U.S. track record in enforcing compliance is abysmal. The enduring expectation that "this time it will be different" meets the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein—doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.¹² With regard to America's enemies, however, the frequent reality is their noncompliance and the absence of effective enforcement tools that Washington is willing to employ.

Our third misguided assumption is that adversaries will moderate their aggressive goals and behaviors given the economic advantages of doing so in a liberal international economic order. A related assumption is that arms control can take advantage of and help expand this cooperative space. This assumption was rather infamously operative prior to World War I in Sir Norman Angell's thesis that war has become too expensive for a rational leader to pursue it.

During the Cold War, much the same argument was applied to the Soviet Union as the rationale for détente agreements. It was later similarly repeated in the expectation that China would rise peacefully and take its place within the civilized "international community." As a related experiment, the United States supposedly could prudently remove regional forces, including nuclear forces, from Asia. That expectation has proven again to be a serious mistake. States' political goals remained at odds, but now China has more resources to pursue them given the economic advantages of global liberalization of trade.

No matter how much one might wish away adversaries, adversaries that do not wish to be wished away have their own way of asserting their presence. As Hedley Bull astutely observed, "history is littered with catastrophe unthinkable and unimaginable to its victims, who placed their trust in a logic of history which deserted them in their hour of need."¹³ Ukraine today could be considered one such example, and whether our folly lands the Free World among the victims of Russia and China's cooperative expansionism remains to be seen. It is blatantly obvious that arms control cannot save us from this predicament, but probably can make things worse.

The following two assumptions are very familiar to this audience. We've done quite a bit of work on debunking them over the years at NIPP, so I will keep my reflections short.

For decades, the U.S. government convinced itself that societal vulnerability to adversaries is stabilizing and in our interest. This mistaken conviction led to severe limitations on missile defenses and a commitment to ideology that has far outlived the treaty

¹¹ Iklé, "After Detection: What?," *op. cit.*, p. 208.

¹² Christina Sterbenz, "12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed," *Business Insider*, October 7, 2013, <https://www.businessinsider.com/misattributed-quotes-2013-10>.

¹³ Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

that originally restricted missile defenses. Almost a quarter century after we finally left the treaty, missile defense capabilities remain inadequate to threats we face.

Another recurring myth is that U.S. actions solely drive adversaries' modernization programs. U.S. restraint, then, will lead them to stop their own modernization program. Some adherents to this dogma even claimed that U.S. actions, effectively unilateral disarmament, would even start a "peace race."

And lastly, we allegedly need arms control because the fewer nuclear weapons, the less of a chance of a nuclear mishap or accident. There is no historical evidence for this proposition, at least as far as we know, although we don't have reliable data for non-U.S. countries.

Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of Proliferation Strategy, Counterproliferation and Homeland Defense.

I will also offer a practitioner's perspective on arms control based on three personal experiences.

The first demonstrates how we often misunderstand the adversary, attributing to him the same motives and goals that we have. In 1987, during the final days of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty negotiations, in a meeting between Ambassador Max Kampelman, our chief negotiator and the Soviet negotiator, the latter asked whether the Soviets—instead of destroying their mobile SS-20 Transporter Erector Launchers (TELS)—could simply saw off several inches from the back of the launchers and then use them for agricultural purposes. Kampelman, who often talked about arms control contributing to the welfare of his grandchildren, immediately agreed to the request noting that the United States was a rich nation and that we would destroy our TELs in accordance with the treaty text. At some later point the Soviets transferred their TELs to a nuclear-armed ally—and not for agricultural purposes. We may like to think that our adversaries care about making the world better for their grandchildren as we do, but that is not their purpose in negotiating arms control agreements. They seek through negotiations to achieve unilateral advantages in nuclear forces through their deployments and by constraining our capabilities.

The second occurred in December 1987. I took part in the Washington Summit between President Ronald Reagan and Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Arms control was at center stage of the summit. Ambassador Kampelman and Gorbachev's chief military advisor, Field Marshall Sergey Akhromeyev, held an arms control session during the summit. In that meeting, Ambassador Kampelman made an opening offer showing how far the United States had come toward the Soviet positions. General Akhromeyev summarily closed his folder and said that the U.S. offer was not enough, to which Ambassador Kampelman responded that he will see if there are further concessions the United States can make to achieve an agreement.

This was the Reagan administration and Max was a great American and regarded as a tough negotiator.

Years later I “borrowed” the Field Marshal’s technique when I negotiated with the Libyans and they sought to include relief from sanctions in our talk. I closed my folder and explained that we came to discuss the elimination of their nuclear program. The British host called for a break. The negotiations reconvened without any more mention of sanctions.

The third experience demonstrates our reluctance or inability to use our leverage effectively. As I stated in my testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during its hearings concerning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the outcome made clear that, if you want an agreement really badly, you will get a really bad agreement. Our negotiations with Iran were characterized by concession after concession to the point of appeasement. Instead of using our economic and other points of leverage, our negotiators conceded almost every point objected to by Iran. The result was a one-sided agreement that did not restrict Iran’s missile programs, its support to terrorist proxies, its regional destabilization activities, or its acts of state terrorism. Even on the nuclear side, by allowing Iran to enrich uranium, it provided the pathway for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

In conclusion, arms control often masquerades as a solution, but it can definitely be a problem.

Susan Koch

Susan Koch is former Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control on the NSC Staff.

My remarks today will be based on a 2018 National Institute study of four arms control noncompliance cases: German violation of the Versailles Treaty disarmament provisions; Soviet construction of the Krasnoyarsk radar in violation of the ABM Treaty; Iraqi violation of the UN disarmament requirements after the First Gulf War; and North Korean violation of all of its nuclear arms control agreements and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions between 1992 and 2009.

Of those four cases, only one ended well. After years of denial, the Soviet Union admitted that the Krasnoyarsk radar violated the ABM Treaty, and dismantled enough of it that it could not again function as a radar.

The German and Iraqi violations were resolved only by devastating wars. The North Korean violations continue unabated to this day. That history is not encouraging. Each case study addressed in the study was unique, but together demonstrated patterns of noncompliance and response which remain relevant now.

First, authoritarian regimes are more prone to noncompliance than democracies. They have little if any respect for the rule of law, are secretive, and accountable only to themselves. Unfortunately, the United States is now interested in arms control only with authoritarians. Next, asymmetries in stakes and resolve among the parties may be the most critical

determinants of noncompliance. In three of the four cases, the violator's stake in noncompliance generally was far greater than the enforcer's stake in compliance.

Germany in the 1920s wanted to restore national greatness and provide the basis for a future strong military. In the 1930s, Hitler did not just violate Versailles, he shredded it. Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-Il believed their regimes were at stake, and sought (temporary) compromise only when they were threatened militarily. On the other side, Britain and France grew tired of Versailles compliance enforcement by the late 1920s, and then turned to appeasement. Several UNSC members wanted after a few years to return to normal (and economically beneficial) relations with Iraq, and the United States moved from military threats to political and economic inducements after the 1994 signature of the Agreed Framework with North Korea.

In the Krasnoyarsk case, the dynamics were quite different. The Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations' stake in ending the Krasnoyarsk violation and the Soviet Union's stake in retaining it were for years equally strong. Ultimately, U.S. resolve proved longer-lasting—although the Soviet Union might have remained more resistant if it were not for the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev. General Secretary Gorbachev may not have valued treaty compliance, but he placed a high priority on good relations with the United States and on demonstrating dominance over the Soviet military establishment.

Three of the four cases demonstrated that, where compliance is elusive, the most effective inducement may be the threat of military action, whether occupation or attack. In the early 1920s, French occupation of the Ruhr, and threats of a repeat, convinced Germany to end some violations, if only temporarily. In the 1990s, U.S. threats of military action led North Korea to sign the Agreed Framework, although not to honor it. Only in the Iraqi case did two of the main parties, the United States and United Kingdom, follow through with actual invasion. While that certainly resolved the compliance issues, the price was enormous.

It may be stating the obvious, but compliance is generally easier to enforce for bilateral than multilateral agreements. The only successful case studied in this report was also the only purely bilateral one. If U.S. Allies had been parties to the ABM Treaty, it is doubtful that they would have demanded—without wavering for over six years—that the radar be dismantled.

While the Versailles Treaty had many parties, the United States was not among them, leaving only the United Kingdom and France as central enforcers of the disarmament provisions. In the 1920s, they disagreed more often than not on compliance issues—differences that the Weimar Government was able to exploit. During the next decade, they tended finally to be in agreement, but in favor of inaction and appeasement.

The UNSC Resolutions on Iraq involved many states. Of the permanent UNSC members, only the United States and United Kingdom remained firm in demanding complete Iraqi compliance.

North Korea's nuclear obligations were a hybrid, but primarily multilateral. The NPT, IAEA Safeguards Agreement and UNSC Resolutions involved most states in the world. The

Agreed Framework was bilateral, but South Korea and Japan were critical to its implementation.

The Six-Party Talks were obviously multilateral, but the United States led in both demands and concessions. The North Korean case fully demonstrates that a bilateral, or clearly U.S.-led, agreement by no means guarantees either compliance or a firm response to noncompliance.

Finally, violations of arms control agreements are at best difficult to deter. One might argue that the case studies were a skewed sample in this regard, because they all involved noncompliance. However, arms control agreements over the past 100-plus years that were never violated are rare indeed. The demilitarization of Germany and Japan were exceptions, but in both cases, the leadership and the population embraced that outcome only after the catastrophe of the Second World War.

Fear of detection and response had some deterrent effect in the Weimar and Iraqi cases, but that was by no means complete. When discovered, the violators sought to appease the enforcers through partial compliance. The same was true of North Korea, although its compliance concessions were even more limited than those of Iraq or Weimar Germany. Finally, expectation of detection did not deter the Soviets from building the Krasnoyarsk radar; they simply assumed that the United States would not demand compliance. Which shows how worried they were that we might be strict arms control enforcers. In this case, at least, they were wrong.

* * * * *

Christopher A. Ford

Christopher A. Ford is former Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance.

Thank you for having me on this program.

It's hard to follow such a terrific roster of speakers who have flagged such important issues, but—and with apologies for any lapses of coherence due to jet lag, since I'm joining you guys from Singapore right now and it's just past two in the morning here—let me at least add a little of my own gloss on these issues. These will just be my own personal opinions, of course, and they won't necessarily correspond to those of anyone else, but I think they'll dovetail well with what the others have said.

Let me note at the outset, however, that I don't consider myself a die-hard arms control skeptic. When it's done right, arms control can, I think, play a valuable role in helping us meet security threats and preserve strategic stability. The problem, however, is that it's far more difficult, and rather less common, for arms control to be "done right" than we in the West like to think it is.

The Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch once wrote to one of his patrons about how to tell a friend from a flatterer.¹⁴ He called, in effect, for *true* friends to show each other the kind of tough love that does not evade or sugar-coat what the other really needs to hear. The flatterer, wrote Plutarch,

always takes a position over against the maxim ‘Know thyself,’ by creating in every man deception towards himself and ignorance both of himself and of the good and evil that concerns himself; the good he renders defective and incomplete, and the evil impossible to amend.

By contrast, the true friend is both able and willing to offer “admonishment and frankness of speech.” Precisely because he is truly a friend, in other words the true friend “blames ... when he must.”

So, bearing that in mind, let me try to offer a little such “blame,” puncturing some of the *flattery* of arms control that I sometimes see in the policy community. I want instead to be a true friend to arms control by flagging some of its potential pitfalls and seductions.

To put it simply, we sometimes *want* arms control so much that we get in our own way. To illustrate this, let me describe a few types of characteristic challenge that can be created by the *mindset* we bring to dealing with issues of arms control. These are, in a sense, *political* or perhaps *cultural* problems—challenges related to how morally and intellectually *serious* we really are about arms control, if you will—and there are at least four of them. These four relate to:

- whether and when to enter into arms control in the first place;
- whether and when to *withdraw* from an arms control agreement;
- challenges of compliance assessment; and
- challenges of compliance enforcement.

Problems of Entering

My good friend the late Jeff Eberhardt was fond of reminding State Department negotiators that “if you want it bad, you get it bad.” That is, if you’re *too* eager for a deal, you give the other guy a powerful tool with which to take advantage of you. *Less* eagerness to get a deal can thus sometimes produce better results.

Malevolent actors like the Iranians and Russians often excel at arms control gamesmanship. We’ve taught them over the years that the mere *prospect* of talks is often enough to get the United States to back off from doing things that might annoy or disadvantage them. And they frequently try to take advantage of this, in effect *weaponizing* our earnest desire for diplomatic solutions against us.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia. How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/plutarch-moralia_how_tell_flatterer_friend/1927/pb_LCL197.265.xml.

The Soviets were particularly eager practitioners of such gamesmanship. (I discussed this in more detail in a paper published by NIPP earlier this year.¹⁵) After they had deployed a new generation of strategic delivery systems as well as their intermediate-range SS-20 missiles in the late 1970s, they began offering “nuclear freeze” resolutions at the United Nations, hoping to lock in place an advantageous balance before Washington could respond with countervailing deployments.

When their forces outnumbered us in central Europe, Moscow promoted a “no-first use” treaty that would have taken off the table our nuclear deterrence against those forces. When President Reagan began pursuing potentially space-based missile defenses and was building up U.S. conventional might, the Kremlin duly offered a plan to ban weapons in space and proposed “Talks on the Non-Increase and Reduction of Military Expenditures.”

One might wonder, in fact, whether that tradition continues today. I saw recently, for instance, that Vladimir Putin—the man who has been violating the New START agreement¹⁶ and who announced Russia’s “suspension” of that treaty in 2023¹⁷—is now suggesting to President Trump that we extend observance of the central limits on strategic systems in New START.¹⁸ One wonders whether Putin’s newfound liking for New START has anything to do with the fact that the U.S. national security strategic policy community has recently coalesced on a bipartisan basis,¹⁹ perhaps for the first time in my lifetime, around the idea that we need to have *new* nuclear delivery systems and *more* nuclear weapons than before in response to the new challenge of deterring *two* nuclear peers at the same time.

If indeed deterrence requires that we now deploy more weapons—and I agree that it does—it’s obviously a terrible idea to agree to extend limits that would preclude us doing so. So *of course* Putin now wants to lock us in at present force levels! His game (and its dangers) should be obvious to anyone paying attention, but arms control can be seductive, and we’ve been fooled before.

Anyway, arms control negotiating is clearly not a business for the incautious or naïve. Sometimes “nyet” is exactly the right answer to an arms control proposal. Ronald Reagan knew that, but the prospect of reaching a “deal”—any deal!—is apparently eternally tempting, and not everybody has the Gipper’s moral courage, as his wife Nancy put it in a different context, to “just say no.”

¹⁵ Christopher A. Ford, *Struggling with The Bomb: Competing Discourses in the Nuclear Disarmament Movement, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 2025), https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Ford_NIPP_disarmament_paper_Vol_5_No_2.pdf.

¹⁶ Edward Wong, “U.S. Says Russia Fails to Comply With Nuclear Arms Control Treaty,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/31/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear-treat.html>.

¹⁷ “Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.,” *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/>.

¹⁸ “Russia signals readiness to extend New START treaty for one year,” *NHK World*, September 22, 2025, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20250923_03/.

¹⁹ Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

Problems of Remaining

A second set of political problem with arms control revolves around how long to *stay* in an agreement when circumstances are changing.

The most obvious way that relevant facts can change, of course, is that the other side may cheat. This was, for instance, the reason for the United States' withdrawal in 2019 from the INF Treaty: Russia was flagrantly cheating, and it had been doing so for years.

It's also possible for withdrawal to become appropriate even when the other side is complying, if *other* facts change in ways that make it disadvantageous to remain. This was the case for us with the ABM Treaty, from which we withdrew after the growth of *third-party* missile threats from North Korea and Iran.

But here's the rub. Historically, we have struggled *politically* with withdrawal even when it's needed. Our earnest *desire* for arms control has sometimes made it difficult for us to gather the courage to *get out of it* when circumstances demand.

Russia, for example, began testing a new cruise missile in violation of the terms of the INF treaty in 2008. The United States knew about this not long afterward, but it actually took the Obama Administration until 2014 to be willing actually to publicly declare Russia a violator, and even then Washington did essentially nothing except simply *talk* about the problem until Obama left office. By the time we in the First Trump Administration arrived on the scene in early 2017,²⁰ Russia had begun actually *deploying* its new missile against us and our allies in Europe.

The United States did finally react concretely under the First Trump Administration, authorizing the Defense Department to start R&D on *American* INF-class systems. And when Russia didn't change course, we announced in 2019 that we were pulling out.²¹ By then, however, it was already *more than ten years* after the first flight-tests of the illegal missile had occurred. That is disgracefully long.

Problems of Compliance Assessment

My third category of political problem is the challenge of honestly assessing *compliance* with arms control agreements. Admitting that problems exist can have major consequences, and that can sometimes make leaders reluctant to be honest in compliance assessment.

With INF, it proved extraordinarily hard for us to get even our friends in Britain, France, and Germany to admit that there was a Russian INF violation at all. They did eventually relent, but they prevaricated for a painfully long time, clearly fearing that their concurrence with U.S. assessments of a Russian violation would mean the end of the treaty. Especially for France and Germany—for, in fairness, the Brits came around sooner—it seemed better to *ignore* the Russian violation than to see a treaty officially collapse.

²⁰ Daryl G. Kimball, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," *Fact Sheets & Briefs*, Arms Control Association, August 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty-glance>.

²¹ Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019," U.S. Department of State, *Press Statement*, August 2, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/>.

And it's not just them. We ourselves have a mixed track record of being willing to admit the existence of problems where such honesty would suggest a need to *do something* in response to them. It was not until more than a *decade* after the U.S. Government first assessed Iran was in the early stages of a nuclear weapons development program, for example, that we were finally willing officially to state what obviously followed from that—namely, that Iran was in violation of its obligations under Article II of the NPT.

Problems of Enforcement

Turning to my fourth and final category of problem, there can also be huge political challenges associated with compliance *enforcement*. This is the old challenge Fred Iklé captured in the title of his 1961 Foreign Affairs article “After Detection—What?”²² If you find a violation, *what are you willing to do about it?*

As it turns out, leaders sometimes find it hard to take resolute and effective action to try to *restore* compliance even once a violation becomes undeniable.

The Obama Administration's approach to INF is a good example, but we should also remember that after Iran's nuclear program first came publicly to light, it took the international community a long time to do anything in response. By the time the first U.N. sanctions were imposed, for instance, the centrifuge plant at Natanz had gone from being merely a provocative hole in the ground to actually *producing* enriched uranium. Once again, shame on us.

Conclusion

So, if there's a myth to dispel here, it is the false idea that asking tough questions about arms control and approaching arms control proposals with some realistic skepticism is necessarily to be *hostile* to it. Pursuing good arms control requires a kind of “tough love” that our policy community has sometimes found difficult to apply.

J.D. Crouch

J.D. Crouch is former Deputy National Security Advisor and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy.

During the following few minutes. I am planning on offering a practitioner's perspective on arms control negotiations. They stem from my experience with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Space Talks with Russia, the Moscow Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense Treaty withdrawal discussions, and from my time on the Hill being involved

²² Fred Charles Iklé, “After Detection--What?,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1961, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1961-01-01/after-detection-what>.

with arms control. I have much more experience negotiating with the Russians than with the Chinese, but some of these lessons are applicable just as well.

Historically, the United States approached negotiations very academically, which was different from how negotiations were approached in the period between the two world wars. After the invention and spread of nuclear weapons, we focused on reducing costs of armaments and maintaining so-called strategic stability. Negotiations with the Soviet Union were not about improving relations per se but there was hope among some that this might be a by-product of negotiations.

We approached the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks as a seminar. We would educate the Soviets, and they will see things the way we do. Then we would come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Meanwhile, negotiations were about power politics for the Soviets, which meant we did not share assumptions on a fundamental level. We approached negotiation as a win-win proposition, they as a zero-sum one. This asymmetry is also reflected in who is in charge of negotiations. Diplomats are in charge of the negotiations process in the United States, members of the military and the security services dominate Russian negotiations.

While the Russians maximize demands going into negotiations, the Americans offer packages that are pre-negotiated during the inter-agency process. We implicitly take Russia's interest into account during the process of devising U.S. proposals, then negotiate down from even those balanced inter-agency agreements.

Any international negotiations are a two-step process for the Americans. First, we negotiate among ourselves. Second, we negotiate with our international counterparts. The Russians state maximalist demands, they often ask for further concessions, and then pocket them when we offer them. The Russians would often not give us anything in return, move on, and ask for more concessions.

While U.S. negotiating teams are real players in the process, the Russians send their diplomats equipped with the government's positions and very little authority to change them. The last significant difference is in implementation of international agreements. While the United States takes into account the "spirit" of the treaty and strives to not come even close to violating it, the Russians take a legalistic approach with the intent of exploiting potential loopholes and taking advantage of opportunities created by the U.S. strict adherence to arms control agreements. In short, the Russians care less about agreements than we do, as they are for them fundamentally political, not technical, documents which are both a reflection of the correlation of forces and something to be disregarded as Russian interests change or opportunities for advantage present themselves.



PROCEEDINGS

ENDING THE THREAT FROM IRAN

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Ending the Threat from Iran” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on October 22, 2025. The symposium highlighted a National Institute *Information Series* article co-authored by Robert Joseph, David Shedd, Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, and Robert Torricelli. The article discussed the nature of the Iranian threat, the failed history of negotiations to prevent Iran from seeking nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and constraints on the use of force, proposing a new U.S. strategy of support for the internal Iranian opposition.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The issue of how to deal with Iran has bedeviled multiple administrations of both parties since the Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979. Concerns over Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs top the list of American worries, coupled with the Islamic regime’s support for terrorism worldwide. The United States still considers Iran the world’s number one state sponsor of terrorism.

For more than 45 years, the Iranian regime has sought to counter American interests at every turn. Tehran has aligned with Russia, China, and North Korea in what has been termed an “Axis of Authoritarians” to overturn the U.S.-led world order and undermine American global dominance. The chants of “Death to America” are more than just rhetorical propaganda for the masses—they reflect a deeply held belief that the United States, as the “Great Satan,” must be defeated.

Various U.S. administrations have attempted to use multiple levers of state power to constrain or roll back Tehran’s dangerous activities. The United States has imposed numerous economic sanctions on Iran and Iranian entities in an effort to choke off financing for Iran’s malicious activities and to penalize and deter the clerical regime from additional transgressions. Unfortunately, economic sanctions have often been circumvented.

Diplomatically, the United States has sought to negotiate an end to Tehran’s nuclear programs and to moderate Iran’s malign behavior through the provision of multiple carrots, including sanctions relief and the unfreezing of Iranian financial assets. The Obama Administration’s JCPOA is perhaps the poster child for such diplomatic outreach, which—despite its much-ballyhooed advantages—failed to constrain Iran’s quest for nuclear capabilities that could ultimately threaten the United States, Israel, and U.S. allies. Indeed, notwithstanding the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement during the first Trump



Administration, it officially ended four days ago, with Iran's Foreign Ministry declaring all restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and related activities "terminated."¹

And militarily, despite Israel's military actions to stop Tehran's nuclear program in its tracks, and the Trump Administration's support in "Operation Midnight Hammer," Iran's nuclear ambitions do not appear to have been dampened, and the regime may be doubling down on its desire to proceed with its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The IAEA estimates that most of Iran's enriched uranium at the Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan sites is likely to have survived the military strikes.²

The apparent failure to date of Western economic, diplomatic, and military actions to deter Iranian mischief making and growing threats to the West suggest an alternative strategy is necessary for dealing with the Islamic regime's intractable hostility toward the United States, Israel, and the civilized world. The need for an alternative strategy is what prompted the writing of this *Information Series* article.³

In addition, it appears that despite the economic hardships, public protests, and growing disillusionment by the Iranian people, the Iranian regime has successfully prevented any significant uprising against their oppressive control, and the Iranian opposition movement is still struggling to present an effective alternative in the face of the regime's brutal crackdowns on dissent.⁴

So, while the regime continues its domestic reign of terror and its rejection of efforts to moderate its destabilizing international behavior, the time is right to consider a different approach.

If anything, the Trump Administration has demonstrated a willingness to overturn conventional thinking on a multitude of issues and to adopt unconventional approaches to seemingly intractable problems. Perhaps now is the right time for the injection of new thinking on the issue of how to end the Iranian threat.

¹ "Iran says restrictions on nuclear programme 'terminated' as deal expires," *Al Jazeera*, October 18, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/18/iran-says-restrictions-on-nuclear-programme-terminated-as-deal-expires>.

² TOI Staff, "UN nuclear watchdog believes most of Iran's enriched uranium unharmed by war with Israel," *The Times of Israel*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-nuclear-watchdog-believes-most-of-irans-enriched-uranium-unharmed-by-war-with-israel/>.

³ Robert Joseph, Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, David Shedd, and Robert Torriceli, "Ending the Threat from Iran," *Information Series* No. 638 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 1, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/robert-joseph-joseph-detrani-keith-payne-david-shedd-and-robert-torriceli-ending-the-threat-from-iran-issue-no-638-october-1-2025/.

⁴ "Who makes up Iran's fragmented opposition?," *Reuters*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/who-makes-up-irans-fragmented-opposition-2025-06-18/>.

Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy, former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and Special Assistant to the President from 2001-2007.

Thank you, David. Let me start with a little background. This past August, I asked my long-time colleagues—Joe DeTrani, David Shedd, Keith Payne and Bob Torricelli—if they would participate in a strategy group taking a fundamentally different approach from past U.S. policy toward ending the threat from Iran.

All agreed, as it was clear we shared a similar set of views based on decades of experiences and a shared set of conclusions and concerns, specifically that all administrations since George W. Bush had failed to counter the threat from Iran, not just its nuclear weapons program but the full spectrum of threats—its support of terrorist proxies with funding and weapons, its state-sponsored terrorism which has killed hundreds of Americans, its destabilizing actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and its threats to U.S. regional friends and allies.

We settled on a division of labor with David taking the lead on the nature of the threat, Joe focusing on the failure of negotiations, Keith on the use of force, and Bob and I providing the initial draft of the overview section, the section on the nature of the regime, and the action recommendations. David and Joe will speak to the threat and negotiations but will also—I hope—share their views on all aspects of our report.

So, with that as background, let me begin with a few general observations. The premise of our argument is that for over 20 years—at least since 2002 when the nuclear program was outed publicly by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)—every successive administration has failed to convince Iran's leaders to moderate and end their pursuit of nuclear weapons. Each one has used different combinations of tools—diplomacy and negotiations, economic sanctions and most recently military force—to persuade or coerce Tehran to change its behavior. Of course, there have been different approaches—from appeasement under Obama and Biden to maximum pressure during the first Trump administration and, in Trump II, bombing the nuclear sites.

While the attacks were both fully justified and tactically effective in causing substantial damage sufficient to disrupt further enrichment for months if not years, at the strategic level, the pattern has not changed. President Trump remains committed to negotiating an agreement to end Iran's nuclear program and the Ayatollah remains committed to rebuilding the program, including enrichment, as well as providing more arms and funding to his terrorist proxies that have been decimated by Israel in the past two years.

Yes, we can and should continue to apply economic sanctions on the regime and, when needed, conduct more military strikes to disrupt the nuclear program. But that won't alter the fundamental dynamics of the past. And we need to contend with the likelihood that Iran's leaders may have concluded that the military strikes on their principal nuclear sites—and the actions taken by Israel in the 12-day war—mean they must move forward with even more determination and urgency to acquire a nuclear weapon to deter further attacks.

For over 40 years, the regime has demonstrated that it is unwilling to change in any meaningful way its behavior, whether internally or externally. There is no reason to conclude that it is now going to change. So, what explains this 20-plus years of failed policies? Why do we continue to pursue the same outcome with the same means? At one level, I think it can be attributed to the failure of imagination, but that often and over-used explanation doesn't provide much insight or a vision for effective change.

The conclusion we draw in our paper is that U.S. policy has failed and will continue to fail as long as we retain the false hope mentioned earlier: that we can convince or coerce the mullahs to change course—a hope we characterize as consistently disappointed but never abandoned. And here is where our analysis differs from that which has guided every administration and has been pervasive across almost all think tanks and academia.

Our assessment rejects the flawed dichotomy underlying U.S. policy that there are only two choices—negotiation or war. As we say in the paper, given that stark choice, every president has understandably opted for negotiation. As war—especially full-scale war and occupation as done in Iraq—is rightly ruled out as an option. And even though it is clear that Iran has used negotiations to buy time to advance its nuclear program and gain concessions that have provided resources for the regime to build its nuclear and missile programs, to supply its proxies, and to oppress its own people.

Put simply, we need to break this cycle of failed policy. The alternative that we advocate—one that has been largely ignored—is to support the Iranian people in their determination to end the religious dictatorship—a regime that is more vulnerable today than ever before given the collapse of its ring of fire strategy, its demonstration of military weakness, and the regime's internal loss of legitimacy resulting from pervasive corruption and brutal domestic repression.

So, as Lenin famously asked, what is to be done? Here the paper is clear as to what support to the Iranian people excludes and includes.

We must begin by abandoning the failed policies of the past. We must reject the false belief that the mullahs will change and become more moderate. We need to stop throwing lifelines to the regime by making concessions that provide billions of dollars that are then used to supply terrorist proxies, build the nuclear and missile programs, and acquire the tools of repression to brutalize their own citizens. And we must abandon the illusion that negotiations, economic sanctions, and even the use of force can lead to an effective agreement to end Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

We must chart a new course for ending the threat from Iran. This requires new policies that support the Iranian people in their struggle to throw off the yoke of the religious dictatorship. This includes the recognition of the self-determination of the Iranian people to create a government that protects their basic rights of life, liberty and pursuit of economic advancement. Support also includes the endorsement of the opposition in their determination to establish a democratic, secular, and non-nuclear Iran. The Iranian people are the foremost victims of the regime and represent the greatest threat to its existence. Supporting their freedom is a moral imperative and the most effective means to achieve U.S. security goals.

More specifically, and here I am quoting directly from our paper, U.S. policy should:

- Bring pressure on the regime through public statements transmitted inside Iran about the nature of the regime—its pervasive corruption, brutal repression and crimes against its own people.
- Tailor different messages and delivery means to influence different sectors of Iran's population, placing particular emphasis on tech savvy youth without connections to the regime.
- Support all components of the democratic opposition. Give official support to the NCRI 10-point plan calling for a democratic, secular and non-nuclear Iran.
- Create relationships with the global Iranian diaspora to undertake actions that increase pressure on the regime.
- Impose maximum pressure to isolate and weaken the regime. Implement a comprehensive approach that builds pressure on the regime using diplomacy, sanctions and other economic means, and intelligence tools.
- Cut off the regime's access to hard currency by enforcing sanctions on Iran's oil and gas.
- Deter Iranian provocative behavior through military presence and other means and, as needed, defend against Iranian use of terror and military force. Deterrence, and if needed, defense, will be strengthened by fielding an effective missile defense of the United States and by continuing to contribute to the missile defenses of U.S. allies.

As President Reagan did with those living under Soviet rule, the United States should provide moral support to the Iranian people by recognizing their right to have a government that provides for their fundamental rights and freedom. Reagan spoke eloquently about the Soviet leadership's disregard for human rights and their efforts to prevent the Soviet people from hearing the truth about their own country and the world. He also engineered ways to get information, denied by their own government, to Soviet citizens about global events and even their own literature and culture. Reagan was as patient and determined as he was confident of the final outcome. We must do the same with Iran.

David R. Shedd

David R. Shedd is former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Intelligence Programs and Reform on the National Security Council under President George W. Bush.

The adversarial challenges between the United States and Iran extend well beyond Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The threats emanating from terror abroad

and against its own people by the Iranian regime date back to the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution, when the Iranian radicals seized hostages in the U.S. Embassy. While Iran's nuclear file came into sharper relief some 25 years ago, terrorism as an instrument of national power under the sponsorship of the regime has been the norm for nearly 46 years. In parallel, albeit relatively more recently, we could now see a regime fully committed to the acquisition of nuclear weapons enabled by a covert centrifuge program alongside efforts being undertaken by Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon in parallel to the nuclear enrichment program. That intent has not abated nor has its use of asymmetric warfare.

It is accurate to state that since 1979, Iran has been in perpetual hostility toward the United States, Israel and other friends and allies of the United States. As the top designated state sponsor of international terrorism, for the past nearly 46 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has committed numerous acts of terrorism. Some of those acts have been committed by Iranians under Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) while other acts of terrorism have been undertaken by Iranian proxies in the region—in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen for example—financed and planned by the IRGC. Iran has used Lebanese Hezbollah, myriad Iraqi militias, Hamas in the case of attacking Israel, and the Houthis in Yemen to carry out their kinetic hostilities against the United States and America's friends and allies.

The radical regime in Tehran does not use terrorism by exception but rather as a prominent element of the regime's instrument of national power. Apart from the weakened state of Iran's proxies in the region over the past one to two years due to U.S. and Israeli actions against the proxies, there is no indication that the regime is prepared to alter its commitment to using asymmetric warfare against the United States and its national interests around the globe. In other words, the regime's threat profile has only diminished because of the degradation of its own capacity to use terrorism vice any indication that the regime has recanted from using terror in their near abroad and beyond.

Nothing has been effective in the past nor is there any indication that anything will work in the future to change the nature of the regime's commitment to terrorism. The litany of actions ranging from the attacks on the U.S. marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 under the direction and control from Tehran, to attacking Khobar Towers in 1996, to the disruption of assassination plots including inside the United States, point to the Mullah's perpetual and profound hostility toward the United States.

Meantime, Iran's despotic rulers apply terror against their own people in a nation of some 90 million long-suffering citizens under a highly unpopular regime. Time and time again, the ruthless security apparatus of the Ministry of State Security, alongside elements of the IRGC, have viciously cracked down against all dissent. Brutal repression is the norm. Human rights are routinely violated in the regime's application of systematic suppression of any form of dissent.

Where is the regime headed in the context of the security threats that are unrelenting from Mullahs? Tehran is committed to continuing both its internal and external mechanisms to foment chaos and use terror tactics if and where possible. In addition, as part of their disruptive tactics, the use of increasingly sophisticated cyber-attacks against the United

States and its friends and allies are likely to increase. We need to remain vigilant for all forms of asymmetric attacks as we continue to face an unrepentant regime for its past actions and the Mullahs of this radical regime remaining committed to fomenting chaos when and where they consider it in their own best interest to do so.

Joseph DeTrani

Joseph DeTrani is the former Special Envoy for Negotiations with North Korea and former Director of the National Counterproliferation Center.

In the early 2000s, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran was not in compliance with safeguard requirements dealing with uranium enrichment and allowing IAEA monitors access to determine safeguard compliance, thus a series of sanctions were imposed on Iran by the United Nations Security Council.

In 2007, the Intelligence Community published a National Intelligence Estimate stating that in 2003, Iran's leadership had decided to end Iran's nuclear weapons program.

In July 2015, the P-5 plus one (U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, Germany and the European Union) and the government of Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—The Iran Nuclear Agreement.

The JCPOA limited uranium enrichment to 3.67% purity; reduced the number and sophistication of centrifuges (19,000 to 6,104 IR-1 centrifuges); capped the enriched uranium stockpile (300kg for 15 years) and provided comprehensive access to IAEA inspectors.

In return, United Nations sanctions (UNSC Resolution 2231) were lifted: arms embargo (5 years), ballistic missile activities (8 years), asset freeze, and ban on nuclear materials and technology. The European Union lifted sanctions on oil and gas, removed banking restrictions and provided access to SWIFT, and unfroze Iranian assets. The United States also lifted sanctions and ended its embargo of oil and gas, shipbuilding cooperation, banking, and removed the National Iranian Oil Corporation and Iranian banks—and other entities—from the sanctions lists.

In short, sanctions were lifted and tens of billions of dollars of frozen assets were now available to Iran, with Iran's right to have access to peaceful nuclear energy per the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The JCPOA did not address Iran's missile programs, their regional activities or human rights issues.

Over the past few years, Iran was enriching uranium at 20% purity and lately, at 60% purity, literally weeks away from enrichment at the 90% purity level needed for nuclear weapons. Moreover, the IAEA most recently complained—as they routinely did in the past—that Iran was not providing IAEA inspectors access to undeclared suspect nuclear sites.

In May 2018, President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA.

In mid-June 2025, concerned with Iran's status as a threshold nuclear weapons state and IAEA concerns about Iran's nuclear program, the United States and Israel conducted airstrikes on Iran's principal nuclear sites: Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan. Current efforts to reengage with Iran on their nuclear program are now dependent on Iran's stated conditions: compensation for the airstrikes conducted by the United States and Israel; no further attacks on Iran; and Iran should be allowed to pursue a peaceful civilian nuclear program, with the right to enrich uranium for said program.

Ilan Berman

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.

For decades, policymakers in Washington have struggled to formulate a response to the enduring challenge posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet the strategies adopted by successive Administrations—from the engagement of the Clinton and Obama eras to the sanctions and “maximum pressure” tried under Presidents Bush and Trump—have fallen short of comprehensively addressing the threat to U.S. interests and American allies presented by Iran's radical regime.

These shortcomings stem from a central deficiency. U.S. policy, whether engagement or pressure, has focused overwhelmingly on the behavior of Iran's regime, including its persistent pursuit of nuclear status and its ongoing support for radical substate proxies. But none have tackled the core driver of the Iranian threat: the radical, expansionist and revisionist ideology of the regime itself. In turn, the inability of U.S. efforts to meaningfully reshape Iranian behavior suggests that nothing short of a fundamental change in the nature of the regime in Tehran will produce meaningful results.

Is such a transformation possible? Empirical data suggests that forty-six years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran is indeed ripe for change, for several reasons.

There is now broad disaffection with the regime on the part of the Iranian people. A recent survey by the Netherlands-based polling institute GAMAAN, for instance, found that an overwhelming majority of Iranians (some 80 percent) now rejects the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as a form of government.

Rampant mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency have further discredited the Iranian regime in the eyes of the Iranian people. Instances of such shortcomings are glaring, and include a deepening resource crisis so profound that Iranian officials have begun to openly discuss the need to move the national capital from Tehran to another part of the country.

Widespread perceptions of inequality and inauthenticity have additionally dented the credibility of Iran's clerical regime. The recent furor over leaked footage of the immodest wedding attire of the daughter of Ali Shamkhani, a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is just the latest example of official regime hypocrisy and its selective application of religious fiat.

All this has led to a large—and growing—field of Iranian opposition actors. Whether these forces can affect real change, however, remains an open question. This summer’s “twelve-day war” between Israel and Iran provided a clear opening for Iran’s opposition forces to mobilize against the regime. However, they did not do so, in the process creating serious doubts in the West about their potential and capabilities.

If revolution is off the table, at least for the time being, then U.S. policy needs to anticipate the ways in which the Iranian regime might evolve. Here, three scenarios stand out.

- A **TECHNOCRATIC TRANSITION**, in which Iran follows the trajectory of China after the death of Mao Zedong in the late 1970s, when Communist Party leaders, in an effort to rebuild domestic and international confidence after the excesses of the Mao era, focused on economic performance, technological competence and good governance.
- A **PARTIAL COLLAPSE** of the Iranian regime, akin to what has taken place in recent years in Venezuela, entailing a scenario in which the regime remains cohesive enough to maintain its hold on power but loses control of key functions (such as border security) and becomes increasingly reliant on foreign sponsors.
- A **TAKEOVER OF POWER** by the country’s most capable and cohesive political force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, in a manner similar to how the Soviet era intelligence state rebuilt and reconstituted itself in Russia following the collapse of the USSR.

In truth, there are indicators of each of these scenarios already present in Iranian politics. As such, they are worth examining in depth by U.S. policymakers as a means of crafting a more robust and responsive American approach.

Ultimately, however, any such policy would, by its nature, involve managing the Iranian threat rather than definitively addressing it. The United States therefore will need to create the necessary political space for regime alternatives to truly flourish, because they represent the only lasting answer to the threat posed by the current regime in Tehran.



SHOULD THE UNITED STATES RESUME NUCLEAR TESTING?

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Should the United States Resume Nuclear Testing?” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on December 11, 2025. The symposium assessed the pros and cons of resumed U.S. nuclear testing in light of President Trump’s comments that the United States would resume nuclear testing “immediately” and criticisms that doing so would be unwise and imprudent.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The issue of nuclear testing has dominated the news recently with President Trump’s comment that the United States intends to resume nuclear testing “immediately” in order to keep up with Russia and China “on an equal basis.” The outcry and reaction this statement generated ranged from modest support among Republicans, to sheer horror among the arms control and disarmament communities.

Pundits and commentators have claimed the president didn’t know what he was talking about, confusing explosive weapons testing with delivery systems testing.¹ Others have asserted any U.S. tests would prompt Russia and China to resume explosive testing, sparking a testing arms race that would benefit Moscow and Beijing much more than Washington.² As one former lab director recently wrote, “resuming full-scale nuclear testing... will fuel another dangerous arms race at a time when global tensions among the great powers are high.... The bottom line is that even though the United States could derive important benefits from resumed nuclear testing, it would lose more than it stands to gain.”³ Still others said that it would take years for the United States to resume nuclear testing given the atrophy of expertise over the years and the need for unprecedented safety measures given the population growth in Nevada where the underground U.S. nuclear test site last witnessed a test in 1992—more than three decades ago.⁴

¹ Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “New Weapons Testing Won’t Include Nuclear Explosions, Energy Secretary Says,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/02/us/politics/trump-nuclear-testing-explosions.html>.

² For example, see Siegfried Hecker, “Lessons From Los Alamos: America Has the Most To Lose From Restarting Nuclear Testing,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 26, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/lessons-alamos>; Timothy Gardner, “Democratic senator urges Trump not to resume nuclear weapons tests,” *Reuters*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/democratic-senator-urges-trump-not-resume-nuclear-weapons-tests-2025-11-25/>; Erin D. Dumbacher, “Will Trump’s Nuclear Testing Order Prompt a Global Race?,” Council on Foreign Relations, October 30, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/will-trumps-nuclear-testing-order-prompt-global-race>.

³ Hecker, *ibid.*

⁴ See, for example, Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, “President Trump Deserves Better Advice,” *RealClear Defense*, November 3, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/11/03/president_trump_deserves_better_advice_1144884.html; David Cortright, “How the United States achieved its de facto nuclear test ban—and how to preserve it,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 12, 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/2025/11/how-the-united-states-achieved-its-de-facto-nuclear-test-ban-and-how-to-preserve-it/>; Joshua Rhett Miller, “Donald Trump’s Nuclear Announcement Sparks Alarm: ‘He Is



According to official reports and statements, however, Russia and China have been engaged in surreptitious nuclear testing activities for years. The State Department's most recent report on the topic reaffirmed the Department's prior conclusions that "Russia has conducted supercritical nuclear weapons tests without TTBT notification since renewing its nuclear explosive testing moratorium in 1996. Concerns remain due to these past activities and the uncertainty and lack of transparency relating to Russia's activities at Novaya Zemlya."⁵

With respect to China, the U.S. government assesses that "concerns remain about activities at the Lop Nur Nuclear Test Site given the PRC's lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities at the site, its previous use of explosive containment chambers, and prior questions regarding its adherence to the 'zero-yield' standard in its nuclear weapons testing moratorium."⁶

Controversy over the president's comments that "Russia is testing nuclear weapons, and China is testing them too...." was heightened when the Secretary of Energy stated that the United States actually does not plan to conduct nuclear explosive tests and would only carry out "nonnuclear" and "noncritical explosions" and when the new head of U.S. Strategic Command, Admiral Richard Correll told Congress in October, "Neither China nor Russia has conducted a nuclear explosive test."⁷ In addition, the head of the CIA and Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee both backed the president's comments, noting that "the CIA assesses that both Russia and China have conducted supercritical nuclear weapons tests in excess of the U.S. zero-yield standard."⁸

In light of this, coupled with the plethora of nuclear threats emanating from Russia and China over Ukraine and Taiwan, the debate over whether a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing is necessary to ensure the safety, security, and reliability of the U.S. nuclear arsenal has become white hot and, dare I say, explosive. There also appears to be a fair amount of confusion over the terminology used to describe the various types of tests that can be conducted, including the notion of zero yield and the distinctions between subcritical, supercritical, and hydronuclear tests, for example. And swirling around all of this is the

Misinformed'," *Newsweek*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trumps-nuclear-announcement-sparks-alarm-10967374>.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, April 2025, p. 26, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Arms-Control-Treaty-Compliance-Report_Final-Accessible.pdf.

⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, April 2022, pp.28-29, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-1.pdf>.

⁷ David E. Sanger and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Trump Doubles Down on Nuclear Tests. His Energy Secretary Differs.," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/03/us/politics/trump-nuclear-tests-energy-secretary.html>.

⁸ Victor Nava, "CIA director, Senate intel chairman say Trump 'is right' about secret Russian and Chinese nuclear tests," *New York Post*, November 3, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/11/03/us-news/cia-director-senate-intel-chairman-say-trump-is-right-about-russian-and-chinese-nuclear-tests/>.

ongoing debate over whether the United States should reconsider ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the Senate overwhelmingly rejected in 1999.

In short, there are many aspects of this issue to consider, and I hope we will cover most if not all of them during today's discussion.

Mark B. Schneider

Mark B. Schneider is Senior Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy and former OSD Principal Director for Forces Policy; Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy; and Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy.

President Trump ordered resumed nuclear testing, stating, "Because of other countries testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process will begin immediately."⁹ He further stated in October, "You'll find out very soon, but we're going to do some testing.... Other countries do it. If they're doing to do it, we're going to do it, okay?"¹⁰

Vice President J.D. Vance also stated, "We have a big arsenal. Obviously, the Russians have a large nuclear arsenal. The Chinese have a large nuclear arsenal. Sometimes you need to test it to make sure its functioning and working properly."¹¹ And Secretary of War Pete Hegseth declared in November, "That [nuclear weapons] is the baseline of our deterrence, and so having understanding and resuming testing is a pretty responsible, very responsible, way to do that."¹² Yet, Secretary of Energy Chris Wright added uncertainty to the controversy when he stated, "I think the tests we're talking about right now are system tests. These are not nuclear explosions. These are what we call non-critical explosions."¹³

Adversary Nuclear Testing

Both the Trump and Biden Administrations determined that Russia was conducting nuclear yield producing nuclear tests. Both raised concerns about covert Chinese nuclear tests. In November, Senator Tom Cotton announced, "After consultations with Director Ratcliffe and

⁹ Donald J. Trump, Trump's Truth, October 2, 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115460423936412555>.

¹⁰ "Trump declines to rule out underground nuclear tests," *Reuters*, November 1, 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/world/20251101/trump-declines-to-rule-out-underground-nuclear-tests>.

¹¹ Roman Kohanets, "US Wants to Ensure Its Nuclear Arsenal 'Works Properly,' Says Vice President Vance," *United24media.com*, October 31, 2025, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/us-wants-to-ensure-its-nuclear-arsenal-works-properly-says-vice-president-vance-12989>.

¹² Bill Gertz, "Hegseth: Nuclear tests bolster credible strategic deterrence, lower risk of nuclear conflict," *The Washington Times*, October 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2025/oct/31/pete-hegseth-nolitics/energy-secretary-reveals-how-us-nuclear-tests-work>.

¹³ Morgan Phillips, "Energy secretary reveals how US nuclear tests will work," *Fox News*, November 3, 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/energy-secretary-reveals-how-us-nuclear-tests-work>.

his team, they have confirmed to me that the CIA assesses that both Russia and China have conducted super-critical nuclear weapons tests in excess of the U.S. zero-yield standard. These tests are not historic and are part of their nuclear modernization programs.”¹⁴

As Dr. John Foster, the former Director of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory noted in 2016, hydronuclear tests “of less than one ton” yield could provide high confidence in the “performance [of nuclear weapons] at low yield.”¹⁵ The First Deputy Atomic Energy Minister of the Soviet Union, Viktor Mikhaylov, acknowledged in 1999 that “...developed traditional nuclear powers can use hydronuclear experiments to perform tasks of improving reliability of their nuclear arsenal and effectively steward its operation.”¹⁶

Covert tests ranging from sub-kiloton to perhaps ten kilotons can be conducted with decoupling, testing in salt mines and in high seismic areas.¹⁷ North Korea has overtly conducted nuclear tests including a thermonuclear weapon and may have covertly conducted low-yield nuclear tests for Iran.¹⁸ Covert testing can result in large adversary advantages in nuclear weapons reliability and allow development of new weapons types.

The Clinton Administration’s Zero Yield Decision

The Clinton Administration rejected the technical advice it received on nuclear testing and negotiated a zero-yield Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). According to Dr. Paul Brown, the Associate Director of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 2019, the Defense Department’s position “...favored a low-yield treaty with a 500 ton testing limit.”¹⁹ And as Dr. C. Paul Robinson, the former Director of Sandia National Laboratory, noted in 2012, “At that time [1995], we in the U.S. labs requested that the permitted test level should be set to a level which is, in fact, [was] lower than a one-kiloton limit, which would have allowed us to carry out some very important experiments, in our view, to determine whether the first stage of multiple-stage devices was indeed operating, successfully.”²⁰ Dr. Sidney Drell, who chaired a 1995 JASON report cited the asymmetric impact of covert sub-kiloton

¹⁴ Victor Nava, “CIA director, Senate intel chairman say Trump ‘is right’ about secret Russian and Chinese nuclear tests,” *The New York Post*, November 3, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/11/03/us-news/cia-director-senate-intel-chairman-say-trump-is-right-about-russian-and-chinese-nuclear-tests/>.

¹⁵ Dr. John S. Foster Jr., “Future Possible Paths for the Nuclear Weapons Complex,” January 22, 2016, mimeo, p. 9.

¹⁶ Quoted in Mark B. Schneider, “The Future of the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent,” *Comparative Strategy*, July 1, 2008, p. 349, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01495930802358539>.

¹⁷ Mark B. Schneider, *The Case for Resumed Nuclear Testing* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2025), pp. 30-31, <https://nipp.org/papers/the-case-for-resumed-nuclear-testing/>.

¹⁸ Mark B. Schneider, “Has Iran Covertly Acquired Nuclear Weapons?,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 32, No. 4, September 2013, pp. 308-312, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ucst20>.

¹⁹ Paul Brown, *The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory’s Impact on U.S. Nuclear Policy from 1958 to 2000* (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, April 2019), p. 92, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/Brown-CTBTbook.pdf>.

²⁰ Paul Robinson, John Foster, and Thomas Scheber, “The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Questions and Challenges” (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, November 7, 2012), Lecture No. 1218, <https://www.heritage.org/armscontrol/report/the-comprehensive-test-ban-treaty-questions-andchallenges>.

testing, noting that “...testing under a 500 ton yield limit would allow studies of boost gas ignition and initial burn, which is a critical step in achieving full primary design yield.”²¹

A History of Failures

The 1958-1961 nuclear testing moratorium failures were ignored. Four weapon designs in the 1961 stockpile “had problems that could be resolved only by additional nuclear tests” and one was used in three delivery systems. Indeed, a report by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory authored by Dr. George H. Miller, Dr. Paul S. Brown, and Dr. Carol T. Alonso, noted, “...a large fraction of the W47 [Polaris] warheads would be duds....”²² They continued that one-third of the weapons fielded after 1958 “...received post deployment nuclear tests to resolve problems.”²³ Tom Ramos, a senior Lawrence Livermore weapons designer, stated in 2022, “It was later found after testing resumed in the 1960s that a good percentage of the warheads placed into the stockpile during the test ban had fatal defects.”²⁴ Unfortunately, a single deployed dud could destroy the Triad by about 2050.

This chart demonstrates the high cost of the science-based stockpile stewardship program and the huge decline in productivity resulting from it.²⁵

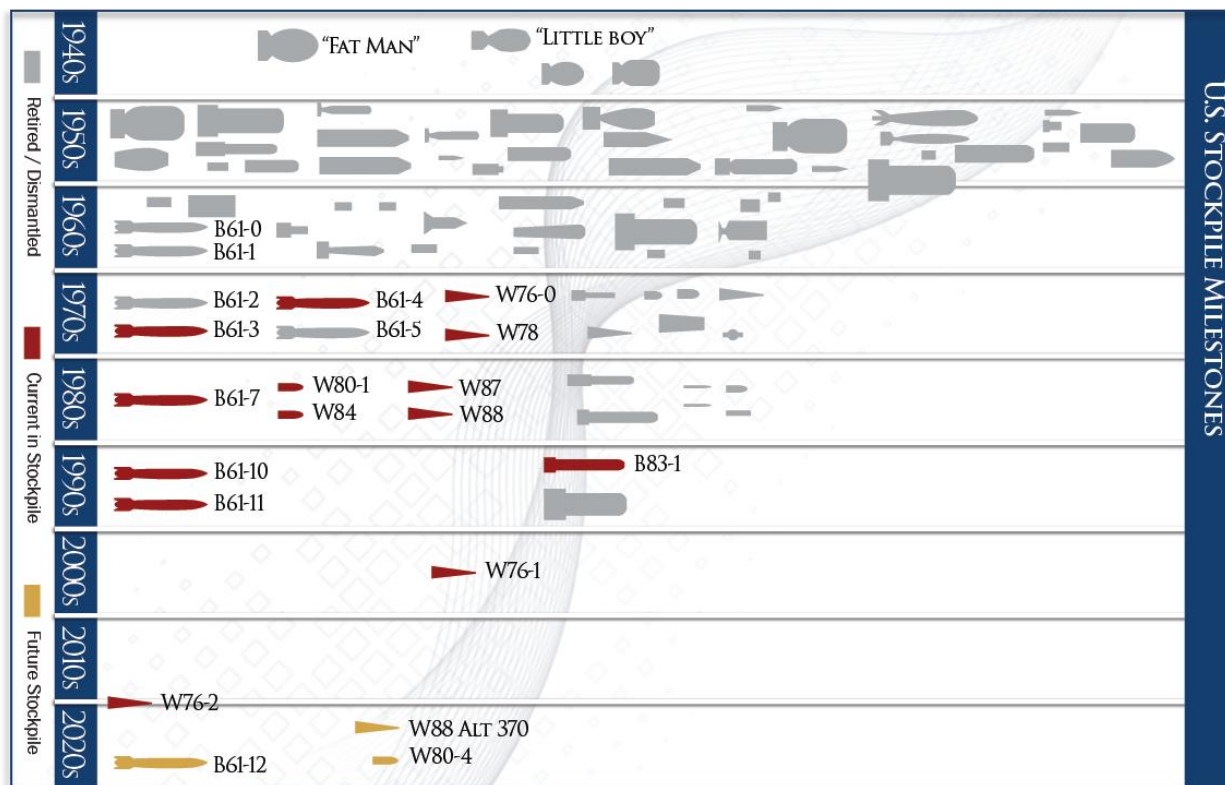
²¹ Sidney Drell, Chairman, “Nuclear Testing Summary and Conclusions,” JSR-95-320, August 3, 1995, <https://rlg.fas.org/jsr-95-320.htm>.

²² George H. Miller, Paul S. Brown, Carol T. Alonso, *Report to Congress on Stockpile Reliability, Weapons Remanufacture, and Role of Nuclear Testing* (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, October 1987), p. 20, available at <https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/6032983>.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23.

²⁴ Tom Ramos, *From Berkeley to Berlin - How the Rad Lab Helped Avert Nuclear War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022), p. 185.

²⁵ Office of the Secretary of War, *The Nuclear Matters Handbook 2020 [Revised]*, 2020, chapter 4, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/ncbdp/nm/NMHB2020rev/chapters/chapter4.html>.



The Case for Resumed Nuclear Testing

In short, our nuclear deterrent is critically important and must be reliable and safe. U.S. inherently safe weapons are uniquely vulnerable without nuclear testing. The Clinton Administration’s zero-yield CTBT was opposed by the Pentagon and all of the national nuclear weapon laboratories. It was rejected by a majority of the Senate. In reality, the arms control rationale for the CTBT is bogus—it cannot prevent nuclear proliferation.

Russia and possibly China are testing and the action-reaction arms race argument is a myth. No other weapon is fielded without extensive testing of the finished product. Science Based Stockpile Stewardship is far more costly and much less certain than explosive testing. In addition, life extension programs are several times as expensive as the original weapons development. The high cost of the stockpile stewardship program is dangerously reducing the number of U.S. nuclear weapons types and increasing the impact of a dud.

Unfortunately, thirty-three years without testing and little in the way of new design efforts has created the least experienced nuclear weapons designers since the late 1940s. As Dr. Harold Agnew, former Director of Los Alamos National Laboratory concluded in 2000, “...to consider putting those things [redesigns] into the stockpile without testing is nonsense.”²⁶

²⁶ James Glanz, “Testing the Aging Stockpile In A Test Ban Era,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2000, p. 1.

Franklin C. Miller

Franklin Miller is former Special Assistant to President George W. Bush and a longtime Pentagon official.

Thanks to David Trachtenberg and to NIPP for inviting me today.

The question of whether the United States should resume some form of nuclear warhead testing in response to Russian and Chinese testing is an important one. Sadly, much of the press coverage and some of the political statements about it have only served to confuse rather than illuminate and clarify the issue.

The question should be analyzed in two distinct but related planes: political and technical.

The political question should be framed as follows: “Does the fact that Russia and China are conducting extremely low yield nuclear warhead testing ‘in violation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty’s Zero Yield provision’ demand a political response in the form of renewed U.S. testing?”

A few facts are in order here:

- First, the United States, while a signatory to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), did not ratify it and therefore is not legally bound by its requirements.
- Second, the CTBT did not establish what “zero yield” meant. In the Treaty’s endgame negotiations in the mid-1990’s, the United States circulated a unilateral note to the UK, France, Russia, and China stating that it interpreted “zero yield” as forbidding the initiation of a fission/fusion reaction. London and Paris issued similar notes. Moscow and Beijing did not respond, and in so doing essentially rejected the U.S. interpretation.
- Third, while Russia and more recently China have been conducting extremely low-yield nuclear tests in a clandestine manner for many years, neither can be accused of violating the CTBT because the treaty does not define the term.
- Fourth, in all candor, during the Treaty negotiations, I, as a senior DoD official at the time, proposed permitting extremely low-yield testing (known as “whisper boosting”) to maintain confidence in our stockpile. The British and French governments agreed with this, and Prime Minister Major and President Chirac so wrote to President Clinton. Then-Defense Secretary Bill Perry also supported whisper boosting. It was vigorously opposed, however, by Energy Secretary Hazel O’Leary, a strong proponent of nuclear disarmament. When the U.S. laboratory directors indicated support for whisper boosting, O’Leary threatened them with massive cuts to their budgets unless they supported zero yield; they caved. Faced with the lab directors’ position, Secretary Perry changed his stance and reluctantly supported zero yield. Clinton, in one of his classic triangulations, established the Stockpile Stewardship Program to sustain confidence in the U.S. stockpile and compensate for the lack of whisper boosting. As a result, while the United States,

Britain, and France turned away from whisper boosting, Russia and China embraced it.

- Fifth, another question remains: “Just because our principal adversaries do something is the United States required to proceed down the same path?” My view is that we should pursue paths we need to pursue for our own reasons, not simply because Russia and China are doing them. As evidence, I note that the USSR sought (among other things) to develop a “wing in ground” aircraft called “Ekranoplan” and Russia has developed the trans-oceanic torpedo (“Status-6” or “Poseidon”) and the nuclear-powered cruise missile called “Burevestnik”—all of which are expensive failed programs. The United States, properly, has not pursued these failures, opting to pursue programs we need.

The technical question needs to be framed in this manner: “After more than 30 years of the Stockpile Stewardship Program (SSP) to sustain confidence in the stockpile, is nuclear testing now required to supplement that program and provide additional data to undergird our warheads’ reliability, safety, and effectiveness?” Under the SSP, our nation’s foremost nuclear scientists—including my friend and co-panelist Dr. Mike Anastasio—who was the head of Los Alamos National Lab and also the Livermore National Lab—have examined America’s existing nuclear stockpile annually. They have concluded, and so reported to the Commanders of U.S. Strategic Command (who in turn notified the Secretaries of Defense and Energy and whose views then went to the President), that nuclear testing is not necessary at this time.

Given that our weapons experts believe testing is not required now, I support that position and will continue to do so until the annual inspection suggests otherwise.

Until testing may become necessary, I would recommend that the funds, which some might devote to testing, instead be allocated to our strategic modernization and to improving our non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) arsenal, especially in fielding the SLCM-N nuclear sea-launched cruise missile more rapidly and developing a nuclear standoff capability for our dual-capable aircraft.

Thomas Scheber

Thomas Scheber is former Vice President of National Institute and Director of Strike Policy and Integration in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

My comments today will focus on the need for an informed, reasoned debate on the need for nuclear testing—now and in the future. There is clearly a strong bias against nuclear testing in almost all open press articles, and the lack of analysis and reasoning in most articles is appalling.

In particular, I want to identify five questionable statements that are typically assumed to be true and that are used often to oppose renewed nuclear testing. Each of these assertions is typically made without factual documentation but each is questionable or just not true.

The author Samuel Clemens called such assertions, “Things we know that just ain’t so.”

Assertion #1. Why now? Commentators often assert that there have been no warhead problems over the past 33 years that have required testing.

First, it is not true that there have been no warhead problems. I offer two examples:

- The first is a nuclear test failure of a warhead currently in the stockpile. This test was conducted prior to 1992. To this day, the reason for the test failure is unexplained. Modifications were made to the warhead design and servicing procedures. However, since the United States was observing a nuclear test moratorium, no nuclear test was conducted to confirm that the problem had, in fact, been fixed.
- The second warhead problem is a concern over the proper function of a moveable component in a warhead in the stockpile. The movable component could be used to select differing output options from the warhead. Instead of fixing the problem and confirming the fix with a nuclear test, the ability to move this component was eliminated, thereby reducing the utility of this warhead.

Both warhead issues, in the past, would have led to confirmatory tests. In the post-1992 test moratorium, the problems were assumed to be corrected with minor changes or warhead options eliminated as no longer required.

I expect that there are more issues since I have not had access to details of warhead reliability for a number of years. Certainly, life-extension modifications to warheads have introduced significant changes to warheads that are now deployed in configurations that differ from the test-certified configurations.

In the early 1990s, the widely accepted mantra at the nuclear labs was, “there is no such thing as a small change to a nuclear warhead.”

Assertion #2. The United States has conducted over a thousand nuclear tests. The data from those tests should be sufficient for analysis of warhead issues in the future.

This assertion is partially true. Depending on the issues to be resolved, test data in the archives may or may not be helpful in addressing a warhead issue of interest.

Remember, in the United States, the vast majority of nuclear tests were conducted to push the envelope of understanding and to explore new concepts, and not to gather a vast array of data to validate computer simulations for existing warheads. Also, nuclear testing was abruptly halted as a political decision in the early 1990’s. The labs had no opportunity to design and conduct tests specifically to collect the data that would have been important to benchmark the advanced computer simulation codes developed over the past 30 years.

In general, our nuclear test database may or may not be adequate to resolve future warhead technical issues. This will depend on the particular issues in question.

Assertion #3. If the United States conducts one or a few nuclear tests, that act will unleash a wave of testing by others, nuclear proliferation, and new nuclear weapon development.

There exists a wealth of studies on the drivers of nuclear proliferation. The vast majority of studies conclude that countries act in their own best interests at the time and not because another country conducts a certain action.

I will not spend any time elaborating on this assertion as others have already commented regarding the errors in this assertion. This assertion should be dismissed as uninformed by decades of studies on decision-making by the leaders of other countries.

Assertion #4. Lab directors have testified that given the choice of diverting funds from existing stockpile stewardship programs—computer simulation and experiments—in order to prepare for a nuclear test—they would not choose testing.

The unspoken assumption with such statements by laboratory directors is that preparing for a nuclear test would require existing programs and people at the labs to be cut in order to fund test preparation activities. However, other options exist to fund preparations for a nuclear test but, to my knowledge, have not been pursued. Options include establishing a test preparation escrow fund at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) for use to begin test preparation activities.

Assertion #5. Since the most recent U.S. nuclear test in 1992, high-rise development in the city of Las Vegas, NV would preclude nuclear testing because of urban considerations, especially potential damage to high-rise structures.

This objection to testing contains the unspoken assumption that the United States would test at a relatively high yield—something near the 150-kiloton limit permitted by the Threshold Test Ban Treaty. However, our scientists could learn a lot about existing warhead reliability from tests at fairly low warhead yields. That is why the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended a very low level of testing be permitted instead of the zero-yield version that President Clinton adopted for the CTBT.

In conclusion, the decision whether to conduct one or more nuclear tests is a complex topic on which reasonable people may disagree. This national issue deserves in-depth, reasoned debate that involves determining reasons for the potential need for testing, the technical issues to be resolved, data needed, and the risks and benefits of different approaches.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Victor Davis Hanson, *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2024), 352 pp.

In *The End of Everything: How Wars Descend Into Annihilation*, the eminent classical historian Victor Davis Hanson examines four cases of military victories that resulted in an end of a civilization, state, or culture and finds potential parallels with conflicts today. The first case discusses Alexander the Great's obliteration of classical Thebes in 335 BC, the second a well-known destruction of Carthage by expansionist Rome in 149-146 BC, the third the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 AD, and lastly, Hanson describes the Spanish destruction of Tenochtitlan which ended the Aztec civilization in 1521. Hanson focuses on these particular final battles, because each city presented the last vestige of a respective civilization's political, cultural, economic, and military stronghold, and following its fall, there was no civilization to speak of left. Most of the defeated people were exterminated or made slaves.

The author identifies common threads that contributed to civilizations' downfalls: e.g., each nation seldom believed that the attackers would completely destroy their capitals and annihilate the survivor. In battle, each continued to overestimate its strength and the infallibility of its defenses. Each nation also put too much faith in allies who failed to provide substantial help when it mattered. Each of them was in a state of decline that went on for decades or centuries prior to the final battle; a mere mirror image of its former peak-strength self. This makes the author's focus on final battles somewhat misleading, even if their detailed accounts make for an interesting read. Civilizations the book examines overtime weakened to the point of making a battle of annihilation through eliminating the capital a viable option for adversaries to pursue.

Occasionally, the author appears to contradict himself. For example, he criticizes the perennial optimism of the besieged, yet, by his own account, Constantinople almost survived the siege and only successive strokes of bad luck made the Ottomans victorious. The focus on individuals simplifies necessarily complex processes. Moreover, the chapters are occasionally too repetitive.

The author warns that the modern world is hardly immune from annihilation of entire peoples and cultures such as described in his book, yet the analogy might be taken too far. The cases do not necessarily illustrate why this should inevitably be so; why some civilizations are completely annihilated and others are not. Moreover, each of the cases predates the creation of the concept of a sovereign state and, with a few extreme exceptions, state borders are no longer synonymous with a single city in which an entire population of peoples concentrates.

Yet, democracies do appear to underestimate the ruthlessness of their adversaries in a manner not dissimilar from ancient Thebans questioning whether that the young Alexander would truly destroy their city if they do not surrender. Modern technologies can cause destruction and loss of life faster than Alexander the Great's armies. Modern autocrats are



not shy about communicating their desire to annihilate other cultures, just as Russia is attempting to do in parts of Ukraine it conquered. Regrettably, even that knowledge is not enough to mobilize the West to defeat the Russian invaders. The consequence could be destruction of uncommon magnitude. Hanson's book is worth reading.

*Reviewed by Michaela Dodge
National Institute for Public Policy*

Kelsey Davenport, *Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons*, Arms Control Association, September 2024, 41 pp.

Disarmament advocates have long dreamt of using arms control treaties and agreements to reduce the risks of nuclear conflict and move the United States (and by extension the rest of the world's nuclear-armed states) toward a world without nuclear weapons. This dream has been elusive because the nature of the international environment is such that some powers are not swayed by Western notions of morality and the imperative of complying with international agreements. Nevertheless, hope springs eternal among those who wish to believe in the inherent goodness of mankind and the notion that international agreements will be complied with by all parties, regardless of political or ideological differences.

Nuclear Disarmament Summits: A Proposal for Rejuvenating Progress Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons, published by the Arms Control Association, is an example of what Samuel Johnson (referring to second marriages) once called the "triumph of hope over experience." It chastises nuclear weapons states for their "lack of political will to pursue bold, creative steps to reduce nuclear risk and reverse the buildup of nuclear weapons capabilities." This charge, however, is hardly applicable to the United States, which has arguably done more to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy than any other country, has led multinational efforts to contain global nuclear threats, and has slashed the size of its own nuclear arsenal by some 85 percent since the height of the Cold War.

The report reviews various international treaties, organizations, and initiatives focused on disarmament issues, including the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the UN Conference on Disarmament, and various Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones. It judges these traditional approaches to be structurally flawed due to their "inadequate or overly broad membership, overreliance on consensus-based decision-making, and limited high-level political engagement." The author's solution to this dilemma: the creation of yet another international forum to discuss disarmament matters, specifically the creation of "a new series of disarmament summits designed to inject momentum into current efforts to reduce the risk posed by nuclear weapons and eliminate nuclear arsenals."

The naivete of such a recommendation is breathtaking, in that it ignores the fact that states view the threats to their security differently and have different motivations for their behaviors, including how they see the value of nuclear weapons. Moreover, focusing on process cannot overcome differences of substance. Although the report states “Involving all nuclear-armed states in the disarmament enterprise...is more urgent than ever,” it offers no practical solution for convincing the most troublesome actors—such as the so-called “Axis of Authoritarians” (i.e., Russia, China, North Korea and Iran)—to engage cooperatively with responsible stakeholders.

The report assesses favorably the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) process launched by President Obama in 2010 and views this as a template for future summits designed to “jump-start progress on concrete actions to advance disarmament.” It applauds the NSS notion of states making national commitments to disarmament (so-called “house gifts”) and participating in multinational endeavors (“gift baskets”) that avoid the “structural impediments” to disarmament that exist among traditional organizations. Such “minilateral initiatives” would ostensibly circumvent the stalemates created by having too many cooks with competing recipes in the disarmament kitchen.

“A more select membership also can exclude states that are disinclined to participate in good faith,” the report notes. The success of this effort among “like-minded states” could “build norms and create peer pressure” among the outliers to get with the disarmament program. Some of the recommended “house gift” actions include having states provide greater transparency on their fissile material stockpiles, declaring their total warhead numbers, freezing the number of number weapons, supporting ratification of the CTBT, and supporting nuclear-free zones. Additional “gift basket” options could include limiting certain nuclear delivery systems, adopting “no-first-use” and “sole purpose” nuclear doctrines, strengthening verification protocols, and restricting the use of artificial intelligence tools in nuclear command and control systems.

These measures are typical reflections of the disarmament movement narrative, and represent a smorgasbord of wishful thinking that is divorced from reality. The notion that holding disarmament summits among like-minded parties will help shame those who seek to exploit their nuclear arsenals for coercive purposes into agreeing to disarm is stunningly naïve. As Ronald Reagan used to say, “nations do not distrust each other because they’re armed; they arm themselves because they distrust each other.” No amount of summitry can change the fact that the international system is a self-help system where states cannot always rely on the largesse of others for their own security.¹ This includes both nuclear-armed states like the United States, who rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence, and states like Russia and China, who use nuclear weapons for coercive purposes and to prevent the United States from taking actions that can check their expansionist drives and tendencies.

As the report concludes (accurately in this case), “Many may consider the concept [of nuclear disarmament summits] to be impractical at this particular juncture in the long

¹ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA, National Institute Press, 2020).

journey to reduce the number and spread of nuclear weapons.” Indeed, there is nothing in the report—or in the subsequent year since the report was issued—to suggest that the author’s desired end state is any closer to being realized, or that the process of Nuclear Security Summits employed 15 years ago is relevant today. In fact, a dose of realism would argue just the opposite, as the international security environment is radically different and decidedly more dangerous than the world of 15 years ago. Just ask the Ukrainians, for example.

In summary, the problem is not a “lack of political will to pursue bold, creative steps to reduce nuclear risk and reverse the buildup of nuclear weapons capabilities,” as the author would have the reader believe. Rather, it is the aggressive postures of those who seek to upend and overturn the existing world order established and nurtured by the United States since the end of World War II and to remake the global order in their own image.² To expect more dialogue to overcome these fundamental differences is, as one brilliant Cold War strategist argued, like “looking for eggs in a cuckoo clock.”³

*Reviewed by David J. Trachtenberg
National Institute for Public Policy*

² See, for example, David J. Trachtenberg, *Why Arms Control Must Fail*, *Information Series*, No. 627 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 12, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-why-arms-control-must-fail-no-627-july-12-2025/.

³ Charles Burton Marshall, “Looking for Eggs in a Cuckoo Clock: Observations on SALT II,” January 22, 1979, in Charles Tyroler, II, ed., *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1984), pp. 94-98.



DOCUMENTATION

The Documentation Section brings excerpts from the U.S. Department of State's *Agency Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2026-2030*. The document outlines the agency's priorities and heavily emphasizes the importance of the Western Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific. The second excerpt is from the Department of Defense's *National Defense Strategy* published in January 2025. The document discusses DoD's priorities and focus, including reprioritizing the Western Hemisphere and building more equitable partnerships with allies. The third document, excerpts from the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on strategic competition in post-New START environment, discusses steps the United States can take to improve its geopolitical position vis-à-vis arming adversaries like Russia and China.

Document No. 1. U.S. Department of State, *Agency Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2026-2030*, January 2026 (select excerpts)¹

Foreword by Secretary Rubio

[...] How do we practice America First foreign policy? To start, we must be clear, concrete, and limited in the delineation of our core national interests. The United States is blessed with tremendous assets—physical, financial, military, geographical, and otherwise—but our resources are hardly infinite and the problems we face are many. We cannot hope to solve every issue, or to prevent every global tragedy. Success requires clear-eyed prioritization of the key interests in our diplomatic agenda. [...]

Domestic renewal begins by reasserting American sovereignty—over our territory, our people and commercial enterprises, and our state. Under President Trump, illegal border crossings have reached historic lows. We will continue to control our borders, ensuring that only lawful and vetted people reach our shores, and expeditiously remigrate all those who do not belong. Just as importantly, the United States must reclaim our economic independence: rebuilding our industrial and manufacturing capacities, building durable supply chains, reestablishing American energy dominance, championing our businesses, and investing in homegrown innovation to ensure U.S. leadership in the technologies of tomorrow.

A robust foundation depends also upon a strong, safe and market-oriented Western Hemisphere. A focus on peace and security in our hemisphere ought not be confused with isolationism or a withdrawal from the rest of the world. Rather, it reflects the common-sense recognition that America cannot effectively project power around the world if it is not prosperous and safe at home.

¹ The full document can be found at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ASP-for-Fiscal-Years-2026-2030-v4.pdf>.



After decades of failed U.S. policymakers prioritizing faraway conflicts, our region has become marred by a handful of weak states overtaken by narco-terrorist criminal organizations, disorder, and the malign influence of geopolitical adversaries. Cartels exploit these failed states to ship poison across our borders, while foreign powers leverage them to project military might mere

The projection of foreign power in the Western Hemisphere will once again be treated as a hostile act towards the United States. In its place, we will cultivate a network of strong, stable, and growth-oriented allies. Together, we will eradicate disorder, drug trafficking, and mass migration in our hemisphere. We will also promote shared prosperity with these friendly states—expanding fair trade, private sector investment, and targeted foreign assistance, and near-shoring key supply chains. [...]

Similar principles will guide American global engagement farther from our shores. Above all, the United States will pursue a posture of peace through strength—maintaining both the might to beat back any adversary, but also the restraint to only use force when necessary. Under President Trump, the United States has already used our strength to become the preeminent facilitator of global peace in the most intractable global conflicts, from Israel and Gaza to Armenia to Cambodia. Our peace and strength are self-reinforcing in a virtuous cycle: a peaceful world is one in which America can be strong and prosperous, while a strong and prosperous America will, in turn, promote more peace and global prosperity.

Nor will the United States shy away from competition with China or other geopolitical adversaries. While we do not seek unnecessary conflict, we will zealously guard our interests— political, security, economic, and otherwise— against encroachment by China, Russia, Iran and other geopolitical rivals. Doing this will require that we shrewdly allocate resources to the most pressing challenges. [...]

To this end, we will also empower strong and self-sufficient allies, ensuring that our friends are able to contribute their fair share towards collective security and welfare.[...] Our allies will also play key roles helping us push back against anti-Americanism in international organizations, protect free and open sea lanes and commercial corridors, and prevent foreign powers from dominating key regional resources and domains.

Once more, commerce will play a critical role in forging alliances and partnerships. American enterprise is the root of our global power and our domestic prosperity. President Trump has made clear that the United States will no longer tolerate being fleeced in the global trading system, the pilfering of our intellectual property, nor exploitation of our workers. Instead, we will embrace the President's dealmaking ethos and forge new ventures, compacts, and trade agreements that will bring about fair and mutually beneficial trade and economic partnerships with our friends and allies. Through a reinvigorated focus on commercial

diplomacy, we will protect American businesses, workers, and economic interests across the world. [...]

This is an ambitious mandate. To seize it, we must above all reclaim American pride. As President Trump has said, for all the challenges we face, the United States is still the indispensable nation. The United States has led nearly every economic, social, technological, and political evolution of the last century and we must never forget it. The original sin of globalism is that it denied American exceptionalism and deluded us into becoming ashamed of our history, strength, and prosperity. The United States must never be made to apologize for our power, our wealth, our victories, or our Western values. At our core, we are a proud people—proud of our country, our might, and our culture. A truly American foreign policy ought to reflect this indomitable spirit.

[...] Success in diplomacy means meeting countries on their own terms, and respecting differences in culture, history, and governance. It means rejecting the arrogant paternalism of thinking we can or should change the customs or politics of foreign nations where there is not a direct benefit to doing so. It means dealing in the art of the possible and not wishing away constraints—whether they be natural, geographical, geopolitical, economic, or social.

The Department of State's diplomatic engagement is at the center of this vision. America First is not a retreat from diplomacy—but rather a recommitment to its truest form. For centuries, diplomacy has been defined by sober, pragmatic dialogue and guided by the axiom that rational global actors will act for the benefit of their people and their states. Although forgotten for too long, the art and prudence of traditional interests-oriented diplomacy has been in the bones of the Department of State since 1789. By reclaiming its promise, together we can put America First and usher in the next era of American peace and prosperity.

Goal 1: U.S. National Sovereignty

The first job of the U.S. government, including the Department of State, is to ensure the continued survival of our nation as a self-governing republic that defends the safety and interests of Americans. For too long, U.S. policymakers assumed that open borders, global integration, and deference to multilateral institutions and agreements would produce outcomes that would be good for the globe and, therefore, good for America. This experiment failed. [...]

The Department will advance the sovereignty of our nation, at the core of which is control of our borders. Without this, there is no recognizable nation on whose behalf the U.S. government can act. We will advocate for the sovereignty of our citizens—their safety at home and abroad, and their freedom from foreign efforts to curb their rights—and of our businesses, which are regularly subject to unfair practices around the world. As the Department restores the sovereignty of the United States, it will reduce deference to

multilateralism and global bureaucratic consensus, which too often reflect destructive ideologies and strategic misalignment with U.S. interests.

Objective 1.1: Secure America's borders and the American people's right to decide who to admit and on what terms.

For decades, the United States allowed tens of millions of migrants—legal and illegal—to enter the country. We were told unfettered mass migration was a fact of nature and a positive good. The more Americans objected, the more migration increased. This was a damaging mistake and an affront to the people that the U.S. government serves. [...]

Previous administrations used the Department's powers—including visa issuance, refugee admission, and billions in humanitarian assistance—to facilitate this crisis. The Department will no longer be complicit in these abuses. Instead, we will protect our borders and defend the value of American citizenship. Ending the crisis brought on by open borders and reversing the damage it has done to the United States is one of the Department's essential tasks. [...]

This includes ensuring that applicants do not pose any risks to public safety or national security, do not bear hostile attitudes toward our citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles, or show other signs of anti-Americanism. In addition, we will reinvigorate and expand the application of the "public charge" ineligibility to ensure visa holders do not become burdens to American society.

Remigration and border security are central to our diplomatic engagements, especially to those in our hemisphere. That includes ensuring foreign countries facilitate the repatriation of their nationals who have no right to remain in the United States; negotiating arrangements with other countries to accept the transfer of asylum claimants and illegal aliens removed from American communities; and working with DHS [Department of Homeland Security] to support voluntary remigration. We also will use foreign assistance to support countries that help us achieve our immigration priorities. Mass migration and weak borders are not inevitabilities to manage, but problems that the Department's resources and U.S. bilateral relationships must help to solve.

Objective 1.2: Ensure all Americans can exercise their rights free from foreign interference.

The U.S. government exists to protect the God-given natural rights of Americans, including the rights of free speech, of religion and of conscience, and the right to choose and influence our common government. Nevertheless, foreign governments and international organizations are creating laws and regulations that impose restrictions on these rights.

These laws enacted across the globe affect American companies, but also can target Americans abroad and at home.

For their own domestic political purposes, foreign governments have imposed restrictions on speech that would be unacceptable in the United States, including by enforcing conditions to operate or levying fines on technology and media companies that operate in those countries. Meanwhile, globalist bureaucrats and activists direct campaigns in multilateral bodies and through NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] which seek to restrict the right of free speech in the name of combatting “hate speech,” promoting “trust and safety,” or countering “disinformation.”

The Department will oppose efforts by foreign countries, international organizations and NGOs, and activist groups that seek to censor Americans in their own country. We will counter these efforts through all appropriate means including visa and financial sanctions.

At the same time, the Department will scrutinize attempts by foreign powers to exercise influence within the United States. These efforts are not new, but now seek to manipulate American public life through a widening spectrum of influence operations. This includes lobbying and lawfare; NGO activities, including through think-tanks, cultural centers, and educational institutions; and media manipulation, including paid media and social media campaigns. In some cases, these activities have fomented or contributed to civil unrest in U.S. cities. Moreover, foreign powers seek to acquire or control assets important to our national security and public safety, including real estate and infrastructure.

Such activities threaten our sovereignty and limit Americans’ exercise of their rights by displacing their legitimate participation in the public life of their own country. In cooperation with other U.S. government agencies, the Department will uncover and investigate such activities and counter them by all available means.

Objective 1.3: Engage in international organizations only when it advances America’s national interests.

International organizations exist to advance the interests of sovereign nations. They are not global legislatures or independent sources of moral, political, or legal authority. They stray from their proper purpose when they develop their own constituencies and seek to advance agendas that no citizen can approve or reject.

Generations of American leadership were convinced that global engagement was a good in itself, and that connectivity therein would bring about global peace and make great power rivalry obsolete. This dream has not and will not come to pass. While the United States was squandering our influence advancing these flawed ideas, we were being outplayed in the real competition among great powers.

The Department will no longer fund or support international organizations or conventions that act contrary to America's interests or that erode our sovereignty. We will no longer defer to unelected international bureaucrats who run them. We will not permit international organizations to become weapons in the hands of our adversaries, deployed to target Americans and citizens of partner nations such as Israel. Instead, we will focus on increasing American influence and driving reform in organizations whose work affects our concrete national interests, particularly the standard-setting bodies, while imposing real accountability on those who threaten Americans, our national interests, or those of our allies. America's adversaries use international organizations to undermine and reshape the global order or to extract funding that is used against our interests. We, in turn, will use American leadership to return useful bodies to their original purposes, i.e., to build coalitions which clearly and concretely serve to advance our national interests.

Specifically, there is need for renewed focus at the United Nations, which has strayed far from its purpose of solving international disputes peacefully. We will push back on the UN's 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advance a program of soft global governance inconsistent with U.S. sovereignty and adverse to the rights and interests of Americans.

We will seek to block resolutions that undermine U.S. interests or those of our allies, withhold or condition funding to promote reforms, and promote U.S.-led peace processes. Additionally, the Department will lead efforts to wind down costly and ineffective peacekeeping and special political missions around the world.

Declarations of international bodies inconsistent with U.S. sovereign law cannot and will not constrain our decision making. We will respond sternly, using the full array of diplomatic and economic tools at our disposal, to such attempts to limit us.

Goal 2: The Western Hemisphere and Establishment of the Donroe Doctrine

Geography has long blessed the United States with distance from other great powers as well as a prosperous and resource-rich hemisphere relatively free of strife and instability. Our status as a global superpower was built on this foundation: without serious enemies or conflicts at our borders, we have been able to project power abroad unhindered.

Over recent decades, however, we have let these pillars of our strength erode: geopolitical adversaries and transnational criminal groups have made major inroads into the region; our local allies have been forgotten in our rush to remake far-distant foreign nations; and our neighborhood has been swamped by unchecked migration, illegal drugs, and the terrorist gangs and cartels that push them. [...]

Under the new “Donroe Doctrine,” the United States has re-established absolute primacy in our hemisphere—both by bringing anti-American and rogue states to heel, and by forging powerful new security and economic partnerships with likeminded states.

Objective 2.1: Counter and reverse our competitors’ influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Originally declared in 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was the north star of American foreign policy during the U.S.’ long rise to superpower status. Decade after decade, the Doctrine evolved in tandem with the threats of the moment, but at its heart, it always reflected the same core truth: that the United States is safest, strongest, and most prosperous when outside adversaries cannot establish themselves in the Western Hemisphere.

Over the last few decades, our country has lost sight of that truth. No longer. The United States will work to ensure our neighbors never feel that they owe political fealty to any extra-hemispheric power, or that any extra-hemispheric power controls the fates and destinies of their people. Furthermore, we will not allow any foreign adversary to use force or establish a military base anywhere in the region, and will seek to reverse the expansion of all other forms of foreign military influence, including the spread of foreign security assistance, intelligence facilities, and facilities with dual-use possibilities.

Historically, the Monroe Doctrine focused primarily on the expulsion of extra-hemispheric military and political influence. The Donroe Doctrine expands this principle to purge unchecked economic, migration, and drug interference and to stamp out malign influence from extra-hemispheric powers, trans-national criminal organizations and rogue regional actors alike. by those outside the hemisphere. The United States does not—and has never—sought a closed economic system in the Western Hemisphere, but we will no longer permit foreign adversaries to use commerce and investment as a stalking horse for control of the region’s critical infrastructure and strategic territory, including vital chokepoints like the Panama Canal.

For that reason, we will prevent such control and roll it back where it has already occurred, and we will do so regardless of whether that control is exercised directly by competing powers or instead through purportedly private entities that operate under those states’ thumbs. We will also oppose predatory loans and other instruments of debt that threaten to ensnare our neighbors and subject them to the control of foreign adversaries. For neighbors already caught up in such schemes, we will sever these financial leashes by using the full array of our country’s economic instruments, including foreign assistance, loans, and private-sector partnerships.

Objective 2.2: Strengthen strategic partnerships in the Western Hemisphere.

Central to our efforts in the Western Hemisphere will be providing alternatives—either commercial, security, or otherwise—to our neighbors in the region. The Department will accordingly work with our regional partners to stand firmly against foreign interference and to uproot it where necessary. Our allies will no longer feel isolated against China or any other extra-hemispheric power, and the United States will remain the region’s partner of choice on the issues that matter most. Even amid any intra-regional disagreement, it should always remain common ground that no one’s interest would be served were the Western Hemisphere to become a theater of serious great-power competition. On the contrary, the United States, by keeping outside great powers at ocean’s length, lays the groundwork for the entire region’s security and prosperity.

The Department must not just reinforce bonds with existing allies, but expand to new partners throughout the region. For too long, our neighbors have been neglected as the United States has been distracted by a never-ending series of crises elsewhere. We will reverse that neglect and restore regional allies to their rightful role as our strategic partners. In that capacity, we will cooperate on issues of mutual concern, including combatting intra-regional challenges like narcotics trafficking. We will also prioritize trade deals in the Western Hemisphere and near-shore key industries in neighboring countries with comparative advantages—not as charity, but because doing so improves the security of our own supply chains. Our policies will pay dividends for the region as well as for the American people and thereby secure lasting advantages to both.

Objective 2.3: Suppress narco-terrorist gangs and cartels.

Prior to this Administration, our country was under siege by narco-terrorist gangs and cartels that killed over 87,000 Americans every year through the deadly drugs they trafficked. In addition to directly harming our people, these organizations fueled destabilizing crime, addiction, and corruption across the region. We will no longer tolerate this scourge or the extra-hemispheric entities and states that often enable and profit from it. [...]

Goal 3: Peace and Stability in the Indo-Pacific Region

How the United States responds to the rise of China will be the defining story of the 21st century. [...] Asia is already the source of nearly half of the world’s gross domestic product by some estimates, and crucial sea lanes and supply chains crisscross the region. Further, we count other Indo-Pacific nations as some of our closest allies. We are unambiguous that regional peace and stability benefit the United States irrespective of competition with countries such as China. We seek closer economic and military ties with Indo-Pacific allies and partners that benefit U.S. strength, not which come at our expense. [...]

Objective 3.1: Strengthen the Indo-Pacific economic system to support U.S. reindustrialization and reinforce ties with allies.

The United States will advance an economic system in the Indo-Pacific that is both free from external coercion and open to the American people. We will advance policies in the region that support U.S. reindustrialization through broad commercial advocacy efforts, the development of secure and resilient supply chains, and the spread of American and trusted alternatives to Chinese-created dependencies. As President Trump has stated publicly, we will combat Chinese intellectual property theft, and counter predatory state-directed economic strategies.

The United States will also seek to build and reinforce our allies and partners in the region through fair, high-impact bilateral trade deals to advance shared prosperity. [...]

We will promote our role as the energy and technology partner of choice in the Indo-Pacific. [...]

Objective 3.2: Deter aggression and establish favorable military balance across the region.

The United States must establish a favorable military balance in the Indo-Pacific to keep the trade routes free and open and to deter aggression. Over the past decade, China has undertaken an unprecedented military buildup which the United States must highlight publicly and remain prepared to counter. [...]

The Department will work to deepen relationships with allies and encourage them to increase their own spending, to invest in deterrence measures, and to allow U.S. military greater access to critical infrastructure and resources. In turn, we will provide allies increased access to our revitalized Defense Industrial Base. We will promulgate with allies, partners, and adversaries alike that the United States maintains a strong interest in a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific and desires neither war nor regime change. We will consistently seek open lines of communication with China and means to reduce misunderstandings and risks. We will champion reliable U.S. defense companies and support defense industry interoperability and collaboration between not just the United States and Indo-Pacific allies, but also with reliable European partners. An integrated Defense Industrial Base will provide the United States and our allies with strategic productive depth in the event of conflict.

Goal 4: Rebuild the Civilizational Alliance with European States

[...] For the bulk of the twentieth century, Europe was the primary theater for great power competition, with the United States standing with allied nations against imperialistic and anti-democratic powers like the Axis and the Soviet Union. America built the post-war global

architecture in service of this transatlantic partnership, leveraging it to become Western Europe's primary security guarantor, financial backstop, and geopolit[i]cal pole in the fight against communism. Together with the free nations of Europe, America defeated the USSR and freed the continent from the yoke of communist tyranny.

Over time, however, the resulting unification of Europe—infected with the dogma of the post-Cold War neoliberal moment—led to a weaker and poorer continent less capable of defending itself, much less joining to support American interests. Content to free-ride on U.S. security guarantees, European nations slashed their defense spending and let their militaries atrophy. Submitting to the unaccountable supranational regulatory bureaucracy of the European Union, the continent deindustrialized, failed to innovate, and slipped into economic malaise. European nations became increasingly reliant upon energy and imports from adversarial powers. EU principles regarding the free movement of people were weaponized to flood Europe with waves of non-assimilated foreign migrants, diluting the bonds of culture, community, and history that sustained historic polities. Meanwhile, the elite came to espouse increasingly radical conceptions of globalism and pan-humanism that led them to reject and undermine the core tenets of Western civilization: Western faith and values, national sovereignty, free expression, free markets, and belief in the polity.

It is time for European nations to wake up. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that Europe continues to face grave security threats and must re-militarize to ensure its security. Likewise, Chinese economic coercion has shown that European countries must also reindustrialize and deregulate to secure their economic future. Finally, a breakdown in public safety and social welfare has revealed that they must abandon the disastrous experiment of mass migration.

European nations must regain their strength to remain a useful partner for the United States. Critically, while the United States stands ready to help reverse the corrosive trends of the past three decades, we do not desire a return to either the European dependency of the Cold War or the instability of competing imperialisms that culminated in two world wars. Instead, we aim to empower European nations that are militarily capable, economically fair, and culturally aligned. This new slate of self-reliant and self-assured states will guard against both estrangement and decline, rebuilding a renewed transatlantic civilizational alliance fit for today's challenges.

Objective 4.1: Transfer primary responsibility for conventional European defense to allies and expand our joint Defense Industrial Base.

The United States benefits from a free and secure European continent but, as outlined in previous sections, we must prioritize our resources to support stability in regions such as the Western Hemisphere or Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, our commitment to European security and prosperity is evidenced by our push for NATO allies to spend five percent of GDP on

defense. This is something European nations must address urgently. [...] The Department will advocate for the creation of tangible national capabilities as European states assume responsibility for their conventional defense and become net contributors to security in Africa and the Middle East. In the pursuit of these capabilities, we will champion reliable U.S. defense companies, resist efforts to divide the transatlantic Defense Industrial Base, and support defense industry interoperability and collaboration between not just the United States and European allies, but also those in the Indo-Pacific. An integrated defense industrial base will provide the United States and its allies with strategic productive depth in the event of conflict.

While strengthening NATO's deterrence in Europe, we will maintain dialogue with Russia, seek the normalization of diplomatic operations, and pursue strategic stability. We will seek the end of the Russia-Ukraine war and will commit diplomatic resources to avoid new conflicts in Europe. We will cooperate closely with European allies on security in the Arctic. As conditions allow, we will negotiate arms control for nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

Objective 4.2: Rebalance U.S. trade with European allies and decrease their economic dependencies on adversarial powers.

The United States will unapologetically pursue balanced, reciprocal trade with European nations. We will resist the EU's attempt to cast itself as a "regulatory superpower" and push back on rules which discriminate against U.S. businesses or have extraterritorial effects on U.S. consumers. The Department will encourage and support European investment in the United States and collaboration between U.S. and businesses in Europe, provided they do not result in further the deindustrialization of the United States. We will vigorously advocate for export opportunities on behalf of sound U.S. businesses.

The export of U.S. energy will be a central pillar in our economic collaboration with European nations. The United States has the resources to end energy dependency on Russia and spur economic growth. We will strongly support U.S. exports of natural gas, nuclear technology, and nuclear fuel, particularly in former Soviet-aligned states. China's support for Russia and its invasion of Ukraine directly undermines security in Europe. The United States will support efforts to reduce dependence on China for critical supply chains and overreliance on China for economic growth. Chinese economic leverage over European states erodes their reliability as U.S. allies. We will support the removal of Chinese hardware and software from critical infrastructure and collaborate closely with European partners to safeguard our joint technological advantages.

Objective 4.3: Defend civilizational values and reassert national sovereignty.

The United States and European nations must be civilizational allies, first and foremost. As

such, the United States will condemn anti-democratic actions which restrict free speech or the free exercise of religion and will oppose the use of lawfare to ban political opponents. [...] Mass migration is a threat to national cohesion, social stability, and civilizational values and we will support European nations' increasing recognition of this. [...]

Goal 5: U.S. Economic and Technological Dominance

The United States' unparalleled economic wealth and technological dominance are foundational to our geopolitical strength and a tremendous source of strategic leverage. In the 20th century, American manufacturing dominance powered our victories in war and our prosperity in peace. But as a result of short-sighted decisions at home and unfair competition abroad, the United States has lost much of our manufacturing base and is too often dependent on foreign countries for critically important inputs. The United States will rescue our industries from unfair trade practices and illegitimate competition, promote American businesses through commercial diplomacy, and firmly reestablish America as the economic and technological juggernaut of the 21st century. [...]

Objective 5.1: Reindustrialize the United States.

U.S. power lies in both our military dominance and our leadership of the global economy. In a geopolitical context driven increasingly by economic statecraft, the future of U.S. supremacy lies in our future productive power. On this front, our position as the country with the highest gross domestic product and leadership in financial markets obscures underlying fractures in the national health of our productive economy, especially in advanced manufacturing products and critical technologies that have implications for national security.

[...] We will identify productivity-enhancing sectors and industries necessary for a vibrant economy, including energy, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, robotics, machine tools, shipbuilding, material sciences, critical and advanced infrastructure, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, space and aerospace, semiconductors, compute, artificial intelligence (AI), data storage, transportation logistics, unmanned and autonomous systems, biotechnology, and quantum science. [...]

The Department will mobilize U.S. businesses and solutions as the preferred choice for allies and partners by pursuing commercial deals in all bilateral relationships and negotiations, thereby creating a strong economic bloc of pro-American countries that leverage American businesses and exports. We will enshrine a new economic security consensus across this bloc of partners and will unlock new commercial industries and opportunities through flagship infrastructure projects. Through the purchase American technology stacks and defense systems, this bloc will finance U.S. reindustrialization and ensure American economic and technological leadership continues throughout the 21st century.

Objective 5.2: Stop foreign actors' abuse of the global trading system.

The conventional consensus on trade policy is that free trade is mutually beneficial and that countries should pursue free trade wherever and whenever possible with few if any exceptions. However, the U.S. position in the global trade regime is lopsided with long-standing, historically large, persistent trade deficits with most countries. [...]

The Administration will rectify our trade deficits through our reciprocal tariff regime and new trade deals that put American businesses first. Working with other agencies, we will work with U.S. businesses to investigate and respond to unfair trade practices that limit market access to other countries. To ensure these measures are effective, we will especially focus on transshipment, whereby countries evade tariff duties by routing their exports through third countries not subject to tariff regulations. As the Administration has already shown, we will impose punitive tariffs of 40% against countries that facilitate tariff evasion through transshipment and other regulations, such as goods made using forced labor. [...]

Specifically, posts will encourage countries to reduce their dependence on Chinese investment offerings. The Department's commercial diplomacy strategy will involve identifying American alternatives to Chinese investment, develop new alternatives where they do not exist, and work with other agencies and other countries to encourage reliance on superior American offerings, especially in critical sectors such as AI. Diplomatic missions will also continually monitor and coordinate responses to ongoing Chinese economic coercion abroad.

Objective 5.3: Drive the United States's strategic leverage by increasing U.S. exports and investment.

Our efforts to increase U.S. leverage with strategic partners complements our efforts to reindustrialize, secure supply chains, and end abuses in the global trade system. To deepen countries' economic connection to the United States and reduce their dependence on China, we will reindustrialize and become the world's factory in the most critical sectors that determine the shape of the global economy. Reindustrialization will be driven through incentives and benefits that only accrue to U.S.-based businesses which hire American workers and develop the dynamism and resilience of the American economy. [...] The Department's economic strategy will promote American exports and opening foreign markets to U.S. businesses. [...]

In collaboration with the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Commerce, we will promote American energy production and export to the rest of the world, thereby achieving the Administration priority of energy dominance while driving down energy prices worldwide.

As part of the Department's participation in the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, we will also encourage continued foreign investment into the United States. However, such foreign investment must focus on development of domestic capacities and industry rather than acquiring American assets. We will promote targeted U.S. investments in strategic countries to expand market access for U.S. exports and enhance U.S. control and influence over key nodes and chokepoints in the global trading system. We will also take steps to ensure that the U.S. Dollar remains the global reserve currency and the trade medium of the global economy, thereby avoiding the security and economic implications of de-dollarization.

The Department will take leadership of efforts to promote the export and control of the American AI tech stack to trusted partners, such as Israel or others across the globe. [...]

Objective 5.4: Strengthen U.S. technological edge and industry dominance.

[...] We must therefore outcompete our rivals in technological development and dominance to win in the economic and military spheres as well. We will accomplish this by protecting our advantages and leadership in the science and tech ecosystem while also promoting U.S. technology exports to lead global market share.

We will prevent our adversaries from gaining access to U.S.-developed and produced technologies, whereby they steal our trade secrets and use our technologies to beat us, including through dual-use applications that enable foreign militaries to threaten our national security. [...] Protecting U.S. technology will not guarantee industry dominance if we do not also export our technologies abroad in place of adversaries. [...] Specifically, we will work with U.S. companies to identify use cases and applications, coordinate synergies between different parts of the AI architecture (e.g. semiconductors, compute, data centers, software, etc.) and negotiate deals abroad.

To promote the adoption of U.S.-preferred technology standards, we will exercise strong leadership in international fora by working with partners to advance our preferences and see them adopted. [...]

There is an ongoing need for research at the frontiers of scientific study and the cutting edge of technology products that will shape the future of the American economy, such as in biotechnology, semiconductors, quantum, and terrestrial and space-based telecommunications architecture. [...]

Goal 6: Targeted Foreign Assistance that Puts American Interests First

[...] Sadly, our wayward foreign aid architecture long ago abandoned strategic discipline and the national interests of the United States. This drift was best exemplified by the United States

Agency for International Development (USAID). Established to respond to urgent humanitarian crises and help poorer allies find durable growth, USAID came to view its core constituency as the global humanitarian community rather than the American nation or people. USAID has been eliminated, and its foreign assistance programs have been realigned under the State Department. [...]

The Department's ongoing assistance programs fit into two basic categories: (1) lifesaving programs and (2) strategic investments. Lifesaving assistance includes time-limited health and humanitarian programs, such as disaster response, food security initiatives, and efforts to combat deadly diseases. Strategic assistance advances longer-term U.S. interests by providing allies with security assistance, foreign military financing and economic support and by promoting commercial and trade ties through programs that facilitate market access and U.S.-led infrastructure development. [...]

Objective 6.1: Leverage assistance as a tool of statecraft.

[...] Foreign assistance is a tool of American diplomacy and statecraft—and every dollar we spend on it must be directly justified on those terms. [...] For too long, assistance justified on globalist or humanitarian bases benefitted groups unfriendly to the United States. No longer. When evaluating assistance programs, we will start by ensuring it is going to groups or countries that actively advance our interests. Relevant factors will include military and security ties, cooperation on national security and migration / remigration priorities, voting in international organizations, and fair economic or trade interconnections.

We will also deploy assistance to advance discrete and time-bound objectives and will quickly and effectively leverage assistance as a tool to advance discrete U.S. economic, security, and diplomatic objectives. Our assistance dollars will be more flexibly deployed in connection with emerging diplomatic negotiations, to meet urgent national security needs, to help U.S. businesses contest global deals, to identify and secure vital supplies of critical minerals, to secure bilateral cooperation on migration and remigration agreements, and to deny our adversaries key geopolitical goals or priorities.

Finally, refocusing on strategic objections will require realigning resources to priority regions and areas. In 2024, USAID spent just 10-15% of its assistance budget in the Western Hemisphere and Asia-Pacific combined. That is an unacceptable allocation of scarce resources given U.S. strategic priorities. Accordingly, the Department will aim in 2026 to spend at least 40% of our overall assistance budget in the Western Hemisphere and East Asia regions. [...]

Objective 6.2: Promote and provide trade, not aid.

Private sector economic cooperation is at the center of the America First foreign policy agenda—as is the proven belief that real development and prosperity is driven by trade, private sector growth, investments in innovation, and by efficient markets. Developing nations want help fostering self-reliant growth, not assistance programs designed to create reliance on multilateral institutions and global non-profits. [...]

Our America First foreign assistance strategy will leverage assistance resources to champion American enterprise and infrastructure. We will make investments in exporting cutting-edge American technology—especially in healthcare, communications, software, energy, and transportation—that will bring developing nations into the 21st century economy and solve local humanitarian, governance, and economic problems all around the world. And we will secure local buy-in, catalyze private capital, and ensure that development projects benefit from the discipline of market principles.

These new forms of assistance will help us better compete with our adversaries who seek to leverage investment to assert control over various developing economies. If done correctly, U.S. investments built on private sector principles of fair exchange, local control and mutual benefit will offer a clear contrast—and more appealing alternative to—exploitative models such as Chinese debt-trap diplomacy.

Leveraging assistance for commercial diplomacy will require significant shifts in the way we program and plan assistance. We will diversify our implementing partner set away from the non-profit and international organization sectors and towards the American business community. To effectively work with the private sector, we will also update our procurement to market standards. We will need to work closely with partner governments to ensure local buy-in, regulatory harmonization and co-investment. And we will be more agile in our assistance programming so as to more quickly and opportunistically take advantage of competitive dynamics, market conditions, and unfolding geopolitical events.

Document No. 2. U.S. Department of Defense, 2026 National Defense Strategy: Restoring Peace Through Strength for a New Golden Age in America, January 2026 (select excerpts)²

[...] Under President Trump's leadership, consistent with his vision and direction as laid out in the National Security Strategy (NSS), the Department of War (DoW) is laser-focused on

² The full document can be found at <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

restoring peace through strength. As detailed in the NSS, the President's approach is one of a flexible, practical realism that looks at the world in a clear-eyed way, which is essential for serving Americans' interests. [...]

Above all, it means prioritizing the missions that matter most for Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity. This means concentrating the Department's efforts to:

- **Defend the U.S. Homeland.** We will secure America's borders and maritime approaches, and we will defend our nation's skies through Golden Dome for America and a renewed focus on countering unmanned aerial threats. We will maintain a robust and modern nuclear deterrent capable of addressing the strategic threats to our country, raise and sustain formidable cyber defenses, and hunt and neutralize Islamic terrorists who have the ability and intent to strike our Homeland. [...] We will guarantee U.S. military and commercial access to key terrain, especially the Panama Canal, Gulf of America, and Greenland. We will provide President Trump with credible military options to use against narco-terrorists wherever they may be. We will engage in good faith with our neighbors, from Canada to our partners in Central and South America, but we will ensure that they respect and do their part to defend our shared interests. [...]
- **Deter China in the Indo-Pacific Through Strength, Not Confrontation.** President Trump seeks a stable peace, fair trade, and respectful relations with China, and he has shown that he is willing to engage President Xi Jinping directly to achieve those goals. But President Trump has also shown how important it is to negotiate from a position of strength—and he has tasked DoW accordingly. Consistent with the President's approach, DoW will therefore seek and open a wider range of military-to-military communications with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with a focus on supporting strategic stability with Beijing as well as deconfliction and de-escalation, more generally. But we will also be clear-eyed and realistic about the speed, scale, and quality of China's historic military buildup. Our goal in doing so is not to dominate China; nor is it to strangle or humiliate them. Rather, our goal is simple: To prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies—in essence, to set the military conditions required to achieve the NSS goal of a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that allows all of us to enjoy a decent peace. To that end, as the NSS directs, we will erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain (FIC). We will also urge and enable key regional allies and partners to do more for our collective defense. In doing so, we will reinforce deterrence by denial so that all nations recognize that their interests are best served through peace and restraint. [...]
- **Increase Burden-Sharing with U.S. Allies and Partners.** Ours is not a strategy of isolation. As the NSS directs, it is one of focused engagement abroad with a clear eye toward advancing the concrete, practical interests of Americans. Through this America First, commonsense lens, America's alliances and partners have an essential role to play—but not as the dependencies of the last generation. Rather, as the

Department rightly prioritizes Homeland defense and deterring China, other threats will persist, and our allies will be essential to dealing with all of them. Our allies will do so not as a favor to us, but out of their own interests. In the Indo-Pacific, where our allies share our desire for a free and open regional order, allies and partners' contributions will be vital to deterring and balancing China. In Europe and other theaters, allies will take the lead against threats that are less severe for us but more so for them, with critical but more limited support from the United States. [...]

For too long, allies and partners have been content to let us subsidize their defense. Our political establishment reaped the credit while regular Americans paid the bill. [...] President Trump has set a new global standard for defense spending at NATO's Hague Summit—3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on core military spending and an additional 1.5% on security-related spending, for a total of 5% of GDP. We will advocate that our allies and partners meet this standard around the world, not just in Europe. As our allies do so, together with the United States, they will be able to field the forces required to deter or defeat potential adversaries in every key region of the world, even in the face of simultaneous aggression. [...]

- Supercharge the U.S. Defense Industrial Base. [...] We must return to being the world's premier arsenal, one that can produce not only for ourselves but also for our allies and partners at scale, rapidly, and at the highest levels of quality. To achieve this, we will reinvest in U.S. defense production, building out capacity; empowering innovators; adopting new advances in technology, like artificial intelligence (AI); and clearing away outdated policies, practices, regulations, and other obstacles to the type and scale of production that the Joint Force requires for the priorities before us. We will simultaneously leverage allied and partner production not just to meet our own requirements but also to incentivize them to increase defense spending and help them field additional forces as quickly as possible. In the process, we will not only ensure our own defense industrial advantage but also put our alliances on stronger footing so that they can do their part to maintain peace through strength on a strong, equitable, and enduring basis. [...]

At the same time, this Strategy will enable the Joint Force to provide President Trump with the operational flexibility and agility required for other objectives, especially the ability to launch decisive operations against targets anywhere [...].

This requires being clear-eyed about the threats that we face, as well as the resources available to both us and our allies to confront them. It requires prioritizing what matters most for Americans and where the gravest and most consequential threats to their interests lie. It requires being honest and clear with our allies and partners that they simply must do more rapidly, not as a favor to Americans but for their own interests. [...] Out with utopian

idealism; in with hardnosed realism. That is the mission we at DoW must embrace—boldly, actively, and without hesitation.

The Security Environment

[...] This Strategy is fundamentally different from the grandiose strategies of the past post-Cold War administrations, untethered as they were from a concrete focus on Americans' practical interests. It does not conflate Americans' interests with those of the rest of the world—that a threat to a person halfway around the world is the same as to an American. Nor does it see implanting our way of life by force as necessary. It does not seek to solve all the world's problems. Rather, it focuses in practical ways on real, credible threats to Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity. As it does so, it recognizes that some threats—like to our Homeland—are more direct and visceral than others. Yet it also acknowledges that even those that may feel distant—like the importance of maintaining U.S. access to the Indo-Pacific, the world's largest market area—still have exceptionally real—indeed, fundamental—implications for our nation's vital interests. [...]

Homeland and Hemisphere

For decades, America's foreign policy establishment neglected our nation's Homeland defenses. This was partly due to the view that such defenses were no longer necessary. But it was also informed by an increasing desire on the part of Washington decisionmakers to ease border controls and facilitate the illegal migration of people and the unchecked, unfair flow of goods. The sorry results speak for themselves. [...]

More direct military threats to the American Homeland have also grown in recent years, including nuclear threats as well as a variety of conventional strike and space, cyber, electromagnetic warfare capabilities. At the same time, although the United States has severely degraded Islamic terrorist organizations like al Qaeda and ISIS in recent decades, these actors continue to adapt and pose a credible threat. American interests are also under threat throughout the Western Hemisphere. [...]

People's Republic of China (PRC)

By any measure, China is already the second most powerful country in the world—behind only the United States—and the most powerful state relative to us since the 19th century. [...] Beijing has already spent vast amounts on the PLA in recent years, often at the expense of domestic priorities. Yet China can still afford to spend even more on its military, should it choose to do so—and it has shown that it is able to do so effectively. Indeed, the speed, scale, and quality of China's historic military buildup speak for themselves, including forces designed for operations in the Western Pacific as well as those capable of reaching targets much farther away.

This matters for America's interests because, as the NSS recognizes, the Indo-Pacific will soon make up more than half of the global economy. The American people's security, freedom, and prosperity are therefore directly linked to our ability to trade and engage from a position of strength in the Indo-Pacific. [...]

That is why the NSS directs DoW to maintain a favorable balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific. Not for purposes of dominating, humiliating, or strangling China. To the contrary, our goal is far more scoped and reasonable than that: It is simply to ensure that neither China nor anyone else can dominate us or our allies. [...] Rather, a decent peace, on terms favorable to Americans but that China can also accept and live under, is possible. [...]

Russia

Russia will remain a persistent but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members for the foreseeable future. Indeed, although Russia suffers from a variety of demographic and economic difficulties, its ongoing war in Ukraine shows that it still retains deep reservoirs of military and industrial power. [...] In addition, although the Russian military threat is primarily focused on Eastern Europe, Russia also possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, which it continues to modernize and diversify, as well as undersea, space, and cyber capabilities that it could employ against the U.S. Homeland.

In light of this, the Department will ensure that U.S. forces are prepared to defend against Russian threats to the U.S. Homeland. The Department will also continue to play a vital role in NATO itself, even as we calibrate U.S. force posture and activities in the European theater to better account for the Russian threat to American interests as well as our allies' own capabilities. Moscow is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony. European NATO dwarfs Russia in economic scale, population, and, thus, latent military power. At the same time, although Europe remains important, it has a smaller and decreasing share of global economic power. It follows that, although we are and will remain engaged in Europe, we must—and will—prioritize defending the U.S. Homeland and deterring China.

Fortunately, our NATO allies are substantially more powerful than Russia—it is not even close. [...] Our NATO allies are therefore strongly positioned to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defense, with critical but more limited U.S. support. This includes taking the lead in supporting Ukraine's defense. As President Trump has said, the war in Ukraine must end. As he has also emphasized, however, this is Europe's responsibility first and foremost. [...]

Iran

President Trump has consistently made clear that Iran will not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. [...] U.S. forces also provided critical support to Israel’s defense throughout the 12-Day War, enabling Israel’s historic operational and strategic successes. [...]

Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” is similarly devastated. Israeli operations have left Hezbollah and Hamas severely degraded. At President Trump’s direction, the United States also launched Operation ROUGH RIDER, which degraded the Houthis’ strike capabilities and ultimately compelled the Houthis to sue for peace—and stop shooting at U.S. ships. [...]

Israel has long demonstrated that it is both willing and able to defend itself with critical but limited support from the United States. Israel is a model ally, and we have an opportunity now to further empower it to defend itself and promote our shared interests, building on President Trump’s historic efforts to secure peace in the Middle East. Likewise, in the Gulf, U.S. partners are increasingly willing and able to do more to defend themselves against Iran and its proxies, including by acquiring and fielding a variety of U.S. military systems. This creates even more opportunities for us to enable individual partners to do more for their defense. It will also enable us to foster integration between regional partners, so that they can do even more together.

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)

The DPRK poses a direct military threat to the Republic of Korea (ROK) as well as to Japan, both of which are U.S. treaty allies. Although many of North Korea’s large conventional forces are aged or poorly maintained, South Korea must stay vigilant against the threat of a North Korean invasion. North Korea’s missile forces are also capable of striking targets in the ROK and Japan with conventional and nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, the DPRK’s nuclear forces are increasingly capable of threatening the U.S. Homeland. These forces are growing in size and sophistication, and they present a clear and present danger of nuclear attack on the American Homeland.

The Simultaneity Problem and Implications for Allied Burden-Sharing

It is only prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters. Such a scenario would be less of a concern if our allies and partners had spent recent decades investing adequately in their defenses. But they did not. Instead, with rare exceptions, they were too often content to allow the United States to defend them, while they cut defense spending and invested instead in things like public welfare and other domestic programs. [...]

This is why burden-sharing is such an essential ingredient of this Strategy, even as DoW prioritizes growing the Joint Force and advocating defense spending topline to support such growth. America's alliances and partnerships form a defensive perimeter around Eurasia. Not only do these relationships offer favorable geography, but they also include many of the world's wealthiest nations. Taken together, our alliance network is far wealthier than all our potential adversaries combined. As a result, if our allies and partners invest properly in their defenses, consistent with the new global standard set at the Hague Summit, together we can generate more than enough forces to deter potential opponents, including if they act concurrently. [...]

Strategic Approach [...]

Line of Effort 1: Defend the U.S. Homeland

As President Trump has said, the U.S. military's foremost priority is to defend the U.S. Homeland. The Department will therefore prioritize doing just that, including by defending America's interests throughout the Western Hemisphere. We will do so as follows:

- Secure Our Borders. Border security is national security. [...]
- Counter Narco-Terrorists in the Hemisphere. [...] We will therefore help to develop partners' ability to degrade narcoterrorist organizations across the Americas and support them as they do, while also maintaining our ability to take decisive action unilaterally. [...]
- Secure Key Terrain in the Western Hemisphere. [...] DoW will therefore provide the President with credible options to guarantee U.S. military and commercial access to key terrain from the Arctic to South America, especially Greenland, the Gulf of America, and the Panama Canal. [...]
- Defend America's Skies with President Trump's Golden Dome for America and Other, Drone-Specific Measures. The Department will prioritize efforts to develop President Trump's Golden Dome for America, with a specific focus on options to cost-effectively defeat large missile barrages and other advanced aerial attacks. [...] We will also ensure that U.S. forces have access to the electromagnetic spectrum required to defend the Homeland.
- Modernize and Adapt U.S. Nuclear Forces. The United States requires a strong, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal adapted to the nation's overall and defense strategies. We will modernize and adapt our nuclear forces accordingly with focused attention on deterrence and escalation management amidst the changing global nuclear landscape. The United States should never—will never—be left vulnerable to nuclear blackmail.
- Deter and Defend Against Cyber Threats. [...]
- Counter Islamic Terrorists. [...]

Line of Effort 2: Deter China in the Indo-Pacific Through Strength, Not Confrontation

[...] our focus will be on supporting strategic stability and on deconfliction and de-escalation more broadly. At the same time, President Trump has made clear his desire for a decent peace in the Indo-Pacific, where trade flows openly and fairly, we can all prosper, and our interests are respected. DoW will use these engagements to help communicate that vision and intent to Chinese authorities, while also demonstrating through our behavior our own sincere desire to achieve and sustain such a peaceful and prosperous future.

We will not lose sight, however, of President Trump's most important direction for the Department—peace through strength. Recognizing this, it is our essential responsibility at DoW to ensure that President Trump is always able to negotiate from a position of strength in order to sustain peace in the Indo-Pacific. To that end, as the NSS directs, we will build, posture, and sustain a strong denial defense along the FIC. We will also work closely with our allies and partners in the region to incentivize and enable them to do more for our collective defense, especially in ways that are relevant to an effective denial defense. Through these efforts, we will make clear that any attempt at aggression against U.S. interests will fail and is therefore not worth attempting in the first place. That is the essence of deterrence by denial. [...]

Line of Effort 3: Increase Burden-Sharing with U.S. Allies and Partners

[...] the Department will prioritize strengthening incentives for allies and partners to take primary responsibility for their own defense in Europe, the Middle East, and on the Korean Peninsula, with critical but limited support from U.S. forces. At the same time, we will seek to make it as easy as possible for allies and partners to take on a greater share of the burden of our collective defense, including through close collaboration on force and operational planning and working closely to bolster their forces' readiness for key missions. [...]

Incentives work and will be a critical part of our alliance policy. We will therefore prioritize cooperation and engagements with model allies—those who are spending as they need to and visibly doing more against threats in their regions, with critical but limited U.S. support—including through arms sales, defense industrial collaboration, intelligence-sharing, and other activities that leave our nations better off.

In practical terms, DoW will proceed as follows:

- Western Hemisphere. Canada and Mexico have strong roles in hemispheric defense, including by working with DoW and other U.S. agencies to prevent illegal aliens and narcoterrorists from reaching America's borders. Canada also has a vital role to play in helping to defend North America against other threats, including by strengthening defenses against air, missile, and undersea threats. In addition, U.S. partners throughout the Western Hemisphere can do far more to help combat illegal migration

as well as to degrade narco-terrorists and prevent U.S. adversaries from controlling or otherwise exercising undue influence over key terrain, especially Greenland, the Gulf of America, and the Panama Canal. [...]

- Europe. As the NSS makes clear, Europe taking primary responsibility for its own conventional defense is the answer to the security threats it faces. The Department will therefore incentivize and enable NATO allies to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defense with critical but more limited U.S. support. Central to this effort, DoW will work closely with our allies to ensure that they deliver on the defense spending pledge that they made at the Hague Summit. We will also seek to leverage NATO processes in support of these goals, while also working to expand transatlantic defense industrial cooperation and reduce defense trade barriers in order to maximize our collective ability to produce forces required to achieve U.S. and allied defense objectives. Finally, we will be clear with our European allies that their efforts and resources are best focused on Europe. This is for the simple reason that it is in Europe where they can—and must—make the greatest difference for our collective defense.
- Middle East. As President Trump laid out in his historic Riyadh speech, the United States seeks a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. As the President also made clear, however, this transformation can only come at the hands of those with the greatest stake in the region's future—our allies and partners in the region itself. Our task is to support them in that effort, building on the strong foundation that President Trump has laid through his clear-eyed, tireless diplomacy. To that end, DoW will empower regional allies and partners to take primary responsibility for deterring and defending against Iran and its proxies, including by strongly backing Israel's efforts to defend itself; deepening cooperation with our Arabian Gulf partners; and enabling integration between Israel and our Arabian Gulf partners, building on President Trump's historic initiative, the Abraham Accords. [...]
- Africa. The Department's priority in Africa is to prevent Islamic terrorists from using regional safe havens to strike the U.S. Homeland. [...]
- Korean Peninsula. With its powerful military, supported by high defense spending, a robust defense industry, and mandatory conscription, South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited U.S. support. South Korea also has the will to do so, given that it faces a direct and clear threat from North Korea. This shift in the balance of responsibility is consistent with America's interest in updating U.S. force posture on the Korean Peninsula. In this way, we can ensure a stronger and more mutually beneficial alliance relationship that is better aligned with America's defense priorities, thereby setting conditions for lasting peace.

Line of Effort 4: Supercharge the U.S. Defense Industrial Base

The U.S. DIB is the foundation to rebuilding and adapting our military so that it remains the strongest in the world. [...]

Our fighting force depends on the DIB to produce, deliver, and sustain critical munitions, systems, and platforms. Our readiness, lethality, range, and survivability—and, ultimately, the military options we provide—are directly linked to the DIB’s ability to securely develop, field, sustain, resupply, and transport the equipment and materiel that affords us our warfighting advantage. We will therefore bolster our organic sustainment capabilities, grow nontraditional vendors, and partner with traditional DIB vendors, Congress, our allies and partners, and other federal departments and agencies to reinvigorate and mobilize our great nation’s unrivaled creativity and ingenuity, re-spark our innovative spirit, and restore our industrial capacity. Making the DIB great again requires clear vision, strong relationships, and a solid commitment to rebuild the ultimate foundation of our military strength. As the NSS makes clear, this effort will require nothing short of a national mobilization—a call to industrial arms on par with similar revivals of the last century that ultimately powered our nation to victory in the world wars and the Cold War that followed. [...]

Document No. 3. U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Hearing to Receive Testimony on Strategic Competition in an Unconstrained, Post-New START Treaty Environment, February 3, 2026 (select excerpts)³

Senator Wicker: [...] The New START Treaty [New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] was negotiated in the bygone era, years ago. In 2010, the idea of abolishing nuclear weapons seemed an attainable goal to some. For a while, the treaty did provide a degree of transparency and predictability between the United States and Russia on the nuclear forces of those two countries. That is until Vladimir Putin decided that compliance with Russia’s obligations were no longer in his interest. That should be instructive, I would add, regarding any promises that he might be trying to make during this year.

Now, as I say, 15 years after the treaty was signed, we face an assortment of threats far more complicated and dangerous than anyone foresaw in 2010. Today, the Putin dictatorship commands the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, and he’s developing new weapons designed to exploit our most vulnerable points.

³ The full transcript can be found at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/transcript_02-03-2026.pdf.

Despite its conventional losses in Ukraine, which are substantial, Russia's nuclear weapons production capacity is far greater than our own. His capacity to produce nuclear weapons is far greater than that of the United States. It will likely remain so for the foreseeable future.

China is poised to become an even greater threat. Over the past several years, Xi Jinping has nearly quadrupled the size of his nuclear arsenal. Meanwhile, he's expanded China's shipbuilding capacity to more than 230 times that of the United States, and he's built thousands of long-range missiles, including Fractional Orbital Bombardment weapons.

The full list of China's military advances is too extensive to cover here. But China's goal is clear; she is committed to replacing the U.S., and is rapidly building to displacing the U.S. as the leader, and is rapidly building the capability to do so.

The emergence of two peer competitors alone represents an unprecedented challenge to the United States. However, these concerns have compounded by an extensive set of new threats to our national security. These threats include North Korea's growing nuclear missile capabilities, the weaponization of space, the accessibility of dangerous narcotics, the increased use of unmanned systems, and the emergence of artificial intelligence. [...] In this complicated environment, deterrence depends on tangible military capability. Some American defense planners express hope for a "decent peace" with our adversaries, but to endure that peace, it must be founded first and foremost on a credible deterrent. To be sure, improved defenses such as Golden Dome initiative play a vital supporting role. But at its core that credible deterrence will always be based on our nuclear forces.

Secondly, strategic competition can no longer be divided into discreet domains. Our adversaries view all types of military capabilities as tools to shape geopolitical outcomes. Our nuclear posture, missile defenses, conventional forces, cyber capabilities, and space assets must be fully integrated and responsive to threats against the U.S. national security, regardless of where those threats arise.

Thirdly, we cannot field the capabilities we need without a strong industrial base. Decades of so-called streamlining have left our domestic manufacturers with almost no capacity to surge munitions production. Our critical mineral supply chains have become brittle, poorly designed workforce development plans have left us with critical labor shortages in manufacturing and skilled trades.

This moment tests American resolve and our commitment to the alliances that have helped preserve our security for decades. Our allies are waiting to see whether we will respond to this new era with seriousness, strength, and leadership, or with hesitation, weakness, and complacency. We must compete with the adversaries I've mentioned, and we must do so responsibly.

This does not mean recklessly seeking conflict, nor does it mean retreating into isolationism. Instead, we recognize that peace is preserved through strength, preparedness, and a willingness to act when appropriate to achieve our national interest. [...]

Ambassador Gottemoeller: [...] Too often, deterrence in arms control are set up in opposition to each other. If nuclear deterrence is the top necessity, then nuclear arms control has to be dead. If nuclear arms control is thriving, then nuclear deterrence must be suffering. I would like to stress that instead, the two enjoy a symbiotic relationship. The strength of one feeds the strength of the other and vice versa.

The symbiosis comes about because stable deterrence is driven by predictability, and nuclear negotiations done right, deliver predictability. The effect comes about because restraints on our opponents reach through agreement, bolster predictability, which in turn supports our nuclear forces in their drive for reliable, stable, and effective deterrence.

Lack of predictability by contrast, feeds uncertainty about the status of the nuclear forces among our adversaries, which means we may end up spending more than we have to on nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles. [...]

It goes without saying that we have to be alert to any cheating going on, and the Russians have violated treaties in an egregious way, including the short and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, INF, which President Trump withdrew from in response in 2019 during his first term in office. That action conveyed an important message; we are alert to treating non-compliance by the Russians or any other country, and we will respond with every legal tool available to us and take military action, nuclear or conventional, as warranted.

President Putin's decision to pull the plug [...] on the implementation of New START in February, 2023 was not permitted by the treaty, and we determined quickly that Russia was therefore in violation of it. That was the right decision, but it does not belie the fact that New START has kept the Russian nuclear force posture to the limits of the treaty despite this violation; 1,550 deployed warheads, 700 deployed delivery vehicles, and 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers.

We have been able to confirm the deployments through our national technical means of verification. As a result, essential predictability has remained despite the violation [...]

I testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in December that I support a one-year extension of the limits of New START. My bottom line is that it does not serve U.S. National Security and trust to have to address the Chinese nuclear buildup, while simultaneously facing a rapid Russian upload campaign.

The Russians have the capacity and experience to succeed in such a campaign. It will be much better for us to keep them limited for at least another year while we continue to plan and prepare for the Chinese threat. Remaining under New START limits for a year does not prejudice our plannings and preparation to upload. The concern about a rapid Russian upload campaign was a finding of the Strategic Posture Commission, of which I was a member. [...]

Refusing the one-year extension on New START limits gives Putin an easy diplomatic win that should have been the President's. But I do not insist that New START is the be-all and end-all of nuclear treaties. President Trump told the New York Times in January that he wants to negotiate a better treaty. That is good. [...]

Mr. Morrison: [...] It's worth recalling that the Cold War officially ended on December 26th, 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the expiration of the New START Treaty this week, we can finally put to rest the last Cold War-style arms control treaty as well. History doesn't afford many blank slate opportunities, but this Thursday will be an opportunity to start over in the domain of arms control.

Let's be clear, arms control can and should be an important tool of competition between nuclear arms states, but it is only a tool of competition, and it is only one tool and is not an end to itself. The Cold War did witness arms control that served us interests in that competition.

For example, the INF agreement was perhaps the most successful arms control treaty ever signed by the United States. Not only did it actually destroy nuclear weapons and prohibit an entire class of them, but the Soviet Union had to destroy more than twice as many nuclear weapons as the United States.

But these criteria are only one piece of the puzzle. There's another piece as Dr. Fred Iklé's said, "After detection - What?" How do we enforce compliance in a future arms control treaty? INF was after all a Cold War agreement, and it was one that Russia ultimately saw fit to end realizing perhaps before we did that, the Cold War was over.

And so, when considering what arms control the United States might want to pursue going forward, we should be thinking today after detection. What I fear, our options are limited. [...]

China is adding at least 100 warheads a year to its nuclear force. General Cotton, the prior Commander of USSTRATCOM, testified before the House Armed Services Committee that, "Russia continues to update its warhead production complex and is producing hundreds of warheads each year."

By 2035, 100 percent of U.S. nuclear weapons, the warheads, and the bombs themselves, will have exceeded their design lives by an average of 30 years. [...] This asymmetry undermines not only arm control but deterrence itself.

Now, history has shown that the only means to reliably enforce compliance with arm control treaties is to be able to threaten that failure to comply will be met with a compelling response. And for the next arm control treaty, if the U.S. doesn't have the means to respond quickly to a violation, what will we have accomplished by agreeing to it? Indeed, relying on ineffective arms control may actually undermine our security by denying us the motivation to make needed investments in our security.

The continued commitment to rebuild the U.S. nuclear deterrence, and to have a system capable of building and maintaining that deterrence is essential not only for U.S. and allied security, but if we are going to be able to get to a point where arms control can again serve our national security [.] [...]

Mr. Morrison: Senator, when the Trump administration had an opportunity to consider this question, we stepped back and we looked at not just what the Russian Force was doing, but also the Chinese force. [...] One of the things that former Secretary of State Pompeo stated was that under New START, "Only 45 percent of Russia's nuclear arsenal was subject to numerical limits. Meanwhile, that agreement restricts 92 percent of America's arsenal."

Where we approached this question in the prior Trump administration was; let's look at an agreement that captures the total force, not just strategic weapons.

Chairman Wicker: Was it a bad deal?

Mr. Morrison: Senator, I believe that the New START Treaty was a bad deal. [...]

Admiral Richard: Senator, first, to be very direct on the answer to your question, I would not recommend a one-year extension to the New START Treaty, absent verification procedures being reinstated.

I am on record testifying in front of this committee that arms [c]ontrol as [A]mbassador [Gottemoeller] mentioned, if done correctly, enhances strategic deterrence, enhances certainty, enhances confidence. But it has to include all parties, it has to include all weapons, and it has to have verification mechanisms built in with consequences for non-compliance. [...]

[A]t a minimum, I would include Russia, China, and the United States in any arms control agreement. Absent that, simply extending the New START Treaty for one year does not constrain Russia to the same way that it constrains us.

It prevents us from answering the challenge that China has added to this, and it increases the uncertainty because it doesn't have the verification mechanisms built in that were so successful in the past. [...]

I would strongly endorse the drive to protect the continental United States with a [G]olden [D]ome. I think we have real-world experience from the Middle East in terms of how that enhances defense. Deterrence provides more options to our leadership, and I would like those same benefits to be applied to the United States.

That said, I think a lesson out of the events in Israel is that deterrence by denial, which is what a defensive system like Golden Dome does, has to always be backed up by the threat of deterrence by cost imposition, otherwise, your opponent has no incentive to stop shooting. [...]

Our entire nuclear deterrence posture is designed to, by threat of escalation, convince your opponent, have a perception in your opponent's mind, that restraint, inaction is their least bad course of action.

And that has been successful for over 60 years in deterring not only nuclear attack on the United States and our allies, but has made a great contribution to the deterrence of Great Power War. [...]

I would offer that we're already in an environment where we need additional forces. That independent of the treaty, Russia has been very successful at adding capability that is not covered by the treaty. [...] China is completely unconstrained.

So, yes. Is there a value to the verification mechanisms in terms of reducing what you might consider error bars around your intelligence community's assessment of your opponent's capability? Yes, but that is very minor in comparison to where they are unconstrained, and have no limits on their ability to improve or increase their forces. [...]

[O]n China, I had a rule with my intelligence folks back at STRATCOM that whatever the intelligence community tells you about China in terms of numbers, double it or triple it, and you will probably be closer to where we're actually going to wind up.

In terms of time, divide by two, maybe by three, and you'll actually wind up being closer. And in my four years since retiring, that rule of thumb seems to have held. So, yes, I think that's the way to approach that. [...]

But from an operational standpoint, in my conversations with the allies, the issue was less about treaties, and it was more about capability and will.

And we have recently demonstrated will. I think we've made positive movement in that direction, but it's the capabilities we have or don't have that is of a much bigger concern to our allies in terms of our ability to honor our extended deterrence commitments. [...]

Ambassador Gottemoeller: [...] President Trump [...] said publicly, and as I've understood, he's discussed with President Xi Jinping, at least according to media reports, that he would like to get into a new nuclear negotiation with China as well. [...] The best information I have is that by 2035, they will have right around 1,500 warheads according to our Department of Defense, now Department of War. [...] I say we have to be self-confident in our ability to work this problem over the next decade, including through responses that we make in the development and modernization of our nuclear triad, but also in terms of how we engage and interact with them at the negotiating table. I do think those two things work together and that we can gain success by having a very firm and strong approach to the modernization of our nuclear triad. [...]

Admiral Richard: [...] I didn't have the luxury when I was at STRATCOM of deterring our opponents one at a time. I had to look at the collective. I am very concerned about the possibility of opportunistic or coordinated aggression, either between major powers such as Russia, and China, and or the regional ones. Again, I had to deter them all.

And so, the simple numerical comparisons don't completely capture the complexity, what the U.S. has to have in order to deter two peers at the same time that have to be deterred differently. And I think there's a lot of work left to be done in terms of even updating how you apply deterrence theory in a three-party world with possibility of coordinated opportunistic and ambiguous aggression.

In a way, all of that needs to be worked out, but I would strongly support what the Strategic Posture Commission said; our current modernization program is necessary, but not sufficient, and there are a number of obvious steps we need to take in terms of additional capabilities to address the threat I just described. [...]

Mr. Morrison: Senator, I think it comes back to deterrence works. And part of our ability to deter is to demonstrate that whoever may choose to challenge us, including if they challenge us in a conspiracy or confederation, can't possibly win.

And that's where I worry about the asymmetry between our nuclear weapons production complex and those of our potential adversaries. I don't believe that right now our complex deters aggression, including aggression by more than one power at a time. [...]

Ambassador Gottemoeller: [...] I absolutely agree, as the Strategic Posture Commission said, that the triad modernization under the program of record is necessary but not sufficient.

So, I think we have to continue to press to get that program of record implemented on time to the degree that is possible. I know delays are already happening, but we just have to keep intense pressure on that process in order to get the program of record completed.

I would like to point out, however, that the Posture Commission also recommended that new requirements not be piled on at this moment, but that we continue on the program of record [...], and then think what else will need to be accomplished.

Mr. Morrison: [...] We skipped an entire generation of modernization of our nuclear force, and we waited until the last minute to modernize everything all at once.

Every year you hear posture hearings. Admiral Richard gave them, his successors have given them. And they talk about the risks of further delays, and those risks accumulate. They undermine deterrence, they undermine assurance of our allies.

And at some point, those risks reach a breaking point that I'm sure Admiral Richard always had to calculate how much uncertainty does he want to give our allies, and how much uncertainty does he want to show to our adversaries? But the risks are real. So, yes, delays undermine deterrence and assurance. [...]

Admiral Richard: Senator, I'd like to offer two points in response to your question. First, you ended it with a discussion of something potentially being, not your exact words, destabilizing. I get that question a lot along with whether or not something is escalatory. [...] I think that is not the first question that should be asked. The first question that we should ask is, are we defended? The second question is, are they deterred? And then, only then, do we start to ask ourselves; is it stabilizing or destabilizing, escalatory or not? Deterrence, fundamentally is the withheld threat of escalation. So, it is not possible to deter without threatening escalation.

Back to your specific question, I think that the United States needs to immediately start taking steps, steps that are currently precluded by the New START Treaty to enhance its posture with the forces that it has today in order to answer the challenge that is presented to us by both Russia's non-compliance, and their efforts around the New START Treaty, as well as China being unconstrained[,] to include uploading warheads to our intercontinental ballistic missiles, removing covers off the four tubes on our trident submarines that are currently empty, and several other posture steps that should be taken, now not a year from now. [...]

Mr. Morrison: Senator, I would urge that we not continue to look through the soda straw of New START and strategic arms control. It's not an accident that the first place the United States deployed an INF range conventional system at the expiration of that agreement was in the Philippines.

We have an opportunity to look at all of the tools in our toolkit to create leverage to drive all parties to the negotiating table. [...] Having the security blanket of continuing the New START Treaty gives both Russia and China an excuse to move this conversation off the table, and look for other areas where they might want to engage. [...]

Admiral Richard: Senator, I'll just offer that I don't know how China could be moving much faster, independent of treaties, that we do or don't have on ourselves. Russia seems to be very capable of going around the New START Treaty to add capabilities and capacity that are not constrained by the treaty. [...]

Senator, first, I remain in strong support of the Sea[-]Launch[ed] Nuclear Cruise Missile, and I think events in the time since I retired have borne out why I made that recommendation. It would've been a great utility to us already, and I think it'll be the same in the future.

But to answer your question, yes, I do think we need to be considering additional capabilities beyond simply supplemental capability of a Sea Launch Cruise Missile. To deter, the threat has to be credible, which means you have to pace the defenses of the states that you are in competition with.

So, I don't think it's too early to start looking at a nuclear capable hypersonic weapon for the U.S., an extension of our conventional capabilities in that area. I think in the future—and there's several others we could discuss—that will be an important addition to maintain our deterrence against Russia and China.

Senator Fischer: As we look at the number of bombers, the number of submarines that are under production right now, do you think that our sizing of our force is based on deterring the current threat environment? Is that the best strategy we can have on this?

Admiral Richard: Senator, those numbers were developed back in 2010 timeframe under a very different strategic environment and strategic threat environment specifically. So, no, I think the numbers are insufficient on all portions of the triad, particularly on the bomber and the ballistic missile submarine leg.

There are additional capabilities that we should consider in addition to the recapitalization of the triad and increasing the capacity inside the triad. One challenge that we face, particularly on the ballistic missile submarine side is the time it would take to get additional ballistic missile submarines given the timelines involved in those productions.

But the answer to your question is, yes, we're going to need more capacity, particularly in the bomber and sea launch legs. [...]

My experience in terms of what causes allies apprehension, particularly in the Asia Pacific, has to do more with our capabilities and in particular, our lack of theater systems available in the Indo-Pacific, and our modest contribution to NATO with the dual-capable aircraft. [...]

I think, fundamentally, agreeing to an additional year [of adhering to New START] constrains us relative to China and the actions that we need to be taking in the very near-term to address that threat while providing us little benefit with Russia. [...]

Mr. Morrison: Senator, as you know, there is already a serial pattern of non-compliance, so I would not be surprised if Russia was doing that. And I already believe it's a bad idea without that information to extend the treaty for one year. [...]

Senator, there's two issues at the heart of the debate over nuclear testing. One, does the current U.S. nuclear stockpile require it for credibility? And two, why are Russia and China doing it if they are doing it? It's that second question, and what we may not know, and if we do know, likely can't talk about in this environment, that causes me the most concern. Not because of the credibility of our deterrent, but the risk of strategic surprise. [...]

Admiral Richard: [...] I would put the highest priority actually on removing the four-missile tube covers on our Trident submarines and returning them to 24 tubes, vice 20 [,] uploading intercontinental ballistic missiles, rem[i]rving up to the appropriate point.

Senator Banks: [...] Mr. Morrison, China's in the middle of a massive nuclear buildup, as you've said. Yet, the department has consistently underestimated the speed and scale of that buildup. [...] Why do we keep underestimating them?

Mr. Morrison: Senator, they are an incredibly complicated intelligence collection target. [...] I think we have never seen a buildup that is proceeding as comprehensively and at the speed that we're currently seeing. So, I think maybe it breaks some of our models. [...]

Senator Kelly: [...] In a world without arms control limits, and with two major adversaries potentially expanding their nuclear arsenals, what are the strategic implications for pursuing this kind of defense?

Admiral Richard: Senator, first, I would support additional defenses, air and missile defenses, for the United States in terms of the way it enhances our security. I think the success of the Israeli system is an example of – the technical challenges that you just described can be addressed.

Senator Kelly: Do you feel they can be addressed at scale –

Admiral Richard: I do think they can –

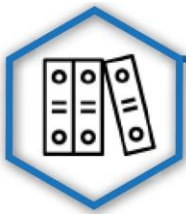
Senator Kelly: – with the full salvos of ICBM?

Admiral Richard: Absolutely. Because the goal is not to – you’re not going to intercept every single weapon going in, but you will intercept enough of them. That one will drive your opponent to have to consider a much larger attack than they might otherwise have.

There’s a deterrent value in that alone, and then introducing a lack of confidence on the part of your opponent. Their attack is going to be successful, yet, they will carry all the consequences of having started it, I think enhances our security. [...]

I would agree decoys are pretty cheap. I would agree that there are ways to discriminate through that. I also think directed energy is pretty cheap. And so, I think there is a technological competition, not unlike other ones we’ve had in our history that we can win. [...]

The actual capacity of Golden Dome hasn’t been specified. But your answer is, no, it’s not designed to stop an entire salvo to 100 percent effectiveness. But we don’t need 99.99. Right? 99 would go a long way in terms of giving us more options, more decision space. We still retain and will need to retain our strategic deterrent in our conventional forces –[.] [...]



FROM THE ARCHIVE

The From the Archive section of this issue offers a 2006 study by National Institute co-founder Dr. Colin Gray. In it, Dr. Gray contends that strategic thought encapsulates “the engine of thought and behaviour,” noting that its “principal function is to make sense of the world for us.” He calls strategic culture “vitally important” to understanding the nature of both friends and foes and how “different security communities think and behave somewhat differently about strategic matters.”

Colin S. Gray, *Out of the Wilderness: Prime-time for Strategic Culture* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2006).

Summary

Strategic culture has come of age, at last. After years in the wilderness, the defense community has adopted it officially as an important concept with significant implications. There are some difficulties, however, in finding a methodology to study it and, indeed, in understanding just how it ‘works.’ In the spirit of Sun-tzu and Jomini, there is a danger that culture is in the process of being identified as the Philosopher’s Stone for policy and strategy; the magical element that will transform ignorance into knowledge. Also, there is some likelihood that culture is becoming fashionable. This means that it must also become unfashionable, after a period of prime-time prominence.

Scholars cannot agree on how to define strategic culture. This is rather foolish since there is general agreement on the content of the subject and, roughly, on how it functions. The principal disagreement is between those who include behavior within their definition, and those who exclude it. This is a burning issue for theory builders but otherwise is not really of any great significance. If we have resort to an educated common sense, a most un scholarly proposition, the difficulty evaporates. All people are ‘cultural creatures.’ Everything we think and do is performed in the context of culture, perhaps cultures. But culture need not dominate. It is an ever present potential influence, sometimes pressing hard, sometimes not. Its principal function is to make sense of the world for us. Some scholars misunderstand the nature and variable character of strategic culture and, as a consequence, they contrast ‘culturalist’ with realist approaches to security. This is wrong. All realists, including neorealists, are, to repeat, ‘cultural creatures,’ whether they like it or not.

Culture is of the utmost importance. It functions at, indeed as, the engine of thought and behaviour. Clausewitz tells us that war is a contest between two wills, and the will of a belligerent is the product of moral factors which can be summarized as culture. Sun-tzu was right in insisting on the importance of self knowledge and of knowledge of one’s enemies. Cultural comprehension meets that insistence.

But there are many perils and pitfalls in both cultural analysis and in an endeavour to apply better cultural understanding pragmatically. In summary form, culture: (1) may explain too much to be useful, since it is ubiquitous in our contexts; (2) has problems of evidence, it is a notoriously opaque, vague, concept; (3) can be misused as a panacea



solution; (4) may appeal to those who favor an essentialist view of the world, and who oversimplify thereby; (5) changes, it is not static, it can even change drastically under the impact of traumatic strategic shock; (6) is usually diverse, albeit under a broad national umbrella of assumptions; (7) is not exclusive, there are many cultural features common among national cultures; (8) can borrow and adapt from abroad; (9) does not guarantee victory, while greater understanding is desirable, someone has to operationalize and act upon cultural understanding; (10) will be diluted in its impact on decisions and actions by the fact that official behavior is always a negotiated outcome among competing interests; (11) and the excellent idea of cultural study all too easily loses its sparkle when it enters the methodological swamp in which professional theorists lurk. Perhaps Rumsfeld was right and it is a good idea to drain some swamps.

Strategic culture is vitally important. There are no persuasive arguments to the contrary. But, a little theory goes a long way in a highly practical field like strategic studies. And culture is no panacea. It is not the golden key that can transform military losers into winners. Cultural change happens, but it will not change suddenly by order from above. Finally, if strategic culture is indeed the concept of the moment, its lustre will soon vanish as it is replaced by the next fashionable wonder solution to our strategic problems.

Introduction: Eyes on ‘The Plot’

Scholars are rightly suspicious of, or disdainful and actually hostile to, common sense. After all, common sense is not really common, rather is it value-charged by culture, the subject of this paper. Nonetheless, we discard and despise common sense at our peril. Among other points, I will suggest that one can explain strategic culture and its associated concepts (public culture and military or organizational culture), what they are, how they work, and why they are important, both simply and accurately enough. Accurately enough for what? Accurately enough to grasp the essentials of ‘the plot’ concerning strategic culture. And that, after all, is all that a defense community needs to achieve. I might proceed further, if pressed, and argue that the bare outlines of ‘the plot’ are the most that can be achieved. By way of a thought provoking analogy, you might care to consider the practical inutility of the nearly 90 years of scholarship that have been devoted to that highly scholar-unfriendly subject, the causes of war. Just about everything that has been written on the subject with a view to developing a general theory of the causes of war, has been a thorough waste of effort. The reason is not hard to find. The job cannot be done. The relevant history is too complex, contexts are too rich and contingent. If you attempt the impossible, settle upon the wrong organizing question, you will accomplish nothing of much value, save by serendipity. I suspect that scholarship on strategic culture, albeit for a different reason, similarly is bound to fail when it ventures far beyond our culture-bound common sense and positivistically seeks a certain general wisdom. Strategy does not yield to the scientific method, and nor does the study of culture.

A powerful, even compelling, idea like strategic culture, easily is reduced to something far less compelling when it is adopted as the concept of the month, or even the period, by

scholars and soldiers and officials. Both groups have their professional biases, even their *deformations professionnelles*. For another analogy, a new religion will likely burst upon an astonished and delighted populace with a rather simple, yet powerfully persuasive, story. But once that story is interpreted and systematized into doctrine by professional theologians, much of the original message, the essential plot even, is apt to be watered down or lost. So, this paper has much to say, not all of it friendly, about the way strategic culture is being studied and prospectively employed. My purpose, though, is entirely constructive. I will endeavour to adhere to what I am calling ‘the plot.’ If you prefer, and with some apologies to Jeremy Black who for some good reasons detests this notion, I will always try to keep in mind a master narrative.¹ That narrative, or plot, explains what we are talking about and, by plain implication, at least, why we are talking about it.

This study advances first by specifying some general points on our subject. Next, it bows to convention and offers judgments on definitions and methodology, notwithstanding the criticisms that have been offered, and will be offered in more detail below, of scholars who overindulge in the heady delights of theory. The author cannot deny that he too is a theorist. The tale then proceeds to explore the reasons why culture matters greatly. Finally, since cultural analysis has become so popular, it is necessary to outline the principal perils and pitfalls that await the overenthusiastic culturalist. But, first, let us stake out a position, and perhaps fortify it a little, by way of registering some general points.

Some General Points

I will begin by anchoring the paper with, perhaps to, five general judgments. These are discussed and developed in more detail in later sections.

1. Culture comes of age: After decades wandering in the wilderness, the few scholars who wrote about strategic culture have recently been joined by, so it seems, just about everyone else. It seems as if the case for cultural analysis has been made and now is widely accepted. Exactly how such analysis should be performed, and on what, precisely, is another matter. Also, the anticipated benefits of cultural analysis remain somewhat uncertain. But, in the U.S. defense community you cannot keep a big, and possibly good, idea down; not once it has secured official adoption. When Army transformation documents refer to an intention to “transform its culture ...,”² you know that both the noun and the verb are words that are much in favor. Ever since 1973, I have been quoting two wonderful sentences from Bernard Brodie’s final book, *War and Politics*. He wrote: “Whether with respect to arms control or otherwise, good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have

¹ Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.1. For an opposing point of view, see Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: IISS, March 2006), pp. 22-6.

² U.S. Army, *Army Campaign Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3, Department of the Army, 12 April, 2004), p. 10.

resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department.”³ Brodie cited the deadly facts that both Napoleon and Hitler despised the Russians. Were he alive today he might well have cited the case of those who invade Iraq without understanding that the country—I speak loosely in that regard—is a multicultural society, which sometimes is controlled by a highly authoritarian central government.⁴ Destroy that central government and the country reverts to control by its enduring tribal power structure. When Brodie offered his advice on the value of anthropology and sociology in 1973, he was conveying a message that the strategic studies community had not been hearing. One would like to believe that today his claim is generally accepted, in principle, if not necessarily much in practice, as yet.

2. Methodology and understanding: Strategy is a practical business.⁵ Scholars who lack experience in government, let alone in war itself, are apt to forget this. Also, of course, Strategic Studies typically is regarded as a sub-field within the broad tent of International Relations (to mix my metaphors). International Relations, the multidiscipline, was kick-started as an academic pursuit in horrified reaction to World War I. What I am claiming is that Strategic Studies and its scholarly contextual master has always been intended to be useful to the society within which it is practiced and possibly to all humankind. It is not a fine art. Since all professions protect themselves with specialized language known only to initiates, it is not surprising that theorists of International Relations have invented their own code words and, like all bodies of theologians, have fractured into competing schools of belief. Should I lose sleep worrying about whether I am a neo-classical realist or a constructivist? Could I possibly be both? Does it matter? The reason for this seeming digression is that scholars of International Relations, most especially those of a marked social scientific bent, are now hot on the trail of that elusive quarry, strategic culture. So, their assumptions, methods and goals, are of some relevance to this paper. The trouble is, I suspect, that the industrious and methodologically innovative theorist is overreaching both what is possible and what is useful. For a helpful analogy, I draw your attention to an article written by Hedley Bull in 1968, “Strategic Studies and its Critics.” Bull addressed, and supported, a charge levelled by some strategists at their own profession. The charge was that in their pursuit of “technical rigor and precision”, many strategists have “lost touch with political variety and change.”⁶ This strategist, for one, cannot avoid the conviction that strategic cultural analysis sometimes is guilty of the same character of error that Bull identified. The demands of rigor and precision in theory construction are allowed to triumph over the substance of the subject. The writings of Alastair Iain Johnston on the strategic culture(s) of China are a classic example of what I mean.⁷ He cannot include

³ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 332.

⁴ See Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 38 (3rd qtr., 2005), pp. 42-8.

⁵ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p.453. “Strategic thinking, or ‘theory’ if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. Strategy is a ‘how to do it’ study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently.”

⁶ Hedley Bull, “Strategic Studies and Its Critics”, *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No.4 (July 1968), p. 600.

⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

behavior in his definition of culture because to do so would torpedo his exercise in theory building. It would be difficult, not to say impossible, to assess the influence of strategic culture if it is both input and already is inherent in the output. I sympathize with him over his dilemma, though not with his solution. While a rigorous method is admirable, it ought not to take precedence over an inconvenient reality.

3. Jomini, Sun-tzu, and the Philosopher's Stone: Culture matters deeply, as is explained in a later section. But, it is not all that matters in strategy and security. Alas the spirit of Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini is alive and well and inhabits Washington, D.C. It was the spirit of his theory that gave us a technical and utterly apolitical understanding of strategic stability during the Cold War. Although Jomini said that strategy was an art, I doubt if he really believed it.⁸ Rather did he believe that there was a science of war, a science the mysteries of which he was the first to present coherently, if not to unlock. If you read liberal commentaries in opposition to ballistic missile defense or to the *Peacekeeper* (MX) ICBM, you will be in Jominian territory, intellectually. The Swiss colonel tells us in his best known book, *The Art of War* of 1838, "that there is one great principle underlying all the operations of war—a principle which must be followed in all good combinations."⁹ The maxims that follow are keyed to the principle of overwhelming an inferior portion of the enemy's army with a superior quantity of yours. In Jomini's words, "[e]very maxim relating to war will be good if it indicates the employment of the greatest portion of the means of action at the decisive moment and place."¹⁰ The confused, if not baffled, soldier of today, can hardly help but be cheered by Jomini's claim, advice is too weak a term, that "[c]orrect theories, founded upon right principles, sustained by actual events of wars, and added to accurate military history, will form a true school of instruction for generals."¹¹

But since Jomini's "one great principle" does not sit comfortably with the character of irregular warfare, our leading contemporary concern—for a while, at least—we can look to ancient China for a more suitable great principle. Not only do we find such help in Sun-tzu, we discover that it blesses cultural understanding. Indeed, it all but mandates cultural study. Despite its overfamiliarity, I am obliged to quote the well known formula.

Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.¹²

⁸ Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (1838; London: Greenhill Books, 1992), p. 321.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

¹² Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, Ralph D. Sawyer, trans. (ca.400 BC; Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 179.

Good advice, and it is at least half true. Self and other knowledge is important, even vitally so, but it does not guarantee success. There is a danger that Sun-tzu's excellent formula, reinforced by a Jominian spirit, will encourage the fallacious conviction that in understanding culture we have stumbled across the answer to, the correct great principle for, our strategic dilemmas. Thus, a secure grasp of the strategic cultures of friends and foes can serve as the Philosopher's Stone that transmutes the lead of mere information into the gold of a comprehension that is strategically usable.

4. Fashion rules, briefly: The American defense community has a history of intellectual, and even policy, capture by the big idea of the moment, perhaps even the decade. Not so long ago, the magic concept was RMA. RMA gave way to transformation, which, to be generous, one could interpret as the logical and practical consequence of RMA. Today it seems, at long last, culture either is, or is in serious danger of becoming, the big idea of the moment. In some ways this is good news. After all, this theorist, for one, has been advocating cultural analysis for 30 years. But, it is a law of life that fashion changes. It changes because American culture favors novelty and innovation, even if it is the rediscovery of the blindingly obvious, and because it is in the very nature of fashion to change. People, including defense theorists, get bored composing briefings on the same subject, time after time. Also, any subject eventually exhausts the imagination of theorists. Furthermore, as America's security problems shift, so does the focus of debate on suitable responses. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that when the current modest level of official enthusiasm for cultural understanding ebbs away, some nuggets of lasting value will be left on our intellectual and institutional beaches. To venture a speculative thought, the most likely reason why strategic culture will lack staying power as a potent idea in the U.S. defense community, will be because of its inherent difficulty.

Strategic cultural understanding is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to operationalize. The fact that it is an important concept, robust in its essentials against challenge, is irrelevant. The practical implications of the promotion of culture to intellectual and doctrinal leading edge status may well, indeed probably will, prove to be unduly demanding. For example, as the global superpower, determined to drain swamps anywhere in the global war on terror (GWOT, a now dated, but still attractive, acronym), America's need for cultural expertise is all but unbounded.¹³ It takes years, even decades, to grow a body of Americans who are truly local experts. All things are possible, but this strategic theorist is skeptical that culture, strategic and other, has the horsepower to stay the course in official U.S. policy focus, let alone in troop training and interagency cooperation. More to the point perhaps, it is by no means self evident that the job is doable.

It is useful to change the question when the original question can produce only a negative answer. In reply to the question, can we achieve good cultural understanding of most of our likely friends and probable foes, one is obliged to say, almost certainly not. So, let us change the question. In answer to the reframed question, can we achieve good

¹³ See Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 6, 2006), esp. pp. 21-2.

enough cultural understanding of some of our likely friends and most probable foes, we can say perhaps, albeit only with the application of a great deal of sustained effort. As much to the point is the issue of just how one uses cultural understanding. Who uses it, and how important is such use? That thought bears directly upon the core concern of this paper, the significance of culture relative to other influences upon decisions and behavior. If culture is a variable intervening between stimulus and decision and action, a conception that this author does not endorse, what else intervenes?

5. Culture matters: Given the critical tone and content of some of this section thus far, it is necessary that it be concluded on a strongly positive note. None of the criticisms levelled thus far and in the sections to come are intended to suggest that culture is of minor, let alone no, importance. This theorist has long been persuaded that culture is a significant, and can even be a determining, influence upon strategic decisions and behavior. The doubts expressed here pertain to the ways in which culture is conceptualized and, of much greater moment, to the practical difficulties that inhibit even culturally well educated performance.

What is Culture and What Does it Do?

This paper opened with an unscholarly endorsement of that old unreliable virtue, common sense. Unreliable though it is, it has much to offer to the would-be user of the concept, and perhaps the theory, of strategic culture. Before we delve into some of the dimmer and rococo regions of academic discourse, let us see if we can describe the essence of our subject in language that is simple and clear, yet which is not, as a consequence, misleading. When we refer to Russian strategic culture, for example, what we are claiming is that there is a 'Russian way' both of thinking about the threat or use of force for political purposes, and of acting strategically. In the latter regard, so this statement maintains, there is a Russian 'way of war.' This 'Russian way' is a distinctive product of Russia's history and geography, as interpreted for guidance by Russians. Stated thus, a host of critical questions beg for answer. Let me pre-empt at least a few of them. Whatever one's scholarly credo on research methodology, as I keep saying it is necessary not to lose the plot. The plot, please remember, the master narrative, is the disarmingly elementary, even commonsensical, idea, that a security community is likely to think and behave in ways that are influenced by what it has taught itself about itself and its relevant contexts. And that education, to repeat, rests primarily upon the interpretation of history and history's geography (or should it be geography's history?) My geopolitical friends favor the aphorism that 'geography is destiny.' Perhaps the dedicated culturalist will offer the rival dictum that 'culture is destiny.'

Let us clear some underbrush. However one chooses to define culture in general, and strategic culture in particular, those of us who wear the badge of the 'culturalist' are not claiming that culture is always, or even necessarily often, the prime determinant of decision and action. Strategic decision and behavior typically is influenced by many

factors, not least by those dynamics of executive action which ensure that outcomes are negotiated among competing interests. However, it is well to remember that virtually whatever the mix of factors that we believe have produced a decision and its consequent strategic behavior, all of the people and the organizations within which they function are more or less distinctively encultured. This fact is more than a little inconvenient for some would be theory builders. It would be helpful if one could postulate stimuli entering a decision making process, with culture expediently confined to the role of intervening variable, among other intervening variables, between stimuli and decision. Alas, the world is not like that. Culture is not an intervening variable. We are all encultured. But to state that obvious point is not to claim that culture, understood as preference, necessarily has the last word on our decisions or our actions. Culture doesn't usually program us to think and behave like automata, though one can find cases where an approximation to such a malady appears to have occurred.

After reading a few pages of tortuous scholarly theorizing one longs for a return to basics. Having come perilously close to scholarly pathology, I will now be as basic as I know how in describing our subject. Strategic culture is of interest because the concept suggests, perhaps insists, that different security communities think and behave somewhat differently about strategic matters. Those differences stem from communities' distinctive histories and geographies. We can, and should, add many caveats and qualifications to the basic statement just offered. But, what I have just stated in the spirit of back to basics, is the plot. It is deceptively simple. One would think that it is so elementary, commonsensical even, as to be banal. And yet, time after time, strategic history reveals belligerents who either believed that strategic culture was common and universal, or who simply chose to ignore the distinctive cultural dimensions of their adversaries. Of course, if one is ignorant of that dimension, it is difficult to do anything other than to assume that the enemy's strategic preferences will be broadly familiar.

I would like to suggest that there is rather less of substance, and of value, to some of the scholarly debate than meets the eye. We should not take our definitions or our theories too seriously.¹⁴ A little theory goes a long way; more often than not it goes too far. I commend to you this anarchic comment by the anthropologist Leslie A. White: "Culture is not basically anything. Culture is a word concept. It is man-made and may be used arbitrarily to designate anything, we may define the concept as we please."¹⁵ That is a little extreme, but his point is valid. Definitions are arbitrary and can be neither right nor wrong. Nonetheless, some definitions of culture are less defensibly arbitrary than are others. Rather than offering my own definition, I will endorse Jack Snyder's 1977 offering from the Rand study which triggered the modern debate about strategic culture. Snyder's definition is good enough to provide focus and to help keep us glued to the plot. Snyder wrote, with one minor amendment, for the changed strategic context:

¹⁴ For a useful guide to the scholarly debate, see Stuart Poore, "Strategic Culture", in John Glenn, Darryl Howlett, and Poore, eds., *Neorealism Versus Strategic Culture* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 45-71.

¹⁵ Leslie A. White, *The Concept of Cultural Systems: A Key to Understanding Tribes and Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 4n.

Strategic culture can be defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to [nuclear] strategy. In the area of strategy, habitual behaviour is largely cognitive behavior.¹⁶

Although I have done scholarly battle with Alastair Iain Johnston over the definitional issue of whether or not strategic culture should be understood to include behavioral as well as ideational phenomena, I am less and less persuaded that that debate had, or has, any real significance.¹⁷ The ability of scholars to make a necessarily opaque concept like strategic culture even less penetrable is truly amazing. Of course, it is the professional drive of the social scientist for theory that is largely to blame. I admit that it is more than moderately difficult to design a theory of strategic culture if the elusive beast, culture, is both input and output, presumed cause and presumed consequence. But, so what! The sins of the would-be cultural theorists pale by comparison with the nonsense that we know as neorealism. That theory, family of theories, or approach—take your pick—is relevant to this discussion since it is often contrasted with culturalism. On a personal note, when I first encountered neorealism, back in 1979 in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, I thought it was so absurd that no one would, or should, take it seriously.¹⁸ Obviously, I was wrong, with respect to its popularity, but not to its merit. Defense professionals understand that defense policy, strategy, and force planning, are all made at home. Also, we understand that home differs radically from security community to security community. So the neorealist proposition that strategic history, past, present, and future, can be explained strictly by reference to the relations among political entities, with no regard paid to their domestic processes, is, frankly, preposterous. I thought this in 1979 and, being deeply conservative, I still think the same way today. A pure neorealist view of strategic history is as flawed as would be an unmodified belief in cultural dominance. I shall argue in this paper that culture must always be a potential influence upon decision and action. But that potential is not uniformly, or necessarily, realized.

Useful work has been done by scholars of recent years in sorting out different segments of our subject. Specifically, there is now widespread agreement that although strategic culture has long been, and remains, the umbrella concept, in fact we need to distinguish among: (1) public culture; (2) strategic culture; and (3) military (organizational) culture. Relatively little work has been performed as yet in attempts to connect the three. Among the many virtues of recognition of these minimal, but essential, distinctions, is the discouragement they should give to those who might be inclined to look for a neatly unitary strategic culture. There may be a body of strategic beliefs and attitudes to which, say, most Americans would sign up. But, the many organizational players in policymaking and policy

¹⁶ Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, September 1977), p. 8.

¹⁷ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 5.

¹⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

implementation will each have their unique take on how those common beliefs and attitudes should be expressed in actual strategic behavior. In effect, I am going back a decade even from Kenneth Waltz, to Graham Allison and the theory of bureaucratic politics.¹⁹ Remember the old maxim: “where you stand depends on where you sit.” I do not wish to reject one rational choice model only to endorse another. Nonetheless, to study strategic culture it is necessary to disaggregate the subject somewhat. In addition to identifying community-wide strategic nostrums and the like, it is necessary also to consider the institutional preferences of self-interested organizations with their career structures. It may make sense to think in terms of multiple cultural identities.

Where does culture come from? As indicated already, it comes from history and geography. However, one must qualify that general claim by noting that culture is not static. It can evolve, it can adapt, and it can even change radically if battered by traumatic shock. Isobel V. Hull, in her study of the military culture of Imperial Germany, observes intriguingly that, “[o]ne might say that militaries are in the trauma business.”²⁰ The First World War itself may not have changed public and eventually the strategic and military cultures of Russia and Germany. But it was the principal enabler of the cultural revolution wrought by the Bolsheviks. Also, with much assistance from the Great Depression, 1914-18 eventually bears a major responsibility for another cultural revolution, that effected by Hitler and his Nazis. Historians argue about whether the Third Reich was the culmination of, or the exception to, German history, and a similar argument occasionally flourished with reference to tsarist Russia and Stalin as the new Red Tsar. My point, simply, is that public and strategic culture can change dramatically. Unsurprisingly, the most usual cause of such change is the traumatic effect of war and its consequences.

We must insist that culture in its several identities—public, strategic, military-organizational—should consist of assumptions and ideas that are strongly held. Its roots may not be very deep, and the plant might be a recent development, but it has to be hardy to be worthy of the description, cultural. Culture does not refer to mere opinions, to fashionable attitudes, or to shifting patterns of behavior. However, to claim that it, this somewhat opaque, mysterious ‘it’ of culture, is more permanent than opinion is not to suggest that it is permanent; it is not. Culture changes, adapts, sometimes adapts poorly, and, as an effect of societal shock, can alter radically.

Like strategy, culture is a difficult concept to explain, let alone portray convincingly.²¹ You know you are in trouble when our culture specialists, the cultural anthropologists and sociologists, cannot agree on a definition. Culture is among the most contested of concepts. Fortunately, as sensible people, in desperation we are at liberty to enlist common sense in our column. Since culture, like love and honor, for other examples, cannot be captured and photographed directly, the best we can manage is to identify evidence, at least probable

¹⁹ Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971).

²⁰ Isobel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 96.

²¹ For an unrestrained and politically incorrect portrayal of the importance of culture, see Victor Davis Hanson, *Why the West Has Won: Carnage and Culture from Salamis to Vietnam* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

evidence, of its presence. In that respect, following the formula suggested by sociologist Raymond Williams, I look for culture in a community's ideals, in its ideas as revealed by its documents and other artefacts, and in its behavior.²² In order to outflank methodologically the long running scholars' dispute over whether or not behavior should be included in the preferred definition of culture, it is helpful to ask, 'what does culture do?'

Today, most, though certainly not all, strategic commentators and senior defense officials agree with the proposition that culture is important. That now popular, even fashionable, opinion, is broadly correct. Such doubts as I have, which are explained later in this paper, pertain not to the issue of culture's importance, but rather to finding useful answers to the quintessential strategist's question, 'so what?' In fact, culture is much easier to explain than it is to define. What does culture do? It enables us to make sense of our world. Culture provides us with the assumptions, largely unspoken and unwritten, that are the foundation for, though not the sole determinants of, our judgments.²³ Culture yields us the truths, small and large, that we know should guide our decisions and actions. In practice, we will often ignore those truths and behave expediently. Our strategic culture is likely to educate us with quite powerful preferences. But in a world that contains competing interests at home, in short a political process, and external menaces, we must do the best we can.

A culturalist perspective is not at odds with a realist one, at least it is not provided one thinks clearly and files some of the more theoretical literature somewhere appropriate. To quote Isobel V. Hull again, we are all "cultural creatures."²⁴ This insight has come as something of a revelation to the devotees of universal rational choice. And, as Keith Payne has argued convincingly with respect to deterrence, the principal pillars of modern Western strategic theory, which is to say the dominant theories of deterrence, limited war, and arms control, were all of them constructed on the false assumption of a common rationality.²⁵ Such an assumption is acultural. There may well be a fairly common rationality among security communities, in fact it is highly probable that all such communities make decisions and act upon them in a rational manner. The trouble lies with the content of that rationality, with its reasonableness in our encultured view, not with the process which purposefully connects means with ends. The suicide bomber is a rational person. But, to us, he or she is not a reasonable one.

Realism and culturalism are not in opposition, except in some fictional universe that should not detain us. Since we are all encultured, whether we like it or not, we are obliged to pursue our interests with our values and preferences as a more or less powerful influence upon our decisions and behavior. As often as not, our world is one of necessity wherein we must simply do our best to realize as many of our desires as the relevant

²² Raymond Williams, "The Analysis of Culture", in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 56.

²³ I am indebted to Black, *Rethinking Military History*, pp. 13-22.

²⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 329.

²⁵ Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

context permits. Culture need not imprison us and command us to behave in ways that are dysfunctional. Of course, it may do, in which case we risk entering a pathological decisionmaking and behavioral condition. I can conceive of behavior motivated by urges that are strongly cultural in origin, but scarcely at all 'realist' as that much abused term should imply. But, it is literally impossible for there to be behavior of a realist character that is utterly bereft of cultural influence. French statecraft, for example, is justly celebrated for its cynical and realistic expediency. Those useful characteristics are not acultural, rather are they integral to French public and strategic cultures.

The scholarly debate that contrasts realism with culturalism inadvertently encourages us to forget that we are encultured with strategic nostrums and other assumptions that derive from interpretation of our security community's historical experience. Culturalists do not need to be unworldly idealists, to be despised and ignored by allegedly hard-headed realists. To repeat: we are all cultural creatures. Moreover, strategic cultures are by and large functional, not dysfunctional, for their bearers. The dedicated owners of truly dysfunctional strategic cultures have a way of vanishing from the history books.

In common with its close relatives, public and military cultures, strategic culture is not an optional extra. All security communities have belief systems, assumptions, and preferences for behavior that play as one, among many, factor or dimension in their strategic histories. On many strategic issues, distinctive cultural influence may scarcely be a player, while on others it will all but command policy. One size in theory does not fit every historical case.

Why Culture Matters

Strategic culture and geopolitics are no rivals, and neither are strategic culture and *realpolitik*. While citing a caveat with respect to some religious contributions to the ideational, it is plausible to claim that culture is not free floating, offering a range of options to communities in need of a little guidance. Rather is culture grounded, even rooted, in the geopolitical history, the unique experience, of a people. When I say that strategic culture is grounded in the historical experience of a particular geopolitically located, if in some cases, mobile, people, I mean that it is that people's interpretation of their history. But, that claim, as just stated, should not be understood as endorsement of a pure version of the constructivist creed. It is not. Despite the many warnings about the perils and pitfalls that await the unwary culturalist that this paper specifies in the next section, let no one doubt that a close to maximalist claim for the importance of culture is going to be advanced here.

Do not forget the core of our subject; what we are really talking about. Regardless of the precise definition of culture, and strategic culture in particular, that you most favour, our subject functions on two levels. First, it can be the prime mover of thought, judgment, policy, and all that follows therefrom. Second, it must always be present as an actual, or potential, influence on our decisions and behavior. The reason, if, yet again, I dare restate the obvious, is that we are all 'cultural creatures.' In his recent Adelphi Paper, *The*

Transformation of Strategic Affairs, Lawrence Freedman makes much use of, and has interesting things to say about, the concept of “narratives.” In Freedman’s words, narratives are “compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn....”²⁶ I must register some, but only some, dissent from Freedman, though, when he claims that

[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events. They are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current.²⁷

That can be so, but it understates the role of culture. It is true to claim that culture, including strategic culture, can be molded purposefully into a narrative cunningly contrived for the purpose of popular persuasion. One thinks immediately, almost reflexively, of the powerful ideologies, indeed the political quasi-religions, of Marxism and Nazism. However, excepting such extreme cases which have been historical outriders of our subject, albeit outriders of extraordinary significance, communities do not deliberately construct their cultures, strategic and other. Those cultures emerge and change as a kind of natural phenomena. They are the ever evolving product of the many efforts people make to explain their past, understand their present, and anticipate their future.

So opaque is the concept of culture, so hard is it to capture and quantify for analysis, that it lends itself all too easily to exaggeration or near dismissal. I suggest that the problem lies not so much with the concept of culture, but rather with our failure to think with sufficient clarity about what it is and how it works. There is too much unhelpful binary analysis. Culturalism or realism, and so forth. Consider Hitler or Stalin, or possibly Osama bin Laden: dedicated ideologues, culturalists in the fullest meaning of the word. Those men simultaneously were (and are) sincere ideologues, yet were able to behave tactically in ways that appeared to contradict their deepest beliefs when it was expedient to do so. Hitler, of course, was far less adaptable than was Stalin. To hold firmly to a master historical narrative that explains the process of change, and who should be history’s winners and who its losers, does not disable one from being agile and adaptable as to means and methods. In practice, a distinguishable national strategic culture is likely to act as a holding company over a number of subsidiary military and other related cultures. Strategic culture will have a stronger or weaker influence from issue area to issue area. Also, the overall strategic culture should be considerably forgiving of those expedient and opportunistic decisions and behaviors which circumstances appear to command.

Despite the judgments just offered, it is well not to forget what our subject is about: what is the plot? If we think schematically and hierarchically, for the sake of this illustration, it is commonplace to postulate a significance tree that has political vision at the top, with the succeeding levels downwards comprising policy, grand strategy, military

²⁶ Freedman, *Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, p. 22.

²⁷ Ibid.

strategy, operations, and tactics. But whence cometh political vision? The answer, of course, is that it comes from what we call culture, strategic culture in this case. It is from our culture that we find the vision of the good or better life for ourselves and for our security community. And it is from that vision that policy draws what it is able, given real-world constraints. Truly, culture must reign, sometimes it rules, while it is ever present, so well integrated as to be unlabelled, in our thoughts and judgments, because we cannot prevent it being so.

There are many reasons one can cite in praise of strategic cultural analysis. I select just five among them to support my claim that such analysis is not only important, it is close to essential. One cannot quite claim that it is essential in the sense of being a *sine qua non* for victory or for the avoidance of defeat. The culturally ignorant can and do win wars. Also, the culturally educated will not necessarily be reliably victorious as a reward for their anthropological expertise. But those caveats are not of great significance. After all, as the Prussian grand master tells us, “[w]ar is the realm of chance.”²⁸ Nothing can guarantee victory. However, there are ways of loading the dice in one’s favor. Cultural comprehension is one such way. So, why does culture matter to the strategist?

Culture and Moral Factors

Culture matters greatly because it is the most important source of the moral factors that are central to the nature of war as well as to the character of wars. On its first page, *On War* declares, without equivocation, that “[w]ar is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”²⁹ And what is this “will”? Clausewitz informs us that “the will is itself a moral quality.”³⁰ He proceeds to explain that

... most of the matters dealt with in this book [*On War*] are composed in equal parts of physical and moral causes and effects. One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.³¹

The object in war is not usually to destroy the enemy physically, rather is it to subordinate his will to ours. It is not much of an intellectual stretch to argue that war, coercion and deterrence, are all intercultural struggles. They are contests between independent wills, the content and strength of which are very much, though not exclusively, the products of culture. But, deterrence, coercion, and war cannot be reduced conveniently simply to intercultural strife. The physical dimension matters also. The Germans and Japanese did not lack potent strategic cultures and the will to win in 1944-45.

²⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. (1832; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (emphasis in the original).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

Rather were they short of men, material, and sound strategy. However, few wars are waged for the proximate purpose of completely destroying the enemy's strategic strength. Rather are they usually conducted for limited purposes and by military and other means roughly proportional to those goals. The salience of culture is revealed most clearly with respect to deterrence. For deterrence to succeed, the intended deterree has to decide he is deterred. He has a choice. And success or failure in deterrence is never attributable strictly to presumed calculations of the material balance. Much, if not most, of the abstract modelling of stable deterrence in which defense analysts used to indulge, was, of methodological necessity, innocent of the vital ingredient of political velocity. Rational choice has difficulty with powerful feelings. Culture, cultural understanding or its lack, is apt to be the key to deterrence success or failure.³²

Know Yourself

As usual, Sun tzu was right. It is important to know ourselves. Unfortunately, it is extraordinarily difficult to know oneself in terms of strategic culture. In principle, we should perform far better, be more consistently successful, if we were able to look in the strategic mirror and see ourselves without significant distortion. In practice, of course, we tend to see ourselves as we would like to be. So deep is a security community's vested interest in its version of its own master strategic historical narrative, that one should not expect objective self assessment. Perhaps in the aftermath of strategic trauma, a measure of objectivity may creep in. The Germans achieved this under the inspired leadership of Chief of Staff Hans von Seeckt after World War I, with their 57 study committees.³³ After Vietnam, the Americans assuredly did not. The official U.S. response to the protracted disaster of the Vietnam project, was to ignore it for more than a generation.

It is necessary to emphasize that countries do not pick their strategic cultures at random, or because of intellectual or other fashion. Particular strategic cultures are adopted, accepted, and digested as "cultural assumptions" to quote Professor Black,³⁴ because they fit the characters and contexts of the relevant societies. It is true that they evolve, and that they can alter radically as a result of traumatic shock. But, it is not true that a strategic culture can be discarded by an act of will, at least not rapidly and thoroughly, save in circumstances of direst necessity. Remember that societies, security communities, do not choose their strategic cultures. Rather do their strategic cultures choose them. There is a marriage between a society's strategic need and the culture that seems best to meet that need. Of course, this is an oversimplification. However, the culture of a nation, the American for example, is not acquired by rational choice, certainly not by a

³² Payne, *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*.

³³ See James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992). Despite this praiseworthy and probably historically unique exercise, it is interesting to note that the Wehrmacht revealed some lethal weaknesses in World War II that had a long history behind them and therefore may warrant ascription as cultural.

³⁴ Black, *Rethinking Military History*, p. 13.

single such choice. The country behaved in as strategically effective a way as it was able. That historical experience came to be all but codified in what today we are calling strategic culture.

Behind strategic culture is a historical record, past, present, and prospectively future, in which material relations among political entities are vitally significant. Strategic culture is likely to be a highly important factor, positive or negative, perhaps some of each, contributing to overall strategic effectiveness. A cultural paradigm is a construction, and as such it can be deconstructed and reconstructed, at least in theory. In practice, even a cultural paradigm that is having a dysfunctional influence upon decisionmaking and actual strategic behavior, may not be changeable. One might not recognize the problem with one's organizing assumptions, and even if one does, the requirements and implications of change may be unduly formidable. Strategic culture certainly can be adaptable, but it is not infinitely so. It is not acquired lightly and casually, and neither can it be discarded and replaced promptly at will from a catalogue of alternative strategic cultures. An interesting question that has yet to attract any noteworthy scholarship address, is the extent to which a security community is able to choose its strategic culture. In most regards we acquire our public, strategic, and military cultures, without any exercise of conscious choice. Given the pervasive influence of strategic culture, generally silent and invisible, it is not obvious that we would know how to go about changing it, even should we wish to do so. After all, culture is a part of us. As I have argued elsewhere, we inhabit a more or less distinctive strategic context, and we are a functioning part of the context.³⁵

There is probably some merit in Americans, Britons, Russians, and so forth, being more culturally self aware. But, we have to pose the classic strategist's question, 'so what?' Americans, Britons, and Russians, are what they are. While they are not locked into strategic cultures that are static and eternal in all respects, they are to an important degree captives of the cultures with which local interpretations of their distinctive histories have armed them. Even if you recognize some significant dysfunctionality in your strategic and military cultures, you may not be able to take effective corrective action. This is very much a live issue at present with respect to the official U.S. commitment to transform its armed forces, the Army most especially, of course, into an instrument of excellence in the conduct of irregular warfare of all kinds. Success is possible, but unlikely. If one compares what we used to call the traditional American 'way of war' with the style required for the countering of insurgency and terrorism, one discovers an almost perfect mismatch.³⁶

Better self-knowledge is desirable, but it can offer no magical solution to the problems of a maladaptive military instrument. Strategic culture is the product of a centuries-long dialogue between a people and its history. It is not going to yield readily, painlessly, and comprehensively to a would-be revolutionary drive from the policymakers of the moment.

³⁵ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, ch. 5.

³⁶ I have argued this thesis in *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War college, March 2006).

Know Others

Again, Sun-tzu was correct, at least he was substantially so. One cannot make a virtue of cultural ignorance. Before striking a cautionary note, let us endorse the commonplace belief that it is highly desirable to understand as much about the adversary as possible. Cultural intelligence is particularly valuable because it explains the intellectual and moral context within which decisions will be made. Needless to say, perhaps, it is far easier to count tanks and missiles than it is to grasp the cultural assumptions of an alien society, let alone comprehend the cognitive psychology of enemy leaders. How do their brains work? Physiologically like ours, of course. But, does our anatomical commonality conceal radical differences in values, preferences, and goals?

Sun-tzu makes much of the utility in understanding the enemy, and rightly so. However, his wise words need to be read with reservations. His good advice identifies a standard that is rarely met, and probably is rarely attempted. How seriously do belligerents strive to understand each other, let alone themselves? Far more often than not crises and wars erupt and one, perhaps both, sides have no choice other than to function in cultural ignorance as best they are able. The classic 'Principles of War' provide a partial solution to the perils of strategic cultural ignorance. At least they do if the object in the war is the complete overthrow of the enemy. One of those 'principles' asserts the utility of maintaining the 'initiative.'³⁷ In other words, keep the enemy dancing to your tune. Operate within his decision cycle, his OODA loop if you prefer, so that he is never able to wage the kind of war he might prefer.³⁸ In practice, this would-be solution to the problem of ignorance is not likely to be very fruitful. The reasons are because most wars are not conducted for unlimited goals, and most wars last long enough for military initiatives to run out of logistic steam, even if only briefly. Also, we know from experience as well as from Clausewitz, that friction, chance, indeed the whole 'climate of war', can embarrass even the wisest of nostrums and maxims.³⁹

Just suppose that the leaders of Imperial Japan understood themselves and, unimaginably, came also to understand the United States by, say, June 1944, the month of the fatal Battle of the Philippine Sea off Saipan. Such cultural comprehension would have been of zero value. Tokyo could not have used such anthropological insight to any strategic purpose. They were doomed. The United States was an implacable foe, totally untroubled in 1944-45 by considerations of collateral damage, and was still considerably ignorant of relevant Japanese culture. But it did not matter for the outcome of the war. Even had Americans grasped fully the importance of the Japanese notion of honor, they could not have used that understanding, save with respect to the vital importance to the enemy of the

³⁷ See John I. Alger, *The Quest for Victory: The History of the Principles of War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); and Anthony D. Mc Ivor, ed., *Rethinking the Principles of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

³⁸ OODA: Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action. This formula for (tactical) victory was invented by Col. John Boyd of the USAF. It was inspired by his experience of jet fighter combat over Korea. See Grant T. Hammond, *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 104.

preservation of the Imperial office. On a much more constructive note, had Americans read their Thucydides carefully in 1940-41, they should have been impressed by the middle item in his famous tryptich of motives for war: fear, honor, and interest. U.S. efforts to coerce Japan posed lethal threats both to Japanese interests and, above all else, to its honor. On the Japanese side, had Tokyo studied American public and strategic cultures, it ought to have realized that the Imperial Navy's Pearl Harbor preference must guarantee the onset of a total war that it could not possibly win. Indeed, the only scenario that might yield success for Tokyo, would be one wherein Germany defeated the Soviet Union. However, even that happy, if increasingly improbable, prospect, would fall short of guaranteeing U.S. acquiescence in Japanese aggression. The mutual cultural misassessments of Japan and the United States in 1940-41, illustrate clearly just how important it can be to achieve cultural understanding of the foe.⁴⁰

The Perils and Pitfalls of Cultural Enquiry

In the judgment of this strategic theorist there is, and can be, no productive debate between those who favor study of the cultural dimension to war, peace, and strategy, and those who do not. The claim that cultural study has not yielded insights superior to those attainable by realist investigation, is misguided on several counts.⁴¹ It is wrong in that it postulates a realist project that is somehow, strangely, culture free. Frankly, that is absurd. Also, it flies in the face of an overwhelming weight of strategic historical evidence. Indeed, the case, not for a culturalist approach, but rather for the study of culture, including cognitive psychology, is so strong that the caveats cited in this section of the paper are only that, caveats not showstoppers.

Everyone will have their own favorite list of doubts and problems with cultural enquiry. Just 11 are cited here for brief analysis. Each could benefit from essay length treatment.

1. Explaining too much: Since all humans are encultured, most of us multiply so, culture begins to look like a theory of everything. Such a theory, alas, is a theory of nothing. If everything we think and do has to be influenced by culture, and is in a vital sense a cultural manifestation, inter alia, there is no non-cultural space at all. Since this peril has some empirical merit, theorists of culture need to consider it more seriously than they have to date. Scholars have to acknowledge that that which is theoretically inconvenient, is not necessarily, as a consequence, untrue. Commonsense can be of assistance.

2. The problem of evidence: What is the evidence? Well, it rather depends on how one defines culture. If we suppose, for the sake of argument that there are wholly extra-cultural influences on policy and strategy, such factors should not be considered outside of

⁴⁰ See Forrest E. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Imperial Japan* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

⁴¹ As in Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies", *International Security*, Vol. 23, No.1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141-70.

their cultural context. The sensible culturalist does not assert that culture invariably rules. Rather is the claim to the effect that culture is usually, perhaps always, a factor, one dimension among many. Unpicking a decision, deconstructing a strategy and style in warfare, for clear evidence of cultural footprints, is always going to be a contestable endeavor. The somewhat irritating truth is that all of us, our institutions, and our processes of governance, have been shaped, at least influenced, by what we understand as culture. This claim is, I believe, methodologically devastating. Nonetheless, it is true. And it does not in any way detract from the proposition that cultural matters are vitally important.

3. Culture as panacea: Politicians and soldiers are problem-solvers. Truth is what works. Strategy, and strategic studies, is a pragmatic undertaking.⁴² As a consequence, defense communities typically are vulnerable to ambush and capture by almost any new sounding big idea which is touted as the solution to the overwhelming problem of the moment. Strategic culture is just such a big idea. It is ironic that it always was a good idea. It was good when this author and others wrote about it in the 1970s and 1980s, and when Sun-tzu praised its virtues 2,400 years ago. Better late than never, one should observe. Context is all. Culture has become popular, even fashionable, all of a sudden, because the United States and its allies today are engaged in transcultural warfare.⁴³ There is nothing whatsoever novel about transcultural warfare, but it does happen to be different from the rough symmetry that characterized the Soviet-American strategic stand-off for 40 plus years, as well as the two world wars. It is understandable that Washington will lend an ear, and provide some money, to almost anyone who is selling a patent medicine to cure its contemporary problems. 'Culture' is one such patent medicine, in the minds of many. This is unfortunate, because, as this paper has argued, there is an excellent case for cultural study. We can only hope that a sensible regard for the cultural dimension to war and strategy will not be tainted unduly by association with the belief that cultural mastery is the path to strategic salvation.

4. Cultural essentialism: One suspects that in most cases, most of the time, it is impractical to seek to distinguish the cultural from the unarguably non-cultural among the influences upon decisions. Indeed, as this paper has suggested tentatively and somewhat dangerously, it is not obvious that a meaningful distinction between the cultural and the extra-cultural can or should be drawn. A brute force way to bulldoze this difficulty is by having resort to the wonderful word, 'essentially.' The determined, not to say dogmatic, culturalist, scores with his or her great essentialist simplification. All the while, a nod is

⁴² "As in many other branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work? More important, will it be likely to work under the special circumstances under which it will next be tested? ... *strategy is a field where truth is sought in the pursuit of viable solutions.*" Brodie, *War and Politics*, pp. 452, 453 (emphasis in the original). I must confess to being the person whom Brodie corrected criticised, by name, with his emphasis upon the pragmatic nature of strategy and strategic study.

⁴³ For an outstanding recent historical analysis of transcultural warfare, see Hew Strachan, "A General Typology of Transcultural Wars—The Modern Ages", in Hans-Henning Kortum, ed., *Transcultural Wars: from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), pp. 85-103.

given to other, lesser influences. The hunt for essential truth is never ending, as scholars strive to penetrate to the heart of the matter. Whether or not there is such an animal is a troubling question.

5. Culture can and does change: Culture does not change frequently or, usually, radically. If it did, it would not be culture. Definition has its uses. Culturalist enquiry is subject to the temptation to assume a relatively static character to strategic and military cultures. The same pathology afflicts those among us who write about 'the American (or other) way of war.' *Mea culpa*, I believe.⁴⁴ Strategic culture both evolves and can shift seismically if it is assaulted by a traumatic shock of sufficient awesomeness.

6. Culture is diverse: A security community may have more than one strategic culture, at least at the level of a traditional 'way of war.' Britain has been the exemplar of a maritime power, and for a long while it was the proud owner of a global empire acquired for profit and defended by maritime supremacy. But, strange to note, in the twentieth century, as in the high Middle Ages for England, Britain was as much, if not more, of a continental, than a maritime power. In World War I, after 19 August, 1915, Britain made an open ended commitment to continental warfare, a decision that eventually resulted in General Haig commanding a BEF of 60 divisions.⁴⁵ In 1939-40, Britain planned to contribute at least 40 divisions to a recreation of the Western Front, a development mercifully ambushed by the Germans' westward strike on 10 May, 1940. While, lastly, from the late 1940s until the end of the 1980s, aside from the campaigns of imperial devolution, and the domestic nuisance of the IRA, the British armed forces prepared assiduously for continental warfare on the North German plain. There was always a significant maritime dimension to British strategic thought and effort, how could there not be for an insular power. But, it is not much of an exaggeration to claim that the twentieth was Britain's continental century. The point of the British illustration is to suggest that reasonably well-led states have strategic cultures that are adaptable to changing, and often deeply unwelcome, political and strategic contexts.

Not only can strategic culture accommodate the diversity needed to meet unexpected threats, also, of course, it has more than one sword arm. Military culture will vary both among the geographically specialized services, and within those services among their separate branches. With some good reason, it may be argued that a country's strategic culture does exist and function as a cohesive whole, notwithstanding the diversity just cited. In fact, I believe this generally, though only generally, to be the case. For reasons of history and geography, to restate the mantra of this paper, communities do have preferred ways in defense preparation, and of war. Their three, or more, services will not be of equivalent combat prowess or national strategic importance. Most, if not all, countries will

⁴⁴ Colin S. Gray, "The American Way of War," in Mc Ivor, ed., *Rethinking the Principles of War*, pp. 13-40.

⁴⁵ Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The dilemma of British defence policy in the era of the two world wars* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), p. 57. Also see David French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), ch. 6.

be more formidable in some, rather than other, forms of warfare. The United States, for example, has been pre-eminent as an air power; indeed it has been the world's first such.⁴⁶

7. Strategic culture is not entirely exclusive: The largely American theorists who created modern strategic thought in the 1950s were unwise to assume that a common logic and rationality would inform Strategic Persons everywhere. Nonetheless, much of the lore of statecraft, strategy, operations, and tactics, is recognized universally as best practice, *ceteris paribus*. People will behave differently not only because they are culturally distinctive, but also because their circumstances will differ. To the best of my knowledge, there is no rule of strategic history or cognitive psychology which requires people to follow their dreams and desires, regardless of context. Culture is an influence, it is not a drug that produces all but mindless strategic behavior. There is a danger that in hunting for evidence of strategic and military cultures, scholars will both privilege the apparently eccentric and neglect the ideas and habits that communities share, especially if they occupy the same cultural space.⁴⁷

8. Strategic cultures borrow and adapt: If one is in hot pursuit of an elusive strategic culture, one is unlikely to be overly friendly to the ideas of cultural borrowing and adaptation. It is frustrating to succeed in corralling a country's strategic culture, only to learn that that culture is willing and able to borrow what its bearers recognize to be contemporary best practice from abroad. In short, strategic and military cultures may be quite adaptable. They will not be infinitely so. As we suggested earlier, truly radical change in culture occurs only as a result of seismic political, social, or military shock. But, it can and does occur. However, recent historical scholarship shows that when security communities benefit from the diffusion of useful strategic ideas and technologies, they are likely to choose to benefit in ways distinctive to themselves.⁴⁸ Historical examples abound, but the cases of national diversity in armored and air forces in World War II provide near perfect illustration of the triumph of culture.

9. Cultural empathy does not ensure victory: It is always a good idea to understand both the enemy and one's friends. But, understanding alone, no matter how accurate, has only limited value. Someone, or something, at the military end of the strategy bridge actually has to do strategy, operationally and tactically. The most characteristic feature of warfare is violence. War entails the threat to use force, and the actual breaking of things and killing of people. As our studies of strategic and military culture advance, we must never forget, to repeat, that strategy is a pragmatic enterprise. It is not hard to identify

⁴⁶ See Eliot A. Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (January/February 1994), pp. 109-24. In his *Storm over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), Richard P. Hallion, the USAF's Official Historian, claims that "[a] dominant land power characterized a *Pax Romana*, and dominant sea power a *Pax Britannica*, dominant air power is the characteristic of modern America," p. 267.

⁴⁷ This danger was flagged many years ago in Gerald Segal, "Strategy and 'ethnic chic,'" *International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No.1 (Winter 1983/84), pp. 15-30.

⁴⁸ The case studies are excellent in Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, eds., *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

weaknesses, in principle, in an adversary's strategic culture. But, can we exploit them? Understanding and consequential effective behavior may be two very different things. As often as not, one suspects, the achievement of a much deeper cultural comprehension will simply reinforce the conviction that the enemy inhabits another intellectual and emotional planet.

10. Policy and strategy are negotiated outcomes: Scholars may succeed in teasing out what they believe to be the core elements of a country's strategic culture, only to forget that their subject is, dare we repeat, a practical one. Academics do not inhabit a world of intellectual compromise and expedient decisions. Instead, they are, or should be, committed to the search for truth. Had such scholars functioned in government they would know that the pure flame of strategic culture is certain to be dimmed by the constraints imposed by scarce resources and competing agencies. In short, policy and strategy are always negotiated outcomes. The negotiation is unlikely to negate the influence of a general strategic culture entirely, but it is certain to ensure that that culture will be mediated by financial constraints and by competing organizational interests and cultures.

11. Beware of the methodological bog: This final peril and potent source of pitfalls was mentioned early on in this paper. Some social scientists, theorists of International Relations to be precise (names withheld to protect the guilty), are wont to commit the same fundamental mistake that mars a great deal of official American defense analysis. In the apposite words of John J. Weltman, and I admit to quoting him out of context, the development of nuclear strategy "represent[ed] an attempt at a Jominian solution to a problem that was essentially Clausewitzian."⁴⁹ The theorists in question seek a certainty of understanding that is not attainable. For a contemporary illustration of this phenomenon, official military enthusiasm for EBO (Effects Based Operations) is the latest example of an attempt to turn the art of war into the science of war.⁵⁰ Of course, it is folly. But, the quest for calculable certainty is never ending.⁵¹ Given the hazards of warfare, such a search is easily understandable. Alas, warfare cannot be reduced to a quantifiable problem. Similarly, many of the worthy efforts by scholars to uncover the secrets of a country's strategic culture, and especially the influence of that culture on behavior, are triumphs of misplaced methodological ingenuity. Methodologically elaborate and rigorous historical case studies of strategic culture, not that there have been many, have a way of being obliged to do great violence to the nuances and complexity of their subject. I doubt if I am the only person to notice that sophistication, at least ambition, in methodology, is rarely rewarded with plausible sophistication in knowledge gained. I suggest, as I have before, that in common with the causes of war, the scholarly challenge presented by strategic

⁴⁹ John J. Weltman, *World Politics and the Evolution of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 152.

⁵⁰ Milan N. Vego, "Effects-Based Operations: A Critique", *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 41 (2nd qtr., 2006), pp. 51-7, is a blistering condemnation that takes no prisoners.

⁵¹ The finest work of strategic theory since Clausewitz's *On War*, warns that "planning for certitude is the greatest of all military mistakes, as military history demonstrates all too vividly." J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (1967; Anapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 72.

culture resides primarily in the highly resistant nature of the subject, rather than with deficiencies in our research.

Conclusions

Five claims serve to conclude this paper.

First, our analysis supports and affirms the view that culture in its several guises—public, strategic, and military-organizational—is vitally important. The “cultural thoughtways” of friends, foes, and, of course, ourselves, can have a directive or a shaping effect upon decisions and behavior.⁵² In 1979, Ken Booth argued that “[s]trategic studies divorced from area studies is largely thinking in a void. The general neglect of area studies is one of the biggest criticisms which can be levelled against strategists.”⁵³ Booth was correct then, while just about everybody interested in security policies and strategy has come, very belatedly, to realize that he is correct for today and tomorrow.

Second, hard experience should tell us that a little theory for the probing of strategic culture goes a long way, usually too far. The needs of theory building and the reality of culture’s ubiquitous contextuality, are, alas, severely at odds. This does not matter for our understanding of strategic culture, but it can be deadly for the practicality, let alone the utility, of theory. I suggest that since we are all necessarily encultured, everything that we think strategically, and that subsequently we seek to do for strategic reasons, may be influenced by the cultural dimension.

Third, cultural awareness and understanding can only be helpful, but they are not a panacea for strategic dilemmas. Even a genuine cultural expertise is not the answer, the magic key to strategic success. There are many reasons why policy and strategy can succeed or fail, and cultural empathy or blindness is only one of them. Those among us who are recent converts to culturalism, or even just to a new respect for the cultural anthropology of conflict, should hasten to reread their Clausewitz. Such factors as chance, friction, fear, the fog of war, and sheer incompetence, may well be more important in the shaping of events than is strategic and military culture.

Fourth, cultural change, even cultural transformation, can and does happen, but do not hold your breath waiting for it. There are serious reasons, rooted in local perceptions of historical experience and in a community’s geopolitical context, why a country’s strategic culture is what it is. To recognize the need for change, as in the United States today with reference to the challenge posed by irregular enemies, is not necessarily to ensure that the needed change will occur. Such change may meet with too much resistance.

Fifth and finally, the new culturalism is in danger of becoming fashionable; indeed, it may be fashionable already. For those of us who have long touted the virtues of cultural study for strategists, it is most satisfying to note that the subject of our belief is now a

⁵² “Cultural thoughtways” is an inspired concept borrowed gratefully from Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

prime-time issue-area. But, the trouble with fashion is that it has to change. We should worry lest the current enthusiasm for cultural study and culturally informed strategic behavior should fade into history. They may join the other inherently brief fashions that have marked the passage of recent American strategic history. New, or more often, rediscovered, concepts can be discarded because they are soon intellectually exhausted, at least at a fairly elementary level. Strategic culture may well cease to find widespread favor once officials, soldiers, and sensible scholars, come to appreciate just how difficult a subject it is. More to the point, perhaps, political and military executives will be discouraged by mature recognition of the difficulties that must hinder prudent efforts to operationalize cultural knowledge and understanding. Practical people, a category that should include strategists, will ask that most brutally direct of questions, 'so what?' So what do we do with greater self-, and other-, cultural understanding? Culture matters greatly, but so do the other dimensions of war, peace, and strategy.
