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Deterrence, Extended Deterrence, Arms Control and Allies

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With

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Preface

The traditional U.S. global system of formal alliances includes NATO, an historically unparalleled multilateral alliance, and multiple bilateral alliances, such as those with Japan and South Korea. Together, these alliances create for the United States both added costs and the risk of becoming involved in conflicts abroad, a so-called “commitment trap.” Added cost and risk are part and parcel of serious collective security agreements—indeed, shared costs and risks are at the center of such agreements. However, collective security alliances can also provide unique security advantages to help meet threats and share costs. The U.S. global alliance structure, for example, provides advantages that are unavailable to current foes in terms of geographical access, power projection, shared intelligence, resources, and available military power.

Historically, alliances have proven on occasion to be an ultimately disastrous commitment trap and, in contrast, an enormous advantage. With regard to the latter, for example, it is difficult to imagine that U.S. successes in World War II and the Cold War could have been achieved at the tolerable costs incurred in the absence of the concerted allied efforts. In the successful prosecution of World War II, for example, key allies together sustained financial costs comparable to those of the United States, and several suffered much greater levels of human loss and property destruction.

The constant calculation of added costs and risk vs advantage is at the heart of estimating the net value of alliances, i.e., the fundamental question is: do the benefits outweigh the risks? There is no enduring objective answer to that question because it depends on the prevailing security context. In the United States, contending isolationist- and internationalist-oriented narratives have

competed for policy priority for 250 years¹ – with the latter dominating U.S. defense policy since the end of World War II, the outcome of which was, for the first time in its history, the United States became deeply involved abroad militarily, and remained so.

However, the U.S. political consensus regarding the great net value of America’s global military alliance system established after World War II and sustained during the Cold War has become increasingly frayed since the end of the Cold War. The initial questioning of its net value followed from the widespread Western expectation of a “New World Order” immediately after the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and a much more benign world order in the making, the obvious question was whether the United States continued to need the global collective security system established to contain the Soviet Union? Neo-isolationists concluded the answer was no. In contrast, internationalists considered continuing U.S. involvement in international institutions to be the key to the emerging New World Order, but the previously associated military requirements could be discarded.

That post-Cold War narrative questioning the continuing value of established military alliances, ironically, has given away much more recently to a very different questioning of the net value of the traditional U.S. commitment to its global alliances: Given the great mounting dangers across the globe from an “axis of autocracies,” many now view the costs and risks of the traditional U.S. alliance commitments to be unacceptable – especially with most allies long-accustomed to relying excessively on U.S. power and expenditure for their protection. Within the space of one generation, questioning of the net value of the U.S. global alliance system shifted

¹ See for example, Patrick Garrity, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy: American Foreign Policy, Revolution, and Regime Change 1776-1900* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2012).

from the naively optimistic expectation that the world was moving toward an unprecedentedly peaceful order, so the Cold War-inspired alliance system was no longer necessary, to the view that the world is so dangerous that the traditional system is now too risky and unaffordable. This profound transition in the narratives arguing against the continuing net value of the established U.S. alliance system and practices has taken place without much notice here or abroad--until very recently when the shocking consequences of a serious U.S. turning away from its traditional role as security guarantor is now looming for key allies—compelling them to rethink well-entrenched, lax patterns of defense preparation.

In this context, the U.S. system of alliances is confronting a crisis of confidence that appears to be more pronounced than the many past intra-alliance problems that have appeared periodically. This contemporary crisis follows from four interrelated developments that have emerged over the course of more than the past two decades: 1) America's post-Cold War generation-long "holiday from history" during which Washington naively concluded that the potential for great power war was a thing of the past and corresponding defense/deterrence preparations could largely be avoided²--in favor of an enduring "peace dividend" and overly-optimistic arms control enthusiasms; 2) the manifestly aggressive geopolitical agendas of Russia, China, and North Korea, their threats, increasing cooperation, and expansive nuclear and conventional forces build-ups; 3) increasingly blunt U.S. expressions of dissatisfaction with allies' behaviors and the costs and risks entailed by the responsibilities of being allies' ultimate provider of security across the globe; and, 4) the general lack of allies' adequate preparation for their own defense, their over reliance on U.S. support, and corresponding deep

² Robert Gates, "We Face Unprecedented Peril," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2024.

concern with the rapid U.S. turnaround from its past “iron clad” commitments to their security.

The discussions in this collection of articles examine these converging developments and some of their consequences, including their potential to disrupt long-established U.S. alliances and goals. For example, the increasing severity of Russian, Chinese and North Korean nuclear threats to America and allies, in combination with an apparent erosion of past U.S. “iron clad” commitments to allied security, are leading several allies to an increasing interest in their own national nuclear capabilities or a new multinational nuclear capability independent of Washington. Sustained moves in this direction could undo decades of U.S. nuclear non-proliferation efforts as the emergence of new nuclear powers could inspire a “cascade” of further proliferation.

The initial articles in this collection focus on Moscow’s renewed aggressive expansionism and the West’s reluctance to acknowledge its decades-long naivete in this regard and corresponding lack of now-needed preparation for defense and deterrence. The first article, written in 2016, pointed to the likelihood of a new war of Russian aggression in Europe – which was realized in 2022. These articles are followed by discussions of Germany’s responses to, and increasing concern with its emerging threat context, and initial indications of Berlin’s corresponding potential interest in national or multinational nuclear deterrence capabilities independent of Washington. The collection concludes with an examination of how Washington’s arms control enthusiasms have had harmful, if unintended consequences that have contributed to the current unprecedented challenges confronting Western security and the future of the U.S. alliance system.

The goal of organizing this curated selection of articles is to show the progression and interrelationship of the factors contributing to the unprecedented external threats

to Western security and internal challenges to the continuing integrity of the global system of alliances that was essential to America's Cold War success. If sustained and adapted as needed to the new threats of the 21st Century, that system will likely prove to have a continuing great net value for the United States. If not, the West's collective security system could collapse--to the great satisfaction of an emerging consortium of extremely hostile autocratic powers.

In conclusion, I would like to express my thanks and great appreciation to my co-authors of two of these assembled articles, Dr. Michaela Dodge and Michael Rühle, for their contributions to this *Occasional Paper*.

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Responding to the Emerging Potential for War in Europe*

The prospect for a regional war between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is growing. This reality is in stark contrast to the long-standing, sanguine belief that the West's post-Cold War relationship with Russia is benign, even cooperative. Indeed, Western powers appear to have based their security planning largely on the assumption that hostility with Russia is, as asserted by the late former Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."³

Until recently, such a claim was widely regarded as a self-evident truth. Now, it is demonstrably false. Understanding the fundamental reasons for this emerging prospect for another European war requires an understanding of recent history.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to its breakup into fifteen separate countries and to the disbandment of the Soviet Union's Cold War alliance system, the Warsaw Pact. Several of these new countries formed from the old Soviet Union, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and some of its former Warsaw Pact allies, such as Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Czech Republic, chose to move away from Russia politically, militarily and economically. They have instead joined the Western alliance system, NATO, and the European Union (EU).

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Responding to the Emerging Potential for War in Europe," *Information Series*, No. 406 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2, 2016).

³ Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 96.

As a result of this transformation of Europe, NATO membership has grown from 16 countries to 28, with new NATO members expanding the alliance to the very borders of Russia. Gone are Warsaw Pact allies that previously provided “buffer space” between the Soviet Union and NATO. In all of this, Moscow sees the West, led by the United States, as guilty of deceitfully undermining Russia, causing the revolutions that brought down allied governments, and now being intent on bringing down Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime in Moscow.⁴

The leadership in Moscow deems this fracturing of the old “Soviet space” and its Cold War alliance system to be intolerable—leaving millions of ethnic Russians outside Russia’s borders and denying Russia its deserved special sphere of dominion in Europe.⁵ Indeed, President Putin has decried the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century.⁶ The newly independent peoples of Europe formerly under the Soviet thumb clearly do not agree, as is demonstrated by their decisions and sacrifices to escape first Soviet and now Russian domination. They rightly view moving to join Western institutions such as NATO and the EU as their sovereign choice and prerogative, and as helpful protection against Russian power and revanchism. Aspiring to this Westward-leaning independence was the great “crime”

⁴ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia Prepares for War with the US and NATO, While Lacking Resources,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 48 (March 14, 2013), available at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40592&no_cache=1#.V023_vkgvcs.

⁵ Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, et al., *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016) pp. 2-3, available at <http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FINAL-FOR-WEB-1.12.16.pdf>.

⁶ Andrew Osborn, “Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union was ‘catastrophe of the century,’” *The Independent*, April 26, 2005, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-was-catastrophe-of-the-century-6147493.html>.

committed by Georgia and Ukraine that led to Russian military attack and territorial occupation in 2008 and 2014, respectively.

The fundamental reasons for the emerging threat of war in Europe are familiar. As was the case with Imperial Germany prior to World War I, Russia under Putin seeks its supposedly rightful “place in the sun” at the expense of its neighbors. Moscow now is willing to use force to overturn the post-Cold War East-West settlement, including numerous explicit threats of nuclear first use.

Russian leaders, for example, have said that Romania could be turned into “smoking ruins,”⁷ and that Poland will be in its “cross hairs.”⁸ Russia has expressed nuclear threats to smaller NATO countries, such as Denmark,⁹ and even to NATO partners such as Sweden.¹⁰ Correspondingly, President Putin has said publicly that he was ready to put Russian nuclear forces on alert when Russian forces occupied Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014; Russian nuclear forces reportedly were put on alert during Russia’s 2008 military operations against Georgia.¹¹

Western leaders, including some senior US military officers, have considered such developments to be

⁷ Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Calls New U.S. Missile Defense System a ‘Direct Threat,’” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/europe/russia-nato-us-romania-missile-defense.html>.

⁸ Fox News and Associated Press, “Putin Warns Romania, Poland over Implementing US Missile Shield,” *Fox News*, May 28, 2016, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/05/28/putin-warns-romania-poland-over-implementing-us-missile-shield.html?intcmp=hpbt1>.

⁹ Reuters, “Russia Threatens to Aim Nuclear Missiles at Denmark Ships if it Joins NATO Shield,” *Reuters*, March 22, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/denmark-russia-idUSL6N0WO0KX20150322>.

¹⁰ Damien Sharkov, “Russia Practiced Nuclear Strike on Sweden: NATO Report,” *Newsweek*, February 4, 2016, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-practiced-nuclear-strike-sweden-nato-report-422914>.

¹¹ Frank Miller, “Keynote, 2015 USSTRATCOM Deterrence Symposium” *US Strategic Command*, July 29, 2015, available at https://www.stratcom.mil/speeches/2015/137/Keynote_2015_USSTRATCOM_Deterrence_Symposium/.

implausible. As, Gen. James Cartwright, former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in the 2012 co-authored, *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report*, “large-scale conflict” with Russia is “implausible,” and, “The risk of nuclear confrontation” with Russia “belongs to the past, not the future.” In addition, the “nuclear balance” is said not to be a “salient factor” in US-Russian relations. Evidence for such critical conclusions is that “several hundred experts” surveyed by the Council on Foreign Relations foresaw no Russian threat.¹²

Yet, Russian nuclear strategy indeed appears to focus on using the threat of limited nuclear first use to compel the West to stand down and accept Moscow’s forceful expansionism without a strong military response. For example, the Russian military occupation of Ukraine’s Crimea Peninsula was followed by Russian nuclear threats to deter any serious military efforts to restore Ukrainian territory.¹³ By all appearances, this strategy has worked for Moscow.

Indeed, Russian leaders, civilian and military, have for years called for precision, “super low-yield” nuclear weapons that could be employed in regional conflict.¹⁴ The apparent purpose of these weapons, in part, is to deter or prevent Western recovery of territories lost to Russian military coercion and aggression. This Russian strategy is

¹² James Cartwright, et al., *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, 2012), pp. 1-11, 19, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Effect of Finland’s Possible NATO Membership: An Assessment* (Helsinki, Finland: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 29, 2016), p. 14, available at <http://formin.finland.fi/public/download.aspx?ID=157408&GUID={71D08E6C-3168-439F-9C31-0326D1014C26}>.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Evidence of Russian Development of New Sukiloton Nuclear Warheads [Redacted],” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Office of Transnational Issues, Intelligence Memorandum, August 30, 2000, available at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DO_C_0001260463.pdf.

based on the notion that Moscow's very limited use of small, "clean" nuclear weapons would deter or defeat a united Western military response, with such a limited level of destruction that NATO would not be willing to escalate the war further.¹⁵ This appears to be Moscow's strategy of nuclear coercion that corresponds to its expansionist goals.¹⁶

The inconvenient truth about contemporary Russian goals and strategy remain unwanted and beyond belief for many Western leaders. Indeed, the United States was still in the process of further reducing conventional forces in Europe in 2014.

Yet, by 2014, Moscow had twice forcibly changed borders in Europe for the first time since World War II. Russian leaders now use multiple coercive tools, including the threat of nuclear first use, to prevent neighbors from taking unwanted Westward steps, such as participating in the US-led ballistic missile defense program in Europe, or joining NATO or the EU. Moscow has had some success in

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Senior Executive Intelligence Brief," June 4, 1999, Approved for release October 2005, available at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB200/19990604.pdf>.; Pavel Felgengauer, "Limited Nuclear War? Why Not!" *Segodnya*, May 6, 1999, as translated by BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, available at <http://dialog.proquest.com/professional/login>.; Central Intelligence Agency, "Russian Postures and Policies on Nuclear Deterrence, First Use, and the Nuclear Threshold: Balancing on a Tightrope [Redacted]," February 7, 2000, Approved for release August 25, 2010, available at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DO_C_0005460644.pdf.; Central Intelligence Agency, "Evidence of Russian Development of New Subkiloton Nuclear Warheads [Redacted]," August 30, 2000, Approved for release October 2005, available at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB200/20000830.pdf>.; Central Intelligence Agency, "Evidence of Russian Development of New Subkiloton Nuclear Warheads [Redacted]," August 30, 2000, Approved for release October 2005, available at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB200/20000830.pdf>.

¹⁶ Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, et al., *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016) pp. 61-73, available at <http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FINAL-FOR-WEB-1.12.16.pdf>.

this coercive campaign, including vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine, while Sweden has recently decided to stand back from its earlier expressed interest in NATO membership, citing the danger of the current nuclear threat environment as its reason for backing off.¹⁷ This Swedish decision may well lead Finland to stand back from NATO membership.¹⁸

This situation in the heart of Europe is a recipe for further confrontation and war. Russia sees itself as recovering its rightful place of primacy in Europe, now denied by a US-led coalition that supposedly wants to bring Russia to its knees. NATO, in turn, sees itself as compelled, reluctantly, to defend against a revanchist, reckless neighbor with a recent history of nuclear threats, military aggression and occupation. Article V of the NATO Treaty calls for members to treat an attack on one as an attack on all, but recent Russian successes and apparent relative NATO passivity may easily inspire Russian overconfidence and miscalculation.

Russia, of course, claims the justness of its cause, and some Western commentary certainly downplays Moscow's threats.¹⁹ But, the great danger posed by Russia's goals and strategy must be recognized: in its bid to overturn the existing order in Europe, Russia seeks to deny its neighbors and erstwhile allies the sovereign right to choose their own futures. And, Moscow employs coercive tools, military operations and nuclear first-use threats to help reestablish its dominion in Europe. Herein lies the basic cause of conflict.

¹⁷ Gareth Jennings, "Sweden rules out NATO membership," *IHS Jane's 360*, May 17, 2016, available at <http://www.janes.com/article/60389/sweden-rules-out-nato-membership>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Effects of Finland's Possible NATO Membership*, op. cit., pp. 55-57.

¹⁹ Mark Galeotti, "Russia is not the Threat the West Thinks it is," *The Moscow Times*, July 14, 2015, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russia-is-not-the-threat-the-west-thinks-it-is/525641.html>.

In contrast, NATO strategy seeks to protect the territory and sovereignty of NATO states and manifestly has no designs on Russian territory. In short, Russia has placed its military, including its nuclear arsenal, in the service of Russian expansionism; NATO strategy is reluctantly defensive against this threat and the alliance has long sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. These are profound differences.

What to do? As an alliance, NATO is much more powerful than Russia. Separately, however, NATO members bordering Russia are much weaker. The reasonable promise that a united NATO could eventually dislodge Russian forces after they have occupied allied territory is necessary but insufficient. Attempting to liberate a NATO ally after a Russian military *fait accompli* would likely see that ally and its neighbors suffer horrific destruction, and could lead to the dangerous escalation of war, including Russian nuclear first use.

NATO must instead prevent a Russian attack from taking place altogether by deterring any Russian expansion into NATO territory. President Putin appears to understand power, and thus may be deterrable.

To help deter Moscow, NATO must--on an alliance-wide basis--impress upon Russian leaders that any violation of NATO territory is intolerable and will be met swiftly by a powerful, united NATO military response capable of defending NATO territory. To wit, Russia must be denied its apparent preferred strategy: first taking Western territory rapidly and presenting the West with a military defeat, and then deterring a powerful, united NATO response by threatening the West with nuclear first use.

Denying Russia its preferred strategy will be a challenge: at this point, according to serious analyses, Russian troops could militarily overrun Baltic capitals in 36

to 60 hours.²⁰ If so, under the Russian threat of nuclear first use, NATO would have to launch a grinding counterattack to liberate NATO territory. Unless NATO is in a position to prevent such a Russian military *fait accompli*, it will be vulnerable to this extremely dangerous Russian strategy.

To counter this strategy, Moscow must also be denied any confidence that it has license to use nuclear escalation to deter NATO from defending NATO territory. NATO must fill this gap in its deterrent that Russian leaders apparently believe they can exploit. It is critical to impress Moscow with the deterring message that any Russian first use of nuclear weapons will carry the gravest risk of escalating to incalculable destruction for Russia and its leadership. Credible, limited nuclear response options may be essential for this purpose of deterring Russia's limited nuclear first use.

This is not a call for NATO nuclear "war-fighting" capabilities or a desire simply to mimic Russian strategy, as some have mistakenly charged.²¹ It is a call for those nuclear deterrence capabilities likely needed to fill a gap apparently perceived by Russian leaders, to include credible NATO limited nuclear response options.

Fortunately, the Obama Administration's modernization programs for US nuclear capabilities now underway should help fill this need, particularly including the B-61 bomb, Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA), and a new cruise missile (Long Range Stand Off—LRSO). These programs should go forward without further delay. Why? Because we should want to deter nuclear confrontation and war as the *highest priority* of our nuclear policy. Such a

²⁰ David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2016) p. 4, available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.

²¹ Senator Dianne Feinstein, as quoted in, Hans M. Kristensen, "Questions About The Nuclear Cruise Missile Mission," *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, March 25, 2016, available at <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2016/03/lrso-mission-questions/>.

prioritization of US goals may seem painfully obvious, but would require a change in the priority established in the Obama Administration's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*, which instead places non-proliferation as the highest priority goal.²²

Critics will say that this is a return to Cold War thinking,²³ and some recommend that the West should instead "do very little" in response.²⁴ No, after decades of relative slumber, restoring the capabilities needed to deter Russia is the most prudent Western strategy in response to Moscow's expansionist goals, Westward military assaults and nuclear threats. These are the new post-Cold War realities and all of NATO now must step up to the task.

²² Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. vi. See also Defense Secretary Robert Gates' cover letter to the 2010 NPR, dated April 6, 2010.

²³ Keith Rogers, "Cold War Mentality Over Nuclear Weapons Returning, Panelists Say," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, May 28, 2016, available at <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/military/cold-war-mentality-over-nuclear-weapons-returning-panelists-say>.

²⁴ Joshua Rovner, "Dealing with Putin's Strategic Incompetence," *War On The Rocks*, August 12, 2015, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2015/08/dealing-with-putins-strategic-incompetence/>.

Deterrence and Arms Control: Ending the Deceptive “Holiday from History”*

Introduction

U.S. deterrence strategies are now deeply problematic and the prospect for significant failure is very real. In contrast to the United States, Moscow and Beijing have been expanding their nuclear arsenals for over a decade and appear to view nuclear weapons as coercive tools for expansion. China appears intent on taking Taiwan by force if necessary.¹ Moscow frequently issues audacious nuclear threats and Russia’s doctrinal statements emphasize a steady lowering of the threshold for nuclear employment.² This will also be true with regard to China if there is a war over Taiwan. There is an emerging Sino-Russian entente, a Russo-North Korean alliance, and extensive Russo-Iranian-North Korean cooperation in a major war against Ukraine, a Western partner. These marriages of convenience are organizing around the clear common intent to overthrow the post-World War II liberal international order. There is potential for multiple, simultaneous geopolitical disasters.

The apparent degradation of the U.S. deterrence position is not the fault of one political party or one president. It is the culmination of decades of unrealistic thinking and self-deception by multiple administrations.

* Original publication: 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).

¹ “Xi says no one can stop China’s ‘reunification’ with Taiwan,” *Reuters*, December 31, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/xi-says-no-one-can-stop-chinas-reunification-with-taiwan-2024-12-31/>.

² Mark B. Schneider, “The Implications of Russia’s New Nuclear Doctrine,” *Information Series*, No. 615 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 5, 2025), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-implications-of-russias-new-nuclear-doctrine-no-615-february-5-2025/.

Policy ideas matter, and U.S. deterrence policies and related preparations have long been beset by a strain of idealistic thinking regarding enemies, deterrence and arms control. A former member of the National Security Council staff has described “an illusion that entranced U.S. policy makers.” That is, “...the idea 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.”³

Security policies derived from, and consistent with this now demonstrably-mistaken worldview, ultimately have been responsible for the apparent degradation of U.S. deterrence credibility and contributed directly to *unprecedentedly* dangerous contemporary threat conditions. Strengthening the U.S. deterrence position now requires urgent action, as was emphasized repeatedly in the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission’s 2023 report.⁴

Idealism: A New World Order?

Washington’s aging idealistic approach to enemies, deterrence and arms control has had consequences entirely contrary to the optimistic promises made by its advocates in and out of government. Following the Cold War, President George H. W. Bush told us we were entering a “new world order” in which the rule of law would

³ As described in the unparalleled critique by Nadia Schadlow, “The End of American Illusion,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), p.37.

⁴ Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture>.

prevail in international relations and small powers would no longer need to fear larger powers.⁵ Many Western officials and academics advanced the expectation that major great power conflict was a thing of the past and related military preparation was increasingly unnecessary, especially with regard to nuclear weapons. A new era of international relations supposedly was at hand. Many officials and academics confidently predicted continuing movement toward an integrated global economy in which commercial cooperation would subdue geopolitical conflicts. A bipartisan expectation was that opponents would bury the hatchet to secure economic benefits; political amity and economic progress would be mutually reinforcing.

This idealistic outlook has endured for decades. In June 2023, then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the post-Cold War worldview reigning in Washington: “We had a strong consensus coming out of the Cold War. We thought that major power competition was over. We thought we’d have an integrated global economy in which commerce ultimately trumped geopolitical competition. We thought we’d have former rivals working together to deal with big transnational problems.”⁶

An overarching security theme of this idealistic worldview was that there was little need to prepare for great power conflict because that was a thing of the past; nuclear capabilities and deterrence were of decidedly declining value and entailed only unnecessary risk. In 2012, a study led by a former Vice Chairman of the Joint

⁵ See, President George H. W. Bush, “Bush Defines the New World Order,” *C-SPAN*, Clip, 4524400, September 11, 1990, video available at <https://www.c-span.org/clip/joint-session-of-congress/user-clip-george-bush-defines-the-new-world-order/4528359>.

⁶ See, “A Conversation With Secretary Antony Blinken,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 28, 2023, available at <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-secretary-antony-blinken>.

Chiefs of Staff and Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, recommended that the United States reduce its nuclear weapons to 450 deployed weapons given the “irrelevance” of nuclear weapons “in dealing with 21st century threats,” and because “The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future....”⁷ The study concluded with the now obviously mistaken assertion that:

9-11 exposed the lack of efficacy – indeed, the irrelevance – of nuclear forces in dealing with 21st century threats. The last episode of nuclear brinksmanship between Americans and Russians took place nearly forty (40) years ago. Since then their nuclear weapons have increasingly become liabilities, not assets.⁸

Professor Colin S. Gray offered a rare contrary prognosis. In 1999, he ridiculed the then prevalent expectations of great power amity and instead forecast, “that world politics two to three decades hence will be increasingly organized around the rival poles of U.S. and Chinese power,” and that China then “would menace Japan.” He also fully expected that Russia would again confront the West militarily and “immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics.”⁹ One might expect that many other academics would have offered similar cautions regarding Washington’s self-serving idealism; but in truth, many were its loudest advocates.

⁷ General James Cartwright (Ret.), et al., *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report, Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture*, May 2012, pp. 6-7, available at https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹ See, Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), pp. 39-41.

U.S. defense spending has reflected the general acceptance of an idealistic worldview. In 1985, Washington spent 5.7 percent of GDP on defense. It spent 2.7 percent of its GDP on defense in 2024 – declining to 2.5 percent in 2034 (as projected). Washington was still *withdrawing* forces from Europe years after Russia’s malign goals and aggression were obvious. The United States withdrew its last battle tank from Europe in April 2013. Sgt. Jeremy Jordan of the 529th Military Police Company commented on the occasion that, “As these tanks sail back to the U.S., we are closing a chapter in history.”¹⁰ And there now are public reports that the United States would likely run out of munitions within the first few days of war in the Pacific.¹¹ As late as 2022, Washington recklessly discarded the precaution of “hedging” nuclear deterrence capabilities against a worse-than-expected future.¹²

Washington’s numerous missteps were not sui generis. They followed from an unrealistic worldview and a corresponding unwillingness of many officials and commentators to acknowledge developments contrary to their favored worldview. For example, Washington’s recognition of emerging Russian and Chinese threats was extremely slow. And, many officials in Washington *still* refer to relations with Russia and China with the benign euphemism of a sportsman-like “competition.”¹³ Why so? Because a more realistic characterization of their threats

¹⁰ Quoted in, John Vandiver, “US Army’s last tanks depart from Germany,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 4, 2013, available at <https://www.stripes.com/migration/us-army-s-last-tanks-depart-from-germany-1.214977>. Thanks to Dr. Michaela Dodge for this telling quote and reference.

¹¹ See the discussion in Bill Gertz, “Pentagon alert: U.S. runs out of missiles in a ‘matter of days’ in China war,” *The Washington Times*, December 5, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/dec/5/congress-u-defense-industry-unable-supply-weapons/>.

¹² Department of Defense, 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, pp. 3, 7, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

¹³ “A Conversation With Secretary Antony Blinken,” op. cit.

would cast doubt on the wisdom of what former Defense Secretary Gates has labeled Washington's multidecade "holiday from history."¹⁴

Ideas Matter: Self-Deception and Its Consequences

The fashionable, unrealistic mode of thinking underlying this "holiday from history" has been the basis for many U.S. arms control initiatives that have contributed to where we are today. A common theme of Washington's self-deception is the expectation that U.S. self-restraint will ease opponents' fears; they will respond benignly and cease their political hostility. The key thought is that the United States has the power to turn off opponents' hostility via benign signaling and behavior, i.e., opponents' threats and hostility are not self-generated; they are a reaction to U.S. provocations and will be transformed by benign U.S. moves. This, of course, is the hubris and preferred hope of great, status quo powers.¹⁵ To promote and protect this narrative, Washington has dismissed or looked away from opponents' indications of enduring hostility and malevolence.

The following are a few beliefs within this worldview that have been common in Washington. Much of this thinking is demonstrably false, and has been for years:

- 1) China and Russia will rise cooperatively and peacefully find their places in the liberal international order if only Washington will cooperate in the process—the old realist history is over;

¹⁴ Robert Gates, "We face unprecedented peril," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2024, available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=We+face+unprecedented+peril.+The+Pentagon+and+Congress+must+change+their+ways.&sq>.

¹⁵ See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 77-78.

- 2) Concerns about Russian and Chinese geopolitical threats are hyperbole—Washington’s behavior drives their fears and can ease them with altruistic signaling and behavior;
- 3) The United States can safely retreat from a two-war standard because the history of great power war is over; America can enjoy a continuing “holiday from history” — particularly in terms of defense spending and preparation;
- 4) Assured U.S. societal vulnerability to enemy strikes is desirable because unmitigated U.S. vulnerability assures enemies, stabilizes deterrence and halts the arms race;
- 5) U.S. actions incite opponents’ arms build-ups, not their own malign goals. Thus, U.S. armaments supposedly are the cause of arms racing: if the United States stops, so will opponents. This “action-reaction” dynamic is an “iron law” of international relations that explains arms racing. Correspondingly, U.S. inaction will lead to opponents’ inaction. Washington can be the example of good behavior to the world and preclude arms races by not inciting them;
- 6) The lower the number of nuclear weapons, the lower the prospects for nuclear war, accidents, and societal damage. So reductions, by definition, are an unalloyed good virtually regardless of an agreement’s details regarding arms;
- 7) Arms control agreements will drive improved political relations, so the United States should seek agreements for the priority purpose of easing political hostilities. Again, agreement details are far less important than achieving an agreement;
- 8) Nuclear weapons are essentially *useless* instruments — and if Washington reduces the role of

these useless weapons, Russia and China will follow suit. Correspondingly, anti-nuclear activists must press Western leaders to reject nuclear weapons. This is the path to global nuclear disarmament.¹⁶

This worldview and associated expectations have been reflected in the West's arms control initiatives and enthusiasms. But, given their underlying lack of reality, Washington's arms control initiatives were bound to be frustrated and the practical results harmful to Western security.

There are many illustrations of this contention; eight of these follow:

First, Washington consciously gave up the capacity to build new nuclear weapons in the 1990s based on the claim that, to promote non-proliferation, Washington had to lead by example and move away from nuclear capabilities itself. A frequent quip of the 1990s in this regard was that "a drunk cannot advocate for abstinence." The message, of course, was that U.S. nuclear abstinence is necessary for non-proliferation.

The United States decided to lead in this direction. For example, after listing a variety of key nuclear policy goals, including deterrence, extended deterrence and the assurance of allies, the Defense Department's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (NPR) stated: "As a critical element of our effort to move toward a world free of nuclear weapons, the United States will lead expanded international efforts to rebuild and strengthen the global nuclear non-proliferation regime — and for the first time, the 2010 NPR places this priority atop the U.S. nuclear agenda." (Emphasis added). Doing so placed corresponding priority on reducing the role and number of U.S. nuclear forces. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' cover letter to the 2010 NPR states that, "This NPR

¹⁶ See Beatrice Fihn, "Nuclear Weapons Are Not a Fact of Life," *New York Times Online*, December 26, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/26/opinion/nuclear-weapons.html>.

places the prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation at the top of the U.S. policy agenda” and explained that reducing the “role and numbers of nuclear weapons” via U.S. arms control efforts was a key to those ends.¹⁷ Unfortunately, opponents clearly decided to move in the opposite direction.

Second, there has been a systemic delay in the public identification of Russian arms control violations because that reality is contrary to the preferred arms control narrative and the worldview that places the United States as the source of opponents’ hostile behavior. There were, for example, virtually no public comments about Russian INF Treaty violations until well after those violations were discussed by unofficial commentators *based on Russian publications*; Moscow’s misbehavior ultimately became so obvious that it had to be acknowledged.

Third, there has been a similar enduring lack of government openness regarding the immense Chinese nuclear build-up—again it is contrary to the preferred narrative. Public recognition of that build-up came by way of unofficial commentators using publicly available overhead surveillance. DoD public reports may still seriously undercount Chinese nuclear weapons.¹⁸

Fourth, 15 years ago, contemporary U.S. strategic nuclear modernization plans were set in motion at a glacial pace and with strict limitations—careful not to add numbers or new weapons lest Washington provoke opponents and ignite an action-reaction arms race. On the basis of such action-reaction expectations, there is continuing opposition even now to this much needed but

¹⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 2010), pp. iii, V, VI, 15, 45; see also, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ included cover letter (April 6, 2010).

¹⁸ See, Mark B. Schneider, *Current and Projected Growth of China’s Nuclear Arsenal, Occasional Paper* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/current-and-projected-growth-of-chinas-nuclear-arsenal/>.

tardy nuclear modernization program of record. The most secure element seems to be the B-21 Raider; but, at this point, it is constrained to a low production rate, apparently for budgetary reasons—the “holiday from history” endures.

Fifth, even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* still asserted arms control and reducing the role of nuclear weapons to be *the most effective* ways to prevent nuclear use, despite Russia’s and China’s obvious rejection of arms control and their *elevating* the role of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ At this point in history, a policy position that so places priority on arms control over deterrence ignores threat realities.

Yet, Washington has continued to abide by the force limitations of the New START Treaty despite Russian withdrawal and violations; doing otherwise would cast doubt on the favored arms control narrative. In adherence to that narrative, the Biden Administration killed the B83 gravity bomb unilaterally, inexplicably eliminated hedging as a deterrence requirement, and opposed even the modest addition to U.S. non-strategic capabilities included in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*.

Sixth, U.S. societal vulnerability to strategic missile threats was ensured by the 1972 ABM Treaty. That Treaty ended, but in many quarters the underlying policy position that U.S. vulnerability is a positive condition endures.²⁰ Of course, this continuing vulnerability leaves Washington fully susceptible to Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear threats and fans allies’ logical fears that the U.S. extended

¹⁹ Department of Defense, 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁰ See, for example, James M. Acton, “The U.S. Exit From the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty Has Fueled a New Arms Race,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 13, 2021, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/12/the-us-exit-from-the-anti-ballistic-missile-treaty-has-fueled-a-new-arms-race?lang=en>; and, Steven Pifer, “Enhancing Strategic Stability: New START and Beyond,” *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2021, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/features/enhancing-strategic-stability-new-start-and-beyond>.

deterrent is incredible – causing related allied proliferation pressures.²¹

Seventh, Reagan's 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was predicated on the promise that remaining U.S. theater nuclear capabilities would be updated and would continue to ensure extended deterrence. Yet, shortly thereafter, George H.W. Bush's Presidential Nuclear Initiatives *unilaterally* eliminated most of those remaining theater nuclear capabilities – to serve as a model for the world to follow. These were the theater nuclear forces intended to provide continuing credible extended deterrence for allies.²² They were almost entirely removed with no serious hedging against the prospect that the future would not be as rosy as expected. The consequence? Moscow now is emboldened by at least a 10-to-one advantage in theater nuclear weapons. Based on illusion, Washington recklessly and unilaterally gave up all apparent non-strategic nuclear escalation options in the Indo-Pacific theater and sustains a minimal nuclear capability in Europe. This dangerous condition degrades the logical credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent and again compels some allies to consider acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Eighth, Washington episodically announces the intent to move to a No-First-Use nuclear policy, despite the *obvious* reality that it would destroy the existing basis for extended deterrence – without any apparent benefit beyond virtue signaling.²³

²¹ See the discussion in, Robert Kelly and Min-hyung-Kim, "Why South Korea Should Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2025), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-korea/why-south-korea-should-go-nuclear-kelly-kim>.

²² See Matthew R. Costlow, "The 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and the Cascading Effects on U.S. Alliances," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, forthcoming 2025, pp. 58-67.

²³ Commentators continue to press for a No-First-Use policy. See for example, Andreas Kluth, "Why is the US Fighting Nuclear Threats Behind Closed Doors?" *Bloomberg News*, August 23, 2024, available at

This dynamic of self-deception leading policy is not new. In 1979, Henry Kissinger offered a similar assessment before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with regard to the then increasing power imbalance in favor of the Soviet Union: “[W]e have placed ourselves at a significant disadvantage *voluntarily*... it is the consequence of unilateral decisions extending over a decade and a half: by a strategic doctrine adopted in the sixties ... and by the choices of the present administration.”²⁴ Unfortunately, there rarely is any accountability in Washington for critical policy decisions made on demonstrably failed and unrealistic ideas.

What Can Now Be Done?

The first suggestion is what *not* to do. Washington must not now return to deterrence strategies emphasizing the intentional targeting of civilian centers—as advocated by several prominent academics to avoid having to increase U.S. nuclear capabilities now in response to Russia and China.²⁵ Seemingly unknown to most commentators, the United States rejected intentionally targeting civilian population centers as the basis for deterrence decades ago; in fact, since at least the 1980s, the United States has sought to minimize civilian targeting as the basis for deterrence. This rejection of a so-called societal “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD) deterrent was for good and strategic

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-08-23/biden-and-harris-must-talk-publicly-about-the-nuclear-risk-with-china-russia>.

²⁴ Quoted in Francis Sempa, “Avoiding the McNamara Trap With China,” *The American Spectator*, January 6, 2025, available at <https://spectator.org/avoiding-the-mcnamara-trap-with-china/>. (Emphasis added).

²⁵ See Keith B. Payne, John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller and Robert Soofer, “The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for ‘Tripolar’ Deterrence,” *National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series*, No. 563, September 26, 2023, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-john-r-harvey-franklin-c-miller-and-robert-soofer-the-rejection-of-intentional-population-targeting-for-tripolar-deterrence-no-563-september-26-2023/.

reasons—it is logically incredible for any scenario other than a massive strategic attack on the homeland, and is contrary to the Law of Armed Conflict and the Just War Doctrine.

With Regard to Strategic Defense?

Washington must get past the old Cold War canards that strategic defenses are destabilizing and are of no value unless they are “leakproof.” Defenses likely contribute to credible deterrence in many pertinent scenarios in which they are not “leakproof.” For example, credible extended deterrence now logically demands active and passive homeland defenses against Russian, Chinese and North Korean *coercive, limited nuclear threats*. In addition, imperfect homeland defenses can help render opponents’ strategic attack plans so uncertain as to make them untenable for any sentient opponent—thereby strengthening deterrence.

President Trump appears to have taken a first step in this direction.²⁶ Strategic deterrence will continue to be essential to protect against large-scale strategic threats for the foreseeable future. However, the logical credibility of extended deterrence *demand*s a U.S. homeland defense capability, and the need for such defenses, even if imperfect, is overwhelming given the reality that deterrence is not foolproof.

With Regard to Strategic Strike Forces?

The proper pacing factor for deterrence is *not* to match the combined number of Russian and Chinese nuclear forces. A deterrence need is for sufficient survivable, flexible, and

²⁶ The White House, Executive Order, “The Iron Dome for America,” January 27, 2025, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>.

controlled strategic retaliatory forces to reliably cover Russian, Chinese, North Korean and potentially Iranian target sets. That is the pacing factor for deterrence purposes. How those numbers are calculated is a complicated process, but the general idea is to identify opponents' highest values and hold at risk the targets associated with those values. This is not an insoluble problem, but adequacy requirements have become more complex with an autocratic and nuclear-armed entente that is at war with the West. Given the decades-long U.S. drive to reduce nuclear weapons and slow nuclear modernization programs, using and uploading legacy U.S. strategic platforms now probably is a necessary and practicable step for this purpose; few other options exist in the near future.²⁷

With Regard to Theater Strike Forces?

A frequent quip is that, for the target, there is no difference between strategic and theater nuclear weapons. Perhaps, but the difference is likely profound in terms of their credibility for extended deterrence. As of now, given the decades-long U.S. drive to reduce nuclear weapons and their role in strategy, the United States has no obvious non-strategic nuclear options in Asia and minimal capabilities in Europe. As was fully recognized during the Cold War, this reality is wholly *inconsistent* with the U.S. extension of credible nuclear deterrence for allies.

Part of the solution to this reality is the expansion of theater nuclear options in support of extended deterrence. These capabilities could take several forms; but, at this point, the new SLCM-N—long opposed by the Biden

²⁷ See Keith B. Payne and Mark B. Schneider, "U.S. Nuclear Deterrence: What Went Wrong and What Can Be Done," National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 601, October 7, 2024, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-and-mark-b-schneider-u-s-nuclear-deterrence-what-went-wrong-and-what-can-be-done-no-601-october-7-2024/.

Administration—may not be available any time soon. If not, more readily available options may include a TASM, TLAM Block V, or a new hypersonic missile (LRHW – Dark Eagle) armed with an existing nuclear weapon.

With Regard to the Application of an Idealistic Worldview to Arms Control

Regardless of the manifest evidence, Washington has yet to acknowledge the frequent harm that its arms control enthusiasms—predicated on an illusory worldview—have caused. They have contributed to the unprecedentedly dangerous contemporary threat context. What could go wrong when harsh realities are dismissed because they do not fit the favored idealistic narrative? President Trump has indicated his willingness to pursue arms control with Moscow and Beijing.²⁸ If so, Washington must move away from the common but demonstrably false expectation that arms control agreements will meaningfully ameliorate political hostilities. They typically do not, and when the strategic value of armaments is subordinated to the pursuit of an illusory political goal, arm control enthusiasms can degrade or eliminate U.S. capabilities that are needed because of political hostilities. This frequently has been the case to date. In short, arms control advocates often place priority on the pursuit of a goal that arms control does not serve, and subordinate the practical effects of agreements to that end. This mode of thinking needs to end.

²⁸ See Laura Kelly, “Trump wants nuclear reduction talks with China, Russia,” *The Hill Online*, January 23, 2025, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/5102798-trump-urges-nuclear-talks-russia-china/>.

Summary and Conclusion

What went wrong with deterrence? The practical consequences of Washington's enduring strain of idealistic thinking have harmed the U.S. deterrence position. This idealism and reluctance to call out harsh realities is not the fault of one political party or decision, and the harmful effects of this thinking and related U.S. arms control initiatives are now manifest in an unprecedentedly dangerous world.

At long last, America may be emerging from its decades-long strategic holiday rationalized by self-deception. Allies should be particularly pleased with this development. But they too must step up; the years of their free-riding are over.²⁹ They often point to the tone of President Trump's policy statements as the basis for contemporary concerns about the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent. But it is the darkening character of the correlation of forces, and the associated risks of extending deterrence, that undermine the apparent credibility of America's extended deterrent. If that eroding correlation is addressed, the tone of related U.S. policy statements will be of minor import; if it is not addressed, the tone of U.S. policy statements will be irrelevant. "Ironclad" commitments to allies can only be real if they are supported by a correlation of forces that enables such commitments. The needed correlation of forces has eroded badly.

What can be done in the near term to strengthen deterrence? The strategic force posture is largely limited in the near term to uploading existing platforms. The degree to which that should be done depends on the target coverage and timing deemed necessary for credible deterrence.

²⁹ See Michael Rühle und Keith Payne, "Die Kultur des Trittbrettfahrens ist vorbei," *Welt am Sonntag*, July 21, 2024, p. 9.

With regard to non-strategic capabilities, there appear to be some available options; these should be pursued immediately, and allies should be supportive – unless they believe that the “Europeanization” of France’s nuclear deterrent actually holds promise. If so, bon chance with that.

“A Time for Choosing”: Urgent Action or Continuing Folly*

Introduction

Washington’s global system of alliances is facing extremely tough internal and external problems. These problems are neither fleeting nor prosaic; they are now structural and will require significant efforts to ameliorate. That harsh reality would matter little if alliances were unimportant to Western security. But they are the West’s key advantage over an aggressive, authoritarian bloc, including a Sino-Russian entente, North Korea and Iran, that seeks to overturn the liberal world order created and sustained by U.S. and allied power. To maintain that advantage, Washington must recognize and respond to those threats, while resisting the usual anti-defense spending/anti-military themes of the “progressive” Left and the seeming neo-isolationism of some on the political Right.

U.S. defense budgets in decline when adjusted for inflation,¹ and a trend within parts of the Republican Party to oppose continuing military aid to Ukraine, are not lost on allies who fear for their security and are ultimately dependent on a seemingly reticent United States for their security. As threat conditions become increasingly severe and obvious, some allies, particularly those who are on the frontlines vis-à-vis Russia, China, and North Korea, understandably are increasingly alarmed.

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, “‘A Time for Choosing’: Urgent Action or Continuing Folly,” *Information Series*, No. 580 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 26, 2024).

¹ Michael J. Boskin and Kiran Sridhar, “Biden’s Budget Neglects the Military,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2024, p. A17, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-budget-neglects-the-military-huge-gap-in-american-strength-and-readiness-142ccc30>.

Evidence of this alarm includes open allied discussions about acquiring independent nuclear capabilities – with the corresponding potential for a cascade of nuclear proliferation. Perhaps most surprising are open German and Japanese discussions of independent nuclear deterrence capabilities.² In Japan, the subject is tied directly to the continuing credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent and has moved from being politically taboo to an open public discussion.³ In February 2023, a Japanese defense study chaired by former military chief of staff Ryoichi Oriki reportedly suggested that “Japan ease its three nonnuclear principles that prohibit possessing, producing or allowing entry into Japan of nuclear weapons.”⁴

An alternative potential allied response to security threats is to move increasingly toward accommodating Moscow and/or Beijing. As contemporary power balances shift and fear among some allies grows, greater accommodation to China or Russia – and corresponding distance from the United States – may appear the most practicable option. Turkey appears to have been positioning itself between the West and Russia for years, while some allies appear to be serving Russia’s interests

² See, for example, Eckhard Lübke and Michael Rühle, “Nuklearmacht Europa: Braucht Europa gemeinsame Nuklearwaffen? Ein Für und Wider,” *Internationale Politik*, No. 1 (Januar/Februar 2024), pp. 110-113.

³ See, for example, Jesse Johnson, “Japan should consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons, Abe says,” *Japan Times*, February 27, 2023, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/27/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-japan-nuclear-weapons-taiwan/>.

⁴ Hiroyuki Akita, “Why nuclear arms debate in South Korea cannot be underestimated: U.S. allies must think outside the box to counter new threats from North Korea,” *Nikkei Asia Online* (Japan), May 5, 2023, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Why-nuclear-arms-debate-in-South-Korea-cannot-be-underestimated>.

from within NATO.⁵ In the Indo-Pacific, New Zealand deepens economic, trade, and cultural ties with Beijing.⁶

That some allies will hedge their geopolitical bets by seeking accommodations with Russia and/or China, and by distancing themselves from Washington, was demonstrated recently in statements by French President Macron and the European Commission's leadership.⁷ According to Macron, "strategic autonomy" must now be Europe's organizing principle;⁸ and the French ambassador reportedly has advised Canada to begin distancing itself from the United States, and stated that Ottawa must choose between the United States and Europe.⁹ As two prominent European commentators have observed, "... based on global American strategic supremacy, the very idea of

⁵ Eric S. Edelman, David Manning, and Franklin C. Miller, "NATO's Decision Process Has an Achilles' Heel," *New Atlanticist*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-decision-process-has-an-achilles-heel/>.

⁶ See, for example, Laura Zhou, "China and New Zealand are a 'force for stability' in a turbulent world, says Foreign Minister Wang Yi," *South China Morning Post*, March 18, 2024, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3255852/china-and-new-zealand-are-force-stability-turbulent-world-says-foreign-minister-wang-yi>.

⁷ See for example, "Macron Says Europe Should Not Follow U.S. or Chinese Policy Over Taiwan," *Reuters*, in, *U.S. News and World Report*, April 9, 2023, available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-04-09/macron-says-europe-should-not-follow-u-s-or-chinese-policy-over-taiwan>. See also, "After Macron, EU Chief Seeks 'Independent' China Policy, Says Abandon US' 'Confrontational' Approach," *Times Now (India)*, May 1, 2023, available at <https://www.timesnownews.com/videos/news-plus/after-macron-eu-chief-seeks-independent-china-policy-says-abandon-us-confrontational-approach-video-99916110>.

⁸ See Vivienne Machi, Tom Kington, Andrew Chuter, "French visions for an autonomous Europe proves elusive," *Defensenews.com*, May 9, 2023, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2023/05/09/french-vision-for-an-autonomous-europe-proves-elusive/#:~:text=EUROPE%20and%20WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20After%20Russia,the%20continent%20standing%20alone%20militarily.>

⁹ Dylan Robertson, "Canada should link with Europe, surpass 'weak' military engagement, French envoy," *The Globe and Mail*, April 5, 2023, available at [HTTPS://WWW.THEGLOBEANDMAIL.COM/POLITICS/ARTICLE-CANADA-SHOULD-LINK-WITH-EUROPE-SURPASS-WEAK-MILITARY-ENGAGEMENT-FRENCH/](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-canada-should-link-with-europe-surpass-weak-military-engagement-french/).

autonomous European defense has long been considered detrimental to the vital transatlantic link. However, with global strategic challenges growing fast, this principle is no longer tenable.”¹⁰

The manifest inconsistency in U.S. behavior important to allies has accelerated this problem. An Israeli analyst described the perception concisely: “The consensus in the region is that the US has abdicated its role as the Superpower vis-à-vis the [Middle East].”¹¹ As allies respond to the reality of rising threats, if a trend toward increasing allied interest in independent nuclear capabilities and/or distancing themselves from the United States expands, sustaining U.S. global alliances will be problematic, to the degradation of U.S. security.

America’s experience with North Korea over the past two decades is instructive. During the period of unquestioned U.S. military superiority over any potential foe, Washington solemnly and repeatedly declared a nuclear-armed North Korea to be “unacceptable.” Yet, five consecutive administrations, Republican and Democrat, have done nothing effective to prevent North Korea’s deployment of nuclear weapons that can now target much of the world, including the United States. As a result, North Korea is a nuclear power that now must be deterred.¹²

U.S. officials and commentators have repeatedly offered confident assertions that the risk is minimal because the

¹⁰ Maximilian Terhalle and Kees Klompenhouwer, “Facing Europe’s nuclear necessities, Deterrence can no longer be seen as just a bipolar equation — and it’s time NATO addresses this fact,” *POLITICO Europe Online*, April 22, 2023, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/facing-europe-nuclear-necessities-strategy-vulnerability-war-weapon/>.

¹¹ Shmuel Bar, “Self-perceptions and Nuclear Weapons,” *Information Series*, No. 558 (July 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/shmuel-bar-self-perceptions-and-nuclear-weapons-no-558-july-13-2023/.

¹² See for example, Timothy W. Martin, “Top U.S. General Sees Changing Nuclear Threat From North Korea,” *The Wall Street Journal Online*, March 11, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/top-u-s-general-sees-changing-nuclear-threat-from-north-korea-4788270a>.

United States can reliably deter North Korea¹³ – assertions based on little more than convenience, hope, and shallow guesswork. Simultaneously, Washington has incessantly pleaded with China to help de-nuclearize North Korea – a problem that Beijing has shown no interest in resolving. Mounting South Korean popular interest in independent nuclear capabilities is a direct consequence of this American failure to deal with a threat that Washington has declared, for more than two decades, to be “unacceptable.”

Russia seeks to recover hegemony in much of Europe, starting with Ukraine, and China is on track to be able to take Taiwan by force within a few years.¹⁴ Recent “leaked” Russian nuclear planning documents reveal a corresponding shockingly low Russian threshold for

¹³ See, for example, Wolfgang Panofsky, “Nuclear Insecurity: Correcting Washington’s Dangerous Posture,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (September/October 2007), pp. 113-114; David E. Sanger, “Don’t Shoot. We’re Not Ready,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2006, p. 1; Mike Moore, “Missile Defenses, Relabeled,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (July/August, 2002), p. 22; Joseph Cirincione, “A Much Less Explosive Trend,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2002, p. B-3; Carl Levin, *Remarks of Senator Carl Levin on National Missile Defense, National Defense University Forum Breakfast on Ballistic Missile Defense*, May 11, 2001, p. 4, available at www.senate.gov/~levin/newsroom/release.cfm?id=209421; Craig Eisendrath, “Missile Defense System Flawed Technically, Unwise Politically,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 23, 2001; and, Sen. Joseph Biden, “Why Democrats Oppose Billions More on Missiles” (Letter to the editor), *The Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2006, p. A11.

¹⁴ The U.S. Commander in the Indo-Pacific reportedly testified before Congress that Beijing is on track to its goal of being able to invade Taiwan by 2027. See, Bill Gertz, “U.S. Indo-Pacific commander warns of growing danger of war over Taiwan: *Aquilino tells lawmakers \$11 billion in added funds needed to deter China*,” *Washington Times Online*, Mar. 21, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/mar/21/us-indo-pacific-commander-warns-of-growing-danger-/>; Jesse Johnson, “China on track to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027, U.S. commander says,” *Japan Times Online* (Japan), March 21, 2024, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/03/21/asia-pacific/politics/taiwan-china-invasion-2027/#:~:text=The%20top%20U.S.%20military%20commander,a%20single%20day%20this%20year.>

nuclear use,¹⁵ and in 2022, the Central Intelligence Agency reportedly concluded that there is a 50 percent or greater chance that Moscow will use nuclear weapons if facing defeat in Ukraine.¹⁶ This is devastating commentary on the West's contemporary deterrence position.

In this grim threat context, the fundamental alliance problem is the enduring U.S. preference to look away from stark security challenges and to prioritize non-defense goals. Western allies have unparalleled potential human and material advantages over virtually any combination of foes—Russia's and China's combined GDPs, for example, are a fraction of the combined GDPs of Western allies. The United States and allies have the potential to contain the Sino-Russian entente, North Korea and Iran. But they have continually punted in this regard and now confront multiple existential challenges.

Washington's actions, and more often inaction over many years, are a primary reason that authoritarian states now pose serious military threats to the West's future. The longer they go unanswered, the more likely it is that today's threats will be the source of tomorrow's crises and catastrophes. Whether the allied powers will act in unity and urgency, or ultimately move in different, disparate directions that undercut Western security, is an open question.

¹⁵ See Mark B. Schneider, "The Leaked Russian Nuclear Documents and Russian First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Information Series*, No. 579 (March 18, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-leaked-russian-nuclear-documents-and-russian-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons-no-579-march-18-2024/.

¹⁶ Ronny Reyes, "CIA estimated 50% chance that Russia would nuke Ukraine if it risked losing war: report," *New York Post*, March 10, 2024, available at <https://nypost.com/2024/03/10/world-news/cia-warned-50-chance-that-russia-would-nuke-ukraine-report/>.

Who and What is to Blame?

The United States and allies may, in the foreseeable future, face a reckoning with harsh security realities. The immediate reason for this possible reckoning, of course, is the growing power and aggression of a hostile, authoritarian bloc that seeks to recast the world order, violently if necessary.

However, the United States and allies have facilitated the security challenges they now face. The antecedents to Moscow's aggression in Europe and China's belligerent expansionism have been blatantly obvious for well over a decade. These threats would be less significant had Washington taken needed steps over the past three decades. But many political leaders, Republican and Democrat, have made decisions based on convenient illusions, and the severe results of those decisions are increasingly obvious. That is, contemporary challenges, in principle, were largely manageable had Western leaders not been captured by unrealistic expectations regarding Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and a cooperative, post-Cold War "new world order." Instead, Washington has facilitated foes' hostile moves and magnified their significance by its failure to recognize and prepare proactively for obviously mounting dangers; as two serious experts have emphasized, Western "weakness is provocative."¹⁷

The U.S. defense budget, defense industrial base and nuclear infrastructure, starved for decades, have not caught up with the great power military threats now confronting the United States and allies.¹⁸ And, for more than a decade

¹⁷ Eric Edelman and Frank Miller, "Understanding that Weakness is Provocative is Deterrence 101," *The Dispatch*, August 8, 2022, available at <https://thedispatch.com/article/understanding-that-weakness-is-provocative/>.

¹⁸ For a discussion of frustrated efforts to align the defense budget with threat realities see, Bryant Harris, "A Nearly \$1 Trillion Defense Budget Faces Headwinds at Home and Abroad," *Defense News Online*, March 7, 2024, available

beyond any reasonable expectation of Russian or Chinese reciprocity, Washington has continued to pursue antiquated arms control thinking and practices that constrain needed U.S. military preparation and deterrence capabilities. Many in Washington still fail to recognize their culpability in this regard. They have extended the immediate post-Cold War “strategic holiday,” “peace dividend” and fixation on arms control solutions decades longer than prudent.

For example, in an unprecedented threat context, rather than responding urgently to an increasingly dangerous and hostile bloc of states, the Biden Administration’s “grand strategy” appears to prioritize pressing the United States and the world into the progressive political mold fashionable in Washington. As Professor Colin Dueck writes, “If the Biden administration’s grand strategy could be summed up in a single phrase, it would be *-progressive transformation at home and abroad.*”¹⁹

Professor Dueck’s apt and jarring assessment of Washington’s focus is confirmed in numerous ways. In response to looming military threats, including the prospect of nuclear war, Washington seems uninterested in correcting course significantly. America now pays more annually to service the national debt than is devoted to national defense. Despite a threat context that is more dangerous than that of the Cold War, the percentage of GDP devoted to defense is roughly half of what it was during the Cold War. And, as currently planned, U.S. defense spending will essentially be flat from 2023 through 2028,²⁰

at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2024/03/07/a-nearly-1-trillion-defense-budget-faces-headwinds-at-home-and-abroad/>.

¹⁹ See Colin Dueck, “The Biden Doctrine,” *The Caravan*, Hoover Institution, March 5, 2024, available at, <https://www.hoover.org/research/biden-doctrine>. (Emphasis in original).

²⁰ Congressional Budget Office Report, *Long-Term Implications of the 2024 Future Defense Program*, October 25, 2023, available at

and adjusted for inflation, the real buying power of the U.S. defense budget will actually decline.²¹ The Commander of Indo-Pacific Command reportedly testified that the administration's current budget request is \$11 billion short of that needed to provide the means identified as necessary to deter conflict with China.²² At the strategic nuclear force level, by the end of the decade, it appears that Washington will have to retire aging existing forces before their replacements can be deployed. These are not the behaviors of a sensible alliance leader prepared to, or preparing to, address unprecedented security dangers.

To be sure, a lack of serious focus on emerging security threats is not new. Washington's dramatic drawdown of forces from Europe, for example, began immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and inexplicably occurred even with Russia's attack on Georgia in 2008 and its first assault on Ukraine in 2014.²³

Russia and China combine unprecedented nuclear buildups and expansionist geopolitical goals, yet Washington remains mired in some of the most optimistic thinking of the immediate post-Cold War period. For example, the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) calls for "urgent" U.S. moves to advance long-standing arms control goals with no prospect for Russian or Chinese reciprocation. In the harsh contemporary threat context, the NPR asserts

<https://www.cbo.gov/publication/59511#:~:text=The%20proposed%20budget%20for%20DoD,2024%20in%20the%20previous%20FYDP.>

²¹ Elaine McCusker, "Don't Be Fooled by Biden's Budget: He's Cutting Military Spending as Our Needs Grow," *AEI Op-Ed*, March 10, 2023, available at <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/dont-be-fooled-by-bidens-budget-hes-cutting-military-spending-as-our-needs-grow/>.

²² As reported in, Gertz, "U.S. Indo-Pacific commander warns of growing danger of war over Taiwan," *op. cit.*

²³ See, Michael Allen, Carla Martinez Machain, and Michael Flynn, "The US Military Presence in Europe Has Been Declining for 30 Years – the Current Crisis in Ukraine May Reverse That Trend," *The Conversation* (January 5, 2022), available at <https://theconversation.com/the-us-military-presence-in-europe-has-been-declining-for-30-years-the-current-crisis-in-ukraine-may-reverse-that-trend-175595>.

that “Mutual, verifiable arms control offers the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use.”²⁴ The comforting expectation that arms control now is the “most effective” way to prevent Chinese or Russian nuclear employment is otherworldly thinking given Moscow’s and Beijing’s words and deeds over many years—yet it continues in Washington.

In a most disturbing reflection of Washington’s misplaced priorities, John Kerry recently asserted that if Moscow would “make a greater effort to reduce emissions now,” it would “open the door for people to feel better about” Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine.²⁵ In fact, a Russian commitment to “reducing emissions” would do nothing to ease Moscow’s crime of invading Ukraine or alter its commitment to violently changing borders in Europe. Similarly, while China and Russia see themselves as in a long-term war with the United States, Washington continues to label engagement with Russia and China as “great power competition,”²⁶—a rhetorical obfuscation that prolongs the pretense of a relatively benign threat environment rather than confront stark threat realities.

In contrast to the Biden Administration’s NPR, the near-contemporaneous Congressional Strategic Posture Commission’s 2023 report repeatedly calls for “urgent” U.S. movement to meet looming security threats. The need to call for urgency, and the fact that it has been criticized as being overwrought,²⁷ is testament to Washington’s

²⁴ Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 16, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

²⁵ Quoted in, Sarah Rumpf-Whitten, “John Kerry says people would ‘feel better’ about the Ukraine war if Russia would reduce emissions,” *Fox News*, March 6, 2024, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/john-kerry-says-people-feel-better-about-ukraine-war-russia-reduce-emissions>.

²⁶ *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁷ For example, Harlan K. Ullman, “America’s strategic nuclear posture review is miles off the mark,” *The Hill Online*, October 30, 2023, available at

decades-long preference for convenient illusions over recognition of rising threats.

In short, the immediate cause of the West's unprecedented security challenge is a hostile bloc of revisionist, authoritarian states. A deeper cause is the decades-long failure of Washington and allies to recognize and rise to the threat—which could have been managed given their unparalleled combined power potential. Ultimately unrealistic, antiquated U.S. and allied thinking and behavior are responsible for the significance of contemporary security challenges.

Burden Sharing

Some U.S. leaders claim that overly dependent allies who refuse to contribute enough for Western defense are the problem. To be sure, many wealthy allies, such as Holland, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy, devote an essentially trivial fraction of their GDP to Western security – preferring to rely on the United States. Their defense efforts are wholly out of sync with the character of threats posed by a hostile Sino-Russian entente.

Washington, however, has been on its own “strategic holiday” for decades and generally has passively indulged allied free riding. U.S. leaders have called on allies for greater defense “burden sharing” for decades. But Washington's simultaneous actions have, with few exceptions, consistently countenanced allies' continued indolence.

Washington continually assures allies that the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence umbrella covering them is solid and reliable. The United States can hardly criticize allies for engaging in wishful thinking and indolent behavior when it continually offers “ironclad” assurances.

Why expect allies to spend serious national treasure when Washington promises its unfailing protection? Why should allies want to change a security formula that demands so little from them – until, of course, that formula is manifestly unreliable.

U.S. and allied thinking are comparably naïve and self-serving: Washington for seemingly expecting – beyond any logic – that its extended nuclear deterrent promises will continue to be credible absent significant new effort, and allies for imprudently going along for the ride because it is most convenient and inexpensive. Allies may be castigated for their share of this folly, but doing so is not slightly hypocritical, and U.S. finger-wagging will ultimately prove unhelpful without real U.S. commitment and leadership.

A Structural Problem: Extended Nuclear Deterrence Credibility

A credible U.S. extended nuclear deterrent is critical to prevent regional war and is an essential glue that holds the alliance system together. Regarding Finland’s recent joining of NATO, Finnish President Alexander Stubb said that, “I would start from the premise that we in Finland must have a real nuclear deterrent...which comes from the United States.”²⁸ In the absence of a credible U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, key allies have indicated that they could be compelled to acquire independent nuclear capabilities – which would likely unravel the alliances, unleash a cascade

²⁸ Anne Kauranen and Louise Breusch Rasmussen, “NATO’s nuclear deterrent must be real for Finland, says new president,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2024, available at [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-inaugurates-alexander-stubb-president-nato-era-2024-0301/#:~:text=NATO's%20nuclear%20deterrent%20must%20be%20real%20for%20Finland%2C%20says%20new%20president,By%20Anne%20Kauranen&text=HELSENKI%2C%20March%201%20\(Reuters\),fought%20election%20on%20Feb.%2011](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-inaugurates-alexander-stubb-president-nato-era-2024-0301/#:~:text=NATO's%20nuclear%20deterrent%20must%20be%20real%20for%20Finland%2C%20says%20new%20president,By%20Anne%20Kauranen&text=HELSENKI%2C%20March%201%20(Reuters),fought%20election%20on%20Feb.%2011).

of nuclear proliferation, and cause unpredictable, paranoid responses by Russia and China.

It is important to pull back the curtain on the extended U.S. nuclear umbrella: It is the U.S. and NATO threat to escalate a regional non-nuclear conflict, potentially to a thermonuclear war, in response to an attack on an ally. It includes the U.S. threat that Washington may resort to a level of warfare on behalf of an ally that could escalate to the destruction of both allies and the United States.

When the United States was reasonably well-protected from nuclear attack by wide oceans and defenses, Washington could, in relative safety, issue such strategic nuclear deterrence threats on behalf of allies. However, as the Soviet Union became increasingly capable of targeting the United States with its own strategic nuclear forces, U.S. extended deterrence nuclear threats became increasingly problematic. During the Kennedy Administration, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev asked U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk directly why Moscow should believe that Washington would risk self-destruction in a thermonuclear war on behalf of distant allies. Rusk's answer was reduced to, "Mr. Chairman, you will have to take into account the possibility we Americans are just [expletive] fools."²⁹ This answer did not even try to claim any logical credibility for the U.S. extended deterrent, but that Moscow should fear that Washington might foolishly be self-destructive.

The questions, of course, are: How credible is this 'we may be fools' basis for extended deterrence, against which enemies, and in what contexts? In 1979, Henry Kissinger addressed this question directly, telling allies publicly that they should *not* expect the United States to abide by suicidal U.S. strategic nuclear threats for their security: "Our European allies should not keep asking us to multiply

²⁹ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 228. See also, Arnold Beichman, "How Foolish Khrushchev Nearly Started World War III," *The Washington Times*, October 3, 2004, p. B 8.

strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or if we do mean, we should not want to execute, because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilization.”³⁰

During the Cold War, Washington undertook numerous steps to restore credibility to the U.S. extended nuclear umbrella. This included maintaining an enormous standing U.S. force in Europe, including over 300,000 troops throughout the 1980s, to help prevent an easy fait accompli that might tempt Soviet aggression, and brandishing approximately 7,000 locally-deployed or deployable, nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) to buttress the credibility of the U.S. extended strategic deterrence umbrella. The expectation was that conventional forces and NSNW would add credibility to the nuclear umbrella and manifest links to the U.S. strategic nuclear threat of intercontinental missiles and bombers. The United States also developed a deterrence doctrine that planned limited strategic nuclear options in support of extended deterrence, in the expectation that limited U.S. strategic nuclear threats on behalf of allies would be more credible than massive, potentially self-destructive U.S. threats.³¹ These theater and strategic moves intentionally added multiple layers to the U.S. extended deterrent in the search for what Herman Kahn called a “not incredible” U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.

Yet, the United States and allies have since minimized or eliminated the multiple theater deterrent layers that reinforced the credibility of the U.S. extended strategic deterrent during the Cold War—and, with few exceptions, have not advanced new and different measures to replace them. The 2001 and 2010 *Nuclear Posture Reviews* touted U.S. advanced conventional weapons as deterrence tools

³⁰ Henry Kissinger, “The Future of NATO,” in *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

³¹ See, Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), pp. 95-96.

enabling Washington to reduce the number of, and reliance on, nuclear forces. But the United States has done very little in terms of actually deploying advanced conventional weapons; key allies have noticed. And, while Moscow disdains arms control, expands its nuclear arsenal, and increases its reliance on nuclear weapons,³² Washington inexplicably continues to prioritize the goals of constraining its strategic and theater capabilities, and reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, as emphasized in the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*. This includes continuing to embrace unmitigated vulnerability to Chinese and Russian strategic missiles, rejecting new NSNW, abiding by arms control agreements that Russia has clearly abandoned, and harboring an enduring aspiration for a No-First-Use nuclear policy that would serve only to further degrade extended nuclear deterrence credibility, as multiple allies have warned for decades. These behaviors reflect a Washington that remains largely stuck in the post-Cold War “strategic holiday,” “peace dividend,” and demonstrably vapid hope that arms control can solve serious force posture problems.

This continuing fundamental lack of Western realism contributes to the declining credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent – a structural problem for the U.S. alliance system given the hostile bloc now confronting the West. The burden for extended nuclear deterrence is largely on the U.S. strategic nuclear triad, which may be insufficiently credible for this purpose without layers of supporting deterrence capabilities because, as Henry Kissinger

³² For discussions of increasing reliance see, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 6, 2023), p. 14, available at <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reportspublications/reports-publications-2023>; and, The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, October 2022), p. 26, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

emphasized in 1979, it connotes a threat Washington “cannot possibly mean” and “should not want to execute.”

Conclusion

Washington and many allies continue to behave as if they are still in the immediate post-Cold War springtime of great expectations. It may be too late to deter a reckoning that decades of indolence and wishful thinking have effectively invited. Recognizing and addressing the threats and structural problems that now beleaguer U.S. global alliances are urgent needs. That recognition and effort must begin in Washington. Ronald Reagan’s famous Cold War speech, “A Time for Choosing,” included a line that fully pertains to Washington and allies today: “We’re at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars, and it’s been said if we lose that war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.”³³

³³ Ronald Reagan, *A Time for Choosing*, October 27, 1964, available at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

Washington: Declare Success and Lead*

NATO faces its most consequential internal test in decades. President Trump has insisted that European members must do more if the Alliance is to remain an American priority. Some allies have responded with fear and loathing as they interpret his intentions and guess what steps Washington will take next. Their expectations range from the ending of America's extended nuclear deterrent "umbrella" for allies, to U.S. withdrawal from the Alliance. Some of this speculation clearly is meant for shock value, but there understandably is renewed discussion in Europe of a European Defense Community outside of NATO, including some form of a "Europeanized" nuclear deterrent. These are not new ideas, but they are once again taken seriously. Some allies seem enthusiastic about a new model of European security; others are much more skeptical.

Before much energy and emotion is invested in speculation about a post-NATO form of security, it is reasonable to coolly consider U.S. intentions and goals. For all the uncertainty and fear in Europe, the general contours of Washington's intentions and goals are not mysterious, unreasonable, or unprecedented.

President Trump clearly believes that European NATO countries and Canada must spend more on defense and, as a consequence, provide more defensive capabilities for the Alliance. This is not a controversial view; it now appears to be shared throughout the Alliance. The remaining questions are: how much more spending, and over what timeframe? Is the responsible spending threshold at least two percent of GDP, as agreed by the Alliance in the far more benign threat context of 2006, or is it now five percent? Given contemporary threat conditions, closer to five percent

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "Washington: Declare Success and Lead," *Information Series*, No. 621 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 1, 2025).

is more reasonable than two: NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has said that, “considerably more than three percent” is needed.¹ But it is important to note that while most NATO members are now increasing their defense spending to over two percent of GDP, some wealthy allies still remain well below even that minimalist threshold, including Spain, Canada, Belgium, Italy and Portugal.²

Such lethargic, nonchalant defense spending may have been reasonable immediately after the Cold War when the general expectation in Europe and Washington was of an emerging “new world order” without great power war. Russia and China supposedly had abandoned revanchist, aggressive goals in favor of economic integration with the West. The United States and allies were quick to recoup a “peace dividend” in this easy context.

The past 15 years have shown, however, that the earlier expectation of an amicable “new world order” was hopelessly naïve. Russia’s horrendous 2022 invasion of Ukraine and related nuclear threats have simply confirmed, even for the most oblivious observers, contemporary harsh threat realities. Nevertheless, the United States and allies have been reluctant to give up their “holiday from history.”³ As a consequence, very real threats now confront the liberal democracies in Asia and Europe, including nuclear threats and a steadily deteriorating balance of power.

This inconvenient threat reality has created the basic dilemma for NATO. When it is clear that great power war is not a thing of the past, the United States is compelled to

¹ Quoted in Ivo Daalder, “NATO Without America,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 28, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/nato-without-america>.

² See NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, June 17, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm.

³ As labeled by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates in, “We face unprecedented peril,” *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2024, available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=We+face+unprecedented+peril.+The+Pentagon+and+Congress+must+change+their+ways.&aq>.

consider the cost and risk of protecting those wealthy allies that choose to remain indolent. Washington cannot care more about lethargic allies' security than they do. This "bottom line" is true regardless of who is in the White House.

Allies that remain negligent in their defense efforts run the two-fold risk of encouraging the aggression of expansionist, autocratic powers while discouraging U.S. willingness to prioritize their security. The North Atlantic Treaty allows each member to determine the scope and timing of its response to an attack against NATO. It does not oblige Washington to extend nuclear deterrence or intervene militarily regardless of an ally's negligence.⁴ Washington could send blankets and night vision goggles, and say "we wish you well," or massive fighting forces. Both options are consistent with the Treaty. If allies want to be assured of their security through NATO's collective defense and American power, they must step up to help repair the West's fading power position. They must contribute seriously to restoring a Western power balance that helps make U.S. "ironclad" commitments credible. That is a reasonable "transatlantic bargain" fully consistent with Treaty obligations. In the absence of a restored balance of power, with greatly increased European conventional forces, "ironclad" commitments must be suspect.

Fortunately, along with Washington, key allies now appear to be recovering from the post-Cold War "holiday from history" and ready to support a Western power position that deters war and makes U.S. security guarantees reasonable and credible. Even Germany, until recently a wealthy defense shirker, has now passed legislation facilitating a large increase in military spending.⁵ Allies that

⁴ As is suggested in, Daalder, "NATO Without America," *op. cit.*

⁵ See Ines Trindade Pereira, "How much do NATO members spend on defence as threat perceptions rise?" *Euronews*, March 28, 2025, available at

refuse to do so must live with the risks they have chosen to run. The allies' options are clear: continue working with the United States in an increasingly dangerous environment or move in a separate direction. The latter option would entail far greater expense and risk. Mark Rutte has rightly said that, given the unprecedented contemporary global security challenges, "this is not the time to go it alone."⁶

As allies become more responsible, Washington needs to clarify that it will not withdraw from NATO, fold the nuclear umbrella, stand idly by if responsible allies are attacked, surrender the position of Supreme Allied Commander, or permit Ukraine to be overrun. Such steps would give Putin what Moscow has been denied for over six decades, the collapse of NATO. That the United States will not take these steps is a truth that needs to be expressed, along with the sharp criticism and ostracization of allies that remain indolent and a collective burden. President Trump should, at this point, declare success. His tone and language have finally accomplished what past Presidents have unsuccessfully sought—for allies to increase their defense efforts to strengthen the deterrence of war. It has taken a Russian invasion and Washington's disruptive language to get to this point. President Trump should recognize his success and, correspondingly, make obvious that Washington will continue to meet the demands of leadership.

In conclusion, NATO's model of the past three decades is neither sustainable nor credible. NATO must adapt to new threat realities in a way that is sustainable and provides credible deterrence. This means that Washington must resist the vapid temptation to withdraw from leading the

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/28/how-much-do-nato-members-spend-on-defence-as-threat-perceptions-rise>.

⁶ Quoted in, Barbara Erling and Liti Bayer, "This is not the time to go it alone, NATO's Rutte tells US and Europe," *Reuters*, March 27, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/this-is-not-time-go-it-alone-natos-rutte-tells-us-europe-2025-03-26/>.

Alliance, on the condition that European allies step up seriously to the contemporary demands of collective security. They can no longer indulge in the luxury of lethargic defense preparations based on the illusion that there is no threat or on the presumption that America will automatically storm the beaches and roll back the aggressor for them. Such oblivious indulgence provides a tempting target for Moscow's strategy of achieving a military fait accompli accompanied by coercive nuclear threats, with support from China, North Korea and Iran. Instead, a workable model for NATO must provide a credible deterrent to Russian aggression. It demands U.S. leadership, and that allies sacrifice much more for the defense of Europe than they have for decades. With these two pillars in place, Putin will be frustrated, but Europe and America will be safer.

German Nuclear Independence From Washington?*

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.

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, "German Nuclear Independence From Washington?," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2026).

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.“

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

Most recently, German Chancellor Fredrich Merz announced that he and French President Maron 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

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 Lübke, “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>.

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>.

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

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-thirje-qe-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>.

weapons?”¹⁰ Other surveys show the majority of respondents remain opposed to German nuclear weapons.¹¹

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

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>.

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.

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 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

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.

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*

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

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.*

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 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

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

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

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

different 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 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

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/#:~>.

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 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.

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

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.

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

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 Munchner 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).

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

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.

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

President-Elect Trump and Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Whither Germany?*

The possibility that the next American president would once again be Donald Trump has been on everyone's mind in Germany for months. A much-discussed concern in Germany is that, if re-elected, Trump would not only give NATO a cold shoulder, but also end nuclear "extended deterrence" protection for America's European allies. If so, after more than 70 years under the American "nuclear umbrella," Europeans would be at the mercy of nuclear coercion by Russia, China and, prospectively, Iran. In line with this pessimistic scenario, many German observers conclude that Berlin would then have to find new ways of securing a nuclear arsenal for protection against nuclear coercion and attack. Their proposals – some serious, others not – range from German acquisition of nuclear weapons to the "Europeanization" of the French nuclear arsenal.

It is impossible to know in advance precisely what the new Trump Administration's policy will be regarding U.S. relations with allies. However, a look at President-elect Trump's first term suggests strongly that German fears of losing American extended deterrence protection are unfounded.

Trump has never made a secret of his frustration with many European allies' relatively low level of defense spending and corresponding lack of capabilities. Although he has used starker language than his predecessors, perhaps reflecting his background in New York City real estate, he basically has restated what all American presidents since Eisenhower have said. That is, unbalanced burden-sharing

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in terms of security policy, which de facto amounts to the United States heavily subsidizing European security, is unacceptable to the American people in the long term and is unsustainable. This is particularly true now given America's global responsibilities; Moscow's and Beijing's entente and aggressive designs; the looming "axis of upheaval," including Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea; and, the serious security and cost problems associated with the largely uncontrolled mass, illegal immigration on America's southern border. These developments have created enormous new security problems and costs for the United States.

In this context, Europeans who still believe that they do not need to spend even two percent of their own gross national product on defense do not understand the times. No administration in Washington, Democrat or Republican, will be able to tolerate continuing free riding by some allies. This is an inconvenient reality for Europeans and criticism of European and other allies will continue if they do not provide at least the increased resources for their defense that they themselves have promised. Berlin, whose "Zeitenwende" (an epochal shift in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine) is threatening to fail, must be prepared for this criticism if it continues to underfund the Bundeswehr. Trump's past sharp language ultimately led many other allies to increase their investment in conventional forces; there is no reason to expect him to be more gentle now if Berlin does not respond to the times.

However, it is a fundamental mistake to conclude that Trump's criticism of European defense underfunding signals that he will remove the American nuclear umbrella over allies. There was no move to do so during Trump's first term in office, and the overwhelming reasons for America's extended deterrent have only increased with the expansion of Russian and Chinese threats. For example, for many decades, the American extended nuclear deterrent

has ensured that allies in Europe and Asia have not had to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. Effective extended deterrence is key to the long-standing U.S. goal of nuclear non-proliferation. This logic has not changed.

It also should be recalled that the previous Trump Administration increased funds to strengthen the U.S. extended deterrent over allies. The Trump Administration's 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, its key nuclear policy document, initiated two new sea-based nuclear weapons to help prevent Moscow from exploiting its dramatic nuclear superiority in Europe either politically or militarily. There was considerable opposition within the Democrat Party to these new nuclear options at the time, but a political consensus appears to be emerging that the American nuclear arsenal must be adapted for the continued protection of allies in Europe and Asia. In other words: the "nuclear umbrella" will remain open and likely even strengthened.

Does this mean that Berlin can now relax in the belief that it no longer has to worry about nuclear deterrence? Of course not. There is continuing risk and burden-sharing in the nuclear field. Germany plays an important role in NATO's so-called "nuclear sharing." Along with other allies, Germany provides aircraft—soon to be the ultra-modern F-35—that reportedly can carry American nuclear weapons. This makes Germany an important factor in NATO's nuclear deterrent in Europe. It is not only the new "front line" Eastern European allies that want Germany to continue to play this role, but also Washington. Fortunately, Berlin may finally be facing up to uncomfortable looming nuclear threat realities and is no longer trying to hide behind idealistic disarmament virtue signaling.

In sum, a second term of Donald Trump may not be convenient for some allies. He is likely to continue to call out laggards regarding the urgency of more balanced

transatlantic burden-sharing. However, the U.S. nuclear protection provided to Europe almost certainly will remain in place, and likely will be strengthened. Germany, therefore, would do well to speculate less about nuclear alternatives and focus instead on continuing its role in NATO's nuclear deterrent, while strengthening its conventional military capabilities, including its defense industry, and deployment of longer-range conventional weapons. That is a contribution to the Alliance that all of Germany's allies have a right to expect from Berlin.

How to Unsettle an Alliance: Subordinate Extended Deterrence to Antiquated Arms Control Initiatives*

Russia's war in Europe and China's expansionist, militarist foreign policy, and the quasi-alliance of these two predators seeking to re-order the globe,¹ have put the long-standing U.S. goals of extended deterrence and allied assurance under considerable strain. A complicating factor in this challenging context is the continuing U.S. propensity to pursue initiatives that appear to show relative disregard for allied concerns regarding extended deterrence—occasionally, it appears, in an effort to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons; this at a time when opponents are placing ever greater prominence on their nuclear capabilities for coercive and war-fighting purposes.

Illustrative of this propensity are the cases of Washington's retirement of the 1980s vintage sea-based nuclear cruise missile, the Tomahawk Land Attack missile (TLAM-N), contemporary opposition to a new sea-based cruise missile, and repeated cycles of expressed interest in the adoption of "sole purpose" or "No-First-Use" (NFU) policies. In these cases, U.S. moves and expressions of

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¹ See for example, Robyn Dixon, "Visions of a new order as Xi pays state visit to Russia," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2023, p. A1, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/19/putin-xi-russia-china-world-order/>; Jonathan Tirone, "US Sees New Era of Nuclear Risk Through China-Russia Cooperation," *Bloomberg News*, May 5, 2023, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-05/us-sees-a-new-era-of-nuclear-risk-dawning-in-china-russia-cooperation>; and, Dmitry Trenin, "Here's why Xi's Moscow visit is a key moment in the struggle to end US hegemony," *RT*, March 20, 2023, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/573273-xis-moscow-visit/>.

policy goals conflict with repeatedly-expressed allied concerns that these U.S. initiatives threaten to degrade the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent—a key to their security positions. These cases illustrate well allied perceptions and expectations regarding extended deterrence and Washington’s apparent willingness to subordinate allies’ concerns to American domestic political pressures. They underscore the need to improve two-way understanding and communication about the realities of extended deterrence and assurance requirements as Western security measures must adapt to a dynamic threat environment. Without such an understanding, smoothing out the “rollercoaster” of U.S. and allies’ relations will be a matter of luck rather than a deliberate effort.

Washington faces ongoing, unprecedented challenges in understanding, shaping and meeting extended deterrence and assurance requirements in its bid to sustain its alliance system—which is critical for U.S. security. The United States must adapt its approach to extended deterrence and assurance and effectively communicate the credibility of that deterrent to allies who are in diverse threat contexts and hold equally diverse threat perceptions. Failing to do so could easily lead to the unraveling of the alliance system that Washington has sustained at great cost over generations. And, if some allies increasingly feel compelled to consider independent means of deterrence, it could also drive a cascade of nuclear proliferation that overturns the decades-long U.S. non-proliferation goal.

The following presents two post-Cold War case studies that illustrate well allied interpretations of the requirements for extended deterrence—and Washington’s apparent occasional willingness to subordinate allied extended deterrence concerns to its pursuit of an “anti-nuclear” agenda that is, at best, dubious in the contemporary threat context.

Eliminating TLAM-N Despite Allied Concerns

Key allies highly valued the U.S. TLAM-N system for its contribution to extended deterrence and assurance—two enduring U.S. goals. Nevertheless, it was taken off Navy ships, attack submarines, and land-based naval aircraft after George H. W. Bush announced the first *Presidential Nuclear Initiative* in 1991.² While the Navy withdrew TLAM-N by mid-1992 and eliminated the nuclear mission for surface ships, it retained the ability to return TLAM-N to deployment on attack submarines,³ reportedly within 30 days, as a hedge against the potential deterioration in the security environment.⁴

The 2009 bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (the Perry-Schlesinger Commission) concluded that “extended deterrence relies heavily on the deployment of nuclear cruise missiles on some Los Angeles class attack submarines” and that “some U.S. allies in Asia would be very concerned by TLAM-N retirement.”⁵ Japanese then-Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada wrote to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that, “...it is necessary that trust in this deterrence be backed up

² Susan Koch, “The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992,” Policy Brief No. 23, *Toda Peace Institute*, p. 3, available at https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-23_susan-koch_presidential-nuclear-initiatives-1991-92.pdf.

³ Paul Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitin, “Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N),” In Focus, *Congressional Research Service*, Updated December 16, 2022, p. 1, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12084>.

⁴ John Harvey and Robert Soofer, “Strengthening Deterrence with SLCM-N,” *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, November 5, 2022, p. 4, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Strengthening-Deterrence-with-SLCM-N.pdf>.

⁵ William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, *The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), p. 26, available at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/America%27s_Strategic_Posture_Aut_h_Ed_0.pdf.

by sufficient capability” and expressed a desire “to receive ongoing explanations of your government’s extended deterrence policy, including any impact this might have on extended deterrence for Japan and *how this could be supplemented*” should TLAM-N be retired.⁶ Okada’s statement is indicative of the importance the Japanese Government attributed to TLAM-N for extended deterrence, even as it would not come out in its direct support, for understandable reasons.

TLAM-N remained in storage and potentially deployable until the Obama Administration announced a decision to retire and eliminate the missile altogether in its 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (NPR).⁷ That report stated, “this system serves a redundant purpose in the U.S. nuclear stockpile” and that “the deterrence and assurance roles of TLAM/N can be adequately substituted by these other means.”⁸ The elimination of TLAM-N was a subject of “controversy” in Japan and in Washington, with some arguing that the retirement of the system would undermine allied assurance and extended deterrence, and others praising President Obama for taking a unilateral step toward nuclear disarmament.⁹ Some allies were unprecedentedly open, and on occasion quite direct, in expressing concern both with the elimination of TLAM-N and the subsequent absence of any apparent new U.S.

⁶ Katsuya Okada, “Letter to the US State Secretary Hillary Clinton,” December 24, 2009, available at https://icnndngoJapan.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/20091224_okada_letter_en.pdf. (Emphasis added).

⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. 28, 46, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ Yukio Satoh, *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Japan’s Security*, Livermore Papers on Global Security, No. 2, October 2017, p. 38, available at <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/satoh-report-final.pdf>.

capabilities to replace the deterrent effect they attributed to TLAM-N.

The fact that TLAM-N was in storage rather than on surface ships reportedly came as an unwelcome surprise to U.S. allies in Asia, particularly in South Korea and Japan.¹⁰ Both countries reportedly “objected strenuously” to the announcement of a decision to retire TLAM-N because, in their eyes and in their assessments of Russia and China, alternative U.S. strategic systems with high yields, e.g., intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, were not sufficiently credible to provide extended deterrence reliably in the case of a regional conflict.¹¹ In short, some U.S. allies judged that TLAM-N provided a more credible deterrent capability, thus making it a valuable contributor to their assurance.¹² Despite allied concerns and the Obama Administration’s commitment to allied consultations prior to changes in U.S. nuclear posture, it moved forward with the decision to retire the TLAM-N, which the Navy finished executing in 2013.¹³

Only five years later, the Trump Administration’s 2018 NPR effectively reversed the decision to forego TLAM-N capabilities by calling for the development of a new low-yield, nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).¹⁴ The NPR identified “the increasing need for flexible and low-yield options to strengthen deterrence and assurance” for allies among reasons for the reversal.¹⁵ Even before the 2018 NPR was made public, former senior

¹⁰ Kevin Chilton, “On US Nuclear Deterrence,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2017), p. 9, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26271631.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A669bccdfe65c13b65f9589cec42c45b7&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ Kerr and Nikitin, p. 1, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, 2018, p. 54, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

officials, including from the Obama Administration, had called for the reintroduction of the TLAM-N capability as a response to Russia's Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty violations.¹⁶ The Trump Administration reportedly valued a prospective new SLCM-N for strengthening assurance and extended deterrence.¹⁷

The Biden Administration has since sought strenuously to cancel the contemporary SLCM-N program, both in fiscal year (FY) 2023 and FY2024 budget requests, but Department of Defense and congressional support for the missile saved it in FY2023.¹⁸ The House version of the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act mandates the Secretary of Defense to establish SLCM-N as a program of record, giving it a more permanent place in the Department of Defense acquisition cycle.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the future of the SLCM-N now appears problematic.²⁰

¹⁶ Sandy Winnefeld and James Miller, "Bring Back the Nuclear Tomahawks," *Proceedings*, Vol. 143, No. 4 (May 2017), available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017/may/bring-back-nuclear-tomahawks>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Strengthening Deterrence and Reducing Nuclear Risks, Part II: The Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N)*, Arms Control and International Security Papers, Vol. I, No. 11, July 23, 2020, pp. 1, 4, available at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/T-Paper_SCLM-N-CLEARED_T-Final.pdf.

¹⁸ Valerie Isinna, "Biden administration kills Trump-era nuclear cruise missile program," *Breaking Defense*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/biden-administration-kills-trump-era-nuclear-cruise-missile-program/>; and Bryant Harris, "GOP moves to instate sea-launched cruise missile nuclear program," *Defense News*, June 21, 2023, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/budget/2023/06/22/gop-moves-to-instate-sea-launched-cruise-missile-nuclear-program/>.

¹⁹ Robert Peters, "Nuclear Forces and Missile Defense in the 2024 HASC NDAA: On the Right Path – But More Needed," *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief*, No. 5324, July 18, 2023, p. 3, available at <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/IB5324.pdf>.

²⁰ See, Robert Soofer and Walter B. Slocombe, "Congress Should Fund the Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, August 3, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/congress-should-fund-the-nuclear-sea-launched-cruise-missile/#:~:text=As%20negotiations%20continue%20in%20the,support%20international%20peace%20and%20security.>

The TLAM-N and SLCM-N case is illustrative of Washington's occasional, apparent subordination of allied views regarding extended deterrence and assurance—seemingly in favor of satisfying a domestic political constituency generally opposed to U.S. nuclear capabilities. This case also illustrates the inconsistency with which the United States pursues capabilities that allies deem important—with Washington declaring them redundant at one time, necessary shortly thereafter, only to become the object of contemporary intra-governmental dispute. Such inconsistency “is a problem. It undermines extended deterrence, and it could undermine assurance too,” pointed out Sugio Takahashi, Head of the Defense Policy Division of the Policy Studies Department at the National Institute for Defense Studies in Tokyo, Japan.²¹ It diminishes U.S. credibility and creates avoidable challenges to assuring allies and extending deterrence.

NFU, “Sole Purpose,” and the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*

For over a decade, allies have consistently expressed sharp, substantive opposition to U.S. proposals for a NFU or “sole purpose” nuclear policy—two different titles for essentially the same policy constraint on U.S. deterrent strategies.²² This allied opposition appears to be based largely on understandable fears that the adoption of such policies would weaken extended deterrence²³—a fear

²¹ Zoom interview conducted on August 9, 2022; quoted in Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2022), p. 73, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/OP-Vol.-2-No.-10.pdf>.

²² See the discussion in, Matthew Costlow, *A Net Assessment of “No First Use” and “Sole Purpose” Nuclear Policies, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2021), available at, <https://nipp.org/papers/a-net-assessment-of-no-first-use-and-sole-purpose-nuclear-policies/>.

²³ Sayuri Romei, “Japan and the Nuclear Challenge in a New Era of Rising Tensions,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (Fall 2019), pp. 70-71,

almost certain to be accurate in plausible circumstances.²⁴ Yet, some U.S. administrations have repeatedly expressed interest in NFU or “sole purpose”—raising questions among allies about U.S. intentions and the continuing credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent.

In 2009, President Obama famously emphasized America’s commitment to nuclear disarmament,²⁵ stating that Washington would take “concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons” and reduce “the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.”²⁶ As one of these steps, the Obama Administration reportedly considered adopting an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy during the lead-up to the 2010 NPR, and again toward the end of the administration.

Ultimately, the 2010 NPR itself rejected “a universal policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons” but stated that the administration “will work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.”²⁷ This approach included strengthening conventional forces and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. national security strategy,

available at

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JIPA/journals/Volume-02_Issue-3/04-Romei.pdf.

²⁴ See Franklin C. Miller and Keith B. Payne, “The dangers of no-first-use,” *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, August 22, 2016, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2016/08/the-dangers-of-no-first-use/>; and, Keith Payne, “Once Again: Why ‘No-First-Use’ is a Bad Idea,” *Information Series*, National Institute for Public Policy, No. 408, July 5, 2016, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/payne-keith-b-once-again-why-a-no-first-use-policy-is-a-bad-very-bad-idea-information-series-no-408/.

²⁵ Office of the White House, “Remarks By President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered,” April 5, 2009, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. viii, 16, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

strengthening regional security architectures, and eliminating chemical and biological weapons.²⁸ The 2010 NPR explicitly recognized the importance the administration attributed to allies in these decisions when it stated it would “consult with allies and partners regarding the conditions under which it would be prudent to shift to a policy under which deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.”²⁹ Allied concerns appear to have played a significant role in the administration’s rejection of the policy for the time.³⁰ Robert Einhorn, Special Advisor for Nonproliferation and Arms Control at the Department of State, said at a rollout event for the 2010 NPR, “In our discussions with allies and friends around the world—and we had many frequent contacts with those friends—they indicated to us that such a radical shift [sole purpose] in [sic] U.S. approach could be unsettling to them.”³¹

Despite changes in governments, allied opposition to “sole purpose” and NFU policies remains remarkably consistent, even amid occasional rhetorical expressions in support of nuclear disarmament. In a 2009 letter, then-Foreign Minister Okada lauded President Obama’s calls for a world without nuclear weapons and expressed interest in commencing discussions about a “sole purpose” nuclear weapons policy.³² Yet, Japan has aggressive opponents and relies on the U.S. extended deterrent, “with nuclear

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁰ Brad Roberts, “Debating Nuclear No-first-use, Again,” *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (June-July 2019), p. 43, available at <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Debating-Nuclear-No-first-use-Again.pdf>.

³¹ Robert J. Einhorn, as quoted in, “DoD’s Nuclear Posture Review Rollout Briefing,” *Defense.gov*, April 7, 2010, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/FPC_4-7-10_Nuclear_Posture_Review.pdf.

³² Okada, *Letter to the U.S. State Secretary Hillary Clinton*, December 24, 2009, unofficial translation, *op. cit.*

deterrence at its core.”³³ Tokyo describes current threats as “an era of crisis” not seen since the Second World War.³⁴ Given the dangerous trends in Japan’s neighborhood, particularly including the Russian, Chinese, and North Korean promotion of nuclear capabilities and threats, successive Japanese governments *have rejected calls* for the United States to adopt an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy, and occasionally expressed an interest in discussing the policy.³⁵

The Second Obama Administration

Toward the end of his second term, the Obama Administration reportedly again considered implementing an NFU declaratory policy. A group of Democratic Senators urged President Obama to adopt an NFU declaratory policy “to bolster U.S. national security and advance the commitment” the President made in Prague in 2009.³⁶ The idea again had significant support within the disarmament community, disappointed by President Obama’s rejection

³³ Ministry of Defense, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond*, December 18, 2018, Provisional Translation, p. 8, available at https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf.

³⁴ As stated in Japan’s 2023 defense white paper, quoted in, [Bill Gertz](#), “Threat from China prompts major military buildup by Japan, including long-range strike weapons,” *The Washington Times*, July 28, 2023, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jul/28/threat-china-prompts-major-military-buildup-japan/#:~:text=A%20security%20E2%80%9Ccrisis%20E2%80%9D%20mainly%20posed,strategy%20report%20made%20public%20Friday>.

³⁵ Nobuyasu Abe, “No First Use: How to Overcome Japan’s Great Divide,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2018), p. 137, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/25751654.2018.1456042?needAccess=true&role=button>.

³⁶ *Letter to President Barack Obama*, U.S. Senate, July 20, 2016, available at https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/9/6/96cf16f8-2e75-4a6d-a71d-b7ebd7404296/39888086CF8EC760E72A410351FE05C6.letter-to-president-obama-on-nuclear-weapons.pdf.

of NFU and “sole purpose” in his first term.³⁷ By then, however, it was blatantly clear that the “restart” the Obama Administration attempted with Russia had come to naught as Moscow invaded yet another country, this time Ukraine, in 2014. The invasion was Russia’s second in six years (Russia invaded Georgia in 2008) and reflected the worsening security environment that made “sole purpose” or NFU policies less likely to gain traction.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the administration’s reconsideration ran into opposition from U.S. allies and reportedly prompted several of them, including Japan, South Korea, France and the United Kingdom, to lobby the Obama Administration against the change.³⁸ While nuclear disarmament advocate Joe Cirincione mocked these allies as “nervous nellies,” as if they did not understand their own security requirements,³⁹ the Obama Administration’s continued rejection of a “sole purpose” or NFU declaration had extensive support among experts and policy-makers in allied countries and the United States.

For example, the administration’s proposal reportedly was opposed by several high-level cabinet officials, including the then-Secretaries of Defense, Energy, and State.⁴⁰ Then-Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James also publicly expressed concerns about the policy, and several other high-level military officials rejected it.⁴¹ Allies

³⁷ Roberts, “Debating Nuclear No-first-use, Again,” op. cit., p. 45.

³⁸ Josh Rogin, “U.S. allies unite to block Obama’s nuclear ‘legacy,’” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2016, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/allies-unite-to-block-an-obama-legacy/2016/08/14/cdb8d8e4-60b9-11e6-8e45-477372e89d78_story.html?utm_term=.c0e0d6c4d694.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Paul Sonne, Gordon Lubold, and Carol Lee, “‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Proposal Assailed by U.S. Cabinet Officials, Allies,” *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2016, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/no-first-use-nuclear-policyproposal-assailed-by-u-s-cabinet-officials-allies-1471042014>.

⁴¹ Aaron Mehta, “US Air Force Secretary Skeptical of No-First-Use Nuclear Policy,” *Defense News*, August 3, 2016, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2016/08/03/us-air-force-secretary->

reportedly learned about the administration's discussion of potentially implementing an NFU declaratory policy from the news, which, if true, indicates poor communication on the U.S. side despite the 2010 NPR's explicit commitment to improving communications about these matters with allies.⁴² Japan, under a different government than during President Obama's first term, and South Korea, remained opposed to the NFU nuclear weapons declaratory policy and, according to experts, "would likely have deep concerns about a sole purpose commitment."⁴³

In January 2017, then-Vice President Joseph Biden stated he believed the administration had "made enough progress that deterring—and if necessary, retaliating—against—a nuclear attack should be the *sole purpose* of the U.S. nuclear arsenal."⁴⁴ While the outgoing Obama Administration ultimately again decided against significant changes in the U.S. declaratory policy, the Biden Administration returned to the cause four years later.

NFU, "Sole Purpose," and the Biden Administration

Candidate Biden continued to support an NFU nuclear declaratory policy during his presidential campaign for the 2020 elections. In 2019, two prominent Democrats, the House Armed Services Committee Chairman, Adam Smith and Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Senate Armed Services

skeptical-of-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/; and, Bill Gertz, "Military Warns Against Nuclear Policy Change," *The Washington Free Beacon*, July 15, 2016, available at <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/military-warns-nuclear-policy-change/>.

⁴² Rogin, "U.S. allies unite to block Obama's nuclear 'legacy,'" op. cit.

⁴³ Richard C. Bush and Jonathan D. Pollack, "Before moving to 'no first use,' think about Northeast Asia," *The Brookings Institution*, July 20, 2016, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/07/20/before-moving-to-no-first-use-think-about-northeast-asia/>.

⁴⁴ Office of the White House, "Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security," January 12, 2017, available at Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security | whitehouse.gov (archives.gov). (Emphasis added).

Committee member, introduced a “No First Use Act,” which would have legally prohibited the United States from using nuclear weapons first in a conflict.⁴⁵ The bill did not make it into law but it was an indication that a “sole purpose” policy would become a prominent part of the 2020 Democratic Party platform.

President Biden’s team members spoke in favor of an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy prior to joining the administration, including then-nominated (and later confirmed) Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security.⁴⁶ President Biden himself reiterated his belief that “*the sole purpose* of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack.”⁴⁷ He said he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”

During the preparation of the 2022 NPR, the Biden Administration reportedly sent a questionnaire to allies asking them about their views regarding U.S. adoption of “sole purpose” and “NFU” policies.⁴⁸ Allied responses apparently were overwhelmingly negative, including from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and Australia.⁴⁹ As noted, successive Japanese governments

⁴⁵ Joe Gould, “Warren, Smith introduce bill to bar US from using nuclear weapons first,” *Defense News*, January 30, 2019, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2019/01/30/warren-smith-introduce-bill-to-bar-us-from-using-nuclear-weapons-first/>.

⁴⁶ Bryan Bender, “‘This is going to be quite a show’: Biden’s arms control team eyes nuclear policy overhaul,” *Politico*, January 27, 2021, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/27/biden-nuclear-weapons-policy-463335>.

⁴⁷ Joseph Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>. (Emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Demetri Sevastopulo and Henry Foy, “Allies lobby Biden to prevent shift to ‘no first use’ of nuclear arms,” *Financial Times*, October 29, 2021, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/8b96a60a-759b-4972-ae89-c8ffb36878e>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

have opposed U.S. initiatives to adopt such declaratory policies.⁵⁰ Discussing the issue, an Australian expert noted that when “doubts have arisen about US commitments in the past, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and even Australia have toyed with their own nuclear weapons programs,” and that there “is no reason to assume they will not do so again.”⁵¹ Jüri Luik, Estonia’s permanent representative to NATO, publicly commented that in Estonia’s opinion, the present nuclear posture should be maintained, i.e., the United States should continue to reject NFU or “sole purpose.”⁵² Ben Wallace, British Secretary of State for Defence, spoke out specifically against changes in U.S. declaratory nuclear policy toward NFU and “sole purpose.”⁵³

To its great credit, the Biden Administration did not adopt NFU or “sole purpose” in its 2022 NPR, despite apparent domestic pressure to do so and endorsement in the 2020 party platform. Negative allied and public responses appear to have contributed to the administration’s foregoing NFU or “sole purpose.” Nevertheless, and undoubtedly to some allies’ distress, the 2022 NPR identified a “sole purpose” policy as a continuing U.S. goal⁵⁴—signaling an enduring aspiration that seems

⁵⁰ Abe, “No First Use: How to Overcome Japan’s Great Divide,” op. cit., p. 137.

⁵¹ Andrew O’Neil, “A ‘No-First-Use’ doctrine would undermine American nuclear deterrence,” *The Interpreter*, January 21, 2021, available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/no-first-use-doctrine-would-undermine-american-nuclear-deterrence>.

⁵² Joe Gould, “Estonia’s envoy to NATO talks Russia, Afghanistan and US nuclear policy,” *Defense News*, November 24, 2021, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/2021/11/24/estonias-envoy-to-nato-on-the-russia-crisis-us-nuclear-policy-and-afghanistan-pullout/>.

⁵³ Ben Wallace, *Web Event at the American Enterprise Institute*, July 13, 2021, available at <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210713-UK-Secretary-of-State-for-Defence-Ben-Wallace-discusses-strategic-priorities.pdf?x91208>.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 9, available at

wholly obtuse to repeatedly-expressed allied concerns—and to the need to *reinforce* credible extended deterrence in the contemporary threat context.

From a U.S. perspective, the apparent fact that over years Washington has seriously considered the adoption of NFU or “sole purpose,” but on each occasion ultimately did not do so, may be seen as exemplary U.S. deference to allied concerns. From an allied perspective, however, it can only be disturbing that the same policy battle with Washington must be fought again and again to stem an initiative that so obviously is contrary to the need for credible extended deterrence and allied assurance—an initiative that continues to be a stated U.S. policy aspiration. Allies must consider their options if they are unsuccessful the next time this familiar cycle reemerges.

The rise of revisionist nuclear-armed states, Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the prominent, coercive role Russia’s nuclear weapons play in this conflict (including shaping U.S. and allied choices with respect to the kinds of weapons they provide to Ukraine and when), hopefully will finally bring to an end consideration of NFU and “sole purpose” policies. The conflict makes obvious Russia’s coercive nuclear threats intended to provide cover for an expansionist war on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II—and Moscow’s potential willingness to employ nuclear weapons. Significant asymmetries in U.S. and Russia’s nuclear forces, particularly in short-range nuclear weapons, and China’s own nuclear threats and effort to reach parity or more on the strategic level, call into question whether the current and planned U.S. nuclear force posture is sufficient to sustain credible deterrence of adversaries and assure allies in the coming years. Amid these developments, the perennial political pressure for “sole purpose” or NFU in the United States can only be

described as an archaic vestige of a time when a benign “new world order” and great power amity were fully expected.⁵⁵ Suffice to say that the actual world order now contrasts sharply with Washington’s past sanguine expectations.

Conclusion

The TLAM-N/SLCM-N case study illustrates well the frequent differences in U.S. and allied perspectives regarding the requirements for extended deterrence and assurance, and Washington’s occasional apparent willingness to subordinate allies’ views—seemingly in deference to domestic political constituencies. Further illustrative of this tendency is the fact that some presidential administrations continue to show interest in NFU or “sole purpose” nuclear policies—despite the fact that U.S. allies and partners strongly oppose them as being detrimental to extended deterrence. Continued U.S. attraction to antiquated “anti-nuclear” initiatives likely to degrade extended deterrence clearly is not the only source of the U.S.-Allied incongruence, but it surely is an avoidable cause.

The different U.S. and allied perceptions and expectations regarding assurance and extended deterrence require an improved two-way understanding of the contemporary realities of deterrence and assurance. Mutual recognition of those realities and their requirements would contribute both to the continued viability of the U.S. alliance structure and to the goal of nuclear non-proliferation. The

⁵⁵ See, for example, President George H. W. Bush’s remarks to a joint session of Congress, quoted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,’” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

alternative contributes to unforced errors and alliance strains.

Once Again: Why a “No-First-Use” Policy is a Bad, Very Bad Idea *

The Obama Administration reportedly is seriously considering adopting a “No-First-Use” (NFU) nuclear policy.¹ A prospective NFU policy would be a US commitment never to be the first to use nuclear weapons – as opposed to existing policy that retains some ambiguity regarding when and if the US would use nuclear weapons. An NFU policy would eliminate that ambiguity for US adversaries. It sounds warm and progressive, and has long been a policy proposal of disarmament activists. NFU has, however, been rejected by all previous Democratic and Republican administrations for very sound reasons, most recently by the Obama Administration in 2010. The most important of these reasons is that retaining a degree of US nuclear ambiguity helps to deter war while adopting an NFU policy would undercut the deterrence of war.

How so? Under the existing policy of ambiguity, potential aggressors such as Russia, China, North Korea or Iran must contemplate the reality that if they attack us or our allies, they risk possible US nuclear retaliation. There is no doubt whatsoever that this risk of possible US nuclear retaliation has deterred war and the escalation of conflicts. In fact, the percentage of the world population lost to war has fallen dramatically since US nuclear deterrence was

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne, “Once Again: Why a “No-First-Use” Policy is a Bad, Very Bad Idea,” *Information Series*, No. 408 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 5, 2016).

¹ Bruce Blair, “How Obama Could Revolutionize Nuclear Weapons Strategy Before He Goes,” *Politico.com*, June 22, 2016, available at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/barack-obama-nuclear-weapons-213981>.

established after World War II.² That is an historic accomplishment.

The fatal flaw of the warm and progressive-sounding NFU proposal is that it tells would-be aggressors that they do not have to fear US nuclear retaliation even if they attack us or our allies with advanced conventional, chemical, and/or biological weapons. They would risk US nuclear retaliation only if they attack with nuclear weapons. As long as they use non-nuclear forces, a US NFU policy would provide aggressors with a free pass to avoid the risk now posed by the US nuclear deterrent.

Promising potential aggressors that they can use modern conventional, chemical or biological weapons against us or our allies without fear of possible US nuclear retaliation will encourage some to perceive greater license to do precisely that. Numerous historical case studies demonstrate without a doubt that some aggressors look for such openings to undertake their military moves to overturn a status quo they deem intolerable. They do not need to see a risk-free path to pursue aggression, only a path that allows them some vision of success, however improbable that vision may seem to others. The great advantage of current US nuclear policy is that the US nuclear deterrent helps to shut down the possibility that would-be aggressors contemplate such paths.

A US NFU policy would be particularly dangerous at a time when both Russia and China may be armed with chemical and biological weapons and are pursuing expansionist policies in Europe and Asia, respectively, to overturn the status quo.³ Russia is by far the strongest

² Richard Mies, "Strategic Deterrence in the 21st Century," *Undersea Warfare*, No. 48 (Spring 2012), p. 17, available at http://www.public.navy.mil/subfor/underseawarfaremagazine/Issues/PDF/USW_Spring_2012.pdf.

³ On Russia and China's compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention see, U.S. Department of State, *2015 Report on Adherence to and Compliance With Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*

military power in Europe. It has moved repeatedly against neighboring states since 2008, forcibly changing established borders in Europe for the first time since World War II and issuing explicit nuclear first-use threats in the process. Only several months ago, Russia reportedly rehearsed the invasion of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark in a military exercise involving 33,000 troops.⁴ In Asia, China is the strongest military power and is expanding its reach against US allies, including by building and militarizing islands in the South China Sea. At a time when key US allies face unprecedented threats from powerful neighbors, the US should not reduce the calculation of risks Russia and China must confront in their respective expansionist drives by adopting a US NFU policy. Indeed, saying so should be considered a breathtaking understatement in a world in which aggressors still exist, as do advanced conventional, chemical and possibly biological weapons, and another world war using “only” such modern non-nuclear weapons could cause death levels far beyond the 80-100 million souls lost in World Wars I and II.

In addition, the Obama Administration declares nuclear nonproliferation to be its highest nuclear policy goal.⁵ Yet, US adoption of an NFU policy would mean that the United States could no longer assure allies with its nuclear

(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2015), State.gov, available at <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/2015/243224.htm>; On Russia and China's compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention see, *U.S. Department of State, Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2005), pp. 54, 55, 58-61, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/52113.pdf>.

⁴ David Blair, “Russian Forces ‘Practiced Invasion of Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden,’” *The Telegraph*, June 26, 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11702328/Russian-forces-practised-invasion-of-Norway-Finland-Denmark-and-Sweden.html>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2010), pp. iii-iv, available at http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

umbrella. No longer would their foes confront the deterring risk of US nuclear retaliation should those foes consider a devastating conventional, chemical or biological attack on US allies and partners. Pulling down the US nuclear umbrella so precipitously would compel some allies and partners who have foregone nuclear weapons in the past, on the basis of the promised US nuclear deterrence umbrella, to consider acquiring their own nuclear weapons. This could include South Korea and Japan. As such, additional nuclear proliferation is virtually an inevitable consequence of a US NFU policy.

Now is not the time for US adoption of an NFU policy; the risks of doing so are too great. Such was the unanimous conclusion of the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission in its 2009 report: the United States, “should not abandon calculated ambiguity by adopting a policy of no-first-use,” because doing so “would be unsettling to some U.S. allies. It would also undermine the potential contributions of nuclear weapons to the deterrence of attack by biological weapons.”⁶ In 2010, the Obama Administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly agreed with this conclusion. Why change now? Since then, global security threats facing the United States and allies have only increased, as, correspondingly, have the reasons for continuing the decades-long Republican and Democratic consensus against an NFU policy.

⁶ William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, *The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institutes of Peace Press, 2009), p. 36, available at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/America%27s_Strategic_Posture_Aut_h_Ed_0.pdf.

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