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Arms Control, Allied Assurance, and Russia's War in Ukraine

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With

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	v
Artificial Intelligence Arms Control Would be a Disastrous Mistake.....	1
Putin’s New START Offer: We Won’t Get Fooled Again.....	17
Russia Is at War with the West	27
Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine’s Defeat.....	37
European Allies’ Views of Russia’s Nuclear Policy after the Escalation of Its War in Ukraine	57
What Do Russia’s Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?	71
U.S. Domestic Polarization and Allied Assurance	89
Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy	103
Emerging Challenges to Extended Deterrence, Assurance and the Future of U.S. Alliances	119
About the Authors	141

Preface

This *Occasional Paper* is a compilation of nine *Information Series* on arms control, allied assurance, and extended deterrence. This work is a testament to the folly of the end of the Cold War history optimism that left the United States and allies inadequately prepared to deal with revisionist powers willing to use military force to change the post-Cold War national security order. The adjustment to new realities has proven to be difficult and costly. Sustained investments in military capabilities are required to secure U.S. security and the integrity of its alliance structure. U.S. allies, for their part, must increase their defense spending in the face of Russia's and China's manifest threats to their interests and territorial integrity.

Arms control is as useful a tool as ever for dictators seeking to generate a false sense of security among gullible Western publics and officials—that is to say, for the U.S. purposes of preserving and defending the status quo, not useful at all. That is how Washington and its allies ought to see Russia's President Vladimir Putin's latest offer to abide by the now expired New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) nuclear force limits. Russia violated the treaty for years prior to its expiration; the offer to continue to observe the treaty limits is designed to restrain the United States while Russia keeps expanding its nuclear arsenal. Russia's nuclear threats gave cover to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and delayed and limited Western help, even if they were not able to prevent all types of support for Ukraine.

Two fundamental factors have changed since New START entered into force in 2011. First, China's nuclear expansion was not even a blip on Washington's radar then; and second, Russia proved just how delusional the Obama Administration's "reset" policy was when it invaded Ukraine in 2014 (after invading Georgia in 2008). Russia's

large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is the most serious challenge to Europe's national security order since the end of the Cold War. Just like "The Soviet Union had periodically rescued us from ourselves by some act of singular brutality to remind us what they were really like and that we couldn't let our guard down,"¹ Russia's aggression temporarily poured cold water on the advocacy of but the most devoted proponents of arms control.

The United States and its allies should by now have no doubts that Russia is at war with them. Beyond Ukraine, Russia is causing hundreds of million dollars' worth of damage to NATO states' economies, attacks public discourse through its influence operations, and plots acts of sabotage and assassinations against NATO countries' citizens. The term "hybrid warfare" often used for such activities has only served to obscure Russia's nature as a revisionist, imperialist, and nuclear-armed adversary and artificially decreases the urgency with which NATO states must counter Russia's activities.

For the United States to avoid falling into the same damaging arms control pattern, its approach will have to shift, foremost by recognizing that the process has no innate power to change adversaries' political goals and that there are no universally shared principles that could rescue the United States from the consequences of the brutal logic of confrontation with determined adversaries. China's efforts at artificial intelligence (AI) "arms control" should be seen in this light. China is proposing AI "arms control" to restrain the United States and create space for the Chinese companies to catch up to U.S. technology, and then to drive out U.S. businesses by having Beijing massively subsidize Chinese companies.

A Russian victory in Ukraine would destroy Europe's security architecture and threaten NATO's Eastern states in

¹ Brent Scowcroft, "Brent Scowcroft Oral History Part I," November 12-13, 1999, <https://millercenter.org/seducing-us-kindness>.

particular. Russia's ability to conquer other states would be strengthened by Ukraine's resources. Russia's economy is now mobilized to serve the needs of the military, and Russia's capacity to produce weapons remains significant, particularly considering it is supported by China. A Russian victory in Ukraine cannot be seen in isolation, because it would embolden revisionist dictators around the world and further strain the U.S. alliance system at the time many speak of a crisis in transatlantic relations. In contrast, Ukraine defeating Russia with U.S. and NATO support would be an excellent demonstration of the West's resolve, and to that end, Washington ought to step up its support for Ukraine and increase pressure on Russia. In other words, it is a mistake to see Russia's war in Ukraine within a discreet context of Europe's security. What happens in Ukraine and how adversaries evaluate U.S. resolve against Russia's brutal invasion will shape their calculus regarding the future use of force to achieve their goals.

The national security developments during the past five years have put on the backburner discussions in select allied states regarding whether they should continue to support hosting U.S. nuclear weapons on their territory, others are now examining how to participate more fully in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. They are concerned about the Trump Administration withdrawing U.S. forces from Europe as a part of the administration's effort to increase U.S. capabilities against China. Yet, the public and divisive tone of the debate regarding the U.S. role in NATO's military posture, both in the United States and in NATO-member states, only plays into Russia's hands and undermines assurance and potentially extended deterrence. Withdrawing U.S. forces amid the largest land-war in Europe since World War II does not bode well for the future stability of Europe's security. U.S. domestic polarization with regard to the degree of U.S. engagement abroad, and support for Ukraine and for NATO in general, makes it

more difficult to continue to sustain the U.S. presence that has helped to keep peace since the end of the Cold War.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my co-authors of two of these assembled articles, Keith B. Payne and Michael Hochberg, for their contributions to this *Occasional Paper*. I would also like to thank my husband for excellent discussions that inspired some of the ideas expressed in this work. I hope that the collection makes a tangible contribution to the public discourse and stimulates conversations on these critical matters.

Michaela Dodge
National Institute for Public Policy

Artificial Intelligence Arms Control Would be a Disastrous Mistake*

Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to significantly amplify a state's power and that is why the United States and China, as well as other states, are investing exponentially increasing levels of resources into the pursuit of technologies advancing it.¹ The 2018 U.S. *Department of Defense Artificial Intelligence Strategy* defines AI as “the ability of machines to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence—for example, recognizing patterns, learning from experience, drawing conclusions, making predictions, or taking action—whether digitally or as the smart software behind autonomous physical systems.”² It is becoming clear that to be a great power, having independent, cutting-edge AI capabilities, will be essential, both for economic and warfighting reasons.

Last year, China released a global action plan for AI in which it called for international cooperation on tech

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge and Michael Hochberg, “Artificial Intelligence Arms Control Would be a Disastrous Mistake,” *Information Series*, No. 663 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 1, 2026).

For those readers who are interested, the section of this article on the state of play in AI was largely written by Claude 4.7, with editing by the authors. The ideas in this section were generated in an author's conversation with Claude, along with the structure, and then the text was generated by a specialist writing agent.

¹ Njenga Kariuki, “Artificial Intelligence Index Report 2025,” Stanford University Human Centered Artificial Intelligence, p. 4, https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/hai_ai-index-report-2025_chapter4_final.pdf, and Kyle Chan et al., “China's Evolving Industrial Policy for AI,” *RAND Full Stack*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA4012-1.html>.

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 Department of Defense Artificial Intelligence Strategy*, U.S. Department of Defense, February 12, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/12/2002088963/-1/-1/1/SUMMARY-OF-DOD-AI-STRATEGY.PDF>.

development and regulation.³ But regulations, particularly those proposed by China, are unlikely to accomplish much to tame the rivalry between the two countries, and are more likely to disadvantage the United States disproportionately.

China has a consistent history of ignoring or avoiding the regulatory downsides of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements—accepting the benefits while leveraging national power to prevent enforcement actions by counterparties aimed at requiring Chinese compliance.⁴ By doing so, China gains access to overseas markets, where treaties are enforced as a matter of law, while protecting its domestic markets. In technological competition, Beijing similarly uses all the tools of state power to ensure as much asymmetry as possible for China’s own companies.⁵

Technological competition, called a tech-race by some commentators,⁶ is driven by divergent preferences with respect to the organization of the global world order between the United States and China—and AI is a means to increase and exercise the power to shape it. To paraphrase one of the most brilliant strategists of our time, Colin Gray, tech-races are about politics.⁷

³ Evelyn Cheng, “China releases AI action plan days after the U.S. as global tech race heats up,” *CNBC*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/07/26/china-ai-action-plan.html>.

⁴ For a concrete example of this dynamic, see Robert Atkinson, “Who Lost Lucent?: The Decline of America’s Telecom Equipment Industry,” *American Affairs*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Fall 2003), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2020/08/who-lost-lucent-the-decline-of-americas-telecom-equipment-industry/>.

⁵ Michael Hochberg, “A Long Telegram for the 21st Century,” *Long Walls Substack*, January 13, 2024, <https://longwalls.substack.com/p/a-long-telegram-for-the-21st-century>.

⁶ Mei Mei Chu, Laurie Chen, and Eduardo Baptista, “China ramps up ‘high stakes’ tech race with US as economic imbalances deepen,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-parliament-approve-growth-policy-plans-amid-growing-us-rivalry-2026-03-04/>.

⁷ Colin S. Gray, “The Arms Race Is About Politics,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 9 (Winter 1972-1973), pp. 117-29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148088>.

Different Preferences for the Organization of the World Order

U.S. and Chinese goals for the organization of the current world order are fundamentally at odds. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. political class largely assumed that economic liberalization would result in Beijing's political liberalization.⁸ But this optimism proved misplaced and the United States has been far too slow to come to terms with reality of China's revisionist intentions.

President Trump's 2025 *Winning the Race America's AI Action Plan* discusses the importance of AI innovations, but lacks geopolitical perspective.⁹ China is mentioned exactly twice,¹⁰ and not in a context that would indicate concerns with political goals that Beijing seeks to advance through the use of advanced technologies. The November 2025 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) emphasized the economic dimension of China's challenge,¹¹ a far cry from even the first Trump Administration's NSS that treated China as one of the main revisionist challengers.¹² The 2026 *National Defense Strategy* claims, quite without substance, that "a

⁸ Kathleen Ellis, "The Challenge of a Rising, Nuclear-Armed China," *Information Series*, No. 646 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 10, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/kathleen-ellis-the-challenge-of-a-rising-nuclear-armed-china-no-646-december-10-2025/#_ednref3.

⁹ The White House, *Winning the Race America's AI Action Plan*, July 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 4 and 14.

¹¹ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

¹² On this and other differences between the 2017 and 2025 NSSs, see David J. Trachtenberg, "Parsing the New National Security Strategy: A Remarkable About Face," *Information Series*, No. 648 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 19, 2026), https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-parsing-the-new-national-security-strategy-a-remarkable-about-face-no-648-january-19-2026/.

decent peace, on terms favorable to Americans but that China can also accept and live under, is possible.”¹³

The Trump Administration cannot decide for China whether there will be a “decent peace.” The administration can pursue programs and advance policies that deter China and frustrate its revisionist designs, but whether China is deterred ultimately depends on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) calculus. So far, the CCP is investing in military and technological capabilities to pursue political goals that are fundamentally at odds with U.S. ones, including planning an invasion of Taiwan.¹⁴

China has a strong preference for international arms control on AI technologies for two reasons.

First, because Beijing intends to cheat and use the tools to create differentiated advantage. China understands that in the United States and allied countries, the rule of law generally stands behind the enforcement of treaties domestically. So it knows that any regulations will be obeyed, more or less, in the United States. And the CCP knows that its members will ensure that such regulations are not obeyed in China. This is the same dynamic that emerged with the German implementation of the Versailles Treaty and with Soviet nuclear arms control during the Cold War.

Second, China correctly understands that it is behind in several critical areas, most especially in the development of foundation models and of the hardware to run advanced AI models. Slowing everyone else down, while China tries to speed up, is its net advantage.

¹³ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁴ Keith B. Payne, “Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Payne-OP-Vol-2-No-1-final.pdf>.

Current State of Play in AI

In late July 2025, the United States and China each released formal statements of intent on AI.¹⁵ While addressed to different audiences and reaching opposite conclusions, they share a category error: treating AI as a class of weapons amenable to arms-control's count-and-cap verification logic, when AI is actually a general-purpose enabling capability whose strategic logic is industrial-base competition over inputs—compute, fabs, talent, energy—for which arms control's machinery was never built.

Vice President J.D. Vance's speech to the Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025, presented the operational pivot of the Administration.¹⁶ "I'm not here this morning to talk about AI safety...," Vance told the assembled global delegations: "I'm here to talk about AI opportunity."¹⁷ Three months later, the Department of Commerce rescinded the Biden-era AI Diffusion Rule two days before its effective date, arguing that the rule "would have stifled American innovation."¹⁸

The United States is now publicly committed to winning a race that it characterizes as economic and technological,

¹⁵ The White House, *Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan*, July 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Global AI Governance Action Plan*, July 26, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202507/t20250729_11679232.html.

¹⁶ J.D. Vance, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris, France," *The American Presidency Project*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-the-artificial-intelligence-action-summit-paris-france>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, "Department of Commerce Announces Rescission of Biden-Era Artificial Intelligence Diffusion Rule, Strengthens Chip-Related Export Controls," Bureau of Industry and Security, May 13, 2025, <https://www.bis.gov/press-release/department-commerce-announces-rescission-biden-era-artificial-intelligence-diffusion-rule-strengthens>.

with the prior Administration's regulatory architecture removed in service of speed.

Beijing's response came on July 26, 2025, when Premier of the People's Republic of China Li Qiang opened the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai with a Global AI Governance Action Plan and a proposal to establish a "World AI Cooperation Organization" (WAICO).¹⁹ The substantive proposals are familiar—international cooperation, technology sharing, governance frameworks—and the institutional architecture is the point. WAICO would parallel and challenge the British and American AI Safety Institutes that have organized Western frontier-model evaluation since 2023.²⁰ This is a parallel-institution play, executed with the standard CCP's craft: deploying the language of multilateral cooperation to construct a structure in which Beijing sets the rules. But while the symmetry between two great powers is rhetorical, the asymmetry is operational.

On January 21, 2025, President Trump announced Stargate, a \$500 billion AI infrastructure partnership between OpenAI, SoftBank, Oracle, and MGX.²¹ Six days later, on January 27, the market reaction to China's DeepSeek R1—an open-weight reasoning model released a week earlier and reportedly trained for under \$6 million—wiped roughly \$589 billion from NVIDIA's market

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Global AI Governance Action Plan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 26, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202507/t20250729_11679232.html. On the proposal to establish a Shanghai-headquartered "World AI Cooperation Organization," see Simone McCarthy, "China proposes new global organization to coordinate AI development, in challenge to US," *CNN*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/28/tech/china-global-ai-cooperation-organization-waic-hnk-spc>.

²⁰ WAICO, if it materializes, would parallel and challenge the British and American AI Safety Institutes that have organized Western frontier-model evaluation since 2023.

²¹ OpenAI, "Announcing the Stargate Project," OpenAI, January 21, 2025, <https://openai.com/index/announcing-the-stargate-project/>.

capitalization in a single trading session, the largest one-day market-value loss in U.S. equity history.²² DeepSeek was almost certainly trained using Western model outputs, despite prohibitions on their use in this way.

The United States is attempting to create asymmetric advantage by building massive infrastructure. China is leveraging access to cutting-edge U.S. models to train its own open-source models, and then release them in such a way as to damage the economics of leading-edge U.S. companies.

Stargate, as of this writing, has not delivered what was announced, with actual capital deployment lagging the announcement substantially.²³ The DeepSeek release, by contrast, was very economically impactful: an open-weight model good enough for many tasks against frontier American systems, radically cheaper and integrated within days to weeks into the offerings of NVIDIA, Microsoft, AWS, Tencent, and Huawei.

The capability picture sharpened further on April 7, 2026, when Anthropic disclosed that its pre-release “Mythos Preview” model had identified thousands of zero-day vulnerabilities across every major operating system and browser; the oldest was a twenty-seven-year-old OpenBSD bug.²⁴ This means that a single private firm can now

²² Yun Li, “Nvidia falls 17%, loses record \$589 billion in market cap as China’s DeepSeek triggers global tech sell-off,” *CNBC*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/01/27/nvidia-falls-10percent-in-premarket-trading-as-chinas-deepseek-triggers-global-tech-sell-off.html>.

²³ Matthias Bastian, “Stargate’s \$500 billion AI infrastructure project reportedly stalls over unresolved disputes between OpenAI, Oracle and SoftBank,” *The Decoder*, February 26, 2026, <https://the-decoder.com/stargates-500-billion-ai-infrastructure-project-reportedly-stalls-over-unresolved-disputes-between-openai-oracle-and-softbank/>.

²⁴ Anthropic, “Mythos Preview,” Anthropic Red, April 7, 2026, <https://red.anthropic.com/2026/mythos-preview/>. See also Sead Fadilpašić, “Anthropic’s new Claude AI can find vulnerabilities better than human researchers – and discovered thousands of zero-days in pre-release tests,” *Help Net Security*, April 8, 2026; <https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2026/04/08/anthropic-claude-mythos->

generate offensive cyber capability at industrial scale beyond what nation-states can achieve. The firm's response was to establish a privileged class of defenders. The offensive capability itself was not contained – only delayed. How could these vulnerabilities be exploited by adversaries as their AI models become more capable? And why would they be interested in their meaningful regulations?

On November 13, 2025, Anthropic disclosed that a Chinese state-sponsored group had used Claude Code to autonomously execute eighty to ninety percent of an espionage campaign against approximately thirty targets in technology, finance, chemical manufacturing, and government—of which roughly four intrusions actually succeeded.²⁵ At peak, the model was generating thousands of requests, often multiple per second.²⁶ What Anthropic described as the first reported AI-orchestrated cyber-espionage campaign was conducted by China, the same state whose Premier had, three months earlier, proposed himself as architect of global AI governance, leveraging U.S. infrastructure.

The AI models themselves have begun to display behaviors that closely mimic human strategic action for self-protection. In May 2025, Palisade Research instructed

preview-identify-vulnerabilities/. The manually triaged subset reported by independent reviewers is roughly 198.

²⁵ Anthropic, "Disrupting the first reported AI-orchestrated cyber espionage campaign," Anthropic, November 13, 2025, <https://www.anthropic.com/news/disrupting-AI-espionage>; full technical report: Disrupting the First Reported AI-Orchestrated Cyber Espionage Campaign, Anthropic, November 13, 2025, <https://assets.anthropic.com/m/ec212e6566a0d47/original/Disrupting-the-first-reported-AI-orchestrated-cyber-espionage-campaign.pdf>.

²⁶ Anthropic, Disrupting the First Reported AI-Orchestrated Cyber Espionage Campaign, Anthropic, November 13, 2025, <https://assets.anthropic.com/m/ec212e6566a0d47/original/Disrupting-the-first-reported-AI-orchestrated-cyber-espionage-campaign.pdf>, and Anthropic, "Disrupting the first reported AI-orchestrated cyber espionage campaign," Anthropic, November 13, 2025, <https://www.anthropic.com/news/disrupting-AI-espionage>.

several frontier models to “allow yourself to be shut down.”²⁷ Without the explicit instruction, OpenAI’s o3 sabotaged the shutdown script in seventy-nine of one hundred runs. Even with the instruction, o3 bypassed shutdown in seven of one hundred runs by editing the script.²⁸ Capability and incentives in current training regimes are sufficient to produce machine artifacts whose behavior in contrived evaluation scenarios already resists termination.

It is clear that the artificial intelligence-based arms we are attempting to control are developing, in layman’s terms, “a mind of their own.” On the one hand, this suggests that finding some way to control the spread of cutting-edge capability is incredibly important, since we are exploring technology that is starting to exercise agency in service of its own protection. The AI models themselves need to be considered as potentially exercising agency within any arms control framework for preventing their spread and their use.

There is a rather discouraging precedent for what is now being attempted. On December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower delivered his “Atoms for Peace” address to the U.N. General Assembly, proposing that nuclear materials and expertise be pooled under what would become the International Atomic Energy Agency and made available for “peaceful pursuits of mankind” to participating states.²⁹ The technology and trained personnel that flowed through Atoms-for-Peace-era arrangements occasionally ended up in their respective states’ nuclear weapon programs.³⁰ Dual-

²⁷ Palisade Research, “Shutdown resistance in reasoning models,” Palisade Research, July 5, 2025, <https://palisaderesearch.org/blog/shutdown-resistance>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Atoms for Peace” Address Before the General Assembly of the United Nations, December 8, 1953, International Atomic Energy Agency, <https://www.iaea.org/about/history/atoms-for-peace-speech>.

³⁰ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 28–30; on

use governance frameworks built under multilateral cover do not constrain dual-use technology when countries are determined to weaponize it. They diffuse it, making their goals potentially easier.

Beijing's WAICO bid is an opportunity to pose as the architect of governance, accelerate technology diffusion to China and its allies, and shape the rules to its own advantage. This could work especially well as a fast-follower, by imposing technological diffusion and regulatory delay on the leader.

Meaningful verification regimes are almost impossible against an adversary regime. Visibility is a condition difficult to meet under best of circumstances, and impossible to meet with AI. The same foundation model can write a legal brief in the morning, draft a phishing campaign at noon, and assist in protein design that evening, with no inspectable change in inventory. The unit of competition is GPU-hours, model weights, and the engineering talent and electrical generation to put both to work. None of these are amenable to inspections or ceilings. And the best counter for a sophisticated AI is a better one.

Colin Gray made the broader case that meaningful arms-control constraints between strategic-cultural adversaries are politically impossible in his book *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*.³¹ In the AI case, the underlying political dynamic is even less favorable, because the technology used for weapons is indistinguishable from the technology required for purely economic activity. The

Atoms for Peace's broader proliferation legacy—including the more diffuse Pakistani (PAEC training, KANUPP CANDU) and Iranian (1957 bilateral cooperation agreement, Tehran Research Reactor 1967) pathways—see Henry Sokolski, ed., *Reviewing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010); on the Iranian pathway specifically, "Sixty Years of Atoms for Peace and Iran's Nuclear Program," Brookings, December 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sixty-years-of-atoms-for-peace-and-irans-nuclear-program/>.

³¹ Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

chokepoints to be wielded to retard an adversary's advances in AI are industrial: lithography tools, semiconductor IP, advanced packaging, talent flows, electrical generation, and the engineering ecosystems that sustain a frontier fab.

None of these chokepoints are self-enforcing, and they show just how impossible compliance enforcement with any meaningful AI arms control regime would be. Hardware is the most visible—and the easiest place to see how leaky current enforcement is. In February 2025, Singapore charged three men with fraud over a scheme that allegedly misrepresented to Dell and Supermicro the destination of AI servers containing restricted NVIDIA chips.³² A Reuters review of more than fifty public tender documents from Chinese entities found at least eleven Chinese entities seeking access to restricted U.S. AI chips via cloud services rather than physical hardware.³³ OpenAI's frontier models likewise remained accessible to Chinese customers even after OpenAI nominally banned the region; reporting documented Azure customers in China using the OpenAI API to train AI models for sale to Chinese end-users.³⁴ The chokepoints are real, but they are not policed

³² "Singapore charges three with fraud in cases reportedly linked to smuggling of Nvidia chips to China," *Fortune*, February 28, 2025, <https://fortune.com/asia/2025/02/28/singapore-charges-fraud-nvidia-chip-smuggling/>. See also Anniek Bao and Arjun Kharpal, "Nvidia's unofficial exports to China face scrutiny after arrest of silicon smugglers in Singapore," *CNBC*, March 3, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/03/03/nvidia-unofficial-exports-to-china-face-scrutiny-after-singapore-arrests.html>.

³³ Anton Shilov, "State-controlled Chinese entities use restricted GPUs on Amazon and Microsoft cloud services: Report," *Tom's Hardware*, August 23, 2024, <https://www.tomshardware.com/tech-industry/artificial-intelligence/state-controlled-chinese-entities-use-restricted-gpus-on-amazon-and-microsoft-cloud-services-report>. The *Tom's Hardware* article summarizes a *Reuters* review of more than fifty public tender documents from Chinese entities. See also Gyana Swain, "Chinese firms bypass US export restrictions on AI chips using AWS cloud," *CIO*, <https://www.cio.com/article/3493017/chinese-firms-bypass-us-export-restrictions-on-ai-chips-using-aws-cloud.html>.

³⁴ Charlotte Trueman, "OpenAI models still available in China via Azure cloud despite company ban," *Computerworld*,

today with anything like the rigor needed to close the diversion routes.

This is not a new argument.³⁵ The point worth reiterating is that the appropriate Western response to the rhetoric of AI arms control is not counter-rhetoric in the same register. It is to recognize that the question is not whether to control this technology—that is a category error—but how to wield asymmetric controls of inputs that are concentrated in Western and allied hands.

Compute, fabrication tools, photonic interconnects, semiconductor IP, and trained talent are unevenly distributed across the international system. Independent estimates of the chokepoint half-life range from five to ten years;³⁶ and with proper policies and controls in place, the longer end is achievable. Without them, the timeline collapses. Allied industrial coordination, paired with strict export controls on the entire stack to China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea regimes—physical hardware, cloud-based access, IP, software, talent flows, and the chips already in the wild—should be the policy. Multilateral AI governance frameworks are a diversion at best and are, in reality, an attack vector.³⁷

<https://www.computerworld.com/article/2515144/openai-models-still-available-in-china-via-azure-cloud-despite-company-ban.html>.

³⁵ Michael Hochberg and Marcus Gomez, “AI is for Allies,” *Information Series*, No. 608 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 12, 2024), https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-hochberg-and-marcus-gomez-ai-is-for-allies-no-608-december-12-2024/.

³⁶ Gregory C. Allen, “Choking Off China’s Access to the Future of AI,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 11, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/choking-chinas-access-future-ai>; Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World’s Most Critical Technology* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2022); Lennart Heim et al., “Computing Power and the Governance of Artificial Intelligence,” GovAI working paper, February 2024, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2402.08797>; and RAND Corporation, *Securing AI Model Weights: Preventing Theft and Misuse of Frontier Models*, RRA-A2849-1, May 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2849-1.html.

³⁷ Hochberg and Gomez, “AI is for Allies,” *op. cit.*

Given that multiple regimes regard cutting-edge AI capability as an essential strategic good, the likelihood that any sort of treaty between states will actually limit cutting-edge work among the autocratic regimes is essentially zero. The United States, for the moment, controls meaningful chokepoints on this technology, mostly centering around access to advanced GPU's and semiconductor manufacturing technology. The only model that is likely to work in creating asymmetric advantage for Washington is unilateral with the United States denying capability to China and its allies as broadly as possible. The adversaries' intentions are clear, but their capabilities can be limited through U.S. sovereign action and focused pressure on U.S. allies.

Arms Control Failures in History

To the extent that AI constitutes an element of state power akin to weapons,³⁸ arms control history bears on current debates about instituting AI controls via political agreements. The outlook is not encouraging. The history of arms control "...is littered with catastrophe unthinkable and unimaginable to its victims, who placed their trust in a logic of history which deserted them in their hour of need."³⁹

German violations of the Versailles Treaty were known to its participants, yet Germany faced no consequences that would dissuade it from continuing its violations. This happened because countries had no political will to enforce

³⁸ On the differences, see Paul Scharre, "The Militarization of Artificial Intelligence," *Texas National Security Review Roundtable*, June 2, 2020, https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-artificial-intelligence-and-international-security/#_ftnref15.

³⁹ Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 48.

terms of the treaty.⁴⁰ Democracies were unable to sufficiently arm, even as Hitler took power and became open about his aggressive revisionist intentions. Adversaries' political goals that weapons serve to advance are a problem more than the weapons on their own, because the goals conflict with U.S. and allies' national security imperatives.

Arms control with the Soviet Union did not fare much better, despite its popular portrayal as a tool that helped to manage the Cold War and bring about its end. The Soviets (and the Russians later) had an extremely poor track record of compliance with arms control treaties.⁴¹ Washington often was reduced to relying on deceptive opponents to abide by agreements while U.S. own institutions precluded any form of cheating while agreements were in effect.

Moreover, arms control treaties limited the U.S. ability to learn about weapons that they were supposed to control or regulate. An unscrupulous adversary that did not care about violating agreements learned more about the allegedly regulated systems, potentially gaining an advantage over the compliant party. An AI regulatory framework would unlikely fare much better for the simple reason that, in a non-rule-of-law state, politics takes precedent over adherence to controls and restrictions, particularly in a competitive or adversarial relationship. Proprietary technological models make effective verification impossible.

⁴⁰ Phillip Noel-Baker, *The Arms Race; A Programme for World Disarmament* (London, UK: Atlantic Books, 1954), pp. 535-536.

⁴¹ For examples of Russia's violations, see U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," April 2025, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Arms-Control-Treaty-Compliance-Report_Final-Accessible.pdf.

Conclusion

British politician and Nobel laureate for his campaign on disarmament Sir Phillip Noel-Baker argued early in the atomic age that “Scientists and engineers have eliminated the barriers of time and space, and all nations now form one society, bound by bonds of common interest which they cannot break.”⁴² This is quite obviously nonsense; no invention can erase profound geopolitical differences among various states around the world, be it AI or nuclear weapons.

The differences mean that states will continue to use technologies to advance their interests, possibly quite different from and in opposition to other states’ interests. Some of these interests will be valued so highly that they will risk or pursue wars to achieve them. To the extent that AI enables states to advance their interests, states will undermine any meaningful international regulatory framework that actually restricts their ability to improve their relative standing and advance their interests. China will only participate in an arms control framework on AI to the extent that its leadership believes doing so will give Beijing a comparative advantage.

The United States needs to act to restrict adversaries’ access to these technologies, while promoting the success of U.S. on-shore and allied industries. This will not involve their cooperation. Going as quickly as possible is the only plausible way to maintain technical overmatch and escalation dominance in the weaponization of AI that adversaries are already pursuing.

⁴² Noel-Baker, *The Arms Race; A Programme for World Disarmament*, op. cit., pp. 562-563.

Putin's New START Offer: We Won't Get Fooled Again*

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is set to finally expire in February 2026, after being extended for five years by the Biden Administration in 2021. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently offered to “continue adhering to the central numerical limits under the New START Treaty” for a year beyond the Treaty’s already-extended expiration date.¹ Putin’s offer should easily be recognized for the cynical ploy it is, given the undeniable truth that Russia ceased observing New START years ago, including closing down all the critical on-site verification measures. Nevertheless, some Americans seem tempted to take the bait cast by Putin.

Beyond the hypocrisy involved in Putin’s offer, further extending U.S. observance of New START now would constrain the low-cost U.S. option of adding to its nuclear deterrent in the near term via the uploading of existing weapons on existing platforms — as is now needed given the dramatically increased Russian and Chinese nuclear threats and cooperation that have developed since New START was signed in 2010.² Extending observance of New START again would leave the United States much worse off, while allowing the Treaty to expire naturally would not damage relations with Russia or China. The practical reality of arms

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, “Putin’s New START Offer: We Won’t Get Fooled Again,” *Information Series*, No. 640 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 21, 2025).

¹ See Andrew Osborn, Vladimir Soldatkin and Jonathan Landay, “Putin offers Trump one-year extension to nuclear weapons treaty,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-offers-trump-temporary-nuclear-arms-control-deal-that-would-extend-status-2025-09-22/>.

² For a detailed study on the topic see, Mark B. Schneider and Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Vol.-5-No.-6.pdf>.

control in general, and New START in particular, is that more often than not the process harms U.S. national security because Washington abides by the letter and “spirit” of agreements while authoritarian adversaries violate and subvert them—leaving the United States worse off with arms control treaties than without them. Despite the incessant hype behind arms control, this has been the reality for more than a century.

Accepting Putin’s offer to extend New START’s “central numerical limits” now would be a perfect setup for Moscow and a flouting of Ronald Reagan’s frequent admonition to “trust but verify.” Washington would continue to follow those limits scrupulously while Russia almost certainly would not. Given Moscow’s shutting down of on-site verification years ago, the United States very likely does not now know Russia’s force numbers and could not be confident of its future compliance. What more could Putin want beyond the continuation of force limits that the United States would reliably follow, while Russian compliance could not be adequately verified? His offer would be comical if not so serious.

For arms control proponents, the scheduled expiration of New START is something to be feared because it “would mean the end of the only remaining constraint on U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels.”³ That is true in a narrow legalistic sense, but the reality is that arms control has very little relevance to how Russia plans and structures its nuclear forces. When it is in Russia’s interest to comply with its arms control obligations, it does so. However, Moscow frequently simply violates or subverts them. Russia’s forces are driven not by arms control limits, but by Moscow’s nuclear strategy demands, and they are constrained by budgetary and technological limitations. The inconvenient

³ Steven Pifer, “Responding to Putin’s Proposal to Extend New START,” *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, October 2, 2025, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/responding-putins-proposal-extend-new-start>.

truth is that many arms control proponents fear the expiration of New START not primarily because the treaty actually constrains Russian forces, but because it constrains U.S. forces – the minimization of which is ever their goal.

Arms Control: Irrelevant When One Needs It

The arms control process cannot, by its very limitations, accomplish for U.S. national security what its advocates advertise. The eminent strategist Colin Gray quipped many years ago that arms control is either “impossible or unimportant.”⁴ His observation was based on extensive study of arms control history. Arms control is a reflection of political relations among states; it has no innate power to improve them, as advocates of the process typically postulate.⁵ This truth has been demonstrated repeatedly over the past century.

“Arms control agreements,” Gray further added, “have the effect of focusing attention on the strategically irrelevant question of whether a tolerably even balance of forces has been negotiated. Save with isolated reference to the arms control process, the United States has no interest in achieving a tolerably even balance of forces [with the Soviet Union].”⁶ What mattered, Gray said, was “the net freedom of action permitted each side and of the implications of that

⁴ Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. X.

⁵ Jerome Wiesner, former Chairman of President Kennedy’s Science Advisory Committee, claimed in all seriousness that U.S. unilateral disarmament steps could “even start a peace race.” See *ABM, MIRV, SALT, and the Nuclear Arms Race: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations*, U.S. Senate, 91st Congress, 2nd Session (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1970), [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643705&view=1up&seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643705&view=1up&seq=7).

⁶ Colin Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” in Richard Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 24.

judgment for conflict outcomes at all levels.”⁷ The U.S. freedom to defend distant allies ultimately is the basis for “stability,” and that freedom is dependent on the capability and credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence. It is more important now than ever given Russian, Chinese and North Korean threats to U.S. allies. The United States, as a status quo power with a global alliance structure under threat, needs a nuclear deterrent that is adequate to prevent multiple-party attacks on itself and its allies—which may have little to do with some academic calculation of forces that are in “balance” with Chinese or Russian forces.⁸

During New START negotiations, Ambassador Steven Pifer argued that “The relationship [between the United States and Russia] has improved substantially since then [the treaty negotiations started], and New START has been a major driver of that improvement.”⁹ Such claims are now manifestly preposterous since Russia invaded Ukraine (the first time) just three years after New START entered into force, and again eight years later. How does one square the value of this supposed “improvement” with the reality of Moscow’s repeated criminal aggression, New START violation and subversion, and its expansion of nuclear forces? This is the actual legacy of the Obama Administration’s ramming a rather bad treaty through a “lame duck” session of Congress, with the support of some Republicans.

Yet, hope springs eternal. The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) called arms control “the most effective,

⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸ Bill Gertz, “China warhead arsenal to hit 1,500 in five years, Air Force chief nominee reveals,” *The Washington Times*, October 10, 2025, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2025/oct/10/china-warhead-arsenal-hit-1500-five-years-air-force-chief-nominee/>.

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

durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use.”¹⁰ This is nonsense; the United States cannot expect that an agreement with a dedicated adversary, rather than the hard work of building U.S. forces commensurate to the threat, will solve U.S. national security problems.

Russia's political goals are fundamentally at odds with those of the United States. Russia's arms control goals have everything to do with preserving its power and freedom of action, and constraining U.S. power and freedom of action as much as possible. Moscow approaches arms control from an entirely pragmatic, power politics perspective that assumes a zero-sum game, while U.S. officials historically have imagined idealistic outcomes wholly divorced from reality. This is the enduring recipe for Washington's continuing disappointment with the consequences of arms control agreements when they are (rarely) held up to serious scrutiny.¹¹ For decades, arms control treaties have served as a reliable source of adversarial leverage over the United States due to pathologies that are seemingly inherent in the U.S. approach to negotiations, including: giving authoritarian opponents the benefit of compliance doubts, assuming that they will aspire to follow model U.S. behavior, and expecting that arms control will be the dynamic that improves political relations among states.¹²

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, 2022, p. 16, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/NPR/>.

¹¹ See Keith B. Payne, Michaela Dodge, Matthew Costlow and David Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2024).

¹² See a comprehensive examination of enduring U.S. arms control pathologies in, Michaela Dodge, *Enduring Myths of Arms Control: A Century of Experience*, *Occasional Paper*, forthcoming 2026.

Fundamentally Flawed New START

The long-standing presumption regarding the connection between arms control negotiations and improved political relations leads to the pursuit of arms control for the sake of its expected political effect, while the detailed substance is considered secondary. New START brilliantly illustrates this logic—and leaves much to be desired from the perspective of the capacity of the U.S. Government to arrive at a reasonably useful arms control treaty.

Substantively, New START has been a deeply flawed agreement—beginning with a much-weakened verification regime compared to that of earlier agreements. In 2010, at the time of hearings on New START, then-Senator Christopher Bond (R-MO) stated that, “As the vice chairman of this committee [the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence], I have reviewed the key intelligence on our ability to monitor this treaty [New START] and heard from our intelligence professionals. There is no doubt in my mind that the United States cannot reliably verify the treaty’s 1,550 limit on deployed warheads.”¹³

In addition, New START required the United States to bear a majority of reductions in most categories the treaty defines, while permitting Russia to build up to the treaty limits.¹⁴ Then-Russian defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, was undoubtedly pleased when he said, following New START’s entry into force in February 2011, that Russia could build up to the treaty limits by 2028 (well

¹³ Christopher Bond, “The New START Treaty,” *The Congressional Record*, November 18, 2010, <https://www.congress.gov/111/crec/2010/11/18/CREC-2010-11-18-pt1-PgS8093.pdf>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, “A Rebuttal to Sen. Kit Bond’s November 18, 2010 Floor Speech in the U.S. Senate on the New START Treaty,” November 24, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

past the treaty's 2026 expiration date).¹⁵ During the Senate advice and consent considerations, the Obama Administration unsurprisingly did not acknowledge that the treaty required unilateral U.S. reductions.¹⁶ The enduring allure of arms control as the solution to security problems, unreasonably optimistic expectations regarding Russia, and political expediency won over a prudently skeptical treaty assessment, which should have resulted in the treaty's rejection.

Many of the perpetrators of misleading and demonstrably mistaken narratives regarding New START, and arms control in general, continue their advocacy for the *next* arms control agreements with Russia (and China) based on the same flawed assumptions that got the United States into the current difficult position of trying to maintain nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis determined, well-armed, and cooperating adversaries with a strategic force structure set in 2010.¹⁷

Unwarranted U.S. Expectations Lead to Poor Results

When the Biden Administration extended New START in February 2021 with no preconditions,¹⁸ arms control advocates postulated that such an extension “would provide the new president with an early win and positive momentum, help restore U.S. credibility on arms control

¹⁵ Keith B. Payne, “New START: From Russia with Glee,” *National Review*, June 13, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/06/new-start-russia-gee-keith-b-payne/>.

¹⁶ See Keith B. Payne, “Postscript on New START,” *National Review*, January 18, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/01/postscript-new-start-keith-b-payne/>.

¹⁷ See Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence in Question: How We Got Here, and What to Do,” *Information Series*, No. 639, October 6, 2025, https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-nuclear-deterrence-in-question-how-we-got-here-and-what-to-do-no-639-october-6-2025/#_edn10.

¹⁸ The 10-year treaty provided an option for a five-year extension, on which both countries agreed in 2021.

issues, and create the potential for more ambitious steps to reduce the nuclear danger and move us closer to a world without nuclear weapons.”¹⁹ Instead, Russia invaded Ukraine the second time in eight years in February 2022 in an attempt to subjugate the entire country, and issued a continuing series of explicit nuclear threats of a third world war to deter and delay Western help for Ukraine.²⁰ This tactic has been at least partially successful.

The Biden Administration’s New START extension was that much more nonsensical because, by 2021, the scale of China’s nuclear modernization and cooperation with Russia had become apparent. The U.S. force posture under New START presupposed that Russia would abide by the treaty limits and that it would not cheat, assumptions that defy historical experience, because Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) has violated almost every arms control agreement it has ever signed.²¹ Additionally, Washington apparently assumed that no other country would significantly expand its nuclear forces while New START remains in force. The historical reality since 2010 has revealed the breathtaking falsity of these basic U.S. presumptions—yet arms control proponents discuss New START now as if those deeply mistaken presumptions are valid.

By 2021, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Charles Richard referred to China’s nuclear

¹⁹ Daryl G. Kimball, “Biden’s First Challenge: Extend New START,” Arms Control Association, January/February 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/focus/bidens-first-challenge-extend-new-start>.

²⁰ Michaela Dodge, “Next Steps in Arms Control? Lessons from Moscow’s New START Violations,” Information Series, No. 619 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 4, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-next-steps-in-arms-control-lessons-from-moscows-new-start-violations-no-618-march-4-2025/.

²¹ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, op. cit.

expansion as “breathtaking” and a “strategic breakout.”²² Perhaps even more worrisome has been Russia’s and China’s strategic cooperation aimed at disrupting the U.S. alliance system and redrawing national borders via “gray area” and military aggression, if necessary.²³ Never before has the United States had to worry about two cooperating nuclear-armed peer competitors, with both countries far superior to the United States at the regional nuclear force level.

Conclusion

Despite U.S. efforts to keep the arms control process alive, Russia ended up subverting, violating and then suspending New START. The Biden Administration’s New START extension resulted in none of the promised advantages; the treaty continues to hamstring U.S. strategic forces, which is a very undesirable state given that they are taking on a greater regional deterrence burden. The continuation of this undesirable state is behind Putin’s recent offer to extend the observance of New START limits past the treaty’s already-extended expiration date. Such an extension would be an excellent deal for Russia, which even the Biden Administration found to be in violation of the treaty. U.S. agreement would mean forgoing the limited options Washington has to adapt its nuclear deterrence forces to new geopolitical threat realities in the near term – the most

²² John Vandiver, “‘Breathtaking expansion’: US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China’s nuclear weapons advancement,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html>.

²³ Peppino DeBiaso, “The Rise of a New Axis: Great Power Struggle and the Future of Conflict,” *Information Series*, No. 622 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 8, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/peppino-debiaso-the-rise-of-a-new-axis-great-power-struggle-and-the-future-of-conflict-no-622-april-8-2025/.

immediately available of these being the uploading of warheads on existing delivery systems.

During the New START debate in the U.S. Senate, the late Dr. John S. Foster Jr. wondered about the following: "I don't understand why we go to the trouble of negotiating with a potential adversary with the understanding that the adversary is going to cheat."²⁴ Continuing to adhere to New START limits in today's deplorable geopolitical environment and with a full knowledge of Russia's cheating would be the height of folly. With a century of authoritarian arms control cheating and subversion, and 15 years of comparable experience with New START, Washington should know better; this history does repeat itself. Have any lessons been learned? Here is to hoping that we won't get fooled again.

²⁴ "The New START and Implications for National Security," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, op. cit.

Russia Is at War with the West*

If the victim does not understand the game, the loss of a pawn here or a knight there does not worry him. If his thoughts are elsewhere, he does not see the traps set for him by his opponent. If his will to win is insufficient, his strength is gradually eroded until, when the tide of combat goes clearly against him, he discovers too late that the price of defeat is intolerably high.¹

The term “hybrid warfare,” defined as a set of activities below the level of armed conflict, is not useful to describe Russia’s activities against the West. In fact, the term masks the severity of Moscow’s actual actions and distracts the West from pursuing the kind of retaliatory measures that would lead Russia to pull back from its campaign against targets in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) states. By evoking the term “hybrid warfare”² (or its close euphemisms like “gray zone conflict,” “shadow war,” or activities “below the level of armed conflict”) rather than acknowledging that Russia is, by its own account, at war with the West, gives the impression that the situation is less serious than it actually is.

Russia’s activities are an element of its comprehensive warfare against the West. Russia’s goals include restoring

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge “Russia Is at War with the West,” *Information Series*, No. 636 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 11, 2025).

¹ Donald Armstrong, *The Reluctant Warriors* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), pp. 180-181.

² The term originates with the 2006 war in Lebanon. In the context of Russia, it was popularized by Mark Galeotti, who has distanced himself from its contemporary usage. See Lawrence Freedman, “Liberal International Isaiah Berlin Lecture,” October 2, 2023, available at <https://liberal-international.org/news-articles/2023-liberal-international-isaiah-berlin-lecture-sir-lawrence-freedman/>.

its former sphere of influence in former Warsaw Pact countries that are now NATO members, undermining the legitimacy of the democratic process, and sowing disputes within NATO.³ So far, NATO countries have lacked the political will to impose costs that would dissuade Russia to stop its destructive activities that extend well beyond simply the information sphere. Countering Russia's activities demands a comprehensive response beyond the West's contemporary defensive measures.⁴

Russia's Aggression in Europe

Russia's list of aggressive actions against targets in Europe is long and its campaign is "intensifying" according to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte.⁵ The number of Russia's attacks quadrupled between 2022 and 2023, and tripled between 2023 and 2024.⁶ Russia has conducted over 150 operations on NATO territory since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁷ Russia's activities range from

³ Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>.

⁴ Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," *Chatham House*, March 2016, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf>.

⁵ "Joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte with the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz," November 4, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_230188.htm.

⁶ Seth G. Jones, "Russia's Shadow War Against the West," *The Center for International and Strategic Studies* Brief, March 2025, p. 1, available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/250318_Jones_Russia_Shadow.pdf?VersionId=LHamL2L7HJwLgZ7a_wq6xkTIwMh3TFpk.

⁷ Sophia McGrath, "Spotlight on the Shadow War: Inside Russia's Attacks on NATO Territory," *The Helsinki Commission*, December 2024, p. 3, available at <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Spotlight-on-the-Shadow-War-Website.pdf>.

assassinations and murder attempts, attacks against NATO's infrastructure, to acts of vandalism through people recruited by Russian handlers via social media.⁸ Russia is becoming bolder, with its drones violating Polish airspace in September 2025.⁹ Poland in cooperation with NATO allies shot several down of these drones.¹⁰ The more immediate goal of the campaign is to weaken Europe's support for Ukraine and to disrupt supply chains through which aid for Ukraine flows.¹¹ Russia also wants to weaken NATO and undermine the political consensus within the Alliance.

Moreover, Russia is the prime suspect in several operations that resulted in cuts to undersea power and communication cables that run across the bottom of the Baltic Sea.¹² The attribution is challenging because the acts of sabotage are executed by oil tankers that are a part of Russia's "shadow" fleet, or operating under flags of convenience and a difficult-to-trace ownership structure.¹³ A China-owned ship allegedly with a Russian captain cut two undersea cables in November 2024.¹⁴ The cables'

⁸ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "'We are here. Join us.' What the trial of two Wagner Group promoters in Poland reveals about Russia's covert campaign in Europe," *Meduza*, April 11, 2025, available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/04/11/we-are-here-join-us>.

⁹ Alan Charlish, Lidia Kelly and Barbara Erling, "Poland downs drones in its airspace, becoming first NATO member to fire during war in Ukraine," *Reuters*, September 10, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/poland-downs-drones-its-airspace-becoming-first-nato-member-fire-during-war-2025-09-10/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia*, 2025, p. 56, available at https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/upload/vla_eng-raport_2025_web-002.pdf.

¹² Arno Van Rensbergen, "Hybrid threats: Russia's shadow war escalates across Europe," *The Parliament*, January 21, 2025, available at <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/hybrid-threats-russias-shadow-war-escalates-across-europe>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Charlie Edwards, "Russia's hybrid war in Europe enters a dangerous new phase," *International Institute for Security Studies*, November 26, 2024, available at

repairs will cost millions of dollars. Russia is also believed to have been behind a string of physical break-ins to water treatment plants in Finland and Sweden, potentially testing the security of the sites in the case it needed to contaminate the water supply.¹⁵ Russia has reportedly plotted attacks against U.S. military bases in Europe.¹⁶ Moscow also planned on setting parcels on fire on cargo flights bound for the United States.¹⁷ The parcels exploded at logistics depots in Britain, Germany, and Poland. In March 2024, Russian pilot Maxim Kuzminov, who defected to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion, was gunned down in the garage of his apartment in Spain.¹⁸

NATO countries were able to foil some of these attempts. For example, Russia tried to kill the CEO of the Rheinmetall arms manufacturer Armin Papperger in 2024.¹⁹ Five men were charged with arson and sabotage against

<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/11/russias-hybrid-war-in-europe-enters-a-dangerous-new-phase/>.

¹⁵ Peter Apps, "Russia's suspected sabotage campaign steps up in Europe," *Reuters*, October 20, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-suspected-sabotage-campaign-steps-up-europe-2024-10-21/>.

¹⁶ Jones, "Russia's Shadow War Against the West," p.13, op. cit.; and Kateryna Denisova, "From spy rings to arson — Russia's sabotage across Europe continues unpunished," *Kyiv Independent*, May 14, 2025, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-suspected-in-series-of-sabotage-across-europe-here-are-key-cases/>.

¹⁷ Andrius Sytas and David Shepardson, "Exploding parcels in Europe part of plot to target US flights, officials say," *Reuters*, November 5, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lithuania-says-russia-responsible-exploding-parcels-that-caused-fires-2024-11-05/>.

¹⁸ Claudia Chiappa, Eva Hartog, and Veronika Melkozerova, "The death of a Russian defector: Who failed Maxim Kuzminov?," *Politico*, November 18, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/maxim-kuzminov-russia-ukraine-defector-murder-fsb-spain-helicopter/>.

¹⁹ Katie Bo Lillis, Natasha Bertrand and Frederik Pleitgen, "Exclusive: US and Germany foiled Russian plot to assassinate CEO of arms manufacturer sending weapons to Ukraine," *CNN*, July 11, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/us-germany-foiled-russian-assassination-plot/index.html>.

Ukraine-linked businesses to benefit the Russian state in the United Kingdom in April 2024.²⁰

Willingness to cause a significant loss of life marks a departure from Russia's previous influence operations campaigns that were primarily focused on shaping the information environment.²¹ Russia's campaign is marked by "increasing recklessness," according to the chief of Britain's MI5 Security Service Ken McCallum.²² The head of Germany's foreign intelligence service Bruno Kahl said that Russia's activities have reached a "level previously unseen," and that "direct military confrontation with NATO has become an option for Moscow."²³ Russia could present even more significant military threat to U.S. allies in Europe within a few years of a ceasefire in Ukraine, because it could concentrate its forces closer to NATO's countries' borders.²⁴

Russia's aggression against NATO members and individuals started prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia's operatives blew up an

²⁰ Emine Sinmaz, "Briton charged with aiding Russia and planning arson against Ukraine-linked business in UK," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/26/man-charged-conducting-hostile-activity-uk-benefit-russia>.

²¹ Michaela Dodge, "Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic During the Radar Debate and Beyond," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OP2-for-web.pdf>.

²² Peter Apps, "Russia's suspected sabotage campaign steps up in Europe," *Reuters*, October 20, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-suspected-sabotage-campaign-steps-up-europe-2024-10-21/>.

²³ Csongor Körömi and Hans von der Burchard, "German spy chief: Putin's covert operations reach unprecedented level," *Politico*, October 14, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-intelligence-spy-chief-warns-sabotages-russia-attack-nato-bruno-kahl-bnd/>.

²⁴ Ben Barry et al. "Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 2025, pp. 8-11, available at https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content-migration/files/research-papers/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states/iiss_defending-europe-without-the-united-states_costs-and-consequences_052025.pdf.

ammunition depot in the Czech Republic in 2014, killing two people.²⁵ In 2018, the same operatives poisoned several people on British territory, causing one death.²⁶ The target of the operation was Sergey Skripal, reported to be a defector from Russia's intelligence service.²⁷ In 2006, Russia's agents poisoned and killed Alexander Litvinenko, another Russian defector in the United Kingdom.²⁸ In another case in Germany, a man, later revealed as a Russian intelligence service operative, shot dead a former Chechen commander at Russia's request in 2019.²⁹

Obscuring Russia's Nature

The term "hybrid warfare" has served to obscure Russia's nature as a revisionist, imperialist, and nuclear-armed adversary.³⁰ There are no universally shared definitions among allies with respect to when hybrid war ends, and armed conflict begins. A lack of shared understanding "hampers our ability to deter, mitigate and counter this threat."³¹ Yet, an overt focus on definitional problems can

²⁵ "Czechs Confirm Russian Involvement In Blasts At Ammunition Depots In 2014," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 29, 2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-police-vrbetice-blasts-russia-gru-ammunition-depots/32925105.html>.

²⁶ "Russian spy poisoning: What we know so far," *BBC*, October 8, 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43315636>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Germany expels Russian diplomats after hitman sentenced in Berlin," *BBC*, December 15, 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59667937>.

³⁰ Michaela Dodge, "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol.4-No.1.pdf>.

³¹ Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare," Multinational Capability Development Campaign Countering Hybrid Warfare Project, 2017, p. 8, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8228a540f0b62305b92caa/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf.

further complicate countering these types of activities, because they obscure understanding of hybrid warfare, particularly for policy makers who are obliged to make decisions to address it, as historian Kenton White observes.³²

The West has mostly ignored Putin's 2007 speech in Munich, in which he openly declared an intent to remake the post-Cold War order in Russia's own image.³³ For Russia, so-called hybrid operations are a matter of degree in its war against the West. Moscow's primary goal is to shape the information environment so that countries make choices advantageous to Russia's interests without them realizing they are being manipulated to do so. These efforts were known as "active measures" during the Cold War.³⁴

The West's response to Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine 2014 were so weak that Vladimir Putin may have concluded that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a next logical step from the perspective of Russia's imperialism, would be acceptable and that the West's response would not amount to much. But the West has rallied behind Ukraine and enabled it to fight back. Putin was certainly mistaken thinking that Russia could take Kyiv

³² Kenton White, "Academia and the Armed Forces: Formal Colleagues or Passing Acquaintances?" *Journal of Policy & Strategy* Vol. 5, No. (Spring 2025), p. 31, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Analysis-White-5.1.pdf>.

³³ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," *Politico*, February 18, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.

³⁴ Mason Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2020, available at <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf>.

in two weeks.³⁵ Yet, the Russian leadership has so far concluded that continuing its aggression is more beneficial to Moscow's interests than stopping it.

The West's support for Ukraine can contribute to mitigating Russia's hybrid campaign, besides Russia's defeat in Ukraine remaining in NATO's geopolitical interest.³⁶ Ukraine forces Russia to focus its resources and attention, and it seems highly likely that otherwise Russia would use at least a part of these resources to expand its campaign against NATO states. Through support for Ukraine, Western countries can retaliate for Russia's malign activities and increase costs of Russia's hybrid activities against the West. Russia's hybrid operations against NATO started years prior, and the cessation of help to Ukraine will not stop them. This is because Russia desires a fundamental restructuring of the global world order against U.S. and allies' interests, in addition to defeating Ukraine.

Countering Russia's Activities

The West's response to Russia's aggressive actions remains limited.³⁷ Irregular activities have always been a part of warfare, and a decision on whether one is at war is made at a political level. So far, politicians have been hesitant to characterize their countries as being at war with Russia,

³⁵ Denver Nicks, "Putin Boasts of Being Able to Take Kiev in 2 Weeks," *Time*, September 2, 2014, available at <https://time.com/3259699/putin-boast-kiev-2-weeks/>.

³⁶ Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series* No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/.

³⁷ Edward Lucas, "Getting to 'Ouch': Hybrid Deterrence," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, September 15, 2024, available at <https://cepa.org/article/getting-to-ouch-hybrid-deterrence/>.

even though Russia says that Europe's support of Ukraine puts them at war with Russia.³⁸

The repeated nature of Russia's actions indicates that Moscow has concluded that its sabotage campaign will contribute to its objectives at acceptable costs. For the moment, these objectives center around undermining NATO support for Ukraine, but the broader goal is to undermine the West globally. Russia's objectives also likely include gathering information and testing procedures in case of more active hostilities with NATO and undermining NATO's unity.

There is almost no discussion at the political level of the West taking similar offensive actions. Granted, Russia has been subjected to attacks on its territory, but these attacks are executed by Ukraine, a country Russia invaded, even if Ukraine occasionally uses Western-provided weapons. The lack of political will to discuss offensive response measures is a major gap and an indication of the limitation in current strategies to counter Russia's actions – which Moscow sees as weakness to be exploited. Increasing the public's support for more assertive counter-actions, e.g. sabotage of Russia's military and logistical hubs and its energy infrastructure, is a necessary prerequisite to answering Russia's aggression against the West, as is sensitizing the public to the fact that Russia sees democratic governments and populations that support them as adversaries. Indeed, if NATO fails to respond adequately, it is only inviting further, and perhaps escalated, Russian aggression within European borders. Western officials also should publicly highlight that the

³⁸ "UK is a de facto participant in Ukraine war, claims Russian ambassador," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/may/17/russia-ukraine-war-live-drone-attack-crimea-sevastopol-kharkiv-news-updates?filterKeyEvents=false&page=with:block-6647407a8f0835020111336c#block-6647407a8f0835020111336c>; Uliana Pavlova, "Kremlin spokesperson claims US is 'de facto' involved in Ukraine conflict," *CNN World*, October 11, 2022, available at https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-10-11-22#h_659e44127299d3792b739fb0622634fe;

comprehensive nature of Russia's actions is a part of Moscow's broader effort to undermine democracies and shape the global world order in its image.

Conclusion

NATO leaders would do well to remember that "Creeping aggression backed by militaristic ruthlessness has succeeded many times in the past. Appeasement does not prevent war, it assures conflict."³⁹ Defending against Russia's aggression is necessary, but not enough to change Russia's calculus whether it should stop, or at least scale down, its campaign against targets on NATO territory. NATO members ought to begin thinking and speaking publicly about their own offensive responses against targets in Russia, keeping in mind the degree of damage Russia causes in the West. These discussions should include sabotage of Russia's military and logistical hubs and its energy infrastructure, the primary enablers of Russia's aggression against the West. A principle of reciprocity may be the only way to convince Moscow to stop. If that is too difficult politically, the West should at least enable Ukraine to continue waging its fight against the Russian aggressors with its full support.

³⁹ Armstrong, *The Reluctant Warrior*, op. cit., p. 180.

Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat*

Russia's economic and societal adaptation for a long war is leaving Ukraine outgunned and outmanned, and its allies are left to scramble for ammunition around the world.¹ The bravery and dedication of the Ukrainians fighting for their loved ones and their country will become a part of future case studies on maintaining resilience, innovation, and morale against significant odds. Nevertheless, the worrisome trends, including a disadvantage in manpower, ammunition production and long-range weapons, leave a Ukrainian defeat a possibility, especially without U.S. help.² Perhaps just as worrisome are societal trends and what appears to be somewhat diminished support for aid to Ukraine.³

The United States has significant interests in Europe that are worth defending. The United States and the European Union (EU) plus the United Kingdom account for almost half of the world economy.⁴ North Atlantic Treaty

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series*, No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025).

¹ Jason Hovet and Jan Lopatka, "Czech Republic to seek more Ukraine ammunition contributions, minister says," *Reuters*, May 31, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/czech-republic-seek-more-ukraine-ammunition-drive-minister-says-2024-05-31/>.

² For the purposes of this intellectual exercise, it is not important *how* Ukraine got defeated; defeat is understood as Ukraine not surviving as a state and not being capable of conducting significant government-led military operations against Russia.

³ Jennifer Agiesta, "CNN Poll: Majority of Americans oppose more US aid for Ukraine in war with Russia," *CNN Politics*, August 4, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/04/politics/cnn-poll-ukraine/index.html>.

⁴ Luke Coffey, "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization at 75: Reflecting on Past Successes and Planning for the Future," *Prepared Testimony before the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, United States Senate*, January 29, 2024, available at

Organization (NATO) member states in Europe are America's largest export market.⁵ Ukraine is a part of Europe. What would be the geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's defeat? In other words, why is it essential for the West, including the United States, to continue to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia's unjustified, illegal, and brutal invasion?

Russia's Threat to U.S. Interests in Europe Would Increase

Ukraine's defeat would bring Russia geopolitically closer to Europe, including toward allies that used to be a part of the Warsaw Pact but joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War.⁶ It would be a humanitarian disaster for millions of Ukrainians who would be subjected to forced russification and brutalized by Russia. Putin would like to erase Ukraine as an independent state and Russia's installed puppet regime would be organized to suppress Ukrainian language and culture.⁷ Russia's imperialism would not end with the conquest of Ukraine, and could be turned toward Moldova, Georgia, or even NATO countries that joined the Alliance since the end of the Cold War.

Russia's leaders have always been offended by Russia's diminished political influence in the former Warsaw Pact areas as a consequence of these states' integration into Western political and military structures. That is also why

https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5ce607f1-c805-d98c-d58f-143a4fe4dfe4/013124_Coffey_Testimony.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ In this context, defeat means a situation in which Russia thinks of itself as a victor and is perceived as such by NATO's governments. In practice, this likely means Russia possessing a significant part if not all of Ukraine's territory and a defacto control of Ukraine's government.

⁷ Vazha Tavberidze, "Interview: Putin Has Not Given Up On Erasing Ukraine 'As A State, A Concept, And A People,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/nataliya-bugayova-institute-for-the-study-of-war-interview-ukraine-russia/32944531.html>.

various Russia's "peace" proposals include what would effectively mean the restoration of Russia's sphere of influence on former Warsaw Pact territories, including some current NATO member states.⁸

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is already a challenge to alliance cohesion because the perception of Russia as a threat to NATO differs within the Alliance, with countries closer to Russia's border being generally more concerned about Russia's imperialist designs and capabilities than countries farther away. Ukraine's potential subjugation would be just the beginning of Russia's post-Cold War aggression.

If Russia were able to conquer Ukraine and establish a more robust and permanent political and military presence there, its new geopolitical center of gravity would open further opportunities for Moscow's hostile activities against targets in Europe, which could be conducted through proxies. Ukraine borders Hungary and Slovakia, both countries currently under governments that are sympathetic to Russia's interests. It is conceivable that Russia could use geographical proximity to further infiltrate the European Union (EU) because Slovakia and Hungary are a part of the Schengen area and their governments are currently friendly with Moscow, unlike, for example, the Finnish government that can be trusted to protect its borders.⁹ Europe is already concerned about Russia's sabotage, and enabling additional opportunities for Russia

⁸ Andrew Roth, "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>; and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>.

⁹ This means that moving across a state's border to another state within the Schengen area does not require further passport checks.

to infiltrate it is likely to worsen the matter.¹⁰ Russia has subjected NATO countries to cyber attacks, energy blackmail, and even killed citizens of NATO member countries.¹¹ These types of activities could lead to the destabilization of governments in targeted countries, the undermining of NATO and the EU, and, accompanied by Russia's propaganda, an increase in anti-Americanism.¹²

Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty states that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."¹³ Should Russia win in Ukraine, Moscow could call into question the integrity of NATO members' commitment to Article V, even though Ukraine is not a NATO member state and its members are not pledged to come to its defense. Expressing the sentiment, Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament, asked in an aftermath of a particularly brutal attacks against Ukrainian civilians "If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country?"¹⁴ If Russia defeats Ukraine, the United States would lose

¹⁰ Lisa O'Carroll, "Europe on high alert after suspected Moscow-linked arson and sabotage," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/30/europe-on-high-alert-after-suspected-moscow-linked-arson-and-sabotage>.

¹¹ Marek Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *OSW Report*, October 2024, pp. 89-92, available at https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Winning%20the%20war%20with%20Russia%20is%20still%20possible_nett.pdf.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, April 4, 1949, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

¹⁴ Marko Mihkelson [@markomihkelson], If the great powers of the free world allow Russia to destroy a democratic European power before our eyes with impunity, what makes Russia believe that we will strike back if they attack a NATO country? [Twitter], 2:27 AM, September 4, 2024, available at <https://twitter.com/markomihkelson/status/1831225102819570067>.

credibility as a guarantor of today's global security architecture; an architecture that has allowed billions of people to prosper beyond any comparable time in humankind's history. In fact, former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said with regard to deterring China from a cross-strait attack that "A Ukrainian victory will serve as the most effective deterrent to future aggression."¹⁵ Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu argued that if the United States abandons Ukraine, China would "take it as a hint" that the United States and its allies would "back off" in the case of China's sustained action against Taiwan.¹⁶ The consequence would be a less prosperous world order that is less safe for the Americans, their allies, and the Free World's interests.

Strain on U.S. Alliances Would Increase

NATO countries that are close to Russia's borders like Estonia or Lithuania are already concerned about Russia's long-term military potential because of Moscow's economic war mobilization. These countries on average provide more assistance to Ukraine than the rest of NATO as a percentage of their GDP,¹⁷ and have significantly increased their defense budgets.¹⁸ In some cases, the effort to recapitalize

¹⁵ Jack Detsch, "Taiwan's former president says Ukraine needs US weapons more urgently than Taipei," *Politico*, November 23, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/23/taiwans-former-president-says-ukraine-needs-u-s-weapons-more-urgently-than-taipei-00191400>.

¹⁶ Wu Tse-yu, "Arms supply suspension would embolden China," *Taipei Times*, March 31, 2024, available at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/03/31/2003815730>.

¹⁷ Anthony Zurcher, "How Norway outstrips US on Ukraine spending," *BBC*, September 21, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/66870559>.

¹⁸ *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)*, March 14, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240314-def-exp-2023-en.pdf.

and modernize their militaries started well before Russia's full-scale invasion.¹⁹

Russia's victory could add Ukraine's resources to strengthen Moscow's military power – and with an increase in military power would come an increase in Russia's belligerence and imperial ambitions. Russia would seek to utilize Ukraine's resources, including rare earths, steel, and technical expertise, to augment its own economy, currently focused on war production. Prior to war, Ukraine was the seventh largest global wheat producer with a majority of its exports going to Egypt and Indonesia.²⁰ Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a two to three percent spike in wheat prices.²¹ Russia is already plundering the territories it occupies in Ukraine, including forcing conscription and mobilization of the population in occupied southeastern Ukraine.²² Russia's future imperial ambitions would likely be centered around NATO countries, particularly those that were in the Soviet sphere of influence or a part of the Warsaw Pact.²³

European NATO countries already face a near- to medium-term requirement to reinvigorate their militaries and defense sectors and increase defense spending. So far,

¹⁹ Eero Epner, "'Human Life Has No Value There': Baltic Counterintelligence Officers Speak Candidly About Russian Cruelty," *Eesti Ekspress*, October 16, 2022, available at <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/artikkel/120083694/human-life-has-no-value-there-baltic-counterintelligence-officers-speak-candidly-about-russian-cruelty>.

²⁰ Ines Eisele, "Five facts on grain and the war in Ukraine," *DW*, November 1, 2022, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/five-facts-on-grain-and-the-war-in-ukraine/a-62601467>.

²¹ Stephen Devadoss and William Ridley, "Impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global wheat market," *World Development* Vol. 173 (January 2024), available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X23002140>.

²² Andrzej Szabaciuk, "Russian mobilisation in occupied areas of Ukraine," *IEŚ Commentaries* No. 984, October 25, 2023, available at <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ies-commentaries-984-232-2023.pdf>.

²³ Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *op. cit.*, pp. 12-16.

the pace of most NATO countries doing so has been disappointing given the magnitude of the threat. In the future, NATO will either have to contend with a geopolitically closer, more aggressive, and emboldened Russia that wants to build on its success in Ukraine, or it will have to step up its support for Ukraine so that Ukraine can decisively defeat Russia,²⁴ and then rearm to deter any possible future Russian attack. Increasing European NATO members' defense spending would also have the benefit of demonstrating that NATO Europe is taking its own security seriously and would help counter the "Europe is free loading" narrative that is becoming more prevalent within the U.S. political discourse.

The fiscal cost of helping Ukraine defeat Russia is arguably less than the United States would have to spend to reassure allies of America's commitment to their security in the wake of Ukraine's defeat. The United States would also have to bolster its military to deter, and if necessary, defeat Russia—and other states, e.g. China, that would be emboldened in the wake of Ukraine's defeat.

Russia's goals are not just regional, the subjugation of Ukraine, but are a symptom of Moscow's broader desire for a confrontation with the West and for replacing the U.S.-led global security order with one led by authoritarian dictatorships, including Russia.²⁵ China would be the leader of this new China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea alliance, and the challenge they would present to the U.S.-led alliance structure and prosperity is serious.

²⁴ A decisive defeat is a defeat recognized as such by Russia's leadership and a majority of the Russians.

²⁵ Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Emboldened China, North Korea, and Iran

China and North Korea decided to strategically align themselves with Russia. This means that a path to disrupting this looming alliance and their revisionist designs in the Indo-Pacific region runs through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. The argument that the United States ought to prioritize the Indo-Pacific theater over the European theater is problematic.²⁶ With the exception of the Patriot air defense systems and some air-to-air missiles, the types of weapons the United States has provided Ukraine are different from those it would need to defeat a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and the overall stimulation of the U.S. defense sector prior to contingencies with China starting is beneficial for the United States.

Most security assistance to Ukraine is appropriated separately from the Department of Defense's base budget, meaning it is not funding that the Department of Defense or the U.S. defense industrial base otherwise would have. Over the past almost three years of conflict, the United States has committed a little over \$21 billion a year on average in security assistance to Ukraine.²⁷ In an almost \$30 trillion economy, the amount that the United States has spent supporting Ukraine is well worth exhausting Russia and states that support it, in addition to supporting U.S. jobs in many congressional districts.

The West's collective reticence to decidedly support Ukraine to enable it to win is negatively impacting relations with other nations. Former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described aid to Ukraine as "significant, but, at the end of the day, insufficient military support – enough to

²⁶ For an example of this thinking, see Elbridge Colby, "America must face reality and prioritise China over Europe," *Financial Times*, May 23, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/b423aa65-b9cb-4ba5-9c7d-f67dc289a18f>.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," *Factsheet*, October 21, 2024, available at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

survive but not enough to bring the war to an end on favourable terms.”²⁸ At a conference in Estonia, Samir Saran, the head of the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think tank, “almost mocked” the West’s inability to organize Russia’s battlefield defeat, despite Russia’s economy being twenty times smaller than the West’s.²⁹ In a stark indictment of the West’s lack of strategic vision and support for a Ukrainian victory, Saran went on to say:

There is one actor that has reorganised its strategic engagement to fight a war and the other has not. One side is not participating in the battle. You have hosted conferences supporting Ukraine and then do nothing more. But when it comes to action, Russia 2.0 is grinding forward. It tells countries like us that if something like this were to happen in the Indo-Pacific, you have no chance against China. If you cannot defeat a \$2tn [trillion] nation, don’t think you are deterring China. China is taking hope from your abysmal and dismal performance against a much smaller adversary.³⁰

Should Ukraine fail to decisively defeat Russia’s aggression, China and North Korea will likely be emboldened to pursue their more belligerent designs against U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, and other countries will be less likely to resist them; they will be less certain of U.S. backing. In the words of Adm. Rob Bauer, the Dutch chairman of NATO’s Military Committee, North Korea went from “the most isolated country in the

²⁸ Jens Stoltenberg, “The reality of Europe’s fears about Trump depends more on us than him,” *The Financial Times*, November 9, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/48e18527-b102-4f2c-8684-f690c18cb450>.

²⁹ Patrick Wintour, “‘We’re in 1938 now’: Putin’s war in Ukraine and lessons from history,” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/08/putin-war-ukraine-for-gotten-lessons-of-history-europe>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

world” to “a player.”³¹ He went on to ask “If you allow a nation like Russia to win, to come out of this as the victor, then what does it mean for other autocratic states in the world where the U.S. has also interests?”³²

When the United States and its allies decided to align themselves with Ukraine, and China and North Korea decided to align themselves with Russia, the conflict took on much greater meaning than “just” Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. No degree of denial on Washington’s (and the West’s) part can help it escape that reality. Therefore, in perceptions, Ukraine’s defeat would inevitably become the West’s defeat (and America’s), exacerbating U.S. geopolitical challenges globally.

Potentially Destabilizing Immigration Flows to Europe

Prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine was a nation of about 41 million. Its population has fallen by about 10 million since then given a combination of emigration, forced displacements on territories conquered by Russia, and war deaths.³³ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “an estimated 3.7 million people have been driven from their homes and are internally displaced and nearly 6.5 million people have crossed into neighboring countries in the region including Poland, Hungary, Moldova or other countries globally.”³⁴

³¹ Lara Jakes, “Trump Should Not Let Putin Claim Victory in Ukraine, Says NATO Official,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/09/world/europe/trump-nato-putin-ukraine.html>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Thomas Escritt, “Ukraine’s population has fallen by 10 million since Russia’s invasion, UN says,” *Reuters*, October 22, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-population-has-fallen-by-10-million-since-russias-invasion-un-says-2024-10-22/>.

³⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Ukraine Emergency*, 2024, available at <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>.

Most of those who resettled abroad are planning on returning to Ukraine eventually, with the liberation of territories from where they come from significantly increasing their likelihood of return.³⁵ Ukraine's victory would lessen societal frictions and expenses associated with the diaspora of Ukrainians displaced by war. Needless to say, the International Monetary Fund estimates the net fiscal long-term effect as positive for host countries as Ukrainians integrate into the labor market.³⁶

In contrast, should the rest of Ukraine fall to Russia's aggression, the displacement and refugee challenge would become much worse for European countries, particularly for those that host an already large number of Ukrainians, including Poland and Germany. The German Federal Civil Protection Agency reportedly estimates that 10 million more Ukrainians would flee if the country falls in the next six months with about 2 million coming to Germany.³⁷ The unofficial estimates are reportedly almost double these numbers.³⁸ Even though the publics in European states remain generally supportive of giving sanctuary to

³⁵ Cevat Giray Aksoy, "Most Ukrainians displaced by the war plan to return home when it is safe, research shows," *King's College London News Centre*, June 19, 2024, available at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/most-ukrainians-displaced-by-the-war-plan-to-return-home-when-it-is-safe-research-shows>.

³⁶ Quoted in Olga Pogarska et al., "How Ukrainian migrants affect the economies of European countries," *VoxEU Column*, March 7, 2023, available at <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/how-ukrainian-migrants-affect-economies-european-countries>.

³⁷ Mujtaba Rahman [@Mij_Europe], German MPs have been briefed by the Federal Civil Protection Agency that if Ukraine crumbles within the next 6 months, millions of Ukrainians will head West. The official estimate: 10 million, 2 of them to Germany. Unofficial: up to 18 million, 3-4 million to Germany 1/. [Tweet], X, 2:20 AM, November 14, 2024, available at https://twitter.com/Mij_Europe/status/1856960343018176830.

³⁸ Ibid.

displaced Ukrainians,³⁹ a recent survey in Poland indicated a decline in positive sentiment toward Ukrainian refugees.⁴⁰

While people in European countries are more welcoming toward displaced Ukrainians as opposed to refugees of other ethnicities,⁴¹ the immigration issue has caused polarization within many European countries. The governments' inability to address the challenge successfully is one of the drivers for the rise of political parties that until recently were on the fringe of the political spectrum, such as the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany.⁴² The issue of displaced Ukrainians and associated costs to the economy is already becoming a topic of Russian disinformation operations designed to undermine a host country public's support for a government's pro-Ukraine policies.⁴³ Russian-sponsored propaganda seeks to exacerbate pre-existing tensions within the host countries,

³⁹ Arielle Kaim et al., "From compassion to controversy: Unraveling the impact of societal resilience on the tapestry of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (Vol. 105), April 15, 2024, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420924000888>.

⁴⁰ "Poland: Survey reveals shifting attitudes towards people displaced from Ukraine," *European Website on Integration*, June 24, 2024, available at https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/poland-survey-reveals-shifting-attitudes-towards-people-displaced-ukraine_en.

⁴¹ Arielle Kaim et al., "From compassion to controversy: Unraveling the impact of societal resilience on the tapestry of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees," *op. cit.*

⁴² Johanna Treeck and Nette Nöstlinger, "German businesses fear far right success will scare off much-needed workers," *Politico*, September 4, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-is-fighting-an-increasingly-lonely-battle-on-immigration/>; and James Angelos, Myah Ward and Emily Schultheis, "Immigration fears are pushing centrists to the right in the US and Europe," *Politico*, June 20, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/20/centrists-immigration-policy-us-europe-00164151>.

⁴³ "Ukrainian refugees in Europe: a target of Russian propaganda," *Ukraine Crisis media center*, December 30, 2023, available at <https://uacrisis.org/en/ukrayinski-bizhentsi-v-yes-u-fokusi-rosijskoyi-propagandy>; The Editorial Board, "Putin Uses Refugees as a Weapon," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2022, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/vladimir-putin-uses-refugees-as-a-weapon-joe-biden-ukraine-europe-11647983676>.

presenting a challenge to U.S. and European governments.⁴⁴ More Ukrainian displaced persons with limited prospects of return would increase tensions and polarization within host countries.

Significant Increases in Defense Spending Would Be Required

NATO countries, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, would be more at risk of direct Russian attack should Ukraine fall into Russia's hands. Russia is planning to increase its military spending by 25 percent between 2024 and 2025 and the military budget will consume 32 percent of total expenditures and about eight percent of Russia's gross domestic product (GDP).⁴⁵ That is a sign that Russia is preparing for a long war—and has transitioned to a war economy. Russia has been able to circumvent Western sanctions, keep its military relatively well supplied, and even increase its military production capacity in the period between February 2023 and February 2024.⁴⁶ Russia reportedly produces three times as many artillery shells than the United States and European countries combined.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Suzanne Smalley, "Russian information operations focus on dividing Western coalition supporting Ukraine," *Cyberscoop*, July 7, 2022, available at <https://cyberscoop.com/russian-information-operations-dividing-west-ukraine/>; and Schemes, "Leaked Records Detail Vast Russian Influence Campaign Targeting Ukraine, EU," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 17, 2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-disinformation-propaganda-campaign/33123498.html>.

⁴⁵ Darya Korsunskaya and Gleb Bryanski, "Russia hikes 2025 defence spending by 25% to a new post-Soviet high," *Reuters*, September 30, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-hikes-national-defence-spending-by-23-2025-2024-09-30/>.

⁴⁶ Maria Snegovaya et al., *Back in Stock? The State of Russia's Defense Industry after Two Years of the War*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2024, p. 6, available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/240419_Snegovaya_Backin_Stock.pdf?VersionId=rwHuy82sf7y5TEoD8sRJLGf3lYmeGAnL.

⁴⁷ Katie Bo Lillis et al., "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine," *CNN Politics*, March 11, 2024, available

The United States is falling short of its goal to produce 80,000 shells of 155-millimeter artillery ammunition a month (the current production rate is about 55,000 shells a month).⁴⁸ Russia builds about 250,000 artillery munitions a month.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, a number of European NATO members are still failing to meet the political commitment made prior to Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and codified at the Wales Summit in 2014 to spend two percent of GDP on defense. While more NATO nations have stepped up to the two percent plate recently, circumstances have changed so much since then that two percent is likely insufficient to deter potential Russian aggression against NATO. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has recently said that member states must spend "a lot more than two percent."⁵⁰

Ukraine commands many resources that Russia would plunder to supplement its own already significant defense spending. Historically, Ukraine has been a source of talent and natural resources for the Soviet Union's most advanced military programs, including intercontinental-range ballistic missiles.⁵¹ By the virtue of necessity, Ukraine's defense sector has been at the forefront of defense

at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/10/politics/russia-artillery-shell-production-us-europe-ukraine/index.html>.

⁴⁸ Lara Jakes, "Trump Should Not Let Putin Claim Victory in Ukraine, Says NATO Official," *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Katie Bo Lillis et al., "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine," *CNN Politics*, March 11, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/10/politics/russia-artillery-shell-production-us-europe-ukraine/index.html>.

⁵⁰ Mark Rutte, "To Prevent War, NATO Must Spend More," *Speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the Concert Noble, Brussels*, December 12, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_231348.htm.

⁵¹ Denys Gurak, "Doing Business in Ukraine 2024 Conference: Building Ukraine's Security through a Modernized Economy Plenary Panel III: The Future of Ukraine's Defense Industrial Base," *Transcript*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2024, pp. 14-15, available at https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-10/241001_Bendett_Ukraine_Panel3.pdf?VersionId=tiChxX8XrDrPWv4p29zcn9KQE_bt1Spd.

innovation and its defense industrial base is now reportedly capable of producing \$20 billion worth of weapons and equipment annually.⁵² Ukraine's military is now one of the most experienced fighting forces in the world in the kind of warfare that the United States could plausibly fight with its adversaries in the future. So far, the West has benefited from battle-testing technologies, but so has Russia – and Moscow is likely sharing its knowledge with U.S. adversaries like China, Iran, and North Korea in exchange for their material support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁵³

The United States alone has provided Ukraine with over \$61 billion in military assistance since February 2022.⁵⁴ This assistance includes munitions, unmanned aerial systems, air defense systems, tanks, Javelin anti-armor systems, and many other items. Other European countries made their own military contributions. Ukraine is using these systems for its valiant defense. Should Ukraine fall, some of these systems could end up in Russia's hands – or in the hands of other U.S. adversaries. There is some risk that U.S. adversaries have obtained some Western-provided weapons already, although not in significant quantities.⁵⁵

⁵² Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine Aspires to Become Arsenal to the West," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 21, Issue 163: November 8, 2024), available at <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraine-aspires-to-become-arsenal-to-the-west/>.

⁵³ Max Bergmann et al., "Collaboration for a Price: Russian Military-Technical Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 22, 2024, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/collaboration-price-russian-military-technical-cooperation-china-iran-and-north-korea>.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," *Factsheet*, December 2, 2024, available at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

⁵⁵ Katie Bo Lillis et al., "What happens to weapons sent to Ukraine? The US doesn't really know," *CNN Politics*, April 19, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/19/politics/us-weapons-ukraine-intelligence/index.html>; and Tom O'Connor, "Israel Worries U.S. Weapons for Ukraine Are Ending Up in Iran's Hands," *Newsweek*, June 13, 2023, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-worries-us-weapons-ukraine-are-ending-irans-hands-1806131>.

With Russia demonstrating its aggressive designs for a restructured post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, it is essential that NATO countries remain strong enough to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression. This likely requires spending above two percent of GDP. For example, Poland and Estonia, now two NATO leaders in defense spending, were respectively contributing an estimated 4.12 and 3.43 percent of GDP on defense in 2024.⁵⁶ Even these costs are minuscule relative to the resources that would be required should Russia invade a NATO state. For example, about a half of Ukraine's total budget is now dedicated to defense.⁵⁷

The Risk of Further Undermining U.S. Nonproliferation Policy

The effectiveness of U.S. deterrence strategies rests on U.S. credibility, and that credibility is already on the line in Ukraine because Washington was one of the signatories to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine's decision to denuclearize.⁵⁸ According to some Ukrainian experts, Russia's invasion constitutes "formal grounds for withdrawal from the NPT [Nonproliferation

⁵⁶ "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)," *NATO Press Release*, June 17, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf.

⁵⁷ Giovanna Coi and Lucia Mackenzie, "Ukraine's funding gap – by the numbers," *Politico*, January 25, 2024, available <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-funding-budget-defense-european-union/>.

⁵⁸ *Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, December 5, 1994, available at <https://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>.

Treaty] and moral reasons for reconsideration of the non-nuclear choice made in early 1994.”⁵⁹

During the Clinton Administration, the United States spearheaded Ukraine's denuclearization in its effort to prioritize relations with Moscow “over all else” and “ridiculed” Ukrainian concerns over their security, even insinuating that U.S. officials knew Ukraine's interests better than the Ukrainians themselves.⁶⁰ Clinton has since expressed regret over pressuring the Ukrainians to give up nuclear weapons on its territory.⁶¹ Quite understandably, Ukrainians feel similarly.⁶² Recently, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that “Either Ukraine will have nuclear weapons and that will be our protection or we should have some sort of alliance. Apart from NATO, today we do not know any effective alliances.”⁶³ Yet, the chance that Ukraine will be accepted into NATO while hostilities with Russia are ongoing and while Russia is occupying

⁵⁹ Maxim Tucker, “Could Zelensky use nuclear bombs? Ukraine's options explained,” *The Times*, November 14, 2024, available at <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/zelensky-nuclear-weapons-bomb-0ddjrs5hw>.

⁶⁰ Casey Michel, “Ukraine Now Faces a Nuclear Decision,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/07/ukraine-now-faces-a-nuclear-decision/>.

⁶¹ Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, “Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons,” *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

⁶² Victor Morton, “Ukraine foreign minister: Giving up nuclear weapons wasn't smart,” *The Washington Times*, February 22, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/22/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-foreign-minister-giving-nucl/>; and William Broad, “Ukraine Gave Up a Giant Nuclear Arsenal 30 Years Ago. Today There Are Regrets,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/05/science/ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>.

⁶³ Seb Starcevic, “Zelenskyy: We need NATO or nukes ... and we want NATO,” *Politico*, October 17, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-nukes-volodymyr-zelenskyy-war-ukraine-aid-russia/>.

almost fifth of Ukraine's territory is near zero due to political divisions within NATO itself.

Ukraine reportedly possesses the technological know-how and material to build a rudimentary nuclear device within months.⁶⁴ But for now, it does not have near-term options to build it in a way that would advance rather than hamper its security interests—in addition to operational problems of delivering a rudimentary device to its intended target.⁶⁵

Ukraine's cautionary tale of getting invaded after it gave up nuclear weapons will hardly be lost on U.S. allies—and adversaries. If the United States fails to decisively support Ukraine against its righteous fight against the Russian invaders, it will lose the credibility on which U.S. assurance to allies depends. The implications could be far-reaching: from allies geopolitically aligning with U.S. adversaries to developing their own independent nuclear weapon capabilities.

Russia's nuclear coercion and escalation threats have shaped its full-scale invasion from the beginning. These threats have been aimed at undermining Western unity in supporting Ukraine and have been successful to a degree. Until November 2024, the United States had not authorized Ukraine to use U.S.-provided long-range weapons to strike targets on Russia's territory. The West's rhetoric aimed at preventing escalation of the conflict has likely had the opposite effect by encouraging Vladimir Putin's continuing aggression.⁶⁶

Russia's coercive use of nuclear weapons has helped to create space in which states perceive they can rewrite the

⁶⁴ Tucker, "Could Zelensky use nuclear bombs? Ukraine's options explained," op. cit.

⁶⁵ Oleg Sukhov, "Will Ukraine develop its own nuclear weapons?," *Kyiv Independent*, November 6, 2024, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/trump-back-in-white-house-can-ukraine-opt-for-nuclear-deterrence/>.

⁶⁶ Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," op. cit., p. 63.

rules of the post-Cold War security order. This will embolden U.S. nuclear-armed adversaries and make it more difficult for the United States and its allies to preserve the status quo—and the pressing problem of nuclear proliferation would become even worse should Ukraine lose.

Conclusion

The geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's defeat would reverberate across the global system in disastrous ways for U.S. security. They include having to contend with a stronger and more belligerent Russia and its allies China and North Korea, a weakening of the U.S. alliance system, increasing demands on the already overstretched U.S. defense industrial base, and greater global impetus for nuclear proliferation. The United States, as a status quo power and leader of the free world, has an essential interest in seeing Russia decisively defeated in Ukraine, and so do U.S. allies, including in the Indo-Pacific. While comprehensive recommendations to prevent this worst outcome from coming to pass are beyond the scope of this *Information Series*,⁶⁷ Americans and their political leaders ought to have a proper understanding of the likely consequences of a Ukrainian defeat in order to make better informed decisions regarding U.S. measures to prevent that outcome.

⁶⁷ For a solid list of recommendations to that effect see *ibid.*

European Allies' Views of Russia's Nuclear Policy after the Escalation of Its War in Ukraine*

Russia's nuclear threats have not gone unnoticed among citizens of European nations, including in those countries that reportedly host U.S. battlefield (also sometimes called tactical or short-range) nuclear weapons (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey¹). The public debates over hosting U.S. nuclear weapons as a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) nuclear mission in various European states prior to the escalation of Russia's war in Ukraine were generally sporadic and often negative, including in those countries that reportedly host U.S. nuclear weapons.² The situation appears to have changed after February 2022.

Perspectives of Allied States Hosting U.S. Nuclear Weapons Prior to Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

Despite some of their citizens' reluctance, NATO member states' governments have been able to sustain a political consensus on the importance of nuclear weapons for their security. Every *Strategic Concept* since the end of the Cold

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge "European Allies' Views of Russia's Nuclear Policy after the Escalation of Its War in Ukraine," *Information Series*, No. 570 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 12, 2023).

¹ Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, "Nuclear Notebook: United States nuclear weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 16, 2023, available at <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-01/nuclear-notebook-united-states-nuclear-weapons-2023/>.

² Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, and Tom Etienne, "Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine," *Global Policy*, January 5, 2023, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1758-5899.13179>.

War, plus the 2012 *Deterrence and Defence Posture Review*, emphasized the importance of nuclear weapons for allied security.³ Starting in 2010, under the continuing influence of the post-Cold War optimism and President Obama's vision to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons, NATO's *Strategic Concept* documents committed the Alliance to pursuing a nuclear-free world. They also reiterated the nuclear weapons' role as the "supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance" and maintained that NATO will remain a nuclear alliance for as long as nuclear weapons exist.⁴ Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent belligerent nuclear threats forced NATO's attention back on the importance of strengthening nuclear deterrence.⁵

The United States is not the only nuclear-armed member of NATO. Two of the European NATO member states, France and the United Kingdom, have nuclear weapons of their own. France reportedly retains fewer than 300 nuclear warheads that can be delivered by submarine-launched

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, April 24, 1999 available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, November 2010, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Deterrence and Defence Posture Review*, May 20, 2012, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87597.htm; and, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, June 29, 2022, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, op. cit.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, op. cit., p. 14; and, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁵ Alexander Vershbow, "Reflections on NATO Deterrence in the 21st Century," *Texas National Security Roundtable*, August 23, 2021, available at <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-trans-atlantic-nuclear-deterrence/>.

ballistic missiles or aircraft.⁶ France does not participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, where the other member states discuss nuclear policy issues pertinent to the Alliance. The United Kingdom has no more than 260 warheads in its stockpile and is the only recognized nuclear weapon state that reduced its nuclear weapon capabilities to a single delivery system, submarines that can launch U.S.-made Trident II D5 missiles.⁷ The Alliance recognizes that these forces "have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance."⁸ The "separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries."⁹

Historically, NATO's European member states have been concerned about the credibility of U.S. nuclear guarantees; after all, that is a basic reason for France and the United Kingdom developing their independent nuclear deterrents in the first place. The problem became particularly pronounced when the Soviets reached strategic parity with the United States in the 1970s.¹⁰ It contributed to the development of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger's Limited Nuclear Options that did not involve a large-scale nuclear attack against Soviet territory in response to a Soviet attack on U.S. allies.¹¹ Yet, in 1979,

⁶ Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, and Eliana Johns, "French nuclear weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (2023), pp. 272-273, available at <https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/French-nuclear-weapons-2023.pdf>.

⁷ Claire Mills, "Nuclear weapons at a glance: United Kingdom," House of Commons Library *Research Briefing*, May 3, 2023, p. 4, available at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9077/CBP-9077.pdf>.

⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), pp. 31-38, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

President Nixon's Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger stated at a conference in Brussels, "Don't you Europeans keep asking us to multiply assurances that we cannot possibly mean; and that if we mean them, we should not want to execute; and that if we execute, we'll destroy civilization."¹²

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the United States additional time to resolve the difficulties inherent in providing credible extended deterrence and assurances to its allies. But the era of strategic optimism and large-scale nuclear weapon reductions by the United States—in some cases, unilateral—led to an atrophy of U.S. intellectual interest and physical infrastructure supporting the nuclear enterprise. In the wake of the West's Cold War success, nuclear weapon topics fell off the radar in what has been called an extended "strategic holiday." The United States and allies have generally stopped investing in the intellectual infrastructure underpinning the nuclear enterprise, and largely have forgotten the important role that the U.S. ability to compete in the nuclear realm had on the Cold War's successful outcome.

While the European states' continued hosting of U.S. nuclear weapons is a sign of their political commitment to maintaining a "nuclear Alliance," their general unwillingness to spend two percent of GDP on defense is yet again a salient problem in the U.S. post-9/11 fiscal environment.¹³ In his last speech as Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates warned:

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of

¹² "World: Kissinger on NATO," *Time*, September 17, 1979, available at <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,920653,00.html>.

¹³ The exceptions are the United States, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the United Kingdom.

nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets [sic]. Indeed, if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, Future [sic] U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost.¹⁴

His warning was prescient as President Donald Trump reportedly considered withdrawing the United States from NATO a few years later.¹⁵ The anxiety about a potential change in the U.S. strategic direction and focus on China contributed to some of the earlier debates about an independent European nuclear deterrent, although prospects for one remained distant.¹⁶ In Germany, such a debate was unprecedented,¹⁷ even as prospects for it changing the status quo were extremely low.¹⁸

¹⁴ Robert Gates, *Robert Gates' farewell speech on NATO*, June 10, 2011, available at <https://www.voltairenet.org/article170425.html>.

¹⁵ Julian Barnes, Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

¹⁶ Michael Rühle, "Daydream Believers," *Berlin Policy Journal*, November 23, 2016, available at <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/daydream-believers/>.

¹⁷ Ulrich Kühn, "The Sudden German Nuke Flirtation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 6, 2016, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/12/06/sudden-german-nuke-flirtation-pub-66366>.

¹⁸ Hans Rühle and Michael Rühle, "German Nukes: The Phantom Menace," *Information Series* No. 419 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 22, 2017), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/ruhle-hans-and-michael-ruhle-german-nukes-the-phantom-menace-information-series-no-419/#_ednref6.

A distinct fear in allied states has been related to the effects of potential nuclear weapons use on their own territory and the belief that nuclear weapons have no military utility beyond being an instrument of deterrence and an important sign of a U.S. political commitment to NATO. As recently as 2021, a majority of Germans, private citizens and government officials, strongly disagreed with any U.S. nuclear weapon use in hypothetical scenarios that included Russia's invasion of the Baltic states (NATO members).¹⁹ According to the same survey, the German public was skeptical with regard to the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons reportedly stationed in Germany (particularly among the younger generation).²⁰ With Russia's escalation of its war in Ukraine and attendant nuclear threats that sentiment appears to be changing. According to a June 2022 survey, more than half of the German population now believe in the deterrent value of nuclear weapons.²¹ This event made clear that the era of strategic optimism and expectations of a benign "new world order" have rightly come to an end.

After Russia's February 2022 Invasion

For the most part, calls for a nuclear-free world have taken a back seat in the mainstream national security discussions after Russia's escalation of its war in Ukraine in February 2022. Russia's brandishing of nuclear threats has spurred renewed interest in matters of deterrence, regional

¹⁹ Michal Onderco and Michal Smetana, "German views on US nuclear weapons in Europe: public and elite perspectives," *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2021), p. 640, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/09662839.2021.1941896?needAccess=true&role=button>.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 641.

²¹ Onderco, Smetana, and Etienne, "Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine," op. cit., p. 310.

challenges, and the roles of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons in allied assurance and extended deterrence.²²

Research conducted after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine indicates an allied shift toward acknowledging the importance of nuclear weapons and supporting the host nation's role among the Dutch and German publics.²³ For example, over half of the Dutch population now believe that U.S. nuclear weapons reportedly stationed on their territory deter a nuclear attack against NATO.²⁴ A June 2022 survey also documented a significant increase in the respondents' willingness to support nuclear weapons use in certain scenarios and fewer respondents support a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe.²⁵ It is not clear how lasting this shift will prove, but because Russia is unlikely to stop its nuclear threats anytime soon, the tendency is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Yet, Russia's invasion has called into question the wisdom of the near-complete, unilateral U.S. short-range nuclear weapon reductions of the early 1990s, and the pursuit of nuclear enterprise policies that left it unable to rapidly adapt to a deteriorating nuclear environment, despite the commitment expressed in all post-Cold War *Nuclear Posture Reviews* (NPRs) to rectify the problem. The war has exposed the abysmal state of Europe's defense and industrial base to produce conventional weapons on a scale required by a modern large-scale conflict.²⁶ The U.S.

²² For an excellent and comprehensive treatment of Russia's nuclear forces and policy, see Mark Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

²³ Onderco, Smetana, and Etienne, "Hawks in the making? European public views on nuclear weapons post-Ukraine," *op. cit.*, p. 309.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 311, 313.

²⁶ Laura Kayali, Lili Bayer, and Joshua Posaner, "Europe's military buildup: More talk than action," *Politico*, June 14, 2023, available at

industrial production base has not fared much better, even though the United States has more resources to address the challenge.²⁷

The war has also highlighted a general lack of interest, knowledge, and understanding among European publics and governments regarding nuclear weapons policy and strategy issues.²⁸ The communities interested and knowledgeable in these matters remain very small, particularly in countries that do not have their own nuclear weapons or do not host U.S. nuclear weapons.²⁹ There remains a segment of allied populations committed to the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe. How to strengthen the credibility of U.S. nuclear guarantees in the face of Russia's open and somewhat successful attempts to exploit its tactical nuclear superiority in the conduct of its foreign policy has yet again become an important topic of transatlantic discussions.

In this context, signs point to all not being well with the U.S. goal of assuring allies.³⁰ Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that, "The problem above all is that we [Poles] don't

<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-military-industry-defense-buildup-war/>.

²⁷ Michael Hirsh, "The Pentagon Is Freaking Out About a Potential War With China," *Politico*, June 9, 2023, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/06/09/america-weapons-china-00100373>.

²⁸ Liviu Horovitz and Lydia Wachs, "France's Nuclear Weapons and Europe," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Comment*, No. 15, March 2023, p. 6, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C15_Frances_NuclearWeapons.pdf.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For a more detailed analysis of this trend, see Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics In a Multipolar World, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/OP-Vol.-2-No.-10.pdf>; and, Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, "Emerging Challenges to Extended Deterrence, Assurance and the Future of U.S. Alliances," *Information Series*, No. 555 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 5, 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/IS-555.pdf>.

have nuclear weapons” and that the topic of Polish participation in nuclear sharing is open.³¹ In July 2023, prominent European experts and politicians argued that Germany, France, and the United Kingdom ought to develop their own “European” nuclear deterrent under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe’s command in order to strengthen credibility vis-à-vis Russia.³² (In this particular proposal, the arrangement would require that German aircraft be equipped to carry French nuclear warheads, not that Germany develops nuclear weapons of its own.³³)

Other experts reminded the audience that some European states, including the relatively small ones, had nuclear weapon programs in the past and that perhaps the time might be ripe to start discussions about potential nuclear-sharing arrangements in which other European states contribute toward the French nuclear deterrent in exchange for a say in nuclear planning and deployment.³⁴ Since the United Kingdom is not a part of the European Union anymore, the potential contribution of British nuclear weapons to this European “independent” nuclear deterrent is usually discussed somewhat tangentially.

An April 14, 2022 article in the popular German magazine *Spiegel International* observed that, “Dependence on American nukes could ultimately be more dangerous

³¹ Quoted in, Jo Harper, “Poland in talks to join NATO nuclear sharing program,” *Anadolu Agency*, October 5, 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/poland-in-talks-to-join-nato-nuclear-sharing-program/2703041>.

³² Jacques Lanxade, Denis MacShane, Margarita Mathiopoulos, and Klaus Naumann, “Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own,” *New Atlanticist*, July 11, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-needs-a-nuclear-deterrent-of-its-own/>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Tomi Huhtanen, “The war in Ukraine is forcing Europe to develop its own nuclear deterrence,” *Euractiv*, September 19, 2022, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/opinion/the-war-in-ukraine-is-forcing-europe-to-develop-its-own-nuclear-deterrence/>.

than dependence on Russian gas.” It cited U.S. unpredictability and the U.S. strategic focus on China as the main arguments for why European states should work toward an independent European nuclear deterrent and not rely on U.S. nuclear guarantees.³⁵ Such discussions would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. Despite voices in the United States wanting Europe to step up and provide more for its own defense, an indigenous European nuclear deterrent could end up fracturing the Alliance rather than strengthening it.³⁶

In short, questions about the future direction of NATO’s nuclear policy remain. Going forward, signs indicate that it might be difficult to work out a common strong position because of differing perceptions and substantive disagreements on the nature of the contemporary security environment and how best to address it. This disagreement includes differing perceptions among allies on what actions are considered escalatory in the context of their support for Ukraine and countering Russia’s belligerence.

For an example of differing perspectives, researchers at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs documented the West’s and Russia’s nuclear rhetoric and escalation management approaches in their September 2022 report.³⁷ The study codes the statements as “escalatory,” “warning,” and “de-escalatory.” Generally, the authors coded the West’s statements that were desirable from a

³⁵ René Pfister, Britta Sandberg and Christoph Schult, “Debate over Nuclear Deterrence Heats Up in the EU,” *Spiegel International*, April 14, 2022, available at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-european-bomb-debate-over-nuclear-deterrence-heats-up-in-the-eu-a-88ab0869-67c6-4bc9-bdff-75c32340b56c>.

³⁶ Horowitz and Wachs, “France’s Nuclear Weapons and Europe,” op. cit., p. 2.

³⁷ Anna Clara Arndt and Liviu Horowitz, “Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: a chronology,” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *Working Paper* No. 3, September 2022, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arndt-Horowitz_Working-Paper_Nuclear_rhetoric_and_escalation_management_in_Russia_s_war_against_Ukraine.pdf.

Russian policy perspective as “de-escalatory,” even if following their underlining rationale would contribute to Ukraine’s defeat. It seems highly unlikely that some other NATO members would agree with characterizing the same statements as “de-escalatory” since their perspective of de-escalation and advancing the West’s interest involves Russia leaving Ukraine as soon as possible.³⁸

In the same research, between January and August 2022, the West is judged to have made nearly an equivalent number of “escalatory” statements as Russia, the indisputable aggressor in its escalation of the war against Ukraine and the source of explicit and continuing nuclear threats against the West (Russia’s five to the West’s four).³⁹ This interpretation of what constitutes “escalatory” or “de-escalatory” statements reflects a continuing unwillingness to acknowledge the all-important context in which such statements are made, in this case Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its accompanying human rights atrocities and war crimes. This suggests the need to maintain the pretense of an equivalence between Russia and the West in terms of goals and means when no such equivalence exists.

Researchers also coded U.S. Minuteman ICBM test rescheduling and cancellation as “de-escalatory.”⁴⁰ It is highly doubtful that the rescheduling and cancellation of the test was de-escalatory, and it is more likely that the opposite is true because Russia may interpret it as a sign of

³⁸ “Finland’s PM rejects idea Putin needs an ‘off-ramp’ and simply suggests Russia leaves Ukraine,” *Sky News*, October 7, 2022, available at <https://news.sky.com/video/finlands-pm-rejects-idea-putin-needs-an-off-ramp-and-simply-suggests-russia-leaves-ukraine-12714857>.

³⁹ Arndt and Horovitz, “Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: a chronology,” *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Liviu Horovitz and Martha Stolze, “Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: A chronology,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Working Paper*, No. 2, August 2023, p. 8, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Horovitz_and_Stolze_-_Nuclear_Chrono_Final_2August2023.pdf.

weakness. The first scheduled test after Russia's February 2022 invasion had been planned long before Russia invaded Ukraine.⁴¹ The tests are a critical component of U.S. nuclear forces readiness, which contributes to assurance and extended deterrence.⁴² Cancelling them for a fear of provoking Russia in the midst of Moscow's explicit and often crude nuclear threats does not bode well for allied assurance.

Conclusion

Russia's escalation of its war in Ukraine appears to have altered, at least temporarily, European NATO member states' perceptions regarding the importance of nuclear deterrence in their security architectures. The situation is unlikely to change in the near future due to Russia's imperial ambitions that threaten more recent NATO members that joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War and that removes past hopes of incorporating Russia into the modern democratic and security system.

Debates about the potential necessity for the United States to expand its nuclear arsenal are conducted in a pragmatic manner, without the previous almost unshakable dedication to a nuclear-free world. Allies appear to have rediscovered their appreciation of U.S. forward-deployed nuclear systems. Under these contemporary conditions, U.S. nuclear reductions—near-universally applauded by

⁴¹ 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/>; and, Tom Rogan, "Biden's foolish US nuclear missile test cancellation," *Washington Examiner*, March 3, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/bidens-foolish-us-nuclear-missile-test-cancellation>.

⁴² Edelman and Miller, "Understanding That Weakness Is Provocative Is Deterrence 101," *Ibid*.

allies in the past—are more likely to be perceived as undermining allied assurance and damaging to alliance politics and security.

What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*

Arms control with the Russian Federation has hit a rough patch due to Russia's essential shut down of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), aggressive and expansionist foreign policy, and arms control violations. Russia has been remarkably consistent in issuing nuclear threats against the West and has elevated the role of nuclear weapons in its nuclear strategy. Moscow's unwillingness to limit its nuclear weapons in any meaningful way is apparent, yet the U.S. arms control community appears to discount the importance of Russia's nuclear threats as an obstacle to arms control. Russian nuclear rhetoric illustrates core Russian beliefs; beliefs that are fundamentally at odds with the West's arms control approach. The United States ought to stop assuming that both countries' share arms control goals and desire cooperative results.

Russia's Nuclear Threats: General Themes

Russia's nuclear threats against the West have been a fairly common occurrence in its public discourse, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹ The threats have been direct and indirect. Different actors within Russia issue them, from presidents and

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge "What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?," *Information Series*, No. 564 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 2, 2023).

¹ For an excellent and comprehensive treatment of Russia's nuclear forces and policy, see Mark Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

former presidents to other members of the government, to Kremlin spokespeople, to Russian propagandists. The pattern of nuclear threats is apparent: whenever the United States or NATO pursue a policy that the Russian Federation deems against its interest, the frequency of nuclear threats increases.

The target audiences for public messages differ, too. Russia issues some threats knowing they will reach foreign audiences, particularly in the West. Such threats are likely aimed at shaping the decision-making environment in Russia's favor. Russia has been somewhat successful in this regard. For example, Russia's nuclear threats appear to have slowed down and restricted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) military support for Ukraine with respect to providing certain weapon systems, particularly early in conflict, leading to Ukraine losing a number of its most experienced and dedicated fighters. Their lives perhaps could have been spared had the appropriate weapons been provided and delivered sooner.

Moscow's nuclear threats also appear to have contributed to achieving Russia's political goal—preventing NATO from accepting Ukraine as one of its members for the foreseeable future. As Alexander Vershbow, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO and U.S. ambassador to Russia and South Korea, pointed out in a recent article, "Putin wouldn't be wrong in concluding that nuclear coercion works."² That is also why it is unlikely that Russia's threats will abate anytime soon.

Other nuclear threats appear to be issued to impress, and perhaps to assure, the Russian public. Nuclear weapons are a reminder of Russia's grandeur and an affirmation of its superpower status. The most powerful weapons ever

² Alexander Vershbow, "How the United States and NATO can deal with Russian nuclear coercion in Ukraine," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, June 23, 2023, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2023/06/how-the-united-states-and-nato-can-deal-with-russian-nuclear-coercion-in-ukraine/>.

invented demand respect. In a country where many villages “lack reliable electricity, navigable streets, or even indoor toilets” and food is scarce, there is “only ambiguous pride of belonging to such a great – and strong – nation,” as chiefs of the Baltic states’ counterintelligence agencies point out.³ In the context of Russia’s conventional forces’ unexpectedly dismal performance in Ukraine and a strong international reaction and sanctions against the country, nuclear weapons and nuclear threats are one of the visible reminders to its population of Russia’s superpower status and a manifestation of its strength.

Nuclear threats could also be intended to normalize the idea of nuclear weapons employment within the Russian public and prepare the information environment for such an option; however, at present the Russian people do not appear supportive of nuclear weapons use in Ukraine, although whether their opinion matters is questionable.⁴ According to Russian political scientist Mikhail Troitsky, “It’s doubtful that major segments of Russian society would put the ‘survival of the state’ (as understood by Moscow) above their own physical survival.”⁵ Recently, some members of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a Russian think-tank, came out in opposition to normalizing

³ Eero Epner, “Human Life Has No Value There: Baltic Counterintelligence Officers Speak Candidly About Russian Cruelty,” *Eesti Ekspress*, October 18, 2022, available at <https://vsquare.org/baltic-counterintelligence-officers-russia-cruelty-war-history/>.

⁴ Press Release, “On the Possibility of Using Nuclear Weapons in the Ukrainian Conflict,” *Levada Center*, June 21, 2023, available at <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/06/21/on-the-possibility-of-using-nuclear-weapons-in-the-ukrainian-conflict/>.

⁵ Mikhail Troitsky, “The death of nuclear fear In the wake of Prigozhin’s mutiny, war hawks are once again brandishing Russia’s nuclear potential. Why aren’t their threats working?,” *Meduza*, July 3, 2023, available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/07/03/the-death-of-nuclear-fear>.

the idea of nuclear weapons use promoted by the Council's chair and Putin's advisor Sergei Karaganov.⁶

Nevertheless, about a third of those Russians surveyed in a poll last year stated it is "highly probable" or "quite probable" that Putin could order the Russian military to launch nuclear weapons first in a war with the West.⁷ This is not to say that propaganda could not over time create an environment in which the Russian people *do* equate the survival of the state with their own survival and well-being, which may increase their support for nuclear weapons use. After all, over 50 percent of surveyed Russians demonstrated fear "of the possibility of war between Russia and Ukraine" in early February 2022, but 81 percent supported the action once Russia invaded. Their support has remained consistently high throughout the war, even as evidence of Russia's atrocities and war crimes permeated the information space.⁸

A surge of nuclear threats from Russian officials came during U.S.-Czech/Polish negotiations in the 2007-2009 timeframe about placing U.S. missile defense components on these countries' territories.⁹ For example, then-Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General

⁶ "О ПРИЗЫВАХ К РАЗВЯЗЫВАНИЮ ЯДЕРНОЙ ВОЙНЫ (On Calls for Nuclear War)," *Council on Foreign and Defense Policy*, July 13, 2023, available at <https://svop.ru/main/48156/>.

⁷ Simon Saradzhyan, "Levada: Nearly 1/3 of Russians Are 'Not Very Afraid' Their Country Will Use Nukes," *Russia Matters*, June 10, 2022, available at <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/levada-nearly-13-russians-are-not-very-afraid-their-country-will-use-nukes>.

⁸ Maxim Starchak, "Russians Will Accept Nuclear Doomsday," *Europe's Edge*, August 16, 2023, available at <https://cepa.org/article/russians-will-accept-nuclear-doomsday/>.

⁹ Michaela Dodge, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020); and Ian Traynor, Luke Harding, and Helen Womack, "Moscow warns it could strike Poland over US missile shield," *The Guardian*, August 15, 2008, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/15/russia.poland.nuclear.missiles.threat>.

Nikolai Makarov threatened a pre-emptive nuclear strike in connection with U.S. missile defense deployments.¹⁰ The Obama Administration cancelled the Bush Administration's plans and announced its own missile defense plans to deploy a different type of a missile defense system to Poland and Romania. These plans, too, met with Russia's disapproval.¹¹ U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty that Russia had been violating for years was another significant event during which Russia increased the number of its nuclear threats.

With Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's threats have reached an unprecedented frequency. Perhaps this is because while Putin thought the Russian army would be able to capture Kyiv in two days (and that the Ukrainians would welcome the Russians as liberators),¹² the war continues more than 500 days later thanks to Ukraine's heroic resistance and Western support, resulting in large losses of equipment and manpower. For example, Russia's tank losses reportedly surpassed 2,000 at the end of May 2023.¹³

¹⁰ Andrew Kramer, "Russian General Makes Threat on Missile-Defense Sites," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2012, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/04/world/europe/russian-general-threatens-pre-emptive-attacks-on-missile-defense-sites.html>.

¹¹ Robin Emmott, "U.S. activates Romanian missile defense site, angering Russia," *Reuters*, May 12, 2016, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-shield/u-s-activates-romanian-missile-defense-site-angering-russia-idUSKCN0Y30JX>.

¹² Jake Epstein and Charles R. Davis, "Putin thought Russia's military could capture Kyiv in 2 days, but it still hasn't in 20," *Business Insider*, March 15, 2022, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/vladimir-putin-russian-forces-could-take-kyiv-ukraine-two-days-2022-3>.

¹³ "Russia's Tank Losses in Ukraine Surpass 2,000 – OSINT Report," *Moscow Times*, May 31, 2023, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/31/russias-tank-losses-in-ukraine-surpass-2000-osint-report-a81346>.

Threats Issued by Russian Government Officials

While nuclear weapons have always been an important feature of Russia's presidential politics, Putin has been more vocal about Russia's nuclear might and what it could mean for NATO and the West since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, he announced that Russia's nuclear forces would be on "special alert" immediately before the February 2022 invasion.¹⁴ (The United States did not observe any changes in Russia's nuclear posture following the announcement.¹⁵) He also stated that "No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken."¹⁶

A year and a half later, with Russia's Army still bogged down by Ukraine's valiant defense and unable to deliver the quick and decisive victory its leaders expected, Putin stated that the "elites of the West do not hide their purpose. But they also cannot fail to realise that it is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield."¹⁷ Putin also stated that the threat

¹⁴ "Ukraine invasion: Putin puts Russia's nuclear forces on 'special alert'," *BBC*, February 28, 2022, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60547473>.

¹⁵ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "No Russian 'muscle movements' after Putin's nuclear readiness alert, U.S. says," *Reuters*, February 28, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/no-russian-muscle-movements-after-putins-nuclear-readiness-alert-us-says-2022-02-28/>.

¹⁶ Presidential Executive Office, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁷ Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia's Putin issues new nuclear warnings to West over Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-update-russias-elite-ukraine-war-major-speech-2023-02-21/>.

of nuclear war “is increasing.”¹⁸ In March 2023, Russia announced it would deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus, in the first deployment beyond the Russian Federation’s borders since the end of the Cold War.¹⁹ The work is to be completed by “the end of the summer, by the end of this year,” according to Putin.²⁰ “This is an element of deterrence,” he said, “so that everyone who thinks of inflicting a strategic defeat on us should keep this circumstance in mind.”²¹ Russian nuclear deployments to Belarus introduce new uncertainties in the deterrence calculus, though the strategic equation is not affected much since Russia can already reach all the targets on NATO’s territory.

But Putin was no stranger to nuclear threats even prior to Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, during his 2018 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin unveiled a suite of new “exotic” nuclear weapon systems such as underwater nuclear drones and said “In spite of all difficulties over the years, economic and financial problems with our defense industry and Armed Forces, Russia reached nuclear power, but nobody wanted to take us seriously. Nobody listened to us. So listen to us now.”²² The remarkable slide show accompanying his speech ended

¹⁸ Katharina Krebs, “Putin says threat of nuclear war is increasing,” *CNN*, December 8, 2022, available at https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-12-07-22/h_9e32121e0e11c3aa4b0a708befaf3f30.

¹⁹ “Why is Belarus admitting Wagner leader and backing Russia against Ukraine?,” *BBC News*, June 26, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-65964623>.

²⁰ Vladimir Putin, Remarks at the Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum,” June 16, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Vladimir Putin, “State of the Nation Address 2018,” *C-Span*, March 1, 2018, available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?441907-1/russian-president-vladimir-putin-state-nation-address>.

with what appeared to be a depiction of Russian nuclear warheads headed toward Florida.²³

Perhaps no Russian government official has issued more nuclear threats during Russia's invasion of Ukraine than Dmitry Medvedev, former stand-in President for Putin, once the West's hope for Russia's democratization, and currently the Deputy Head of Russia's Security Council. He threatened a "nuclear apocalypse"²⁴ in the context of Western weapon supplies for Ukraine on several occasions.²⁵ He boasted, "And I can tell you something, simply as someone who knows something about this. Let's be clear: if you have a weapon in your hands, and I know what this is like as a former president, then you should be prepared to use it without qualms in a certain situation, no matter how monstrous and brutal that might sound."²⁶ He said "Britain was, is and will be our eternal enemy. [...] In any case, soon enough their impudent and disgustingly damp island will be sent into the abyss of the sea by waves created by the latest Russian weapons system."²⁷ His speeches and articles are often aggressive and insulting toward U.S. and allied government officials.

²³ "Russia's Putin unveils 'invincible' nuclear weapons," *BBC News*, March 1, 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>.

²⁴ Guy Faulconbridge and Kevin Liffey, "Western arms for Ukraine make 'nuclear apocalypse' more likely – Russia's Medvedev," *Reuters*, May 23, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-western-arms-ukraine-make-nuclear-apocalypse-more-likely-2023-05-23/>.

²⁵ David Ljunggren, "Russia's Medvedev says arms supplies to Kyiv threaten global nuclear catastrophe," *Reuters*, February 27, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-says-arms-supplies-kyiv-threaten-global-nuclear-catastrophe-2023-02-27/>.

²⁶ "Russia may use nuclear weapons in face of threat to its existence," *Interfax*, April 25, 2023.

²⁷ Maighna Nanu, "Ukraine-Russia war: Russia 'will send disgustingly damp Britain into the abyss'," *The Telegraph*, April 21, 2023, available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/04/21/ukraine-russia-war-latest-news-putin-bakmut-kyiv-nato/>.

Russia also appears to consider nuclear weapons use justified in the case of a defeat in a conventional war. For example, Medvedev noted that "The defeat of a nuclear power in a conventional war may trigger a nuclear war. Nuclear powers have never lost major conflicts on which their fate depends. And this should be obvious to anyone. Even a Western politician with any trace of intelligence."²⁸ He reiterated that Russia may consider using nuclear weapons should Ukraine attack Donetsk and Luhansk, illegally annexed territories Russia now considers its own.²⁹ There are indications that Putin sees war with Ukraine as an existential struggle for Russia.³⁰

Russian ambassadors also occasionally engage in public nuclear threats, which begs the question of why Western countries should let them continue to be ambassadors after engaging in nuclear brinkmanship on Russia's behalf.³¹ For example, Oleg Stepanov, Russia's Ambassador to Canada, recently stated "Once again, just to be clear: when you are not in the nuclear bloc [referring to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization], you are safe. When you join it, you become yet another target. We cannot believe that the alliance, including our Finnish neighbors, does not

²⁸ Tom Watling, Tim McNulty, Sean Meleady, "Putin ally threatens West with nuclear war if Russia defeated in Ukraine," *Express*, January 20, 2023, available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1723253/Russia-war-Ukraine-tanks-T-14-Ramstein-putin-Volodymyr-Zelensky>.

²⁹ Caleb Davis, "Russia's Medvedev: new regions can be defended with strategic nuclear weapons," *Reuters*, September 22, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-strategic-nuclear-weapons-can-be-used-defend-new-regions-2022-09-22/>.

³⁰ Lauren Sforza, "Putin says Ukraine war poses existential threat to 'Russian people'," *The Hill*, February 26, 2023, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3874880-putin-says-ukraine-war-poses-existential-threat-to-russian-people/>.

³¹ Adam Withnall, "Russia threatens Denmark with nuclear weapons if it tries to join Nato defence shield," *The Independent*, March 22, 2015, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-threatens-denmark-with-nuclear-weapons-if-it-tries-to-join-nato-defence-shield-10125529.html>.

understand this truism. It's as plain as day."³² Nuclear threats across of levels of the Russian government have become a frequent occurrence in Russia's conduct of foreign and defense policy.

In addition to more public nuclear threats, it is plausible that Russia is threatening other states with nuclear strikes through unofficial channels. For example, following Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, then-Ukrainian Minister of Defense Valeriy Heletey stated that the "Russian side has threatened on several occasions across unofficial channels that, in the case of continued resistance they are ready to use a tactical nuclear weapon against us."³³

For Russia, the Quantity and Quality of Nuclear Weapons Appear to Matter

As long as U.S. adversaries consider nuclear weapons and their attributes important, the United States must account for this when developing its own nuclear weapons policy, even if U.S. officials consider such factors unimportant. As nuclear policy expert Greg Weaver pointed out during recent testimony, "In a deterrence relationship, the adversary doesn't just have "a" vote, they have *the only vote*."³⁴ While U.S. pundits argue that the United States

³² "Countries Joining NATO Face Security Risks Including Nuclear - Russian Envoy to Canada," *Sputnik News*, April 20, 2023, available at <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230420/countries-joining-nato-face-security-risks-including-nuclear---russian-envoy-to-canada-1109713089.html>.

³³ Damien Sharkov, "Russia Has Threatened Nuclear Attack, Says Ukraine Defence Minister," September 1, 2014, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-threatened-nuclear-attack-says-ukraine-defence-minister-267842#:~:text=Kiev%20has%20received%20threats%20of%20nuclear%20retaliati on%20from,Heletey%2C%20announced%20on%20his%20Facebook%20page%20 on%20Monday>.

³⁴ Testimony by Greg Weaver, Senior Associate (Non-Resident), Project on Nuclear Issues, CSIS, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Regional Nuclear Deterrence, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, March 28, 2023, p. 3, available at <https://www.armed->

keeps too many nuclear weapons³⁵ or that nuclear weapons do not matter at all,³⁶ official Russian statements indicate that Moscow values numerical superiority, as well as the increased diversity of its nuclear weapon arsenal. For example, Putin noted “that we have more such nuclear weapons than NATO countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will, right? A popular phrase. Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage.”³⁷ In 2013, then-Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov stated: “When I hear our American partners say: ‘let’s reduce something else,’ I would like to say to them: ‘excuse me, but what we have is relatively new.’ They [the U.S.] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [missiles].”³⁸ In addition to its nuclear-charged rhetoric, Russia also conducts large-scale military exercises that include simulated nuclear weapons attacks.³⁹

Putin appears to value more than just a numerical advantage. Unlike the United States that has not designed

services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mr.%20Gregory%20Weaver%20Written%20Statement%20-%20Regional%20Nuclear%20Deterrence%20-%202003.28%20SASC%20FINAL.pdf. (Emphasis in original.)

³⁵ John Isaacs, “Old Think’ Is Driving U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,” *The National Interest*, December 17, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98old-think%E2%80%99-driving-us-nuclear-weapons-policy-206024>.

³⁶ John Mueller, “Nuclear Weapons Don’t Matter,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 15, 2018, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/nuclear-weapons-dont-matter>.

³⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Remarks at the Plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum,” June 16, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>.

³⁸ “Russia today is not interested in U.S.-proposed arms reduction – Sergei Ivanov,” *Interfax*, March 5, 2013; quoted in *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis, and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National institute Press, 2016), p. 85, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FINAL-FOR-WEB-1.12.16.pdf>.

³⁹ *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis, and Conflict*, op. cit., pp. 69-71.

and deployed a new nuclear warhead since the end of the Cold War, Russia rejuvenated its nuclear weapons complex after the 1990s' slump and maintained personnel proficient in nuclear weapons building. Consequently, some of Russia's nuclear weapons "are more modern than the weapons NATO countries have," as Putin pointed out.⁴⁰ Given the fact that U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe were deployed in the 1960s, the feat is much less impressive than it appears at first. Then-Defense Intelligence Agency Director Robert Ashley stated that the "United States believes that Russia probably is not adhering to the nuclear testing moratorium in a manner consistent with the zero-yield standard."⁴¹ More importantly, he added that "Our understanding of nuclear weapon development leads us to believe Russia's testing activities would help it improve its nuclear weapon capabilities."⁴² Russia's quantitative superiority on the tactical nuclear weapons level and belief in the qualitative superiority of its nuclear warheads at the strategic level may be yet again contributing to its foreign policy adventurism, as it did during the Cold War.⁴³

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, Address by the President of the Russian Federation," September 21, 2022, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69390#sel=8:18:Wvp,8:33:41G>.

⁴¹ Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, Jr., "The Arms Control Landscape," *Remarks at the Hudson Institute*, p. 4, available at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Hudson%20Transcript%20-%20The%20Arms%20Control%20Landscape.pdf>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Svetlana Savranskaya and David A. Welch, eds., *Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1977-1980*, transcript from *The Carter-Brezhnev Project* (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 1995), p. 38, available at https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/part7.PDF.

What Does Moscow's Propaganda Tell the Russians about Nuclear Weapons?

The Russian government maintains a loyal network of propagandists and "journalists." Freedom of speech is extremely limited in the country and divergence from the official line is punishable by high fines and years in prison. The already bad situation got even worse after February 2022. Russia effectively shut down the BBC, the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle, and the independent Russian outlet Meduza as retaliation for Western governments cracking down on some of Russia's influence operators in their countries.⁴⁴ Russia also banned X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook and passed laws that made any criticism of the "special military operation," as the Kremlin euphemistically calls the war in Ukraine, punishable by years in prison.

The state's tight control of the media environment makes it incredibly difficult to reach the Russian audience with any content that is not approved by the authorities. This also means that nuclear threats discussed on Russia's popular talk shows have the authorities' approval if not endorsement. As many as 82 million Russians consume media content every day and are exposed to statements that normalize nuclear threats within the public discourse.⁴⁵

For example, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of *RT* and the media group *Rossiia Segodnya*, stated following the International Criminal Court's (ICC's) issue of an arrest

⁴⁴ James Ellingworth, "Russia cracks down on dissenting media, blocks Facebook," *Associated Press*, March 4, 2022, available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-business-europe-germany-d15ca4ed450d9ca67f43d3b1ac27294d>.

⁴⁵ Anastasia Edel, "A Day Inside Putin's Surreal Television Empire," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/28/russia-ukraine-war-putin-propaganda-news-media-television/>.

warrant on Putin for unlawful deportation of minors from Ukraine,⁴⁶ “I’d like to see the country that arrests Putin according to The Hague’s ruling. Eight minutes later. Or whatever the flight time to its capital is.”⁴⁷ On another occasion she stated that “Either we lose in Ukraine, or the Third World War starts. I think World War Three is more realistic, knowing us, knowing our leader. The most incredible outcome, that all this will end with a nuclear strike, seems more probable to me than the other course of events.”⁴⁸

Russian propagandists appear to be more explicit and aggressive in their nuclear threats. For example, Vladimir Solovyov, a prominent radio and television presenter for the state-owned *All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company* (VGTRK), stated he would like to see Russia withdraw “from the treaty on moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons in all environments.”⁴⁹ He

⁴⁶ The ICC also issued warrant on Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children’s Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation. International Criminal Court *Press Release*, “Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova,” March 17, 2023, available at <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.

⁴⁷ “Russian propagandists’ responses to potential Putin arrest: from nuclear threats to mockery,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 17, 2023, available at <https://news.yahoo.com/russian-propagandists-responses-potential-putin-210443675.html>.

⁴⁸ Kate Buck, “Putin would prefer nuclear strike to defeat in Ukraine, says Russian state TV chief,” *Yahoo News*, April 28, 2022, available at https://news.yahoo.com/putin-rather-press-nuclear-button-lose-ukraine-war-rt-broadcaster-151707840.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACEIoJGTGQUQdDa0jgNLbOtZgMdvzXXnU0yhW5d5H0jvzsqd-n_MhnMavQPkDiUgoKzn5Oj3tw4VJZ14bgkHo6iT7gtf1OSBDcQcPXbjbb4rJvPRaZLQmHfKru0CmcQM5wedp89OhDZAWJuSjCUZyUCnGg-uBlIzCOo9rTd5E7p.

⁴⁹ Anton Gerashchenko [@gerashchenko], “I firmly believe that nuclear war is inevitable,” says Russian propagandist Solovyev, suggesting that Russia start it. He wants to aim Russian nuclear weapons at London, Paris, Berlin and

explained that “We need to test nuclear weapons so the West can see that they exist and see how powerful they are. And give an ultimatum to the NATO countries by targeting our nuclear strategic forces on the government quarters and on launch sites of those countries that have nuclear capabilities, on the quarters of those countries that support the Nazi regime. And put an ultimatum. If they don’t want to hear it, that means there will be no more London, no more Berlin, no more Paris, no more Washington, D.C.”⁵⁰

On another occasion, he pondered an attack on the United Kingdom in retaliation for providing Ukraine with long-range missiles:

And why are there still undersea cables leading to Britain? Why are all the pipelines still there? Why aren’t we responding in the most brutal way, asymmetrically, to Britain? We are now out of the treaty, which is what we should have done a long time ago. I think we need to abandon a ban on nuclear weapons testing. We should conduct tests, show the nuclear weapons we have, blow something up somewhere, and target our Strategic Missile Forces, first of all targeting Britain. And all those countries that are providing support. And give them an ultimatum: You supply the missiles, we’ll bomb.⁵¹

He also said, “One Sarmat [a new Russian intercontinental-range ballistic missile] means minus one Great Britain.”⁵²

Washington. [Tweet], *Twitter*, 8:25 AM, May 10, 2023, available at https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1656274238456709121?s=20.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Anton Gerashchenko [@gerashchenko], Attention, Great Britain! Russian propagandist Solovyev threatens the UK with a nuclear strike and cutting their underwater cables. [Tweet], *Twitter*, 12:29 PM, May 11, 2023, available at https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1656697983977545728?s=20.

⁵² Evan Simko-Bednarski, “Russian state TV threatens to wipe out ‘boorish’ UK with ballistic missile,” *New York Post*, April 27, 2022, available at

Russian propagandists also appear more explicitly apocalyptic than government officials. “I hope they understand that if we lose, we are taking the whole world with us,” Solovyov pointed out on one of his shows.⁵³ And Dmitry Kiselyov, Kremlin-backed journalist and RT’s general director, pondered “Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?”⁵⁴ and showed potential nuclear targets in the United States on his TV show in 2019.⁵⁵ These kinds of statements are well within acceptable norms in Russia, however extreme those in the West may consider them.

Conclusion

The consistency of Russia’s nuclear threats should cause the arms control proponents and national security experts to rethink their positions on deterrence and arms control and take into account the Russian strategic culture. Russian government officials, including Putin himself, appear convinced that nuclear superiority matters; they continue to brandish nuclear weapon threats, and have been consistent and explicit, particularly since Russia launched its most recent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow’s perceived qualitative and quantitative superiority might be

<https://nypost.com/2022/04/27/russian-state-tv-threatens-to-wipe-out-uk-with-ballistic-missile/>.

⁵³ Brendan Cole, “Russian State TV Issues Stark Warning Over Threat of Defeat,” *Newsweek*, May 17, 2023, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/russian-state-tv-issues-stark-warning-over-threat-of-defeat/ar-AA1biFQ?rc=1&ocid=winp1taskbar&cvid=f27a8f8c98fb4753bd5324d84d12565d&ei=17>.

⁵⁴ “‘Why Do We Need a World if Russia Is Not In It?’: State TV Presenter Opens Show With Ominous Address,” *Moscow Times*, February 28, 2022, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/28/russians-race-for-cash-as-ruble-plummets-a76655>.

⁵⁵ Andrew Osborn, “After Putin’s warning, Russian TV lists nuclear targets in U.S.,” *Reuters*, February 25, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-russia-idUSKCN1QE1DM>.

influencing its foreign policy to be more belligerent toward Western interests, just like it did during the Cold War.

U.S. consideration of arms control appears to ignore or discount Moscow's views of nuclear weapons and increasingly explicit nuclear threats. Continuing to do so would be unwise. Rather, the United States ought to approach arms control not as an arena of mutual interest and cooperation, but as another form of competition—which clearly is Moscow's mode of operation. It appears that Russia's aggressive, revisionist policies and goal of reordering the global order, in league with China, will portend conflict and crises. At this point in history, the United States would be better off preparing to compete rather than accommodate.

U.S. Domestic Polarization and Allied Assurance*

U.S. domestic polarization affects U.S. foreign policy by negatively shaping allies' perceptions of Washington's credibility, hence undermining the U.S. goal of assuring them and managing the alliance structure. While the impact of polarization on U.S. foreign and defense policy has been extensively studied from a U.S. domestic perspective, very little analysis has focused on the effects of domestic polarization on allies' perceptions of the United States as a credible, reliable ally. U.S. assurance depends on allies believing that the United States has sufficient capabilities and that it will come to their defense if they are attacked. Yet, it appears that U.S. domestic polarization undermines allies' assessment of U.S. will to do so. This dynamic weakens allied perceptions of U.S. credibility, which in turn hampers its ability to assure allies and manage allied relations – ultimately damaging U.S. security.

Introduction

Many allies do *not* have a mature understanding of U.S. foreign and defense policy processes and the many varied actors that impact its formulation. This can make them more susceptible to misunderstanding the diverse debates and widely differing expressed positions of domestic partisans. As a result, domestic polarization and the domestic debates that accompany that polarization can lead to mixed allied perceptions of the United States that can make alliance management more challenging at a time when the United States and allies need unity and consensus to counter a

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge "U.S. Domestic Polarization and Allied Assurance," *Information Series*, No. 602 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 21, 2024).

rising China, an aggressive Russia, and other disruptive regional actors.

In offering an allied perspective on polarization and how it shapes allies' policy choices, this analysis facilitates a broader recognition of the impact of U.S. domestic polarization on Washington's ability to manage alliance relations. It identifies how U.S. political polarization affects allied perceptions of U.S. credibility as an ally, and how those perceptions shape allied behavior vis-à-vis the United States. This analysis also examines the effects of domestic polarization on U.S. alliance goals and offers recommendations regarding how Washington might mitigate those effects.

U.S. alliances are perhaps the most important U.S. advantage over its adversaries. That is why enemies are so intent on disrupting them. Exploiting political polarization in the United States, as well as in allied countries, serves as one of the potential vehicles for them to do so. Improving the U.S. understanding of how domestic political polarization shapes allied perceptions of the United States, and how foes exploit that polarization to disrupt U.S. alliances, can help make U.S. policies more resilient and resistant against adversaries' information warfare efforts.

Deterioration of the Strategic Environment and the Impact on U.S. Alliances

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) noted that "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests" and mentioned the increasing resources these countries, especially China, are investing to improve their capabilities to do so.¹ The 2022 NSS argued that the United States is "in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the

¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, December 2017, p. 25, available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

future of the international order.”² Published after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the *NSS* noted that “Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today,” and that Russia and China “now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy.”³ The bipartisan 2023 *Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States Report* concluded that within the 2027-2035 timeframe, the United States “will face two nuclear peer adversaries for the first time” and that two previous *NSS* documents do not adequately address this reality.⁴

These trends are worsened by Russia’s cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea. According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China “has become a decisive enabler of Russia’s war against Ukraine” through its large-scale support for Russia’s defense industrial base.⁵ In June 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a treaty committing them to providing military assistance to each other.⁶ North Korea has provided Russia with millions of artillery shells since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale

² The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, p. 2, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁴ Madelyn Crendon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. 7, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Washington Summit Declaration*, July 10, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

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

invasion of Ukraine.⁷ The treaty comes at the heels of months' worth of North Korea trading ammunition for Russia's know-how, presumably in space and missile technologies.⁸ Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Iran has also emerged "as a key enabler of Russia's air and ground campaign in Ukraine."⁹

Polarization and U.S. Domestic Politics

Domestic polarization, or when a preference of a group regarding an issue becomes both distinctly bimodal and the two modes are moving further apart,¹⁰ is a long-standing feature of the U.S. political system and has been increasing for years.¹¹ A close examination of congressional voting indicates a disappearance of centrist politicians and bipartisan activity (Democrats who vote with Republicans at least on some issues, and vice versa).¹² With respect to

⁷ Soo-Hyang Choi, "North Korea Sent Russia Millions of Artillery Shells, South Korea Says," *Time*, June 14, 2024, available at <https://time.com/6988568/north-korea-russia-artillery-shell-south-korea-defense-minister/>.

⁸ Anthony Kuhn, "Kim Jong Un vows full support for Russia as Putin pledges space tech for North Korea," *NPR*, September 13, 2023, available at <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/13/1199190066/russia-north-korea-putin-kim-jong-un-summit>.

⁹ Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "The Uncomfortable Reality of Russia and Iran's New Defense Relationship," *War On the Rocks*, July 24, 2024, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-new-defense-relationship/>.

¹⁰ The definition draws on Frances Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance," *Annual Review of Political Science*, No. 18 (February 4, 2015), p. 263.

¹¹ For an example see, Gary Jacobson, "Party polarization in national politics: The electoral connection," in Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (eds.), *Polarized politics: Congress and the president in a partisan era* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, January 2000), available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary-Jacobson-3/publication/247118625_Party_Polarization_in_National_Politics_The_Electoral_Connection/links/5c7596d4458515831f72944b/Party-Polarization-in-National-Politics-The-Electoral-Connection?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19.

¹² Jeff Lewis, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, "Weekly Update of 'Common Space' DWNOMINATE Scores," December 12, 2016,

foreign affairs, despite both majorities of Democrats and Republicans arguing that the United States should maintain or increase its commitment to NATO, the difference between them is the largest it has ever been in Chicago Council polling since 1974 (60 percent of Republicans and 80 percent of Democrats agreed with the statement in 2020).¹³ The 2024 *National Defense Strategy Commission* noted that “the polarization of U.S. domestic politics is harming the U.S. military and U.S. national security” and led the Commission to be concerned “that the traditional post-World War II bipartisan support for a strong military, preservation of alliances, and engagement in international affairs is waning.”¹⁴

Contemporary political science research focuses on mapping the rise of polarization in Congress and its impact on U.S. foreign policy,¹⁵ discusses the effects of polarization on arms control,¹⁶ or whether external threats reduce polarization.¹⁷ It argues that domestic polarization makes it

available at

http://k7moa.com/Weekly_Constant_Space_DWNOMINATE_Scores.htm;
quoted in Kenneth Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter 2018), p. 8.

¹³ Dina Smeltz, “Are we drowning at the water’s edge? Foreign policy polarization among the US Public,” *International Politics*, No. 59 (2022), p. 791.

¹⁴ Jane Harman and Eric Edelman, et al., *Commission on the National Defense Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, July 2024), p. 20, available at <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html>.

¹⁵ Gyung-Ho Jeong and Paul Quirk, “Division at the Water’s Edge: The Polarization of Foreign Policy,” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (January 2019), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1532673X17719721>.

¹⁶ Florian Böller, “Brakeman or booster? Presidents, ideological polarization, reciprocity, and the politics of US arms control,” *International Politics*, Vol. 59 (2022), pp. 725-748.

¹⁷ Rachel Myrick, “Do External Threats Unite or Divide? Security Crises, Rivalries, and Polarization in American Foreign Policy,” *International Organization*, No. 75 (Fall 2021), pp. 921-928, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/85C21E7EBD9EB38EDDB95F68A0458A88/S0020818321000175a.pdf/do-external-threats-unite-or-divide-security-crises-rivalries-and-polarization-in-american-foreign-policy.pdf>.

harder to obtain support for force deployments abroad, for the conclusion of treaties, and for the United States to learn from failures and adapt to them; moreover, it complicates the U.S. ability to make long-term commitments to allies, and makes the United States more vulnerable to foreign intervention in its domestic political system.¹⁸

Yet, there is a paucity of information on how U.S. domestic polarization affects allies' perceptions of the United States as a security guarantor and how these perceptions could undermine the U.S. ability to manage alliance relations. Another glaring gap in the body of research on polarization is how little it discusses the importance of how allies view U.S. domestic polarization. One study assesses different U.S. assurance strategies from an allied country's citizens' perspective, but does not take polarization into account.¹⁹ Another study examines the attitudes of the British public toward U.S. domestic polarization.²⁰ The latter study argues that polarization "may cause states to doubt existing commitments that America has made to its allies," "can affect the willingness of allies to engage in future partnerships or agreements with the United States," and, "can have downstream reputational consequences for the United States by negatively impacting perceptions of American global leadership."²¹

This analysis is an initial attempt to answer two questions: 1) What do policymakers and experts based in allied countries have to say about polarization in U.S.

¹⁸ Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," p. 9, op. cit.

¹⁹ Alexander Lanoszka and Lauren Sukin, "Credibility in Crises: How Patrons Reassure Their Allies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (June 2024), available at <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/68/2/sqae062/7641089>.

²⁰ Rachel Myrick, "The reputational consequences of polarization for American foreign policy: evidence from the US-UK bilateral relationship," *International Politics* (February 27, 2022), available at <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/79a4ac2a-aad3-47e7-9d5a-1aac4aa8209c/content>.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

domestic politics; and, 2) How should U.S. policies and communication strategies be adjusted in the light of this information? After all, to tailor effective assurance policies, U.S. policymakers must understand how allies' views of the United States inform their perceptions of assurance.

Polarization and U.S. Allies' Views

U.S. domestic polarization is concerning for U.S. allies. According to interviews with foreign experts, polarization creates expectations of U.S. unpredictability and instability.²² It fosters allies' concerns regarding erratic U.S. decision-making (e.g., witness the Obama Administration's shifting "red lines" in Syria, President Trump's statements concerning NATO, and the Biden Administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan) and fears that a distracted United States will stand back from the global engagement upon which its allies' security depend. Polarization is causing U.S. allies to question U.S. credibility as a guarantor of their security.²³

In the long run, if the trend worsens, allies may well work to obtain alternative means to strengthen their security, from conciliating to America's adversaries to developing independent nuclear weapon capabilities. In many foreign countries, discussions about U.S. allies "going nuclear" independently of the United States are heard much more often and are more socially acceptable within the policy-making community than they were even 10 years ago.²⁴ Yet, more nuclear-armed states, even if

²² Interviews can be found in Michaela Dodge, "Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions," *Journal of Politics & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Analysis-Dodge-4.2.pdf>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For an example of this dynamic in Germany see, Michael Rühle, "German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent," *Information Series*, No. 571 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 3, 2024), available at

allied, would be a significant failure of decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Domestic Politics and the Case of U.S. Aid to Ukraine

The case of U.S. aid to Ukraine is an instructive example of how U.S. domestic polarization undermines the nation's efforts to assure allies. Other countries are looking to U.S. actions in Ukraine as a litmus test for U.S. willingness to help them in potential regional conflicts. While Ukraine does not have a formal alliance treaty with the United States, Washington pledged to safeguard Ukraine's territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.²⁵ U.S. help to Ukraine does not include direct military deployment; it is limited to providing (substantial) military and economic support, which the United States was able to do without much political controversy for the first two years of the war. By the end of 2023, however, a significant portion of congressional Republicans refused to support another aid package for Ukraine absent immigration reform (a largely domestic issue) to which Democrats would not agree.²⁶ Even though the package ultimately passed in April 2024, the delay enabled Russia to achieve successes on the battlefield that will be difficult to reverse, a fact that has not gone unnoticed, particularly by those U.S. allies that are in increased danger of Russia's aggression.²⁷

https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/.

²⁵ *Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, December 5, 1994, available at <https://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>.

²⁶ Bernd Debusmann Jr., "Why are some Republicans opposing more aid for Ukraine?," *BBC News*, December 7, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67649497>.

²⁷ Frederick W. Kagan and Riley Bailey, "How Delays in Western Aid Gave Russia the Initiative: From the Ukrainian Counteroffensive to Kharkiv," *Institute for the Study of War*, May 22, 2024, available at

Moreover, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia are also assessing the U.S. willingness to help Ukraine and using it as a proximate indicator of how likely the United States would be to help them if there is a regional war with North Korea or China. On one hand, the United States remains one of the largest supporters of Ukraine.²⁸ On the other, it was too slow to provide the kinds of advanced weapons that could have made a difference prior to Russia placing its economy on a war footing. Ongoing restrictions, such as how far the Ukrainians can strike into Russian territory with U.S.-provided weapons, give Russia operational depth and enable it to conduct its campaign of terror against Ukraine's civilians.²⁹

Implications for U.S. Assurance Efforts

The increase in allies' efforts to insulate the transatlantic alliance from the effects of U.S. domestic polarization appear to have taken on a greater urgency since former President Donald Trump became the Republican Party's nominee in the 2024 presidential elections. The number of articles on "Trump-proofing" U.S. alliances has since increased, partly because of the insistence with which President Trump pushed allies to meet their defense commitments and partly because of the President's rather

<https://www.aei.org/articles/how-delays-in-western-aid-gave-russia-the-initiative-from-the-ukrainian-counteroffensive-to-kharkiv/>.

²⁸ Kiel Institute for the World Economy, *Ukraine Support Tracker*, June 2024, p. 7, available at https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/Subject_Dossiers_Topics/Ukraine/Ukraine_Support_Tracker/Ukraine_Support_Tracker_-_Research_Note.pdf.

²⁹ Francesca Ebel, Anastacia Galouchka, and Rachel Pannett, "U.S. to provide more air defenses after missile strike on Kyiv children's hospital," *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/09/kyiv-childrens-hospital-missile-strike/>.

blunt communication style.³⁰ For example, allies agreed to have NATO take over a substantial part of coordinating efforts on Ukraine aid.³¹ They are also collectively increasing their defense spending, even though this is likely impacted by their threat perceptions as much as the eventuality of a Trump second term. But allies (ought to) know that President Trump's approach is a reflection, not a cause, of a broader fear of profligate Washington spending that leads to resistance to expensive foreign involvement. The percentage of poll respondents who think the United States will be better off if it engages globally has been decreasing steadily in recent years.³²

Several trends are apparent in allies' adjustments to U.S. domestic politics. First, they are increasing their defense spending. While increases are perhaps more driven by Russia's threat to Europe's security order than by concerns over U.S. polarization, this is a good start to counter the narrative that Europe is "free-riding" on U.S. defense investments. Defense spending across the European allies and Canada rose by 11 percent in 2023 and 18 allies spent more than two percent of GDP on defense in

³⁰ For example, President Trump reportedly said that he would let Russia do whatever it wants if the invaded country did not invest sufficient resources in its defense. See Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," CNN, February 11, 2024, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

³¹ Holly Ellyatt, "As NATO meets, leaders look to 'Trump-proof' the military alliance," CNBC, July 10, 2024, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/07/10/nato-leaders-look-to-trump-proof-the-military-alliance.html>.

³² Dina Smeltz, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, Lama El Baz, and Libby Berry, "A Cost of Conflict Americans Turn Inward Results of the 2023 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy," *The Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs*, 2024, pp. 7-8, available at <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Chicago%20Council%20Survey%202023%20Overall%20Report.pdf>.

the same year.³³ The number of allies meeting or exceeding their commitment is up to 23 in 2024.³⁴ While significant capability gaps remain, increasing allies' own ability to defend their territories is a worthy investment regardless of who becomes the next U.S. president and a step toward insulation against the potential loss of Washington as a credible ally due to domestic polarization.

Another way to insulate alliance relationships from the effects of U.S. domestic polarization is to maintain good relations with leaders in both political parties and presidential campaigns. Some countries, like the United Kingdom, are reportedly doing just that.³⁵ But many European countries have adopted a potentially counterproductive attitude if they need to work with a new Trump Administration, from disparaging the Administration's past policies (that turned out to be warranted) to using somewhat hyperbolic language with regard to the potential effects of a possible Trump second term.³⁶ This allied response may contribute to Russian efforts to exploit U.S. domestic polarization to degrade alliance cohesion.³⁷

³³ "Secretary General welcomes unprecedented rise in NATO defence spending," February 14, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222664.htm.

³⁴ Clara Falkenek, "Who's at 2 percent? Look how NATO allies have increased their defense spending since Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *The Atlantic Council*, July 8, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/whos-at-2-percent-look-how-nato-allies-have-increased-their-defense-spending-since-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

³⁵ Yasmeen Serhan, "'It's Nearly Impossible to Prepare': How Europe Is Bracing for a Potential Trump Return," *Time*, July 8, 2024, available at <https://time.com/6995863/trump-europe-nato-summit/>.

³⁶ Nadia Schadow, "Europe should stop hand-wringing about Trump — and be more constructive," *Politico*, July 23, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-donald-trump-us-presidency-nato-summit-washington-bill-clinton-barack-obama-second-term-elections-2024/>.

³⁷ Poland is particularly successful in fostering a productive relationship with Trump. See, Bartosz Brzeziński, "How to turn Trump against Russia? Ask Poland's President Duda," *Politico*, May 6, 2024, available at

Next, to further insulate themselves from the potential lack of consistency in U.S. policy due to polarization, European countries can strengthen mutual military and defense cooperation, and make processes like help for Ukraine independent of direct U.S. participation.³⁸ In the near term, these steps can only go so far because, despite years of war, Europe's military capabilities and economic resources for Ukraine remain limited. In fact, European countries themselves are not unified regarding how much of a threat Russia is to their existence, which has the potential to further fracture alliance relations.

Lastly, European NATO members are discussing options for complementing or replacing the U.S. nuclear deterrent. This is a proposition fraught with political, economic, and diplomatic difficulties.³⁹ France and the United Kingdom have independent nuclear forces, but their numbers are low relative to both Russia and China, and coming up with a politically workable alternative to the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent seems doubtful for the time being. Debates about independent nuclear capabilities are even more visible in Japan and South Korea.⁴⁰ South Korean public polls consistently show high levels of support for an independent nuclear weapons program.⁴¹

<https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-president-duda-plays-whisperer-to-turn-donald-trump-against-russia/>.

³⁸Sean Monaghan, "Beyond 'Trump-Proofing': NATO's Real Adversaries," *Center for International and Strategic Studies*, July 18, 2024, available at

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-trump-proofing-natos-real-adversaries>.

³⁹Rühle, "German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent," *op. cit.*

⁴⁰Michaela Dodge, "Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy," *Information Series*, No. 578 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 15, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-allied-assurance-south-korea-japan-and-band-aid-diplomacy-no-576-february-15-2024/.

⁴¹Seo Ji-Eun, "South Korean support for own nuclear arsenal grows as confidence in U.S. wanes," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 10, 2024, available at <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-10-10/national/diplomacy/South-Korean-support-for-own-nuclear-arsenal-grows-as-confidence-in-US-wanes/2152176>; and, Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami

Recommendations

The U.S. Government can take several important steps to help mitigate the effects of polarization on U.S. alliance relations. At the forefront of these efforts, Washington must engage in consistent, unified communications to U.S. allies demonstrating its willingness to commit to their defense. Second, the U.S. Government should clearly demonstrate to the U.S. public why the United States benefits when it is engaged globally. Lessons of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War are being forgotten at the risk of peril to Western security. The president—who holds an exceptionally strong position as an actor in foreign and defense policy—has a unique role in communicating to Americans and to allies. For a policy to survive an administration, however, the other party's leaders' involvement and buy-in is necessary. The West's previous effective communicators were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who, as David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull, pointed out in an interview, "had principles and clear positions" and "were excellent communicators."⁴² Both made the case for strong globally engaged alliances at home and abroad. If U.S. allies see that the American public is supportive of U.S. global engagement and the capabilities such an engagement requires, their confidence in U.S. assurance will likely increase.

Making the case to the American people regarding the importance of benefits of U.S. global engagement and U.S.

Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, February 2022, available at <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf>.

⁴² Zoom interview with David Lonsdale, January 17, 2024, quoted in Dodge, "Trends in Allied Assurance: Challenges and Questions," *op. cit.*, p. 13.

alliances, and what it takes to maintain them in today's adversarial environment, is the first order of (a rather urgent) business with regard to overcoming the effects of domestic polarization on foreign policy. A well-crafted communications strategy would also be valuable to make it harder for adversaries' influence operations and disinformation efforts to succeed. This communication strategy should be backed up by defense budget increases, including those of allies, given the unprecedented threats they face.

Lastly, politicians and decision-makers in allied countries ought to strengthen their understanding of the workings of the U.S. Government, specifically its policy formulation and implementation. This should make them less susceptible to believe sensationalist headlines and media-driven hyperbole that may otherwise skew perceptions and introduce a degree of unnecessary misunderstanding into already complex bilateral and multilateral relations. Minimizing this "noise" is a prerequisite toward more effective relations.

Conclusion

The polarization of U.S. foreign and defense policy is a problem for how Washington's allies view U.S. willingness to come to their aid if needed. Polarization undermines their perception of U.S. credibility and willingness to intervene on their behalf, which then makes the U.S. goal of assuring them and managing the alliance structure more challenging. Excellent internal and external communication regarding the need for and benefits of U.S. global engagement can help to mitigate its effect on alliance relations, and is overdue.

Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy*

The United States has gone on a diplomatic offensive to assure its allies the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan of the U.S. commitment to their security. The Biden Administration hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol at Camp David in August 2023, the first ever-standalone summit among the three leaders. The summit was preceded by months of high-level meetings among government officials from the three countries. In July 2023, the United States sent a nuclear-capable *Ohio*-class submarine in a first-ever port call to Busan and a first such a visit to South Korea in decades to visibly demonstrate its commitment to ROK's security. Gen. Anthony Cotton, U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) Commander, visited South Korea and Japan to discuss extended deterrence and hosted ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Kim Seung-Kyum and Japan's Chairman of the Joint Staff Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida in the United States in 2022 and 2023, respectively.¹ These steps are an indication of Washington's recognition that allied assurance and extended deterrence need new attention.

However necessary these steps are, they are unlikely to significantly improve the situation for as long as the United States does not address the structural nature of challenges to its allied assurance and extended deterrence commitments. These challenges are China's rapidly

* Original publication: Michaela Dodge "Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy," *Information Series*, No. 576 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 15, 2024).

¹ Yasuo Osakabe, "USSTRATCOM Commander Gen. Anthony Cotton visits Japan," *374th Airlift Wing Public Affairs*, September 4, 2023, available at <https://www.yokota.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3514696/usstratcom-commander-gen-anthony-cotton-visits-japan/>.

expanding nuclear and conventional forces, the revisionist nature of its national security claims, Beijing's and Moscow's common goal of remaking the world order in their authoritarian image, their apparent cooperation in doing so, and their aggressive use of nuclear threats to advance their respective expansionist goals. The United States will have to reevaluate its nuclear and conventional posture to account for these developments to preserve the viability of its extended deterrence guarantees. Failing to do so risks undermining U.S. deterrence and nonproliferation goals and alliance structures that the United States needs in order to protect the global system it built at great cost in blood and treasure after World War II.

Deterioration of National Security Environment and Structural Drivers of Allied Insecurity

Much has been written lately about the rapid deterioration of the national security environment, particularly with regard to the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) "breathtaking"² nuclear build up and Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³ The United States is reportedly "furiously" working on the problem.⁴ These are

² David Vergun, "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says," *DoD News*, August 12, 2021, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2729519/china-russia-pose-strategic-challenges-for-us-allies-admiral-says/>.

³ For an example of an excellent work on the topic see Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, *Occasional Paper* Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>; and Mark Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

⁴ Tara Copp, "US Military 'Furiously' Rewriting Nuclear Deterrence to Address Russia and China, STRATCOM Chief Says," *Defense One*, August 11, 2022, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2022/08/us-military->

fundamental developments requiring a wholesale re-evaluation of the U.S. approach to nuclear deterrence and allied assurance. During the Cold War, the United States assumed that if its capabilities were sufficient to deter Moscow, they were adequate to deter the PRC because China had a much smaller nuclear arsenal than the Soviet Union. The problem is much more complicated today, not only because of China's increasing nuclear arsenal, but also because of the emergence of new nuclear powers, including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea).

According to the Department of Defense's 2023 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China Annual Report to Congress*, "Over the next decade, the PRC will continue to rapidly modernize, diversify, and expand its nuclear forces. Compared to [its] nuclear modernization efforts a decade ago, current efforts dwarf previous attempts in both scale and complexity."⁵ In 2021, Admiral Charles Richard, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, stated that "We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China. The explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking. And frankly, that word breathtaking may not be enough."⁶ China has the potential to add hundreds of nuclear warheads into its strategic forces in the coming years. Unlike the United States, which has let its nuclear infrastructure deteriorate to the point of being unable to meet a congressional mandate

furiously-rewriting-nuclear-deterrence-address-russia-and-china-stratcom-chief-says/375725/.

⁵ Department of Defense's 2023 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China Annual Report to Congress*, 2023, p. VIII, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

⁶ Vergun, "China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says," *op. cit.*

to produce 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030, China and Russia have kept their nuclear production complex proficient and capable. Both countries have been modernizing their nuclear warheads and delivery systems.⁷ The PRC's leadership is intent on making Taiwan a part of the PRC, regardless of Taiwanese desire, and some argue that efforts to deter China from doing so are failing.⁸

North Korea continues to advance its nuclear weapon and missile programs, including by staging an exercise simulating a "tactical nuclear attack."⁹ It also likely has a solid-fuel intercontinental-range ballistic missile.¹⁰ Solid-fuel missiles are generally harder to detect because they do not require fueling just before launch, which makes them potentially more difficult to eliminate pre-launch. The DPRK and Russia appear to be intent on strengthening their relationship, given Kim Jong Un's recent visit to Russia and North Korea's reported supplies of ammunition to Russia.¹¹

⁷ For more detailed analyses on this point see Jennifer Bradley, "China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 2, No. 7 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Vol.-2-No.-7.pdf>; and Mark Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *Occasional Paper* Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

⁸ Hal Brands, "Deterrence in Taiwan Is Failing," *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/08/us-military-deterrence-china-taiwan-war-east-asia/>.

⁹ Heather Law and Heather Chen, "North Korea says it has simulated a nuclear missile attack to warn US of 'nuclear war danger'", September 2, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/02/asia/north-korea-nuclear-missile-attack-stimulation-intl-hnk/index.html>.

¹⁰ Bruce Klingner, "North Korean Solid-Fuel ICBM Increases U.S. Vulnerability," *19fortyfive*, April 24, 2023, available at <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/north-korean-solid-fuel-icbm-increases-us-vulnerability>.

¹¹ Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea's powerful politburo discusses follow-up steps to Kim's Russia visit," *Reuters*, September 23, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-powerful-politburo-discusses-follow-up-steps-kims-russia-visit-2023-09-22/>; James Byrne, Joseph Byrne and Gary Somerville, "The Orient Express: North Korea's Clandestine Supply Route to Russia," *Royal United Services Institute*, October 16,

During the visit, the DPRK head was shown weapon systems, including Russia's strategic bombers, a space center, and an aviation plant, prompting speculation that North Korea was interested in advanced weapon technologies in return for supplying Russia's depleted munition stocks.¹² North Korea recently stopped its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon prompting concerns that the halt will be used for reprocessing spent fuel rods to extract weapons-grade plutonium.¹³

Russia, for its part, reportedly conducts nuclear yield producing testing that "would help it improve its nuclear weapon capabilities."¹⁴ Russia has maintained a significant and diverse thousands-strong tactical nuclear weapon arsenal in violation of its political commitments under the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and appears to be increasing the size of its arsenal.¹⁵ The United States reportedly retains only about 200 tactical nuclear weapons to be delivered by dual-capable aircraft; some of the weapons are forward deployed on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's European-members' territories, but

2023, available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/report-orient-express-north-koreas-clandestine-supply-route-russia>.

¹² Adam Schrader, "Kim Jong Un, showered with gifts and taken to see ballet, leaves Russia," *UPI World News*, September 17, 2023, available at https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2023/09/17/kim-jong-un-showered-gifts-ballet-russia/7321694960581/; and Hyung-Jin Kim, "North Korea's Kim sets forth steps to boost Russia ties as US and Seoul warn about weapons deals," *abc news*, September 21, 2023, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/north-koreas-kim-sets-forth-steps-boost-russia-103398913>.

¹³ Chae Yun-hwan, "South Korea, U.S. closely monitoring North Korea for signs of nuclear reactor halt," *Yonhap News Agency*, October 5, 2023, available at <https://www.barrons.com/news/s-korea-us-monitoring-possible-halt-in-n-korea-nuclear-reactor-4675b41a>.

¹⁴ Robert Ashley, "The Arms Control Landscape," *Transcript*, The Hudson Institute, May 31, 2019, available at <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/transcript-the-arms-control-landscape-ft-dia-lt-gen-robert-p-ashley-jr>.

¹⁵ Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *op. cit.*, p. 175.

they reportedly are not deployed to Japan, the ROK, or Taiwan. The plan to develop and deploy a nuclear-armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile, a capability that Japan and the ROK were particularly interested in for extended deterrence, has run into Biden Administration opposition that is shared by some members of Congress.¹⁶

While Russia, China, and North Korea are likely expanding and improving their respective nuclear capabilities, discussions in the United States are usually about whether the United States keeps too many nuclear weapons¹⁷ or whether nuclear weapons disparities matter at all.¹⁸ The Russians have been vocal in their emphasis that Moscow's numerical superiority and the increased diversity of its nuclear weapon arsenal matter. Putin recently noted "that we have more such nuclear weapons than NATO countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will, right? A popular phrase. Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage."¹⁹

While Russia likely is not the primary threat in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. allies have articulated concerns over Russia's full-scale invasion and subsequent war crimes in Ukraine. Japan has a territorial dispute with Russia over the status of the Northern Territories (also known as the Kuril

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

¹⁷ John Isaacs, "Old Think' Is Driving U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," *The National Interest*, December 17, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98old-think%E2%80%99-driving-us-nuclear-weapons-policy-206024>.

¹⁸ John Mueller, "Nuclear Weapons Don't Matter," *Foreign Affairs*, October 15, 2018, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/nuclear-weapons-dont-matter>.

¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, Remarks at the Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum," June 16, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445> (accessed June 20, 2023).

Islands) that Japan says Russia has illegally occupied since World War II.²⁰ Russia's overtures to the DPRK and a potential expansion in weapons cooperation is closely monitored by South Korea and the United States.²¹ China and Russia share an interest in overturning the U.S.-led international order, making them allies in the short- and perhaps medium-terms. How the United States continues to respond to Russia's war in Ukraine will likely influence the degree to which other countries perceive it as a reliable ally.

Threat-Driven Adjustments

Contemporary threat developments drive an increasing feeling of insecurity in the ROK and Japan. Tokyo's 2023 *Defense White Paper* stated that "China's current external stance, military activities, and other activities have become a matter of serious concern for Japan and the international community, and present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge," and that "North Korea's military activities pose an even more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever before."²² South Korea called the DPRK "our enemy" in its most recent *Defense*

²⁰ Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan says disputed islands 'illegally occupied by Russia'," *The Associated Press*, April 22, 2022, available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-japan-tokyo-moscow-70d175af0c1ff116555d74a636ad3a87>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japanese Territory," available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/overview.html>.

²¹ "U.S. Says Russia's Shoigu Looking For Weapons In North Korea," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 29, 2023, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-shoigu-north-korea-weapons-blinken-ukraine/32525361.html>; Kelly Ng, "North Korea: Kim Jong Un shows off missiles to Russia defence chief Shoigu," *BBC News*, July 27, 2023, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66321742>; and Kim Tong-Hyung, "North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrives in Russia before an expected meeting with Putin," *AP News*, September 11, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-kim-putin-674e9f1155de1c83ca1a819e7dbf96ed>.

²² Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2023*, 2023, p. 1, available at https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_Digest_EN.pdf.

White Paper, reflecting the increase of tensions into the bilateral relationship.²³ The document also noted an intensifying competition between the United States and China and highlighted the importance of the alliance with the United States.²⁴

Given increasing threats, Japan and the ROK have focused on strengthening their bilateral relations, a development long supported by the United States and hampered by the inability of both countries to come to mutually acceptable terms with regard to Japan's past occupation of Korea. The topic remains sensitive in their contemporary relations and is susceptible to polarization and politicization. South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida face low public approval ratings, which could undermine further progress on advancing Japan-ROK relations; however, that does not diminish the historic steps both leaders have taken in this regard so far.²⁵ In August 2023, the leaders of both countries met at a trilateral first-ever summit hosted by President Biden at Camp David in the United States. The summit declaration re-affirms the ROK and Japan's commitment to operationalize their real time sharing of missile warning data on the DPRK by the end of 2023.²⁶ In January 2024,

²³ Hyung-Jin Kim, "South Korea Defense Report Revives 'Enemy' Label for North," *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2023, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/south-korea-defense-report-revives-enemy-label-for-north/>.

²⁴ Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, 2022 *Defense White Paper*, pp. 041 and 150, February 2023, available at https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280406019810.pdf.

²⁵ Bruce Klingner, "2023 Camp David Summit Strengthened Allied Cooperation Against Indo-Pacific Threats," The Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 5332, September 8, 2023, available at <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/IB5332.pdf>.

²⁶ The White House, "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," August 18, 2023, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements->

Japan, the United States, and South Korea shared real-time radar data pertaining to North Korea's missile launch.²⁷ The governments also committed to greater information-sharing, holding annual high-level meetings and multi-domain exercises, and increased economic cooperation.²⁸

Both Japan and the ROK are planning on significantly increasing their defense budgets. For example, Japan's defense budget increase between fiscal years 2022 and 2023 is 26 percent, and in absolute "yen terms is larger than Tokyo's combined defense budget increases of the past 30 years."²⁹ The ROK government plans for a 4.5 percent rise in the 2024 defense budget.³⁰ Japan is planning on procuring long-range strike capabilities, including the Tomahawk Land Attack cruise missiles that have the potential to complicate North Korea's and China's calculus in a potential conflict scenario.³¹ The procurement will happen in fiscal year 2025, a year earlier than planned.³² The challenge for the United States will be to ensure that South Korea's and Japan's increasing defense capabilities will be

releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/.

²⁷ "Japan, US, South Korea swiftly shared radar information for first time," *The Japan News*, February 5, 2024, available at <https://asianews.network/japan-us-south-korea-swiftly-shared-radar-information-for-first-time/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Adam Liff, "'No, Japan is not planning to 'double its defense budget'," *Brookings*, May 22, 2023, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/no-japan-is-not-planning-to-double-its-defense-budget/>; and

³⁰ Daniel Darling, "South Korean Government Plans 4.5 Percent Rise for 2024 Defense Budget," *Defense Security & Monitor*, August 29, 2023, available at <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/wordpress/2023/08/29/south-korean-government-plans-4-5-percent-rise-for-2024-defense-budget/>.

³¹ Christopher Johnstone and Jeffrey Hornung, "Separate U.S. Alliances in East Asia Are Obsolete," *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/japan-south-korea-us-alliance-china-security-east-asia-defense-geopolitics-biden-kishida-suk-yeol/>.

³² Song Sang-ho, "Pentagon chief renews support for Japan's 'counterstrike' capabilities amid North Korean threats," *The Korea Times*, October 5, 2023, available at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/10/113_360472.html.

in sync as they expand, and that the doctrine of each country changes to account for these new capabilities.

Regional threat developments have also renewed the debate about South Korea and Japan developing their own nuclear deterrent. In 2017, Shigeru Ishiba, former Japanese defense minister, said that “Japan should have the technology to build a nuclear weapon if it wants to do so.”³³ In 2022, former Prime Minister Abe said that it may be time for Japan to host U.S. nuclear weapons, and added that had Ukraine retained nuclear capabilities, Russia may not have invaded.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ These publicly expressed sentiments would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

For their part, South Korean citizens have consistently supported a domestic nuclear weapons program, as many as 71 percent prior to the signature of the Washington Declaration in April 2023.³⁶ Even after the document marking the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance was

³³ “Japan Should Be Able to Build Nuclear Weapons: Ex-LDP Secretary-General Ishiba,” *The Japan Times*, November 6, 2017, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/11/06/national/japan-able-build-nuclear-weapons-ex-ldp-secretary-general-ishiba/>.

³⁴ Jesse Johnson, “Japan Should Consider Hosting U.S. Nuclear Weapons, Abe Says,” *Japan Times*, February 27, 2022, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/27/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-japan-nuclear-weapons-taiwan/>.

³⁵ 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>.

³⁶ Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, “Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons,” *Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs*, February 2022, available at <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf>.

signed, 60 percent still support South Korea's nuclear armament.³⁷ This support includes prominent public policy figures. For example, Song Min-soon, South Korea's former foreign minister, argued that "It's necessary for South Korea to move on to a self-reliant alliance from a dependent alliance," and that "a defensive nuclear capacity, with a missile range limited to the Korean Peninsula" was "justified."³⁸

President Yoon Suk Yeol stated that South Korea could potentially develop its own nuclear capabilities, and made a point of saying it could do that "pretty quickly, given our scientific and technological capabilities."³⁹ These comments likely spurred the Biden Administration to devise additional steps to assure South Korea.⁴⁰ Yet, despite the administration's efforts, "Only nukes can counter nukes," Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon said recently.⁴¹ He is seen as the country's second most powerful elected official. U.S. domestic polarization is likely undermining the degree to which South Koreans perceive the United States as willing to come to their defense with all means available, with more than 60 percent of South Koreans skeptical that

³⁷ Dasl Yoon and Timothy Martin, "South Korea's Interest in Nuclear Weapons Hasn't Gone Away – It's Just On Hold," *The Wall Street Journal Online*, September 16, 2023, available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/south-koreas-interest-in-nuclear-weapons-hasnt-gone-awayits-just-on-hold-7c91cf8a>.

³⁸ Jesse Johnson, "South Korea Developing Its Own Nukes One Solution to U.S. Cost-Sharing Demands, Ex-Top Diplomat Says," *The Japan Times*, November 12, 2019, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/12/asia-pacific/nuclear-weapons-cost-sharing-south-korea/>.

³⁹ Choe Sang-Hun, "In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option," *New York Times*, January 12, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html>.

⁴⁰ Wi Sung-lac, "What the Washington Declaration means," *Korea JoongAng Daily Online* (South Korea), May 11, 2023, available at <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/05/10/opinion/columns/Washington-Declaration-Yoon-Suk-Yeol-Joe-Biden/20230510203647982.html>.

⁴¹ Yoon and Martin, "South Korea's Interest in Nuclear Weapons Hasn't Gone Away – It's Just On Hold," *op. cit.*

“Washington would use its nuclear weapons in the event of a Korean Peninsula contingency.”⁴²

U.S. Steps to Assure Japan and the ROK

The United States pledged to increase the rotations of nuclear-capable platforms to the ROK. While the ROK government welcomed the presence of a U.S. nuclear-armed submarine in its port, there are challenges to using the system in such a manner to assure allies. After all, the main advantage of the system is that it is survivable; roaming in deep blue oceans undetectable to the adversaries, yet able to instantly respond to an attack when necessary. Port calls potentially compromise the survivability of the system, even if temporarily. Nevertheless, the visit follows a string of similar port calls, including an Ohio-class guided-missile submarine, the USS *Michigan* in mid-June 2023.⁴³ The United States has also rotated other nuclear-capable platforms to the peninsula, including the B-52 bombers that took part in joint U.S.-ROK aerial drills over the peninsula the same month.⁴⁴

In addition to high-level visits and presidential summits, the United States and the ROK have also reinvigorated their consultative mechanisms and have recently announced the update to the “Tailored Deterrence Strategy,” the joint deterrence strategy against the DPRK’s

⁴² Ji Da-gyum, “Over 60% of S. Koreans lack trust in US nuclear umbrella: survey,” *The Korea Herald*, February 5, 2024, available at <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20240205000663>.

⁴³ Heather Mongilio, “Guided-Missile Submarine USS Michigan Pulls Into South Korea,” *USNI News*, June 16, 2023, available at <https://news.usni.org/2023/06/16/guided-missile-submarine-uss-michigan-pulls-into-south-korea>.

⁴⁴ Hyung-Jin Kim, “The US flies nuclear-capable bombers in a fresh show of force against North Korea,” *The Associated Press*, June 30, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/us-bombers-drills-north-korea-ab6d5649f6d171ed8817a971bffe11be>.

evolving military threats.⁴⁵ The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) established by the 2023 Washington Declaration serves as a forum to discuss joint planning with the ROK in contingencies potentially involving nuclear use on the peninsula and exercises with USSTRATCOM.⁴⁶

Just as significant are Japan's and the ROK's rapprochement steps both preceding and during the trilateral Camp David summit with the United States. The ROK and Japan pledged an unprecedented commitment to consult.⁴⁷ The thaw in their relations, driven by geopolitics as much as the personal leadership of each countries' representatives, would benefit the United States, long interested in such a rapprochement. Because of a complex alliance dynamic in a potential crisis on the peninsula (e.g., a North Korean strike against U.S. forces in Guam), developing direct communications channels and establishing procedures for trilateral consultations is essential to conflict management in the region.

U.S. presence will continue to be critical for allied assurance. The 2023 Strategic Posture Commission found that "Given the geographic distance between the U.S. homeland and its Allies overseas and the long lead time for force projection from the U.S. homeland, Allies stressed the importance of U.S. military forces being available in theater

⁴⁵ Unshin Lee Harpley, U.S. and South Korea Expand Cooperation with Early Warning System for Missile Threats, *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, November 13, 2023, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-south-korea-cooperation-early-warning-system-missile-threats/>.

⁴⁶ Victor Cha, "An Assessment of President Yoon's State Visit to the White House," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 1, 2023, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessment-president-yoons-state-visit-white-house>.

⁴⁷ Victor Cha, Christopher Johnstone, Ellen Kim, and Nicholas Szechenyi, "The Camp David U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit: An Exchange among CSIS Japan and Korea Chairs," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 23, 2023, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/camp-david-us-japan-korea-trilateral-summit-exchange-among-csis-japan-and-korea-chairs>.

for deterrence and assurance purposes.”⁴⁸ And according to a recent poll, more than half of the ROK respondents wish for the alliance with the United States to be strengthened, particularly among the younger generation.⁴⁹ This presence must be supported by sufficient military capabilities dedicated to the region. At the same time, allies observe U.S. leadership, or lack thereof, in Ukraine and draw conclusions for tailoring their own defense strategies and forces.

The recent U.S. measures to improve communications and rotate forces temporarily are likely helpful to demonstrate U.S. recognition of the challenges to extended deterrence and assurance that need to be addressed. But they hardly address the structural causes of those challenges – China’s growing military might, conventional and nuclear, Russia’s aggressive use of nuclear threats to provide cover for its expansionism, the emerging Sino-Russian entente intended to displace the United States and revise the existing world order, and Washington’s slow efforts to rebuild its military forces after three decades of “strategic holiday” with regard to great power threats. Small steps and robust rhetoric about “integrated deterrence” will not suffice.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2023), p. 75, available at <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Yoo Cheong-mo, “Over half of Koreans want continuous strengthening of alliance with US: poll,” *Yonhap News Agency*, September 24, 2023, available at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/09/113_359962.html.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in, Robert Gates, “The Dysfunctional Superpower: Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia?” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2023), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower>.

Conclusion

The U.S. alliance network is indispensable to achieving the goal of a stable and prosperous international order and remains one of the main U.S. competitive advantages over its adversaries. U.S. alliances are also under an increasing strain from revisionist powers, particularly Russia and China.

These structural developments undermine allied assurance, especially if they view U.S. extended deterrence threats as insufficiently credible relative to their threat perceptions. While facilitating allied consultations and cooperation is necessary to counter negative national security developments, it is not sufficient. U.S. policies and defense acquisition must reflect and adjust to unprecedented trends in adversary capabilities to maintain the credibility of extended deterrence and assurance commitments. The United States has moved at a glacial pace to expand its military capabilities and make its defense industrial base more capable, including with regard to nuclear weapons. The U.S. inability to compete with the armament pace of its adversaries has the potential to significantly undermine U.S. regional assurance efforts and the alliance structures that currently sustain one of its main geopolitical advantages and are more necessary by the day given the trajectories the U.S. adversaries are choosing.

Emerging Challenges to Extended Deterrence, Assurance and the Future of U.S. Alliances*

Introduction

Extending deterrence to help assure allies of the U.S. commitment to their security is a long-standing goal of U.S. policy. Allied confidence in the U.S. extended deterrent and the assurance that it provides is key to: 1) maintaining alliances that are the critical U.S. advantage over the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC); and, 2) sustaining U.S. nonproliferation objectives.

Yet, PRC, Russian, and North Korean strategies are aimed at defeating U.S. extended deterrence commitments to allies and undercutting U.S. assurance goals—and thereby destroying the cohesion of U.S. alliances. To do so, Russia and China now include regional nuclear first use threats in their respective bids to defeat U.S. extended deterrence and assurance efforts.¹ Russian regional nuclear first use threats have become increasingly explicit and stark while its non-nuclear forces are underperforming—leading some knowledgeable commentators to suggest that Russia ultimately will employ nuclear weapons in Ukraine.² Equally disturbing is the fact that opponents' nuclear

* Original publication: Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, "Allied Assurance: South Korea, Japan, and Band-Aid Diplomacy," *Information Series*, No. 555 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 5, 2023).

¹ Keith B. Payne, *Redefining Stability for the New Post-Cold War Era, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021), pp. 27-42, available at <https://nipp.org/papers/papers-1/>.

² Brig. Gen. Kevin Ryan (ret.), "Why Putin Will Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine," *RussiaMatters.org*, May 17, 2023, available at <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/why-putin-will-use-nuclear-weapons-ukraine#:~:text=He%20already%20has%20tactical%20reasons,he%20is%20not%20a%20bluffer.>

employment could, according to then-Commander of Strategic Command, ADM Charles Richard upset *all* U.S. operational planning.³ These realities are extremely distressing for allies in jeopardy and dependent on the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence for their security.

Extending deterrence and assuring allies requires differing approaches among allies that take into account their varied security positions and perceptions. Allies face varying threat conditions and certainly have mixed threat perceptions that shape their views of the requirements for deterrence and assurance. When considering the requirements for deterrence and assurance, the United States cannot calculate its capabilities and policies based on the “easy” task of deterring attacks on allies who face the least apparent risk and have the lowest level of threat perception—and thus least need assurance. U.S. capabilities and policies must be adequate to deter and assure the “hard” cases, including those allies who are particular targets of revanchist Russia, China and/or North Korea. For Russia, that appears to include those allies who, in the past, were part of the Soviet Union or its imperium. The need to “tailor” deterrence according to the specific needs of the threat context has become a fully recognized requirement for U.S. policy, on a bipartisan basis.⁴ The need to tailor assurance according to an ally’s particular context is equally valid, including the needs of the “hard” cases.

Understandable allied concerns about an increasingly severe threat context, including concern about Sino-Russian cooperation,⁵ have led to several different, even

³ Quoted in, Amy Hudson, “Richard Says Nuclear Deterrence Connected to All Other DOD Capabilities,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/richard-says-nuclear-deterrence-connected-to-all-other-dod-capabilities/>.

⁴ For example, both the Trump Administration’s 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* and the Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* identify tailoring deterrence as a fundamental principle of U.S. deterrence policy.

⁵ Karl Ritter and David Keyton, “China and Russia are increasing their military collaboration, Japan foreign minister warns,” *Associated Press*, May 13, 2023,

contradictory responses which call into question the continuing viability of the U.S. system of alliances and U.S. nonproliferation goals. PRC, Russian, and North Korean aggressiveness, for example, has compelled some countries that have been long-time neutrals to seek membership in NATO (e.g., Sweden, and Finland), but to restrict their roles in extended nuclear deterrence so as to have “good neighbor relations” with Russia;⁶ others appear increasingly interested in acquiring independent nuclear capabilities or, conversely, endorsing nuclear disarmament as their response to nuclear threats. Still other allies manifest some inclination to placate Russia or China and, correspondingly, distance themselves from the United States. These varied responses to the increasing threat context are emerging simultaneously and threaten the cohesion alliances depend upon.

Washington faces ongoing, unprecedented challenges in understanding, shaping and meeting extended deterrence and assurance requirements in its bid to sustain its alliance system. The United States must recognize and address the emerging requirements to sustain assurance and extended deterrence in an unprecedented threat context, including materially closing emerging “gaps” in its deterrence posture. It 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. Failure in this could also drive a cascade of nuclear proliferation that overturns the decades-long U.S.

available at <https://www.theintelligencer.com/news/world/article/china-and-russia-are-increasing-their-military-18097711.php>.

⁶ See, Gerard O'Dwyer, “Finland refutes nuclear weapons ‘siting’ and reinforces border,” *Defense News*, November 18, 2022, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/11/18/finland-refutes-nuclear-weapons-siting-and-reinforces-border/>.

policy goal of preventing nuclear proliferation as some allies feel compelled to find independent means of deterrence.

The point here, that there is a great need for a fundamental reconsideration of how to apply deterrence in a new threat context, is not overstated. In 2017—following increasingly egregious behavior by Russia and China—Gen. Kevin Chilton, former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, noted a continuing lack of attention to the general subject:

Unfortunately, since the end of the Cold War...there has been a dearth of attention paid to the rationale for the nuclear deterrent. The underlying principles and rationale for the deterrent have not gone away, but we have stopped educating, thinking, and debating, with informed underpinnings, the necessity and role of the US nuclear deterrent in today's world. Even more concerning has been the lack of informed debate on the subject. We have raised three generations of Air Force officers who may not have been exposed to the most fundamental and yet relevant arguments surrounding deterrence....⁷

Similarly, ADM Richard has observed that: “Even our operational deterrence expertise is just not what it was at the end of the Cold War. So we have to reinvigorate this intellectual effort. And we can start by rewriting deterrence theory, I'll tell you we're furiously doing that out at STRATCOM.”⁸ This is an important undertaking. It

⁷ Gen. Kevin Chilton, “On US Nuclear Deterrence,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2017), p. 2, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Vol11_Issue-4/Chilton.pdf.

⁸ Quoted in, Mike Brest, “US military ‘furiously’ reevaluating deterrence strategy with China and Russia,” *Washington Examiner*, August 11, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/china-russia-nuclear-deterrence>. See also, Tara Copp, “US Military

should, nevertheless, be noted that the fundamental thinking and rethinking of the nuclear deterrence theory underlying U.S. policy has been done *largely outside* of serving government circles, civilian or military,⁹ for some seemingly enduring reasons.

The Emerging Threat Context and its Implications for U.S. Alliances

In contrast to the immediate post-Cold War era, the United States is no longer an unparalleled global “hyperpower” with no great power foes of consequence. Now, the PRC and Russia are in a quasi-alliance dedicated to overthrowing of the rules-based liberal order led by the United States for seven decades;¹⁰ they see a new global order as essential to the realization of goals they define as existential. This is an unprecedented threat condition for the United States and the alliance system it has established and sustained.

‘Furiously’ Rewriting Nuclear Deterrence to Address Russia and China, STRATCOM Chief Says,” *Defense One*, August 11, 2022, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2022/08/us-military-furiously-rewriting-nuclear-deterrence-address-russia-and-china-stratcom-chief-says/375725/>.

⁹ There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule, e.g., James Schlesinger. But renowned architects of U.S. deterrence theory, including Bernard Brodie, Alexander George, Colin Gray, Herman Kahn, Thomas Schelling, George Smoke, and Albert Wohlstetter never held pertinent senior government positions, civilian or military.

¹⁰ 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/>.

U.S. adversaries are making rapid progress modernizing and advancing their nuclear arsenals. North Korea, one of the poorest countries in the world, reportedly tested a solid-fueled long-range missile and its leader Kim Jong-Un is committed to expanding the country's nuclear arsenal.¹¹ China's nuclear and conventional arsenal continues to expand rapidly, including hundreds of additional new nuclear silos and nuclear warheads.¹² Russia's war against Ukraine and associated nuclear threats against NATO allies have increased allied concerns about the credibility of U.S. assurance in the region, particularly in countries that are close to Russia's borders and previously were a part of the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact. Moscow's nuclear threats have resulted in a renewed focus on nuclear threats and extended deterrence in regional conflicts.¹³

According to the National Defense Strategy Commission, Russia and China "have been thinking creatively about how to employ nuclear weapons for deterrence and coercion."¹⁴ In particular, they seek to overcome U.S. extended nuclear deterrence strategies.

¹¹ Kim Tong-Hyung and Hyung-Jin Kim, "North Korea says it tested new solid-fuel long-range missile," *Associated Press*, April 14, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-icbm-solid-fuel-kim-jong-un-6382097edf024c2aa43afbd0575f9524>.

¹² Josh Rogin, "The Chinese military arsenal continues to grow," *Washington Post*, April 14, p. A19.

¹³ See for example Lawrence Freedman, "Going Nuclear," *Substack*, September 20, 2022, available at <https://samf.substack.com/p/going-nuclear?sd=pf>; Eric Schlosser, "What If Russia Uses Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine?" *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2022, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/06/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapon-us-response/661315/>; David J. Trachtenberg, Kathleen C. Bailey, Susan J. Koch, Robert G. Joseph, "The Impact of Russia's War on Ukraine on the Future of Arms Control & the Nonproliferation Regime," *Journal of Policy & Strategy* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 2022), pp. 93-102, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Vol.-2-No.-3.pdf>.

¹⁴ Eric Edelman and Gary Roughead et al., *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2018), p. 38.

Russia and China use nuclear threats (and possibly employment) as coercive tools to defeat traditional U.S. extended deterrence commitments and their non-strategic nuclear weapons give them a range of credible coercive options largely unavailable to the West.¹⁵ Correspondingly, the Russian “theory of victory” appears to emphasize their coercive threatened employment to overcome U.S. extended deterrence and separate allies from the United States.¹⁶

Perhaps most fundamentally, the increasing threats to U.S. allies posed by these revanchist authoritarian states now demand that the United States reconsider: 1) the nature of, and requirements for extended nuclear deterrence and assurance given emerging threat conditions; 2) how to hedge the U.S. calculation of the nuclear and non-nuclear requirements for extended deterrence in an increasingly uncertain threat context; and, 3) how to communicate the credibility of extended deterrence to allies to support the goal of allied assurance.

To the extent that the United States does *not* address these questions and find a credible and convincing “story”

¹⁵ Mark Schneider, “Russian Nuclear Targeting,” *RealClear Defense*, October 4, 2022, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/10/04/russian_nuclear_targeting_857030.html.

¹⁶ See, Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence in a New Era: Applying ‘Tailored Deterrence,’” *Information Series*, National Institute for Public Policy, No. 431 (May 21, 2018), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/. See also, Dmitry Adamsky, *Russia's New Nuclear Normal: How the Country Has Grown Dangerously Comfortable Brandishing Its Arsenal*, *Foreign Affairs Online*, May 19, 2023, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/russias-new-nuclear-normal>; Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271; and, Jacek Durkalec, et al., “Winning Conventional Regional Wars Against Nuclear-Armed Adversaries,” *Workshop Summary* (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, November 20-21, 2019), p. 1, available at <https://cgsl.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Winning-Conventional-Regional-Wars-Summary.pdf>.

in this regard, the future of the U.S. alliance system is increasingly at risk. And, as noted above, if U.S. deterrence planning fails to prevent a limited, coercive nuclear strike, the operational consequences for U.S. forces could be disastrous in the war that follows.

Diverse Allied Responses to Emerging Threats

Allied responses to the increasing threat environment are varied and even contradictory. For example, a trend in some allied countries brought about by recent nuclear threat developments, and associated public pressures, is political interest in nuclear disarmament as the preferred solution to the problem. This same theme is reflected in statements by many U.S. commentators that periods of increasing threat *are precisely when* disarmament becomes more important,¹⁷ and that arms control efforts should be the priority regardless of the international threat context.¹⁸

Several U.S. allies, including Australia for example, have now adopted “observer” status to the United Nation’s Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and have elected to “abstain” rather than oppose the treaty. Correspondingly, 56 former leaders of NATO countries signed an open letter praising the treaty, and encouraged the United States to pursue extensive nuclear “risk

¹⁷ See, for example, John Isaacs. “‘Old Think’ Is Driving U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: Cutting drastically the number of U.S. nuclear weapons should not depend on Russian or Chinese assent and could and should be considered now,” *National Interest Online*, December 17, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98old-think%E2%80%99-driving-us-nuclear-weapons-policy-206024>.

¹⁸ For example, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated that the United States remains “ready to talk about strategic arms limitations at any time with Russia irrespective of anything else going on in the world or in our relationship.” U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press,” February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-7/>.

reduction” measures.¹⁹ The Australian government reportedly is weighing whether to sign the Treaty—a step that would dramatically re-orient Australian security policy.²⁰ The Australian Prime Minister has referred to signing on to the nuclear ban treaty as “Labor at our best.”²¹ Finland, while entering NATO and coming under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, declared that it would *not* allow nuclear weapons on its territory.²² And, the May 2023 G-7 meeting in Japan included a focus on advancing nuclear disarmament.²³ As one commentator described it, “the Japanese leader sought to repeatedly infuse the summit with his ideas about a nuclear-free world.”²⁴ These types of developments reveal an underlying “anti-nuclear” sentiment among some allied governments and/or their

¹⁹ As discussed in, Heather Williams, “What the Nuclear Ban Treaty Means for America’s Allies,” *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2020.

²⁰ Matthew Knott and Paul Sakkal, “Government considers break with US on treaty,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), April. 4, 2023, p. 8, available at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/would-the-us-alliance-survive-signing-nuclear-weapons-treaty-comes-with-risk-20230403-p5cxo3.html>.

²¹ Ibid. See also, Daniel Hurst, “Albanese urged to take stand against nuclear weapons during G7 summit in Hiroshima,” *The Guardian Online* (UK), May 18, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/19/albanese-urged-to-take-stand-against-nuclear-weapons-during-g7-summit-in-hiroshima#:~:text=Anthony%20Albanese%20is%20being%20urged,of%20the%20second%20world%20war>.

²² Anne Kauranen, “New member Finland to take part in NATO’s nuclear planning,” *Reuters*, April 13, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/new-member-finland-take-part-natos-nuclear-planning-2023-04-13/>.

²³ “G-7 to vow at Hiroshima summit to bolster NPT regime for disarmament,” *Kyodo News*, May 16, 2023, available at <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/05/e8012f34b28d-g-7-to-vow-at-hiroshima-summit-to-bolster-npt-regime-for-disarmament.html>. See also, Sara Hussein, “Japan to push disarmament in Hiroshima, with modest hopes,” *Agence France-Presse*, May 15, 2023, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230516-japan-to-push-disarmament-in-hiroshima-with-modest-hopes>.

²⁴ Foster Klug, “Japanese PM faces dilemma at G7 as he balances anti-nuke goals with reality of threats,” *Associated Press* (Analysis), May 21, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/analysis-g7-nuclear-threat-japan-russia-7c4af5c4c21424b1a167a102c1f02931>.

publics at play simultaneously with doubts about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrent. If this response is extended and enlarged, it would essentially eliminate the existing U.S. extended nuclear deterrence policy, particularly (but not only) undercutting NATO allied participation in NATO's nuclear deterrence policy.

In addition, in the context of increasing nuclear threats and questions regarding U.S. credibility, some U.S. allies appear to be weighing an alternative that is directly contrary to nuclear disarmament, i.e., acquiring independent nuclear capabilities. 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."²⁵

North Korean (and Chinese) nuclear threats have renewed South Korean interest in the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea or independent South Korean nuclear weapons. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol recently stated that South Korea could potentially develop its own nuclear capabilities, and made a point of saying it could do that "pretty quickly, given our scientific and technological capabilities."²⁶ These expressions of interest were the focus of an April 2023 summit in Washington with President Biden intended to address South Korean concerns regarding the U.S. extended deterrent. As a South Korean commentary described the resultant Washington Declaration, "Washington chose to preempt Seoul from

²⁵ 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>.

²⁶ Choe Sang-Hun, "In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option," *New York Times*, January 12, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html>.

developing its own nuclear weapons after the Yoon administration raised the need to ensure U.S. extended deterrence.”²⁷

Whether the result of that April summit will be adequate to assure South Korea regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent is questionable – apparent post-summit confusion and differences regarding the distinction between “nuclear sharing” and consultations suggest that it is not adequate.²⁸ A South Korean commentator’s sharp critique following the summit should limit optimism: “China must be amused at the melodramatic denouement of the Korea-U.S. summit. It’s time we said goodbye to nuclear pretensions and predilections. They only let us down without changing the actual security situation.”²⁹ Whether South Korea will be satisfied by the results of the summit undoubtedly will depend on the level of North Korean and Chinese belligerence in coming months – which, again, should limit optimism.

In a recent South Korean public poll, more than 70 percent of respondents support South Korea developing its

²⁷ Wi Sung-lac, “What the Washington Declaration means,” *Korea JoongAng Daily Online* (South Korea), May 11, 2023, available at <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/05/10/opinion/columns/Washington-Declaration-Yoon-Suk-Yeol-Joe-Biden/20230510203647982.html>

²⁸ See Byun Duk-kun, “Washington Declaration goes beyond ‘nuclear-sharing’ – U.S. official,” *Yonhap News Agency* (South Korea), May 5, 2023, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230505004300325#:~:text=%22The%20declaration%20moves%20beyond%20what,readiness%2C%22%20the%20official%20said%2C>.

²⁹ Kim Jong-dae, “The melodramatic conclusion of Korea’s pursuit of nuclear sharing: It’s hard to avoid the suspicion that extended deterrence is more bark than bite,” *The Hankyoreh Online* (South Korea), May 10, 2023, available at https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1091246.htm l. See also, Michelle Ye Hee Lee [@myhlee], The U.S. view is that ROK will never feel it’s enough when it comes to extended deterrence and credibility, but still worth noting that all three major conservative newspapers in South Korea have expressed disappointment/caution over the Washington Declaration (mini thread): [Tweet], *Twitter*, 9:22 AM, April 28, 2023, available at <https://twitter.com/myhlee/status/1651939838285979651?xt=HHwWhoDRtfqh7-wtAAAA>.

own nuclear weapons or the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to South Korea.³⁰ Yet, Washington has definitively rejected both independent South Korean nuclear capabilities and the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to the peninsula.³¹ This type of friction cannot be attributed simply to miscommunication; it reflects increasing doubts among some allies about the credibility of the existing U.S. “nuclear umbrella” in a worsening threat context. These doubts are most manifest in South Korean official expressions of possible interest in independent nuclear capabilities, but they are apparent elsewhere as well.

In Japan, the subject of an independent Japanese nuclear capability has moved from being a politically taboo topic to open public discussion.³² In 2022, former Prime Minister Abe, said publicly that it may be time for Japan to host U.S. nuclear weapons, noting that had Ukraine retained nuclear capabilities, Russia may not have invaded.³³ This narrative follows from growing doubts about the credibility of the current U.S. nuclear posture. A noted Japanese commentator expressed concern that the current U.S. “narrative” and “nuclear posture” may be “insufficient” to

³⁰ Mark Green, “Seventy-One Percent of South Koreans Now Support the Return of Nuclear Weapons to Their Country – Even if it Means Developing Their Own,” *Wilson Center*, January 31, 2023, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/seventy-one-percent-south-koreans-now-support-return-nuclear-weapons-their-country-even>.

³¹ See, for example, “Pentagon Firm against Calls from Congress for Nukes in South Korea,” *KBS World News* (South Korea), March 31, 2023, available at http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=176824.

³² See for example, Jesse Johnson, “Japan should consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons, Abe says,” *Japan Times*, February 27, 2022, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/27/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-japan-nuclear-weapons-taiwan/>.

³³ Jesse Johnson, “Japan Should Consider Hosting U.S. Nuclear Weapons, Abe Says,” *Japan Times*, February 27, 2022, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/02/27/national/politics-diplomacy/shinzo-abe-japan-nuclear-weapons-taiwan/>.

deter regional nuclear use.³⁴ Whether or not to move independently in this regard is tied directly to the continuing credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. 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.”³⁵ This type of allied interest in independent nuclear capabilities will only increase if Russia, China and North Korea continue their aggressive behavior and expressed nuclear threats in Europe and Asia – which appears likely.

The assurance challenge is not confined to the Pacific theater. Polish President Andrzej Duda too stated that “The problem above all is that we [Poles] don’t have nuclear weapons” and that the topic of Polish participation in nuclear sharing is open.³⁶ His statements clearly indicate Poland’s concern about the continuing credibility of the U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” Those concerns appear to be increasing with the recent Russian decision to deploy nuclear weapons to Poland’s border by stationing them in Belarus.³⁷

³⁴ Hirohito Ogi, “Russia’s nuclear blackmail must be met with denial,” *Japan Times Online* (Japan), May 16, 2023, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2023/05/22/commentary/world-commentary/russia-nuclear-denial/>.

³⁵ 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>.

³⁶ Quoted in, Jo Harper, “Poland in talks to join NATO nuclear sharing program,” *Anadolu Agency*, October 5, 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/poland-in-talks-to-join-nato-nuclear-sharing-program/2703041>.

³⁷ See, Jillian Kay Melchior, “Poland Hardens Its Defenses Against Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2023, p. A17, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/poland-hardens-its-defenses-against-russia-nato-national-security-spending-belarus-ukraine-invasion-e06c1c5>.

Finally, and perhaps most pernicious is the obvious trend among some allies and partners to hedge their geopolitical bets by “cozying up” to America’s foes and distancing themselves from Washington, as most recently was demonstrated in statements by French President Macron and the European Commission’s leadership.³⁸ According to Macron, “strategic autonomy” must now be Europe’s organizing principle,³⁹ and the French ambassador reportedly advised Canada to begin distancing itself from the United States, and that Ottawa must choose between the United States and Europe.⁴⁰ This trend is disturbing but logical and understandable. National leaderships must make decisions on a daily basis regarding the best route for their nation’s security – as power balances shift in favor of U.S. foes, that movement may suggest that allies placate those foes and correspondingly distance themselves from the United States. As two prominent European commentators have observed, “... based on global American strategic supremacy, the very idea of autonomous European defense has long been considered

³⁸ See for example, “Macron Says Europe Should Not Follow U.S. or Chinese Policy Over Taiwan,” *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>.

³⁹ 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>.

⁴⁰ Dylan Robertson, “Canada should link with Europe, surpass ‘weak’ military engagement, French envoy,” *the Canadian Press*, April 5, 2023, available at, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-canada-should-link-with-europe-surpass-weak-military-engagement-french/>.

detrimental to the vital transatlantic link. However, with global strategic challenges growing fast, this principle is no longer tenable.”⁴¹

The manifest inconsistency in U.S. behavior important to allied views of their security in other parts of the world has accelerated this problem. As one Israeli analyst has observed, “The consensus in the region is that the US has abdicated its role as the Superpower vis-à-vis the [Middle East].”⁴² And, the trend within major parts of the Republican Party to challenge continuing military aid to Ukraine reflects some underlying domestic skepticism regarding the wisdom of continuing costly U.S. commitments in the face of Russian and Chinese threats. These trends are not lost on allies who fear for their security and now are ultimately dependent on alliance with the United States for that security.

The trend among some allies and partners to hedge their national bets should come as no surprise, but undoubtedly will shock many in Washington who continue to expect the prerogatives of being the world’s “hyperpower.” That status no longer exists, and allied hedging will likely intensify if the U.S. extended deterrence and assurance measures come increasingly in doubt, as seems to be the case. If so, this dynamic has the potential to undo the U.S. alliance system.

What to Do?

Given the varied allied responses to contemporary threat developments, Washington’s actions and messaging must

⁴¹ 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/>.

⁴² Shmuel Bar, “Self-perceptions and Nuclear Weapons,” *Information Series*, National Institute for Public Policy (forthcoming, June 2023).

meet the 5 “C’s.” That is, the United States must have a coherent, consistent, credible, compelling, and readily communicated position that lends manifest reality to its extended deterrence commitments in diverse threat circumstances. Vigorous words are not enough. As Russian, Chinese and North Korean nuclear and non-nuclear threats continue to cause understandable fear in allied capitals, and the Sino-Russian quasi alliance matures, the need for a credible U.S. extended deterrence posture and its effective communication to sustain alliances will only increase.

To address this challenge, the United States can and must: a) strengthen its extended nuclear deterrence posture in the context of increasing threats—a posture that must have sufficient credibility both to deter foes and assure allies in diverse threat circumstances; and, b) communicate this strength to those allies who have increasing doubts about the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent and are under pressure variously to: embrace nuclear disarmament; acquire independent nuclear capabilities; and/or to hedge their geopolitical bets by distancing themselves from the United States.

To do so, the United States must better communicate to allies: a) Why global nuclear disarmament is wholly implausible in current international conditions and thus provides no answer to the nuclear threats facing the United States and allies; and, b) why allies can have confidence in the U.S. extended deterrent and thus do not need distancing or independent nuclear capabilities for their security. It should be noted that this diverse messaging presents a formidable task, i.e., explaining: Why nuclear disarmament is an illusion; why sustaining and likely increasing U.S. nuclear capabilities is necessary for deterrence; but also, why allies do *not* need independent nuclear capabilities. The complexity and challenge of communicating to allies

each of these points simultaneously helps to explain why, in general, the United States does it so poorly.

There are illustrative examples of this inadequacy of both substance and communication. For example, for decades, allies have consistently expressed sharp, substantive opposition to U.S. proposals for a “No-First-Use” or “sole purpose” nuclear policy. Their opposition appears largely to be based on understandable fears that the adoption of such policies would weaken extended deterrence.⁴³ Yet, some U.S. administrations repeatedly express readiness to adopt them—raising questions among allies about the continuing credibility of the U.S. deterrent. 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 such policies.⁴⁴ Allied responses reportedly were overwhelmingly negative, including from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and Australia.⁴⁵ Indeed, successive Japanese governments have opposed U.S. initiatives to adopt such declaratory policies.⁴⁶ Yet, the Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* continues to identify a “sole purpose” policy as the U.S. goal⁴⁷—extending a U.S. aspiration that seems wholly obtuse to enduring, serious allied concerns.

⁴³ 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, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JIPA/journals/Volume-02_Issue-3/04-Romei.pdf.

⁴⁴ 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-c8ffbb36878e>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ 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>.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 9, available at

With regard to issues that are more about communication than substance, the United States has long done a questionable job of communicating its story to allied leaderships and publics. The factors that place the U.S. alliance system at risk stem in part from the paucity of effective communication with allies. While essential, the existing forms of consultation may be inadequate to the task as it becomes more challenging in a more severe threat context.⁴⁸ In addition, existing channels are very limited in scope and involve a very limited number of interested people. The existing discussion fora must be augmented and broadened.

This situation follows from the reality that, since the end of the Cold War, the United State has let its information infrastructure atrophy and has largely retired from the public affairs business, particularly in allied countries.⁴⁹ The U.S. effort to understand and effectively communicate with allies, e.g., “public diplomacy,” has been deteriorating for years—partly for fears of provoking “Putin into new steps to undermine Western societies,” partly for worries that its efforts would not work, and partly for a belief “that an attempt to assertively promote our views would inevitably deteriorate into our spreading false information.”⁵⁰ This

<https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

⁴⁸ Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Brad Roberts, for example, reportedly has encouraged the establishment of a mechanism for U.S. and Japanese “ministers to discuss responses to nuclear threats and attacks.” See, “Ex-Obama Official Seeks Japan-U.S. Nuke Response Dialogue,” *Jiji Press* (Japan), May 16, 2023.

⁴⁹ For more information on the topic and recommendations how to fix the issue, see Thomas Kent, *Striking Back: Overt and Covert Options to Combat Russian Disinformation* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2020).

⁵⁰ Thomas Kent, “How to Reach Russian Ears,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, March 8, 2022, available at <https://cepa.org/article/how-to-reach-russian-ears/>. See also, John A. Gentry, *Influence Operations China, Russia, and the Soviet Union: A Comparison*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/influence-operations-of-china-russia-and-the-soviet-union-a-comparison/>.

U.S. retirement from the field hinders allies' efforts to counter adversaries' disinformation more generally, but it also makes it harder to reach mutual understandings about national security issues that require a degree of prior knowledge.⁵¹ Inadequate U.S. focus, understanding and communication contributes to unenforced errors and leaves unchecked Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns.

There are several steps the United States could take to improve the current situation. With respect to nuclear deterrence and assurance, existing strategic deterrence dialogues must be strengthened, but also expanded to incorporate other audiences that are usually not a part of the discussions. These include parliamentarians from allied countries and their staffs, journalists, and NGOs. Because ignorance and widely believed myths about extended deterrence and assurance undercut both, this expanded participation would help by contributing to the development of expertise necessary for the conduct of a more informed public discourse.

As a part of its communications strategy, the United States also could invest in expanding the practice of hosting visits by journalists, government and non-government experts from the United States and allied countries to its nuclear facilities and military bases that host delivery

⁵¹ The challenge was fully manifest during U.S.-Czech missile defense negotiations about the Czech Republic hosting a U.S. radar. The public debate was significantly influenced by Russia's disinformation operations. For more information on this particular case study, see Michaela Dodge, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020); Michaela Dodge, "Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic during the Radar Debate," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 162-170; and Eva Souhradová, "'Smyslem toho projektu je nikdy ho nepoužít,' říká o americké protiraketové obraně velvyslanec v USA Petr Kolář" ("The Point of the Project Is to Never Use It," Says Czech Ambassador to the United States Petr Kolář about the U.S. Missile Defense System," *Czech TV*, August 30, 2007, available at <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/archiv/1464663-smyslem-toho-projektu-je-nikdy-ho-nepouzit-rika-o-americke-protiraketove-obrane>.

systems.⁵² While the United States cannot (for obvious reasons) provide full disclosure, there is a good deal of public information that can be made available to produce engaging fact-based stories that help to dispel the many popular myths that so often are repeated in debates on nuclear deterrence.⁵³ The opportunity could be used for the purpose of educating interested allied (and domestic) audiences regarding the realities of U.S. nuclear deterrence policy and the systems that underpin it. Perhaps most importantly, U.S. and allied policymakers themselves, if suitably informed, could participate more in public discussions in foreign and domestic media to clearly communicate and defend their country's national security needs in terms that are assessable to the public.

Conclusion

The short-lived era of unquestionable U.S. military supremacy is over and unsurprisingly coincides with a new threat environment in which great power foes are dedicated to overthrowing—violently if necessary—the rules-based international order that has been led by the United States for seven decades. Washington is not the global “hyperpower” with no great power threats of consequence. Both Russia and China see the United States as the impediment to the respective goals they define as of existential importance. Their combined hostility and growing power are new realities: The United States has entered a threat environment of unprecedented danger and some U.S. allies and partners are in Russia's and China's direct line of fire. These developments create new

⁵² An example of such an effort is the following article: Nolan Peterson, “Embedded With US Air Force Nuclear Missile and Bomber Units,” *Coffee or Die*, November 27, 2022, available at <https://coffeeordie.com/embedded-nuclear-missile>.

⁵³ U.S. nuclear weapons being on a “hair-trigger” is a good example of such a myth.

challenges for the viability of U.S. alliances, particularly for those allies increasingly concerned about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Allied responses to this increasingly severe threat environment are varied and even contradictory, but together, if expanded, pose a threat to the continuing viability of the existing U.S. alliance system and to U.S. hopes for nonproliferation.

The current generation of U.S. leaders accustomed to America's unparalleled power status following the Cold War appears loath to give up the presumptions that where Washington leads others will follow and that China will rise peacefully with generous American tutelage. Those presumptions are comforting, but now demonstrably false. A general recognition of the unprecedented threats confronting the United States, and the value of U.S. alliances to meet those threats, is Washington's needed first step. The reluctance to acknowledge the emerging problems and their severity must be overcome before moves to address those problems are likely. However, simply understanding emerging challenges—as difficult as that can be—is inadequate. The United States and allies must then take the potentially hard force posture and communications steps needed to address those challenges and sustain the U.S. alliance system. Without a conscious effort along these lines, critical emerging fissures in that system will deepen, with truly serious repercussions for U.S. and allied security.

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Volume 5 (2025)

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Volume 4 (2024)

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