

The image features a close-up, high-angle shot of several gold bars resting on a fabric with the stars and stripes of the American flag. The bars are highly reflective, showing bright highlights and deep shadows. The text 'FINE GOLD 999.9' and 'NET WT 1000g' is embossed on the bars. The CSBA logo is positioned at the top center, with the full name of the organization below it.

CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

AVOIDING A STRATEGY OF BLUFF THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN MILITARY PRIMACY

HAL BRANDS
ERIC EDELMAN

AVOIDING A STRATEGY OF BLUFF THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN MILITARY PRIMACY

HAL BRANDS
ERIC S. EDELMAN

CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

2017

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND BUDGETARY ASSESSMENTS (CSBA)

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hal Brands is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and is also Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). In 2015–2016, he was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow. In that capacity, he served as a special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, working on a range of strategic planning and policy issues. He has also consulted with a range of government offices and agencies in the intelligence and national security communities, as well as the RAND Corporation, and provided research and analysis for the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense. He received his BA from Stanford University (2005) and his PhD from Yale University (2009). He previously worked as an Assistant and Associate Professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy and as a researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

Eric S. Edelman is Counselor at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. He retired as a career minister from the U.S. Foreign Service on May 1, 2009. He has served in senior positions at the Departments of State and Defense as well as the White House, where he led organizations providing analysis, strategy, policy development, security services, trade advocacy, public outreach, citizen services, and congressional relations. As undersecretary of defense for policy (August 2005–January 2009), he was DoD's senior policy official, overseeing strategy development with global responsibility for bilateral defense relations, war plans, special operations forces, homeland defense, missile defense, nuclear weapons and arms control policies, counterproliferation, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, arms sales, and defense trade controls. He served as U.S. ambassador to Finland in the Clinton administration and Turkey in the Bush administration and was Vice President Cheney's principal deputy assistant for national security affairs. He was chief of staff to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, special assistant to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt, and special assistant to Secretary of State George Shultz. His other assignments included the State Department Operations Center, Prague, Moscow, and Tel Aviv, where he was a member of the U.S. Middle East delegation to the West Bank/Gaza autonomy talks. Ambassador Edelman has been awarded the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Award, the Presidential Distinguished Service Award, and several Department of State Superior Honor Awards. In 2010, he was named a knight of the French National Order of the Legion of Honor. Ambassador Edelman serves on the National Defense Panel, on the bipartisan board of directors of the United States Institute of Peace, and on the board of the Foreign Policy Initiative. He received a B.A. in History and Government from Cornell University and a Ph.D. in U.S. Diplomatic History from Yale University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Thomas Mahnken, Frank Hoffman, Antulio Echevarria, and other individuals for their comments and suggestions on this or earlier versions of this report. They are also grateful to Kamilla Gunzinger for editing and production support. The opinions and analysis in this study are those of the author; any shortcomings are solely their responsibility. CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of funders, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on our website at www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
AVOIDING A STRATEGY OF BLUFF	1
Introduction	1
U.S. Military Primacy and Post–Cold War Grand Strategy.....	2
The End of the Post–Cold War Era.....	5
Disinvesting in Defense.....	7
The Creeping Crisis of U.S. Military Primacy	10
The False Promise of Retrenchment.....	15
Living with Risk	19
Reinvesting in Primacy	22
Conclusion.....	29

Executive Summary

If strategy is the calculated relation of means to ends, then today America is careening toward strategic insolvency. Following the Cold War, the United States possessed unrivaled military primacy, both globally and in all the world's key strategic theaters. Yet today, Washington faces military challenges that are both more severe and more numerous than at any time in decades, precisely as its own defense cutbacks have significantly reduced U.S. military capabilities. The United States confronts challenges from revisionist great powers such as China and Russia, aggressive rogue states such as Iran and North Korea, and international terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. At the same time, constant-dollar defense spending fell from \$768 billion in 2010 to \$595 billion in 2015, the fastest drawdown—in percentage terms—since the Korean War. The result has been a creeping crisis of American military primacy, as the margin of superiority to which the United States has become accustomed has diminished, and a growing gap between U.S. commitments and capabilities has emerged.

This state of strategic insolvency poses numerous dangers to both the United States and the broader international order that American grand strategy has traditionally supported. It will undermine U.S. alliances, by creating new doubts regarding the credibility of Washington's guarantees. It will undercut deterrence, by tempting adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran to calculate that the United States may be unwilling—or unable—to oppose aggression. It will make for far harder fights should conflict erupt in key areas from Europe to the Middle East to East Asia, and it may ultimately result in a situation in which the United States simply cannot defend countries it has pledged to defend. The United States would currently face grave difficulties defending the Baltic states from a Russian assault, for instance; the military balance around Taiwan and elsewhere in East Asia has also eroded dramatically. Finally, as U.S. military power becomes less imposing, U.S. diplomacy is likely to encounter greater difficulties as well. American officials continually aver that the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in the history of the world, but today, U.S. military power has become dangerously insufficient relative to the grand strategy and international order it has traditionally supported.

Great powers facing strategic insolvency have three basic strategic options. First, the United States could decrease its global commitments, thereby bringing its strategic obligations back into alignment with a diminished military resource base. In practice, this might mean dispensing with U.S. security commitments to the most geographically exposed allies and partners—such as Taiwan and the Baltic states—in hopes of reconsolidating a more defensible strategic perimeter. Yet the appeal of this option is largely illusory, for even reducing defense spending will not come close to balancing the U.S. federal budget absent major changes in tax and entitlement policies, and U.S. retrenchment from East Asia, the Middle East, or Eastern Europe is likely to generate profound geopolitical instability. Aggressive

revisionist powers may well be emboldened by U.S. retreat; remaining U.S. allies may lose confidence in the credibility of American defense pledges. Retrenchment may somewhat narrow the gap between U.S. capabilities and commitments in the short run, but only at the likely price of a further erosion of the global order that U.S. strategy has been meant to defend.

A second option is living with greater risk. In practice, this would mean either gambling that enemies will not test increasingly precarious commitments or employing riskier approaches—such as relying on nuclear weapons or other escalatory strategies—to sustain those commitments. This approach has a certain intuitive appeal—it substitutes deterrence by punishment for deterrence by denial—and the United States indeed relied on such approaches during the Cold War. Yet it also entails profound liabilities. Simply hoping that exposed commitments will not be challenged could work for a time, but this approach carries enormous risk that those guarantees will eventually be tested and found wanting, with devastating effects. Likewise, more escalatory approaches to deterrence may lack credibility—if America is not willing to bear the fiscal costs associated with making its defense commitments credible through conventional means, would it really risk the astronomically higher costs associated with nuclear escalation in a conflict over Taiwan or the Baltic states? This approach thus risks leading the United States into a trap where, if its interests are challenged, it is confronted with a choice between pursuing escalatory options that carry a prohibitive price or simply acquiescing to aggression.

This leaves a final option, which is to make the significant resource investments necessary to expand U.S. capabilities and restore strategic solvency. In the case of American strategy today, this would probably entail a major, sustained military buildup comparable to that undertaken by the Carter and Reagan administrations near the end of the Cold War, complemented by defense reforms, development of future capabilities and new operational concepts, and other steps. The purpose of this buildup would be to create an authentic two-plus or even three-theater capability, and to enable a range of investments that are supported by a broad expert consensus as being necessary to maintaining U.S. primacy in a more competitive environment.

Under this approach, the United States could, for instance, invest in a more robust and survivable Eastern European presence featuring heavy brigades, enhanced airpower and ground-based fires, and critical enablers. It could significantly increase its investments in existing capabilities—from additional *Zumwalt*-class destroyers and nuclear attack submarines, to stealthy fighters and long-range bombers, to vastly enhanced stocks of precision-guided munitions, to improved capabilities in space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare—necessary to penetrate anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) bubbles and retain air and sea control in high-end conflicts, as well as to maintain the upper hand in fights with Iran and North Korea. This approach would ease the tradeoffs between critical capabilities for today's fight (and particularly for counterterrorism operations), such as the A-10, and those critical for confronting more advanced adversaries in tomorrow's fight, such as the F-35. Crucially, it would ensure that the United States is able aggressively to fund development and production of future technologies that are now receiving initial seed funding but cannot be fielded in numbers without additional resources. Finally, this approach would provide for the increased force structure that is necessary not simply to cover a larger number of contingencies, but to reduce stress on the current force.

As we acknowledge, the costs of this approach would be significant. But they would hardly be unmanageable for a wealthy superpower that currently spends relatively low levels of its gross domestic product on defense. Under even the most aggressive buildup currently contemplated, military spending would consume only around 4 percent of GDP, as compared to 10–12 percent at the peak of the Cold War. Moreover, such a buildup can be eminently tenable from a fiscal perspective if

tax and entitlement issues are addressed; if those issues are not addressed, the U.S. fiscal position will become untenable regardless of how much or how little the country spends on defense. Other objections to this approach—such as the idea that it would spur arms races with adversaries or simply encourage allies to “free-ride” on U.S. efforts—are also unpersuasive. Significantly expanding U.S. capabilities therefore represents the best approach to sustaining deterrence, upholding an existing international system that has been remarkably congenial to American interests, and ensuring that the United States is not left in a position of worsening strategic overreach that will, eventually, be exposed and punished.

AVOIDING A STRATEGY OF BLUFF

Introduction

Strategy has been defined as the calculated relation of means to ends. By this standard, the United States is hurtling toward strategic insolvency.¹ For more than two decades after the Cold War, Washington enjoyed essentially uncontested military dominance and a corresponding ability to sustain a historically favorable global order—all at what was, by comparative standards, a bargain-basement price. Now, however, the United States confronts military-geopolitical challenges that are both more numerous and more severe than at any time in the post–Cold War era—precisely as its own disinvestment in defense has left U.S. military resources far scarcer than before. The result is a creeping crisis of American military primacy, as the margin of superiority upon which the United States has traditionally relied is diminished, and an increasingly undeniable gap between American commitments and capabilities widens. “Superpowers don’t bluff,” went a common Obama-era refrain—but today, an overextended American superpower is being left with a strategy of bluff as its preeminence wanes and its military means come out of alignment with its geopolitical ends.²

Foreign policy, Walter Lippmann famously wrote nearly 75 years ago, entails “bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power.” If a statesman fails “to bring his ends and means into balance [if he veers into strategic insolvency] he will follow a course that leads to disaster.”³

The state of strategic insolvency that the United States confronts today is indeed fraught with peril for Washington and the broader international order. It is sure to undermine U.S. alliances, by raising fresh doubts about the credibility of American guarantees. It will weaken deterrence, by tempting adversaries to think that aggression may be successful or go unopposed. Should conflict erupt in key areas where the military trends are most unfavorable, the United States may find that it cannot defend

¹ The concept of strategic solvency is derived from Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1943); and Samuel Huntington, “Coping with the Lippmann Gap,” *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 3, 1987–1988, pp. 453–477. For a shorter version of the argument presented in this report, see Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, “The Crisis of American Military Primacy and the Search for Strategic Solvency,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4, 2016–2017, pp. 27–42.

² Glenn Thrush and Jennifer Epstein, “The Lonely President,” *Politico*, August 29, 2013.

³ Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 9–10.

countries it has pledged to defend, or that it can do so only at a prohibitive price. Finally, as the shadows cast by U.S. military power grow shorter, American diplomacy on a range of issues will likely become less effective, and the global system as a whole prove less responsive to U.S. influence. American officials ritualistically aver that the United States possesses the greatest fighting force in the history of the world, and indeed the U.S. military continues to be far superior—in aggregate, global terms—to any single national competitor. But the brutal truth is that today, American military power has become increasingly and dangerously insufficient relative to the broader strategy and international order it supports.

So how should the United States respond? History and strategic logic suggest that great powers facing strategic insolvency have three basic options. First, they can decrease their commitments, thereby bringing their global obligations back into alignment with diminished resources. Second, they can simply live with greater risk, either by gambling that enemies will not test increasingly precarious commitments or by employing riskier approaches to sustain those commitments—such as reliance on nuclear weapons or other escalatory strategies—without significantly increasing resource costs. Finally, they can make the resource investments necessary to expand their capabilities and thereby restore credibility to their strategy.⁴ In the case of American strategy today, the prospective investments associated with this third option are quite significant—restoring strategic solvency would probably require a concerted, long-term defense buildup comparable to that undertaken by the Carter and Reagan administrations near the end of the Cold War.⁵ Yet this approach is not nearly as economically daunting as it may seem. Moreover, compared to the alternatives, it represents the best option for sustaining the benefits of American primacy, and for ensuring that the United States is not left in a position of worsening strategic overreach that will, eventually, be exposed and punished.

U.S. Military Primacy and Post–Cold War Grand Strategy

Since World War II, the United States has been committed to having a military second to none. From the end of the Cold War, the United States has been committed to maintaining overwhelming military primacy. The idea, as George W. Bush declared in 2002, that the United States must possess “strengths beyond challenge” has been a source of bipartisan consensus; it has been stated, with varying degrees of bluntness or opacity, in virtually every major U.S. strategy document from the early 1990s to the present.⁶

It has also been reflected in concrete terms. Since the early 1990s, the United States has consistently accounted for 35–45 percent of world defense spending, and it has possessed utterly peerless abilities

⁴ In practice, these options are not mutually exclusive—one could conceivably pursue a hybrid approach. But here, we treat these options as distinct, to better flesh out their respective risks and merits.

⁵ On this history, see Daniel Wirls, *Buildup: The Politics of Defense in the Reagan Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁶ Bush quoted in “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York,” June 1, 2002, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=62730&st=&st1=>; and Melvyn Leffler, “Dreams of Freedom, Temptations of Power,” in Jeffrey Engel, ed., *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Barton Gellman, “Keeping the U.S. First; Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992; and Eric Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 63–77.

to project power and command the global commons.⁷ Perhaps more important, for most of the post–Cold War era U.S. primacy has also been unrivaled in all the world’s key strategic regions—particularly Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. From thrashing Saddam Hussein’s million-man Iraqi military at historically unprecedented casualty exchange rates during Operation Desert Storm, to deploying—with impunity—two carrier strike groups off Taiwan during the China-Taiwan crisis of 1995–1996, Washington has been able to project military power superior to anything a regional rival could employ even on its own geopolitical doorstep. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry said it well during the Taiwan episode: “Beijing should know, and this [U.S. fleet] will remind them, that while they are a great military power, the strongest, the premier military power in the Western Pacific is the United States.”⁸

This condition of American military dominance has been arguably the single most salient feature of the post–Cold War international system, and it has constituted the hard-power backbone of an ambitious American global strategy. After the Cold War, U.S. policymakers—starting with the George H.W. Bush administration—committed to averting a return to the unstable multipolarity that had plagued earlier eras, and to perpetuating the more stable and favorable unipolar order that the Soviet collapse had enabled. They committed to fostering an international environment in which liberal values and an open international economy could continue to advance and flourish, and in which international scourges such as rogue states, nuclear proliferation, and catastrophic terrorism would be prevented from spoiling such a favorable system. And because they recognized—some early post–Cold War euphoria notwithstanding—that military force remained the *ultima ratio regum*, they understood that doing so would require outright military preponderance.

The United States would need sufficient military power to back up worldwide alliance commitments that maintained stability and projected American influence overseas. It would have to preserve a substantial margin of overmatch versus any potential great power rival that otherwise might be tempted to challenge for regional or eventually global preeminence. It would require the capabilities needed to answer the sharpest challenges to the international system, such as Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 or transnational menaces such as piracy and jihadist extremism more recently. It would need the ability to continue providing critical public goods such as freedom of the seas. Finally, because prevailing global norms and rules are not self-reinforcing but are generally a function of hard power realities, the United States would need the superiority to ensure that its own values and ideas remained ascendant. It was perhaps impolitic to say that both U.S. strategy and the international order required that America possesses “strengths beyond challenge,” or “full-spectrum dominance,” but it was not at all inaccurate.⁹

⁷ U.S. shares of global military spending can be traced in the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s annual reports and military spending database, available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

⁸ Art Pine, “U.S. Faces Choice on Sending Ships to Taiwan,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1996.

⁹ The two previous paragraphs on post–Cold War grand strategy draw on Hal Brands, “The Not So Bad Superpower,” *The American Interest* 12, no. 3, January/February 2017, pp. 6–17; Peter Feaver, “American Grand Strategy at the Crossroads: Leading from the Front, Leading from Behind, or Not Leading at All,” in Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, *America’s Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, May 2012), pp. 59–70; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar*

Nor was it inaccurate to say that American primacy was eminently affordable, frequent complaints about its financial cost notwithstanding. At the height of the Cold War, the United States spent over 12 percent of GDP on defense. During the Reagan buildup in the 1980s, the number at times exceeded 6 percent. Yet since the mid-1990s, the number has never exceeded 4.7 percent and has usually been between 3 and 4 percent.¹⁰ In a historically favorable international environment, the United States could enjoy primacy—and its geopolitical fruits—on the cheap.

Yet American strategy also heeded, at least until recently, the fact that there was a limit to how cheaply that primacy could be had. The United States did not need Cold War-era levels of military spending after the Soviet collapse, and the American military did shrink significantly during the 1990s. But U.S. officials were aware that if Washington cut back too far, then its primacy would erode to a point where it ceased to deliver its geopolitical benefits—alliances would lose credibility, the stability of key regions would be imperiled, rivals and adversaries would be emboldened, sources of international disorder would go unaddressed. As the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, one of the founding documents of post-Cold War grand strategy and military policy, stated, the United States must not go “righting every wrong,” but it would “retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations.”¹¹

In these circumstances, American primacy was like a reasonably priced insurance policy. It required nontrivial—and often-lamented—expenditures, but it protected against unwelcome developments that would ultimately carry a far higher price.¹² The United States generally kept up its insurance premiums for two decades after the Cold War. But more recently American primacy, and the basic solvency of U.S. strategy, has been imperiled by a perfect storm of pernicious geopolitical and domestic developments.

Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); and Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance.”

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 393; and World Bank, “Military Expenditure (% of GDP),” available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US&page=3>.

¹¹ Draft of “Defense Planning Guidance, FY 1994–1999,” attachment in Dale A. Vesser, “FY 94–99 Defense Planning Guidance Sections for Comments,” Memorandum to Secretaries of the Military Departments et al., February 18, 1992, available at http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_full.pdf; and Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹² The “insurance” concept was frequently invoked by former Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, whose office had supervised the drafting of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, in the 1990s. See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 227; and Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: DoD, May 1997), available at <http://www.dod.gov/pubs/qdr/>.

The End of the Post–Cold War Era

One of the fundamental enablers of affordable American primacy has been the fact that, for most of the post–Cold War era, the international system was—by historical standards—remarkably benign. Dangers existed, of course, and as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 demonstrated, they could manifest with horrific effect. But for roughly two decades after the Soviet collapse, the world was characterized by remarkably low levels of great power competition and conflict, by historically high levels of security in key theaters such as Europe and East Asia, and by the comparative weakness of those “rogue” actors—Iran, Iraq, North Korea, al-Qaeda—that most aggressively challenged American power. During the 1990s, some observers even spoke of a “strategic pause,” the idea being that the end of the Cold War had afforded the United States a respite from normal levels of geopolitical danger and competition. Now, however, the strategic landscape is darkening, as four interrelated factors converge to stress American primacy and return the world to a more normal—which is to say more threatening—state.¹³

First, great power military competition is back.¹⁴ The world’s two leading authoritarian powers—China and Russia—are contesting key global norms such as nonaggression and freedom of navigation, seeking hegemony within their regions, and developing the military punch to underwrite these revisionist programs. Notwithstanding severe economic and demographic problems, Russia has conducted a major military modernization emphasizing nuclear weapons, high-end conventional capabilities, and rapid-deployment and special operations forces. Many of these capabilities are meant to restore Russian strength vis-à-vis the United States and its NATO allies, and many of them have been on display in recent conflicts in Ukraine and Syria.¹⁵ China, meanwhile, has been undertaking a buildup of historic proportions, with its constant-dollar defense outlays rising more than eightfold, from \$26 billion in 1995 to \$215 billion in 2015.¹⁶ Ominously, these expenditures have been geared primarily toward developing the power projection and A2/AD tools necessary to simultaneously threaten China’s neighbors and complicate U.S. intervention on their behalf. Washington has grown accustomed to having a generational lead over any military challenger; Russian and Chinese modernization are cutting into that lead and creating a more competitive global military environment.

Second, the international outlaws are no longer so weak. North Korea’s conventional forces have atrophied over the past 20 years, but Pyongyang has nonetheless amassed a robust and survivable nuclear arsenal, and it is steadily advancing toward the long-range delivery vehicles—medium-range and intercontinental ballistic missiles—needed to threaten not just America’s Asian allies but also

¹³ The idea that globalization was making great power war obsolete was explored by Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999). On the recent deterioration of the global strategic environment more broadly, see Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “Stress Testing American Grand Strategy,” *Survival* 58, no. 6, November–December 2016, pp. 93–120.

¹⁴ For a good overview, see Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3, May/June 2014, pp. 69–79.

¹⁵ On Russian modernization, see, among many others, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2015* (London: IISS, 2015), pp. 159–167; Catrin Einhorn, Hannah Fairfield, and Tim Wallace, “Russia Rearms for a New Era,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2015; and Eric S. Edelman and Whitney Morgan McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

¹⁶ See the previous SIPRI database reference and Evan Braden Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Front Line: U.S. Defense Strategy and the Rise of China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

eventually the United States itself.¹⁷ Iran has now been legitimized as a nuclear-threshold state, one that also continues to develop a growing ballistic missile force and A2/AD capabilities such as anti-ship cruise missiles, as it simultaneously intensifies the use of sectarian and proxy forces across the Middle East.¹⁸ As Iran emerges from nuclear-related international sanctions, its ability to pursue additional military capabilities will only be strengthened. For its part, the Islamic State is likely now on the road to defeat, but it has displayed military capabilities far superior to that of any previous terrorist group and served notice that counterterrorism will continue to place significant operational demands on U.S. forces for the foreseeable future. “We’ll be in a perpetual state of suppression for a long time,” Director of National Intelligence James Clapper often warned.¹⁹ Rogue actors have long been a preoccupation of American defense strategy, of course, but recently the rogues have become more empowered, more militarily capable, and more threatening than at any time since Saddam Hussein’s defeat in 1991.

Third, and related to the first two trends, the democratization of technology has produced more actors that are more capable of contesting American superiority in more dangerous ways. In particular, the spread of information-age technology has lowered the barriers to entry for precisely those high-end capabilities that have underpinned the qualitative dimension of U.S. military superiority. The spread of anti-satellite and cyber warfare capabilities; the proliferation of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and ballistic missiles to state and non-state actors alike; the increasing global availability of key elements of the precision-strike complex; and the acquisition or development of unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned underwater vehicles by a range of countries hostile to the United States—all of these phenomena have had a military leveling effect by providing weaker actors with access to capabilities that were formerly the province of technologically advanced states.

These trends have thereby complicated U.S. dominance and prospective operations in a variety of contexts, from counterterrorism missions to great power competition, and in a variety of domains, from ground and air to space and cyberspace. As advanced technologies “proliferate worldwide,” Air Force Chief of Staff, General David Goldfein, has commented, “the technology and capability gaps between America and our adversaries are closing dangerously fast.”²⁰ Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel put it similarly in 2014: “We are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and in space—not to mention cyberspace—can no longer be taken for granted.”²¹ Indeed, as such advanced capabilities spread, fourth-generation systems (such as F-15s or F-16s) may provide

¹⁷ See, for instance, Barbara Staff and Ryan Browne, “Intel Officials: North Korea ‘Probably’ Has Miniaturized Nuke,” *CNN*, March 25, 2016; David Albright, “Future Directions in the DPRK’s Nuclear Weapons Program: Three Scenarios for 2020,” U.S.–Korea Institute, November 2015; and John Schilling and Henry Kan, “The Future of North Korean Nuclear Delivery Systems,” U.S.–Korea Institute, April 2015.

¹⁸ See Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, and Ray Takeyh, “Time to Get Tough on Tehran: Iran Policy after the Deal,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1, January/February 2016, pp. 64–75; and Mark Gunzinger and Christopher Dougherty, *Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2012).

¹⁹ David Ignatius, “The U.S. Can’t Fix It: James Clapper on America’s Role in the Middle East,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2016. On the military demands of counterterrorism even after ISIS is defeated, see Peter Feaver and Hal Brands, “Trump and Terror: U.S. Strategy after ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2, March/April 2017, pp. 28–36.

²⁰ Statement of General David L. Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, to the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 15, 2016, available at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Goldfein_09-15-16.pdf; and Thomas Mahnken, “Weapons: The Growth and Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 45–57.

²¹ Chuck Hagel, “Defense Innovation Days,” Keynote Address, Newport, RI, September 3, 2014.

decreasing utility against even non-great power competitors, and far more fifth-generation capabilities may be needed to perpetuate American overmatch.

Fourth and finally, the United States now confronts a greater multiplicity of military challenges than at any time since the Cold War. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Washington faced aggressive rogue states, appalling humanitarian crises, and globally capable terrorist groups—but not intense great power military rivalry at both ends of Eurasia. The United States was saddled with significant operational demands in the Middle East and the prospect of war on the Korean Peninsula—but the rest of East Asia and Europe were comparatively secure. Now, all the old threats still exist—but many of the more permissive conditions have vanished. The United States confronts the dangers posed by rogue states, lethal jihadist organizations, state failure in the Middle East, and great power military competition all at the same time; there are severe security challenges in all three key strategic theaters in Eurasia. “I don’t recall a time when we have been confronted with a more diverse array of threats, whether it’s the nation-state threats posed by Russia and China and particularly their substantial nuclear capabilities, or non-nation states of the likes of ISIL, Al Qaida, etc.,” Clapper commented in early 2016; trends in the strategic landscape constituted a veritable “litany of doom.”²²

As Clapper noted, the international security environment has thus become simultaneously more threatening and more complex. The United States faces not just more severe, but also more numerous, challenges to its military dominance and geopolitical interests than it has for a quarter-century.

Disinvesting in Defense

One might expect the leading power of a historically favorable international system to respond to an increasingly menacing security environment by upping its own, relatively modest investments in maintaining that system. Over the past several years, however, the United States has done the opposite, undertaking a marked disinvestment in defense. In constant dollars, defense spending fell from \$768 billion in 2010 to \$595 billion in 2015, a decline of nearly one-fourth, and President Obama’s final budget request was for only \$583 billion.²³ As defense analyst Katherine Blakely has written, the rate of this drawdown “has been faster than any other post-war drawdown since the Korean War at a compound annual growth rate of -5.5 percent.”²⁴ Defense spending as a share of GDP fell from 4.7 percent to 3.3 percent over the same period, with the Congressional Budget Office projecting that, on their current trajectory, military outlays would fall to 3.0 percent by 2017, and 2.6 percent by 2024—the lowest level since prior to World War II.²⁵

²² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “DNI Clapper Provides Series of Threat Assessments on Capitol Hill,” press release, February 29, 2016, available at <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/featured-articles/223-featured-articles-2016/1334-dni-clapper-provides-series-of-threat-assessments-on-capitol-hill>.

²³ See the previously referenced SIPRI database and Richard Sisk, “Obama’s Last Defense Budget Adds Funds for Europe, Counterterrorism,” *Military.com*, February 9, 2016.

²⁴ Katherine Blakely, *Analysis of the FY 2017 Defense Budget and Trends in Defense Spending* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), p. iv.

²⁵ World Bank, “Military Expenditure (% of GDP)”; Loren Thompson, “Pentagon Budget Headed below 3% of GDP as Warfighting Edge Wanes,” *Forbes*, February 2, 2015; and David Ochmanek et al., *America’s Security Deficit: Addressing the Imbalance between Strategy and Resources in a Turbulent World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

In some ways, this trend is unsurprising. American defense spending *always* declines after major wars, particularly frustrating wars like those fought in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11.²⁶ Yet from 2010 onward, this pressure was compounded by several others: the legacy of Bush-era budget deficits; the impact of the Great Recession, which depressed tax revenues while driving up federal spending on non-defense items; and President Obama's decision to transfer resources from national security to domestic priorities such as health care reform and other domestic discretionary spending.

These forces, in turn, were exacerbated by the terms of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the subsequent sequester mechanism that was activated when partisan gridlock prevented agreement on a long-term deficit-reduction plan. The spending cuts that were initiated by the BCA and then deepened by the sequester fell disproportionately on defense, which absorbed roughly 50 percent of the reductions despite accounting for less than 20 percent of the federal budget. In addressing defense cuts in 2012, President Obama invoked Dwight Eisenhower in stressing "the need to maintain balance in and among national programs." The irony, however, is that the resulting cuts were decidedly unbalanced, as the U.S. government pursued marginal deficit reduction via an excessive focus on defense.²⁷ By walling off most personnel costs from required reductions, and by severely limiting flexibility in how cuts could be made and allocated across programs, moreover, the sequester ensured that DOD reductions were too frequently made in blunt rather than strategic fashion.²⁸

The results of this budgetary buzzsaw have been concrete and severe. Readiness has suffered alarmingly, with all the services facing significant challenges in conducting current counterterrorism operations while also preparing for the ever-growing danger of great power war. As the House Armed Services Committee noted in 2016, "The services are very good at counterinsurgency, but they are not prepared to endure a long fight against higher order threats from near-peer competitors."²⁹ The Army Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley, has put it more bluntly, stating that only one-third of the regular Army's brigade combat teams are ready for high-end combat, and warning that unready forces could result in a "butcher's bill paid in blood." In short, the United States is facing the prospect of a "hollow force" much like the U.S. military after Vietnam.³⁰

Critical investments in modernization have also been compromised. Purchases of currently planned capabilities have been reduced or deferred across the services; the ability to develop and field promising future capabilities that are now being explored through seed investments is sharply

²⁶ The pattern is chronicled in Melvyn Leffler, "Defense on a Diet: How Budget Crises Have Improved U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 6, November/December 2013, pp. 65–76.

²⁷ "President Obama Unveils Smaller Military," *Public Radio International*, January 5, 2012.

²⁸ On the sequester and its impact, see Robert Zarate, "Obama's FY2014 Defense Budget & the Sequestration Standoff," *FPI Analysis*, Foreign Policy Initiative, April 11, 2013, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/fpi-analysis-obama%E2%80%99s-fy2014-defense-budget-sequestration-standoff>; Todd Harrison, *Analysis of the FY 2013 Defense Budget and Sequestration* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, August 2012); and Jennifer Strong, "Shrinking of Military Unprecedented, Says Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense Christine Fox," *Public Radio International*, May 23, 2014.

²⁹ Quoted in Dave Majumdar, "The Pentagon's Readiness Crisis: Why the 2017 Defense Bill Will Make Things Worse," *The National Interest*, July 13, 2016.

³⁰ Travis Tritten, "Service Chiefs Paint Bleak Picture ahead of Defense Budget," *Stars and Stripes*, September 15, 2016; and General Mark Milley, Chief of Staff United States Army, Statement to Senate Armed Services Committee, September 15, 2016, available at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Milley_09-15-16.pdf.

constrained by BCA-related budget limits, as well as by general budgetary uncertainty. “We have . . . curtailed our modernization in a number of areas critical to staying ahead of our potential adversaries,” Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson testified to Congress in 2016.³¹ Similarly, senior Pentagon officials have recently confirmed that the Third Offset Strategy—designed to produce capabilities and operational concepts that can counter rising great power military challenges—cannot fully materialize at current levels of funding. “We’ll do the demo, we’ll be very happy with the results, [but] we won’t have the money to go on,” Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall remarked in 2016.³² In fact, the worst of this problem has yet to manifest. In the 2020s, the military will be hit with a massive “bow wave” of deferred—and, based on current trends, unaffordable—investments needed to recapitalize its nuclear triad as well as high-end conventional capabilities.³³

Finally, force structure has had to be sacrificed. The Army has fared the worst—under President Obama’s final budget, it was slated to decline to 450,000 personnel by 2018, or more than 30,000 personnel fewer than it possessed prior to 9/11.³⁴ But the pain has been widely felt. The Air Force “operates the smallest and oldest force in its history,” notes one recent assessment, and all of the services are at or near post–World War II lows in terms of force structure.³⁵ One relevant point of comparison across the services is that the U.S. military is now significantly smaller than the 1990s-era “Base Force,” which was designed as “a minimum force that constituted a floor below which the nation should not go if it was to remain a globally engaged superpower,” at a time when the international environment is far more dangerous, and global military competition far more severe, than it was 20 years prior.³⁶

To be sure, inadequate funding is not the only source of the stresses on the U.S. military today. The punishing operational tempo that has characterized much of the past 15 years would have posed severe challenges for readiness in any budgetary environment. Modernization is threatened by soaring personnel expenditures. Administrative waste and bloat represent another problem, one that several recent secretaries of defense have tried to tackle, with varying degrees of success.

But “strategy wears a dollar sign,” as Bernard Brodie famously wrote; defense capabilities are ultimately a function of the resources available to develop, procure, and maintain them.³⁷ And today

³¹ Cheryl Pellerin, “Service Chiefs: Budget Uncertainty, Funding Levels Are Biggest Challenges,” *DoD News*, September 15, 2016.

³² See Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Pentagon Can’t Afford to Field 3rd Offset Tech Under BCA: Frank Kendall,” *Breaking Defense*, October 31, 2016.

³³ On the cost of nuclear modernization, see Todd Harrison and Evan Montgomery, *The Cost of U.S. Nuclear Forces: From BCA to Bow Wave and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, August 2015).

³⁴ See Jim Tice, “Army Shrinks to Smallest Level since before World War II,” *Army Times*, May 7, 2016; and Tony Capaccio and Gopal Ratnam, “Hagel Seeks Smallest U.S. Army since before 2001 Attack,” *Bloomberg*, February 24, 2014.

³⁵ Mark Gunzinger, Jacob Cohn, Ryan Boone, and Timothy Walton, “Strategic Choices for Future Competitions,” in Jacob Cohn, Ryan Boone, and Thomas Mahnken, eds., *How Much Is Enough? Alternative Defense Strategies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), p. 17.

³⁶ Mark Gunzinger, *Shaping America’s Future Military: Toward a New Force Planning Construct* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013), p. 3.

³⁷ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959), p. 358.

the United States is paying for less capability relative to the threats it, and the international order, face than at any time in decades. U.S. strategy thus faces two ultimately irreconcilable trends—increasing dangers, on the one hand, and declining capabilities, on the other. A rough world rarely lets such contradictions go unpunished for long.

The Creeping Crisis of U.S. Military Primacy

The cumulative result of these trends has been to create a creeping and unprecedented crisis of America’s post–Cold War military primacy. To be clear, at a global level the United States still possesses vastly more military power than any single challenger, particularly in the crucial power-projection assets—from aircraft carriers and fifth-generation tactical aircraft to defense satellites and aerial refueling tankers—that constitute the basis of America’s global reach.³⁸ Yet even that global primacy is not what it once was.

The United States now faces a Russia that once again possesses significant extra-regional power-projection capabilities as well as peer or near-peer capabilities in areas such as strategic nuclear forces and offensive cyber. Moscow has not confined its competition with the United States to Europe; it has conducted significant military operations in the Middle East, while also seeking to revive (albeit in lesser form) the broader Soviet-era pattern of global power projection. The United States also faces a China whose military budget is now more than one-third of the U.S. budget and climbing rapidly, and which is increasingly developing advanced power-projection capabilities of its own.³⁹ China is now competing geopolitically with the United States not just in Asia but beyond; the prospect for more serious military rivalry in the Indian Ocean, the Horn of Africa, and perhaps other areas cannot be ruled out in the coming years. And perhaps more importantly, American global primacy is not only being challenged; it is also becoming increasingly irrelevant. During the post-Cold War era, it was America’s ability to deploy unmatched military power not just globally, but also within any given region, that gave U.S. primacy its geopolitical bite. Today, American military power is losing that bite. For the most intense geopolitical competitions are primarily regional rather than truly global in scope, and here the trends have been running hard and fast against the United States.

In East Asia, China’s two-decade military buildup has combined with the inherent advantages of geography to bring Beijing to a point where it can seriously contest American power projection within the first island chain. “The balance of power between the United States and China may be approaching a series of tipping points,” RAND Corporation analysts have written, as the region witnesses “a progressively receding frontier of U.S. dominance.”⁴⁰ The situation in Eastern Europe is, if anything, far worse. Here, the combination of unfavorable geography and aggressive Russian modernization has created a high degree of Russian overmatch in the Baltic and elsewhere along NATO’s exposed eastern

³⁸ See Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century,” *International Security* 40, no. 3, Winter 2015/2016, pp. 7–53; and Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won’t Overtake the United States,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3, May/June 2016, especially pp. 91–92.

³⁹ On the Chinese military budget, see the SIPRI database.

⁴⁰ Eric Heginbotham et al., *The US–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. 342, xxxi; and Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,” *International Security* 38, no. 4, Spring 2014, pp. 115–149.

flank. As both Army officials and independent analysts have observed, U.S. and NATO forces are “outnumbered and outgunned” in this crucial area.⁴¹ Recent moves to strengthen U.S. and NATO posture are welcome and necessary, but they have contributed only marginally to redressing this situation. In the Middle East, the military balance remains more favorable—U.S. capabilities are vastly superior to those of Iran or any other hostile actor. But here, too, the development of Iranian A2/AD and ballistic missile capabilities are likely to complicate U.S. operations in any conflict, while the reemergence of Russian military power in the region has already narrowed U.S. freedom of action in regional crises.⁴² The world has changed since the 1990s; in key areas across Eurasia, the U.S. military edge has eroded.

That erosion, in turn, is having profound implications for American defense strategy and for U.S. global strategy more broadly. For one thing, it is ensuring that U.S. forces will face far harder fights should conflict occur. War against an Iran or a North Korea would be daunting enough, given these countries’ successes in developing asymmetrical and/or nuclear capabilities. Even Iran, for instance, could use its ballistic missile capabilities to attack U.S. bases and allies, employ swarming tactics and precision-guided munitions against U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf, and activate Shiite militias and proxy forces, all as a way of inflicting higher costs on the United States. “Such an approach may not, in itself, be a war-winning strategy for Iran,” two analysts write, but it could somewhat level the playing field and make the outcome of a conflict in the Gulf less certain.⁴³ Conflict against Russia or China would be something else entirely. Fighting a near-peer competitor armed with high-end conventional weapons and precision-strike capabilities would subject American forces to an environment of enormous lethality, “the likes of which,” General Milley has commented, “the United States Army, the United States *military*, has not experienced . . . since World War II.”⁴⁴ Similarly, another detailed analysis has noted that:

A modern-day “major combat operation” along the lines of those upon which Pentagon planners base their requirements would feature a major opponent possessing modern integrated air defenses; naval power (surface and subsurface); advanced combat aircraft (to include bombers); a substantial inventory of short-range, medium-range, and long-range missiles; current-generation ground forces (tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, rockets, and anti-armor weaponry); cruise missiles; and (in some cases) nuclear weapons. Such a situation involving an actor capable of threatening vital national interests would present a challenge that is comprehensively different from the challenges that the U.S. Joint Force has faced in past decades.⁴⁵

⁴¹ David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO,” *War on the Rocks*, April 21, 2016; and David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, January 2016).

⁴² Gunzinger and Dougherty, *Outside-In*; Anna Borshchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan, “How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East,” *Policy Watch 2709*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2016.

⁴³ Gunzinger and Dougherty, *Outside-In*, pp. 21–52, quote on pp. 21–22. See also Eric Edelman and Whitney McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat: A Defense Strategy for a Troubled Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Army \$40B Short on Modernization Vs. Russia, China: CSA Milley,” *Breaking Defense*, October 3, 2016.

⁴⁵ Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2016), p. 224.

Indeed, operating within the integrated air defenses of a great power challenger, the United States might be unable to achieve or sustain the air superiority without which it has not fought in decades; it might face other severe operational disadvantages as well. American forces could thus suffer losses at a far higher pace than in any conflict in recent memory. U.S. forces might still win such a fight—albeit on a longer timeline, and at a cost in lives that would seem enormous by post–Cold War comparisons—but then again, they might not.

The best open-source analysis indicates, for instance, that U.S. and NATO forces would have little chance of halting a determined Russian assault on the Baltic states. Facing severe disadvantages in crucial capabilities such as tanks, ground-based fires, and airpower and air defenses, those forces would simply be swept aside or destroyed in place within two to three days. Washington and its allies would then be confronted with an agonizing dilemma—whether to mobilize NATO’s full resources for a protracted war that would necessarily involve conventional strikes on Russian territory and thereby run the risk of nuclear escalation, or acquiesce in a *fait accompli* that might well destroy the alliance by fatally discrediting its Article 5 commitment.⁴⁶

Similarly, recent assessments indicate that, whereas the United States would have dominated virtually any plausible conflict with China in the 1990s or even a decade ago, achieving a positive outcome in the most likely conflicts today would be highly challenging—and will become even more difficult in the future. Consider a conflict over Taiwan. China might not be able to defeat the United States in a long war in which both countries fully mobilized and committed their national resources. But it could establish air and maritime superiority early in a conflict with Washington and thereby impose unacceptable losses on U.S. air and naval forces. As one comprehensive analysis concludes, China “is not close to catching up to the U.S. military in terms of aggregate capabilities, but it does not need to catch up to the United States to dominate its immediate periphery.” The crucial “tipping point” in a Taiwan contingency could come as early as 2020 or even 2017; in a contingency involving the Spratly Islands or other areas within the first island chain, it could come within as little as another decade.⁴⁷ “Looking forward,” Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson has warned, “I remain deeply concerned about the gap between what the American people expect of their Navy now and for the foreseeable future, and the available resources to deliver on those expectations.”⁴⁸ As American superiority erodes, in other words, the United States runs a higher risk that it might simply be unable to make good on its military commitments; its global strategy is increasingly likely to be exposed as bluff.

It is certainly becoming doubtful that the United States can execute its global defense strategy as outlined in published official documents. For nearly 20 years after the Cold War, the United States adhered to a two “major regional contingency” (MRC) standard, geared toward maintaining stability in

⁴⁶ Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank*; and Edelman and McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free*.

⁴⁷ Heginbotham et al., *U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, pp. xxx, 338, 342; Jim Thomas, “U.S. Asia-Pacific Strategic Considerations Related to PLA Naval Forces Modernization,” Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, December 11, 2013.

⁴⁸ Admiral John Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations, Statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 15, 2016, available at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richardson_09-15-16.pdf.

multiple regions by ensuring that an adversary in one region could not undertake opportunistic aggression meant to exploit U.S. preoccupation in another. As the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review put it, “Such a capability is the sine qua non of a superpower and is essential to the credibility of our overall national security strategy.”⁴⁹ By the time of President Obama’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, however, budget cuts had already forced the administration to change the “2MRC” construct to a “1.5 or 1.7” war standard, premised on decisively defeating one opponent while simultaneously “imposing unacceptable costs”—presumably primarily through air power and perhaps sea power—on another.⁵⁰ Yet now the U.S. capacity to execute even this less ambitious strategy is under strain, just as the international environment is raising questions about whether the goals of the strategy are actually ambitious enough.⁵¹

This is because the Obama administration’s revision of U.S. defense strategy was announced prior to sequestration, which further injured U.S. capabilities and readiness. It was announced prior to Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, which shattered the notion of a stable Europe and raised the disturbing possibility that one of America’s wars might be against a nuclear-armed, revanchist Russia rather than a weaker rogue state. And beyond these issues, events in Europe and the Middle East since 2011–12 have raised the question of whether a 1.7 war standard or even a two-war standard are even sufficient anymore, given that the United States could conceivably face a situation in which it confronts two major regional wars in Eastern Europe and East Asia, along with significant counterterrorism operations or an Iran-focused contingency in the Middle East. Long-time defense analyst Thomas Donnelly has argued that “anything less than a military with a ‘three-theater’ capacity and capability . . . falls short of the challenges of our time.”⁵² Similarly, as the National Defense Panel noted in 2014: “In the current threat environment the United States could plausibly be called upon to deter or fight in several regions in overlapping timeframes: on the Korean peninsula, in the East or South China Sea, in the Middle East, South Asia and quite possibly in Europe. . . . Additionally, the spread of al Qaeda and its spin-offs to new areas in Africa and the Middle East means that the U.S. military must be able to sustain global counterterrorism operations and defend the American homeland even when engaged in regional conflict overseas.”⁵³ The two MRC standard and its various derivations emerged at a time when U.S. opponents were comparatively weak and the number of conceivable contingencies was quite limited; neither of those conditions holds up as well today.

⁴⁹ Section 3, “Defense Strategy,” in DoD, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, available at <http://www.dod.gov/pubs/qdr/sec3.html>.

⁵⁰ DoD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2012), p. 4; and Michael O’Hanlon, “Sizing U.S. Ground Forces: From ‘2 Wars’ to ‘1 War + 2 Missions,’” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1, Spring 2014, especially pp. 151–153.

⁵¹ On the deficiencies of anything less than a two MRC standard, see Daniel Goure, *The Measure of a Superpower: A Two Major Regional Contingency Military for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2013).

⁵² Thomas Donnelly, “Great Powers Don’t Pivot,” in Cohn, Boone, and Mahnken, eds., *How Much Is Enough?* p. 7.

⁵³ National Defense Panel (NDP), *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future: The National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), p. 23, available at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Ensuring-a-Strong-U.S.-Defense-for-the-Future-NDP-Review-of-the-QDR_0.pdf; and Andrew Krepinevich, *Preserving the Balance: A U.S. Eurasian Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

In sum, the United States is rapidly reaching, if it has not already reached, the point of strategic insolvency—the point at which its capabilities become clearly insufficient to uphold its global commitment and strategy. And even beyond the dangerous risks noted previously, this situation is likely to pose fundamental challenges for American statecraft.

The cohesion of U.S. alliances will suffer, for instance, as American allies lose confidence that the United States can truly protect them in a crisis. We have gotten a taste of this already; Rodrigo Duterte's recent distancing of the Philippines from Washington has apparently been rooted, at least partially, in his lack of confidence regarding the U.S. security commitment. As he commented in announcing his "separation" from Washington in October 2016, "America has lost" the competition for influence in the region, and it has become necessary for the Philippines to align more closely with China and Russia as a result.⁵⁴ Adversaries, in turn, will become more likely to probe and challenge U.S. commitments, in order to gauge Washington's willingness to make good on increasingly tenuous promises, and in the knowledge that the U.S. ability to respond decisively is in decline. "The ability to contest dominance might lead Chinese leaders to believe they could deter U.S. intervention in a conflict between it and one or more of its neighbors," several military analysts have written, undermining deterrence and making the use of force seem more attractive.⁵⁵ Nor are these dynamics purely hypothetical—one need look no further than Russian intimidation of the Baltic states and other NATO members, Iranian expansionism in the Middle East, or increasingly aggressive Chinese coercion of the Philippines and Japan in recent years, to see them in action. The military balance profoundly shapes a potential aggressor's propensity for risk-taking; in Europe and East Asia, that propensity appears to be on the rise.

Finally, as U.S. military power becomes relatively less imposing, the United States is likely to find that the diplomatic and global influence that power provides will become less impressive as well. Washington will, as a general rule, encounter greater difficulties in getting its way on crucial issues of international order. Norms and ideas that the United States supports will lose strength, and increasingly be challenged by actors who become less fearful of the consequences of testing the existing global system. More and more, the United States will thus confront what one pundit has called a "broken-windows world," as longstanding rules become more difficult to enforce.⁵⁶ Both U.S. grand strategy and the stability of the post-Cold War system have been premised on Washington possessing a historically remarkable degree of military overmatch; as that overmatch fades, American grand strategy and the order it supports will undoubtedly come under greater strain.

⁵⁴ Ben Blanchard, "Duterte Aligns Philippines with China, says U.S. has Lost," *Reuters*, October 20, 2016.

⁵⁵ Heginbotham et al., *U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, p. xxxi.

⁵⁶ See Bret Stephens, "Yes, America Should Be the World's Policeman," *Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2014. The reference to "broken windows" is derived from groundbreaking work in criminology that suggests violation of norms in communities promotes greater likelihood of disorder spreading and making law enforcement more challenging and difficult. See George L. Kelling and Catherine M. Coles, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

The False Promise of Retrenchment

So how should the United States address its problem of strategic insolvency? One option is reducing commitments. If the United States cannot sustain its existing defense strategy and its existing approach to global affairs at a level of resources it is willing to expend, then it could pare back its global obligations until those that remain are more commensurate with available capabilities.

What might this look like in practice? The United States might, for instance, embrace a sort of Nixon Doctrine for the twenty-first century, by making clear that although it will protect its partners and quasi-allies in the Middle East from conventional, state-based aggression by malign actors such as Iran, it will provide only indirect assistance—arms sales, intelligence sharing, and other such aid—to defend them from internal or nontraditional threats such as the Islamic State.⁵⁷ Or, it could simply delegate Persian Gulf security more broadly to its Arab allies in the region—making them responsible for meeting both conventional and nontraditional threats—on the grounds that they already significantly outspend Iran on defense and could presumably prevent Tehran from imposing its will on the region if they were properly organized and motivated. This would, in effect, be a reversion to America's pre-1979 posture in the Middle East, when it maintained only a skeletal military presence there and relied on key regional powers—in that case, the “twin pillars” of Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran—to maintain security.

Most dramatically of all, if the United States were really serious about closing the ends-means gap from the ends side, it could dispense with some of the commitments that it is likely to find most costly and difficult to uphold in the coming years. Doing so would require going beyond the perpetually troublesome Middle East. It would, perhaps, entail liquidating security guarantees—whether explicit or ambiguous—to militarily exposed countries in East Asia and Eastern Europe such as Taiwan and the Baltic states, while still perhaps helping them defend themselves through continued arms sales.⁵⁸ In short, the United States would respond to overstretch through geopolitical retrenchment.

The logic of retrenchment is straightforward. There are significant political challenges involved in finding more resources for defense over the long run, because popular non-defense programs such as Social Security and Medicaid are consuming ever-larger portions of the federal budget, and because tax increases pose political problems of their own. (Democrats have traditionally been unwilling to countenance entitlement cuts, as has President Trump more recently; Republicans have blanched at tax increases.)⁵⁹ Accordingly, the United States should make a virtue of necessity—and take the path of least political resistance—by reducing or liquidating commitments while it can do so of its own volition, rather than having the hollowness of its pledges exposed by crisis or war. Doing so, proponents claim,

⁵⁷ The Nixon Doctrine, issued by the president in 1969, stated that although the United States would keep its existing treaty commitments in Asia and defend its allies against aggression by a nuclear power (e.g., the Soviet Union or China), it would provide only military and economic assistance to allies and partners facing other types of threats, namely insurgencies. For the Nixon Doctrine, see Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy in Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵⁸ The idea of cutting Taiwan loose has occasionally been floated in recent years. For an analysis of those proposals, see Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, “Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 23–37.

⁵⁹ On U.S. fiscal challenges, see Congressional Budget Office (CBO), *Updated Budget Projections: 2016 to 2026* (Washington, DC: CBO, 2016).

would not simply reduce American burdens; it might make for a more organic and stable international order. Ideally, American allies—or erstwhile allies—would be incentivized to pick up the slack left by Washington’s withdrawal from its most exposed military positions; in the near term, relations with rivals such as Russia and China might also improve as the United States showed greater deference to those powers in their own regional backyards.⁶⁰

Leaving aside the merits of these claims for a moment, it is worth noting that there are historical precedents for great powers effectively narrowing the capabilities-commitments gap through selective retrenchment. The implementation of the Nixon Doctrine and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam helped Washington liquidate unsustainable commitments and retreat to a more defensible strategic perimeter in the 1970s, following significant strategic overstretch in the decade prior. More significantly, over a period of decades beginning in the late nineteenth century, the United Kingdom gradually, and more-or-less successfully, relinquished obligations it could no longer meet. It did so, first, by deferring to rising regional powers such as the United States and Japan, and increasingly relying on them to maintain acceptable orders in their respective spheres of influence, and second, by ultimately encouraging Washington to take up many of London’s global burdens after World War II. Graceful retrenchment, then, has not historically been an impossibility.⁶¹

It is, however, extremely problematic in the current context. First, although this option would have the benefit of reducing U.S. defense burdens, it is simply illusory to think that it would restore American fiscal solvency. As the CBO and other observers have noted, defense spending is not the primacy driver of U.S. deficits; mandatory entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are.⁶² “The growth in elderly entitlement spending keeps deficits unsustainably large in the long run,” one Congressional Research Service report concludes.⁶³ Even if the United States were to undertake far more drastic geopolitical retrenchment—with corresponding military cuts—than that considered here, there is no escaping America’s long-term deficit and debt problems without either tax increases or cuts to entitlement programs (or both). Retrenchment would not, therefore, allow the United States to avoid politically difficult decisions about taxes and spending; at best, it would defer those decisions another few years down the road.

Second, whatever the theoretical attractions of retrenchment, this approach—particularly the more aggressive variants that could be needed to truly close the ends-means gap—would be enormously difficult to implement in practice. For one thing, core U.S. alliances—those in Europe and the Asia-

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Christopher Layne, “Offshore Balancing Revisited,” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 2, Spring 2002, especially pp. 245–246; Joshua Shiffrin and Sameer Lalwani, “It’s a Common Misunderstanding: The Limited Threat to American Command of the Commons,” in Christopher Preble and John Mueller, eds., *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2014), especially p. 241; and Christopher Layne, “Sleepwalking with Beijing,” *The National Interest* 137, May/June 2015, pp. 37–45. The arguments in favor of retrenchment are summarized in Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The False Logic of Offshore Balancing,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2, Summer 2015, pp. 7–28.

⁶¹ See Andrew Krepinevich, Simon Chin, and Todd Harrison, *Strategy in Austerity* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2012); John Gooch, “The Weary Titan: Strategy and Policy in Great Britain, 1890–1918,” in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 278–306; and Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35, no. 4, Spring 2011, pp. 7–44.

⁶² CBO, *Updated Budget Projections*, especially p. 2.

⁶³ Marc Labonte, *Reducing the Budget Deficit: Policy Issues*, R41778 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 15, 2012), p. 15, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41778.pdf>.

Pacific—are backed by treaties that carry the force of law. Simply as a procedural matter, abrogating any existing treaties—or in the case of Taiwan, amending the Taiwan Relations Act to enable a withdrawal of the ambiguous U.S. security commitment—would probably be a difficult and disruptive matter.

The policy implications of any such shift would be even more disruptive. The U.S. commitment to the Baltic states does not stand alone but is part of a larger American commitment to NATO; shredding the former commitment risks undermining the cohesion of the broader alliance, as well. If the United States were no longer willing to defend Estonia when it became too inconvenient, how much confidence could Poland have about its own future in the alliance? Even in Asia, where the United States has bilateral alliances rather than a single, multilateral alliance, announcing that Washington was no longer willing to defend Taipei could well cause leaders in Manila, Seoul, or Tokyo to wonder if they might be the next to be abandoned. It could thereby lead them to hedge their strategic bets accordingly, by pursuing closer ties with China or otherwise distancing themselves from Washington. Alliances rise or fall on the credibility of the patron's promises; it is therefore difficult to revoke some guarantees without casting doubt on others.⁶⁴

This touches on a third liability, which is that this approach seems far more likely to generate geopolitical instability than stability. Retrenchment has historically worked best when there is some friendly power to which the overstretched hegemon can hand off its excessive responsibilities—in other words, when any geopolitical slack can promptly get picked up in a constructive manner. But this is precisely why the analogy between the United States today and the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is fatally flawed. Today, there is no liberal great power waiting in the wings, as Washington was for London. Rather, most of the countries that most share the traditional U.S. view of the international order—Japan, the United Kingdom, the major European allies—confront far graver long-term economic and demographic challenges than the United States. Others, such as India or perhaps Brazil, simply will not be in a position to play this role for decades, if even then.⁶⁵ Rather, those countries that are best positioned to pick up any geopolitical slack following U.S. retrenchment—Russia and China—have conceptions of international order very different from the one Washington has traditionally pursued.

In these circumstances, it is hardly guaranteed, as a structural realist approach might predict, that U.S. retrenchment would lead to more organic stability by simply forcing friendly local actors to do more to defend themselves and check aggressive revisionist powers. Rather, the outcome might just as plausibly be under-balancing—in which collective action problems, internal political divisions, or resource limitations prevent timely action against a potential aggressor—or bandwagoning, in which

⁶⁴ In contrast to older research, more recent scholarly work has demonstrated the importance of credibility and reputation in international affairs, in keeping with the experience of most practitioners. See Keren Yarhi-Milo and Alexander Weisiger, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2, March 2015, pp. 473–495; and Kathryn McNabb Cochran, "Strong Horse or Paper Tiger? The Reputational Effects of War Outcomes," Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 2009.

⁶⁵ See Sumit Ganguly, "Think Again: India's Rise," *Foreign Policy*, July 5, 2012; Hal Brands, *Dilemmas of Brazilian Grand Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2010); and Joseph Nye, *Is the American Century Over?* (London: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 23–45.

exposed countries buy a measure of safety by aligning with, rather than against, an aggressive power.⁶⁶ Indeed, one of the reasons that countries in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia have chosen to balance against potential aggressors since World War II is precisely that they believe the United States will provide a geopolitical backstop for such efforts—that it will not leave them all alone against a stronger, hostile power. Remove or weaken the backstop, and the will—and, particularly in Asia, the capability—to balance effectively may fade, as well.

Meanwhile, although writing off Taiwan or Estonia might produce a near-term improvement of relations with Beijing or Moscow, the longer-term effect would simply be to remove a chief constraint on the type of more aggressive behavior that both powers have increasingly been manifesting. Put more bluntly, if Moscow and Beijing seem eager to bring their respective near abroads to heel now, just wait until the U.S. security perimeters in Europe and East Asia are retracted somewhat. Rather than successfully appeasing regional challengers, American retrenchment might simply create conditions in which they could better intimidate and coerce their neighbors. In his classic work, *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin summed up these dangers of retrenchment nicely:

Retrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power, and thus retrenchment can have a deteriorating effect on relations with allies and rivals. Sensing the decline of their protector, allies try to obtain the best deal they can from the rising master of the system. Rivals are stimulated to ‘close in,’ and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process.⁶⁷

If the more aggressive variants of retrenchment are thus deeply flawed, even more limited versions—such as a Middle Eastern Nixon Doctrine—have their limits. As Iran’s military power continues to grow in the coming years—and removal of nuclear-related sanctions makes this seem likely—even the wealthy Persian Gulf kingdoms will find it increasingly difficult to deal with Tehran’s advanced and asymmetric capabilities without U.S. assistance. (This is true all the more because, without U.S. leadership, the collective action problems that have long plagued the Gulf countries are likely to worsen.) Moreover, it is worth remembering that the United States essentially tried to enact a version of this approach via its withdrawal from Iraq in late 2011. But it soon discovered that Iraq—a vital state in the middle of a region that is still of great importance to the United States—simply lacked the ability to withstand challenges from non-traditional foes such as the Islamic State on its own. (Baghdad also increasingly fell under Iranian influence with the U.S. counterweight removed.) Moreover, U.S. retrenchment actually encouraged political and military developments that left the Iraqi state more vulnerable to the collapse it experienced in 2014, such as the increasingly sectarian nature of Nuri al-

⁶⁶ Although these phenomena receive less scholarly attention than balancing, they are well established in the literature. See Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1, Summer 1994, pp. 72–107.

⁶⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 194; and Zachary Selden, “Balancing Against or Balancing With? The Spectrum of Alignment and the Endurance of American Hegemony,” *Security Studies* 22, no. 3, May 2013, especially pp. 331, 338–339; Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: America, China, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 254; and Hal Brands, *The Limits of Offshore Balancing* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), pp. 49–52.

Maliki's governance and the hollowing out of the Iraqi Security Forces.⁶⁸ Here as elsewhere, then, retrenchment may somewhat narrow the gap between U.S. capabilities and commitments in the short run, but only at the likely price of significantly heightened international dangers and instability—and a further erosion of the global order that U.S. strategy has been meant to defend.

Living with Risk

If the United States is unwilling to devote significantly greater resources to defense but does not wish to invite the geopolitical instability and dangers associated with retrenchment, then a second option for dealing with strategic overstretch is simply to live with a greater degree of risk. This is, in fact, the strategy toward which the United States has been sliding—albeit implicitly—in recent years, as its commitments have come out of alignment with the available capabilities.⁶⁹ It is also perhaps the default option for overstretched great powers that lack the will or the ability to make more difficult decisions associated with either increasing resources or rolling back obligations.

In today's environment, a strategy of living with greater risk could take at least two different—though not mutually exclusive—forms. First, the United States could accept a higher level of risk with respect to its myriad global commitments, by wagering that even the most exposed commitments are unlikely to be tested because U.S. adversaries are relatively risk averse and are thus unwilling to start a war that might result in American intervention. In other words, the United States might not be able to defend Taiwan effectively, but the mere prospect that an invasion would lead to a Sino-American war would suffice to stay Beijing's hand.

Second, the United States could accept a higher level of risk in another manner—by bridging the capabilities-commitments gap through riskier strategies that substitute the threat of escalation for additional resources. Most likely, this would entail relying more heavily on U.S. nuclear warfighting capabilities and the threat of nuclear retaliation to defend vulnerable allies in East Asia or Eastern Europe—the idea, for instance, would be to make Russia fear that an attack on Estonia would lead to either a tactical or strategic nuclear response. (Because U.S. allies are already covered by the American extended nuclear deterrent, in practice this approach would involve making nuclear threats and guarantees a more explicit part of U.S. declaratory policy, and integrating a greater reliance on nuclear weapons into U.S. operational plans.) Similarly, this approach could entail integrating the use, or threat of use, of powerful nonnuclear capabilities such as strategic cyber attacks against an enemy's critical infrastructure for the same purpose—bolstering deterrence on the cheap, by raising the costs that a potential aggressor would expect to pay.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6, 2014, pp. 25–34; and Dexter Filkins, "What We Left Behind," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.

⁶⁹ This point is made in Thomas G. Mahnken with Dan Blumenthal, Thomas Donnelly, Michael Mazza, Gary Schmitt, and Andrew Shearer, *Asia in the Balance: Transforming U.S. Military Strategy in Asia* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2012).

⁷⁰ To clarify, this would entail doing more than simply using cyber as part of a U.S. conventional defense of Taiwan or the Baltic, something that existing war plans presumably call for already. Rather, it would entail using strategic cyber attacks against targets—economic, infrastructural, or military—not directly associated with the aggression underway. It would, in effect, be the cyber equivalent of strategic nuclear strikes—a "massive retaliation" doctrine for the cyber age.

Lest either of these approaches sound implausible, we might recall that both have a fairly distinguished historical pedigree. In the late 1940s, at the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Truman administration understood very well that the United States had virtually no chance of effectively defending Western Europe from a determined Soviet assault. But it was nonetheless willing to take on the security guarantees that were central to the alliance on the calculated gamble that the Soviets were unlikely to risk global war by mounting a near-term attack on U.S. allies, particularly during the period of the U.S. nuclear monopoly.⁷¹ As George Marshall, Truman’s secretary of state, somewhat caustically put it, American strategy essentially involved “playing with fire while we have nothing with which to put it out.”⁷² And in the 1950s, to control costs and address the continuing deficiency of U.S. and allied conventional forces, the Eisenhower administration relied heavily and explicitly on nuclear threats to deter aggression against exposed allies from Taiwan to West Germany.⁷³ Throughout much of the Cold War, in fact, the United States compensated for conventional inferiority—particularly in Central Europe—by integrating an early recourse to nuclear weapons into its war plans. Accepting greater risk would simply mean, therefore, updating Cold War-era approaches for today’s purposes.

There is a certain logical appeal to this approach. Regardless of how a conflict over the Baltic states, Poland, or Taiwan might turn out, undertaking such an endeavor would still be incredibly risky—and potentially costly—for China and Russia. That risk just *might* be sufficient to induce a degree of caution. Moreover, even if the United States could not defend these allies by directly blunting an enemy assault, the threat of nuclear, cyber, or other escalation might make clear that any revisionist gains are not worth the price.⁷⁴ If deterrence by denial is a luxury the United States can no longer afford, then perhaps deterrence by punishment will do the trick.

Yet like geopolitical retrenchment, the idea of substituting risk for cost contains serious liabilities. Simply hoping that exposed commitments will not be challenged might work—for a while. But this strategy carries an enormous risk that at some point those guarantees will, in fact, be tested and found wanting, with devastating effects on America’s reputation and credibility. The United States could experience its version of the “Singapore moment”—an episode, as when the Japanese captured that supposedly formidable British redoubt and sank much of its Far Eastern battle fleet along the way, when a great power’s strength and promises are revealed to be an empty shell, and its image as a strong and capable actor in a key part of the world never recovers. Along the way, a strategy of bluff would

⁷¹ See Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); and Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 87–90.

⁷² Quoted in Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 42.

⁷³ See H.W. Brands, “The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 4, October 1989, pp. 963–989.

⁷⁴ Another option that might be included under this rubric would be a far-seas blockade of China in the event of Chinese aggression in East Asia. The allure of this approach is that it would not require defeating Chinese forces within the first island chain; the problem is that it would risk incurring heavy damage to the global economy (as well as the economies of China’s major trading partners), while causing negative humanitarian effects within China and leaving U.S. allies to face Chinese aggression while the United States waited for the coercive effect of the blockade to make itself felt. For a debate on the merits of such an option, see Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 385–421; and Evan Braden Montgomery, “Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4, 2013, pp. 615–623.

likely weaken deterrence and reassurance on the installment plan, as allies and adversaries perceive a shifting balance of power and understand that U.S. guarantees are increasingly chimerical. The United States could therefore end up with both the destabilizing consequences of retrenchment, along with the risk of conflict that comes from hanging on to preexisting obligations.

The second variant of this approach—embracing riskier and more escalatory approaches—has problems of its own, namely that it probably lacks credibility. Consider the use of threats to employ powerful strategic cyber attacks if a commitment to Taiwan or the Baltic states is challenged. The trouble with such threats is that, as U.S. officials such as former President Obama have publicly acknowledged, “open societies” such as the United States are “more vulnerable” to the danger of massive cyber attacks than are authoritarian rivals such as Russia or China.⁷⁵ In other words, and particularly when confronting a great power challenger, the United States may simply lack the cyber escalation dominance needed to make a strategy of cyber retaliation believable.

This holds even truer in the nuclear realm. Threatening to respond to Communist aggression with nuclear weapons, whether tactical or strategic, might have been a fairly credible approach in the 1950s—when China lacked nuclear weapons, the United States had a massive nuclear advantage over the Soviet Union, and neither challenger could reliably target the U.S. homeland. (Even then there were doubts, including among officials within the Eisenhower administration, about whether the president would actually execute a strategy that entailed starting a nuclear war to defend commitments that were not themselves crucial to the global balance of power.⁷⁶) But these conditions no longer hold today. Both of America’s great power rivals possess secure second-strike capabilities, and both can threaten to inflict horrific costs on the United States should nuclear escalation occur. (Both countries are also currently undertaking significant nuclear modernization programs, and Russia is integrating explicit and implicit nuclear threats into its statecraft to a greater degree than at any time since the Cold War.)⁷⁷ Indeed, upon any sort of sustained reflection, it seems almost preposterous to suggest that if the United States were not willing to bear the fiscal costs associated with making its conventional defense commitments credible, it would somehow be willing to risk the astronomically higher costs associated with nuclear escalation.

This approach thus risks leading the United States into a trap where, if its interests are challenged, it is confronted with a choice between pursuing escalatory options that carry a severe and likely prohibitive price or simply acquiescing to aggression. Awareness of this dynamic may, in turn, make adversaries more likely to push in the first place, whether through conventional military aggression or the sort of “gray zone” or “salami slicing” approaches that have characterized recent Chinese and Russian

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ron Synovitz, “Europe Bracing against Risk of Russian ‘Influence Operations,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 16, 2017. A similar dynamic is referenced in David Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, “What Options Does the U.S. Have after Accusing Russia of Hacks?” *New York Times*, October 8, 2016.

⁷⁶ Brands, “Age of Vulnerability”; and Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁷⁷ On recent developments in Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals and strategy, see Thomas Christensen, “The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China’s Strategic Modernization and U.S.–China Security Relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4, August 2012, pp. 447–487; and Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2016,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 3, April 2016, pp. 125–134.

statecraft.⁷⁸ The idea of trading cost for risk may seem attractive in theory, then, but in practice, the risks may prove far higher and more dangerous than they initially seem.

Reinvesting in Primacy

This leaves a final option, which is to increase the level of resources devoted to defense, thereby bringing capabilities back into closer alignment with commitments and strengthening the hard-power backbone of both U.S. grand strategy and the international order. Given the growing military challenges that the United States faces, and the erosion of U.S. military capabilities over the past several years, this would likely mean undertaking a sustained, multiyear buildup of magnitude similar to that undertaken by the Carter and Reagan administrations from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, when defense spending increased by roughly 50 percent in real terms. This buildup would, of course, require permanently lifting the BCA caps currently in place, to provide for both increased resource levels and greater long-term budgetary stability. It would require not just procuring larger quantities of existing capabilities, but also investing aggressively in development and fielding of future capabilities, particularly high-end conventional capabilities geared toward defeating great power challengers as well as middle-tier problem countries such as Iran and North Korea. And crucially, greater resources would have to be coupled with development of innovative operational concepts for defeating A2/AD and other threats, streamlining of DOD procedures and acquisitions processes, and other efforts that are independent of budget and force levels but nonetheless have a powerful impact on how effectively and efficiently the Pentagon can use its available means.

Aside from these very general characteristics, the precise nature and size of such a buildup would presumably be subject to some debate and negotiation, even among supporters of this approach. But a number of recent proposals give a sense of the likely parameters. If the United States aimed to restore an authentic two-MRC capability, for instance, it might follow the recommendations issued in 2014 by the bipartisan National Defense Panel. Those recommendations call for a force consisting—at a minimum—of 490,000 active-duty Army soldiers and 182,000 marines, a Navy of between 323 and 346 ships (versus 274 today), and an Air Force of unspecified size but presumably substantially larger than that envisioned in late Obama-era budgets.⁷⁹ If, more ambitiously, the United States sought something closer to a two-plus or even a three-war standard in recognition of the fact that all three of the world's key geostrategic theaters are seriously unsettled, it would need to undertake a buildup that would be more significant still.

One estimate of a two-plus MRC force, issued by the Heritage Foundation, advocates a force construct of 50 Army brigade combat teams, 346 ships and 624 naval strike aircraft, 1200 Air Force

⁷⁸ On gray zone, see Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015); Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," *E-notes*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 2016; and Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the Trump Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

⁷⁹ NDP, *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future*. Because the NDP called for a return to the "Gates budget"—the last pre-sequestration budget—while making clear that even this level of spending might not be sufficient to meet the multiplicity of threats the United States now confronts, it seems likely that following the recommendations of the panel would produce a force somewhat larger than these numbers indicate.

fighter/attack aircraft, and 36 Marine battalions.⁸⁰ A more recent estimate, issued by Senator John McCain and influenced by the work of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and others, calls for a three-theater force made up of a Navy of over 330 ships and nearly 900 frontline naval strike fighters, an Air Force of 60 combat squadrons and 1500 combat aircraft, an Army of at least 490,000–500,000 active-duty soldiers, and a Marine Corps of at least 200,000 active-duty marines. (Because McCain’s budget reaches out only five years, these numbers would presumably be expected to grow further over time.)⁸¹ Another estimate of a three-theater force, produced by the American Enterprise Institute, calls for a military that, over a ten-year period, would grow to comprise 600,000 active-duty Army soldiers, over 200,000 active duty marines, a Navy of 346 ships, and an Air Force of unspecified but significantly increased end strength. The number of F-22s, for instance, would rise from 185 today to 450 over ten years.⁸²

As one would expect, these more aggressive proposals—particularly those advocating a two-plus or three-theater construct—would require significant new investments. The McCain budget calls for \$430 billion in new money over five years compared to Obama’s final defense budget, which would culminate in a fiscal year 2022 budget of just over \$800 billion (as opposed to roughly \$583 billion in Obama’s final budget request).⁸³ The AEI proposal, issued in late 2015, calls for \$1.3 trillion over 10 years, so as to reach \$633 billion, or the level of the “Gates budget” (the last pre-sequestration five-year defense budget) as early as 2018, with considerable further growth beyond that.⁸⁴ Both of these force constructs are meant, as McCain has written, to produce a military “sized, shaped, and postured to defend and, if necessary, wage and win conventional warfare in three priority theaters.”⁸⁵ Both reflect a “high-low” mix of capabilities designed to enable effective operations including counter-terrorism activities, large-scale conventional war against an enemy such as Iran or North Korea, and high-end combat against a great power adversary. And both proposals—along with the others discussed here—

⁸⁰ Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength*. Note that, in contrast to the other proposals discussed here, the Heritage proposal avoids discussions of total end strength for the Army and Marines, preferring to focus on the number of BCTs. Heritage contends that this is a more useful way of calculating actual combat power.

⁸¹ John McCain, *Restoring American Power: Recommendations for the FY 2018–FY2022 Defense Budget*, defense white paper (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, Senate Armed Services Committee, January 16, 2017), especially pp. 9–14, available at http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/25bff0ec-481e-466a-843f-68ba5619e6d8/restoring-american-power-7.pdf. Indeed, although the McCain force appears somewhat smaller in key respects than the American Enterprise Institute force discussed subsequently, this is primarily because the McCain budget runs for only five years and recognizes that there are limits to how much force structure can productively be amassed during such a period. If McCain’s budgetary trajectory continued over 10 years, the force it produced would presumably be larger. In fact, McCain’s proposal is structured in such a way as to give decision-makers the opportunity to undertake precisely such expansion after the initial five-year period if geopolitical conditions so require. For some of the work upon which the McCain budget draws, see Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Bryan McGrath, Craig Hooper, Jesse Sloman, and Timothy Walton, *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017). This study proposes a fleet of 382 manned ships, “of which 340 fall under the Navy’s battle force counting rules.”

⁸² Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies, *To Rebuild America’s Military* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015), especially p. 25.

⁸³ McCain, *Restoring American Power*, p. 20.

⁸⁴ Donnelly, “Great Powers Don’t Pivot,” p. 7. See also Marilyn Ware Center, *To Rebuild America’s Military*, p. 70.

⁸⁵ McCain, *Restoring American Power*, p. 5; Marilyn Ware Center, *To Rebuild America’s Military*, P. 1.

provide for the robust recapitalization of the U.S. nuclear deterrent as deferred modernization of the triad comes due in the next decade.

To be clear, a buildup even to a three-theater standard certainly would not solve all of America's military problems, or eliminate all the strains on the force and its ability to deliver desired military and geopolitical outcomes. But it would enable a range of investments that are supported by a broad expert consensus as being necessary to maintaining U.S. primacy in a more competitive environment and sustaining American commitments into the future.

Under this approach, the United States could, for instance, invest in a more robust and survivable Eastern European presence featuring heavy brigades, enhanced airpower and ground-based fires, and critical enablers. It could significantly increase its investments in existing capabilities—from additional *Zumwalt*-class destroyers and nuclear attack submarines, to stealthy fighters and long-range bombers, to vastly enhanced stocks of precision-guided munitions, to enhanced air and missile defenses, to improved capabilities in space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare—necessary to penetrate A2/AD bubbles and retain air and sea control in high-end conflicts, as well as to maintain the upper hand in fights with Iran and North Korea.⁸⁶ This approach would ease the tradeoffs between critical capabilities for today's fight (and particularly for counterterrorism operations), such as the A-10, and those critical for confronting more advanced adversaries in tomorrow's fight, such as the F-35. Crucially, it would ensure that the United States is able to aggressively fund the development and production of future technologies in areas such as autonomy, robotics, and hypersonic and directed-energy weapons. These technologies are now receiving initial seed funding, but cannot be fielded in numbers without additional resources.⁸⁷ Finally, this approach would provide for the increased force structure that is necessary not simply to cover a larger number of contingencies, but to reduce stress on the current force.

So how viable is this option for the United States today? Critics offer four primary objections. The first is that this approach is unnecessary because the Pentagon can maintain U.S. primacy at existing budget levels either by pursuing technological innovation and strategic offsets or undertaking business and acquisition reforms. The second is that a sustained, multiyear buildup will overtax the U.S. economy, and is essentially unaffordable in light of persistent budget deficits, a debt-to-GDP ratio that has now reached roughly 76 percent and climbing, and the growing cost of domestic entitlement programs.⁸⁸ A third objection is that such an approach will prove self-defeating over time because it will spur arms races with American adversaries that will require ever-higher levels of military investment to counter. A fourth objection is that such an approach will incentivize continued “free-riding” by U.S. allies and partners because they will conclude that the United States will continue

⁸⁶ On the importance of these various capabilities, see Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific,” pp. 140–143; Ash Carter, “Remarks at U.S. Naval Academy Commencement,” May 27, 2016, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/783891/remarks-at-us-naval-academy-commencement>; Timothy Walton, “Securing the Third Offset Strategy: Priorities for the Next Secretary of Defense,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 82, 3rd Quarter, 2016, pp. 6–15; and Mark Gunzinger and Bryan Clark, *Winning the Salvo Competition: Rebalancing America's Air and Missile Defenses* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

⁸⁷ See Freedberg, “Pentagon Can't Afford to Field 3rd Offset Tech under BCA.”

⁸⁸ On debt-to-GDP ratio, see CBO, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2016 to 2026* (Washington, DC: CBO, 2016), p. 3.

heavily subsidizing their defense for the indefinite future.⁸⁹ All of these arguments have some logic, but none is ultimately persuasive.

The first argument—about innovation, offsets, and defense reform—is alluring but unsatisfying. To be sure, repurposing existing capabilities, developing future high-end capabilities that can create significant dilemmas for competitors from Iran to China, and designing innovative operational concepts—essentially, what former Secretaries Hagel and Ashton Carter termed the Third Offset strategy—is absolutely vital to restoring strategic solvency. The problem, however, is that offsets and innovation cannot by themselves compensate for the fact that Washington simply has too few forces to cover the range of plausible contingencies. Moreover, any meaningful offset strategy is itself dependent on significantly greater resources. For as senior officials such as former Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall have acknowledged, right now the Pentagon simply cannot field even promising technologies in numbers sufficient to have strategic impact.⁹⁰ Offsets and innovation are necessary for sustaining American primacy, but they are hardly sufficient. Similarly, although virtually all experts agree that defense reform is essential, no one has yet identified a feasible reform program sufficient to close the capabilities-commitments gap. As the National Defense Panel noted in 2014, “the savings from a robust effort to tackle waste and inefficiency, though substantial, will not come close to addressing the Department’s current, gross funding shortfall.”⁹¹

The economic argument is also deceptive. Although a multiyear buildup would certainly be very expensive—as noted, as much as \$1.3 trillion in new money over 10 years—it would hardly be unmanageable in relation to America’s overall economic capacity. Even the most aggressive buildups that have been proposed in recent years would push defense spending to only around 4 percent of GDP over time.⁹² Even inflating that number to 4.5 percent to provide a modest buffer, the fact remains—as we have seen—that the United States has supported far higher levels of defense spending as a percentage of GDP in the past without compromising overall economic performance. (It is also worth noting that 4.5 percent of GDP is less than the United States spent even at the height of deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2010.)⁹³ One cannot draw a perfect parallel with earlier eras, of course, because during the 1950s America enjoyed higher growth and lower levels of deficits and debt than it does today. But the argument that these factors make a major buildup economically impossible remains suspect.

For one thing, there is some evidence to suggest that defense spending increases are particularly useful in stimulating overall economic growth. As Martin Feldstein, a former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, has noted, “Military procurement has the . . . advantage that almost all of the equipment and

⁸⁹ These objections are often raised by proponents of geopolitical retrenchment. On these ideas, see Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 33–50; and Christopher Layne, “China’s Challenge to U.S. Hegemony,” *Current History* 107, no. 705, January 2008, especially pp. 16–18.

⁹⁰ Freedberg, “Pentagon Can’t Afford to Field 3rd Offset Tech under BCA.”

⁹¹ NDP, *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future*, p. xii.

⁹² Marilyn Ware Center, *To Rebuild America’s Military*, p. 2.

⁹³ World Bank, “Military Expenditure (% of GDP).”

supplies that the military buys is made in the United States, creating demand and jobs here at home.”⁹⁴ Moreover, such a buildup would not necessarily be untenable from a fiscal perspective, because the simple fact is that defense spending does not drive either federal spending or federal deficits to the extent that is often imagined. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in FY 2016 defense accounted for only 16 percent of federal spending and falling, with mandatory domestic entitlements accounting for 49 percent and rising.⁹⁵

In other words, the growth of federal debt is caused more by unconstrained entitlement spending and insufficient tax revenues than it is by defense outlays. What this means is that if the United States is willing to make politically difficult decisions regarding tax increases and curbing entitlement growth, then there is little inherent reason it cannot afford significantly higher levels of defense spending while also getting its fiscal house in order. If, conversely, the United States is unwilling or unable to confront such politically difficult decisions, then the deficit will explode, the debt-to-GDP ratio will become unmanageable, and programs like Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid will go bankrupt regardless of how much or how little the country spends on defense. Increased defense spending should not be seen as a raid on the national treasury, then; it should be seen as part of a necessary rebalancing of a U.S. fiscal portfolio that has slanted heavily toward domestic priorities at the expense of national security in recent years, and that has become unsustainable for reasons largely independent of defense.

The third common objection to increased defense spending, regarding potentially intensified competition with U.S. rivals, is also problematic. For it is hard to see how increased U.S. defense spending could trigger an arms race with Russia or China, or even Iran or North Korea, precisely because these countries have already been working very hard to develop military capabilities aimed substantially or even primarily at the United States. China, for instance, has been averaging double-digit annual defense spending increases for two decades. There is already strenuous military competition underway between Washington and its adversaries, in other words; it is just that those adversaries are the ones taking the competition most seriously right now. This is, in fact, one of the key reasons why the United States finds itself in a state of strategic insolvency today. Moreover, although it is reasonable to worry that increased U.S. defense efforts—particularly if paired with additional forward presence in a region like Eastern Europe or East Asia—might lead to a near-term increase in tensions, basic deterrence theory would suggest that, over the longer term, the failure to counter Russian and Chinese buildups, and to limit their opportunities for successful coercion or aggression, might well prove more destabilizing.

Nor, for that matter, is it quixotic to think that the United States could achieve stronger deterrence and warfighting capability with the resource increases under consideration here. As extensive studies and wargaming exercises have indicated, the United States does not need a massive force in Eastern Europe or the Baltic to deter Russian aggression. It simply needs one that is sizable and survivable enough to prevent an easy Russian fait accompli and thereby confront Moscow with the prospect of a longer war that it would, most likely, lose. The U.S. contribution to such a NATO force would be easily

⁹⁴ Martin Feldstein, “Defense Spending Would Be Great Stimulus,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 2008.

⁹⁵ “Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 4, 2016, available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/policy-basics-where-do-our-federal-tax-dollars-go>.

affordable within the context of a significant military buildup.⁹⁶ In East Asia, geography and continually improving Chinese capabilities make deterrence and effective warfighting a serious challenge. But given that U.S. capabilities and personnel are still qualitatively superior to their Chinese counterparts in most respects, new investments that allow for the fielding of additional existing capabilities and the development of high-end future capabilities can have a meaningful, positive effect on the military balance—so long as they are also paired with posture changes and innovative operational concepts that allow those capabilities to be employed effectively.⁹⁷ More money and more forces aren't everything in either of these contexts, of course, but they do go a long way.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that Russia and China, or even Iran and North Korea, are powerless to respond to U.S. capability enhancements, or that there will *never* come a time when Washington simply cannot preserve the desired level of overmatch at an acceptable cost. That day may eventually arrive. Yet in light of the significant internal challenges—political, economic, demographic, or all of the above—facing each of America's adversaries, the passing of U.S. primacy is hardly inevitable.⁹⁸ And given how advantageous U.S. primacy has proven over the decades, America's goal should be to push the point at which it becomes unsustainable as far into the future as possible.

This brings us to the fourth and final objection, regarding allied free-riding and the need for a collective approach. U.S. strategy has always been a concert strategy, and so this approach certainly requires enhanced allied efforts. Countries from Japan and Taiwan to Poland and the Baltic states will have to spend more on defense if their situation is not to become untenable; they will, in many cases, also have to adopt more cost-effective and realistic defense strategies.⁹⁹

But because the United States cannot simply make this decision for its allies, the question is which U.S. approach is most likely to encourage constructive changes. And although advocates of retrenchment often argue that the only way to get allies to do more is for the United States to do less, the historical reality is that the United States has been most successful at securing increased allied contributions to the common defense when it, too, has been willing to do more. In previous instances when NATO allies collectively increased military spending—as part of the Lisbon program of the early 1950s, for instance, or the long-term defense program of the Carter-Reagan years—they did so as part of a broader program in which the United States also significantly increased its defense outlays and contributions to European security.¹⁰⁰ When Japan broadened its geopolitical and defense outlook in the early 1980s

⁹⁶ Shlapak and Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank." See also David Ochmanek, RAND Corporation, "Restoring the Power Projection Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces," Testimony to Senate Armed Services Committee, February 16, 2017, especially p. 5.

⁹⁷ See Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific"; Heginbotham et al., *U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, pp. 346–348; and Walton, "Securing the Third Offset Strategy."

⁹⁸ See, for instance, Robert Kaplan, "Eurasia's Coming Anarchy: The Risks of Chinese and Russian Weakness," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 2, March/April 2016.

⁹⁹ See Jim Thomas, John Stillion, and Iskander Rehman, *Hard ROC 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence through Protraction* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014); Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, the analysis in Richard L. Kugler, *Laying the Foundations: The Evolution of NATO in the 1950s*, Research Note (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, June 1990).

and agreed to expand security cooperation with the United States, it did so in a similar context.¹⁰¹ One can also identify similar dynamics more recently and in other geographic areas. The United States elicited the best performance from the Iraqi military and government when the American commitment to that country was at its greatest, during the surge of 2007–08. The performance declined rather than improved as the U.S. commitment was subsequently reduced.¹⁰² Contrary to what one might expect, then, the United States may actually get the most out of its allies and partners when those countries are reassured of the American commitment—and are thus prepared to take risks of their own.

In sum, none of the principal objections to this approach carry as much force as critics claim. And as these objections fall away, the advantages and logic of this approach come into sharper focus. This approach recognizes, for instance, how beneficial American military primacy has been in shaping an international order that has been quite congenial to American interests, global prosperity, and great power peace, and it makes the investments necessary to sustain as much of that order as possible.¹⁰³ This approach is the one best geared toward maintaining deterrence of rivals and reassurance of America’s allies, by providing the United States with greater ability to meet aggression from a range of enemies and rivals—without recourse to dangerously escalatory strategies such as nuclear weapons use in the most operationally demanding scenarios. As a result, this may well be the approach best geared toward *avoiding* the use of military force over the long term, by averting situations in which American adversaries from Iran and North Korea to Russia and China think that aggression might pay. “Peace through strength” is not a meaningless catch-phrase, after all; it is a sound strategic proposition that has been central to U.S. statecraft for decades.¹⁰⁴

Finally, although it is fair to object that there may not be any feasibly obtained amount of military power that would allow the United States to meet all of its commitments if challenged simultaneously—and it is fair to point out that some operations, like a clash with Russia or China, or even a full-on war against North Korea, would be enormously demanding for a force of any size—this approach arguably gets the United States closest to addressing the commitments-capabilities gap in a credible and non-destabilizing way.¹⁰⁵ In view of these strengths, and the weaknesses of the other available options, there is thus a strong case that closing the capabilities-commitments gap from the commitments end represents the best available approach to restoring strategic solvency. The costs of

¹⁰¹ See Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, “The Soviet Factor in U.S.–Japanese Defense Cooperation, 1978–1985,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp. 72–103. To be clear, the Soviet threat played a crucial role in stimulating increased allied defense spending and efforts in all of these instances. But the point here is that allies were more likely to respond to that threat in constructive ways when the United States was also leaning forward geopolitically.

¹⁰² Stephen Biddle, Michael O’Hanlon, and Kenneth Pollack, “How to Leave a Stable Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5, 2008, pp. 40–58; and Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁰³ On this point, see, for instance, Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

¹⁰⁴ This point is stressed in William Inboden, “The Role of a Strong National Defense,” in Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ On North Korea, see Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind, “The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements,” *International Security* 36, no. 2, Fall 2011, pp. 84–119.

this approach are certainly significant. But they are not unaffordable, and they are arguably less than the costs, whether financial or otherwise, that are inherent in other strategies.

Conclusion

“Without superior aggregate military strength, in being and readily mobilizable, a policy of ‘containment’ . . . is no more than a policy of bluff.”¹⁰⁶ This admonition, written by the authors of NSC-68 in 1950, reflected a dawning realization that America’s global commitments were in growing danger of being undermined and ultimately exposed as hollow due to a shortfall in the military power that is essential to underwriting any ambitious geopolitical program. Today, the United States again faces a crisis of strategic solvency, as a plethora of gathering international threats has combined with a dearth of necessary military resources to leave the American superpower in an increasingly overextended state. The crisis of American military primacy is here, with potentially severe impacts on deterrence, reassurance, and the stability of the post–Cold War order.

The United States thus faces a stark choice about how to proceed. Of the options considered here, the most preferable is the course of finding the significant new resources necessary to bring American forces—current and future—back into line with the obligations and purposes they are meant to serve in U.S. grand strategy. Undertaking a sustained, major military buildup will not be cheap, but it is certainly affordable for a wealthy superpower that has benefited so much from the geopolitical benefits and stability that its primacy has afforded. Indeed, the fundamental question regarding whether the United States can undertake this course is not, ultimately, an economic one. It is whether the country will politically prioritize the investments needed to sustain its primacy or allow itself to slip further into strategic insolvency with all the associated dangers for the United States and global order.

¹⁰⁶ “A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” NSC 68, April 14, 1950, available at <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm>.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
AEI	American Enterprise Institute
BCA	Budget Control Act
BCT	brigade combat team
CBO	Congressional Budget Office
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
DOD	Department of Defense
FY	fiscal year
GDP	gross domestic product
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MANPADS	Man-Portable Air Defense Systems
MRC	major regional contingency
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDP	National Defense Panel
NSC	National Security Council
SAIS	Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

1667 K Street, NW, Suite 900

Washington, DC 20006

Tel. 202-331-7990 • Fax 202-331-8019

www.csbaonline.org