



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

**ANALYSIS**

## **Preserving the Balance: A U.S. Eurasia Defense Strategy**

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Now more than ever, the United States needs to formulate an effective defense strategy to preserve U.S. interests in a strategic environment characterized by looming international and domestic challenges.

CSBA Distinguished Senior Fellow and President Emeritus Dr. Andrew Krepinevich's *Preserving the Balance: A Eurasia Defense Strategy* focuses on the United States' long-standing interest in preventing the rise of a hegemonic power on the Eurasian land mass capable of dominating its human, technical and material resources. Such a development would represent a major threat to U.S. national security. With this core interest in mind, the strategy presented in this paper calls for major changes in the U.S. defense posture. Among them: shifting to more of a forward defense posture; according top priority, in deed as well as word, to the Western Pacific Theater; taking on greater risk in the European and Middle East theaters than has been the case since the Cold War's end; developing a competency in the ability to compete based on time; emphasizing new concepts of operation and a different division of labor between the United States and its allies; and last, but far from least, according high priority to the social dimension of strategy, to include developing and advancing persuasive strategic narratives to the American people, the citizens of allies and prospective strategic partners, and the revisionist powers' populations.

## Executive Summary

This paper provides a U.S. defense strategy for Eurasia whose purpose is to sustain the unprecedented era of security and prosperity for the United States and like-minded nations that emerged following the Cold War. Toward this end, the strategy focuses on the longstanding U.S. interest in preventing the rise of a hegemonic power on the Eurasian landmass capable of dominating its human, technical and material resources. If a single power came to dominate either Europe or Asia, it would possess substantially greater manpower, economic and technical capacity—and thus greater military potential—than the United States. Such a development would represent a major threat to U.S. national security.

With this core interest in mind, the strategy presented here calls for major changes in the U.S. defense posture. These changes include shifting to more of a forward defense posture; according top priority, in deed as well as word, to the Western Pacific Theater; taking on greater risk in the European and Middle East theaters than has been the case since the Cold War's end; developing a competency in the ability to compete based on time; establishing new concepts of operation and a different division of labor between the United States and its allies; and last, but far from least, according high priority to the social dimension of strategy, to include developing and advancing persuasive strategic narratives to the American people, the citizens of allies and prospective strategic partners, and the revisionist powers' populations.

### Refocus on the Balance of Power

Today the United States finds itself at a strategic inflection point. Its longstanding security interests along Eurasia's periphery are being challenged by revisionist powers—in this case, China, Russia, and Iran—that seek to overturn the international order in the Western Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East, respectively, through coercion, subversion or other means outside the rules-based international system. As their military capability grows, one cannot rule out their resorting to overt aggression, either by miscalculation or design, to achieve their aims.

This challenge is occurring on a scale not seen since the Cold War, and arguably not experienced over the past century. Of the three revisionist powers, China clearly presents far and away the greatest long-term threat. The Chinese Communist Party's increasing reliance on nationalism for its legitimacy and China's historical sense of entitlement to regional hegemony make it a revisionist power. Beijing's "China Dream" envisions a "Greater" China that includes not only Taiwan but also most of the disputed South China Sea and its islands, and Japan's Senkaku Islands. If China makes good on its territorial ambitions (and especially if this results in fracturing the U.S.-Japan alliance), China will almost certainly achieve hegemony in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

Russia under Putinism is focused on reestablishing itself as a great power, in part by restoring Moscow's spheres of influence over former Soviet republics that include three sovereign states now members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Despite mounting economic difficulties at home, Moscow followed its forcible annexation of Crimea by supporting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine; deploying forces to the Middle East in support of Iran's Syrian client regime; pursuing efforts to intimidate NATO frontline states in Eastern Europe; harassing U.S. and allied air and naval forces operating in international waters; and violating the terms of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Yet Russia is poorly positioned to engage in a protracted competition with the United States. Its economy is roughly only one-tenth and its population half that of America's, and the gap in both cases is widening. This suggests that although Russia is clearly a revisionist power, as a threat it may be approaching its high-water mark. Over time it could evolve into a lesser threat or even a status quo power seeking primarily to defend what it has, rather retake than what it has lost. If so, Russia could become a U.S. security partner.

The challenge posed by China and Russia to U.S. security interests along the Eurasian periphery is compounded by the threat of radical Islamism, in both its Shi'a and Sunni manifestations. Iran's leaders seek to establish Iran as the Middle East's dominant state by isolating their principal Sunni Arab rivals, undermining Sunni Arab rule in states with predominant Shi'a populations, solidifying Iran's influence in Lebanon and Syria, and winning U.S. acquiescence in its efforts to become a nuclear threshold state.

The Sunni strain of radical Islamism also pursues ambitious goals. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for example, seeks to reestablish the Caliphate and evict all non-Sunni Muslim elements from the Islamic world. Its ultimate aim is to subject the entire world to the will of Allah, by force if necessary, as called for in its followers' interpretation of the Qur'an.

### A Threat Growing in Scale

Viewed individually (China) and collectively (China, Russia, Iran), the revisionist powers' economic might relative to the United States is substantially greater than any power or group of powers America has faced over the past century. Viewed in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) based on contemporary currency exchange rates, China alone poses a far greater relative economic challenge to the United States than did Soviet Russia, Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany. China's GDP is roughly 60 percent that of the United States, or at least half again as much as that of America's principal rivals over the past century. Moreover, China's growth rate continues to surpass that of the United States, and by a substantial margin. While traditional U.S. European allies remain among the world's great economic powers, their investments in defense have withered to the point where they barely meet NATO minimum standards, or in most cases fall far short of meeting them at all.

Moreover, the low economic entry barriers to some emerging forms of military competition, such as cyber warfare, and perhaps biological warfare as well, are likely to increase further the scale of the challenges confronting the United States.

### Threats Shifting in Form

The challenges confronting the United States are also shifting in form from those presented by Soviet Russia or, more recently, minor hostile states and radical Islamist terrorist groups. Over the first decade or so following the Cold War the United States enjoyed large advantages in many key military competitions relative to the revisionist powers. In recent years, however, these U.S. advantages have diminished, in some cases significantly. Importantly, the revisionist powers are challenging U.S. military dominance by developing capabilities that avoid the American military's strengths while exploiting its weaknesses. The United States is losing its quarter-century near-monopoly in precision warfare as the revisionist powers develop and field anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems and capabilities that focus, not on power projection, but on denying U.S. forces access to the Eurasian periphery. This phenomenon is most pronounced in the Western Pacific, with China the pacing threat.

The U.S. military has lost its nuclear monopoly over countries in the developing world, specifically in South Asia (India and Pakistan) and the Western Pacific (North Korea). There is increasing risk that proliferation will spread to the Middle East.

The proliferation of advanced military capabilities, combined with the low entry barriers to competing at a high level in several emerging warfare areas (such as in cyber and biological warfare) has produced a "democratization of destruction" that finds even small groups with the potential to inflict damage far exceeding what comparably sized groups were able to do a generation ago. As evidenced by the Second Lebanon War and recent operations conducted by Russia's "Little Green Men," the distinction between the lethality of conventional and irregular forces is becoming less profound. The "blurring" occurring between conventional and irregular warfare is matched by the progressively narrowing "firebreak" between conventional and nuclear warfare, as precision-guided weaponry and cyber payloads become more capable of substituting for nuclear weapons under certain conditions, and as nuclear powers (such as Russia) design low-yield nuclear weapons to offset their vulnerability to advanced conventional warfare. The military competition is also shifting in the sense that it is becoming more intense in relatively new warfare domains, to include space, cyberspace, and the seabed.

The rapid pace of change in the character of warfare shows no signs of slowing anytime soon. Technology continues advancing along a broad front, with artificial intelligence (AI), big data, the biological and human behavioral sciences, directed energy, and robotics, alone or in combination, having the potential to produce dramatic shifts not only in the conduct of military operations but also in the military balance as well.

Therefore, the United States will require not only a larger military than currently planned but also a significantly different kind of military to preserve a stable, favorable balance of power to achieve its security objectives at an acceptable level of risk. Toward this end, the U.S. military's challenge will be to exploit existing sources of advantage while developing new ones oriented on competing effectively as the character of warfare continues to change.

#### The Means at Hand

Despite the decline in its relative position in key areas relating to the military competition, the fundamental U.S. situation remains strong. The U.S. economy is likely to remain the world's largest over this paper's 20-year planning horizon. Its dynamic free-market economy enables the "creative destruction" necessary for healthy long-term economic growth. When combined with the economies of its major allies, the democratic great powers' economic capacity—at least as measured by GDP—far exceeds that of the revisionist powers. The United States also possesses a large and technically literate manpower pool. Its defense industrial base, although shrunken, remains the world's finest.

Yet, as the challenges to U.S. security are increasing, funding for defense has been reduced. This action is unprecedented since the United States became an active global power threequarters of a century ago. A key reason for this state of affairs is the American people's unwillingness to put their country's fiscal house in order. This stems largely from a failure to restrain spending and boost revenues. U.S. debt is growing at a rapid rate. Simply covering the interest payments on the debt cost \$233 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2015. Left unaddressed, this will increase by over 250 percent—to \$830 billion—by the middle of the next decade.

Further compounding the U.S. fiscal challenge, both the Social Security and Medicare trust funds are being depleted and are projected to be exhausted in the early 2030s. If these estimates hold, significant cuts in benefits would be required or increased taxes would need to be imposed to offset or reduce the decline in benefits—or some combination thereof.

These fiscal challenges can be resolved—if the American people are willing to cover these expenditures through spending cuts and/or a significant boost in taxes—or if economic growth were sufficiently robust to increase government revenues more rapidly than the cost of its spending. At present, however, none of these conditions obtains.

The trend toward fiscal insolvency risks putting the United States on a path to social instability, pitting young against old, rich against poor, and workers against those on public assistance. Given these circumstances, absent the emergence of a clear, existential threat to the United States—or U.S. leaders that are willing and able to make the case for fiscal probity and a strong national defense—it will prove increasingly difficult to win public support for restoring the country's defense effort to Cold War spending levels of greater than 6 percent of GDP—or even the level of over 4 percent supported in the decade following the 9/11 attacks. Consequently, while the strategy proposed here assumes an end to the Budget Control Act ("sequestration") limits, it does not assume anything beyond modest increases in resources for defense. It would be imprudent for those crafting a Eurasian defense strategy to assume the kind of surge in spending that major challenges to U.S. security produced in the past. Yet an unwillingness to improve the country's defenses during a period of rising threats risks being "penny wise and pound foolish," failing to meet the danger before it grows and requires a far greater effort to offset.

As sobering as the U.S. position is, the position of America's great power allies is even worse. While the CBO's estimate of U.S. defense funding falling to 2.6 percent of the country's GDP by the mid-2020s is worrisome, America's principal NATO allies are struggling to invest much more than half of that share in defense. Japan remains stuck on a ceiling of 1 percent of its GDP for defense.

### The Strategy

The strategy achieves the desired ends with the resources projected to be made available, at an acceptable level of risk. To accomplish this, the strategy assigns priority among the three revisionist powers and three military theaters of operation to China and the Western Pacific Theater of Operations (WPTO). The reasons for this are several, and they are compelling. They are informed by key planning factors such as relative military potential, strategic depth, and strategic risk.

### Military Potential

Neither Russia nor Iran has anything remotely approaching China's economic or military potential. Nor is either likely to develop anything comparable to China's potential over the next several decades. Although Russia has a more formidable nuclear arsenal than China, should they choose to do so, the Chinese could field nuclear forces that would match or exceed those of the United States and Russia under the terms of the new START agreement.

Importantly, the WPTO is the only theater where U.S. allies and partners do not enjoy an advantage over the principal revisionist power in economic and military potential. In the European Theater, both in terms of economic scale, technical sophistication and manpower America's NATO allies' assets far exceed those of Russia. Similarly, the loose collection of strange bedfellows in the Middle East that includes Egypt, Israel, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE enjoys similar advantages relative to Iran. Simply put, America's allies and partners in both the European and Middle East theaters of operation are fully capable of creating and sustaining a favorable military balance with minimal direct U.S. support—should they choose to do so.

### Strategic Depth

Strategic depth (or lack thereof) is an important factor in the military competition along the Eurasian periphery. For those that enjoy strategic depth, a strategy relying on defense in depth (or a “layered” defense) becomes possible, as does the option of trading space to gain time so as to achieve a more advantageous position (such as gaining time for mobilizing forces or inducing a powerful state to enter the war as an ally).

The United States lacks strategic depth in the Western Pacific. This, along with other key factors, requires the United States to adopt a forward defense posture in that theater. On the other hand, the United States enjoys great strategic depth in Europe, providing a greater opportunity to recover from initial setbacks. The United States can deploy reinforcements in the alliance’s large “rear area” in relative safety. In the Middle East, Iran and the radical Sunni Islamist groups present far less of a military threat than do China or Russia.

#### Geostrategic Risk

While it should plan to avoid such a situation, in extremis the United States and its allies could lose all of Eastern Europe to Russia and still prevent it from dominating the Continent. Even if Iran came to dominate much of the Middle East, the United States would still possess far greater economic and military potential than a latter-day Persian–Islamic Empire. The same cannot be said, however, with respect to the Western Pacific, the only theater in which a great power U.S. ally, Japan, is a frontline state. Were Japan to be subjugated or, more likely, “Finlandized” by China, the military balance in the Western Pacific would shift decisively in China’s favor. The result would very likely be catastrophic for the U.S. position.

Therefore, the strategy accords priority to the Western Pacific as by far the principal focus of U.S. defense efforts. Given the considerations outlined above, the U.S. military should adopt a forward defense posture in the Western Pacific, while emphasizing expeditionary postures in both Europe (its second priority), and the Middle East (its third priority).

These priorities should, however, be viewed in a manner similar to those in the U.S. World War II strategy of "Germany First." Although the defeat of Germany was indeed the highest priority, the war in the Pacific was hardly ignored. Similarly, the relative allocation of forces among the three theaters in the event of simultaneous acts of aggression will depend on the specific circumstances encountered at the time.

#### The Western Pacific Theater Posture

Japan is fully capable of assuming the lead for its own defense and, by extension, the defense of the northern sector of the first island chain (FIC). Over time U.S. forces should be gradually introduced to the Western Pacific, to include forward-deployed rotations to supplement Japan's Self-Defense Force within the context of the Archipelagic Defense operational concept.

The United States should assume primary responsibility for the southern sector of the FIC, to include defending its ally, the Philippines, and providing assistance to Republic of China (Taiwan), where it has a long-term security commitment. Australia could provide forces for the southern sector as well. Frontline states (the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam) should be assisted in creating resistance forces capable of conducting advanced irregular warfare operations to raise the cost of Chinese aggression and delay their ability to consolidate their gains and expand their A2/AD zones.

#### Theater Operational Reserve

Japanese air and naval forces, along with its newly formed mobile army units, could serve as an operational reserve in the northern sector. U.S. air and naval forces, including the U.S. Marine Corps, could function in a similar role along the entire FIC. If necessary, American and Japanese operational reserve forces could support U.S. Marine Corps and selected U.S. Army (Special Forces, Ranger, Airborne, and Air Assault) forces positioned along the WPTO "rim" in conducting counter-offensive operations. These forces must be prepared to act promptly to recover lost territory before enemy forces can establish A2/AD defenses in newly occupied areas.

Although located in South Asia, India could emerge as a key ally or security partner of the United States through its ability to influence the WPTO military balance indirectly by diverting substantial Chinese resources away from areas opposite the FIC.

#### The European Theater of Operations Posture

The European Theater of Operations (ETO) is accorded second priority in the Eurasian defense strategy. The defense posture in the ETO calls for the United States (and hopefully major West European NATO allies) to take the lead in building the East European frontline states' capability to address Russian acts of low-level aggression while serving as a deterrent against overt Russian aggression. The United States should support the efforts of its East European NATO allies to field A2/AD capabilities to deter and, if need be, defeat overt Russian aggression. In the event of general war, NATO can exploit its strategic depth, enabling forward forces to trade space for time (if necessary) until reinforced by U.S. and West European expeditionary forces. Once Russian A2/AD forces are sufficiently reduced, operations can be undertaken to recapture lost territory.

Given the demands for U.S. forces in the other two Eurasian theaters (especially the Western Pacific) and the prospect of declining resources for defense, the United States European posture is limited to deploying modest air and ground forces to Eastern Europe, supplemented by pre-positioned equipment and logistics stocks.

#### Theater Operational Reserve

Absent a significantly greater effort on the part of its NATO allies or a major, sustained increase in its defense resources, the U.S. forces available to form an operational reserve are modest. This is by necessity, not design. Strategy is about setting priorities and allocating risk.

Given projected defense funding, expeditionary U.S. forces based in the continental United States (CONUS) should be sufficient to address a major contingency in the European or the Middle East theaters of operations but not both simultaneously.

U.S. reinforcements must also be capable of operating effectively in an A2/AD environment. Like their forward-deployed Army counterparts in the Western Pacific, reinforcing Army units should emphasize cross-domain operations: air defense, missile defense, and longrange rocket artillery. Unlike Army forward-deployed forces along the FIC in the Western Pacific, however, these ground forces would also need to maneuver to seize and hold territory. Assuming Russian A2/AD forces are effective, U.S. ground forces may have to operate far more dispersed than in the past, placing a premium on resilient communications and light mobile units armed with guided-rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles (G-RAMM) munitions, as well as heavy mechanized forces, aviation elements, and cross-domain capabilities. In brief, we are talking about a new kind of field army.

#### Middle East Theater of Operations Posture

Given Iran's limited conventional force military potential and its relatively modest ability to prevent the deployment of U.S. forces into the region, the Middle East Theater of Operations (METO) is accorded third priority in the U.S. Eurasian defense strategy.

Importantly, Israel's ability to dominate Iran in the conventional and nuclear competition over the near- to mid-term, along with the forces of Turkey and Sunni Arab states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates should be sufficient to discourage Iran from undertaking overt acts of aggression. The principal immediate challenge from Iran (and its proxies) and radical Sunni Islamist groups comes in the form of advanced irregular warfare. Thus, the United States needs to accord priority in the near term to supporting the efforts of local security partners to defeat enemies waging this form of war.

Given these considerations, the U.S. military effort in the Middle East Theater of Operations emphasizes modest forward-deployed training and advisory forces to support partner states' efforts to suppress radical Sunni Islamist groups and counter Iranian moves to establish regional dominance. Additionally, direct support over what is currently provided to partner states and non-state groups (such as the Kurds) can be made available in the form of U.S. Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) assets, air strikes, and Special Operations Forces engaged in combat (direct action) and combat support missions.

#### Theater Operational Reserve

Should a large-scale threat to U.S. interests arise, American and allied forces can be augmented by elements of U.S. expeditionary forces positioned outside the METO. These forces must be prepared, in conjunction with host nation and allied forces, to conduct operations to secure major energy extraction, production and transportation facilities along the southern Persian Gulf littoral, as well as the shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz.

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#### Counter-Offensive/Forcible-Entry Forces and the Strategic Reserve

As with its expeditionary forces, U.S. forces conducting counter-offensive/forcible-entry operations would likely be sufficient to address either a Western Pacific (such as in the Philippines) or a Middle East (such as along the Persian Gulf's northern shores) contingency, but not both simultaneously.

U.S. conventional global strike forces—to include global C4ISR assets; long-range precision strike; cyber strike force packages; and theater air and missile defenses—constitute a strategic reserve that can be deployed with relative speed to any of the three theaters of operation. In addition to acting as a deterrent force in all three theaters, the strategic reserve can be employed to blunt aggression, buying time until American and allied operational reserves or expeditionary forces can deploy while degrading enemy A2/AD capabilities. The strategic reserve can also be employed in support of U.S. counter-offensive forces at the decisive point.

### The Military-Technical Competition and Search for the “Next Big Thing”

Any Eurasian defense strategy designed for a protracted rivalry must take into account the long-term military-technical competition between the United States and the revisionist powers.

Developing new sources of competitive advantage that will enable America’s armed forces to sustain favorable balances in the three Eurasian theaters of operation and in critical functional areas (such as strategic warfare) is central to this competition. Moreover, in this highly uncertain and dynamic security environment creating capability options mitigates the risk that the U.S. military could place some wrong “big bets” when it comes to equipping its forces.

Technology trends also indicate one or more new “big things” will emerge to alter the character of warfare substantially. History suggests that those militaries that identify these new forms of warfare will enjoy a major advantage over their rivals. Thus there is great incentive to be the first (or among the first) to identify and exploit the “next big thing” (or “things”) in warfare.

What might the U.S. military do to identify the next breakthroughs in warfare? Before proceeding to make major systems choices in its defense program, the U.S. military should undertake a sustained field experimentation campaign with the objective of identifying how best to exploit emerging technologies within the context of new operational concepts oriented on dominating key military competitions.

### Time-Based Competition

But the military must do more than identify major new sources of advantage. It must exploit them as well, and do so more rapidly than its rivals.

The United States is losing its long-term advantage in a number of key military-related technologies. This is partially unavoidable, as many emerging technologies with the potential to boost military effectiveness, such as AI, big data, directed energy, genetic engineering, additive manufacturing, and robotics are being driven primarily by the commercial sector. Since these technologies are available to all who have the means to obtain them, competitive advantage will accrue to those militaries that can not only identify how best to exploit them but that can do so more quickly than their rivals.

Thus, time is becoming an increasingly valuable resource.

Unfortunately, the current U.S. acquisition system does not excel at either speed or agility. Rather than leveraging time to its advantage, the United States Defense Department squanders this precious resource, often taking over a decade or more to field new systems and capabilities.

Consequently, the United States is taking far longer than its adversaries to field the new capabilities essential to remain competitive in a world of rapid technological change. If its military is to maintain its long-standing advantage in the quality of its equipment, the U.S. defense establishment will need to develop ways to compress radically the time it takes to get new equipment into the field.

### The Battle of the Narrative

Last but perhaps most important of all is the strategy's social dimension. To set the nation on the path toward restoring its fiscal foundation and providing the resources necessary to preserve its security, America's national security leaders must educate the American people on the threats to the country's vital security interests and economic well-being. Second, they must present a strategy that can address these threats. Third, a case must be made for the resources necessary to execute the strategy and for the American people to accept the sacrifices that will be required to liberate these resources. This implies a long overdue plan to reverse the country's rapidly declining financial standing. Fourth, given that the United States is likely in a long-term competition with the revisionist powers, this effort must be capable of being sustained over time. The United States should support the efforts of ally governments to make a similar case to their peoples. Finally, a strategy to challenge the revisionist powers' message to their publics must be developed and implemented.