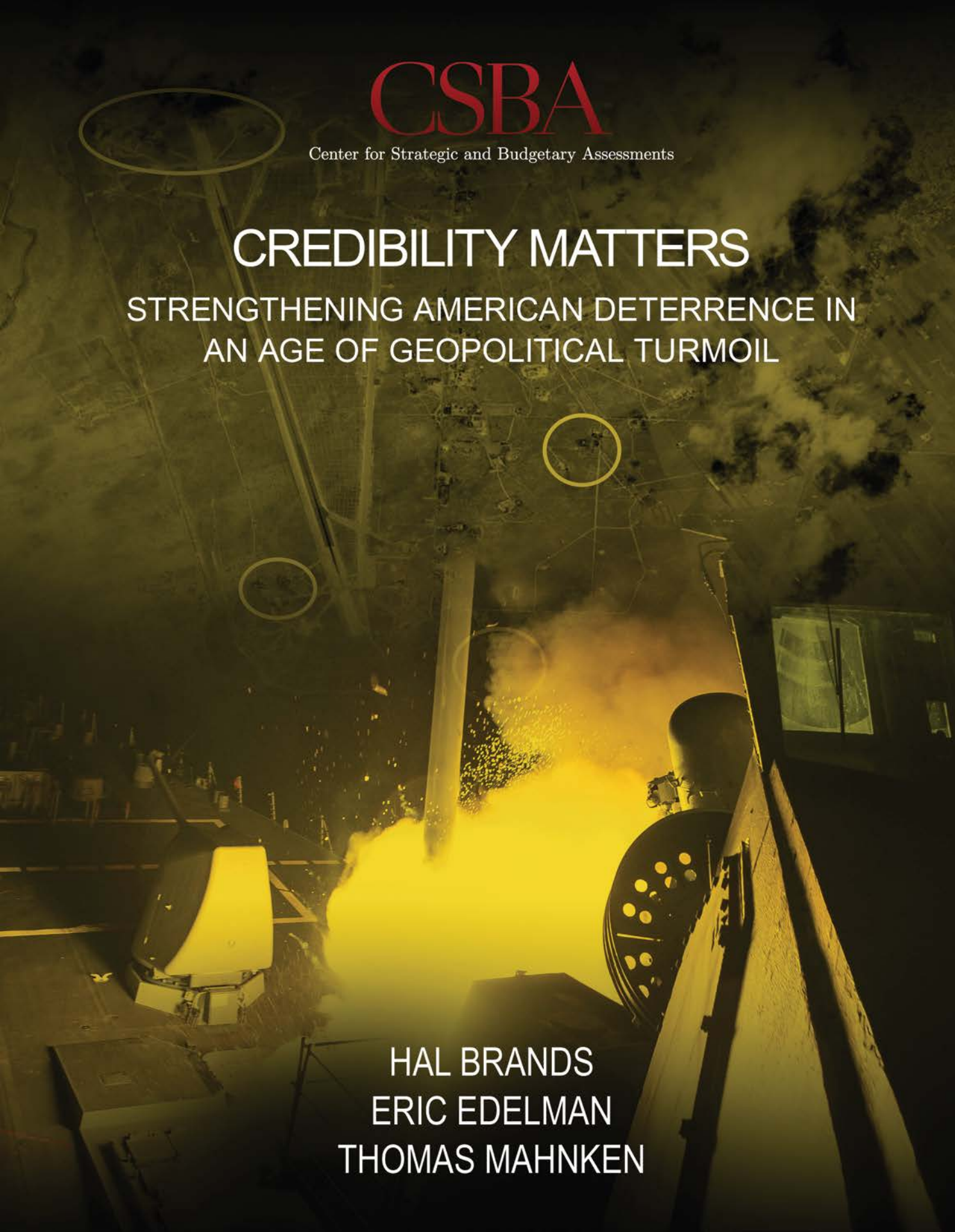


An aerial night-time photograph of a ship's deck. A large, bright yellow-orange plume of fire and smoke is erupting from a missile launch, illuminating the surrounding area. Several yellow circles are drawn on the image, highlighting specific areas of interest on the deck and the launch area. The overall scene is dark, with the bright light from the launch providing the primary illumination.

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CREDIBILITY MATTERS

STRENGTHENING AMERICAN DETERRENCE IN
AN AGE OF GEOPOLITICAL TURMOIL

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Introduction

How credible are the promises the United States makes to its allies and partners and the threats it issues to rivals and adversaries? How committed and capable do international observers perceive America to be in defending the international system it has anchored for decades? Few questions are more important to the effectiveness of American defense and national security policy. Credibility is a frustratingly intangible—yet utterly critical—quality in global affairs. It reflects the degree to which a country's word is perceived to be its bond—the extent to which it is able and willing to make good on commitments undertaken and warnings delivered. If America's credibility is strong, then adversaries will be deterred, allies will be reassured, and relative geopolitical stability will prevail. If American credibility is weak, then adversaries will be emboldened, allies will be unnerved, and geopolitical revisionism and aggression will proliferate. Opportunistic powers will gradually become more assertive on the theory that their aggression will not be punished; the international system will veer toward greater conflict and upheaval. Given the extent to which the existing international system ultimately rests on American extended deterrence and security guarantees, it is no exaggeration to say that credibility is the glue that holds the U.S. global posture together; it is the very foundation of international peace and stability.

Today, unfortunately, the United States confronts a deepening crisis of credibility in global affairs. For much of the post-Cold War period, the United States possessed such dramatic military and geopolitical overmatch that its ability and perceived willingness to deter adversaries from undertaking significant acts of geopolitical revisionism were seen to be very strong. As William Perry wrote in a seminal *Foreign Affairs* article in 1991, America's conventional deterrent was highly credible because the “revolutionary advance in military capability” that the United States had achieved would allow it to triumph in most conceivable conflicts at very low cost.¹ A quarter-century later, however, American credibility is being called into question. In the South China Sea, in the Baltic region and along Europe's eastern flank, and in the Middle East, American adversaries are probing for weaknesses in the U.S. geopolitical posture. Meanwhile, American allies and partners show growing nervousness about Washington's willingness and ability to deter or defeat aggression against them.

Credibility, like deterrence, is a function of perceived capability and perceived resolve to use it, and America's current credibility gap reflects shortfalls in both of these areas. The overmatch that the United States relied upon to make its commitments credible in the post-Cold War era is fading, due to prolonged U.S. defense austerity and determined military buildups by America's rivals. Adversaries are deliberately pursuing strategies and capabilities meant to cast doubt on the credibility of American guarantees by demonstrating the limits of U.S. ability to uphold the present

¹ William Perry, “Desert Storm and Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 4, Fall 1991, p. 66.

order. Not least, there appears to be a widespread international perception that the United States has undercut its own credibility in recent years, through policies and rhetoric that have raised doubts about its international posture, its determination in responding to geopolitical revisionism, and its basic steadiness and reliability in global affairs. These factors have created an increasingly dangerous situation in which American credibility is eroding and steps to halt and reverse that erosion are becoming urgent.

The remainder of this report consists of three sections. The first section explains the concept of credibility and reviews ongoing debates over whether and to what extent credibility really matters in international affairs. The second section covers developments in recent years that have challenged American credibility. The third section outlines a series of principles for fortifying U.S. credibility in a tumultuous world. These principles cover an array of issues, from drawing U.S. red lines more carefully—and then enforcing them more vigorously—to cultivating a reputation for greater risk-taking in competitions with U.S. geopolitical rivals. Taken together, they constitute an agenda for shoring up the credibility on which so much of U.S. foreign policy and the international order depends.

Understanding Credibility

In international politics, credibility represents the degree to which an actor's threats and promises are believed by other actors in the international system; it is a function of the degree to which an actor's words are taken to be believable. If a country's commitments are credible, then its adversaries and allies believe that those commitments can and will be upheld when subjected to pressure. If they are not considered credible, then there is some significant doubt about whether the country can make good on assurances or threats. "In international politics," Daryl Press writes, "credibility is a prized asset. A country whose promises are credible can build valuable alliances because potential allies will not fear betrayal or abandonment. A country whose threats are credible can deter many enemies and prevent costly wars rather than fight them."²

Credibility is thus a subjective perception rather than an objective reality—what matters is less whether a country *will* actually make good on its threats and promises than whether other actors *believe* that it will. "A bluff taken seriously," Henry Kissinger once wrote, "is more useful than a serious threat taken as a bluff."³ And like deterrence, credibility is a function of both perceived capabilities and perceived resolve. If a country possesses enormous military capabilities but is seen to lack the will or resolve to use them in a crisis, then its threats will not be credible to adversaries,

² See Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), especially p. 1; and Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Reshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, 2014, p. 376.

³ See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 299–300.

thus undermining deterrence, or to allies, thus undermining reassurance and reducing its ability to forge lasting coalitions. As Thomas Schelling wrote, “To *fight* abroad is a military act, but to *persuade* enemies or allies that one would fight abroad, under circumstances of great cost and risk, requires more than a military capability. It requires projecting intentions.”⁴ Likewise, a state may be perceived to have the will to defend its interests, but if it lacks the capabilities to effectively do so, its pledges will not be seen as credible. “Deterrence requires a combination of power, the will to use it, and the assessment of these by the potential aggressor,” Kissinger wrote in the early 1960s. “Moreover, deterrence is a product of those factors and not a sum. If any one of them is zero, deterrence fails.”⁵

U.S. policymakers have long been preoccupied with establishing and maintaining the credibility of American commitments, and with good reason, given the global role that Washington has played since World War II. For nearly four generations, the backbone of America’s geopolitical posture has been its worldwide network of alliances, partnerships, and security guarantees. By some estimates, the United States is now pledged—either formally or informally—to defend over sixty countries around the world.⁶ The United States relies on these guarantees to deter adversaries from pursuing aggression or aggrandizement; to dissuade allies from engaging in dangerous behavior, such as nuclear proliferation or arms-racing; and thereby to maintain stability and peace—and all the blessings that go with it—in the world’s crucial regions. These guarantees, in turn, serve their purpose only if both adversaries and allies believe that the United States can and will honor them.⁷ Credibility is thus the geopolitical coin of the realm for America; U.S. global strategy and the international system it supports hinge on whether American threats and promises are seen as convincing.

For U.S. policymakers, issues of credibility have taken on still greater importance as a result of the nuclear revolution. During the Cold War, the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union was, in the final analysis, contingent on America’s ability to convince both Moscow and American allies that Washington was willing to go to the most extreme lengths conceivable—waging nuclear war—to protect its friends. And because of the inherent difficulty of projecting this image, U.S. policymakers were especially attuned to demonstrating that America could be counted on in lesser contingencies. In essence, America had to persuade allies and partners that it was willing to run

⁴ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 36.

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 12.

⁶ See Adam Taylor, “The U.S. Is Bound by Treaties to Defend a Quarter of Humanity,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2015; and Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4, Spring 2015.

⁷ See Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “What Are America’s Alliances Good For?” *Parameters* 47, no. 2, Summer 2017; and William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 88–121.

moderate risks on their behalf if it hoped to convince them that it would run the ultimate risk on their behalf. As Robert McMahon notes, “the presence of nuclear weapons” was chief among the features of the postwar world that “combined to magnify dramatically the psychological component always present in great power decision making.”⁸

Yet if credibility has been central to America’s global posture, it has also been inherently difficult to generate and sustain. In his classic formulation, Schelling explained that the United States had to defend California if for no other reason than to convince adversaries that it would defend Oregon and Washington.⁹ But in reality, the task for American officials has always been subtler and more vexing. This is because American officials have had to convince adversaries and allies that the United States is willing to fight not only on behalf of its own physical security, but also on behalf of faraway countries whose *individual* security may matter relatively little to Washington, even if their *cumulative* security matters a great deal to the overall global balance of power. The United States has had to establish credibility not just with respect to “direct deterrence” but also with respect to “extended deterrence.” Doing so is inherently challenging, as Clausewitz wrote nearly two centuries ago: “One country may support another’s cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own. A moderately-sized force will be sent to its help; but if things go wrong the operation is pretty well written off, and one tries to withdraw at the smallest possible cost.”¹⁰ America’s postwar grand strategy has entailed a continuing struggle to overcome this ingrained dynamic in global affairs.

As a result, U.S. policymakers have long emphasized the need to possess military capabilities sufficient to defend American allies and partners in a crisis. They have also gone to great lengths to shore up the “resolve” variable the credibility equation—to convince friends and foes that Washington is willing to take risks and bear costs on its allies’ and partners’ behalf. In 1950, the Truman administration chose to fight in Korea, in large part to reassure Japan and especially the new NATO allies in Western Europe. At the same time, Washington was undertaking the military buildup associated with NSC-68 to develop a more credible suite of defense capabilities.¹¹ During the Cuban missile crisis, U.S. officials worried that a weak response would lead allies and adversaries around the world to question American resolve. “If we are unable to face up to the situation in Cuba against this kind of threat,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk remarked, “I think that they would be critically encouraged to go ahead and eventually feel like they’ve got it made as far

⁸ Robert J. McMahon, “Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 4, Fall 1991, p. 469.

⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p.56.

¹⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 603.

¹¹ See William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 4, 43–44.

as intimidating the United States is concerned.”¹² In the mid-1960s, the Johnson administration escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam in no small part to vindicate America’s reputation as a “good doctor”—to demonstrate the lengths to which it would go to defend threatened allies.¹³ And from the 1970s onward, concerns of credibility figured in other U.S. interventions and policies. In sum, U.S. policymakers have generally behaved as though sustaining credibility requires not simply possessing adequate capabilities but also offering regular demonstrations of American resolve. They have behaved as though U.S. commitments are basically interdependent, and so if Washington fails to honor one guarantee today, it could undermine other, potentially more important, guarantees tomorrow.¹⁴

Scholars, by contrast, have tended to take a more skeptical view of issues surrounding credibility. To be sure, the foremost early theorists of credibility were academics. Thomas Schelling, for instance, included in his classic 1966 book *Arms and Influence* this passage defending the demonstrative use of force to bolster perceptions of American credibility and resolve:

It is often argued that “face” is a frivolous asset to preserve, and that it is a sign of immaturity that a government can’t swallow its pride and lose face. It is undoubtedly true that false pride often tempts a government’s officials to take irrational risks or to do undignified things—to bully some small country that insults them, for example. But there is also the more serious kind of “face,” the kind that in modern jargon is known as a country’s “image,” consisting of other countries’ beliefs (their leaders’ beliefs, that is) about how the country can be expected to behave. It relates not to a country’s “worth” or “status” or even “honor,” but to its reputation for action. If the question is raised whether this kind of “face” is worth fighting over, the answer is that this kind of face is one of the few things worth fighting over. Few parts of the world are intrinsically worth the risk of serious war by themselves, especially when taken slice by slice, but defending them or running risks to protect them may preserve one’s commitments to action in other parts of the world and at later times. “Face” is merely the interdependence of a country’s commitments; it is a country’s reputation for action, the expectations other countries have about its behavior. We lost thirty thousand dead in Korea to save face for the United States and the United Nations, not to save South Korea for the South Koreans, and it was undoubtedly worth it.¹⁵

A later generation of scholars, however, departed from Schelling’s analysis. Few scholars question the importance of credibility per se, if credibility is defined as the perception that the United States will act to defend its key interests. What they have critiqued, rather, is the idea that establishing credibility requires regular demonstrations of American resolve, particularly through the use of

¹² Douglas Gibling, “The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3, June 2008, p. 428.

¹³ See, for example, Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 28.

¹⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 124; and McMahon, “Credibility and World Power.”

¹⁵ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 124.

force. Some scholars have noted, for instance, that concerns with resolve and credibility led the United States to undertake policies—such as escalation in Vietnam—that incurred losses far out of proportion to the reputational gains.¹⁶ Others claimed to find little evidence that past demonstrations of resolve actually mattered in affecting opponents' calculations of credibility. In one widely read study, Daryl Press contended that Western appeasement of Hitler at Munich had little or nothing to do with his subsequent aggression, and that Nikita Khrushchev's repeated climb-downs on Berlin and other issues in the late 1950s had scant impact on Western perceptions of his resolve.¹⁷ Press and other scholars argued that other variables—the balance of capabilities and the perceived importance of the interests at stake—were paramount in determining perceptions of credibility.¹⁸ Other scholars have made similar arguments, claiming that “politicians' persistent belief in the value of reputation for resolve is merely a cult of reputation,” or even, in an extreme form, that “credibility is an illusion—and an exceptionally dangerous illusion at that.”¹⁹

Such doubts may be most prevalent within the ivory tower, and relatively few policymakers would share academics' skepticism about the importance of credibility and demonstrations of resolve.²⁰ Yet it is worth noting that a similar skepticism has emerged in some surprising quarters of the policymaking community of late. As Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in 2016, then-President Obama believed that the U.S. foreign policy community “makes a fetish of ‘credibility’—particularly the sort of credibility purchased with force.” As the president acidly remarked, “Dropping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force.”²¹

It would require an extended essay to adjudicate these debates regarding credibility and its constituent parts. Yet three key points can briefly be made here. First, and most important, the more extreme critiques of credibility and U.S. policymakers' preoccupation therewith are badly overstated. For one thing, accepting that credibility is an illusion, or that past behavior has no impact on perceptions of an actor's subsequent credibility, requires accepting that normal rules of human interaction—in which past behavior is crucial to expectations about future behavior—are simply suspended in the international arena. If a person reneges on a commitment, his peers and

¹⁶ This is a principal theme of nearly all academic works on Vietnam.

¹⁷ Press, *Calculating Credibility*.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 8–9; Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes are High: Deterrence and Conflict among Major Powers* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002); and Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Shiping Tang, “Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 1, 2005, p. 34; and Christopher Fettweis, “Credibility and the War on Terror,” *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 4, Winter 2007/2008, p. 608.

²⁰ See Hal Brands, “The Real Gap: Why Scholars and Policymakers Disagree,” *The American Interest* 13, no. 1, September/October 2017.

²¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

interlocutors will likely doubt his sincerity with respect to other commitments; there is no logical reason to suspect that similar patterns do not prevail in international politics. For another thing, deeming credibility an illusion requires accepting that virtually all U.S. officials who think otherwise—in part because they know, from experience, that U.S. allies as well as adversaries are constantly assessing recent American behavior in hopes of divining what Washington will do in the next crisis—are simply mistaken. Not least, there is now considerable historical analysis and evidence illustrating that credibility does matter and past actions do indeed affect reputations. Scholars have convincingly argued that:

- Ronald Reagan’s decision not to retaliate meaningfully for Hezbollah’s attacks on the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 had a corrosive effect on how other terrorists and state sponsors perceived U.S. intentions. When U.S. officials threatened Syrian president Hafez al-Assad with retribution if he did not cease supporting Hezbollah, for instance, Assad replied that he did not credit American threats.²²
- Conversely, the U.S. willingness to defend South Korea in 1950 influenced Soviet perceptions of American resolve to resist further East bloc military advances. As William Stueck writes in his definitive history of the Korean War, “Stalin’s immediate successors learned the lesson that to arouse the United States from a slumber through blatant military action could prove a costly mistake. It would take more than a generation and a new group of leaders before the Soviet Union would run a repeat performance.”²³
- The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam did encourage additional East bloc challenges in the Third World—in Angola, for instance—by signaling a declining U.S. willingness to act decisively to head off Soviet and Cuban advances in peripheral areas.²⁴
- John F. Kennedy’s perceived irresolution in handling the Bay of Pigs invasion encouraged Khrushchev to bully him at the Vienna Summit in 1961. His actions there and in response to the construction of the Berlin Wall also influenced the Soviet decision to place missiles in Cuba a year later.²⁵

²² Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 247–248.

²³ Stueck, *The Korean War*, p. 353.

²⁴ Kathryn McNabb Cochran, *Strong Horse or Paper Tiger? Assessing the Reputational Effects of War Fighting*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2011), pp. 345–389.

²⁵ See Danielle Lupton, *Leaders, Perceptions and Reputations for Resolve*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2014), pp. 271–303.

- Early U.S. irresolution and failure to make good on coercive threats in dealing with the Balkan crisis in the early 1990s led actors in that crisis to doubt subsequent U.S. promises and threats. Later shows of resolve, by contrast, had a constructive impact on the subsequent behavior of those actors. “Whenever US officials failed to respond to probes and challenges, violence escalated. When resolve was demonstrated through mobilizing military forces or airstrikes, escalation was controlled.”²⁶
- Tepid U.S. responses to al-Qaeda attacks during the 1990s, along with the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia following the deaths of less than 20 American servicemen in 1993, encouraged Osama bin Laden to escalate his strikes in the belief that the United States would react to a shocking attack on the homeland by withdrawing from the greater Middle East.²⁷

Moreover, and notwithstanding the academic skepticism discussed above, there has also emerged a growing body of social science literature in recent years indicating that the extreme critiques of credibility are unpersuasive, because past actions and demonstrations of resolve do influence subsequent expectations. Studies have shown that:

- “States that have honored their commitments in the past are more likely to find alliance partners in the future. Conversely, alliance violations decrease the likelihood of future alliance formation.”²⁸
- Backing down in a dispute with a given challenger increases the likelihood that the challenger “will escalate the current dispute,” whereas an effective response that forces the challenger to back down decreases the likelihood that the challenger will subsequently escalate. In other words, retreating now encourages more severe challenges later; resisting now can have the opposite effect.²⁹
- “A defender that enjoys superiority in military resources but does not use force in some manner in a current conflict is at a higher risk of experiencing a re-challenge than is a defender that enjoys military superiority and uses it in some.” In essence, demonstrations

²⁶ Frank Harvey and John Mitten, “Fighting for Credibility: U.S. Reputation Building in Asymmetric Conflicts from the Gulf War to Syria,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3, September 2015, p. 514.

²⁷ See Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

²⁸ Gibler, “The Costs of Reneging,” p. 450.

²⁹ Paul Huth, Christopher Gelpi, and D. Scott Bennet, “The Escalation of Great Power Militarized Dispute: Testing Rational Deterrence Theory and Structural Realism,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3, 1993, p. 618.

of resolve through the use of force are important in shaping the future behavior of adversaries.³⁰

- “Behavior in earlier conflicts . . . becomes the basis for inferring likely behavior in response to subsequent challenges. . . . A country that yielded in a dispute in the previous year is more than two and one-half times as likely to be challenged than is a country that has not yielded in the previous ten years.”³¹

In short, there is good reason to think that credibility and resolve are more than mere figments of policymakers’ imaginations.

A second point, however, is that there are nonetheless limits to our understanding of how credibility works. There remain unresolved debates about whether credibility attaches to leaders or countries, whether it functions more strongly within a given relationship than across the breadth of a country’s relationships, how long a reputation for resolve or lack thereof lasts, and other issues.³² This is not surprising. Credibility is, after all, a state of mind. That means it is fairly difficult to observe, let alone measure, particularly because doing so often requires getting inside the head of foreign leaders who may have incentives to publicly misrepresent their true estimation of U.S. credibility. Accordingly, credibility is a subject to which there will likely always be attached some degree of uncertainty and ambiguity.

This leads to a third point, which is that concerns with credibility—and particularly with the role that demonstrations of resolve play in generating credibility—need to be kept in perspective. When the United States withdrew from Vietnam, it may have encouraged Moscow to push for advantage in peripheral areas such as Angola, but it evidently did not lead the Kremlin to doubt American willingness to fight for areas of greater importance, such as Western Europe.³³ The reason for this is not that credibility and reputation are unimportant; it is simply that past performance and perceptions of resolve are but one factor that determines the credibility of a commitment. Other issues—such as the strength of the interest at stake and the balance of capabilities—also play a vital role. In addition, there are limits to how far a country should go to establish a reputation for credibility and resolve. There was undoubtedly some reputational value in proving that the United States would absorb enormous costs to defend South Vietnam, for instance, but there was not so

³⁰ Joseph Grieco, “Repetitive Military Challenges and Recurrent International Conflicts, 1918–1994,” *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 2, 2001, p. 300.

³¹ Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2, 2015, pp. 481, 486.

³² Some of these issues were flagged many years ago in Robert Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” *International Security* 7, no. 3, Winter 1982–1983.

³³ Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall make related arguments in *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

much value as to outweigh the massive costs in lives and treasure. Credibility is worth cultivating and defending, but not at any price.

All of this is to say that credibility is a crucially important—if perhaps not all-important—factor in U.S. foreign policy. Unfortunately, America currently confronts a growing credibility gap in international affairs.

Credibility in Crisis

As noted, any effort to measure a country's credibility is an inherently fraught proposition. Credibility is a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon because perceptions of an actor's will and capabilities are constantly shifting in light of new information and evolving circumstances. Additionally, the perceptions that international observers have of American capabilities and resolve are often difficult to capture with precision, not least because foreign leaders may have good reason not to reveal their true assessments of U.S. policy. An ally that is seeking additional American support, for instance, may deliberately overstate its doubts regarding U.S. credibility. Finally, it is important to note that concerns among both U.S. and international observers about American credibility are essentially perpetual, precisely because credibility is so intangible and yet so central to America's geopolitical posture. All of these factors complicate efforts to quantify the level of American credibility today. Disclaimers notwithstanding, however, there is good reason to worry about this issue, because of three interlocking factors that have evidently affected international views of U.S. power and will in recent years.

The first factor is simply that the military balance has shifted in unfavorable ways. In the 1990s and early 2000s, U.S. credibility benefitted substantially from the unprecedented overmatch that the American military enjoyed not just globally but in every key regional theater. Over the past decade, however, U.S. capabilities have significantly declined relative to those of the competition. The U.S. defense budget fell from \$759 billion in 2010 to \$596 in 2015.³⁴ The rate of this drawdown, writes Katherine Blakeley, “has been faster than any other post-war drawdown since the Korean War at a compound annual growth rate of -5.5 percent.”³⁵ That drawdown, in turn, has led to deferred modernization (including for high-end conventional capabilities crucial to deterrence in theaters such as East Asia and Eastern Europe), alarming shortfalls in readiness, and declining force structure. At the end of the Obama years, the U.S. military was significantly smaller than the 1990s-era “base force,” which was considered the minimum force necessary to sustain Washington's global commitments in the early post-Cold War world, and which was unveiled at a

³⁴ U.S. military spending can be traced in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) annual reports and in its military spending database, available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>. See also Richard Sisk, “Obama's Last Defense Budget Adds Funds for Europe, Counterterrorism,” *Military.com*, February 9, 2016.

³⁵ Katherine Blakeley, *Analysis of the FY 2017 Defense Budget and Trends in Defense Spending* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), p. iv.

time when the international security environment was far more benign than what the U.S. faces today.³⁶

Meanwhile, U.S. adversaries and rivals have been building up as Washington has been building down. Whereas the United States has spent the last decade and a half focused on defeating Islamist extremists in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—and underwent a period of prolonged defense austerity beginning in 2011—China and Russia have been investing significantly in new military capabilities. As a result, Beijing and Moscow have recently reaped the fruits of sustained defense buildups emphasizing many of the capabilities needed to project power against American allies—and those needed to prevent the United States from coming to those allies' defense. China's buildup has been particularly impressive; constant-dollar defense outlays rose from \$26 billion in 1995 to \$214 billion in 2015.³⁷ Despite confronting economic difficulties, Russia was also able to roughly double defense spending over a ten-year period, pouring many of those resources into advanced conventional capabilities, rapid deployment and special operations forces, and nuclear weapons.³⁸ At the same time, challengers such as North Korea and Iran have been assiduously developing their own military capabilities meant to neutralize U.S. advantages—nuclear weapons and progressively longer-range delivery systems in the case of Pyongyang, and ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and other anti-access/area denial capabilities in the case of Tehran. It remains true, as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth have written, that the United States possesses a significant overall military lead vis-à-vis any single competitor, particularly in global power projection capabilities.³⁹ But America's relative military power has nonetheless diminished as the capabilities of its adversaries have advanced and as regional military balances have shifted adversely.

This shrinking margin of power is affecting U.S. credibility in two ways. Most directly, trends in the military balance have made it more difficult for America to uphold its commitments in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific in the event they are tested. Open-source analysis has revealed, for instance, that the United States would face enormous challenges in defending the Baltic states

³⁶ See 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); and David Ochmanek et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

³⁷ See the previously referenced SIPRI database 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.

³⁸ 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).

³⁹ 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.

from a determined Russian assault.⁴⁰ Similarly, the United States may now be reaching the point at which the costs of beating back a Chinese attack on Taiwan become prohibitive.⁴¹ Because these dynamics are unfolding in plain sight, it follows that they are making U.S. commitments progressively less credible. At the same time, declining military capabilities send problematic signals regarding American resolve. The amount of money that the country invests in its military is, after all, emblematic of how much it is willing to sacrifice to uphold its global obligations. A declining defense top-line can thus easily be interpreted as representing a declining willingness to sustain those obligations. A “smaller and less capable military,” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey warned in 2014, “could reduce our ability to intimidate opponents from escalating conflict.”⁴²

The shifting balance of capabilities is closely related to a second source of erosion, which is that U.S. adversaries are deliberately prioritizing strategies and tools meant to weaken the persuasiveness of American guarantees. As scholars such as Ankit Panda, Vipin Narang, and Jeffrey Lewis have observed, North Korea’s military strategy is aimed directly at the credibility of the U.S. alliance with South Korea. Pyongyang’s strategy likely entails nuclear strikes against U.S. forces or other targets in South Korea and Japan early in a conflict, in order to preempt efforts at regime change, coupled with the credible threat of delivering nuclear strikes on the U.S. homeland to deter a robust American response. The overall goal of this strategy is to “de-couple” the United States from South Korea by making it seem implausible that Washington would actually take the measures necessary to prevail in a serious conflict involving the North. “North Korea’s ability to hold the U.S. homeland at risk cuts a knife through the credibility of American extended deterrence commitments to Japan and South Korea,” Panda and Narang write.⁴³ Pyongyang’s strategy would seem to be having something of the desired effect. Japanese and North Korean elites are now increasingly willing to discuss the possibilities that their countries might acquire nuclear weapons in response to the North Korean threat—presumably because they are less confident that the United States would trade Seattle for Seoul or San Diego for Tokyo.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ 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).

⁴¹ Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. xxx, 338, 342; and 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.

⁴² James Rosen, “Military’s Top General Offers Grim Outlook on Nation’s Defense,” *McClatchy DC*, March 4, 2014.

⁴³ Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang, “North Korea’s ICBM: A New Missile and a New Era,” *War on the Rocks*, July 6, 2017; Jeffrey Lewis, “North Korea is Practicing for Nuclear War,” *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2017; and Leonie Allard, Mathieu Duchatel, and Francois Godemont, “Pre-Emptying Defeat: In Search of North Korea’s Nuclear Doctrine,” European Council on Foreign Relations, *Policy Brief*, November 2017.

⁴⁴ Van Jackson, “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Nuclear Umbrella,” *Foreign Policy*, May 18, 2015.

America's great power challengers are pursuing much the same goal, albeit by more diverse means. Both Russia and China are seeking to expand their geopolitical domains and roll back U.S. influence in their respective "near abroads." They recognize that doing so requires them to rupture the relationship between Washington and its allies and partners, because that relationship is what empowers Russian and Chinese neighbors to resist aggression and coercion. Accordingly, both countries are making determined efforts to attenuate those ties by undercutting the credibility of U.S. guarantees. The development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities, whether in the Russian periphery or the Western Pacific, is part of this program because it is meant to raise the costs and thus decrease the likelihood—both real and perceived—that the United States would come to the rescue in a crisis.⁴⁵ Russia's aggressive nuclear strategy, which emphasizes an early resort to nuclear strikes as part of the so-called escalatory de-escalation doctrine, is intended to produce the same effect by forcing the United States to pay a potentially exorbitant price for entering any conflict over, say, the Baltic states.⁴⁶ To support these efforts both Russia and China have been engaged in a thoroughgoing quantitative and qualitative buildup of their nuclear capabilities that might further call into question the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees.⁴⁷

Russia and China are also seeking to undermine American credibility more subtly, through so-called gray zone approaches to expansion and coercion. The goals that Russia and China are pursuing are indeed significant, but their methods are calibrated and incremental.⁴⁸ In essence, Russia and China are seeking to revise the status quo but avoid triggering U.S. alliance commitments via the overt use of force against the United States or countries to which it has provided security guarantees. By doing so, they are intending to sow doubt as to whether the United States can indeed uphold the existing order in regions such as Eastern Europe and East Asia; they are also attempting to foster uncertainty as to whether the United States will in fact respond to larger provocations down the road. In other words, Russia and China are pursuing what Schelling referred to as "salami tactics" or "tactics of erosion." "If the United States can't handle the small threats," asks one analyst, "then how can it handle the big ones?"⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Edelman and McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free*.

⁴⁶ See Max Fisher, "How World War III Became Possible," *Vox*, June 29, 2015.

⁴⁷ For more on Russian and Chinese nuclear modernization, see the statement of Dr. Mark B. Schneider, senior analyst, National Institute for Public Policy, in U.S. Congress, *Nuclear Weapons Modernization in Russia and China: Understanding the Impacts to the United States*, transcript of hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, Strategic Forces Subcommittee held on October 14, 2011 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), pp. 33–42; and Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Nuclear Posture Review 2018* (Washington, DC: DoD, February 2018), pp. 7–11, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf>.

⁴⁸ On these initiatives, see Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015); and Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," Foreign Policy Research Institute, *E-Notes*, February 5, 2016.

⁴⁹ Jackson, "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Nuclear Umbrella."

Consider the example of Russian policy. In Ukraine, Russia initially took an approach—the “little green men” strategy, combined with a reliance on “volunteer” forces in eastern Ukraine—meant to achieve revisionist aims without overtly employing identifiable Russian military forces. Similarly, Russian officials have literally moved the wire fences marking the separation between Georgia and the Russian-backed breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the dead of night.⁵⁰ And although these efforts are geared toward coercing or intimidating non-U.S. treaty allies, the Russians are pursuing a more limited version of these tactics in dealing with other European states. Particularly since 2014, Moscow has regularly attempted to intimidate U.S. treaty allies in the Baltic region and elsewhere by illegally overflying their airspace, violating their territorial waters, and even reportedly mounting limited and unacknowledged forays into their territory.⁵¹ The effect of these various initiatives—and, undoubtedly, the intention—has been to raise uncomfortable questions about the credibility of U.S. alliance guarantees by generating uncertainty about whether and how strongly America is able and willing to push back against such tactics. In essence, Russia is attacking U.S. credibility through approaches that span the conflict spectrum.

Chinese policy offers an even more compelling example of this phenomenon. China’s offensives in the East China Sea and South China Sea have been undeniably expansionist yet carefully metered. By creating artificial islands, staking expansive maritime sovereignty claims, and coercing neighboring states that stand in the way, China has been seeking to set the contours of a new, Sino-centric regional order. Yet Beijing has been doing so through gradualist tactics that are specifically designed not to be so provocative as to give America cause for a significant conventional military response. In doing so, China is incrementally shifting the regional status quo in its favor, thus creating doubts about the relevance of American security guarantees and leading countries in the region to wonder if Washington will respond forcefully should China’s assertiveness escalate. As one analyst writes, “The persistent increase in China’s intimidating presence in the South China Sea has the effect, intended or not, of raising doubts about America’s course there. The appearance grows that the U.S. may, for a while, offer encouragement to its allies . . . but can do little or nothing to actually prevent China’s military dominance of the maritime region.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Andrew Higgins, “In Russia’s ‘Frozen Zone,’ a Creeping Border with Georgia,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2016; and Christopher Chivvis, *Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” and What Can Be Done About It* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, March 22, 2017).

⁵¹ See, for example, Michael Birnbaum, “Russian Warplanes Keep Buzzing the Baltics. Here’s How NATO Scrambles,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 2016.

⁵² William Frasure, “U.S. Credibility in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, May 3, 2016; James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “Deterring China in the ‘Gray Zone’: Lessons of the South China Sea for U.S. Alliances,” *Orbis* 61, no. 3, 2017; and Robert Haddick, “America Has No Answer to China’s Salami-Slicing,” *War on the Rocks*, February 6, 2014.

Such concerns seem to have influenced the calculus of Rodrigo Duterte, who has undertaken an effort since mid-2016 to reposition the Philippines between Washington and Beijing. “America has lost” the competition for regional influence, he declared. Or, as one of Duterte’s confidants has commented, “He feels aligning with our allies against China is not going to benefit the country.” “The idea is that our allies are not going to war for us, so why should we align with them?”⁵³ Similarly, there are reports that South Korean and Japanese officials “remain concerned with gray zone challenges . . . and want more clarity about how the United States will contribute to their defense in these situations.”⁵⁴ Across a variety of competitions and relationships, U.S. adversaries are pursuing strategies that call American credibility into doubt.

These strategies have interacted with a third factor causing the erosion of U.S. credibility—the observed behavior of America itself. Preserving credibility has long been an abiding preoccupation of American officials. Yet over the past decade, and under presidential administrations of both parties, there have been several key episodes and developments that have cast greater doubt on the U.S. role and intentions in global affairs.

Many of these developments have involved Syria. In 2007, the Israeli government provided the George W. Bush administration with intelligence indicating that the Assad regime in Syria was constructing a nuclear reactor as part of a clandestine nuclear weapons program. There was also, reportedly, information implicating North Korea in the construction of the reactor. As Vice-President Richard Cheney and other advisers pointed out, the Syrian reactor thus challenged American credibility on two grounds. First, it cut across promises made by President Bush after 9/11, when he publicly declared that the United States would not permit “the world’s most dangerous regimes” to develop “the world’s most dangerous weapons.” Second, the suspected North Korean role in developing the reactor transgressed the unambiguous warning Bush had issued after Pyongyang’s first nuclear test in October 2006, when he declared that Washington would hold the Kim regime responsible for the transfer of nuclear technology to other states or non-state actors. In the end, however, the administration, overburdened with two difficult wars, divided on how imminent and dangerous the threat was, and conscious that it had been burned before by seemingly solid intelligence about a rogue state’s WMD programs, declined to strike. Instead, Bush acquiesced in Israeli’s decision to bomb the reactor. As Cheney and others lamented

⁵³ Ben Blanchard, “Duterte Aligns Philippines with China, says U.S. Has Lost,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016; and Gordon Chang, “America, Not Duterte, Failed the Philippines,” *The National Interest*, April 16, 2017.

⁵⁴ See Brad Glosserman, “Struggling with the Gray Zone: Trilateral Cooperation to Strengthen Deterrence in Northeast Asia,” *Issues and Insights* 15, no. 13, 2015, p. v.

at the time and after, the administration thereby missed a chance to demonstrate its credibility on two key policy issues.⁵⁵

The second and higher-profile incident involving Syria was the infamous “red line” episode of 2013. The year prior, Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, had casually announced that the use or large-scale movement of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would cross an American “red line” and thus merit an unspecified but presumably significant military response. After a series of relatively small-scale chemical attacks in early 2013, the regime then carried out a massive attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, causing over a thousand civilian deaths. The Obama administration subsequently prepared to take punitive military action against Assad, with the Pentagon winding up for airstrikes and U.S. officials publicly arguing that Washington’s credibility—both as guarantor of the international norm against chemical weapons usage and protector of the international order more broadly—was on the line. “It is directly related to our credibility and whether countries still believe the United States when it says something,” Secretary of State John Kerry remarked.⁵⁶ In the event, however, Obama drew back from military action after the United Kingdom dropped out of the coalition, after the president then surprised his own advisers by seeking congressional authorization for a strike, after it became clear that such authorization was unlikely, and then, finally, after the Russian government interceded by offering to broker a diplomatic solution. The resulting arrangement rid Assad of some but not all of his chemical weapons stockpiles—as demonstrated when the regime again undertook a massive chemical weapons attack on the civilian population in early 2017. The September 2013 deal with Russia and Assad definitively averted U.S. military action that was, in all likelihood, not forthcoming at this point in any event.⁵⁷

Critics of the Obama administration seized on the episode—both the slapdash quality of American decision-making and the ultimate outcome of the affair—as evidence of the administration’s fecklessness. Government officials and Obama supporters, by contrast, argued that U.S. credibility had not been undermined—because, in their view, American coercive threats had produced the eventual settlement—and claimed that concerns about reputation and credibility were overdone.⁵⁸ Obama, for his part, later referred to the incident as one of his proudest moments, because he was

⁵⁵ For more on this episode, see Elliott Abrams, “Bombing the Syrian Reactor: The Untold Story,” *Commentary*, February 1, 2013; David Sanger and Mark Mazzetti, “Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2007; and Richard Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold, 2011), pp. 470–472. See also Bob Woodward, “In Cheney’s Memoir, It is Clear Iraq’s Lessons Didn’t Sink In,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2011; its rejoinder, Elliott Abrams, Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, and John Hannah, “The Right Call on the Syrian Threat,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2011; and M.J. Lee, “Smackdown: Bob Woodward vs. Team Cheney,” *Politico*, September 16, 2011.

⁵⁶ John Cassidy, “John Kerry’s Case for Bombing Syria,” *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2013.

⁵⁷ See Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”; Glen Kessler, “President Obama and the ‘Red Line’ on Syria’s Chemical Weapons,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2013; and Eric Sterner, “Dictators and Deterrence: Syria’s Assad, Chemical Weapons, and the Threat of U.S. Military Action,” *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 5, 2014, pp. 407–423.

⁵⁸ For a defense, see Derek Chollet, “Obama’s Red Line, Revisited,” *Politico*, July 19, 2016.

able to pull back from military involvement in a complex Middle Eastern civil war and rid Syria of some 1300 tons of chemical weapons.⁵⁹ Sorting out whether Washington gained more than it lost in the red line incident would require more extensive analysis. What is clear is that the incident fostered a widespread perception that the United States was unenthusiastic at best about enforcing its own commitments via military action, and that it had thereby undercut America's reputation for decisive action in international affairs.

Chuck Hagel, Obama's Secretary of Defense at the time, later said that "our adversaries were watching this too," and that "we were losing credibility everywhere in the world" as a result of the outcome.⁶⁰ Kerry had remarked before the planned strikes that the "credibility and future interest of the United States of America and our allies" were implicated, and that "our interests would be seriously set back in many respects if we are viewed as not capable, or willing, most important, to follow through on the things that we say matter to us."⁶¹ Looking back on the incident, Kerry later acknowledged that the failure to strike "cost us significantly in the region. And I know that and so does the president. . . . Perception can often just be the reality."⁶² Indeed, several U.S. partners in the Middle East—particularly in the Persian Gulf—were reportedly surprised and unsettled by the lack of military action to enforce the red line. (Although none of those partners were willing to participate in the airstrikes, some of them were, reportedly, willing to pick up the financial tab for U.S. operations.⁶³) "Iran is the new great power of the Middle East," the Saudi ambassador in Washington reportedly lamented, "and the U.S. is the old."⁶⁴

Such concerns even spilled over beyond the region. French President Francois Hollande commented that "this signal was interpreted as weakness from the international community," and Japanese defense experts reportedly fretted about what the episode indicated regarding U.S. red lines in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶⁵ "If you are not going to enforce red lines you should not talk about [them]," one Japanese observer commented.⁶⁶ Likewise, another report indicated that U.S.

⁵⁹ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

⁶⁰ Anjali Tsui, "Chuck Hagel: U.S. Credibility Was Hurt by Policy in Syria," *PBS.org*, October 11 2016.

⁶¹ Daniel Larison, "The 'Failure' to Bomb Syria and the Myth of 'Credibility,'" *American Conservative*, December 9, 2016; and "Full Transcript: Kerry, Hagel, and Dempsey Testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on Syria," *Washington Post*, September 3, 2013.

⁶² Natasha Bertrand, "Kerry: Not Enforcing Obama's Red Line in Syria 'Cost' the U.S. Considerably in the Middle East," *Business Insider*, December 5, 2016.

⁶³ On this point, see David Wade, "Lessons from the 'Red Line' Crisis," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017.

⁶⁴ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

⁶⁵ James Kirchick, "Credibility Counts," *The Weekly Standard*, December 26, 2016. Such perceptions were confirmed to one of the authors in later conversations with Japanese and European defense and foreign ministry officials.

⁶⁶ Kirchick, "Credibility Counts."

allies in the Asia-Pacific “have privately expressed fears that Washington might similarly abandon its defense commitments to them if North Korea or China attacked.”⁶⁷ These reactions should not have been surprising to U.S. officials, for even Obama had argued that U.S. credibility was on the line prior to drawing back from action: “It’s important for us to recognize that when over a thousand people are killed . . . and there is no action, then we’re sending a signal that that international norm doesn’t mean much. And that is a danger to our national security.”⁶⁸ This is not to say, of course, that U.S. action in Syria in 2013 would have deterred Vladimir Putin from annexing Crimea in 2014, as some observers have argued. But it is more plausible that U.S. abstention created a more inviting context for Putin to use force in Syria in 2015. More broadly, it appears evident that global perceptions were affected by the red line episode.

Obama sent ambiguous signals regarding American credibility in other ways, as well. He called for regime change in Syria by declaring that Assad must go—thereby attaching U.S. prestige to the achievement of that outcome—and then failed to generate sufficient pressure to bring that result about. The administration’s failure to enforce the Syria red line, as well as its reluctance to push back against Iranian expansionism in the Middle East while negotiating the nuclear deal with Tehran, reportedly led some U.S. regional partners to doubt whether Washington was still willing to act as a check on destabilizing Iranian actions. That concern, in turn, may have played a role in the Saudi decision to invade Yemen in early 2015, a move that further destabilized the region.⁶⁹

In East Asia, the administration repeatedly declared that Chinese island-building, excessive maritime claims, and coercion were unacceptable. But its responses to the Chinese offensive were sometimes hesitant or ineffective, as was the case in 2012, when China ignored a U.S.-brokered stand-down in Beijing’s confrontation with Manila over Scarborough Shoal and the United States then inflicted few meaningful penalties on Beijing.⁷⁰ More broadly, the fact that Washington failed to generate sufficient leverage to halt or meaningfully impede China’s progress—even as it consistently called on Beijing to show restraint—created a widespread impression that the United States was unable or unwilling to uphold the regional status quo. “The United States’ desire to

⁶⁷ See Bruce Klingner, “Rebalancing to the Pacific: Asia Pivot or Divot?” in Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength: Assessing America’s Ability to Provide for the Common Defense* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2015), available at <http://index.heritage.org/military/2015/important-essays-analysis/rebalancing-pacific-asia-pivot-divot/>.

⁶⁸ Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama and the Presidents of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia,” White House, August 30, 2013, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/remarks-president-obama-and-presidents-estonia-lithuania-and-latvia>.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, David Kirkpatrick, “As U.S. and Iran Seek Nuclear Deal, Saudi Arabia Makes Its Own Moves,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2015; Yaroslav Trofimov, “Like Israel, U.S. Arab Allies Fear Obama’s Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2015; “Senior Saudi Prince Condemns Obama Comments on Middle East,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2015; F. Gregory Gause, “Why The Iran Deal Scares Saudi Arabia,” *New Yorker*, November 26, 2013; Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), especially chapters 9, 10; and Ilan Goldenberg, “A Strategy to Push Back Iran in Syria,” Center for a New American Security, *Commentary*, September 24, 2015.

⁷⁰ See Curtis China, “Red-Line Warning Haunts U.S. Ties in Asia,” *CNN*, November 1, 2016; Haddick, “America Has No Answer to China’s Salami-Slicing.”

avoid conflict meant that every time China acted assertively or defied international law in the South China Sea, Washington instinctively took steps to reduce tensions, thereby allowing China to make incremental gains,” wrote Ely Ratner, deputy national security adviser to Vice-President Joseph Biden. “The lack of U.S. resistance has led Beijing to conclude that the United States will not compromise its relationship with China over the South China Sea.”⁷¹ Similarly, another group of analysts noted that “in private conversations, U.S. government officials frequently express the view that current policies are insufficient. The inability of U.S. policymakers to deter coercive actions or to articulate a coherent gray zone strategy has raised questions about Washington’s ability to protect U.S. interests, to integrate China into the international order, and to maintain existing alliance commitments.”⁷²

Finally, Obama encouraged doubts about U.S. credibility through his rhetoric. Obama, through much of his tenure, argued that the United States should focus more on domestic affairs than on foreign affairs—that it should prioritize nation-building at home rather than nation-building abroad. He frequently denigrated the possibility of military action against American adversaries such as Iran, even as the administration insisted that “all options are on the table” in confronting the Iranian nuclear program. The president also made clear his skepticism regarding U.S. allies, referring to them as “free-riders.” And, of course, the president publicly denigrated the concept of credibility, dismissing it as an irrational preoccupation of the foreign policy elite.⁷³ Words as well as actions matter in international affairs, and Obama’s words sometimes sent signals—intended or unintended—that did not reinforce America’s reputation for resolve.

In fairness, the Obama administration did take—and deserves credit for—some measures to strengthen U.S. credibility. After the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the administration launched the European Reassurance Initiative and later spearheaded NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence initiative, both meant to begin redressing the dangerous imbalance of military power along the alliance’s eastern flank. Obama himself visited Estonia in 2014, declaring that the Baltic states would never again lose their independence in an effort to draw a clear red line around America’s Article V allies.⁷⁴ In the Asia-Pacific, the Obama administration reaffirmed that the Senkaku Islands were covered by the U.S.-Japan military alliance, and the U.S. Navy assisted in the

⁷¹ Ely Ratner, “Course Correction: How to Stop China’s Maritime Advance,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 4, July/August 2017, p. 67.

⁷² Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), p. 19.

⁷³ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”; and David Karl, “How Sincere Were Obama’s Threats to Stop Iranian Nuclear Proliferation?” *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2016.

⁷⁴ Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia,” White House, September 3, 2014, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>; and “NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence,” NATO factsheet, May 2017, available at http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf.

resupply of Filipino Marines on Second Thomas Shoal when it appeared that Beijing was determined to exert control over that disputed feature.⁷⁵ In 2016, a strong—and apparently effective—warning to Beijing not to further upset the status quo at Scarborough Shoal also demonstrated that the United States did retain some credibility vis-à-vis China.⁷⁶ But these measures notwithstanding, as Obama left office there was still a widespread perception—which, when it comes to credibility, is the same thing as reality—that American resolve had been lacking in recent years. As King Abdullah II of Jordan remarked, “I think I believe in American power more than Obama does.”⁷⁷

These concerns have continued to grow during the Trump administration. During his campaign for the presidency in 2015–2016, and also after becoming president, Trump made a number of statements and undertook several key policy departures that added to international doubts about American credibility. The president termed NATO “obsolete” and raised the possibility that the alliance’s eastern-most members might be left to fend for themselves if attacked. He argued that Washington should encourage Japan and South Korea to develop nuclear arsenals in order to enable U.S. geopolitical retrenchment. He repeatedly castigated U.S. allies for failing to “pay their fair share” and occasionally spoke of demanding higher payments from them if the United States were to continue guaranteeing their security.⁷⁸ On his first trip as president to Europe, he pointedly refused to explicitly endorse Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty; leading advisers subsequently cast all U.S. relationships—including alliances—as transactional marriages of convenience rather than deep and enduring relationships cemented by mutual interests and mutual values.⁷⁹ In the Asia-Pacific, the administration pulled out from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade accord, an agreement that the United States had catalyzed and which was widely seen as a bellwether for U.S. commitment to the region in the face of China’s rise. “For America’s friends and partners, ratifying the TPP is a litmus test of your credibility and seriousness of purpose,” Singapore’s prime minister had earlier commented.⁸⁰

To be clear, Trump subsequently walked back some of his more inflammatory comments about NATO and other U.S. alliances, and on his second trip to Europe he did explicitly endorse Article

⁷⁵ Ankit Panda, “Obama: Senkakus Covered Under U.S.-Japan Security Treaty,” *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2014.

⁷⁶ Zack Cooper and Jake Douglas, “Successful Signaling at Scarborough Shoal?” *War on the Rocks*, May 2, 2016.

⁷⁷ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

⁷⁸ See, for example, Cassandra Vinograd, “Donald Trump Remarks on NATO Trigger Alarm Bells in Europe,” *NBC News*, July 21, 2016, available at <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-remarks-nato-trigger-alarm-bells-europe-n613911>; Stephanie Condon, “Donald Trump: Japan, South Korea Might Need Nuclear Weapons,” *CBS News*, March 29, 2016, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-japan-south-korea-might-need-nuclear-weapons/>; and Peter Baker, “Trump Says NATO Allies Don’t Pay Their Share. Is That True?” *New York Times*, May 26, 2017.

⁷⁹ Susan Glasser, “Trump National Security Team Blindsided by NATO Speech,” *Politico*, June 5, 2017; and H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017.

⁸⁰ Matthew Pennington, “Singapore PM: U.S. Credibility on the Line over TPP Trade Deal,” *Seattle Times*, August 1, 2016.

V.⁸¹ His administration has so far remained committed to initiatives such as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and the European Deterrence Initiative (formerly the European Reassurance Initiative), and it sought to restore U.S. credibility on chemical weapons issues by striking a Syrian air base after another major chemical weapons attack on civilians in April 2017. (It should be noted, however, that the administration perhaps unintentionally encouraged that attack by—just a few days earlier—indicating that it was no longer opposed to Assad remaining in power. And, as noted subsequently, the attack was so limited in scope and risk that it is not clear how much credibility it actually recouped.⁸²) The president's advisers have also taken pains to underscore American commitment to allies and partners, and recent U.S. strategy documents—the *National Security Strategy* released in late 2017, as well as the *National Defense Strategy* and *Nuclear Posture Review* completed in early 2018—strongly emphasize the need to sustain U.S. commitments and strengthen America's geopolitical posture.⁸³ Finally, the administration did secure a significant short-term increase in military spending through the bipartisan budget deal of February 2018. But there is still no doubt that the overall result of Trump's ascendancy has been to create new speculation about America's orientation in global affairs and the credibility of its traditional guarantees.

"The times when we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over," German chancellor Angela Merkel commented after Trump's trip to Europe in May 2017. "We Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands."⁸⁴ "Trump's emerging transactional foreign policy is not reassuring," a Filipino official commented.⁸⁵ In the United States, Senator John McCain acknowledged that "many are questioning whether America is still committed" to its traditional interests, values, and positions.⁸⁶ And there are already signs that American rivals such as China are positioning themselves to reap the benefits of a decreasing U.S. commitment to the

⁸¹ Dan Merica, Kevin Liptak, and Jeff Zeleny, "Trump, Showered in Polish Praise, Backs NATO's Article 5," *CNN*, July 6, 2017.

⁸² See, for instance, Rebecca Savransky, "McCain: Trump Aides 'Partially to Blame' for Encouraging Syrian Regime's Behavior," *The Hill*, April 9, 2017.

⁸³ *National Security Strategy 2017* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018), available at <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; and OSD, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*.

⁸⁴ Eli Watkins, "While Campaigning, Merkel Says Europeans Can't 'Completely' Rely on U.S., Others," *CNN*, May 29, 2017.

⁸⁵ Javier Hernandez, "Trump's Mixed Signals on South China Sea Worry Asian Allies," *New York Times*, May 10, 2017.

⁸⁶ "Remarks by Senator John McCain at U.S. Studies Center in Sydney, Australia," May 30, 2017, available at <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2017/5/remarks-by-senator-john-mccain-at-u-s-studies-center-in-sydney-australia>.

international system. The Russian government, likewise, has made clear that it looks forward to the transition to a “post-West world order.”⁸⁷

In sum, American credibility is increasingly under strain, as a result of growing challenges to both America’s post-Cold War superiority in military capabilities and global perceptions of its strategic resolve. In an evolving international system marked by growing upheaval, volatility, and opportunistic behavior by revisionist actors, the erosion of American credibility is likely to have a further destabilizing effect.

Repairing America’s Credibility

What can be done to strengthen America’s credibility in the years to come? Here the multifaceted nature of credibility is essential to understand. If credibility is a complex amalgam of a country’s capabilities and its perceived will to use those capabilities, then the United States will need to take steps in both of these areas. Because the erosion of U.S. credibility has occurred over multiple years and presidential administrations, repairing that credibility will also be a prolonged, ongoing process. There are certain near-term steps Washington can take to shore up both its capabilities and its reputation for resolve and commitment, but a comprehensive program for doing so will necessarily take time and sustained effort.

Taking Declaratory Policy Seriously

The first element of that program should be a concerted effort to clean up what has been, in recent years, a remarkably sloppy and self-defeating approach to declaratory policy. The cardinal rule of credibility is that nations should set their red lines carefully and purposefully—and then enforce them vigorously when they are transgressed.⁸⁸ Yet in recent years, both Republican and Democratic administrations have fallen into the habit of drawing red lines—sometimes quite haphazardly—then following through only weakly, inconsistently, or ambiguously.

As we have seen, the Obama administration drew its Syria red line somewhat casually, then declined to enforce it following the Assad regime’s massive chemical weapons attack of August 2013.⁸⁹ The administration also struggled to match rhetoric with policy in other areas, such as the South China Sea. But it should be stressed that failures of this sort have been a bipartisan affair. The Bush administration issued a seemingly unambiguous warning against the transfer of North Korean nuclear technology to any other nation or actor in 2006, but remained on the sidelines

⁸⁷ Lizzie Dearden, “Russia’s Foreign Minister Calls for ‘Post-West World Order’ in Speech to Global Leaders,” *The Independent*, February 18, 2017; and Clay Chandler, “Has Donald Trump Ceded Global Leadership to China’s Xi Jinping?” *Fortune*, June 3, 2017.

⁸⁸ The case for care and caution in drawing red lines is articulated in Bruno Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 3, Fall 2014.

⁸⁹ In addition to the sources cited previously, see Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, “The Thick Red Line: Implications of the 2013 Chemical-Weapons Crisis for Deterrence and Transatlantic Relations,” *Survival* 59, no. 6, December 2017–January 2018.

when Pyongyang was caught transferring a virtual duplicate of its plutonium reactor to Syria, essentially leaving enforcement of a U.S. red line to Israel.

The Trump administration has fared even worse in this regard. The administration did enforce the Obama administration's red line against chemical weapons use in Syria by using 59 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles to strike a Syrian air base after a particularly egregious chemical attack against the civilian population in March 2017. "The more we fail to respond to the use of these weapons, the more we begin to normalize their use," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explained, in a clear re-articulation of the original U.S. position. As discussed in greater detail below, however, it is not clear that the strike was forceful or wide-ranging enough to have the desired effect in restoring the credibility of American warnings against chemical weapons use—as demonstrated by the fact that the Syrian regime was again using chemical weapons less than a year later. Relatedly, the administration has subsequently done little to respond to those more recent chemical weapons attacks (for instance, the series of chlorine gas attacks by regime forces in Douma in January and February 2018).⁹⁰ In some ways, the Trump administration has found itself repeating its predecessor's performance in trumpeting the importance of a declared red line, but then not defending that red line as strenuously as the rhetoric might have led one to expect.

This dynamic has been even more pronounced with respect to North Korea. According to Van Jackson's study of 30 years of U.S.-North Korean crises, "Bluffing erodes threat credibility, while honest signaling preserves it." Yet the Trump administration has often seemed to ignore this maxim. Even before he assumed office, Trump put American credibility on the line by tweeting that a North Korean test of an ICBM capable of reaching the United States "won't happen." Several ballistic missile tests that appeared to demonstrate intercontinental capability, however, revealed that this was a red line that the administration was unwilling or unable to enforce. During the summer of 2017, the president then threatened—apparently in off-the-cuff fashion—that if North Korea continued to threaten America, "They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen." Again, when North Korea responded by threatening to fire several nuclear-armed missiles toward Guam, the administration's response was mostly rhetorical. Throughout this period, moreover, Trump regularly muddled his own declaratory statements by suggesting that he might be open to negotiations with Kim, and by repeatedly singling out South Korea for criticism in the

⁹⁰ Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper, and Michael D. Shear, "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria," *New York Times*, April 6, 2017; United Nations Security Council, Technical Secretariat, *Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding an Alleged Incident in Khan Shaykhun, Syrian Arab Republic, April 2017* (United Nations Security Council, June 30, 2017), available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1720662.pdf>; and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, *Seventh Report of the Organisation For the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism* (United Nations Security Council, October 26, 2017), available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1734930.pdf>. For more on continued chemical weapons use, see Michael Schwartz, "U.S. Accuses Syria of New Chemical Weapons Use," *New York Times*, January 23, 2018.

middle of an ongoing confrontation with North Korea.⁹¹ The point here is not necessarily that the United States should have been willing to go to war over North Korean rhetoric or missile tests, but simply that the administration erred by making strong declaratory statements that it was in no position to substantiate when challenged. The ultimate effect of all this is not yet clear, but for those who worry about the restoration of diminished U.S. credibility, it has not been an encouraging series of events.

As a result of missteps by administrations of both parties, then, the United States has undermined what scholars refer to as its “signaling reputation.”⁹² Rectifying that damage will require that current and future administrations take greater care when putting American credibility on the line—and show greater resolve in defending it when it comes under doubt. To be clear, there are healthy debates to be had about where exactly American red lines should be drawn regarding North Korea, the South China Sea, or any number of issues, and what measures should ensue if those red lines are transgressed. What is essential, however, is that such declaratory statements should be issued only after careful deliberation and planning regarding the importance of the issue at stake and the likely response (or range of possible responses) to a challenge. During the Cold War, when nuclear declaratory policy lay at the heart of strategic deterrence, policymakers generally—if not always—gave greater care to such pronouncements because of the terrible implications of getting these matters wrong. With the renewal of great power competition and, in particular, nuclear competition, there is all the more reason to take greater care and attention in the drafting of policy statements than has been the norm in more recent times.

Re-Investing in Defense

Cleaning up the messiness that has characterized declaratory policy will be a necessary condition for restoring America’s reputation for resolve, but it will not be sufficient. Adversaries and allies will be looking not only to American words but also to American deeds, and this implies changes in America’s observed behavior as well as its stated intentions. This leads to a second key imperative of any program to reset allied and adversary perceptions of the United States: launching a long-term effort to rebuild U.S. military capabilities, thereby strengthening the material foundations of American credibility.

As previously noted, since 2011 U.S. defense spending has declined and American strengths have eroded, just as both Russia and China have been increasing their own military outlays and

⁹¹ Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 193; Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, “‘It Won’t Happen,’ Donald Trump Says of North Korean Missile Test,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2017; Saba Hamedy and Joyce Tseng, “All the Times President Trump Has Insulted North Korea,” *CNN Politics*, December 1, 2017, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-north-korea-insults-timeline/index.html>. The impromptu and unscripted “fire and fury” remark at Bedminster in August 2017 is discussed in Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), pp. 291–292.

⁹² For the importance of “signaling reputation,” see Keren Yarhi-Milo, “After Credibility: American Foreign Policy in the Trump Era,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 1, January/February 2018, pp. 68–77.

deploying capabilities aimed at decoupling Washington from its allies. Today, the United States needs to begin a sustained increase in defense spending in order to strengthen its ability to meet commitments that are coming under growing pressure and—just as importantly—signal American resolve in a more competitive geopolitical environment. Although this may sound like very broad guidance, in fact this approach represents a tried-and-true strategy for refurbishing U.S. credibility after previous periods of retrenchment. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, for instance, significant hikes in defense spending enabled the procurement and fielding of capabilities designed to offset the Soviet military gains of the prior decades. Symbolically, moreover, they served as a down payment on improved credibility until those capabilities began to come online. As Soviet officials acknowledged, America and its allies were building military strength “with unprecedented means and speed.”⁹³

The Trump administration has committed rhetorically to undertaking such a buildup, even invoking the Reagan-era slogan “peace through strength.” To date, however, action has fallen short of rhetoric. As Katherine Blakeley has noted, the Trump administration’s initial plans for defense spending fell far short of the Reagan-era buildup or even the more modest increases deemed necessary by the Department of Defense. The more recent two-year budget deal completed in February 2018 improves matters somewhat, as it will allow the Pentagon to address severe readiness problems and sustain badly needed modernization programs such as the B-21. It also has some symbolic value as a demonstration that the era of defense cutbacks and austerity is over—at least for the time being. But the resulting defense increases currently appear likely to flatten out after Fiscal Year 2019, and so the deal does not seem to presage sustained, annual growth in defense spending. Given that both Secretary of Defense Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dunford have testified that continuing 3–5 percent annual growth above inflation will be necessary to compete with Russia and China (among other threats) in the long run, this bodes ill for U.S. credibility over the medium and long term.⁹⁴

In addressing this problem, there is an urgent need to respond to Chinese and Russian investments in capabilities—particularly, their nuclear forces and anti-access/area-denial capabilities—that cause others to question whether the United States can still uphold its more challenging commitments in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific. The specific capabilities needed to address these threats have been discussed and debated in detail elsewhere, and that

⁹³ See Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), pp. 216–218; Daniel Wirls, *Buildup: The Politics of Defense in the Reagan Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, p. 89.

⁹⁴ Katherine Blakeley, *Defense Spending in Historical Context: A New Reaganesque Buildup?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, November 8, 2017); Hal Brands, “Trump’s Budget Deal Helps the Military (But the Fight Isn’t Over),” *The Weekly Standard*, February 12, 2018.

discussion will not be recapitulated extensively here.⁹⁵ Yet in thinking about the relationship of specific military capabilities to U.S. credibility, three broad points are worth noting.

First, given that geopolitical competition and even conventional warfare occur in the shadow of the nuclear balance, nuclear modernization is critical to bolstering American credibility in the face of Russian and Chinese modernization. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that the very fact of U.S. nuclear modernization will weigh heavily in restoring American credibility by signaling the country's long-term commitment to preserving the extended nuclear deterrence on which its alliances rest. The *Nuclear Posture Review* released in early 2018 is a step in the right direction, as it commits the United States to modernizing the existing triad and developing more discrete capabilities that may discourage adversaries such as Russia from resorting to limited nuclear use to avert conventional defeat on the battlefield.⁹⁶ As administration officials have privately stressed, in fact, the need to reassure U.S. allies and prevent de-coupling was central to the calculations underlying that document.

Second, investments in capabilities—from unmanned undersea vehicles to hypersonic weapons to long-range, penetrating bombers—that can burst A2/AD bubbles and survive in contested environments are essential to mitigating perceptions that the United States is losing its ability to operate in the Baltic region, the waters around Taiwan, or other front-line areas. That perception, as recent analysis has made clear, represents perhaps the single greatest threat to the credibility of U.S. alliances today.⁹⁷ Third, to the extent that credibility derives not simply from military capabilities but from both allies' and adversaries' awareness thereof, the United States should be willing to selectively demonstrate technological breakthroughs and new capabilities, so long as doing so does not undermine operational effectiveness. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work put it, "We will reveal for deterrence, and we will conceal for war-fighting advantage."⁹⁸ Wargames and table-top exercises in which U.S. military officials can partially reveal new capabilities and their likely effects to key allies may be particularly useful in this respect.

⁹⁵ See, for instance, Bryan Clark et al., *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); Edelman and McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free*; Eric S. Edelman and Whitney Morgan McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat: A Defense Strategy for a Troubled Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); and Evan Braden Montgomery, *Extended Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

⁹⁶ OSD, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018. For more information on U.S. nuclear modernization efforts, see Mark Gunzinger, Carl Rehberg, and Gillian Evans, *Sustaining the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent: The LRSO and GBSD* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018).

⁹⁷ See, for instance, Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, "Invisible Doomsday Machines: The Challenge of Clandestine Capabilities and Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2017.

Strengthening Allies

Increasing U.S. capabilities, especially at the high end of the spectrum, relates closely to a third imperative of restoring American credibility, which is working with key allies to strengthen their own deterrent and warfighting capabilities. Credibility is, of course, a U.S. national asset, but since it is most commonly invoked in discussions of U.S. alliance relations, measures that strengthen the overall alliance can have a positive effect on the overall credibility of that alliance.

In particular, by providing front-line allies with more sophisticated capabilities such as missile defenses, ballistic and cruise missiles, and long-range artillery, the United States could allow its allies to offset their conventional weakness vis-à-vis great power competitors. Providing such capabilities would thereby reinforce indigenous deterrence while also giving U.S. allies the ability either to continue a limited war for a longer period of time or to escalate a conflict to a level uncomfortable to the aggressor. Additionally, this approach would reinforce the credibility of American extended deterrence by countering or offsetting an adversary's A2/AD capabilities, thereby lowering the cost of U.S. power projection. As Jakub Grygiel has written, providing allies with cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and other offensive capabilities that "threaten targets deep inside the enemy's homeland" can strengthen the credibility of U.S. guarantees. It does so both by increasing the likelihood that an ally under attack can escalate the conflict to a level that would make American involvement more likely, and by giving NATO additional advanced capabilities within Russia's A2/AD bubble. Similarly, the provision of defensive capabilities such as missile defenses and improved anti-aircraft defenses can allow U.S. allies to resist more effectively under enemy attack, thereby decreasing the possibility of a successful *fait accompli* that would preclude timely American intervention. Under a similar logic, the provision of advanced missile defenses to partners like the United Arab Emirates and allies such as South Korea offers an example that could be replicated elsewhere, whether in the Western Pacific, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East.⁹⁹

Here one critical caveat should be noted. The provision of advanced capabilities to allies can actually undercut U.S. credibility if such initiatives are interpreted as efforts to make those allies more self-reliant and thus pave the way for American disengagement—to substitute arms sales for binding security commitments. This measure will therefore be most effective if pursued in the context of a broader, integrated program to strengthen U.S. credibility such as the one outlined here.

⁹⁹ See Jakub Grygiel, "Arming our Allies: The Case for Offensive Capabilities," *Parameters* 45, no. 3, Autumn 2015, p. 40; and Thomas G. Mahnken, "Competitive Strategies for Small States," in *Frontline Allies: War and Change in Central Europe* (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2015).

Getting Tough in the Gray Zone

Increasing U.S. and allied credibility and strength at the higher ends of the conflict spectrum is therefore essential. Yet doing so will matter relatively little if America's position and credibility are steadily eroded through lower-end challenges that do not rise to the level of open warfare.

Accordingly, a fourth imperative is that the United States must also enhance its response to the salami-slicing or gray zone tactics that are weakening American credibility on the installment plan, and it will need to do so through both military and non-military means. Washington has frequently struggled to do so in recent years, in part because of understandable but often paralyzing concerns about escalation. As work by Ross Babbage, Zack Cooper, Ely Ratner, and other authors indicates, however, there are a range of plausible measures the United States and its close allies could take to counter the most prominent example of those tactics—Chinese maritime expansion and coercion in the South China Sea.

These measures would extend far beyond the freedom of navigation operations that are often the focus of discussions about meeting the Chinese challenge in the South China Sea—although maintaining a robust yet unpredictable cycle of those operations remains foundational to signaling Washington's commitment to supporting allies and partners and upholding the regional order. They might include the increased use of financial and economic sanctions against Chinese entities involved in maritime coercion or illegal land reclamation; informational activities to shed greater light on China's destabilizing behavior; and military measures, such as stationing additional U.S. assets in the area or even helping friendly nations fortify the disputed features they occupy. They might also include the provision of cheap and plentiful A2/AD capabilities such as fast-attack craft, sea mines, and land-based anti-ship missiles to U.S. allies and partners to strengthen their own defensive capabilities and redress the imbalance that has allowed China to push the envelope so aggressively.¹⁰⁰ What is crucial is that these measures demonstrate that the United States is prepared to impose greater costs on gray zone aggression than has been the case to date; that it has at its disposal options that can retard, or at the very least meaningfully penalize, that behavior; and that Washington is willing to expose itself to greater uncertainty and risk in order to achieve the desired effect.

¹⁰⁰ See Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the United States and its Allies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016); Ankit Panda, "South China Sea: Fourth US FONOP in Five Months Suggests A New Operational Rhythm," *The Diplomat*, October 12, 2017; Ratner, "Course Correction"; and Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, "Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1, Winter 2018.

Cultivating a Tolerance for Risk

This last point is essential, and it relates to a fifth step the United States should take to strengthen its credibility: demonstrating an increased willingness to accept reasonable risk in the pursuit of American interests. After all, allies and adversaries doubt American credibility not when it is risk free for the United States to uphold its interests and obligations, but when doing so threatens to come at a price. And all too often in the recent past, the United States has prioritized avoiding risk—whether of a confrontation with China over its expansion in the South China Sea or East China Sea, or with Russia over its aggression in Ukraine—over pursuing stronger efforts to penalize or counter adversary coercion. Yet avoiding risk in the near term has only caused longer-term strategic risk to multiply by eroding perceptions of American resolve in friendly capitals and among competitors. A higher—but not boundless—tolerance for risk offers a clearer demonstration to friend and foe alike that the United States values what is at stake and will not easily be dissuaded from defending it.

Here the record of the Trump administration has been mixed so far. The administration can justifiably claim credit for the decision to provide lethal assistance to the government of Ukraine and for striking a Syrian military airfield in April 2017 in response to chemical weapons attacks by Bashar al-Assad's forces: two decisions that represented modest reversals of the pronounced risk aversion that often characterized U.S. policy over the prior decade. Yet the latter initiative may not in fact have sent the desired message, precisely because it was still so carefully circumscribed.

According to media reports, U.S. cruise missile strikes represented only a fraction of the assault that the Obama administration had originally planned and then discarded in 2013. The Pentagon targeted only a single Syrian airfield, and plans for the attack were disclosed to the Russian military ahead of time to minimize the risk that Russian personnel stationed at the base might be injured or killed.¹⁰¹ These steps probably had the effect of telegraphing that the U.S. strikes were a one-off initiative, designed to inflict symbolic punishment on the Syrian regime while carefully avoiding any danger of escalation. Given that the Syrian regime subsequently continued to use chemical weapons, and that Russian forces (whether official or unofficial) would subsequently challenge and even attack U.S. and U.S.-backed forces in Syria, there appears reason to doubt whether the strikes indeed strengthened American credibility and leverage to the extent desired.¹⁰² Prudence is often a virtue in foreign policy, and extreme recklessness can undercut rather than

¹⁰¹ See Peter Baker, Neil MacFarquhar, and Michael Gordon, "Syria Strike Puts U.S. Relationship with Russia at Risk," *New York Times*, April 7, 2017; and Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria Strike Plan Was Much Bigger than Trump's," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2017.

¹⁰² Idrees Ali and Thomas Escritt, "Public Reports 'Clearly Show' Assad's Use of Chemical Weapons: McMaster," *Reuters*, February 17, 2018; and Ellen Nakashima, Karen DeYoung, and Liz Sly, "Putin Ally Said to Be in Touch with Kremlin, Assad Before His Mercenaries Attacked U.S. Troops," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2018.

strengthen U.S. commitments. Yet it does not pay for America always to be the party that seems constrained by fear of things getting out of hand.

A better approach would be to handle these issues in ways that signal that the United States has some greater appetite for risk in defending the commitments and principles it claims to value. A wider-ranging and more aggressive set of strikes on Syria, for instance, would have signaled to Moscow and Damascus alike that the United States views the norm against the use of chemical weapons as important enough to court some danger in enforcing that norm—and, by extension, that both Syria and Russia cannot necessarily predict or downplay the consequences of Assad continuing to transgress it. To take another example, a step that would both strengthen America's North Korea policy and demonstrate some greater tolerance for reasonable risk would be a reinvigorated Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to interdict North Korean cargoes that appear to carry nonproliferation contraband. Recent evidence of North Korean assistance to the Syrian government's chemical weapons stockpile detected by the UN panel of experts as well as other ongoing provocations would seem to more than justify this step.¹⁰³

Undertaking Demonstrative Uses of Force

Finally, a sixth—and perhaps controversial—measure the United States might consider is the demonstrative use of force as a way of bolstering international perceptions of American resolve. For better or worse, actions in one episode or setting can influence a state's perceived credibility in another episode or setting. This can be true even when the connection is not quite as strong, direct, or all-influencing as is sometimes believed. As we have seen, the failure of the United States to take action against the Syrian regime following Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013 influenced perceptions of U.S. credibility not just in Syria but also in the broader Middle East and beyond. Conversely, Moscow has used its military intervention in Syria since 2015 not simply to establish itself as the arbiter of Syria's future, but also to cultivate a reputation in much of the region for being willing and able to act decisively.¹⁰⁴

The United States has used such demonstrations of power before, to good effect. The operation to liberate Grenada in 1983 had both the intention and the effect of diminishing concerns that Washington was hobbled by the so-called "Vietnam syndrome." During the Iran-Iraq War several years later, the U.S. Navy carried out Operation Praying Mantis—the largest naval operation since World War II—not simply to discourage further Iranian attacks on U.S.-escorted convoys but also to demonstrate American will to protect its interests in the Persian Gulf. In 1990–1991, one of the key considerations underlying Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm was to show

¹⁰³ Michael Schwartz, "U.N. Links North Korea to Syria's Chemical Weapons Program," *New York Times*, February 27, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ For more on Russian goals and strategy, see James Sladden et al., *Russian Strategy in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

that the United States possessed the resolve to respond to international aggression and instability in two separate contexts: in the long shadow of the Vietnam War and in an emerging post-Cold War era in which some international observers believed that Washington would disengage from global affairs. President George H.W. Bush confided to his diary, “It’s surprising how much I dwell on the end of the Vietnam syndrome . . . how do we get on with our role with credibility.”¹⁰⁵ The administration’s steeliness in handling that crisis, combined with the decisive defeat of Saddam Hussein’s forces, did much to strengthen America’s credibility as the 1990s dawned.¹⁰⁶ None of these uses of force was purely demonstrative, as other motives were involved in every case. But the potential benefits for American credibility—and the potential damage that might result from not acting—were prominent in the considerations of U.S. policymakers.

This does not mean that the demonstrative use of force is a panacea, or that it should be employed promiscuously. There have been cases in which such uses of force have arguably backfired. By ordering attacks against Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge government seized the U.S. ship *Mayaguez* and its crew in 1975, for instance, the Ford administration successfully signaled that America would still defend its interests after the fall of Vietnam. Yet it also set into motion a poorly planned and poorly executed operation that cost more American lives than it saved.¹⁰⁷ What all this indicates is not that demonstrative uses of force must be altogether avoided, but that they must be carefully calibrated, well planned, and—most importantly—unambiguously successful. Efforts that are not part of a larger political-military strategy or that do not respond to a genuine security problem risk being regarded as gratuitously coercive; they are also less likely to strengthen American credibility than to damage international perceptions of American judgment. It would thus be unwise to take too literally the admonition that, “Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.”¹⁰⁸ But as U.S. policymakers carefully consider when, where, and how to use force, they should remain alert to the fact that effective and decisive military action can have spillover benefits reaching far beyond the battlefield in question.

¹⁰⁵ For more on “post-Vietnam syndrome” and the role it played in President Reagan’s thinking about the Grenada operation, see Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 451. For more on Operation Praying Mantis, see Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 263–320. For more on the Gulf War, see George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 484, 486.

¹⁰⁶ See Perry, “Desert Storm and Deterrence”; and Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, pp. 316–317.

¹⁰⁷ See Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 64–65.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Jonah Goldberg, “Baghdad Delenda Est, Part Two,” *National Review*, April 23, 2002.

Conclusion

Credibility is not a myth, nor is it the invention of policymakers' fevered minds. Rather, credibility is a critical asset to a superpower whose global security commitments underpin the peace and stability of the international order. Over the past decade, policy missteps, a declining margin of military superiority, the inconsistent behavior of multiple presidents, and the determined efforts of U.S. adversaries have all combined to create a crisis of American credibility. Confronting that crisis is essential if the United States is to protect its interests and shore up the international order in the years to come.

Indeed, repairing American credibility is essential if the United States is to accomplish the goals that the Trump administration outlined in its own *National Security Strategy*. As noted, that document calls for policies to improve U.S. standing in security competitions with a range of malign authoritarian actors.¹⁰⁹ But U.S. strategy will not become more competitive or more effective unless allies are reassured that Washington will still fulfill its global obligations and adversaries believe that America will react strongly if tested. The specific steps outlined here would constitute a good start in reestablishing that reputation, but ultimate success will require a discipline, focus, and consistency that, so far, has eluded the Trump administration. Whether the administration succeeds in repairing the damage American credibility has suffered in the recent past, or whether it simply compounds that damage, will be among the biggest tests of U.S. statecraft during the Trump presidency.

¹⁰⁹ *National Security Strategy 2017*.

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The cover art is a composite image of two open-source images.

- 1) The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Ross fires a tomahawk land attack missile on April 7, 2017. Navy photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert S. Price.
- 2) A battle damage assessment image of Shayrat Airfield, Syria, following U.S. missile strikes delivered by the USS Ross and USS Porter Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers, April 6, 2017. Photo courtesy of Digital Globe via the Department of Defense.



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