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Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program

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Bring the National Defense Strategy into Balance

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TOPLINE

Time is running out. The United States is overextended, involved in two wars — in Ukraine and the Middle East — even as it confronts its greatest strategic challenge — China — in a third distant theater in the Indo-Pacific. American military power is great but not unlimited. The next administration's National Defense Strategy should prioritize the challenge posed by China, shifting away from Europe and the Middle East to focus more on deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific. Doing so requires relearning the strategic purpose of alliances and strategic partnerships to recognize that these relationships are not ends in themselves but, rather, means to achieve U.S. national security objectives.

THE PROBLEM

The last administration came into office wanting focus on the Indo-Pacific, warning, "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." Its National Defense Strategy (NDS) vowed "ruthless prioritization" to meet the challenge posed by China, but the Department of Defense (DoD) failed to deliver on that promise. The concept of "integrated deterrence" — the centerpiece of the last administration's NDS — was too broad a concept to help with this problem. Integrated deterrence called for the use of "every tool at the Department's disposal, in close collaboration with our counterparts across the U.S. Government and with Allies and partners, to ensure that potential foes understand the folly of aggression." The recourse to other government agencies using non-military instruments of power to deter U.S. adversaries was in itself

an admission that the NDS had a means-ends mismatch. It also gave the illusion of closing this gap.

Instead of exercising strategic discipline, the Biden administration progressively deepened commitments in Europe and the Middle East, pulling military resources and attention away from the Indo-Pacific. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States has deployed an additional 20,000 forces to Europe, bringing the total to over 100,000 American service members either deployed or permanently stationed across the theater. It has also spent billions in security assistance in supporting Ukraine's war effort, including supplying Kyiv with a "significant number" of long-range precision missiles, called Army Tactical Missile Systems, or ATACAMS.

In the last year, the United States has also surged air and naval forces into the Middle East, despite the critical role that some of these assets were playing in deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. In August 2024, for example, after redeploying the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Groups from the Pacific to the Middle East, the United States was without a carrier in the Indo-Pacific for the first time since 2001. The Pentagon has also more than doubled the number of U.S. Air Force fighter squadrons and deployed B-52 bombers and additional aerial refueling aircraft to the region, bringing the total number of U.S. forces in the Middle East to about 43,000.

In simultaneously supporting Ukraine and Israel, the United States has depleted weapon stockpiles, especially the air and missile defense capabilities it needs to defend U.S. bases in the Indo-Pacific. Pentagon officials have admitted that the U.S. military's stores of long-range air and missile defense interceptors are running low, straining its ability to continue supplying Ukraine and Israel with the weapons they need without endangering its own military readiness. Since October 7, the U.S. Navy has fired weapons like the Standard Missile-3, Standard Missile-6, and Tomahawk missiles — ranging in cost from several million to tens of million apiece — at rates faster than it can replace them. In October 2024, for example, two U.S. Navy ships fired about a dozen SM-3 interceptors at Iranian ballistic missiles headed for Israel — expending a year's worth of SM-3 production in a single day. The defense industry has struggled to ramp up production, owing to a combination of technical complexity and shortages of critical components. The United States simply cannot produce its way out of the acute tradeoffs it now faces between wars in Europe and the Middle East, and the urgent need to strengthen deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific.

ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

As my Stimson colleague Christopher Preble has argued, given China is a formidable strategic competitor, it is more important than ever for the United States to set clear priorities and make hard choices. The Commission on the National Defense Strategy would have the next administration ignore this problem: it recommends the United

States build a large forward deployed force capable of waging simultaneous conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East, and proposes raising taxes and cutting entitlement benefits, like Social Security, to pay for it. This "more-of-everything" approach is a bad deal for the American people, especially because there is an alternative — playing a smaller military role in Europe and the Middle East while shifting U.S. military resources to the Indo-Pacific.

European allies are in position to take primary responsibility for their own security and defense. They have significantly more latent power than Russia — with a combined gross domestic product ten times larger than the Russian economy and a total population three times larger than that of Russia. Moreover, European militaries collectively outspent Russia four to one on defense in 2023 and are roughly equal in personnel with the Russian armed forces, despite Russia increasing defense spending and expanding its military amid the war in Ukraine. European countries have some significant capacity shortfalls, particularly in critical air enablers, for which they depend on the U.S. military, and continue to spend their defense euros inefficiently, owing to excessive duplication and fragmentation of Europe's defense industry, but they still have considerable military power with which to counter Russian threats.

Similarly, a U.S. military presence in the Middle East is not required to maintain the balance of power in that region. Iran is the most plausible candidate for regional hegemony, but it is much too weak economically and militarily to make a successful bid. Moreover, as the political scientist Eugene Gholz has argued, the geography of the region works against Iranian regional hegemony, as it would require Tehran to conquer oil-rich Kuwait, southern Iraq, and eastern Saudi Arabia, projecting its military power thousands of miles beyond its borders. Indeed, one of the main reasons Tehran relies on asymmetric approaches to deterrence — including the use of proxy actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah — is the country's military weakness relative to the United States and other regional actors. These hard-power realities suggest Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states are capable of containing the Iranian threat without a large U.S. military footprint.

Advocates of continued primacy, however, contend that the United States cannot pull back in either region. They insist the United States remain "all in," or U.S. allies — including those in the Indo-Pacific — will no longer believe America's security commitments are credible. These fears are overblown. What matters in credibility calculations are the capabilities the United States can bring to bear and the issues at stake in a given situation. Reputations matter in international relations, but they are not the only — or even necessarily the most important — factor in these calculations.

More fundamentally, the United States needs to relearn the strategic purpose of alliances and security partnerships: They are not ends in themselves but means to

secure U.S. national security interests. For the last administration, being a "good" ally seemed to mean never saying "no," or at least almost never. Promising to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes" and "bear-hugging" Israel may seem noble acts, but neither served well U.S. interests — or ironically enough, Ukrainian or Israeli interests.

In endorsing Kyiv's maximalist war aims — to restore its 1991 borders — for example, Washington found itself supporting Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive even though it had little chance of success against Russia's heavily fortified lines. In ignoring these military realities, however, the United States failed Ukraine as an ally. When it might have negotiated from a position of strength, Kyiv instead pursued total victory and as a result may have missed its best opportunity to negotiate a favorable settlement.

Likewise, the last administration refused to use its leverage with Israel to pressure Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government to end the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, or to avoid reckless actions that risk escalation with Iran. Instead, it repeatedly used words like "ironclad" and "unwavering" to describe U.S. support for Israel and promised the "United States has Israel's back," no matter what. The logic seemed to be that if Washington offered unconditional support for Israel's wars, it would gain some measure of influence over Israeli decision making.

That approach has clearly failed. Israel has mostly ignored U.S. calls to limit civilian casualties, refrain from opening a second front in Lebanon, and avoid direct conflict with Iran. Instead, the U.S. military became an active participant in the war — twice stepping in to defend Israel against Iranian missile and drone attacks following Israeli escalations. Though Washington has correctly supported Israel's right to defend itself, it also seeks to avoid a wider war in the Middle East, one that risks once again drawing the U.S. military back into the region and away from the Indo-Pacific. When Israeli policy diverged from U.S. interests, the last administration was unwilling to risk a public breach with Netanyahu and thus lost its ability to restrain Israel in ways consistent with U.S. interests.

It has also had negative consequences for Israel, which finds itself facing increasing international isolation, looming financial crisis, and tit-for-tat attacks with Iran that may push Tehran further toward developing nuclear weapons. In trying so hard to prove itself a reliable ally, the last administration left U.S. alliances and partnerships unmoored from their true purpose — serving U.S. national security interests.

The next administration should not make the same mistakes. The United States absolutely needs allies and partners, particularly in confronting China, but these relationships require recalibration.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Initiate a Global Force Posture Review. Early in the last administration, the Pentagon launched a Global Force Posture Review to reassess how to "best allocate military forces in pursuit of national interests." Given the Department of Defense had designated China as its "pacing threat" and the Indo-Pacific as its priority theater, most defense analysts expected the Global Force Posture Review to propose a rebalance of U.S. military personnel and equipment to bases in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, the public summary of the classified review proposed no major changes, effectively doubling down on maintaining a large U.S. military footprint in all three theaters — Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific — and suggesting there was no need to make any meaningful changes to the U.S. military presence abroad. The next administration should initiate a Global Force Posture Review — and it should be conducted credibly this time. This review should aim to align U.S. military commitments and global force posture with U.S. strategic priorities and threats, shifting away from the Middle East and Europe and finally strengthening deterrence and defense in Asia.

Reform U.S. Alliances and Partnerships. The next administration should also conduct a review of existing U.S. alliances and partnerships, asking whether these relationships continue to advance U.S. national security interests. In many cases, the answer will be yes, but that they need reforms. The existing NATO command structure, for example, is a microcosm of European dependence on American military capabilities, as the top military commander is always an American officer. The next administration should propose a new transatlantic bargain, in which European allies assume primary responsibility for their own security and defense and the United States shares leadership of the alliance, starting with the appointment of a European Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

In other cases, like with Ukraine and Israel, the United States may need to set clear limits on U.S. security commitments. In almost all cases, including in the Indo-Pacific, Washington should push U.S. allies and partners to not only spend more on their own defense but to also make smarter acquisition choices — moving away from small numbers of "big-ticket" items like fighter jets — using its considerable leverage in terms of military aid and arms sales to push allies and partners toward acquiring large numbers of relatively cheap and mobile assets, such as surface-based missiles, drones, sea mines, and air defenses, that would greatly strengthen their deterrence and defense.

Place Asymmetric Denial at the Center of the National Defense Strategy. The next administration should jettison the concept of integrated deterrence. The United States has long used the combined threat of diplomatic isolation, military action, intelligence releases, and economic sanctions to deter U.S. adversaries — indeed, it was the

bedrock of the U.S. “containment” strategy against the Soviet Union. But it is not a defense concept; it is a grand strategic one. The White House should decide how to best integrate the military and other instruments of power to best advance U.S. national security interests, as typically spelled out in the National Security Strategy. The DoD should focus on its own mission — preparing to fight and win future wars. The next administration should prioritize developing new operational concepts and making changes to U.S. force structure and posture to strengthen deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific.

Instead of integrated deterrence, the cornerstone of U.S. defense strategy should be asymmetric denial. This strategy would not try to symmetrically combat China’s home-court advantage but rather attack its power-projection weaknesses. The United States’ greatest strategic advantage is that it seeks to preserve the territorial status quo and prevent the emergence of Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. The United States, alongside its allies and partners, needs to convince China that it cannot achieve a fait accompli by increasing the costs and uncertainty associated with offensive air and maritime operations.

Rather than assume all the uncertainty and risk by trying to symmetrically gain and maintain air superiority and sea control inside China’s anti-access/area-denial capabilities, a more effective approach would be to transfer those same uncertainties and risks onto the Chinese strategy. This approach would focus on denying China the ability to gain and exploit the air superiority and sea control that Chinese military writers acknowledge that they need to stand any chance of winning a quick and decisive military victory.

Instead of a small number of large, exquisite, and hard-to-replace manned platforms, a strategy of denial calls for building the U.S. military primarily around large numbers of relatively cheap and good-enough air, sea, and subsurface drones and mobile anti-air and anti-ship missiles that can achieve mutual air and sea denial inside the First Island Chain. Instead of doubling down on legacy concepts and weapon systems, the next administration should champion innovation — real innovation — and bring means and ends into balance.