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Key Points

The United States can no longer deter China and Russia without building the capability and capacity to make its threats credible. Denial of this fact will almost certainly lead to a war between great powers.

The incoming administration must urgently initiate a comprehensive review of U.S. foreign and defense policies, akin to the effort that led to NSC-68 in 1950.

This initiative should focus on formulating a holistic U.S. strategy that safeguards national security goals and minimizes the risk of U.S. forces becoming engaged in a great power war.

A significant increase in defense spending is critical to counter the modernized and growing forces of adversaries like Russia and China, but a larger budget alone will not effectively address the underlying issue.

The DOD is beset by structural deficiencies that impede reform. Namely, the Goldwater-Nichols Act established a structure in which key figures responsible for national strategy development and military readiness are excluded from the chain of command.

Efforts such as the 2015 Third Offset Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy failed to foster needed changes as a result of these internal dynamics. DOD requires reorganization to remove the systemic problems that have thwarted past attempts at reform.

A Call for a New NSC-68 and Goldwater Nichols Reform

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Abstract

In light of the recent hostile maneuvers of actors like Russia, Iran, and China, it is clear the system of deterrence relationships the United States fosters to preserve global security is wavering. The U.S. military no longer has the capability and capacity to defend the rules-based international order that has long been the cornerstone of its foreign policy. In the near future, this failure of deterrence could very well lead to a war between the United States and China.

Deficiencies of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Reform Act (GNA) are a root cause of under-resourcing our critical warfighting forces. This legislation restructured the DOD, resulting in a bureaucratic structure that severely restricts the ability of the services to prioritize long-term strategic threats in favor of the immediate, non-combat demands of the combatant commands and civilian defense bureaucracy. Consequently, there is a pervasive pattern within the military of neglect of long-term defense procurement strategies and requirements. The resulting failure of U.S. forces to modernize and recapitalize has emboldened America's adversaries to use violence to pursue their expansionist goals, setting the United States on a path toward a great power war. To prevent this and retain the current rules-based world order, the U.S. government and defense establishment must immediately take four actions.

- Initiate a comprehensive reassessment of national security, objectively evaluating the prevailing threat landscape and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing strategies.
- Take immediate action to restructure the DOD and correct the organizational deficiencies that hindered past reform efforts aimed at countering the threats posed by China and Russia.
- Increase the defense budget to bring it in line with the evolving security landscape.
- Evaluate defense capabilities and shift investment among the services based on a cost-per-effect assessment. This requires a holistic review of the roles and missions of service contributions to the National Defense Strategy.

Introduction: The Most Dangerous Crisis Ever Facing America

The United States now faces a national security crisis unparalleled in its history. As was the case when President Truman commissioned the reassessment of America's national security in 1950 that led to National Security Council Paper 68, or NSC-68, the country has entered a period in which its foreign policy objectives and military capabilities are severely misaligned. The global system of deterrence relationships the United States fosters to preserve a world governed by law rather than force is faltering. The first sign of this was the fall of the Republic of Afghanistan, followed quickly by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More recently, Iran and its proxy forces launched attacks on Israel and commercial shipping in the Red Sea, and they continue to conduct low-level military operations against U.S. forces across the Middle East. As these events unfolded, the People's Republic of China dramatically increased its harrying actions against U.S. naval forces in the South China Sea and stepped up its preparations for a potential invasion of Taiwan. Whether by coordination or coincidence, these disparate military actions have worked synergistically to expose the fact that the United States no longer has the military wherewithal to fully maintain the rules-based international order that has long been the cornerstone of its foreign policy. There is a significant chance that, in the near future, this cascading failure of deterrence will lead to a war between the United States and China.

The impetus behind these events is no mystery to U.S. defense leadership. In the past, the United States had the military capability to deter its adversaries, but after decades of deprioritizing defense programs focused on projecting U.S. power, China, Russia, and Iran no longer believe the United States can prevent them from pursuing their expansionist interests through force. Nor is the lack of confidence in U.S. power projection capability unique to our adversaries. For years, U.S. defense leaders and writings on national security strategy warned that America's lack of investment in power projection capabilities was weakening its defenses and encouraging its adversaries to act belligerently.

Over the past decade, both civilian and military leaders at the Department of Defense (DOD) have consistently identified the deficiencies of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Reform Act (GNA) as the root cause of under-resourcing critical warfighting forces. This legislation restructured the DOD, resulting in a bureaucratic structure that severely restricts the ability of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the service chiefs to prioritize long-term strategic threats. The immediate, non-combat demands of the combatant commands and the fluctuating goals of the civilian defense bureaucracy often take precedence. Consequently, there is a pervasive pattern within the military of neglect for long-term defense procurement strategies and requirements as formulated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and services and approved by Congress.

For example, over the last three presidential administrations, Congress and defense leaders have repeatedly attempted to reform defense to prioritize capabilities and increase capacity to deter China and Russia as those threats escalated. However, these reforms failed because they attempted to target insufficient investment in appropriate technologies and insufficient focus on great power competition. They did nothing to address the root cause of these issues, which lies in GNA-based organizational flaws. These failures to evolve and adapt conversely emboldened America's adversaries to use violence to pursue their expansionist goals and to undermine the U.S.-led liberal international order.

The United States is now faced with an impossible choice. It can reduce its foreign policy goals and commitments to bring them in line with its diminished military capabilities, or it can increase its military capabilities and capacity to bring them in line with its long-held goal of supporting a rules-based international system—one in which violence is not an acceptable means of resolving international disputes. If the United States chooses to remove its deterrence guarantees to Taiwan and its exposed European allies, it is likely that China will attack Taiwan and Russia will attack a Baltic or Nordic state within the next few years. Such events are also likely to signal the end of global confidence and support for the current liberal international order, with potentially catastrophic implications for core U.S. economic interests and homeland defense. If the United States instead chooses to retain its diplomatic commitments, it must grow its military capability to meet them. This not only means increasing defense spending but also, importantly, making significant changes in the way the DOD is organized and how it prioritizes its long and short-term spending goals.

If the United States instead continues to attempt to deter China and Russia without building the capability and capacity to make its threats credible, adversaries will eventually call its bluff. Such a scenario will almost certainly lead to a war between great powers.

It is not too late for the United States to choose option two—to bring its defense policy in line with its foreign policy goals—but there is no longer time to spare. After decades of neglect, the country's capability to fight conventional wars and deter major powers is anemic. The bulk of its legacy platforms for conventional war are decades old. While all the services reflect this neglect, the worst off is the U.S. Air Force, which today is the oldest, smallest, and least ready in its entire history.[1] The backbone of the nation's bomber fleet, the B-52, just celebrated the 72nd anniversary of its first flight. The bulk of its fighter aircraft—F-15s and F-16s—were originally designed in the 1960s and 1970s, and they were first built during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter years. The Navy's Ticonderoga-class cruisers and Los Angeles-class submarines were first commissioned in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. The Army's primary battle tank, the M1 Abrams, was initially deployed in the 1980s. Equally or more concerning, the programs Congress has initiated since the end of the Cold War to modernize the military with new high-tech capabilities are decades behind schedule and show no sign of accelerating. Overcoming the organizational inertia that has allowed this to occur will require a comprehensive and assertive reevaluation of both procurement strategies and operational doctrines. This reevaluation must be accompanied by an increase in funding, targeted investments in emerging technologies, and streamlined decision-making processes to ensure rapid and effective modernization.

In short, the United States is currently on a path toward a great power war. To prevent this and retain the current rules-based world order, the U.S. government and defense establishment must immediately take four actions.

- First, it must initiate a comprehensive reassessment of national security, objectively evaluating the prevailing threat landscape and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing strategies. This assessment must begin from a clear-eyed understanding that the current approach and attempts at defense reform have failed, and so long as these failures remain unaddressed, a war between great powers becomes increasingly likely. It should provide a realistic appraisal of adversaries' and allies' capabilities and intentions, as well as the evolving objectives of the United States within the international arena. It must also outline the requisite means to rectify the slow collapse of the current rules-based international order and deter potential great power conflicts.

- Second, it must take immediate action to restructure the DOD and correct the organizational deficiencies that hindered past reform efforts aimed at countering the threats posed by China and Russia. This will entail, among other things, repositioning the service chiefs within the chain of command while taking steps to preserve the ability of U.S. forces to conduct joint operations. A full-scale review of the array of bureaucracies connected with OSD should be accomplished with an eye to shifting missions and authorities toward the services. Emphasis should be placed on enabling strategic decision-making that prioritizes the acquisition of capabilities based on an honest assessment of cost-per-effect and the deployment of forces geared toward addressing the challenges of great power competition.[2] Congress must revise or replace the GNA with policies that better balance the DOD's immediate and long-term priorities.
- Third, it must increase the defense budget to bring it in line with the evolving security landscape. Constructing a military force capable of dissuading China and Russia from engaging in actions that may precipitate a major power conflict requires substantial enhancements in funding. If the administration and Congress are unable or unwilling to increase defense spending enough to credibly deter China and Russia, they must be willing to cede international leadership to competing adversary powers with the full knowledge that their interests and values are wholly contradictory to our own. This will have significant negative economic and security impacts on core U.S. interests on levels most American citizens would find totally unacceptable.
- Fourth, it must start evaluating defense capabilities with an eye toward shifting investment among the services based on a cost-per-effect assessment. That is, to spend defense dollars wisely does not mean cutting or adding to budgets where most convenient or politically easy. Investment options should instead be weighed against each other and based on the desired battlespace effects, rooted in a strategy that poses a credible deterrent force that can overcome the challenges posed by adversary military capabilities. DOD and Congress must evaluate the weapon systems already in existence and favorably resource those that don't just contribute to meeting the needs of U.S. defense strategy but are critical to making it credible and effective in action. This would require a tough-minded and comprehensive review of the roles and missions of service contributions to the strategy.

While the reforms described above will be difficult, they can either be made proactively or will become necessary in the event U.S. deterrence fails.

This paper is laid out in three parts. Part I describes how the United States gradually evolved its foreign policy goals in ways that significantly exceed its military's power to enforce them. It then describes how a series of well-intentioned decisions, particularly the choice to pursue the Goldwater Nichols Reform Act, caused the United States to abandon its goal of preventing the rise of violent autocratic regional hegemons in lieu of dozens of other lesser diplomatic and military objectives. Part II describes how defense reforms initiated by recent administrations and supported by Congress aimed to restore the balance between the nation's military capabilities and foreign policy goals, yet these efforts failed due to the perverse organizational dysfunction of the defense establishment and the outdated framework of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. Part III describes how these

failures led to the current crisis and proposes a strategy to address the obstacles hindering the implementation of widely recognized, agreed-upon, and necessary changes.

It would be difficult to overstate the severity of the current crisis—this paper is an alarm, not hyperbole. If the United States does not change course quickly, there is a high probability that, soon, it will become involved in a war with China and possibly Russia and Iran. It is still possible to prevent this outcome, but immediate action will be required.

Part I: From NSC-68 to Fear of Next-War-Itis

After more than three decades of peace between great powers, it is difficult for most Americans to understand why U.S. defense leaders consistently argue that it is important to maintain a military strong enough to deter China and Russia. For them, it is puzzling why, despite the hundreds of billions the United States spends on defense every year, national security experts believe that the United States is losing its ability to achieve that goal. To understand what is going on, it is necessary to comprehend the strategic analysis from the 1950s that led to the decision to maintain a military capable of preventing the emergence of aggressive, autocratic regional hegemons. Then, it is just as important to grasp how, partially as a result of the Goldwater Nichols Act, the United States gradually slid away from this standard after the Cold War and how this decline in vigilance gradually led to the current dangerous security environment.

NSC-68: Why the United States Attempts to Deter Potential Regional Hegemons

Understanding why U.S. foreign policy places a strong emphasis on thwarting the rise of regional hegemons and maintaining a military to support this goal begins with reviewing how the United States originally adopted this approach.

The international security environment the United States faced in 1950 was much like the one it faces today. In the wake of WWII, the United States reduced its conventional power projection capabilities in the hope of returning to the peaceful isolation and small military budgets that characterized its foreign policy before and between the First and Second World Wars. However, as the United States drew down its forces, the Soviet Union became increasingly bellicose and began building and fielding its own nuclear capability. With war looming on the Korean peninsula and the situation in Europe deteriorating rapidly, President Truman requested a strategic assessment of American national security. The result was NSC-68, a report of Truman's National Security Council that diagnosed the emerging crisis and set a course for U.S. national security policy, which persists today.

NSC-68 represented a radical change in priorities. The document began by establishing that the problem the United States faced was a rapidly changing balance of international power that threatened to pull the nation into a third world war. The system of global alliances that was meant to maintain international stability for 40 years prior was weak and unstable. The writers believed this deterioration drew the United States into two world wars. With the recent fall of Germany and Japan, the situation was even more unstable, and much like modern-day China, the Soviet Union was using both violent and non-violent means to exploit the power vacuum. The central fear of NSC-68's authors was that this situation would lead to a war fought with atomic weapons. But almost as alarming was the knowledge that if the area under the domination of the Kremlin extended much further, it would become a regional hegemon. At that point, no future coalition would be adequate to stop it.[3]

While the authors of NSC-68 argued that the world's shifting balance of power was central to the problem, they also believed that ideology played a critical role. Like modern-day communist China, and unlike the United States and its democratic allies that value and depend on the liberty of their citizens, the Soviet Union's autocratic system required absolute ideological control over its subjects. Moreover, the same compulsion to exercise total control expanded to nations and peoples outside its borders. Thus, the Soviet Union, compelled by its ideology, extended its influence and hoped to tighten its grip on power beyond its homeland. If its efforts were successful, the global system that would emerge would be inimical to America's most closely held values.[4]

The fear of violent regional hegemons that led to NSC-68 laid down the cornerstone of modern U.S. foreign policy. Rather than retreating into the isolationist policies that indirectly contributed to the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars, the United States would pay the high costs of making itself militarily strong, supporting the peaceful political and economic functioning of the free world, and fostering democratic change in the world's leading autocracy. Importantly, unlike its opponent, the United States would not pursue its goals through war or subjugation. Rather, the aim of U.S. foreign policy through this era was to deter nuclear conflict, constrain its adversary's ability to use force to extend its influence, and simultaneously demonstrate the superiority of a democratic system by example. The writers of NSC-68 predicted that this strategy would eventuate in either the fall of the Soviet Union to internal forces or, at worst, a free and economically prosperous democratic coalition of nations capable of coexisting with a communist superpower.[5]

This analysis is not time-bound to the 1950s—it has clear parallels with today's crisis. With only five years since WWII, and given the USSR's aggressive actions, the world appeared on course to a third world war. The authors' decision to advocate for a powerful military was not capricious. Rather, it was based on the firm conviction that the cost of failing to deter an autocratic great power would be significantly higher than the cost of maintaining a powerful military.

For the 40 years following its publication, NSC-68 provided a compass heading for U.S. foreign policy. Throughout the Cold War, the United States maintained relatively high levels of defense spending, rising as high as 14 percent of GDP in 1953. As the authors predicted, U.S. actions allowed the world to avoid a third world war or a nuclear conflict. Likewise, it correctly anticipated that if the Soviet Union was unable to expand through the use of force, it would eventually collapse. Importantly, American citizens of that era who lived through WWI and WWII understood that the cost of preventing war was far preferable to the alternative, as the cost of lives, opportunities, and resources in war is catastrophic.

How the United States Slid from Vigilance to Fear of Next-War-Itis

When the Soviet Union ultimately began to disintegrate, the United States confronted two challenging decisions regarding its military. The first was whether to continue to maintain the substantial burden of supporting a first-class force. The second, which came to the fore in the 2000s, was whether to maintain a force oriented toward the traditional role of deterring regional hegemons or one aimed more at counterinsurgency and promoting democracy abroad.

In the decade directly following the Cold War, the United States initially determined to maintain its vigilant role in deterring the use of force by potential regional hegemons. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Bush administration almost immediately published a new National Security Strategy that rejected a return to isolationism.[6] Deliberations on the strategy focused, to a large extent, on the same fears that motivated NSC-68: namely, that lack of U.S. vigilance had contributed to the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars and that preparation had prevented a third.[7] The United States proved its commitment to these goals when, in 1991, it led an international coalition to defeat Iraq's attack on Kuwait in an apparent attempt to dominate the Middle East.

Yet, over the next two decades, U.S. foreign policy underwent a series of profound changes that systematically moved its defense policy away from its focus on major power politics and fueled arguments for decreasing investments in its military capabilities. For example, in the first few years after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the United States made efforts to link economic assistance and trade with China to liberal reforms through a policy of principled engagement.[8] As had been the case during the Cold War, the goal was to link U.S. assistance in building China's prosperity and power to its willingness to forego autocratic internal policies, abandon aggressive foreign policies, and join the rules-based international order that the United States had fought to foster since 1950.

By the mid-1990s, this focus began to wane as a wave of optimism fueled by a novel theory of history began to influence the first generation of U.S. foreign policy leaders wholly lacking WWII experience. These leaders advocated for a more idealistic U.S. approach, transitioning from the doctrine of principled engagement to that of enhanced engagement.[9] The new policy reversed the traditional approach: rather than aiming at economically containing China to prevent it from becoming powerful without first becoming free, the new doctrine aimed at helping it become wealthy based on the assumption that this would cause it to become more liberal and less militarily aggressive. Under this new paradigm, the United States showered China, and to a lesser extent Russia, with economic benefits, like Most Favored Nation status and foreign aid, while turning a blind eye to China's flagrant breaches of global trade norms, state-sponsored commercial espionage campaigns, and aggressive military policies. The overall effect was to assist China's rapid economic rise and to provide it with the means to increase its ability to project military power beyond its borders.

Owing largely to its newfound optimism about China and Russia, the United States began to use its military with greater frequency for lesser contingencies to stabilize regions and, in some cases, support long-term nation-building activities. Throughout the period, DOD was engaged in nearly constant small-scale contingencies (SSCs) in Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Serbia, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among other places. The DOD increasingly paid the bill by postponing the recapitalization of its aging Cold War equipment. By the mid-2000s, much of the nation's mainline military capabilities, originally developed during the Cold War, were operating decades beyond their planned retirement dates.[10] By the late 2000s, readiness rates had dropped precipitously, leaving a growing portion of America's air and sea forces technologically or mechanically unable to operate in the likeliest major power contingencies.[11]

In 2008, the debate over whether the United States should prioritize defense procurement for ongoing small wars or for deterring China and Russia reached a tipping point. Driven by calls from U.S. Central Command, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates came down on the side of altering defense priorities to focus on the current conflict. In a strongly worded speech, he called out the Air Force Chief of Staff for preparing for future conventional conflict in nonpermissive environments, labeling it "Next-War-Itis." He called for an even more rapid shift in priorities toward supplying forces for nation-building and away from building forces capable of deterring Russia and China.[12]

Gates was pushing on an open door. To the dismay of many in the services and the Joint Staff, the DOD, led by the combatant commands, rushed to implement his guidance. In the decade following 2008, the shift in DOD priorities was institutionalized, with defense resources systemically transferred from programs that supported the long-term goal of deterring potential regional hegemons to those that supported the combatant commands' immediate needs. Programs designed to fight peer competitors, often already years or decades behind schedule, were further delayed or canceled. Emblematic of this, but far from exceptional, was the Air Force's non-stealthy B-52 Bomber, which officially entered service in 1955 and, despite bitter protests by the Air Force, was programmed to remain at the center of America's strategic bomber fleet until at least 2060.

In short, in the period following the end of the Cold War, characterized by the fear of Next-War-Itis, the resources available to fight peers and, more generally, to prosecute conventional wars were harvested for use in expanding the day-to-day missions of combatant commands. The subsequent reduction in the United States' ability to deter threats was substantial and failed to prevent the types of conflict that came to the fore in the early 2020s in Europe, the Middle East, and particularly Asia.[13] NSC-68's warning has been forgotten, and China, Russia, and Iran seized upon that lapse.

How the Goldwater Nichols Act Caused Vigilance to Fail

The conventional justification cited for shifting U.S. defense procurement away from a focus on great power competition is an evolving threat landscape. For example, Secretary of Defense Gate's "Next-War-Itis" argument was meant to transfer greater resources from long-term modernization programs to the immediate needs of the ongoing Iraq War. While the ensuing decisions to cancel or postpone significant weapons development programs are currently viewed as a mistake, the error can be ascribed to overly optimistic assessments about China and Russia's propensity to abstain from aggression at the time. This Pollyannaish assumption further suggested that the DOD could adapt more reflexively in response to evolving threat dynamics as needed. Strategic reasoning of this sort undoubtedly played a role in the decision to deprioritize long-term defense planning, but it was not the main reason for the change.

In recent years, a growing chorus of defense leaders, including current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Charles Q. Brown, former Commandant of the Marine Corps General David H. Berger, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michelle Flournoy, and elected officials in the House and Senate have argued that the move away from preparing for future wars has less to do with strategy and more to do with organizational incentives embedded in the structure of DOD by the 1986 Goldwater Nichols Act.[14]

At the core of the problem is the recurring need for the DOD to make difficult decisions about how to allocate limited defense dollars between current operations and preparing for the future. These decisions are challenging because, while the need to fund current operations is clear and garners immediate results, the need to fund programs capable of deterring or fighting major powers in future wars is more ambiguous, and the payoff is delayed. Delaying gratification is difficult in most situations, including operationally and politically. When lives are immediately on the line, prioritizing future conflict requires a unique combination of authority, vision, and discipline.

Before the GNA, the individuals charged with making these hard decisions were mainly the chiefs of staff of the individual services. Traditionally, the chiefs were in the military chain of command that connected the president to frontline fighters. They were responsible for weighing the costs and benefits of the tradeoffs between investments in urgent ongoing operations and the more distant but critical goals of preventing the rise of regional hegemons and deterring a third world war. These choices were often exceptionally hard for both practical and ethical reasons. Chiefs were well-suited to make them because they were personally accountable for both short and long-term outcomes. They were charged with both commanding ongoing military operations and advocating for the equipment their service would need in future wars in Congress. Their legacies kept them responsive to future generations that could benefit or suffer from their decisions years after they had left office.

In 1986, however, the GNA removed the service chiefs from this role. There were reasons to do so at the time. The National Security Act of 1947 reorganized the military and delineated service missions, but DOD has evolved in the last 40 years. The services were increasingly partisan and experiencing significant problems collaborating in joint operations, which undermined the military's warfighting capability. The GNA's solution was to remove the service chiefs from the chain of command and insert regional combatant commanders to serve as the bridge between the president and frontline fighters. In theory, the combatant commanders would be primarily concerned with effective joint operations rather than loyalty to any service, so the authors of the legislation believed this would address the problem of interservice rivalry and enhance the military's warfighting capability.

The authors of GNA were aware of the potential challenge this would create for the DOD when it was forced to make hard choices about allocating scarce resources between short and long-term procurement needs. Whereas the service chiefs held access to the global defense picture, the individual regional combatant commanders did not have this context. Consequently, combatant commanders would be incentivized to advocate for resources to meet the immediate needs of their individual regions.

The GNA solution was to empower the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJSC) to serve as the principal advisor to the president. In this role, he and the Joint Staff would develop the National Defense Strategy, adjudicate between the combatant commands, and serve as a brake on their calls to prioritize immediate needs over the more critical long-term goals that had concerned the authors of NSC-68. Thus, the theory went, the Chairman would replace the service chiefs and provide a less partisan, more joint perspective.

Unfortunately, the GNA's solution did not work for two reasons. First, although the legislation removed the service chiefs from the chain of command, it did not place the Chairman in the new chain of

command alongside or above the combatant commanders. There were reasons for this decision. The United States has long eschewed the German general staff model, believing it is imprudent to place authority over the entire military in the hands of any single unelected individual. The division of military power has long been a staple of liberal democracy.

The result of not placing the CJCS in the military chain of command effectively made the position advisory rather than executive. In this reporting chain, the CJCS is responsible for formulating national military strategy and priorities as the president's primary military advisor, but the office lacks statutory authority to compel other organizations to comply with the Chairman's recommendations.[15] In this system, influence over the combatant commands and services depends on the CJCS's ability to cajole and persuade them to prioritize long-term and global planning needs, often at the expense of their own priorities and resources.[16] In practice, this means that the Chairman's ability to strategically shape defense procurement is far less effective than the authors of the GNA anticipated.[17]

In short, the GNA attempted to replace the service chiefs' role in adjudicating the tension between the DOD's short and long-term requirements by empowering the CJCS to advise the president, but the CJCS could not fulfill this role because he was not placed in the chain of command. Thus, after the GNA was implemented, there was no uniformed individual in the chain of command responsible for the long-term execution of an overall defense procurement strategy. Thus, national-level strategy played a marginal role in procurement policy. To the extent that any individuals or organizations fulfilled this role, it was a vast array of civilian bureaucratic fiefdoms in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) that were neither constituted nor equipped to do so.

The second variable that undermined the Department's ability to make hard choices between current and future defense needs involved an event unforeseen by the authors of the GNA. Shortly after establishing the combatant command system, whenever combat broke out in various regions, the DOD began to utilize joint task forces rather than the existing combatant command structures. This created a new construct in which regional combatant commanders were bypassed for combat missions. Practically speaking, this often left combatant commanders mainly responsible for their command's peacetime rather than combat missions.

The decision to repeatedly remove the regional combatant commanders from combat had significant effects on defense procurement. With the service chiefs sidelined, the combatant commanders had become the most important voices in the defense procurement process. Importantly, this dynamic endured even after their exclusion from commanding combat missions by the new joint task force construct. Their shifted focus from combat to peacetime missions did not decrease their influence on defense procurement. This resulted in a persistent draw on defense dollars to fund a growing number of non-combat operations that too often did not contribute to an overarching strategy of preventing the rise of regional hegemons or deterring great power adversaries. These changes—excluding the service chiefs, disempowering the Chairman, building bureaucratic fiefdoms in OSD, and removing combat from the portfolio of combatant commanders—created an incentive system incapable of systematically or strategically assessing the tradeoffs between short and long-term defense requirements.

The perspective that removing the service chiefs helped to create a monolithic system, one that does not allow for healthy competition in ideas, avoids hard decisions, and regularly resorts to "group-think," is

widely shared both within and outside the defense community.[18] While opinions vary about how to resolve these problems, there is a good deal of consensus among defense leaders that the current organizational structure of the DOD systemically underprioritizes long-term planning. Without the ability to plan long-term, the system is clearly broken.

The primary Congressional staff architect of the GNA, James R. Locher, argues that the central problem, given how the legislation has evolved, is that "DOD is unable to rigorously assess risks and benefits among competing courses of action and alternative capability sets… Typically, the Joint Staff defaults to the need for consensus and is not able to choose between stark alternatives." As part of the solution, Locher recommends placing the service chiefs back in the chain of command for specific functions.[19]

In a similar vein, writing about her experience with the Joint Staff, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Flournoy described a "tyranny of consensus" that limits the development of quality options and hinders decision-making and agility."[20] General Joseph Dunford, in even more revealing congressional testimony about his own experience as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the process as frustrating and organizational dynamics as rendering decision-making and establishing priorities exceedingly challenging.[21]

These concerns are not confined to the DOD. For instance, in 2021, a bipartisan coalition from the House Armed Services Committee communicated their concerns in a strongly worded letter to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense that the internal dynamics of the DOD were significantly bypassing both the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and Global Force Management Allocation Plan (GFMAP) by prioritizing the requests of the combatant commands over investments in longer-term readiness and modernization efforts. This interference, they argued, had escalated to a level that necessitated immediate attention and corrective action.[22] Bipartisan groups in the Senate have made related appeals.[23]

While all the criticisms hold significant weight, Congress' apprehensions regarding the DOD systematically sidestepping the NDS and GFMAP are particularly noteworthy. The NDS and GFMAP are cornerstone documents guiding the DOD's defense procurement strategy, aligning DOD funding allocations with national priorities delineated by the Secretary of Defense, the CJCS, the service chiefs, and elected Congressional leaders. By circumventing these documents and giving precedence to requests from combatant commands, the DOD risks prioritizing immediate exigencies over the strategy established by these ostensibly higher authorities. This not only results in sub-optimal strategic outcomes, but it actively contravenes the constitutional mandate to subordinate the military to elected civilian leadership in the executive and legislative branches of government.

The Department's current organizational incentive structure fostered this state of play, which significantly undermines the United States' ability to deter its great power adversaries. Writing from their experiences as service chiefs in a series of articles in 2021, then-Chief of Staff of the Air Force (and current CJCS) Gen Brown and then-Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Berger explained that the current organizational structure systemically prioritizes the urgent over the important. This results in a:

> *Joint force [that] is not ready to satisfy the demands of great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, we have directed significant resources to ensure they are ready for dozens of other lesser requirements predicated upon an ability to project power across strategic distances in permissive environments.*[24]

Stated concisely, while national uniformed and civilian leaders in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the services, the Joint Chiefs, the House, and the Senate have all repeatedly decried the current system that neglects preparation for great power war, they have so far proved powerless to change the way the Department allocates its resources. Over time, this allowed the balance of military power between democratic and autocratic major powers to shift dramatically in favor of the autocracies. This shift is not the result of strategic calculations based on an assessment of the threat environment; it is the result of organizational problems within the DOD created by the GNA.

Part II: Why Defense Reform Keeps Failing

Over the past decade, China and Russia grew more powerful and militarily aggressive. While DOD officials issued increasingly dire warnings about these burgeoning threats and tried twice to respond, both attempts failed because Congress chose not to grow the defense budget to match the requirements of the DOD's strategy. Likewise, because Congress and the DOD did not fix the perverse incentive system created by the GNA, available funds continued to systemically divert toward the combatant commands. As the above section suggests, defense reform is needed desperately. To formulate real resolutions, it is necessary to first understand what types of reform have already been attempted and why they failed.

The Failure of the Third Offset Strategy

The DOD's first attempt at reform began in 2015, four years after the United States withdrew from Iraq and almost a decade into the avoidance of Next-War-Itis. The change came amid growing concerns about China and Russia and their increasing willingness to use violence in their respective regions. In 2013, China enhanced its harassment of U.S. Navy assets, built a chain of militarized islands in international waters to enforce its claims to vast regions of the South China Sea, and militarized its claim to Japan's Senkaku Islands by declaring an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over them.[25] In 2014, Russia invaded and occupied Crimea and commenced low-intensity military operations in eastern Ukraine.

China and Russia's actions demonstrated that the U.S. defense posture was no longer sufficient to deter them from using violence in pursuit of regional hegemony. Yet, this reality was insufficient to persuade the United States to increase its defense spending to counter these growing threats. Rather than do nothing, though, the Office of the Secretary of Defense announced that it would pursue what it labeled the Third Offset Strategy.

The Third Offset Strategy was a comprehensive effort to maintain and extend the military's competitive advantage against growing Chinese and Russian martial power that emphasized the innovative use of novel technologies to counter those states' numerical and geographical advantages. More specifically, the Third Offset Strategy sought to leverage artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, advanced robotics, cyber capabilities, and other emerging technologies to offset modernized and capable adversaries.[26] In simple terms, the strategy sought to exploit the U.S. technological advantage to counter the growth in the military capabilities of China, Russia, and other adversaries.[27]

The Third Offset Strategy was based on the First and Second Offset Strategies, which the United States executed during the Cold War. These strategies succeeded because, at the time, both the DOD and industry responded quickly to meet the strategies' requirements. At the dawn of the Cold War, there had been an urgent need to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) to counter the USSR's advantage in numbers and proximity

to Western Europe. By prioritizing the project as part of the First Offset Strategy, the DOD was able to accomplish one of history's greatest technological achievements in a mere three years.[28] In the late 1970s, when, once again, U.S. Forces suffered a vast numerical inferiority in conventional forces in Europe, it executed the Second Offset Strategy. This time, the goal was to use stealth, precision guidance, and networking to overcome the USSR's larger force inventory. Once again, the DOD was able to execute the strategy quickly. For instance, the F-117 stealth fighter progressed from initial concept to operational readiness in less than three years.[29]

Given the speed with which the DOD and U.S. industry responded to the First and Second Offset, there was a strong precedent for the United States to use its advantages in innovation to offset China and Russia's increasing military power and ambition. However, the Third Offset has yet to materialize. Despite the urgent appeals from the services and Joint Staff and several innovative programs, a decade later, it remains challenging to identify any single new U.S. technology or weapon system in operation with significant implications for major power war or deterrence.[30]

In retrospect, the DOD's inability to replicate the speed of its previous Offset Strategies is unsurprising. Throughout the 1990s, GNA changes systemically moved defense acquisition authority from military to civilian decision-makers—from the services to the secretariat—with concomitant changes in priorities and timelines. Where the military services had tended to prioritize combat in acquisition decisions, the centralized DOD culture that arose from the Goldwater Nichols reforms after the Cold War often prioritized bureaucratic processes, consensus, and an array of non-military political priorities.[31] This culture drastically increased timelines, costs, and overruns.[32]

As procurement power became more centralized, the Department actively encouraged similar centralization in industry. At the end of the Cold War, there were over 100 major defense firms. By the end of the 1990s, there were five.[33] For decades, the worst-kept secret in Washington was that, under the new system, the defense acquisition process was broken.[34] The Pentagon had simply lost its ability to innovate or respond quickly to the nation's defense priorities. During the Cold War, the DOD had generally been able to deploy ground-breaking new weapon systems rapidly. By the late 2010s, major systems were often paid for but then abandoned, and the timelines for large projects averaged between two and three decades.[35]

In short, the Third Offset Strategy likely failed for two reasons: a simple lack of funding and more serious organizational problems. Given the cumbersome and centralized post-GNA U.S. defense bureaucracy, it is actually unclear now whether the Third Offset could be achieved with any amount of money. Therefore, it is safe to say that primarily organizational problems within the DOD slowed the Third Offset nearly to the point of irrelevance.

The Failure of the 2018 Pivot to China and Great Power Competition

In the period following 2015, China and Russia intensified their military challenges to the established international order. China escalated its aggressive posture in the South China Sea and pursued the modernization of its armed forces with vigor. Concurrently, Russia expanded its military activities in Ukraine's Donbas region, actively intervened in the Syrian Civil War, and embarked on the development of a suite of advanced new weapon systems, such as hypersonic missiles.

In 2018, three years into the Third Offset Strategy, the United States published a new National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) that officially focused defense on China rather than across the wide scope of threats highlighted in past strategies. On paper, the new focus on great power competition finally and officially undid the fear of Next-War-Itis that had paralyzed U.S. defense procurement related to future wars since 2008. This approach was replicated in the 2022 NDS and continues to guide policy today.

The rationale behind the 2018 NDS's pivot to great power competition and focus on China was the same one that visionaries like Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work described when they advocated for the Third Offset Strategy. They related this pivot to the one the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment had championed in the early 1990s when the center of the world's economy pivoted from Europe to Asia. If an increasingly belligerent China were able to dominate the region by force and fear, it would become the regional hegemon and eventually dominate and displace the rules-based world order with an autocratic system more congenial to its own system of government. While such an outcome was once a distant challenge, the authors of the NDS argued that, in 2018, it had crystallized into an immediate one.[36]

One of the core concepts behind the 2018 National Defense Strategy centered on forming regional defense partnerships to counter China's approach of singling out and targeting countries one at a time. The requirement to potentially defend Taiwan against invasion played a pivotal role in this strategy. Defense planners posited that if China were to invade Taiwan successfully, it would significantly weaken the confidence of regional allies and partners in the U.S. commitment to their safety and security, thereby diminishing their resolve to resist pressure from China.[37] This concern mirrored those of NSC-68 from nearly 70 years earlier about the Soviet Union, but emphasized the urgency of addressing China's assertive foreign policy to prevent the unchecked spread of its expansionist goals.

While there was a good deal of bipartisan agreement in the defense community about the growing threat and need for reform, as had occurred in 2015, the writers of the new NDS faced two significant hurdles. The first was that they would have to execute that massive new requirement without an increase in funding. The second was that, even in the face of demands from the White House, the Joint Staff, and the services, the perverse organizational structure of the DOD created by the GNA continued to frustrate attempts to refocus procurement on the capabilities needed to fight great power opponents.

The Pentagon adopted two approaches to attempt the execution of the ambitious 2018 National Defense Strategy without increasing defense spending. The first was to call for a variety of reforms to the organization of the DOD. The second was to move from the so-called two-war force sizing construct to a one-war force sizing policy focused on China. This signaled a major departure from the two-war construct established by the 1993 Bottom-Up Review, which dominated post-Cold War military thinking.[38] While the attempt to reorganize the DOD quickly collapsed under the weight of the Pentagon's bureaucracy, the downgrade to a one-war construct was more successful.

The rationale for transitioning to a single-war planning framework was ostensibly to reallocate resources to Asia, thereby enhancing the credibility of U.S. deterrent forces within the region. This approach meant accepting greater risk because, as the Pentagon diverted resources from other regions, it diminished the credibility of U.S. deterrent promises to allies

and partners in those theaters. The effectiveness of the revised strategy hinged on several implicit and explicit assumptions concerning the Pentagon's capacity and readiness to execute the strategy, as well as the presumed incapacity of foreign adversaries to coordinate their actions to capitalize on new strategic windows of opportunity. Both sets of assumptions ultimately proved to be overly optimistic. The strategy—with the full support of elected leaders, the Secretary of Defense, the CJCS, and service chiefs—was meant to compel the Pentagon to shift away from its decades-old policy of prioritizing the immediate demands of combatant commands over the requirement to create forces capable of providing for their future needs. Yet, the move did not result in the intended balance between current and future missions. In the six years since the strategy was implemented, a wide array of those elected officials and military and civilian leaders have consistently voiced their concerns regarding the Department's failure to achieve this redirection.

The reasons behind DOD's inability to change after 2018, and indeed 2015, are laid out starkly in a 2021 article written by current CJCS Gen Brown and then-Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Berger in collaboration with other service chiefs. In the article, Brown and Berger noted that the great power threats the United States faced were existential and could not be addressed using the old models of policy and investment. Writing three years after the publication of the new NDS endorsed by Secretary of Defense James Mattis and CJCS Joesph Dunford, they pointed out that there had been no appreciable change:

> *Our current readiness model strongly biases spending on legacy capabilities for yesterday's missions at the expense of building readiness in the arena of great-power competition and investing in modern capabilities for the missions of both today and tomorrow.*[39]

The problem, as Brown and Berger cited, was just as outlined above—that the organizational structure of the DOD systemically prioritized "today's combatant command requirements [over] the modernization imperatives required to enable tomorrow's combatant commanders."[40]

This organizational misallocation of priority is not only limited to short versus long-term planning needs but also service equities. The Indo-Pacific theater, which is the focus of the new strategy, necessitates a force composition that leans heavily toward naval, air, and space capabilities. It follows that implementing a China-focused strategy would require the Department to transfer resources from the Army's budget to prioritize the Navy, Air Force, and Space Force budgets. The focus on counterinsurgency in the 2000s similarly increased the Army's budget at the expense of Air Force recapitalization and modernization investments. In fact, the Army received over $1.3 trillion more than the Air Force between 2002 and 2021, an average of $66 billion more per year than the Air Force.[41] Yet, such a decision today would require hard choices that Undersecretary Flournoy and many others have described as impossible, given the DOD's consensus culture. Instead, the service shares of the defense budget remain static, and DOD's leadership continues to approve Army investments in duplicative capabilities—for example, the Army's $60–70 million-a-shot long-range surface-to-surface missiles for long-range strikes, which the Air Force could conduct with far more cost-effective capabilities.[42]

While the 2018 pivot failed to garner sufficient funds and fell afoul of the same organizational problem that had undermined previous efforts to reform the DOD, its biggest failure had nothing to do with budgets or organization. The principal assumption underlying the strategy was that the United States could safely move to a one-war construct and avoid increasing the defense budget because its adversaries in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were not capable of

synchronizing their actions to exploit this change in U.S. force planning. So long as bad actors did not coordinate their actions, the plan had some chance of succeeding.

As of 2024, this final assumption has proven incorrect. Whether through intentional coordination or mere coincidence, deterrence has failed in multiple theaters at the same time, leading to the present crisis. This failure raises the possibility that the conflict will escalate to involve China, potentially drawing the United States into a great power war.

Part III: The Present Crisis

The historical backdrop of defense reform outlined above lays the foundation for the present crisis. In response to the expanding ambitions and military capabilities of China and Russia, defense planners hoped that the United States could maintain the rules-based international order without augmenting the defense budget by focusing on technology and transitioning to a one-war construct focused on a future war with China. These strategies operated on idealistic assumptions that the civilian and uniformed leadership within the DOD could effectuate changes in procurement policy to more directly address great power competition and that China, Russia, and other adversaries would be incapable of exploiting the one-war construct through simultaneous actions. However, both assumptions proved overly optimistic, thereby planting the seeds for the present crisis.

The current crisis sprouted in August 2021, when, in alignment with its China-centric one-war policy, the United States withdrew its military forces from Afghanistan. Predictions by the United States that Afghanistan's government could sustain internal stability for one to two years, or even indefinitely, after the departure of U.S. troops proved catastrophically naive. The Taliban overran Afghan government forces and seized control of the country in a matter of mere days, and did so even before the United States could complete its withdrawal.[43]

Seven months later, in February 2022, Russia initiated an invasion of Ukraine, again contrary to Western expectations. Ukraine fended off the invasion for more than two years, during which time the United States provided significant support to Ukraine under the menace of Russian nuclear saber-rattling. Given the Pentagon's long-held decision to maintain a quantity of munitions in reserve that could sustain a potential conventional war outside of the Asia Pacific region, this aid has significantly depleted important categories of America's ordnance.[44] Furthermore, the ongoing costs and risks associated with the war have deepened political divisions within the United States and strained its willingness to back allies and partners in general.

With U.S. weaponry stretched thin to support Ukraine in Europe, a number of Iranian proxy forces initiated hostilities in the Middle East in 2023. In October, Hamas attacked Israel, prompting Israel to invade Gaza. Hezbollah entered the conflict, launching daily missile barrages into Israel. In February of 2024, Houthi forces in Yemen began conducting missile attacks in the Bab el-Mandeb strait, attempting to cut off the Red Sea and Suez Canal to all but Iranian and Chinese oil shipments. Iran also launched air and missile strikes at Israel several times across 2024. Concurrently, the United States and Iran are engaged in a simmering conflict characterized by escalating air and missile strikes on each other's forces across Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, with no clear offramp.[45]

As these events unfolded, China significantly increased its military harassment of U.S. naval assets in the South China Sea and military maneuvers around Taiwan.[46] Between 2021 and 2023, the U.S. Navy reported that China's military conducted 180 harassment operations against U.S. aircraft,

more than it had conducted in the previous decade.[47] These actions are arguably the most worrying hostilities because, in conjunction with increased diplomatic threats and military maneuvers around Taiwan, they portend a serious conflict with China over Taiwan should U.S. deterrent assurances falter.

To grasp the longer-term implications of the current crisis, it is essential to acknowledge that, from the U.S. perspective, there are two distinct yet intricately connected and potentially adverse outcomes arising from America's failure to deter adversaries from using violence to advance its foreign policy goals. One concerns the continuing viability of the broader international order, while the other is specifically related to conflict with China.

Scenario 1: Adversaries Work Together to Unravel the Rules-Based International System

In the event the United States' failure to deter Russia and Iran from resorting to violence to advance their regional aims continues, the risk increases that the rules and norms that have kept the globe at relative peace for the last three decades will unravel. While this may be considered the less dire of the two consequences, it is still a profoundly concerning outcome poised to unfold. Over time, this erosion of order and stability will embolden other nations, such as North Korea and Venezuela, to escalate their use of force to bolster their influence or counter perceived threats, thereby undermining the relative peace and stability painstakingly maintained by the United States since the Gulf War in 1991 through a delicately balanced international system of allies and partners. At a minimum, this trajectory is likely to result in heightened violence, a weakened global economy, and, potentially, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. At worst, it will result in a direct conflict between Russia and NATO.

This "outcome" is, in fact, already well underway and has the potential to become a vicious cycle in which violence in one region distracts U.S. attention and divides U.S. resources, facilitating autocratic states' plans to take advantage of the distraction in a distant theater. There is some evidence that the world's autocratic states understand this dynamic and are synchronizing their use of violence. Three weeks prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia concluded a friendship agreement with China, touted as having "no limits," and the two autocratic nations have subsequently conducted joint military exercises.[48] As the war in Ukraine has escalated, Russia and Iran have significantly increased their military coordination, with Russia providing advanced military technology and support to Iran and Iran providing drones and advisors to Russia.[49] Russia and North Korea similarly grew their military ties.[50]

While it is likely that the autocratic states are actively working together to some degree to undermine U.S. deterrence, this scenario does not hinge on explicit collaboration. The mere act of aggression by any of these nations against any U.S. ally or partner stretches the U.S. military's resources, which are postured for only one war, weakening the assurance of its deterrent promises to all other allies and partners. The obligation to counter China in the Taiwan Strait limits America's capability to assist Ukraine. Similarly, the commitment to Ukraine diminishes its capacity to confront Iran and its affiliates in regions such as Israel, Yemen, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. Escalation by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea against the Republic of Korea or Venezuela against Guyana would exacerbate the problem.

The intensification of U.S. military engagement in any of these conflicts offers additional windows for action to all other adversaries; they do not need to trust each other or actively coordinate to seize

opportunities to further their foreign policy goals through violence and intimidation. Given the current limitations of U.S. forces, allowing bad actors to act on opportunities as they emerge, unchecked, the unfolding cycle will inadvertently advance the agendas of other autocracies.

Scenario 2: War with China

The second and more existential outcome involves a potential conflict with China. Currently, worsening relations with China represent the most formidable challenge the United States has encountered since its founding. During the first two World Wars and the Cold War, the United States possessed an economy and industrial capacity vastly larger than its adversaries. Even after the Soviet Union occupied the industrial centers of Central and Eastern Europe in 1950, its gross national product (GNP) amounted to only a quarter of that of the United States. Consequently, in earlier conflicts, the United States was nearly assured of victory, given sufficient time and resolve.

Unlike these former adversaries, however, China has an economy roughly equivalent to that of the United States and much more industrial capability in dual-use industries such as shipbuilding.[51] This marks the first time in history that the United States has faced a globally ambitious autocratic peer competitor. In a protracted multi-year or multi-decade conflict typical of confrontations between major powers, China would wield an advantage akin to the one the United States enjoyed in earlier global conflicts.

Beyond this, China has deliberately downplayed its escalating defense expenditure over the last decade, fostering a misplaced sense of security in the West. Recent assessments suggest that previous U.S. calculations grossly underestimated China's defense budget. Contrary to earlier approximations, which posited China's spending at around one-third of the United States' outlays, emerging evidence suggests that their spending is approaching parity.[52] Moreover, China has massed its combat forces near the Taiwan Straits, their most likely combat zone, while U.S. forces are globally dispersed. China would enjoy significant tactical advantages in a conflict over Taiwan.

These and other factors render a situation in which it is unclear whether the United States is capable of defending Taiwan from an attack by China. Certainly, the situation is far from hopeless; the United States would almost certainly fight such a war as part of a coalition involving Japan and other actors, and defending Taiwan would be significantly easier than invading. Nevertheless, America's decades of deprioritizing procurement of the types of capabilities necessary for engaging in this type of scenario means conflict would likely be prolonged. There is no assurance that the democratic coalition would be victorious or that victory could be achieved at an acceptable price.[53] In short, the present crisis scenario is nothing short of a powder keg with the potential to rapidly escalate into a third world war, one in which the United States could conceivably find itself on the losing side.

As the specter of conflict with China looms, the pivotal question revolves around whether China perceives U.S. deterrent threats as credible. The last three U.S. presidents have all directly stated or strongly implied that the United States would engage in combat to safeguard Taiwan against a Chinese incursion. However, for deterrence to work, the prospective aggressor must believe that the deterring nation possesses the military capability to back its threat. If the United States currently even has the capability to back its threats, most U.S. observers believe the margin is thin, and Chinese analysts undoubtedly share this conclusion.

The Horns of the Dilemma

Given the tenuous nature of the deterrent advantage held by the United States and its partners in Asia, the United States finds itself on the horns of a dilemma. If it prioritizes commitments to allies and partners outside Asia, it risks diminishing its deterrent capabilities in the Taiwan Straits. Such a scenario could embolden China to act, using violence to assert control over Taiwan. This would almost certainly lead to a war between the United States and China.

Conversely, if the United States does not prioritize these commitments, it runs the risk of exacerbating the escalating cycle of violence that poses a threat to the stability of the liberal international order in Europe and the Middle East. In the long run, this instability would almost certainly spread to Asia, leading to the outcome the United States attempted to prevent by diverting resources to those commitments outside the region.

This precarious situation is the result of decades of neglect in preparing for future conflicts. Presently, U.S. military commitments, as defined in its National Defense Strategy, far exceed its military capabilities and capacity. Past attempts to address this disparity did so through defense reforms alone, without augmenting defense spending, and redirected limited defense resources toward Asia. They failed. This failure can largely be attributed to the DOD's organizational structure, which, shaped by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, has resisted shifting its focus away from day-to-day combatant command requirements toward the development of a force capable of deterring or winning in a conflict against a great power adversary. Urgent and substantial changes in DOD's funding and organization are imperative to enhance the ability of the United States to aid its allies and partners, preserve the current international system, and simultaneously reduce the likelihood of a conflict with China.

An Urgent Call for a New NSC-68

Today, the United States finds itself facing challenges reminiscent of those it faced in 1950, where a misalignment between foreign policy objectives and military capabilities prompted President Truman to commission a reassessment of national security, culminating in NSC-68. Despite encountering resistance within the security apparatus, Truman successfully navigated these obstacles, ushering in an era of unprecedented global prosperity and the longest period of peace between major powers in history. Today's crisis demands a similar level of commitment and resolve.

Addressing the current crisis necessitates a four-step approach.

- First, the president must initiate a comprehensive reassessment of national security, objectively evaluating the prevailing threat landscape and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing strategies. This assessment must begin with a clear-eyed acknowledgment that the current approach and attempts at defense reform have failed. It must likewise be premised on the understanding that should the nation simply ignore the crisis, it will likely lead to war between great powers. A realistic appraisal of adversaries' and allies' capabilities and intentions, as well as the evolving objectives of the United States within the international arena, is needed to frame a comprehensive assessment. In essence, the government must formulate a new holistic national security policy akin to the 1950s-era NSC-68 that recognizes the escalating interconnectedness between China, Russia, and other actors and develops a defense posture capable of achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. This policy

will lay the groundwork for cultivating a future force equipped with the necessary capabilities and capacity to deter and, if required, defeat these threats across multiple theaters simultaneously. The most critical aspect of this initiative must be to recognize how the world has changed since the benign period of unquestioned U.S. military supremacy and, based on this diagnosis, develop a pragmatic and dispassionate approach to dealing with the world as it is today.

- Second, immediate action is required to restructure the DOD to correct the organizational deficiencies that hindered past reform efforts aimed at countering the threats posed by China and Russia. Congress must revise or replace the GNA with policies that better balance the DOD's immediate and long-term priorities. This will entail, among other things, repositioning the service chiefs within the chain of command while taking steps to preserve the ability of U.S. forces to conduct joint operations. A full-scale review of the array of bureaucracies connected with OSD should be accomplished with an eye to shifting missions and authorities back toward the services. The goal of such a restructuring of the DOD is to remove the systemic impediments to developing the capability needed to deter or combat major powers. This includes enabling strategic decision-making that prioritizes the acquisition of capabilities based on an honest assessment of cost-per-effect and the deployment of forces geared toward addressing the challenges of great power competition.[54] This approach reallocates greater authority to the military services, which must organize, train, and equip forces for the future, whereas the combatant commands would only continue to prioritize immediate concerns.
- Third, the president must work with Congress to ensure the defense budget grows to align with the escalating threat landscape. This means growing defense spending from its current level of 3.6 percent of GDP to 5–6 percent of GDP. Growth is, in part, necessitated by moving from a one-war back to a two-war force planning construct. Increased funding must be targeted at the development and maintenance of forces capable of deterring aggression from China and Russia, as well as those forces capable of supporting America's commitments in other theaters. These forces must be interoperable with those of allied nations. Given the immediacy of the current crisis, funds must be allocated in a manner that requires industry to act quickly rather than in the decades-long periods that have become the norm. Finally, no funds should be allocated until the DOD is reorganized to avoid the pitfalls that have undermined past attempts at procurement reform.
- Finally, DOD and Congress must start evaluating defense capabilities with an eye toward shifting investment among the services based on a cost-per-effect assessment of the weapon systems already in existence. Such an appraisal considers the effects needed and desired to fulfill a winning strategy against a great power adversary, then matches funding and resources to the most cost-effective capabilities that contribute to meeting the needs of U.S. defense strategy. Effecting this approach would require a tough-minded and comprehensive roles and missions review on par with the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces (CORM) conducted in 1995/1996.[55]

Calls for reform such as these would be impossible within the relatively peaceful conditions that characterized most of the post-Cold War era. However, this era has passed. In recent years, the world has entered a period sharing more in common with the early years of the Cold War than with the post-Cold War era. In this earlier period, between 1947 and 1953, the United States embarked on a candid evaluation of the global threat environment and made arduous and sometimes unpopular decisions. These decisions necessitated a reconfiguration of power dynamics within the U.S. security apparatus and substantial increases in defense expenditure. During this period, defense spending surged to unprecedented levels outside of both world wars. The peak in 1953 amounted to approximately 14 percent of GDP. While this figure may appear staggering today, the choice to pay these costs resulted in the current liberal international order and almost certainly deterred a third world war.

While the reforms described above will be difficult, there is little question about whether the United States will eventually enact them, given the current threat landscape. The pivotal question lies in the timing and rationale behind such decisions. The United States can undertake them proactively as a means of deterring adversaries, mirroring Truman's approach in 1950. Conversely, as NSC-68 warned 75 years ago, it can postpone them until it is compelled to make them after deterrence fails, as occurred in 1917 and 1941.

Conclusion

The United States is presently confronted with the most significant national security challenge since its founding. In the past three years, the global deterrence networks that the United States developed to promote a world governed by laws rather than force have begun to fail. Arising from an imbalance between the objectives of U.S. foreign policy and its defense capabilities, there is a substantial risk that the rapidly escalating failure of deterrence relationships around the globe will lead to a military confrontation between the United States and China.

Following the Cold War's conclusion, the United States aimed to both contain the emergence of autocratic great powers and uphold global peace and democracy. These objectives relied heavily on the military's capacity to prevent autocratic nations from resorting to violence to achieve their ambitions—a feasible strategy when the United States was the sole superpower. However, the landscape has evolved, with the nation now facing security challenges from two great powers and several smaller threats.

The competition is not purely a military one; it reflects a significant shift in global economic power and a clash between democratic and autocratic visions for how the world's system of governance should work. Given the reliance of the United States and its democratic allies on military deterrence against autocracies, the U.S. military serves as the primary safeguard for the existing international order. Yet, as currently structured, the U.S. military is ill-equipped for this role. In the first place, the size of the U.S. defense budget has not kept up with the growth of its adversaries' spending. In second, the Department of Defense has systematically resisted calls for the type of defense procurement reform that would enable it to deter or fight major power opponents.

Resolving the present crisis demands a swift and substantial augmentation of the defense budget. As crucial as this step may be, the expansion of the U.S. defense budget must be deferred until Congress tackles the systemic organizational challenges within the department that have obstructed previous reform endeavors. The DOD is beset by structural deficiencies that impede reform.

Efforts to bolster the DOD's capabilities vis-à-vis great power adversaries, exemplified by initiatives such as the 2015 Third Offset Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy, foundered as a result of these internal dynamics. Until the department undergoes meaningful reform, mere monetary injections will not effectively address the underlying issue.

These organizational issues have been identified by numerous high-level officials within the DOD and are well understood. The Goldwater-Nichols Act established a structure in which key figures responsible for national strategy development and military readiness—the CJCS and service chiefs—are excluded from the chain of command. Meanwhile, combatant commanders, who, despite their titles, have often been displaced as combat leaders by joint task forces, remain within the chain. This arrangement fosters an incentive system that hampers the DOD's strategic coherence and effectiveness. This situation persists not because it is deemed effective but due to bureaucratic inertia and the fact that only Congress can enact the necessary reforms.

To navigate these challenges, the president must urgently initiate a comprehensive review of U.S. foreign and defense policies, akin to the effort that led to NSC-68 in 1950. This initiative should focus on formulating a holistic U.S. strategy that safeguards national security goals and minimizes the risk of U.S. forces becoming engaged in a war with China or Russia—or both. It must involve reorganizing the DOD to remove the problems that have thwarted past attempts at reform, and it must include a significant increase in defense spending to counter increases in its adversaries' military capabilities. It is not yet too late to avoid a great power war or to prevent the collapse of the current rules-based international system, but if reform is not initiated rapidly, these results are highly likely to occur in the near future. ✪

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