



# Defending Forward

## Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad

Foreword by former Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta

Edited by Bradley Bowman

December 2020





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# FOREWORD

By Leon E. Panetta

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Besieged by a global pandemic, saddled with growing federal debt, and distracted by other domestic challenges, Americans are not thinking about U.S. defense policy or global military posture. Lately, they have grown concerned about the very state of our democracy.

When foreign policy manages to enter a conversation, it often takes the form of support for “ending endless wars.” I certainly appreciate the desire to end military conflicts and deployments. Too often as secretary of defense, I found that my most difficult responsibility was calling or writing families to inform them that a loved one tragically paid the ultimate price for our country.



↑ Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta speaks to military personnel during his visit to Camp Lemonnier on December 13, 2011, in Djibouti. (Photo by Pablo Martinez Monsivais – Pool via Getty Images)

But whether we like it or not, the United States confronts a growing array of serious national security threats. Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang, in addition to a number of determined terrorist organizations, continue to pursue objectives inimical to American interests.

In considering how to best respond, I draw lessons from my five decades of public service.

One of them is the realization that keeping our homeland safe and prosperous requires Americans to lead on the international stage – engaging other nations and building capable coalitions. Withdrawing into a defensive and insular crouch here at home risks leaving Americans more isolated and more vulnerable to threats. Large oceans do not provide the protection they once did.

*More than ever, Americans must go abroad to remain secure at home.*

More than ever, Americans must go abroad to remain secure at home. Such a view is neither a right nor left policy – it is smart policy informed by a modern history

of devastating wars, hard lessons from more recent conflicts, and current realities.

Such a policy requires well-resourced and capable American diplomats, development experts, and intelligence professionals. But it also requires a ready and well-trained military, forward-positioned and equipped with the most modern and advanced weapons and systems available.

I also know from my time in government that the threats we confront are simply too numerous and complex for Americans to address alone. We simply lack the resources to defend our country and our citizens sufficiently against revisionist powers, rogue states, and terrorist organizations simultaneously. The economic impact of the global pandemic will only widen the gap between the defense resources required and those available.

Thankfully, America is blessed with an unparalleled network of allies and partners to help mitigate this resource gap. The right U.S. military posture can empower local partners, deter aggression, and defend our interests. This

approach can ultimately reduce the demand on the U.S. military and the U.S. Treasury.

My experiences in government also teach me that every military deployment and withdrawal deserves intense scrutiny. Military interventions almost never go as planned, and they often last longer and include more challenges than originally anticipated. The use of armed force should be considered a last resort.

Americans are certainly right to scrutinize and debate military interventions. There is much to criticize, for example, about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and how the campaign in Afghanistan has been conducted.

But we must also apply the same scrutiny to withdrawals. In doing so, Americans will find that some withdrawals can be equally deleterious to our national security, especially when the withdrawals are conducted precipitously and without clear preconditions.

Unfortunately, debates about war often devolve into opposing sides caricaturing one another as “militant” on one side and “naïve” on the other – neither advancing knowledge nor illuminating the American interest. If we agree that those calling for withdrawal are not advocates for American “weakness,” we must also be willing to say that those making the case for forward defense-in-depth military deployments are not advocates for “endless war.”

Given the consequences, we must encourage a more serious and substantive discussion regarding America’s global military posture and what is required to protect our core national security interests.

That is exactly the kind of national conversation this monograph, edited by Bradley Bowman, seeks to inform.

*Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad* is a collection of essays by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and its Center on Military and Political Power. The monograph’s 22 essays, written by an impressive array of experts and former officials, are divided into five sections.

The first section includes essays that provide helpful historical context, describe the current state of the debate, and make the policy argument that retaining – not restraining – forward-positioned U.S. forces in key locations alongside allies and partners represents the best way to defend U.S. interests.

Sections two, three, and four examine three regional combatant commands that are vital to U.S. security and prosperity: Central Command, European Command, and Indo-Pacific Command, respectively. The contributions in each section describe U.S. national security interests, the leading threats to those interests, and the necessary American military posture in each region.

Section five includes essays that focus on the path forward, offering specific suggestions related to Beijing’s policy of military-civil fusion, the cyber domain, special operations, Israel and China, and a Pacific Deterrence Initiative. Each of these chapters offers a new perspective to traditional discussions regarding U.S. overseas military posture.

*This volume is certainly not designed to end the debate, but to enhance it.*

This volume is certainly not designed to end the debate, but to enhance it. The debate is the continuation of one whose roots trace back to the “Vietnam Syndrome,” which has saddled American strategic thinking for decades.

Readers will find arguments in this monograph with which they may agree or disagree. That is the intent. Let us hope they spark a serious, timely, and substantive discussion about our national defense. It is long overdue.

*Leon E. Panetta*  
*Former Secretary of Defense*  
*Member, Board of Advisors,*  
*FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power*  
*Monterey, California*





## THE BIG DEBATE AND LOOMING CHALLENGES

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*Americans must choose what role they want to play in the world. Following World War II, American leaders realized that U.S. leadership, strength, and engagement on the international stage was the best means to secure freedom, prosperity, and security at home. Now, after years of painful conflicts in the Middle East, some Americans are tempted to restrain American power abroad—infatuated with the superficially appealing hope that if the U.S. withdraws, threats will subside and not follow Americans home. History and current threats, however, warn against such an approach. Washington should clearly define its global and regional interests and identify the leading threats to those interests. Such an analysis reveals a daunting array of challenges. China and Russia seek to undermine and displace the United States and create an international system more accommodating to might-makes-right authoritarianism. The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to export terrorism and inch toward nuclear weapons capability. Pyongyang threatens the American homeland with potentially nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. And terrorist organizations continue to seek opportunities to kill Americans and our allies. In light of these threats, U.S. military forward defense alongside allies and partners represents the best way to secure American interests.*

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## The Retrenchment Syndrome

### A Response to “Come Home, America?”

By Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster

*Editor’s note: This chapter originally appeared in the July/August 2020 edition of Foreign Affairs.*<sup>1</sup>

In the decades after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the simplistic but widely held belief that the war had been unjustified and unwinnable gave way to “the Vietnam syndrome”—a conviction that the United States should avoid all military interventions abroad.<sup>2</sup> The mantra of “no more Vietnams” dominated foreign policy, muting more concrete discussions of what should be learned from that experience. Instead, the analogy was applied indiscriminately; U.S. military operations in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East prompted assertions that the use of force would lead to “another Vietnam.” It was not until the United States won a lopsided victory over the military of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the 1990–91 Gulf War that President George H. W. Bush could declare that the United States had finally “kicked the Vietnam syndrome.”

*Disengagement from competitions overseas would increase dangers to the United States; the paltry savings realized would be dwarfed by the eventual cost of responding to unchecked and undeterred threats...*

Nearly three decades later, however, a new mantra of “ending endless wars” has emerged from frustrations over indecisive, protracted, and costly military interventions abroad.<sup>3</sup> These frustrations have reproduced the Vietnam syndrome in a new guise: the Afghanistan-Iraq syndrome.

Across the political spectrum, many Americans have come to believe that retrenchment would not only avoid the costs of military operations overseas but also improve U.S. security. They have found support for this belief in analyses like those that appeared in this magazine’s lead package for its March/April 2020 issue, titled “Come Home, America?”<sup>4</sup>

The authors of the articles in that package offered different variations on the retrenchment theme. But what some of the articles have in common is an appeal that reflects strong emotions rather than an accurate understanding of what went wrong in the wars that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Proponents of a U.S. withdrawal from its military commitments play to visceral feelings of war weariness and argue that the difficulties of those wars were the inevitable consequence of the United States’ misguided pursuit of armed domination. Some retrenchers depict U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War as a fool’s errand, impelled by a naive crusade to remake the world in the United States’ image. And although advocates of retrenchment often identify as realists, they subscribe to the romantic view that restraint abroad is almost always an unmitigated good. In fact, disengagement from competitions overseas would increase dangers to the United States; the paltry savings realized would be dwarfed by the eventual cost of responding to unchecked and undeterred threats to American security, prosperity, and influence.

### Alternative History

In their critiques of the post-9/11 wars, retrenchers fail to acknowledge the hidden costs of their recommendations. Although a majority of Americans now agree that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was a mistake, retrenchment advocates ignore the consequences of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from

1. Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, “The Retrenchment Syndrome: A Response to ‘Come Home, America?’” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-01/retrenchment-syndrome>)

2. William Schneider, “The Vietnam Syndrome Mutates,” *The Atlantic*, April 2006. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/04/the-vietnam-syndrome-mutates/304891/>)

3. Senator Bernie Sanders, “Ending America’s Endless Wars,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2019. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-24/ending-americas-endless-war>)

4. “Come Home, America?” *Foreign Affairs*, February 11, 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/press/2020-02-11/come-home-america>)



↑ Activist in lower Manhattan, New York, marches by military recruiters on March 19, 2019. (Photo by Erik McGregor/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Iraq in 2011 and of the broader disengagement from the Middle East that accompanied it. Those steps ceded space to jihadi terrorists and Iranian proxies, thereby creating an ideal environment for the return of sectarian violence and the establishment of the self-declared caliphate of the Islamic State (or ISIS). The Obama administration made similar mistakes in Libya earlier in 2011, after pushing for a NATO air campaign that helped depose the dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi.<sup>5</sup> Although it was determined to avoid the mistakes of the George W. Bush administration's war in Iraq, the Obama administration paradoxically exceeded them, failing to shape Libya's political environment in the wake of Qaddafi's demise; nearly a decade later, the Libyan civil war rages on, and the country remains a source and a transit point for millions seeking escape from turmoil in northern Africa and the Sahel.

Retrenchers ignore the fact that the risks and costs of inaction are sometimes higher than those of engagement. In August 2013, the Syrian regime used poison gas to kill more than 1,400 innocent civilians, including hundreds of children. Despite U.S. President Barack Obama's declaration in 2012 that the use of these

heinous weapons to murder civilians would cross a red line, the United States did not respond with military force. U.S. inaction enabled the regime's brutality, emboldening Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian and Russian supporters to intensify their mass homicide. In 2017–18, U.S. President Donald Trump finally enforced the Obama administration's red line, retaliating against the use of chemical weapons by Assad with strikes against the Syrian military. But Trump's decision in 2019 to withdraw U.S. forces from eastern Syria complicated efforts to eliminate ISIS and bolstered the influence of Assad and his sponsors in an area whose control would give them a significant advantage in the war.<sup>6</sup> Almost nine years since the Syrian civil war began, a humanitarian catastrophe continues in Idlib Province, which, at the end of 2019, generated over a million more refugees, many of whom succumbed to extreme cold or the novel coronavirus.

Despite evidence that U.S. disengagement can make a bad situation worse, retrenchers have pushed for a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020 will allow the Taliban, al Qaeda, and various other jihadi terrorists to claim victory, recruit more young people to their cause, gain control of more territory, and inflict suffering through the imposition of draconian sharia.<sup>7</sup> Just as the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS generated a refugee crisis that reached into Europe, the establishment of an Islamic emirate in a large portion of Afghanistan would generate another wave of refugees and further destabilize Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of over 220 million people. Terrorist organizations that already enjoy safe haven in the Afghan-Pakistani border region will increase their profits from illicit activities such as the narcotics trade and apply those resources to intensify and expand their murderous

5. Dominic Tierney, "The Legacy of Obama's 'Worst Mistake,'" *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2016. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/>)

6. Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Northern Syria," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>)

7. David Petraeus and Vance Serchuk, "Can America Trust the Taliban to Prevent Another 9/11?" *Foreign Affairs*, April 1, 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-04-01/can-america-trust-taliban-prevent-another-911>)



campaigns. Retrenchers do not acknowledge that U.S. withdrawal often leaves a vacuum that enemies and adversaries are eager to fill.

Retrenchment advocates are relatively unconcerned about enemies gaining strength overseas because they assume that the United States' geographic blessings—including its natural resources and the vast oceans that separate it from the rest of the world—will keep Americans safe. But in today's interconnected world, threats from transnational terrorists (or viruses, for that matter) do not remain confined to particular regions. The humanitarian, security, and political consequences of the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have reached well beyond the Middle East and South Asia. Just as China's concealment of the coronavirus forestalled actions that might have prevented a global catastrophe, the United States' withdrawal of support for its partners on the frontlines against jihadi terrorists could generate staggering costs if the terrorists succeed in penetrating U.S. borders as they did on September 11, 2001. And a reduction of U.S. support for allies and partners along the frontiers of hostile states, such as Iran and North Korea, or revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, could result in a shift in the balance of power and influence away from the United States. Retrenchment could also result in a failure to deter aggression and prevent a disastrous war.

Retrenchers also overlook the trend that the security associated with the United States' geographic advantages has been diminishing. In 1960, the historian C. Vann Woodward observed that technologies such as the conventional aircraft, jet propulsion, the ballistic missile, and the atomic-powered submarine marked "the end of the era of free security." Those technologies overtook "Americans so suddenly and swiftly that they have not brought themselves to face its practical implications." Retrenchers are out of step with history and way behind the times.

## False Prophecies

Even the most compelling arguments for sustained engagement overseas are unlikely to convince hardcore retrenchers, because they believe that an overly powerful United States is the principal cause of the world's problems. Their pleas for disengagement are profoundly narcissistic, as they perceive geopolitical actors only in relation to the United States. In their view, other actors—whether friends or foes—possess no aspirations and no agency, except in reaction to U.S. policies and actions. Retrenchers ignore the fact that sometimes wars choose you rather than the other way around: only after the most devastating terrorist attack in history did the United States invade Afghanistan.

*Retrenchers ignore the fact that sometimes wars choose you rather than the other way around.*

In the "Come Home, America?" package, Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press argue in "Reality Check" that abandoning what they describe as Washington's pursuit of primacy would quell China and Russia while providing opportunities for cooperation on issues of climate change, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation.<sup>8</sup> And in "The Price of Primacy," Stephen Wertheim asserts that a less threatening United States could "transform globalization into a governable and sustainable force" and bring about a reduction in jihadi terrorism, a less aggressive China, a curtailment of Russian interference, the termination of North Korea's threat to U.S. and regional security and human rights, and even progress against the threat from climate change.<sup>9</sup>

If these promises seem too good to be true, it's because they are. Retrenchment hard-liners are confident in such claims because they assume that the United States has preponderant control over future global security

8. Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, "Reality Check: American Power in an Age of Constraints," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-02-10/reality-check>)

9. Stephen Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>)



and prosperity. In reality, adversaries have the power to act based on their own aspirations and goals: American behavior did not cause jihadi terrorism, Chinese economic aggression, Russian political subversion, or the hostility of Iran and North Korea. And U.S. disengagement would not attenuate those challenges or make them easier to overcome.

## Strategic Empathy

The movement in favor of retrenchment is in part a reaction to the overoptimism that animated U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, some thinkers and policymakers assumed that the process of democratization that was unfolding in eastern Europe would be replicable in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. But they failed to give due consideration to local contexts and to political, social, cultural, and religious dynamics that make liberal democracy and the rule of law hard to reach. Similarly, after the United States' lopsided military victory in the Gulf War, some assumed that future wars could be won quickly and decisively because U.S. technology had produced a "revolution in military affairs." But this presumption ignored continuities in the nature of war, such as the enemy's say in a war's course of events and its political, human, and psychological complexities. Excessive optimism soon grew into hubris, setting the United States up for unanticipated difficulties in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The best antidote to such overconfidence, however, is not the excessive pessimism offered by retrenchers. Policymakers should instead adopt what the historian Zachary Shore calls "strategic empathy": an understanding of the ideology, emotions, and aspirations that drive and constrain other actors.<sup>10</sup> Strategic empathy might help at least some advocates

of retrenchment qualify their adamant opposition to democracy promotion and human rights advocacy abroad and might allow them to accept that the United States cannot determine, but can influence, the evolution of a world in which free and open societies flourish. In recent years, protests against authoritarian rule and corruption have flared up all over the world. In Baghdad, Beirut, Caracas, Hong Kong, Khartoum, Moscow, and Tehran, people have made clear that they want a say in how they are governed.<sup>11</sup> Support for those who strive for freedom

*Retrenchment may hold emotional appeal for Americans tired of protracted military commitments abroad, but blind adherence to an orthodoxy based on emotion rather than reason would make Americans less safe.*

is in the United States' interest, because a world in which liberty, democracy, and the rule of law are strengthened will be safer and more prosperous. Disengagement from competitions overseas would cede influence to others, such as the Chinese Communist Party, which is already redoubling efforts to promote its authoritarian model. Retrenchment may hold emotional appeal for Americans tired of protracted military commitments abroad, but blind adherence to an orthodoxy based on emotion rather than reason would make Americans less safe and put the United States further in the red.

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10. Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

11. Keith Johnson, "2019: A Year of Global Protest," *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/23/2019-a-year-of-global-protest/>)

## “Endless Wars” and the Danger of Ignoring History

By Clifford D. May and Bradley Bowman

“Ending endless wars” is the goal and mantra of many of those calling for Washington to withdraw troops from overseas deployments. It is an appealing notion. It also demonstrates stunning ignorance. History offers little evidence that protracted armed conflicts – so-called “endless” or “forever” wars – can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion by leaving one’s enemies to plot in safety and comfort. Should the U.S. government adopt such an approach, Americans must expect to be insufficiently protected in the present and more dangerously threatened in the future.

“The story of the human race is war,” Winston Churchill, a keen and lifelong student of history who had fought in four wars by age 25, concluded.<sup>12</sup>

In 1968, historians Will and Ariel Durant proved Churchill correct quantitatively. They calculated that there had been only 268 years free of war in the previous 3,421.<sup>13</sup>

In 1995, the eminent historian Donald Kagan concurred. In *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, he wrote that “war has been a persistent part of human experience since before the birth of civilization.”<sup>14</sup>

Consider a few examples: The Persian-Roman wars were fought from 54 BCE to 628 – a span of 681 years. The Anglo-French wars began in 1066 and lasted for almost 750 years. The Iberian Religious Wars, fought in what is now Spain and Portugal between Christian kingdoms and Muslim emirates and caliphates, started in 711 and ended in 1492 – a period of 781 years.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the horrors of World War I, world leaders in 1920 established the League of Nations. Signatories to the League’s covenant explicitly committed “not to resort to war.”<sup>16</sup> The mission was the maintenance of peace.<sup>17</sup> However, the League failed, and we now refer to the Great War (1914–18) as World War I – the precursor to World War II (1939–45).

In 1928, 15 nations signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact renouncing war “as an instrument of national policy.”<sup>18</sup> Notably, the signatories included the president of the German Reich and the emperor of Japan. Within a few years, they and other signatory nations would deploy troops to multiple battlefields.<sup>19</sup>

Still, such isolationist thinking remained fashionable. Between 1918 and 1939, the prevailing view in the United Kingdom was that it would be wasteful and unhelpful to build a powerful military. In 1933, the Oxford Union Society passed a resolution declaring: “This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country.”<sup>20</sup> Winston Churchill and Charles

12. Richard M. Langworth, “Churchill on War: Part 1,” *The Churchill Project at Hillsdale College*, April 30, 2015. ([https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/churchill-on-war-part-1/#\\_ftn11](https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/churchill-on-war-part-1/#_ftn11)); Peter Clarke, “Churchill’s World Crisis,” *Finest Hour* 182, fall 2018, page 26. (<https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-182/churchills-world-crisis/>); U.S. Library of Congress, “Churchill and the Great Republic: An Age of Youth,” accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/wc-youth.html>)

13. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2010), page 81.

14. Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York City: Anchor, 1996), page 4.

15. Nathaniel Whelan, “The Longest Wars Ever To Be Fought In Human History,” *World Atlas*, July 16, 2020. (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/longest-wars-in-human-history.html>)

16. The Covenant of the League of Nations, Paris, June 28, 1919. ([https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp))

17. U.S. Department of State, Office of The Historian, “The League of Nations, 1920,” accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/league>)

18. General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy, August 27, 1928. (<https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280168041>)

19. Warren F. Kimball, “‘That Neutral Island’: Ireland in World War II’ (with apologies to Clair Wills\*),” *The Churchill Project at Hillsdale College*, August 16, 2019. (<https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/ireland-ww2/>)

20. Martin Ceadel, “The ‘King and Country’ Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 1979, pages 397–422. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2638871?seq=1>)



➦ National Iwo Jima War Memorial Monument in Rosslyn, Virginia, overlooking the Potomac and Washington, DC. (Photo by Joe Sohm/Visions of America/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

de Gaulle both argued strenuously against this line of thinking, but to no avail.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, Germans were finding pacifism less appealing. Among the consequences, as noted by historian Andrew Roberts in his most recent book, *Leadership in War*, over just six weeks in 1940, the French “lost 90,000 men killed, 250,000 wounded, and 1.9 million captured.” At that point, Marshal Philippe Pétain, a hero of World War I, surrendered to Hitler, while de Gaulle fled to London.<sup>22</sup>

Following World War II, the two great powers – the Soviet Union and the United States – were able to avoid direct military conflict with one another. The Cold War was fought using diplomacy, economics, espionage, information, disinformation, and proxies. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a close call. But hot wars were not

entirely avoidable; the United States did deploy tens of thousands of troops to Korea and Vietnam. More to the point, even during periods without kinetic actions, both sides prepared for the possibility of war. Israelis, who have learned a thing or two about conflict over the past 72 years, now call such periods “the wars between the wars.”<sup>23</sup>

With the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall, many in the West were eager to take a “peace dividend.”<sup>24</sup> This was to be America’s “unipolar moment,” when the United States and its allies purportedly had no enemies worth worrying about. Surely, the thinking went, leaders of most nation-states would develop some form of representative governance with a decent respect for basic human rights.

James Woolsey, a former FDD chairman, saw a rather different scenario unfolding. Testifying before Congress just after being nominated as President Bill Clinton’s CIA director in 1993, he referred to the Soviet Union as a “large dragon” America had slain. He predicted we would soon be threatened by a “bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.”<sup>25</sup> He was prescient; in 2001, a particularly nasty serpent bit America.

To make matters worse, it turned out the dragon did not stay dead.<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Putin, who came to power in the Kremlin in 1999, was not interested in transforming Russia into a liberal, law-abiding member in good standing of the international community. A self-styled czar/commissar, he has worked assiduously to revive and expand Russian power. Regarding geopolitics as a zero-sum game, he has undermined the United States

21. Antoine Capet, “Churchill Proceedings – How Charles de Gaulle Saw the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ Relationship,” *Finest Hour* 157, winter 2012–2013, page 52. (<https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-157/churchill-proceedings-how-charles-de-gaulle-saw-the-anglo-saxon-relationship/>)

22. Andrew Roberts, *Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History* (New York City: Viking Press, 2019), page 143.

23. Clifford D. May featuring Bradley Bowman and Brigadier General (Res.) Jacob Nagel, “War and Peace, and Wars Between Wars,” Episode 52, *Foreign Policy*, March 23, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/03/25/war-and-peace-and-wars-between-wars/>)

24. Francis Fukuyama, “The National Interest: The End of History?” *Center for the National Interest*, No. 16, summer 1989, pages 3–18. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1>)

25. R. James Woolsey Jr., *Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 3, 1993, page 76. (<https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/hearings/103296.pdf>)

26. “Vladimir Putin,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 10, 2020. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Putin>)



⬆ Screenshot from a People's Liberation Army Air Force video showing nuclear-capable H-6 bombers carrying out a simulated attack on what appears to be Andersen Air Force Base on the U.S. Pacific island of Guam. (Photo via Task & Purpose)

and NATO in whatever ways he can. The people of Georgia and Ukraine have paid the steepest price.

China's rulers also did not agree that increasing prosperity and democratization must go hand in hand. Instead of liberalizing and participating in the post-World War II liberal rules-based order, Beijing has sought to recast the international system in its own authoritarian image and impose its own rules.

To this end, the Communist Party of China has launched a multi-faceted campaign that includes massive theft of intellectual property – America's in particular.

It is worth recalling what Sun Tzu, the great Chinese military strategist, born around 544 BCE, observed that "a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle."<sup>27</sup> Two and a half millennia later, in 1999, two officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) wrote a manual called *Unrestricted Warfare*, a plan to wage

war in such a surreptitious manner that the victim remains oblivious.<sup>28</sup>

The primary goal is to build a PLA capable of defeating U.S. forces. In a report earlier this year, the top U.S. commander in the Indo-Pacific warned that the military balance of power vis-a-vis China was becoming increasingly "unfavorable."<sup>29</sup> Recently, the PLA Air Force released a provocative video that appears to show attacks on Guam, an American territory.<sup>30</sup>

Americans and other free peoples have been slow to wake up to this threat.

But the threats do not end there. For decades, American and other Western diplomats have attempted to prevent the hostile and despotic rulers of North Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them to targets anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, North Korea today has nuclear weapons

27. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963), page 87.

28. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Trans. U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999). (<https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>)

29. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "Regain the Advantage: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy," April 5, 2020. (<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>)

30. "China air force video appears to show simulated attack on U.S. air base on Guam," *Reuters*, September 21, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/china-usa-security/china-air-force-video-appears-to-show-simulated-attack-on-us-air-base-on-guam-idUSL3N2GI0J2>)



and increasingly accurate intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>31</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to export terrorism and likely could attain a nuclear weapons capability in relatively short order.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, there are other threats to consider, too. Since 9/11, despite the elimination of Osama bin Laden and several other terrorist leaders, non-state jihadi terrorist groups have been both mutating and proliferating. Though the Islamic State has been deprived of the territory it conquered in Syria and Iraq, the organization has not been conclusively defeated.<sup>33</sup> Only military pressure applied in the wider Middle East – and mainly from U.S. bases in the Middle East – has deprived these groups of the breathing space they need to successfully plan and carry out additional attacks against Americans.

So, now the United States is challenged and threatened by both “dragons” and “snakes,” as David Kilcullen, an Australian-American soldier and scholar who served as a top adviser to the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan and is currently on the Board of Advisors of FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power, has observed.<sup>34</sup> Kilcullen notes that the dragons (Moscow and Beijing) and the snakes (Tehran, Pyongyang, and non-state jihadi groups) are learning from each other and becoming more dangerous in the process.<sup>35</sup>

If democracies have any hope of defending themselves against this daunting array of threats, free peoples must begin by at least acknowledging that these foes exist – and that our enemies mean to do us harm. Leaving them alone and declaring “mission accomplished” is not the answer.

No society in human history has permanently ended or escaped war by retreating and declaring conflicts over. Those who theorize that the outcome will be different in the 21st century declare themselves proponents of “responsible statecraft.” But they have evidence to support neither their theory nor their claim.

We all recognize the terrible costs war exacts on nations and individuals – particularly the brave citizens who fight them and the family members who are left behind. It is right and prudent to view war as a last resort. Our leaders should do all they can to prevent wars, deter enemies, and utilize diplomacy, economic sanctions, and other means to defend America’s vital interests. The responsibility of leaders is to forestall conflicts that are avoidable and shorten those that are not.

To be sure, not all deployments, interventions, conflicts, and wars are in America’s strategic interest. Not all battles can be won. And not all battles must be won in order to prevail in the larger wars. There can be strategic retreats. However, history’s most successful leaders have understood that prioritizing the avoidance of military conflict above all else invites aggression. Understanding this leads to the conclusion that the United States should maintain the most capable military forces possible, retain well-designed defenses, and forward-deploy military forces alongside key allies and partners.

This approach will not end all wars, now or in the future. It will, however, better protect Americans – while making conflicts fewer and farther between.

31. “Missiles of North Korea,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>)

32. Francois Murphy and Arshad Mohammed, “Explainer: How close is Iran to producing a nuclear bomb?” *Reuters*, January 17, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-explainer/explainer-how-close-is-iran-to-producing-a-nuclear-bomb-idUSKBN1ZG22P>)

33. Mike Giglio and Kathy Gilsinan, “The Inconvenient Truth About ISIS,” *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2020. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/kurdish-leader-isis-conflict-iraq-iran/606502/>)

34. “David Kilcullen,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/team/david-kilcullen/>)

35. David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

## Retain American Power, Do Not Restrain It

By Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz

The call for the United States to show “restraint” by withdrawing from foreign entanglements and keeping the focus at home is growing in foreign-policy circles – and not just in the Trump administration. According to Richard Grenell, the former U.S. ambassador to Germany who briefly served as acting director of national intelligence this spring, the goal is to “bring [home] troops from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, from South Korea, Japan and from Germany.”<sup>36</sup>

The current movement appears to have started in 2014, when Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Barry Posen published the seminal work on foreign-policy restraint.<sup>37</sup> His work, not surprisingly, resonated with realists-cum-isolationists such as John Mearsheimer<sup>38</sup> and Stephen Walt,<sup>39</sup> not to mention a gaggle of libertarians who found a new bottle for their old laissez-faire wine.<sup>40</sup> There is even a restrainers’ think tank, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft,<sup>41</sup>

erroneously named for former President John Quincy Adams owing to a fundamental misreading of his thinking and its applicability to 21st-century superpower affairs.<sup>42</sup>

Isolationist ideas clearly appeal to Trump. But they have also taken hold on the left. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’ wing of the Democratic Party ensured that a call for the end of “forever wars” found its way into the Democrats’ platform.<sup>43</sup> President-elect Joe Biden’s long record in the U.S. Senate as a foreign-policy internationalist – as well as his choice of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris from the Democratic Party’s moderate wing as his running mate – offers hope for greater U.S. engagement with traditional allies. Yet it remains uncertain whether the Biden administration will push back decisively against the country’s most determined adversaries. And as vice president, Biden had a seat at the table when then-President Obama adopted his own elements of isolationism,<sup>44</sup> including his withdrawal of troops from Iraq, his unwillingness to enforce his own “red line” against the Syrian regime’s use of chemical

36. “Trump threatens a new troop withdrawal. It would endanger yet another U.S. relationship.” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-threatens-a-new-troop-withdrawal-it-would-endanger-yet-another-us-relationship/2020/07/22/898126e6-caa9-11ea-91f1-28aca4d833a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-threatens-a-new-troop-withdrawal-it-would-endanger-yet-another-us-relationship/2020/07/22/898126e6-caa9-11ea-91f1-28aca4d833a0_story.html))

37. Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh0db>)

38. “John Mearsheimer,” *The University of Chicago*, accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://political-science.uchicago.edu/directory/john-mearsheimer>); Yale University, “John J. Mearsheimer, ‘The Case for Restraint,’” *You Tube*, November 22, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsonzzAW3Mk>)

39. “Stephen Walt,” *Harvard Kennedy School*, accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/stephen-walt>); Stephen Walt, “A Manifesto For Restraint,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, December 4, 2019. (<https://quincyinst.org/2019/12/04/a-manifesto-for-restrainers/>)

40. Christopher A. Preble and A. Trevor Thrall, “65. Restoring Prudence and Restraint in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *CATO Handbook for Policymakers, 8th Edition* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2017). (<https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-handbook-policymakers/2017/2/cato-handbook-for-policymakers-8th-edition.pdf>)

41. “About QI,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, accessed November 10, 2020. (<https://quincyinst.org/about/>)

42. Bradley Bowman, “Commentary: Trump Syria withdrawal decision immoral and short-sighted,” *Military Times*, October 8, 2019. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2019/10/08/trump-syria-withdrawal-decision-immoral-and-short-sighted/>); Hal Brands, “John Quincy Adams Isn’t Who You Think He Is,” *Bloomberg News*, February 8, 2020. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-02-08/john-quincy-adams-isn-t-who-you-think-he-is?sref=3OIZCXOE>)

43. Senator Bernie Sanders, “Ending America’s Endless War: We Must Stop Giving Terrorists Exactly What They Want,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2019. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-24/ending-americas-endless-war>); Democratic National Committee, “2020 Democratic Party Platform,” August 18, 2020, pages 72 and 75–76. (<https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/>)

44. “Obama: Focus on Nation Building at Home,” *Voice of America*, May 4, 2012. (<https://www.voanews.com/archive/obama-focus-nation-building-home>)

weapons, and his tepid response to Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea.

The common theme among restrainers: The United States has no business intervening in other nations' affairs. Or, as Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, a 34-year veteran of the U.S. Army, chairman of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, and former national security advisor to Trump, noted, isolationists hold the "romantic view that restraint abroad is almost always an unmitigated good."<sup>45</sup>

*Restrainers ... often conflate the initial decision to intervene at all with how a conflict is subsequently managed or how eventually to withdraw.*

In some ways, the restraint movement echoes the isolationism championed in the 1930s and 1940s by Charles Lindbergh's America First Committee. Like that earlier isolationism, the restraint movement draws the wrong lessons and inferences from U.S. wars. In the 1930s, isolationists invoked World War I, in which almost 120,000 Americans perished, as a reason to avoid challenging German and Japanese fascism. The thought was that if Americans just stayed out of World War II, the totalitarians would leave the United States alone.

Today's restrainers similarly seek to capitalize on the suffering and difficulties associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the broader fight against terrorism, when they argue for the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces from these and other conflicts.<sup>46</sup> Restrainers, however, often conflate the initial decision to intervene at all with how a conflict is subsequently managed or how eventually to withdraw. These are different policy decisions. Indeed, one can be critical of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and how the war was managed – while also believing that Washington should retain a modest U.S. military presence to help prevent a return of the Islamic State and to counter the influence of Iran.

Restrainers have also attempted to leverage the Great Recession and the current economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic to incite populist passions.<sup>47</sup> They do this by falsely suggesting that defense spending is the primary source of the federal deficit and debt.<sup>48</sup> Defense spending is near post-World War II lows in terms of percentage of U.S. gross domestic product and percentage of federal spending.

Restrainers consistently paint existing and potential conflicts and U.S. military deployments with the same brush, warning of another "forever war."<sup>49</sup> However, not every conflict leads to an interminable quagmire. Even the so-called War on Terror, despite its headaches, so far has helped prevent another major foreign terrorist

45. Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, "The Retrenchment Syndrome: A Response to 'Come Home, America?'" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-01/retrenchment-syndrome>)

46. Stephen M. Walt, "The End of Hubris: And the New Age of American Restraint," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-04-16/end-hubris>); Stephen Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>)

47. Barney Frank, "How to Save the Global Economy: Cut Defense Spending," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2012. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/03/how-to-save-the-global-economy-cut-defense-spending/>); Stephen Wertheim, "COVID-19 and the costs of military primacy," *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 22, 2020. (<https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/22/covid-19-and-the-costs-of-military-primacy/>); Mike DeBonis, "Citing financial cost of pandemic, House liberals demand cut in military spending," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/citing-pandemic-house-liberals-demand-cut-in-military-spending/2020/05/19/ee49c8c2-9961-11ea-a282-386f56d579e6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/citing-pandemic-house-liberals-demand-cut-in-military-spending/2020/05/19/ee49c8c2-9961-11ea-a282-386f56d579e6_story.html)); Stephen M. Walt, "Socialists and Libertarians Need an Alliance Against the Establishment," *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2018. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/24/socialists-and-libertarians-need-an-alliance-against-the-establishment/>)

48. Bradley Bowman, "Don't Use COVID As Excuse to Slash Defense Spending," *Breaking Defense*, May 20, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/05/dont-let-the-covid-deficit-hurt-defense-spending/>)

49. Trita Parsi, "Trump Can Either Leave the Middle East or Have War With Iran," *Real Clear Defense*, April 30, 2020. ([https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/30/trump\\_can\\_either\\_leave\\_the\\_middle\\_east\\_or\\_have\\_war\\_with\\_iran\\_115236.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/30/trump_can_either_leave_the_middle_east_or_have_war_with_iran_115236.html))

attack on the United States, which many had predicted to be inevitable after 9/11.

The term “forever war” is itself curious. History, unfortunately, is a forever war – the chronicle of states’ struggles with their enemies. To be sure, one can write a truly wondrous history of human achievement. But sadly, as the Spanish writer George Santayana observed, “only the dead have seen the end of war.”<sup>50</sup>

Restrainers operate under the mistaken assertion that the world would be a safer or better place if U.S. influence would simply recede.<sup>51</sup> The 20th century tells another story. As the historian Robert Kagan argued in his 2012 book *The World America Made*, the U.S.-led world order has heralded a global rise in liberalism and human rights, better education and health, greater wealth, and more access to information.<sup>52</sup>

Equally puzzling is the notion that global problems and conflicts are of little consequence to the United States.<sup>53</sup> What happens abroad inevitably affects Americans at home. Al-Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks despite America’s best efforts to steer clear of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda was and is based. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor despite Washington’s best efforts to stay out of the fray.



↑ A U.S. Navy sailor assigned to Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 5 fast-ropes from an MH-60S Seahawk helicopter during HYDROCRAB at Santa Rita, Guam, on August 19, 2019. HYDROCRAB is a quadrilateral exercise conducted by forces from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Helen Brown)

Isolationists initially blocked then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt from providing greater support to an embattled Britain, and millions of lives were lost from not confronting German leader Adolf Hitler sooner.<sup>54</sup>

The best way to protect American interests is to engage internationally and maintain a well-designed, forward-deployed military presence alongside allies and partners. As Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell have noted,

50. George Santayana, “Tipperary,” *Soliloquies in England and later soliloquies* (New York City: Scribner’s Sons, 1922), page 101. (Available at: <https://archive.org/details/soliloquiespytwo00santrich/page/n111/mode/2up?q=%22only+the+dead+have+seen+the+end+of+war%22>). It is for this reason that former President Ronald Reagan advocated “peace through strength.” This view served the United States and its NATO allies well in Europe during the Cold War. Reagan, of course, was only borrowing from the Roman adage: “If you want peace, prepare for war.” The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu and his Prussian counterpart Carl von Clausewitz offered similar advice. Their common belief: Weakness and lack of resolve invite aggression.

51. Stephen M. Walt, “There’s No Such Thing as Good Liberal Hegemony,” *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/theres-no-such-thing-as-good-liberal-hegemony/>); Stephen Wertheim, “The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn’t Dominate the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>); Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi, “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020. (<https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>); Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-01/pull-back>)

52. Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York City: Vintage, 2013).

53. Stephen M. Walt, “Monsters of Our Own Imaginings,” *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2016. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/24/monsters-of-our-own-imaginings-brussels-bombings-islamic-state/>); Stephen M. Walt, “Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea,” *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/how-not-to-save-ukraine-arming-kiev-is-a-bad-idea/>); Stephen M. Walt, “Chill Out, America,” *Foreign Policy*, May 29, 2015. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/29/chill-out-america-fear-terror-threats/>); Doug Bandow, “Why Are Americans Still Targets in Afghanistan?” *CATO Institute*, July 16, 2020. (<https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-are-americans-still-targets-afghanistan>)

54. In fact, had the United States stayed engaged in Europe in the 1920s, Hitler’s rise might have been preventable.



U.S. deployments of varying magnitude along what they call the “unquiet frontier” that stretches from the Baltic Sea to the South China Sea counter the rise of revisionist powers such as China, Russia, and Iran.<sup>55</sup> Support for U.S. allies, coupled with a U.S. military presence in forward bases, helps deter gathering threats.<sup>56</sup>

*The best way to protect American interests is to engage internationally and maintain a well-designed, forward-deployed military presence alongside allies and partners.*

When Washington plays an outsized role in shaping and maintaining the international rules-based order, Americans and people around the world are safer and more prosperous. That is what the United States has done, for the most part, since World War II. And that leadership role has helped ensure that global conflicts such as the Cold War did not erupt into devastating military confrontations.

Admittedly, the U.S.-led international order certainly has not prevented all wars. There have been costly mistakes along the way. But responding to those mistakes by ignoring persistent threats and drawing down U.S. military posture for its own sake would be shortsighted and dangerous.

Those who welcome the retreat of U.S. power have yet to fully answer one important question: What happens after the United States goes home? When the British Empire unraveled after World War II, the United States stepped into the void, promoting an international system based on the rule of law. Who will follow the United States? The alternatives are frightening.

Russia is far less equipped to become a superpower but would be a particularly predatory, corrupt, and avaricious one under Russian President Vladimir Putin. China, for its part, actively seeks global leadership. The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) authoritarian hostility to democracy; weaponization of data;<sup>57</sup> human rights abuses;<sup>58</sup> support for rogue states such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan;<sup>59</sup> threats to Hong

55. Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

56. Trump’s decision to remove significant numbers of U.S. troops from Germany and his threat to do the same from South Korea may have been a negotiating tactic to extract greater cost-sharing from other NATO members and Seoul. But that approach is ill-advised. U.S. soldiers are not mercenaries available to the highest bidder. Nor is the U.S. military presence in these countries charity; U.S. troops are forward-deployed to deter adversaries and protect core U.S. national security interests. See: Ryan Browne and Zachary Cohen, “US to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany in move that will cost billions and take years,” *CNN*, July 29, 2020. (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html>); David Maxwell, “Penny wise, pound foolish: The flawed logic of withdrawal from South Korea,” *Military Times*, July 19, 2020. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/07/19/penny-wise-pound-foolish-the-flawed-logic-of-withdrawal-from-south-korea/>)

57. Zak Doffman, “Chinese Hackers ‘Weaponize’ Coronavirus Data For New Cyber Attack: Here’s What They Did,” *Forbes*, March 12, 2020. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2020/03/12/chinese-hackers-weaponized-coronavirus-data-to-launch-this-new-cyber-attack/#eef9e838610>); Charlie Campbell, “How China Is Using ‘Social Credit Scores’ to Reward and Punish Its Citizens,” *Time*, January 16, 2019. (<https://time.com/collection/davos-2019/5502592/china-social-credit-score/>)

58. John Sudworth, “China Uighurs: A model’s video gives a rare glimpse inside internment,” *BBC* (UK), August 4, 2020. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53650246>)

59. Brigadier General (Res.) Jacob Nagel and Mark Dubowitz, “With a Potential Iran-China Deal, Time for Israel to Reassess Its Policy,” *Newsweek*, July 26, 2020. (<https://www.newsweek.com/potential-iran-china-deal-time-israel-reassess-its-policy-opinion-1520422>); “North Korea defies sanctions with China’s help, UN panel says,” *Agence France-Presse*, April 17, 2020. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/north-korea-defies-sanctions-with-chinas-help-un-panel-says>); Sanjana Gogna and Nasima Khatoon, “The China-Pakistan Nuclear Nexus: How Can India Respond?” *The Diplomat*, March 27, 2020. (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/the-china-pakistan-nuclear-nexus-how-can-india-respond/#:~:text=China%2520has%2520a%2520long%2520history,its%2520nuclear%2520deterrent%2520against%2520India>)

Kong and Taiwan;<sup>60</sup> militarization of the South China Sea;<sup>61</sup> and massive theft of intellectual property<sup>62</sup> should all serve as warnings about a Chinese-led world order. And let us all dispense with the fiction that the European Union could be an alternative to the United States in defending democracies.

U.S. power, therefore, must be *retained*, not restrained.

Retaining U.S. power should take different forms depending on the region and country. A reflexive tendency to retain all U.S. military deployments would be as unwise as a reflexive tendency to withdraw them. Each must be measured methodically in terms of U.S. interests and threats to them. And this should be accomplished with the smallest U.S. force posture necessary.<sup>63</sup>

*Retaining U.S. power should take different forms depending on the region and country.*

Restrainers are, of course, justified in their desire to avoid needless conflict. But the importance of U.S.

willingness to confront challenges cannot be discounted. Weakness makes war more likely, not less. Diplomacy without military leverage leads to discussions about how much the United States is willing to retreat. This will only leave Americans more insecure.

In the end, not all conflict is avoidable, just as not all withdrawals are advisable. The United States must therefore wield its military judiciously and guard its wealth. The goal should be to fight battles only when core national interests demand it.

But in the 21st century, if Americans want to be safe at home, some of our bravest citizens must stand watch abroad. For that reason, restraint in the form of wholesale military withdrawal is the wrong prescription. With new threats gathering, Americans should want the retainers to win this debate.

*A similar version of this chapter originally appeared in Foreign Policy on August 18, 2020.<sup>64</sup>*

60. Craig Singleton, "The Fallout From China's Hong Kong Power Play," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 26, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/05/26/the-fallout-from-chinas-hong-kong-power-play/>); Bradley Bowman, "Hong Kong Today, Taiwan Next?" *Newsweek*, June 5, 2020. (<https://www.newsweek.com/hong-kong-today-taiwan-next-opinion-1508842>)

61. "Chinese Power Projection Capabilities in the South China Sea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, accessed November 12, 2020. (<https://amti.csis.org/chinese-power-projection/>)

62. Eric Rosenbaum, "1 in 5 corporations say China has stolen their IP within the last year: CNBC CFO survey," *CNBC*, March 1, 2019. (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/28/1-in-5-companies-say-china-stole-their-ip-within-the-last-year-cnbc.html>)

63. Thankfully, the military is not the only tool of national power at Washington's disposal. Another is economic warfare. The economic tools created in the aftermath of 9/11 are targeted and surgical. Their strength derives from the dollar-denominated financial system constructed by the United States, a system under which the world still operates. Sanctions have allowed the United States to maintain important leverage over adversaries. These tools must be used judiciously, as should all instruments of national power. But restrainers often deride these economic tools, claiming they are a gateway to war rather than a means of suasion and avoiding war. They lambaste their use against U.S. enemies and adversaries such as Iran and Russia, even as some restrainers seem eager to use the same tools of economic warfare against U.S. allies such as Israel. See: Trita Parsi, "Dead-End Diplomacy: Washington's Failed Sanctions on Iran," *Global Asia*, Vol. 8, No. 2, June 2013. ([https://www.globalasia.org/v8no2/cover/dead-end-diplomacy-washingtons-failed-sanctions-on-iran\\_trita-parisi](https://www.globalasia.org/v8no2/cover/dead-end-diplomacy-washingtons-failed-sanctions-on-iran_trita-parisi)); Trita Parsi, "Sanctions Make War More Likely," *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2017. (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/sanctions-make-war-more-likely>); Paul J. Saunders, "When Sanctions Lead to War," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2014. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/opinion/when-sanctions-lead-to-war.html>); Daniella Greenbaum Davis, "Ilhan Omar Just Came Out Against Sanctions. So Why Does She Back BDS?" *Forward*, October 24, 2019. (<https://forward.com/opinion/433643/ilhan-omar-just-came-out-against-sanctions-on-mideast-countries-so-why/>)

64. Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, "The Dangerous Illusion of Restraining U.S. Power," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/18/us-global-power-retain-vs-restrain/>)



## CENTRAL COMMAND

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*Some Americans seek to withdraw military forces from the wider Middle East. But if Washington conducts timeline-based withdrawals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria without regard for persistent threats, it will increase the chances of an ISIS resurgence or another 9/11-style attack on the U.S. homeland. It would be far more prudent to retain a modest conditions-based U.S. military presence in select countries to empower existing partners and contain threats, rather than prematurely withdrawing and having to return later at a greater cost. The “endless wars” narrative is dangerously detached from American national security interests and the reality of current U.S. military posture in the region. Large-scale American ground wars in the Middle East have already ended. In the Central Command area of responsibility, the question now is whether Washington will retain the modest forward defense required — alongside partners bearing the bulk of the burden — to compete with Russia and China, to deter the Islamic Republic of Iran, and to blunt terrorist threats.*

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## The Jihadist Threat Persists

By Thomas Joscelyn

President Trump and President-elect Biden do not agree on much. But they concur that America needs to extricate itself from “endless wars” against jihadists.<sup>65</sup> There is just one problem: Jihadist terrorists will not go away simply because Americans want them to. ISIS and al-Qaeda will continue to fight on, seeking victory and threatening Americans.<sup>66</sup> The only question is whether the United States will meet the jihadist terrorist threat proactively overseas or belatedly in America’s homeland.

The political desire to “end” the post-9/11 wars is compounded by a renewed sense of urgency with respect to the great power rivals of China and Russia. Defense and intelligence officials are rightly concerned about the growing military capabilities of these two revisionist powers. However, this should not cloud Washington policymakers’ view of terrorist threats. Indeed, one often hears that America must pivot away from the fight against jihadism so the U.S. military and intelligence establishment will have the



↑ Islamic State recruits at the “Dawoud al Somali” training camp in Somalia’s northern Puntland region, September 21, 2019. (Photo via FDD’s Long War Journal)

resources necessary to counter Chinese and Russian aggression.<sup>67</sup> However, this argument ignores a simple fact: America has already pivoted away from large-scale post-9/11 wars.

Comparing the number of American service members deployed in jihadist war zones over time is instructive.<sup>68</sup> In 2008, there were approximately 190,000 American troops deployed across Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>69</sup> By June 2020, there were fewer than 15,000 American troops

65. Steve Holland, “Trump to West Point grads: ‘We are ending the era of endless wars,’” *Reuters*, June 13, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-wars/trump-to-west-point-grads-we-are-ending-the-era-of-endless-wars-idUSKBN23K0PR>); Bill Barrow, “Biden promises to end ‘forever wars’ as president,” *Associated Press*, July 11, 2019. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/07/11/biden-promises-to-end-forever-wars-as-president/>)

66. The idea that America can unilaterally “end” the post-9/11 conflicts dates to the Obama administration. President Obama claimed to have brought the Iraq War to a “responsible end” in 2011 and argued he was doing the same in Afghanistan in 2014. However, the jihadists continued to fight, forcing Obama to intervene once again in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. For Obama’s comments on bringing the wars to an “end,” see: President Barack Obama, The White House, “Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq,” *Remarks to the press*, October 21, 2011. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq>); David Hudson, White House, “Bringing the War in Afghanistan to a Responsible End,” May 27, 2014. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/05/27/bringing-war-afghanistan-responsible-end>)

67. In December 2019, then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said he seeks “a lower number” of troops in Afghanistan so they could either be brought home or “redeployed to the Indo-Pacific to face off our greatest challenge in terms of the Great Power Competition that’s vis-a-vis China.” Shawn Snow, “Esper wants to move troops from Afghanistan to the Indo-Pacific to confront China,” *Military Times*, December 18, 2019. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/12/18/esper-wants-to-move-troops-from-afghanistan-to-the-indo-pacific-to-confront-china/>)

68. Jihadist war zones are defined here as jurisdictions where al-Qaeda and/or ISIS wage insurgencies. These jurisdictions include Afghanistan, East Africa (mainly Somalia and surrounding countries), West Africa (mainly Mali and surrounding countries), North Africa (the United States has a presence in Tunisia to monitor jihadists there and in Libya), Iraq, and Syria. Jihadists are also waging insurgencies in countries without a significant American presence, such as Yemen.

69. Amy Belasco, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 2, 2009, page 9. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>)



across those two countries and Syria.<sup>70</sup> Approximately 8,600 of them were stationed in Afghanistan, and the Trump administration is reducing the number to 2,500.<sup>71</sup> In addition, approximately 6,000 to 7,000 U.S. troops were located across Africa, where they were assisting others in the fight against al-Qaeda and ISIS.<sup>72</sup> In sum, there were only about 22,000 American troops in jihadist war zones by mid-2020.<sup>73</sup> That was less than 12 percent of the troops deployed in 2008 in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>74</sup>

The question today is not whether the United States should end massive combat efforts with tens of thousands of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those efforts have already ended. The question today is whether the United States will continue its modest, economy-of-force missions in support of allies and partners in these locations. If the United States does so, it can – at a relatively low and sustainable cost – secure American interests, prevent jihadist advances, and deprive terrorist groups of the space they need to launch attacks on Americans. If Washington withdraws from these locations, there could be dangerous repercussions.

ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other jihadist groups remain committed to their goal of building an Islamic caliphate. They are attempting to overthrow existing governments throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia. They hope to replace those governments with emirates that rule according to *Sharia*, or Islamic law.

From al-Qaeda's perspective, the first and most important emirate is the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has portrayed the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the cornerstone of a new caliphate, telling his followers around the globe that they should emulate it as a model for Islamic governance.<sup>75</sup>

Refusing to take him at his word, the United States seeks an exit from Afghanistan. The international terrorist threats in both Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan will not disappear after America leaves. So, while the war in Afghanistan is not going well, the small U.S. presence has actually made a difference. Even more heartening is the fact that Afghan forces have carried the lion's share of the burden there since 2012.<sup>76</sup> Thus, with a reduced presence in the country,

70. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How U.S. Troops Are Preparing for the Worst in the Middle East," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/middleeast/troops-iran-iraq.html>). According to *The New York Times*, there were "around 5,500 troops in Iraq and 600 in Syria" as of earlier this year. There were also "roughly 12,000 to 13,000 troops in Afghanistan" at that time, but the Trump administration reduced that figure to 8,600 by June 2020.

71. Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Troops in Afghanistan Reduced to 8,600, General Says," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/world/asia/afghanistan-us-troop-withdrawal.html>); Lorne Cook, "NATO mulls its future in Afghanistan as US draws down troops," *Associated Press*, November 30, 2020. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2020/11/30/nato-mulls-its-future-in-afghanistan-as-us-draws-down-troops/>)

72. Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Charlie Savage, and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Eyes Africa Drawdown as First Step in Global Troop Shift," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/world/africa/esper-troops-africa-china.html>)

73. An unknown number of contractors, intelligence personnel, and other diplomatic support staff are also dedicated to the counter-jihad effort.

74. Other support personnel, including contractors and service members deployed outside of the war zones, are also involved in these conflicts. This includes personnel stationed at bases in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

75. Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda leader argues Taliban's 'blessed emirate' a core part of new caliphate," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 24, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/al-qaeda-leader-argues-talibans-blessed-emirate-a-core-part-of-new-caliphate.php>). Despite the Taliban's supposed counterterrorism assurances, which were enshrined in the February 29, 2020, accord with the United States, the group remains closely allied with al-Qaeda to this day. Thomas Joscelyn, "No Deal Is Better Than A Bad Deal," *The Dispatch*, March 4, 2020. (<https://thedispatch.com/p/no-deal-is-better-than-a-bad-deal>)

76. The United States steadily drew down in Afghanistan from 2011 through 2016. Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018," *Congressional Research Service*, May 10, 2019, page 7. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>). Obama sought a complete withdrawal but maintained fewer than 10,000 troops because the Taliban-led insurgency was gaining ground. In 2017, Trump ordered a small increase of several thousand troops but began withdrawing these troops in 2020.

U.S. forces have helped their Afghan partners prevent the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies from seizing provincial capitals.<sup>77</sup> This has deprived terrorist groups of the ability to launch another major attack on the United States from Afghanistan. Additionally, the United States has retained a counterterrorism outpost that counters threats across the region – including in Pakistan. Should the United States complete its withdrawal, these gains would dissipate.

A defeat in Afghanistan would also likely inspire al-Qaeda branches elsewhere. In Somalia, al-Shabaab is fighting to topple the internationally recognized federal government and replace it with an al-Qaeda emirate. In West Africa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its subsidiary, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM, or the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims”), seek to form their own emirate in Mali. Both AQIM and JNIM operate elsewhere throughout North and West Africa as well. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has twice seized large chunks of the country and still seeks to build its own *Sharia* regime. Al-Qaeda groups are also fighting in Syria, where the

prospects for a jihadist emirate currently look dim, but the threat persists.

In most of these areas, the United States has partnered with local forces or Western allies. In Somalia, for instance, the United States and regional nations have backed the federal government in Mogadishu, preventing jihadists from overrunning the country.<sup>78</sup> America's support has helped prevent al-Qaeda and ISIS from establishing emirates in parts of Africa. In Syria, a minimal footprint of approximately 2,000 U.S. Special Operations Forces, buttressed by tens of thousands of members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), helped defeat the ISIS caliphate (a smaller ISIS presence remains).<sup>79</sup> Without such support, Americans should expect jihadist regimes would rise or return.

Some Americans might dismiss such warnings and ask: Why is jihad overseas a security concern for Americans? The answer is simple: The jihadists have demonstrated time and again since the 1990s that as they gain ground “over there,” the threat to Americans rises “over here.”<sup>80</sup>

77. For example, several provincial capitals, including Ghazni, Farah, and Kunduz, would likely be in the jihadists' possession right now if it were not for U.S. forces and airpower. Bill Roggio, “Taliban overruns another base in north as it withdraws from Ghazni City,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 15, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/taliban-overruns-another-base-in-north-as-it-withdraws-from-ghazni-city.php>)

78. Even with U.S. Africa Command's help, the Somali government has failed to recapture all territory held by al-Shabaab. The group controlled 20 percent of Somalia as of late 2019. Diana Stancy Correll, “AFRICOM airstrikes take out four al-Shabab militants,” *Air Force Times*, December 30, 2019. (<https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-military/2019/12/30/afcom-airstrikes-take-out-four-al-shabab-militants/>). France's intervention in Mali in early 2013 toppled al-Qaeda's nascent emirate. These partners and allies continue to shoulder much of the load, with American logistical and intelligence support. For example, the United States helped France hunt down the longtime emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdulmalek Droukdel. French officials identified Droukdel as a senior member of al-Qaeda's global management team. Danielle Paquette, “France says it killed top al-Qaeda leader in Mali,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/france-says-it-killed-top-al-qaeda-leader-in-mali/2020/06/05/69075198-a76c-11ea-b619-3f9133bbb482\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/france-says-it-killed-top-al-qaeda-leader-in-mali/2020/06/05/69075198-a76c-11ea-b619-3f9133bbb482_story.html)); Baba Ahmed, “French forces kill al-Qaida's North African commander,” *Associated Press*, June 5, 2020. (<https://apnews.com/article/c5d77febbf446c9f88308a34e6330d2e>)

79. Brett McGurk, “Hard Truths in Syria: America Can't Do More With Less, and It Shouldn't Try,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>). American airpower and other capabilities were crucial, but U.S. partners suffered the majority of the casualties in the ground war, with the SDF claiming 11,000 of its members were killed and another 21,000 wounded. Had it not been for the SDF, the United States would have either had to commit more of its own personnel to fight or leave the caliphate standing. Ibid. See also: SDF Press, “Statement to Public Opinion,” March 23, 2019. (<https://sdf-press.com/en/2019/03/statement-to-public-opinion-14/>)

80. See: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, “The 9/11 Commission Report,” July 22, 2004, page 362. (<https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>). After describing how al-Qaeda planned the 9/11 hijackings in the Taliban's Afghanistan (“in a region so poor that electricity or telephones were scarce”), the commissioners wrote that “9/11 has taught us that terrorism against American interests ‘over there’ should be regarded just as we regard terrorism against America ‘over here.’”

The Obama administration withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 based on the appealing but misguided belief that America could declare victory and go home, leaving the troubling Middle East behind. But jihadists stormed through much of Iraq and Syria in the months that followed, seizing territory the size of Tennessee and terrorizing civilians across both countries. Some voices dismissed ISIS' territorial advances in 2013 and 2014 as a purely local concern.<sup>81</sup> But that assessment quickly proved erroneous, as the so-called caliphate mushroomed into a global menace, plotting terrorist attacks around the world.<sup>82</sup> Today, should the United States give up its small presence in Iraq and Syria, an ISIS resurgence would be unsurprising.

*If they were not running from U.S. and partner forces, these terrorists would have had more opportunities to plot and launch attacks on America or our allies.*

On a tactical level, wholesale withdrawals that remove American troops entirely would make it more difficult for Washington to target key terrorist leaders. Even as Trump has lamented “endless wars,” the U.S. military and intelligence establishment has utilized the relatively modest remaining military presence in key locations to hunt down dozens of dangerous terrorists around the globe. If they were not running from U.S. and partner forces, these terrorists would have had more opportunities to plot and launch attacks on America or our allies.

Intelligence derived from America's modest military footprint has also made Americans safer. That includes an October 2019 raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>83</sup> It also includes a strike announced one month prior that killed Hamza bin Laden, Osama's son and ideological heir in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.<sup>84</sup> From September 2019 through June 2020, the United States took out other senior terrorists in Afghanistan, Mali, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>85</sup> These strikes likely saved countless American lives.

The disconnect between the political rhetoric concerning “endless wars” and the reality of the terrorist threat could not be more pronounced. It is easy to decry war and call to bring American service members home. But it is not so easy for advocates of American retrenchment to explain how the United States would locate and strike the world's most dangerous terrorists without a military presence near the jihadists' strongholds. Supporters of wholesale American military withdrawals often fail to acknowledge the importance of forward U.S. military bases as platforms for intelligence collection and counterterrorism operations.

The days of massive U.S.-led “nation-building” projects or ill-conceived interventions in the wider Middle East and Central and South Asia are long over. But a complete American military retreat would represent an unnecessary and devastating self-inflicted wound that would only invite more terrorist attacks on Americans – and perhaps even prompt another wave of wars most Americans would like to avoid.

81. Obama described ISIS as the “jayvee” of terrorism because he thought the group's aspirations were local. David Remnick, “Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>)

82. While ISIS has thus far failed to attack the United States, it inspired the December 2015 shootings in San Bernardino, California, and the June 2016 massacre at an Orlando nightclub. By the end of 2019, the FBI was investigating more than 2,000 terrorist cases, hundreds inspired by the caliphate's call. The FBI has thwarted numerous ISIS plots, including those directed by jihadists based in Iraq and Syria who provide online guidance to willing recruits.

83. The White House, Press Statement, “Statement from the President on the Death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” October 27, 2019. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-death-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi/>)

84. Hamza repeatedly threatened Americans, vowing to exact revenge for his fallen father. The White House, Press Statement, “Statement from the President,” September 14, 2019. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-from-the-president-10/>)

85. For a summary of the terrorists killed, see: Thomas Joscelyn, “Examining the Threat from ISIS and Al Qaeda,” *Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism*, June 24, 2020. (<https://homeland.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony%20-%20Joscelyn%20I&C%200624.pdf>)

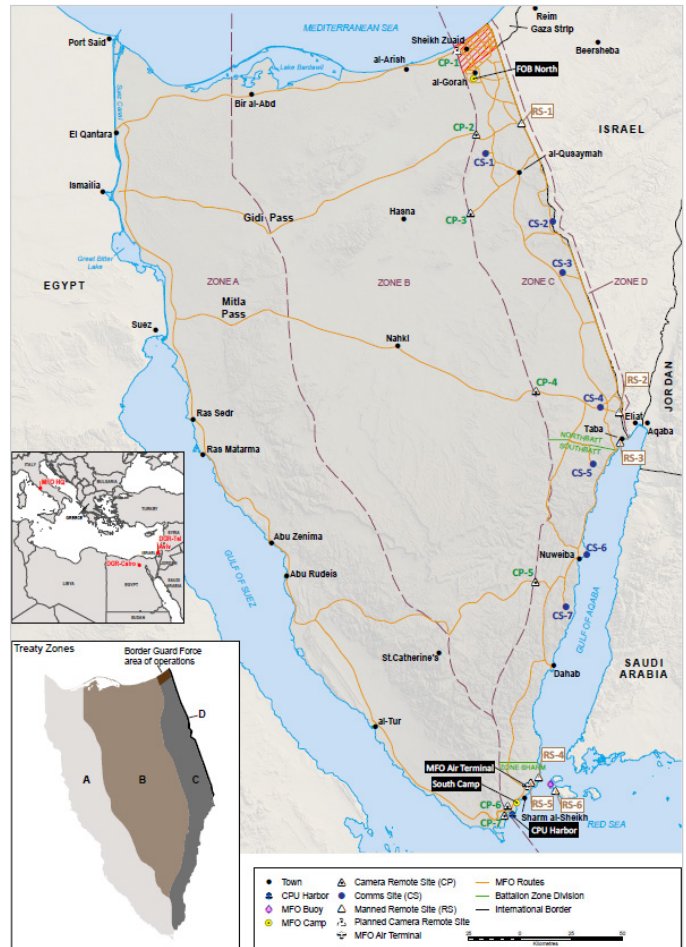


## Avoiding a Self-Inflicted Wound in the Sinai

By Bradley Bowman and Major Amoreena York

Following Israel's historic peace agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on September 15, 2020, it is reasonable for Americans to ask why U.S. troops should continue to serve in the Sinai to prevent conflict between Israel and Egypt – two governments that made peace more than four decades ago.<sup>86</sup> In fact, as part of the Pentagon's ongoing review of U.S. global military posture, designed to free up finite resources for higher priorities, former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper sought to end the U.S. military's role in the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), an independent international organization designed to maintain peace between Israel and Egypt.<sup>87</sup> However, ending the MFO mission would be a penny-wise and pound-foolish mistake. The MFO helps achieve key objectives in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).<sup>88</sup>

The MFO “mission is to supervise the implementation of the security provisions of the [1979] Egyptian-Israeli Treaty of Peace and employ best efforts to prevent any violation of its terms.”<sup>89</sup> Today, the MFO consists of approximately 1,154 troops in the Sinai from 13 nations. The American military contingent is the largest, with 452 service members, down from a high of more than 1,150 service members in 1986.<sup>90</sup> Almost half of the U.S. military contingent comes from the Army National Guard or Reserve.



↑ Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) Sinai map. (Photo via MFO).

In addition to personnel in the Sinai, the MFO maintains a headquarters in Rome as well as offices in Cairo and Tel Aviv. The combination of observers on the ground and offices in Egypt and Israel provides the MFO director general the ability to authoritatively tackle developments

86. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Israel’s Wars,” accessed October 13, 2020. (<https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/History/Pages/Israel-Wars.aspx>); U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process,” accessed October 13, 2020. (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/camp-david>). In 1978, thanks in large part to American leadership, Egypt and Israel signed the Camp David Accords, which culminated later in the historic March 1979 peace treaty.

87. Jared Malsin and Nancy A. Youssef, “U.S. Eyes Troop Drawdown in Egypt’s Restive Sinai,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2020. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-troop-drawdown-in-egypts-restive-sinai-11588867664>). Unable to obtain UN approval for a peacekeeping force, the United States led the effort to establish a multinational peace observation force. Discussions between the United States, Egypt, and Israel led to the establishment of the MFO in 1981. Multinational Force and Observers, “About Us,” 2020. (<http://mfo.org/en/about-us>)

88. Carly Beckerman-Boys, “Assessing the Hystorgraphy of the October War,” *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy*, Ed. Asaf Siniver (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pages 11–28.

89. Multinational Force and Observers, “Mission,” accessed November 6, 2020. (<https://mfo.org/our-mission>)

90. Multinational Force and Observers, “USA,” accessed November 6, 2020. (<https://mfo.org/contingents?year=1986&id=USA>)



in the Sinai Peninsula, utilizing a unique and direct line of communication with both countries. This line of communication, says former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt (2011–2013) Anne Patterson, is difficult for any third country or embassy to emulate. In this way, the MFO has helped to prevent war between Egypt and Israel for almost four decades. This stands in stark contrast to five wars between Egypt and Israel in the 33 years preceding the MFO’s establishment.

Skeptics challenge this MFO accomplishment by dismissing peace as inevitable or a foregone conclusion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consider the MFO’s role during an August 2012 crisis described in a recent report by Israeli Brigadier General (Res.) Assaf Orion and Canadian Major General (Ret.) Denis Thompson. Jihadists killed 16 Egyptian border guards and then used their armored vehicles to attack Israeli forces. Cairo then sent a massive military force into Sinai that was not coordinated with Israel, sparking grave concern there.

Orion and Thompson note that Ambassador David Satterfield, then the director general of the MFO, shuttled between Egypt, Israel, and the Sinai, “narrowing the gaps in understanding, carrying messages, bringing Washington’s weight and interests to the table, and devising procedures to address the new situation and allay the parties’ concerns.”

Orion and Thompson argue persuasively that the MFO’s “unique combination [of] unwavering U.S. support, world-class diplomacy, high levels of access and trust in both capitals, excellent field-monitoring capabilities, and the U.S. military as a backbone” played a decisive role in defusing tensions between Egypt and Israel.<sup>91</sup>

Some may dismiss this anecdote as no longer relevant due to the relatively stable and constructive relations that Jerusalem and Cairo currently enjoy. However, the

revolutions that brought deeply anti-Israel regimes to power in Iran in 1979 and Egypt in 2011–2012 are important examples of how confident predictions in the Middle East can quickly unravel. The dangers are still evident in Egypt, where ill feeling toward Israel among the general population remains widespread.

*With lingering concerns about instability in post-revolutionary Egypt, the benefits of the MFO to U.S. national security interests are quite clear.*

With lingering concerns about instability in post-revolutionary Egypt, the benefits of the MFO to U.S. national security interests are quite clear. The NDS established as one its top priorities “[d]efending allies from military aggression.” The MFO accomplishes exactly that for Israel – America’s closest and most reliable ally in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the NDS says, the U.S. military “will foster a stable and secure Middle East that denies safe havens for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to stable global energy markets and secure trade routes.”<sup>92</sup> The MFO supports each of the four elements of that policy.

The MFO has played an indisputable role in facilitating a more “stable and secure Middle East.” The peace that the MFO has sustained served as a foundation for Israel’s peace with Jordan in 1994 and ultimately Israel’s peace with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain this year. While new conflict between Egypt and Israel is an unlikely prospect in the near-term, military analysts understand that risk is measured in terms of both likelihood *and* severity, and it is unwise to neglect the latter consideration.

91. Assaf Orion and Denis Thompson, “Avoiding An Epic Mistake: The Case for Continuing the U.S. Mission in Sinai,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 2020. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote80-Orion-Thompson.pdf>)

92. U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 2018. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>)

The NDS also prioritizes denying “safe haven for terrorists.” The Sinai is an area of weak central authority, home to a significant terrorist insurgency that includes militants who have sworn allegiance to ISIS.<sup>93</sup> Israel’s confidence in the MFO’s treaty verification processes allows Egypt to deploy additional combat power to Sinai to address the ongoing insurgency. The MFO’s ability to monitor these exceptional temporary deployments mitigates Israel’s legitimate concerns about the re-militarization of Sinai. The transparency and communication channels provided by the MFO have been indispensable in navigating this process.

The U.S. military presence in the Sinai also supports the NDS’ goal of ensuring the region is “not dominated by any power hostile to the United States.” Underscoring the fact that great power competition occurs in the Middle East, too, the Russian navy is increasingly active in the eastern Mediterranean, while Russian regular and irregular forces operate in Syria and Libya. Moscow works hard to cultivate relationships with Cairo, conducting a large air defense exercise in Egypt in 2019 and helping the country build a nuclear reactor.<sup>94</sup>

Meanwhile, the People’s Republic of China established its first overseas military outpost in Djibouti in 2017 at the opposite end of the Red Sea from the Suez Canal. As part of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese companies pursued a lease arrangement at Israel’s Haifa Port and ownership of Greece’s Port of Piraeus.<sup>95</sup> In

short, Moscow and Beijing would almost certainly leap to exploit an unforced American error in the Sinai.

Finally, the U.S. military contingent in the MFO supports the NDS’ objective of contributing to “stable global energy markets and secure trade routes” in the Middle East.<sup>96</sup> While this objective is certainly not explicitly part of the MFO’s mission, it is worth remembering that the Suez Canal, one of the world’s most important maritime and energy chokepoints, sits adjacent to the Sinai Peninsula. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, oil flowing through the Suez Canal and nearby SUMED pipeline accounted for roughly 9 percent of total worldwide seaborne-traded petroleum in 2017. They were responsible for 8 percent of global liquefied natural gas trade, as well.<sup>97</sup> The Suez Canal is also vital for the U.S. Navy, which regularly sends vessels through the canal.

*Moscow and Beijing would almost certainly leap to exploit an unforced American error in the Sinai.*

Having a U.S. military force adjacent to this important chokepoint connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and beyond is an asset not to be relinquished. It is not hard to envision a scenario in which a U.S. withdrawal from the MFO results in the collapse of the organization. The United States provides a large

93. Jared Malsin and Nancy Youssef, “U.S. Eyes Troop Drawdown in Egypt’s Restive Sinai,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2020. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-troop-drawdown-in-egypts-restive-sinai-11588867664>)

94. John Vandiver, “Russia launches air defense drills in Egypt in sign of growing influence in region,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 19, 2019. (<https://www.stripes.com/news/russia-launches-air-defense-drills-in-egypt-in-sign-of-growing-influence-in-region-1.605202>). Regarding the reactor, see: Salwa Samir, “Pandemic won’t halt construction on Egypt’s first nuclear power plant,” *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2020. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/egypt-nuclear-power-plant-russia-work-coronavirus.html#ixzz6asSoZDaU>)

95. On Piraeus, see: “China, Greece agree to push ahead with COSCO’s Piraeus Port Investment,” *Reuters*, November 11, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-china/china-greece-agree-to-push-ahead-with-coscoss-piraeus-port-investment-idUSKBN1XL1KC>). Regarding Haifa, see: Yonah Bob, “China wins on Haifa port, but fights with US for the future-analysis,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), December 12, 2019. (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/china-wins-on-haifa-port-but-fights-with-us-for-the-future-analysis-610510>)

96. U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 2018. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>)

97. U.S. Energy Information Administration, “The Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline are critical chokepoints for oil and natural gas trade,” July 13, 2019. (<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=40152>)



↑ Leaders assigned to 1st Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment salute the MFO commander during his inspection of troops while participating in the unit's MFO award ceremony held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. (Photo by U.S. Army)

portion of the force protection capability for the MFO, and most of the other MFO nations contribute troops based on their relationship with Washington, which provides the majority of the personnel. If Washington were to pull its military contingent from the MFO, many other contributing nations would worry for the safety of their forces. Some nations might no longer see benefit in retaining troops there.

Beijing or Moscow would likely step into the vacuum created by an American departure, seeking to establish a new civil or military presence in the Sinai.<sup>98</sup> Ironically, in such a scenario, an American reduction of its modest military commitment to compete more effectively with

China and Russia elsewhere would gift Beijing and Moscow a coveted strategic outpost vital to energy, economic, and military security at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Thankfully, key leaders in Congress appreciate the bigger picture. In an extraordinary bipartisan effort, the Democrat and Republican leaders of the House and Senate foreign relations, armed services, and Appropriations committees sent a letter on May 13, 2020, to then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo regarding the MFO.<sup>99</sup> The legislators warned that a withdrawal from the MFO would represent a “grave mistake” that could “ultimately make it more difficult to implement the NDS.”<sup>100</sup>

The Pentagon is right to review U.S. military posture in every combatant command to ensure an optimal military posture that fully aligns ends and means. In the Middle East, an objective review would demonstrate that ending the modest U.S. military contribution to the MFO would endanger key NDS objectives and represent a short-sighted and self-inflicted wound to American national security interests.

*The views expressed or implied in this commentary are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of U.S. Strategic Command, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. A similar version of this chapter originally appeared in Defense One on October 15, 2020.*<sup>101</sup>

98. United Nations Peacekeeping, “United Nations Peacekeeping, China,” June 30, 2019. (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/china>); see also: United Nations Peacekeeping, “How we are funded,” accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>); United Nations Peacekeeping, “Contributors to UN Peacekeeping Operations by Country and Post Police, UN Military Experts on Mission, Staff Officers and Troops,” August 31, 2020. ([https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01\\_summary\\_of\\_contributions\\_28.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01_summary_of_contributions_28.pdf))

99. Senator James E. Risch, Senator Robert Menendez, Representative Eliot L. Engel, Representative Michael T. McCaul, Senator James M. Inhofe, Senator Jack Reed, Representative Adam Smith, Representative Mac Thornberry, Senator Lindsey Graham, Senator Patrick Leahy, Representative Nita M. Lowey, and Representative Harold Rogers, *Letter to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in support of the Multinational Force and Observers in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula*, May 13, 2020. (<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/05-15-20%20MFO%20Letter.pdf>)

100. Ibid.; National Defense Authorization Act for 2021, Section 1284, 116 Congress (2020). (<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/S4049%20-%20FY%202021%20NDAA.pdf>)

101. Bradley Bowman and Major Amoreena York, “Washington Should Avoid a Self-Inflicted Wound in the Sinai,” *Defense One*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/10/washington-should-avoid-self-inflicted-wound-sinai/169290/>)

## America's Small but Effective Presence in Syria

By David Adesnik and Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Green

American debates about the U.S. military presence in Syria highlight sharp differences within the Trump administration and within both political parties. In each of these political quarters, there are those determined to disengage from the Middle East and those who insist the United States still has vital interests in the region.<sup>102</sup>

An eagerness to end America's costly engagements in the Middle East is not difficult to understand. Yet U.S. policy toward Syria ought to reflect a clear-eyed assessment of the country's relevance to U.S. interests, not merely frustrations related to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Admittedly, there are painful lessons to learn from those wars. But what advocates of withdrawal from Syria fail to recognize is that the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq was successful because it drew upon those lessons.

The grinding difficulty of maintaining tens of thousands of troops in Iraq led the Pentagon to recognize that the sustainability of multi-year counterterrorist operations depends on the replacement of direct U.S. military efforts with an indirect approach that works "by, with, and through" local partner forces.<sup>103</sup> The current operation in Syria



Map of Syria (Photo via The World Factbook 2020. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

has demonstrated the potency of that approach. A contingent of U.S. troops, numbering roughly 2,000 at its peak, has since supported the SDF, whose numbers (including auxiliaries) the Pentagon Inspector General estimated at 100,000.<sup>104</sup> The SDF suffered more than 11,000 deaths on the battlefield fighting the Islamic State.<sup>105</sup> If not for the SDF, many of the dead would have been Americans.

102. Lindsay Wise and Natalie Andrews, "GOP Senators Widen Divide with Trump on Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2019. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/senators-formally-introduce-bipartisan-sanctions-bill-condemning-trumps-decision-to-pull-back-troops-in-syria-11571331779>); Franco Ordonez, "In Democratic Debate, a Fiery Clash Over U.S. Role in Syria," *NPR*, October 16, 2019. (<https://www.npr.org/2019/10/16/770502802/in-democratic-debate-a-fiery-clash-over-u-s-role-in-syria>)

103. Catherine Marie Dale, "Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results, and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, February 22, 2008. ([https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20080222\\_RL34387\\_f288e7cbfb70bd63eaf9b7c588c45747b7979b1d.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20080222_RL34387_f288e7cbfb70bd63eaf9b7c588c45747b7979b1d.pdf)); General Joseph L. Votel and Colonel Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89, 2nd Quarter, 2018. ([https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89\\_40-47\\_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_40-47_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307))

104. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," November 15, 2019, page 35. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/21/2002214786/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OIR\\_REPORT\\_.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/21/2002214786/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT_.PDF))

105. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "SDF says over 11,000 of its forces killed in fight against the Islamic State," *Kurdistan24* (Iraq), March 23, 2019. (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0dfe596-6536-49d7-8e23-e52821742ae9>);





U.S. forces drive through a partner-force checkpoint after a successful joint patrol mission near al-Tanf Garrison, Syria, on April 29, 2020. (Photo via U.S. Army Staff Sergeant William Howard)

While the United States and its partners defeated the caliphate, a low-level insurgency continues.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, a principal lesson of the U.S. intervention in Iraq is that victories won on the battlefield will prove fleeting if not followed by stability operations. American troops and their SDF partners hold significant terrain in Syria, supporting U.S. efforts to counter the Islamic State but also the Islamic Republic of Iran's patient campaign to dominate the region.

A withdrawal from Syria would compromise American efforts to contain both the Sunni and Shiite varieties of violent Islamist extremism. Defeating these adversaries will require decades, not years. The U.S. involvement in Syria may remain necessary until the SDF can deal

with the Islamic State and other threats on its own. But this involvement should not require the commitment of large numbers of forces if Washington employs an indirect approach. Indeed, U.S. operations in Syria have demonstrated that long-term efforts are sustainable, requiring the commitment of modest military assets deployed in a largely supporting role.

The ability of the Islamic State to inspire and launch mass-casualty attacks in the United States and Europe ensured broad bipartisan and transatlantic support for combat operations in Iraq and Syria beginning in 2014.<sup>107</sup> From that point onward, the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition pursued a consistent objective of defeating the caliphate, and that focus endured even

**106.** Jennifer Cafarella with Brendan Wallace and Jason Zhou, "ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 2019. (<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20-%20ISIS%27s%20Second%20Comeback%20-%20June%202019.pdf>)

**107.** Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html>); Ashby Jones, "Orlando Shooting Ranks Among Deadliest Attacks in U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2016. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/orlando-shooting-ranks-among-deadliest-attacks-in-u-s-1465746043>)

amidst the transfer of power between two very different U.S. administrations. Both administrations understood that the United States has a vital interest in preventing the resurgence of either the Islamic State or a successor group determined to carry out terrorist attacks abroad.

*America's continued presence in Syria directly impacts U.S. policy relating to the Islamic Republic of Iran, since Tehran considers the regime of Bashar al-Assad to be an indispensable client.*

America's continued presence in Syria directly impacts U.S. policy relating to the Islamic Republic of Iran, since Tehran considers the regime of Bashar al-Assad to be an indispensable client. While fighting ISIS, the U.S.-led coalition secured terrain in northeast Syria that comprised roughly 30 percent of the country's land area, including key oil and gas fields. The American presence now hinders Iran's "land bridge" (a ground transport corridor) across Syria and Iraq connecting Iran to areas under the control of Lebanese Hezbollah — a key component of Iran's plans to wage war on Israel.<sup>108</sup>

Northeast Syria also includes a lengthy border with Turkey. Turkey has been at war for decades with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is both a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and the progenitor of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>109</sup> Since the

YPG forms an integral part of the U.S.-aligned SDF, the U.S.-led campaign has amplified tensions between Washington and Ankara.

The Pentagon provides little public information about the number or disposition of troops in Syria. The department indicated in April 2018 it would no longer report the aggregate number of troops in Syria.<sup>110</sup> Media reports indicated the presence of roughly 1,000 U.S. troops in Syria when President Trump issued his second withdrawal order in October 2019. This was the second time Trump announced a full withdrawal from Syria only to amend his decision following vigorous objections from his advisors and congressional Republicans.<sup>111</sup> Then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper told reporters the following month, "We're going to have about 500 to 600-ish troops there, at the end of the day." He said this number did not include the garrison at al-Tanf, which sits astride the main highway running from Baghdad to Damascus near the convergence of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Jordanian borders. This garrison houses no more than 200 U.S. troops.<sup>112</sup>

Open-source data indicate that in addition to its presence at al-Tanf, the United States maintains bases near the Rumeilan oil field in the northeastern tip of Syria, as well as bases near three other oil fields further south along the Euphrates River in Deir Ezzor province.<sup>113</sup> This is consistent with the president's emphasis on ensuring Syrian energy resources stay out of enemy hands. The al-Tanf garrison also enables the

108. David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 2019, pages 9–17. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>)

109. Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran," *Congressional Research Service*, January 23, 2019. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IF10350.pdf>)

110. Tara Copp, "Pentagon Strips Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria Troop Numbers from Web," *Military Times*, April 9, 2018. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/04/09/dod-strips-iraq-afghanistan-syria-troop-numbers-from-web/>)

111. Catie Edmondson, "Senate Rebukes Trump Over Troop Withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/us/politics/senate-vote-syria-afghanistan.html>)

112. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, U.S. Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Press Gaggle en route to INDOPACOM," *Remarks to the press*, November 13, 2019. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2016020/secretary-of-defense-esper-press-gaggle-en-route-to-indopacom/>)

113. Fabrice Balance, "The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 1, 2020. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-fragile-status-quo-in-northeast-syria>)

United States and its local partners to disrupt ISIS operations in Syria's southeastern desert.<sup>114</sup>

In Syria, the risks of withdrawal are not hypothetical. This became abundantly clear in October 2019, when Trump ordered the sudden pullback of forces from the Syrian-Turkish border. In response, Turkish strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan immediately sent troops and proxy forces across the border to attack Kurdish elements of the SDF. Turkish forces also committed atrocities and displaced large numbers of civilians.<sup>115</sup> Pressure on ISIS diminished, as Kurdish SDF fighters pivoted to counter Turkey's advance.<sup>116</sup> And Russia exploited the chaos by inserting its own troops into the area, including those involved in a September 2020 vehicle collision with U.S. forces.<sup>117</sup>

The greatest loss caused by Trump's withdrawal order may have been the SDF's diminished trust in the United States. Tens of thousands of SDF fighters had conducted ground operations as part of the coalition, which has allowed the United States to fight mainly from the air and minimize its casualties. Having a partner like the SDF is the reason the United States has been able to employ an indirect approach, in keeping with the painful lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Assuming America can rebuild trust with its partners on the ground, reliance on an indirect approach should be the way forward for the American military in Syria. This would allay concerns about the cost of long-term deployments, in terms of both lives and funding. The Pentagon does not report the annual cost of operations in Syria, but we know that operational forces account for a small portion of the warfighting budget.<sup>118</sup>

Fewer than a thousand U.S. troops now operate in Syria in an area twice the size of Massachusetts, where they train and advise a partner force that numbers in the tens of thousands. That U.S. number should be regularly reviewed. Indeed, if the goal is to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State, halt Iran's ambitions, or prevent other malign actors from expanding their reach, the Pentagon may need additional forces.

Of course, in keeping with their authorized mission, U.S. forces within Syria do not conduct operations against Assad's forces or their Russian and Iranian partners, except in self-defense.<sup>119</sup> Still, the presence of U.S. forces in tandem with the SDF helps to advance a range of American interests. And it does so at minimal cost.

*The views expressed or implied in this commentary are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.*

114. David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 2019, pages 22–23. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>)

115. Asser Khattab, "'Filled with hatred and a lust for blood': Turkey's proxy army in northern Syria accused of abusing civilians," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2019. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/filled-with-hatred-and-a-lust-for-blood-turkeys-proxy-army-in-northern-syria-accused-of-abusing-civilians/2019/11/09/345e2fd6-0175-11ea-8341-cc3dce52e7de\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/filled-with-hatred-and-a-lust-for-blood-turkeys-proxy-army-in-northern-syria-accused-of-abusing-civilians/2019/11/09/345e2fd6-0175-11ea-8341-cc3dce52e7de_story.html))

116. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," May 11, 2020, page 49. ([https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/13/2002298979/-1/-1/1/LIG\\_OIR\\_Q2\\_MAR2020\\_GOLD\\_508\\_0513.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/13/2002298979/-1/-1/1/LIG_OIR_Q2_MAR2020_GOLD_508_0513.PDF))

117. Courtney Kube, "Pentagon sending troops to Syria after clashes between U.S., Russian military," *NBC News*, September 18, 2020. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/pentagon-sending-troops-syria-after-clashes-between-u-s-russian-n1240319>)

118. Rick Berger, "Why Withdrawing from Syria and Afghanistan Won't Save Much Money," *Defense One*, February 26, 2019. (<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/02/why-withdrawing-syria-and-afghanistan-wont-save-much-money/155134/>)

119. On two separate occasions, the United States conducted air strikes on Syrian regime targets following the regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. The strikes mainly employed ship-based missiles. Chief Pentagon Spokesperson Dana W. White and Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White and Joint Staff Director Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. in the Pentagon Briefing Room," *Remarks to the press*, April 14, 2018. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1493749/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-chief-spokesperson-dana-w-white/>)



## Learning the Correct Lessons From Iraq

By John Hannah

There is a striking duality to the U.S. military involvement in Iraq since 2003. On the one hand, Iraq is the poster child for the so-called “endless wars” of the post-9/11 era that Americans are so eager to put in the rearview mirror. On the other hand, America’s experience in Iraq is a cautionary tale about the dangers of precipitous withdrawal.

The departure of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 triggered a downward spiral that ended disastrously in 2014, with the Islamic State declaring its caliphate from the Great Mosque in Mosul.<sup>120</sup> This prompted massive waves of refugees that destabilized Europe,<sup>121</sup> and dramatically heightened the risk of mass-casualty terror attacks against the United States and its allies.<sup>122</sup> Less than three years after supposedly ending America’s war in Iraq, President Obama was forced to rush thousands of forces back into the breach to fight a new war born of the vacuum left behind by his hasty retreat.<sup>123</sup>

In evaluating the U.S. military posture in Iraq today, the lessons of 2011, rather than those of 2003, bear the greatest relevance.<sup>124</sup> The question that policymakers face in 2020 is not whether to sustain a large-scale ground war in the Middle East. Instead, the question is whether to keep in place a small force to support an imperfect



Map of Iraq (Photo via The World Factbook 2020. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

partner in a strategically significant part of the world where adversaries still threaten important U.S. interests.

At the height of the Iraq War, there were over 170,000 American troops deployed in the country,<sup>125</sup> many engaged in intense combat operations against insurgent forces. Nearly 4,500 U.S. service members lost their lives in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.<sup>126</sup> In 2010, the Pentagon’s budget in Iraq exceeded \$60 billion.<sup>127</sup>

120. Alissa J. Rubin, “Militant Leader in Rare Appearance in Iraq,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2014. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/world/asia/iraq-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-sermon-video.html>)

121. “Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts,” *BBC News* (UK), March 4, 2016. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>)

122. “Worldwide Threats to the Homeland: ISIS and the New Wave of Terror,” *Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security*, July 14, 2016. (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg25265/html/CHRG-114hhrg25265.htm>)

123. Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, “Obama to Send 1,500 More Troops to Assist Iraq,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2014. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/world/middleeast/us-to-send-1500-more-troops-to-iraq.html>)

124. After the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, the Iraqi government drew closer to Iran and became far more sectarian in its policies, alienating wide swathes of its Sunni population and creating a wellspring of latent support for ISIS when the terror group burst on the scene in 2014. A repeat performance today that again leaves Iraq without a U.S. counter-balance to the hegemonic designs of Iran and its sectarian proxies would dramatically increase the risk of major inter-communal strife and the emergence of a fertile breeding ground for ISIS’ resurrection.

125. Amy Belasco, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 2, 2009, page 66. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>)

126. U.S. Department of Defense, “Casualty Status,” July 13, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>)

127. Anthony H. Cordesman, “Strategic Dialogue: Shaping the Iraq-U.S. Relationship,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 17, 2020, page 100. ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713\\_Strategic\\_Dialogue\\_FIN.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713_Strategic_Dialogue_FIN.pdf))



By contrast, since the U.S. return to Iraq in 2014, U.S. troop levels peaked at approximately 5,200.<sup>128</sup> Fewer than 25 have been killed in action.<sup>129</sup> While special operators have accompanied Iraqi troops on combat missions against ISIS, the majority of U.S. assistance has been far from the front lines, in the form of air and artillery support, training, logistics, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.<sup>130</sup> For fiscal year 2021, the Pentagon is seeking about \$7 billion to cover operations not only in Iraq but in Syria as well.<sup>131</sup>

By orders of magnitude, the size and cost of the current U.S. deployment are significantly less burdensome than in the 2000s. The nature of the U.S. role now is significantly less risky. Today, U.S. troops are acting in support of an Iraqi ground force that has shouldered nearly all the fighting and absorbed almost all of the casualties in the war against ISIS.

The downsized U.S. presence has nonetheless advanced America's vital interest in combatting ISIS and preventing terror attacks against the homeland or U.S. global interests. At relatively low cost, with a local partner making most of the sacrifices, the territorial caliphate of one of history's most dangerous terrorist organizations was systematically dismantled.<sup>132</sup>

The defeat of the ISIS caliphate represents a spectacularly successful model of how to leverage a small U.S. presence to achieve major counterterrorism objectives that enhance American security. The challenge now is ensuring that remnants of ISIS, which continue to fight a low-level insurgency in scattered portions of Iraq and Syria, cannot reconstitute as a major transnational terrorist threat as they did after the 2011 U.S. withdrawal. Maintaining a U.S. presence for the foreseeable future, and continuing to provide critical support to Iraqi troops, would dramatically reduce the risk of an ISIS resurgence.

A modest U.S. military presence in Iraq also supports Baghdad's efforts to claw back sovereignty over its security forces. Following the 2011 U.S. withdrawal, Iran exploited the emergence of ISIS to expand its infiltration of the Iraqi state. Tehran's Iraqi Shiite allies, acting under the direction of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), came to dominate the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-sanctioned coalition of militias created to defend Baghdad after large parts of the Iraqi army collapsed in the face of ISIS' invasion.<sup>133</sup> Though formally subordinate to the Iraqi prime minister and funded in part by the government, pro-Iran PMF groups continue to conduct military operations in open defiance of the chain of command, engage in illicit economic schemes, and exercise substantial political power in the

128. "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018," *Congressional Research Service*, May 10, 2019, pages 13–14. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>); Alissa J. Rubin, Lara Jakes, and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Attacks Surge in Iraq Amid Debates on U.S. Troop Levels," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-strategic-dialogue-troops.html>)

129. U.S. Department of Defense, "Casualty Status," December 7, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>)

130. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, October 2017. ([https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Lasting%20Defeat%20-%20final\\_0.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Lasting%20Defeat%20-%20final_0.pdf)); AP Archive, "U.S. Artillery Supports Iraqi Forces in Mosul," *You Tube*, April 22, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPKug5jHBNs>)

131. Anthony H. Cordesman, "Strategic Dialogue: Shaping the Iraqi-U.S. Relationship," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, page 100. ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713\\_Strategic\\_Dialogue\\_FIN.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713_Strategic_Dialogue_FIN.pdf))

132. The danger the caliphate posed by virtue of the vast territory it controlled, the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues it generated, and the tens of thousands of jihadists it recruited were dramatically reduced with its collapse.

133. Alissa J. Rubin, Lara Jakes and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Attacks Surge in Iraq Amid Debates on U.S. Troop Levels," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-strategic-dialogue-troops.html>) Iraq is the critical staging area from which cross-border support in the form of artillery, logistics, and intelligence collection flows to the small U.S. contingent and their Syrian Kurdish partners fighting ISIS in northeastern Syria. A withdrawal from Iraq and an end to those support activities could cripple the U.S. counter-ISIS mission in Syria.

Iraqi parliament – not unlike what Iran’s most powerful foreign proxy, Hezbollah, does in Lebanon.<sup>134</sup>

Iran’s proxy militias pose the greatest threat to U.S. troops in Iraq. Since May 2019, they have repeatedly targeted American military and diplomatic personnel with mostly low-level rocket attacks.<sup>135</sup> On the two occasions when U.S. citizens were killed, U.S. forces retaliated against militia facilities, killing numerous fighters.<sup>136</sup> When the militias responded to the first U.S. strike by staging a violent protest that threatened the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad,<sup>137</sup> President Trump ordered a drone strike that killed Iran’s most powerful general, Qassem Soleimani, as well as Iraq’s most important militia commander and the de facto head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>138</sup> Within days, pro-Iran elements of Iraq’s parliament passed a non-binding

resolution calling for the eviction of U.S. forces,<sup>139</sup> while Iran attacked two bases hosting U.S. troops with short-range ballistic missiles, killing none but causing more than 100 concussive brain injuries.<sup>140</sup>

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi entered office in May 2020.<sup>141</sup> A former intelligence chief with good ties to the United States, Kadhimi has prioritized Iraqi sovereignty over the Iran-backed militias. As part of a new strategic dialogue with Washington, the government has underscored its commitment to prevent attacks on American troops.<sup>142</sup>

In an effort to bolster the new premier, Trump hosted Kadhimi at the White House in August 2020.<sup>143</sup> Shortly thereafter, the United States announced it would reduce the number of troops from 5,200 to

134. Renad Mansour, “More Than Militias: Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces are Here to Stay,” *War On The Rocks*, April 3, 2018. (<https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>); Omar L. Nidawi, “The growing economic and political role of Iraq’s PMF,” *Middle East Institute*, May 21, 2019. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-economic-and-political-role-iraqs-pmf>)

135. Behnam Ben Taleblu, “Collecting and analyzing Shiite militia attacks against the U.S. presence in Iraq,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, May 5, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/05/05/collecting-and-analyzing-shiite-militia-attacks-against-the-us-presence-in-iraq/>); “IntelBrief: Renewed Iran-Backed Attacks in Iraq Ratchet Up The Pressure,” *The Soufan Center*, June 22, 2020. (<https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-renewed-iran-backed-attacks-in-iraq-ratchet-up-the-pressure/>). Starting in summer 2020, Iran-backed groups also began using roadside bombs to attack Iraqi-manned convoys transporting supplies and equipment to U.S. forces. See: John Gambrell, “U.S. Says Blast Hits Iraq Convoy, Border Attack Claim False,” *Associated Press*, August 12, 2020. (<https://apnews.com/article/dubai-united-arab-emirates-kuwait-middle-east-bombings-2fdd550f5382066bcfd031fe69d65e14>)

136. Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Launches Airstrikes on Iranian-Backed Forces in Iraq and Syria,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/world/middleeast/us-airstrikes-iran-iraq-syria.html>); Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “U.S. Carries Out Retaliatory Strikes on Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/world/middleeast/military-iran-iraq.html>)

137. Falih Hassan, Ben Hubbard, and Alissa J. Rubin, “Protesters Attack U.S. Embassy in Iraq, Chanting ‘Death to America,’” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/world/middleeast/baghdad-protesters-us-embassy.html>)

138. Michael Crowley, Falih Hassan, and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qassim Suleimani, Commander of Iranian Forces,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>)

139. “Iraq parliament passes resolution to expel US-led coalition troops from country,” *France24* (France), January 5, 2020. (<https://www.france24.com/en/20200105-iraq-parliament-passes-resolution-to-expel-us-led-coalition-troops-from-country>)

140. Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, “More than 100 US troops diagnosed with brain injuries from Iran attack,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pentagon-tbi-exclusive/exclusive-more-than-100-u-s-troops-diagnosed-with-brain-injuries-from-iran-attack-officials-idUSKBN2041ZK>)

141. Louisa Loveluck, “Iraq names new prime minister, paving the way to tackle nation’s deepening crisis,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraq-names-new-prime-minister-paving-the-way-to-tackle-the-deepening-crisis/2020/05/07/2340e600-9039-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraq-names-new-prime-minister-paving-the-way-to-tackle-the-deepening-crisis/2020/05/07/2340e600-9039-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93_story.html))

142. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, Media Note, “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue,” June 11, 2020. (<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/>)

143. Katie Rogers and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Meets With Iraqi Leader Amid Negotiations Over U.S. Troop Levels,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/20/us/politics/trump-iraqi-prime-minister.html>)

3,000.<sup>144</sup> Over the course of 2020, the United States also withdrew from eight Iraqi bases, consolidating its presence in just two or three locations – acknowledging the growing capabilities of Iraqi forces against ISIS, but also seeking to protect U.S. troops from additional militia attacks.<sup>145</sup> The United States also deployed air defense batteries to protect its remaining positions as well as the U.S. Embassy, with several successful rocket interceptions subsequently reported.<sup>146</sup> The head of U.S. Central Command, General Frank McKenzie, expressed confidence that the smaller footprint would not significantly impair the anti-ISIS mission.

The troop reductions seemed well-coordinated with Baghdad. While managing the operational risks of a smaller U.S. presence, the move served the political needs of both sides: specifically, Trump’s promise to the American people that he was winding down the U.S. military presence in Iraq, and Kadhimi’s desire to show that the U.S. presence was not permanent.

Totally uncoordinated, however, was the U.S. threat days later to shutter its Embassy in Iraq unless the government put an end to militia attacks.<sup>147</sup> Coming so soon after Kadhimi’s meeting with Trump, the threat blindsided not only Iraqi officials but many of their American counterparts. The move seemed triggered by an escalation of attacks on U.S. interests that occurred in the wake of Kadhimi’s Washington visit.

An embassy closure could prove highly destabilizing. It would signal a devastating loss of U.S. confidence

in Kadhimi. It could cripple Iraq’s ability to attract badly needed international investment. Perhaps most concerning, it would mark a major victory for Iran’s efforts to drive the United States out of Iraq and pave the way for Tehran’s domination of the Iraqi state. Absent a diplomatic presence in Baghdad, Washington’s ability to sustain its military operations in Iraq (and Syria) would be in serious doubt.

General McKenzie has stated that Iran seeks to eject U.S. forces from Iraq.<sup>148</sup> Doing so would clear the way for an IRGC-controlled land bridge from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea, providing Iran and its proxies with unfettered abilities to deploy advanced weapons across this geographical expanse, including precision-guided missiles that threaten U.S. interests, Israel, Jordan, and other U.S. partners.<sup>149</sup>

It makes sense for Washington to maintain pressure on the well-intentioned but weak Iraqi government as part of an effort to protect American soldiers and diplomats. But the United States should be careful not to jeopardize a very modest military presence that successfully contains dangerous threats to U.S. interests posed by ISIS and Iran. Though far from perfect, Kadhimi is an Iraqi leader who appears genuinely committed to building the U.S.-Iraqi partnership and strengthening Iraqi sovereignty. The basis exists for a sustainable and effective forward deployment that – with the disastrous lessons of 2011 in mind – the United States should not surrender.

144. “U.S. formally announces troop reductions in Iraq,” *Reuters*, September 9, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iraq-troops/united-states-formally-announces-troop-reduction-in-iraq-idUSKBN2601RZ>)

145. Maher Nazeh and Thaier Al-Sudani, “U.S.-led troops withdraw from Iraq’s Taji base,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-military/u-s-led-troops-withdraw-from-iraqs-taji-base-idUSKBN25J088>)

146. “U.S. air defenses intercept rocket fired toward Baghdad’s Green Zone,” *Al-Monitor*, July 6, 2020. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/us-air-defenses-intercept-rocket-iraq-baghdad-green-zone.html#:~:text=A%20US%20air%20defense%20system,Iraq's%20deputy%20speaker%20of%20parliament>); Maher Nazeh and Thaier Al-Sudani, “U.S.-led troops withdraw from Iraq’s Taji base,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-military/us-led-troops-withdraw-from-iraqs-taji-base-idUSKBN25J088>)

147. Edward Wong, Lara Jakes, and Eric Schmitt, “Pompeo Threatens to Close U.S. Embassy in Iraq Unless Militias Halt Attacks,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/pompeo-embassy-baghdad-iraq.html>)

148. Carla Babb, “CENTCOM Chief Says US Can Do Job in Iraq With Fewer Forces,” *Voice of America*, July 15, 2020. (<https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-exclusive-centcom-chief-says-us-can-do-job-iraq-fewer-forces>)

149. David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, “Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Bridge to the Mediterranean,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 18, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>)

## Countering the Iranian Threat in the Persian Gulf

By Mark Dubowitz, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Varsha Koduvayur

Isolationists on the American right and left are taking advantage of understandable domestic exhaustion with conflicts in the Middle East to argue for devaluing the Persian Gulf among other U.S. interests while calling for a large-scale withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the region. Should the isolationists get their way, core U.S. interests in the Middle East will be unprotected, inviting more of the very thing they seek to avoid: military conflict in the Middle East.<sup>150</sup>

Consistent with the 2017 National Security Strategy<sup>151</sup> and the 2018 NDS,<sup>152</sup> the core U.S. interests in the Gulf are: 1) maintaining a favorable balance of power; 2) preventing the spread or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction; 3) targeting terrorists and their safe havens to prevent attacks on our homeland, interests, and allies; and 4) securing freedom of navigation in international waters.

The Islamic Republic threatens four core American interests in the Gulf. Over the past four decades, the regime in Iran has continued its quest for regional hegemony and a nuclear weapon. Tehran has prioritized its anti-Americanism and revolutionary foreign policy even under the most severe fiscal and public health conditions.<sup>153</sup> In both word<sup>154</sup> and deed,<sup>155</sup> the regime threatens freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, through which nearly 20 percent of maritime oil supplies,<sup>156</sup> vital to the global economy, traverse daily. Iran's growing arsenal of missiles and rockets targets America's regional allies, U.S. forces, and maritime traffic.<sup>157</sup> Last year, Tehran downed a U.S. drone in international airspace, sabotaged oil tankers, and fired cruise missiles and drones that inflicted severe damage on a critical Saudi oil facility.<sup>158</sup>

### *The Islamic Republic threatens four core American interests in the Gulf.*

Beijing and Moscow appear increasingly supportive of Tehran and in December 2019 partook in a trilateral

150. For example, see: Andrew Bacevich, "Kissing The Carter Doctrine Goodbye (Shouldn't Be This Hard)," *The American Conservative*, May 2, 2020. (<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/kissing-the-carter-doctrine-goodbye-shouldnt-be-this-hard/>); see also: Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi, "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination," *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020. (<https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>)

151. The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, page 7. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>)

152. U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," 2018, page 9. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>)

153. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "COVID-19 And Iranian Foreign And Security Policy: Stasis, Not Change," *Radio Farda*, May 23, 2020. (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/covid-19-and-iranian-foreign-and-security-policy-stasis-not-change/30630438.html>)

154. "Iran threatens to block Strait of Hormuz oil route," *BBC News* (UK), December 28, 2011. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16344102>); Arsalan Shahla and Ladane Nasser, "Iran Raises Stakes in U.S. Showdown With Threat to Close Hormuz," *Bloomberg News*, April 22, 2019. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-22/iran-will-close-strait-of-hormuz-if-it-can-t-use-it-fars>)

155. Jon Gambrell, "US Navy expert: Tanker attack mine resembles Iranian mines," *Associated Press*, June 19, 2019. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/06/19/us-navy-expert-tanker-attack-mine-resembles-iranian-mines/>)

156. U.S. Energy Information Agency, "The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint," June 20, 2019. (<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>)

157. Anthony H. Cordesman with Aaron Lin, "The Iranian Sea-Air-Missile Threat to Gulf Shipping," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2015. ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/150219\\_Cordesman\\_IranAirSeaMissileThreat\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150219_Cordesman_IranAirSeaMissileThreat_Web.pdf))

158. Varsha Koduvayur, "The Saudi oil attacks won't devastate the global economy. Here's what could," *CNN*, September 20, 2019. (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/20/perspectives/saudi-oil-attacks-global-economy/index.html>)





➦ Officers make a plan during Iron Union 18-6 in the United Arab Emirates on January 23, 2018. Iron Union is a recurring exercise focusing on combined arms, security, and staff operations, designed to strengthen military-to-military relations between U.S. and the UAE land forces. (Photo by Sergeant Thomas Crough)

naval exercise in the Indian Ocean.<sup>159</sup> Independently, each of those countries is committed to undermining the U.S.-led international order, including American security partnerships in the Gulf.<sup>160</sup> Russia is working to replace the United States as a leading supplier of military hardware to Gulf countries.<sup>161</sup> China has not been afraid to use bribery to promote its arms sales or to expand trade, infrastructure, communications, and business networks.<sup>162</sup> China's reliance on Gulf oil gives Beijing further incentive to get involved in

regional military and political affairs to fuel economic growth in China.

Finally, there is the asymmetric threat. Terrorist groups that operate in the broader Middle East continue to target U.S. interests both in the Gulf region and the homeland.<sup>163</sup> Drawing on support from sponsors of terrorism or operating in jurisdictions of weak central authority, these groups seek to attack America's interests and allies or even the American homeland, as al-Qaeda did on September 11, 2001.<sup>164</sup> U.S. military pressure on terrorists in the wider Middle East has prevented another 9/11-style attack. A reduction of the U.S. military in the Middle East could give terrorists exactly the breathing space they seek to launch a new attack.

Despite these grave threats, a growing chorus of voices on both the left and right is arguing for a withdrawal of most U.S. troops from the region. A July 2020 report from the Quincy Institute, for example, suggests the United States should cease pursuing "military domination" (it is unclear who is calling for such an approach) and "significantly draw down its military presence in the region over a period of five to ten years." Ignoring the lessons of the disastrous 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq that heralded the rise of the

**159.** Ben Westcott and Hamdi Alkhshali, "China, Russia and Iran hold joint naval drills in Gulf of Oman," *CNN*, December 27, 2019. (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/27/asia/china-russia-iran-military-drills-intl-hnk/index.html>)

**160.** Iran's President Hassan Rouhani specifically thanked Russia and China in his virtual UN General Address in 2020. See: "Pres. Rouhani opposes anti-Iran sanctions in UNGA speech," *Islamic Republic News Agency* (Iran), September 22, 2020. (<https://en.irna.ir/news/84050776/Pres-Rouhani-opposes-anti-Iran-sanctions-in-UNGA-speech>). For relevance, see: Courtney McBride and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Rouhani, Trump Rebuke One Another's Nations on U.N.'s Virtual Stage," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2020. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/rouhani-trump-rebuke-one-anothers-nations-on-u-n-s-virtual-stage-11600806980>)

**161.** Moscow tried to use the September 2019 Iranian attack on Saudi oil facilities as a sales opportunity, attempting to persuade Riyadh to purchase Russian systems. Adam Taylor, "For Saudi Arabia, an oil field attack was a disaster. For Russia, it's a weapons sales pitch," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2019. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/09/20/saudi-arabia-an-oil-field-attack-was-disaster-russia-its-weapons-sales-pitch/>)

**162.** Bradley Bowman, "Objectives of U.S. Arms Sales to the Gulf: Examining Strategic Goals, Risks, and Benefits," *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa*, June 16, 2020, pages 14–15. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20200616/110808/HHRG-116-FA13-Wstate-BowmanB-20200616.pdf>)

**163.** See comments about Afghanistan in: Scott Pelley, "H.R. McMaster on America's Enemies and What He Saw in the White House," *CBS News*, September 20, 2020. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/h-r-mcmaster-battlefields-china-afghanistan-national-security-60-minutes-2020-09-20/>)

**164.** See: Christopher Wray, "Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland," *Testimony before the House Homeland Security Committee*, October 30, 2019. (<https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/global-terrorism-threats-to-the-homeland-103019>)

Islamic State, the report calls for a drawdown “regardless of any potential stability milestones.”<sup>165</sup>

Such an approach would likely undercut Washington’s ability to contest and deter Iranian military aggression. Tehran continues to use the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force to conduct terrorism and foment instability. One reason for this technique is Tehran’s relatively weak conventional military. If the United States removes too many combat capabilities from the region and signals an unwillingness to back its diplomatic priorities with military strength, it not only will fail to reduce IRGC terrorism, but could embolden Tehran to increase its conventional military aggression. The end of the UN arms embargo on Iran only exacerbates this concern.

A large-scale U.S. military withdrawal from the Gulf region might also put the Pentagon in the position of having to fight its way back into the region following major aggression by Tehran. As the Islamic Republic fields increasingly capable anti-access and area-denial capabilities, deploying U.S. military personnel back to the region could become more difficult.

In East Asia, the U.S. military is eager to establish increased combat capabilities closer to China. In the Gulf context, it would be short-sighted to relinquish such positions the Pentagon already enjoys near Iran and alongside one of the world’s most strategic waterways.

In direct support of the NDS’ principal priority of great power competition, a continued, right-sized U.S. military posture in the Gulf would also reduce the incentives for Gulf partners to look to Moscow and Beijing for defense partnerships. A large-scale withdrawal would cause Gulf partners to question the reliability of Washington’s security assurances, incentivizing them to turn increasingly to Moscow and Beijing.

The U.S. military cannot ignore partner military readiness and capability, either. Given the threats from Tehran and others, enhancing partner capability not only enables burden-sharing,<sup>166</sup> but also represents the only path to a safe and durable withdrawal of *some* U.S. forces from the region. Ignoring this important strategy would only increase the chances Washington would have to return in haste in the future – likely at a greater cost.<sup>167</sup>

*A continued, right-sized U.S. military posture in the Gulf would also reduce the incentives for Gulf partners to look to Moscow and Beijing for defense partnerships.*

The United States must also consider the impact of a withdrawal on our efforts to halt Iran’s efforts to destabilize the region through material<sup>168</sup> and political support for violent non-state groups. An excessive reduction of U.S. forces in the Gulf would reduce Washington’s ability to detect, interdict, and expose weapons proliferation. That would make it easier for

165. Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi, “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020. ([https://quincyinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ending-America%E2%80%99s-Misguided-Policy-of-Domination\\_FINAL\\_COMPRESSED.pdf](https://quincyinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ending-America%E2%80%99s-Misguided-Policy-of-Domination_FINAL_COMPRESSED.pdf))

166. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., “Posture Statement,” *Testimony before House Armed Services Committee*, March 10, 2020. (<https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>)

167. John Hannah and Bradley Bowman, “The Pentagon Tries to Pivot out of the Middle East—Again,” *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/military-pivot-middle-east-saudi-arabia/>)

168. For example, see: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “The United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain Issue Joint Statement on Iran Arms Embargo Following Consultations,” June 29, 2020. (<https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-the-kingdom-of-bahrain-issue-joint-statement-on-iran-arms-embargo-following-consultations/>). More recently, Iranian military officials have bragged about this. “Iran reveals their transfer of missile, drone information to Yemen,” *Al-Masdar News* (Lebanon), September 22, 2020. (<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/iran-reveals-their-transfer-of-missile-drone-information-to-yemen/>)

Tehran to conduct its operations directly or by proxy and to advance its arms proliferation strategy.<sup>169</sup>

Lastly, America's transformation into a net energy exporter does not mean Washington no longer has an interest in the free flow of energy in the Gulf region. American energy consumers and producers remain vulnerable to what happens in the Gulf. A supply disruption anywhere that spikes the global price of oil impacts consumers and producers everywhere.

Energy flows in the region also impact great power competition. China, as well as key U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea, remains deeply dependent on Gulf energy supplies. The United States effectively controls the lines of communication that deliver that oil.

If competing with China is America's number one challenge in the coming decades, voluntarily relinquishing control over such a chokepoint makes little sense. Such an unforced error by the United States would stoke fears of U.S. retrenchment among Gulf allies, potentially creating more economic, energy, and military opportunities in the region for Moscow and Beijing.

Suggesting that China take over policing this key maritime chokepoint, as some have done, is short-sighted.<sup>170</sup> An authoritarian regime that aggressively pursues its narrow security, economic, and geopolitical

aims via predatory tactics will not be committed to keeping waterways open for all actors.

*Washington should work with its Gulf partners to strengthen their air, land, and maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, with the goal of maximizing shared all-domain awareness of Tehran's malign behavior in and around the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.*

Going forward, Washington should work with its Gulf partners to strengthen their air, land, and maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, with the goal of maximizing shared all-domain awareness of Tehran's malign behavior in and around the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Early detection of threats to freedom of navigation and mine warfare should be a priority.<sup>171</sup>

Interoperable, multilayered regional air and missile defense systems in the Gulf should also be a priority.<sup>172</sup> The Islamic Republic possesses the largest arsenal of ballistic missiles in the Middle East<sup>173</sup> and is increasingly willing to use it.<sup>174</sup> Tehran is also

169. "Pompeo says U.S. seized Iranian weapons on way to Houthi rebels in Yemen," *Reuters*, July 8, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-pompeo/pompeo-says-u-s-seized-iranian-weapons-on-way-to-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-idUSKBN2492AV>)

170. Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi, "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination," *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020, page 16. ([https://quincyinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ending-America%E2%80%99s-Misguided-Policy-of-Domination\\_FINAL\\_COMPRESSED.pdf](https://quincyinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ending-America%E2%80%99s-Misguided-Policy-of-Domination_FINAL_COMPRESSED.pdf))

171. See: Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "The Iranian Mine Warfare Threat: An Intelligence Assessment," November 1984. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00314R000300100002-7.pdf>). The United States should also upgrade its ageing mine warfare fleet. Robert Faturechi, Megan Rose, and T. Christian Miller, "Iran Has Hundreds of Naval Mines. U.S. Navy Minesweepers Find Old Dishwashers and Car Parts," *ProPublica*, August 5, 2019. (<https://www.propublica.org/article/iran-has-hundreds-of-naval-mines-us-navy-minesweepers-find-old-dishwashers-car-parts>)

172. Ambassador Eric Edelman, "The US Role In The Middle East In An Era Of Renewed Great Power Competition," *Hoover Institution*, April 2, 2019. (<https://www.hoover.org/research/us-role-middle-east-era-renewed-great-power-competition>)

173. Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," *Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, January 29, 2019. (<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>), page 10.

174. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iran is increasingly using missiles in its military operations — that's a problem," *The Hill*, January 21, 2020. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/479076-iran-is-increasingly-using-missiles-in-its-military-operations-thats-a>)





↑ A damaged installation in Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil processing plant is pictured on September 20, 2019. (Photo by Fayez Nureldine/AFP via Getty Images)

enhancing its drone and cruise missile capabilities, as demonstrated by the September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities.<sup>175</sup> Tehran's short-range ballistic missiles can strike U.S. military bases and other Gulf targets with increasing accuracy. Protecting U.S. bases from the full range of threats requires the deployment of defensive capabilities, including Aegis ballistic missile destroyers, C-RAMS, Patriot batteries, and Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) systems as well as next-generation systems.

In conjunction with Gulf partners, Washington should work to implement recommendations from the Missile

Defense Review calling for connecting sensors and shooters in partner nations.<sup>176</sup> To reduce the burden on U.S. forces, Washington should expedite missile defense system sales to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.<sup>177</sup> This would contribute to a layered and integrated regional missile defense system.<sup>178</sup> Washington should also help Gulf countries address lower-tier unmanned aerial threats from mortars, rockets, and drones.

Additionally, Washington should work with Gulf partners to strengthen the International Maritime Security Construct. While Bahrain was the only Gulf member of the Construct at the time of its founding, the Construct has since expanded to include Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>179</sup> Washington should encourage other Gulf nations to join and contribute.

Such measures would deter and defeat potential threats in the Gulf before they materialize closer to home. Conversely, a large-scale withdrawal of U.S. military forces would undermine American national security, offering a significant geopolitical opportunity for adversaries such as China, Russia, Iran, and jihadist groups to exploit.

175. David Wainer, "Missiles in 2019 Saudi Oil Attacks Came From Iran, UN Says," *Bloomberg News*, June 12, 2020. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-12/missiles-used-in-saudi-attacks-last-year-came-from-iran-un-says>)

176. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019, page 47. (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.pdf>)

177. Currently, only one GCC member, the United Arab Emirates, has taken delivery of THAAD. Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," *Congressional Research Service*, April 29, 2020, (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>), page 29.

178. The authors are cognizant of the trust, technical, and geopolitical challenges in having GCC nations integrate their air and missile defenses. But, as the Iranian missile threat grows, these nations have an incentive to put aside those differences. See: Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Gulf and the Challenge of Missile Defense: Net Assessment Indicators," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 26, 2019. ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200227\\_Gulf\\_Missiles.pdf?NOvF1a7BYqY0.L2qKR0lrzvH2LQ2vITr](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200227_Gulf_Missiles.pdf?NOvF1a7BYqY0.L2qKR0lrzvH2LQ2vITr)); Frank A. Rose, "If Trump is serious about addressing the Iranian ballistic missile threat, he should enhance multilateral missile defense cooperation with Gulf states," *The Brookings Institution*, June 20, 2018. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/20/if-trump-is-serious-about-addressing-the-iranian-ballistic-missile-threat-he-should-enhance-multilateral-missile-defense-cooperation-with-gulf-states/>)

179. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Embassy in the United States, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Joins the International Maritime Security Construct," September 18, 2019. (<https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/kingdom-saudi-arabia-joins-international-maritime-security-construct>); "UAE joins new US-led Persian Gulf maritime security mission," *Agence France-Presse*, September 19, 2019. (<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/09/19/uae-gulf-international-maritime-security-construct/>)



## America Does Not Have to Choose Defeat in Afghanistan

By Bill Roggio

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda launched its now-infamous attacks on the United States, hijacking airplanes and slamming them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Al-Qaeda's leadership planned and launched those attacks from Afghanistan,<sup>180</sup> prompting President George W. Bush to demand that the Taliban turn over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to face justice.

The Taliban, which had provided al-Qaeda safe haven, refused. Its leader, Mullah Omar, instead made a bold prediction: The Taliban would prevail in a war with America. "God is with us," Omar said.<sup>181</sup>

Nearly two decades on, the United States is on the precipice of proving Omar right. The Trump administration has negotiated a withdrawal deal with the Taliban that legitimizes the group's role in the international community. The deal undercut the Afghan government – Washington's only hope for a sustainable withdrawal. The deal also absolves the Taliban of its role in sheltering and supporting al-Qaeda both before and since 9/11.<sup>182</sup>

At first glance, Afghanistan – underdeveloped, landlocked, and war-torn – would appear to possess little strategic importance for the United States. The 9/11 terrorist attacks, however, proved otherwise. A premature, politically motivated U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan could permit the country to once again become a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the United States.

The United States still has clear strategic interests in Afghanistan because much of the global terror threat still emanates from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban controls or contests nearly 60 percent of the country.<sup>183</sup> Terror groups – including some directly supported by Pakistan<sup>184</sup> – operate training camps across the region.<sup>185</sup> The Islamic State, no friend of the Taliban or its allies, also has a presence there. Both camps seek to use Afghanistan to advance their regional and international goals of establishing a global caliphate.

A military presence in Afghanistan enables the United States to more effectively monitor and strike at senior terrorist leaders in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan remains a safe haven for the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and many other terrorist groups.<sup>186</sup> The 2011 raid that

**180.** The 9/11 Commission report discusses al-Qaeda's plot to attack the United States from Afghanistan. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," July 22, 2004. (<https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>)

**181.** "Mullah Omar after 9/11 - in his own words," *The Guardian* (UK), Sept. 26, 2001. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/26/afghanistan.features11>)

**182.** Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Trump's Bad Deal with the Taliban," *Politico*, March 18, 2019. (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/18/donald-trump-afghanistan-zalmay-khalilzad-225815>)

**183.** Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, "Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>)

**184.** Bill Roggio, "Baluchistan province is a primary hub for Afghan Taliban," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 25, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/05/baluchistan-province-is-a-primary-hub-for-afghan-taliban.php>)

**185.** Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Taliban promotes 4 previously unidentified training camps in Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 26, 2017. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/taliban-promotes-4-previously-unidentified-training-camps-in-afghanistan.php>)

**186.** Bill Roggio, "Pakistan a 'safe haven' for 'terror groups': U.S. State Department," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 25, 2020. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/pakistan-a-safe-haven-for-terror-groups-u-s-state-department.php>). That is one reason why the United States has a vital interest in remaining in Afghanistan: to keep an eye on the country that continues to provide cover, support, weapons, and other essential aid to the Taliban.

killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan,<sup>187</sup> was launched from bases in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>188</sup>

But America's greatest disadvantage in this conflict ultimately boils down to its poor political understanding of this troubled region and its lack of will to engage in long fights. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are inexorably linked.<sup>189</sup> The United States cannot defeat al-Qaeda without defeating the Taliban. And yet, for the past decade, Washington has treated the Taliban and al-Qaeda as distinct entities, the former described in Washington as one with which Americans can somehow negotiate. Military leaders and policymakers across three administrations have failed to properly define the threat and implement a coherent strategy to address it.

In a short-sighted and politically motivated desire to withdraw from Afghanistan, the Trump administration has invoked the narrative of "ending the endless wars." To hasten its exit, the United States has conceded to virtually every major Taliban negotiation objective – while receiving no tangible commitments in return. If the United States proceeds along this diplomatic path, divorced from battlefield realities, it can expect a meteoric rise in the Taliban's power. This will directly translate to increased power for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. This could then necessitate a future U.S. return to Afghanistan.

The American public does not understand this dynamic. They have soured on the war, in large part because leaders in Washington have failed to explain America's continued interests in Afghanistan.<sup>190</sup> Withdrawal is one of the rare policy positions embraced by factions within both parties in a divided America. The Trump administration is committed to its path forward in Afghanistan, and President-elect Biden previously said he would withdraw most American troops but keep a small counterterrorism presence.<sup>191</sup> A drawdown is well underway, but there appears to be growing bipartisan concern in Congress regarding the expedited Trump withdrawal plan, which ignores conditions on the ground.<sup>192</sup> The Department of Defense has withdrawn thousands of service members and closed five bases in the provinces of Laghman, Paktika, Helmand, and Uruzgan – and the United States appears determined to withdraw all or most U.S. troops next year<sup>193</sup>

The troops who remain in Afghanistan are split between the train, advise, and assist mission (NATO) and the counterterrorism mission (U.S. Forces Afghanistan). It is unclear how many bases remain open. At minimum, the U.S. military maintains bases at Bagram, Kandahar, Kabul, and likely Herat.

If U.S. policymakers choose to ignore the risks associated with a withdrawal, they must understand that a Taliban victory is synonymous with an al-Qaeda

**187.** Bill Ardolino and Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda emir Osama bin Laden confirmed killed by US forces in Pakistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 1, 2011. ([https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/05/al\\_qaeda\\_emir\\_osama.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/05/al_qaeda_emir_osama.php))

**188.** Brian Ross, Matthew Cole, and Avni Patel, "Osama Bin Laden: Navy SEALs Operation Details of Raid That Killed 9/11 Al Qaeda Leader," *ABC News*, May 2, 2011. (<https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/khalid-sheikh-muhammad-capture-osama-bin-laden-courier/story?id=13506413>)

**189.** Thomas Joscelyn, "Taliban 'reluctant to publicly break with al Qaeda,' Inspector General reports," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 21, 2020. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/taliban-reluctant-to-publicly-break-with-al-qaeda-inspector-general-reports.php>)

**190.** Rebecca Kheel, "Poll: About three quarters support bringing troops home from Iraq, Afghanistan," *The Hill*, August 6, 2020. ([https://thehill.com/policy/defense/510851-poll-about-three-quarters-support-bringing-troops-home-from-iraq-afghanistan#.Xy3li2Qc\\_QE.twitter](https://thehill.com/policy/defense/510851-poll-about-three-quarters-support-bringing-troops-home-from-iraq-afghanistan#.Xy3li2Qc_QE.twitter))

**191.** Simon Lewis and Michael Martina, "The foreign policy issues that divide Trump and Biden," *Reuters*, September 18, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-foreign-policy-factbox/factbox-the-foreign-policy-issues-that-divide-trump-and-biden-idUSKCN24S134>)

**192.** William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Conference Report to Accompany H.R.6395, 116th Congress (2020), Section 1215. (<https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>)

**193.** Vandana Rambaran and Lucas Tomlinson, "US closes 5 military bases in Afghanistan as part of Taliban peace deal," *Fox News*, July 14, 2020. (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/us-military-closes-5-bases-afghanistan-taliban-deal-special-rep>)

victory. American policy makers should not fool themselves into believing the Taliban will restrain al-Qaeda, let alone “destroy” the group, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo proclaimed just one day after signing the deal with the Taliban.<sup>194</sup> If the Taliban did not do so when there were approximately 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, why would they do so once the United States leaves or has only a token force there?<sup>195</sup>

American policymakers should also be forewarned that a Taliban victory and American defeat in Afghanistan will inspire America’s other enemies and adversaries. China and Russia have relished America’s challenges in Afghanistan, seeing them as a sign of general weakness. Pakistan eagerly sees America’s exit as a green light to continue supporting terrorists and using similar groups to challenge India. Terrorists, of course, will also seek to exploit and export their victory in Afghanistan. After all, the 1989 defeat of Soviet troops in Afghanistan by Islamist fighters was what fueled recruitment by the nascent al-Qaeda movement.

If the United States is truly serious about supporting the Afghan government and preventing al-Qaeda from solidifying power, Washington must fundamentally change its approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States must properly define the nature of the enemy and maintain a military presence in Afghanistan that is geared to countering that enemy. This need not be a massive presence. But a counterterrorism mission alone in Afghanistan will not solve the problem. Such a presence would, in fact, prolong the war and ensure that support for the war effort would dwindle further.

The United States must end its coddling of Pakistan and finally designate it as a state sponsor of terrorism. Washington should leverage this designation, along with other tools in the U.S. diplomatic and economic arsenal, to compel Pakistan to end its support for the

Taliban. This would include sanctions on individuals and entities that aid the Taliban; trade embargos; economic sanctions; and more.

In this effort to address terrorism emanating from Pakistan, Washington has no better partner than India. Washington and New Delhi increasingly view the China challenge similarly. That growing alignment has facilitated dramatic improvements in U.S.-India defense cooperation.<sup>196</sup> The two countries should build on that progress to more effectively counter terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

As the United States applies meaningful pressure on Pakistan, Washington must also put to rest the idea that it can negotiate with the Taliban without first achieving success on the battlefield. That will require robust and consistent support for the internationally recognized Afghan government. While Afghans can and should conduct most of the ground combat, the United States must end its obsession with reducing the number of troops in country and instead focus on having the correct composition of forces in key locations in Afghanistan to protect U.S. interests. This would include special operations forces; quick-reaction forces to back troops in the field; close air support; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; and combat support. This kind of support would prevent a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and can be accomplished with a relatively modest U.S. military presence.

It may be too late, however. If Americans conduct a calendar-based withdrawal in Afghanistan, the Taliban will have won, potentially overthrowing the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan. That would mean al-Qaeda will have won, too, energizing a threat that may ultimately force the United States to reluctantly deploy again.

<sup>194</sup>. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, “Transcript: Mike Pompeo on ‘Face the Nation,’ March 1, 2020,” *CBS News*, March 1, 2020. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-mike-pompeo-on-face-the-nation-march-1-2020/>)

<sup>195</sup>. “Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018,” *Congressional Research Service*, May 10, 2019, page 7. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf#page=10>)

<sup>196</sup>. Bradley Bowman and Cleo Paskal, “US-India declaration has a Sino subtext,” *The Sunday Guardian* (India), December 21, 2019. (<https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/us-india-declaration-sino-subtext>)



## EUROPEAN COMMAND

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*NATO represents a grand strategic asset for the United States, and Washington must actively seek to strengthen the alliance's political unity and military readiness. The United States retains vital national security interests in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the positioning of American forces there alongside NATO allies serves to deter aggression from the Kremlin and facilitates U.S. operations in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. The alliance has also improved military readiness in the Baltic region following Moscow's 2014 invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea. But additional steps must be taken in the Black Sea region and the Eastern Mediterranean. Washington should also re-assess plans for U.S. military withdrawals from Germany and ensure that any adjustments to American military posture there focus on readiness, alliance unity, and the deterrence of Moscow.*



## American Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean

By Ambassador Eric S. Edelman and Aykan Erdemir

The Eastern Mediterranean’s strategic location at the nexus of Africa, Asia, and Europe has made the region an epicenter of great power competition for over two millennia. It is no coincidence that U.S. pushback against Soviet expansionism began here in 1947 with the Greek-Turkish aid package as part of the Truman Doctrine.<sup>197</sup> Although the region remained a focal point of U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War, its importance waned as the U.S.-Soviet conflict ended and as Washington turned its attention farther east following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia also signaled to Mediterranean littoral powers that the United States was leaving the region to its own devices. After Libya became the first case of what one of President Obama’s advisors called “leading from behind,” both state and non-state actors revised their respective ambitions and strategies in anticipation of a reduced American role in the years ahead.<sup>198</sup> The Trump administration’s conflicting signals about U.S. interests and commitment, including attempts to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, only deepened the sense that the United States is quitting the region.<sup>199</sup>

There are two key reasons why the United States should urgently develop a coherent strategic vision for the Eastern Mediterranean. First, a growing list of state and non-state adversaries has filled the void in the region, posing a mounting threat to the United States, its treaty



Map of the Eastern Mediterranean region (Photo via The World Factbook 2020. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

allies, and its critical partners. Second, Turkey – once a pro-Western bulwark on NATO’s southeastern flank – has become a belligerent challenger following almost 18 years of rule by the country’s Islamist strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan.<sup>200</sup> Ankara’s hostile posture not only targets Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel, but also imperils U.S. efforts to promote regional energy development that would reduce Europe’s dependence on Russian natural gas. All of this requires an urgent recalibration of U.S. strategy in the region.<sup>201</sup>

The challenges do not end there, however. The Syrian Civil War has allowed Russia and Iran to expand their footprint in parts of the country controlled by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Kremlin’s bases and advanced air defenses along Syria’s Mediterranean coast pose a growing threat to the United States and its allies. Iran’s extensive proxy network, through Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, exerts virtually unchallenged political and military influence in Syria and Lebanon and has given Iran an opportunity to extend a “land

197. Dennis Merrill, “The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, March 2006, pages 27–37. (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00284.x>)

198. Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama’s foreign policy,” *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2011. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>)

199. Ambassador Eric S. Edelman and Aykan Erdemir, “Trump’s Capitulation to Erdogan Destroys U.S. Credibility,” *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/08/trumps-capitulation-erdogan-turkey-syria-kurds-destroys-us-credibility/>)

200. Merve Tahiroglu and Ambassador Eric S. Edelman, “Erdogan’s Rising Islamist Militarism,” *The Washington Examiner*, March 6, 2018. (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/erdogans-rising-islamist-militarism>)

201. “Reshaped After the Pandemic: Turkish Aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *The Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, July 29, 2020. ([https://jinsa.org/jinsa\\_report/reshaped-after-the-pandemic-turkish-aggression-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/](https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/reshaped-after-the-pandemic-turkish-aggression-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/))



↑ CH-47 Chinook flight engineer assigned to B Co “Big Windy,” 1-214th General Support Aviation Battalion during a training flight over the island of Cyprus on January 15, 2020. (Photo by Major Robert Fellingham)

bridge” to the Mediterranean.<sup>202</sup> Tehran’s provision of precision-guided munitions to Hezbollah is a game changer, potentially leaving Israel little choice but to undertake a major military effort in Lebanon against the terrorist organization – something that could spark a larger war with Hezbollah’s benefactors in Tehran.<sup>203</sup>

Non-state actors such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah continue to threaten conventional militaries. The rapid flow of foreign fighters throughout the region, including Turkey’s airlift of Syrian jihadists to Libya, underscores the difficulties of containing non-state actors, particularly when they receive assistance from state sponsors.<sup>204</sup>

The Mediterranean Sea, for millennia a thoroughfare for population movements between Africa, Asia, and Europe, is once again an entrepot for irregular migration into Europe. Mass displacement of people, and the ensuing brain drain and capital flight, not only poses challenges to sending states, but also destabilizes EU member states by catalyzing populist/nationalist movements that have frequently advocated pro-Russia policies. The vulnerability of these democracies to an influx of refugees has allowed Russia and Turkey to weaponize population displacement as part of their respective asymmetric strategies.<sup>205</sup>

202. David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, “Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 18, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>)

203. Jacob Nagel and Jonathan Schanzer, “Get Ready for a New Type of Israeli War,” *The National Interest*, July 11, 2020. (<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/get-ready-new-type-israeli-war-164578>)

204. Isabel Debre, “Pentagon report: Turkey sent up to 3,800 fighters to Libya,” *Associated Press*, July 17, 2020. (<https://apnews.com/c339f71bf029f36b1091ee31c9f0171a>)

205. Seth J. Frantzman, “Turkey weaponizes refugees against Europe,” *The Hill*, March 10, 2020. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/486291-turkey-weaponizes-refugees-against-europe>)



What elevates all these challenges to a new level is Turkey's Islamist turn and increasingly rogue behavior. This includes Ankara's purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia, gunboat diplomacy to challenge maritime borders, proxy warfare in Libya, weaponization of migrants, patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and willingness to work with other jihadist proxies.<sup>206</sup> Although Ankara often presents itself as a counterweight to Russia and Iran in the region, Erdogan's Turkey is increasingly part of the problem. Ankara has time and again enabled state and non-state adversaries of the United States and played a spoiler role within the transatlantic alliance.<sup>207</sup>

Despite these serious challenges, the discovery of significant hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean offers opportunities to strengthen Washington's posture in the region. Hoping to exploit Mediterranean natural gas reserves, a number of key players, including Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, met in Cairo in January 2019 to establish the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.<sup>208</sup> France subsequently asked to join the forum, and the United States has applied to become a permanent observer.<sup>209</sup>

Turkey's truculence has pushed several states, including Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece, to look for ways to deepen regional political and military cooperation with the United States. Following calls to lift the U.S. arms embargo on

Cyprus, the bipartisan Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act signed into law in December 2019 did just that.<sup>210</sup> It also authorizes the establishment of a United States-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Center to facilitate energy cooperation among the United States, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus; authorizes Foreign Military Financing assistance for Greece; and provides International Military Education and Training assistance for Greece and Cyprus.<sup>211</sup>

To meet the rising challenges and take advantage of the emerging opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States must treat the region as a coherent strategic entity and overcome organizational stovepipes within the national security bureaucracy that impede sound policymaking. The U.S. administration should unequivocally convey its commitment to the region, politically and militarily. Recent steps to reassert U.S. military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean are a good start, but Washington's current regional force posture remains a shadow of its former self and insufficient to deter adversaries.

To this end, given the region's vital maritime chokepoints and sea lines of communication, the United States should continue to enhance its naval presence in the region and defense cooperation with Greece, building on recent agreements announced in Crete by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.<sup>212</sup> Maintaining a

**206.** "Sea Changes: U.S. Challenges and Opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean," *The Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, August 1, 2020. (<https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Sea-Changes-U.S.-Challenges-and-Opportunities-in-the-Eastern-Mediterranean.pdf>)

**207.** Aykan Erdemir and John A. Lechner, "Axis of Anger: The Machiavellian VIRTUs," *The American Interest*, September 7, 2018. (<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/09/07/the-machiavellian-virtus/>)

**208.** Amr Emam, "Eastern Med countries agree to move ahead with gas forum," *The Arab Weekly*, July 27, 2019. (<https://the-arab-weekly.com/eastern-med-countries-agree-move-ahead-gas-forum>)

**209.** "France, US request to join East Mediterranean Gas Forum," *Daily News Egypt* (Egypt), January 17, 2020. (<https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/01/17/france-us-request-to-join-east-mediterranean-gas-forum/>)

**210.** Jonathan Schanzer and Bradley Bowman, "It's time to lift the arms embargo on Cyprus," *The Hill*, May 8, 2019. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/442624-its-time-to-lift-the-arms-embargo-on-cyprus>)

**211.** Todd Prince, "Congress Passes More Legislation Aimed At Curbing Russia's Energy Grip On Europe," *Radio Free Europe*, December 21, 2019. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/congress-passes-more-legislation-aimed-at-curbing-russia-s-energy-grip-on-europe/30337217.html>)

**212.** Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo And Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis Joint Press Statements After Their Meeting," September 29, 2020. (<https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-greek-prime-minister-kyriakos-mitsotakis-joint-press-statements-after-their-meeting/>)

small ground presence in northeast Syria to prevent an Iranian land bridge to the Mediterranean should also be part of the U.S. strategic calculus.

Deepening energy cooperation also serves as a pillar of U.S. strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean. Washington should appoint a special envoy for the Eastern Mediterranean to work closely with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and challenge the Turkish government's disruptive offshore claims. The United States can also establish a U.S.-led annual combined joint maritime exercise focused on maritime energy security that brings Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and interested Arab countries together.

In Libya, the security vacuum has emboldened both Turkish and Russian attempts to destabilize the country.<sup>213</sup> To mitigate the resulting political, military, and humanitarian crises that are spilling over into the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe, the United States must assume a diplomatic leadership role and work harder to achieve a negotiated solution in coordination with the European Union.<sup>214</sup>

The United States also needs to offer stronger incentives and disincentives, including sanctions (for example, under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act), to induce Ankara to reverse its malign behavior.<sup>215</sup> As the downturn in U.S.-Turkish relations puts the future of U.S. access to Turkey's Incirlik Air Base at risk, Washington must also make contingency plans for alternative basing options.<sup>216</sup>

As during the Cold War, the Eastern Mediterranean is re-emerging as a prime arena for regional and great power competition. Energy resources loom large, with major implications for freedom of the seas and the regional balance of power. The United States has over the past decade stayed largely aloof from this zone of intensifying crisis, but Washington cannot remain disengaged for much longer before Russian and Turkish actions further destabilize the region.

Turkey's new interventionism, in particular, raises grave concerns because it has relied on local Islamist proxies and increasingly on surrogate forces recruited from Islamist militias that have been fighting in Syria. Exporting these groups to Libya has intensified the conflict there. Their presence also raises troubling questions about these jihadists' potential onward movement from North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean to NATO allies in Europe and ultimately the U.S. homeland.

There are significant bureaucratic impediments that Washington must overcome to address these threats. Competing authorities exist between different combatant commands and State Department geographic bureaus. But the escalating tensions, including among NATO member states such as Italy and France, demand U.S. leadership and attention. Failure to prioritize the Eastern Mediterranean will condemn it to a continued downward spiral with baleful consequences for the region, Europe, and ultimately the United States itself.

213. Aykan Erdemir, Varsha Koduvayur, and Philip Kowalski, "Turkish Proxy Gains in Libya are No Cure for Ankara's Growing Isolation," *The National Interest*, May 26, 2020. (<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>)

214. "Turkey's Escalation in Libya: Implications and U.S. Policy Options," *JINSA Gemunder Center's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project*, May 27, 2020. ([https://jinsa.org/jinsa\\_report/turkeys-escalation-in-libya-implications-and-u-s-policy-options/](https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/turkeys-escalation-in-libya-implications-and-u-s-policy-options/))

215. Aykan Erdemir and Merve Tahiroglu, "Handling Turkey's Erdogan: What Washington can learn from Russia," *The Hill*, February 14, 2018. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/373896-handling-turkeys-erdogan-what-washington-can-learn-from-russia>)

216. John Cappello, Patrick Megahan, John Hannah, and Jonathan Schanzer, "Covering the Bases: Reassessing U.S. Military Deployments in Turkey After the July 2016 Attempted Coup d'État," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 25, 2016. ([https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/Covering\\_the\\_Bases.pdf](https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/Covering_the_Bases.pdf))



## Preserving America's Military Posture in Germany

By Bradley Bowman and  
Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges

President Trump appears to view the U.S. military presence in Germany as a favor or charity. He has also linked it to German defense spending.<sup>217</sup>

“They are delinquent of billions of dollars, this is for years delinquent,” Trump said in June. “So we are putting the number down to 25,000 soldiers.”<sup>218</sup> Trump reiterated the message in June – “So, I said until they pay, we’re removing our soldiers, a number of our soldiers” – and again in July.<sup>219</sup>

Berlin has indeed persistently fallen short of its commitment to devote 2 percent of GDP to military expenditures by 2024.<sup>220</sup> Germany devoted 1.36 percent of its 2019 GDP to defense (up from 1.18 percent in 2014, the year Russia invaded Crimea).<sup>221</sup> Insufficient defense spending reduces the

resources available to support alliance objectives. It also deprives the German military of the resources it needs to maintain sufficient military capability, capacity, and readiness.<sup>222</sup>

There is also a mismatch between Germany’s 2 percent target and where NATO and Washington most need Berlin to invest. As NATO’s border has shifted eastward, Germany has gone from a frontline state to a rear area logistical hub. Thus, in addition to integrated air and missile defense, Germany most needs to invest in cyber-protected logistical and transportation infrastructure to quickly push reinforcements eastward during a crisis. Such investments are not currently captured by the 2 percent metric.<sup>223</sup>

Regardless, America has every right to demand that NATO allies carry their fair share of the defense burden – a point Republican and Democrat administrations have emphasized for decades. Yet since 1949, only Trump has risked the credibility of NATO’s deterrent as a means of pressuring U.S. allies. Both before and after becoming president,

**217.** Trump has focused on the failure of some NATO allies to honor their defense spending commitments, while dismissing the importance of the alliance and the threat from Moscow. U.S. Embassy in Estonia, Press Release, “Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Bilateral Breakfast,” July 12, 2018. (<https://ee.usembassy.gov/remarks-nato-summit/>); The White House, Press Release, “Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure,” July 29, 2020. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-072920/>); Robin Emmott, “Germany commits to NATO spending goal by 2031 for first time,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-nato/germany-commits-to-nato-spending-goal-by-2031-for-first-time-idUSKBN1XH11K>)

**218.** Max Cohen, “Trump confirms he wants to pull thousands of U.S. troops from Germany,” *Politico*, June 15, 2020. (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/15/trump-germany-military-320560>)

**219.** Ryan Browne and Zachary Cohen, “US to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany in move that will cost billions and take years,” *CNN*, July 29, 2020. (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html>); Donald J. Trump, “Germany is delinquent in its payment to NATO,” *YouTube*, July 29, 2020, 00:38:00. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEuB0413Hlc&feature=youtu.be&t=38>)

**220.** Robin Emmott, “Germany commits to NATO spending goal by 2031 for first time,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-nato/germany-commits-to-nato-spending-goal-by-2031-for-first-time-idUSKBN1XH11K>)

**221.** North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2012-2019),” June 25, 2019. ([https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2019\\_06/20190625\\_PR2019-069-EN.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf)); Robin Emmott, “Germany commits to NATO spending goal by 2031 for first time,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-nato/germany-commits-to-nato-spending-goal-by-2031-for-first-time-idUSKBN1XH11K>)

**222.** Kyle Rempfer, “German military too small to aid ‘collective defense,’ official says,” *Defense News*, January 25, 2018. (<https://www.defensenews.com/flashpoints/2018/01/25/german-military-too-small-to-aid-collective-defense-official-says/>); Robbin Laird, “Will Germany, Not Ready & Slow To Invest, Keep EU Leadership, Deter Putin,” *Breaking Defense*, February 20, 2019. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2019/02/will-germany-not-ready-slow-to-invest-keep-eu-leadership-deter-putin/>)

**223.** General (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, “Making Sense of New U.S. Basing Decisions in Europe: A Conversation with Philip M. Breedlove and Ben Hodges,” *Remarks during an online event hosted by The Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/event/webinar-making-sense-of-new-us-basing-decisions-in-europe-a-conversation-with-philip-m-breedlove-and-ben-hodges/>). The reference to Cold War-era Germany of course refers to West Germany.

Trump suggested that the United States might not honor its Article 5 commitment to its allies if they did not fulfill their defense spending commitments.<sup>224</sup>

This brand of hardball may have played a role in prompting increased defense spending among NATO allies in Europe.<sup>225</sup> NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has credited Trump for this increase in defense spending (although Moscow's 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea likely provides the predominant explanation for the increase).<sup>226</sup>

Missing from this debate is the fact that American troops are in Germany because their presence serves U.S. interests. NATO represents one of America's greatest grand strategic assets. Moreover, the U.S.-German bilateral relationship serves as a key pillar of this alliance and, by extension, of the stability and security of Europe. The Trump administration's approach to Germany and the U.S. military posture has imperiled this.<sup>227</sup> The United States should recommit to a robust military presence in Germany, while addressing any disagreements with Berlin, which only help Moscow.

This is fully consistent with the 2018 U.S. NDS, which declares "[l]ong-term strategic competitions with China and Russia" to be the Pentagon's "principal



Map of Europe (Photo via *The World Factbook 2020*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

priorities." In terms of countering Russia, NATO is a key asset. The NDS accordingly describes efforts to fortify the alliance as one of the Pentagon's top priorities.<sup>228</sup> By conveying to Moscow that the alliance is unified, determined, and capable of protecting every member,

224. President Donald Trump, "Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html>); See also: President Trump later made comments supporting Article 5, but much of the damage had already been done. Fox News, "Tucker: Why question US obligations to Montenegro," *YouTube*, July 18, 2018, 00:01:34. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXoVv2cGRoI&feature=youtu.be&t=94>)

225. Major Amoreena York and Mikhael Smits, "NATO Defense Expenditures Rising But More Needed," *Real Clear Defense*, September 3, 2019. ([https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/09/03/nato\\_defense\\_expenditures\\_rising\\_but\\_more\\_needed\\_114714.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/09/03/nato_defense_expenditures_rising_but_more_needed_114714.html)); See also: Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, General John Hyten, and General Tod Wolters, U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Senior Leaders Brief Reporters on European Force Posture," July 29, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2292996/departement-of-defense-senior-leaders-brief-reporters-on-european-force-posture/>)

226. William Cummings, "'Trump is having an impact': NATO head credits president's tough talk for \$100B boost," *USA Today*, January 28, 2019. (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/01/27/nato-chief-credits-trump/2695799002/>); See discussion between Kori Schake and David Kilcullen: "The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 10, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/events/2020/03/10/the-dragons-and-the-snakes/>)

227. Katie Bo Williams, "GOP Lawmakers Hammer Trump's Germany Troop Withdrawals," *Defense One*, September 30, 2020. (<https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/09/gop-lawmakers-hammer-trumps-germany-troop-withdrawals/168898/>)

228. "A strong and free Europe, bound by shared principles of democracy, national sovereignty, and commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is vital to our security," the NDS says. U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," 2018, page 9. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>); Article 5, of course, declares that "an armed attack against one" NATO member "shall be considered an attack against them all." The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, DC, April 4, 1949, Article 5. ([https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm))

NATO can deter the Kremlin from attacking NATO countries, as it has for more than seven decades.<sup>229</sup>

As General (Ret.) Philip Breedlove, who previously served as the top U.S. and NATO commander in Europe, recently noted, “NATO is more important now than it’s ever been since the fall of the [Berlin] wall” in 1989.<sup>230</sup>

For one, U.S. military posture in Europe helps build the readiness of NATO allies and improve interoperability – ultimately decreasing the security burden on the United States. This is a top priority as the United States looks to right-size and adjust its military posture around the world.

America’s military presence in Europe helps Washington conduct and support U.S. military operations in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East. Germany hosts the best U.S. military training facilities in Europe and some of America’s

most important bases.<sup>231</sup> Many U.S. bases in Germany have played a vital role in supporting operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example.<sup>232</sup>

The U.S. military presence in Germany also deepens and broadens vital political, diplomatic, and people-to-people ties between the two countries. That is particularly important given the geographic position of Germany, the size of its economy, and Berlin’s power within NATO, the European Union, and Europe more broadly.<sup>233</sup> In other words, it will be quite difficult to maintain the unity of NATO if U.S.-German relations continue to deteriorate.<sup>234</sup>

It is also worth remembering that Germany supported NATO’s invocation of Article 5 for the first time in the alliance’s history following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Over the subsequent years, thousands of Germans have served in Afghanistan alongside Americans – with some Germans paying the ultimate price. As of June 2020, 1,300 German troops

**229.** Moscow invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 but has not invaded a NATO member. That is no coincidence. Kremlin leaders understand that an attack on any NATO partner would invite war with the United States.

**230.** General (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, “Making Sense of New U.S. Basing Decisions in Europe: A Conversation with Philip M. Breedlove and Ben Hodges,” *Remarks during an online event hosted by The Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/event/webinar-making-sense-of-new-us-basing-decisions-in-europe-a-conversation-with-philip-m-breedlove-and-ben-hodges/>)

**231.** Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, located near Ramstein Air Base in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate, is the largest American military hospital outside the continental United States. The southwestern German city of Stuttgart hosts the headquarters of U.S. European Command, whose area of responsibility covers 51 countries and territories. U.S. European Command, “The Region,” accessed September 18, 2020. (<https://www.eucom.mil/about/the-region>). The Grafenwoehr Training Area constitutes what the U.S. Army calls the “largest and most sophisticated permanent training area in Europe.” U.S. Army, 7th Army Training Command, “Grafenwoehr Training Area,” accessed September 18, 2020. (<https://www.7atc.army.mil/GTA/>). Spangdahlem Air Base’s infrastructure is among the best of any U.S. air base in Europe.

**232.** “Can you imagine doing anything in the Middle East without the throughput of Spangdahlem, Ramstein, and the hospital at [Landstuhl Regional Medical Center] in Germany?” Breedlove remarked in August, noting that the U.S. military hospital in Ramstein has “saved thousands of American lives.” General (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, “Making Sense of New U.S. Basing Decisions in Europe: A Conversation with Philip M. Breedlove and Ben Hodges,” *Remarks during an online event hosted by The Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/event/webinar-making-sense-of-new-us-basing-decisions-in-europe-a-conversation-with-philip-m-breedlove-and-ben-hodges/>)

**233.** Germany boasts the largest population and economy of any country in Europe. Central Intelligence Agency, “Germany,” *The World Factbook*, September 10, 2020. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gm.html>); World Bank, “Germany,” accessed September 18, 2020. (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/germany>)

**234.** It is reasonable to expect some other European countries to follow Berlin’s lead when it comes to relations with Washington. Jacob Poushter and Mara Mordecai, “Americans and Germans Differ in Their Views of Each Other and the World,” *Pew Research Center*, March 9, 2020. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/03/09/americans-and-germans-differ-in-their-views-of-each-other-and-the-world/>); North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Resolute Support Mission Key Facts and Figures,” June 2020, page 2. ([https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_f2014/assets/pdf/2020/6/pdf/2020-06-RSM-Placemat.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_f2014/assets/pdf/2020/6/pdf/2020-06-RSM-Placemat.pdf))



were still serving in Afghanistan – second-most among alliance members, behind only the United States.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration in July 2020 announced a significant reduction in the U.S. military presence in Germany. Then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the United States will reduce the U.S. military presence in Germany from 36,000 troops to 24,000, adding that “nearly 5,600 service members will be repositioned within NATO countries, and approximately 6,400 will return to the United States.”<sup>235</sup>

Among the 5,600 service members repositioning within Europe, many will go to Belgium or Italy. In light of the stated reason for moving troops out of Germany, this shift is odd. Both countries spend less on defense as a measure of GDP than does Germany.<sup>236</sup> Belgium spent 0.93 percent of its GDP on defense in 2019, and Italy spent 1.22 percent.<sup>237</sup>

Under the relocation plan, the headquarters of U.S. European Command and U.S. Special Operations Command Europe would move to Belgium. The Pentagon argues this co-location with Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons will improve staff coordination. But in the age of modern communication, such benefits seem paltry compared to the move’s costs to the Defense Department’s budget and to the U.S. relationship with Germany.<sup>238</sup>

The potential movement of some operational units may also require scrutiny. Under the plan, for example, one F-16 squadron would move from Germany’s Spangdahlem Air Base to Aviano Air Base in Italy. While moving this would provide additional air power closer to the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, Aviano already hosts two F-16 squadrons. There is also a question as to whether Aviano has sufficient infrastructure to host a third F-16 squadron.<sup>239</sup> Moreover, some of these moves will take months or

**235.** Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, General John Hyten, and General Tod Wolters, U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Senior Leaders Brief Reporters on European Force Posture,” July 29, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2292996/departement-of-defense-senior-leaders-brief-reporters-on-european-force-posture/>). For comparison, according to the Defense Department, the United States had almost 249,000 service members in Germany in September 1989. U.S. Department of Defense, “Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths By Regional Area And By Country (309A),” September 30, 1989. ([https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp\\_reports.jsp](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp)). In a notable response to Esper’s announcement, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, “We never hid that [we think] the less American soldiers there are on the European continent the calmer it is in Europe.” Nic Robertson, “Trump’s Germany troops pullout may be his last gift to Putin before the election,” *CNN*, August 2, 2020. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/02/politics/trump-germany-troops-russia-intl/index.html>)

**236.** Missy Ryan, Karen DeYoung, and Loveday Morris, “Pentagon plan will move troops from Germany to Italy, Belgium and back to U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-troop-withdrawal-germany/2020/07/29/f5d23982-d19f-11ea-af07-1d058ca137ae\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-troop-withdrawal-germany/2020/07/29/f5d23982-d19f-11ea-af07-1d058ca137ae_story.html))

**237.** North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2012-2019),” June 2019. ([https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_f2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2019\\_06/20190625\\_PR2019-069-EN.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_f2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf))

**238.** Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, General John Hyten, and General Tod Wolters, U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Senior Leaders Brief Reporters on European Force Posture,” July 29, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2292996/departement-of-defense-senior-leaders-brief-reporters-on-european-force-posture/>)

**239.** Jennifer H. Svan, “Spangdahlem’s F-16s aren’t leaving Germany for Italy just yet,” *Stars and Stripes*, September 15, 2020. ([https://www.stripes.com/news/spangdahlem-s-f-16s-aren-t-leaving-germany-for-italy-just-yet-1.645166?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=EBB+09.16.20&utm\\_term=Editorial+-+Early+Bird+Brief%22%20%5C%20%22.X2IFb\\_U2xO0.twitter](https://www.stripes.com/news/spangdahlem-s-f-16s-aren-t-leaving-germany-for-italy-just-yet-1.645166?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB+09.16.20&utm_term=Editorial+-+Early+Bird+Brief%22%20%5C%20%22.X2IFb_U2xO0.twitter)). In a double blow to Spangdahlem, KC-135 tankers and CV-22 Ospreys would remain in Mildenhall, England, instead of transferring to the base in Germany. Aaron Mehta, “US Air Force exit from Germany ‘going to take some time,’ top general says,” *Defense News*, September 14, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/air-force-association/2020/09/14/us-air-force-exit-from-germany-going-to-take-some-time-top-general-says/>)





➦ U.S. soldiers exit from the ramp of a U.S. Air force C-130 Hercules aircraft during an Airborne operations parachute jump near Stuttgart, Germany, September 21, 2016. Led by jumpmasters from Special Operations Command Africa, airborne operations like these help personnel maintain proficiency and increase the unit's readiness for expeditionary deployments. (Photo via U.S. Army Visual Information Specialist Jason Johnston)

years, especially when congressionally authorized and appropriated military construction is required.<sup>240</sup>

Esper said these decisions were part of an ongoing review of the U.S. military posture in all combatant commands.<sup>241</sup> Unfortunately, if some of these decisions are executed, their primary victim will be U.S. national security interests.

It is, of course, necessary for the Pentagon to continually reassess and adjust U.S. overseas military posture,

including in Germany. It certainly makes sense to shift some forces to strengthen NATO's eastern flank – in Poland, the Baltics, and the Black Sea region. A continuous Stryker Brigade rotation in the Black Sea region may also make sense.<sup>242</sup> Such moves, however, should be solely focused on securing U.S. national security interests and be conducted in a manner that does not sow unnecessary discord in the alliance or damage the U.S.-Germany defense relationship.

There is also a question regarding readiness. Any adjustments to U.S. force posture in Europe should focus on readiness. The movement of some capabilities from Germany to Italy, or keeping Air Force capabilities at Mildenhall Air Base in England instead of Spangdahlem or other bases in Germany, may not help readiness. It is worth remembering that facilities at Mildenhall are among the Air Force's oldest in Europe, while Spangdahlem's are among the newest.

Admittedly, the plan may add some needed enhanced military capability on NATO's flank. However, these gains are coming at the cost of reduced NATO unity and damage to America's bilateral relationship with Germany. For these reasons, Congress would be wise to exercise robust oversight of the proposed moves and perhaps even send the Pentagon back to the drawing board.

*A similar version of this chapter originally appeared in Defense One on October 5, 2020.*<sup>243</sup>

**240.** Aaron Mehta, "US Air Force exit from Germany 'going to take some time,' top general says," *Defense News*, September 14, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/air-force-association/2020/09/14/us-air-force-exit-from-germany-going-to-take-some-time-top-general-says/>); See also: General (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, "Making Sense of New U.S. Basing Decisions in Europe: A Conversation with Philip M. Breedlove and Ben Hodges," *Remarks during an online event hosted by The Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/event/webinar-making-sense-of-new-us-basing-decisions-in-europe-a-conversation-with-philip-m-breedlove-and-ben-hodges/>)

**241.** Mackenzie Eaglen, "Esper Is Attempting the Biggest Defense Reform in a Generation," *Defense One*, January 15, 2020. (<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/01/esper-attempting-biggest-defense-reforms-generation/162457/>)

**242.** General (Ret.) Philip M. Breedlove and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, "Making Sense of New U.S. Basing Decisions in Europe: A Conversation with Philip M. Breedlove and Ben Hodges," *Remarks during an online event hosted by The Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/event/webinar-making-sense-of-new-us-basing-decisions-in-europe-a-conversation-with-philip-m-breedlove-and-ben-hodges/>)

**243.** Bradley Bowman and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Benjamin Hodges, "Worth Preserving: US Military Posture in Germany," *Defense One*, October 5, 2020. ([https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/10/worth-preserving-us-military-posture-germany/168974/#:~:text=Defense%20Secretary%20Mark%20Esper%20said,return%20to%20the%20United%20States.%E2%80%9D](https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/10/worth-preserving-us-military-posture-germany/168974/#:~:text=Defense%20Secretary%20Mark%20Esper%20said,return%20to%20the%20United%20States.%E2%80%9D).)). The authors would like to thank FDD Research Fellow Benjamin Weinthal for his research contributions to this chapter.

## Strengthening NATO in the Black Sea Region

By Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO prioritized the Baltic Sea region, where several NATO allies share a border with Russia. NATO therefore deployed "enhanced Forward Presence" (eFP) battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to deter further Russian aggression.<sup>244</sup> In the Black Sea region, however, NATO chose a "tailored Forward Presence" (tFP) – that is to say, a smaller and less capable force, yielding the initiative there to the Kremlin.

Moscow values the Black Sea region at least as much as the Baltic Sea region. The Black Sea is Russia's "launching pad" for its destabilizing operations in North Africa and the Middle East. This includes Syria, where the Kremlin has propped up the murderous Assad regime and sent millions of refugees fleeing to Europe.<sup>245</sup>

Moscow also has its own territorial objectives in the Black Sea region, as demonstrated by Russia's ongoing militarization of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine and Russia's continued occupation of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.<sup>246</sup> The Kremlin has engaged in serious

provocations in the Kerch Strait and flaunted international law with illegitimate claims to territorial waters around Crimea and Romania's Exclusive Economic Zone.<sup>247</sup> When NATO forces fly and sail where international law permits, Moscow often challenges them.<sup>248</sup>

While the threat from China garners the most attention in Washington, the 2018 National Defense Strategy makes clear that Russia remains a top threat and that maintaining NATO readiness is still the best way to respond.<sup>249</sup>

*The 2018 National Defense Strategy makes clear that Russia remains a top threat and maintaining NATO readiness is still the best way to respond.*

In assessing NATO's eastern borders with Russia, several general concerns emerge. They include: (1) a perceived lack of cohesion, which could invite Russian aggression; (2) inadequate readiness levels among some allies; (3) inadequate integration of air and missile defense capabilities; and (4) shortfalls in military mobility. These issues must be addressed.

At the broadest level, however, Washington must raise the priority of the Black Sea region and develop a strategy that puts the Black Sea in the middle of

244. This chapter is a distillation of, and update to, this report published by the Center for European Policy Analysis: Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, Colonel (Ret.) Ray Wojcik, and Carsten Schmiedl, "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, May 2020. ([https://cepa.org/cepa\\_files/2020-CEPA-report-one\\_flank\\_one\\_threat\\_one\\_presence.pdf](https://cepa.org/cepa_files/2020-CEPA-report-one_flank_one_threat_one_presence.pdf))

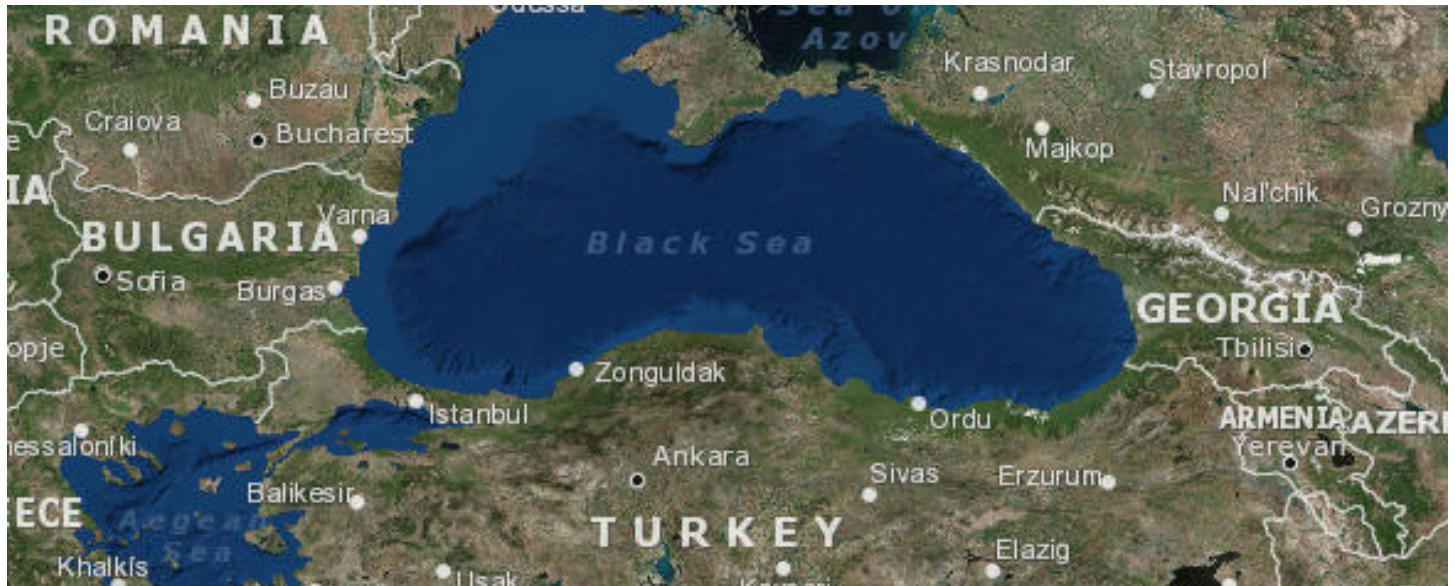
245. Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Russia and Black Sea Security," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, December 2018, page 11. ([https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp\\_1812\\_black\\_sea\\_russia\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_russia_0.pdf))

246. James Brooke, "A frozen conflict may be Ukraine's best option," *Atlantic Council*, January 20, 2020. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/a-frozen-conflict-may-be-ukraines-best-option/>); "Military occupation of Moldova by Russia," *Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts*, June 24, 2019. (<http://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/military-occupation-of-moldova-by-russia>)

247. NATO Economics and Security Committee, Sub-Committee on Transition and Development, "The Black Sea Region: Economic and Geo-Political Tensions," August 14, 2020, pages 9–12. ([https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2020-08/035%20ESCTD%2020%20E%20-%20ECONOMIC%20AND%20GEO-POLITICAL%20TENSIONS%20BLACK%20SEA%20REGION\\_1.pdf](https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2020-08/035%20ESCTD%2020%20E%20-%20ECONOMIC%20AND%20GEO-POLITICAL%20TENSIONS%20BLACK%20SEA%20REGION_1.pdf)). See also: David B. Larter, "After a Kerch Strait confrontation, the US beefs up Ukraine's maritime forces," *Defense News*, July 2, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/07/02/after-the-kerch-strait-confrontation-the-us-moves-to-beef-up-ukraines-maritime-forces/>)

248. Bradley Bowman and Major Shane Praiswater, "Over the Black Sea, Moscow Escalates Its Military Provocations," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 1, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/09/01/over-black-sea-moscow-escalates-provocations/>)

249. U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America," January 19, 2018. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>)



Map of the Black Sea region (Photo via NATO on the Map, NATO.int)

Eurasia’s geostrategic map. Accordingly, NATO should declare all capabilities across the alliance’s eastern flank as “Forward Presence” vs “enhanced” and “tailored.”

Moreover, NATO should improve mission command, intelligence sharing, and its physical presence in the Black Sea region. That should start with a Graduated Defense Plan, similar to what was approved for the Baltic region. NATO should also establish a joint, three-star headquarters for the Black Sea region. This command would utilize intelligence from all sources, improving situational awareness, and enhancing “speed of recognition” in the Black Sea region.

This is particularly important based on the lessons of Moscow’s hybrid invasion of Crimea. That episode made it clear that NATO needed to improve its speed: (1) speed of recognition of Kremlin intentions despite Russian cyberattacks and disinformation efforts as well as exercises and movements; (2) speed of decision making at all echelons of the alliance and/or national forces; and (3) speed of assembly to

prevent or respond to a potential crisis. Training and resourcing, therefore, should focus on rapid, effective, and fast responses.

In terms of physical presence, NATO should strengthen the defense of the western Black Sea with unmanned maritime systems and ground-based systems, including anti-ship missiles, drones, and rotary wing attack aviation. Similar to the NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltics,<sup>250</sup> the alliance should conduct persistent maritime policing missions with a non-littoral NATO naval presence. NATO should also establish an Unmanned Aircraft System Center of Excellence in Romania.

To support these forces, the alliance should improve communication, mission command, transportation, intelligence, fuel, ammunition storage, and assembly area infrastructure in the Black Sea region. The October 2020 codification of a 10-year road map for U.S.-Romania defense cooperation represents a positive step. Romania has been modernizing the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base near the Black Sea.<sup>251</sup>

<sup>250</sup>. NATO Allied Air Command, “Baltic Air Policing,” accessed October 8, 2020. (<https://ac.nato.int/missions/air-policing/baltics>)

<sup>251</sup>. David Vergun, U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S., Romania Chart 10-Year Road Map for Military Cooperation,” October 8, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2376797/us-romania-chart-10-year-road-map-for-military-cooperation/source/GovDelivery/>)





↑ U.S. Army personnel offload military equipment at the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base near Constanta in Romania on February 14, 2017. (Photo by DANIEL MIHAILESCU/AFP via Getty Images)

This increased physical presence must, of course, be protected from attack. That requires enhancing and integrating air and missile defense (AMD). These AMD capabilities must be layered for maximum defense. Romania hosts a U.S. Aegis Ashore system and has already taken delivery of a Patriot air defense system.<sup>252</sup> Still, additional AMD resources are needed in the region. Furthermore, to ensure and maintain readiness, the alliance should conduct regular theater-wide AMD exercises, command post exercises, and live-fire exercises.

These forward elements must also be fully integrated into the larger Supreme Allied Commander Europe area of responsibility. Forward elements in the Black Sea region should be supported by transcontinental transportation infrastructure, more frequent logistical and deployment exercises, and improved military mobility.

All of this will certainly draw the attention of Moscow. This means cyber protection must be a priority, given Russia's reliance on this asymmetric warfare tool.

While there is clearly much work to do, the good news for Americans is that much of this new Black

Sea region military posture need not consist of U.S. forces. Washington should certainly encourage and help lead the effort, but a majority of the forces can and should come from other NATO members – once again highlighting the value of the alliance for Americans.

Strengthening military posture within the NATO alliance, however, is not enough. The United States should adopt a more assertive strategy in support of Ukraine and Georgia. That means providing more support to Ukraine's navy. It also means encouraging European and NATO nations to ban from their ports all Russian naval and merchant vessels that sail from any Crimean ports. NATO, with American leadership, should also intensify cooperation with Georgia under existing initiatives, including the modernization of Vaziani military airfield.

To encourage enhanced security in the Black Sea region, NATO should adopt a more nuanced approach in measuring whether an ally is carrying its fair share of the defense burden. The 2 percent metric currently does not account for or incentivize some of the things the alliance most needs. Examples include contributions toward improved military mobility and cyber protection of transportation infrastructure.

NATO has made significant progress along its eastern flank since 2014. This includes increased rotational forces, more prepositioned equipment, and significant increases in the quantity, sophistication, and scale of NATO exercises. Much of this progress, however, has occurred in the Baltics and Poland. It is now time to address vulnerabilities and gaps in the Black Sea region.

If democracies have learned anything in recent years, it is that Russian President Vladimir Putin views such vulnerabilities as a green light for aggression.<sup>253</sup>

252. Ibid.

253. Bradley Bowman and Major Scott Adamson, "Lessons for the Pacific From the European Deterrence Initiative," *Breaking Defense*, August 28, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/08/lessons-for-the-pacific-from-the-european-deterrence-initiative/>)





## INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND

*The People's Republic of China is undertaking the most ambitious military modernization effort in its history—one that is focused on countering the ability of the U.S. military to operate in the Pacific to compel Beijing's neighbors to acquiesce to its demands. Accordingly, the U.S. military deterrent in the Indo-Pacific has eroded. Washington must act urgently to undertake a series of military posture shifts, doctrinal developments, and capability investments. Some of these efforts are already underway, but there is much more to do. A failure to advance these nascent and ongoing efforts risks inviting costly and avoidable aggression from Beijing. Fortunately, Washington enjoys an extraordinary network of allies and partners with a shared commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—and none of them are more important than Japan. Washington must strengthen defense cooperation with these allies and partners—and that should include efforts to help the free people of Taiwan defend themselves. Meanwhile, Washington should not lose sight of the grave threat from North Korea and the value of forward-positioned U.S. forces in South Korea.*

## China's Military Aims

By Craig Singleton

The leading threat to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific is the CCP and its PLA. Previously referred to as the “Red Army” under Mao Zedong, the PLA has evolved considerably from its humble beginnings as a defensive, ground-based army.<sup>254</sup> Guided by the 2019 Chinese whitepaper “National Defense in a New Era,”<sup>255</sup> the PLA is currently undergoing a comprehensive restructuring and modernization. The goal is to produce a capable and agile expeditionary fighting force to support President Xi Jinping’s vision for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by 2049.<sup>256</sup> In the intervening years, the PLA will remain focused on eliminating key capability gaps, defending China’s maximalist territorial claims, and actively undermining U.S. and allied interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Xi has broadly defined the PLA’s mission as defending China’s “sovereignty, security, and development interests.”<sup>257</sup> These efforts have taken on a new dimension as the CCP seeks to safeguard its monopoly on power at home and its growing economic interests abroad, including its One Belt One Road (OBOR) investments. Thus, beyond simply enhancing China’s military capacity and furthering Beijing’s ability to impose its will throughout the Indo-Pacific, the PLA figures to play an important role in Xi’s principal goal of attaining great-power status and securing China’s place within the international hierarchy.

The CCP and the PLA seek to compel other countries to acquiesce to Beijing’s demands. This focus on achieving diplomatic and economic outcomes beyond a mere reduction in U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific is a key component of China’s efforts to limit and, in some cases, eliminate U.S. military influence over other countries. Xi’s ultimate goal is to constrain the U.S. ability to rally regional partners to take measures at odds with China’s long-term interests.

*The CCP and the PLA seek to compel other countries to acquiesce to Beijing’s demands.*

With its 13th Five-Year Plan in 2016, Beijing embarked on a campaign to strengthen its capabilities in all warfighting domains. The PLA’s estimated \$261 billion-plus defense budget<sup>258</sup> is also focused on reversing the once-heralded Chinese notion that “land must outweigh the sea.” The PLA now prioritizes a diverse set of technological capabilities throughout the Indo-Pacific.<sup>259</sup> These include conducting joint operations on a modern battlefield, with an emphasis on expanding naval operations far beyond China’s immediate vicinity; employing integrated, real-time command and control networks to ensure rapid decision making and information sharing; enhancing China’s anti-access/area-denial capabilities; and winning “informatized” (cyber) wars.<sup>260</sup>

254. United States Marine Corps, *The Culture of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2009). (<https://info.publicintelligence.net/MCIA-ChinaPLA.pdf>)

255. People’s Republic of China State Council Information Office, “China’s National Defense in a New Era,” July 2019. (<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/whitepaperonnationaldefenseinnewera.doc>)

256. Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018).

257. “习近平出席解放军代表团全体会议 [Xi Jinping Attends PLA Delegation Plenary Meeting],” *People’s Daily* (China), March 11, 2014. (<http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2014npc/n/2014/0312/c376707-24609511.html>)

258. “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2019. ([https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/fs\\_2020\\_04\\_milex\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/fs_2020_04_milex_0_0.pdf))

259. People’s Republic of China State Council Information Office, “China’s Military Strategy (2015),” May 2015. (<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf>)

260. The Pentagon describes “informatization” as “conditions in which modern military forces use advanced computer systems, information technology, and communication networks to gain operational advantage over an opponent.” The Pentagon interprets the concept as “high-intensity, information-centric regional military operations of short duration.” U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” 2011, page 3. ([https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011\\_CMPR\\_Final.pdf](https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf))



Chinese President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping attends the commissioning ceremony of China's first domestically built aircraft carrier in Sanya, on December 17, 2019. (Photo by Li Gang/Xinhua via Getty Images)

China's military modernization has been substantively aided by its study of U.S. military operations as well as the knowledge China has gained from counter-piracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.<sup>261</sup> The CCP's military advancements have also been furthered by Beijing's illicit acquisition of intellectual property and other sensitive information as part of China's military-civil fusion strategy.<sup>262</sup>

In support of its short- and long-term goals, the PLA has prioritized the following:

- Investing in cutting-edge command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems.<sup>263</sup>
- Revolutionizing and expanding China's navy, already the world's largest, with new, technologically advanced submarines, destroyers, amphibious ships, patrol craft, aircraft carriers, unmanned underwater vehicles, and other surface combatants.<sup>264</sup>
- Streamlining the PLA's logistics and defense industrial base.<sup>265</sup>
- Deploying technologically sophisticated aircraft and equipment, including fourth- and fifth-generation fighter jets, long-range bombers, and transport aircraft.<sup>266</sup>
- Developing intermediate-range ballistic missiles, such as the DF-26, and hypersonic and anti-ship ballistic missiles that could threaten U.S. aircraft carriers and key U.S. bases, such as Guam.<sup>267</sup>
- Designing and deploying advanced space and offensive cyberspace assets as well as upgrading the PLA's nuclear weapons capabilities.<sup>268</sup>
- Prioritizing non-combat mission capabilities, such as military assistance and training programs throughout the Indo-Pacific.<sup>269</sup>

261. Jung Jae Kwon, "Red under Blue: Chinese Humanitarian Action in UN Peacekeeping Missions," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 27, Issue 3, April 2020, pages 417–444. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13533312.2020.1746186>)

262. Emily de la Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic, "How to Beat China's Military-Civil Fusion," *The American Interest*, June 22, 2020. (<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/22/how-to-beat-chinas-military-civil-fusion/>)

263. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," 2019. ([https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf))

264. Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, October 28, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>)

265. Chad Peltier with Tate Nurkin and Sean O'Connor, "China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations," *Jane's*. (<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China%20Expeditionary%20Logistics%20Capabilities%20Report.pdf>)

266. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," 2019. ([https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf))

267. Bradley Bowman and Major Shane Praiswater, "Guam needs Aegis Ashore," *Defense News*, August 25, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/08/25/guam-needs-aegis-ashore/>)

268. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," 2019. ([https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf))

269. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017," May 15, 2017. ([https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017\\_China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report.PDF](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF))



The PLA's increasingly maximalist approach to its near abroad has roots in Chinese domestic politics and the CCP's historical attempts to bolster its legitimacy during times of national crisis. The PLA's posture is also driven by a desire to neutralize China's principal threats – Taiwanese separatism and the United States. While the CCP's efforts have taken several forms, they have clearly manifested in the PLA's consolidation of territorial gains in the South China Sea (SCS) and Beijing's persistent challenges to the sovereignty of its neighbors. Alarming, the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, noted in 2018 that China, as a "peer competitor," was "capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States."<sup>270</sup>

The PLA's posture does not, however, hinge on its ability to defeat the U.S. military outright, but rather to make intervention too costly for the United States to consider. To accomplish this in the SCS, for example, the PLA has invested heavily in fortifying several of its SCS installations with anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems, and advanced jamming equipment.<sup>271</sup> Beijing took these steps despite a tacit 2015 promise by Xi to then-President Obama that China would not militarize the area.<sup>272</sup> This has resulted in the near-normalization of the PLA's illegal

SCS build-up and its "nine-dash line" declarations despite a unanimous 2016 ruling by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Seas rejecting Beijing's territorial claims.<sup>273</sup>

*While the CCP's efforts have taken several forms, they have clearly manifested in the PLA's consolidation of territorial gains in the South China Sea and Beijing's persistent challenges to the sovereignty of its neighbors.*

Establishing military bases throughout the Pacific could significantly enhance the PLA's ability to project power, though China's dearth of military allies has historically hamstrung such efforts. China's future efforts to build military bases in the Southern and/or Western Pacific might include attempts to leverage an initial foothold from OBOR projects in certain countries of interest, reminiscent of Beijing's successful strategy in East Africa.<sup>274</sup> In other cases, the PLA may seek to conclude agreements for a small number of dual-use ports and bases offering limited support for military ships and aircraft in addition to commercial vessels, under the guise of protecting China's economic interests.<sup>275</sup> Locations of basing interest likely include Myanmar, Thailand,

270. Admiral Philip S. Davidson, "Advance Policy Questions for Admiral Philip Davidson, USN Expected Nominee for Commander, U.S. Pacific Command," *Written answers provided to the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, April 17, 2018. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson\\_APQs\\_04-17-18.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_APQs_04-17-18.pdf))

271. Hannah Beech, "China's Sea Control Is a Done Deal, 'Short of War with the U.S.,'" *The New York Times*, September 20, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-navy.html>); Amanda Macias, "China quietly installed missile systems on strategic Spratly Islands in hotly contested South China Sea," *CNBC*, May 2, 2018. (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/02/china-added-missile-systems-on-spratly-islands-in-south-china-sea.html>)

272. Jeremy Page, Carol Lee, and Gordon Lubold, "China's President Pledges No Militarization in Disputed Islands," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2015. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-completes-runway-on-artificial-island-in-south-china-sea-1443184818>)

273. Permanent Court of Arbitration, Press Release, "The Tribunal Renders Its Award," July 12, 2016. (<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2990864/Press-Release-on-South-China-Sea-Decision.pdf>)

274. Keith Johnson and Dan De Luce, "One Belt, One Road, One Happy Chinese Navy," *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2018. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/17/one-belt-one-road-one-happy-chinese-navy/>); James E. Fanell, "Asia Rising: China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1, winter 2019. (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7871&context=nwc-review>)

275. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," May 2, 2019. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf))



Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.<sup>276</sup>

At present, the PLA lacks the ability to deploy and sustain large numbers of conventional forces globally or to persistently service ships at sea, although the PLA has supported limited conventional deployments via disaster relief and peacekeeping operations, primarily in Africa.<sup>277</sup> The PLA Navy has also operated and deployed vessels as far away as the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, Baltic, and Arctic seas. These missions were conducted under the auspices of naval diplomacy, with one mission in 2017 lasting nearly seven months and encompassing port calls in 20 countries, including countries in Europe.<sup>278</sup> Additional examples of incremental PLA power projection include increasingly expansive PLA Air Force training missions beyond the first island chain and into the Western Pacific, including several exercises within 1,000 miles of Guam. These operations, many preceded by missions involving hydrographic research ships, have occurred in parallel with China's increasingly belligerent behavior in the SCS as well as a series of provocative drills simulating the seizure of a strategic island under Taipei's control.<sup>279</sup>

Moving forward, there are clear indications the PLA remains eager to deploy farther into the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. Beijing will be keen to capitalize on what it perceives as a "period of strategic

opportunity" – increasing its military capabilities without sparking a major conflict.<sup>280</sup> Whereas previous PLA deployments were designed to fall below the threshold of alarming the international community or provoking the United States, future missions, particularly in the waters around Taiwan, will likely become more provocative as China seeks to assert control over disputed areas and enhance its global standing.

*There are clear indications the PLA remains eager to deploy farther into the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.*

Although the PLA currently remains in an inferior position relative to the United States in terms of overall military strength, recent and expected gains reveal China is on track to attain great power military status much sooner than 2049. This is predicated upon degrading U.S. influence throughout the region, not simply undermining America's military might. Paradoxically, Beijing's attempts to constrain Washington and coerce its neighbors will likely galvanize an increasingly robust response from the United States and its regional partners. In doing so, countries in the region will be better positioned to effectively confront China's increasingly malign behavior, thus jeopardizing Beijing's grand strategy and possibly strengthening America's hand in the region.

<sup>276</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," 2020. (<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>)

<sup>277</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "China's Pursuit of Overseas Security," *RAND Corporation*, 2018. ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2200/RR2271/RAND\\_RR2271.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2271/RAND_RR2271.pdf))

<sup>278</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," 2019. ([https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf))

<sup>279</sup> Brad Lendon, "China increases military drills as tensions with US heat up," *CNN*, August 11, 2020. (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/11/asia/china-taiwan-guam-military-exercises-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>)

<sup>280</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "China Military Power," 2019. ([https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf))

## Seizing the Advantage in the Asia-Pacific

By Eric Sayers and Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery

Today's military balance in the Western Pacific is the product of China's successful 25-year effort to build a military capability that specifically targets and holds at risk U.S. air and maritime forces.<sup>281</sup> Since the Taiwan Strait crisis of the mid-1990s, China has worked diligently to exploit vulnerabilities in U.S. forces and mitigate U.S. strengths. China's geography, strategy, and military systems place U.S. military forces – and the American interests they defend – at significant risk.<sup>282</sup> There is reason to believe that Beijing could successfully launch a lightning attack that would seize a strategic advantage or objective.<sup>283</sup> This, in turn, would force Washington either to accept the result of an attempted *fait accompli* or to engage in a high-risk military conflict to dislodge PLA forces.

To avoid this scenario and protect vital economic and national security interests, the United States – along with regional allies and partners – must undertake a series of military posture shifts, doctrinal developments, and capability investments.

At the outset of the Cold War in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Washington established new security alliances and built a system of global military bases. Reflecting a strategic consensus regarding the need for forward defense, these bases were designed to defend American interests by stationing significant sea, air, and land power in both Europe and Asia. Beginning in the 1970s, for various political and diplomatic reasons, Washington slowly shifted U.S. military posture out of bases in South Vietnam and Thailand (1975), Taiwan



Map of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM's) area of responsibility. As a geographic combatant command, USINDOPACOM is in charge of using and integrating U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps forces within the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility to achieve U.S. national security objectives while protecting national interests. (Photo via USINDOPACOM)

(1979), and the Philippines (1991) and consolidated in Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea), where the majority of U.S. forces have been since the 1990s. For the first two decades of China's modernization effort (1994 to 2012), U.S. force posture in Asia remained largely stagnant.

Starting in 2012, the Obama administration pursued a modest effort to modernize and reposition U.S. forces in Asia. The goal was to develop a new posture that was "geographically dispersed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable."<sup>284</sup> This meant reinforcing capabilities in Northeast Asia and establishing new capabilities in Southeast Asia.

281. U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," May 2, 2019. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2000127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2000127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf))

282. Elbridge Colby, "Hearing on Implementation of the National Defense Strategy," *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, January 29, 2019. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Colby\\_01-29-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Colby_01-29-19.pdf))

283. U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission, "Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission," 2018. (<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>)

284. Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, "A New Global Posture for a New Era," *Speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations*, September 30, 2014. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/605614/a-new-global-posture-for-a-new-era/>)

These changes included transitioning to a more capable nuclear-powered aircraft carrier forward-stationed in Japan and modernizing its embarked carrier air wing.<sup>285</sup> The United States also stationed two extra destroyers and a squadron of fifth-generation fighters in Japan,<sup>286</sup> an additional submarine and THAAD missile battery in Guam and South Korea,<sup>287</sup> and rotational Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore.<sup>288</sup> Washington further inked a new defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines and established a persistent Air Force and Marine Corps presence in Australia.<sup>289</sup>

These efforts provided opportunities to construct a sustainable posture at new and relevant locations in the theater. Some efforts made direct operational contributions, particularly the U.S. Air Force initiatives in Northern Australia.<sup>290</sup> Others, such as the Marine Corps training initiative in Australia and rotational Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, focused more on training and reassuring allies and partners but did little to add combat power or counter Chinese forces.

In short, while the U.S. military has started to improve its physical infrastructure and military capabilities in the theater, the somewhat languid pace of change, combined with Chinese force modernization and growth, has contributed to a continuing dangerous shift in the military balance of power.

Going forward, the United States must establish sufficient forces and capabilities in the theater to deter aggression and enable sufficient surge forces to arrive in a timely manner should deterrence fail. There are a number of steps the United States should undertake without delay.

### *The Pentagon should start by making China the explicit priority in the next National Defense Strategy.*

The Pentagon should start by making China the explicit priority in the next National Defense Strategy (NDS). The 2018 NDS determined that the “long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department.”<sup>291</sup> While both countries threaten U.S. interests, the long-term economic and military challenge posed by China exceeds that of Russia.<sup>292</sup> The next NDS should clearly state this.<sup>293</sup> Operational planners, logisticians, and weapon system developers will all take their cues from the NDS.

The Pentagon must also press its undersea warfare advantage. One of the remaining areas of U.S. asymmetric advantage against China is America’s attack submarine force. The U.S. Navy boasts the most capable attack submarines in the world, but the fleet is too small and

**285.** Teri Weaver, “USS George Washington makes historic arrival in Japan,” *Stars and Stripes*, September 27, 2008. (<https://www.stripes.com/news/uss-george-washington-makes-historic-arrival-in-japan-1.83519>)

**286.** Corporal Aaron Henson, United States Marine Corps, “Lightning II Strikes Iwakuni, F-35B Arrives,” January 18, 2017. (<https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/1052138/lightning-ii-strikes-iwakuni-f-35b-arrives/>)

**287.** “Navy adds 4th submarine to Guam-based fleet,” *Associated Press*, February 11, 2014. (<https://apnews.com/2cf8a940847d456ea0d5371fdb56822>); see also: U.S. Army, “US to deploy THAAD missile battery to South Korea,” September 16, 2016. ([https://www.army.mil/article/171316/us\\_to\\_deploy\\_thaad\\_missile\\_battery\\_to\\_south\\_korea](https://www.army.mil/article/171316/us_to_deploy_thaad_missile_battery_to_south_korea))

**288.** Lim Min Zhang, “US to deploy 2 littoral combat ships to S’pore,” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), March 8, 2019. (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/us-to-deploy-2-littoral-combat-ships-to-spore>)

**289.** U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, “EDCA,” accessed November 6, 2020. (<https://ph.usembassy.gov/tag/edca/>)

**290.** Australian Department of Defence, “United States Force Posture Initiatives,” accessed July 12, 2020. (<https://www.defence.gov.au/Initiatives/USFPI/#:~:text=The%20objectives%20of%20the%20Initiatives,humanitarian%20assistance%20and%20disaster%20relief>)

**291.** U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” 2018. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>)

**292.** In 2019, China ranked 2nd in the world in GDP (\$14.3 trillion), while Russia ranked 11th (\$1.7 trillion), with Russia’s GDP less than one-eighth the size of China’s. World Bank, “Gross domestic product 2019,” 2019. (<https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>)

**293.** Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery and Eric Sayers, “Make China the Explicit Priority in the Next NDS,” *Center for a New American Security*, July 27, 2020. (<https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/make-china-the-explicit-priority-in-the-next-nds>)





↑ U.S. Navy ships assigned to the USS Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group joined ships of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Royal Canadian Navy in formation while aircraft from the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, JMSDF, and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force fly in formation during Keen Sword 21. (Photo via U.S. Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Samuel Hardgrove)

growing smaller. The fleet is projected to decline from 51 today to a low of 42 in 2027, leaving the Navy with 24 fewer submarines than required by operational plans.<sup>294</sup> To correct this growing deficit, the Pentagon should ensure that as many Los Angeles-class attack submarines receive service life extensions as is feasible. The Navy must also gradually raise and maintain the new attack submarine construction build rate to three per year. Additionally, the Navy also needs to continue to reposition submarines to the Pacific, including by basing new Virginia-class submarines in San Diego and Hawaii and basing a fifth, and eventually sixth, submarine in Guam. Going forward, Congress must prioritize investment in America's undersea warfare infrastructure: attack submarines, ocean surveillance systems, and unmanned undersea vehicles.

In response to the growing threat from the PLA, the Department of Defense must also shift toward a distributed and more lethal airpower posture. China's

efforts to threaten U.S. and allied airfields and logistics facilities with large numbers of modern cruise and ballistic missiles places U.S. air superiority at risk. To address this threat, the United States must be able to rapidly adjust its in-theater airpower and develop operational concepts that generate maximum combat power from an increasingly resilient architecture. Washington should prioritize new airfield investments 1) on forward U.S. territory, including Guam, Palau, Yap, Tinian, and Saipan; 2) on existing bases in Japan; and 3) on sites where the United States may gain access, including in Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

In Japan, the U.S. military should consider repositioning strike fighters currently at Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa to bases in northern Japan. Doing so would distribute strike power and move some strike fighters farther out of range of the majority of China's short- and medium-range missiles.

<sup>294</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," May 2, 2019. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf)); Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Virginia Class Attack Submarine Procurement: background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, September 24, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL32418.pdf>)

Additionally, the joint force should improve its fifth-generation capability in the Pacific, place U.S. Air Force F-35s in Misawa, and place ground detachments of U.S. Navy E-2D aircraft in Guam and Japan. In addition, the U.S. National Guard squadron of F-22s currently in Hawaii should be transferred into the active Air Force and moved to Alaska, Guam, or northern Japan to enhance readiness. Finally, the United States should invest in cruise missile defense systems (the Army can no longer effectively defend against the full spectrum of cruise missiles) and should forward station portable “deployable airbase systems” throughout the theater. This should include fixed integrated air and missile defense to leverage current advanced sensor systems.

The U.S. military also needs to restore its strike system proximity, increase its access to the theater, and improve the capability and availability of munitions pre-positioned there. The primary focus should be a strategy of deterrence by denial in the maritime domain through the deployment of overlapping anti-ship and land-attack missile networks. This requires an emphasis on permanently deploying systems that can operate inside the theater, starting with long-range bombers (operated from Guam, Australia, and potentially Alaska in the future).

*The United States should seek to rotate large quantities of mobile ground-based strike systems that can place Chinese maritime and land targets at risk with conventional weapons across the first island chain.*

Second, the United States should seek to rotate large quantities of mobile ground-based strike systems that can place Chinese maritime and land targets at risk

with conventional weapons across the first island chain.<sup>295</sup> These systems could be maintained in the theater in Guam and then rotated on a regularly basis throughout locations in Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and elsewhere if the host nations can be persuaded that such an initiative supports mutual interests.

Finally, this effort will require survivable maritime strike systems, both inside the first island chain (such as unmanned surface and subsurface systems with strike payloads) and outside the first island chain (carriers with long-range unmanned strike platforms). These systems should be paired with a resilient, survivable space-based surveillance and targeting system. This sensor-platform-weapon pairing will demonstrate credible U.S. operational and logistics postures to allies and adversaries alike.

To achieve all of this, the Defense Department should adopt a five-year budget exercise for the Asia-Pacific, similar to the European Deterrence Initiative, that enables U.S. Indo-Pacific Command to direct more resources through the service-controlled budgets to address its shortfalls. A Pacific Deterrence Initiative that draws 1 percent of the total annual defense budget would likely suffice for this primary challenge.<sup>296</sup> While congressional support is necessary, this initiative also requires full Pentagon support.<sup>297</sup>

These steps to improve U.S. forward-positioned military posture in the Pacific will not be easy or cheap. However, they are necessary to protect U.S. economic and national security interests and would be far less expensive than a military conflict with China. Such steps would also serve as a deterrent by creating uncertainty for Chinese planners while providing U.S. planners with the tools necessary to prevail in a conflict should deterrence fail.

<sup>295</sup>. Eric Sayers, “The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Future of the Indo-Pacific Military Balance,” *War on the Rocks*, February 13, 2018. (<https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/asia-inf/>)

<sup>296</sup>. Randy Schriver and Eric Sayers, “The Case for a Pacific Deterrence Initiative,” *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/the-case-for-a-pacific-deterrence-initiative/>)

<sup>297</sup>. Senator Jim Inhofe and Senator Jack Reed, “The Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Peace Through Strength in the Indo-Pacific,” *War on the Rocks*, May 28, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/the-pacific-deterrence-initiative-peace-through-strength-in-the-indo-pacific/>)

## Standing With the Free People of Taiwan

By Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery and Bradley Bowman

Advocates for American “restraint” and withdrawal often attribute international tension to the policies and actions of the United States, while ignoring the ideological predispositions, motivations, and actions of others. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident – or more consequential – than in the Taiwan Strait.

If the United States is to defend its core interests in Asia and avoid war with China, leaders in Washington be clear-eyed about developments related to Taiwan – and act accordingly. Those actions should include further strengthening Taiwan’s capability to defend itself, enhancing the U.S. military’s ability to surge to Taiwan’s defense, building interoperability between the Taiwanese and American militaries, and countering Beijing’s efforts to isolate Taiwan.

Taiwan is an exemplar of what is possible when people are provided protection from authoritarian coercion. When the United States broke relations with Taiwan in 1979 but effectively agreed to support the latter’s defense against an attack from the mainland, Taiwan was a military dictatorship with a small economy. Over the past 40 years, Taiwan has transformed itself into a vibrant democracy, adopted numerous liberal reforms, increased its economy 18-fold,<sup>298</sup> and recently demonstrated superb leadership throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, who served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs during the Obama administration and national



Map of Taiwan (Photo via The World Factbook 2020. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

security advisor to then-Vice President Biden, respectively, were right to argue in *Foreign Affairs* last year that the current conditions in Taiwan represent “the greatest unclaimed success in the history of U.S.-Chinese relations.”<sup>299</sup>

The CCP undoubtedly finds this extraordinary track record troublesome and inconvenient. After all, Taiwan has demonstrated that a Chinese model of both prosperity *and* freedom is possible. That is a message the CCP does not want disseminated to the population on the mainland.

In a troubling sign of what may come, Beijing has undertaken the most ambitious military modernization

<sup>298</sup>. According to Taiwan’s central bank, Taiwan’s GDP was \$33.88 billion in 1979 and \$610.87 billion in 2019, an increase of 1,786 percent over 40 years. Central Bank of the Republic of China, “Principal Figures-Annual,” accessed November 20, 2020. (<http://statdb.dgbas.gov.tw/pxweb/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=NA8101A1A&ti=Principal%20Figures-Annual&path=../PXfileE/NationalIncome/&lang=1&strList=L>)

<sup>299</sup>. Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe>)



effort in the history of the People's Republic of China,<sup>300</sup> much of it focused on Taiwan. And in the interim, Beijing has wielded its growing military might in a concerted effort to intimidate and coerce Taiwan.<sup>301</sup>

Following a string of extraordinary provocations by the PLA, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen delivered a speech in October 2020 that amounted to an olive branch and invitation to dialogue. Within hours, Beijing responded by releasing videos of PLA exercises featuring “amphibious landing craft, attack helicopters and land-based missiles” simulating an invasion of Taiwan.<sup>302</sup>

America must now carefully consider its options in support of a beleaguered ally in a tough neighborhood.

*Taipei needs to be the military equivalent of a porcupine – an unappealing candidate for attack by a predator.*

First, consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act<sup>303</sup> and longstanding U.S. policy,<sup>304</sup> the United States should continue to provide Taiwan the means to defend itself. This seems like a daunting task given that China spent nearly 25 times as much as Taiwan on defense last

year.<sup>305</sup> However, the reality is that Taiwan does not need to match the capabilities of the PLA. Rather, Taipei needs to be the military equivalent of a porcupine – an unappealing candidate for attack by a predator.

With that in mind, it is worth considering the ways Beijing might strike. Beijing could try an amphibious assault across the Taiwan Strait (80 miles at its narrowest) or conduct a massive airborne/aerial assault. The PLA could also use its growing air and naval forces to blockade Taiwan's ports and impose an economic embargo. Alternatively, the PLA could launch a sustained ballistic and cruise missile assault on Taiwan's critical infrastructure to break the will of the population. China might also use gray-zone tactics such as sustained cyberattacks and information campaigns, which could also imperil Taiwan's critical infrastructure and weaken the public's will to resist. Beijing could employ any of these approaches or a combination of them.

To dissuade Beijing from such adventurism, Taiwan requires numerous counter-intervention weapons.<sup>306</sup> These include mobile land-based anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles, manned portable air defense systems, anti-armor weapons, torpedoes for both submarines and aircraft, defensive sea-mining capabilities, portable air- and sea-based radars and drones for situational awareness, agile cyber defense

**300.** Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, “Chinese Military Parade Highlights Erosion of U.S. Military Supremacy,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 3, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/10/03/chinese-military-parade-highlights-erosion-of-us-military-supremacy/>)

**301.** Bradley Bowman and Andrea Stricker, “Arm Taiwan—but Skip the Nukes,” *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/04/taiwan-military-aid-nuclear-weapons/>)

**302.** Gerry Shih, “China threatens invasion of Taiwan in new video showing military might,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-taiwan-invasion-military-exercise/2020/10/12/291f5d86-0c58-11eb-b404-8d1e675ec701\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-taiwan-invasion-military-exercise/2020/10/12/291f5d86-0c58-11eb-b404-8d1e675ec701_story.html))

**303.** Taiwan Relations Act, Pub. L. 96-8, 93 Stat. 14, codified as amended at 22 U.S.C. §3301. (<https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>)

**304.** President Ronald Reagan, The White House, Memorandum, “Arms Sales to Taiwan,” August 17, 1982. (<https://www.ait.org.tw/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/08171982-Reagan-Memo-DECLASSIFIED.pdf>)

**305.** The People's Republic of China spent \$261.1 billion on defense in 2019, or 2,511 percent of the \$10.4 billion spent by Taiwan. “Military expenditure by country, in constant (2018) US\$ m., 1988-2019,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020. (<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20in%20constant%20%282018%29%20USD.pdf>)

**306.** These can be acquired either by building them indigenously or purchasing them from the United States.

systems, anti-ballistic missile systems, and air defense aircraft (fighters and airborne early warning).<sup>307</sup>

U.S. arms sales over the past four years have provided Taiwan access to many of these systems.<sup>308</sup> The challenge for Taiwan is finding the funds for purchases and having enough left over to recruit, train, and retain its relatively small but professional military. All the while, Taiwan must also provide minimum quality training for a much larger crisis reserve force.

There are two possible avenues to address this budgetary challenge. First, Taiwan could continue to increase its defense expenditures. In 2021, Taiwan will spend a record \$16 billion, or 2.4 percent of GDP, on defense.<sup>309</sup> This is a healthy amount for a democracy; only a few democracies spend this much.<sup>310</sup> A second avenue is for the United States to provide financial assistance, as Washington does for Israel, another

beleaguered democracy.<sup>311</sup> The United States could consider providing matching grant funds (up to a certain amount) for Taiwan's defense spending above 2.5 percent of GDP each year—for the purpose of purchasing U.S.-origin hardware.

*Unsurprisingly, predators tend to prefer prey that are less prepared and well-armed.*

Some may be reluctant to provide Taiwan additional U.S. arms, blaming the increased tension in the Taiwan Strait on the Trump administration's more robust pace of U.S. arms sales to Taipei.<sup>312</sup> There is no doubt that Beijing does not appreciate U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Unsurprisingly, predators tend to prefer prey that are less prepared and well-armed.

**307.** This reflects Taiwan's "Overall Defense Concept," a strategy for building a cost-conscious force for dealing with a potential Beijing cross-strait invasion.

**308.** U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – MQ-9B Remotely Piloted Aircraft," November 3, 2020. ([https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/taiwan\\_20-74\\_cn.pdf](https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/taiwan_20-74_cn.pdf)); U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – RGM-84L-4 Harpoon Surface Launched Block II Missiles," October 26, 2020. (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-17>); U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – Himars, Support, and Equipment," October 21, 2020. (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-15>); U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – AGM-84H Standoff Land Attack Missile-Expanded Response (SLAM-ER) Missiles," October 21, 2020. (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-16>); U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – MS-110 Recce Pod System," October 21, 2020. (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-14>); U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Press Release, "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) – MK 48 Mod 6 Advanced Technology (AT) Heavy Weight Torpedo (HWT)," May 20, 2020. (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-12>)

**309.** Taiwan's 2021 budget is TWD 453.4 billion, or USD 15.9 billion – this increase reflects special spending for F-16 purchases. Sean Lin, "Proposed defense budget to rise 4.4%," *Taipei Times* (Taiwan), August 14, 2020. (<https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2020/08/14/2003741651>)

**310.** Democracies spending at least 2.5 percent of GDP on defense: Israel (5.3 percent), Armenia (4.9 percent), the United States (3.4 percent), Ukraine (3.4 percent), Bulgaria (3.2 percent), Columbia (3.2 percent), South Korea (2.7 percent), and Greece (2.6 percent). "Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, (<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP.pdf>)

**311.** In fiscal year 2020, the United States provided Israel with \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing plus \$500 million in missile defense assistance, for a total of \$3.8 billion. Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," *Congressional Research Service*, November 16, 2020, page 2. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>)

**312.** A. Trevor Thrall and Jordan Cohen, "Time to Rethink Arms Sales to Taiwan," *Defense One*, November 2, 2020. (<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/11/time-rethink-arms-sales-taiwan/169702/>)



➦ An MH-60R helicopter takes off from the flight deck as the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin conducts routine operations in the Indo-Pacific region. (Photo via U.S. Navy Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Cody Beam)

But to attribute the tension in the Taiwan Strait to the U.S. decision to provide Taiwan the means to defend itself is to ignore history. Beijing's more aggressive foreign and defense policy dates from Xi Jinping's ascension to general secretary of the CCP in 2012 – not the Trump administration's arms sales to Taiwan after 2016.<sup>313</sup> And if increased U.S. support for Taiwan is to blame for Beijing's more aggressive policies in the strait, what then explains Beijing's parallel escalations in the South China Sea, in Hong Kong, or on China's border with India?<sup>314</sup>

For fear of upsetting Beijing, previous U.S. administrations have too often hesitated to provide arms to Taiwan. Seizing the advantage, China has

pushed ahead with a major armament campaign that has altered the military balance of power in the Taiwan Strait – setting the conditions for the PLA to coerce or attack Taiwan.<sup>315</sup>

Failing to provide Taiwan what it needs to help defend itself would only increase the chances of Chinese aggression and put additional burden on the United States for an inevitable response.

Given the growing PLA capability, however, assistance to Taiwanese military alone is not sufficient. Beijing is growing too strong, too fast. To deter aggression, the United States must demonstrate the ability to come quickly and decisively to Taiwan's aid.

313. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2019 Annual Report to Congress," November 2019, chapter 5. (<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/Chapter%205%20-%20Taiwan.pdf>). See also: Daniel Taylor and Benjamin Frohman, "Chapter 4 – Economic Integration Is Not Enough: Policy and Planning for Taiwan in the Xi Jinping Era," *Securing the China Dream: The PLA's Role in a Time of Reform and Change*, Eds. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Tiffany Ma (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020), pages 53–74. (<https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/securing-the-china-dream.pdf>).

314. Bradley Bowman and Andrea Stricker, "Arm Taiwan—but Skip the Nukes," *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/04/taiwan-military-aid-nuclear-weapons/>)

315. Paul Sonne, "China is ramping up nuclear and missile forces to rival U.S., Pentagon says," *The Washington Post*, September 1, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-is-ramping-up-nuclear-and-missile-forces-to-rival-us-pentagon-says/2020/09/01/00c4dca4-ec95-11ea-a21a-0fbbe90cfd8c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-is-ramping-up-nuclear-and-missile-forces-to-rival-us-pentagon-says/2020/09/01/00c4dca4-ec95-11ea-a21a-0fbbe90cfd8c_story.html))



This task is increasingly more difficult than many Americans realize. U.S. wargames consistently predict a U.S. failure in such a scenario. The solution to the shortfalls identified in these wargames is two-fold: First, Taiwan needs to “hang on” longer. Second, the United States has to be able to more rapidly surge sufficient cost imposition forces to turn the tide.

To present an effective surge force, U.S. commanders require sufficient launch systems and weapons to destroy both the Chinese navy at sea and select land targets ashore, as well as resilient and redundant systems (satellites and aircraft) that can acquire and track Chinese maritime assets and then convey the targeting data to launch systems. U.S. commanders also need defensive systems (fighter aircraft, air defense ships, and maritime patrol aircraft) that allow the principal launch systems to destroy their targets; sea control forces (ships, submarines, aircraft) that can exert temporal and geographic maritime control to either establish or break maritime blockades; and logistics and force-protection systems that enable these forces to operate far from the U.S. homeland.<sup>316</sup>

These enhancements to Taiwanese and American military capabilities must be accompanied by a third area of improvement: building improved integration between U.S. and Taiwanese forces. This must include comprehensive individual- and unit-level training, as well as operational-level exercise programs that build interoperability, emphasize shared warfighting situational awareness, and culminate in joint operational planning. Initial areas of focus should include precision strike, special warfare, air and missile defense, sea denial operations, and critical infrastructure protection – each of which addresses possible Chinese cross-strait attack vectors.

Finally, the United States should seek to counter Beijing’s efforts to isolate Taiwan.

In terms of military preparedness, that should mean including allies in the effort where possible, namely Japan and Australia. Their involvement could include arms sales, training opportunities, or even participation in larger multinational exercises that include Taiwan. Diplomatically, Washington should lead a multilateral campaign to increase Taiwan’s participation and representation at the United Nations and its agencies. A study of the Palestinian campaign at the United Nations from 2011 to 2018 may offer some useful techniques that could be employed.<sup>317</sup>

The protection of core U.S. national security interests, and potentially the freedom of the Taiwanese people, will depend on whether the incoming Biden administration rejects excessive constraints related to arms sales as well as self-imposed restrictions on interactions between the U.S. and Taiwan militaries. These limitations have dogged previous administrations. Reviving such constraints would ignore the CCP’s aims and exacerbate the current situation in the Taiwan Strait.

International security and prosperity this century will be largely determined by the relationship between the United States and China, and that relationship finds its most acute test in the Taiwan Strait. Washington must chart a path that protects core U.S. interests and avoids a major military conflict with Beijing. That is best accomplished by taking steps alongside Taiwan to make an attack by Beijing unthinkable.

<sup>316</sup>. Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, “Is Esper’s New Plan for the Navy Enough for the Indo-Pacific?” *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/is-espers-new-plan-for-the-navy-enough-for-the-indo-pacific/>). Recent U.S. defense procurements have included numerous improvements in these required capabilities, to include long-range anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles, heavyweight torpedoes, fifth-generation aircraft, ballistic missile defense systems, and offensive cyber tools. There are also significant efforts underway to develop ground-based long-range strike missiles, unmanned surface and subsurface vehicles, hypersonic weapon delivery systems, penetrating bombers, and persistent, resilient space-based surveillance systems. There is cause for some optimism if key research, development, test, and evaluation programs can be fielded in the next few years.

<sup>317</sup>. Jonathan Schanzer and Grant Rumley, “Palestine’s Plan for when Peace Talks Fail,” *The National Interest*, March 17, 2014. (<https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/palestines-plan-when-peace-talks-fail-10061>)

## Japan Remains the Cornerstone of the Pacific

By Mathew Ha, Major Stephanie Mafrici,  
and Colonel (Ret.) David Maxwell

To deter Chinese aggression in East Asia, Washington has no more capable and reliable ally than Japan. In its 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, the Department of Defense called the U.S.-Japan alliance “the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>318</sup> If Washington and Tokyo are to defend their core interests and deter regional aggression, they must pursue an even stronger defense partnership – one that includes a robust U.S. military posture in Japan, improved Japanese military capabilities, and demonstrated interoperability between U.S. and Japanese forces. Any plans to redeploy U.S. forces from Japan to locations farther away from China, Taiwan, and the South China Sea would be exactly the wrong thing to do.

The United States currently maintains a robust array of forward-stationed military forces in Japan, including approximately 54,250 troops stationed across 85 facilities.<sup>319</sup> These forces serve as a key element of America’s forward-deployed defense in the Pacific.

The most capable U.S. forces in Japan are the naval forces that comprise the U.S. 7th Fleet. These include the USS *Ronald Reagan* aircraft carrier strike group, which has nine modernized cruisers and destroyers in addition to the aircraft carrier and its embarked air wing.<sup>320</sup>



Map of Japan (Photo via The World Factbook 2020. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020)

There is also an expeditionary strike group consisting of Amphibious Squadron 11, the amphibious carrier USS *America* (equipped with F-35Bs), and four other amphibious assault ships.<sup>321</sup> These amphibious ships directly support the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) in Okinawa and together provide crisis/foreign disaster response and theater security cooperation efforts throughout the Pacific.<sup>322</sup> These U.S. Navy and Marine assets serve as the “contact” and “blunt” forces called

318. U.S. Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” June 1, 2019, page 22. (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>)

319. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 13, 2019, page 30. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33740.pdf>)

320. “Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group 5 departs for 2020 operational deployment,” *Navy Recognition*, June 8, 2020. (<https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2020/june/8565-ronald-reagan-carrier-strike-group-5-departs-for-2020-operational-deployment.html>)

321. The USS *America* is a flat-bed amphibious launching ship, whereas the support vessels are transport dock and landing dock vessels designed to support amphibious assaults. James Bolinger, “Amphibious assault ship USS America drops anchor at its new homeport in Sasebo, Japan,” *Stars and Stripes*, December 5, 2019. (<https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/amphibious-assault-ship-uss-america-drops-anchor-at-its-new-homeport-in-sasebo-japan-1.610052>)

322. The III MEF routinely deploys from Okinawa throughout the Pacific as part of U.S. efforts to counter Chinese aggression in the region. The Marine Corps’ 2030 Force Design optimizes the Marine Corps’ capability to serve as a deterrent against adversary actions in the maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific region. The Marine Corps is investing in more unmanned and long-range anti-ship weapons and developing the Marine Littoral Regiment to operate within China’s weapons engagement zone to deter aggression and deny China the ability to conduct a *fait accompli* attack. United States Marine Corps, “Force Design 2030,” March 2020. (<https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460>)

for in the 2018 NDS and allow a quick U.S. response to protect maritime routes and American citizens living in the region. Naval vessels operating in international waters serve as sovereign soil from which the United States can defend troops, allies, and common domains and, if necessary, impose costs on adversaries, without having to coordinate with host nations.<sup>323</sup>

U.S. air forces are spread across the Japanese islands. Kadena Air Base in Okinawa represents a major concentration of the U.S. presence in the Pacific and would play a prominent role in a conflict with China or North Korea.<sup>324</sup> The base permanently hosts F-15 fighter aircraft, KC-135 tankers, E-3 aircraft, and HH-60 helicopters<sup>325</sup> and supports F-22 and F-35 fighters for rotational deployments.<sup>326</sup> Iwakuni Air Base hosts Navy and Marine air assets, including F-18E/F

Super Hornets, EA-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft and United States Marine Corps F-35Bs.<sup>327</sup> Misawa Air Base hosts U.S. Air Force F-16C Fighting Falcons. These units can launch from within the first island chain to counter aggression by China's PLA and establish air superiority, enabling other U.S. forces to enter the region in any contingency.<sup>328</sup>

U.S. Army forces include strategic communications and combat support, such as the 78th Signal Battalion, which provides joint command, control, and communications (C3) capabilities for U.S. forces throughout the Pacific.<sup>329</sup> Army forces also contribute, along with the Navy, to the U.S. integrated Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) architecture.<sup>330</sup> This protects U.S. and Japanese forces by providing early warning and detection of missile threats. BMD assets include Aegis-equipped

323. U.S. Navy, "Why the Carriers?" accessed July 15, 2020. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200701105035/https://www.navy.mil/navydata/ships/carriers/cv-why.asp>); U.S. Department of Defense, Office of General Counsel, "Department of Defense Law of War Manual," June 2015, updated December 2016, page 878. (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/DoD%20Law%20of%20War%20Manual%20-%20June%202015%20Updated%20Dec%202016.pdf?ver=2016-12-13-172036-190>)

324. "The U.S.-Japan Alliance," *Congressional Research Service*, June 13, 2019, page 39. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33740.pdf>)

325. The 18th Wing of the U.S. Air Force at Kadena Air Base comprises 54 F-15s, 15 KC-135s, two E-3s, and 10 HH-60s as well as 8,000 trained U.S. Air Force personnel deployed to support U.S. Air Force commitments in the Pacific. This wing supports air operations in defense of U.S. and Japanese shared interests. See: U.S. Air Force, Pacific Air Forces, "Kadena Air Base" June 23, 2006. (<https://www.pacaf.af.mil/Info/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/909901/kadena-air-base/#:~:text=Strategic%20importance,a%20U.S.%20military%20presence%20here>)

326. The most recent rotations were in 2017 for F-35s and 2018 for F-22s. See: U.S. Air Force, 419th Fighter Wing, "Hill Airmen set for F-35 deployment to Japan," October 24, 2017. (<https://www.419fw.afrc.af.mil/News/Article/1351971/hill-airmen-set-for-f-35-deployment-to-japan/>); U.S. Air Force, Pacific Air Forces, "F-22 Raptors return to Kadena Air Base" May 30, 2018. (<https://www.kadena.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1535851/f-22-raptors-return-to-kadena-air-base/>)

327. United States Marine Corps, "1<sup>st</sup> Marine Aircraft Wing: Fighting and Winning," accessed November 13, 2020. (<https://www.1stmaw.marines.mil/Unit-Home/About/>); U.S. Navy, "EA-18G Growler Airborne Electronic Attack Aircraft," October 27, 2020. (<https://www.navy.mil/Resources/Fact-Files/Display-FactFiles/Article/2166036/ea-18g-growler-airborne-electronic-attack-aircraft/>)

328. Dave Deptula, "Building the Air Force we need to meet Chinese and Russian threats," *Forbes*, February 11, 2019. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/davedeptula/2019/02/11/building-the-air-force-we-need/#6ece20c22b97>); U.S. Air Force units also include transport aircrafts such as the C-130J Super Hercules, C-12J Huron, and the UH-1N helicopters, which complete air-land, airdrop, and aeromedical/distinguished visitor missions. These units comprise the 374th Airlift Wing at Yokota Air Base. For more information, see: U.S. Air Force, Yokota Air Base, "374th Airlift Wing" January 5, 2010. (<https://www.yokota.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/410693/374th-airlift-wing/>)

329. U.S. Army, U.S. Army Japan, "78<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion," accessed August 12, 2020. (<https://www.usarj.army.mil/units/78sig/>). Other major U.S. Army units include the 35th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, the 10th Support Group, the 38th Air Defense Brigade, and U.S. Army Aviation Battalion Japan. U.S. Army, U.S. Army Japan, "Organization," accessed November 23, 2020. (<https://www.usarj.army.mil/about/organization/>)

330. The BMD architecture in Japan has two layers. The first is the maritime tier, with eight Aegis-equipped destroyers fitted with the Standard Missile-3 interceptor. This tier offers greater survivability than land-based assets due to the Aegis' high-speed mobility and stealth. Aegis vessels can also detect and track intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) targeting the territorial United States. They send ICBM data to Ground-Based Interceptors in Alaska and California to intercept the ICBMs. The second, ground-based tier includes PAC-3 units and AN/TPY-2 X-band radars. PAC-3 interceptors are meant to shoot down missiles that penetrate through the first layer. See: Jeffrey Hornung, "Is Japan's Interest in Strike Capabilities a Good Idea?" *War on the Rocks*, June 17, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/is-japans-interest-in-strike-capabilities-a-good-idea/>)



Navy destroyers, Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) units, and AN/TPY-2 X-band radars.<sup>331</sup>

Japan enjoys a critical geographic position astride the first island chain near both countries. Beijing understands this and has responded by developing a range of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities designed to target and constrain the U.S. military along the first island chain and prevent U.S. “surge” forces from arriving. China will soon have as many as 2,000 cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missiles capable of targeting bases and forces in and around Japan.<sup>332</sup> North Korea also possesses the capability to target bases in Japan.<sup>333</sup>

China has also pursued an aggressive agenda to coerce Japan into relinquishing sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. Japan’s Defense Ministry notes that China has already undertaken “unilateral, coercive attempts to alter the status quo” through territorial

incursions in the East China Sea.<sup>334</sup> The United States has made it clear that the administrative control of these islands is covered under the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty;<sup>335</sup> therefore, any aggression toward Japan would not only threaten Japan but also U.S. troops there and the more than 57,500 American civilians living in Japan.<sup>336</sup>

A failure to retain sufficient U.S. combat power in Japan and along the first island chain would erode deterrence throughout Asia by providing Beijing the opportunity to quickly accomplish its military objectives before U.S. reinforcements could arrive.<sup>337</sup> This is due to the “tyranny of distance” associated with the vast expanses of the Pacific. That, combined with the increasingly capable PLA A2/AD threat, would delay U.S. efforts to “surge” contingency crisis reinforcements from Guam, Alaska, Hawaii, or the Lower 48 states.<sup>338</sup> Furthermore, reducing U.S. capabilities in Japan would place the second island chain at risk. This includes the U.S.

331. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 13, 2019, pages 34–35. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33740.pdf>)

332. The PLA Rocket Force has almost 2,000 short- and medium-range missiles that could range Japanese and U.S. targets along the first island chain. Additionally, China possesses intermediate-range ballistic missiles with near-precision-strike capabilities that could target the second island chain. This also threatens U.S. aircraft carriers, thereby enabling China to push U.S. forces further back. See: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” 2019, page 47. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf))

333. Since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011, North Korea has conducted 16 ballistic missile tests that directly flew over Japan. “Database: North Korean Provocations,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 20, 2019. (<https://beyondparallel.csis.org/database-north-korean-provocations/>)

334. Ministry of Defense of Japan, “National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond,” December 18, 2018, page 5. ([https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218\\_e.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf))

335. President Barack Obama, The White House, “Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan,” *Remarks to the press*, April 24, 2014. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>); Phil Stewart and Kiyoshi Takenaka, “In Japan, U.S. defense chief reaffirms commitment to security treaty,” *Reuters*, February 3, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-usa-mattis/in-japan-u-s-defense-chief-reaffirms-commitment-to-security-treaty-idUSKBN15I11K>); “U.S. will defend Senkakus Under security treaty, Biden tells Suga,” *Kyodo News* (Japan), November 12, 2020. (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/11/ea088f2cd634-urgent-suga-holds-phone-talks-with-biden.html>)

336. “American Residents in Japan,” *Statistics Japan*, accessed July 15, 2020. (<https://stats-japan.com/t/kiji/11634>); Japanese Ministry of Justice, “在留外国人統計 [Statistics on Foreign Residents Registered],” 2018. ([http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei\\_ichiran\\_touroku.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html))

337. General Stephen R. Lyons, “Military Mobility and Great Power Competition: A Conversation with USTRANSCOM Commander General Stephen R. Lyons,” *Remarks delivered during an event hosted by Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 12, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/events/2020/08/12/military-mobility-and-great-power-competition/>)

338. U.S. Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” Department of Defense, June 1, 2019, page 20. (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>)

territory of Guam and its approximately 160,000 American citizens.<sup>339</sup>

Indeed, Japan's location provides a more effective defense in depth against regional adversaries than any other country in the region. This defense in depth shapes the adversary's decision making, forcing him to take initial actions far away from U.S. soil, providing the United States time and space for decision making during conflict. Japan's location complicates Beijing's risk calculus when considering making a first move against the United States – helping to deter Chinese aggression.<sup>340</sup> U.S. forces stationed in Japan also enable the U.S. ability to play a decisive role in contingencies defending South Korea.

Despite this compelling rationale, the risk from the growing A2/AD threat to U.S. forces in Japan has tempted the Pentagon to move U.S. forces farther from China, outside the range of most PLA missiles. In 2019, the Marine Corps announced plans to transfer 5,000 Marines to Guam beginning in October 2024.<sup>341</sup> However, this redeployment would undermine U.S. military deterrence of the PLA. Rather than moving them to Guam, the United States should redistribute forces within the first island chain.

To maximize the U.S. position in Japan, adjustments are required. Priorities should be hardening bases and ports that cannot move and building flexibility, lethality, and agility into forward-deployed units, which can then rapidly disperse throughout the archipelago.<sup>342</sup> This would maintain the strategic positioning of military assets – but increase survivability. Redistribution would also relieve the pressure on Okinawa, which hosts an outsized and hard-to-defend portion of the U.S. military presence in Japan.<sup>343</sup>

*Priorities should be hardening bases and ports that cannot move and building flexibility, lethality, and agility into forward-deployed units, which can then rapidly disperse throughout the archipelago.*

Japan has a highly capable joint force that is interoperable with U.S. air, maritime, and ground capabilities. Despite spending only 1 percent of GDP on defense, Japan has a navy equipped with Aegis destroyers, quiet diesel submarines, and numerous helicopter carriers and an air force with modern fighters (F-35A, F-15s, et cetera) and support aircraft (E-2D air control and maritime patrol aircraft).<sup>344</sup>

339. Ian Burrows, "Guam: America's military base in the Western Pacific," *ABC News* (Australia), August 8, 2017. (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-09/where-is-guam-and-how-many-us-troops-are-there/8788566>)

340. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "Regain the Advantage: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy," April 2020. (<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>)

341. "Okinawa-based U.S. marines may start moving to Guam in Oct. 2024," *Kyodo News* (Japan), May 14, 2019. (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/05/80f07dc6ca2d-okinawa-based-us-marines-may-start-moving-to-guam-in-oct-2024.html>)

342. Major Scott D. Adamson and Major Shane Praiswater, "With air bases at risk, Agile Combat Employment must mature," *Defense News*, November 12, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/11/12/air-bases-are-at-risk-without-the-agile-combat-employment-approach/>)

343. The government of Okinawa has a history of grievances with Tokyo. Its prefecture hosts 50 percent of the U.S. military presence in Japan. A discussion about relocating those forces to other prefectures in Japan or to Guam is ongoing. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is a point of contention because it is located in an urban residential area and intrudes into daily life of the local population. While the United States and Tokyo initially agreed to move Futenma to the remote Okinawa location of Cape Henoko, the Okinawa government suspended the move to renegotiate locating the base off Okinawa altogether. The latest time timetable estimates relocation by 2032. See: Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, "The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy," *Congressional Research Service*, January 20, 2016. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42645.pdf>); C. Douglas Lummis, "USMC's Futenma Replacement Facility in Okinawa Delayed – For How Long?" *The Diplomat*, January 4, 2020. (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/usmcs-futenma-replacement-facility-in-okinawa-delayed-for-how-long/>)

344. "The U.S.-Japan Alliance," *Congressional Research Service*, June 13, 2019, pages 25–26. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33740.pdf>)



🔗 Japanese soldiers from the 22nd Infantry Regiment of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force train with American soldiers during a bilateral exercise. (Photo via the U.S. Army)

Washington, however, must work with Japan to modernize and integrate intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities; secure C3 systems augmented by artificial intelligence; and improve cyber and space capabilities.<sup>345</sup> Such efforts will help establish a comprehensive battlefield information network to shorten the time required to detect threats, decide what

to do, and deliver the necessary combat effect.<sup>346</sup> This is essential to block China's effort to achieve information dominance through the PLA Strategic Support Force.<sup>347</sup>

With the support of a new Pacific Deterrence Initiative, the United States should invest in weapons and capabilities for deployment to Japan, as well as in durable infrastructure there to support these systems.<sup>348</sup> This is essential to deter a PLA first strike.<sup>349</sup> The United States should seek Tokyo's support to deploy ground-based missiles across several locations in Japan to increase cost-imposition capacity and place the PLA's A2/AD capabilities at risk in a conflict.<sup>350</sup> These assets would create a defensive counter against Chinese missiles for key U.S. logistic nodes and naval vessels. Such deployments would require improvements in infrastructure, such as hardened launch pads and expeditionary airfields, as well as logistical reserves and communication nodes.

The United States should also work with Japan to expand anti-air capabilities in places such as Japan's southwestern Nansei Islands (a.k.a. Ryukyu Islands) near the Miyako Strait.<sup>351</sup> This would help deter

<sup>345</sup>. Japan's 2019 Medium Term Defense Program reveals plans to enhance space, cyberspace, and electronic warfare capabilities to help the United States counter the PLA Strategic Support Force. See: Japanese Ministry of Defense, "Medium Term Defense Program (FY 2019 - FY 2023)," December 18, 2018, pages 7–9. ([https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/chuki\\_seibi31-35\\_e.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/chuki_seibi31-35_e.pdf))

<sup>346</sup>. Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (New York City: Hachette Books, 2020).

<sup>347</sup>. The PLA Strategic Support Force serves to "seize and maintain the battle information control in contemporary informationized warfare." See: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 2019, page 88. ([https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf))

<sup>348</sup>. The Pacific Deterrence Initiative is one of the provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 that intends to strengthen U.S. military infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific to deter Chinese aggression. See: Bradley Bowman and Major Scott Adamson, "Lessons for the Pacific from the European Deterrence Initiative," *Breaking Defense*, August 28, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/08/lessons-for-the-pacific-from-the-european-deterrence-initiative/>)

<sup>349</sup>. The Stimson Center found that temporary deployments adding U.S. firepower have deterred both China and North Korea. See: Barry Blechman, "Fast Deployments Deter Better than Bases: Stimson," *Breaking Defense*, August 7, 2020. ([https://breakingdefense.com/2020/08/fast-deployments-deter-better-than-bases-stimson/?fbclid=IwAR3udgCPbTpCSeYDBjSlgBg7vXcvBn2-Zrs\\_vT-b7aBu3M2Qd1IalI5EZNQ](https://breakingdefense.com/2020/08/fast-deployments-deter-better-than-bases-stimson/?fbclid=IwAR3udgCPbTpCSeYDBjSlgBg7vXcvBn2-Zrs_vT-b7aBu3M2Qd1IalI5EZNQ))

<sup>350</sup>. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "Regain the Advantage: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy," April 2020. (<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>)

<sup>351</sup>. Japan has already been fielding surface-to-air, anti-ship, and electronic warfare assets and a new ground-forces amphibious brigade to protect these threatened islands. Moreover, a U.S. deployment of assets such as medium-range ballistic missiles or ground-launched cruise missiles will help Japan better defend this disputed region. See: Xavier Vasseur, "Japan's 12 SSM Deployed to keep watch on Miyako Strait," *Naval News*, April 23, 2020. (<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/04/japans-type-12-ssm-deployed-to-keep-watch-on-miyako-strait>)



Chinese maritime and air incursions and deny China air superiority.<sup>352</sup>

Additionally, consistent with the U.S. Air Force's Agile Combat Employment operational concept, the United States should practice dispersing fighter aircraft in smaller sections across Japan to better distribute strike power, prevent multiple losses at one location, and move them farther away from the range of Chinese ballistic missiles.<sup>353</sup> Such distribution will create targeting dilemmas for China and ensure the United States can establish and sustain U.S. allied air superiority and integrate with Japanese forces.

*The United States should practice dispersing fighter aircraft in smaller sections across Japan to better distribute strike power, prevent multiple losses at one location, and move them farther away from the range of Chinese ballistic missiles.*

On missile defense, Japan, for its part, should enhance its warning and targeting capabilities by installing a

distributed network of mobile and fixed sensors and radars, thus ensuring early warning capability against various missile threats.<sup>354</sup> Japan should also reassess the capacity of its current short- and medium-range missile interceptors to conduct mutually supporting, overlapping, and reinforcing defense.<sup>355</sup> And working with the United States, Japan should ensure the Bilateral Joint Operations Command Center can engage incoming threats with the most appropriate defensive capability.<sup>356</sup>

To fund these priorities, Washington should encourage Japan to remove its 1 percent of GDP cap on defense spending. Doing so would enable Tokyo to fund increased weapon system procurement and military readiness, increasing Japan's contribution to the alliance and its posture throughout East Asia. That will be more important than ever in the coming years as the United States and Japan work together to secure common interests that are increasingly under threat.

*The views expressed or implied in this commentary are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Marine Corps, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.*

352. Masashi Murano, "The Japan-U.S. Alliance in a Post-inf World: Building an Effective Deterrent in the Western Pacific," *Hudson Institute*, December 18, 2019. (<https://www.hudson.org/research/15571-the-japan-us-alliance-in-a-post-inf-world-building-an-effective-deterrent-in-the-western-pacific>)

353. Major Scott D. Adamson and Major Shane Praiswater, "With air bases at risk, Agile Combat Employment must mature," *Defense News*, November 12, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/11/12/air-bases-are-at-risk-without-the-agile-combat-employment-approach/>)

354. Bryan Clark and Timothy A. Walton, "It's time to rethink Japan's missile defenses," *Defense News*, June 26, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/06/26/its-time-to-rethink-japans-missile-defenses/>)

355. Tim Kelly, "Japan to consider strike capability to replace missile defense system," *Defense News*, June 25, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-kono/japan-to-consider-strike-capability-to-replace-missile-defence-system-idUSKBN23W10Y>)

356. Vince Little, "Control hub used to direct exercise," *Stars and Stripes*, November 17, 2007. (<https://www.stripes.com/news/control-hub-used-to-direct-exercise-1.71252>); Bryan Clark and Timothy A. Walton, "It's time to rethink Japan's missile defenses," *Defense News*, June 26, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/06/26/its-time-to-rethink-japans-missile-defenses/>)

## Partnering With Seoul to Deter Pyongyang

Colonel (Ret.) David Maxwell and Mathew Ha

The U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula protects vital U.S. interests in the region and deters military attack by North Korea against the U.S. homeland or America's South Korean ally. The Trump administration, however, has pursued burden sharing negotiations with Seoul in a manner that undermines American interests and the U.S.-ROK alliance. A review of U.S. interests, as well the leading threats to those interests, demonstrates the importance of recommitting to U.S. combat power in South Korea.

North Korea is often derided as a “hermit kingdom,” cut off from the technologies and advances of the modern world. But the threat from North Korea cannot be ignored. It has continued to develop and deploy a ballistic missile arsenal capable of ranging the continental United States. These missiles include the Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).<sup>357</sup> Experts estimate North Korea possesses between 30 and 60 nuclear weapons.<sup>358</sup> To make matters worse, the North seeks to miniaturize nuclear warheads to mount on these ICBMs. It is likely North Korea's nuclear and ICBM tests in 2017 were designed to further this goal as well as send a warning to the U.S. during the year of “fire and fury.”<sup>359</sup> North Korea has not conducted an ICBM test since November 2017 but continues to advance its ballistic missile program.<sup>360</sup>



Map of the Korean Peninsula (Photo via the Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, via the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

However, on October 10, 2020, at a military parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Workers Party of Korea, Pyongyang introduced two new, untested missile systems: a possible Hwasong-16 ICBM and a possible Pukguksong-4, a submarine-launched ballistic missile.<sup>361</sup> In addition, the regime displayed a wide variety of advanced conventional weapons, showing marked

357. “Missiles of North Korea,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, accessed August 3, 2020 (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>)

358. Siegfried S. Hecker, Robert L. Carlin, and Elliot A. Serbin, “A Comprehensive History of North Korea's Nuclear Program: 2018 Update,” *Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation*, February 11, 2019. (<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/content/dprk-history-2018-update>); see also: Ed. Thomas F. Lynch III, “Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition,” *National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies*, 2020, page 225. (<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/SA2020/Strategic-Assessment-2020.pdf?ver=-NTckVdG56-CffYJ73PTgg%3d%3d>); see also: Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Samuel D. Ryder, “North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs,” *Congressional Research Service*, updated July 14, 2020, (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10472>)

359. Mark Landler, Choe Sang-Hun, and Helene Cooper, “North Korea Fires a Ballistic Missile, in a Further Challenge to Trump,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2017. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/world/asia/north-korea-missile-test.html>)

360. Ibid. See also: Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Samuel D. Ryder, “North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 14, 2020. (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10472>)

361. Vann H. Van Diepen and Michael Elleman, “North Korea Unveils Two New Strategic Missiles in October 10 Parade,” *38 North*, October 10, 2020. (<https://www.38north.org/2020/10/vdiepenmelleman101020/>)

improvement since the 70th anniversary parade.<sup>362</sup> These developments reveal that Pyongyang has continued evading sanctions and undermining the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign.

North Korea has continued to develop its military capabilities primarily to achieve its seven-decades-old goal of unifying the Korean peninsula under the North Korean totalitarian family dynasty.<sup>363</sup> The North Korean military represents an existential threat to South Korea – one of America’s important democratic partners in a turbulent region – and Pyongyang’s ICBMs pose a direct threat to the United States.<sup>364</sup>

Pyongyang’s military, the fourth-largest in the world, threatens South Korea and Japan.<sup>365</sup> Although equipped with mostly outdated Russian equipment backed by an antiquated communist military doctrine,

the North’s numerical advantage is formidable. North Korea’s 1.2 million active-duty personnel double the 600,000 troops fielded by South Korea’s military.<sup>366</sup> North Korea deploys 70 percent of its forces between Pyongyang and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – around 30 miles or less from Seoul. The North also positions its artillery and rocket arsenal just north of the DMZ, in range of the greater Seoul metropolitan area, which is home to more than 25 million South Koreans and 150,000 Americans.<sup>367</sup> This threatens millions of innocent lives.<sup>368</sup>

Pyongyang also has developed a wide range of asymmetric capabilities to offset weaknesses inherent in its obsolete equipment and vastly inferior economy.<sup>369</sup> These include chemical and biological weapons,<sup>370</sup> advanced cyber operations,<sup>371</sup> and one of the world’s largest special operations forces.<sup>372</sup> North Korea is also developing and fielding thousands of short- and

362. Lieutenant General (Ret.) In-bum Chun, “Crocodile Tears and a Monster Missile: A South Korean Assessment of North Korea’s Military Parade,” *38 North*, October 21, 2020. (<https://www.38north.org/2020/10/ichun102120/>)

363. David Maxwell, “The Nature of the Kim Family Regime: Guerrilla Dynasty and Gulag State,” *OEE Red Diamond published by TRADOC G-2 Operational Environment & Threat Analysis Directorate*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, January–March 2019. (<https://community.apan.org/wg/gckn/m/red-diamond-threats-newsletter-gallery/310343/download>); see also: David Maxwell, “Assessment of North Korean Strategy in Preparation for High Level Diplomacy in September 2018,” *Divergent Options*, September 7, 2018. (<https://divergentoptions.org/2018/09/07/assessment-of-north-korean-strategy-in-preparation-for-high-level-diplomacy-in-september-2018/>)

364. The bedrock of the alliance is the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, which calls for mutual defense against external threats.

365. Eleanor Albert, “North Korea’s Military Capabilities,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2019. (<https://www.cfr.org/background/north-koreas-military-capabilities#:~:text=North%20Korea%20military%20is%20the,others%20serve%20as%20reserve%20soldiers.>)

366. Eds. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, “Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2020, page 19. ([https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Korea\\_Net\\_Assessment\\_2020.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Korea_Net_Assessment_2020.pdf)). There are now open-source reports that the modernized conventional military equipment demonstrated at the October 10, 2020, parade has been fielded by operational units, but it is likely that this equipment will soon be fielded to priority combat formations.

367. Gian Gentile, Yvonne K. Crane, Dan Madden, Timothy M. Bonds, Bruce W. Bennett, Michael J. Mazaar, Andrew Scobell, “Four Problems on the Korean Peninsula: North Korea’s expanding nuclear capabilities drive a complex set of problems,” RAND Corporation, 2019, page 11. ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/tools/TL200/TL271/RAND\\_TL271.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/tools/TL200/TL271/RAND_TL271.pdf))

368. Christopher Dickey, “North Korea and ‘The Tyranny of Proximity,’” *The Shadowland Journal*, April 15, 2017, <http://christopherdickey.blogspot.com/2017/04/north-korea-and-tyranny-of-proximity.html>; Anthony Cordesman, “South Korea’s Civilian Vulnerabilities in War,” *Central for Strategic and International Studies*, March 22, 2018. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-civilian-vulnerabilities-war>)

369. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” 2017. (<https://media.defense.gov/2018/May/22/2001920587/-1/-1/1/REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-DEMOCRATIC-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-KOREA-2017.PDF>)

370. John V. Parachini, “Assessing North Korea’s Chemical and Biological Weapons Capabilities and Prioritizing Countermeasures,” *RAND Corporation*, January 17, 2018. (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT486.html>)

371. U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” January 29, 2019. (<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>)

372. “Part 3: Special Operations Forces,” *Federation of American Scientists*, accessed November 30, 2020. (<https://fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/agency/kpa-guide/part03.htm>)



medium-range missiles and rocket systems designed to threaten U.S. and ROK bases across the peninsula.<sup>373</sup>

If North Korea were to attack South Korea, the human and economic consequences would be staggering. It is worth remembering that over 2 million Koreans and 36,574 Americans lost their lives in the Korean conflict.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, war could also spill over beyond the peninsula, resulting in North Korean ballistic missile, cyber, and unconventional warfare attacks on Japan, for example. Such a conflict could also lead to direct clashes between China and the United States – as it did in 1950.

*In 1997, the highest ranking defector from North Korea, Hwang Jang-yop, openly stated that the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea is the only thing deterring North Korean aggression.*

The United States has belatedly sprinted to improve homeland missile defense against a potential North Korean ICBM attack on the American homeland. These defenses against a limited North Korean

ICBM attack provide an element of deterrence by denial. However, as Pyongyang builds its ICBM and nuclear programs, the United States needs credible deterrence by punishment, too. The forward U.S. military presence in South Korea provides just that. In 1997, the highest ranking defector from North Korea, Hwang Jang-yop, openly stated that the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea is the only thing deterring North Korean aggression.<sup>375</sup>

The U.S. presence in the South is not insignificant. There are 28,500 U.S. troops assigned to United States Forces Korea.<sup>376</sup> In addition, a U.S. Army Brigade Combat Team rotates to South Korea every nine months. Strategic assets from the U.S. Air Force and Navy, including bombers, submarines, and aircraft carrier strike groups, routinely deploy to the Korean theater and exercise with South Korean forces.<sup>377</sup> The largest component of forward-stationed U.S. forces is the Eighth U.S. Army, with the majority of troops based at Camp Humphreys, which is the largest U.S. military installation outside the United States.<sup>378</sup> That facility was completed in 2018 at a cost of approximately \$10.7 billion.<sup>379</sup> South Korea provided 90 percent of the funding, which fell outside the scope of the normal

373. Kelsey Davenport, “Worldwide Ballistic Missile Inventories,” *Arms Control Association*, December 2017. (<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/missiles>); see also: “Korean Armed Forces,” *ArmedForces.eu*, accessed November 30, 2020. (<https://armedforces.eu/North-Korea>); Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Samuel D. Ryder, “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 14, 2020, (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10472>)

374. “Korean War Fast Facts,” *CNN*, June 6, 2020. (<https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/28/world/asia/korean-war-fast-facts/index.html>); “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 29, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf>)

375. “A Rare Portrait of North Korea,” *Time*, September 7, 1998. (<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054378,00.html>)

376. Emma Chanlett-Avery, “U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 23, 2020, page 1. (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11388>)

377. United States Forces Korea is a subunified command under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). When directed, INDOPACOM will provide forces to ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command for training and, if necessary, execution of defense plans. All the U.S. components combine with their South Korean counterpart headquarters to support defense plans under the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command.

378. United States Forces Korea, “Strategic Digest,” 2018, page 33. (<https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/2018%20Strategic%20Digest-Digital-PUB.PDF?ver=2018-03-26-205659-943>)

379. Sergeant Jung Dong-in, U.S. Army, “Eighth Army begins new chapter at USAG Humphreys,” July 13, 2017. ([https://www.army.mil/article/190823/eighth\\_army\\_begins\\_new\\_chapter\\_at\\_usag\\_humphreys](https://www.army.mil/article/190823/eighth_army_begins_new_chapter_at_usag_humphreys))

Special Measures Agreement process.<sup>380</sup> Many of these U.S. Army forces serve as the enablers to safely and effectively surge large-scale U.S. ground forces during a crisis or war with North Korea.

The 7th Air Force consists of two fighter wings at the Osan and Kunsan air bases. The U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Special Operations components consist only of headquarters, which support the rotational deployment of U.S. forces for planning, training, and exercises.<sup>381</sup>

After decades of partnership and deterrence, the U.S.-ROK relationship has recently come under strain.<sup>382</sup> Ignoring the clear benefits of the U.S. military presence in South Korea, the Trump administration has pushed Seoul to contribute more to offset the costs of stationing U.S. forces. While discrete disagreements over burden sharing between allies every few years are commonplace, the Trump administration's obstreperous approach has introduced new and unnecessary tension into the relationship. Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang could not be more pleased.

President Trump has reiterated his desire to bring U.S. troops home "at some point."<sup>383</sup> Special Measures Agreement negotiations stalemated in the summer of 2020 after Trump demanded South Korea increase



U.S. Army's M1A2 tank and soldiers and South Korean soldiers participate in a river crossing exercise in Yeoncheon-gun, South Korea. (Photo by Chung Sung-Jun via Getty Images)

burden sharing by 400 percent.<sup>384</sup> The administration's surprise announcement that it would withdraw 9,500 U.S. troops from Germany unsurprisingly put removal of troops from Korea in the spotlight.<sup>385</sup>

Pyongyang would perceive a significant U.S. military withdrawal from South Korea as evidence of a declining U.S. willingness to honor its treaty commitments to South Korea. This could invite the North Korean military aggression that America's military presence has deterred for decades. Withdrawal would also represent a gift to Beijing, which is eager to see the U.S. military

380. Emma Chanlett-Avery, "U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, June 23, 2020, page 2. (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11388>); see also: Memorandum of Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of the United States of America Regarding the Agreed Recommendation for Implementation of the Agreement Between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America on the Relocation of United States Forces From the Seoul Metropolitan Area, October 26, 2004. (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/95894.pdf>)

381. United States Forces Korea, "Strategic Digest," 2018, pages 35–41. (<https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/2018%20Strategic%20Digest-Digital-PUB.PDF?ver=2018-03-26-205659-943>). U.S. forces undergo an extensive combined training regimen to ensure ROK-U.S. interoperability and thus enhance deterrence and defense. Interoperability also provides secondary benefits when ROK and U.S. forces conduct coalition operations around the world, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan or anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa.

382. David Maxwell, "U.S.-ROK Relations: An Ironclad Alliance or a Transactional House of Cards?" *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, November 15, 2019. (<https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-rok-relations-an-ironclad-alliance-or-a-transactional-house-of-cards/>)

383. President Donald Trump, The White House, "Press Conference by President Trump," *Remarks to the press*, June 12, 2018. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-conference-president-trump/>)

384. Michael Flynn, Michael Allen, and Carla Martinez Machain, "Trump wants South Korea and Japan to pay more for defense," *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2019. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/26/trump-wants-south-korea-japan-pay-more-defense/>)

385. Nick Wadhams and Arne Delfs, "Trump Surprises Germany With Plan to Withdraw 9,500 U.S. Troops," *Bloomberg News*, June 5, 2020. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-06/trump-to-pull-9-500-troops-from-germany-amid-continuing-tensions>)

depart the region. Such a move might even force Seoul and other U.S. allies in Asia to consider further accommodating Beijing's interests.

The cost savings for America, it should be noted, are far from clear. It is not inexpensive to move up to 28,500 troops, their dependents, and their equipment off the peninsula. The Pentagon would be forced to spend billions of finite dollars on personnel moves and new military construction projects for a withdrawal that would reduce military readiness and make America less safe.

*Congress has expressed bipartisan concern regarding any potential withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea.*

Congress has expressed bipartisan concern regarding any potential withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. Most recently, in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 Conference Report, Congress included section 1258, which would make it more difficult to reduce the number of U.S. troops in South Korea below 28,500 troops – the current level there.<sup>386</sup>

Going forward, Washington should certainly continue to press Seoul during the Special Measures Agreement negotiation process to ensure fair and equitable burden sharing.<sup>387</sup> But Washington should not do so at the expense of other U.S. interests or with unrealistic expectations of America's Korean allies. South Korea is not a freeloader; Seoul spends nearly 2.7 percent of GDP on defense, one of the highest rates among the world's democracies.<sup>388</sup> Negotiations should account for all types of support, and the agreement should be implemented for the traditional five-year period. In addition, Washington should reach an agreement with South Korea on strategic flexibility, which will more easily allow the United States to use U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula to support training, exercises, and contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>389</sup>

As part of a review of U.S. military posture, the Pentagon should assess what is required in South Korea to defend America's interests and deter North Korean aggression. If the Defense Department conducts an objective appraisal, there may be ways to reduce America's footprint or shift some additional burden to South Korea, but the Pentagon will also find that a significant U.S. military withdrawal from South Korea would be unwise, even dangerous.<sup>390</sup>

<sup>386</sup>. William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Conference Report to Accompany H.R.6395, 116th Congress (2020), Section 1258. (<https://docs.house.gov/billssthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>)

<sup>387</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>388</sup>. "Ito Kohtarō, "What to make of South Korea's Growing Defense Spending," *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, March 12, 2020. ([https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/ito\\_02.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/ito_02.html)); World Bank, "Military expenditure (% of GDP) - Korea, Rep.," accessed November 30, 2020. (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=KR>)

<sup>389</sup>. Oh Seok-min, "U.S. push for troop flexibility could boost chances of off-peninsula USFK missions," *Yonhap News Agency* (South Korea), July 22, 2020. (<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200722008300325?section=national/defense>)

<sup>390</sup>. Eds. Bradley Bowman and David Maxwell, "Maximum Pressure 2.0: A Plan for North Korea," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 5, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/12/3/maximum-pressure-2/>)





## THE PATH FORWARD

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*Due to its hostile authoritarian ideology, large economy, and increasingly capable military, the People's Republic of China arguably represents the greatest threat to American interests—and those of our democratic allies. Washington must better understand the nature of the global threat from Beijing, improve U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific, and strengthen military research and development with tech-savvy democratic allies. The United States military must also modernize and improve its capabilities in all warfighting domains—including cyber. Simultaneously, Washington must keep sufficient pressure on terrorist groups to deprive them of the space they need to attack Americans, our interests, and our allies. Especially when U.S. forward operating bases are nearby, special operations forces can play an important role in that effort.*

## Countering Beijing's Fused Overseas Strategy

By Emily de La Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic

A growing chorus of voices in the United States advocates for a reduction in overseas posture, just as the CCP is doing the opposite. Across the world, the CCP is aggressively expanding its posture and power. While it does so through some traditional military means, much of the CCP's forward positioning assumes a civilian and commercial character. Such positioning can appear benign or unrelated to military power. However, appearances can be deceiving. The CCP has become adept at integrating its military and civilian resources, tools, and influence, surreptitiously shifting the military balance in its favor.

Such integration is a function of the CCP's strategy of "military-civil fusion" (MCF). Derived from a strategic appreciation of information technology's role in the future of warfare, this strategy seeks an unimpeded flow of resources and information between military and civilian. In fact, MCF redefines the purpose of those two spheres. It leverages both commercial and military tools in the service of comprehensive national power. According to a People's Republic of China (PRC) expert on the topic, "the military is for civilian use, the civilian is military, and the military and civilian are fused."<sup>391</sup> This concept is more than rhetorical: Beijing has institutionalized technological, information, and financing cooperation among its economic and military actors.<sup>392</sup>

MCF serves as a bridge between, for example, Huawei's global 5G infrastructure or Beidou's satellite navigation system and the PLA's overseas deployments. MCF also assigns security implications to China's leverage over critical global supply chains – including, for example,



↑ A rocket carrying a satellite for the Beidou Navigation Satellite System blasts off from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in southwest China's Sichuan Province, June 23, 2020. (Photo by Xue Chen/Xinhua via Getty Images)

in rare earth elements. This "State-led, Enterprise-driven" model guides the incentives and operations of countless other Chinese commercial players. Those players establish positions of power in the global architecture that integrate with Beijing's military footholds to project PRC power globally, in both the security and the commercial domains.

China's MCF strategy demands that Washington and its allies assess Beijing's military and commercial postures together. Doing so challenges assumptions about the global competitive balance and enduring U.S. strengths. Beijing competes asymmetrically and indirectly to erode U.S. military superiority. China cannot yet rival the U.S. system of overseas basing. However, China already enjoys a dominant position in international information infrastructure that may increasingly determine battlefield outcomes.

Beijing invests in global physical and virtual infrastructures: ports, railways, satellite networks, 5G networks, social media platforms, and internet standards, to name a few.<sup>393</sup> These PRC assets could enable Beijing to monitor, impede, evict, or attack

391. Ma Qing Feng, "中国国防经济与国民经济同共促研究 [Research on the Synergy Between Defense Economy and National Economy]," *Henan University*, 2013.

392. Emily de La Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic, "How to Beat China's Military-Civil Fusion," *The American Interest*, June 22, 2020. (<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/22/how-to-beat-chinas-military-civil-fusion/>)

393. Elaine K. Dezenski, "Below the Belt and Road: Corruption and Illicit Dealings in China's Global Infrastructure," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 6, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/05/04/below-the-belt-and-road/>)

the U.S. military. Port investments might enable surveillance. Down the road, such investments could mature into naval bases. Space infrastructure can be weaponized. 5G networks might be used as a tool of espionage, sabotage, or network confrontation.

### *5G networks might be used as a tool of espionage, sabotage, or network confrontation.*

This risk is evident in China's Djibouti investments. Djibouti is home to the PLA's first overseas military installation.<sup>394</sup> In early 2016, China's Central Military Commission established an Office of Overseas Operations.<sup>395</sup> The following November, General Fan Changlong, then-vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, visited the Djibouti outpost and declared that "the construction of overseas support facilities should strengthen overall coordination ... and provide strong support for military forces to carry out overseas missions."<sup>396</sup> Beijing intends to protect its global economic interests by expanding the PLA's overseas posture. Ultimately, the CCP intends to compete directly with the United States in international military deployments.

Telecommunications will be another important flashpoint to monitor. At a Senate Intelligence Committee Hearing in February 2018, the leadership of six U.S. intelligence agencies warned against equipment and services provided by Huawei and

state-owned ZTE. FBI Director Chris Wray warned that the Chinese companies could "maliciously modify or steal information."<sup>397</sup> In May 2018, the Department of Defense prohibited Huawei and ZTE equipment on bases.<sup>398</sup> And the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 introduced a government-wide ban on contractors using significant telecommunications components made by Huawei or ZTE. The pushback against China's telecommunications continues in the United States and in allied and partner countries.<sup>399</sup> Concerns consistently point to direct espionage risks, with Chinese companies sending sensitive data back to Beijing.

Considered in isolation, however, these cases tell an incomplete story. The full threat becomes visible when the Djibouti and Huawei stories are told together, in the context of MCF. Djibouti and other overseas bases and support points follow and amplify China's commercial positioning. Some of this positioning is physical: The PLA's presence in Djibouti builds on an infrastructure backbone provided by projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway built by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, operated by the China Railway Group, and financed by the EXIM Bank of China. But much of the positioning is also virtual, to include telecommunications, satellite networks, smart cities, and surveillance systems.

The Chinese actors developing those commercial footholds are directed by Beijing. Beidou, China's

394. Xi Zhigang, "中国首个海外后勤基地落子吉布提 [China's first overseas logistics base settles in Djibouti]," *International Brand Observation*, 2016, pages 22–25. ([https://www.zhangqiaokeyan.com/academic-journal-cn\\_international-brand-observation\\_thesis/0201220733152.html](https://www.zhangqiaokeyan.com/academic-journal-cn_international-brand-observation_thesis/0201220733152.html))

395. People's Republic of China Ministry of Defense, "中央军委联合参谋部作战局成立海外行动处 [The Operation Bureau of the Joint Staff Headquarters of the Central Military Commission Establishes the Overseas Operations Office]," March 31, 2016. ([http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2016-03/31/content\\_6986671.htm](http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2016-03/31/content_6986671.htm))

396. "军委视察首个海外后勤保障设施 传递何种信号 [What Kind of Signal Does the Military Commission's Inspection of the First Overseas Logistics Support Facility Send?]," *Global Times* (China), November 28, 2016. (<https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJYRnZ>)

397. James Vincent, "Don't use Huawei phones, say heads of FBI, CIA, and NSA," *The Verge*, February 14, 2018. (<https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/14/17011246/huawei-phones-safe-us-intelligence-chief-fears>)

398. Shannon Liao, "The Pentagon bans Huawei and ZTE phones from retail stores on military bases," *The Verge*, May 2, 2018. (<https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/2/17310870/pentagon-ban-huawei-zte-phones-retail-stores-military-bases>)

399. Hadas Gold, "UK Bans Huawei from its 5G Network in Rapid About-Face," *CNN*, July 14, 2020. (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/14/tech/huawei-uk-ban/index.html>)



space champion, and China Railway are state-owned. Huawei is ostensibly private, but CCP funding and monitoring guide it (and similar Chinese companies) toward strategic assets that Beijing deems important. There are no exceptions. All Chinese enterprises face a legal obligation to share data with the CCP.

Already, a global Beijing-controlled information architecture increasingly grants China the potential both to collect critical information and to *shape* the information environment.<sup>400</sup> The MCF apparatus will continue to convert commercial levers into military ones to grant the CCP global military as well as economic control.

*The United States must now work with allies and partners to build consensus and respond to Beijing's MCF strategy and activities.*

In his 2017 book *China's Role in the Future World*, retired PLA Colonel and Beijing University Professor Wang Xiangsui wrote that “internet technology links the world economy and political system together. Space technology is similar. It holds the majority of strategic information and communication channels.” Control over information networks thus becomes, per Wang, “a critical means of weakening the United States.” If the United States can no longer utilize or rely on these networks, “it will lead to the end of the U.S.-led system... Therefore, in today's world, the United States will not want to fight.”<sup>401</sup>

China does not aim to replicate the U.S. model of power projection. It organizes its military and commercial champions to work together to collect and shape global data and to hold U.S. information at risk, including in areas and domains that have previously been considered uncontested. Understood in that framework, Huawei is not just an espionage risk, but rather a contender for a global, military-relevant information backbone. Djibouti is not simply an indicator of what Beijing might want or become. Djibouti is one node in an already-developed web of installations able to generate, albeit asymmetrically, global coercive force. China's so-called “String of Pearls” is not theoretical or limited to the Indian Ocean. China's global power projection is real and growing.

The United States must now work with allies and partners to build consensus and respond to Beijing's MCF strategy and activities. That means systematically sharing information about Beijing's asymmetric approach, to create a common threat perception and to collectively expunge bad actors such as Huawei. It also means the United States and its partners must together develop trusted networks, capabilities, and supply chains to compete more effectively and deprive Beijing of MCF exploitation opportunities.

For the Pentagon, it means greater vigilance concerning ostensibly commercial positioning by the PRC that could impact security calculations. Finally, Washington should think twice before forfeiting forward-positioned military bases alongside allies that help secure U.S. interests and counter Beijing's MCF campaign.

<sup>400</sup>. Emily de La Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic, “Game of Phones: 5G and the US-China Standards Fight,” *The Octavian Report*, summer 2019. (<https://octavianreport.com/article/5g-us-china-standards-fight/>)

<sup>401</sup>. Wang Xiangsui, 未来世界的中国地位 [*China's Role in the Future World*] (Beijing: Changjiang New Century Culture Media Company, 2017).

## Defending Forward in the Cyber Domain

By Samantha Ravich and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Edward C. Cardon

Thirty years ago, on August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. When the United States decided to respond, it took months to send hundreds of thousands of troops and thousands of tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, helicopters, aircraft, ships, and associated equipment to the Gulf. Washington conducted this massive deployment essentially unhampered and unchecked by adversary actions. More than five months after Iraq's invasion, the United States and its partners finally launched Operation Desert Storm on January 17, 1991. Following six weeks of air attacks, the ground campaign concluded after only 100 hours.<sup>402</sup>

This outcome was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, it could have ended quite differently if a cyberattack against U.S. national security assets in the run-up to the conflict had succeeded. Early in 1990, hackers broke into computer networks at numerous Department of Energy labs and leveraged their access to breach systems at U.S. military commands, downloading large tranches of information about military personnel, materiel, and maneuvers. The hackers tried to sell the information to Saddam Hussein. Fortunately, he declined the offer.<sup>403</sup>

What if Saddam had accepted? When Air Force General Hansford Johnson, then-commander of U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), gave the order to activate his Crisis Action Team on August 4, 1990, the enemy might have already infiltrated his

systems, thereby undermining “C-Day” – the beginning of deployment. The first Military Airlift Command flight might not have arrived in the area of operations on August 7. Network outages and corrupted data might have prevented hundreds of U.S. C-5 and C-141 aircraft, along with planes volunteered by the airlines, from taking off in the first place.

The ships of Maritime Prepositioning Squadrons 2 and 3 might not have been ready for the first-ever wartime test of the Afloat Prepositioning Force. Military Sealift Command might not have received the messages to activate the remaining five Fast Sealift Ships and might not have issued the request to activate all 17 of the Ready Reserve Force's Roll-On/Roll-Off vessels. The 217-ship “steel bridge” across the Atlantic might not have been created by December 31, 1990.<sup>404</sup>

Thankfully, that did not happen. The United States, however, will almost certainly not be so lucky in any future crisis. “The world is changing,” General Stephen Lyons, the current commander of USTRANSCOM, testified on February 25, 2020. “In the past, we were able to deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and employ them how we wanted.” Today, this is an advantage America's enemies seek to counter and deny.<sup>405</sup>

The days of uncontested and lengthy large-scale deployments that amass combat power for American military conflicts have come to an end, especially against adversaries such as Russia or China. After carefully studying the Gulf War, Beijing and Moscow spent the intervening decades developing a variety of means to prevent the U.S. military from even arriving

402. “Computer security experts: Dutch hackers stole Gulf War secrets,” *Associated Press*, March 24, 1997. (<https://apnews.com/article/9bdfd653327fc9c17e643090f08d1d04>)

403. “The Evolution of U.S. Cyberpower,” AFCEA, pages 11–17. (<https://www.afcea.org/committees/cyber/documents/theevolutionofuscypower.pdf>)

404. James K. Matthews and J. Cora Holt, *So Many, So Much, So Far, So Fast: United States Transportation Command and Strategic Deployment for Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint History Office and United States Transportation Command: Research Center, 1992). (<https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Transcom.pdf>)

405. General Stephen R. Lyons, “Statement of General Stephen R. Lyons, United States Army: Commander, United States Transportation Command,” *Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, February 25, 2020. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Lyons\\_02-25-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Lyons_02-25-20.pdf))

in the prospective conflict zone. Both countries have established and openly published military concepts for using cyber and other tools of disruption. In a potential great power conflict, Pentagon planners must assume that adversaries will use cyber capabilities against forces based in the continental United States, power projection forces, logistics capabilities, and supporting national critical infrastructure.

As General Lyons testified, adversaries seek to subject U.S. forces to “persistent, all-domain attack” – including through the cyber domain. With roughly 85 percent of U.S. military forces residing in the continental United States, the ability to disrupt the projection of U.S. combat forces to a potential conflict zone in the Baltics, Taiwan Strait, or South China Sea, for example, could leave U.S. national security interests dangerously unprotected.<sup>406</sup> Indeed, the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission expressed concern in its report that China and Russia might conduct *fait accompli* attacks before U.S. forces could even arrive.<sup>407</sup>

Given that the majority of U.S. forces reside in the United States, the Pentagon relies upon “just in time power projection,” shipping and receiving materiel only when needed. While such a process may increase efficiency and reduce costs, it creates vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit. One of the major weaknesses of “just in time” deployments is the cyber vulnerabilities inherent to the commercial and military networked systems required for planning, force generation, and force projection over vast distances at scale.

This is not a theoretical threat or one relegated to some future conflict. Today, U.S. networks and systems are in constant contact with a multitude of cyber adversaries. The growing use of cyber weapons against the United States, ranging from intellectual property

theft, disinformation, data destruction, and denial of service attempts is a clear sign that a purely defensive strategy will fail.

For the U.S. military, countering cyber threats is an ongoing, persistent, global operation. In 2018, for example, David Bennett, director of operations for the Defense Information Systems Agency, said the Defense Department blocks 36 million malicious emails on a daily basis.<sup>408</sup> The volume of malicious activity in cyberspace has been growing each year, with no sign of slowing down.

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By moving some U.S. combat capability from the United States forward – closer to the point of potential adversary aggression – the Pentagon can reduce the cyber opportunities adversaries currently enjoy to target U.S. forces en route to a conflict. Due to the changing character of war, however, that step is not enough to ensure America retains the ability to deter adversary aggression.

The Pentagon has long-understood that there are multiple phases of warfare: Phase 0 (shape the battlefield), Phase 1 (deter), Phase 2 (seize initiative), Phase 3 (dominate), Phase 4 (stabilize), and Phase 5 (enable civil authority).<sup>409</sup> Utilizing new capabilities and technologies, America’s adversaries have developed structures and capabilities to integrate and blend these

<sup>406</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>407</sup>. U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission, “Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission,” November 14, 2018. (<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>)

<sup>408</sup>. Frank Konkel, “Pentagon Thwarts 36 Million Email Breach Attempts Daily,” *Nextgov*, January 11, 2018. (<https://www.nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2018/01/pentagon-thwarts-36-million-email-breach-attempts-daily/145149/>)

<sup>409</sup>. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States,” March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1 July 12, 2017. ([https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1\\_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967))



phases into simultaneous operations that target U.S. vulnerabilities and block traditional U.S. strengths. Americans typically believe they are either at war or at peace with a particular country. Beijing and Moscow have rejected that binary equation and instead engage in perpetual modulated gray-zone aggression – much of it in the cyber domain.

In recognition of this, the Defense Department’s 2018 Defense Cyber Strategy<sup>410</sup> called for a comprehensive reevaluation of the way the Pentagon operates in the cyber environment. Rather than just attempting to respond to cyberattacks, the strategy calls for the United States to “defend forward to disrupt or halt malicious cyber activity at its source, including activity that falls below the level of armed conflict.” This also requires the United States to integrate its cyber capabilities into the other U.S. warfighting domains, making the adversary defend itself across the full spectrum of its infrastructure.

The congressionally mandated Cyberspace Solarium Commission report,<sup>411</sup> released in March 2020, also elaborated on the concept of “defend forward.” The Commission said that “to disrupt and defeat ongoing adversary [cyber] campaigns, the United States must proactively observe, pursue, and counter adversaries’ operations and impose costs short of armed conflict.” Such an approach would drive the United States to conduct rapid defensive action at the point of origin before real damage is done inside the United States.

In short, “defend forward” calls for early understandings and early warnings of potential adversaries’ actions rather than waiting for indicators of attack within the United States. “Defend forward” means protecting America’s most critical networks and working to thwart cyberattacks on U.S. infrastructure well before they become reality. The monitoring of adversary target selection and

techniques – *while inside the adversaries’ environment* – enables the United States to support and protect at-risk U.S. systems.

Normally, cyberattacks would be first identified, if discovered at all, as an anomaly in the network, long after the initial breach. Statistically, it is known that after-the-fact detection occurs weeks or months after the initial breach.<sup>412</sup> By that point, the damage is already done. The “defend forward” concept is intended to prevent that from happening.

Proactive observance, pursuit, and countering of adversary cyber operations requires authorities to interact with adversary’s operations outside of the United States. And while the United States is still getting up to speed, the fiscal year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act legislation significantly improved the ability to execute offensive cyber operations with sections that (1) established cyber surveillance and reconnaissance as a “traditional military activity”; and (2) established the authority to disrupt, defeat, and deter cyberattacks from China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The Trump administration then created the policy process to conduct these operations with National Security Presidential Memorandum 13. By rapidly embracing and employing this policy of “defend forward” and imposing costs on cyber aggressors in the gray zone, Washington will, over time, establish deterrence throughout cyberspace.

America’s capabilities in cyberspace are rapidly evolving, as are those of its adversaries. For the United States to be effective, such capabilities must be buttressed by forward-stationed and forward-deployed forces in all domains, including cyber capabilities. For it is the integration of capabilities across all domains and elements of national power that can best secure American security interests for decades to come.

410. U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary: Department of Defense Cyber Strategy 2018,” October 2018. ([https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658/-1/-1/1/CYBER\\_STRATEGY\\_SUMMARY\\_FINAL.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658/-1/-1/1/CYBER_STRATEGY_SUMMARY_FINAL.PDF))

411. U.S. Cyberspace Solarium Commission, “United States of America Cyberspace Solarium Commission Report,” March 11, 2020. ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ryMCIL\\_dZ30QyJFqFkkf10MxIXJGT4yv/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ryMCIL_dZ30QyJFqFkkf10MxIXJGT4yv/view))

412. “Data Breach and Investigations Report: 2020,” Verizon Wireless, 2020 (<https://enterprise.verizon.com/resources/reports/dbir/>)

## Enhancing Special Operations for Sustained Counterterrorism Operations

By David Kilcullen

Politicians on both sides of the aisle are seeking to reduce or eliminate U.S. military bases in Afghanistan, Africa, and the Middle East. Some of them believe the strategic risks associated with such withdrawals can be safely mitigated through sustained counterterrorism operations conducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). However, without a network of nearby military bases, SOF can sometimes struggle to accomplish such missions safely.

The Islamic State and the Taliban have repeatedly proven themselves to be adaptive enemies. The Islamic State, in particular, has a long track record of regenerating whenever pressure dissipates – as it did after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. The group is currently thought to be moribund, but it retains thousands of active fighters and dozens of networks across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. For their part, the Taliban are stronger, with greater territorial reach and more combat power than any time since 2001. Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan-Pakistan remains robust and continues to expand its footprint. And while Africa's oldest jihadist insurgencies continue to thrive in the Horn of Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel, new groups are emerging in Mozambique and elsewhere.

The situational awareness and rapid-reaction capability afforded by a persistent forward presence can be critical for keeping pressure on terror groups. This pressure is often best applied by small SOF teams operating alongside indigenous partner forces to reinforce, resupply, evacuate, or rescue teams for both force protection and mission success. Because of the immense distances often involved, this is much more difficult without conventional bases nearby.



➦ Malian special forces soldiers participate in combat drills at Loumbila, Burkina Faso, February 16, 2019, as part of an annual, African-led, integrated military and law enforcement exercise to strengthen key partner nation forces throughout North and West Africa. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Peter Seidler)

To be effective, intelligence assets that support a counterterrorism mission must know the location of the terrorist target – not *now*, but at flight time plus preparation time plus approval time for their strike asset. If that asset is a special operations team sitting on the helicopter pad of a forward operating base (FOB) 15 minutes' flying time away, at five minutes' notice to move, with a 10-minute lead time for approval, then intelligence collectors need to know where the target is going to be 30 (15 + 5 + 10) minutes from now. The ability to strike terrorist networks or keep guerrilla groups off balance, pioneered by General Stanley McChrystal's Task Force 714 in Iraq then replicated in Afghanistan, depended to a very large degree on a dense forward posture in those theaters. This allowed strike teams to "lily pad" from one FOB to another, across a network of troop bases and forward outposts, staying within rapid striking distance of likely targets so that they could respond at short notice.<sup>413</sup>

By contrast, if the strike asset is a Tomahawk missile launched from a submarine 500 nautical miles away in the Arabian Sea, and it takes one hour of flight time for the missile to reach the target, plus two hours to pass targeting information to the submarine and get the boat into firing position, plus five hours to brief the principals'

<sup>413</sup>. See: Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organisation: A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq* (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2016). ([https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=51792030](https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=51792030))



↑ Azawad Salvation Movement militants fly their flag atop a vehicle that allegedly belonged to American service members killed during an ambush in the Tongo Tongo area in West Niger in October 2017. This image was taken on March 17, 2018, in Menaka, Mali. (Photo by STRINGER/AFP via Getty Images)

committee and obtain national command authority approval for the strike, then the intelligence-collection asset needs to know where the target will be eight hours from now. Thus, if collectors are observing a terrorist in the late afternoon, they need to know where he or she will be having breakfast and simultaneously confirm that no non-combatants will be harmed in a strike that is still many hours away. This is a far more daunting proposition. In fact, the lack of bases (and hence lack of strike assets) near the target area was one reason the United States failed to kill Osama bin Laden in the 1990s and why he survived to mastermind the 9/11 attacks.<sup>414</sup>

The same logic applies to defensive and offensive operations. The tragic loss of four American operators and several of their Nigerien counterparts at the hands of the Islamic State during the Tongo Tongo ambush in October 2017 in southwestern Niger occurred, in part,

because the team was operating with limited support, at extreme ranges, in a theater with extremely low force density and few forward bases from which a rescue could be mounted.

The village of Tongo Tongo is almost 100 miles by road from the U.S. base at Ouallam, Niger, itself 80 miles from Niamey, the site of Advanced Operations Base (AOB) Niger, where the company headquarters was located. AOB-Niger was controlled by a Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE) at N'Djamena, Chad, another 1,600 miles to the east. The SOCCE reported to headquarters in Baumholder, Germany, a further 2,600 miles away, which in turn reported to Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA) outside Stuttgart.<sup>415</sup> The incredibly light force density of SOF in a counterterrorism theater such as Northwest Africa is also noteworthy – just two companies' worth of special operators, out of only about 650 military personnel in the whole of Niger.<sup>416</sup>

After the ambush, a Pentagon investigation found that miscommunication – of missions, plans, and risk levels – among headquarters separated by enormous distances contributed to the incident.<sup>417</sup> Likewise, when ambushed at approximately 11:35 AM on October 4, the team was returning to Ouallam after being out all night to track a leader of the Islamic State-Greater Sahara in the area, but with stale (and therefore faulty) intelligence.<sup>418</sup> This illustrates the arithmetic noted earlier: The target had moved before the strike asset, a day's drive away, could arrive.

As the Americans and Nigeriens came under attack, AOB-Niger and the SOCCE at N'Djamena called

414. See, for example: Bob Woodward and Thomas E. Ricks, "CIA Trained Pakistanis to Nab Terrorist But Military Coup Put an End to 1999 Plot," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2001. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/03/cia-trained-pakistanis-to-nab-terrorist-but-military-coup-put-an-end-to-1999-plot/377c71d6-eede-49d2-98ff-c9c87493b710/>)

415. See: Joseph Trevithick, "DOD Briefing on the Ambush in Niger in October 2017," *YouTube*, May 17, 2018. (<https://youtu.be/seJ-Upl1tjw8>)

416. Alexis Arieff, "Niger: Frequently Asked Questions about the October 2017 Attack on U.S. Soldiers," *Congressional Research Service*, October 27, 2017, page 4. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44995.pdf>)

417. U.S. Department of Defense, "Oct 2017 Niger Ambush Summary of Investigation," May 10, 2018. ([https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418\\_niger/img/Oct-2017-Niger-Ambush-Summary-of-Investigation.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418_niger/img/Oct-2017-Niger-Ambush-Summary-of-Investigation.pdf))

418. Joseph Trevithick, "DOD Briefing on the Ambush in Niger in October 2017," *YouTube*, May 17, 2018. (<https://youtu.be/seJ-Upl1tjw8>)



urgently for backup. It took 90 minutes for two unarmed U.S. drones to arrive overhead, and another 10 minutes for French Mirage aircraft to arrive and perform a “show of force” that forced the enemy to back off.<sup>419</sup> By this time, the team, which had already sustained several injuries and deaths, was hunkered down in a final defensive position, about to be overrun. French helicopters arrived at 4:00 PM and with the assistance of a French and Nigerien ground force. They evacuated the survivors at about 5:30 PM, six hours after they had first called for help. It was another hour before ground forces found the bodies of Staff Sergeants Brian Black, Jeremiah Johnson, and Dustin Wright, and another 36 hours before Nigerien troops, with help from locals, were able to find Sergeant La David Johnson’s remains.<sup>420</sup>

The Pentagon investigation – and intensive media reporting – subsequently blamed commanders within SOCAFRICA for the ambush, and several were disciplined or dismissed. However, Tongo Tongo was almost entirely a result of the tyranny of distance. It was a tragedy waiting to happen, the near-inevitable outcome of a basing posture that forced SOCAFRICA to operate with extremely low force density and limited air assets, across an enormous area where knowledge of the community and intelligence on the enemy was extremely limited even for Nigerien security forces, let alone for commanders thousands of miles away.

Some might argue that none of this really matters, since the War on Terrorism is winding down. Unfortunately, the terror threat to Americans will not end because Washington says so. But even if the terror threat does

fade, bases established for the Global War on Terror – in Africa, but also in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, the Philippines, and elsewhere – offer the ability to compete more effectively against Beijing. China has a naval base in Djibouti, controls an array of commercial and military (or dual-use) sites across Africa, and deploys more than 2,000 troops across the continent in various roles.<sup>421</sup> In competing against Beijing or in a potential future crisis, forward bases in the region would be worth their weight in gold. And as the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq showed, after relinquishing a forward presence, recreating it is not simple, cost-free, or uncontroversial.

*New technologies do offer advantages. But as the arithmetic of counterterrorism shows ... there is no substitute for forward-deployed forces.*

SOF are often portrayed as super-soldiers, able to achieve the impossible on a shoestring budget, at enormous distances, with minimal support. Likewise, drones, satellites, and long-range communications are assumed to have eclipsed the need for a physical presence. New technologies do offer advantages. But as the arithmetic of counterterrorism shows, and as the tyranny of distance at Tongo Tongo emphasizes, there is no substitute for forward-deployed forces. They make it easier for SOF to operate with an acceptable chance of survival and success. And even in the unlikely event that the War on Terrorism ends, other conflicts loom. Far-flung bases may prove vital assets for American strategists, and sooner than one might expect.

<sup>419</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>420</sup>. U.S. Department of Defense, “Oct 2017 Niger Ambush Summary of Investigation,” May 10, 2018, page 5. ([https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418\\_niger/img/Oct-2017-Niger-Ambush-Summary-of-Investigation.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418_niger/img/Oct-2017-Niger-Ambush-Summary-of-Investigation.pdf))

<sup>421</sup>. See: Peter Suci, “China’s Naval Base in Africa Is Getting Bigger. Is a Network of Bases Next?” *The National Interest*, May 11, 2020. (<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-naval-base-africa-getting-bigger-network-bases-next-153146>); “China’s expanding military footprint in Africa,” *The Mail & Guardian* (South Africa), October 24, 2018. (<https://mg.co.za/article/2018-10-24-chinas-expanding-military-footprint-in-africa/>)

## Strengthen the Alliance With Israel to Contain China

Mark Dubowitz and Jonathan Schanzer

Forward-deployed U.S. military forces will be effective only if they are wielding world class military technology and capability. To win the intense military-technology competition of the 21st century, Washington must strengthen and secure its economic and military cooperative research and development (R&D) relationships with America's key tech-savvy democratic allies, such as Israel.

In recent decades, Beijing has staked out investments in Israel in high-tech and critical infrastructure. Beijing's goal has been to extract from the Jewish State, as well as from other tech-savvy countries, including the United States, expertise in machine learning, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, edge computing, and other cutting-edge technologies – all in an effort to accelerate China's aggressive efforts to modernize its military.<sup>422</sup> Increasingly, Israeli leaders understand the importance of decoupling from Beijing, and they are taking steps to do so. But the United States must work with Jerusalem to arrive at the desired outcome: constraining CCP influence in the Levant

and maintaining Israel as America's tech partner and strategically located land-based aircraft carrier.

The U.S.-Israel alliance is already deep and broad, based on shared values, common interests, and a mutual desire to preserve the U.S.-led world order. As the Senior Director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, Bradley Bowman, has noted, "Israel uses billions in annual U.S. military aid to purchase American weapons—strengthening America's defense innovation base, creating U.S. jobs, and building vital U.S.-Israel military interoperability. U.S. and Israeli service members train together, conduct combined exercises, and share best practices."<sup>423</sup> There is also valuable U.S.-Israel cooperation on tunnel detection,<sup>424</sup> countering unmanned aerial systems,<sup>425</sup> armored vehicle and tank protection,<sup>426</sup> and missile defense.<sup>427</sup> These technologies save American lives.<sup>428</sup>

*Increasingly, Israeli leaders understand the importance of decoupling from Beijing, and they are taking steps to do so.*

This relationship still has room to grow. Following the introduction of bipartisan bills in both the Senate and House of Representatives, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted 27-0 to require the establishment of a

422. Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "Chinese Military Parade Highlights Erosion of U.S. Military Supremacy," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 3, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/10/03/chinese-military-parade-highlights-erosion-of-us-military-supremacy/>); see also: Yossi Melman, "China Is Spying On Israel to Steal U.S. Secrets," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/24/china-and-russia-are-spying-on-israel-to-steal-u-s-secrets-putin-netanyahu-xi-haifa-ashdod-iai-elbit/>)

423. Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "Deeper Partnership With Israel Can Help U.S. Solve Defense Dilemma," *Real Clear Defense*, November 7, 2019. ([https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/11/07/deeper\\_partnership\\_with\\_israel\\_can\\_help\\_us\\_solve\\_defense\\_dilemma\\_114835.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/11/07/deeper_partnership_with_israel_can_help_us_solve_defense_dilemma_114835.html))

424. Yarden Schwartz, "Israel Is Building a Secret Tunnel-Destroying Weapon," *Foreign Policy*, March 10, 2016. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/10/israel-is-building-a-secret-tunnel-destroying-weapon-hamas-us-gaza/>)

425. Seth J. Frantzman, "New defense budget bill foresees US-Israel counter-drone cooperation," *Defense News*, August 13, 2018. (<https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2018/08/13/new-defense-budget-bill-foresees-us-israel-counter-drone-cooperation/>)

426. Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "U.S. Army Receives First Delivery of Israeli-Made Active Protection System," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 17, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/uncategorized/2019/10/17/us-army-receives-first-delivery-of-israeli-made-active-protection-system/>)

427. Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "U.S. Deploys THAAD Anti-Ballistic Missile System to Israel," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 6, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/03/06/u-s-deploys-thaad-anti-ballistic-missile-system-to-israel/>)

428. Jacob Nagel and John Hannah, "COVID-19 and the Need for Enhanced U.S.-Israel Technology Cooperation," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 17, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/17/covid-19-and-the-need-for-enhanced-us-israel-technology-cooperation/>)

U.S.-Israel Operations-Technology Working Group.<sup>429</sup> A similar provision was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 Conference Report.<sup>430</sup> The initiative should strengthen systematic early military R&D cooperation<sup>431</sup> between the United States and Israel to prevent dangerous capability gaps – rather than addressing them belatedly. The working group would help ensure, as the sponsoring senators wrote, that U.S. “warfighters never encounter a more technologically advanced foe.”<sup>432</sup> This working group could also serve as a forum to address concerns related to China that might impact U.S.-Israel military research and development.

In his book *The Kill Chain*, former staff director for the Senate Armed Services Committee Chris Brose highlights the stakes of the competition with China. Over the last decade, the United States has lost war games against China “almost every single time.” The lesson: The Pentagon must urgently field modern military technologies, capabilities, and networks to reduce the time required to detect threats, determine the best course of action, and deliver the necessary military effect.<sup>433</sup>

Strengthened early cooperative R&D with the “Startup Nation” can help. Israel is among America’s most technologically advanced allies. Israel’s high-tech sector produces cutting-edge technologies at a pace only rivaled by California’s Silicon Valley and

Boston’s Route 128. Israel is a “global leader in many of the technologies important to Department of Defense modernization efforts,” as the aforementioned legislation notes. Neither the United States nor Israel can permit the CCP to steal military technology to leapfrog American technology or further erode U.S. military supremacy.

Beijing has been stymied before. In the 1990s and 2000s, the People’s Republic of China sought military technologies from Israel, including a \$1 billion deal in 2000 for the Phalcon airborne tracking system and a 2004 deal for Israeli enhancements to the Harpy aerial anti-radar system. In both cases, Washington raised objections.<sup>434</sup> Jerusalem responded to U.S. concerns and canceled the sales.

To be sure, China has leverage with Israel. Beijing accounts for roughly 10 to 15 percent of Israel’s economy. In fact, China is Israel’s second-largest trading partner and source of foreign investment by country, after the United States. Sino-Israeli trade stood at almost \$15.3 billion in 2018,<sup>435</sup> an over 4,200 percent increase in real dollar terms since 1995.<sup>436</sup>

While the extent of China’s investment in sensitive technologies is still not public, there are indications that Chinese companies are investing in Israeli companies specializing in the technology, agriculture, and biomedical sectors. They aim to acquire technology in

429. The annual defense bill subsequently approved by the full senate also included the provision. Bradley Bowman, “Congressional Momentum Builds to Establish U.S.-Israel Working Group,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 25, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/06/25/momentum-builds-for-us-israel-working-group/>)

430. William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Conference Report to Accompany H.R.6395, 116th Congress (2020), Section 1299M. (<https://docs.house.gov/billssthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>)

431. Bradley Bowman, “Securing technological superiority requires a joint US-Israel effort,” *Defense News*, May 22, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/22/securing-technological-superiority-requires-a-joint-us-israel-effort/>)

432. Bradley Bowman, “Senators Call for U.S.-Israel Operations-Technology Working Group,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 3, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/03/03/senators-call-for-u-s-israel-operations-technology-working-group/>)

433. Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (New York City: Hachette Books, 2020).

434. Arthur Herman, “Israel and China Take a Leap Forward—but to Where?” *Hudson Institute*, November 5, 2018. (<https://www.hudson.org/research/14663-israel-and-china-take-a-leap-forward-but-to-where>)

435. World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution, “Israel trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 2018,” accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ISR/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>)

436. World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution, “Israel trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 1995,” accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ISR/Year/1995/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>)



artificial intelligence, robotics, edge-based computing, autonomous vehicles, and cybersecurity. These are largely the areas that the Pentagon identified as top modernization priorities. China is also establishing partnerships with leading Israeli universities, such as the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, to “foster knowledge transfer between China and Israel.”<sup>437</sup>

Israeli high-tech start-ups raised \$325 million from Chinese investors in the first three quarters of 2018, up from \$76 million in 2013.<sup>438</sup> While these numbers are concerning, there are signs that Chinese high-tech investment in Israel has declined in the last year or two. Some of Beijing’s smaller investments are strategic, reflecting an effort “to drain the brain” of Israeli innovation, as one Israeli venture capitalist put it.<sup>439</sup>

Beijing’s strategy of military-civil fusion, as well as its longstanding history of technology and intellectual property theft, raise further concerns about its investments in Israel. Beijing seeks to undermine U.S. military supremacy while proliferating weapons to Israel’s enemies. And the CCP has a well-documented desire to topple the U.S.-led world order on which Israeli security and prosperity depend.<sup>440</sup> A stake in Israeli critical infrastructure could further provide Beijing with leverage over Israel. It could also facilitate Chinese espionage and force the United States to curtail military-military cooperation and intelligence sharing with Israel as concerns mount.<sup>441</sup> That would hurt Israel and potentially divide the Jewish State from its most important ally.<sup>442</sup>

In a positive step, Israel has established a foreign investment review body, but the mechanism should do more to fully screen and block problematic investments. It must screen high-tech investments in sensitive areas, conduct a retroactive review of past investments, and scrutinize tenders *prior* to awarding a foreign bid, particularly those associated with advanced technology. A list of forbidden business areas might also be an idea worth pursuing.

Washington should encourage Israel to strengthen its legal and bureaucratic defenses against China’s malign activity, including by limiting former senior Israeli officials from working for Chinese state-owned enterprises or private Chinese companies that pose security risks. Israel also needs to review regulations governing the designation of Chinese and other foreign state-run media as foreign agents. Additionally, Israel should mandate counterintelligence training and support for Israeli companies working in China. The United States can help to encourage such steps by sharing relevant intelligence on Chinese intentions in Israel.

One important additional step for Washington would be to help Israel identify investment alternatives. American firms are already stepping up (belatedly) to supplant China in the construction of Israeli infrastructure.<sup>443</sup> Other U.S. allies and partners, such as Japan, Canada, India, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan, which already invest in Israel, may also be eager to help. New opportunities now abound after the historic UAE-Israel peace agreement, thanks to growing

437. Shira Efron, Howard J. Shatz, Arthur Chan, Emily Haskel, Lyle J. Morris, and Andrew Scobell, “The Evolving Israel-China Relationship,” *RAND Corporation*, 2019. ([https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2641.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2641.html))

438. “Israeli High-Tech – Chinese Investments,” *IVC*, accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://www.ivc-online.com/Portals/0/RC/POSTS/Chinese%20Investors%202013-Q3-2018.pdf?timestamp=1542560691892>)

439. “Still Waiting for Lift Off,” *IVC*, February 15, 2018. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200622030323/https://www.ivc-online.com/News-PR/News-Archive/nid/a4c22133-2e12-e811-80e4-00155d0b832c>)

440. “China’s Got a New Plan to Overtake the U.S. in Tech,” *Bloomberg News*, May 20, 2020. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/china-has-a-new-1-4-trillion-plan-to-overtake-the-u-s-in-tech?sref=LGSIKKkN>)

441. Shira Efron, Karen Schwindt, and Emily Haskel, “Chinese Investment in Israeli Technology and Infrastructure Security Implications for Israel and the United States,” *RAND Corporation*, 2020. ([https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3176.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3176.html))

442. Jacob Nagel and Mark Dubowitz, “With a Potential Iran-China Deal, Time for Israel to Reassess Its Policy,” *Newsweek*, July 26, 2020. (<https://www.newsweek.com/potential-iran-china-deal-time-israel-reassess-its-policy-opinion-1520422>)

443. Ivan Livingston, “U.S. Firms Interested in Israel Port After Passing Last Time,” *Bloomberg News*, October 29, 2020. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-29/american-firms-bid-for-israel-port-after-staying-away-last-round?sref=eP3WAQGC>)

investment and technology ties between the Israeli and Emirati private sectors as well as the establishment of The Abraham Fund, with its “more than \$3 billion in private sector-led investment and development initiatives to promote regional economic cooperation and prosperity in the Middle East and beyond.”<sup>444</sup>

Congress can be helpful by legislating and funding the establishment of trilateral foundations between Israel, the United States, and these allies. These foundations could be modeled on the Binational Industrial Research and Development Foundation, which helped kickstart U.S.-Israeli high-tech cooperation in the 1970s.<sup>445</sup> Adding private venture capital firms to these foundations, which would contribute capital in exchange for the right of first refusal on deals, could increase both dollars and expertise.

*United States and tech-savvy Israel must together guard against the theft of their military technology and ensure they remain on the same side in the great power competition with China.*

Finally, most Israeli officials clearly understand that the sale of military technologies to China is a red line that must not be crossed. They appreciate that China is a serial proliferator that will send those technologies to Israel’s enemies, such as Iran. Jerusalem understands that an American ally should never be arming an American adversary. But some Israeli business leaders believe they are held to higher standards than other U.S. allies, particularly when it comes to civilian technology cooperation with China. Of course, some civilian technology can have military applications. This is exactly why America and Israel should establish

a bilateral mechanism to refine a common approach toward the China challenge.<sup>446</sup>

U.S. military strength is the ultimate guarantor of a rules-based international order not dominated by the CCP. Strengthened U.S.-Israel military cooperation can give American (and Israeli) warfighters the tools they need to prevail on future battlefields. To bolster this vital military partnership, the United States and tech-savvy Israel must together guard against the theft of their military technology and ensure they remain on the same side in the great power competition with China.

That means Israel must be more discerning about blocking the CCP from acquiring sensitive Israeli technologies and investing in critical infrastructure. Washington, for its part, can help by identifying alternative sources of investment in Israel to supplant Chinese funding, establish a regular strategic dialogue on all aspects of the U.S.-China-Israel issue, and work to help Jerusalem decouple from China. Washington should appreciate that such Israeli steps away from Beijing must be taken without public fanfare. Surrounded by enemies devoted to Israel’s destruction, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jerusalem wants to avoid turning the Middle Kingdom into an enemy.

No bilateral relationship is without its challenges. The United States and Israel continue to build a strong alliance despite occasional policy disagreements and counterintelligence concerns. If the United States and Israel take these additional steps together, the two countries will further strengthen and secure their alliance. This relationship could then be replicated with other American allies as Washington challenges China in domains and regions worldwide.

<sup>444</sup>. U.S. Embassy in Israel, Press Release, “US, Israel, UAE announce establishment of Abraham Fund following Accords commitment,” October 20, 2020. (<https://il.usembassy.gov/us-israel-uae-announce-establishment-of-abraham-fund-following-accords-commitment/>)

<sup>445</sup>. Israel-U.S. Binational Industrial Research and Development Foundation, “What is BIRD?” accessed December 2, 2020. (<https://www.birdf.com/What-is-BIRD/>)

<sup>446</sup>. This should include decision makers in the economic, security, and trade bureaucracies. It could emulate the regular dialogue held between Washington and Jerusalem on the Iranian threat. Another model is the U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue, convened in 2014 at the Department of State. At the time, it was the highest-level regular diplomatic meeting between the two countries. A Track II dialogue of former U.S. and Israeli government officials and think tank experts could strengthen these efforts.

## Lessons From the European Deterrence Initiative

By Bradley Bowman and Major Scott Adamson

Benjamin Franklin famously wrote, “an Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure.”<sup>447</sup> While Franklin was certainly not thinking of national security, the United States would be wise to apply the principle to deterring Chinese aggression. Leaders of the Senate and House armed services committees included a provision (section 1251) in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 Conference Report that would establish a Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI).<sup>448</sup>

If the bill is signed into law, the Pentagon can model the PDI on a similar effort in Europe, launched after Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea. Distracted elsewhere and confused regarding Putin’s intentions, Washington had allowed the military deterrence of Moscow in eastern Europe to atrophy. Putin saw his opportunity and pounced.

Having learned some tough lessons, the United States belatedly created the European Reassurance Initiative, later called the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).<sup>449</sup> According to testimony in February 2020 by General Tod Wolters, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Europe, the EDI has increased “forward-stationed and rotational forces,” funded exercises and training, built partner capacity, and significantly improved prepositioned stocks and vital military infrastructure.

The EDI, Wolters said, has been “critical to our deterrence and posture successes.”<sup>450</sup>

That is exactly what the United States must do without delay in the Indo-Pacific. Some in the Pentagon are concerned that a PDI might reduce flexibility, but it is past time to align U.S. budgets and programs with rhetoric in the Pacific. Or as Representative Mac Thornberry, ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, has said: “It is time to put our money where our mouth is.”<sup>451</sup>

In standing up a PDI, three lessons from Europe are particularly instructive. The first: waste no time in getting started. Before Moscow’s aggression in Ukraine, Washington dithered and ignored warning signs. Russia’s 2008 invasion and occupation of large portions of Georgia, along with Russia’s subsequent military modernization efforts, should have set off alarms.

*The warning signs are clear in Hong Kong, along the border with India, in the South China Sea, and in the seas and skies surrounding Taiwan.*

The United States must not make the same mistake with the CCP’s activities in the Indo-Pacific. The warning signs are clear in Hong Kong, along the border with India, in the South China Sea, and in the seas and skies

447. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, “On Protection of Towns from Fire, 4 February 1735,” *Founders Online*, accessed November 12, 2020. (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0002>)

448. William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Conference Report to Accompany H.R.6395, 116th Congress (2020), Section 1251. (<https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>); Bradley Bowman and John Hardie, “Aligning America’s ends and means in the Indo-Pacific,” *Defense News*, April 22, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/04/22/aligning-americas-ends-and-means-in-the-indo-pacific/>)

449. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release, “FACT SHEET: European Reassurance Initiative and Other U.S. Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners,” June 3, 2014. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/03/fact-sheet-european-reassurance-initiative-and-other-us-efforts-support->)

450. General Tod D. Wolters, *Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, February 25, 2020. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wolters\\_02-25-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wolters_02-25-20.pdf))

451. Aaron Mehta, “Thornberry wants \$6 billion this year to launch counter-China fund,” *Defense News*, April 16, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/04/16/thornberry-wants-6-billion-this-year-to-launch-counter-china-fund/>)





↑ A U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker refueling aircraft prepares to refuel Navy F/A-18 Hornets over Wake Island during an escort mission from Japan to the United States. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Ben Fulton)

surrounding Taiwan.<sup>452</sup> The top U.S. military officer in the Indo-Pacific has warned that the U.S. military balance of power with China continues to become “more unfavorable.”<sup>453</sup> Washington should not wait for Beijing to invade Taiwan or attack U.S. vessels in the South China Sea before taking action.<sup>454</sup>

A delay would be particularly harmful because building the kind of deterrence referenced by Wolters takes

time. Finite budgets and industrial capacity contribute to protracted timelines when procuring equipment.<sup>455</sup> Similarly, the need for defense-cooperation agreement negotiations, host-nation approvals, and contractor capacity extends the timeline to build the necessary infrastructure. In the case of the EDI, only a handful of the more than 70 authorized EDI military construction projects have been completed since the program began in 2015. Seven years in, there is still much work to do.<sup>456</sup>

452. Bradley Bowman and Andrea Stricker, “Arm Taiwan—but Skip the Nukes,” *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/04/taiwan-military-aid-nuclear-weapons/>)

453. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, “Regain the Advantage: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s (USINDOPACOM) Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy,” April 2020, page 8. (<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf>)

454. Bradley Bowman, “Hong Kong Today, Taiwan Next?” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2020. (<https://www.newsweek.com/hong-kong-today-taiwan-next-opinion-1508842>); Major Liane Zivitski and Bradley Bowman, “Beijing is seeking to expel the US from the South China Sea,” *Washington Examiner*, May 12, 2020. (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/beijing-is-seeking-to-expel-the-us-from-the-south-china-sea>)

455. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, “U.S. Air Forces in Europe Plans for the Procurement and Pre-Positioning of Deployable Air Base Kits,” December 27, 2018. (<https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/1722583/us-air-forces-in-europe-plans-for-the-procurement-and-pre-positioning-of-deploy/>)

456. Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh, “The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 16, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10946.pdf>)

The PDI may take years as well. Washington should not expect that it can quickly reverse decades of neglect in the Indo-Pacific. Indo-Pacific Command's call for \$20 billion over the next six years to implement the NDS further demonstrates the need to get started without delay.<sup>457</sup>

There is also a relevant lesson when it comes to how this effort is funded. Congress has authorized and funded the EDI using the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account.<sup>458</sup> That account was originally intended to fund short-term expenses associated with post-9/11 conflicts. Today, the continued use of the OCO account for major multi-year initiatives is a workaround for budget limits associated with the 2011 Budget Control Act.<sup>459</sup> This approach comes at a cost in terms of program predictability, prioritization, and assessment.<sup>460</sup>

Due to the OCO account's one-year term, versus the base budget's five-year outlook, the abridged OCO planning cycle hinders congressional oversight, undercuts messaging to key allies and great power adversaries, and hampers the Pentagon's ability to measure progress as part of the regular planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process.<sup>461</sup> Funding the PDI with the base budget instead of OCO

will require Congress to establish priorities and pursue bipartisan consensus. That is exactly what is required to ensure the PDI's long-term success.

A third lesson learned from the EDI is the importance of investing in the less glamorous but vital capabilities related to infrastructure and logistics. To deter additional Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, the United States used the EDI to invest in airfields and other facilities necessary to transport and support combat forces. Wolters believes those critical investments have been essential in building deterrence: "Through EDI, we have enhanced our presence in theater to assure Allies and deter adversaries."<sup>462</sup>

The United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific need to do the same. A recent report by Indo-Pacific Command emphasized the role of infrastructure in "distributing forward-deployed forces across the breadth and depth of the battle space." That will require investment in the first and second island chains to facilitate the survival, mobility, dispersal, and lethality of U.S. forces.<sup>463</sup>

In addition to avoiding diversion of PDI funds for unrelated projects in the United States, Congress and the Pentagon should focus on airfields, equipment

457. Paul McLeary, "EXCLUSIVE Indo-Pacom Chief's Bold \$20 Billion Plan For Pacific; What Will Hill Do?" *Breaking Defense*, April 2, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/04/exclusive-indo-pacom-chiefs-bold-20-billion-plan-for-pacific-what-will-hill-do/>)

458. Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh, "The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview," *Congressional Research Service*, June 16, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10946.pdf>)

459. Brendan W. McGarry, "The Defense Budget and the Budget Control Act: Frequently Asked Questions," *Congressional Research Service*, September 30, 2019. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44039.pdf>)

460. Michelle Shevin-Coetzee, "The European Deterrence Initiative," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2019. ([https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI\\_Format\\_FINAL.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI_Format_FINAL.pdf)); U.S. Government Accountability Office, "European Reassurance Initiative DOD Needs to Prioritize Posture Initiatives and Plan for and Report Their Future Cost," December 2017. (<https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/688849.pdf>); U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Inspector General, "Evaluation of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI)," August 22, 2017. (<https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/19/2001858688/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2017-111.PDF>)

461. Frederico Bartels and Daniel Kochis, "Congress Should Transform the European Deterrence Initiative into an Enduring Commitment," *The Heritage Foundation*, May 29, 2018. (<https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/congress-should-transform-the-european-deterrence-initiative-enduring-commitment>); Michelle Shevin-Coetzee, "The European Deterrence Initiative," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2019. ([https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI\\_Format\\_FINAL.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI_Format_FINAL.pdf))

462. General Tod D. Wolters, *Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, February 25, 2020. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20-05\\_02-25-2020.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20-05_02-25-2020.pdf)); General Tod D. Wolters, *Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, February 25, 2020. ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wolters\\_02-25-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wolters_02-25-20.pdf))

463. Paul McLeary, "EXCLUSIVE Indo-Pacom Chief's Bold \$20 Billion Plan For Pacific; What Will Hill Do?" *Breaking Defense*, April 2, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/04/exclusive-indo-pacom-chiefs-bold-20-billion-plan-for-pacific-what-will-hill-do/>)

pre-positioning, port facilities, munitions, and fuel storage. The PDI should initially direct investments toward the most urgent needs and feasible opportunities. Efforts should be made to expedite projects by streamlining long-lead agreements, planning, and design. Projects in U.S. territories may offer the best opportunities for quicker completion. Additionally, building upon airfield expansion efforts on Tinian and acting on Palau's recent overture to host U.S. military ports, bases, and airfields offer good examples of where immediate action should occur.<sup>464</sup> Meanwhile, the Department of State should actively explore additional opportunities with allies and partners, especially those in the first island chain.

Quickly building this infrastructure would enable much-needed distribution of critical capabilities, flexibility, resiliency, and maneuverability. Crucially, the rapid dispersal of U.S. forces, with myriad alternative sites for use in a contingency, would complicate Beijing's planning and increase deterrence.<sup>465</sup>

This concept is well-integrated in the EDI's military construction program, which encompasses 16 host nations and spans over 25 different sites. The same needs to be done in the Indo-Pacific.

PDI infrastructure investments should also be aligned with Indo-Pacific Command's top weapons system priorities. That includes facilities needed to field the command's top unfunded priority: "360-degree persistent and integrated air defense capability in Guam." This improved air defense would help address China's missile arsenal, which is growing

in quantity, capability, and range. That would help shield Guam – an island Indo-Pacific Command calls the "most important operating location in the Western Pacific."<sup>466</sup>

High-profile weapons systems built in the districts and states of well-positioned members of Congress will usually receive the political support they need. But the PDI is crucial because it will ensure similar support for the vital infrastructure needed in the Pacific.

*As Washington moves to create a PDI, there is much to learn from the experience in Europe.*

As Washington moves to create a PDI, there is much to learn from the experience in Europe. If Washington applies those lessons appropriately, Americans can benefit from Franklin's sage advice – and gain an edge in the great power competition that promises to shape the 21st century.

*The views expressed or implied in this commentary are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. A similar version of this chapter originally appeared in Breaking Defense on August 28.*<sup>467</sup>

464. U.S. Department of the Air Force, "Military Construction Program: Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Budget Estimates," February 2020. ([https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/MILCON/\\_FY21%20Air%20Force%20MILCON\\_1.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-091213-253](https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/MILCON/_FY21%20Air%20Force%20MILCON_1.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-091213-253)); Celine Castronuovo, "Palau offers US military new sites for Pacific bases," *The Hill*, September 8, 2020. (<https://thehill.com/policy/defense/policy-strategy/515501-us-military-receives-offer-for-new-military-bases-in-pacific>)

465. Major General Brian M. Killough, "The Complicated Combat Future of the U.S. Air Force," *The National Interest*, February 9, 2020. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/complicated-combat-future-us-air-force-121226>)

466. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "Regain the Advantage: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy," April 2020, page 7. (<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf>). See also: Bradley Bowman and Major Shane Priaswater, "Guam needs Aegis Ashore," *Defense News*, August 25, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/08/25/guam-needs-aegis-ashore/>)

467. Bradley Bowman and Major Scott Adamson, "Lessons for the Pacific From the European Deterrence Initiative," *Breaking Defense*, August 28, 2020. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2020/08/lessons-for-the-pacific-from-the-european-deterrence-initiative/>)





# CHARTING A BIPARTISAN PATH TO SECURE AMERICAN INTERESTS

By Bradley Bowman

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Americans find themselves at an inflection point. We must decide what role we want to play in the world. Serious problems at home pull attention and resources inward, yet grave international threats loom. Persuaded by calls to “end endless wars,” some Americans support withdrawing into what former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta calls “a defensive and insular crouch here at home.”

But informed by his many decades of public service, including his time as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Panetta cautions against such an approach. Instead, he suggests three lessons that are worth revisiting to build a bipartisan national consensus on the future of U.S. global military posture.

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## Going There to Be Secure Here

The first lesson is that “Americans must go abroad to remain secure at home.” Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 terror attacks, and now COVID-19 have reminded Americans that what happens overseas matters at home. Threats neglected “over there” may ultimately hurt Americans “over here.” And as American business leaders have long understood, the overwhelming majority of the world’s consumers live outside the United States. Therefore, to sustain American prosperity and secure the economic foundation on which U.S. national security rests, Americans must retain unfettered access to overseas markets and resources.

*Arguing that America must position some forces forward is not akin to calling for an over-militarized U.S. foreign policy that encourages ill-advised U.S. military interventions.*

Such assertions are not a call for “endless war” or American “military domination,” as some suggest.<sup>468</sup> Arguing that America must position some forces forward is not akin to calling for an over-militarized U.S. foreign policy that encourages ill-advised U.S. military interventions.

Much of the competition with China and Russia occurs outside the military sphere. The United States needs robust and well-resourced diplomatic and development capabilities. This calls for a comprehensive U.S. strategy that goes well beyond the Department of Defense and employs all the tools of national power.<sup>469</sup> For that reason, Congress was right to overturn the Trump administration’s efforts to slash funding for the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>470</sup>

But if the United States does not also maintain a modernized and ready military in key locations abroad, all of America’s other capabilities will not be sufficient to deter aggression and secure American interests. This is particularly true as China and Russia work to field military capabilities superior to those of the United States.

America’s great power and rogue state adversaries have consistently tried to avoid direct military conflict with the United States, because of superior American military forces positioned in key locations. Instead, adversaries have preferred to challenge the United States in other domains. But if the United States permits its relative military power to erode and fails to retain sufficient forward defenses, one can reasonably expect more direct military aggression from adversaries.

Therefore, the question is not whether American forces must be deployed abroad to secure Americans and their interests. The question is when and where those deployments should occur and what form should they take.

## America Needs Help

The second lesson Panetta highlights is that “the threats we confront are simply too numerous and complex for Americans to address alone.”

As is often said, the essence of strategy is the coordination of ends and means. America must delineate core national interests, assess the most dangerous and likely threats to those interests, detail the means available and required, and outline the ways those means should be employed.

When one considers the resources required to simultaneously compete with China and Russia, deter Iran and North Korea, and keep pressure on Islamist

<sup>468</sup> Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annette Sheline, and Trita Parsi, “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, July 17, 2020. (<https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misgud-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>)

<sup>469</sup> Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, *Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York City: Harper, 2020).

<sup>470</sup> Cory R. Gill, Marian L. Lawson, and Emily M. Morgenstern, “Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2021 Budget and Appropriations,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 1, 2020. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46367.pdf>)

terrorist organizations, it becomes clear the United States needs help.<sup>471</sup> The United States lacks the resources and capacity to address all of these challenges alone.

Adding to the complexity, these threats and other challenges tend not to remain in neatly confined and compartmentalized regions abroad. Beijing is engaged in activities hostile to American interests all around the globe, and Moscow's malign activities are not relegated simply to NATO's eastern flank. Iran continues to inch closer to a nuclear weapons capability while expanding its ballistic missile arsenal and exporting terrorism far and wide.<sup>472</sup> Meanwhile, North Korea has nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can strike the American homeland.<sup>473</sup> And terrorist organizations still relish the opportunity to kill Americans at home.

"Thankfully," Panetta writes, America is not confronting these threats alone. We are "blessed with an unparalleled network of allies and partners that helps to mitigate this resource gap." This network is the envy of America's adversaries. It represents a strategic asset of enormous value that Washington should nurture, not neglect.

In recent years, much of the White House rhetoric may have left a different impression. Allies and partners have often been characterized as burdens to be jettisoned, and the presence of U.S. military forces in some countries has been treated as a charity to be extended or withdrawn.

There are certainly frustrations and challenges associated with alliances and partnerships. But this does not negate the fact that securing America requires Washington to maintain and strengthen relationships with countries that share common interests and values.

As Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell argue in their book, *The Unquiet Frontier*, the forward deployment of U.S. forces alongside allies accrues numerous benefits. Forward-positioned allies and partners supported by U.S. forces can deter war, discourage bandwagoning with America's rivals, deny those rivals key terrain and chokepoints, provide early warning, enable American power projection, and help achieve victory if conflict comes.<sup>474</sup>

Kori Schake, former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, former U.S. Strategic Command Commander Admiral (Ret.) Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter make a similar argument in a November 2020 article in *Foreign Affairs*. They argue for a "forward strategy" consisting of "U.S. diplomats and military forces in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East" positioned alongside allies. This "defense in depth" posture gives "credence to U.S. commitments" and establishes "a bulwark against threats, a shock absorber and an early warning system that gives time and space to meet dangers when they arise."<sup>475</sup>

Consider a few examples. In Syria, the United States worked with the SDF to defeat the ISIS caliphate. The SDF, which provided most of the ground forces, suffered

471. U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America," January 19, 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

472. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Remember, Iran's Terror Network Is Global," *Radio Farda*, February 8, 2020. (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-terror-network-is-global-qods-khamenei/30424117.html>); Bradley Bowman and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Successful SM-3 weapons test offers missile defense opportunity," *Defense News*, November 21, 2020. (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/11/21/successful-sm-3-weapons-test-offers-missile-defense-opportunity/>)

473. Eds. Bradley Bowman and David Maxwell, "Maximum Pressure 2.0," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 5, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/12/3/maximum-pressure-2/>)

474. Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

475. Kori Schake, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Chief of Naval Operations Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter, "Defense In Depth Why U.S. Security Depends on Alliances—Now More Than Ever," *Foreign Affairs*, November 23, 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-23/defense-depth>)



up to 13,000 casualties.<sup>476</sup> Without these partners, augmented by U.S. air, logistical, and intelligence support, the caliphate would still exist or American forces would have made those sacrifices instead.

Afghanistan offers a similar lesson. The U.S. military effort there has been far from ideal. But in the country from which al-Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks, Afghan security forces have doggedly battled al-Qaeda and their Taliban partners. Afghans do not want their country overrun by terrorists who stone women in soccer stadiums. Americans are not – and should not be – indifferent regarding the outcome; our values and security are at stake.

A few thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan, augmented by an equal or greater number of NATO allies, can support Afghan partners to avoid a terrorist takeover, while mounting counterterrorism operations that keep pressure on terrorists and deny them the space they need to attack our homeland. The benefits of retaining a modest military presence in Afghanistan put the burden of proof on those arguing for a timeline-based withdrawal that ignores conditions on the ground.<sup>477</sup>

It also is worth remembering that Europe generated two world wars in less than 30 years – ultimately pulling the United States into both. But following World War II and the 1949 establishment of NATO, Europe has enjoyed an extraordinary period of relative peace. While Moscow has invaded non-NATO countries Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin has not invaded a NATO member country since the alliance was formed.

What explains this? The presence of U.S. combat forces in Europe make clear to Moscow that America and its NATO allies have both the political will and military capability to honor their Article 5 commitments to defend against an attack.<sup>478</sup>

Admittedly, the costs of maintaining this U.S. military presence in Europe have been significant. But the costs of forward-stationing U.S. forces there pale in comparison to the cost of a conflict with Russia.

Similarly, in East Asia and the South China Sea, Beijing seeks to expel the U.S. military to bully its neighbors and take control of Taiwan. This threatens core American economic, diplomatic, and national security interests.<sup>479</sup>

In the case of Taiwan, in particular, the People's Republic of China is developing the military capabilities to initiate lightning-quick aggression to achieve Beijing's objectives and then prevent U.S. reinforcements from arriving.<sup>480</sup>

But by deploying U.S. forces in Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere alongside increasingly capable allies while strengthening military partnerships with Australia, India, and others, Washington can cause Beijing to wonder whether its aggression would come at too steep a cost. This is the essence of deterrence – a key component of U.S. military strategy for seven decades.

## Not All Withdrawals Are Good

A third lesson Panetta highlights is the idea that both military deployments *and* withdrawals deserve serious scrutiny.

<sup>476</sup>. Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, “Statement of Hon. James F. Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC,” *Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, October 22, 2019. (<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/10%2022%2019%20Assessing%20the%20Impact%20of%20Turkey's%20Offensive%20in%20Northeast%20Syria.pdf>)

<sup>477</sup>. Bradley Bowman, “To Succeed in Competition with China, Don't Abandon the Middle East,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 10, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/09/10/competition-china-dont-abandon-middle-east/>)

<sup>478</sup>. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Collective defence – Article 5,” accessed December 2, 2020. ([https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm#:~:text=Article%205%20provides%20that%20if,to%20assist%20the%20Ally%20attacked](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm#:~:text=Article%205%20provides%20that%20if,to%20assist%20the%20Ally%20attacked))

<sup>479</sup>. U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission, “Providing for the Common Defense The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission,” November 14, 2018, Chapter 1. (<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>)

<sup>480</sup>. Bradley Bowman and Andrea Stricker, “Arm Taiwan—but Skip the Nukes,” *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2020. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/04/taiwan-military-aid-nuclear-weapons/>)

Many Americans have understandably lost patience with the U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Owing to wild swings in U.S. foreign policy, Washington has failed to consistently explain the persistent interests and threats in those theaters. This has left many Americans with the false impression that the United States can complete timeline-based withdrawals with few negative repercussions.<sup>481</sup>

Those pushing for American military retrenchment, however, “do not acknowledge that U.S. withdrawal often leaves a vacuum that enemies and adversaries are eager to fill,” writes Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, chairman of FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power.<sup>482</sup> That is certainly the case in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Some advocates conflate decisions to withdraw U.S. military forces with the initial decision to intervene or how the deployment has been prosecuted. But to best serve U.S. interests, each decision deserves robust and independent scrutiny.

As authors in this monograph suggest, one can assert that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a mistake and also believe that America should still maintain a few thousand troops in Iraq and a few hundred in Syria to help prevent the return of the ISIS caliphate.

Similarly, one can believe that the American effort in Afghanistan has been poorly prosecuted while also asserting that a timeline-based withdrawal that relieves pressure on terror groups there could permit the country to once again become a launchpad for international terror attacks.

With the U.S. military withdrawals currently underway, the United States on January 20, 2021, will have fewer than approximately 6,000 U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria – combined. Compare that to a peak of over 170,000 U.S. troops in Iraq in 2007 and approximately 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2011.<sup>483</sup>

This relatively small U.S. force posture is playing an outsized role in preventing terrorist groups from gaining too much strength. There may come a time when such U.S. military deployments in these theaters are no longer necessary. But for now, the burden of proof again rests with anyone who suggests the United States can simply ignore the very clear threats that remain.

## Looking Ahead

President-elect Biden said on November 24 that his administration will be “[r]eady to lead the world, not retreat from it.”<sup>484</sup> That sentiment is laudable and consistent with the best bipartisan traditions of U.S. foreign policy. But such a policy must not apply solely to America’s diplomatic and development efforts; it must also apply to America’s military posture abroad.

There are forces within both political parties pulling on Washington to shrug at threats abroad and withdraw U.S. forces, come what may. As this monograph argues, that would be a dangerous mistake. America requires a military posture of “Defending Forward.” This will help secure American interests and provide the best hope to avoid conflicts in the 21st century.

<sup>481</sup>. Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York City: Harper, 2020).

<sup>482</sup>. Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, “The Retrenchment Syndrome,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-01/retrenchment-syndrome>)

<sup>483</sup>. Merrit Kennedy, “U.S. Says It Will Cut Number Of Troops In Iraq By Nearly Half This Month,” NPR, September 9, 2020. (<https://www.npr.org/2020/09/09/911032406/u-s-says-it-will-cut-number-of-troops-in-iraq-by-nearly-half>); Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, “Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018,” Congressional Research Service, May 10, 2019, page 7. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>); Amy Belasco, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues,” Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009, page 66. (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>)

<sup>484</sup>. Anne Gearan, “Biden’s national security rollout doesn’t include a Pentagon pick,” *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bidens-national-security-rollout-doesnt-include-a-pentagon-pick/2020/11/24/3ec47764-2e9c-11eb-96c2-aac3f162215d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bidens-national-security-rollout-doesnt-include-a-pentagon-pick/2020/11/24/3ec47764-2e9c-11eb-96c2-aac3f162215d_story.html))

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**Bradley Bowman***Monograph Editor*

Bradley Bowman serves as senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He has almost nine years of experience in the U.S. Senate, where he served as a national security advisor to

members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. He has also served as an active-duty U.S. Army officer, Black Hawk pilot, staff officer in Afghanistan, Council on Foreign Relations international affairs fellow, and assistant professor at West Point. At West Point, he taught courses on American politics, foreign policy, and grand strategy. He also taught a graduate course on "Congress and U.S. National Security Policy" at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Bowman has testified to Congress and published widely on U.S. defense strategy and policy.

**Scott Adamson**

Major Scott D. Adamson is an active-duty U.S. Air Force officer and visiting military analyst at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. Most recently, he served as chief, Africa Branch within the Civil Engineer Division

of Headquarters United States Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa. Previously, he served as deputy chief, Design and Construction Branch within the Europe Division of the Air Force Civil Engineer Center, where he oversaw construction projects executed under the European Deterrence Initiative. He has deployed to Afghanistan, Oman, and Niger.

**Edward C. Cardon**

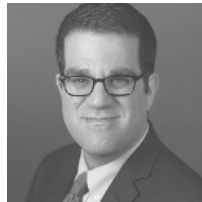
Lieutenant General (Ret.) Edward C. Cardon serves on the Board of Advisors at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He previously served for over 36 years in the United States Army, with major command assignments including

commanding general of the 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea, commanding general of U.S. Army Cyber Command, and head of the Task Force that helped create Army Futures Command, which is responsible for modernizing the Army. Since retirement, he continues to focus on helping leaders and teams solve hard problems.

**Leon E. Panetta***Foreword Author*

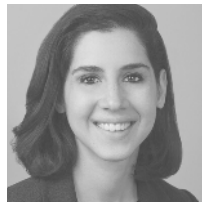
Secretary Leon E. Panetta's life in public service began in 1964 as a U.S. Army intelligence officer and spans 16 years in Congress as well as two administrations. Secretary Panetta

served as director of the Office of Management and Budget during the Clinton administration prior to serving as chief of staff to President Clinton. During the Obama administration, he served as director of the CIA before becoming secretary of defense. He serves on the Board of Advisors at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power and is chairman of the Panetta Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit organization located on the Monterey Peninsula.

**David Adesnik**

Dr. David Adesnik is a senior fellow and the director of research at FDD. Previously, he served as policy director at the Foreign Policy Initiative and as deputy director for Joint Data Support at the U.S. Department of Defense,

where he focused on the modeling and simulation of irregular warfare and counterinsurgency. Prior to that, he served as a research staff member at the Institute for Defense Analyses, during which he spent four months in Baghdad as an operations research and systems analyst for Multinational Corps – Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

**Emily de La Bruyère**

Emily de La Bruyère is a senior fellow focused on China policy at FDD, where she has pioneered data tools tailored to Beijing's strategic and institutional structures. Her work focuses on China's standardization ambitions, military-civil

fusion strategy, and the implications for U.S. economic and national security. She uses primary-source, Chinese-language materials to provide decision-makers insight on geopolitical, technological, and economic changes. In addition to her work at FDD, she is a co-founder of Horizon Advisory, a consulting firm focused on the implications of China's competitive approach to geopolitics.



### Mark Dubowitz

Mark Dubowitz is the chief executive of FDD, an expert on Iran's nuclear program and global threat networks, and a contributor to FDD's China Program. Sanctioned by Iran in 2019 for his work in shaping Iran sanctions

policies, Dubowitz has advised the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and testified more than 20 times before the U.S. Congress and foreign legislatures.



### Eric S. Edelman

Ambassador Eric S. Edelman is a senior advisor at FDD and serves on the Board of Advisors at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He previously served in senior positions at the departments of State and Defense as well as the White

House, including as undersecretary of defense for policy from August 2005 to January 2009 and U.S. ambassador to Turkey. He is currently counselor at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Roger Hertog distinguished practitioner in residence at the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and a non-resident senior fellow at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia.



### Aykan Erdemir

Dr. Aykan Erdemir is senior director of FDD's Turkey program and a former member of the Turkish Parliament. He has been at the forefront of the struggle against religious persecution, hate crimes, and hate speech in Turkey. In

recognition of his advocacy for minority rights and religious freedoms, Dr. Erdemir was awarded the Stefanus Prize for Religious Freedom and the First Freedom Award of the Hellenic American Leadership Council. He is also a founding and steering committee member of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief and serves on the Anti-Defamation League's Task Force on Middle East Minorities.



### Robert L. Green

Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Green is an active-duty U.S. Army officer who served as a visiting military fellow at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He is currently attending the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced

International Studies as a member of the Secretary of Defense Strategic Thinkers Program. He most recently served as an Army Strategist for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G-39. From June 2015 to December 2018, Lieutenant Colonel Green was the principal subject matter expert for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other senior leaders in the development and coordination of strategy and policy pertaining to the Syria portfolio.



### Mathew Ha

Mathew Ha is a research analyst at FDD focusing on North Korea. Specifically, he studies North Korea and focuses on illicit financial networks, malicious cyber operations, and human rights abuses. Other areas of his research include U.S.

alliances in Asia and inter-Korean relations. Previously, he worked with the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.



### John Hannah

John Hannah is senior counselor at FDD and serves on the Board of Advisors at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He previously served as former Vice President Dick Cheney's national security advisor. He also worked as

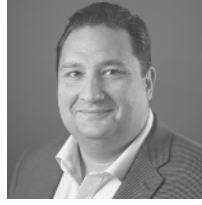
a senior advisor to Secretary of State Warren Christopher during the Clinton administration and as a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff during the presidency of George H.W. Bush.



### Ben Hodges

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges holds the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis. His last military assignment was as commanding general, United States Army Europe (Wiesbaden, Germany)

from 2014 to 2017. Prior to that, he commanded NATO's Allied Land Command in Izmir Turkey from 2012 to 2014. He commanded the 1st Brigade Combat Team "Bastogne" in the 101st Airborne Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2004. His other operational assignments include chief of operations for Multi-National Corps – Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2005 to 2006 and director of operations, Regional Command South in Kandahar, Afghanistan, from 2009 to 2010.



### Thomas Joscelyn

Thomas Joscelyn is a senior fellow at FDD and is senior editor of *FDD's Long War Journal*, a widely read publication dealing with counterterrorism and related issues. Much of his research focuses on how al-Qaeda and the Islamic

State operate around the globe. He has testified more than 20 times before Congress. *The Daily Beast* has described him as one of "the most trusted authorities on the al-Qaeda network because of his encyclopedic knowledge of terrorist biographies."



### David Kilcullen

Dr. David Kilcullen is professor of international and political studies at UNSW Canberra, professor of practice at Arizona State University, CEO of the research firm Cordillera Applications Group, and a member of the Board of

Advisors at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He is an expert on future warfare, guerrilla and unconventional warfare, and counterterrorism. Over a 25-year career with the Australian and U.S. governments as a soldier, intelligence officer, and diplomat, he served in Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Colombia. He has written five prize-winning books and numerous scholarly articles on terrorism, insurgency, urbanization, and future warfare.



### Varsha Koduvayur

Varsha Koduvayur is a senior research analyst at FDD, where she focuses on the Gulf states. She covers the Gulf's political and economic reform trends, internal dynamics, regional geopolitics, and illicit finance. Koduvayur also

works on issues pertaining to China-Gulf and South Asia-Gulf relations. She was previously a researcher for the Middle East practice at Eurasia Group and a junior fellow in the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



### Stephanie Mafrici

Major Stephanie Mafrici is an active-duty U.S. Marine Corps officer, specializing in communications. She is currently a fellow in the Secretary of Defense's Strategic Thinkers Program and previously served as a visiting military

analyst at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. For four years, Major Mafrici was assigned to III Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa, Japan, where she planned communications for more than 30 military exercises, traveling throughout Japan, South Korea, and the rest of the Indo-Pacific region. As a company grade officer, Major Mafrici deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



### David Maxwell

Colonel (Ret.) David Maxwell is a senior fellow at FDD. A 30-year veteran of the United States Army, he retired in 2011 after serving in various command and staff assignments in the Infantry in Germany and Korea as well as in the

Special Forces at Ft. Lewis, Korea; Japan; and the Philippines. Colonel Maxwell served on the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command, where he was a planner and co-author of operations and contingency plans, later serving as the J5 and then chief of staff for Special Operations Command Korea. He has also been the G3 and chief of staff of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.





### Clifford D. May

Clifford D. May is the founder and president of FDD. A veteran news reporter, foreign correspondent, and editor (at *The New York Times* and other publications), he has covered stories around the world. Since 2014, he has been

the “Foreign Desk” columnist for *The Washington Times*. From 2016 to 2018, May served as a commissioner on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. He was previously appointed as an advisor to the Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton Commission) of the United States Institute of Peace and afterwards received a two-year appointment to the bipartisan Advisory Committee on Democracy Promotion, reporting to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.



### H.R. McMaster

Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster serves as chairman of the Board of Advisors at FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power. He served as a U.S. Army officer for 34 years and retired as a lieutenant general in 2018.

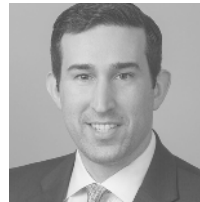
He remained on active duty while serving as the 26th assistant to the president for national security affairs. He taught history at West Point and holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is currently the Fouad and Michelle Ajami Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Stanford University.



### Mark Montgomery

Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery serves as senior director of FDD’s Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation. Prior to joining FDD, he served as the executive director of the congressionally mandated Cyberspace

Solarium Commission, where he remains a senior advisor. Previously, he served as policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee under the leadership of Senator John S. McCain, coordinating policy efforts on national security strategy and cyber policy. Rear Admiral Montgomery served for 32 years in the U.S. Navy as a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer.



### Nathan Picarsic

Nathan Picarsic is a senior fellow at FDD with a focus on China policy. He has closely monitored trends of Chinese impact across key economic and military balance areas for over a decade and is a leading expert on competitive strategies

and approaches to long-term peacetime competition. His work has contributed to broader recognition of the Chinese Communist Party’s focus on military-civil fusion and technical standards as critical factors in U.S.-China competition. He is a co-founder of Horizon Advisory, a consulting firm focused on the implications of China’s competitive approach to geopolitics.



### Samantha Ravich

Dr. Samantha Ravich is the chair of FDD’s Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation and its Transformative Cyber Innovation Lab and the principal investigator on FDD’s Cyber-Enabled Economic Warfare project. She is

also a member of the Board of Advisors at FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power. Dr. Ravich serves as vice chair of the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board and sits on the Secretary of Energy’s Advisory Board, where she co-chaired the Department of Energy’s Artificial Intelligence Working Group. She is also a commissioner on the congressionally mandated Cyberspace Solarium Commission. She previously served as deputy national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney.



### Bill Roggio

Bill Roggio is a senior fellow at FDD and editor of *FDD’s Long War Journal*, which provides original reporting and analysis on the Global War on Terror from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, Iran, and

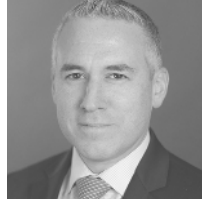
beyond. Roggio’s expertise is informed by his time in the field embedded as a journalist with the U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army, and Iraqi forces in Iraq between 2005 and 2008 and with the Canadian Army in Afghanistan in 2006.



### Eric Sayers

Eric Sayers is a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Sayers previously served as special assistant to the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, where he advised Admiral Harry Harris on strategic engagements

and special initiatives in the Indo-Pacific theater and Washington, DC. He previously served as a professional staffer for the Senate Armed Services Committee, where he managed the Asia-Pacific/Pacific Command policy portfolio and advised Chairman John S. McCain on regional security issues.



### Johnathan Schanzer

Dr. Jonathan Schanzer is senior vice president for research at FDD, where he oversees the work of the organization's experts and scholars. He previously worked as a terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of the

Treasury, where he played an integral role in the designation of numerous terrorist financiers. Dr. Schanzer has written hundreds of articles on the Middle East, along with more than a dozen monographs and chapters for edited volumes. He testifies often before Congress and publishes widely in the American and international media.



### Craig Singleton

Craig Singleton is an adjunct fellow at FDD, where he analyzes great power competition with China. He previously spent more than a decade serving in a series of sensitive national security roles with the U.S. government, including

overseas assignments at the U.S. Embassies in Baghdad, Iraq; Caracas, Venezuela; and, Mexico City, Mexico, where he regularly briefed U.S. federal law enforcement and military personnel, foreign governments, and policymakers.



### Behnam Ben Taleblu

Behnam Ben Taleblu is a senior fellow at FDD, where he focuses on Iranian security and political issues. Leveraging his subject-matter expertise and native Farsi skills, Taleblu closely tracks a wide range of Iran-related topics, including

nuclear non-proliferation, ballistic missiles, sanctions, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the foreign and security policy of the Islamic Republic, and internal Iranian politics.



### Amoreena York

Major Amoreena York is an active-duty U.S. Army officer who served as a visiting military analyst at FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. She previously served as the commander of the U.S. Army's Aviation Company, Task

Force Sinai, supporting the Multinational Force and Observers peacekeeping mission in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.



## Center on Military and Political Power



FDD's Center on Military and Political Power (CMPP) provides timely and relevant research and analysis to promote the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter and defeat threats to the freedom, security, and prosperity of Americans and our allies.

Since 9/11, Congress and administrations from both parties have often not provided the Department of Defense the timely, predictable, and sufficient funding required to support ongoing operations, maintain readiness, and modernize forces. Meanwhile, China, Russia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and North Korea have focused on perceived American vulnerabilities by modernizing and expanding their capabilities. A range of actors have employed hybrid or gray-zone tactics; operated against the United States and allies in increasingly contested domains such as space and cyberspace; and employed new forms of economic, informational, and legal warfare. These efforts are often combined under sophisticated, asymmetrical strategies designed to accomplish objectives below the level that might elicit a concerted response. As a result, U.S. military superiority has deteriorated or vanished in key defense capabilities, and the balance of power in strategic locations such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Western Pacific has shifted in a way that emboldens enemies, adversaries, and rivals. These developments endanger our vital interests, undermine deterrence, invite aggression, and increase the likelihood of military conflict in which our enemies could impose tremendous costs on the United States. To inform and catalyze urgent action, CMPP focuses on promoting the national security policies, strategies, and capabilities needed to win the great power competition with China and Russia, deter rogue states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and North Korea, and counter jihadist terrorism.



CMPP features *FDD's Long War Journal*, which provides original and accurate reporting and analysis on the Global War on Terror, as well as a Visiting Military Officer Program that provides professional development opportunities for active-duty U.S. military personnel and connects officers to FDD's National Security Alumni Network.

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### Chairman

**LTG (ret.) H.R. McMaster**

*former national security advisor  
to the president*

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### Senior Director

**Bradley Bowman**

*former national security advisor in the  
U.S. Senate and U.S. Army pilot*



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