



*The Marathon Initiative*

# Competition and Constraint: Toward a Balanced American Security Strategy

Washington cannot shrink from great-power competition where U.S. security is threatened, but nor can it form a strategy on the assumption that it possesses unlimited resources to compete, with equal effort, in all the world's major theaters at the same time.

This paper details that dilemma and outline foreign policy approaches that could be framed in response. The goal is not to dictate a specific American strategy, but to develop a framework for focusing debate.

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## I. COMPETITION AND CONSTRAINT

The international system is defined by competition and constraint: Competition, because the United States faces increasingly aggressive rivals who seek to undermine American and allied security; constraint, because the fiscal, military and diplomatic resources needed to confront those rivals are limited in crucial ways. This growing pressure on America's world position demands a strategic response to defend the nation's interests.

Of course, Americans disagree vigorously about what their interests are and how to pursue them through foreign policy. But the concept of national interest contains three implicit assumptions that should be less controversial. First, it assumes that the United States *has* interests in the world, and that the safety and well-being of the American people depends in part on how the country's power is wielded beyond its shores. Second, it assumes that America's efforts to shape the world's power balance should be tethered to those interests. Third, it assumes an alignment between means and ends: Washington should have the capacity to vindicate its interests.<sup>1</sup>

Breaking with any of these assumptions could throw American foreign policy off balance. If Washington loses sight of Americans' concrete stakes in world events, the country's security and sovereignty will erode over time. If it pursues idealistic goals that don't serve the interests of the American people, it will squander the finite resources available to defend them. If it sets goals beyond its power to achieve — or fails to build power commensurate with its goals — Washington will lose credibility at home and abroad.

This paper, informed by conversations within the Marathon Initiative and engagement with strategists outside it, applies these principles to the emerging geopolitical landscape. Washington cannot shrink from great-power competition where U.S. security is threatened, but nor can it form a strategy on the assumption that it possesses unlimited resources to compete, with equal effort, in all the world's major theaters at the same time. The following pages detail that dilemma and outline foreign policy approaches that could be framed in response. The goal is not to dictate a specific American strategy, but to develop a framework for focusing debate.

## II. THE THREE-FRONT PROBLEM

The minimum strategic interest that should preoccupy American policymakers is the survival of the United States as a free and independent country with its fundamental institutions and constitutional principles intact. The United States enjoys an enviable geopolitical position, separated by oceans from the world's other major powers. But the Eurasian landmass contains most of the world's population and productive capacity. Consolidated in the wrong hands, those resources could be brought to bear to isolate, coerce, and threaten the American people. Preventing a single state or combination of states from dominating Eurasia is thus the central imperative of American strategy.

To that end, Washington in the 20<sup>th</sup> century accumulated security commitments in three primary theaters: Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. Today, a revisionist state threatens the security of each theater, forcing the United States to stretch its resources across a widening geopolitical front.

Wars have broken out in two of the three theaters. The first is the Russia-Ukraine war intensified by Russia's all-out 2022 invasion. The second is the war in the Middle East triggered by the 2023 assault on Israel by Hamas, an Iran-backed militant group (as other Iranian proxies, as well Iran itself, have since joined the fight to varying degrees). In the third theater, China has massively built up its military and clearly telegraphed its intention to take control of Taiwan. War in Asia would be more destructive than those raging in Europe and the Middle East because it involves a rival that is militarily and economically stronger than the others.

America's adversaries have grown more coordinated and aligned. They share a desire to eject American power from their respective regions, as well as to compete with the United States for influence in Africa and Latin America. Meanwhile, Washington faces military and fiscal constraints that hinder America's ability to overmatch adversaries in each theater simultaneously. That three-front problem could ease in the future, but it could also intensify. It must be accepted and reflected in a balanced strategy.

### III. REGIONS

#### I. ASIA

This is the region of Eurasia where the military imbalance is most acute. Successive administrations have recognized the People's Republic of China as America's foremost competitor. Beijing has undertaken a massive military buildup, more than doubling its official defense budget to \$232 from \$106 billion in the last 12 years.<sup>2</sup> One U.S. government estimate put the real figure closer to \$700 billion — as much as the Pentagon spent in 2019 — while other analysts put the figure somewhere in between.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the exact balance of military spending, the concentration of China's forces in the Indo-Pacific gives it an advantage over Washington in a regional conflict because China only needs to be strong in one place while U.S. resources are spread across multiple theaters.

The United States has been a Pacific power since the 19th century, and Japan's ruinous bid for regional dominance in the 1930s and 1940s underscored the imperative of maintaining a stable balance of power in East Asia. With the region's emergence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a world center of advanced manufacturing and economic growth, and China as the first peer military competitor of the United States since the fall of the Soviet Union, that imperative has grown more pronounced.

China has made no secret of its desire to overturn the region's security order. It has developed more than 25 outposts in the contested Paracel and Spratly Islands, claimed waterways under the jurisdiction of the Philippines and other countries, and vowed to “unify” Taiwan, a strategically located island of 23 million inhabitants, with the Chinese mainland by force if necessary.<sup>4</sup> Such a conquest would dramatically and immediately increase China's coercive power in the region — particularly over Japan, the world's third-largest economy and perhaps the most important American ally in the world.

The United States has been able to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan for decades, including in the Taiwan Straits crises of 1954, 1958 and 1995, but that deterrence is eroding. China's military exercises simulating an assault are growing more and more frequent and intense. If the U.S. military defended the island from attack, most war games envision a bloody and protracted conflict costing thousands of American lives and trillions in economic damages.<sup>5</sup> American victory is no longer assured.

A secondary regional flashpoint is on the Korean peninsula. The United States is treaty-bound to defend South Korea (as well as Japan) from attack by nuclear-armed North Korea. Pyongyang's missile tests have increased in frequency — 46 from 2008 to 2015, compared to 132 from 2016 to 2023 — underscoring the multiple challenges to American deterrence in the region.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. THE MIDDLE EAST

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the principal threat to American interests in the Middle East. A revolutionary Shia regime, it is engaged in a long war of destruction against Israel and a competition for primacy against Sunni states like Saudi Arabia.

Iran has an ability to threaten American interests out of proportion to its direct economic and military footprint because of its network of allied militias in weak states from Iraq to Lebanon to Yemen, and because of the importance of the Middle East to world oil markets and trade. Tehran also stands on the precipice of nuclear breakout, an acute challenge to nuclear non-proliferation in the region and possibly beyond.

Even the current limited war between Israel and Hamas has contributed to a more-than 200 percent increase in the price of shipping, as attacks by the Yemen-based Houthi militia force ships to divert away from the Red Sea.<sup>7</sup> Securing freedom of navigation against Iran-backed threats is costly; the U.S. Navy has used over \$1 billion worth of munitions responding to nearly 200 Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, yet the group continues its attacks.<sup>8</sup>

America has been engaged in Middle Eastern security for over a century, and Washington maintains an interest in denying Iran or any other hostile power undue control over the Arabian Peninsula and world energy markets. Successive administrations have sought to retrench from the region, but Iran's sustained attempts to break the American-backed security architecture obstruct that objective.

Outside Iran, the greater Middle East also continues to be a base for transnational Islamist movements — as highlighted by the Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan in 2021 and events like the Islamic State terrorist attack in Moscow this year — that could target the American homeland.

## 3. EUROPE

Russia's all-out war on Ukraine from 2022 to the present has thrust Moscow's predatory ambitions to the forefront of world politics. The war has killed or wounded one million troops on both sides.<sup>9</sup> It has prompted a tremendous infusion of U.S. and allied resources to Ukraine, including \$55 billion (and growing) in American military aid.<sup>10</sup> Russia has levied the most serious threats of nuclear weapons use since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The principal American objective in the region is a peaceful Europe that is open to American commerce and led by friendly states. A narrower objective is to deter and if necessary defeat Russian aggression against the NATO alliance. That could trigger a direct, catastrophic war between Russia and the United States. Moscow has put its economy on a war footing since invading Ukraine, spending an estimated 35 percent of its budget on defense (\$140 billion), and sourcing weapons and materials more closely from U.S. adversaries in Beijing, Pyongyang and Tehran.<sup>11</sup>

Transatlantic relations — that is, ties between America and Europe — have been important to American security since its War of Independence, when France intervened on the colonists' side. Though its relative wealth and population have declined in recent decades (and appears set to continuing declining), Europe remains one of the world's richest and most advanced regions. The European Union is America's largest trading partner and the source of more than 40 percent of foreign direct investment in the United States.<sup>12</sup> While Russia is not as powerful as the Soviet Union, its drive for westward territorial expansion menaces America's long-running interest in the continent's stability and strategic alignment with Washington.

#### 4. LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA

As in the Cold War, geopolitical competition today is diffuse and frequently reaches beyond the borderlands of great powers themselves. China is America's major rival in the competition for geopolitical and economic advantage in Latin America and Africa, though Russia's military exploits in African countries such as Niger are on the upswing. Great-power efforts to control access to strategic natural resources on both continents could threaten America's long-term economic and military interests.

Warding off foreign military intervention in the Western Hemisphere has been a core U.S. foreign policy objective for more than two centuries. Iran's military support to Venezuela and Russia's naval exercises around Cuba show how adversarial states can pursue power projection in America's backyard. Foreign intervention in Latin America can also exacerbate conflicts that propel migration crises.

An uncontrolled southern border threatens American security directly because of the spillover of deadly drugs (tens of thousands of Americans die annually from fentanyl overdoses) and gang violence.<sup>13</sup> It might undercut Americans' political appetite for projecting power outside the Western Hemisphere in the first place.

## IV. LIMITS ON AMERICAN POWER

Some limits on Washington's ability to defend U.S. interests globally are *internal* to the American political system — that is, subject to our own political choices — while some are *external* to it — that is, features of the world system that Washington cannot control.

The chief *internal* limit is the American defense budget, which helps determine how much military power policymakers have at their disposal to shape the calculations of competitors. The United States spends about 13 percent of the federal budget on defense, compared to 69 percent when U.S.-Soviet competition was at its peak in the 1950s and a Cold War average of 40 percent.<sup>14</sup> The decline is driven both by the growth of social spending (in part a function of an aging society) and the decline of defense spending as a share of economic output. But credibly maintaining a balance of power in key regions of the world is not a cheap enterprise when powerful rival states are determined to change it.

Limited defense expenditures dilute America's ability to sustain its defense perimeter in concrete ways. Take the Patriot missile-defense system, a premier system for shooting down missiles and planes. The United States Army reportedly deploys 14 Patriot batteries and produces missiles at a rate of about 46 per month.<sup>15</sup> Russia's barrages on Ukraine have increased Kyiv's need for the systems. Meanwhile, Iran's April missile barrage on Israel has increased demand for these systems from American allies in the Middle East. In a war in East Asia, Patriots would also be critical to the defense of Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines from China's aerial attacks. These growing global requirements force Washington to prioritize the defense of some borders and regions over others.

This scarcity problem — which also exists for weapons such as long-range anti-ship (LRASM) and air-to-surface missiles (JASSMs)<sup>16</sup> — will continue to constrain America's strategic options for the near term. The defense-industrial base does not have the capacity to produce weapons at a fast-enough clip. Barring dramatic changes — and even then — increasing output will take years of higher investment and buildup.

The U.S. budget deficit (the annual difference between how much the government spends and how much revenue it collects) is about \$1.9 trillion. The debt-to-GDP ratio sits at 99 percent and is projected to reach 122 percent in the next decade.<sup>17</sup> Interest rates on U.S. debt have doubled in the last five years.<sup>18</sup> This higher cost of borrowing will put downward pressure on defense in the coming years, even under hawkish congressional majorities, as interest payments on the debt absorb resources that might have gone to innovation. Non-defense political priorities — including for tax cuts and social spending — will not vanish to make way for a larger Pentagon budget.

Putting the U.S. on a war footing would require a paradigm shift. Qualitatively (such things are hard to measure) the American public does not appear at present to regard Chinese, Russian and Iranian revanchism with as much alarm as it regarded Soviet



aggression in Europe in the late 1940s and East Asia in the early 1950s. Forced to choose between guns and butter, democracies do not always choose guns.

Meanwhile, one *external* limit on the ability to safeguard American interests is the durable presence of authoritarian regimes. Representative government is an ideal with global appeal, and American democracy can be a strategic advantage in the global competition of ideas. But Washington has limited power to change the fact that countries like Russia, China or Iran are governed by dictatorships.

Autocratic regimes may behave in ways that create friction with democracies like the United States, but that friction must be managed and controlled on the assumption that it will persist. Revolutions in tyrannical states are always possible, but if autocracy disappears from certain states or regions, it will not be on Washington's timeline. And one autocracy may ultimately be replaced by another — as in the transition from the Soviet Union to today's Russia.

Another limit is technological. The United States has a traditional qualitative advantage in military technology — on display, for example, in Israel's missile-defense superiority against Iran and its proxies. But technological innovations diffuse with growing ease in the modern world, and the American margin of advantage can't be taken for granted. China is thought to lead the U.S. on certain military-technological frontiers, such as hypersonics.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, even exquisite weapons systems can be overwhelmed by quantity and mass; the war in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of old-fashioned artillery shells in winning and holding territory.

At the same time, that war has shown the limits of financial sanctions to change the behavior of powerful states. China and India have helped propel Russia's continued economic growth in the teeth of coordinated Western sanctions since its invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions took off as a foreign policy tool in the post-Cold War era of American dominance. They appear less effective in a world of multiplying economic power centers.

A final external limit is the revealed weakness of global norms and institutions. The idea that trade would necessarily align competitors with American interests, for example, has been disproved by China's behavior since its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization. The International Criminal Court's indictment of Vladimir Putin and the leaders of Israel and Hamas does nothing to stop those wars.

Overreliance on global norms can create the illusion that America's foreign policy ideals will self-actualize. But the "international community" won't domesticate the world's states into "responsible stakeholders." To the extent that states behave in a way amenable to the United States, their decisions will be rooted primarily in an old-fashioned balancing of interests. Shaping the world system accordingly requires the application of power.

## V. OPENINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The fundamental advantage of American security strategy is that it is based on preserving the independence of already-sovereign states. Washington does not need to conquer or subordinate its adversaries; it only needs to prevent them from conquering or subordinating America's allies, thus maintaining regional balances of power in Eurasia that are consistent with the security of the United States.

To some extent, the increasingly dire world security situation is already prompting regional allies to harden their defenses. Examples include Poland's expenditure of 5 percent of its GDP on defense by 2025 (from 2.4 percent before the war in Ukraine) and, in the Indo-Pacific, Australia's revamp of its military planning to focus on contingencies from a Sino-American war.<sup>20</sup>

As they try to revise matters in their favor, adversaries can make mistakes and overreach, exposing their vulnerabilities. Russia's aggression in Ukraine threatens American allies, but it was also an expensive gamble. If Moscow fails to subject Kyiv to its control, it will likely have helped create a more cohesive, well-armed and Western-aligned state on its border.

Russia's invasion might be a long-term draw on its war-fighting abilities and specifically its ground forces. Though Russia is revving up its military industry, its war in Ukraine could divert resources that Russia might otherwise use to menace other regions along its frontier with NATO.

In other words, Washington can seek to exploit Moscow's own multi-front dilemmas. The same goes for China. Just as America's East Asian allies are threatened by China's ambitions in and around the First Island Chain in the Pacific, India is threatened by China's territorial ambitions in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean. Promoting India's continued economic growth and military strength (among other states in the Indo-Pacific) can thus help keep China's attention divided across multiple frontiers.

Another potential point of overreach by China is its turn in recent years toward a "dual circulation" economic strategy of statism and centralization, as well as its massive overproduction problem that relies on foreign markets' willingness to absorb its exports.<sup>21</sup> Beijing's drive toward self-sufficiency may be intended to put it in a position to weather a regional war. But if growth rates slow, the approach could also hinder Beijing's efforts to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor.

By the same token, strong U.S. growth would help ease the fiscal pressure that constrains American hard power. Good economic stewardship has always been vital to successful power projection. American growth has been higher than that of most rich countries in recent decades, thanks in part to its market-oriented tax and regulatory policies. To the extent that Washington implements policies that encourage investment

and growth (or at least avoids policies that unnecessarily curtail growth) it might have marginally more resources to devote to defense.

Encouraging domestic energy production would pay off doubly from a strategic standpoint. In addition to boosting near-term growth and therefore easing budgetary pressures, robust energy production could be a source of leverage against oil-exporting adversaries. Moscow takes advantage of high global energy prices to finance its imperial aspirations (at over \$230 billion, Russia's oil and gas revenues this year will likely exceed its military budget).<sup>22</sup> American energy independence — whether from hydrocarbons or renewable energy sources — would also dilute Iran's ability to threaten American interests in the Persian Gulf, perhaps reducing the amount of power that needs to be projected in that region.

Finally, there may be ways for the U.S. to squeeze more deterrent power out of a limited defense budget by fortifying the defense-industrial base. The Pentagon can shift some of its research and development budget toward munitions contracts with a faster payoff.<sup>23</sup> Bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles in the procurement process can be examined and waived if possible. Congress can subsidize inputs such as plastics, steel and electric switches to accelerate the production of key weapons.<sup>24</sup> Coordinating these efforts with allies would amplify their effects.

## VI. APPROACHES

Neither retreating to the Western Hemisphere, nor restoring the level of primacy America enjoyed in the 1990s and 2000s, is a realistic strategic objective for the United States. In between are other ways of strategic thinking aimed at protecting core interests and managing scarcity.

In broad terms, these include: Sequencing (taking on threats in an order that is advantageous to the United States), prioritization (concentrating resources on the biggest problem) and ramp-up (rapidly building up American military power). They aren't mutually exclusive, and choosing which to execute is an inherently political decision. But it makes sense to distinguish them as separate strategic approaches for clarity's sake.

For current purposes, the urgent thing is that strategists take the dual pressures of competition and constraint seriously, and grapple with the tradeoffs that they inevitably entail. Failure to do so invites continued overstretch and a collapse of America's world position, which would necessitate more radical and very likely unpalatable strategic changes than those that are available now.

### I. SEQUENCING

Sequencing seeks to leverage time as a strategic asset. For example, if China is a longer-term threat to the United States, and Russia is a weaker and nearer-term threat, then the logic of sequencing might counsel pouring strategic resources into Eastern Europe in the hopes of decisively setting back Russia before turning more U.S. attention to the Pacific. Advocates argue that delivering a signal defeat to Russia by proxy in Ukraine could discourage large-scale aggression in other theaters. Failing to resolve Russia's regional ambitions on terms favorable to the United States could extend conflict in Eastern Europe and derail "pivots" to other regions.

Done successfully, focusing on threats sequentially can help conserve resources and focus objectives. To take a contemporary example on a smaller scale and shorter time-horizon: Israeli strategists talk about finishing the fight against Hamas in the south before turning to Hezbollah in the north.

Of course, breaking up threats temporally is not always possible. The enemy, after all, "gets a vote." To the extent that the main threats to American interests are in fact simultaneous, there is less room for sequencing. The viability of sequencing in a particular scenario therefore depends on the degree of certainty policymakers can assign to estimates of adversarial intentions and capabilities, such as the oft-referenced date of 2027 for Beijing's readiness to take Taiwan.

The success of sequencing also depends, crucially, on America's ability to prevail decisively in one theater (and replenish its weapons and dollars) in time to protect its

interests in another. A stalemate in Ukraine, for instance, that requires the continued large-scale flow of U.S. resources, would not facilitate a strategic pivot.

Sequencing might be less attractive to those who regard America's rivals as members of a common axis united by authoritarian or anti-liberal ideology. From that perspective, the threats in each region are harder to differentiate. But even if American adversaries are ideologically aligned, the level of threat to specific American allies can ebb and flow over time. Washington can make use of sequencing to control the flow of resources to different fronts. It can also look for ways to drive wedges between rivals: For example, Russia's increasing reliance on North Korea might be a point of friction with China.

There could be ways to sequence America's three-front problem other than moving decisively against Russia in Ukraine. For example, Iran is the weakest of America's adversaries and perhaps the easiest to deter. One option — if America's adversaries really are ideologically and strategically enmeshed — could be to confront Iran aggressively and first in a bid to restore deterrence across the entire front. Of course, as revealed by Iran's sponsorship of Houthi piracy in the Red Sea, an ambitious approach to Iran could also divert great quantities of naval assets and munitions.

## II. PRIORITIZATION

Prioritization is stronger medicine than sequencing. Instead of trying to repel threats on a timeline favorable to Washington, a strategy of prioritization would concentrate resources on deterring the most serious threats, period — to the disfavor or even exclusion of lesser threats in other regions. If Washington can identify the rival capable of doing the most damage, it can surge resources to deter that rival while attempting to offload its security role in other regions.

China is clearly the strongest of America's rivals, with a GDP more than an order of magnitude greater than Russia's, and a correspondingly greater coercive power in its region and the world. Beijing's intention to start a war in the Western Pacific might be up for debate, but its manifest preparations and destructive abilities are not. Other Asian states are relatively weaker than China and unlikely to balance its power on their own. That makes East Asia — and particularly the Taiwan Strait — the natural priority theater.

The question of where the United States would draw down resources as part of a realignment of priorities is more difficult. The argument for reducing American power in Europe is that Russia is weaker than China and that the region is sufficiently wealthy to defend itself with a smaller American role. That is hard to deny based on raw GDP numbers, but greater European defense autonomy will not emerge overnight. Russia might seek to take advantage in the interim.

The Middle East is less economically significant than Asia or Europe, and the United States has been drawing down its direct footprint there since the War on Terror. But the region's importance to global energy markets and trading routes remains. The turmoil

in the United States over the war in Gaza shows the region's significance to domestic political currents. Unlike countries on NATO's front line, Israel has no natural source of great-power security support besides the United States.

The precise nature of security tradeoffs between the three fronts is complicated and technical. Some weapons, like 155mm ammunition and battle tanks, are important to Israel, South Korea and Ukraine, while anti-ship missiles are most important to the deterrence of China in the western Pacific. However, weapons such as Stinger missiles are in demand in both Taiwan and Ukraine, the U.S. has diverted naval assets from the Pacific to the Mediterranean and Red Seas over the course of the conflict in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> Successfully prioritizing will require making careful calculations about weapons systems and the regional contingencies in which they might be used.

Deploying or stockpiling weapons to deter China would aim to convince Beijing that a war with the United States would be unsuccessful. The risk is always that by prioritizing one front, Washington will lose control in another — making a general “run on the bank” more likely if rivals detect that America might not be willing to back up its security commitments.

Even a successful strategy of prioritization might allow rivals to make gains in secondary theaters. For example, prioritizing the threat from China could allow Russia to seek a more favorable resolution in Ukraine, amplifying its threat to NATO states in the long run. That long-run risk might be worth it if the alternative is a collapse of the U.S. position in the primary theater.

If one problem with sequencing is that strategists cannot reliably predict *when* crises will occur, one problem with prioritization is that they cannot reliably predict *where* crises will occur (and how politics and opinion will respond to eruptions in secondary theaters). When resources for projecting American power are scarce, this uncertainty — in time and space — inevitably grows.

### III. RAMP-UP

The most superficially attractive solution, then, is to attack the scarcity problem itself. After all, American power, like that of its rivals, is not fixed. To the extent that limits on power are internal, policymakers can ramp up America's capacity to influence geopolitical events. The most straightforward way to do this is through greater investment in American and allied armed forces.

That would entail spending more on a larger military and long-term weapons contracts to stimulate demand. How much more is a political question; the 5 percent of GDP sometimes floated would reflect hundreds of billion dollars more every year than Congress currently allocates to the Pentagon.<sup>26</sup>

An American military ramp-up would entail meaningful changes to the economy and labor force: The diversion of workers to defense industries, the conversion of consumer

factories to munitions factories, and the acceleration of production schedules (and accompanying changes to the regulatory landscape). And of course, it would need to be paid for by tax increases, cuts to other government programs, or by borrowing — with a concomitant increase in the deficit.

Parallel to the hard-power track, Washington might also make better use of economic and diplomatic instruments to amplify its persuasive power in the international arena, such as by linking foreign aid more tightly to U.S. strategic objectives. Closer strategic alignment with Pacific Island states is a recent example of successful American diplomacy amid competition with China.

The United States has ramped up its military capability in a short period before, most recently in the wake of the September 11 attacks of 2001 (defense spending as a share of GDP increased from 2.9 percent in 2001 to 4.6 percent by 2009).<sup>27</sup> It plausibly could do so again. But today the deficit is at historic levels and tax hikes and benefit cuts are politically unpopular. There is no major ramp-up on the immediate political horizon. (The Pentagon budget has remained roughly flat as a share of GDP during the war in Ukraine.)

The window to deter a major war is shrinking. Moreover, nuclear weapons make great power conquests harder to reverse than they were, for example, in World War II or the Korean War. If China successfully seized Taiwan, or Russia a NATO state, the American people might (or might not) sign up for more robust war mobilization — but potentially permanent damage to the American position would already have been done.

There is room for a realistic defense ramp-up to expand the menu of strategic options available to Washington. On its own, however, ramping up American power won't be sufficient to rebalance the means and ends of American strategy. The illusion that a return to primacy is just around the corner — after the next battlefield development, or the next U.S. election — is a crutch for Washington to avoid confronting tradeoffs. Ramp-up should be seen as a supplement, not a substitute, for a wider strategic debate.



## VII. CODA: LOOKING INWARD

The United States finds itself overstretched in a dangerous world. It will be increasingly pressed to meet all its accumulated commitments, across multiple fronts in Eurasia, at the same time. The age of competition and constraint thus calls for American policymakers not just to build up American power, but to seek more efficient uses of it, focus on some threats over others, and pare back American commitments where the country lacks the capacity to defend them.

This paper has tried to describe that problem set. But it's worth emphasizing, in conclusion, that there is no arithmetic solution. Detached strategic analysis can only go so far. How tradeoffs are managed — and if they are managed — will also be shaped by the country's domestic politics and ideology.<sup>28</sup>

Three salient features of the American political system deserve mention. The first is polarization. The two political parties are unusually evenly matched, and they regard one another with a historically high level of suspicion and disdain. This makes foreign policy reversals more likely as power changes hands.

Partisan disagreement concerning America's role in the security of Europe and the Middle East has flared amid the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars. Greater political consensus seems to exist around the threat from China, but that consensus has not yet been tested under the pressure of a hot war. Polarization might be a double-edged sword in strategy formation: On the one hand, it can widen the aperture in foreign policy debates, making way for new thinking; on the other, it makes consensus harder to sustain.

A second feature of America's political system is institutional inertia.<sup>29</sup> The machinery of American foreign policy — mostly set up in the wake of the Second World War to manage America's security interests — is vast and complex, often by necessity. It includes bureaucracies in defense, intelligence and diplomacy which might have specific interests and priorities. Just as domestic spending programs tend to be easier to create than to roll back, the same can be true of foreign policy commitments. Successful pivots aren't just a matter of strategic decision but of bureaucratic management.

Finally, foreign policy is influenced by ideology, for better and worse. America's three-front problem is rooted in the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union that was animated by the threat from international Communism. Washington's defense treaties in Europe and East Asia formed early in the Cold War to contain Communism's spread; its modern Middle East commitments date to competition with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. The Soviet Union's collapse left those commitments standing in a profoundly changed ideological environment.

The Communist Party still rules in Beijing, of course, and the United States has a strategic interest in denying hostile powers control over the world's major resource and



industrial centers no matter the ideology those powers profess. But the decline of Communism as an expansionary ideological force in international politics complicates efforts to give American foreign policy an overriding purpose or meaning.

Strategy, in other words, has many inputs. The way the United States weighs its interests is guided by ideology, events and leaders. But the sometimes-tragic process of choosing between competing priorities must be rooted in a basic understanding of the country's power and its limits. Today, American power is constrained relative to its security obligations, and there is no easy way out.

This paper certainly doesn't purport to offer one, but hopefully it can contribute to a more focused debate. All plausible tradeoffs involve risks Washington would rather avoid. Continued complacency, however, is the greatest risk of all.

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