



The Marathon Initiative

Strategic Sequencing, Revisited

October 18, 2024

The United States faces a growing risk of multi-front war against Russia, China and Iran. The optimal response to this danger would be a sequential strategy aimed at inflicting a strategic defeat on Russia in Ukraine on a faster timeline than China is prepared to move against Taiwan. But for that strategy to work, the United States must use the current window wisely to shore up the situation in Eastern Europe, broker a more effective division-of-labor with allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and reform the U.S. defense industrial base.

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Executive Summary

The United States is running out of time to avoid a multi-front war against Russia, China and Iran simultaneously. The optimal strategy for averting this scenario would be to sequence the main dangers in front of us by stopping Russia's westward advance in Ukraine before China is ready to attack Taiwan. The problem is that we have not used the period since the start of the Ukraine war as wisely as our adversaries. As a result, we now face a heightened possibility of a war on multiple fronts that could be beyond our immediate ability to win. America's best option is still to try to sequence the threats in Europe and Asia. But doing so will require the United States and its allies to:

- Help Ukraine gain a battlefield advantage, with a view to ending the war diplomatically on favorable terms;
- Build a strong Eastern European glacis centered on Ukraine, as the basis for future reconcentration of U.S. effort in the Indo-Pacific;
- Develop a more effective division-of-labor in which allies provide the bulk of conventional deterrence in the European theater;
- Reform the U.S.-allied industrial base and form defensive trade groupings with major allies to prepare for sustained competition with China, Russia and Iran.

The Logic of Sequencing

The idea of sequencing is simply to concentrate resources against one opponent in order to weaken its disruptive energies before turning to another, either to deter or defeat it. Sequencing is necessary because power is not infinite. For even the strongest of states, it is bounded by all kinds of things: distance, money, attention span. By dealing decisively with one opponent before other threats have fully manifested, a great power seeks to avoid a situation where either its military resources are stretched too thin and it suffers catastrophic defeat, or it has to shoulder the financial burdens of ramping up for a sustained war against all enemies in all directions concurrently, with concomitant strains on its economic base and society. The goal is to gain an advantage in competition by manipulating the factor of time.¹

¹ Not a lot has been written on the element of time in strategy. See Nadia Schadlow, "The Forgotten Element of Strategy," *The Atlantic*, June 22, 2023 and the author's essay in A. Wess Mitchell, Jakub Grygiel, Elbridge A. Colby, and Matt Pottinger, "Getting Strategic Deprioritization Right," *The Marathon Initiative*, June 26, 2023, https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Marathon-Initiative_Getting-Strategic-Deprioritization-Right96.pdf.

Sequencing's use in strategy is as old as history. Thucydides tells us that, in the lead-up to the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians made a five-year truce with the Spartans in order to deal with the Phoenicians before returning their focus to the Peloponnese.² Machiavelli writes that the Roman Republic skillfully sequenced its fights with Samnites, Latins and Etruscans, and that it first dealt with Pyrrhus before concentrating against Carthage.³ Variants of the strategy were used by Roman emperors to juggle threats from Dacians and Parthians, by Byzantine rulers to avoid fighting Vandals, Persians and Huns at the same time, by Habsburg monarchs to alleviate competition with Prussians, Bourbons and Ottomans, and by the Edwardian Britons to avoid war with Russia, France and Imperial Germany concurrently.⁴

A sequencing strategy would seem to be especially well-suited to the United States' present predicament because the opponent that moved first (Russia) is much less powerful than the main threat, which is China.⁵ At the time Russia invaded Ukraine, the Chinese military was estimated to need several years of modernization before it would be ready to attack Taiwan.⁶ The Russians, by contrast, were both impatient and, in relative terms, militarily weak. The United States and its allies therefore had a chance to decisively deplete the lesser of our two main rivals by providing support to Ukraine, which was both motivated and capable, with help, of doing the job.

The logic of sequencing dictates that we maximize our collective advantages against Russia by pursuing a strong but focused effort to inflict a proxy defeat on it in Ukraine, while using the contest as a prompt to get the U.S. defense-industrial base, and those of our allies, up to par. This would allow us to pivot more attention to the Indo-Pacific as

² Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book 1.112.

³ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book 1, chapter 1.

⁴ A. Wess Mitchell, Jakub Grygiel, Elbridge A. Colby, and Matt Pottinger, "Getting Strategic Deprioritization Right," *The Marathon Initiative*, June 26, 2023, https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Marathon-Initiative_Getting-Strategic-Deprioritization-Right96.pdf.

⁵ For an articulation of sequencing logic in the context of the Ukraine war, see the author's articles: "A Strategy for Avoiding Two-Front War," *The National Interest*, August 21, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/strategy-avoiding-two-front-war-192137>; "Putin's Invasion Could Be a Strategic Opportunity," *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/23/russia-ukraine-putin-war-invasion-strategy-biden/>; and "The Geopolitical Opportunity of Ukraine's Kursk Offensive," *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/15/kursk-ukraine-russia-offensive-incursion-china-asia-us-geopolitics-strategy/>.

⁶ Elbridge Colby, "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan: Being Ready Is the Best Way to Prevent a Fight With China," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>.

China grows more powerful but now with a weakened Russia, and mobilized alliances, on the other flank.

A Closing Window

The war in Ukraine has therefore represented a strategic opportunity for the United States. By arming a small state whose people are willing to fight for their continued independence, Washington could expand and refocus a U.S. defense-industrial base still geared to counter-insurgency warfare, with benefits not only for Ukraine but for similarly vulnerable allies Israel and Taiwan. By waging a proxy war at one end of Eurasia, it could improve the odds of avoiding another, potentially much more consequential war at the opposite end of Eurasia – or ensuring that it is better equipped for waging that war effectively if it does break out.

But for such a strategy to work, Washington has to actually implement it. The whole point of sequencing is to use time more effectively than one's opponent. As multiple official documents have made clear, the U.S. military is presently not postured nor equipped to fight wars against two peer competitors simultaneously – much less handle both while facing other, lesser but still serious challenges.⁷ Thus the imperative for the United States since the start of the Ukraine war has been to not just provide support to Ukraine but to rally allies and ramp up our own ability to wage war at scale, in order to prepare for and thus hopefully deter a war with the main opponent, China.

Unfortunately, we have not seized this opportunity. Since the start of the Ukraine war, the United States has:

- Reduced military spending in real terms while increasing the deficit and expanding outlays for domestic programs.⁸

⁷ See most notably the 2018 and 2022 National Defense Strategies and the findings of the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission.

⁸ "Biden Shrinks the U.S. Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-defense-budget-pentagon-u-s-military-china-russia-israel-ukraine-ba7fd46b>.

- Reduced the size of the army, announced delays in shipbuilding schedules, and pared back advanced programs like fighter aircraft and missile defenses.⁹
- Failed to address well-documented inadequacies in the U.S. defense-industrial base, with persisting shortages in key munitions and lead times of between 6 and 18 years for replacing the weapons that we have provided to Ukrainian forces.¹⁰

Most U.S. allies have not used the time well either. It's true, as NATO leaders announced in July, that 23 of the 32 members of that Alliance now meet their 2014 commitment to 2 percent of GDP on defense.¹¹ But with a few notable exceptions like Poland, most European allies have begun to slip back into pre-war complacency.¹²

- Germany's much-anticipated defense surge, known as the *Zeitenwende*, failed to materialize; the country's defense budget has been underfunded for the past two years, while the 2025 budget cut aid to Ukraine by half and contained less money than the German Army says it needs to be ready for war *five years* from now.
- At the European level, Germany continues to resist attempts at preparing for war that would require the issuance of common bonds.¹³
- At the 2024 NATO Leaders Meeting, allies failed to endorse a higher spending goal of 3 or more percent to replace the now-outdated Wales pledge.¹⁴

⁹ Davis Winkie, "Army takes troop level and spending cuts in Biden budget," *ArmyTimes*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/05/28/army-takes-troop-level-and-spending-cuts-in-biden-budget/>; Mike Stone, "Exclusive: Biden slashes F-35 jet order 18% in 2025 budget request, sources say," *Reuters*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-slashes-f-35-jet-order-18-2025-budget-request-sources-say-2024-02-14/>.

¹⁰ Mark F. Cancian, "Rebuilding U.S. Inventories: Six Critical Systems," CSIS, January 9, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rebuilding-us-inventories-six-critical-systems>.

¹¹ "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government," NATO, July 10, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_227417.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹² "Poland to spend 5% of GDP on defence in 2025, says foreign minister," *Reuters*, July 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/poland-spend-5-gdp-defence-2025-says-foreign-minister-2024-07-13/>.

¹³ "The Germany-shaped void at Europe's heart," *The Economist*, July 21, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/07/21/the-germany-shaped-void-at-europes-heart>.

¹⁴ Lili Bayer, "Let's not make it official: NATO allies reluctant to increase spending goals," *Politico*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-allies-reluctant-increase-spending-goals/>.

- Pledges by major European allies at the 2022 Madrid summit to deploy division-sized units on NATO's eastern flank have not been fulfilled; at present, the United States maintains nearly twice the number of troops in that critical region as western Europe combined.
- A recent report found that NATO lacks the posture, logistics, industrial capacity or "will to fight" that would be needed in a major conflict, and that Europe as a whole remains reliant on U.S. nuclear weapons to "expel, not repel" an attack.¹⁵

In contrast to the West, U.S. adversaries have moved much more determinedly to use the current window to their advantage. Since the start of the Ukraine war:

- Russia has reconstituted its armed forces and switched to something like a full war footing, with around a third of all government spending now going to defense and large swaths of civilian industry converted to military manufacturing.¹⁶
- China has increased defense spending by at least 20 percent, accelerated its nuclear and naval buildups, and made significant strides in sanctions-proofing its energy and financial sectors.¹⁷
- Iran has raised military spending twofold, significantly stepped up shipments of missiles to its proxies across the Middle East, and brought its nuclear program to the brink of weaponization.¹⁸

¹⁵ "Is NATO Ready for War," CSIS, June 11, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-ready-war>.

¹⁶ Noah Robertson, "Russian military 'almost completely reconstituted,' US official says," *DefenseNews*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/04/03/russian-military-almost-completely-reconstituted-us-official-says/>.

¹⁷ Aadil Brar, "US and China Defense Budgets Compared," *Newsweek*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-us-defense-budget-compared-xi-1875995>; Brad Lendon, "Expert's warning to US Navy on China: Bigger fleet almost always wins," *CNN*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/16/asia/china-navy-fleet-size-history-victory-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>; Christopher Vassallo, "'Shadow Reserves': China's Key to Parry U.S. Financial Sanctions," *The Marathon Initiative*, August 9, 2024, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/2024/08/shadow-reserves-chinas-key-to-parry-u-s-financial-sanctions/>.

¹⁸ Kimberly Donovan, Maia Nikoladze, Ryan Murphy, and Yulia Bychkovska, "Global Sanctions Dashboard: How Iran evades sanctions and finances terrorist organizations like Hamas," *The Atlantic*

The disparity in effort between large autocracies and Western democracies is not altogether surprising. The former are animated by revisionist goals and see a plausible chance to realize those goals through focused national effort, even if it comes at the expense of other social objectives. The latter are wealthy, open societies accustomed to a long and genial peace. War is expensive. No politician, whether European or American, wants to be the person who proposes cuts to pension benefits for the elderly or free education for the young in order to buy tanks and bombers.

What *is* surprising however is the extent to which the seriousness of the present predicament has not penetrated the collective psyche of Western elites and publics, despite nearly three years of large-scale warfare in Ukraine. As a historical frame of reference, consider that in the years immediately prior to World War Two – a period broadly analogous to where we are today on the geopolitical clock – Great Britain increased spending on the Royal Air Force by 700 percent and on the Royal Navy by 130 percent.¹⁹ That, for a country that is commonly thought to have been “asleep” to the rising danger of war and that was much weaker than in its rivals in relative terms than the present-day United States, whose leaders tend to be associated with the legacy of appeasing the threats arrayed against them. In our case, the pattern seems to be reversed: Where the democracies of the 1930s talked quietly while trying to sharpen a bigger stick, today’s West talks loudly while carrying a small stick.

Narrowing Options

The current state of affairs is gravely dangerous. For two and half years, the nations of the West have had before them on full display in Ukraine a foreshadowing of the wastage and ruin that would attend a protracted war with an industrialized power. And yet U.S. and allied preparations for such a contingency have not amounted to much more than a restocking of the scale of military provisions that we would have needed to face a bit player like Saddam Hussein or the Taliban.

The upshot is that the United States is effectively setting aside its optimal strategy, sequencing, and allowing its opponents to realize *their* optimal strategy, which is a

Council, October 26, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/global-sanctions-dashboard-how-iran-evades-sanctions-and-finances-terrorist-organizations-like-amas/>; Ellen Knickmeyer, “US says Iran moving forward on a key aspect of developing a nuclear bomb,” *AP*, July 19, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-nuclear-weapons-sullivan-blinken-2ba2de90dce5047c4a698b2d57a90e4b>.

¹⁹ N. H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, vol. I (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1976), p. 532.

coordinated or opportunistic “run on the bank” aimed at overwhelming U.S. allies in multiple theaters. The worst of all worlds would be to signal U.S. resolve to decisively punish the Russian assault on Ukraine as a threat to democracy and the “rules based international order”, as the Biden Administration has done, and then not mount the scale of effort that those stakes would indicate is necessary. The resulting rhetoric-reality gap gives U.S. adversaries the time and incentive to redouble their preparation for war while setting Washington up for a massive credibility shortfall when we prove incapable of defending what we have announced is so dear and crucial.

America’s strategic range of choice going forward will be heavily shaped by what it and its allies have done or not done in the precious window that is now closing. If we fail, whether by choice or drift, to effectively execute a sequencing strategy, our options will narrow to a handful of alternatives, all of which carry significant downsides.²⁰

1. *Outgrow the problem.* The most attractive option would be to mount a massive defense buildup aimed at ensuring that America is equipped to deter and if necessary fight *all* of its adversaries simultaneously. Under this scenario, the United States would expand the defense budget by a factor of two or more and return to a 2 or 2.5 war standard.²¹ The reason this approach hasn’t already been attempted is that it generates tradeoffs that are politically and financially difficult. National debt levels are already higher than they were at the end of World War Two. Significant increases in military spending would require some combination of decreases to social programs and increased taxes, both of which are exceptionally hard politically and, in any event, can’t be accomplished overnight.
2. *Prioritize Asia.* A second option is to prioritize the Indo-Pacific in U.S. military and diplomatic attention and let the chips fall where they may in Europe and the Middle East.²² The rationale would be that we have done what we can to help Ukraine and would be wise to husband our available strength for a contest with our strongest competitor. A reorientation of U.S. military resources to the Indo-

²⁰ See the overview of U.S. strategic options in Jason Willick, “Competition and Constraint: Toward a Balanced American Security Strategy,” The Marathon Initiative, September 2024, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Willick-TMI-Competition-and-Constraint-09-2024.pdf>.

²¹ Commission on the National Defense Strategy, RAND, 2024, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html>.

²² Elbridge Colby, “America must face reality and prioritise China over Europe,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/b423aa65-b9cb-4ba5-9c7d-f67dc289a18f>.

Pacific might have the added benefit of prompting the Europeans to take greater responsibility for conventional defense in their region. But such a move also carries considerable risks. Coming at a moment before the Europeans are ready to shoulder a greater defense burden, it might enable Russia to enlarge its gains in Ukraine and bring direct pressure to bear on the NATO frontier, which would then draw in *more* U.S. military attention to Europe. A Ukrainian collapse, following on the heels of the calamitous Afghanistan withdrawal, could do lasting damage to America's reputation among allies and adversaries alike in all of the world's regions.

3. *Offensive sequencing.* A third option discussed in some circles would be to try to mitigate the multi-front dilemma by launching a military attack against Iran.²³ The idea would be to take decisive action against the weakest of America's large opponents, thereby alleviating the pressure on one imperiled ally (Israel) and freeing up bandwidth for other theaters. The obvious problem is that such a move would likely backfire, with potentially catastrophic results. Modern Iran is not 1990s Iraq; it's a near-nuclear power linked by pseudo alliances to both China and Russia. Attacking Iran could trigger a wider Middle East war that could escalate in unpredictable ways and require the United States to redirect scarce military resources from the European and Indo-Pacific.
4. *Turn inward.* A fourth option, at least on paper, would be for the United States to try to alleviate its strategic pressures by downsizing the country's overseas commitments. The idea would be to cut back aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, and refocus U.S. energies inward, on rebuilding stockpiles and refurbishing the national economic base. Doing so, the reasoning goes, could keep America from getting sucked into a major conflict while creating incentives for allies to get serious about their own defense. The problem is that, in the current pressurized setting, it is more likely to prompt adversaries to *expand* their ambitions and prompt allies to assume conciliatory stances vis-à-vis U.S. adversaries or, in some cases, even develop nuclear weapons of their own. Coming at a moment of peak instability, this approach could help precipitate the very world crisis that the United States should be trying to avoid.

²³ See for example Matthew Kroenig, "The Case for Destroying Iran's Nuclear Program Now," *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/03/israel-iran-nuclear-weapons-biden-netanyahu-destroy-now/>.

Getting Serious about Sequencing

The downsides of these strategies should focus our minds on making the best possible use of the window of time that is now closing. A sequencing can still work, but it will require a highly disciplined and determined effort from the United States and its allies.

First, we need to help Ukraine regain and sustain a battlefield advantage. The crux of sequencing is to halt the advance of one rival (Russia) in order to focus greater eventual effort toward, another (China). A reasonable observer might ask if the same effect could be achieved by simply pushing the Ukrainians to agree to a ceasefire, without providing further military aid. The answer is probably not, because unless the Ukrainian Army represents a formidable force, the *Russians* are unlikely to see an incentive to do anything except continue taking territory for as long as they can. Bringing the Russians to the negotiating table in a serious way, in other words, depends upon the Ukrainians being able to inflict serious defeats upon, and hold their own against, the Russians.

To see the point, consider a historical example. In the early 1900s, Great Britain needed to reduce tensions with Imperial Russia in order to focus on the threat from Germany. At the time, Russia was expanding aggressively into Northern Asia, thereby forcing Britain to maintain large naval forces in the Far East. Britain worked to change Russia's calculus by allying with an Asian proxy, Japan, which dealt a strategic defeat to Russia in 1904. Only when Russia's preferred course of expansion had been thwarted by Japan in Asia could Britain safely shift its own naval focus to Europe, where Russia ended up becoming an ally against Imperial Germany. Closer to our own time, the United States pursued a similar strategy in the 1980s by helping the Mujahadeen deplete Russian power in Central Asia. This ultimately drove the Soviet state to a point of financial exhaustion that altered the overall strategic balance to our favor.

A policy of helping Ukraine would follow a similar logic: By stopping Russia in its preferred course of expansion toward Europe, the United States will have the best chance of being able to eventually divert greater military attention to the China threat. Like the 1900s Japanese or 1980s Afghans, today's Ukrainians represent a determined local actor that stands a fair chance of defeating a great-power opponent if given sustained outside support. The Ukrainians' needs are well-documented in this respect, and include not only certain types of munitions suited to land-warfare environments but also relaxed permissions to use those weapons against targets inside Russia.

Second, we need to help the Ukrainians get ready for a diplomatic denouement of the war. The whole point of empowering Kyiv to take the offensive should be to increase its leverage at the negotiating table. Historically, well-timed diplomacy has been a crucial

ingredient in successful sequencing strategies. Diplomacy provides the political mechanism by which a great power attempts to cement stability in one theater to shift focus to another. The merits of the resolution that it achieves – how much advantage it confers, the legitimacy it enjoys, how long it lasts – has an important bearing, for good or ill, on the ability to sustain focus elsewhere in the future.

In thinking about diplomacy's role in Ukraine, we should be guided less by process than by the outcome we are trying to achieve, in keeping with our overall strategy. What we want in Eastern Europe is a strong glacis to help keep Europe stable in coming years as the U.S. focuses more attention toward Asia. Ukraine would logically be the centerpiece of that glacis, as it will be the largest and best fighting force in Europe for the foreseeable future. Diplomacy should therefore strive to create conditions for a Ukraine that is as territorially large and economically viable as possible. It should also give Ukraine a Western institutional prospect, without which which Ukraine could someday be coopted or exhausted into becoming part of the Russian empire, thus weakening the glacis. This is not an act of charity but rather geostrategic good sense.

The form and timing of diplomacy should follow from these objectives. A formal peace treaty may not be the best formula for achieving them. Historically, wars of aggression involving the kinds of barbarity that Russia has visited upon Ukraine do not lend themselves to a general settlement quickly – or even at all. Germany during the Cold War, to cite a prominent example, went without one for a quarter of a century; Korea, to cite another, was brought to a tenuous resolution by an armistice that took more than two years to broker and never graduated to a wider political settlement.

In Ukraine's case, we should not be eager for a settlement if it comes at a moment when battlefield realities are likely to deliver a rump state that would have low utility in the Eastern European glacis that we need for conducting a pivot. For a cautionary tale, we need only look at the Franco-British deal that stripped away Czechoslovakia's borders in 1938 (an example of sequencing gone awry) or, closer to our own time, the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (supposedly meant to support a reallocation of U.S. force to Asia), for models not to replicate. Both were built on agreements, but neither brought the needed stability in the place in question. Better to have an imperfect armistice that yields a defensible Ukrainian state than a formal settlement that does not.

Right now, it's hard to say what a diplomatic downshift in Ukraine could look like. While the situation may not yet favor negotiations, there is a lot we can be doing to

prepare the groundwork.²⁴ We should be working behind the scenes to align the agendas of Ukraine and European allies into a unified stance on major questions that are likely to arise, including non-recognition of Russian territories in the East and ensuring that Western leverage, which is bound up in the rules and processes of numerous interagency processes across multiple allied states, can be utilized to maximum effect when the time comes.

Third, a sequencing strategy will not succeed unless Europeans begin to take substantially greater responsibility for the defense of their neighborhood. The entire logic of sequencing rests on the ability to get the secondary theater in a shape that allows a reorientation of attention to the primary theater without taking on inordinate risk in the former. Arming the Ukrainians to gain a battlefield advantage and helping them translate that advantage into diplomatic results are short-term steps in that direction. But unless the populous, wealthy, industrialized European countries next-door are able and willing to backstop the Eastern European glacis over the long-haul, a U.S. sequencing strategy will only deliver transient results.

We should be clear that this is not about “abandoning” Europe. Even once the United States has prioritized Asia, it will be a European power and continue to have compelling strategic reasons to keep certain kinds of high-end military hardware in that theater, both to augment European capabilities and to have a *point d’appui* from which to project power to other places, including Asia. During the Cold War, the United States occasionally had to downsize its presence in Europe to support an emphasis on Asia. In the most dramatic example, at the height of the Vietnam War, something like 70 percent of global U.S. military resources were located in Asia and just 30 percent were in Europe.²⁵ During that time the United States relied heavily on European forces, and in particular West Germany, to take up the slack in conventional defense while it continued to provide critical support in nuclear and air-power roles.

We need something similar today. The problem is the low baseline of European capability from which we are operating. Unlike after World War Two, Western Europe after the Cold War essentially disarmed. To reverse that, Europe would need to sustain an effort at war preparation that orders of magnitude greater than what it has undertaken since the start of the Ukraine war. At a minimum, the United States needs

²⁴ Thomas R. Pickering, “How to Prepare for Peace Talks in Ukraine: Ending a War Requires Thinking Ahead,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-prepare-peace-talks-ukraine>.

²⁵ Tim Kane, “Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2005,” Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006.

its European allies to be able to provide *at least* half of the conventional forces needed for collective defense in a NATO Article 5 crisis.²⁶

Getting to that point will require fundamental changes in not only how much Europe spends on defense but in how it organizes and regulates its own defense industrial base.²⁷ From a policy perspective, the point to stress is that the United States will need to be both a role model in war-preparation and a persistent public advocate if these changes are ever going to be taken – and right now it seems to be neither.

While getting European into better shape on defense will take time, there are steps that NATO allies can take in the meanwhile that would begin to alleviate the burden on the United States in the secondary theater. The most important of these is to accept a greater share of responsibility for conventional deterrence on NATO's eastern flank. At the 2022 NATO Leaders Meeting in Madrid, they promised to do just that, with a pledge to deploy brigade-sized formations in Poland, Romania and the Baltic States. But they have moved at a snail's pace in filling these commitments.²⁸

As it stands, Europe is an uneven risk pool in which a handful of states on the frontier bear the brunt of the danger, with the United States filling the gaps. Washington should seek a new grand bargain with Europe aimed at altering this state of affairs. It should be willing to support creative arrangements, including joint Franco-Polish-German military formations, a combined European level of ambition in NATO, or even a greater European Union role in regional security, in order to see them addressed. America's comfort-level with admitting Ukraine to NATO should increase in proportion to the willingness of major Western European allies to shoulder the bulk of the burden for securing the territory of *current* member states east of Germany. Until that happens, even the best assistance to the Ukrainians and the most inspired diplomatic arrangements will be tactical improvisations at best. To pivot to Asia, America needs a fulcrum in Europe, and that can only be provided by the Europeans themselves.

²⁶ Camille Grand, "Defending Europe with Less America," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Defending-Europe-with-less-America.pdf>; Heinrich Brauss and Christian Mölling, "NATO 2030 - The Military Dimension," NATO, January 21, 2021, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1551#>.

²⁷ Sean Monaghan, Eskil Jakobsen, Sissy Martinez, Mathieu Droin, Gregory Sanders, Nicholas Velazquez, Cynthia Cook, Anna Dowd, and Maeve Sockwell, "Is NATO Ready for War?" CSIS, June 11, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-ready-war>.

²⁸ Monaghan et al., "Is NATO Ready for War?"; A. Wess Mitchell, "Western Europe Is Still Falling Short in NATO's East: Deterring Russia Requires More Than Just Promises," *Foreign Affairs*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/falling-short-nato-east-deterring-russia>.

Finally, the United States and its allies must get serious about preparing for sustained competition with China, Russia and Iran. Sequencing is a strategy for gaining an early advantage in that competition – not a solvent for the underlying fact of competition. The whole point is to manage time wisely by using the proxy wars that are underway in Ukraine and Israel to increase our own capacity to wage war, so that a larger and more consequential war may yet be avoided *due to our enhanced strength*. If a sequencing strategy fails in its immediate aims but nevertheless delivers a significant plus-up in the West’s collective capabilities, it will still leave us better off than we would otherwise have been for fighting a future war in the Indo-Pacific when it comes.

The most pressing priority must be to bring the U.S. defense-industrial base into alignment with the realities of a great-power competitive landscape. Increasing defense spending is necessary but insufficient; in parallel, the country must act urgently to expand its military production capacity. The immediate emphasis should be producing the types of munitions that are needed in Ukraine but also have utility in Israel and Taiwan, including UAVs, artillery shells, and air and missile defense (AMD) systems. To support this goal, we should be willing to expand the range of weapons that are eligible for multi-year contracts, waive regulatory obstacles that prevent plant expansion, increase workforce training, and where necessary convert civilian industry to military production.²⁹ America must treat the matter with the same urgency and focus that it devoted to fighting COVID and expanding clean technology.

At the same time, the United States should be doing all in its power to realize the full economic and technological advantages of its extensive overseas alliances. The top goal of U.S. commercial diplomacy should be to bring as many key allies and partners as possible into trade and regulatory alignments that support the overarching U.S. goal of thwarting Chinese control of strategic industries. The centerpiece should be a trade grouping with some of the attributes of collective security, geared to ensuring that U.S. allies are less susceptible to Chinese coercion and that the United States possesses the ability to manufacture at scale in the areas that matter most for security.³⁰

²⁹ See Robert Almelor Delfeld, “Broadening the Base: A Blueprint for Expanding Defense Industrial Capacity,” The Marathon Initiative, April 2024, <https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Broadening-the-Base-Final-2024-04-2.pdf> and Mackenzie Eaglen and Bill Greenwalt, “Multiyear Contracts Could Solve Plenty of Pentagon Problems,” *DefenseNews*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/09/28/multiyear-contracts-could-solve-plenty-of-pentagon-problems/>.

³⁰ See Aaron L. Friedberg, “Stopping the Next China Shock: A Collective Strategy for Countering Beijing’s Mercantilism,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/stopping-next-china-shock-friedberg>.

Conclusion

In all of these areas – military, diplomatic, economic – the logic is the same: America and its allies must use the present window more wisely than we have to-date if we want to get ahead of the world crisis that is now gathering momentum. The wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East are wake-up calls to a complacent West to seriously prepare for a more turbulent future. Sequencing remains America's optimal strategy for dealing with the array of enemies that is massing against us. But that strategy only works if U.S. and allied leaders act with determination to get our armed forces, economies and societies ready for systemic war. Doing so involves risks and costs, but it is preferable to the alternatives of a precipitous pivot to Asia, an attempt at offensive sequencing, or turning inward in hopes of a retrenchment dividend. The hour is late, but the situation is not hopeless. We should do everything in our power to prepare for the worst in hopes of avoiding it.