



POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

A Close Look at the 2018 National Defense Strategy

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1. Introducing the 2018 National Defense Strategy Roundtable

Ryan Evans

America's national security thinkers make for a tough crowd, especially when it comes to published or leaked U.S. government strategy documents. These documents tend to be either jargon-saturated monstrosities without real prioritization or so bold as to be controversial. As an example of the latter, in the next issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, Hal Brands shows how the *Defense Planning Guidance* that leaked from the first Bush administration in the early 1990s can start an argument well over 20 years later. Debates over the Trump administration's *National Security Strategy*, the leaked version of its *Nuclear Policy Review*, and the recently released *National Defense Strategy* show that these kinds of documents still arouse predictable passions.

Thus far, the *National Defense Strategy* has been the best-received of the three. The first salvo from the commentariat was largely laudatory in response to the strategy's clear prioritization of great power competition. Yet some of these same voices have criticized the document's rickety relationship with the reality of America's willingness to spend on military power.¹ These features of the strategy constitute the main areas of inquiry in this roundtable, featuring McKenzie Eaglen of the American Enterprise Institute; Dennis Blasko, formerly of the U.S. Army; Michael Kofman of CNA; and Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute.

¹ Kori Schake, "Mattis's Defense Strategy is Bold." *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2018.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/22/mad-dog-mattiss-defense-strategy-is-bold/>.

One of the challenges of assessing this strategy is that we do not really know what is in it. The document that has been released is a shorter and unclassified summary of the real document. Still, there are a number of clear insights that this new strategy can provide, and the participants of this roundtable explore them ably.

First, let's discuss the elephant in the oval-shaped room: the president of the United States. One of the problems with any strategy released by this administration is that no one is quite sure if it truly represents President Donald Trump's own vision.

The gaps between the president and his administration's written policies infects the strategy's approach to competition with China. Blasko compares this new strategy with the *National Security Strategy* and with Trump's speech announcing it and finds troubling inconsistencies that he worries will lead to muddled policies. Whereas the Pentagon and the authors of the *National Security Strategy* seem to have a clear-eyed view of the challenges posed by China, the president says he wants to "build a great partnership" with Beijing. Blasko argues, "If reality is closer to the president's vision, then some U.S. policies may need adjustment. If the latter, then the global 'winner takes all' competition requires radical changes to U.S. policy."

Eaglen is pleased to see the Pentagon trying to focus American energy and attention on threats posed by Russia and China, but wonders if the president is on board or if he is still fixated on counter-terrorism. "On the campaign trail," she writes, "candidate Trump was as hard as they come on how to defeat terrorists ... Trump will surely seek additional wins on the battlefield wherever he can, and combatting terror will offer the greatest opportunity for these victories in the immediate future."

Prioritizing great power competition might prove difficult for reasons that are more deeply rooted in our political system than Trump. Shaking America free of the allure and habits of counter-terrorism will be no mean feat for any U.S. leader. Eaglen explains:

Political pressure to continue prioritizing the fight against terrorism means that while Pentagon leaders want more equilibrium between the long-term competition with China and Russia, counter-terrorism operations are likely to remain nearly all-consuming absent daily leadership to buck the system and change course.

Still, China and Russia occupy a prominent place in the Pentagon's strategy document. But Washington has yet to come to terms with what Preble calls the "ultimate irony":

Enemy number one, China, is funding our profligate ways by buying U.S. Treasury bills. Indeed, Americans, indirectly at least, are funding part of China's military modernization through the interest paid on the U.S. notes they hold.

Moscow will undoubtedly be pleased by Russia's prominence in the *National Defense Strategy*, no matter what the Kremlin might say publicly. Since its defeat in the Cold War, Moscow has sought to rebuild Russia as a great power and to be recognized as such. As Kofman observes, the *National Defense Strategy* grants Russia that status, placing it alongside China, an even heftier power. In his stinging critique, Kofman writes:

[I]t seems the only discernible theory of victory is just restoring America's eroding military advantages. It's clear how this answers the Pentagon's needs for more, but what this solves in terms of the Russia problem set, be

it in Syria, Ukraine, Crimea, or forms of competition below the threshold of war, remains a mystery. A more effective strategy would signal a clear intent to establish U.S. coercive credibility, demonstrate resolve, and lay out a plan to deter over that which matters, while at the same time assuring America's adversaries that the competition is not existential, and thus can be bounded.

Interestingly, Kofman, a Russia military expert, and Blasko, a China military expert, each view the other country as posing a more serious threat to U.S. power and America's leading role in the international order. Kofman bemoans the fact that the *National Defense Strategy* treats Russia and China much too similarly. By trying to step up military competition with Russia, Kofman argues, the Pentagon will make it harder to "marshal resources to manage a much stronger challenge looming from China."

For his part, Blasko sees Russia as more likely than China to undermine the foundations of the international order since it has been less of a beneficiary of it. And while China's military modernization is daunting, it has also been disruptive and, according to Blasko, in the near-term, it "is unlikely that the senior PLA leadership believes it has the capability to displace the United States from the Indo-Pacific region."

Kofman and Blasko both level the same charge at the *National Defense Strategy's* assumptions on Russia and China respectively. Kofman argues that Russia is already eminently deterrable and that a war with Russia is avoidable due to the substantial nuclear arsenals held by both nations. Therefore, escalating a military competition with Russia might only make matters worse without advancing U.S. interests. Referring to military competition with China, Blasko writes:

Escalation of the military situation increases the chance of mistakes and miscalculations by all parties involved. Additional nukes, B-2s and carriers won't fix the problem; U.S. political leaders need more options than flexing their son's 19-inch biceps. The self-inflicted decimation of the State Department is more of an immediate threat to American national security than is China.

Regardless of the wisdom of these strategic decisions, the question remains: How can the United States pay for an ambitious competition with two great powers while meeting a plethora of other security commitments, that include containing Iran and preventing a disaster on the Korean Peninsula? Any strategy should begin with this question — but that is not in the American habit. Nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, and tanks are expensive and the *National Defense Strategy* indicates an appetite for more of them. “That is,” as Preble politely observes, “an unreasonable expectation.” The Pentagon's vision of the strategic landscape, he writes, is

unlikely to rouse the public to forego domestic spending goodies, or tolerate vastly higher taxes, in order to defeat. Indeed, the primary foe — China — is financing America's spending binge, and is also a key factor powering the global economy.

Eaglen sketches out an array of competing demands, from the need for more conventional capacity and capability, to nuclear modernization, to key manpower shortages across the military, including and especially pilots. “With all of these competing needs,” she writes, “it is unclear whether the Pentagon will be able to do what previous administrations have not and sustain the aspirational goal Mattis has laid out in the *National Defense Strategy*.”

For his part, Preble is less concerned about many of these competing choices. He argues that it is possible to defend and advance America's vital interests without wallowing in bankruptcy, which is where the country could end up if it continues on the path set before it by the *National Defense Strategy*.

The voices featured in this roundtable are critical, yes. Still, Secretary Jim Mattis and his team deserve credit for bold thinking and for largely avoiding the mealy-mouthed jargon that is too often the norm for documents such as this.

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2. The Pentagon's 19-Inch Biceps Versus Revisionist Threats: China in the National Defense Strategy

Dennis J. Blasko

The Trump administration has been consistently inconsistent in nearly everything it has done in its first year in office. Over the past month, this inconsistency has extended into the realm of national security and defense policy. What the president says is often not consistent with what senior administration officials say or with the documents the bureaucracy produces. When there is a drastic shift in policy, the American public deserves a full explanation — especially when it involves a major power like China. Given the discrepancy between words and deeds, many in the United States and world are confused. This confusion will persist as long as the main principle underlying the Trump foreign policy is “I’m the only one that matters.”²

At the rollout of the *National Security Strategy*, President Donald Trump declared: “A nation that is not prepared to win a war is a nation not capable of preventing a war.... our strategy is to preserve peace through strength.”³ The same theme is repeated in the first sentence of the unclassified summary of the *National Defense Strategy*: “The Department of Defense’s enduring mission is to provide combat-credible military forces needed to

² Bill Chappell, “‘I’m The Only One That Matters,’ Trump Says Of State Dept. Job Vacancies,” NPR, Nov. 3, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/11/03/561797675/im-the-only-one-that-matters-trump-says-of-state-dept-job-vacancies>.

³ The White House, “Remarks by President Trump on the Administration’s National Security Strategy,” Dec. 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

deter war and protect the security of our nation. Should deterrence fail, the Joint Force is prepared to win.”⁴

In order to prevent war, the *National Defense Strategy* makes building a more lethal force its first priority. The *National Security Strategy* expresses the same idea, using the word “overmatch,” which is linked to diplomacy, shaping the world, and producing innovative capabilities:

The United States must retain overmatch— the combination of capabilities in sufficient scale to prevent enemy success and to ensure that America’s sons and daughters will never be in a fair fight. Overmatch strengthens our diplomacy and permits us to shape the international environment to protect our interests.⁵

It continues, “We must convince adversaries that we can and will defeat them—not just punish them if they attack the United States.” In other words, the United States must have the will to employ its capabilities and ensure that potential unnamed adversaries understand its intentions.

⁴ The Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, Jan., 2018,

<https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, Dec., 2017,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

The president's words and Pentagon policy reach back at least to the quote, "*Si vis pacem, para bellum*" (If you want peace, prepare for war)⁶, attributed to the 4th century Roman Vegetius. This concept of deterrence is not unique to the United States and has a less muscular doppelganger in Chinese military doctrine.⁷

The president's rollout speech, the *National Security Strategy*, and the *National Defense Strategy* provide important insights into the objectives, priorities, and — unfortunately — the inconsistencies and flaws of U.S. security strategy. These three official statements reveal the gaps between what the president says and what the government bureaucracy writes, between administration rhetoric and action (as revealed by funding requests), and between ideological-based versus evidence-based conclusions.

The president's words are markedly different from the administration's perception of the immediate Chinese (and Russian) threat to the international system. While the president recognizes Chinese challenges to "American influence, values, and wealth," he nonetheless seeks to "build a great partnership." The Pentagon, on the other hand, assesses that the Chinese want to "shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model," and displace the United States on its way to world preeminence. If reality is closer to the president's vision, then some U.S. policies may need adjustment. If the latter, then the global "winner takes all" competition requires radical changes to U.S. policy.

⁶ "Flavius Vegetius Renatus Quotes," Military Quotes, accessed Jan. 25, 2018, <http://www.military-quotes.com/vegetius-renatus.htm>.

⁷ Dennis J. Blasko, "Peace Through Strength': Deterrence in Chinese Military Doctrine," *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/peace-through-strength-deterrence-in-chinese-military-doctrine/>.

The *National Defense Strategy* dismisses without refutation official Chinese statements of intentions, the extent of its dependence on foreign trade, and the near-term disruptions in the Chinese armed forces caused by its recent reforms.⁸ Yet, despite the differences in our political systems, U.S. policies of deterrence and force modernization are similar to China's in many ways.

Rivals or Revisionists? How a Country is Categorized sets the Tone for the Relationship

The *National Security Strategy* is a component of the larger “America First” foreign policy. It assures the world that the United States’ new strategy of “principled realism” is “guided by outcomes, not ideology.” But significant differences in the president’s words and those found in it and *National Defense Strategy* muddy the nature and intensity of the Chinese threat and the appropriate policies to implement in response. The president speaks of a challenge manageable through “partnership,” while the *National Security Strategy* warns of a regional Chinese threat and the *National Defense Strategy* presents an imminent threat to the world order in which China seeks to replace the United States as the global leader. Whatever the magnitude of the Chinese threat, the president and administration are committed to making historic⁹, “increased and sustained”¹⁰ investment to deal with the entire gamut of threats, now and in the future.

A major element of “principled realism,” it seems, is labeling China and Russia “revisionist powers” in both the *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense*

⁸ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*.

⁹ *National Security Strategy*.

¹⁰ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*.

Strategy. The president, however, used the word “rival” in his speech, a much less ominous word than “revisionist,” and wants to “build a great partnership with those and other countries, but in a manner that always protects our national interest.”

The *National Security Strategy* does not explain the meaning of “revisionist,” but states that the United States will improve the performance of the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization through reforms — reforms that benefit the United States first and foremost. For the United States, such reforms apparently do not rise to the level of “revision” of the international system.

The *National Defense Strategy* defines revisionism as going far beyond reform to institutions and as threatening other nations’ political systems. It makes the profound assertion that Russia and China are intent on shaping the “world consistent with their authoritarian model — gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.” This assessment describes a much greater threat to the United States and world than the president’s description of the “challenges” Russia and China pose.

The *National Security Strategy* includes Chinese capabilities among those used by “adversaries” and the *National Defense Strategy* calls China a “strategic competitor.” But both documents fall short of identifying China as an enemy.

The Pentagon’s strategy pronounces Beijing’s military objectives as pursuing “a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.” A month earlier the *National Security Strategy* described narrower military goals: “China has

mounted a rapid military modernization campaign designed to limit U.S. access to the region and provide China a freer hand there.”

The *National Defense Strategy*'s depiction of Chinese intentions elevates the immediate Chinese threat well above the words competitor, rival, or challenge. Though not explained, this epiphany likely is the result of decades of strategic distrust of Chinese intentions, worst-case assumptions, and compressing the timeline for Chinese military modernization to years, not decades.¹¹

Similar to the president's *National Security Strategy* rollout speech, the statement in the *National Defense Strategy* about displacing the United States is followed by the incongruous “far-reaching objective” to “set the military relationship between our two countries on a path of transparency and non-aggression.” In light of what the *National Defense Strategy* describes as China's intentions to remake the entire world in its own image, “a great partnership” and military relationship of transparency and non-aggression sound like more of the feckless policy of engagement, which the *National Security Strategy* says the United States must “rethink.”

Needless to say, the Pentagon's version of Chinese objectives contradicts many years of official Chinese statements about their ambitions toward the United States, their region, and the world.¹² Only last November Xi Jinping revealed, “As I said to the President, the

¹¹ John L. Thornton “Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust,” China Center at Brookings Institute, March, 2012, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0330_china_lieberthal.pdf.

¹² “The top 10 quotes of Xi on China-U.S. ties,” *New China*, Sep. 14, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/14/c_134623163.htm.

Pacific Ocean is big enough to accommodate both China and the United States”¹³ — an outlook supplemented by a litany of official declarations of “peaceful development,”¹⁴ that “China does not seek regional hegemony or sphere of influence,” and its concept of win-win cooperation.¹⁵

As policy document, and not an intelligence assessment, the *National Defense Strategy* is not obliged to offer proof to dispute Xi or to support its interpretation of Chinese intentions. The Defense Department’s last report to Congress, issued in May 2017, included no such goal in the list of the Chinese Communist Party’s strategic objectives.¹⁶

Diplomacy and the Disconnect between Words and Resources

The strategies’ references to the importance of American diplomacy are belied by the administration’s funding priorities. In his speech, the president did not mention the word “diplomacy” or the role of the State Department. Yet, both the security and defense strategies frequently refer to using diplomatic (and other) tools in the execution of policy

¹³ U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China, “Remarks by President Trump and President Xi of China in Joint Press Statement,” Nov. 9, 2017, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/selected-quotes-press-statement-president-trump-joint-press-conference-president-xi/>.

¹⁴ The State Council “China’s Peaceful Development,” People’s Republic of China, September 2011, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi: The New Concept of Win-win, Multi-win and All-Win is Right Direction of Development of International Relations,” Feb. 2, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1234405.shtml.

¹⁶ 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?ver=2017-06-06-141328-770.

objectives so that the United States can negotiate from a position of strength to shape the international environment. However, under-resourcing diplomacy appears to be the actual policy of the administration. The reality is clear: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson supports massive cuts¹⁷ to his department's budget (down from \$55.6 billion in 2017 to \$37.6 billion in 2018 compared to the \$639 billion defense budget request¹⁸) and reducing the "ranks of civil servants and foreign service officers by about 2,300 positions."¹⁹

Over half a dozen retired four-star flag officers opposed such cuts, quoting what then-Commander of U.S. Central Command, current Defense Secretary James Mattis, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2013,

[I]f you don't fund the State Department fully then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.... The more we put into the State Department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of apparent American withdrawal from the international scene.²⁰

¹⁷ "Testimony of Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State," Opening Remarks Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, June 14, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/271895.htm>.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Proposal," Release No: NR-192-17, May 23, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1190216/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2018-budget-proposal/>.

¹⁹ Joel Gehrke, "Senators not happy with Rex Tillerson's State Department reform effort," *The Washington Examiner*, Nov. 14, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/senators-not-happy-with-rex-tillersons-state-department-reform-effort/article/2640644>.

²⁰ Dan Lamothe, "Retired generals cite past comments from Mattis while opposing Trump's proposed foreign aid cuts," *Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/27/retired-generals-cite-past-comments-from-mattis-while-opposing-trumps-proposed-foreign-aid-cuts/?utm_term=.19359385e14f.

Another gap between rhetoric and resourcing is the *National Security Strategy*'s reference to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, "which selects countries that are committed to reform and then monitors and evaluates their projects." The very next paragraph begins with the admonition to "Commit Selectively." Selective commitment is illustrated by the Millennium Challenge Corporation's budget request of \$800 million for FY2018 (.13 percent of the defense request) "for programs in Mongolia, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Togo, and Timor-Leste..."²¹ Though not exactly equivalent, the work of the Millennium Challenge Corporation pales when compared to China's "Belt and Road Initiative."²² For a comparison of the scale of U.S. and Chinese efforts in infrastructure development in the region, the Center for Strategic and International Studies has an interactive map²³ that describes over 50 Chinese projects compared to three U.S. efforts.

But enough about us. What about the Chinese goal to achieve "Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term" and displace the U.S. "to achieve global preeminence in the future"? The future can be a long time from now, but usually the near-term runs from two to five years out. Thus, the real question is what will the People's Liberation Army (PLA) be capable of in the 2020 timeframe?

²¹ "Executive Summary, Congressional Budget Justification, FY 2018," Millennium Challenge Corporation, United States of America, accessed Jan. 25, 2018, <https://www.mcc.gov/resources/story/story-cbj-fy2018-executive-summary>.

²² The State Council, "The Belt and Road Initiative," People's Republic of China, accessed Jan. 25, 2018, <http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>.

²³ "Reconnecting Asia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed Jan. 25, 2018, <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/map/>.

PLA Modernization and Deterrence

Chinese military doctrine defines warfighting, deterrence, and military operations other than war as the three [basic ways of using military force](#).²⁴ Warfighting is the core of deterrence. Three conditions are necessary for deterrence: 1) an “adequate deterrent force,” 2) the “determination and volition [to employ] the strategic deterrent force,” and 3) interaction “between the deterrer and the deterred.”²⁵ Deterrence is China’s preferred method achieve its strategic objectives; warfighting is used when deterrence fails and there is no alternative. As is evident from the quotes cited above, this concept of deterrence parallels in many ways the U.S. policy of “peace through strength.”

Currently, the PLA is focused on defense within the first island chain, but is gradually expanding air and sea operations to more distant seas²⁶, as seen by numerous methodical flights²⁷ and cruises²⁸ in the western Pacific. Over time, the PLA Navy and Air Force seek to establish crew proficiency for their new ships and aircraft, train small units to operate in large formations, prepare commanders and staffs to plan for the employment of combined arms and joint forces, familiarize the forces with new operating areas, and

²⁴ *The Science of Military Strategy*, (Military Academic Works, Academy of Military Science, 2013).

²⁵ Blasko, “Peace Through Strength’.”

²⁶ “Full Text: China’s Military Strategy,” Xinhuanet, accessed Jan. 25, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001_4.htm.

²⁷ Yuan Can, “PLA Air Force to regularize training over First Island Chain,” *People’s Daily Online*, Sep. 3, 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0913/c90000-9114575.html>.

²⁸ “Chinese aircraft carrier heads for West Pacific for blue water training,” *Xinhua*, Dec. 26, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-12/26/content_7423537.htm.

demonstrate newly acquired capabilities to the world. The operative word above is “gradual,” consistent with the PLA’s long-term modernization program.

The PLA’s “three step development strategy” — made public in the [2006 white paper](#)²⁹ (and revised slightly in [the 2008 white paper](#))³⁰ — established a generic outline for modernization, setting milestones at 2010, 2020, and the mid-21st century (2049). The nonspecific 2010 goal of laying “a solid foundation” came and went with little fanfare. Last year, Xi announced the 2020 milestone had been completed without tying it directly to the strategy, “The PLA has basically completed mechanization and is moving rapidly toward ‘strong’ informationized armed forces.”³¹ At the 19th National Party Congress, he redefined the timeline³² by moving the mid-century objective of “modernization of national defense and armed forces” forward to 2035. Specifically, he directed the PLA to enhance the modernization of military theory, organization, personnel, and weaponry and equipment by that date (many of these themes are mentioned in the *National Defense Strategy* as tasks essential for the Department of Defense to address in “rebuilding” the U.S. military). Xi also changed the final, mid-century goal to building the PLA into a “world-class military,” a term left undefined. Officially, the PLA has adopted a generational, not near-term, approach to modernization.

²⁹ “National Defense Policy,” accessed Jan. 25, 2018, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/194485.htm>.

³⁰ “China’s National Defense in 2008,” accessed Jan. 25, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2009-01/20/content_1210227_4.htm.

³¹ Li Jiayao, “China Focus: “Be ready to win wars,” China’s Xi orders reshaped PLA,” *Xinhuanet* Aug. 2, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-08/02/content_7699926.htm.

³² “决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利” [Decisively Build a Well-off Society in a Comprehensive Way, Win the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics], China Military Network, Oct. 19, 2017, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-10/19/content_189964.htm.

Over the past two years the PLA has implemented the largest organizational changes since the 1950s and launched a 300,000-man reduction. The previous national and regional command structure was replaced in 2016³³ and, beginning in April 2017, operational units underwent even greater changes.³⁴ The amount of disruption in the PLA has been unprecedented, demonstrated by:

- “Over 90 percent of military officers from the original [18] group armies and 40 percent from combat brigades have been transferred” to different units³⁵
- [New commanders and political commissars](#)³⁶ have been assigned to all 13 new group armies; of the 26 new leaders, 22 were transferred from outside the theater’s area of responsibility
- “Over 1,000 units at the regiment level or above” were disbanded³⁷
- “Over 100 brigade and regiment-level units”³⁸ moved to new locations

³³ Dennis J. Blasko, “Walk, Don’t Run: Chinese Military Reforms in 2017,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 9, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/walk-dont-run-chinese-military-reforms-in-2017/>.

³⁴ Zhang Tao, “China reshuffles 84 corps-level military units,” *Xinhuanet*, March 18, 2017, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-04/18/content_7567179.htm.

³⁵ Huang Panyue, “PLA stresses combat readiness, reassigns officers based on battle requirements,” *Xinhuanet*, Dec. 11, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-12/11/content_7861974.htm.

³⁶ Wang Jun, “13个新集团军主官人选均确定，原有的集团军主官全部换岗” [13 New Group Army Leaders Identified, Original Group Army Leaders Changed Posts], *The Paper*, Aug. 16, 2017, http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1765430.

³⁷ Yamei, “Facts and Figures on China’s military reform,” *Xinhua*, Dec. 19, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/19/c_136837189.htm.

³⁸ “Over 100 brigade and regiment-level units”: Wang Junkang, Fu Xiaoxiang, “视频 | 干得漂亮！中国陆军2017年大事记” [Video: Well Done! Chinese Army Events in 2017] at time mark 00:26, China Military Network, January 2, 2018, http://tv.81.cn/jlwyx/2018-01/02/content_7892906.htm.

- The number of trans-regional exercises dropped from a peak of 29 in 2015³⁹ before organizational reforms began, to only 15 in 2016⁴⁰ and to about 10 in 2017⁴¹ (some of which were not reported widely in the military media as in prior years)
- Some units have felt compelled to conduct psychological counseling⁴² for their personnel

It appears that the senior PLA leadership was prepared to accept a short-term reduction in operational readiness in the hope of increased combat effectiveness by 2020 and beyond. These reforms are intended to fix a number of problems identified in the Chinese media, including:

- The “Two Big Gaps”⁴³: “(1) currently, there are big gaps between the level of our military modernization compared to the requirements for national security and the (2) level of the world’s advanced militaries.”

³⁹ “解放军今年重大实战化演习一场接一场” [This Year the PLA Conducted Major Realistic Field Exercises One After Another], *People’s Daily*, December 30, 2015, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2015/12/30/c1011-27995904.html>.

⁴⁰ “中国陆军怎样走过“军改元年”” [How Did the Chinese Army Pass the “First Year of Military Reform”], *Xinhuanet*, Jan. 5, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2017-01/05/c_129433633.htm.

⁴¹ “中国军队 2 0 1 7 : 打造实战化训练“升级版”” [Chinese Military 2017: Building an “Upgraded Version” of Realistic Training], *Xinhuanet*, Dec. 27, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-12/27/c_1122176158.htm.

⁴² “图片” [Photo], China Military Network, Aug. 13, 2017, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-08/13/content_185391.htm.

⁴³ “学习习近平总书记关于强军目标的重要论述” [Study Xi Jinping’s Important Statement on the Goal of Strengthening the Military], *People’s Daily*, July 22, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0722/c40531-22275029.html>.

- The “Two Inabilities”⁴⁴: the PLA’s ability “(1) to fight a modern war is not sufficient, (2) our cadres at all levels ability to command modern war is insufficient.”
- The “Five Incapables”⁴⁵: “some cadre cannot (1) judge the situation, (2) understand the intention of higher authorities, (3) make operational decisions, (4) deploy troops, and (5) deal with unexpected situations.”

Based on these and hundreds of other internal critiques of PLA capabilities, it is unlikely that the senior PLA leadership believes it has the capability to displace the United States from the Indo-Pacific region in the near-term.

PLA modernization should be assessed in both absolute and relative terms. There is no doubt, in absolute terms, today’s PLA looks different and has increased capabilities over its predecessor of two decades in the past. Relatively speaking, in certain areas, such as some categories of ballistic and cruise missiles, air defense, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities, the PLA ranks among the world’s leaders. However, in many other functions, the PLA trails advanced militaries by one to multiple decades of experience. These include

- Battalion-level combined arms,
- Close air support,

⁴⁴ “学习习近平总书记关于强军目标的重要论述” [Study Xi Jinping’s Important Statement on the Goal of Strengthening the Military], *People’s Daily*, July 22, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0722/c40531-22275029.html>.

⁴⁵ “破解“五个不会”难题要从源头入手” [Start From the Source to Break the “Five Incapables” Problem] China Military Network, Oct. 13, 2015, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-10/13/content_125880.htm.

- Air assault (helicopter),
- Aircraft carrier and long-range sea-based air defense,
- Advanced anti-submarine warfare,
- Stealth and armed unmanned aerial vehicle,
- Long-distance over-water air, and
- Large-scale dissimilar aircraft operations.

Chinese military leaders are well aware that the PLA has not conducted a modern, joint campaign and has not engaged in extended combat operations for over 30 years,⁴⁶ warning the troops of the “peace disease.”⁴⁷

PLA capabilities in 2020 are expected to be sufficient to deter, interdict, degrade, or defeat most hostile actions in its near seas, but decrease as distances from China’s coast increase and units have to operate beyond the range of land-based aircraft and missiles. For the next several years, senior PLA leaders will likely have a more cautious approach to initiating combat operations than may be found in future generations of leaders when modernization is completed. Nonetheless, if directed by the Communist Party, today’s PLA leadership will employ whatever capabilities are available to defend China’s interests wherever they may be.

⁴⁶ “沈阳军区司令员张又侠解读新时期军事训练新革命” [Shenyang Military Region Commander Zhang Youxia Interprets the New Revolution in Military Training in the New Period], [China.com](http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2009-11/20/content_18925256.htm), Nov. 11, 2009, http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2009-11/20/content_18925256.htm.

⁴⁷ Reuters Staff, “China military training inadequate for winning a war: army paper,” *Reuters*, Oct. 12, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-military/china-military-training-inadequate-for-winning-a-war-army-paper-idUSKCN0I1o8Q2o141o12>.

Words Matter

Competitor, rival, challenge, revisionist, threat, adversary, enemy. A strategy must be able to prioritize and distinguish the differences. The *National Security Strategy* is correct to put Russia and China at the top of U.S. strategic priorities; as authoritarian powers, Russia and China present strategic challenges to the United States, but for different reasons. It is imperative the United States implements measures appropriate for each.

Russia maintains a truly existential nuclear threat to the United States and a conventional force it is willing to employ in combat from Europe to Asia, but possesses limited economic might. China has a credible nuclear deterrent, improving conventional military capabilities, and a vibrant economy heavily engaged in trade with the world, but is dependent on sea lines of communication, until additional rail and road systems connecting China to its trading partners are completed. China has benefited from the international system more than Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union and seeks to modify, not destroy, the existing order to its own advantage, as does the United States. Russia is more prone to undermine its foundations. Both are major players in the government and private cyber and information war domains. China now feels confident enough in its development model to present itself to developing countries as “an alternative to Western-style democratic political systems and free-market economies.”⁴⁸ Does anybody see Russia as any type of model to emulate?

The Chinese government and Communist Party have undisclosed policies and objectives, employ “Big Lie” tactics, spin information to their advantage — often omitting pertinent

⁴⁸ Bonnie S. Glasser, “Is China proselytising its path to success?” *East Asia Forum*, Jan. 11, 2018,

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/11/is-china-proselytising-its-path-to-success/>.

information, attempt to influence foreign governments, leaders, and populations, commit espionage and steal commercial and government secrets, and try to intimidate foreign and domestic political opponents and economic competitors or even partners (such as businesses operating in China). They will rarely, if ever, accept responsibility for a mistake or apologize for a wrongdoing. But everything they say is not a lie. If the Chinese government and media are completely untrustworthy, why does the U.S. government continually call for greater transparency?

It is the job of U.S. government leaders and officials, the intelligence community, academia, think tanks, the media, and analysts to sort through the massive amount of information generated by and about China and report objectively, making judgments based on evidence, not preconceived suppositions. If the administration wants the American people to believe that China intends to displace the United States from the Indo-Pacific region and achieve global preeminence, it will have to present a much more cogent set of facts than found in any of the documents available to the public so far.

The *National Security Strategy* correctly assesses that “adversaries and competitors [have become] adept at operating below the threshold of open military conflict and at the edges of international law.” This applies especially to Chinese actions in the South and East China Seas that have combined military, coast guard, law enforcement, militia, fishermen, and civilian capabilities to advance Chinese territorial claims. More challenges short of overt conflict are to be expected, many of which will be new and unexpected. The United States and its regional friends and allies need multi-dimensional toolkits to deal with these contingencies.

Washington must have more instruments to wield than the world’s most expensive hammer. For example, increased U.S. Navy presence and Air Force overflights in the

South China Sea will likely result in China using American actions to justify increasing its military posture and lethality in its backyard⁴⁹, what Beijing regards as “necessary measures.”⁵⁰ Escalation of the military situation increases the chance of mistakes and miscalculations by all parties involved. Additional nukes, B-2s and carriers won’t fix the problem; U.S. political leaders need more options than flexing their son’s 19-inch biceps. The self-inflicted decimation of the State Department is more of an immediate threat to American national security than is China.

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⁴⁹ Bonnie Glasser (@BonnieGlasser), “Maybe the Chinese are looking for a justification to start operation military assets from their islands in the Spratlys and have decided to use US FONOPs as an excuse,” Twitter post, Jan. 21, 2018, <https://twitter.com/BonnieGlaser/status/955429394373324800>.

⁵⁰ ChengCheng, “China vows “necessary measures” after U.S. warship nears Huangyan Island,” *Xinhuanet*, Jan. 20, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/20/c_136910889.htm - o-twi-1-90797-7250227817ecdff034dc9540e6.

3. In Search of the White Whale: The National Defense Strategy's Quest for Lethality

Mackenzie Eaglen

Secretary of Defense James Mattis' new *National Defense Strategy* articulates that “inter-state strategic competition,” not counterterrorism, is now the principal concern of American national security.⁵¹ While the unclassified summary of the document fails to discuss the strategic tradeoffs and budgetary ramifications of this transition, it does shed light on what this new bit of Pentagon-ese means: preparing American forces to win a high-intensity military confrontation with China and Russia.

This is a significant break from the last administration's 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the strategic guidance developed in its wake.⁵² Beyond elevating a major war above counterinsurgency or combating “rogue regimes” like Iran or North Korea, Mattis reverses course from the final years of the Obama administration and identifies China rather than Russia as the most pressing threat. The *National Defense Strategy* proclaims China's ambitions to be uniquely hegemonic, heralding Beijing's intent to seek “displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”

But combatting this threat will require a significant effort to build a force capable of undertaking the totality of operations it may be called upon to complete. Achieving this

⁵¹ The Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Jan., 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁵² The Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014*, March 4, 2014, http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf.

balance between preparedness for high- and low-intensity warfare will not be a rote question of increasing readiness, capability, and capacity in tandem. Instead, it will demand the difficult outcome of arresting the temptation to constantly mortgage the future security of the nation at the expense of incessant micromanagement of the crisis *du jour*.

The brevity of the classified strategy's summary disguises the depth of the budgetary and force planning challenges that lie ahead. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis' redoubled efforts to concentrate on China is a laudable change on paper, but terribly difficult to implement in practice. The Pentagon cannot afford a bout of monomania: the need to modernize the nuclear deterrent and missile defense systems can no longer be safely forestalled, and there will be strong political incentives to continue to emphasize counter-terrorism operations and spread modernization funding to other programs. With all of these competing needs, it is unclear whether the Pentagon will be able to do what previous administrations have not and sustain the aspirational goal Mattis has laid out in the new *National Defense Strategy*.

What are the most pressing obstacles toward achieving this administration's strategic goal to rebalance the present with the future?

Trump Himself

On the campaign trail, candidate Trump was as hard as they come on how to defeat terrorists, from renewing the Bush-era comparison of "radical Islam" to an ideological challenge akin to Fascism or Communism, to claiming that NATO was obsolete "because it failed to deal adequately with terrorism," to his famous claims that he knows "more about ISIS than the generals do" and would "bomb the sh!% out of them" and "take out

their families” to “knock the hell out of ISIS.”⁵³ Trump has a vested interest in fulfilling his campaign promise to eliminate the Islamic State early and end the specter of terrorism, a requirement exacerbated by his effort to take questionable credit for having “defeated” the group outright.⁵⁴ Trump will surely seek additional wins on the battlefield wherever he can, and combatting terror will offer the greatest opportunity for these victories in the immediate future.

The Political Currency of Counter-Terrorism

Even with the absence of a 9/11 scale attack since 2001, it is still exceedingly difficult for policymakers to shift the conversation from eliminating all terrorist threats abroad to preparation and protection in the event of terrorism at home. Doing so would send the message that that terrorism is here to stay, and that policymakers are unable to guarantee every incident will be prevented. Because politicians are unwilling to admit that we cannot stop every incident and lunatic, the military option remains the preferred and

⁵³ The White House, *National Security Strategy 2006*, March 16, 2006, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2006/>.

Politico Staff, “Full text: Donald Trump’s speech on fighting terrorism,” *Politico*, Aug. 15, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-terrorism-speech-227025>.

Aaron Blake, “19 things Donald Trump knows better than anyone else, according to Donald Trump,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/04/17-issues-that-donald-trump-knows-better-than-anyone-else-according-to-donald-trump/?utm_term=.20491d7ec14f.

Pamela Engel, “Donald Trump: ‘I would bomb the s--- out of ISIS,’” *Business Insider*, Nov. 13, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-bomb-isis-2015-11>.

Tom LoBianco, “Donald Trump on terrorists: ‘Take out their families,’” *CNN*, Dec. 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/02/politics/donald-trump-terrorists-families/>.

⁵⁴ Peter Bergen, “Bergen: No, Trump didn’t defeat ISIS,” *CNN*, Oct. 18, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/18/opinions/trump-isis-defeat-opinion-bergen/index.html>

over-emphasized “solution” across government. This strong political impulse would challenge any administration, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

Political pressure to continue prioritizing the fight against terrorism means that while Pentagon leaders want more equilibrium between the long-term competition with China and Russia, counter-terrorism operations are likely to remain nearly all-consuming absent daily leadership to buck the system and change course. Further, it’s unclear that all within the Pentagon are onboard with Mattis’ objective to elevate preparedness for a war with China and diminish counter-terrorism’s importance. Not only are there disputes between and among regional combatant commands, there are also ongoing power struggles between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the uniformed Joint Staff on this very question.

Capability Over Capacity? Not So Fast

When pressed about which to prioritize, Mattis clearly indicated his preference to increase the capabilities of American forces before expanding them — same as the last team atop the Pentagon, and the one before that.⁵⁵ Maintaining that focus will be exceedingly difficult given the goals of the White House and service leaders, and the strategic reality that American forces are unmistakably overstretched due to a constant supply-demand problem that seems unlikely to let up.

⁵⁵ James Mattis, “Secretary of Defense Announces National Defense Strategy,” *DoD News*,

<https://www.defense.gov/Videos/videoId/580418/>.

On the campaign trail, increasing the size of the military and defeating the Islamic State were the two security goals candidate Trump frequently touted.⁵⁶ Unlike major weapons programs, which often carry the sting of cost overruns and require long time horizons, growing the force is something that can be accomplished relatively quickly and that the average American citizen can readily understand as improving national security. In a recent Congressional Budget Office analysis of the costs of Trump's campaign promises about the military, resourcing his promises to grow the military would consume 44 percent of new military spending — about \$50 billion a year by 2027.⁵⁷

Service leaders have thrown their support behind these increases. From *Wall Street Journal* editorials to Congressional testimony and the Navy's *Strategic Readiness Review* in the wake of last summer's fatal collisions, the leaders of each service have testified about the need for significant and sustained growth of each service over the next decade to adequately resource operational needs.⁵⁸ Despite the rising costs of military personnel and exigent modernization needs, Mattis cannot discount the need to grow the size of the military in the near term, further straining his goals to build up capability.

⁵⁶ Ashley Parker and Matthew Rosenberg, "Donald Trump Vows to Bolster Nation's Military Capacities," *New York Times*, Sep. 7, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/us/politics/donald-trump-speech.html>.

⁵⁷ Congressional Budget Office, "Analysis of the Long-Term Costs of the Administration's Goals for the Military," Dec. 4, 2017, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/53350>.

⁵⁸ Heather Wilson and David Goldfein, "The Air Force Needs a Budget That Aims Higher," *The Wall Street Journal*, Sep. 11, 2017, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-air-force-needs-a-budget-that-aims-higher-1505171248?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB_09.13.2017&utm_term=Editorial - Early Bird Brief](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-air-force-needs-a-budget-that-aims-higher-1505171248?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB_09.13.2017&utm_term=Editorial-Early Bird Brief).

Association of the United States Army, "CSA Milley Would Like to See 100,000 More Soldiers," June 9, 2017, <https://www.ausa.org/news/csa-milley-would-like-to-see-100000-more-soldiers>.

Richard Spencer, "Secretary of the Navy Strategic Readiness Review," *US Naval Institute News*, Dec. 14, 2017, https://news.usni.org/2017/12/14/secnav_readiness_review.

Whether It's Big Wars or Counter-Terrorism, the Outlook Isn't Good

Despite the Pentagon's decision to minimize public commentary on negative readiness metrics, there are some sobering indicators of the worrying state of training, readiness, and mobilization plans for a major confrontation. President Trump has intensified the air campaign against the Islamic State, expending more ordinance than expected and forcing the Air Force to issue reprogramming requests to strip other programs of funds to funnel into munitions production.⁵⁹ The Marine Corps has had to cut programs that provide vital fire support — such as the 120mm mortar and the shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapon — to keep other programs in the black. As Mattis noted in his remarks last week, one of the frequent victims of budgetary instability is large-scale exercises designed to prepare Army units, particularly Guardsmen and reservists, for high-intensity combat.⁶⁰ Then of course there are the all too familiar statistics: only a third of Navy and Marine Corps F-18s are combat ready, the Air Force has a shortfall of 2,000 pilots with two-thirds of the empty billets in fighter units, and maintenance delays are impacting over a dozen attack submarines.⁶¹

⁵⁹ John Haltiwanger, "Trump has Dropped Record Number of Bombs on Middle East," *Newsweek*, Sep. 19, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-era-record-number-bombs-dropped-middle-east-667505>.

⁶⁰ Mattis, "Secretary of Defense Announces National Defense Strategy."

The Associated Press, "Shutdown cancels North Carolina National Guard training," *Army Times*, Jan. 22, 2018, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/01/21/shutdown-cancels-north-carolina-national-guard-training/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb01.22.18&utm_term=Editorial - Early Bird Brief.

⁶¹ Geoff Ziezulewicz, "Only one-third of Super Hornets ready to 'fight tonight' as of October, admiral says," *Navy Times*, Nov. 9, 2017, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2017/11/09/only-one-third-of-super-hornets-ready-to-fight-tonight-as-of-october-admiral->

Solving these challenges will require more than just additional end-strength or force structure. It will require wholesale changes to the support systems underpinning each military service. For the Air Force, most modernization programs depend on the effort to restore its cadre of pilots. Until the T-X trainer is rolled out *en masse* alongside pricey changes to aviation pay and benefits, buying more platforms needed to operate inside contested airspace (read: F-35s) will not be immediately useful.⁶² As part of the new Futures Command, the Army has established a cross-functional team led by a major general dedicated to modernizing the approach to Army training to better simulate high-tempo combat zones.⁶³ For its part, the Navy will soon announce a 20-year, \$10 billion dollar initiative to overhaul the four public shipyards to improve maintenance capabilities and accelerate production of *Virginia*-class attack submarines.⁶⁴

[says/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB-11-10&utm_term=Editorial - Early Bird Brief.](#)

Ashley Burns, "Air Force Pilot Shortage Reaches 2,000," *Flying*, Nov. 13, 2017, <https://www.flyingmag.com/air-force-pilot-shortage-reaches-2000>.

Sydney Freedberg Jr., "15 Subs Kept Out of Service: 177 Months Of Drydock Backups," *Breaking Defense*, Oct. 31, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/10/15-subs-kept-out-of-service-177-months-of-drydock-backups/>.

⁶² Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, "Air Force announces initiatives to lessen pilot shortage," *US Air Force*, Aug. 25, 2017, <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1290397/air-force-announces-initiatives-to-lessen-pilot-shortage>.

⁶³ Courtney McBride, "Leaders Tapped for Eight Cross-Functional Team Pilots," *PMPNT*, Oct. 30, 2017, <https://www.pmpnt.army.mil/leaders-tapped-for-eight-cross-functional-team-pilots/>.

⁶⁴ Megan Eckstein, "NAVSEA: FY 2019 Navy Budget Request Will Include More Shipbuilding, Life Extensions to Help Grow Fleet," *US Naval Institute News*, Jan. 2, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/01/02/navys-fy-2019-budget-request-will-include-new-shipbuilding-life-extensions-help-grow-fleet>.

Not Enough Time

Retooling a military attenuated to 16 years of grinding counterterrorism operations into one adequately prepared to stand toe-to-toe against the most capable foes on the planet does not happen overnight. Gen. Mark Milley, chief of staff of the U.S. Army, recently cautioned that the transition to readying for “the big war” could take nearly 30 years. To elucidate his point, Milley discussed the success of an Apache attack helicopter pilot in Operation Desert Storm, noting, “He was able to do that because of years of training, and because there were people in the seventies who said ‘I want a new attack helicopter.’”⁶⁵

The transition toward a fleet better prepared to tackle high-intensity threats will likewise not come quickly — the Navy is slated to release a new 30-year shipbuilding plan alongside the FY 2019 budget request and has already stated that pursuing a 355-ship fleet through new construction alone would take until the mid-2040s.⁶⁶

Ensuring Mattis’ objectives come to fruition will take the perfect storm of subsequent administrations that are committed to sustaining funding for a military buildup and maintain the same prioritization of international threats. It will also require cultural and

⁶⁵ Meghann Myers, “Chief: The Army has to start preparing for ‘the big war,’” *Army Times*, Jan. 18, 2018, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/01/17/chief-the-army-has-to-start-preparing-for-the-big-war/?utm_source=RC+Defense+Morning+Recon&utm_campaign=f165b41895-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_01_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=o_694f73a8dc-f165b41895-8533.

⁶⁶ Megan Eckstein, “FY19 Budget Request Will Include 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan,” *Real Clear Defense*, Jan. 18, 2018, https://www.realcleardefense.com/2018/01/19/fy19_budget_request_will_include_30-year_shipbuilding_plan_299715.html.

Eckstein, “NAVSEA: FY 2019 Navy Budget Request Will Include More Shipbuilding, Life Extensions to Help Grow Fleet.”

institutional changes within the Pentagon and the military services, though to their credit Mattis and his team are actively pursuing the requisite work as evidenced by Under Secretary Ellen Lord's shakeup of Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics and the new Army Futures Command.⁶⁷

Conventional Modernization is a Bigger Issue than China

There are sound strategic reasons to develop capabilities other than those needed to defeat the Chinese in order to keep second tier threats from becoming primary ones.

Today, the Army is embarking on a spiritual successor to its "big five" modernization effort of the 1980s, pledging to devote at least 80 percent of its forthcoming annual research and development to a new set of six capabilities.⁶⁸ This suite of upgrades to the Army's air, ground, missile defense, and networking capabilities are all needed to deter aggression from other foes while the Air Force and maritime services persecute a potential conflict with China to a successful resolution.

⁶⁷ Aaron Mehta, "Here's how Ellen Lord will reduce acquisition time by 50 percent," *Defense News*, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/12/08/heres-how-ellen-lord-will-reduce-acquisition-time-by-50-percent/>.

David Vergun, "US Army Futures Command to reform modernization, says secretary of the Army," *US Army*, Dec. 8, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/197886/us_army_futures_command_to_reform_modernization_says_secretary_of_the_army.

⁶⁸ Kari Hawkins, "AMC-developed weapons remain vital to Army," *US Army*, Sep. 6, 2012, https://www.army.mil/article/86839/amc_developed_weapons_remain_vital_to_army.

Patrick Tucker, "US Army Chief Announces Major Reorganization For How Army Develops, Buys Weapons," *Defense One*, Oct. 6, 2017, <http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2017/10/feeling-rivals-heat-us-army-streamlining-and-centralizing-way-it-buys-weapons/141603/>.

The Air Force is also facing significant pressure to develop new capabilities with limited use in a high-intensity conflict. While Mattis has said that counterterrorism is a mission that doesn't require lots of specialized equipment, he would be wise to remember that in the decade after 9/11 over \$100 billion in modernization funding went to support programs that had immense immediate utility but little value in a high-intensity conflict.⁶⁹ The most eminent example for today's generation is the Air Force's sustained interest in an OA-X light attack aircraft, which could free up fourth-generation aircraft from needing to support low-intensity operations.⁷⁰ This priority is something implicitly supported in the new strategy, which calls for more efficient counterterror operations. However, procuring enough of these aircraft to seriously impact operations in Iraq and Afghanistan could cost \$2.8 billion.⁷¹

A Nuclear Urgency

Failing to modernize the nuclear arsenal to resource immediate needs would disproportionately degrade long-term American security. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work noted,

⁶⁹ Mackenzie Eaglen, "Repair and Rebuild: Balancing New Military Spending for a Three-Theater Strategy," *American Enterprise Institute*, Oct. 16, 2017, <http://www.aei.org/publication/repair-and-rebuild-balancing-new-military-spending-for-a-three-theater-strategy/>.

⁷⁰ William Miller, "An Unconventional Proposal for Bringing the OA-X to Life," *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 15, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/an-unconventional-proposal-for-bringing-the-oa-x-to-life/>.

⁷¹ Eaglen, "Repair and Rebuild: Balancing New Military Spending for a Three-Theater Strategy."

The only existential threat to our nation is a nuclear attack. Nuclear weapons remain the most important mission we have ... The choice right now is modernizing or losing deterrence.⁷²

Work had estimated that with Obama-era plans, the services would need a combined \$270 billion between 2021 and 2035 to fully modernize the triad.⁷³ More recent predictions given the early goals of the Trump administration signaled an even more dramatic expenditure — \$1.2 trillion over the next 30 years.⁷⁴ Short of a massive change in our nuclear posture, there is little reason to expect these costs to diminish. In fact, if pre-decisional drafts of the Nuclear Posture Review are any indication, spending on the nuclear mission will increase still further.⁷⁵

These figures discount likely additional investments in missile defense capabilities, such as those which dominated Trump’s request for additional FY 2018 defense appropriations

⁷² Kris Osborn, “Pentagon Says It Needs \$270 Billion to Upgrade Nuclear Arsenal,” *Military.com*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/06/25/pentagon-says-it-needs-270-billion-to-upgrade-nuclear-arsenal.html>.

⁷³ Robert Burns, “Nuke chief: Time is now to begin updating nukes,” *Associated Press*, Feb. 29, 2016, <https://apnews.com/a12604d546404be9b7846c3d2d128db4/nuke-chief-time-now-begin-updating-nukes>.

⁷⁴ Robert Alvarez, “Yesterday is tomorrow: estimating the full cost of a nuclear buildup,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Nov. 3, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/yesterday-tomorrow-estimating-full-cost-nuclear-buildup11264>.

⁷⁵ Ashley Feinberg, “Exclusive: Here Is A Draft Of Trump’s Nuclear Review. He Wants A Lot More Nukes.” *The Huffington Post*, Jan. 11, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-nuclear-posture-review-2018_us_5a4d4773e4b06d1621bce4c5.

in November.⁷⁶ By design, strategic missile defense capabilities like the Ground Based Interceptor are not meant to defend against general Russian or Chinese attacks. Continuing interceptor production at 12 per year to hedge against serial production of North Korean ICBMs could cost \$3 billion over the course of the next five years, discounting the costs for further research and more silos.⁷⁷ However, these investments are essential if Mattis hopes to sustain a focus on Russia and China, for if North Korea or Iran were able to develop reliable capabilities to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, they would surely need to be prioritized as greater threats to American security.

The National Defense Strategy as a Driver of Uncertainty

Throughout the document, there is a single recurring buzzword: “lethality.” This is intended to drive nearly every decision the force will undertake over the course of implementation. The term is likely the brainchild of Mattis himself, considering its proliferation in the Defense Department guidance he authored upon taking this job.⁷⁸

But what exactly is lethality? That’s nearly impossible to determine from the unclassified version of the *National Defense Strategy*. While lethality is intended as a driver for many decisions the force will undertake over the course of implementation, it is never explicitly defined. Nor is it a long-established Pentagon buzzword with relatively consistent

⁷⁶ Ankit Panda, “The Trump White House Seeks an Additional \$4 Billion for Missile Defense in Fiscal Year 2018,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 7, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/the-trump-white-house-seeks-an-additional-4-billion-for-missile-defense-in-fiscal-year-2018/>.

⁷⁷ Eaglen, “Repair and Rebuild: Balancing New Military Spending for a Three-Theater Strategy.”

⁷⁸ Cheryl Pellerin, “Mattis Details Three Lines of Effort in Memo to DoD Personnel,” *DoD News*, Oct. 11, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1339147/mattis-details-three-lines-of-effort-in-memo-to-dod-personnel/>.

meaning, like “modernization.” Lethality first made its appearance in official guidance Mattis authored in fall 2017. In that memo, Mattis distinguishes lethality from capability, suggesting the former is something else altogether.⁷⁹ Inside the Pentagon, there are whispers that it is Marine Corps-specific phraseology — a service that “owns no domain” and therefore evaluates dominance through a different and unique cultural lens. Nor can lethality be a potential synonym for modernization — after all, if it was, why not frame it in familiar terms?

Like Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “revolution in military affairs,” the definition of this overused term is largely in the eyes of the beholder, and may even change over the course of the administration. However, ambiguity in strategic guidance is a recipe for confusion and perhaps even failure. For that reason, Mattis should clarify what he means by lethality. Based on its use in the *National Defense Strategy*, the term *seems* to imply the kind of tactics, concepts, readiness improvements, and technologies needed to prevail in a high-intensity war — in other words, lethality is that subset of modernization programs designed specifically to defeat the Russians and Chinese. Think more “Third Offset Strategy” and less classic upgrades of legacy fleets and inventories. Lethality would then be the investments that will result in war-winning capabilities provided all of the aforementioned distractions can be successfully avoided or mitigated. In other words, it is Mattis’ prized but elusive white whale.

As a prolific reader and student of history, Mattis’ should then recall *Moby Dick*. He must take all the best of Captain Ahab in his relentless pursuit of the white whale (here, a

⁷⁹ James Mattis, *Memorandum for all Department of Defense Personnel*, Oct. 5,

2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/GUIDANCE-FROM-SECRETARY-JIM-MATTIS.pdf>

military prepared to defeat China), but learn from the Pequod's destruction and avoid the inflexibility that would result from only focusing on that objective at the expense of all others. Overall, Mattis will need to manage up, manage down, and catch some lucky political and geostrategic breaks if he hopes to succeed in his quest for lethality.

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4. Searching for Strategy in Washington's Competition with Russia

Michael Kofman

Reading the recently released 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, which trumpets the national security establishment's emergence from "a period of strategic atrophy," one can be forgiven for wondering what took so long.⁸⁰ The new formulation emanating from the Pentagon, that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern of U.S. national security," is both refreshing and long overdue.⁸¹ America seems to be the last of the great powers to self-consciously join a geopolitical competition that has been unfolding for some years with Russia and China.

Yet this strategy will not suffice to maintain the U.S. position in the international system. Indeed, it is a symptom of the very same strategic atrophy decried in the first lines of the document. The *National Defense Strategy's* urgency is valid and its desire to focus on inter-state conflict meritorious. Its tone and framing is, in many ways, a good start. But it betrays a poor understanding of the nature of the problem and the adversaries with whom we are competing. My focus here will be on strategic competition with Russia, although I also offer a few remarks on China.

In principle, one can agree with Kori Schake's positive review "that the document propounds a clear vision to the current challenges to U.S. security, the roles military force will play in protecting against those challenges, and the priorities for spending and

⁸⁰ Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Jan. 2018. <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁸¹ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*.

activity to strengthen the enterprise.”⁸² The vision is clear, but it is not necessarily correct. There is great clarity in terms of contested domains, capabilities in demand, and the loss of military advantage. Unfortunately, this document is absolute gobbledygook on the challenge posed by revisionist powers and the way forward to arresting a concomitant decline in U.S. military power and influence. It does not seem to benefit from a firm understanding of international politics or deterrence concepts. There is a very retro 1980s vibe to this document, more looking backward to the competition that was – and in that sense, nostalgic⁸³ – than forward to the competition that is and will be.

The *National Defense Strategy* both overstates the military challenge and, at the same time, misses the point on the strategic challenges facing the United States. Thus, it comes off somewhat as a blind swordsman, unable to cogently describe the threat, or the strategic environment, but confident that a larger sword is needed. Much of the Russian establishment is having a conversation on the importance of non-military means in determining the outcome of a contest prior to the onset of combat operations, i.e. winning without fighting.⁸⁴ And while this conversation is unfolding, America’s strategy is fixated on conventional dominance, deterrence by denial, and chasing after unobtainium: the ability to win regional wars against peer nuclear states who field a strong nuclear and conventional deterrent. The Pentagon remains wholly committed to the fantasy of having

⁸² Kori Schake, “Mattis’s Defense Strategy is Bold”, *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 22, 2018,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/22/mad-dog-mattiss-defense-strategy-is-bold/>.

⁸³ Andrew Hill, “Nostalgia and Strategy: There Never Was a Golden Age”, Policy Roundtable: What to Make of Trump’s National Security Strategy, *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 21, 2017,

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/#essay3>.

⁸⁴ Lt. Col. Timothy Thomas (Ret.), “The Evolving Nature of Russia’s Way of War”, *Military Review*, Jul-Aug, 2017, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/July-August-2017/Thomas-Russias-Way-of-War/>.

conventional wars with nuclear states, where they will let us win, accepting defeat without a nuclear exchange.

The document offers a recitation of grievances against classic great power behaviors. There is no effort made to lay out Russian strategy as the Pentagon understands it, and what it is the two countries are actually competing over, versus what Washington simply doesn't like and must contain. Therefore, the text lacks a concept of how the United States will attack Russia's strategy, gain leverage, and – in the long-term – deter or compel Russia over those things that America finds of vital interest.

While this is an unclassified summary of a larger document, it seems the only discernible theory of victory is restoring America's eroding military advantages. It's clear how this answers the Pentagon's need for more, but what this solves in terms of the Russia problem set, be it in Syria, Ukraine, or forms of competition below the threshold of war, remains a mystery. A more effective strategy would signal a clear intent to establish U.S. coercive credibility, demonstrate resolve, and lay out a plan to deter over that which matters, while at the same time assuring America's adversaries that the competition is not existential, and thus can be bounded.

What are those things that really matter as far as Russia is concerned? What is the real challenge the Department of Defense should be seeking to solve? The first problem is that Russia is not adhering to the previously agreed rules governing European security, a region where the United States is highly exposed because of weak allies and extended deterrence commitments that are difficult to make good on after NATO expansion. Following that problem is the observed reality that, as the confrontation expands, Russia is undeterred from political, cyber, and information attacks on the U.S. homeland and its allies. Thus, an effective U.S. strategy would establish "rules of the road" for the current

confrontation, just as the United States did during the Cold War. Either through deterrence or mutual agreement, the United States needs to find ways to constrain Russian advantages. Third, managing competition with Russia by pouring gasoline on it will make it harder for the United States to marshal resources to manage a much stronger challenge looming from China. The United States is unappreciative of Russian resilience, believing demographic and economic challenges will somehow make this problem fade away. And finally, in managing a confrontation with both powers, there is a need to prevent U.S. responses from engendering a Sino-Russian entente, a strategic development for which the U.S. policy community is unprepared.

From Russia With Inter-State Strategic Competition

At first blush the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* is a crowning achievement for Moscow. Russian leaders have long sought recognition as a strategic competitor. This document bestows that honor and – even better for the Kremlin – places Russia in the same bracket as China. Throughout the document testimonials can be found to Russian military and non-military power. At least privately, Moscow will welcome this strategy as an acknowledgment of its coercive credibility.

Still, the *National Defense Strategy* has an odd list of complaints about Russia, stating that “the use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, but when coupled with its expanding and modernizing nuclear arsenal the challenge is clear.” Is it clear? Upon reading this sentence, it did not seem that clear to me. The Russian challenge is hardly delimited to nuclear weapons and political warfare, nor are those necessarily combined. The actual impact and efficacy of the latter remains contested. Assuredly, the Russia-Georgia War of 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the almost entirely

conventional fighting continuing in Ukraine are hardly the product of emerging technologies to subvert democratic processes, unless this is new jargon for tanks and artillery.

The *National Defense Strategy* portrays the United States as seeking to fight certain Russian capabilities, rather than understanding how the adversary approaches use of military and non-military instruments, their strategy, and the nature of the competition. The locus of Russian thinking today is on how to shape adversary decision-making from crisis to escalation in conflict, based on the right integration of capabilities and methods to either deter, deter-in-conflict, or compel the adversary. That is what winning is about in a competition between nuclear powers, especially when most conflicts between great powers are over other third countries, allies, and cases of extended deterrence, where there is an asymmetry of interests. They understand that war is a contest of wills, a conflict between two systems. While Moscow certainly does not have all of the tools required to make this a complete strategy, its head is in the right place on what a competitive approach can look like leveraging one country's advantages and the other's vulnerabilities.

The Pentagon's vision for success appears to be the ability to win a conventional war with two powers, both of which have considerable local advantages, effective nuclear arsenals, and a potent capacity to impose costs on the U.S. homeland in domains that are offense dominant. The *National Defense Strategy* posits that "in wartime, the fully mobilized Joint Force will be capable of: defeating aggression by a major power; deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere."⁸⁵ However, throughout the document the strategy conceives of deterrence as the capacity to win. Why is this a problem? Ask yourself three honest

⁸⁵ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*.

questions: Is nuclear war winnable against peer nuclear powers? Is a conventional war between peer nuclear powers winnable without it escalating to nuclear war? That is, would Russia let the United States “win” a general conventional war without using nuclear weapons first?

Nyet!

This is why Russia has a robust arsenal of tactical and non-strategic nuclear weapons, together with a modernized strategic nuclear force. Forget about domains, lethality, and all the jargon. The risk of conventional war escalating into nuclear war is a large part of the deterrence reality, one that has long served American and Russian interests.

Whatever fears and nefarious thoughts we may harbor towards each other, escalation dynamics and the resulting risk instill sobriety. Confrontation short of armed conflict remains the principal challenge. The military balance is an important factor, but indirect competition plays a larger role in shaping the international landscape. Even in an idyllic world, where the United States gets to fight strictly conventional wars against nuclear powers, we must think about competitive strategies. Russia, which represents 3.1 percent of global GDP,⁸⁶ poses an outsized threat. Moscow spends a fraction what the United States does on a fairly sustainable program of defense modernization.⁸⁷ Consider China, which may come to rival both the U.S. defense budget and research and development budget in the not too distant future, and imagine how competitive conventional deterrence by denial is likely to be as an approach later into the 2020s.

⁸⁶ “GDP Based on PPP, share of the world”, IMF DataMapper, International Monetary Fund, last modified Oct., 2017, <http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>.

⁸⁷ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia’s Military Modernization Plans: 2018-2027”, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 495, PONARS Eurasia, Nov., 2017, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm495_Gorenburg_Nov2017.pdf.

Russia's successful campaign in Syria is yet another demonstration of how adversaries can employ limited conventional power, integrated with other instruments, to achieve political ends. This is relevant not only because Russia has demonstrated the ability to put together its own coalition (something China has not), but because it is visibly adept at changing the policies of U.S. allies in a particular conflict, including Turkey, Israel, and even Saudi Arabia. While the *National Defense Strategy* sets out the goal of attracting new partners, it fails to acknowledge the threat being posed to existing alliances and partnerships from fairly successful international politics as practiced by our competitors. We did not come up short in domain superiority in Syria, or failed the race for military advantage, but rather failed to translate them into successful statecraft and international politics.

Reading the Strategy in Moscow

How will our Russian adversaries receive this document? As I mentioned above, they will first be flattered that they are now clearly recognized by the United States as a strategic competitor, indelicately binned with China, which is a much stronger power. Scanning through the strategy's to-do list, the language on alliances and partnerships is rather nonthreatening from Moscow's perspective, as it implies a 'circle the wagons' mentality around NATO, while any further alliance expansions seem aimed at Asia. This is what Moscow hoped to achieve: an America focused on vital interests rather than competing for Russia's "near abroad." Although the devil is in the details as to what 'fortifying NATO' truly means. The big text giveth and the small text taketh away.

Russia's General Staff will be fixed closely to the lines discussing plans for forward stocks and munitions, layered missile defense, autonomous systems, and some ambiguously

worded plan to strike within air defenses to take out ‘mobile power-projection platforms’ (whatever that means).⁸⁸ Russia is concerned about the size of the U.S. footprint in Europe, how quickly it can be expanded, and the creep of strategic infrastructure towards its borders, i.e. missile defenses. The question in Moscow will be how Washington intends to achieve a ‘favorable regional military balance’ and which of its capabilities will be forward deployed to help realize this vision versus those intended to be surged into theater.

On the other hand, plans for defense in cyberspace and space will probably be viewed as cost prohibitive projects in offense dominated domains where Russia is a near peer, and likely to remain competitive at a much lower price. The strong, but strategically questionable, desire to chase down Russian coercive credibility on nuclear escalation is also not especially worrisome for Moscow. Russia’s doctrine allows the use of nuclear weapons not just in retaliation for nuclear attacks, but in cases where a conventional attack jeopardizes the existence of the state.⁸⁹ It is intentionally ambiguous on what that means, but is principally defensive in nature and based on conditions with a strong asymmetry of interests.

This is a logical offset to U.S. conventional superiority, founded in the view that America’s conventional arsenal poses a strategic threat given how many regimes Washington has taken apart with it in the past 25 years. It is also central and inherently credible, whereas America’s nuclear deterrent is extended, and therefore less so. As the issue rests around resolve, and the interests at stake in the conflict, it is therefore very unlikely that

⁸⁸ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.*

⁸⁹ President of the Russian Federation. *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, Moscow: Kremlin, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>.

Washington can alter anything by acquiring a modicum of nuclear weapons of a similar nature. The capabilities will add options, but options we would be wise not to use in a threshold of conflict where Russia will have much greater resolve, and escalation dominance.

That said, a fixation on sticks to try and acquire capabilities of a similar kind is natural. Blame too much wargaming and scenario-based thinking. The Pentagon just has to convince itself that somehow, just somehow, it can have a purely conventional war and win. On the whole it can do little harm to buy such things, unless raising entrapment concerns among allies is considered harm. They may prove useful to offset China in the long term. The rest of the proposed measures can be summarized as the traditional ‘get more stuff better’ approach, together with a sprinkling of jargon and liberal application of the word ‘competitive.’

Order Obsession: Russia and China Are Not the Same

The strategy disappoints in its imprecise and confounding language on the strategic challenge posed by Russia and China. It states: “It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian *National Defense Strategy* — gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.” This is where the *National Defense Strategy* oversimplifies and muddies the challenge.⁹⁰ For one, Russia and China do not want the same thing, nor are their natural drives to maximize security via buffers or establish regional hegemony any different from other great powers. The question rests on sources of conduct. Russia is more focused on maximizing security, which has important but bounded consequences for U.S. interests,

⁹⁰ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.*

whereas China has grander visions for expanding its power and say in the international system.

China may pose a genuine challenge to U.S. global leadership, but Russia seeks great power exemptions and traditional privileges, such as a sphere of influence, buffer states facing NATO, and the recognition that its security needs supersede the political independence of its neighbors. However, there is no evidence of a special shared vision for an authoritarian world order between Moscow and Beijing. On the contrary, it is Washington that seems frequently confused as to the difference between the post-World War II order, which was established and underwritten by great powers left standing after that conflagration, including the Soviet Union, and the post-Cold War order, which saw a further expansion of American influence and political ideology in the international system.

The good news is that historically, an existing international order cannot be quickly destroyed and replaced with a new one absent a great power war. The orders we have come to know, whether it be the Concert of Europe in 1815, the post-World War I order under the League of Nations, or the post-World War II order centered around the United Nations and other institutions, were the products of great power wars.⁹¹ Such a dramatic transition is unlikely for the simple reason that great powers today are peer nuclear weapon states who deter each other. The nature of the order can change over time through erosion, compromise, or new institutions, as it is hardly set in stone, but there is no clear path for either Russia or China to rapidly overturn the foundations of the current international system.

⁹¹ See G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

The United States also cannot readily retreat from the current international order and simply allow it to crumble. As this new strategy illustrates, America is pinned by its own vast alliance and partner network. The American commitment to the international order is structural, intertwined with institutions, alliances, and the desire to maintain primacy in international politics.

Indeed, the prevalence of inter-state competition below the threshold of conflict, including proxy wars, is a symptom of stability in the system rather than the growing disorder marked by the recently announced *National Defense Strategy*. It is visible because the relative power balance has changed, but the overall escalation dynamic makes it impossible for revisionist powers to overturn the order even if they so desired. Equally there is little to suggest that Russia or China have malign designs to rework the economic foundations of the current order. Unfortunately, the fact that the order itself may survive doesn't answer the fundamental question for the United States on if and how it will be able to retain leadership and influence in the order that persists. Neither does the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.

The current strategy fails to speak to the structural confrontation that already exists with Russia, and the one brewing with China. As a consequence, the Pentagon's vision to "expand the competitive space" is in stark contradiction with its desire to maintain the international order and deter adversaries. That is how orders not destroyed by wars can erode away, as realpolitik and competition takes primacy over institutions and norms. Increasing inter-state competition, with both parties, will only result in a further deterioration of what Washington considers to be norms or rules of the road, and the creation of alternative structures by other powers in an effort to reduce the competitive

space. It will also lead to proxy wars, a negative sum gain for the international system and U.S. interests.

The entire document is whistling past the graveyard on the more strategic matter at play, which is that the inter-state competition described is not a free for all. It is principally taking place between Russia and China on the one hand, and the United States on the other. Iran too is likely more worried about the U.S. than its regional adversary Saudi Arabia. The net product of a strategy aimed at winning against both powers – and incidentally the chief rogue states, Iran and North Korea, with whom the long-term competitors are too on friendly terms – can very well be a Russia-China entente.⁹² More often than not, alliances are made by powers in response to threats. That is, only the United States can make a Russia-China entente take place by posing a much greater threat to both of them than they do to each other and engaging in a set of actions that make that threat more ‘same’ than different from a strategic perspective.

Although widely panned by the policy community today as improbable, the prospect that these two countries will increasingly work together politically, economically, and in the security space is looking ever more likely.⁹³ Some may consider it hedging, or a ‘soft alliance,’ but there are many levels of pacts, ententes, and agreements beyond formal alliances that can change the course of history. Russia in particular has few other options

⁹² Alexander Gabuev, “A ‘Soft Alliance’? Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis”, ECFR Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, Feb., 2015, www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf; Leslie H. Gelb and Dimitri K. Simes, “Beware Collusion of China, Russia”, *The National Interest*, Jul.-Aug., 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/beware-collusion-china-russia-8640>.

⁹³ Dmitri Trenin, “From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Apr., 2015, [Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy](https://www.carnegieendowment.org/policy-roundtable-close-look-2018-national-defense-strategy).

to sustain the confrontation, China may come along in due time. In general, the probability of an event happening tends to increase with each policy official who is certain it is impossible.

The *National Defense Strategy* is a good indicator that while Washington recognizes the rise or resurgence of competitors, it's still in denial about itself, and the likelihood that a strategy to retain primacy is probably both unrealistic and unnecessary to maintain leadership. Well, it's probably necessary for defending a preferred force sizing construct and service priorities. That said, it's unclear if the strategy settles the question on whether Russia is a long-term challenge or a strategic adversary. The grievances listed are frankly scenario based, and largely confined to Russia's behavior in Europe. It is hard to break a mainstay of the policy community's assumptions that Russia will go away sometime in the 2020s. Whether because it will run out of money, people, or spontaneously transform into a democracy with no conflicting national interests, there is always a hidden expectation that Russia will depart the scene and allow the Pentagon to have the more intimate competition with China that it so very much desires.

A Better Set of Answers

As leading historians, like Stephen Kotkin, have argued,⁹⁴ Russia is a perpetually weak great power. It has moments of resurgence, thanks to state campaigns of internal mobilization, but then frequently falls behind. Yet it is also eminently resilient. There is a strong likelihood of Moscow posing a sustained if not increasingly bellicose challenge all the while Beijing looms in the forefront.

⁹⁴ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics", *Foreign Affairs*, May-Jun., 2016,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics>.

At the same time Russia is a highly vulnerable country, always suspecting the United States wants to further fragment what's left of its sphere of influence and develop capabilities to nullify its nuclear deterrent. Having never recovered psychologically from Operation Barbarossa in 1941, Russia's military is always fearful of a first strike. This is fertile ground to plow, as Russia will spend heavily to defend against U.S. airpower superiority, expand its nuclear arsenal as an offset, and seek to fortify regions like the Arctic at exorbitant prices. Moscow fears the strategic potential of the U.S. long range conventional arsenal, and is still a long way away from establishing its own conventional options to retaliate in kind.

There is also ample room for strategic ambush as Russia increasingly eyes the expansion of its role in the Middle East, to become an alternative power broker on the cheap. Great powers are often their own greatest enemies. They overreach, drive their neighbors to balance and make allies with adversaries, and leave room for strategic riposte. Although current investments in military reforms and modernization have a strong inertia effect, the United States can engage in a host of policies that sap Russian ability for internal balancing, thus making it increasingly less competitive beyond the 2020s. Russia in the Middle East is less a challenge, and more an opportunity to take advantage of.

Dominance and the pursuit of winning has often been a fool's errand with Russia. As Napoleon watched Russian leadership set their own capital ablaze in 1812, before his painful retreat, he learned the lessons that having conventional overmatch and winning against Russia are poorly related. Since Moscow ultimately decides what winning is, and in the current scenario it looks like a nuclear exchange that the United States probably does not win by any measure of that word, the concept is meaningless as a strategic framework for dealing with this power. Contrary to the deeply held beliefs of the authors

of this strategy, deterrence is not absolute, but relative.⁹⁵ Absolute deterrence is almost unachievable with Russia given the geography, and in time may be equally impracticable with China given the balance of military power.

However, there is no indication that Moscow is especially interested in that which the United States is desperately seeking to defend, attacking NATO conventionally, while the *National Defense Strategy* has little to offer on how to counter prolonged strategies of erosion, subversion, and fragmentation. It tries to solve Russian aggression, a low probability event, and has little for the more likely problems and indirect means of competition already in progress. Furthermore, it offers nothing in terms of assurance to the competing powers. The strategy's indelicate proposition that the United States will "expand the competitive space" while being "open to opportunities for cooperation but from a position of strength and based on our national interests," is tantamount to a demand for submission, from a superpower declining in absolute and relative strength.⁹⁶ Absent assurances that the competition can be bound, that it is actually over something and not over everything, not only will Russia not be deterred, but it will be encouraged to expand the confrontation absent any other way forward.

The strategy's slogan that "the surest way to prevent war is to be prepared to win one," is also misplaced. In retrospect, most of the participants of the two world wars also planned to deter by preparing to win. They sought the force structure and posture intended to resist each other's attacks in a contest for superiority. Strategies aimed at victory and those at deterrence are not the same thing, though the latter is frequently used in policy

⁹⁵ Bernard Brodie, "The Anatomy of Deterrence", RM-2218, RAND Corporation, 1958, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM2218.html.

⁹⁶ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*.

texts to smuggle in the former.⁹⁷ Overzealous pursuit of dominance and forward based military presence may not be the surest way to victory, but it is often the surest way to create security dilemmas and force bidding contests against powers with tremendous regional advantages. Not only can such answers cause the very wars they seek to prevent, but they hold the potential to spend the United States into oblivion.

This strategy reflects a good understanding of America's policy establishment. There is plenty red meat for the grist here. It is consistent with its intellectual progenitors, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby's long held vision that the key to conventional deterrence

is maintaining an advantage in conventional military power, particularly with respect to a given potentially contested area. In particular, scholarship indicates that conventional deterrence has been most effective when adversaries judged that a potential defender's conventional forces could resist their attacks, particularly in a relatively short timeframe.⁹⁸

This perspective discards much of the work of greats like Bernard Brody, that deterrence is not about the myopic pursuit of dominance or superiority, nor is deterring necessarily identified with winning (how can it be with nuclear peers?),⁹⁹ but the 'win to deter' view clearly undergirds the strategic vision in the *National Defense Strategy*.

⁹⁷ Brodie, *Anatomy*.

⁹⁸ Elbridge Colby and Jonathan F. Solomon, "Avoiding Becoming a Paper Tiger: Presence in a Warfighting Defence Strategy", *Joint Force Quarterly* 82, Jul., 2016, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-82/Article/793233/avoiding-becoming-a-paper-tiger-presence-in-a-warfighting-defense-strategy/>.

⁹⁹ Brodie, *Anatomy*.

America is hardly the first power to face a decline from unipolarity, struggling to find competitive strategies to maintain primacy, while finding its extended network of alliances and partners under threat from capable challengers. Nor is the United States the first to launch ruinous campaigns to the Middle East and Central Asia, only to find it should have husbanded those resources for strategic adversaries. The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* offers clear answers to these long-term challenges, a direct assault with what resources are left to muster for the coming decades, reminiscent of Shakespeare's "once more onto the breach, dear friends, once more; or close the wall up with our English dead," from Henry V.

Yet the answers found in the current *National Defense Strategy* are unconvincing. They are better suited for winning table top wargames than winning strategic competitions with actual adversaries. Albeit provocative, it might be easier to conceive of European Command and Pacific Command as the modern day Western and Eastern Roman Empire, taking bets on where conventional deterrence by 'winning' and a strategy based on direct competition will prove unsustainable first. Reading the current *National Defense Strategy*, one wonders how "dynamic force employment," a "lethal, agile, and resilient force posture," can truly redress the negative secular trends in the strategic environment described by the text. Is resilience compatible with agility? Expanding alliances and deterrence commitments with dynamism? Clawing back dominance across all domains and spectrums of conflict with sustainability? Expanding the competitive space while trying to keep the international order from weakening due to the expanding competition?

The secretary of defense rightfully reminds us that "no strategy can long survive without necessary funding and the stable, predictable budgets required to defend America in the

modern age.”¹⁰⁰ Yet perhaps there is a silver lining in this admonition, since it’s unclear that such a strategy focused on direct competition can be sustained by America’s economy in light of other national priorities. Perhaps it is best we stay emergent and lean, keeping our strategy iterative, and adjusting as the future unfolds. This strategy is a good step forward from the strategic miasma in which we were, but it is unlikely to take us where we can, or necessarily should go.

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¹⁰⁰ Jim Garamone, “National Defense Strategy a ‘Good Fit for Our Times,’ Mattis Says”, DoD News, Defence Media Activity, Department of Defence, Jan. 19, 2018,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1419671/national-defense-strategy-a-good-fit-for-our-times-mattis-says/source/GovDelivery/>.

5. The National Defense Strategy is Writing Checks that America Can't Cash

Christopher Preble

As with the *National Security Strategy* issued last month, the new *National Defense Strategy* reveals some worrisome discontinuities between the Trump administration's official goals and the president's often undisciplined rhetoric.

However, leaving aside the @realDonaldTrump Twitter feed — after all, one can't blame Pentagon officials for the commander-in-chief's tweets — there are several other issues that the *National Defense Strategy* does not and probably cannot resolve. The document proposes many costly missions for the military, with the belief that more resources will materialize to execute them. That is an unreasonable expectation. The *National Defense Strategy* identifies “strategic competitors” that are unlikely to rouse the public to forego domestic spending goodies, or tolerate vastly higher taxes, in order to defeat. Indeed, the primary foe — China — is financing America's spending binge, and is also a key factor powering the global economy.

For all of these reasons, the Defense Department is likely to fall short of the ambitious goals set forth in the *National Defense Strategy*, even with the capable Secretary of Defense James Mattis in charge. On the other hand, if it succeeds, and convinces the American people that major and sustained new military spending is needed in order to deter or defeat long-term strategic competitors, we should all fear the ramifications. Finding the cash to cover the figurative checks that the *National Defense Strategy* writes would transform the American political and economic landscape. Such changes are

unnecessary and unwise given America's favorable geostrategic situation. We can defend vital U.S. interests without driving the nation further into bankruptcy.

More Missions

No one disputes that the U.S. military has many missions. It should be focused on those that address the greatest threats to U.S. security. Alas, the *National Defense Strategy* speaks of setting priorities, but ultimately compounds the gap between the military's ends and means.¹⁰¹ The following is an incomplete list of the many adversaries, areas of concern, and presumed vulnerabilities-to-be-plugged that are named in the unclassified summary of the *National Defense Strategy*:

- The reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by revisionist powers, especially Russia and China;
- The weakening of the post-World War II international order;
- North Korea;
- Iran;
- Challenges to U.S. military advantage in every domain — air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace;
- An ever more lethal and disruptive battlefield; rapid technology advancements and the changing nature of war;
- Non-state actors;

¹⁰¹ Walter Lippmann opined that “foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power.” From *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), 34-36, quoted in Frank G. Hoffman, “Towards a Balanced and Sustainable Defense,” Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes, July 2, 2009, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2009/07/towards-a-balanced-and-sustainable-defense/>.

- The fact that the homeland is no longer a sanctuary; and
- Weapons of mass destruction.

The classified version is presumably even longer. The ends, in other words, are many and varied. The solution? More means.

In announcing the release of the *National Defense Strategy* during a speech at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Mattis hammered the point: the department needs more money. "No strategy can long survive," he said, "without necessary funding and the stable, predictable budgets required to defend America in the modern age."

He continued:

As hard as the last 16 years have been on our military, no enemy in the field has done more to harm the readiness of the U.S. military than the combined impact of the Budget Control Act's defense spending cuts, worsened by us operating, 9 of the last 10 years, under continuing resolutions, wasting copious amounts of precious taxpayer dollars.¹⁰²

Mattis is hardly the first secretary of defense to bemoan the uncertainty surrounding the budgeting process. In 2009, Bob Gates told the Economic Club of Chicago that it was "important ... to have a budget baseline with a steady, sustainable, and predictable rate of

¹⁰² "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy," January 19, 2018,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>.

growth that avoids extreme peaks and valleys that are enormously harmful to sound budgeting.”

He also said, however:

If the Department of Defense can't figure out a way to defend the United States on a budget of more than half a trillion dollars a year, then our problems are much bigger than anything that can be cured by buying a few more ships and planes.¹⁰³

Few in Washington today seem to agree with such sentiments. They want more. In one recent exercise, the American Enterprise Institute's Thomas Donnelly proposed increases to military spending totaling \$1.3 trillion over ten years, with spending as a share of GDP averaging about 3 percent.¹⁰⁴

Others find that increment of national wealth woefully inadequate. For example, Eliot Cohen believes that “a new, sustained target of 4 percent [of GDP] would hardly break the bank.”¹⁰⁵ We might ask our banker about that (more on that below). We might also ask the American people, who would be expected under Cohen's proposal to pony up

¹⁰³ “Secretary of Defense Speech,” Economic Club of Chicago, July 16, 2009,

<http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1369>.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Donnelly, “Great Powers Don't Pivot,” in *How Much Is Enough? Alternative Defense Strategies*, Jacob Cohn and Ryan Boone, ed., Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 207, 208.

many hundreds of billions of dollars more for the military than currently projected.¹⁰⁶ That might not seem like much in a \$19 trillion economy, but tell that to members of Congress who have struggled to find even a few billion dollars to help their constituents struggling to recover after natural disasters, from wildfires to hurricanes.

How Much Is Enough?

Adjusting for inflation, Gates’s “half a trillion” would be about \$576 billion in today’s dollars. Mattis has reportedly requested, and been granted, a base budget between \$610 and \$615 billion for FY 2019.¹⁰⁷ But the Budget Control Act caps the FY 2019 budget at \$549 billion. We might expect Overseas Contingency Operations spending — which is exempted under the Budget Control Act — to make up for some of the difference, but we should be wary of relying on this gimmick to evade spending limits.

It isn’t obvious how Mattis and his staff intend to square the circle. Elbridge Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, told reporters

¹⁰⁶ According to the Congressional Budget Office’s most recent projections, defense spending (budget authority) will total \$3.322 trillion between FY 2018-2022. Four percent of GDP during that period amounts to \$4.287 trillion, a gap of \$965 billion. Even a gradual increase, in which Pentagon spending reaches the four percent target over five years, would consume an additional \$552 billion, and \$225 billion in FY 2022 alone. Author’s calculations from “An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2017 to 2027,” Congressional Budget Office, June 2017, Tables 1 and 4, www.cbo.gov/publication/52801.

¹⁰⁷ Tony Bertuca, “Sources: Mattis Went to Trump for Pentagon Budget Growth – and Got It,” *Inside the Army*, January 22, 2018. <https://insidedefense.com/inside-army/sources-mattis-went-trump-pentagon-budget-growth-and-got-it>.

that planners opted for spelling out the requirements, first, with the hope that the “strategy will then drive the budget.”¹⁰⁸

Pentagon officials seem to underestimate the scale of that challenge, which goes well beyond the Budget Control Act caps. The U.S. federal government is, after all, operating in the red. Although the official debt figure is nearly \$20 trillion, some argue that debt held by the public (\$14.6 billion) is a more accurate representation of federal liabilities.¹⁰⁹

But a full accounting of obligations in excess of revenues is vastly greater, even, than the official \$20 trillion debt. In 2016, my Cato colleague Jeff Miron put the figure at \$117 trillion.¹¹⁰ This is consistent with research by the University of Pennsylvania’s Jagadeesh Gokhale, who concluded “the U.S. fiscal imbalance is about seven times the total national debt held by the public.”¹¹¹ It is important to note that promises to pay future retirees are not ironclad commitments, and could be altered at any time by legislation. It is also conceivable that taxes on current workers will be raised, or even that some combination of reduced payments and higher taxes will close the gap. But the political prospects for any such changes are dim.

¹⁰⁸ Aaron Mehta, “National Defense Strategy Released with Clear Priority: Stay Ahead of Russia and China,” *Defense News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2018/01/19/national-defense-strategy-released-with-clear-priority-stay-ahead-of-russia-and-china/>.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, “Q&A: Gross Debt Versus Debt Held by the Public,” Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, Sep. 11, 2017, <http://www.crfb.org/papers/qa-gross-debt-versus-debt-held-public>.

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey Miron, “U.S. Fiscal Imbalance over Time: This Time Is Different,” Cato Institute White Paper, Jan. 26, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/publications/white-paper/us-fiscal-imbalance-over-time-time-different>.

¹¹¹ Jagadeesh Gokhale, *The Government Debt Iceberg*, The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2014, <https://iea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Gokhale-Interactive-PDF.pdf>.

The *National Defense Strategy* doesn't ignore the need for spending money more wisely. It counts "reforming the Department's business practices for greater performance and affordability" as one of "three distinct lines of effort." It affirms a solemn "responsibility to gain full value from every taxpayer dollar spent on defense," describes plans to accelerate the development of new technologies and improve innovation, and pledges "to achieve full auditability of all its operations." The strategy also commits the department to "drive greater efficiency in procurement of materiel and services," and reduce overhead and headquarters staff, and reaffirms the department's long-standing desire to shed "excess property and infrastructure" through the Base Realignment and Closure process. These are all worthy goals, but they can't close the gap between what the department says it needs, and what is likely to be made available.

In short, although Mattis himself admitted to the importance of restoring "America's economic viability, because no nation in history has maintained its military power that was not economically viable and did not keep its fiscal house in order," the U.S. fiscal house is a wreck.¹¹²

At War with Our Banker

The ultimate irony? Enemy number one, China, is funding our profligate ways by buying U.S. Treasury bills. Indeed, Americans, indirectly at least, are funding part of China's military modernization through the interest paid on the U.S. notes they hold.¹¹³

¹¹² "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy."

¹¹³ Jethro Mullen, "China Is America's Biggest Creditor Once Again," *CNN Money*, Aug. 16, 2017,

<http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/16/investing/china-us-debt-treasuries/index.html>.

U.S. leaders have been aware of this conundrum for years. Consider, for example, an exchange in March 2009 between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. On the one hand, Clinton “*affirmed the U.S. desire for a successful China, with a rising standard of living and improving democracy at a pace Chinese leaders could tolerate.*” In addition, Clinton continued, according to a cable published by Wikileaks:

We wanted China to take more responsibility in the global economic sphere, create more of a social safety net for its people, and construct a better regulatory framework for the goods China manufactures. The Secretary also noted the challenges posed by China’s economic rise, asking, “How do you deal toughly with your banker?”¹¹⁴

Contrast such sentiments with the *National Defense Strategy*, which seems unfazed by the obvious economic links between the two countries, and little interest in seeing China succeed economically or politically:

As China continues its economic and military ascendance ... it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.

¹¹⁴ “US Embassy Cables: Hillary Clinton Ponders U.S. Relationship with its Chinese ‘banker,’” *The Guardian*, December 4, 2010, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/199393>.

Emphasis added.

Similar sentiments appeared in the just-released National Security Strategy, and mark a dramatic departure for U.S. foreign policy. As Zack Cooper and Mira Rapp-Hooper note:

For decades, the United States has sought to make China a “responsible stakeholder” in the existing regional and international order. By incorporating China into existing institutions and power structures, this narrative held, the international order would help to make China a benign major power. At the very least, the order would change China more than China would change it.¹¹⁵

But the Trump administration appears to have abandoned this approach. The *National Security Strategy* reads:

[T]he assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners ... turned out to be false.¹¹⁶

If that is the case, does the Trump administration also believe that, on balance, close economic ties between the United States and China no longer serve U.S. strategic

¹¹⁵ Zack Cooper and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “China, America, and the End of the Responsible Stakeholder Theory,” *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/#essay5>.

¹¹⁶ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, Dec., 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. Phil Levy notes the same passage. See Phil Levy, “Economics in the National Security Strategy: Principles vs. Practices,” *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/#essay6>.

interests? That's not clear. But even if the president and his national security team conclude that our economic co-dependence with China should continue, we still come back to the issue of limited resources.

Misplaced Fears

Americans haven't traditionally been willing to spend vast sums of money on the military during times of relative peace. Are the circumstances so different today?

Probably not. Americans are scared of terrorists, not China. To the extent that the *National Defense Strategy* prioritizes one challenge over another, combating ISIL and other counter-terrorism operations — though still important — are less so than five years ago. “Long-term strategic competition with China and Russia,” the document explains, are the “principle priorities” for the department.

One could argue that the public *should* be more afraid of China and Russia than of terrorists. After all, terrorists kill fewer Americans every year than accident-causing deer or falling furniture.¹¹⁷ Worldwide, the number of people killed in terrorist attacks fell in 2017.¹¹⁸ But it is more accurate to say that Americans shouldn't be that afraid, period.

¹¹⁷ See John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “Responsible Counterterrorism Policy,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis, September 10, 2014, 5. <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/responsible-counterterrorism-policy>.

¹¹⁸ Matthew Henman, “Global Militant Attacks Caused Fewer Fatalities in 2017,” IHS Markit, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/global-militant-attacks-caused-fewer-fatalities-in-2017.html>.

Nonetheless, public anxiety about terrorism has not abated in the United States.¹¹⁹ A poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs taken in June 2017 found that 75 percent of respondents named international terrorism as a critical threat to the United States, whereas only 38 percent named China, and only 30 percent Russia.¹²⁰ The Pew Research Center found similar results: 74 percent of Americans labeled the Islamic State as a major threat, whereas Russian and Chinese power and influence registered at 47 and 41 percent, respectively.¹²¹

Notes the *Washington Post*'s Adam Taylor, "the threat from terrorism is simple to understand and specifically designed to instill fear. In contrast, the threats posed by a rising China and Russia are complicated; the United States does not have a purely adversarial role with either."¹²²

¹¹⁹ Christopher Preble, "We Are Terrorized: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing, and Why It Can't Be Easily Fixed," *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 8, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/01/we-are-terrorized-why-u-s-counterterrorism-policy-is-failing-and-why-it-cant-be-easily-fixed/>.

¹²⁰ Dina Smeltz, et al., "The Foreign Policy Establishment or Donald Trump: Which Better Reflects American Opinion?" The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 20, 2017, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/foreign-policy-establishment-or-donald-trump-which-better-reflects-american-opinion>.

¹²¹ Jacob Poushter and Dorothy Manevich, "Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats," Pew Research Center, Aug. 1, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats/>.

¹²² Adam Taylor, "The Pentagon Says China and Russia Are Bigger Problems for U.S. than Terrorists. American Voters May not Agree," *Washington Post*, Jan. 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/20/the-pentagon-says-china-and-russia-are-bigger-problems-for-u-s-than-terrorists-american-voters-may-not-agree/?utm_term=.4eacee95eb5d.

Conclusion

So, to recap, we're broke. To the extent that we are able to continue spending more money than we have, we can thank the primary challenger singled out in the *National Defense Strategy*: China. And we, in turn, are indirectly funding their military modernization.

The American people are unlikely to sign onto an ambitious new program to fight the Chinese — in addition to Russians, North Koreans, Iranians, and ISIL. And, we shouldn't want Americans to harbor greater animosity toward China, in particular. That could stir up protectionist sentiments that would undermine the U.S. economy. In the modern era, trade wars are almost as damaging as real wars.

The drafters of the new strategy might reason that a big scary opponent is needed to shake additional dollars loose to fund big-ticket items like warships and aircraft, plus new nukes and space weapons, but the costs and risks of demonizing China far outweigh the benefits to the Department of Defense, and, more importantly, the nation.

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