



RETHINK

Foreign Policy

REALISM *in* **PRACTICE**

**A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE
AMERICAN STRATEGY FOR
THE 21ST CENTURY**

By Tyler Koteskey, CVA Policy Director

“Foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserves, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power.”

WALTER LIPPMANN, *U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: SHIELD OF THE REPUBLIC*, 1943

INTRODUCTION

Balancing Ends, Ways, and Means Through Realism and Restraint

In 1989, Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr. of the U.S. Army War College outlined a simple, pragmatic definition for thinking about strategy. Lykke saw strategy as a “three-legged stool” combining the nation’s *ends* (or objectives) with its *ways* (or approaches), and its available *means* (or resources).¹ To be effective, strategy must match a nation’s strategic ends with its means and employ the best-suited ways to achieve them.

America sits at a strategic crossroads. For decades, the United States has set objectives that are increasingly beyond U.S. capabilities to credibly achieve if strenuously challenged. America also faces growing domestic and international constraints that limit U.S. freedom of action to a far greater extent than shortly after the Cold War. What’s worse, policymakers continue to overuse military approaches as their main tool for addressing our nation’s strategic challenges, damaging our armed forces’ readiness and neglecting other pillars of American national power. With America’s strategic

ends, ways, and means so misaligned, our vital national interests are under greater long-term threat.

Concerned Veterans for America believes it is time for a different approach. To borrow from Alexander Hamilton, the United States can enact overdue foreign policy reform through “reflection and choice, or... accident and force.”² We can proactively and safely transition to a more prudent, sustainable, and effective foreign policy or be forced to chaotically adjust our approach through inaction.

This report offers a way forward. Recognizing the United States' growing constraints since the end of the Cold War, "Realism in Practice" argues that pursuing realistic, manageable objectives with the appropriate tools of national power provides America the soundest footing on the world stage.

In employing more effective *ways* to pursue U.S. ends, policymakers should turn to the DIME model of national power³ used since the Cold War, leveraging American Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic power to a greater extent.

Policymakers can use our military strength more effectively when it matters most by holding it in

reserve more often, prioritizing the regional force posture tradeoffs and capabilities that will best protect our core interests. Through a realist and retrained approach, the United States can maintain higher readiness and maintain a robust capability to project power when necessary in order to fight and win the nation's wars.

To secure vital American interests in our rapidly changing world, policymakers need to look at our strategic situation honestly, not with wishful thinking. Balanced, prudent foreign policy that more holistically employs America's advantages offers our nation its most effective strategic path forward.

A Disciplined, Realistic View of the World and American National Interests

Safeguarding the American experiment through a strong national defense is the federal government's most important role. To defend our country effectively, policymakers need to make decisions grounded in realism—which starts with understanding the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be. Realism forces policymakers to think with strategic discipline.

The United States is incredibly powerful but faces limits like all countries. A realistic view of power's enduring importance on the international stage and of how to manage it skillfully is vital for effective U.S. foreign policymaking. Realists recognize certain basic facts about the world:

- The international system is **anarchic** – states don't have an international "911" to call to settle serious disputes. Instead, states have to help themselves.
- As a result, states intentionally seek more power and security in order to survive. Countries like the United States, that dominate their regions as **hegemons**, are the most secure.
- Like it or not, the most powerful states, called **great powers**, shape the world stage most, because their greater relative strength has the biggest impact on the international system.
- Sometimes, one state's pursuit of more security leads others to feel threatened, sparking action-reaction cycles of growing tension called **security dilemmas**. These can lead to war.
- In our international system, deep reserves of national power continue to be important. Maintaining a strong national defense,

alongside other tools of national power, is essential.

- Even so, power should be managed effectively. A state that seeks security too aggressively risks overextension and driving others to work together to tip the balance of power against it.
- War, even when necessary, is always risky and full of unintended consequences. Policymakers should never choose war lightly.

America's strong position makes **restraint** the best foreign policy approach to secure its vital interests:

- America has key advantages: a dynamic economy, a durable system of governance that ensures the promise of prosperity, a strong military with a sizeable nuclear arsenal, and favorable geography. Put together, these blessings make the United States the most secure great power in world history.
- The United States faces its share of strategic challenges, but none are insurmountable. By applying the wisdom of realism and restraint, policymakers can avoid overextension by accurately assessing threats and prioritizing them appropriately.

- While powerful, the United States does not have infinite resources. Every great power in history has faced security challenges, often across several fronts at once. These states were most successful when they practiced strategic discipline, husbanding their strength and using their full spectrum of diplomatic, economic, and informational tools to avoid war with multiple adversaries at once.⁴
- Pursuing greater restraint in U.S. foreign policy will leave America stronger and better equipped to deter, and if need be, defeat our greatest long-term threats without getting bogged down.

U.S. foreign policy serves America better with a disciplined, strategic eye, focused on securing **core U.S. national interests**. These include:

- The safety and sovereignty of our homeland, including our borders.
- The foundations of our economic prosperity.
- The preservation of our liberal-democratic system.
- The peaceful containment of would-be regional hegemons.

Preserving America's Strong Global Position Requires Matching Our Foreign Policy Goals With Our Resources and Using the Right Tools of National Power to Achieve Them

Since the end of the Cold War, policymakers in both parties have utilized a heavy U.S. military footprint as the primary means of executing American foreign policy. Large resulting troop deployments in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia collectively supported a strategy of *deep engagement* across the globe. This outlook was more tempting at a time when many thought the world had permanently changed after the Cold War and that the United States could afford this force posture over the long-term.

But this expansive approach undermined America's strategic position for decades by setting unsustainable goals and consistently overemploying the military to achieve them, neglecting other tools of national power and costing our country greatly.

Open-ended military interventions that devolved into nation building exercises during the Global War on Terror cost the United States over 7,000 troops in combat and upwards of \$6 trillion.⁵ Over two decades, suicide tragically claimed the lives of at least 30,000 veterans of these conflicts.⁶

COSTS OF THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

7,000+

U.S. Troops
Killed in Action

30,000+

Veterans Lost
to Suicide

\$6 TRILLION+

Spent

Sources: Department of Defense,
Cost of War Project

The additional long-term costs of VA health care and disability benefits for post-9/11 veterans can be conservatively estimated at at least \$2.2 trillion through 2050.⁷

The United States incurred strategic costs as well.

America's distraction in the Middle East benefitted

great power competitors like Russia and China while empowering regional adversaries like Iran by removing its rivals.

More recently, U.S. attempts to take the lead in crises in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia all at once are increasing strain on America's depleting munitions resources.⁸ Ignoring U.S. limits instead of grappling with how best to prioritize and manage threats guarantees a dangerous strategy of bluff—a set of foreign policy objectives out of balance with our available power.

In a world of growing constraints, hard strategic choices are inevitable, but making them proactively will best protect American interests abroad.

And when it is necessary, there's a better way for our military to fight. Boggling our troops down in vague open-ended conflicts in regions peripheral to our vital interests sets our forces up for failure, does little to make America safer from its main threats,

and causes burnout. Focusing more of our defense resources toward a large and effective Navy and Air Force would more credibly deter our most formidable rivals, such as China, in the Pacific. By supporting these robust power projection capabilities, the United States would also be better positioned to come to the

defense of our allies in order to maintain regional balances of power.

The United States should continue to be actively engaged in the world and to maintain strong armed forces capable of defending its interests. But to achieve these goals, policymakers need to set realistic, prioritized objectives and employ the right tools of U.S. national power to achieve them. In a world of growing constraints, hard strategic choices are inevitable, but making them proactively will best protect American interests abroad.

RECOGNIZING GROWING CONSTRAINTS ON U.S. POWER:

To set achievable foreign policy objectives, policymakers need a realistic view of the United States' capabilities and strategic environment. America remains extraordinarily powerful and secure, but growing domestic and international constraints limit U.S. power projection abilities more than in previous decades. Proactively adjusting U.S. strategy accordingly will make American security commitments more credible over the long-term.

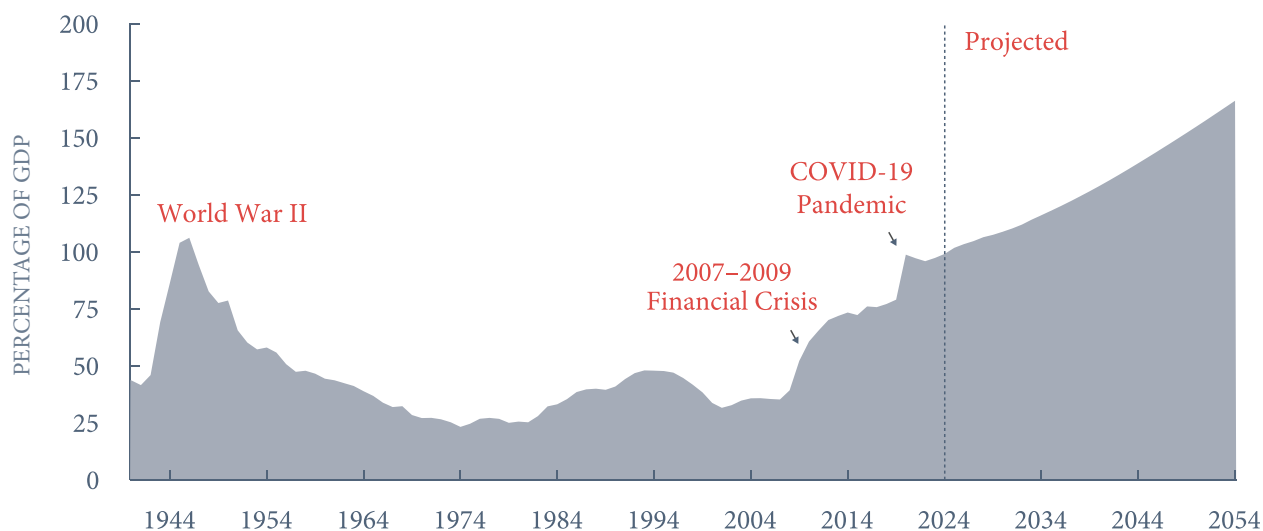
DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS:

Economic:

After decades of spending beyond our means, the United States is saddled with over \$35 trillion in debt. Before the end of the decade, America's peacetime debt burden will become so large that it will exceed our record World War II debt-to-GDP ratio. In fact, the U.S. debt burden is now so large that it is drawing previously unthinkable warnings from the International Monetary Fund, which announced that the United States "critically need(s) to take policy action to address fundamental imbalances between spending and revenues."⁹

Our fiscal track record is producing concrete consequences. Our debt has grown so large that

U.S. Debt-to-GDP Ratio, 1940-2054 (Projected)



Source: Congressional Budget Office, Long-Term Budget Outlook: 2024-2054.

interest payments alone will surpass the entire U.S. defense budget this year. The debt burden is also slowing America's economic growth. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget estimates that rising U.S. debt could reduce the future growth of American incomes by as much of a third over the next three decades.¹⁰ Massive debt threatens the dynamism that fuels American prosperity and enables us to maintain a strong national defense.

Long-term fiscal irresponsibility will bring a budgetary reckoning that forces hard defense choices. Within a decade, the Social Security retirement trust fund will run dry, forcing automatic across-the-board cuts to beneficiaries.¹¹ A few years later, the Medicare Hospital Insurance trust fund will also exhaust, and inaction will force reduced Medicare payments.¹² Setting our fiscal trajectory on a sustainable path will require painful choices which will limit our ability to expand defense spending, but doing so is necessary to maintain the dynamic economy which is the backbone of our security.

After decades of running high deficits, America lacks the fiscal space to significantly increase defense

spending without risking a fiscal crisis. U.S. strategy needs to adjust while we secure our financial future.

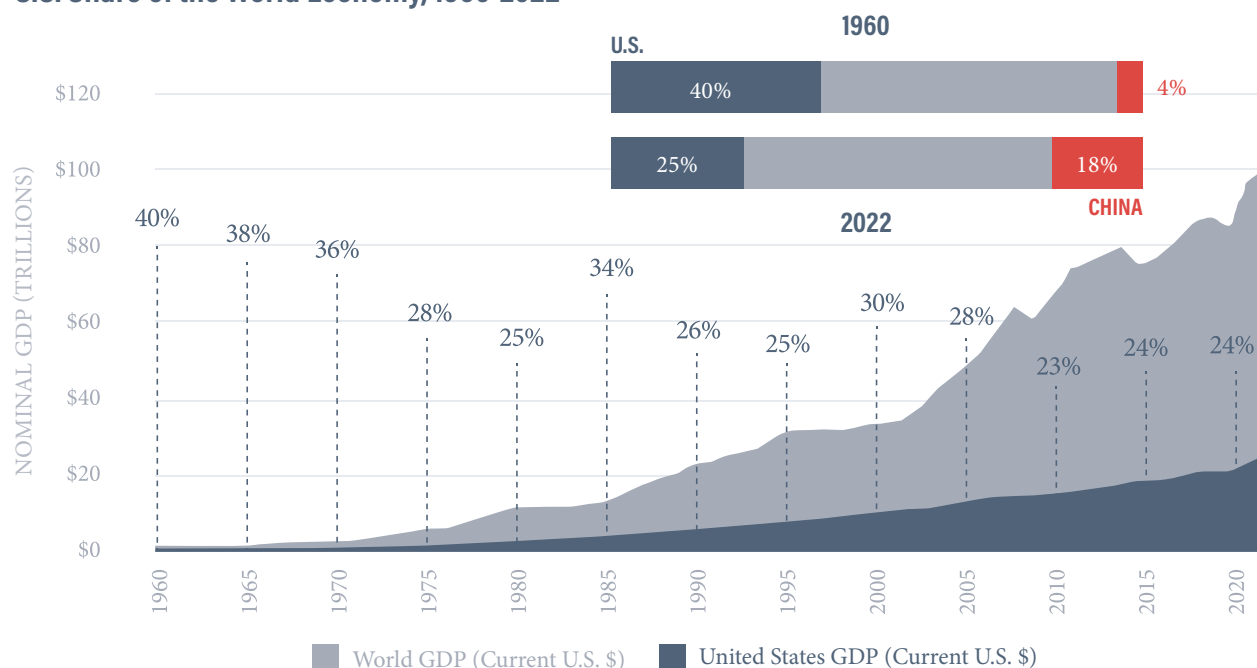
Political:

Americans are growing more frustrated with our foreign policy status quo and the obligations it incurs. Amid a generationally stark recruiting crisis, we will struggle to maintain global commitments that the American people do not see as clearly connected to their core security interests.

- Less than a quarter of Americans support a more active U.S. role in international affairs, according to AP-NORC polling.¹³
- Since 2018, according to the Chicago Council, support for an active U.S. role in the world has consistently declined.¹⁴
- Six times as many Americans want to reduce U.S. troops in Europe as want to increase them, according to the Institute for Global Affairs.¹⁵
- CVA-YouGov polling finds that 52 percent of Americans oppose sending more troops to the Middle East.¹⁶

INTERNATIONAL CONSTRAINTS:

U.S. Share of the World Economy, 1960-2022



Source: The World Bank

Economic:

America is still the world's most powerful nation, but other countries have increased their relative strength compared to the United States since the end of the Cold War. These realities increase the costs of pursuing expansive strategic goals.

America has the world's largest economy, but as other nations have grown, we no longer have the overwhelming market power we did after World War II. Despite substantial U.S. growth over the past six decades, the U.S. share of world GDP declined from almost 40% in 1960, to 25% in 2022.¹⁷ And while its long-term growth faces headwinds, China's share of the world's economy grew from 4% in 1960 to 18% in 2022.¹⁸

Military:

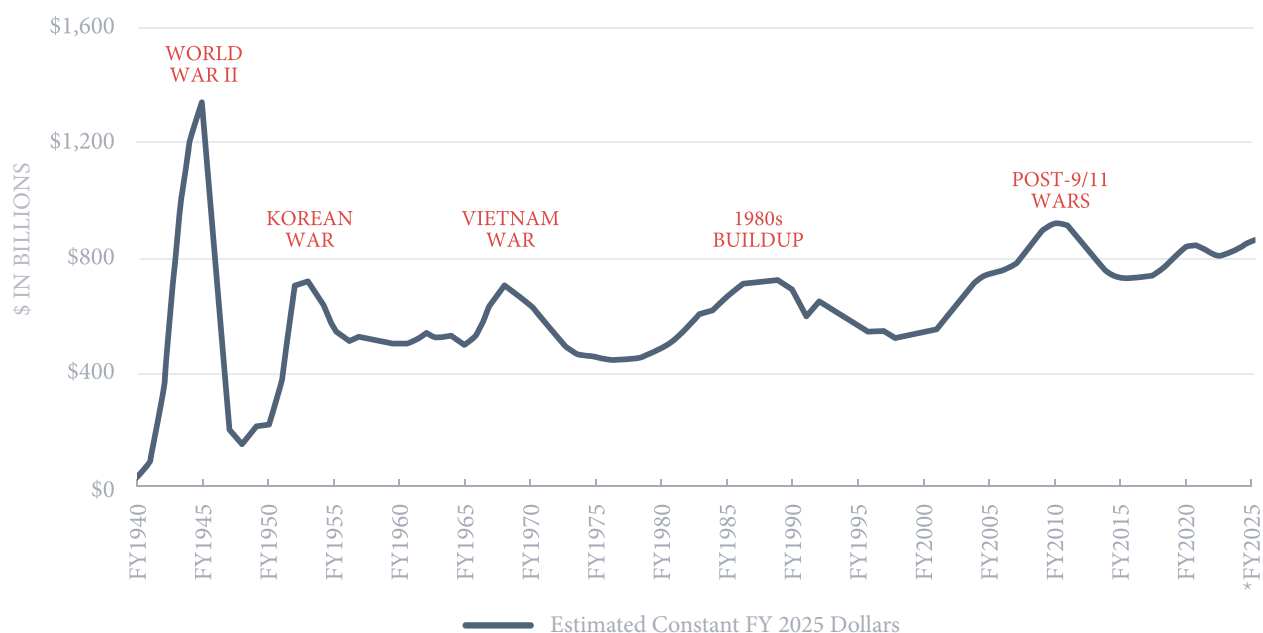
Over time, other countries have been able to convert their economic growth into military power. As

a result, even as inflation-adjusted U.S. defense spending has increased well above peak Cold War levels since the fall of the Soviet Union, America's share of world defense spending fell over the same time period.

In 1992, the U.S.' share of global defense spending was 51%, more than the rest of the world combined. Despite substantial growth since then, by 2023, the U.S. defense budget comprised 37% of world military spending.¹⁹ By contrast, China's military budget was only 2% of world defense spending in 1992. As the PRC has developed, its defense budget reached 13% of global defense spending in 2023.²⁰ The United States remains far and away the world's most capable military power, but these trends put more limits on potential American power projection abroad.

In particular, the spread of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) missile technology limits U.S. power

U.S. Real Defense Spending, 1940-2025



*FY 2024 and FY 2025 amounts are OMB/DOD spending projections.

Source: Figure created using data from OMB Historical Tables 3.1 and 10.1. Figures are adjusted to estimated constant FY 2025 dollars using “Total Defense” deflator in OMB Table 10.1.

projection abilities against adversaries and makes U.S. overreliance on conventional military superiority to secure our strategic goals unsustainable.²¹ However, the growing defensive advantages of A2/AD also allow our partners and allies to better defend themselves against potential aggressors.²²

Prior U.S. defense postures centered on our ability to fight multiple wars at once, but mounting internal and external constraints have made this construct progressively more untenable and more strategically

dangerous overtime.²³ By 2018, the National Defense Strategy dropped the untenable “two-war” standard. These structural limits amid serious recruiting shortfalls require adaptation. The return of multiple great power competitors does not give the United States the luxury of overlying on military force as was possible against weaker rogue states in the ‘90s and early 2000s. America needs adroit diplomacy to manage threats and lower the risk of a multi-front conflict with capable adversaries.²⁴

Rebalancing How America Uses Its Tools of National Power

The United States will engage more effectively with the rest of the world and better secure its advantages if it rebalances how it uses its tools of national power across the DIME (Diplomatic, Informational, Military Economic) spectrum.

A strong military geared toward our top security threats remains vital. With its strong maritime traditions, the United States should maintain formidable naval and air power capable of defending key U.S. trade routes and strategic chokepoints in peacetime or denying those crucial to our adversaries in war. But to be most strategically effective, the United States should lean less heavily on military force as its go-to solution to advance its interests, preserving its military capabilities for vital contingencies.

America underuses its Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic power. These tools have the potential to amplify our latent military strength and advance our national interests at far lower costs to our troops and taxpayers. Databases like the Lowy Institute's

Asia Power Index showcase this comprehensive view of national strength, demonstrating the full DIME spectrum's value in advancing national interests.²⁵

MILITARY:

The U.S. military is the world's finest. Policymakers should continue to ensure that U.S. forces are top-notch and designed to effectively deter, and if need be, defeat our greatest external threats. Nevertheless, our military's greatest asset to the United States is the value it provides when its deterrence holds and it does not have to be used. Policymakers should support our military's ability to deter would-be aggressors by maintaining its credible capacity to rapidly project force if our allies cannot maintain regional balances of power.

Since 9/11, the United States has over relied on military force to secure its interests, at great human, economic, and reputational cost. Two decades of conflicts and unsustainably high operational tempos, even in peacetime, have harmed military readiness, especially for naval and air assets crucial for projecting and sustaining force against our most important rivals.²⁶

A realistic U.S. strategy must set objectives that can be credibly achieved via politically sustainable defense budgets. This means prioritizing limited resources towards our most strategically important interests and capabilities, not ignoring tradeoffs.

Regional Prioritization:

Limited means and multiple challenges require tough choices about where to prioritize limited defense resources. Right now, the United States' overly militarized foreign policy approach overstretches the joint force through concurrent heavy footprints in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Recent strategy documents like the 2021 Global Force Posture Review and the 2022 National Security Strategy ignored US constraints and made no hard choices about force posture and commitments across each theater. We owe it to American security interests to do better.

Europe:

Our wealthy European allies are well-positioned to take greater responsibility for NATO's defense against Russia. Collectively, NATO-Europe outclasses Russia across several fronts. NATO-Europe's combined GDP of more than \$20 trillion dwarfs Russia's more than ten-fold, and still surpasses Russia's economy more than six-fold when measured by purchasing power parity.²⁷

Our European allies also have four times Russia's population, and their nearly two million active-duty

troops still significantly out-number Russia's even after Moscow increased its military from 900,000 to 1.3 million troops since its invasion of Ukraine.²⁸ Most of NATO-Europe also has significantly more technologically advanced economies than Russia, buttressing their research and development edge.²⁹

Unfortunately, too much of Europe lacks the political will to take the lead in its own defense. Key NATO members like Germany continue to experience chronic readiness issues and have only half-heartedly increased defense spending.³⁰ What's more, too many NATO members have entertained expanding NATO's scope beyond the alliance's core task of defending Europe to adding presence missions in the Indo-Pacific.³¹ NATO-Europe need to adequately handle its own regional defense first.

Excessive efforts to "reassure"

European allies discourage them from reinvesting in their militaries, damaging the long-term health of the transatlantic relationship. Instead, the United States should free up needed resources for its more strategically important Indo-Pacific theater by gradually drawing down its frontline military footprint in Europe and adopting a logistical support role, giving our NATO allies time to reprioritize their own security.³²

Middle East:

After two decades of war in the Middle East, the United States needs to reduce its regional military commitments. Open-ended U.S. troop deployments in countries like Iraq and Syria are disconnected from vital U.S. interests. Nevertheless, this footprint provides adversaries like Iran easier opportunities to target our forces as they please.³³ America can achieve its counterterrorism goals and protect trade flows with

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a far more limited basing footprint as it did during the Cold War.³⁴ Additionally, reducing domestic barriers to American energy production can continue to allow the Middle East to safely be less strategically important for the United States overtime.

America should still prioritize diplomatic engagement in the Middle East. Doing so reduces the likelihood of crises escalating to regional war and fosters cooperation among our different partners in the

U.S. policymakers should deter conflict with the PRC by aiding partners such as Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan in acquiring asymmetric defensive systems that raise the cost of potential aggression.

region. But the United States neither needs to nor should tie its Middle Eastern diplomatic objectives to future U.S. troop deployments. declines and the United States becomes less dependent on Middle Eastern energy, the Indo-Pacific will be the most strategically important region for the United States to focus on in the decades to come. War between the United States and China would be catastrophic for both countries and the world economy.³⁵

Indo-Pacific: As Europe's relative economic importance declines and the United States becomes less dependent on Middle Eastern energy, the Indo-Pacific will be the most strategically important region for the United States to focus on in the decades to come. War between the United States and China would be catastrophic for both countries and the world economy.³⁵

U.S. policymakers should deter conflict with the PRC by aiding partners such as Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan in acquiring asymmetric defensive systems that raise the cost of potential aggression. Avoiding peripheral commitments elsewhere can free up additional U.S. forces and strengthen our deterrent credibility. U.S. policymakers should also recognize that the best way to maintain an edge over China long-term is through leveraging America's Diplomatic, Economic, and Informational strengths to help countries across the region and world understand that the United States is a superior partner.

DIPLOMATIC:

Policymakers significantly undervalue U.S. diplomatic capabilities. America benefits from an unparalleled global network of partnerships that offer substantial advantages over our more isolated adversaries. These networks can be better leveraged to manage regional risks and allow America to concentrate on top threats. Opportunities to improve U.S. diplomatic engagement include:

- Better leveraging the power of public diplomacy to make the case for American values, by hosting and participating in international summits.
- Regularly communicating with our competitors, bracketing case-by-case collaboration on issues such as environmental cooperation, public health, and/or arms control where possible, and creating civil and military deconfliction mechanisms to reduce the risks of accidents.
- Leveraging America's appeal for driven people across the world by streamlining our legal immigration system to maintain our economic, scientific, and cultural advantages, while still prioritizing border security.
- Clearly communicating expectations about our alliances and partnerships to prevent unrealistic expectations of U.S. support from encouraging reckless behavior.
- Avoiding permanent new U.S. security commitments and ensuring that existing alliances support U.S. interests rather than functioning as ends in themselves. NATO, for example, should not admit weak or strategically compromised countries that add more liability to the rest of the alliance's members than they contribute in military capability.

INFORMATIONAL:

U.S. access to information, its ability to advance compelling public narratives, and its overall cultural influence feed its national power. Our dominant media landscape, leading higher education system, influential entertainment industry, abundant exchange programs, and robust civil society offer important advantages in shaping public opinion abroad to reduce the costs of U.S. foreign policy goals. America should actively help countries understand the benefits of partnership with it as well as the potential drawbacks of deep ties with our adversaries.

Leveraging American Soft Power:

The United States' **soft power**, or the appeal of America's culture and values abroad, helps make its foreign policy goals easier to achieve. Our citizens' ability to build personal, economic, and diplomatic connections with others abroad and vice versa directly advances U.S. soft power. Additionally, the Broadcasting Board of Governors' five networks, such as Voice of America, allow citizens of other countries alternatives to state-run media. These channels are most effective when they earn their audiences' trust by maintaining reputations as even-handed, independent news sources.³⁶

The United States can also help more citizens of other countries see the benefits of America's values and system of self-governance by improving the legal immigration system and increasing its number of cultural exchanges. One of the most effective ways to spread U.S. ideals is by showcasing the power of their example in action to people around the world who are drawn to them.

Intelligence Sharing:

When confident in our assessments and when possible in ways that protect sources and methods, the United States should share intelligence of adversaries' activities to thwart schemes or expose aggression and

rally partners. Employing information advantages this way was crucial in late 2021, when the United States shared detailed evidence of Russia's invasion preparations to European allies and Ukraine. These measures helped Kyiv improve its defensive plans and allowed European allies to better coordinate aid delivery efforts, playing an important role in preserving Ukraine's independence.

Protecting U.S. Data:

The federal government should reduce our adversaries' ability to steal personal data, intellectual property, and national secrets by deepening cooperation with private industry to identify and disseminate cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

ECONOMIC:

Even as others grow, the United States retains the world's largest economy and most robust capital markets. American economic dynamism allows its citizens to experience the benefits of prosperity, but that economic strength also supports U.S. national security as the foundation of our national defense. That is why former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mike Mullen, was right to point out that America's staggering national debt is our greatest long-term security threat.

Our unsustainable fiscal trajectory endangers our long-term growth, the ability to sustain our military, and the long-term viability of the dollar as the global reserve currency.

“The most significant threat to our national security is our debt.”

– Adm. Mike Mullen,
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs
of Staff 2007-2011

Keeping Our Economic Fundamentals Strong:

Policymakers need to pursue fiscal, budgeting process, and regulatory reforms to avert crisis, protect our financial future, and preserve America's ability to rapidly grow.

Global Economic Engagement:

America can position itself as a preferred partner across the world by aggressively pursuing trade agreements, whether with existing allies and partners or with emerging markets as an alternative to Chinese investment. These deeper economic ties boost American economic growth, help diversify supply chains, and build U.S. influence abroad.

Energy Security:

Our allies and partners in Europe and Asia will benefit from U.S. energy exports in the years to come if we allow them to. American Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), for example, was crucial to helping the European Union wean itself off of Russian natural gas amid Moscow's war on Ukraine. Between 2021 and 2023 the U.S. share of European natural gas imports increased over three-fold.³⁷ The United States now supplies half of all of Europe's LNG.³⁸

Deeper economic ties boost American economic growth, help diversify supply chains, and build U.S. influence abroad.

Similarly, East Asian economies like Japan and South Korea are projected to require increasing amounts of LNG in the decades to come.³⁹ Unfortunately, the Biden Administration's current ban on new LNG export infrastructure holds the United States back from meeting this demand. The moratorium cedes market power to rivals and hurts allied industry through higher energy prices—right at a time when we need our partners abroad to be taking on a greater share of their own defense burden. Unleashing U.S. energy production will benefit American consumers and U.S. foreign policy interests alike by strengthening friendly economies and our own.

Build Relationships, Not Barriers:

Economic sanctions can be powerful tools in certain cases, but they are regularly overused to simply punish behavior policymakers oppose, carrying long-term risks to U.S. economic strength. The Treasury Department's 20-year sanctions review found that between 2001 and 2021, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned over 9,400 additional people and entities, an increase of over 933%.⁴⁰ Since taking office, the Biden Administration has added 5,500 names to OFAC sanctions lists, doubling the pace of additions under President Trump and tripling the rate under President Obama.⁴¹

Sanctions are tempting tools to turn to but can easily falter. When applied without broad international buy-in or targeted at behavior adversaries consider vital enough to their interests to accept high costs over, sanctions have been historically ineffective at achieving their goals.⁴²

America will build more long-term influence by creating and deepening mutually beneficial economic ties around the world. Progressively erecting barriers will reduce the appeal of the U.S. financial system, further fragment the global economy, and alienate countries we may seek to influence by forcing them to choose against their will between economic relationships with the United States and its adversaries. America has more to gain by doubling down on being a more appealing alternative. Acting consistently, predictably, and in limited scope on sanctions policy will improve the U.S. investment climate and our reputation abroad, protecting the dollar's role as the global reserve currency.

CONCLUSION

The United States' strategic environment has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. It's time for our strategy to adjust accordingly. Greater constraints at home and new challenges abroad require the United States to ensure that its *ends* match its available *means*. The United States should continue to maintain a world class military tailored to meet our principal threats but avoid overlying on this tool as a first resort when better options exist.

To succeed in the 2020s and beyond, America should rebalance its approach by employing the full range of Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic *ways* at its disposal to protect its vital national interests. Applying a realist eye to U.S. foreign policy can help decisionmakers prioritize different American interests and concentrate our limited resources accordingly.

ENDNOTES

¹ Col. Arthur F. Lykke, Ret., “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review* 69, no. 5, (May 1989): 2-8.

² See: Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 1, 1787. Arguing for the ratification of the Constitution, Hamilton advised policymakers to proactively strengthen the new United States “through reflection and choice,” rather than allowing the limitations of the Articles of Confederation to require action through “accident and force.” Adopting a disciplined, sustainable U.S. foreign policy is similarly necessary and will be safer if handled proactively.

³ Steven Heffington, et. al., “A National Security Primer,” National War College. https://nwc.ndu.edu/Portals/71/Documents/Publications/NWC-Primer-FINAL_for%20Web.pdf?ver=HOH30gam-KOdUOM2RFoHRA%3D%3D

⁴ For an overview of how historical great powers like the Byzantine Empire, the Republic of Venice, Habsburg Austria, and Edwardian Britain avoided overextension by limiting the number of opponents they had to fight simultaneously, see: A. Wess Mitchell, “Strategic Sequencing: How Great Powers Avoid Multi-Front War,” The Marathon Initiative, September 14, 2020. https://www.themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ONA-Report_Mitchell_TMI_FINAL-220214.pdf

⁵ “Casualty Status as of 10 A.M. EDT April 9, 2024,” Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>; The Cost of War Project estimates the cost of post-9/11 conflicts at \$5.8 trillion between FY 2001 and FY 2021, counting war-related DoD base budget increases, Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) appropriations, VA care costs for post-9/11 veterans, additional interest due to OCO borrowing, and Homeland Security terrorism prevention and response efforts. The full cost of the post-9/11 wars could be as high as \$8 trillion, if \$2.2 trillion in estimated future veterans’ care costs through 2050 are added in. See: Neta Crawford, “The U.S. Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars,” Cost of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University, September 1, 2021. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/BudgetaryCosts>

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