

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Even though America's conventional war in Afghanistan was a failure, Special Operations Forces of the United States Special Operation Command (USSOCOM) executed an extremely effective counterterrorism campaign: There has not been another major attack on the homeland, global terrorist threats are reduced and managed, collaboration with international partners is effective, and units under USSOCOM are the most capable and experienced warfighters in two generations.

There is a movement to reduce the scope and scale of USSOCOM's mission in favor of other service priorities in great-power competition. This would be a mistake because USSOCOM can be employed effectively in great-power competition.

It makes sense to capitalize on USSOCOM's experience and repurpose its mission to include irregular warfare within the context of great-power competition, thereby providing a robust organization that is capable of achieving strategic effects that are critical both to our national defense and to the defense of our allies and partners around the globe. Irregular warfare should be used proactively to prevent state and nonstate actors from negatively affecting U.S. policies and objectives while simultaneously strengthening our regional partnerships. If we maintain irregular warfare's traditional focus on nonstate actors, we limit ourselves to addressing only the symptoms (nonstate actors), not the problems themselves (China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran).

Needed Reforms

- **Make irregular warfare a cornerstone of security strategy.** The U.S. can project strength through unified action with our Interagency,³⁸ allies, and partners by utilizing irregular warfare capabilities synchronized with elements of national power. Broadly redefining irregular warfare to address current state and nonstate actors is critical to countering irregular threats that range from the Chinese use of economic warfare to Russian disinformation and Islamist terrorism. A broad definition of irregular warfare in the National Security Strategy would allow for a whole-of-government approach, thereby providing resources and capabilities to counter threats and ultimately serve as credible deterrence at the strategic and tactical levels.
 1. Define irregular warfare as “a means by which the United States uses all elements of national power to project influence abroad to counter state adversaries, defeat hostile nonstate actors, deter wider conflict, and maintain peace in great-power competition.”
 2. Characterize the state and nonstate irregular threats facing the U.S. by region in the National Security Strategy.

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3. Direct that irregular warfare resources, capabilities, and strategies be incorporated directly into the overall National Defense Strategy instead of being relegated to a supporting document.
 4. Establish an Irregular Warfare Center of Excellence to help DOD train, equip, and organize to conduct irregular warfare as a core competency across the spectrum of competition, crisis, and conflict.
- **Counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) globally.** DOD, in conjunction with the Interagency, allies, and partner nations, must work proactively to counter China's BRI around the globe.
 1. Task USSOCOM and corresponding organizations in the Pentagon with conceptualizing, resourcing, and executing regionally based operations to counter the BRI with a focus on nations that are key to our energy policy, international supply chains, and our defense industrial base.
 2. Use regional and global information operations to highlight Chinese violations of Exclusive Economic Zones, violations of human rights, and coercion along Chinese fault lines in Xinjiang Province, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in addition to China's weaponization of sovereign debt.
 3. Directly counter Chinese economic power with all elements of national power in North America, Central America, and the Caribbean to maintain maritime freedom of movement and protect the digital infrastructure of nations in the region.
 - **Establish credible deterrence through irregular warfare to protect the homeland.** A whole-of-government approach and willingness to employ cyber, information, economic, and counterterrorist irregular warfare capabilities should be utilized to protect the homeland.
 1. Include the designation of USSOCOM as lead for the execution of irregular warfare against hostile state and nonstate actors in the National Defense Strategy.
 2. Demonstrate a willingness to employ offensive cyber capabilities against adversaries who conduct cyberattacks against U.S. infrastructure, businesses, personnel, and governments.

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3. Employ a “name and shame” approach by making information regarding the names of entities that target democratic processes and international norms available in a transparent manner.
4. Work with the Interagency to employ economic warfare, lawfare, and diplomatic pressure against hostile state and nonstate actors.
5. Maintain the authorities necessary for an aggressive counterterrorism posture against threats to the homeland.

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Nuclear deterrence is one of the most critical elements of U.S. national security, as it forms a backstop to U.S. military forces. Every operational plan relies on the assumption that nuclear deterrence holds. Ever since the U.S. first acquired nuclear weapons, Administrations of both parties have pursued a strategy designed to deter nuclear and non-nuclear attack; assure allies; and, in the event of nuclear employment, restore deterrence at the lowest possible cost to the U.S. Today, however, America’s ability to meet these goals is increasingly challenged by the growing nuclear threats posed by our adversaries.

- China is pursuing a strategic breakout of its nuclear forces, significantly shifting the nuclear balance and forcing the U.S. to learn how to deter two nuclear peer competitors (China and Russia) simultaneously for the first time in its history.
- Russia is expanding its nuclear arsenal and using the threat of nuclear employment as a coercive tactic in its war on Ukraine.
- North Korea is advancing its nuclear capabilities.
- Iran is inching closer to nuclear capability.

Meanwhile, all U.S. nuclear capabilities and the infrastructure on which they rely date from the Cold War and are in dire need of replacement. The next Administration will need to focus on continuing the effort to modernize the nuclear triad while updating our strategy and capabilities to meet the challenges presented by a more threatening nuclear environment.

Needed Reforms

- **Prioritize nuclear modernization.** All components of the nuclear triad are far beyond their intended lifetimes and will need to be replaced over the next

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decade. This effort is required for the U.S. to maintain its nuclear triad—and will be the bare minimum needed to maintain U.S. strategic nuclear deterrence.

1. Accelerate the timelines of critical modernization programs including the Sentinel missile, Long Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO), *Columbia*-class ballistic missile submarine, B-21 bomber, and F-35 Dual Capable Aircraft.
 2. Reject any congressional proposals that would further extend the service lives of U.S. capabilities such as the Minuteman III ICBM.
 3. Ensure sufficient funding for warhead life extension programs (LEP), including the B61-12, W80-4, W87-1 Mod, and W88 Alt 370.
- **Develop the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N).** In 2018, the Trump Administration proposed restoring the SLCM-N to help fill a growing gap in U.S. nonstrategic capabilities and improve deterrence against limited nuclear attack.³⁹ The Biden Administration canceled this program in its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR).⁴⁰ The next President should support and accelerate funding for development of the SLCM-N with the goal of deployment by the end of the decade.
 - **Account for China's nuclear expansion.** To ensure its ability to deter both Russia and the growing Chinese nuclear threat, the U.S. will need more than the bare minimum of nuclear modernization. President Biden's 2022 NPR described the problem but proposed no recommendations to restore or maintain nuclear deterrence.
 1. Consider procuring more modernized nuclear systems (such as the Sentinel missile or LRSO) than currently planned.
 2. Improve the ability of the U.S. to utilize the triad's upload capacity in case of a crisis.
 3. Review what capabilities in addition to the SLCM-N (for example, nonstrategic weapons or new warhead designs) are needed to deter the unique Chinese threat.
 - **Restore the nuclear infrastructure.** The United States must restore its necessary nuclear infrastructure so that it is capable of producing and maintaining nuclear weapons.

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1. Accelerate the effort to restore plutonium pit production, which is essential both for modern warhead programs and for recapitalizing the stockpile.
 2. Continue to invest in rebuilding infrastructure, including facilities at the National Laboratories that support nuclear weapons development.
 3. Restore readiness to test nuclear weapons at the Nevada National Security Site to ensure the ability of the U.S. to respond quickly to asymmetric technology surprises.
- **Correctly orient arms control.** The U.S. should agree to arms control agreements only if they help to advance the interests of the U.S. and its allies.
 1. Reject proposals for nuclear disarmament that are contrary to the goal of bolstering deterrence.
 2. Pursue arms control as a way to secure the national security interests of the U.S. and its allies rather than as an end in itself.
 3. Prepare to compete in order to secure U.S. interests should arms control efforts continue to fail.

MISSILE DEFENSE

Missile defense is a critical component of the U.S. national security architecture. It can help to deter attack by instilling doubt that an attack will work as intended, take adversary “cheap shots” off the table, and limit the perceived value of missiles as tools of coercion. It also allows space for diplomacy during a crisis and can protect U.S. and allied forces, critical assets, and populations if deterrence fails.⁴¹ Adversaries are relying increasingly on missiles to achieve their aims.

- China and Russia, in addition to their vast and growing ballistic missile inventories, are deploying new hypersonic glide vehicles and investing in new ground-launched, air-launched, and sea-launched cruise missiles that uniquely challenge the United States in different domains.
- North Korea has pursued an aggressive missile testing program and is becoming increasingly belligerent toward South Korea and Japan.
- Iran continues to maintain a missile arsenal that is capable of striking U.S. and allied assets in the Middle East and Europe, and its rocket launches demonstrate that it either has or is developing the ability to build ICBMs.

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Missile defense has been underprioritized and underfunded in recent years. In light of these growing threats, the incoming Administration should treat missile defense as a top priority.

Needed Reforms

- **Champion the benefits of missile defense.** Despite its deterrence and damage-limitation benefits, opponents argue incorrectly that U.S. missile defense is destabilizing because it threatens Russian and Chinese second-strike capabilities.
 1. Reject claims made by the Left that missile defense is destabilizing while acknowledging that Russia and China are developing their own advanced missile defense systems.
 2. Commit to keeping homeland missile defense off the table in any arms control negotiations with Russia and China.⁴²
- **Strengthen homeland ballistic missile defense.** The United States currently deploys 44 Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) as part of its Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system to defend the homeland against North Korea, but as North Korea improves its missile program, this system is at risk of falling behind the threat.⁴³
 1. Buy at least 64 of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI), which is more advanced than the GBI, for an eventual uniform fleet of interceptors.⁴⁴ The Biden Administration currently plans to buy only 20.
 2. Consider additional steps to strengthen the GMD system such as a layered missile defense or a third interceptor site on the East Coast.
- **Increase the development of regional missile defense.** As the Ukraine conflict amply demonstrates, U.S. regional missile defense capabilities are very limited. The United States has been unable to supply our partners reliably with any capabilities, and the number and types of regional missile defense platforms are less than the U.S. needs for its own defense. The U.S. should prioritize procurement of more regional defense systems such as Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), Standard Missile-3, and Patriot missiles.
- **Change U.S. missile defense policy.** Historically, the U.S. has chosen to rely solely on deterrence to address the Russian and Chinese ballistic

missile threat to the homeland and to use homeland missile defense only against rogue nations.

1. Abandon the existing policy of not defending the homeland against Russian and Chinese ballistic missiles and focus on how to improve defense as the Russian and Chinese missile threats increase at an unprecedented rate.⁴⁵
2. Invest in future advanced missile defense technologies like directed energy or space-based missile defense that could defend against more numerous missile threats.

- **Invest in new track-and-intercept capabilities.** The advent of hypersonic missiles and increased numbers of cruise missile arsenals by threat actors poses new challenges to our missile defense capabilities.

1. Invest in cruise missile defense of the homeland.⁴⁶
2. Accelerate the program to deploy space-based sensors that can detect and track missiles flying on nonballistic trajectories.⁴⁷
3. Accelerate the Glide Phase Interceptor, which is intended to counter hypersonic weapons.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The mission of the Department of Defense is to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation's security. This chapter provides a blueprint to ensure that the Department can meet our national security needs. Its preparation was a collective enterprise of individuals involved in the 2025 Presidential Transition Project. All contributors to this chapter are listed at the front of this volume, but Sergio de la Pena and Chuck DeVore deserve special mention. The author alone assumes responsibility for the content of this chapter, and no views expressed herein should be attributed to any other individual.

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ENDNOTES

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