

Chapter Title: Implications

Book Title: *The Strategy of Denial*

Book Subtitle: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict

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Published by: Yale University Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1vbd1b7.15>

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Implications

WHAT DOES THIS BOOK'S ARGUMENT IMPLY for the United States?

Most fundamentally, the book describes how the United States can ensure an international environment conducive to its own security, freedom, and prosperity in a world where America is no longer as dominant as it once was. It charts a way for the United States to correlate the costs it would incur and the risks it would face to deny China, the world's most powerful other state, hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, the world's most important region. And it demonstrates that the United States can deny China its aim of regional predominance in a way that is feasible and responsible. This itself is tremendously important because it shows that conceding the Indo-Pacific is not, as some contend, the only way to avoid catastrophic loss.¹

At the same time, this book also shows how the United States can satisfy its core national objectives of ensuring Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity without needing to pursue grandiose ambitions. Contrary to some arguments, the United States does not need to make the world democratic or liberal in order to flourish as a free republic, nor does it need to dominate the world in order to be secure. This, too, is enormously important because it shows that Americans do not have to reach too far or suffer too much in order to achieve what they reasonably want in the world.

But successfully pursuing this middle way will not be easy.

Military Implications

In this book I have sought to provide a framework, a conceptual structure, rather than a set of specific programmatic or operational recommendations. I hope that this conceptual structure will provide useful boundaries within which debates about the right force structure, force posture, operational concepts, technology, and other key aspects of military effectiveness can take place. Providing this framework is the core utility of a defense strategy, which is at best more a paradigm—a simplifying framework—to focus attention and effort rather than a detailed how-to manual.² Militaries and like institutions tend to function most effectively when they can work on a narrower and more focused problem or set of problems, such as this book has sought to provide.³ Strategies that are vague or too broad fritter away limited attention, effort, and resources; by doing too little to distinguish between the important and the marginal, they leave those trying to implement them unsure of what to work on or toward or what the bounding constraints are for solutions. Strategies that are too specific or inflexible, meanwhile, increase the risks of error, overspecifying, and brittleness.

The cardinal implication of this book's argument is that the United States should focus on making denial defense a reality in the Indo-Pacific with respect to its allies, including Taiwan. Preventing China's regional hegemony there is the most important strategic objective of the United States; this goal should therefore receive strict priority in US defense planning and resourcing. Denial defense is the military strategy that most readily correlates the benefits of pursuing this aim with the costs and risks, and it is likely that a denial defense can work there *if* the United States and its allies and partners apply the needed level of effort and focus. Denial defense should therefore be the preferred standard for the United States and its allies with respect to China in the Indo-Pacific. Fortunately, the Defense Department's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* has already steered the US Joint Force in this direction.⁴ Key regional allies such as Japan and Australia are also moving along similar lines.⁵

Denial defense is a reasonable criterion because, from a military planning perspective, if these most exposed allies can be effectively defended, other US allies to their rear are very likely to be effectively defensible as well. In such circumstances, China will find no good way to employ its focused and sequential strategy and will not be able to use military coercion to short-circuit or pry

apart the anti-hegemonic coalition. Facing such an effective balancing coalition, China will have to negotiate the terms of its continued rise on equitable rather than dominant terms. This will open opportunities for détente and engagement with Beijing from a position of strength. Thus an effective denial defense posture will be the best way for the United States and its allies to ensure a desirable, stable peace in the Indo-Pacific.

In concrete terms, the United States should focus first on an effective defense of Taiwan, the natural first target of China's focused and sequential strategy. As outlined previously, Taiwan is militarily significant, given its location in the middle of the first island chain, and important for America's differentiated credibility. Walking away from its defense would therefore significantly reduce the United States' differentiated credibility as the external cornerstone balancer of an anti-hegemonic coalition. At the same time, Taiwan is likely defensible to the standard of an effective defense laid out in the book.⁶ Taiwan cannot be immunized from Chinese attack, but it likely can be protected from conquest. Ensuring an effective denial defense of Taiwan should therefore be the primary scenario the US Department of Defense uses to prepare US forces for the future, with a *fait accompli* attempt by Beijing serving as the primary focus of such planning. US forces should first and foremost be sized and shaped to ensure they can defend Taiwan successfully to the standard laid out previously. At the same time, Taiwan itself must significantly augment and improve its defenses and make itself more resilient.⁷

Because it is possible that China might eventually seek to circumvent Taiwan or that an effort to defend Taiwan might fail, the United States and its allies should also prepare to ensure an effective denial defense of the Philippines against an increasingly powerful China. The Philippines is likely to be the second-best target among existing US allies for China's focused and sequential strategy. It is a US ally and so enmeshes US differentiated credibility; it also occupies a critical position along the first island chain. At the same time, it has limited capacity for self-defense and is reasonably close to China.

Concurrently, the United States must account for the possibility that a focused denial defense will fail. It and its allies should therefore make provision for an integrated denial defense-cum-binding strategy. This posture should ensure that even if China attempts to subjugate Taiwan or the Philippines, it will be forced to broaden and intensify the war in ways that would catalyze the resolve that the United States and other potentially engaged members of the

anti-hegemonic coalition need to prevail, either through an expanded denial campaign or, if that fails or is judged infeasible, a recapture approach.

Because a focused denial defense is preferable, however, the United States and its allies and partners should seek to minimize the trade-offs generated by preparing this fallback posture. Whenever possible, their investments in a binding strategy should also contribute to a focused denial defense. This should be possible because investments in a binding strategy are largely about increasing the integration of allies and partners into a more cohesive defense posture, greater resilience, and adding basing and dispersal options. Many of these investments would add to or at least would not detract from the ability to conduct effective circumscribed denial campaigns on behalf of Taiwan or the Philippines.

These strategies form the bounding constraints within which American efforts should evolve and within which military-operational, technological, and diplomatic debate can take place. They have the benefit of being sufficiently narrow to concentrate attention but do not prescribe how they should be operationalized. Moreover, they are concrete and tractable—albeit still very challenging and complex—rather than merely aspirational or hortatory. This is far more likely to produce US military forces that are optimally developed, postured, and trained for the geopolitical interests of the American people. A similar logic holds true for how these strategies can productively frame the comparable efforts of US allies and partners in the anti-hegemonic coalition. Fortunately, much superb work is already being produced in this direction.⁸ It is now a question of this work being developed, refined, and implemented to the purposes and standard laid out here.

The US Defense Perimeter

How far should this defense go? As indicated earlier, we cannot determine the optimal American defense perimeter without understanding the best military strategy for achieving US political aims in ways that correlate the costs and risks Americans assume to the interests at stake. To repeat, the American defense perimeter encompasses those states to which the United States has attached its differentiated credibility through a security guarantee, normally through a formal alliance but also, as in the case of Taiwan, through a quasi-alliance relationship. In the context of China's pursuit of regional hegemony in Asia, whether the United States sustains or eliminates its existing alliances, and

whether and how it forms new ones, should be a function of the need to form and sustain an anti-hegemonic coalition that is stronger than China and its own pro-hegemonic coalition, especially in the context of a systemic regional war. US alliances should be designed to serve this goal by providing sufficient reassurance to nervous coalition members that they will be protected from China's focused and sequential strategy.

Now that we have a clear sense of what the optimal American military strategy is, we can determine more clearly the right defense perimeter for the United States. The best plausible outcome for the United States is an alliance architecture that achieves its purposes while presenting as limited a threat surface as possible. To ensure that China does not establish predominance over Asia, the anti-hegemonic coalition must be more powerful than China in the event of a systemic regional war. If the coalition is to entice and retain enough states to meet this standard, those states must feel sufficiently secure in the face of Beijing's best strategy, the focused and sequential strategy. The main purpose of the American defense perimeter is thus to provide enough reassurance to enough important states that might otherwise bandwagon with China that they can prudently work to balance it alongside the United States.

In simpler terms, Washington must not allow China to have such an open field that it can subordinate enough states to tip the regional balance of power in its favor. This, naturally, puts a premium on the United States adding states as allies. At the same time, however, the United States must take care to avoid adding allies that would be indefensible—meaning those that cannot be effectively defended without the United States losing, being so weakened as to compromise its ability to uphold other alliances in the coalition, or demanding so much from the American people that they elect to pull back from the coalition or the alliances within it.

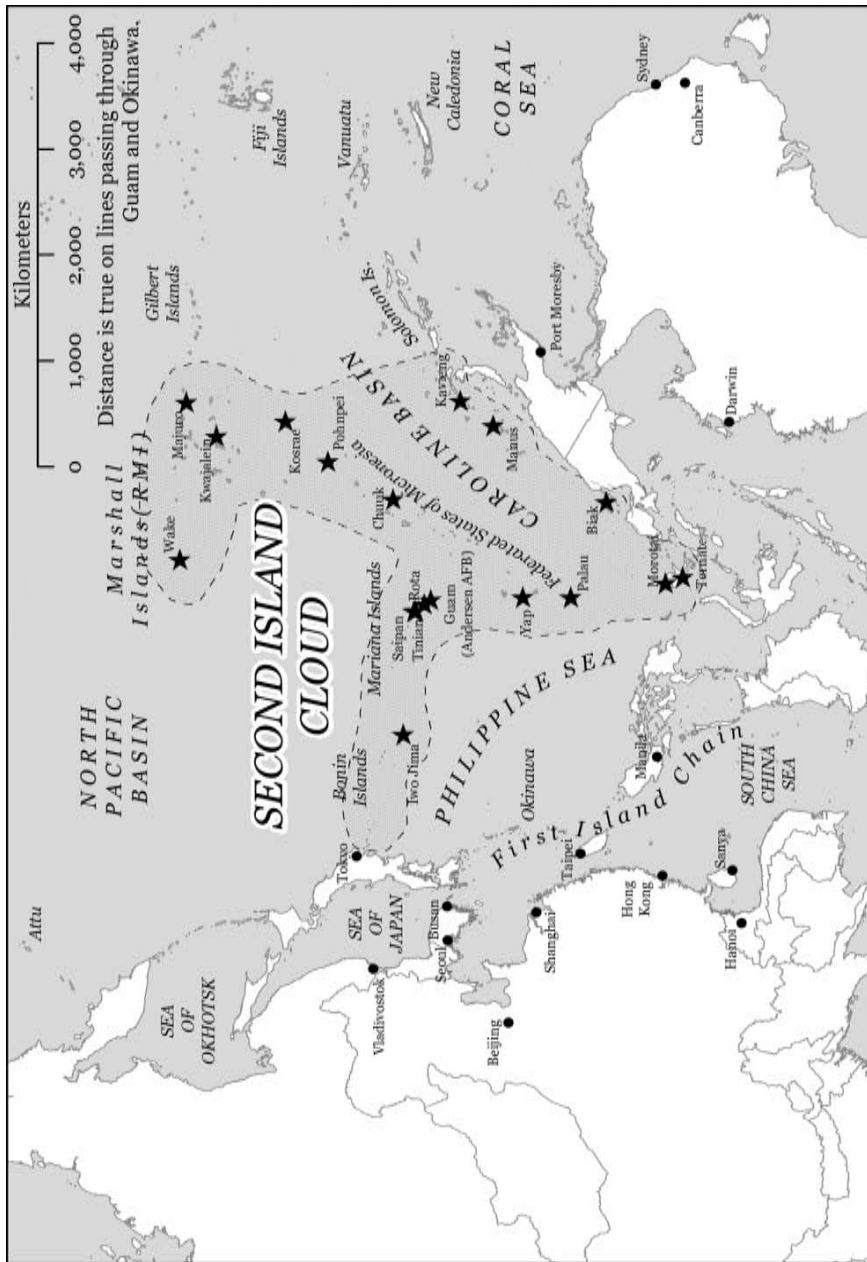
As discussed previously, the current US alliance architecture in the region forms the baseline for any US decisions. Determinations about these alliances' futures do not take place in a vacuum, especially because of the fraught consequences of withdrawing from existing alliances as compared to adding new ones. Beyond this, that legacy alliance architecture presents important advantages. The states allied with the United States are some of Asia's most advanced and powerful nations, and they provide much of the strength needed to balance China. They also present a defensive logic, forming a largely uninterrupted perimeter along the first island chain of the Western Pacific. This is no accident but a product of US strategic decision-making after the Second World War.⁹

Primarily for these reasons, it makes sense for the United States to maintain its existing alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific. Japan is absolutely critical; without it, the anti-hegemonic coalition would almost certainly fail. Australia is a highly advanced economy with a significant military; it is also distant from China and therefore highly defensible. Both of these US alliances should therefore be retained. I have already discussed at length the rationale for maintaining at least the legacy quasi-alliance with Taiwan.

It also makes sense for the United States to retain its alliances with the Philippines, the Pacific Island states, and South Korea. Although the Philippines lacks the ability to contribute significantly to its own defense, let alone that of other US allies, it forms the southern pillar of the first island chain and offers abundant locations for projection of military power throughout the southern part of the Western Pacific and the South China Sea. This is advantageous for the United States; by the same token, it would be highly beneficial for China if the United States abandoned Manila. The Philippines is also plausibly defensible. If the United States can defend Taiwan, it can almost certainly defend the Philippines.

The United States should also sustain its close linkages with many of the archipelagic and island states of the Central and South Pacific, including Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. Together, these form what has been termed a second island cloud, affording geography critical for effective US power projection, strategic depth, and resilient support. They are also highly defensible since they lie to the rear of the first island chain.¹⁰

South Korea is the one legacy American alliance located on the Asian mainland, separated from China by North Korea and the Yellow Sea. Because of its proximity to China, South Korea is likely to grow increasingly challenging to defend from a determined Chinese assault, either with or through North Korea, by sea, or both. That said, including South Korea in the US defense perimeter is worth the challenges for several reasons. First, South Korea is one of the world's largest and most advanced economies; it would make a major contribution to an anti-hegemonic coalition, whereas its neutralization, let alone transfer to China's pro-hegemonic coalition, would be a great loss. Second, Korea is important to the effective defense of Japan; if China were able to use South Korea as a base of operations, it would greatly complicate the defense of Japan. Last, South Korea is plausibly defensible, located as it is on a peninsula next to Japan and especially given that it fields one of the most capable militaries in the



Second island cloud. Original map by Andrew Rhodes.

world, contributes significantly to its own defense, and is capable of contributing more, given the size and sophistication of its economy. Particularly given that the conventional military threat from North Korea has substantially receded in recent decades, if that from China grows, then South Korea and the United States can increasingly redirect their defense preparations toward defending against a potential assault by China.

Thus it makes sense for the United States to maintain its legacy defense perimeter in Asia. The main questions for American defense strategy, then, are whether the United States should expand its alliance commitments, and if so, to which states, and how much it should seek to orient its alliances more toward collective defense than the legacy hub-and-spoke model.

The first issue relates to the US defense perimeter. From the American perspective, all things being equal, an alliance architecture with more secure and fewer vulnerable members is better. This lessens American exposure to Chinese action by reducing the number of members susceptible to China's focused and sequential strategy while adding states that are readily defensible and can contribute to the common defense. The problem is that the states with the greatest incentives to form an alliance with the United States are those most vulnerable to Beijing's focused and sequential strategy; yet although these states might add to the alliance's total power, they also increase its exposure to Chinese action. More secure states that are fearful of Chinese regional hegemony, meanwhile, are more inclined to free ride; adding them to the defense perimeter may not add much in practice to the US ability to uphold the anti-hegemonic coalition and other alliances within it.

The second issue relates to the degree of interconnection among US alliances. Broadly, the more cohesive the United States can make its alliances in resisting China's bid for regional hegemony, the better. The problem lies in the difficulty and costs of making this a reality. It is hard to persuade states to truly align their strategic plans and postures given the self-help realities of the international environment. These difficulties are compounded in the case of US alliances in Asia by the far-flung and diverse geopolitical circumstances of America's various allies in the region. Given the widely differing strategic contexts of such countries as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, it will be difficult to bring them together in a collective alliance that intertwines their fates. The issue for the United States is how far to press the matter.

Any discussion of expanding the US defense perimeter must start with the fundamental criterion for the anti-hegemonic coalition, which is that it must be

more powerful than China and its pro-hegemonic coalition with respect to a systemic regional war. US alliances should be retained and added with an eye to satisfying this condition. All things being equal, the more the military balance favors the coalition, the better. Moreover, the more the coalition can deny China the opportunity to apply the focused and sequential strategy, the better. The closer the military balance, and the more states to which China can apply its focused and sequential strategy, the more states must be included in the coalition and given US security guarantees, and the more tightly coupled these links will need to be.

In practical terms, this means that the farther forward in maritime Asia the coalition and US alliance guarantees go, the better, since this will leave fewer states susceptible to falling into China's pro-hegemonic coalition. At the same time, this interest must be balanced against the powerful US and coalition interest in avoiding including states that are not defensible.

The key determinant of the need to expand the US defense perimeter is, then, the relative power balance between China and its pro-hegemonic coalition on the one hand and the anti-hegemonic coalition on the other. Each coalition's side of the ledger could be augmented by internal growth on the part of existing members or the addition of states, and each could be weakened by internal stagnation or the withdrawal of members. For the United States, the primary dynamic on which to focus is that the stronger China itself grows and the more states it adds to its coalition, the more states Washington and its partners will need to add to their own coalition to compensate. This in turn is likely to impel Washington to add to its roster of allies and to make its alliances more tightly interconnected in order to reassure nervous coalition members.

Most directly, if China seizes a US ally from the anti-hegemonic coalition and brings it into its own, this would shift the balance in Beijing's favor, both through the direct transfer of the state's power and through the damage to Washington's differentiated credibility. Accordingly, the extent to which the United States and its engaged allies and partners can effectively defend existing US allies will be critical in determining whether and, if so, how much the United States needs to expand its defense perimeter and how much more cohesion is needed among these allies.

If, for instance, the United States and any other participating states fail to defend Taiwan effectively and China can subjugate it, this would remove a key blocking point in the first island chain, add Taiwan's wealth and power to the

pro-hegemonic coalition while removing it from the anti-hegemonic coalition, and weaken US differentiated credibility. In these circumstances, because both the coalition's material power and American differentiated credibility would be weakened, the United States would have to pay a higher premium to ensure the coalition's effectiveness. The pressure on the anti-hegemonic coalition and the United States would only grow more pointed if China were then able to subordinate another US ally, such as the Philippines.

But if the United States and any other engaged allies and partners can effectively defend Taiwan, the pressure to expand the US defense perimeter will be more attenuated. Taiwan would still be affiliated with the coalition, and US differentiated credibility would be safeguarded. The anti-hegemonic coalition and thus the US alliance architecture would not be so pressed to add states, perhaps even none beyond those already participating. And the United States would be less pressed to push for greater cohesion among existing allies.

Changing the US Defense Perimeter?

Assuming, then, that the United States should at minimum hold to its existing allies in Asia, how should the United States consider altering its defense perimeter with respect to the region?

Outside Asia

As a general principle, it makes sense for the anti-hegemonic coalition to add as many affiliated states as possible. A plausible coalition in Asia is unlikely to be a fully multilateralized alliance; rather, it is more likely to be an informal or semiformal confederation that, while including some bilateral and possibly narrower multilateral alliances, does not bind the participating states to each other's defense in all cases. The benefit of this informality is that there is little downside to adding states; they increase the coalition's power without risking much. The trade-off is that such a loose confederation risks leaving exposed states out in the cold, subject to China's focused and sequential strategy, as more distant coalition members shy away from taking on Beijing's best strategy.

This means that the prime caution for the coalition lies in adding states that are exposed. Conversely, there is essentially only upside to adding states that are not so exposed. The United States and other coalition members should seek

to add as many states as are willing to join the coalition that are to the rear vis-à-vis China of those states already in the coalition—and, because of the greater potency afforded by US security guarantees, especially to the rear of US allies. In practice, this is likely to mean east of the first island chain or west of India. Because these states are already effectively defended from China's best military strategy by the combination of distance and American and other allied and partner military power interposed between, there is little downside to including them in the coalition.

Still, these states are likely to add only limited value in the face of Beijing's focused and sequential strategy. Except for the United States, no state outside Asia can project significant military power into the region. (Russia is an Asian power, and even its ability to project military power in Asia is limited.) As a result, even those prepared to join the coalition are unlikely to be able to offer much. Moreover, many distant states will feel the threat posed by China less keenly and are likely to want to avoid the problem or even seek to collaborate with China. As a consequence, the United States and its allies and partners should not count too much on the contributions of states outside Asia.

That said, some states outside the Indo-Pacific area might be willing and able to contribute to the anti-hegemonic coalition in ways that, though not militarily significant to the struggle in the Pacific, are still meaningful. They might do so because they believe that their interests, for instance, in ensuring relatively free commerce with the region would be threatened by Chinese regional hegemony. Such states also might have enough power to make a difference in a war between the United States and the coalition against China, such as through economic leverage that could become relevant in a protracted war or war termination scenario. Further, such states might be able to backfill in handling security threats that, though secondary or tertiary in comparison to the resolution of a war in the Pacific, are still important.

These states might include France, with its far-flung island possessions and vast economic exclusion zones in the South Pacific, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Their military efforts, however, are likely more efficiently allocated toward managing their own or nearby regions, thereby relieving the United States from the necessity of having to focus on Europe and the Middle East, rather than making what would almost certainly be marginal contributions in the Indo-Pacific.

India

India must be a critical member of any anti-hegemonic coalition. It is very powerful and therefore has reason to expect a high degree of influence in the region; Chinese hegemony would consequently cost India a great deal. Moreover, India and China share a long, disputed land border and naturally compete for influence in the Indian subcontinent and adjacent areas. With so much to lose, New Delhi has a most potent interest in denying China regional hegemony, and it appears to be in earnest about this goal and realistic about the scale of effort required.¹¹

India can also defend itself. It is likely to become the world's third largest economy in short order (and possibly second before long), and it possesses a strong tradition of nationalism and self-reliance. It has built one of the world's most formidable militaries, including developing a nuclear arsenal that is likely to be capable of surviving an attempted disarming first strike by China.¹² Further, although India shares a long land border with China, its key territories, such as cities like Delhi and Mumbai, are located far from this border. Because of these factors, India is almost certainly capable of effectively defending its key territory against Beijing.

It is therefore unlikely that the United States will need to offer, or that India will seek, an alliance (at least of the kind focused on in this book) between Washington and New Delhi. India is likely to remain a resolute member of any anti-hegemonic coalition without requiring such a guarantee. And given these factors and America's interests in husbanding its strength and differentiated credibility, Washington has no reason to insist on one.

Moreover, there is a natural division of labor within the coalition between the United States, Japan, and Australia on one side and India on the other. Because Asia's most advanced economies are located in the Western Pacific and South China Sea and because many of them implicate Washington's differentiated credibility, this area will constitute the primary theater of competition between the anti-hegemonic coalition as a whole and China and its pro-hegemonic coalition. Given China's size, the United States and its allies in the Western Pacific will need to focus rigorously on preparing for a conflict in this area, particularly over Taiwan or the Philippines. This will indubitably consume a very great proportion of American resources and effort.

But China will also have the ability and interest to try to add to its coalition or otherwise enable its pursuit of regional hegemony in other important areas of

the Indo-Pacific, particularly the Indian subcontinent and Indian Ocean area. Beijing might seek to add states in this area to its pro-hegemonic coalition or seek access agreements with local states to enable the employment of its military forces, including in ways that could affect a conflict over Taiwan or another state in the Western Pacific. Yet the United States, if it is primarily occupied with the Western Pacific, will almost certainly simply not have the spare power to simultaneously muster a leading effort in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

India, however, has an even more powerful interest in limiting Chinese influence in this subregion than the United States does. Moreover, its military forces and other levers of power are more naturally suited for employment in its own region; India has a very large land force, along with air and maritime forces, that are readily employable in its own area but of distinctly limited utility beyond it.

Accordingly, the United States should encourage India to focus on its own area, both by directly balancing Chinese assertiveness and also by bolstering important neighboring states that might otherwise fall under Beijing's sway. New Delhi might even sensibly provide alliance guarantees to states such as Myanmar. The United States can seek to enable and empower India as much as possible in these directions.

A deeper alliance between the United States and India would become more advisable under two contingencies, neither of which appears pressing in the near term. First, a US guarantee would become advisable if India's resolve were faltering and such a commitment could meaningfully reinforce it. Conversely, an alliance would become attractive if the US and allied position in the Western Pacific deteriorated and a rising India could contribute to redressing it.

So long as China remains the primary and rising power in Asia, the United States and other coalition members to all practical purposes benefit unreservedly from a stronger India. They should therefore seek to increase India's economic and military power in order to provide as strong a counterweight as possible to China and to limit the pressure on the United States and other Western Pacific states.

Southeast Asia

The rubber meets the road for the United States in Southeast Asia, an area nearby China and much of which is not within the US defense perimeter but that includes countries that the United States and its allies and partners could

plausibly defend. As a general principle, the coalition should encompass as many states in Southeast Asia as it can, since this both adds their power to the anti-hegemonic side and denies it to China's coalition. But these benefits must be weighed against the states' defensibility. Given that there is little prospect of effectively defending the landlocked states on China's northern and western borders—which are in any case small economies—this essentially means that the United States and other coalition members have an interest in an effective defense as far forward in maritime Asia as possible.

With a few exceptions, the countries of the region are not formally allied with either Washington or Beijing. The US defense perimeter peters out with the Philippines before picking up again far to the south in Australia, with Thailand as an ambiguous case. Cambodia, meanwhile, is usually thought of as within China's orbit.

Much of the area remains unaffiliated, however, not clearly in the anti-hegemonic coalition or in China's pro-hegemonic coalition. Southeast Asia therefore offers an open field within Asia for China to induce or subordinate states to back its bid for regional hegemony.¹³ Moreover, many of these states have large and growing economies and occupy significant geographical positions, making their decisions important. For Beijing, dominance over this area would constitute a long stride toward regional predominance.

Accordingly, the United States and the anti-hegemonic coalition have an interest in bringing important Southeast Asian states into the coalition and perhaps in Washington's forming alliance relationships with them. The problems are twofold. First, some of these states are difficult to defend, and some may be simply indefensible. Second, many states in the area do not want to have to choose between aligning with either the United States or China; indeed, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, among others, have strong traditions of non-alignment.¹⁴ Despite these difficulties, any shift in the power balance toward China and its pro-hegemonic coalition would impel the United States and its allies and partners to consider adding Southeast Asian states to the anti-hegemonic coalition. Moreover, because of the greater danger such a powerful China and its coalition would pose, the United States might need to offer at least some of these states a security guarantee in order to provide them with the degree of assurance required to affiliate with the coalition in the face of such peril.

In light of these factors, the coalition would likely benefit by adding Indonesia, the largest state and economy in Southeast Asia and almost certainly the

most defensible. Indonesia is located south of the Philippines, already a US ally, and thus to the rear of the US defense line. Moreover, with the exception of Borneo (which is unlikely to be key territory), Indonesia is located well to the south, below Malaysian Borneo and the Malay Peninsula. It is also an archipelago, which plays to the United States' advantages in the maritime arena. Even more, Indonesia is located just north of close US ally Australia, which has strong incentives to ensure the effective defense of its northern neighbor. This increases the probability that Indonesia's defense would invite the aid of other states. These factors also mean it would likely be reasonable for the United States to add Indonesia as an ally, if that proves necessary.

How the coalition should view the region's other states is less clear-cut.

Vietnam is a significant and growing economy with a capable military and a reputation for resolute self-defense. Its proximity to China and fierce independent streak will likely lead it to join an anti-hegemonic coalition without needing or even, given its tradition of eschewing alliances, wanting an alliance with the United States. This is a positive arrangement for the United States, which can and should still aid Vietnam's ability to defend itself. The question is, if China and its pro-hegemonic coalition grow in power and Vietnam becomes increasingly nervous about its vulnerability to China's focused strategy, would it make sense for the United States to ally with Hanoi? Vietnam's traversable land border with China makes much of its key territory difficult to defend against Beijing, especially given that the US military's advantages are particularly great in aerospace and maritime operations rather than on land. The United States should seek to avoid having to confront this dilemma by empowering Vietnam to defend itself. In any event, Washington should be very conservative about attaching its differentiated credibility to the effective defense of Vietnam. There would have to be a very potent benefit or need in order to match the gravity of this risk.

Malaysia and Singapore are wealthy, significant economies. The narrow neck of the Malay Peninsula gives both countries a significant degree of defensibility. Still, the peninsula is closer to the Asian mainland than Indonesia, making it more accessible to Chinese military power, especially if Thailand affiliates with Beijing or permits Chinese forces to cross or use its territory. The United States should therefore seek to bring these two important states into the anti-hegemonic coalition but be reluctant to extend an alliance guarantee to them. Brunei, given its wealth and location, surrounded by Malaysia's Sarawak territory, would likely fall into the same category.

Thailand is likely to be a significant swing state in the region. It is one of Southeast Asia's largest economies and centrally located; along with Vietnam, it sits between China and most of the maritime part of the region. Because of its wealth and strategic position, it would bring significant value to the anti-hegemonic coalition. But there is reason to be skeptical of Bangkok's willingness to join, and there are major risks to the United States of a full alliance relationship with Thailand. The two are technically allies now, but their relationship is generally understood to be considerably more ambiguous and thinner than Washington's relationship with Tokyo, Canberra, or even Manila. It is not entirely clear what Washington's defense obligations are if Thailand is attacked.¹⁵

First, Thailand has a historical tradition of accommodation rather than resistance. It accommodated the European imperial powers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to preserve its autonomy and pursued a similar course toward imperial Japan in the Second World War.¹⁶ This makes it unclear what policy Bangkok will pursue—with the anti-hegemonic coalition, with Beijing, or somewhere in between. Second, there are serious risks to a full-fledged US alliance with Thailand, if that is what is required to ensure its membership in the anti-hegemonic coalition. Thailand is separated from China only by weak Laos, Myanmar, and northern Vietnam. Accordingly, Thailand is relatively exposed to Chinese action along a land border, reducing the relative efficacy of US military forces. This makes an American alliance guarantee difficult to uphold. Thus, while the United States and other members of the anti-hegemonic coalition should seek to persuade Bangkok to join them, they should not be overly optimistic about Bangkok's doing so. Moreover, the United States should be very conservative about a full alliance relationship that obligates Washington to come to Thailand's defense.

Myanmar presents a strategic picture similar to Vietnam's, but from a lower power base. Myanmar has a strong tradition of independence and shares a long land border with China, but it is weaker than Vietnam, making its effective defense even harder. At the same time, however, Myanmar stands between China and the Indian Ocean; gaining use of Myanmar's territory could give Beijing reliable access to the Indian Ocean, with all its attendant advantages.¹⁷ Accordingly, the United States and, given its proximity, India should be concerned about this and should seek to help Myanmar defend itself against Chinese action, but Washington should also be very conservative about extending an alliance guarantee to Yangon. As India grows in power, however, New Delhi might consider extending such an alliance guarantee, backed by US support.

Other states in Southeast Asia are already aligned with China or else too unimportant or too indefensible to make desirable additions to the anti-hegemonic coalition. Landlocked and weak Laos, for instance, will likely be unable to resist pressure from China, its direct neighbor along a land border.

Collective Defense

In addition to altering its defense perimeter, the United States can seek to integrate the efforts of its allies and partners toward the common goal of providing an effective defense of the most vulnerable US allies within the coalition—in other words, a true collective defense model. As noted before, the question is not whether this is desirable; the United States generally has an interest in its allies and partners collaborating to help defend other US allies, especially vulnerable ones. The question is how far to push the issue with allies and partners that may be resistant to doing so and that, in any case, may have limited ability to contribute to these efforts.

This issue is not highly relevant for most US allies and partners. It makes more sense for US allies in Europe to focus on defending Europe. Other countries outside Asia cannot project even negligible military power into the Western Pacific. And within Asia, most US allies and partners are better off ensuring their own effective defense because of their own limited capacity, military situation vis-à-vis China, or both. States like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan, which lack any meaningful capability to project power, will have their hands full ensuring they can contribute to their own effective defense. The same is probably true of Indonesia and Malaysia, if they joined the coalition. Singapore might be able to help a collective defense effort elsewhere, but its contribution would be small. South Korea has the ability to develop power projection forces but, as I will discuss later, should focus on providing for its own defense against North Korea and China.

As most states in the coalition will need to focus on their own defense, and because the United States has a critical interest in limiting the degree to which coalition members need to rely on it for their defense, Washington should provide all reasonable assistance to states seeking to defend themselves against Chinese attack or coercion, including those that are not US allies. The more stoutly these states can resist Chinese assault or coercion, the less likely they will be to fall under Beijing's sway and the less likely they are to need a formal

US alliance guarantee to participate in the coalition. Moreover, by providing all manner of defensive arms to these states, the United States and its allies and partners can demonstrate in the clearest way their interest in helping protect the sovereignty and independence of states in the region. It is unlikely that China will go to similar lengths, since doing so would undermine Beijing's ability to attain regional hegemony. This could only strengthen the coalition's hand in the regional competition with China.

This leaves Japan and Australia as states that could contribute significantly to the collective defense of a vulnerable ally such as Taiwan or the Philippines. Both are wealthy states with capable militaries that can develop relevant power projection capabilities.

Japan

Japan's role is critical. It is the world's third or fourth largest economy and at the very forefront of technological development. Yet it spends relatively little on defense. Given Japan's enormous unrealized military potential and geographic position along the US defense perimeter, it is simply vital that it increase its defense efforts.

Because of its location along the first island chain as the front line of the US defense perimeter within the anti-hegemonic coalition, Japan's first order of business is, alongside the United States and possibly other states such as Australia, to ensure the defense of Japan itself. Given the scale and sophistication of the Chinese military threat, Japan will now need to take a full role in its own defense in an integrated posture with the United States. This requires a significant change from its post-Second World War defense model, which entailed a high degree of demilitarization and an unequal reliance on the United States.

Given the size of the Japanese economy and its proximity to the most stressing scenarios for the US defense perimeter, however, Japan may also be able to allocate some efforts to preparing to aid the United States in mounting an effective defense of Taiwan, Japan's immediate neighbor to the south. This is not only of general utility to Japan, which is fundamentally reliant on the effective maintenance of the US alliance system in Asia, but also of direct military consequence for Japan. If China were able to subjugate Taiwan, it would gain unfettered access beyond the first island chain, substantially increasing Japan's vulnerability to Chinese military action. Tokyo can also plan to aid the US defense of the Philippines for comparable reasons, although those contributions

are likely to be more attenuated given the greater distance of the Philippine archipelago from Japan.

Japan is, moreover, capable of this increased effort. It spends approximately 1 percent of its enormous GDP on defense—well below what the United States and China spend and far below what would reasonably be expected given Tokyo's own perception that it is seriously threatened by the growth of Chinese military power.¹⁸ There is thus tremendous room for growth in Japan's contributions to defending both itself and the broader coalition.

Australia

Australia is a medium-sized but highly advanced economy with a significant military capability. It has a strong interest in a forward defense in the Western Pacific designed to sustain a functioning anti-hegemonic coalition. This is because, though it is distant from Taiwan and the Philippines, its fate is likely to be decided in the Western Pacific. A China that could dominate Southeast Asia would present the United States and any remaining coalition partners with a far more difficult power balance and consequently a far more painful, challenging, and risky effort to defend Australia. By leveraging bases in Southeast Asia, China could apply its focused strategy against Australia, presenting the United States with the exceptionally difficult military problem of helping to defend it. Although the United States did so in the Second World War, that defense was against a Japan that was far weaker relative to the United States than China would be. Australia thus has a strong interest in ensuring that the anti-hegemonic coalition checks China's focused and sequential strategy well before it reaches Australia's shores. The United States should therefore seek to enlist Canberra to prepare its forces to aid US efforts to defend the Philippines and Taiwan. Australia already appears to be moving in this direction.¹⁹

The Anti-Hegemonic Effort in Asia and Broader US Defense Strategy

As emphasized throughout this book, the key fundamental interest of the United States in the international arena is in preventing any other state from gaining hegemony over a key region of the world, and China in the Indo-Pacific is the only state that could plausibly pretend to this status in the foreseeable future. Preventing China from establishing such predominance must be the overriding

priority for US strategy. If the United States and its allies and partners achieve this goal, other challenges will be manageable in an international system conducive to their interests; if they fail, all other challenges will pale in comparison to the consequences, and the management of those challenges will be subject to Chinese preferences rather than those of Americans and others in the coalition. This overriding interest must therefore be reflected across every aspect of the US armed forces and US defense planning, including the size, shape, composition, and readiness of the nation's armed forces, as well as the missions they are tasked to perform.

How, though, should this interest be related to and integrated with any other interests that the United States expects its armed forces to serve? This is a crucial question because, while China's pretensions to regional hegemony are America's primary geopolitical concern, they are not the only interest on which US defense strategy should focus.

Managing the Deadliest Threats

To return to the beginning of the book, Americans' core interests are in ensuring their security, freedom, and prosperity. Before they can address such goods as freedom and prosperity, however, they must first ensure their security from attacks that kill large numbers of Americans.

Perfect security is not the goal; it is neither possible nor consistent with the high value Americans attach to their freedom. Americans tolerate high murder and highway lethality rates rather than accept the consequences of policies that seek to eliminate them.²⁰ But there is a limit to the level of threat Americans will accept. Exactly where this limit falls is a matter of political debate because defending against threats involves trade-offs in terms of freedoms and resources. At a minimum, however, it is likely to mean securing the United States against attacks that kill hundreds and certainly thousands of Americans. The US defense establishment—and the national security establishment more broadly—should therefore ensure that the American people are adequately defended against this level of danger. What are these threats?

Pandemics

The most serious threat to human life is likely pandemic disease, as the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us. It makes abundant sense for the American

people to dedicate resources to ensuring a reasonable degree of protection from such diseases. Dealing with pandemics is not, however, principally a defense matter. Militaries are about the large-scale employment of lethal force; this has negligible utility against diseases that are neither susceptible to violent force nor intelligent—diseases cannot be coerced. Dealing with them, rather, is primarily a matter for public health—vaccines, medicine, hospital facilities, medical equipment, public hygiene, and the like. Military forces may assist in these functions, but doing so is not truly a military role unless such diseases are wielded deliberately by intelligent actors.

Moreover, pandemics do not put geopolitics on hold; power politics exists even during and after such outbreaks. They may even intensify geopolitical competition by distracting states' leaderships and changing power balances in ways that create opportunities for aggressive action. This means that, while effort and expense required to control the threat of pandemic disease may be very great, these efforts do not logically trade against national security requirements. Even if it may have fewer resources and less bandwidth for doing so, the United States will still need to plan for dealing with national security threats in a world of pandemic diseases.

Nuclear Deterrence

The most consequential plausible threat to the American people—in terms of the devastating consequences if it does happen—is the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States. Any nation or entity that possesses a nuclear weapon could do the most grievous damage to the United States; it might also be able to achieve comparable damage with biological or possibly other novel weapons. The United States therefore needs a defense posture able to deal with the threat those who possess these weapons pose. Again, because perfect defense is impossible against the nearly infinite ways such weapons might be employed, deterrence is generally a critical element of any sensible strategy for dealing with the problem. And because of their unique destructiveness, promptness, and other advantages relative to biological weapons, nuclear weapons are a most suitable implement of deterrence against such a large-scale attack. Nonnuclear means of retaliation are also critical, however, to credibly deter lesser threats, given the political, reputational, and environmental problems a nuclear response could well generate.

In practice, this means that the United States should field a nuclear deterrent that can survive any plausible first strike, that is large and destructive enough in its effects to manifestly outweigh the benefits for any opponent of a large-scale attack, and that is discriminate enough to allow for effective employment in a limited war. The United States should ensure that its nuclear deterrent is sized and shaped to achieve this.

In particular, US nuclear forces should be able to destroy the most valued assets of any state that could wield such destructive force against Americans. This is important because it sets a relatively independent criterion for sizing and shaping US nuclear forces. Nuclear weapons ultimately deter and influence by the prospect of devastation of valued things. Naturally, divining what an opponent most values is an inherently subjective judgment, a matter of approximation, not of scientific certainty. Nonetheless, nuclear targeting has a long pedigree, and categories of such targets are well established in US strategic planning.²¹ This means that American nuclear forces do not necessarily need to be greater or fewer than those of potential US opponents. Nor do all of them need to be ready on any given day. As long as they can survive, be mobilized, and achieve the effects designated, that level of effort should be sufficient.

A nuclear deterrent that meets this standard—especially one coupled with the conventional forces the United States would field under the defense strategy laid out in this book—would be well suited to deterring large-scale lethal attack by any even modestly rational actor. Any actor contemplating such an attack would face US armed forces capable of retaliating not only in the most destructive fashion but also discriminately, in ways adapted to the nature of the attack. This covers essentially all the relevant actors in the world.

Counterterrorism

But what of potential attackers whose rationality is not always susceptible to this type of deterrence? States very rarely fall into this category. A state, by definition, is an organized entity that has something it values and holds—territory and its citizenry. It essentially always has something that can be threatened, making it susceptible to coercion. States may value things differently, but they always care about something. This means that US nuclear and conventional military power offers a solid basis on which to deal with any state.

Individuals and groups, especially smaller groups, are not always so rational. Some people and groups may be willing to do enormous damage against Americans even knowing they will suffer grievous retaliation. We usually call these people terrorists. But the United States is not concerned to this degree with *all* terrorists. Rather, it is worried about those who might plausibly kill significant numbers of Americans, especially in international terrorist attacks.

This is, however, a relatively limited subset of terrorists. Many, if not most, of the world's terrorist organizations see little benefit to killing significant numbers of Americans, and whatever benefits they do see they consider less weighty than the costs and risks of undertaking such attacks. Groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Basque Fatherland and Liberty, and the radical remnants of the Irish Republican Army tend to direct their violence toward local targets rather than the United States, both because they see striking at local targets as more likely to result in progress toward their goals and because attacking the United States is likely to bring down its wrath and risks worsening rather than improving the prospects of their achieving their goals. Even groups such as Hezbollah that have attacked Americans have often done so at least partly for local political reasons.²²

Moreover, even among those groups that may see benefit in killing significant numbers of Americans, including through attacks on the United States itself—groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and their offshoots or affiliates—there are a number of factors limiting their interest and ability in doing so. Few such groups actually have or could realistically obtain the capability for a large strike. This is in significant part because any international terrorist attack is difficult to pull off. Law enforcement and intelligence services, international travel barriers, and restrictions on the availability of weaponry present significant barriers. Most terrorist organizations lack the personnel, resources, and sophistication required to overcome such obstacles and mount a large-scale attack. Inspiring attacks by individuals or smaller groups abroad can be easier, but those attacks also tend to be relatively small-scale.

A major terrorist attack on the United States is still possible, however, so continued vigilance is required to ensure that al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their potential successors are prevented from executing such an attack. But in an era of intensifying competition between the United States and China, that vigilance must be coupled with deliberate thinking about measures that not only deny terrorist organizations the ability to kill significant numbers of Americans but also allow for the strengthening of the US ability to defend allies in Asia against China.

There are opportunities to do this. The first is through coercion. Most terrorist organizations value something that the United States or others can damage or destroy, and they are therefore likely to be susceptible to coercion. So long as the United States can credibly threaten the things these organizations hold most dear, it should be able to persuade them not to try to kill significant numbers of Americans.²³ This should be possible even in the case of groups that may seek to kill significant numbers of Americans and may even have the ability to do so—or a credible chance of obtaining such an ability—so long as those groups have other interests or equities that they care about more than killing significant numbers of Americans. Such interests could include the lives of their leadership, control of territory, or certain political equities. So long as the United States can hold those targets at risk or otherwise influence them, there is reason to believe that these groups may be coercible. Moreover, it may not be necessary to coerce a whole group; rather, if parts of such groups can be deterred or coerced, that may be enough to hobble an attempted attack.

Importantly, this holds true not only for terrorist organizations whose motivations are immanent but also for those whose aims are transcendental; even these latter groups typically have earthly possessions or other interests that can be threatened. It is true as well of organizations that use suicide attacks. Although these groups might encourage or even order their foot soldiers to use such tactics, that does not necessarily mean that the organization's leaders or the groups as a whole are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to achieve their objectives. So long as they have something they value more than killing significant numbers of Americans, they should be coercible.

One cannot, however, predict with certainty that coercion will work against terrorist organizations considering attacks on Americans. There are and will be cases where deterrence simply will not work. Millenarian groups like Aleph (formerly known as Aum Shinrikyo) may be so focused on extramundane considerations that they are very difficult to coerce. And even in cases where a group's leadership might be susceptible to coercion, their subordinates may be less so and may act on their own.

The United States should therefore maintain the ability to prevent those organizations from planning, preparing for, and executing an attack to kill significant numbers of Americans, including by force if necessary.²⁴ Moreover, the United States should not be passive; aggressively targeting terrorist groups is often an effective method to keep them on their back foot.

But critically, the United States must do so as economically as possible so that the US military can protect the American people from international terrorism while simultaneously maintaining—or if necessary, restoring—a sufficiently powerful military capability against China in Asia. The United States has made progress in this regard over the past twenty years, including by shifting away from large-scale military interventions—which do not solve the terrorism problem and may make it worse—to smaller-footprint operations exploiting standoff capabilities and close cooperation with local partners to degrade or destroy terrorist organizations that have or may be able to secure an ability to kill significant numbers of Americans.²⁵ The United States should prioritize refining these more economical methods in order to sufficiently degrade or defeat terrorist threats using the least expensive and smallest number of forces possible. There has been some valuable work on how to do so, but more is needed to develop, refine, and implement such a more economical approach.²⁶

The outlines of such an approach are discernible. The United States should first enable and incentivize local and regional actors to take the lead in the fight against terrorists operating out of these actors' own or proximate territory. In places where local and regional actors lack the resolve or ability to sufficiently degrade terrorists operating in their territory even with American help and encouragement, however, the United States must be prepared to act itself. But it should prioritize employing more cost-effective means to collect and analyze intelligence on terrorist groups, conduct strikes against them, and enable and execute limited ground operations against terrorist targets. This more economical approach should be feasible because terrorists lack the resources of a state like China. The United States does not need stealth aircraft to conduct strikes against terrorist groups or the highest-quality unmanned systems to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance against them. Rather, it can use more tailored, less expensive capabilities. These capabilities—such as light-attack aircraft and lower-cost unmanned aerial vehicles—should be treated as distinct from the broader set of conventional military capabilities the United States must develop and use, in combination with its nuclear forces, to deter or defeat Chinese aggression; capabilities for the counterterrorism mission should be developed specifically to deal with this threat, with a special focus on economy, rather than being a subset of conventional force operations. These military efforts must be coupled with continued development of law enforcement, intelligence,

diplomatic, and other nonmilitary capabilities, in cooperation with other like-minded nations, to improve their shared ability to identify and intercept foreign attacks before they arrive on US shores or anywhere else where significant numbers of Americans might be vulnerable.²⁷

Last, it is important to recognize in this context that much of the US force structure allocated to the Middle East in the past two decades has not been focused on preventing terrorist attacks on the United States as such. Rather, many—if not most—of these forces have been engaged in regime change operations against Iraq, in the nation-building and pacification efforts that followed, or in deterring Iran from attacking American interests. Some US forces in Afghanistan have been focused on counterterrorism, but others have concentrated on broader nation-building and pacification efforts. This means that the legacy US force presence in the Middle East is not the baseline for counterterrorism operations. This force could be smaller, likely significantly so, if scoped more narrowly on counterterrorism.

The Core Missions of the US Armed Forces

The core missions of the US armed forces should be to ensure an effective defense of allies in the anti-hegemonic coalition against China, maintain an effective nuclear deterrent, and deter or prevent large-scale lethal attacks against Americans, including terrorist attacks. In simplified terms, this breaks the US armed forces down into the nuclear arsenal, conventional forces, and the military counterterrorism enterprise. The nuclear arsenal and the counterterrorism enterprise are relatively self-contained demands that require only a relatively modest share of US defense efforts and resources. Over the 2020s, recapitalizing the US nuclear arsenal is expected to consume approximately 5–7 percent of the total defense budget. The United States spends something on the order of 15 percent of the defense budget on the counterterrorism enterprise—a significant fraction, but valuable given the importance of the mission.²⁸

This means that the great bulk of US defense effort and resources go to the conventional forces, which are the primary mechanism for American deterrent and defense activities. While plenty of attention goes to the costs and demands on the other two missions, the main question for the nation in practical terms is what it should demand of its conventional forces. These are not purely military questions. Especially because of the expense involved, they are fundamentally

political questions relating to how much importance the country is prepared to place on its defense. The Covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences only throw these questions into sharper relief.

I have argued in this book that the United States should ensure that its conventional forces are able to effectively defend—in concert with other allies and partners—any US ally, however vulnerable. Because China is by far the most powerful state in the international system other than the United States and because the Indo-Pacific is the world's most important region, achieving this goal in the Indo-Pacific must be the priority for US conventional and, to the degree they are implicated, nuclear forces. The United States should therefore spend enough on defense to meet this standard.

The Issue of Simultaneity

The main question that follows for conventional force planning, then, is: Once this criterion has been satisfied, how much does the nation want to prepare for additional and particularly simultaneous contingencies? That is, what does the nation expect its military to do *in addition and at the same time* that it is conducting an effective denial defense of Taiwan or another threatened ally in the Western Pacific? This is important because simultaneity is a primary driver of the size, shape, and composition of military forces. If the nation believes that it can deal with threats sequentially, then it can address additional threats *after* having addressed the primary threat. But if it judges that it must be prepared to deal with multiple threats simultaneously, the armed forces must be sized, shaped, and postured accordingly.

Simultaneity is important because wars might break out concurrently, whether independently from one another or because, with the United States engaged elsewhere, other potential attackers see an opportunity. The United States simultaneously fought Germany and Japan in the Second World War, effectively requiring two separate sets of forces; conversely, it addressed what it considered a violation of the Monroe Doctrine in Mexico *after* the Civil War, deploying federal forces that had just defeated the Confederacy to pressure the French to withdraw from Mexico.²⁹ Britain wrestled with this issue in the years before the First World War. In the late nineteenth century, Britain faced multiple rivals in several theaters of its far-flung empire—not only Germany in Europe but France in Africa, the United States in the Western Hemisphere, Russia in

Central Asia, and Japan in East Asia—and conducted its military planning accordingly. In the years leading up to war, however, London increasingly recognized the primacy of the threat from imperial Germany. It settled its disputes around the world with each of its other rivals and altered the size, shape, and composition of its armed forces to focus on the threat from Germany in Europe.³⁰

Once the United States has established that it can conduct an effective denial defense of Taiwan, sustain the nuclear deterrent, and maintain an effective counterterrorism enterprise, it is prudent for the United States to do two things. First, it should make *some* provision for a simultaneous conflict in one particular scenario: between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe. This is the only plausible scenario in the contemporary international environment in which the United States, if it did not act simultaneously, might be unable to defeat a plausible adversary's theory of victory against an ally.³¹ Second, the United States should maintain missile defenses sufficient to defeat an intercontinental missile attack by any state other than Russia or China.

No other contingency is sufficiently pressing to distract America's attention from these core missions. North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba all have serious differences with the United States and some ability to do it harm. But each has substantial assets that can be attacked by the United States, which is far more powerful than any of them. This is a very strong basis for deterrence.

None of them, moreover, can present a plausible theory of victory against a US ally because none combines a survivable nuclear arsenal with conventional forces able to seize and hold any ally's key territory in the face of plausible resistance. There is thus no strict need for the United States to address the conventional threat from any of them simultaneously with conducting a denial defense of Taiwan. Once it has finished dealing with China in Asia, the United States and any engaged allies and partners could readily dislodge these states' forces from any gains and, if necessary, wreak tremendous punitive damage on them.

This is evident from an analysis of their military positions. North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and any other plausibly hostile states lack military forces that can even pretend to be able to conquer US allies. They therefore present no remotely conceivable scenario that might require handling simultaneously with an effective defense of Taiwan.

North Korea

North Korea has a large conventional military, but it is antiquated, even decrepit.³² It should be expected to present exceptionally formidable resistance to an assault into North Korea. The United States, however, has no compelling strategic interest in conquering North Korea or changing its government. Although Washington might wish for a different form of government there, this desire is not a sufficiently compelling reason to justify an invasion.

The United States does, on the other hand, have an interest in the defense of its ally, South Korea. As discussed previously, the United States should retain its alliance with South Korea, and its differentiated credibility is therefore at stake in that nation's effective defense.

South Korea can, however, defend itself from a North Korean invasion on its own or with modest US support. South Korea has an economy of approximately two trillion dollars (PPP) and spends roughly 2.5 percent of its GDP on defense, in absolute terms more than twenty-five times what North Korea spends; the South Korean military also benefits from an advanced economy and access to US equipment and expertise.³³

Because of this, South Korea could almost certainly defeat a North Korean invasion on its own. It could defend itself better, at lower cost and risk, with more significant US support—but the question is how much the United States strictly *needs* to contribute simultaneously to this effort alongside an extremely stressing war with China over Taiwan. The answer is that South Korea could essentially hold out on its own. Once the United States had prevailed against China, it could allocate resources to help defend South Korea against North Korea, but this effort should not detract from the US ability to defend Taiwan or another US ally—including South Korea itself—from China's focused strategy. The same logic would apply if a conflict with North Korea broke out while the United States was at peace with China; in this case Washington should ensure that its efforts against North Korea did not detract from its ability to meet this same standard. To emphasize, this would not be a *good* outcome, given the damage North Korea could inflict on parts of South Korea, but it would allow the United States to meet its basic commitments to US allies threatened by an exceptionally powerful China—including South Korea itself.

The main problem, however, is that North Korea has nuclear weapons. It could use these to threaten South Korea or even Japan and, absent an effective

counter, might be able to use these weapons to coerce Seoul or Tokyo. Although the United States would benefit from the ability to preempt North Korea's nuclear forces, this would almost certainly be exceptionally difficult, if not practically impossible, to pull off.³⁴

The United States, South Korea, and Japan do, though, have the option of relying on the US nuclear arsenal to deter North Korean attack. It is better for all three allies, however, if the United States is able to respond to any North Korean nuclear use without itself being vulnerable to a North Korean nuclear attack.

This is not merely a selfish US interest, assuming that all three states share a powerful interest in avoiding the need for South Korea or Japan to acquire an independent nuclear arsenal. In the event that North Korea could strike at the United States and sought to coerce Seoul or Tokyo, the United States would have to weigh its interest in defending South Korea and Japan from North Korea against its own enormous interest in avoiding nuclear attack. Moreover, American interests regarding North Korea are limited. On its own, North Korea cannot present a primary strategic challenge to America's core interest in preventing another state's hegemony over a key region, since Pyongyang has no prayer of being able to achieve hegemony in Asia. The cardinal strategic challenge North Korea poses is in its ability to weaken the anti-hegemonic coalition against China or if it becomes directly linked to China, as it was in 1950. If South Korea's or Japan's commitment or contributions to the anti-hegemonic coalition were weakened because of North Korea, then important US interests would suffer. This interest is, however, considerably more indirect than the threat posed by China.

As a result, the asymmetry of interests between North Korea and the United States over the Korean Peninsula could thus become significant. This is especially so because North Korea appears to have a very high pain tolerance; the government displays little regard for its subjects' well-being, raising the amount of damage and narrowing the set of targets the United States would need to be able to hold at risk in order to effectively deter or coerce Pyongyang. If North Korea could credibly threaten the United States with nuclear attack, a situation might arise in which North Korea could attempt a significant but still limited act of coercion or aggression against South Korea or Japan and seek to deter a sufficiently firm US response by threatening a nuclear strike against the United States itself, whether directly or as a result of things "getting out of hand" as a

result of a forceful US response. The benefits of responding might appear too modest to Americans to justify risking such a painful consequence, potentially enabling North Korea to coerce South Korea or Japan. Seoul or Tokyo might find this situation exceptionally unsatisfying, jeopardizing relations with the United States and even their active participation in the anti-hegemonic coalition itself.

For these reasons, the United States—and South Korea and Japan, because of their reliance on an American nuclear deterrent—are all better off if Washington can confidently deny North Korea the ability to hit the United States with a nuclear weapon. In that circumstance, North Korea is likely to judge a US commitment to defend Japan and South Korea as more credible and thus is more likely to be deterred from precipitating such a course of action. The US ability to deny North Korea such an ability can involve a number of steps, including nonkinetic left-of-launch efforts. Realistically, however, the United States cannot be sure that preemptive measures will work, and it does not want to be forced to choose between acting either preemptively and comprehensively or not at all, since preemption heightens both the risk of error and the chance the United States will be seen as the aggressor.

Missile defenses, which try to deny missile attack once an opponent has launched them and thereby shown its intent, are therefore highly valuable. If the United States can confidently use missile defenses to deny North Korea the ability to attack America, Pyongyang's leverage over the United States, South Korea, and Japan will be distinctly limited, leaving all three states better off.

This is consistent with efforts to provide defenses for South Korea and Japan as well. Realistically, however, it will be much harder, if not impossible, to provide a perfect defense for them, given North Korea's much larger inventory of shorter-range missiles. Seeking a perfect defense would not only fail but consume far too large a proportion of Japan's and South Korea's defense efforts. Ultimately, Japan and South Korea are better off coupling limited missile defenses for their respective territories with reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence and an effective missile shield for the United States against North Korea.

The problem is that missile defenses are expensive and have an unfavorable cost-exchange ratio. They offer little prospect of blocking a large and sophisticated attack, such as could be launched by Russia or China. This means that a modest North Korean missile arsenal is manageable, but if Pyongyang's arsenal

expands substantially and modernizes, it will cause a geometric rather than arithmetic increase in US costs and difficulties, which will trade against the US ability to defeat a Chinese assault against an ally in the Western Pacific.³⁵

The United States should undertake an integrated approach to managing this problem. First, it should seek to inhibit as much as possible the maturation and growth of North Korea's long-range missile and nuclear arsenals. An important part of this may be linking the development of North Korea's arsenal with Chinese support and ensuring that China is properly incentivized to eliminate or at least minimize Pyongyang's access to the technology and other resources needed for this effort.³⁶ Second, the United States should seek to improve its missile defense systems while bending the cost curve back toward its favor, if possible.³⁷ Third, the United States and others can seek to engage North Korea diplomatically to try to stem the growth of its nuclear and missile arsenals.

If this integrated effort fails and North Korea's arsenal grows markedly, American missile defense costs may become so heavy as to jeopardize other core missions. In this case, the United States and its allies will have to weigh several courses of action. One is to rely more on US nuclear deterrence alongside missile defenses. It is important to remember that these defenses—like any defenses—do not need to be perfect to have an effect, though imperfection has far more severe consequences in nuclear than conventional war. Additionally, the United States and its allies might seek to tie North Korea's actions even more closely to China's, linking Beijing's interests much more closely to how Pyongyang behaves so as to discourage China from enabling North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

If these courses prove insufficient and the costs threaten to detract from US core defense missions, the United States and its allies would have to consider friendly proliferation to South Korea, Japan, or both. Independent or semi-independent nuclear arsenals in Seoul's or Tokyo's hands would defeat North Korea's ability to exploit any divergence between its own willingness to run risks and US resolve. South Korea or Japan would then have their own means to retaliate against a North Korean nuclear attack, and the North is too poor to build the strike and missile defense architecture to block a South Korean or Japanese response. Such friendly proliferation would no doubt send out tremendous strategic reverberations, not least to China but also globally. These significant costs would have to be weighed against those of the alternative.

The point for US defense strategy is that, if affordable, on top of its core missions the United States should seek to maintain missile defenses sufficient to deny a North Korean ability to strike the United States with a nuclear weapon.

Iran

There is no need for the United States to address a threat from Iran simultaneously to conducting a denial defense of Taiwan and maintaining its strategic deterrent, counterterrorism enterprise, and missile defenses. Iran's conventional military is large and would present a formidable opponent if the United States wished to invade and occupy Iran, but doing so is not necessary to any US strategic interest and would almost certainly be a monumental and expensive mistake as well as a likely failure. Iran's conventional forces, meanwhile, do not pose a very significant threat of being able to seize the territory of such US regional partners as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Their forces alone would stand a decent chance of repelling an Iranian invasion of one of these states. More to the point, even if Iranian forces did seize partner territory, US forces hold a commanding mastery over Iran's with respect to the Gulf states' territory and could readily expel and devastate any Iranian forces *after* defeating China over, for instance, Taiwan.³⁸ The United States could couple this expulsion of Iranian occupying elements with a punishing retaliatory campaign, which would add a large cost to Iran on top of the denial of its objectives. The same logic would hold true if a conflict with Iran broke out while the United States was at peace with China. But, as with North Korea, in such circumstances the United States should be sure that any efforts against Iran did not compromise its ability to defend Taiwan or another US ally in Asia.

Although Iran also possesses or directs substantial proxy and other unconventional forces able to strike at and harass US partners, these forces could not seize partner territory in any way that the United States could not reverse after having prevailed in a Taiwan contingency—and it is critical to emphasize that this is the standard US forces must meet, not ending Iranian strikes or harassment. That said, the United States can seek to mitigate its partners' vulnerability to such strikes or harassment through, for instance, the sale of missile defenses, hardening equipment, and training in dispersal. It can also encourage other states—especially those outside of Asia, such as the United Kingdom, France,

and other European states—to play a larger role in helping regional partners defend themselves from Iranian strikes and harassment.

Iranian acquisition of a nuclear arsenal would complicate but not fundamentally change this calculus. The United States and other states rightly strive mightily to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. So long as the United States has the ability to defend its own territory against Iran's ability to deliver such a weapon, American resolve to respond to Iranian employment of any nuclear weapons it might attain is likely to be high—and thus its extended nuclear deterrent credible. In such a circumstance, the United States could retaliate with devastating force against Iran if it used nuclear weapons against, for instance, Israel or Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons, the United States should, as in the case of North Korea, take all reasonable and affordable steps to ensure that it possesses sufficient defenses to deny Iran any offensive benefit from such acquisition. It should especially deny Iran the ability to hit the United States with a nuclear weapon; cost permitting, these defenses would ideally be added to rather than combined with any defenses allocated toward North Korea.

Russia

The one scenario for which the United States might reasonably make provision for simultaneous action is a potential Russian attack on NATO member states in Eastern Europe. The reason is twofold. First, unlike any potential US adversary other than China, Russia does have a plausible way by which it could seize and hold the key territory of a US ally even in the face of US resistance. Second, Europe is one of the key regions of the world.

The fundamental stake at issue for the United States is denying Russia or any other state hegemony over Europe. No state—including Russia—has any realistic prospect of attaining predominance over Europe for the foreseeable future, in part because there is already an anti-hegemonic alliance there: NATO. The United States therefore has a potent interest in the maintenance of this alliance and thus in the effective defense of its member states.

NATO has, however, grown much larger than is necessary to achieve the goal of denying another state regional hegemony over Europe. Today it encompasses most of the European continent, including all of its large states except for Russia and Ukraine. Measured solely by membership, it boasts much more

than a favorable regional balance of power in Europe vis-à-vis Russia, something closer to an overwhelming preponderance. It could be considerably smaller and still fulfill the fundamental task of denying another state hegemony over Europe.

This means that, from an American point of view, NATO could lose members and still perform its core function. Some NATO states, moreover, are difficult to defend. But the critical issue is that withdrawing alliance commitments is much more problematic than never making them in the first place. Accordingly, withdrawing commitments from some NATO states would surely have significant reverberations; even more, failing to mount an effective defense of member states could undermine the alliance's differentiated credibility, possibly enough to cause it to fissure or even break apart.

Consequently, although the alliance has room to give in terms of its power margin over Russia, it also must consider the implications of withdrawing commitments from existing members. The question, then, is whether existing member states can be defended at a tolerable cost while the United States and other allies are fighting or preparing to fight a war in the Pacific, and consistent with the primary US interest in upholding the anti-hegemonic coalition in Asia. If they can be defended under those conditions, it makes sense to keep the alliance in its current form. If they cannot, it would be more sensible to redraw NATO's defense perimeter to be consistent with this standard.

This is a pointed question because although Russia's precise intentions with respect to NATO are unclear, there do appear to be circumstances in which Moscow might be willing to use military force against the alliance. Russia has been willing to use military force against other states in recent years, including in Ukraine since 2014. And Moscow regards NATO as hostile, a mechanism for spreading Western ascendancy into Russia's traditional zone and a means of weakening and even dismembering the country. Moscow accordingly appears to want to weaken the alliance or even break it apart. Undermining NATO, Moscow appears to assess, would lessen the political and military threat the West poses to Russia's sovereign integrity as well as open up space for Russia to exercise more influence, and possibly hegemonic control, in what Moscow views as its "near abroad."³⁹ By seizing and holding allied territory, Moscow could undercut the alliance's differentiated credibility and move toward this goal.

Russia's plausible theory of victory against NATO is a *fait accompli* strategy rooted in its proximity to the alliance's easternmost members and its possession

of sophisticated conventional forces as well as a large and varied nuclear arsenal. It does not have the practical ability to seize and hold noncontiguous NATO territory in the face of allied opposition; Moscow could not plausibly project such power across a resistant Ukraine or the Black Sea to seize and hold, for instance, Romania or Bulgaria.

Northeastern NATO is different. Here Russia directly borders the Baltic states and Poland, and Moscow enjoys a substantial local conventional military superiority over the Baltics and possibly at least parts of Poland. This is due to several factors. One is the weakness of the small Baltic states, whose militaries pale in comparison to Russia's. A second is geography. These countries occupy a narrow strip of territory sandwiched between Russia and the Baltic Sea; forces placed there are more vulnerable to attack—especially surprise attack—from Russia. A third is the thinness of the broader allied defense posture in Eastern NATO, a result of the alliance's decisions not to build up its defense posture in the states NATO added after the Soviet Union's collapse. Although NATO has strengthened its defenses in the east in recent years, Russia still may be able to generate local superiority, and possibly a significant degree of it.⁴⁰

As a consequence, Russia could rapidly move its conventional forces into the Baltic states, very likely overrunning NATO forces and conceivably doing so very quickly. Russian forces could then harden and fortify their positions, integrating them with neighboring Russian battle networks in Russia proper as well as the Kaliningrad exclave, raising the costs of a NATO counterattack from the west. If allied forces are ill prepared to engage the Russians quickly, such a counterattack could take substantial time to mount, especially in the context of a simultaneous US conflict with China. And any such delayed counterassault would almost certainly need to be large and ferocious in order to expel the entrenched Russian defenders from their positions. Russian forces would have had substantial time to develop sophisticated and resilient defenses using the natural advantages of the ground and the closeness of Russia's own territory.⁴¹

Moscow could not, however, rely solely on its conventional forces for such a gambit to work. Russia is enormously overmatched in conventional forces by the North Atlantic Alliance, and even by the United States alone. Russian conventional forces would be formidable and extract a high cost in a purely conventional defense, but Moscow has to expect that this effort would almost certainly fail. Given the stakes, NATO—and possibly such friendly nonmem-

bers as Sweden and Finland—would almost certainly follow through on the liberation of the occupied member states if only conventional forces were at issue.

Nuclear forces would therefore be key to any Russian theory of victory. Russia's nuclear weapons, which rival those of the United States in size and sophistication and exceed them in variety and applicability to the battlefield, could enable Moscow to threaten to inflict costs on the alliance far out of proportion to the stakes at issue. But as discussed previously, the primary challenge to employing nuclear weapons for coercive leverage in situations of mutual vulnerability is that their use must appear plausibly sensible in light of the nuclear retaliation that can be expected to follow. If using these weapons seems clearly irrational in light of these consequences, then the threat of their employment will not appear very credible and thus is unlikely to matter much.

But Russian use of its nuclear weapons *could* appear sensible and thus credible if the conflict unfolded in a certain way. Because of NATO's preponderance of power over Russia and because of the scale of the counterassault the alliance would have to mount to eject entrenched Russian forces from Eastern NATO territory, Russia would need to dedicate a great proportion—perhaps the bulk—of its forces, and certainly its best, to defend what it had just taken. To defeat and eject such an entrenched Russian force, NATO would very likely have to overwhelm it. Yet in doing so, the alliance could plausibly seem to imperil Moscow's ability to defend Russia proper, given the proximity of the Baltics and eastern Poland to key Russian territory.

Once the alliance had broken the back of Russia's forces in Eastern Europe and possibly Western Russia, what, Moscow might wonder, would stop them from going farther, perhaps exploiting Russia's defeat by dictating political terms that would infringe on Russia's own sovereignty, at least as Moscow understood it? NATO might deny any such aspirations, but would Moscow believe such protestations, especially given that war aims can so readily change during a conflict? To Russian decision-makers—and to those wondering how they might act—such a set of circumstances might appear to make deliberate nuclear escalation a less unattractive option for Russian decision-makers than conventional defeat and relying on the alliance's clemency. In a sense, the strength of Russia's strategy would lie in its weakness—its vulnerability if its forces defending its gains in the Baltics and Eastern Poland were to be ejected. Without this fundamental weakness, Russia's threat to escalate would not, paradoxically, seem so credible.⁴²

Given these realities, in the face of an allied counterassault Moscow might credibly threaten to escalate to nuclear employment against NATO. Russia might pick any number of different strategies and targets from the enormous menu of options afforded by its nuclear arsenal, but the basic logic would likely be what is commonly referred to, at least in the West, as an *escalate to de-escalate* (or *escalate to terminate*) strategy.⁴³ Under this logic, Russia would seek to prevail by daring the West to follow it up the nuclear ladder while eroding NATO's conventional military advantages through selective nuclear employment. In such circumstances, NATO would face a most powerful incentive to stop. As discussed earlier, while there is no precedent for such a situation, it seems most likely that it would resolve by forces halting more or less in place—which would mean a Russian victory, with major repercussions for the alliance.

Fortunately for the United States and NATO, there is a clear way to defeat Russia's theory of victory, and the alliance has a superabundance of resources to do so. This is not primarily about nuclear forces. Russia's nuclear forces are very large; even if Moscow were willing to reduce them, the reduction is unlikely to diminish its ability to use the arsenal for an escalate to terminate strategy in these circumstances.

The critical element in Russia's theory of victory that NATO can most readily redress is its local conventional force advantages, and specifically its ability to seize and hold allied territory. Assuming that nuclear brinkmanship contests are most likely to end in a halt in place, the crucial thing is to ensure that Moscow cannot seize and hold allied territory. This is the *sine qua non* of Russia's theory of victory; without an ability to hold allied territory, Moscow's escalate to terminate strategy would not gain it much.

Accordingly, the alliance needs a force posture that can deny a Russian *fait accompli* against the Baltics and Eastern Poland. This means allied and partner forces that can contest a Russian assault from the outset of hostilities and, most important, not allow Russia the let-up that it could use to consolidate its hold on any seized territory. NATO allies could use either one of the denial options laid out previously to achieve this goal; that said, given the topography—including the lack of major land features between Russian and allied territory—denying Russia the ability to consolidate its hold on seized territory is likely to be more attractive. The key, however, is to ensure the ability to sustain a denial defense such that, at a minimum, the Russians would have to mount a much larger assault to try to overcome it, reducing their probability of success in the first place

but also undercutting their contention that they would be acting defensively and thus the credibility of any nuclear threats they might issue. This would undermine their theory of victory.

Properly postured and readied ground and air forces as well as their key enablers are likely to be crucial for achieving this standard. Such forces need not be postured far forward or fixed in place like a new Maginot Line. Rather, a growing body of analysis suggests that they can be mobile and flexible—indeed, this will make them more resilient and survivable—but they need to be ready to move forward swiftly to contest Russian advances. Fortunately, the United States and NATO as a whole have made considerable progress in recent years in rectifying gaps in their defense posture in the East through more realistic and larger exercises, improved readiness, and posture enhancements.⁴⁴

This strategy, however, needs to be considered in a broader context. Russia poses a serious threat to NATO, but this threat is both more tractable and less consequential than the threat China poses in the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, the United States should give the first priority to making sure it is able to mount an effective defense of Taiwan or another ally in the Western Pacific above any efforts to defend Eastern NATO. It should make provision to help defend Eastern NATO *only* once it is assured that its denial defense of an ally in the Western Pacific will succeed.

It also means that, should a war break out with Russia in Europe, the United States should be sure that it maintains the ability to conduct a denial defense of Taiwan or another ally against China in the Western Pacific. This is critical because Beijing might take advantage of the opportunity afforded by a war in Europe to advance toward regional hegemony by conducting attacks on one or more US allies in Asia. Because China is so much more formidable and its actions are so much more consequential, the United States must ensure that it can defeat China's theory of victory *even* if Russia has acted first.

Indeed, the most stressing variant of such a simultaneous war scenario—and thus the one most relevant to the development, posturing, and readying of the force—would likely be a simultaneous conflict with China and Russia in which the Russia conflict emerged first, since Moscow's claims to be acting defensively and thus reasonably would ring far hollower if it attacked NATO while the United States was engaged in a war with China. Such a move would be likely to appear opportunistic rather than forced on Moscow; it would thus very likely legitimate a much fiercer and resolute NATO response, diminishing any

Russian theory of victory that relied on a perception of Moscow's reasonableness and defensive goals.

A contingency in which conflict with Russia broke out first, followed by war with China, thus presents the most serious challenge to US defense planning. This contingency is manageable, though, for one reason in particular: the NATO allies, as well as other states concerned by the potential for a Russian attack, such as Finland and Sweden, have the wherewithal to address it.⁴⁵ In simplest terms, these countries are together overwhelmingly richer, larger, and stronger than Russia, and if adequately prepared, they could readily defeat a Russian assault into NATO with much less American involvement than they currently depend on. America's NATO allies constitute almost fifteen times the GDP of Russia and spend four times what Moscow allocates to defense.⁴⁶ Even providing a substantial discount because of European demilitarization after the Cold War and Russia's cohesion as a unitary actor, non-US NATO still enjoys a very significant power advantage over Moscow. These countries along with plausible European partners could readily supply most if not the great proportion of the forces needed for an effective denial defense of Eastern NATO. Indeed, increased defense efforts by Poland alone in recent years promise to diminish Moscow's ability to conduct a successful *fait accompli* strategy in the East.⁴⁷

Much of the issue in Europe is really about Germany. Germany is, as noted earlier, by far Europe's largest economy and its most important state. Yet it spends a small fraction—in 2018, 1.2 percent of GDP—on defense, and what it does spend yields little military capability that would be relevant to a contest with Russia. This is a historical anomaly—since 1989, not 1945. In 1988, a West Germany two-thirds the size of the current Federal Republic fielded twelve divisions along its border with East Germany, with three more in ready reserve. Today the reunited nation can barely field a pale shadow of that force.⁴⁸ Germany is therefore highly capable of contributing a great deal more to NATO's collective defense than it currently does, and given its wealth and sophistication, its doing so would make an enormous difference. If Germany today provided even a fraction of the capability that a smaller West Germany provided for alliance defense in 1988, the Russian *fait accompli* strategy would be seriously dented, if not denied. This would also allow smaller states to integrate their forces into Germany's within NATO; for instance, Danish, Dutch, Belgian, Italian, and even British and French contributions would benefit from being able to interoperate with more significant German forces.

A more robust effort by Germany and other relevant European states would enable a sound strategic approach by the United States and its allies to simultaneous conflicts against China in Asia and Russia in Europe. In these circumstances, European and whatever US forces could reasonably be made available might be able to halt a Russian assault against Eastern NATO outright; but, if not, these forces could focus on blunting a Russian attack, forcing Moscow to mount a larger campaign to succeed and keeping the fight going sufficiently to deny Moscow's attempt at a *fait accompli*. Once the United States had defeated the Chinese attack on a US ally in the Western Pacific and achieved a level of assurance that it could free up forces from that conflict, the United States could swing those forces to help defend the alliance and eject Russian forces from whatever ground they had gained.

This approach assumes that other European NATO allies will assume a considerably greater role in Eastern member states' defense. This is not a question of capacity; Europe is fully capable of assuming a much greater fraction of collective defense for NATO. It is a matter of will. NATO Europe, which maintained a stout military during the Cold War, substantially demilitarized after the collapse of the Soviet Union because it faced no meaningful threat. Now, however, Russia poses a significant threat to the alliance in the East, while the United States must focus on its essential role as the external cornerstone balancer on China and the Indo-Pacific.

But will they? Europeans—or at least some Europeans, including important ones like the Germans—should ultimately be willing to do so. Europe's reduction in defense effort after the Cold War was logical. Increased defense spending in this period would not have materially increased Europeans' security. The collapse of the USSR removed the main threat to NATO European security, and in its wake, the United States elected to sustain higher levels of defense spending and maintained an enormous military advantage over any plausible opponent, including Russia.

But conditions have changed. Russia has restored its ability to use military force against European NATO and has demonstrated its willingness to use its armed forces to take and hold territory and undermine neighboring states. China, meanwhile, is rapidly growing in military capability; dealing with it will by necessity absorb a greater share of US attention and resources.

In this context, Europeans have a choice. They can continue to spend little on defense, calculating that the Russians are not sufficiently dangerous to justify

greater exertions or that NATO's Eastern states can safely be lost without too much decrement to the security of the Alliance's traditional core members. Or they might wager that the Americans are bluffing about greater burden-sharing, as they have in the past; a European decision not to do more might therefore be a calculated decision to free ride, based on the Europeans' confidence in Washington's unwavering commitment to their security.

Regardless of the rationale, a decision to avoid increased defense effort by Europeans would carry substantial costs and risks. Most pointedly, the United States might very well not fill the gap in Eastern NATO left by any European unwillingness to strengthen their own defense efforts. Indeed, my argument in this book is that the United States *should not* plug these gaps. If China succeeds in its focused and sequential strategy in Asia, it can establish hegemony over the world's most important region. If Russia succeeds in a *fait accompli* in Eastern Europe, it will call NATO into question and open the East to Moscow's predominance, but it will not be able to dominate the wealthiest parts of the continent.

Thus if compelled to face such a choice by European unwillingness to shoulder more of the defense burden, the United States must first ensure an effective defense of its allies in the anti-hegemonic coalition against China. And to do so effectively it must not spend too much on defense, since this could impair its economic prospects, the foundation of its long-term strength and thus its security. This puts a cap on how much the United States can allocate to European defense on top of its efforts in Asia. In such a situation, Washington might well then pursue the same tack the Europeans themselves had previously taken, assuming that in such a circumstance Germany would rearm to defend itself against a more powerful and emboldened Russia, which would deny Russia's ability to move farther west.

This would, of course, be an awful outcome. It would imperil European stability and could reopen the continent to an aggressive, overt form of power politics it has not seen in decades. A better choice for Europeans would be to spend more on defense and spend it more effectively, developing forces that, along with US elements, can effectively deny a Russian *fait accompli* attempt against Eastern NATO. Much preliminary evidence suggests that Europe is moving slowly and fitfully in this direction. Germany, however, remains the major outlier, and it should be the primary focus of US and Allied efforts to reconcile its obligations with its defense efforts.

Eastern NATO can, then, be effectively defended at a reasonable cost by a combination of greater European investment and adapted efforts and posture within NATO. This means that there are insufficient grounds to risk the alliance's cohesion by expelling the Baltic states from NATO. Doing so would signal a serious weakness at the core of NATO and would be more costly than beneficial.

At the same time, US strategy should focus on setting the conditions for a different relationship with Russia. The United States and the anti-hegemonic coalition would benefit substantially if Russia does not become too closely aligned with China and would benefit even more if Moscow inclined more toward the coalition. Enabling such a shift in the US-Russia relationship is compatible with more effective defenses against Russian action in the West, so long as it is clear that the US and allied strategy is focused on fortifying NATO's *defensive* position in Europe. To that point, the military strategy laid out here emphasizes the defense of NATO territory through a limited war—not the development or deployment of forces to invade Russia, forcibly change its government, decapitate its leadership, or disarm its strategic forces. By making clear both US restraint and the futility of trying to undermine NATO, this approach should reduce Moscow's interest in focusing its attention and efforts westward and allow it to take a clearer view of the substantial threat to its autonomy from China. This does not demand a full rapprochement or alignment of Moscow's perspective with those of the United States and Europe; it requires only a shift in balance and approach. Even a Russia that adopted a more moderate, less threatening position toward Europe while focusing more on checking Chinese power would be a significant boon to the anti-hegemonic coalition in Asia.⁴⁹

Ultimately, issues of simultaneity highlight the fundamental question of how much resources to dedicate to national defense. Strategies and strategic choices cost money; in Bernard Brodie's phrase, they wear a dollar sign.⁵⁰ More ambitious strategies are generally more expensive. It is possible that the nation will agree to provide substantial additional resources for defense beyond the 3–4 percent of GDP allocated in recent decades.⁵¹ Such an increase may be prudent if international circumstances materially worsen, particularly if China significantly increases its spending on military forces.

The nation's defense strategy should not, however, demand unusually high levels of spending on the military unless they are truly necessary. Even on

strategic grounds, outside of research and development, money spent on defense is generally not invested as productively as it might be if invested in the civil economy; it is better for the nation's long-term strength—including military might—for spending to go elsewhere.⁵² Moreover, money used for defense is not consumed by the citizenry, and if the purpose of US strategy is to promote not only Americans' security but their freedom and prosperity as well, Americans should not be unduly inhibited from allocating as much of the fruit of their work as feasible to consumption, charity, social services, or other purposes.

This means that the US defense establishment should seek to prune as many noncritical missions and activities as possible before demanding significant additional resources. Significant additional resources may be necessary to achieve the core necessary missions of the US armed forces, especially if China increases its own spending on the PLA. But the US government should first ensure that the money already allocated to it is spent as efficiently and rationally as possible. This means ceasing to buy or do things that do not clearly and efficiently contribute to one of the critical missions of the US armed forces outlined earlier.

What If the Strategy Is Too Much to Bear?

This book focuses on how America and its allies and partners can prevent China from realizing its goal of regional hegemony. What if, however, the demands of the approaches laid out here are too much for Americans to bear?

This could happen for several reasons.

Perhaps the most straightforward is that Americans may not be convinced that taking a leading role in denying another state hegemony over a distant region, however key, is worth the sacrifice and risk entailed. Such a development is more likely the stronger China is, since an effective defense of vulnerable allies in the anti-hegemonic coalition would then be more difficult as well as more costly and risky for the United States. It is therefore critical that the United States and others in the anti-hegemonic coalition maintain their economic vitality as much as possible in order to avoid such an outcome.

Americans are also more likely to turn away from this effort if other coalition members—especially allies, given the particular demands this strategy levies on America for their effective defense—do not pull their weight, whether through tending to their own defense, aiding others', or both. This situation would also increase the demands on Americans, who might begin to ask themselves—not

unjustly—whether the effort is worth the costs and risks, if people in the region itself do not fear Chinese dominance enough to strive to counteract it. If the nations Americans are preparing to defend at such great risk can survive Chinese hegemony over their region, this might be seen to lend strength to the argument that perhaps Americans can too. A reasonably equitable sharing of burdens among the coalition states—and especially US allies within it—is therefore essential. Given Japan's importance, position, and very low levels of defense spending, this issue is especially pointed for Tokyo. Its decisions on this matter are likely to have outsized implications for the entire anti-hegemonic coalition.

That said, America has a far greater interest in denying China's regional hegemony than in equity among alliance members. It is the divergence in gravity between these interests that makes efforts to promote equitable burden-sharing so difficult and yet so important.⁵³ The less allies do, however, the more they will test not only the resilience of America's commitment to denying China hegemony over Asia but its ability to do so. China will almost certainly be so powerful that even with a very high degree of American effort and focus, a much greater effort from states like Japan will be essential. Moreover, states do not always make the best decisions; lassitude by other coalition members, especially allies, will tempt Americans to make an ill-advised decision to disengage from Asia or simply not commit enough to the effort, to the detriment of all who share this profound interest.

For the same reason, the United States must avoid becoming entangled in peripheral wars that sap American will and power, exhausting the US public and making the contest in the central theater of Asia even more direly competitive. Americans are more likely to decide that the benefits are not worth the costs and risks in such circumstances. Accordingly, it is crucial that the United States use its military instrument judiciously. Americans' strength and resolve should be husbanded for the primary challenges, above all China in the Western Pacific, lest they flag or be weakened beyond what is necessary for success in the central theater. Calls to use military force for anything but these primary challenges should thus receive a highly skeptical review and generally be resisted.

Friendly Nuclear Proliferation

If the American people do not want to make the effort needed for an effective defense of their allies, they have two options: they can accept Chinese regional hegemony or tolerate (or even encourage) some proliferation

of nuclear weapons to US allies and partners. I outlined the demerits of the first earlier.

Some of the demerits of the second are well known. A world in which more states have nuclear weapons is probably a considerably more dangerous one. Although some prominent scholars have argued that general nuclear proliferation would produce a more stable world, this idea has had little purchase outside the academy.⁵⁴ A world in which many states have nuclear weapons might contribute to deterrence among them, but it would also contain more, and more complex, relationships among nuclear weapons states, more opportunities for accident or error, and more drivers for cataclysm. Whereas general proliferation might promote some level of stability, then, it would come at an extraordinarily high level of risk.

And widespread proliferation might not prove as stabilizing as these scholars have suggested, because it might not be quite as potent a deterrent as its advocates think. It is true that nuclear weapons introduce a fundamentally different level of caution for any prospective attacker, but they do not wholly suspend the rules of logic and reason. States that have nuclear weapons facing a nuclear-armed opponent know that the surest way to invite the most devastating nuclear blow is to launch a nuclear attack. They have the most powerful reasons to avoid such an outcome, even when their territorial integrity is at stake. In other words, even a state at risk of invasion has the strongest incentives to avoid a nuclear reprisal; occupation or even conquest, especially if partial, may be preferable to destruction. This is especially so when a small state faces a large one, such as China, that has a larger and more sophisticated arsenal and likely significant missile defense capabilities.⁵⁵ This dynamic is only more pronounced when what is at stake is the partial loss of territory or autonomy; nuclear war may be a tenable option when the alternative is total devastation or enslavement, but less so when it means the loss of a few provinces or submission to hegemony.⁵⁶ Nuclear weapons are not, therefore, a panacea. Their proliferation would complicate and hamper China's ability to establish hegemony over the Indo-Pacific but would not necessarily defeat it.

That said, selective nuclear proliferation might, rather than supplant the anti-hegemonic coalition's defense, strengthen it, in particular by making the binding strategy more effective. This could be especially relevant if China were able to attain commanding conventional military superiority over the coalition or important parts of it. In such an eventuality, a binding strategy confined to con-

ventional forces might not suffice, since China might be able to overcome even a consolidated coalition conventional defense and pick apart its members.

Coalition members might then turn to the United States to compensate for this conventional military inferiority with the threat of first use of its nuclear forces. Because China would have immense ability to respond to US first use with nuclear reprisals against the United States itself, however, Americans would have the most powerful reasons for restraint. China might reckon that it could induce US nuclear restraint while salami-slicing away Washington's Asian allies and partners.

Selective nuclear proliferation to such states as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and even Taiwan might help bridge the gap between regional conventional defeat and US willingness to employ its nuclear forces, especially at scale. In this world, Chinese victory in a conventional war against the United States and its allies might transgress the interests of one of these nuclear-armed regional allies enough to prompt its nuclear use against China to defend its territory. That would likely trigger a Chinese response, including against US forces fighting alongside those of the embattled ally, which in turn would be more likely to catalyze American nuclear use to prevent the full collapse of its allies' position. Such a posture would likely make the anti-hegemonic coalition's deterrent posture more formidable. Indeed, selective nuclear proliferation of this sort to the United Kingdom and France is judged by many to have contributed to NATO's deterrent posture during the Cold War, when the Soviets enjoyed conventional superiority in Europe. This is, in fact, NATO's official stance.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, the perils of proliferation make this option a last resort. Far preferable is an effective conventional defense backed by, but not primarily reliant on, the nuclear forces of the United States. That standard will be hard and costly to attain, and it will require sustained focus and discipline—but the alternatives are worse.