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# WARTIME FOOTING

## A Two-Front Strategy to Confront China and Russia

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States and its allies face a serious and growing threat from an authoritarian axis led by China and Russia that will erode U.S. power and security if it is not effectively countered. Chinese leader Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party have ordered the People's Liberation Army to be ready to conduct a successful invasion of Taiwan by 2027, and Russia continues to wage an aggressive war in Ukraine and a sabotage campaign across Europe that includes assassinations, bombings, and subversion.

This report outlines a U.S. defense strategy of flexible engagement built around a two-war planning construct and a rapid shift to a wartime industrial footing to counter an axis led by China and Russia. It prioritizes the Indo-Pacific first and Europe second, as well as deterring and, if necessary, defeating two major powers simultaneously with significant allied and partner involvement. To do so, the United States should focus on several steps:

- Expand and modernize its force structure to deter two multi-theater wars, one in the Indo-Pacific against China and another in Europe against Russia, while preparing for contingencies in the Middle East, Latin America, and other regions;
- Develop a new offset strategy focused on Air-Sea Battle in the Indo-Pacific and Air-Land Battle in Europe that blends advanced and lower-cost unmanned systems with long-range precision strike and nuclear modernization;
- Adopt a posture prioritizing dispersed, mobile, and survivable U.S. forces;
- Accelerate reforms to the defense industrial base to operate with greater speed and production capacity.

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### MULTI-THEATER THREATS

The United States is in an increasingly perilous international security environment. Europe has witnessed its largest land war since World War II as Russia continues its assault on Ukraine. Conflict persists involving the United States, Israel, and Iran in the Middle East. Tensions in the Taiwan Strait, East and South China Seas, and Korean Peninsula remain high, and U.S. forces conducted an escalating campaign in the Western Hemisphere that included the seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

These dynamics have unfolded as authoritarian states, led by China and Russia, are undermining U.S. and allied interests and rapidly arming. An authoritarian China

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presents the most serious threat to the United States and its interests abroad, and the Chinese Communist Party's principles and values are antithetical to those of the United States and its democratic allies in stifling democracy, brutally repressing dissent, and eviscerating freedom of speech. The U.S. military has lost "overmatch"—the ability to militarily overwhelm an adversary in all the domains of conflict—in a war against China. China has swiftly modernized its military and rapidly advanced in all major domains of warfare, such as air, maritime, land, space, cyber, and nuclear capabilities. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) possesses formidable air and naval power, long-range precision strike systems, and advanced space and cyber capabilities that can threaten U.S. forces, bases, and logistics across the western Pacific. Meanwhile, Russia is rebuilding its military with external support, particularly from China, and will likely remain a significant threat to Europe and the United States.

China and then Russia are the two most significant great power threats to the United States because of their military capabilities and desire to expand their power and influence at the expense of the United States. The United States does not face the same degree of threat in the Middle East with Iran, in East Asia with North Korea, or in the Western Hemisphere with Venezuela, Cuba, or other state and non-state actors. Yet the United States is not adequately prepared for this security environment. Without urgent and rapid changes, the United States risks losing the ability to deter major conflict—especially in the Indo-Pacific—and to fight and win a protracted war in one or more regions.

Almost all U.S. force structure elements are low by historical standards. The total number of U.S. Air Force aircraft, U.S. Army active duty personnel, U.S. Navy ships, and U.S. Marine Corps active duty personnel are lower than at almost any time since 1950. In addition, China has made significant advances in some areas and its shipbuilding capacity is over 230 times larger than the United States. U.S. defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product is also smaller than at any time since 1950. And according to a series of war games run by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States still runs out of some critical long-range precision munitions after roughly a week of a conflict with China. The U.S. defense industrial base is not fully prepared for a protracted conflict, though there have been some positive steps in modernizing defense acquisition, spurring innovation, and strengthening supply chains. Production capacity is still insufficient, stockpiles of air defense interceptors and some long-range munitions are low, supply chains are brittle, acquisition systems remain slow and encumbered by peacetime norms, and the defense budget—especially the Pentagon's spending on procurement—is inadequate for the current environment.

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## **A TWO-WAR CONSTRUCT**

Based on these threats, the United States should adopt a two-war planning construct that focuses on deterring and defeating two major powers simultaneously: China in the Indo-Pacific and Russia in Europe. Allies must play a critical role in both theaters.

U.S. force posture, force structure, and the industrial base need to urgently adapt in multiple theaters. In some areas, such as munitions production, it will take between two and four years to produce sufficient stockpiles for a protracted conflict and are critical for deterrence by denial. China is moving at a rapid pace and any delay in developing and executing a strategy will only hasten their lead in such areas as shipbuilding and missiles.

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In the opening phases of a conflict, such as over Taiwan, traditional forces operating in traditional ways will not be effective or survivable.

There is a growing need for smaller-footprint mobile systems and cheaper weapons that can be acquired en masse and pre-positioned in or near the battlespace. U.S. forces also must be postured differently—and be more dispersed—to survive and operate in a contested battlespace. Geographic prioritization should guide force posture. The U.S. Army should assume principal responsibility for Europe along with the U.S. Air Force, while the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force should lead in the Indo-Pacific. Allied and partner contributions—such as from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan—are essential. In the Middle East, the United States should continue to work closely with Israel and U.S. partners in the Persian Gulf to counter Iran and its partner forces.

Deterring two wars—and fighting and winning them if deterrence fails—demands shifting the U.S. industrial base to a wartime footing and increased defense spending to more rapidly develop, procure, and field new capabilities. A wartime environment requires a renewed focus on rapid production, minimized regulatory burdens, a robust workforce, and more effective leveraging of the United States’ innovative commercial sector. Axis states are already moving in this direction, with China particularly scaling up defense production through military-civil fusion.

Building off the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s concept of Hellscape, which involves massive numbers of underwater, surface, and aerial systems to target Chinese invasion forces, the U.S. military should refine concepts of Air-Sea Battle for the Indo-Pacific and Air-Land Battle for Europe. These concepts of operation should focus on rapidly striking at the center of gravity of a Chinese or Russian invasion force and crippling these countries’ offensive campaigns. In addition, these concepts point to five priority areas for the industrial base: (1) a high-low mix of undersea capabilities, including submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs); (2) a high-low mix of air capabilities, including cheap unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) and fifth- and sixth-generation fighters and bombers; (3) long-range precision strike systems, including cheaper systems that can be used in larger numbers; (4) air defense systems to counter missiles and UASs; and (5) other capabilities, such as advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum, space, and cyber warfare. Such changes require years of sustained investment, capital expenditures, production, workforce development, and supply chain fortification.

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## **THE CLOCK IS TICKING**

U.S. leaders from President George Washington to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan warned that peace is secured only through strength. Today’s threats also echo the warnings that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill issued before World War II—warnings Britain and much of Europe ignored at great cost. The United States must not repeat the mistake of failing to counter adversaries that are arming. Building the force structure and industrial base required to deter and, if necessary, win a multi-theater war will take time. But delays will only raise the costs and risks. In an era of emboldened authoritarian rivals, the United States must act now.