



The Marathon Initiative

Realizing the Contact & Blunt Layers in Europe and Asia

The purpose of this study is to provide a strategic framework for how the United States, and the Department of Defense in particular, should think about and act toward its allies and partners in an era defined by great power competition. In effect, it is an attempt to sketch the outlines of what the Pentagon has termed a “Guidance for the Development of Allies and Partners.”

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY: THE OUTLINES OF A GUIDANCE FOR THE
DEVELOPMENT OF ALLIES AND PARTNERS

The purpose of this study is to provide a strategic framework for how the United States, and the Department of Defense in particular, should think about and act toward U.S. allies and partners in an era defined by great power competition. In effect, it is an attempt to sketch the outlines of what the Pentagon has termed a “Guidance for the Development of Allies and Partners” – that is, a strategic concept for how the Department of Defense should view, engage with, and work with U.S. allies and partners.

This study looks at the roughly ten-year timeframe – 2030, give or take – and then provides suggested guidance for the Department in light of that projected future. Within this context, the study is designed to be sharp and forward-leaning. It is deliberately not constrained by present political or diplomatic realities, but is rather an assessment of where the military-strategic balances seem to be heading – and how the Department might best adapt accordingly.

The value of the study lies in describing where the most pressing long-term military challenges to U.S. strategic interests will likely be, analyzing where U.S. allies and partners can help fill those gaps, and in providing concrete proposals for where the United States should try to direct or influence allied and partner efforts. It is a conceptual framework, designed to provide a model for the future challenges the nation will face if current trends roughly continue. Consequently, it is focused on what the United States should want and seek over time, not what it most plausibly can do in the near term or how to conduct diplomacy to achieve these ends. Rather, it is designed to be an “inside voice” strategic construct for how the Department can think about and act toward its allies and partners. Diplomatic, political, and other constraints will continue to exist, but the premise of this study is that, in light of a world defined by intensifying great power competition, the Department will be better served if possessed of a clear, structured sense of where it ideally *should* go.

A Note on Methodology: This study was developed based on intensive review of the literature on Asia security, U.S. defense strategy, and related issues. It was also heavily informed by participation in virtual dialogues with Asian and European security partners, particularly but not exclusively those dialogues sponsored by DTRA. Finally, the draft was scrutinized in and revised based on two virtual roundtables, one consisting of prominent Asian security experts and the other of prominent U.S. defense experts.

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THE DIRECTION OF U.S. STRATEGY

The central objective of American strategy is to prevent a rival or coalition of rivals from dominating a key region of the world and through such hegemony compromise U.S. prosperity, freedom, and security.¹ According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), China seeks regional hegemony first, and from that position global preeminence.² Russia, while considerably less powerful than China, remains a threat to European security and particularly to eastern NATO.

In light of these objectives, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) and now the Biden Administration have both indicated that China is the top challenge to U.S. strategic interests and the priority threat for DOD.³ More particularly, the NDS guided DOD to focus on preserving favorable regional balances of power in order to deny China and Russia's hegemonic or domineering aspirations. It specifically focused DOD on negating Chinese and Russian theories of victory against exposed members within the U.S. defense perimeter because, absent such an ability, an aspiring hegemon like China could use its military advantages to pry apart or short-circuit any anti-hegemonic coalition.⁴

Beijing could most plausibly do so by pursuing a *focused and sequential* strategy – the scoped and iterative use of its military advantages to coerce or compel U.S. allies and partners to disaffiliate from any anti-hegemonic coalition until such a coalition is simply too weak to stand up to Beijing.⁵ In particular, DOD has increasingly identified the *fait accompli* as the most dangerous strategy Beijing or Moscow could employ in pursuit of such an approach.⁶

To meet this challenge, the military strategy the NDS promoted and that DOD now emphasizes is *deterrence by denial*, which focuses on denying an opponent success at obtaining its objective rather than relying on the imposition of punitive costs to coerce the attacker's withdrawal.⁷ The NDS envisioned achieving this denial approach through a layered Global Operating Model that comprises in part a *contact layer* to build relationships and sense threats and a critical *blunt layer* to delay, degrade, and ideally deny any *fait accompli* attempt.⁸

To fulfill this guidance, the NDS laid out three primary lines of effort for the defense establishment. In its first, the NDS emphasized the need for the Joint Force to focus on restoring its warfighting edge against China and Russia in critical scenarios. In the Strategy's critical Second Line of Effort (LoE-2), meanwhile, the NDS directed DOD to "strengthen and evolve our alliances and partnerships into an extended network capable of deterring or decisively acting to meet the shared challenges of our time."⁹ The idea, in other words, was to address the geopolitical challenges of renewed great power competition not simply by trying to rely on the United States' own efforts, but rather also to effectively leverage the strength of those allies and partners.

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE STATE OF PLAY ON NDS LOE-2

As of summer 2021, it appeared that DOD's approach to allies and partners was still largely inertial. There had been some promising movement, however. In late October 2020, then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper issued the "Guidance for Development of Alliances and Partnerships" (GDAP).¹⁰ This guidance is not public, but it appeared to reflect a perception on the part of DOD leadership that the Department requires a more strategic, focused, and rigorous approach to ally and partner engagement.¹¹ Meantime, DOD's emphasis on the importance of allies and partners has only increased under the Biden Administration, and it appears likely there is significant work underway on the topic.¹² This makes the need for a clear vision all the more important.

FRAMING THE U.S. STRATEGIC-MILITARY PROBLEM

The focus of U.S. defense planning is currently – rightly – Taiwan. Taiwan is the most attractive target for China's near-term employment of its military and, if Beijing could subordinate Taiwan, a U.S. quasi-ally along the U.S. defense perimeter, this result would undermine American credibility in Asia and significantly strengthen China's military position in the Western Pacific. Moreover, a U.S. ability to defend Taiwan is likely to translate into an ability to defend U.S. allies in the maritime Asia-Pacific, particularly Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and to some degree peninsular South Korea. Accordingly, in the near-term, the top U.S. defense planning priority appears to be ensuring the ability to deny a Chinese *fait accompli* against Taiwan.¹³

Looking further out, however, the picture for U.S. defense planning becomes much more multifaceted and stressing. China is likely to continue growing in military power, potentially very substantially.¹⁴ This, coupled with China's incentive to use its military power to break apart any anti-hegemonic coalition, indicates that the United States will likely need to consider defense scenarios beyond Taiwan – even as ongoing preparation for the defense of Taiwan is likely to consume a great portion of U.S. effort, resources, and attention. This could leave a significant gap between what the United States is able and willing to do on the one hand and the requirements of defending any broader anti-hegemonic coalition on the other.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The upshot of this is that, within roughly the coming decade, the United States and its allies and partners may face a greater number of stressing conflict scenarios. In Asia, this will fundamentally be a product of the continued marked growth of Chinese military power, including in its ability to project power. In Europe, this is more likely to be the result of the clear necessity for the United States to turn its overwhelming attention to Asia even as Russia maintains a powerful military.¹⁵ These factors could leave important potential gaps in U.S. defense planning and that of any anti-hegemonic coalition the United States will seek to sustain and uphold.

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The primary research questions motivating this study are therefore:

- **New Scenarios:** What does the growth of Chinese and Russian power over the medium-term mean for their respective ability to use military power against U.S. allies, quasi-allies, and partners? In light of this, what are the concerning scenarios that DOD should contemplate?
- **Gaps:** Are there gaps that emerge between the United States' ability and resolve to address these scenarios on the one hand and China's ability and resolve to exploit them on the other? If so, where will they be most consequential and severe?
- **Allied and Partner Contributions:** Given such gaps and the likely focus of U.S. efforts on ensuring the integrity of its existing defense perimeter, what should the United States seek to gain or elicit from relevant allies and partners to redress such disparities?
- **Political Strategic Changes:** Do these findings suggest a need for recalibrating the status of U.S. political relationships with allies and partners (e.g., adding or subtracting formal allies or quasi-allies)?

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EMERGING SCENARIOS VIS A VIS CHINA IN ASIA

CHINA'S MEDIUM-TERM TRAJECTORY

In the medium term, continued growth in the capability, strength, and reach of China's military would make several scenarios in Asia of strategic significance to the United States more plausible and challenging.

This is the simple product of two factors: first, the growing potency of China's military and, second, Beijing's interest in applying the focused and sequential strategy against vulnerable U.S. allies and partners as well as swing states whose orientation makes a difference in the regional balance of power. Political conditions are difficult to anticipate over the medium term; it is possible, however, to gauge a rough sense of the military balance if current trajectories hold.

In this light, this study considers scenarios based on the following criteria. They are those that would involve potential Chinese action against states that are:

- U.S. allies or quasi-allies **or**
- Close partners **or**
- States in which the United States and any anti-hegemonic coalition has a significant strategic interest, for instance because of economic size or important geography; **and**
- Will be directly impinged upon by the growth of China's military power.

The Philippines

The Philippines is a full-fledged U.S. ally, to which the United States is committed by the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. In addition, the Philippines occupies critical geography along the first island chain. If China controlled the Philippines or even could simply deny U.S. access to it, this would seriously undermine any anti-hegemonic coalition's position in Asia.

China is set to be able to project significant military power against the Philippines by 2030. China is likely to have substantial air, naval, amphibious, and air assault forces capable of force projection from mainland China and military bases in the South China Sea, backed by robust space, cyber, electronic warfare, and other enabling capabilities. More concretely, at some point China is likely to have the naval and air forces needed to mount an amphibious and air assault against the main islands of the Philippine archipelago, including aircraft carriers and escorting vessels as well as sea and air transports. In addition, by this point China will likely have an even more robust anti-access/area denial force designed to blunt and degrade U.S. forces' ability to operate effectively in defense of the Philippines.¹⁶ Moreover, Beijing's capability to mount such an assault would be greater still if U.S. efforts to strengthen its military position in the Western Pacific lag, and especially if Taiwan were to fall.¹⁷

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Given these force development trends, China will by the early 2030s likely have the *capability* to assault the Philippines, most relevantly the main islands including Luzon. Whether China will *intend* to do this is unknown at this point. China does not presently claim Philippine territory as its own beyond islets in the South China Sea.¹⁸ Nonetheless, China may want to use its newfound power to coerce the Philippines for a variety of reasons, including forcing its disaffiliation from the U.S. alliance, gaining access to its territory for military purposes or simply denying it to the United States, and more broadly pursuing its goal of regional hegemony. A direct assault is likely to be the most effective, if dramatic, way of mounting such grand coercion. In light of this, U.S. defense planners will increasingly need to consider the possibility of a Chinese attack on or even invasion of the Philippines, particularly the main island of Luzon.

South Korea

The Republic of Korea is also a U.S. ally, boasting an advanced economy and capable military forces. It also occupies important geography directly neighboring Japan, America's most important ally in the region (and probably the world). If South Korea fell under China's control or hegemony, it would deal a serious blow to the U.S. alliance network in pure balance of power terms but also markedly increase China's direct threat to Japan.

China's possession by roughly 2030 of the air, naval, and amphibious assault forces described earlier would also enable it to project significant military power against South Korea. Indeed, to the extent that PLA force design is optimized for cross-strait operations against Taiwan, it is likely also to be able to mount amphibious and air assaults against South Korea, as South Korea is roughly 200 miles from Chinese territory across the Yellow Sea.¹⁹ While much of China's power projection forces have been postured against Taiwan and contingencies along China's southern approaches, the PLA might reposition these forces in the Northern Theater Command to augment existing ones.²⁰ Moreover, China might exploit South Korea's peninsular geography to conduct a ground assault, including in tandem with North Korea.²¹

As with the Philippines, Beijing does not presently threaten military aggression or issue expansive territorial claims against South Korea. But that could change. Beijing might also seek to coerce South Korea for broader strategic reasons, particularly to weaken the U.S. alliance system in the Western Pacific by prying away one of its most valuable members. Beijing might apply the focused and sequential strategy against Seoul through bombardment and blockade, selective seizure of key territory, or even a full-scale assault designed to bring South Korea to heel. To be sure, given South Korea's military prowess, this would be a major military effort even for Beijing. But if current trendlines in China's power relative to that of the United States and its allies continue, some forms of such military assault will become feasible.

Accordingly, the United States and South Korea will need to consider the prospect of a PLA assault or bombardment campaign against the South over the medium-term – likely *in addition* to the threat from North Korea. Prudent planning should assume that North Korea would either pose an additional danger through independent, opportunistic

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aggression or, alternatively, might coordinate with Beijing in any such attack on South Korea.

Vietnam

Unlike the Philippines and South Korea, Vietnam is neither a U.S. ally nor the beneficiary of any sort of quasi-alliance U.S. commitment like Taiwan. That said, Hanoi is likely to become an increasingly important U.S. partner in Asia. It is significant for its strength, including in military terms; its relative resolve to push back on China compared to most Southeast Asian states; and its geographical position at China's southern border and covering much of the western edge of the South China Sea. In light of these reasons, it is conceivable that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship could become closer – potentially considerably so, and possibly to such degree that it would implicate U.S. defense planning considerations. Importantly, such a relationship need not constitute a full-scale alliance for the United States to consider the advisability of aiding Vietnam's defense against China, especially since Vietnam's shift into China's camp would substantially weaken any U.S.-led anti-hegemonic coalition.²²

Vietnam will face a considerably elevated threat from China over the medium-term. China's projected military capabilities by the early 2030s would enable it to employ major military force against Vietnam, directly and/or through neighboring Laos. While disputed islets in the South China Sea receive the most attention today, the most direct significant military threat Beijing can pose to Vietnam is likely a ground assault across the extensive land border between them, like China undertook to the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. Beijing could also attack Vietnam through Laos as well as across or over the South China Sea.²³ Unlike during their 1979 conflict, however, China will likely enjoy marked quantitative *and* qualitative military advantages over Vietnam. Given this clear power imbalance, Vietnam could struggle to defend at least its northern territory.

Again, it is not clear whether China will want to mount such a campaign against Vietnam. It does not currently claim mainland Vietnam as part of its own territory. But China may want to mount such a campaign for reasons other than territorial annexation, including to “teach Vietnam a lesson” along the lines of the 1979 campaign, to gain a superior position astride the vital South China Sea, and/or to block Hanoi's cooperation or affiliation with a broader anti-hegemonic coalition or even form an alliance with the United States. Russia has used force against Ukraine in recent years at least in part for this last reason. And, given Vietnam's reputation for resolve, China could plausibly judge an invasion of the country to be necessary to bring Hanoi into line, as Hanoi may resist lesser forms of coercion.

Given these factors, U.S. defense planners will need to take account of this potential scenario in the medium-term. Whether or not Vietnam becomes a formal U.S. ally, it will almost certainly be an important part of any more informal coalition seeking to check Beijing's ambitions, while its geography and power make it a significant player in Southeast Asia. Thus, while the United States may not regard a Chinese assault against Vietnam with the same degree of concern as one against the Philippines or South Korea, it would still be very significant for U.S. interests.

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Thailand

Thailand is nominally a U.S. ally but of a particular, even peculiar, kind. Despite the legacy commitment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and subsequent bilateral statements, it is not clear that the United States is meaningfully committed to defending Thailand.²⁴ This ambiguity is not purely a matter of Washington's reluctance; Bangkok has traditionally been loath to clarify the issue.²⁵ Moreover, Bangkok's domestic political evolution has also led to tensions in the relationship with the United States. Even more, Bangkok appears to perceive China as less threatening than Washington; indeed, it is by no means clear that Thailand takes the U.S. side against China.²⁶

That said, the United States would clearly be concerned about any Chinese ability to use serious military force against Thailand, not only because of Washington's longstanding relationship with Bangkok but also because of Thailand's large economy and central geographic position within Southeast Asia. From a military perspective, Thailand has a comparable geographic position relative to China as Vietnam, though its capital is much farther to the south. But China's military advances over the next decade are likely to substantially increase Beijing's ability to wield direct military force against Thailand. Moreover, Thailand is commonly thought to be weaker militarily and less resolute than Vietnam.²⁷

If China could exploit its military advantages to bring Thailand into its own camp and/or gain access to its territory, including for military operations, it would considerably strengthen China's position in Southeast Asia. Beijing could use such Thai affiliation to substantially increase its coercive and direct military power throughout the region. Moreover, if regional actors perceive U.S. credibility to be attached to Thailand's defense – despite the ambiguity of the U.S.-Thai relationship – this could be an additional attraction for Beijing, since bringing the country to heel would weaken U.S. credibility among regional states, aiding Beijing's pursuit of its goal of regional hegemony. As in other examples, Beijing might seek to achieve this goal through a variety of military strategies, including bombardment and punitive strikes, land grabs, and even full-scale invasion.

U.S. defense planners will therefore need to take account of this potential scenario in the medium-term. Regardless of the evolution of the political relationship between Washington and Bangkok, Thailand's large economy and key position mean that the United States will need to be concerned with any Chinese attack against it.

Myanmar

Myanmar is neither a U.S. ally nor partner. Indeed, it now has a very contentious relationship with Washington due to the Tatmadaw's February 2021 coup and crackdown.²⁸

Still, Myanmar occupies an important geography in the context of the competition with China. It borders China directly to the north and fronts the Indian Ocean on the south. Accordingly, Myanmar offers a direct route from China to the Indian Ocean and thus to

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the Persian Gulf and beyond, presenting one way of circumventing Beijing's "Malacca Dilemma."²⁹ If Beijing could bring Myanmar under its control or gain reliable access to it, China could reduce the efficacy of any attempt by the United States and others to cut off China from these areas and markets. Moreover, access to Myanmar would allow Beijing to more readily and directly project military force into the Indian Ocean area as well as against India, Myanmar's neighbor to the west.

Thus, even though there are no significant territorial or other such disputes between China and Myanmar, for these reasons alone Myanmar could become the object of Chinese coercion or even assault or invasion designed to compel Myanmar's affiliation with China.³⁰ And because China shares a long land border with Myanmar, Beijing would have at least some significant ability to do so. Myanmar, meanwhile, has a large military but the country is poor, has little external backing, and its military focuses primarily on internal security and battling separatists.

Accordingly, because of its potential implications for Chinese access beyond maritime Southeast Asia, the United States will need to consider the potential for a Chinese military move against Myanmar over the medium-term.

The above are likely to be the most stressing scenarios affecting members of any anti-hegemonic coalition seeking to check China's domination of Asia.

India is, depending on the metric used, Asia's second or third-largest economy, with a very formidable military on which it spends a considerable fraction of its GDP. It is also divided from China by the world's highest mountains. Accordingly, while India directly abuts China and the PLA is almost certainly qualitatively superior to India's armed forces, India has considerable ability to defend itself against the PRC, especially from invasion into India's core territory rather than along the disputed but remote territories along the two states' border. Accordingly, barring significant changes in expected trends, India is likely to be able to handle even a more powerful Chinese military largely on its own.

In the case of Japan, China's ability to project power against the Japanese southern islands, such as the Ryukyus, will also likely grow, but the Chinese threat to Japan is receiving considerable attention in the alliance context, and, due to its proximity and similarity to Taiwan, benefits from the planning for the defense of Taiwan.

RUSSIA'S MEDIUM-TERM TRAJECTORY

At the same time, Russia will have the capability to create stressing scenarios for NATO, possibly simultaneously with Chinese action in the Asia-Pacific due to either deliberate planning or to Moscow's perception of an advantageous opportunity. (The reverse is also true.) Over the past decade, Russia has shown its willingness to use military force to achieve its political objectives, conquering and holding territory in the 2008 war with

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Georgia and the ongoing war with Ukraine. These wars on Europe's eastern frontier, together with Russia's active military presence in Syria, have also showcased new military capabilities, tested several ways of conducting military operations, and tightly integrated its use of force with economic, diplomatic and covert operations. Through these projections of power, Russia has also demonstrated a persistent westward vector of its strategy, seeking to place Moscow in a central, decisive position in Europe.

The immediate effect of these Russian military actions is that they bring to the surface pre-existing differences in the United States-led alliance in Europe. Frontline countries along the Baltic-Black Sea axis are deeply worried about Russia, while those in the Mediterranean region and in Western Europe have a more sanguine view and are willing to partner with Russia on some issues. For the purposes of this project, we consider only those countries that are most directly threatened by a Russian military attack because such a scenario would consume U.S. military attention and resources, degrading its ability to deter, and if needed, defend against Chinese armed action in Asia.

Baltic States

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are NATO allies and remain extremely exposed to a Russian attack. Their small geographic size, combined with their location adjacent Russian lands and their Russian minority groups, create conditions vulnerable to the whole spectrum of Russian offensive actions. As a result, these states are staunchly aligned with the United States through NATO and have considerably increased their (albeit modest) military spending. The vulnerability of the Baltic states would increase exponentially in the event that Russia fully absorbed Belarus.

A Russian attack against the Baltic states, as against Poland and Romania, would be a direct challenge to NATO's principle of collective defense, enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The ideal approach to deter Moscow is a clear military posture of the Alliance making it too difficult to achieve or sustain a territorial *fait accompli*. The Baltic states have strengthened their territorial defense capabilities and benefit from ongoing but modest rotations of NATO forces. As a result, NATO's defense posture relies heavily on reinforcement, including forces that could take some time to arrive. Such deterrence by reinforcement is a product of political compromise within NATO rather than a response to the nature of the threat. A Russian military attack against the Baltic states thus remains a distinct possibility in the medium-term.

Poland

Poland is also a NATO ally and one of the few that meets the agreed-upon defense outlay of 2% of GDP. Poland is the geopolitical prize for a westward-pushing Russia. With Poland firmly embedded in a Western alliance, Russia remains a power on the outskirts of Europe; with a neutered Poland, Russia would have a direct, commanding hand into Europe. The geography of the region creates this imperative for Russia, thus maintaining the constant possibility of aggressive Russian moves against Poland.

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The most concerning scenario is a limited war aiming at a *fait accompli* of relatively smaller territorial dimensions than in the case of the Baltic states which, given their geographic size, are vulnerable to a full conquest before the mobilization of NATO forces. Such a Russian action would aim at presenting NATO with a difficult decision of having to escalate in order to push back the invading forces, or of seeking a diplomatic solution. The former would be risky and politically difficult to take on by an Alliance that prides itself on cohesion, while the latter would trade off the credibility of NATO for a promise of a peaceful resolution.

Russia, therefore, will continue to present a significant military threat against Poland, and U.S. and Allied defense planners will need to take account of this over the next decade.

Romania

Romania is a NATO ally and helps anchor the security of the alliance on its eastern and southern frontier. Unlike the Baltic states and Poland, Romania does not share a border with Russia. However, it is exposed to instability generated by Russian forces in Moldova, and a bit further, in Ukraine. Most importantly, Romania is a Black Sea state, and Russian efforts to close this sea to NATO and especially U.S. naval and air forces present a direct threat to Romania's security.

The most concerning scenario in this case is therefore not a land invasion like in the Baltics or Poland, but a series of moves by Russia closing NATO access to the Black Sea. Russia's war in Ukraine and occupation of Crimea can be seen therefore as part of sequential efforts to threaten Romania from the sea. U.S. and Allied defense planners will need to take account of this naval dimension of the Russian threat in the medium-term.

Sweden

Sweden is not a NATO ally but is a close partner of the Western alliance (an Enhanced Opportunity Partner) and directly neighbors NATO members Norway and Denmark. In the medium-term, any Russian offensive in the Baltic region would present a direct threat to Sweden because it would aim at closing the Baltic Sea to NATO allies, preventing NATO forces from using Swedish territory, and hindering Swedish assistance to the Baltic States as well as to Finland and Norway.³¹ The most concerning scenario is a Russian attempt to deny access to NATO air and naval assets in the Baltic Sea, as well as on Swedish territory. NATO planners will need to consider this scenario over the medium term.

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A NEW MODEL FOR COALITION MANAGEMENT: THE COMPLEMENTARY APPROACH

The basic problem facing the United States is that the likely magnitude of China's military power by the 2030s will leave many regional states, including U.S. allies and partners, but also other states whose fate is of consequence to the United States, vulnerable to military assault by China. Meantime, Russia is likely to pose a continuing threat to parts of NATO. The United States' relative military power will be inadequate to defend them all.

Indeed, if current trends continue, the United States might need to focus *exclusively* on defending its own allies in Asia and Taiwan given the primacy of the China threat and of Asia as a theater, leaving non-allied Asian states and NATO increasingly exposed. *Even this* could be a very difficult challenge, especially if the efforts of the United States and its allies and partners to augment and focus their military power on the threats from China and to a lesser degree Russia continue to lag in proportion to the threat. This situation would leave a wide field for Beijing to employ its military strength to subordinate regional states and advance toward its goal of regional hegemony, and for Russia to pursue its own efforts to break apart NATO and restore its dominance over portions of Eastern Europe.

Given profound U.S. opposition to such an outcome, how then should the United States respond to this challenge with respect to its network of allies and partners? The logic advanced here is that the United States should focus its alliance and partnership efforts on generating greater contributions to meeting shared threats. In particular, the United States should concentrate on aligning allied and partner contributions and U.S. efforts to enable them on the military threats to which these states are most acutely attuned and most capable of helping to address.

In other words, rather than try to fully integrate or globalize U.S. political-military relationships, the United States should build on and empower allies and partners where: 1) their motivation is strongest, 2) their interests align with those of the United States, and 3) their relative capability is greatest. This will provide a template for rationalizing alliance, partnership, and security cooperation efforts to align them with the most effective and efficient defense of the overall U.S. ally and partner network as well as other states about which the United States has reason to be concerned.

In brief, the United States should seek to address this imbalance using an *interest-based approach* to coalition management, focused on encouraging, promoting, and enabling allied and partner efforts where:

- their security interests are most directly engaged;
- their security interests align with the United States; and

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- their military capabilities (active or latent) would materially affect the local military balance.

This would constitute a different approach from the traditionally-ascendant, *integrated model* of coalition management, which seeks to induce allies and partners to develop, field, and deploy forces and capabilities that synchronize with the United States' own efforts. Thus, for years the United States urged NATO allies and others like Australia and South Korea to contribute expeditionary military forces to initiatives far removed from their core security interests. In this model, the United States effectively tries to “globalize” its alliances and partnerships – seeking to persuade its confederates to act as if they fully share Washington’s global interests.

The problem is that this approach runs against the grain of allies and partners’ interests as well as the plausible limits of their capabilities. It requires that they fundamentally adapt their conception of their interests to our own and project power often beyond what they are reasonably able to achieve. Yet countries rarely, if ever, fully share America’s global interests. In part because of the limits of their reach, their interests as well as their capacity for effective action thus tend to cluster in their own neighborhood.³²

In light of this reality, the alternative model proposed here focuses on encouraging allies and partners to act where their own interests already are engaged and aligned. In essence, this represents a *complementary* model of coalition management. Rather than pursue integration, emphasizing interoperability and interchangeability, the complementary model would focus on maximizing allies and partners’ contributions where they are most willing and able – and thus likely – to make a material contribution to shared interests. This *may* involve integration and interoperability – if it makes sense for the United States to be actively involved – but it may not. In other theaters or areas where U.S. focus is less wise or needed, then the model may call for empowering autonomous action by allies and partners.

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THE COMPLEMENTARY MODEL IN PRACTICE

ASIA

In Asia, the complementary model has different implications for allies and partners.³³ The primary factors behind these differing implications are states' vulnerability to Chinese military action and their ability to counteract this threat. The below section offers conceptual categorization of states based on these factors.

Category One: Self-Defense

The most straightforward category includes those states in close proximity to mainland China that cannot defend themselves on their own against Beijing. These states should focus their defense planning almost exclusively on self-defense against the PLA (with the partial exception of South Korea). The United States, in turn, should seek to build up their capacity to do so by whatever means possible and remove all unnecessary barriers to that goal – while sharply curtailing demands that they engage in unrelated efforts. The United States should then focus its own defense planning efforts on using its own military power to add to the indigenous defenses of those states to which it has a security commitment or in those cases in which it believes a state's subordination would sufficiently jeopardize U.S. interests.

States in this category, in roughly descending order of importance and urgency for U.S. policy, include:

- **Taiwan**: Taiwan is China's most propitious initial target for its focused and sequential strategy, and the PLA is highly focused on it.³⁴ Consequently, China wants to bring Taiwan to heel, while U.S. differentiated credibility is attached to the island's fate and it is militarily significant given its location. Meanwhile, the cross-strait military balance has become increasingly unfavorable.³⁵
 - **Implications**: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Taiwan should be laser-focused on ensuring Taiwan's ability to contribute to its own defense, specifically by blunting any invasion alongside U.S. forces, as well as augmenting its resilience against a Chinese attempt to use blockade, bombardment, or other cost-imposition strategies to compel the island's surrender. In particular, this means encouraging the thoroughgoing implementation of reforms to Taiwan's defense posture along the lines of the Overall Defense Concept and pressing for significant increases in Taiwan's defense spending.³⁶
 - **Priority**: Highest
- **The Philippines**: The Philippine military has little autonomous capability for defense against Chinese attack.³⁷ Yet given China's growing maritime and power projection capabilities, a Chinese assault against the Philippines main islands will become an increasingly acute threat.³⁸ Meanwhile, the loss of the

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Philippines to China's sway would be disastrous for the U.S. military position in the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia.

- Implications: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with the Philippines should shift away from internal stabilization and counterterrorism/anti-piracy efforts toward bolstering Manila's ability to contribute to its own self-defense as well as allowing and furthering U.S. access to the archipelago. While the Philippines' ability to contribute to its own defense would necessarily be insufficient to defend itself on its own, such efforts can help, including by reducing the costs and difficulties to the United States of defending the Philippines.
- Priority: High
- South Korea: Unlike most of the other states in this category, the Republic of Korea is a very large economy and militarily capable. The reality, however, is that nearby China outmatches its wealth and strength by a long measure. Moreover, South Korea must also plan and prepare for attack by North Korea. Given the growing capability of the PLA, South Korea's defense planning should make greater provision for the prospect of Chinese aggression, including in tandem with North Korea.
 - Implications: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with South Korea should urge Seoul to focus on improving its self-defense capabilities vis-à-vis China, while ensuring that Seoul assumes a greater and greater portion of its conventional defense against North Korea since the United States will need to focus on defending its allies (including South Korea) and Taiwan from China. In practice, Seoul should be capable of defeating a conventional ground assault from North Korea. This would allow the United States to focus its conventional force efforts exclusively on China – including the defense of South Korea from Chinese attack alongside the ROK – freeing up U.S. forces on the Peninsula from a distracting focus on North Korea. Accordingly, the United States should avoid seeking South Korea's participation in other contingencies beyond the Peninsula, as these would almost certainly be a distraction from these heavy demands. It should also urge Seoul to avoid investments in power projection or “shiny object” capabilities such as longer-haul naval forces.³⁹
 - Priority: Medium-High
- Vietnam: Vietnam has one of Southeast Asia's most formidable militaries, but it shares a long land border with China, as well as with weak Laos which also adjoins China. Hanoi's military balance with the PRC, moreover, is becoming more and more unfavorable, and is likely to continue along this negative trajectory. Thus, China will increasingly have an option to mount a direct assault into Vietnam.

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- Implications: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Vietnam should focus not only on augmenting Hanoi's capabilities in the South China Sea but more and more on strengthening Hanoi's ability to defend itself against a direct assault by China. This would include bolstering Vietnam's ground and maritime self-defense forces as well as its capabilities to resist China's increasingly formidable air, naval, and other high-technology forces. The goal of U.S. engagement should be to strengthen Hanoi's ability to defend itself as much as possible against a Chinese assault or invasion, ideally such that the United States would not have to face a choice between direct and substantial intervention to aid Vietnam's defense on the one hand or allowing Vietnam to be subordinated by China on the other. This would help push off the hard choice of whether to extend a formal security commitment to Hanoi, which the United States is best off avoiding if at all possible.⁴⁰
- Priority: Medium-High
- Thailand: Thailand has a significant military and is a large country but will nonetheless be increasingly vulnerable to a direct Chinese assault via neighboring states such as Laos or by sea. Beijing would gain significant military and political advantage by bringing Thailand into its camp, and may judge those benefits worth the costs and risks of direct military action or the credible threat thereof. Meantime, while the U.S. security commitment to Bangkok is ambiguous, the United States benefits from a Thailand that is not under Beijing's hegemony.
 - Implications: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Thailand should focus on promoting Bangkok's ability to resist a Chinese assault. This involves concentrating on the ability of Thailand's land, air, and naval defense forces to resist a Chinese attack. This will reduce the probability that the highly ambiguous U.S. commitment to Thailand will be tested, which is in the U.S. interest – both in and of itself but also because it will avoid the United States having to make a difficult choice between backing Thailand and cutting it loose. That said, the United States will have to balance assistance to Thailand against the possibility that Bangkok will move into Beijing's pro-hegemonic coalition, in which case Thailand's military strength could be turned to China's overall advantage in Southeast Asia.
 - Priority: Medium
- Myanmar: Myanmar shares a long land border with China and occupies a strategic position along the Indian Ocean and neighboring India. It therefore could become an attractive target for Beijing's coercion, including by the use of direct military force. A successful such use would undermine the interests of the United States and any anti-hegemonic coalition. Thus, while the U.S.-

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Myanmar relationship has suffered due to the coup and brutal recent crackdown by the Tatmadaw, this U.S. interest holds regardless of the nature of the Myanmar government. At the same time, India maintains closer links with and focus on Myanmar, and shares a long border and tradition of collaboration with it.⁴¹

- Implications: U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Myanmar should focus on bolstering its ability to resist Chinese assault. Given India's advantages of proximity to as well as its naturally deeper interest in neighboring Myanmar, however, U.S. aid and efforts should align with and seek as much as possible to support New Delhi's ability to aid, work with, and exercise leverage over Myanmar. Over time, given the sharply unfavorable military balance that will exist between China and Myanmar, it may become advisable for a coalition member to extend some deeper form of security commitment to Myanmar. Because of its proximity and naturally deeper interests in Myanmar, it would make the most sense for India to assume this role if possible. Accordingly, U.S. defense and security cooperation toward Myanmar should seek to align efforts with India as much as possible.
- Priority: Medium
- Pacific Islands: The United States requires the ability to use the Pacific Islands for access to Asia. U.S. military operations to defend its interests in the Western Pacific would be predicated on the ability to operate in, through, and from these islands. Precisely because of this, China might target them for coercion, including by military assault, in order to hamper the U.S. ability to project power into the Western Pacific.⁴² Because these islands are to the rear of the first island chain, however, their defense should be relatively straightforward so long as the United States and its allies are able to hold at Washington's existing defense perimeter.
 - Implications: U.S. defense/strategic focus with the Pacific Islands should focus primarily on enabling U.S. access and developing the capacities for effective U.S. and allied/partner military operations against China from these locations in the event of conflict. To the extent these nations have military capacity, this should be oriented at self-defense and/or "gray zone" operations to relieve demands on U.S. forces.
 - Priority: Low

Category Two: Coalition Defense Contributors

The second category includes highly capable states that are reasonably defensible from Chinese attack, whether because of their power, distance, and/or other factors, but share an interest in actively checking Beijing's hegemonic aspirations in the region. Because these states have both the security buffer and capacity to contribute beyond mere self-defense, U.S. defense/strategic engagement with them should be oriented toward

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enabling and preparing them, either alongside the United States or independently, to defend vulnerable parts of the anti-hegemonic coalition where their contribution would be most additive.

States in this category include:

- Japan: Japan, given its power, wealth, and sophistication, is the regional cornerstone of any anti-hegemonic coalition in Asia. Moreover, it is situated along the critical first island chain, making it directly relevant to the primary theater for military contingencies between the United States as well as any participating coalition members on the one side and China on the other. Given Japan's economic and (thus far largely latent) military power, the strong U.S. military posture in the country, and its geographic advantages as an archipelago offshore from mainland Asia, it should be – relatively speaking – defensible against the PLA. Accordingly, Japan should be able to allocate some level of defense effort toward other contingencies important to the coalition.
 - Implications: The primary focus of U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Tokyo must clearly be to ensure that Japan substantially increases its level of defense effort so that it *can* ensure not only its own self-defense but also contribute to overall coalition defense against an increasingly powerful China. Though Japan's defense *strategy* has moved in a positive direction, including with its 2018 defense planning guidance, its spending remains woefully inadequate to the level of military threat posed by Beijing.⁴³ Japan's defense expenditure has hovered around one percent of GDP, even as China's has increased dramatically.⁴⁴ U.S. policy should seek to ensure Japan spends, at a minimum, two percent of GDP on defense – and ideally more – to reflect the level of threat China poses and the importance of Japan's contributions to meeting it.

Beyond the level of spending, U.S. defense/strategic engagement should first ensure an effective defense of the Japanese archipelago but also – quietly if necessary – prepare joint planning for the defense of Taiwan, which is critical to Japan's own security, as well as eventually South Korea.⁴⁵ Recent high-level statements by leading Japanese statesmen indicate that Tokyo understands this point and is increasingly ready to prepare to contribute to Taiwan's defense.⁴⁶

Since there are no plausible, serious scenarios in which Japanese forces would not be fighting alongside U.S. forces, *the U.S. and Japanese militaries should be as integrated as possible*, mirroring U.S.-South Korean arrangements or those of Cold War NATO forces along the inner-German border. This would reflect a significant change from the legacy arrangement with Japan, which substantially segregated the two militaries, but is now necessary because Japanese contributions will become increasingly important to the military balance in the Western Pacific and neither the United States nor Japan can afford unnecessary or ineffective duplication in light of China's growing power.

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- Australia: Australia is far from China, providing it a high margin of security. It also has a capable, albeit relatively small, military. But Canberra rightly recognizes that, given its small population and economic heft, its fate will be determined in the center of the Asian theater and therefore that its best interests are served by improving its ability to contribute to coalition defense forward, in the Western Pacific, South China Sea, and broader Pacific area.⁴⁷
 - Implications: Australia's defense strategy and efforts are already moving in the right direction with its 2020 Defense Strategic Update. Accordingly, U.S. defense/strategic engagement with Canberra should primarily focus on ensuring Australia is optimally postured, empowered, and equipped to contribute to important contingencies. In this light, Australia could likely play a valuable role in a Taiwan scenario, but might also be best-suited to secondary roles in such a conflict and/or alternative scenarios, such as the defense of the Philippines. At the same time, the United States should encourage and equip Canberra to take a leading role in handling "gray zone" operations in the South Pacific and other less urgent theaters.

Overall, these factors mean that the United States should pursue genuinely deeper integration of military planning, force development, and other functions with Australia, while also enabling Australia's ability to maximize its contributions through pooling military-related procurement and research and development.⁴⁸

- India: While India is likely to be able to handle the direct military threat from China essentially on its own, India's military is at an increasing qualitative disadvantage against the rapidly improving PLA.⁴⁹ Moreover, New Delhi also has to focus on Pakistan, dividing how much it can focus on China. For these reasons, India's military capabilities are largely oriented on territorial defense and India's immediate areas rather than on power projection.
 - Implications: The core U.S. interest with India is in ensuring its ability to defend itself and check Beijing's ambitions in South Asia. In that light, especially given the likely unfavorable relative power trajectories between China and India, the United States essentially unreservedly benefits from a stronger India. This is especially pressing because the power imbalance between China and India could widen even further if China's economic performance continues to outperform India's.

Accordingly, U.S. defense/strategic engagement with India should focus on bolstering India's military power, concentrating on self-defense and in broader South Asia. Recognizing the serious challenges India will face and the limits on its power projection capacities, the United States should not seek to draw Indian military and strategic attention away from its core area. Instead, the United States should promote India's ability to take primary responsibility in South Asia, where India's

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interests are most acutely engaged and its capabilities are at their highest efficacy. This includes enabling India's ability to operate in its near abroad, both on land and in the Indian Ocean.

In particular, this should lead the United States to support India's ability to take a leading role vis a vis neighboring South Asian states, including Nepal, Bhutan, and most importantly Myanmar. As noted previously, Myanmar is important geographically and, being isolated and weak, vulnerable to Chinese action. India, though, has a strong and direct interest in resisting China's hegemony over Myanmar, which shares a long border with India and fronts the Indian Ocean, including potential areas for Indian SSBN patrolling in the Bay of Bengal.⁵⁰ U.S. attention, meanwhile, must go to the primary theater in the Western Pacific. Accordingly, the United States would benefit from India taking a leading role in ensuring Myanmar's autonomy from China.

The United States should also encourage and support but also leverage India's armaments and technology industry, both for mutual benefit but also to empower other allies and partners in the region. For instance, the United States should encourage and facilitate the development and sale/transfer of high-quality weapons such as Brahmos missiles to as many appropriately-situated like-minded states as possible. The United States should also relieve pressure on India to halt purchases of Russian military equipment *if* those purchases are cost-efficient and effective ways of strengthening India's military. The U.S. interest in a strong India resisting China's dominance in South Asia substantially outweighs Washington's interest in inhibiting India's engagement with Russia.

Category Three: Weaker and More Insulated

The third category of states are those of middling or limited capability, but unlikely to fall inside China's crosshairs in the medium term, primarily because they are to the strategic rear of coalition members, including U.S. allies. Since they are situated behind front line states, they are also unlikely to lean forward in checking Chinese aspirations for regional dominance, given both the dangers and risks of doing so as well as the confidence or hope that Beijing's ambitions will be frustrated by others. Moreover, their plausible contributions to addressing the military balance at the front line are too modest to make a major difference; this means they are more likely to be able to "fly under the radar." Such states, in other words, are in a classic free-rider situation.

Because these states are therefore unlikely to be motivated, let alone able, to contribute meaningfully to key collective defense scenarios, U.S. policy toward them should focus on, first, gaining where useful actual or potential access to them for military and logistical purposes, and second, promoting their ability to defend themselves against China over the long-term and/or backfill U.S. less critical security interests in the event of a Sino-U.S. conflict. Both goals would prove especially valuable in the event the front line of an anti-hegemonic coalition falls farther back, for instance because of the loss of or defection

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by key states such as Taiwan, Vietnam, or the Philippines to China. U.S. strategic diplomacy should seek to quietly but clearly frame and pursue defense engagement with these third category states through this lens. In the case of South Asian countries, though, the U.S. should seek to align its efforts as much as possible with those of New Delhi, generally deferring to India's leadership in the region.

States in this category include:

- Indonesia: Given its position well to the south of any anti-hegemonic coalition's front line with China, Indonesia appears very unlikely to lean forward into the scenarios described previously. But its status as one of the world's largest countries and economies and its geography as an enormous archipelago at the southern end of the South China Sea mean it could be highly significant if that front line were to move farther south and/or east from the first island chain. Accordingly, U.S. strategic engagement should focus on building the conditions for direct U.S. and allied (e.g., Australian) military access in the event of conflict. Given Canberra's high focus and deep expertise on Indonesia, Washington would likely be best suited to tightly integrate its defense diplomacy and engagement toward Jakarta with Canberra.⁵¹
- Malaysia: Malaysia lies well behind the front line, buffered from the potential of direct Chinese attack by Thailand, Vietnam, and other significant states. While it has been on the receiving end of Chinese pressure, including aggressive gray zone operations, Kuala Lumpur seems unlikely to lean forward. Given that, like Indonesia, Malaysia's size and position mean its significance for any anti-hegemonic coalition would grow if the front line were to move south, though, U.S. strategic engagement with Malaysia should therefore follow a similar logic as toward Indonesia.
- Brunei: Brunei is a very small but very wealthy state, with limited military power. The United States is therefore likely best-off seeing it in a similar frame as Brunei's neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia.
- Singapore: Singapore is a small but wealthy state. Unlike Brunei, however, it has a modest but significant military capacity. Singapore's political situation is complicated by attempts to avoid alienating either the United States or China. In light of these factors, the United States is likely best-off pushing for ensured access to Singapore's important port and other facilities. To the extent possible, Washington should press Singapore to take a role in ensuring open access through and around the Malacca Strait, and ideally to play a role in interdicting Chinese shipping in the event of conflict.⁵²
- Nepal: The United States should back India's strategy toward Nepal, given its vulnerability to Chinese action, lack of capacity for autonomous action, and position between India and China.

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- Bhutan: The United States should back India's strategy toward Bhutan, given its vulnerability to Chinese action, lack of capacity for autonomous action, and position between India and China.
- Bangladesh: The United States should back India's strategy toward Bangladesh, given its lack of capacity for autonomous action and its geographic position essentially within India.
- Sri Lanka: The United States should largely align its defense engagement with Sri Lanka with that of India, although Sri Lanka's maritime position astride key sea lanes to the Persian Gulf and Europe will require an independent U.S. perspective.

Category Four: Limits of U.S. Power

- Laos: Laos is very weak and, due to its land border with China, exceptionally vulnerable to Chinese action. Accordingly, there is very little the United States can do to protect Laos.
 - Implications: The primary interest the United States has in Laos is in promoting the defense of Vietnam and Thailand. Accordingly, the United States should, where possible, promote Laotian defense in concert with these states.
- Mongolia: Mongolia is very weak and, due to its land border with China, exceptionally vulnerable to Chinese action. Accordingly, there is essentially nothing the United States can do to defend Mongolia.
 - Implications: The only possible recourse for Mongolia from Chinese action would be Russian opposition. Accordingly, any defense/strategic engagement with Mongolia should be conducted in accordance with this reality.
- North Korea: North Korea presents a uniquely difficult case. It has a highly adversarial relationship with the United States as well as South Korea and Japan. On the other hand, its relationship with China is at least fraught and there are indications it may seek distance and autonomy from Beijing. Pyongyang seems to want to avoid becoming subservient or a proxy for Beijing. At the same time, the United States and its allies have a strong interest in North Korea not becoming a pliant tool for China's purposes. For instance, a simultaneous attack by North Korea alongside China against South Korea and/or to distract U.S. and allied attention from an attack on Taiwan would be very difficult to handle. Accordingly, there is at least some degree of latent convergence of interest between the United States and its allies on the one hand and North Korea on the other.
 - Implications: Needless to say, the United States has no defense/strategic support for or engagement with North Korea. Accordingly, there is little the United States can do. That said, the United States should seek wherever possible to encourage North Korea's resolve to resist Chinese

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domination and, consistent with defense of U.S. allies, ability to fulfill that aspiration.

Category Five: China's Confederates

The final category in Asia are those states that are already aligned with China or likely to move into this category. They include Pakistan and Cambodia. The United States should minimize any defense support to such states, aligning instead with U.S. allies/close partners like India and Vietnam, both to limit the ability of the former to distract U.S. confederates and the risk of alienating New Delhi and Hanoi.

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The prioritization of the Asian theater, driven by China's rise and increasingly aggressive posture, will place a greater burden on U.S. allies in Europe to provide for the defense of European NATO. Their security will be more dependent on their own ability to deny Russia its military objectives by blunting its potential offensive. At the same time, from the U.S. perspective, European allies will have to be able to hold the line on their continent, especially in the case of a coordinated push by China and Russia: the U.S. will simply not have the resources to devote exclusively to the European region and will be forced to choose where to allocate them.⁵³ In this context, Europe cannot be the priority, given Asia's greater importance and the graver threat posed by China. As a result, Europe's most exposed frontline countries, from Sweden to Romania, have to assume the role of, at minimum, first responders in case of a Russian attack.⁵⁴

In order to strengthen these allies and aid them in their role as local balancers against Russia, U.S. planners will have to take into consideration three trends that are unfolding in the region.

- European security is regionalized: each country has a geographically narrow security focus (Sweden on the Baltic Sea, the Baltic states on their border, Poland on Kaliningrad and the "Suwalki Gap," Romania on the Black Sea, while, for instance, Italy on the Mediterranean, Spain on North Africa). This has led to a growing gap in threat perception regarding Russia in Europe, and U.S. defense planners should take this into account as, for example, some countries that have a more cooperative approach toward Russia may not participate in deterring Moscow. There is a limited room for the harmonization of such threat perceptions and of the resulting policies. This will entail a more variegated relationship among the U.S., other leading NATO players like Germany and the United Kingdom, and other allied countries.
- European allies will focus on territorial defense. European allies have moved away from the "specialization" approach that defined their force structure in the first two post-Cold War decades. Today allies along the eastern flank are focusing on territorial defense, while others farther west have failed to properly resource their militaries. This means that the United States needs to rethink its planning for the defense of Europe. Washington should encourage this dynamic, focusing Europe's efforts on territorial defense. In any case, with the abandonment of "specialization," the Europeans are less capable of contributing to U.S. overseas contingency operations. Moreover, despite small and symbolic military presence of European allies in each other's territories, both the limited military capabilities of European states and their different threat assessments will severely constrain a Europe-wide defense posture based on solidarity. In light of these factors, U.S. defense and strategic engagement should work with these factors to concentrate European efforts on developing their capabilities for territorial defense.
- This said, the reality is that European states will be most likely to protect themselves, blunting an initial Russian attack, if they have faith that the United

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States will come to their aid. For instance, even Poland has expressed doubts about its ability and willingness to send forces to the Baltic states in case of a Russian attack unless the United States deploys a heavy armored brigade to Polish territory. Thus even as the United States focuses more on Asia, U.S. planning has to take into account this tendency toward vacillation and even bandwagoning. The United States should, consistent with its priority focus on Asia, therefore look to find cost-efficient ways of contributing to Europe's defense, ranging from limited military presence in the most exposed states to facilitating easier acquisition of U.S. technologies (e.g., UAVs).

Category One: Frontline First Responders

- **Baltic States:** The three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) are prime targets for Russian aggression from multiple directions (from the sea, from Kaliningrad, from Russia, and from Belarus). Their defense will become even more difficult if Belarus falls more fully under Russian control. Because of the Baltics' exposure and of the difficulties of defending them, the United States should continue to rotate forces, maintaining a presence and encouraging participation of other NATO allies. Moreover, it should aid the development of Baltic deterrence by denial capabilities, ranging from total defense and unconventional warfare techniques to weapons imposing serious costs on an invading army (e.g., anti-tank missiles, landmines).
- **Poland:** As a middle power in the region, Poland plays a crucial role in maintaining deterrence against Russia. A loss of Poland, either due to a military attack or some form of political and economic neutering, will make NATO's eastern frontier untenable. For this reason, the United States should maintain a strong partnership with Poland and enhance its military ties through rotating forces and training on Polish territory. It should also empower Poland by providing robust and advanced weapons systems and capabilities.
- **Sweden:** Sweden is not a NATO ally but it is on the frontline and it plays a role in deterring Russia. Its small military was focused on out-of-area operations, but in recent years the realization of a dramatic deterioration in Baltic Sea security has spurred a reorientation toward territorial defense. Sweden is unlikely to be able to defend its strategic areas (e.g., Stockholm, Gotland, or Malmö) for a prolonged period and thus will need to rely on allies. The United States should encourage this renewed attention to territorial defense and support Swedish efforts to develop EU military capabilities to protect the Baltic Sea. While greater cooperation with NATO would be welcome, the United States should be cautious in pushing it too much both because of potential backlash in Swedish public opinion and because of likely Russian opposition. It is possible to enhance Sweden's role in regional deterrence without having it fully in NATO.

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Category Two: Second-line Defenders

- **Romania:** Romania is not under threat of a direct territorial invasion by Russia and its defense posture in regional deterrence should reflect this. Its main role is to sustain the logistical hubs necessary for the alliance to come to the aid of frontline allies. This involves also playing a role in the Black Sea, where Russia been increasingly aggressive in making it a closed sea over which it is asserting control. The United States should help Romania develop greater capabilities for the Black Sea.
- **Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary:** These are states that for geographic and political reasons are not threatened by Russian military capabilities and consequently often engage in policies that are more conciliatory toward Moscow. But they play a key role in deterring Russia from attacking a frontline state: allied forces will need to be able to pass through or over these states in order to defend the most exposed allies. The United States should maintain logistical hubs, while continuing to push these allies to spend more on their own defense. Their forces not only will be needed to protect NATO's logistical hubs and tails, but also should be able to participate in defensive roles on the eastern frontline. This is especially true for Germany, which should play a much more robust and leading role in the conventional defense of Eastern NATO.

Category Three: Europe's Rear

This is the third category of European states, which because of their geographic position are distant from the main defensive line in the east, are less vulnerable to Russian military aggression, and consequently are often the least interested in contributing to a strong deterrent posture on Europe's eastern frontier. But despite this their behavior plays an important role in maintaining European defense. In particular, the United States should encourage three sets of policies among these countries. First, these countries should develop strong defenses against Russian corruption and cooptation tactics that often contribute to a pro-Moscow strategic tilt in these capitals. Second, the United States should continue to insist on greater defense spending in these states in order for them to be able to keep stability in their own immediate region, enabling focus on the primary threat to the Alliance from the east. This is especially necessary for countries such as Italy and Spain that should concentrate on keeping the Mediterranean region (including parts of North Africa) stable. Third, the United States should pressure allies in this category that are often ambiguous in their support for a strong European deterrence against Russia. This may require resorting even to sanctions, in cases of allies actively undermining the security of the alliance through deals with Russia or China (e.g., in 5G technology). Unlike in Asia, these states in Europe's rear are still treaty allies and the United States should continue to treat them as such, and expect from them to act in the best interest of the alliance.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR ALLY AND PARTNER DEFENSE PLANNING

State	Threat Picture	Role in U.S. Alliance/Partnership Structure	Ideal Type of Defense Relationship with U.S. Military (Integrated, Complementary, or Outsourced)	Defense Cooperation Focus
<i>Taiwan</i>	Direct threat from China of invasion or serious blockade.	Key node in U.S. defense perimeter at center of first island chain, but too weak for independent self-defense so requires deep American effort and focus.	Integrated/interoperable to degree possible, given Taiwan's only defense scenario would involve the United States as well and Taiwan lacks capacity for independent self-defense against PRC.	U.S. should press Taiwan for major increase in effort to focus laser-like on self-defense against PRC invasion and/or blockade, integrating with U.S. forces wherever politically feasible.
<i>Philippines</i>	Looming threat over medium-term of Chinese use of power projection forces to attack Philippines directly.	Critical geography as archipelago part of first island chain fronting Western Pacific and South China Sea. Primarily valuable for access for U.S. forces given that Philippines is very weak militarily.	Integrated/interoperable to degree possible, given Philippines' only defense scenario would involve the United States as well and inability of Manila to independently defend itself against determined Chinese attack.	Ensuring fullest possible U.S. access to and readiness for operations from Philippine Archipelago, including for ground-launched missile deployments. Orient military assistance away from stabilization and counterterrorism where politically feasible in direction of building up country's capacity for contributing to self-defense against a Chinese assault or invasion.
<i>South Korea</i>	Increasing threat over medium-term of direct attack by China, including coupled with North Korean action/attack.	Critical U.S. ally given size of economy and salience for defense of Japan.	Complementary for North Korean conventional attack, with ROK handling bulk of conventional defense. Integrated with United States for defense against Chinese attack to extent possible.	Encourage South Korea to manage the North Korean conventional threat. But prepare for a joint U.S.-ROK defense of South Korea against Chinese attack, including a joint Chinese attack in concert with the DPRK.

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<i>Japan</i>	Increasingly direct threat from Chinese military given growth of both A2/AD and power projection forces, as well as Japan's unique geopolitical importance.	Essential cornerstone of U.S.-led anti-hegemonic coalition in Asia, given size of economy and critical position along first island chain.	Integrate capabilities as much as possible with the United States given all plausible scenarios (Taiwan, ROK, Philippines) would involve U.S. forces as well.	Press for major increases in Japan's defense spending. Focus Japanese efforts on self-defense of Japanese Archipelago but also immediately adjacent contingencies, especially Chinese attack on Taiwan or South Korea, given relevance to defense of Japan. Integrate U.S. and Japanese forces for these scenarios as much as possible, for instance on model of Combined Forces Command. Also integrate military R&D, production, etc. to take advantage of scale, Japanese technological sophistication, etc.
<i>Australia</i>	Distant direct threat from China. But Australia understands that its fate will be determined forward in Asia, so willing to contribute to addressing these scenarios.	Important contributor of high-end forces, albeit modest in scale. Access/power projection location for air bases, logistics, etc.	Integrate with the United States as much as possible given all plausible (Philippines, Taiwan, other SE Asian states over longer term) scenarios would involve the United States as well. Complementary focus by Australia on gray zone challenges in Southeast Asia.	Focus on much deeper integration of range of military and defense-related activities, including research and development, procurement, contingency planning; and the like.
<i>India</i>	Direct threat from PLA along long shared border. But India will likely have strong capacity for self-defense, especially of key territory.	Critical pillar of any anti-hegemonic coalition, anchoring it in South Asia.	Complementary/regional sheriff. Emphasize India's ability to operate in South Asia as effectively as possible with minimal U.S. involvement, rather than interoperability.	Bolster Indian military as much as possible, with focus on northern border and South Asia. Emphasize Indian autonomous activity/leadership in South Asia rather than interoperability with U.S. forces per se. Bolster Indian military and technological capacity, whether through U.S. joint efforts or through other sources (including Russia).
<i>Vietnam</i>	Growing direct threat from PLA along northern border or via South China Sea or Laos.	Strongpoint of likely anti-hegemonic coalition given indigenous military capacity, resolve, and position in SE Asia/along South China Sea.	Complementary. Emphasize Vietnam's ability to operate as effectively as possible with minimal U.S. involvement rather than interoperability.	Bolster Vietnamese military as much as possible, with emphasis on direct defense against Chinese attack vice SCS.

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<i>Myanmar</i>	Growing direct threat from PLA along northern border. Would provide PRC direct access to Indian Ocean, relieving Beijing's "Malacca Dilemma."	Given political circumstances, unlikely to be active participant in any anti-hegemonic coalition for foreseeable future. But its autonomy from Chinese domination is in interest of such coalition, given its geography.	Outsource oversight/protection from China as much as possible to India.	Unlikely to be feasible. Main effort should be to empower India to handle. If defense cooperation with Myanmar becomes possible, then effort should focus on bolstering direct defense capacity against China.
<i>Thailand</i>	Growing direct threat from China via Laos. Danger is that Beijing may see advantage in coercing Bangkok to bandwagon with PRC, both because of Thailand's heft in Southeast Asia and its central geographic position there.	Given Thailand's equivocation and geographic placement as well as domestic political circumstances, Bangkok is unlikely to be active participant in any anti-hegemonic coalition for foreseeable future. But its autonomy from Chinese domination is in interest of such coalition, given its geography and economic heft.	Complementary. Emphasize Thailand's ability to operate as effectively as possible with minimal U.S. involvement rather than interoperability. Seek to avoid forcing issue of how serious U.S. alliance with Thailand actually is.	Focus engagement with Thai military as much as possible on direct defense against Chinese attack.
<i>Indonesia</i>	Limited threat from China unless Taiwan, Philippines, and/or Vietnam fall under Chinese sway.	Unlikely to be active participant in any anti-hegemonic coalition given attractiveness to Jakarta of free-riding. But archipelago could provide valuable strategic depth in Taiwan, Philippine, or Vietnam contingency. Would become far more important if anti-hegemonic coalition's front line fell back.	Complementary. Emphasize Indonesia's ability to operate as effectively as possible with minimal U.S. involvement rather than interoperability.	Focus engagement with Indonesian military on developing options for U.S. and allied access to/employment of territory in event of contingency, as well as Indonesian direct defense of territory if "front line" falls back.
<i>Singapore</i>	Limited threat from China unless Taiwan, Philippines, and/or Vietnam fall under Chinese sway.	Likely to be equivocal but may be willing to do more to aid anti-hegemonic coalition quietly or "under the table." Important for imposing "Malacca Dilemma" on China.	Complementary: focus on maritime domain awareness, intelligence on shipping patterns and actors, interdiction capabilities.	Focus engagement on practicing shipping interdiction in the event of a contingency, as well as A2/AD of the region around Singapore in order to provide a permissive environment for doing so.

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<i>Malaysia</i>	Limited threat from China unless Thailand and/or Vietnam fall under Chinese sway.	Unlikely to be active participant in any anti-hegemonic coalition given attractiveness to Kuala Lumpur of free-riding. But could provide valuable strategic depth in Taiwan, Philippine, or Vietnam contingency. Would become more important if “front line” fell back.	Complementary. Emphasize Malaysia’s ability to operate as effectively as possible with minimal U.S. involvement rather than interoperability.	Focus engagement with Malaysian military on developing options for U.S. and allied access to/employment of territory in event of contingency, as well as Malaysian direct defense of territory if “front line” falls back.
<i>South Asian Countries</i>	Varying threat from China based on geography.	Relatively unimportant except in relation to India’s position.	Under India’s “regional sheriff” purview.	Outsource to India as much as possible.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A number of the concepts in this section in particular are drawn from and developed at greater length in Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019), p. 8, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), p. 1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; and Lloyd J. Austin, III, "Message to the Force," Memorandum for All Department of Defense Employees, March 4, 2021, p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/04/2002593656/-1/-1/0/SECRETARY-LLOYD-J-AUSTIN-III-MESSAGE-TO-THE-FORCE.PDF>.

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⁵ For further elaboration of these concepts, see Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 110-147.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019), p. 18, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

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⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), p. 8, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

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¹³ Senior DoD leaders have consistently affirmed the importance of augmenting the United States' conventional defense of Taiwan. See Lloyd J. Austin III, "Confirmation Hearing to be Secretary of Defense," transcript, Senate Armed Services Committee, January 19, 2021, pp. 141-143, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-02_01-19-20211.pdf; Kathleen H. Hicks, "Confirmation Hearing to be Deputy Secretary of Defense," transcript, Senate Armed Services Committee, February 2, 2021, pp. 112-133, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-03_02-02-2021.pdf; and Colin H. Kahl, "Confirmation Hearing to be Undersecretary of Defense for Policy," transcript, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 4, 2021, p. 106, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-08_03-04-2021.pdf. See also Elbridge Colby and Jim Mitre, "Why the Pentagon Should Focus on Taiwan," *War on the Rocks*, October 7, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/why-the-pentagon-should-focus-on-taiwan/>; Elbridge Colby, "America Can Defend Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-can-defend-taiwan-11611684038>.

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¹⁶ RADM Michael McDevitt, USN, ret., "DOD's Role in Competing with China," testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, January 15, 2020, pp. 10-12, <https://armedservices.house.gov/cache/files/4/8/48d8614f-61de-4c80-8d3c-3d9a852c39ce/51C63D7EAB2BEA7D8C19EE9A2D494D9B.20200115-hasc-radm-michael-mcdevitt-usn-ret-statement-vfinal.pdf>; and Chad Peltier, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, prepared for UC (London: Jane's, December 2019); U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2020 Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, December 2020), pp. 394-400, <https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2020-annual-report-congress>

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²³ Cf., e.g., Nguyễn Hồng Thao, "China's Military Modernization: Implications for Vietnam's Security," unpublished paper presented at DTRA STRI workshop, June 2021, p. 2.

²⁴ The U.S. State Department describes the relationship in the following terms: "The United States and Thailand are signatories of the 1954 Manila Pact of the former Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which, together

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²⁶ Zachary Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand,” *War on the Rocks*, January 2, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/america-should-be-realistic-about-its-alliance-with-thailand/>.

²⁷ E.g., Richard Halloran, “Thailand’s Pivot,” *Air Force Magazine* (September 2013), pp. 102-104, <https://www.airforcemag.com/PDF/MagazineArchive/Documents/2013/September%202013/0913pivot.pdf>.

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³³ This section benefited substantially from private workshops The Marathon Initiative held: one with Asian security experts on June 21, 2021, and another with U.S. defense experts on July 21, 2021, as well as written feedback received on a draft of this paper in connection with these workshops.

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³⁶ Drew Thompson, “Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan’s Radical New Defense Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/hope-on-the-horizon-taiwans-radical-new-defense-concept/>; Lee Hsi-min and Eric Lee for The Diplomat, “Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept, Explained,” *The Diplomat*, November 5, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/taiwans-overall-defense-concept-explained/>.

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³⁹ See, for instance: <https://www.navalnews.com/event-news/madex-2021/2021/05/south-koreas-new-cvx-aircraft-carrier-project-an-overview/>

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⁴² Derek Grossman et al., *American's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2900/RR2973/RAND_RR2973.pdf.

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⁵² I am grateful to Thomas Shugart for this suggestion.

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